

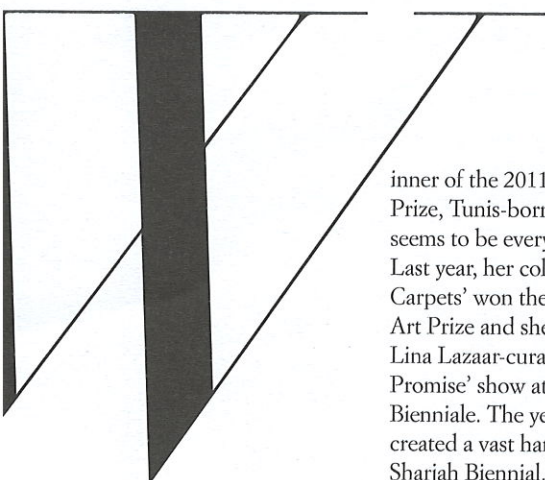
An aerial photograph of a desert landscape, showing sand dunes and tracks in the sand. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The text is overlaid on the upper half of the image.

NADIA KAABI-LINKE

# *BLACK* or *WHITE?*

Arsalan Mohammad meets ultra-prolific Berlin-based artist Nadia Kaabi-Linke ahead of her new show at Dubai's Lawrie Shabibi for a conversation about beetles, bugs and how black is the new white...





inner of the 2011 Abraaj Capital Art Prize, Tunis-born Nadia Kaabi-Linke seems to be everywhere at the moment. Last year, her colossal sculpture, 'Flying Carpets' won the 2011 Abraaj Capital Art Prize and she participated in the Lina Lazaar-curated 'Future Of A Promise' show at the 2011 Venice Biennale. The year before that, she created a vast hanging sculpture for the Sharjah Biennial. Meanwhile, in Berlin,

her adopted hometown of seven years, she's created an installation for a public art project, 'Mein Stein', in the Platz der Stadthof, undertaken residencies in France and the UK and in the midst of all this, has also managed to find the time to assemble 'Black Is The New White', a dynamic new multimedia solo exhibition at Dubai's Lawrie Shabibi gallery. Lesser individuals would, following such a productive year or so, crumpled into a heap of exhaustion by now. Not so Kaabi-Linke, who presented herself at our lunch meeting in Berlin recently with all the vim and vigour of an artist who is most clearly, caught up in the most thrilling of creative rolls.

Typically, Kaabi-Linke's art takes painstaking research, investigative approaches and clinically-precise formulations to develop into work that takes a keen, yet sidelong view at societies and human activity across diverse cultures, environments and political states. Her scientific education – an ongoing passion – reveals itself in her logical, empirical artistic equations and structures. Herself a pan-global, polyglot born to a Tunisian father and Russian mother, she has lived in Tunis, Dubai and Paris before Berlin. Perhaps this is one reason why her encompasses such universal macro-perspective with laser-like attention to detail. From the colossal 'Flying Carpets' structure to new works involving laser-worked glass panes, found lobster pots, satirical fashion advertising and even the humble scarab beetle, Kaabi-Linke spans histories, societies, stories and memories in constant investigations of the world around us.

*Your new show in Dubai presents six new pieces, each of which is quite distinct to the other. You move from art to fashion, and so on, such as in 'Black Is The New White', where you invent a 'luxury' fashion brand, Joseph Van Helt, selling black dishdashas for men and white abayas for women.*

In 'Black Is The New White', what I want to create is confusion. Black is the new white? Why is the man wearing black when he is usually wearing white? And also, art has become very connected to fashion. Now in photography, video and so on, it's about the trends, not the work itself. So here we have a model, in the desert and you can see, he's sweating! He's very elegant, he's almost prophetic. He's very seductive! Women can't resist him [laughs]. So, I called this brand Joseph – which can be Western, or Yusef in Arabic – van Helt.

*Then we have a painting on paper, which I think you said was traced from a building in Tunis – a Ministry building?*

My work is all about context – yes, it's the Ministry of Tourism in Tunis. It's a print of the wall, a painting – there's actually a lot of techniques in this work. This was done on silk paper, I was rubbing it with wax and black ink and then, back in the studio, I worked on it more with paint. That window is really there, I printed it at a 1:1 scale. But whilst I worked on the colours and enhanced them, I didn't invent anything, it's all about the context. I take a piece of something from everyday life and I switch it around to ask questions about the things that seem evident, but are actually not. It's a subtle,



pervasive way to say, 'What do you think about this?' or 'Does it seem right?' To analyse.

