



'189' (2010)

COMPUTER LOVE



SHAIKHA AL MAZROU

Shaikha Al Mazrou working in her studio at Sharjah University. Photo by Asma al-Shabibi.

UAE-born artist Shaikha Al Mazrou recently completed an MA from Chelsea College of Art in London, scooping the MA Student Prize along the way. Having influences ranging from Frank Stella to Hassan Sharif, Al Mazrou's distinctive practice melds installation, found objects and sculpture. 'I tend to stay away from themes of my culture' she tells Asmaa al-Shabibi

Shaikha Al Mazrou is a UAE artist born in 1988, who creates artworks that deal with colour, form and interaction. I first saw her works at the Sikka fair in 2011 and more recently, met her at her graduate show at the Chelsea College of Art this summer. And here, I was struck by the sheer visual impact of her show. Coupled with this, when I got to know her a bit better, I was impressed by her evident artistic commitment and drive - not only towards being an artist but also to making a contribution to

arts education in the UAE. However, Al Mazrou eschews easy clichés that could pander to audiences expecting certain things of a young, female Arab artist. Refreshingly, excitingly, Al Mazrou is an artist exploring the decontextualized potentiality and transferable qualities of her materials, from plastics and fabrics to the spent CPU units and motherboards of discarded PCs, amongst other concerns. After a widely-acclaimed graduate show in London – and her scooping of the annual Students' Prize – Shaikha has returned to the UAE where she is planning her next projects as well as teaching sculpture at Sharjah University. Which is the point where we step in with a few questions.

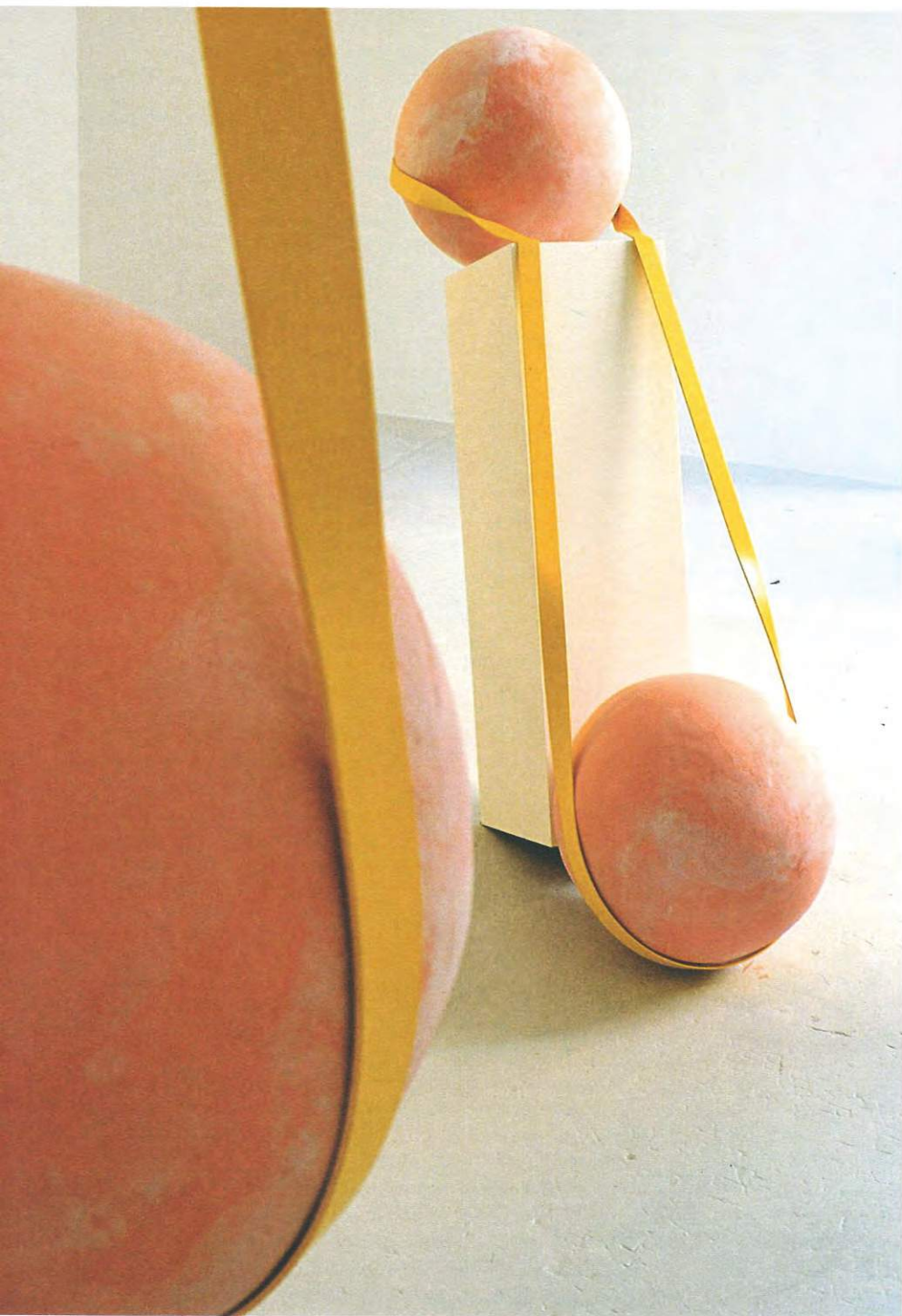
I wanted to start by talking about the use of computer components in your works. How did this come about?

In my final year at college, I was flicking through magazines and came across images of electronic waste yards. The aesthetics of the images - their forms and colours - really grabbed my attention. In my programme at the College of Fine Arts, Sharjah, we were encouraged by our professor to look at materials and play with them and so I decided one day to dismantle a computer and play with the parts.

