

SHADI HABIB ALLAH

# BARE AESTH- ETICS



Always unpredictable and with a quicksilver critical focus is Shadi Habib Allah. **Jason Waite** catches up with the elusive Palestinian artist in New York.

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*Juha was walking through the streets at midnight.*

*The watchman asked: "What are you doing out so late, Juha?"*

*"My sleep has disappeared and I am looking for it."*

he folk figure Juha does not belong to a single place or border, but rather, wanders across time through cultures and genres; his movements contingent on the needs of the storyteller. Juha is less a person and more an embodied structure. He (it) traverses tales from the humorous to the parable, functioning as an empty container that is continually filled with the jester, wise man, average citizen, conman and fall guy – his position is one of utility, a social critic that can never be fully assimilated. He is elusive, an open-source *tabula rasa*. "He takes a body for a moment and then leaves it," remarks Shadi Habib Allah. "A mere temporary existence, it adapts itself or they adapt it, then it dissipates and someone else picks it up."

This critical malleability is present in Habib Allah's practice and operates in the realm of displacement; creating temporary spaces inside the circulation of illicit goods, maintenance systems or bodies. His works function similar to a clog in the plumbing, one that does not affect the immediate sink, but rather allows the pressure to build in the network of pipes and causes a disruption in an apartment elsewhere in the building. Here, the minor displacements within these systems' movements have outsized epistemological consequences. This literally comes into view in the work *Chair Sink*, installed in a public toilet at Columbia University and where the now New York-based Habib Allah had decided to attend its MFA programme. He arrived in 2008 with little knowledge of the city but soon found it to be a place where "your thoughts build up with other people's and a constructive form of thinking takes place." Looking at the underbelly of this construction, *Chair Sink* modifies the washbasins in the restroom by welding a folding chair to the drainage pipes – interjecting the space of one object into another. The discarded water is then temporarily suspended and displaced into an alternative circulation and diverted into the cavity of the readymade chair, where it rumbles through the dark structure announcing its invisible presence.

"Infrastructure is like a shadow," notes Habib Allah, casting a gaze up at the exposed pipes of the Brooklyn café where we sit. This slight bypass/aberration in the system brings the whole apparatus into view. Here, the system of waste transfer is not only embedded in the building, but also alters the



Opening spread: (Detail)  
*Mechanical Garden*. 2007.  
Spinwheels, skewers, iron  
cylinders and thread. 8 x 6 m.  
Image courtesy the artist.

This page: Installation view  
of *S/N: SFICNA0021*. 2012.  
Aluminium, 20 gage metal,  
video camera, fiberglass, bond  
body filler. 155 x 48 x 40 cm.  
Inset: Video still from *S/N:  
SFICNA0021*. 2012. Single  
channel HD video. 16 minutes.

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Palestinian artists had these repetitive motifs  
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very structure and distribution of space within its walls. This social substrate has the potential to both sustain life and condition the space in which we live and how we move through it. It is this gesture – a slight delay in the system – which ruptures the mechanisms of invisibility. This hanging pause disrupts the expectations of quotidian order and forces an acknowledgment of the complex relationship with this infrastructure that shapes our daily life.

