Credits

Cover: Lara Baladi. [Detail] Oum El Dounia
(The Mother of the World)

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Caravan is a term that historically denotes a company of travellers—often merchants, pilgrims or migrants—who venture across desert trade routes for business, cultural or spiritual purposes. Today, the idea of a caravan is associated with tourism and leisure. Tourist agencies invite visitors to traverse time in order to experience ancient civilisations, take part in "Bedouin-style adventures" and visit a series of carefully selected historical sites.

Through history, fiction and travel literature has portrayed caravans in the Middle East in a way that straddles fantasy and reality. Meanwhile, modern-day caravan tours claim to offer a gateway into a romantic past including belly dancers, bazaars, camels, hieroglyphics and other opulent tokens of ancient Arabia. In both contemporary and ancient contexts, caravans contain both real and imaginary elements. They embody memories of the past that are only loosely representative of the complexities of cultural traditions and history.

Artists in this exhibition explore ideas of travel, nostalgia and reconstructing the past in a way that reveals the hazy divide between recorded history and myth. The artworks investigate both personal and collective histories behind prevailing ideas of the heritage, culture and antiquity.

Mandy Merzaban
Exhibitions Manager and Curator
The title of the exhibition “Caravan” aptly describes the journey of a group of artists who respond individually and collectively to the passage of time in a region rich with ancient myths and contemporary symbols. However, the art in this exhibition challenges the common definition of caravan as an assembly of vehicles traversing a desolate desert landscape. Artworks by several generations of Arab artists present a visual expedition through the last 50 years of the region’s art production, from the existentialist Sufi philosophy of Shakir Hassan Al Said’s “One-Dimension” theories presented in mixed-media abstract pieces to Shadi Habib Allah’s organic figures stripped of any geo-cultural notations. These artists examine the ontological landscape; the former explores the spiritual human condition while the latter looks at new ways of seeing and using advanced computer technology of animation to highlight the inherent nature of humans and objects.

Caravan takes the viewer from the seemingly uninhabited interiors of traditional homes in Lamya Gargash’s photography to the profusion of figures in the photomontages of Lara Baladi, where the past is animated within an array of familiar characters, drawing us into a fictitious world. Images of past and present also dominate Khalid Hafez’s large canvases, where women take centre stage as Goddess figures.

Ancestral traditions and local mythology are also central to Hassan El Glaoui’s paintings and in the anthropomorphic figures of Halim Karabibene’s artwork respectively. The passage of time permeates Diana Al Hadid’s mixed-media work of ancient architectural fragments juxtaposed with debris of contemporary objects, leading us to question the authenticity of historical objects as artefacts.

Colourful, figurative paintings of daily life in pre-war Iraq are typical of works by Faisal Laibi, in contrast to Iraqi artists Hanaa Malallah and Nazar Yehyah, who focus on the destruction wrought by war in Iraq and the resulting environmental degradation and the loss of life. Sculptural pieces of Ahmed Askalany are inspired by the traditional craft of weaving to create oversized animal shapes. In this exhibition, hens common to the Egyptian countryside are skilfully sculpted using palm leaves.

The Barjeel Art Foundation has succeeded in bringing together a distinguished group of Arab artists whose art offers the viewer different readings of historical narratives that vacillate between reality and fiction. In the process of deciphering the multi-layered meanings of ancient and contemporary symbols, the art challenges us to embark on a personal journey through time.
يصف عنوان معرض "القافلة" رحلة مجموعة من الفنانين الذين تفاعلا بشكل فردي أو جماعي مع مسألة مرور الوقت في منطقة غنية بالأساطير القديمة والرموز المعاصرة. وتتحدى فنون هذا المعرض التعريف التقليدي للقافلة بصفتها مجموعة من السفراء الذين يتجزأون الدروب الصحراوية المفهومة. وذلك من خلال عرض أعمال فنية تميزها لفناناً عرب من أجيال مختلفة يقدمون رحلة حاسمة في خمس سنين ياباً من الإنتاج الفني في المنطقة بانتظاراً من الفلسفة المعاصرة الصوفية لنظريات البعث الواقعي التي قدمها شاهد حسن آل سعيد في أعمال تجريبية متعددة.

وتأتي رحلات القافلة في إلهامها من حرفة الحياكة التقليدية لإبداع أشكال حيوانية ضخمة؛ وقدم الفنان في هذا المعرض مجسمات لطيور الدجاج - الشائع تربيتها في الأرياف المصرية - استناداً على استقطاب نخبة مميزة من الفنانين العرب.»

«مؤسسة برجيل للفنون»

لم نجحت الأعمال التي قدمها هؤلاء المبدعين في تقديم قراءات مختلفة للروايات التاريخية التي تتأرجح بين الواقع والخيال. وفي خضم سعينا لتوضيح المعاني المتعددة لتلك الرموز القديمة، تجتمع هذه الأعمال الفنية لتقودنا في رحلة شخصية عبر الزمن.