*Now, there's an intriguing piece here in the show which is basically – well, actually – a lobster-pot. And you've identified a rather peculiar design element here, is that true?*

I found this lobster pot when I was in Sharjah, producing 'Flying Carpets' last year. When I saw it the first time I was very surprised. I thought that the pattern of the star was there for purely functional purposes and no-one probably looked at the shape of the David star. But the symbolism is important: it's a David star that forms the shape of a lobster trap by its simple multiplication. I feel also attracted to this object because it seems to me like a 3D drawing, an accurate drawing of the repeated form of the star in the space. I called this piece 'Smooth Criminal', one of my favourite Michael Jackson songs, because I saw some similarities between the lyrics and the trap. The smooth criminal is sneaking into Annie's apartment, Annie is blind and cannot see what happens or who is there. This reminded me pretty much of the Palestinian conflict, so it was somehow killing two birds with one stone!

*I have to say this is the first time I have had an interview that includes Michael Jackson, lobsters, Stars of David and Sharjah.*

For me too. But this is just my point of view. Everyone can understand the work the way they want. I think that there is no one who is completely wrong nor totally right in this complicated geopolitical drama. As a Tunisian, Arab, African person, I have always thought that it is easy to throw always the responsibility on the Western world for local problems. Yes, we were colonised. Yes, there was exploitation, etcetera, but we also are responsible for the fact that we don't advance economically, industrially, scientifically and so on. I think that part of this is related to our blind attachment to old traditions that have stayed unchanged from the Middle Ages and probably even before that. We live in a modern, technological age, yet we are still stuck with these traditions.



[Left] Off the wall at the Ministry of Tourism in Tunis. [Main picture] On location for the 'Black Is The New White' shoot. (photographs by TKL)

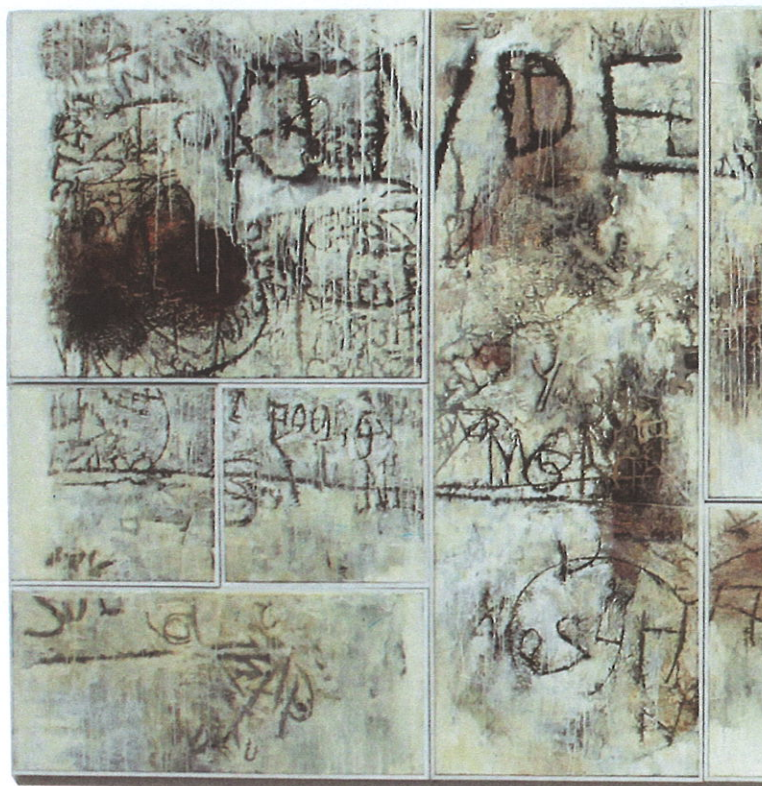


*IT'S ALL ABOUT THE CONTEXT. I TAKE A PIECE OF SOMETHING FROM EVERYDAY LIFE AND I SWITCH IT AROUND TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE THINGS THAT SEEM EVIDENT, BUT ARE ACTUALLY NOT*