### SHAPE SHIFTING

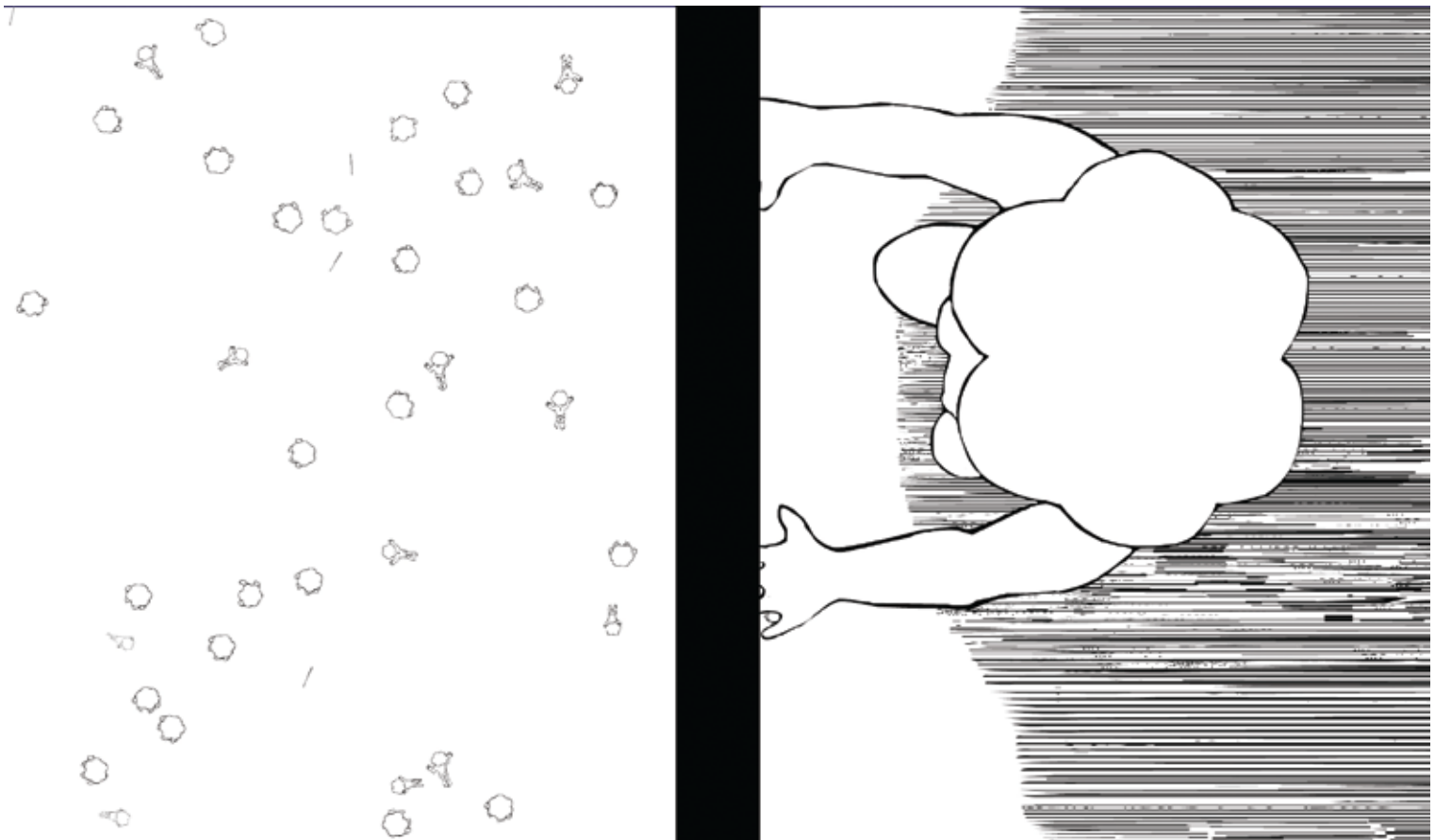
As a young child growing up in East Jerusalem, Habib Allah remembers constructing life-size figures from household objects and placing them in the garden at the tail end of dusk – “when one can barely see – exactly when you can see and not see.” The dim light transformed the figures into spectral forms that startled passers-by, often causing them to run away. However, as the artist reflects further, “what is interesting is that

this initial image registers in their head” – this perception of a threat caused by the speculative imagination that provokes an immediate response. The gap “between seeing something and acting is decided based on this one image,” says Habib Allah; “if they would spend more time, they would recognise it for what it is.” In this moment, he finds the problematics of the relationship of the work and the spectator. How can preconceptions be confronted and upended while holding the same attention which needs to be challenged? Exploring this cognitive dissonance, *Mechanical Garden* is a delicate series of forms composed of counterweighted pinwheels and skewers; when a breeze blows, they reveal an organic movement of branches swaying in the breeze, with individual leaves fluttering.

Habib Allah came to art late in life. He majored in English Literature at the University of Haifa and dabbled in sculpture before leaving to enrol in the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem in 1999. There, he encountered the

Below: *Ok, Hit, Hit But Don't Run*. 2009. Four channel video installation with audio. Image courtesy the artist.