سلمى المقدادي
منسقة متاحف ومؤرخة فنية
مدير برامج الفنون والثقافة
مؤسسة الإمارات

وタンبي الرسومات التشفيائية اللونية للحياة اليومية في العراق ما قبل الحرب السمة العامة في لوحات فيصل عيبي، والتي تناقض مع الأعمال التي ركزت على تصوير الدمار الذي تسببت به الحرب في العراق وما نجم عنها من تدمير بيئي وخسارة في الأرواح. وتستحق أعمال أحمد عسقلاني النحتية إلهامها من الحرفة التقليدية لإبداع أشكال حيوانية ضخمة: وقدم الفنان في هذا المعرض مجسمات لطيور الدجاج - الشائع تربيتها في الأرياف المصرية - منحوتة باستخدام سعف النخيل.

لقد نجحت مؤسسة برجيل للفنون في هذا المعرض باستقطاب نخبة مميزة من الفنانين العرب الذين قدموا أعمالهم الفنية للفنانين العرب الذين تخرجوا في الأقليات الفنية المختلفة للفنون التاريخية التي تتأرجح بين الواقع والخيال. وفي خضم سعينا للفنون المعاصرة المبتكرة، توجد الأعمال الفنية لتقودنا في رحلة شخصية عبر الزمن.

Themes of historical accuracy, institutional power and social memory feature in the artwork of painter and interdisciplinary artist Mohamad Said Baalbaki. Based in Berlin, the Lebanese artist was initially known for painted works that drew on his experiences as a child during the Lebanese Civil War and Israeli occupation. Baalbaki and his family were often uprooted and forced to move between different districts in Beirut and elsewhere in Lebanon during the war. Baalbaki’s paintings, often devoid of people, portray piles of items such as suitcases, shoes, clothing and other belongings, symbolising lost, unrecorded and forgotten stories of history. A conceptual shift in Baalbaki’s work occurred in 2006 when he began to examine the role of museums and institutions in guiding dominant perceptions of history.

Baalbaki seeks to challenge the credibility of the museum, asking: “why and how does an artefact presented in a museum convey the impression of utmost credibility and authenticity to the spectator?” Baalbaki’s work, featured in many prestigious galleries, has been exhibited across the Middle East, Europe, Canada and the United States.

Mohamad Said-Baalbaki

B. Beirut, Lebanon, 1974

MM: Initially, your body of work focused on painting and the materiality of paint on canvas. How did your approach help you convey some of your personal experiences growing up in Beirut during the civil war in the 80s?

MSB: My biography is very closely linked to painting. I come from a family of artists and painting was one of my early childhood discoveries. Growing up in Beirut during the civil war meant that we were often forced to stay within the four walls of our home; this was a protective space and at the same time a kind of prison. Painting became a place of refuge for me, the realm where I could dream and explore new things.

The things I had experienced were not always easy to convey. As a student in Beirut, my paintings dealt with themes of destruction and reconstruction. Later on after moving to Berlin, my work took a different turn and I began to develop other themes. During my early years in Berlin my paintings were quite dark: I suffered from the lack of light, often feeling homesick and I was not sure where I belonged. Themes of exile, travel and identity became central to my work. I used suitcases and boxes as metaphors to express these sentiments. These motives possess a certain ambivalence. On one hand, every person who has experienced war links them to flight and exile. You get used to always having a packed suitcase on hand in case you need to flee. On the other hand, they represent new beginnings, hope, travel and even adventure. These different meanings converge and overlap in my paintings of suitcases. In 2006, I went back to Beirut for an artist’s residency and it was during this extended stay that colour and light found its way back into my painting. I had made the

Mohamad Said-Baalbaki. Trunks. Oil on canvas. 150 x 200 cm 2006
Property of the Barjeel Art Foundation
© Christie's Images Ltd., 2010
Caravan

decision to stay in Berlin, to build a home there and this decision took much of the anxiety out of my life. I enjoyed a new-found freedom. So the suitcases took on another meaning, they began to symbolise hope and new beginnings rather than flight and danger. This visual aspect was paralleled by a technical factor: in the hot and dry climate of Beirut, paint dries much faster than in Germany, so I was able to work with a complex technique using multiple layers of paint and thus introduce a sense of light in my paintings. This light together with the warm, soft colours shows a relation to French painting, something I feel closely connected to.

MM: Can you elaborate on what motivated your transition from painting to a more conceptual approach? Have you abandoned painting entirely?

MSB: I have been moving in these two parallel yet interlinked universes for the past three or four years. While they are complementary, I have discovered that it is impossible for me to work simultaneously in both since they represent very different approaches. Yet, they form two central pillars of my work. Painting is and will always remain my first artistic medium, the one I find most natural to express myself in. I consider myself first and foremost a painter. But my painting has changed during this process to become more conceptual, focusing on complex ideas that show a certain ambivalence or irony. This is also a reflection of my life in Berlin with its different aspects. I have not yet solved my question of identity, which is like a tree whose roots stretch further and further in all directions. All these ideas take time to develop, they cannot be hurried and this is what I am working on currently. I am in a phase of intensive work, spending many hours a day painting and I have discovered that I missed this intensity.

On the other hand, my conceptual work allows me to develop other ideas that have been of lasting interest to me, such as archaeology, history, archives and collections. It also allows me to reflect on contemporary society in a different way, from a more analytical, “scientific” angle. I have always been fascinated by the world of science and research. If I had not studied painting, I could easily imagine myself working in this field.