But in some of your works you have used over one hundred motherboards - that must have been a lot of dismantling.

Yes, you can see from the works that some of them have over 180 motherboards – that means I dismantled that number of CPU's by hand. It became an obsession and I had to write letters to schools and organisations asking for unused computers. Many times I got rejected and almost gave up. Luckily, I stumbled upon a 'black market' of discarded computers in the industrial area in Sharjah. I purchased hundreds and not only extracted the motherboards but as the monitors built up I also saw an aesthetic value in their forms as well. So I later incorporated them into other works such as 'Red on White 1' and '2' (2013).

So in some ways the process is also an essential part of your work?



'I AM INTERESTED IN MATERIAL: ITS COLOUR, FORM AND MANIPULATION.'

'Tension II' (2014)

Yes the process is very important for me. It would have been easy to order the motherboards, but for me, the process of scouring the country for these abandoned materials was very important.

What are these works trying to say? You mention that it is the form and colour that interested you. Is this work an abstract composition using found parts?

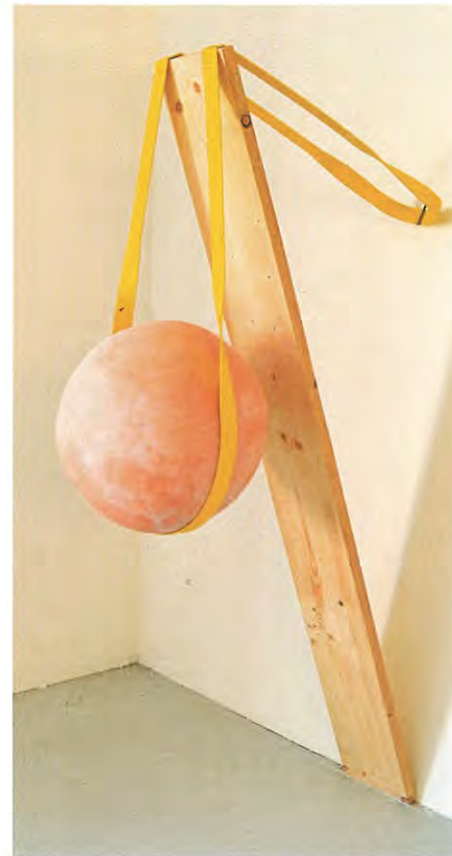
Each work from this series has a different story but I would say the first started from the appropriation of a work by Paul Klee called 'Ancient Sound, Abstract on Black' (1925) that I saw in Abu Dhabi. I was interested in these motherboards in terms of their shapes, colours and how a composition could be created from them. This work inspired me to push ahead with the idea. So the works are quite painterly even though I was using three-dimensional objects to create the arrangement.

When you say 'arrangement' it also sounds like you are referring to a musical score.

That's absolutely right. When I researched more about Paul Klee I also came to learn he was a talented musician and translated music into his works. At the time I was also introduced to Synchronism, an approach to painting that analogised colour to music. I started thinking about incorporating this into my works. In 2010 I did a workshop at Sharjah Art Foundation with Tarek Atoui and we also collaborated on a project together.

Tell me more about this collaboration...

We produced the sounds of a damaged CPU and combined it with strobe lights and an abstract motherboard 'painting' that translated the CPU sounds into color patterns. The piece was called '103' (it was made of 103 circuit boards).



(From Left to Right)
Relax (2014) 'Tension II' (2014)
'Tension I' (2014)

So you seem to reference art history in your works, Modernism in particular, and seem to be influenced by the Bauhaus school. This is quite unusual for a young artist from this region

Yes, I tend to stay away from themes about my culture. I am genuinely interested in art history and so I look at past art movements and how this can be reinterpreted today. I feel this gives my practice a wider scope and more depth. So for example in my work 'Blue Stack' (2010) you can see a reference to Donald Judd and yet I used a computer monitor to produce an abstract minimal form.

There is also some Frank Stella in your work too.
Yes absolutely!

What would you say is the thread that links your artworks together?
I am interested in material: it's colour, form and manipulation. All my drawings start with geometric shapes and develop from that. I also like the idea of illusion especially when it relates to material or the structure of a piece. So some of my works will change appearance depending upon which angle they are approached from.

We met at your graduate show in London at the University of the Arts Chelsea campus. I told you your sculptural works were a stand-out. You then went on to win the MA Student Prize – out of over seventy students. How did you feel about that?

I was absolutely thrilled. There was a lot of stress and anxiety that went into those works – so many failed attempts. I fabricated all the parts – the ceramic balls and the steel 'bands'. Winning the prize really made it worth it – it was the icing on the cake.

The works show a development in your practice. Was this achieved through the MA programme? Did you plan from the outset to make works like this?

The best thing about the London MA programme was that we were instructed not to create art similar to previous works. So my goal was to know the language of sculpture without having a specific concept in mind. I worked with so many materials such as ceramic, bronze, wax, concrete and steel and developed a fascination with ceramics and its endless possibilities. It was pure experimentation. But I always kept coming back to a minimal aesthetic and the geometric forms of my drawings.

How do you want to impact the art scene in the UAE?

Well, pursuing my MA was really about being growing as an academic and contributing this knowledge to my culture. I am now a sculptor instructor at the College of Fine Arts, Sharjah and intend to really drive my students in the same way I was pushed. I am so grateful to professor Colin G Reaney and all my other teachers. I would also like to be a role model as a practicing artist here. So many of my contemporaries abandoned art – it is a young art scene and it is important to see students become academics or practicing artists in the long term.

What is next on the horizon for you in terms of your art?

Well at the moment I am working on a public installation that has been commissioned by the Arab Fund For Art & Culture and which Amanda Abi Khalil is curating. This should be unveiled later this year. **HBA**