# *‘WHY NOT MAKE A NATIONAL IDENTITY WITH DEVELOPMENT? BY DOING SOMETHING CREATIVE?’*



*But one could argue that these traditions are maybe illogical when we try to understand them within the context of our 21st century lives, but they still have an importance to our respective senses of collective cultural identity?*

Yes, but that's my question. Why not make a national identity with development? By doing something creative? I wish the best for Arab nations, and of course, firstly, for my country. But our identity should be something like – we produce the fastest trains in the world! Or we have so much solar energy and there is a global problem with fossil energy in the world – we can invent a new technology to produce clean energy and even export it. Why always wait for the West to invent and sell us their ideas? That's what I want to be my identity. I don't want my identity to be stuck in a dress, which doesn't even make my everyday life easier. But let's go back to the question of Israel and the Arabs. From my point of view, Israel condemns terrorism but perpetrates acts of violence and terror against civilians? Because it is a recognised state, it can present acts of illegal killings as self-protection and thus appear legitimate. It seems to me like the Zionism, from the very beginning of the Israeli state, was counting on the Palestinians' naivety and was setting traps. If the Palestinians don't use strategy and calculate their acts in advance they have little chances to win. Habib Bourguiba in 1965, when he came to Jericho, had already said at that time that the politics of everything or nothing will lead only to the loss of Palestine, he and all Tunisians at that time were considered as non-Arabs and non-Muslims by the Arab community. And the irony is that today the Palestinians wish to get at least to the 1967 borders and Israel refuses. To choose Hamas as an official representative doesn't make things easier for Palestinians. Since then, they were able to do all they wanted, with no international restrictions. It's as if Israel kept on setting traps and the Arab League kept getting caught in them.

*And when you saw the Star of David on the trap, then you felt...*

I felt it was an object that reflected very well my personal view on the conflict. So this is the story of 'Smooth Criminal', the lobster trap – I didn't create it, I just found it. Just like the state of Israel, it is an object that looks nice. Israel is,

besides Lebanon, the only recognised democracy in the region. It has the image of being a shelter to victims of Holocaust and anti-Semitism, and since these things are historical truth, they also use the past to explain that they finally have the right to live in their own land. They are masters at presenting themselves as a free democratic country which is legally defending itself from terrorism. This is a clean and nice image, and, above all, it works. Like the lobster trap, it looks beautiful and is pretty functional too.

*But Israel draws international condemnation regularly for its actions in Palestine?*

From a minority, but fortunately this is starting to get wider, yes. And at the same time let's keep in mind that Israel, unlike Iran, has already nuclear weapons and it is illegal, but this seems to be OK for the international community.