MM: In your ongoing conceptual work “Al Buraq”, you fabricate a fictional story about how two German scientists in the early 20th century discover the remains of Al Buraq, a winged horse with a human head used by Prophet Muhammad to travel from Jerusalem to Mecca in a single night. What is the motivation behind this body of work and why did you decide to use Al Buraq? In what ways is the fabrication a reflection of what goes on in the world around us?

MSB: The work’s central aspect is not Al Buraq, which is not mentioned in the first part of the project, but rather the question of how knowledge and truth are fabricated and transmitted. After completing my MFA, I did a master’s in museum studies. Instead of focusing purely on how to present knowledge in an objective way, I was interested in using the museum space as an artist; I wanted my intervention to be present. At that time, I developed a number of ideas on this basis. One project was a concept for a museum of history in Beirut. To define a history in Lebanon is almost impossible, many different views clash and many people claim to possess “truth”. Ideas on what defines the “nation” are so diverse that the idea of a clearly defined historic truth that could be presented in an accessible way in an institution remains almost fictional. For another project, I used parts of a personal archive of newspaper clippings on archaeology and history. Though the physical archive was lost during the July War of 2006, I remembered one clipping about an intriguing discovery of dinosaur bones in the Beqaa Valley that occurred during a search for oil. Since the scientists’ quest was for oil, the bones had no value to them and the discovery was largely unnoticed. Such stories were always very interesting to me because they show how we attach value and importance to pieces of scientific information and how very shortsighted considerations often
influence our long-term understanding. Another aspect is how easily people allow themselves to be tricked by constructions based on images. One of the most glaring recent examples was the way Colin Powell was able to make the whole world believe in Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction in 2003, only through the use of a couple of manipulated photos.

The “Al Burak” project studies the fabrication of truth and knowledge. It starts with the discovery of a casket with mysterious bones belonging to an unknown animal during an archaeological excavation. A discussion ensues between two scientists who try to analyse the finds, thereby navigating between realms of fiction and reality, religion and science, knowledge and belief. The discovery that the shoulder blade of the animal has a strange deformation, showing properties of a possible wing, is the crucial part, a ‘pars pro toto’ for all legendary winged creatures of history: Pegasus, winged lions, winged griffons, etc. It links the worlds of legend and myth on one hand and science on the other.

**MM:** We are often quick to accept records provided by museums and institutions as factual and objective. In creating artefacts, data and research texts and arranging them in a way where they would mimic an authentic curatorial display in a museum, your work challenges a viewer’s gullibility in trusting facts based on appearances alone. How does your work call into question perceptions of recorded history and the credibility of the museum?

**MSB:** I wanted particularly to challenge the viewers’ ideas of the museum as an institution that conveys facts and knowledge. Many objects in museums and collections are in fact contested and may or may not be “fakes”. Their presence in a museum, however, conveys credibility onto them, even if their provenance is not known. This immediately leads to the next question: “What is a “fake”? And further than that: might not a “fake” have some value in itself? At what point does a “fake” become “authentic”? It was a common practice in Ancient Rome to commission copies of pieces of Greek art. A Roman copy of a Greek statue might once have been considered a “fake”, but now it has become a piece of ancient fine art in itself and is displayed as such. At some point in the future, maybe this will happen to other “fakes”, too.

In this project I was interested in exploring what mechanisms work to create truth and knowledge. The objects were one part, the documentation (texts, letters, photographs, drawings) another and the presentation itself the third. I wanted to create a space reminiscent of 19th century museum collections so I produced typical museum cabinets and showcases to achieve this ceremonial atmosphere of another time. My intention was to come as close to a genuine museum display as possible, for it to appear as though it had been accumulated over decades, when in essence I would be presenting a complete fabrication. The discovery, documents, objects and creature in question are presented as legitimate finds and thus question the environments and circumstances that influence how we accept objects and ideas as “facts”.

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**Caravan**

*Al-Burak I, das menschenköpfige Reittier des Propheten“ (2007-09)*


Rekonstruktionen eines Skeletts des Buraks nach islamischen Darstellungen

Prominent Iraqi mixed-media artist, Hanaa Malallah cultivated her artistic practice growing up in an environment of conflict, sanctions, war and occupation. Remaining in Iraq despite periods of violence, lawlessness and travel restrictions in the 1980s and 1990s, Malallah investigates the concept of homeland, spirituality and ruin in her art practice. Malallah spearheaded the ‘ruins technique’ among Iraqi artists beginning in the 1970s: using damaged materials to depict ruin. As art materials became sparse due to sanctions in the 1990s, artists turned even more to items found in their surroundings: burnt paper, torn cloth, barbed wire, splintered wood and bullets among them. Concern over the loss of Iraq's heritage, particularly the destruction of its libraries and the looting of the Baghdad National Museum following the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, is one prominent theme in her work, which often carries the residual scent of smoke. “My works appear as in ‘ruins’ the cycle of destruction visited upon my city Baghdad, its desecration and humiliation,” Malallah has said. She also looks at the relationship between religion, spirituality and art using the symbol of the Hoopoe bird, mentioned in the Quran. Malallah has taken part in countless group and solo exhibitions in Iraq, Europe, the Middle East and the United States.

Henaa Malallah
B. Thee Qar, Iraq, 1958

Malallah, who was born in 1958 in the Iraqi city of Thee Qar, has been one of the most influential Iraqi artists of her generation. Despite living in a country rife with conflict, war and occupation, she has continued to develop her artistic practice, often using damaged materials to depict the concept of ruin. Her work often carries the residual smell of smoke, reflecting the destruction of her city Baghdad.