Facing page: Installation view of *Chair Sink*. 2009. Folding industrial chair, plumbing bits and sketches. Variable dimensions.





work of his fellow Palestinian students – many of whom he felt were trapped by symbolic imagery that was heavily embedded in Palestinian visual culture, coming from sources such as posters. “I felt that a lot of the work I was seeing by Palestinian artists had these repetitive motifs and subject matter,” he explains. Habib Allah was fully aware that such work “came out of a sense of resistance, as art served a particular agenda in Palestine during the 1980s, 1990s and even up to the present day.” Nevertheless, he felt the sedimentary effects of this imagery and wanted to evade its language in order to take “a different trajectory” that could “develop the Palestinian narrative further.” In labouring to find this position, Habib Allah has fostered a commitment to “develop a different aesthetic strategy that addresses the context while being able to circulate and operate in multiple spheres.” Expanding the field of critical modes of representation from a Palestinian perspective, his approach “adopted a minimal aesthetic – white, colourless, simple, with every choice pared down to a minimum.” Habib Allah does not long to resurrect a previous period or further an iconography of tropes, but, rather, he strips down visual decisions to their essentials in order to carry forward a bare aesthetic. He arrives at the substructure, beneath the level of representation, and instead circulates on the undercurrents of the symbolic.

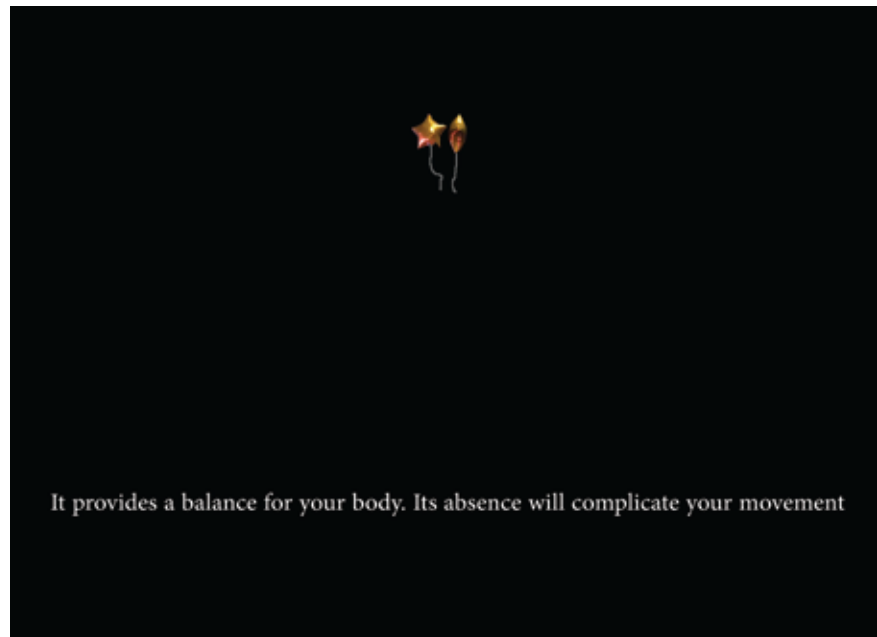
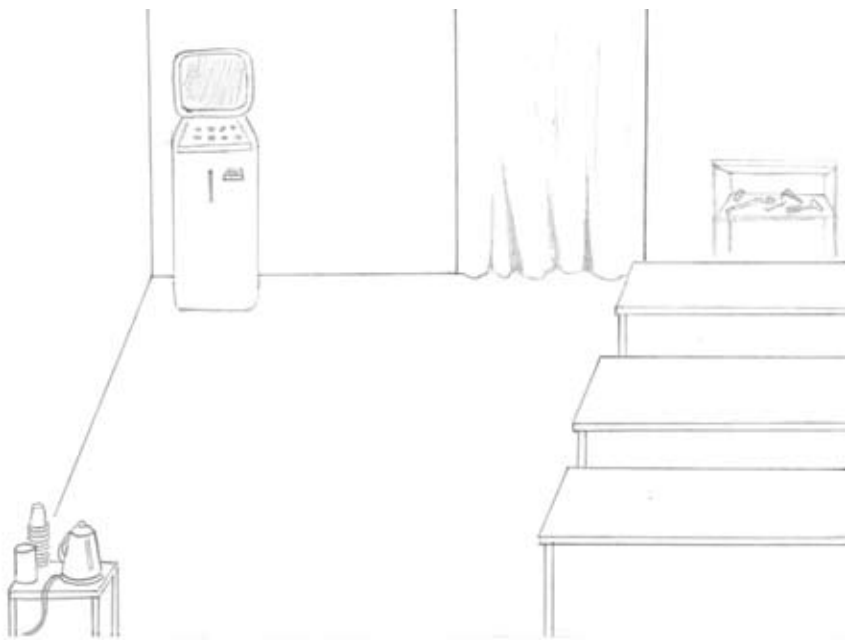
For Palestine’s first collateral event at the 2009 Venice Biennale, *Palestine c/o Venice*, Habib Allah spent almost a year making a series of hand-drawn multi-screen animations, *Ok, Hit, Hit But Don’t Run*. The scenes of primitive man approach the notion of bare life not as an exception in society but as the omnipresent way of being – in this primal state there is no exclusion because there is no society – only life or death. Here, humanity unfolds beneath our gaze in a bird’s-eye view: being, copulation, babies and more copulation – as the mass of bodies slowly starts to fill the space, the antagonism builds, the eventual overcrowding resulting in murder and cannibalism. In looking