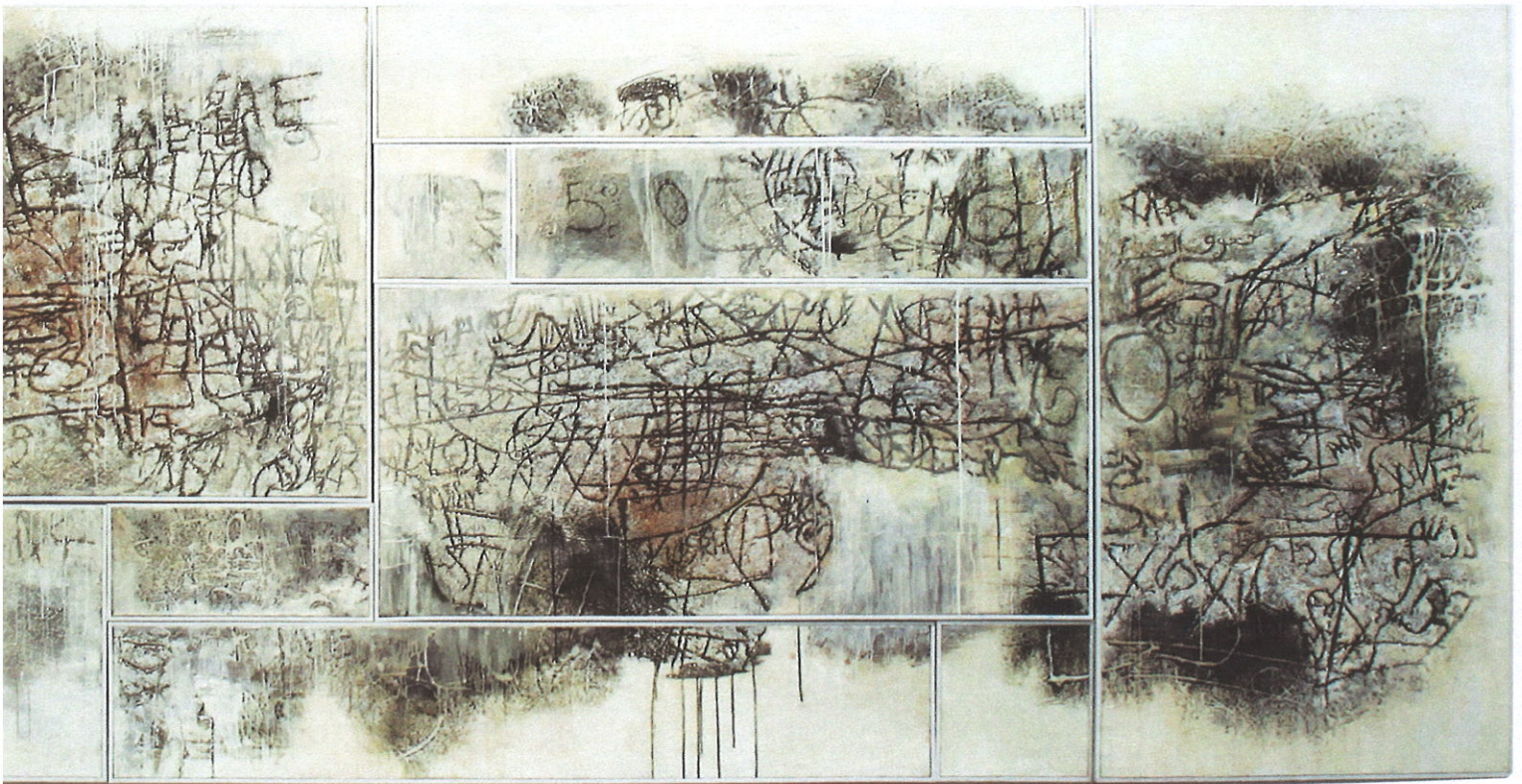
*You really think it's only a minority?*

Yes, I think so, yes. Maybe it's because I'm living in Germany. Here, I can't speak about this, because I am Arab. It will be directly – if I say something about Israel, it will be 'Oh, you think that because you are an Arab'. These things are taboo subjects in Germany.

*Let's move onto this peculiar installation – this is a series of beetles, ambling down a shelf that's a bit crooked, it's tilted downwards. If the beetles were to get to the edge, they'd fall off... These beetles are ugly, yet sort of quite friendly-looking too...*

[Laughs] They're not ugly, they're gorgeous! These bugs are all glass-made and handmade from glass and actually, they're not beetles they're bugs. They're not the disgusting ones from the dirty houses, they're the desert ones, the sweet ones. They're sooooo sweet! I love them! Süß! So, here, we speak about linear time, cyclical time and spiral time. It's related to both the ancient





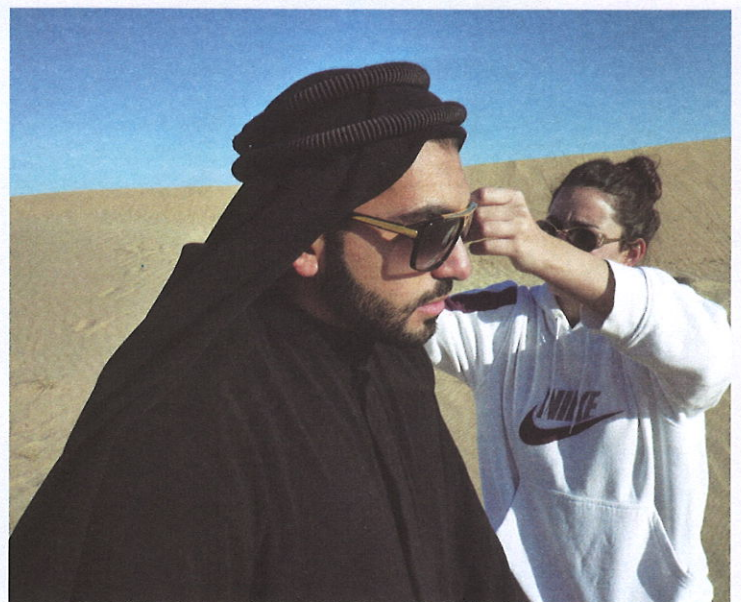
'Bara'a Yadawiya' (2011) [this page] 'Bugs' (2012) (Courtesy Lawrie Shabibi) [below] Prepping 'Joseph van Helt' on location, UAE, 2011 (Courtesy TKL)