Her art practice was influenced by the ‘ruins technique’, which she pioneered among Iraqi artists in the 1970s. This technique involved using damaged materials to depict ruin. As art materials became scarce due to sanctions in the 1990s, artists turned to items found in their surroundings, such as burnt paper, torn cloth, barbed wire, splintered wood and bullets.

Concern over the loss of Iraq’s heritage, particularly its libraries and the looting of the Baghdad National Museum following the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, is a prominent theme in her work. Malallah’s art often carries the residual scent of smoke, reflecting the destruction of her city Baghdad and its desecration and humiliation.

She also explores the relationship between religion, spirituality and art, using the symbol of the Hoopoe bird mentioned in the Quran. Malallah has taken part in countless group and solo exhibitions in Iraq, Europe, the Middle East and the United States.
Themes of war, wandering and expatriation are evident in the work of Iraqi painter and mixed-media artist Nazar Yehyah. He creates nonfigurative, deeply textured pieces that tend to rely on dim colours, such as sandy browns and oily blacks, as well as construction materials and other objects to reflect the deterioration prevalent in a war-torn environment. The Tigris River links the works in his most-recent collection, including the piece presented in the show. They were made with different media on fabrics, and track the transformation of the Tigris “from a space of beautiful memories to an arena stained with sectarian conflict and policy”, Meem Gallery cited Yehyah as saying. “I was born near this river and watched its rapidly flowing water carrying boats, wandering between Karkh and Rasafa every day in the placid, peaceful life of the people of Baghdad. This transports me from what I know of it now: it is a river that conceals anonymous victims, feeding the fish in its waters.” Yehyah, now settled in Houston, graduated from Baghdad’s Academy of Fine Arts with a degree in painting in 1987. He has held solo and group shows in Iraq, Lebanon, the United States, Britain, and across the Gulf Arab region, as well as participating in the Asian Art Biennale.
Caravan

Image courtesy of Meem Gallery, Dubai
Lara Baladi

B. Beirut, 1969

Elements of reality and fantasy are woven into visually alluring form in the artwork of interdisciplinary artist Lara Baladi. With a focus on photography and multimedia, Baladi creates photomontage, video and installation works that often straddle the past and present and draw the viewer into a dizzying array of narratives. A mix of Egyptian and Lebanese origin,

Baladi photographs and meticulously arranges found imagery in a way that portrays the chaotic realities of the world in a coherent, mythological manner. She explores the pervasive nature of time in pieces that express the past, observe the present and envisage the future. In “Oum El Dounia”—which means ‘Mother of the World’ in Arabic and is often used as a reference to Egypt in popular culture—one of the many subjects Baladi deals with is the Biblical concept of the third day of creation, when water and earth were separated, allowing humanity to begin. A flaming orange and blue landscape, a sheesha smoker in a purple cocoon and a luminous mermaid comprise some of the peculiar characters of her imagined world. Baladi, who lives and works in Cairo, has exhibited widely in the Middle East, Europe, Japan, Australia and the United States.

Lara Baladi

B. Beirut, 1969

论证的科学元素–这使它充满艺术性和创造力的融合–在介绍中应用于表达它们。结合摄影的现代技术和多媒体方式，Baladi创作了拼贴画、视频和装置作品，这些作品往往跨越过去和现在，并将观众带入眩晕的叙事。作为埃及和黎巴嫩的混合体，Baladi通过精确的构图和处理所发现的图像，在一种连贯、神话般的方式下表现出了世界混乱的现实。她探索了时间的蔓延性，在作品中描绘过去，观察现在并预想未来。在“Oum El Dounia”——这个意味着“世界之母”——在阿拉伯语中经常用于对埃及的参考之一，是Baladi处理的许多主题之一，包括对创世第三天的定义，那时水和大地被分开，人类得以开始。燃烧的橙色和蓝色的风景，一个戴着紫色茧的sheesha香客和一个发光的美人鱼是她想象世界中的一些奇特角色。Baladi，她住在开罗，广泛地在中东、欧洲、日本、澳大利亚和美国展出。
Lara Baladi
“Oum el Dounia” (“The Mother of the World” in Arabic and also an expression used to refer to Egypt) Original collage commissioned by La Fondation Cartier pour l’Art Contemporain 300 x 100 cm lamda print laminated on plexi. Edition 2/6. © Copyright Lara Baladi, 2000.

Image courtesy of Lara Baladi and Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde.
Caravan

to socialise; the spaces include both traditional elements and evidence of globalisation. The majlis concept has moved out of the strictly domestic sphere into popular culture; tourists and foreign residents alike are able to participate in a majlis experience that may only loosely represent its authentic function. Gargash has participated in numerous group shows in Canada, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Japan and France and represented the UAE at the 2009 Venice Biennale.

