

SHADI HABIB ALLAH

B. 1977, JERUSALEM, PALESTINE
LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK, NY, US

Through subtle but pointed interventions, Shadi Habib Allah sheds light on systems and subcultures that are largely ignored by or invisible to mainstream society. As he reveals the pervasiveness of alternative economies, infrastructures, and ways of life, he proves the contingency of those that are considered dominant or typical. Habib Allah's work may take the form of sculpture, video, or installation; often, it incorporates the documentation of an action. For *Chair Sink* (2009), the artist unplugged the pipes of two sinks at Columbia University and rerouted their water through the hollow tubes of a metal folding chair. By "hijacking the plumbing system"—if only for a few seconds—the work calls attention to an amenity that sustains our lives but over which, as individuals, we have little or no control. In a similar vein, *Scale Calibrator* (2010-ongoing) documents the artist's efforts to travel by air with a pyramid of ten dumbbells, welded to one another and certified by the International Committee of Weights and Measures as having a total weight of fifty pounds. The difficulties he encounters—despite adhering to the "fifty-pound rule"—disprove the putative objectivity of the authority that governs commercial air travel.

← *Untitled, 2015 (still).*
Video

↗ *The King and the Jester, 2010 (still).*
Video; 26 min

If *Scale Calibrator* suggests the rigidity of legally sanctioned bureaucracy, *The King and the Jester* (2010)—a short, partially scripted documentary—reveals a hierarchy that accommodates a certain amount of resistance.

The film chronicles the day-to-day operations of an auto body shop in Miami's Liberty City, an area that has become notorious for stripping and rebuilding stolen cars. The colorful banter among the men in the shop is replete with assertions of power and status that parallel those of the vehicles, which are tricked out with fins, rims, and spectacular paint jobs. In the film's most memorable scene, a succession of employees is called on to massage the aching feet of the shop's boss, a man called Babba: "Squeeze it—if you don't squeeze it, I'll blow!" Babba's demands initially seem humiliating, but his employees alternate between obedience and playful derision; the film may chronicle illegal activity, but it is almost tender in tone. *S/N 8FIGNA0021* (2012) also gives a human face to the black market: The project began when the artist commissioned the theft of a digital video camera. By directing his own camera's lens at a mirror, he captured footage that shows two men disassembling the stolen camera's original



shell and encasing it in another, effectively erasing its identity and giving it a new one so that it cannot be traced. The artwork comprises the video and the camera itself, which is enrobed in a Frankenstein-like body of recycled car parts.

In his new untitled work, included in the Triennial, Habib Allah captures his stop-and-start journeys through remote areas of the Sinai Peninsula, ones beyond the popular touristic destinations of Sharm El Sheikh and Dahab. South of this resort-dominated area, the Peninsula is largely composed of closed military zones and traversed by Bedouin peoples, some of whom are involved with smuggling. This bustling trade is, as the artist notes, a by-product of Egypt's longstanding negligence of the Bedouin populations and its exploitation of their territories. Shot by Habib Allah over many months, the nonlinear video charts multiple trips in which he is passed through one Bedouin network to another, as if he, himself, were a smuggled good. From one perspective, his action can be seen as a straightforward business transaction: For the required sum, and with the proper access, he is smuggled from the southern Sinai desert deep into its more remote and neglected areas. From another vantage point, it presents the potent machinations of political invisibility, as the Bedouins leverage their ongoing legal marginalization and deep familiarity with the desert to defy military surveillance and thrive, albeit illegally, by locating routes and hideouts through a terrain that otherwise seems open and unmarked. In the work the Bedouins are presented anonymously, with faces blurred as a gesture to protect them and, also, to not break the social contract of the journey. Habib Allah's palpable lack of agency and personal mobility throughout the process, which is amplified by short cuts within the video meant to mirror the quick, tactical routes of the smuggling process, find parallels in broader legal regulations on immigration that restrict movement on the basis of national conflicts. —SB