and the modern. But, why bugs? Well, there's a lot of symbolism here. Bugs, in the modern times – when you say a 'bug in the system', it's considered to be a dysfunction within the system. And where does that come from? It's literally a bug that was found in this huge server in one of the earliest computers. A bug went into a huge old computer in Harvard University in the 1940s. And look here [*waves a scan of a yellowed paper detailing a mainframe failure, complete with an apologetic-looking bug's carcass sellotaped to it*] after the breakdown of the whole system, the operators traced the error back to a trapped bug, so today we say there's a bug in the system. So, that's one level of understanding this. The other thing is now, we go back to the Egyptian times, the time of the scarab beetle. Precisely, the *scarabaeus sacer*. This is the one I am using here.

#### Scarab beetles? Are they bugs?

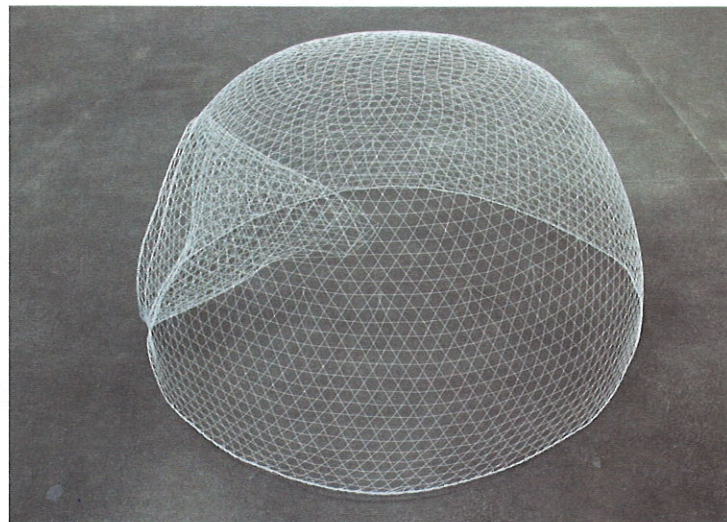
They are considered saints in Egypt! Back in the old times, the Egyptians were sensitive to the Nile going up and down the country. When these bugs began arriving each year in the people's houses, it meant that the Nile was coming, announcing a new time of fertility for the land. This is why these beetles were so prized. Now we're going back to Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. The Tunisian revolution was possible because of many reasons but one of the reasons was with the Facebook and the social media. I was following this from the very beginning, through Facebook. Like, in the first month, you had snipers in the streets and people were really risking their lives – there were shootings and things in the streets. And you would have a lot of information coming out, saying, if something happens you can call this number and can go to the army here or the hospital there. And this information was on Facebook, Twitter etcetera, so everyone knew everything quickly. But then, in a lot of this information, a lot of it was wrong also – if →





Lobster pots in Sharjah and [far right] 'Smooth Criminal' (2012)  
(Courtesy Lawrie Shabibi)

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you followed some of this information, you might end up being killed. And you have always these things that create a lot of panic and fear and you can't trust anyone. A lot of misinformation, like a lot of bugs in the system.