Lamya Gargash

B. Dubai, 1982

Photographs of spaces in public and private realms of Emirati society are featured in the portfolio of Dubai-based photographer Lamya Gargash. As the society around her transforms at rapid speed, Gargash investigates how certain aspects of tradition and culture are preserved and others are erased or transformed. Quiet and ethereal, Gargash's photos highlight a series of vacant spaces such as the majilis, hotel lobby, family room, bedroom and bathroom. Gargash combines aesthetics of interior design, theatre and museum display in photos that are both nostalgic and forebode the consequences rapid generational change. She uses light in each of the spaces to accentuate absence and emptiness. Her Majlis series focuses on the room in Emirati homes where people traditionally gathered
Syrian-born artist Diana Al Hadid works in sculpture, installation and drawing. She is most renowned for erecting elaborate sculptures of architecture, such as towers and labyrinths in a state of near ruin. Al Hadid's practice takes an experimental approach with materials, such as cardboard, plywood, polystyrene, plaster, fibreglass and polymer gypsum. Her sculptures resemble and reconstruct various motifs, including Biblical and mythological narratives, Gothic architecture, Islamic ornamentation and advances in physics and astronomy. Her large-scale, imposing sculptures often appear both fragile and rigid, as though they were frozen at the cusp of collapse, caught between physical and temporal realms. Her drawings, such as seen in this exhibition, complement these works. Raised and currently residing in the United States, Al Hadid references the rise and fall of ideologies and civilisations and explores cultural hybridity and incidental invention through experimentation. With fragments of Ottoman domes, pipe organs, grand pianos, Corinthian pillars and grand staircases, the sculptures traverse time, and create otherworldly structures that exist in a present-day context. Al Hadid's work has been exhibited in several museum exhibitions throughout the United States, Greece, Germany and Spain. Her work has also been showcased in exhibitions in the United Kingdom, Turkey, France and the United Arab Emirates, including the Sharjah Biennial.

Diana Al Hadid

B. Aleppo, Syria, 1981

Diana Al Hadid. Record of a Mortal Universe. Steel, plaster, wood, fibreglass, polystyrene, plastic, polymer gypsum, concrete, paint 390.7 x 401.3 x 424.2 cm.2007. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery Private Collection.

© Diana Al Hadid
MM: Can you talk a bit about your experience growing up in Ohio?

DH: Ohio has a fairly wide range of both rural and urban experiences, but I was raised somewhere in the middle, in the suburbs. The suburbs of the American Midwest form a strange place for many reasons. It is at once extremely friendly and familiar, and alienating. There is also a lot more space than you have in a big city, and you spend a lot of time in cars. Driving can be a meditation going from city to city. Some of my favourite people come from Ohio.

MM: How did your practice evolve into sculpture? How do your drawings relate to your sculptures and what role do they play in the greater context of your artwork?

DH: When I first committed myself to sculpture, I was at Kent State for my undergraduate studies. I was first a drawing major because it seemed to be the most wide-open, non-denominational of the departments. And of course like, I think, most artists, I was drawing before I did anything else. After my first sculpture class, I changed my major because it felt even more limitless, and more challenging to me. I felt that there was more to explore for me with sculpture–experimenting with new materials let me behave a little like a lab researcher. And learning how to build things from scratch taught me to be a more creative problem-solver. I also spent a year doing photography intensively, and some time doing digital art. But I seemed to care a lot more when I worked with more tactile materials, so I followed that clue. Drawing, though, has always been part of my practice and continues to be. I’ve noticed that broadly speaking, my work is constructed from amassing planes (or layers) and lines, which leaves the work dense but never enclosed, so there is a sense of transparency. I tend not to think or build in a solid mass. I see things in terms of shells.
and encasements–exterior and interiors. That’s a common denominator. I build a lot of lines, little by little, in both my sculptures and my drawings. More recently, the lines and planes have become a little more liquid and both the sculptures and the drawings are becoming a complex of puddles and drips.

MM: Can you describe a bit about your process and how you plan and assemble your sculptures?

I don’t know how to answer this simply. As I said, I do a lot of experiments with materials, and see what they can do or how they can misbehave. There’s also a lot adding/subtracting/sawing/gluing/cutting/pasting. And then there’s a lot of inching things over to the left and then to the right and back to the left again. Sometimes my plan is more clear than other times in the beginning, but the work always changes as I make decisions along the way. I never make all the decisions at once or ahead of time; it tends to lose the purpose somehow. I like to discover what I’m doing and learn what I’m interested in as I make it, so I begin very simply with what I know has to be done.

MM: What considerations do you make in regards to space and how a viewer may or may not be able to interact with the work?

DH: Scale, of course, is the relationship between the small and the large. But it’s not just a matter of size and space, it’s also a way to distribute attention. I find my attention fluctuates from microscopic and macroscopic things, and this relates as well to a zooming back and forth in focus from the far future to the distant past. I think sculpture generally tends to implicate the human body somehow (at least in terms of scale). And I think therefore as a result of my interest in distant places, my sculptures end up usually outside my own reach. (But this relates also to the previous answer, in that the building process and the materials dictate the outcome of the work)

As far as “interaction”, viewers are welcome to project themselves into the space, psychologically but never literally (unless it’s clearly an installation that is traversable). I always want the viewer to move entirely around the sculpture because there is always more to the story than a single perspective can show. The piece often changes quite a bit in the round. That answers one form of “interaction”. But in terms of another form—the viewer’s experience with the work—to be honest, I worry a lot more about what I want from myself or of myself. I hope people see everyday things with more depth, complication and empathy—but I don’t purport to be able to do that for them, or to be able to show them how. I just hope that interacting with my work causes people first to slow down.