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PROFILE

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for an escape, some characters begin to climb up, and out of the frame and into the gallery, reaching a one-to-one scale with the viewer before disappearing in their freedom. The chaos of life is swept away by contingency in the form of a natural disaster, as a large wave wipes the dystopia clean and the cycle begins again. Habib Allah wryly describes these figures as “flat and drained of any volume, to intentionally negate feelings of empathy” and instead replaces this void with a critical distance laced with humour. A dark comedy of excess, and yet it is laughter that jolts the body and brings lightness in the face of surpassing disaster.

## KINAESTHETIC DISRUPTIONS

Since moving to New York, Habib Allah has also begun to explore the documentary form – he filmed *The King and the Jester* in an auto body shop in Miami and sought to explore how his bare aesthetics can operate in capturing the social sphere. The video traces the elliptical field of power in the workplace where language is the preferred method of coercion. In this space, honour is at stake in every confrontation. The diverse cast of characters in the shop is in a constant state of antagonism that challenges one’s position, masculine identity and agency. It is the protagonist, Red, who navigates this terrain and attempts to exercise power but ends up play-

ing the fool, astute but deferential – the role of the jester is his way of creating a measure of autonomy in the claustrophobic space. Throughout the film, “the space feels like it doesn’t have any authority,” observes Habib Allah. Rather, he brings the soft power at work into sharp contrast in the final scene where the boss, Baba, compels his employees to take turns giving him a foot massage – the ultimate subordination. “There is a proximity, but at the same time, a distance involved with the characters,” says Habib Allah, who never fails to mention that there are small passages in the video that are scripted, or more accurately, where he set up the conditions with the expectation of a certain response. This brings into question the framework of the documentary format itself and exposes its structure as a means of capturing and displaying “true images.”


*S/N: 8F1GNA0021* was first shown as a solo project at last year’s Art Basel through his Dubai gallery, Green Art (where Habib Allah’s most recent works are on show until 5 May). Comprising a sculpture and a film about a stolen camera and its transformation, the video features the process of buying the stolen camera before it is taken to an auto body shop, where it records its own dismantling through a mirroring system. Stripped of its original form, the camera, and thereby its means of imaging-making, are laid bare. The camera is reassembled with car parts into a sculpture, subsequently entering the art

Facing page: Video stills from *The King and the Jester*, 2010. Single-channel video with audio. 26 minutes.

Above:  
Left: Untitled, 2013. Graphite on paper. 320 x 220 cm.  
Right: Video still of Untitled, 2013. Single channel Hdv. 7 minutes.

*All images courtesy Green Art Gallery, Dubai and the artist unless otherwise specified.*

market with a new legal body. “In Liberty City, Miami, where the transformation takes place, the auto body shops are notorious for taking stolen vehicles and transforming them into new legitimate entities,” notes Habib Allah. “The title is the serial number of the camera – the only trace of its former identity,” he says with a slight chuckle; “the entire illicit economy functions right under the nose of authority.” He carries this economy forward by bringing it into the heart of the market of Art Basel, where the sculpture was sold and its circulation continues.

These simple gestures constitute a practice that is constantly moving and adapting with the bare minimum. As Habib Allah ruminates, “if you can say the same thing with 10 words, why use 100?” Looking out over his mostly empty studio, he muses, “I want to create an art practice without utilising too much material.” 

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