And something else interesting was that you would approximately know where these things would start, where the revolutions start. They'd start somehow following blindly and going one direction, into the unknown. It's very linear. But then at the same time, the word revolution – 're' implies that it is something repeating, that it is a cycle. And the difference is in ancient times, in Egypt, they had a circular model of time, things repeating. Whereas in modern times, we have a linear time span. And at the same time, this linear history has always been punctuated by revolutions. So again, this thing with a line, you are going in one direction, there is a kind of repetition, the bug itself represents this movement. You know you are going somewhere but you don't know where you are going. And at the same time, this will happen with the revolution.

*Do you feel there will be a positive outcome in Tunisia?*

Is it positive? We don't know, what's happening in Egypt now is - a lot of people I know are saying it's much worse now than it was before. In Tunisia, we are not at that point but it is still very unstable. So what I wanted to do with this work was make this line on a huge wall. They are not glued on by the way. If you don't touch them they won't move, but they can fall. But they are yes, they are heading to the edge and there, you don't know what happens!

*But in a sense, so you say everything is cyclical so we can therefore, predict the outcome of the future?*

I don't know, maybe in 20 years or 100 years, we can know. History until now is always like this. I try to be positive as I feel I don't have a choice. If I feel black, I stop. I have reasons why I see a little bit of light. But not a lot.

*Last year, you won the Abraaj Capital Art Prize with your installation 'Flying Carpets', which then went on to feature at the 'Future Of A Promise' group show of Middle Eastern art at the Venice Biennale. Could you explain how this work came about – I believe it was actually modelled on a bridge in Venice?*

Yes, it's not actually representing carpets, but it's the guys on the bridges in Venice who are illegally selling goods on the carpets. And there's a reason why I referenced the carpets and they used the carpets because it's the best way to fly from the police, that's why it's flying carpets! And also, they all come from East Africa, Middle East, India or Pakistan, representing this idea, this image of the Orient. So what I did exactly was select a bridge...

*What qualities were you looking for in your ideal bridge?*

I went to the Biennial a few years ago and coming out of the Giardini, I saw how the police were persecuting these traders in quite a harsh and shocking way. Tourists don't get to see this usually. The image stayed in my mind. But then I thought, this took place on a bridge, I would like to find the bridge where the traders always come. The one I found was very strategic, between

San Marco and the Giardini, it was very central. And it's a real documentation, this work. I didn't invent a single centimetre, it's all really on a 1:1 centimetre scale.

It's a documentation of the traders' presence on that bridge over one week. What I did was to take their exact outlines with chalk, so when the traders left, the markings stayed and I could measure it. I measured exactly the distances and the steps, how many steps, where so I can know the dimensions exactly – it's pure documentation. It's a tribute to them, but just through these invisible traces, they don't leave any traces. Then, the way it was put together – there's always a 2cm distance between the steel pieces, they never touch. They are integrated but they never connect! They hover without touching, the form of the bridge is realized just through the traces.

*How did you decide on this particular approach?*

In the beginning, I didn't think to use a bridge. You see these people are everywhere, not just on bridges. I was thinking about the frame, the dynamic of the bridge and it seemed symbolic – the bridge is coming from one place to the other and that's what these people were doing, they were travelling and their situation was still precarious. But still, why flying carpets in Venice, why not in other cities? Because Venice was the crossing point between East and West. You can see this everywhere in the architecture, Venice was the centre of commerce because of Arabs and other Middle Eastern and South Asian people that used to come through there.

*Yes, Venice was always a crazy mix of people from all over the place*

Yes, when you see my work you see that every word I use, every approach, every element, it always accumulates to make sense. So at the end what happened, why Venice became known, was because of these very people, the traders, their ancestors! And now, they are being treated like s\*\*\*, you know. So there's this time-bridge, geographical-bridge – and of course, the bridge itself.

*So in your representation, the bridge serves to demonstrate the transience of these people's existence, the precariousness of their situation, the bridging of cultures...*

Yes, completely, Venice is known for its bridges! I did this work because they are present everywhere but no one actually sees them. But as human beings, as people, they don't exist, they are invisible. And the work, you'll notice, is almost invisible. It's like their situation.

*Why did you render the piece in metal?*

It's a complete contradiction, I use the metal as they are free to fly the coop with their carpets, but it's also their prison, it's the flying carpets and the prison at the same time. So that why I used the geometric bars, like a flying prison but also this beautiful, hovering thing. That's also why I don't invent. Everything is there. Things come to me. I just accept them. ■

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