MM: In the process of building how do you decide when your work is complete?

DH: As I start a work, the choices and options seem limitless and I begin with what I know needs to happen first and taper my decisions from that point on. The next step is built on the previous and the options become more limited. I think by the end, the options are slighter and slighter and I become less interested when all the problems are solved, so I move on. But I am making decisions up to the last minute, so what may seem like the most minor thing can really affect the whole piece completely.
**MM:** Your work references multiple architectural histories, narratives and ornamentation in one simultaneous viewing experience. You have said you can approach sculpture somewhat like a lab researcher, constantly reacting to the process as it evolves. How do you determine which of these historical elements you will include and how do they function in your work?

**DH:** The process of making these works is perhaps not always as conscious from the onset as it may seem to have been when the work is finished. The lab researcher comment was more in regards to experimenting with materials, seeing what works and what doesn’t. The materials I use and the process involved are never far from the narrative references you mentioned, they are not discrete elements considered independently of one another. In either case, I don’t have all the answers from the beginning. I simply chase the most-urgent curiosity, whether its pursuit leaves only a residue in the piece or whether it leads me elsewhere in the work I don’t know. Neither the concept nor the composition, nor the material, nor any of these things that make up the work in the end are so clearly predetermined. I have trouble thinking of meaning in such clear, symbolic terms. I think a more accurate way to think of this is having a magnetic attraction or gravitational pull towards something. It is important to make this clarification regarding the course of the work because it addresses not just how the work is made, but more importantly, why. My interests unfold alongside the work; as I learn about each piece, I learn what interests me. I don’t make the work to show people what I’m interested in. I make work to become interested, to learn something. The research doesn’t exist outside of my work, it doesn’t inform my work, the research is the work, and the work is research.

**MM:** You have a nuanced range of titles for your works such as *Portal to a Black Hole*, *Spun to the Limits of My Lonely Waltz* and *Record of a Mortal Universe*. Each seems to reference science fiction and myth. How do you decide to name your works and what role do they play in providing a narrative?

**DH:** Yes, I do seem to be attracted to difficult-to-reach places. I don’t have a simple answer for how I arrive at my titles, but I do know that I wait until the end, which must mean something. It’s likely because by then I am sure I have done all the necessary research or experimenting that I can do within that piece. Then I try to find a title that may point to something I discovered (perhaps a small fact or a process or a big organising principle), or some element that seems to matter to me here more than it did there. Usually it’s not one thing, so typically my titles will simultaneously refer to two or more things. I don’t know if they “provide a narrative”, but at best they suggest a clue.
Shakir Hassan Al-Said

B. Samawah, Iraq, 1925-2004

One of Iraq’s most-influential artists, Shakir Hassan Al-Said produced abstract works of art inspired by the principles of Islamic sufism. The late artist regarded painting as an act of sacred contemplation, and he developed an art philosophy known as al-Bua’d al-Wahid, or One Dimension, representing the area between the visible world and the invisible realm of God. Al-Said’s paintings and mixed-media works often sought to give a glimpse into this dimension. He believed contemplation of the glory of God caused the personal self to disintegrate into the eternal one. Known for co-founding the Baghdad Modern Art Group in 1951, Al-Said was an inspiration for many artists in his generation to create a distinctive Iraqi style that was simultaneously modern and traditional, carrying a unique contemporary “Arabo-Islamic” aesthetic. Other than sufism, Al-Said’s art was rooted in Western modern thought, including structuralism, semiotics, deconstructionist, phenomenology and existentialist thought. Magnificently textured, his paintings often toy with the sense of time, appearing seemingly ancient while also containing elements, such as graffiti and splashes of paint, that bring them into the modern context.

Shakir Hassan Al-Said. Jala Aidun (Evacuation, We will return). 1983
Mixed media on board. 122 x 102cm
© Image courtesy of Bonhams
Mixed-media artist Khaled Hafez draws on legend and fiction to explore dichotomies that exist within popular culture in his native Egypt. Themes including secular versus religious, male versus female and sacred versus commercial are evident in his paintings and video works. Hafez recycles and manipulates images from media and advertising that have entered into popular consciousness, often juxtaposing them on canvas with ancient gods and goddesses. His work is inspired by the movement inherent in Ancient Egyptian paintings, where all painted elements—figures, shapes and animals—were in motion rather than caught in a static pose. “In contemporary culture dominated by a century of Western film and animation, the similarity between these ancient and contemporary forms of the kinetic is intriguing to me, and a focal aspect of my research,” Hafez said in a statement carried by Culture Hall. Goddesses convey ideas of female supremacy, with male figures usually appearing in smaller form in a challenge to the prevailing sexism in mainstream Egyptian culture. In works prior to the Jan 25 revolution, Hafez also juxtaposed military and civilian figures within a dense, suspense-filled composition. Hafez’s work has been showcased widely in group exhibitions in the United States, Greece, Germany, Belgium, Britain, France, China, Bosnia and Italy.

(Right) [Detail] Khaled Hafez. Seated Goddess with Side up. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas. 120 x 200 cm. 2009. Image courtesy of the artist and Caprice Horn.
Khaled Hafez. Seated Goddess with Side up. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas. 120 x 200 cm. 2009. Image courtesy of the artist and Caprice Horn. Property of the Barjeel Art Foundation.
Prominent Kuwaiti artist Sami Mohammed investigates how personal struggle, conflict and cultural identity can be represented in the human form through sculpture. Beginning with creating forms from clay at an early age, Mohammed's sculptural practice evolved as a tool to capture aspects of his heritage and later as a way to express the universality of human struggle. One of the founders of the Kuwaiti Association for Plastic Arts in 1967, Mohammed later completed a degree in sculpture at the Fine Arts College in Cairo and studied in the United States. On returning to Kuwait in 1974, he explored new materials such as metal, wood and gypsum to capture aspects of Bedouin lifestyle and daily activity. He is best known for poignant bronze sculptures, which often include male figures in a moment of intense physical pain and emotional struggle. Capturing in graphic detail figures breaking through walls and barriers, with broken flesh and strained muscles and tendons, his art reflects the peak of human resistance. Through his work, Mohammad represented the massacre of Palestinian refugees at camps Sabra and Shatila in 1982 during the Lebanese Civil War. His work has been exhibited globally, including at the launch of Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art in Qatar in 2010.

Sami Mohammed
B. Kuwait, 1943

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Ahmed Askalany

B. Qena, Egypt, 1978

Egyptian artist Ahmed Askalany utilises traditional materials, weaving and craft methods of Upper Egypt to create sculptures that express his native roots in a contemporary context. Born in a southern Egyptian village, Askalany derives inspiration for his work from human figures and animals in his native town. Askalany connects traditional forms and materials in a way that responds to the complexities of contemporary art. He weaves palm leaves using an ancient Egyptian craft technique typically associated with basic objects, such as baskets. However, his work should not be viewed as folk art because, prior to his work, there was no artistic tradition in Egypt of weaving figures of animals and people from palm leaves. His sculptures are in a constant state of reflection, capturing fleeting moments such as a horse ride or a kiss. In Askalany’s own words, “simplicity is my philosophy—to convey the idea directly to the viewer without going into detail”. Askalany has participated in several solo and group exhibitions in Egypt and abroad, including in Paris, Rome, the Venice Biennale, Holland, Sarajevo, Cuba and the Gulf Arab region. His first show, in 1998, was held in his native Qena.

Ahmed Askalany. Hen #1, #2, #3. Palm leaves, resin and chicken wire. 38 x 20 x 35 cm, 40 x 20 x 43 cm, 40 x 20 x 43 cm. 2008. Photo courtesy of Tayma Bittard.
Highly praised Egyptian artist Chant Avedissian engages the viewer with a body of work that integrates images of iconic figures in Egyptian history, traditional Pharaonic iconography and art of the 1950s and 1960s. A Cairo-born artist with Armenian roots, Avedissian's interests in folk art, sufi poetry, Zen principles and aestheticism are evident in his creations, which also strike a balance with Western work processes. Avedissian, educated in Montreal and Paris, has a strong interest in traditional arts and local materials. He celebrates popular culture and politics in Egypt using images printed over stencilled backgrounds that are hand-painted and coloured using local pigments. His work features stars from the heyday of Egyptian music and cinema—notably Umm Kalthoum, Farid Al-Atrash, Abdel Halim Hafez, Faten Hamama and Asmahan. As well, political figures from between the early days of King Farouk's rule and President Gamal Abd El Nasser's death are portrayed. The influence of these cultural and political icons still resonates in Egypt today. Avedissian also uses Islamic geometric patterns, Ottoman design, hieroglyphics from magazines, advertisements and stock photos to create his bold works of art. His pieces have been exhibited around the world.

Chant Avedissian

B. Cairo, Egypt, 1951

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Chant Avedissian "King's Valley" Oil and watercolour on cardboard 43 x 63 cm.
© Image courtesy of Bonhams
Prolific Moroccan painter Hassan El Glaoui has a formidable portfolio of artwork that seeks to capture the cultural essence of his homeland, with particular emphasis on the bond between a horse and its rider. Painting horses and Tbouriba form a natural part of El Glaoui's practice because of his early exposure to the equestrian lifestyle. In Moroccan cultural tradition, Tbouriba refers to the practice of horse riders charging simultaneously while aiming their jezails (long-barrelled rifles) toward the sky. Despite opposition from his father, a powerful pasha named Thami, El Glaoui began painting in his teens and, following art education in France, he held his first show in 1952 in Paris. He then returned to Morocco in 1965, concentrating on painting horses. El Glaoui regards his work as a “living mirror of the past and the traditions which are still the essence of the Moroccan spirit.” “My love of my country has been the defining spirit of my painting. I have recorded our ancestral roots, the flowers in the Valley of the Kasbah and the red Cherifian palaces, the royal corteges with their long lines of white burnouses and the mounted cavalry and their horses,” El Glaoui said in an interview carried by Yacout in 2009. Numerous exhibitions have showcased El Glaoui's acclaimed work, including in Paris, New York, Brussels, London and Casablanca.

[Right] Hassan El Glaoui. Kadiry. Oil on canvas. 160 x 110 cm. 2009-10
Photo courtesy of Tayma Bittard
Caravan

Hassan Glaoui. Kadiry. Oil on canvas. 160 x 110 cm. 2009/10

Hassan Glaoui. Ben Barka. Oil on canvas. 123 x 97 cm. 2009/10
Images courtesy of Tayma Bittard.
George Bahgory

B. Luxor, Egypt, 1935

A cclaimed Egyptian painter George Bahgory creates cubist-style paintings that tap into the colourful history of Egyptian popular culture and heritage. Beginning his career as a cartoonist in the late 1950s for a magazine called Rose El-Youssef, Bahgory’s figurative style, sarcasm, and political awareness and satire infiltrated his later transition to painting. Among a generation of cartoonists that promoted the Nasserist ideology of Pan-Arabism, women’s rights and national reform, Bahgory infuses his artworks with the residue of Egyptian national history and culture. Periodically using references to popular icons of the era, like diva Umm Kalthoum, in his painted works, Bahgory’s paintings playfully evoke a sense of deep nostalgia, historical reflection and cultural preservation. “With every stroke of the brush I recall an Egypt that I don’t want to disappear,” Bahgory said in an interview with Al Ahram newspaper. After completing a degree at Egypt’s Fine Arts Institute, Bahgory left his home country in the early 1970s to study at the Fine Arts Institute of Paris, where he lived for the following three decades. Receiving numerous prestigious awards, Bahgory has published six books, three of which were dedicated to art. Bahgory’s work has been showcased internationally, including in the Middle East and Europe.

(Right) [Detail] George Bahgory. Après Gauguin. 2009. Mixed Media on canvas. 208 x 208 cm
(Left) George Bahgory. The Egyptian writer. 2009. Oil on canvas. 80 x 118 cm
(Above) George Bahgory. Apres Gaugin. 2009. Mixed Media on canvas. 208 x 208 cm

Images courtesy of Tayma Bittard.
Painting in a figurative and surreal manner, acclaimed Tunisian painter Halim Karabibene reflects on political and socio-cultural themes in artwork. Karabibene's canvases are often crowded with people, animals, and half-human, half-animal figures that are stationary or floating. The artist draws on European artistic and political history, and is inspired greatly by the atmosphere of his hometown, Bizerte. The northernmost Tunisian city bordering the Mediterranean Sea includes a harbour from the early French protectorate, and is surrounded by medieval fortifications.

"Using cultural clichés as a catalyst, these fantastic and outlandish visions are a representation of our shared—and so often hysterical—collective consciousness," Tunisia's Galerie el Marsa has said to describe Karabibene's work. Caustic humour underlies his dream-like creations, which reflect on issues facing society and politics. Karabibene, who studied at the School of Architecture of Paris, has spent the last few years trying to push the government to inaugurate Tunisia's first National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. He has exhibited in Tunisia, as well as France, Italy, Spain, Morocco, UAE and the United States.

Halim Karabibene. Carthage Story. 2007. Oil on canvas. 120 x 120 cm
Image courtesy of the Barjeel Art Foundation.
Faisal Laibi Sahi

B. Basra, Iraq, 1947

An important figure in modern Iraqi art, Faisal Laibi Sahi works with oils, acrylic, water colours and ink to create lively, colourful paintings which convey a distinctly Iraqi style of painting and expression. Many of his vibrant painted works complexly depict everyday Iraqi life in history, including coffee shop scenes, while he has also worked with detailed ceramics and simplified linear drawings. Living outside of Iraq for about three decades and now settled in London, Laibi Sahi acquires continual inspiration from the rich cultural heritage of pre-Islamic Mesopotamian civilisations, namely Sumer, Babylon and Assyria. Influences from these civilisations are mixed with modern techniques and skilfully woven into his works. His coffee shop pieces often depict a variety of influential figures within Iraqi society, sometimes containing political references. His paintings and drawings express a keen sense of historical identity that surpasses patriotism. Laibi Sahi studied in Baghdad in the late sixties before furthering his education in Paris. Since 1966, Laibi Sahi has held many solo shows in Iraq, Algeria, Britain, Italy and Germany, as well as participating in numerous group shows the world over.

Caravan

Faisal Laibi Sahi. The Coffee Shop 2. Acrylic on canvas. 178 x 150 cm. 1996.

Image courtesy of the artist and Al Bareh gallery.
The television shows the frontal view of two male figures laying side by side in a constant exchange of competitive, distrustful gazes, seemingly attempting to overpower one another. A recent graduate of the Columbia University’s Master’s of Fine Arts programme, Habib Allah has exhibited at the Riwaq Biennale, the 2009 Venice Biennale, Tate Modern and the Israeli Centre for Digital Art. He was twice awarded 2nd Prize for the Young Artist Award of the A.M. Qattan Foundation.

Shadi Habib Allah

Jerusalem, Palestine, 1977

East Jerusalem-based emerging media artist Shadi Habib Allah investigates the human condition in animation, video and sculpture works. For his animations, Habib Allah uses a black pen to draw simple figures in basic, repetitive shapes set against a plain landscape to create generic archetypal stories about the role of power and fear in human societies and history. In “An Ongoing Tale”, Habib Allah sets up a bird’s eye view of what appears to be members of a tribe performing a series of basic human actions: hunting, dancing, lighting a fire. Through the different scenes, the idea of fear is defined in a changing set of relationships. The central component of the piece, consisting of five animated scenes, is projected onto the floor, while the other is presented on a television screen adjacent to the projection.
[Installation view]
Shadi Habib Allah.
Two Channel video installation.
Image courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery.