



ZOULIKHA BOUABDELLAH,
Walk on the Sky. Pisces
Courtesy of artist

The Abraaj Capital Art Prize (ACAP) 2008

by Reem Fekri

This year, Art Dubai visitors can expect to see striking pieces of contemporary art by the winners of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize (ACAP). Kutlug Ataman, Zoulikha Bouabdellah and Nazgol Ansarinia are the winners of this prestigious \$200,000 prize – the largest in the world. Reem Fekri interviews the artists and reflects their newfound recognition.

CURATORIAL STATEMENT, Carol Solomon on Zoulikha Bouabdellah.

*Zoulikha Bouabdellah's "Walk on the Sky. Pisces" is an evocative installation piece that recreates the astrological constellation of Pisces, which appears in the night sky in the month of March. Constructed as an open, three-dimensional space, it has a footprint measuring 36 square meters and a height of 3 meters. A system of light-emitting diodes is used to create a luminous network of 76 polygonal stars varying in size and color to form the constellation. Mounted on an aluminum ceiling, the celestial coordinates are reflected as in a mirror on the floor beneath polished stainless steel, upon which viewers are invited to walk. Multiple and wide-ranging sources inform the work – the polygon star (a key geometric configuration in Islamic art); Ptolemy's influential second-century astronomical treatise, the magisterial *Almagest*; and the story of the legendary glass floor erected in front of King Solomon's throne, which the Queen of Sheba (Bilqis) was led to believe was water.*

CURATORIAL STATEMENT, Cristiana Perrella on Kutlug Ataman.

Kutlug Ataman turns the camera on himself presenting "Strange Space", a recorded performance piece. Part of Ataman's most re-

cent and challenging project, Mesopotamian Dramaturgies, focused on the problematic relationship between East and West, globalisation and persistence of local cultures. In Strange Spaces Ataman is filmed while crossing a sulphurous desert land with bare feet and blinded eyes. A vision inspired by classical folk and court tales typical of Mesopotamia, in which the hero, blinded by the love of the heroine, is condemned to wander in the desert trying to find her, to just burn into flames when they finally meet. The ancient narrative theme is used by Ataman as a metaphor of the encounter of modernity and tradition, of their reciprocal attraction and the trauma this attraction may cause

CURATORIAL STATEMENT,
Layla Fakhr on Nazgol Ansarinia.

Nazgol Ansarinia's work explores the patterns and structures of modern-day life. She seeks to portray intangible aspects of social, physical and emotional interactions within the framework of society. Taking inspiration from her immediate environment, Ansarinia closely investigates individual systems before restructuring them into her own configurations. This process aims to realign our relationship with the mundane. As a continuous exploration of systems and patterns, the artist explores one the most stereotyped artifacts of her native Iran: the Persian carpet. Mostly perceived as precious commodity, the Persian carpet has been the most utilized object for Iranians throughout history. While we have become numbed to the repetition of floral shapes, Ansarinia prompts us to have a closer look at what is being taken for granted.

With her project for ACAP, she has transformed the traditional floral motifs of the Persian carpet into scenes of contemporary life in Iran. By taking the multi-layered structures of her home town Tehran as a starting point, she explores how juxtaposing factors, scenarios and events can co-

exist within a single framework. Upon close inspection the individual carpet motifs appear awkward and incongruous but when viewed as a whole the disparities converge into a harmonious design. This reflects the complex dynamics between order and chaos within Iran today.

ACAP is just another step forward in the Middle East - the UAE in particular, as it is now in the process of developing a contemporary art infrastructure that mirrors that of the West. Developments such as the Guggenheim, the Louvre and various other institutions and galleries have been popping up in the region and appearing within the news as well as gossiped about within cultural industry circles.

Perhaps what is most noticeable to critics in the west is the regions ability to go ahead with these ambitious projects. Guests at Art Dubai for example, murmured amongst themselves about the amount that was being invested in the arts – both for profit and non-for profit. What was noticeably missing five years ago is rapidly booming now.

Art galleries, museums and cultural quarters are rapidly becoming part of the regions infrastructure, with a view to generate a cultural economy aside from that generated from oil dependency or petrodollars, is becoming less and less over the years. Whilst this cultural boom was gaining world-wide recognition, perhaps one of the more noticeable things was the lack of an indigenous art prize. For decades in the West, the arts have benefited from prestigious art awards, in which the artist is presented with a large sum of money and an almost immediate shot to global fame – the Turner Prize and Becks Futures are just to name a few.

Perhaps the Turner Prize is the most known of these prizes – set up in 1984, its aim was to celebrate new developments in British contemporary art. In its earlier days, the prize was often regarded as being demeaning to art and re-



KUTLUG ATAMAN, *Strange Space*. Courtesy of the artist
Image courtesy of the artist



NAZGOL ANSARINIA, *Carpet colored drawing*. Courtesy of the artist

sembling that of a rat race, as all but one was seen as losers. There was also uncertainty and confusion about the purpose of the prize – whether it was to award Britain’s most reputable artists or highlight up and coming artists using experimental techniques. Funding of the prize was also questioned because the sponsor remained anonymous and therefore suspicions were raised – it was questioned whether there were hidden commercial interests pulling strings.

The Turner Prize, which often causes controversy, has

now increased the prize money to £20,000 and sponsored by Channel 4 – artists are restricted to an age limit (under 50) in order to highlight outstanding work rather than lifetime achievements. All ready in its infant stages, Abraaj Capital Art Prize mirrors the Turner Prize on many levels. Sponsored by an investment company, it serves to highlight some of the regions most talented, young and innovative artists – except here, interestingly, they must apply for the prize with a curator and they themselves must be from the within the ME-

NASA region. Ataman is from Turkey, Ansarinia is Iranian and Bouabdellah is French-Algerian.

Many argue that pieces submitted for these prizes are often cold, mechanical and conceptual – art critic Jonathan Jones complained that the art produced for these mega attraction shows are whereby something appears to be startling at first but later expresses a banal idea that lacks in importance and reflects on notions of advertising. ACAP winners couldn't be further from this – this year, the three winning pieces that will be unveiled at Art Dubai this year are aesthetically and conceptually mesmerizing. Interestingly, one of the requirements for ACAP was that artists produce a physical piece of work that would eventually become part of a corporate collection. Some may argue that this alters artistic judgment and changes the role of funder and producer for the purpose of fame and revenue. However, ACAP's requirements are valid within the context of Dubai's booming art scene and agreeing to corporate requirements for funding – funding through commercial means are often the only possible way of producing such fantastic works.

Art prizes play a valuable role in society, and there needs to be a way of approaching new art with open-mindedness, steering away from clichés and perhaps this is one of the best ways. Aside from encouraging artists to participate, it certainly attracts huge crowds – to the Tate Britain for the Turner Prize and now, to Art Dubai for ACAP. Hopefully, this will encourage future cultural institutions within the MENSA region to hold similar prizes and allow for further experimentation and production.

Reem Fekri, an Emirati, grew up in Dubai and later moved to London to study Fine Art at The Chelsea School of Art and Design, and Central Saint Martins. She later read a Masters in Cultural and Creative Industries and Creative Organizations at King's College. Still confused about the title of her MA, she now works as a gallery liaison for Art Dubai, and is the Editor for the Dubai Art Journal. Fekri has previously contributed to Brownbook Magazine and most recently, Contemporary Practices. She lives and works in London, with frequent visits to Dubai.



KUTLUG ATAMAN

An interview with Kutlug Ataman, 2008

One of the winners of the Abraaj Capital Prize

Reem Fekri: You have been arrested and you have received death threats, yet despite this you have achieved an incredible amount in your artistic career, such as being a nominee for the prestigious Turner Prize in London during 2004 and the winner of Carnegie Award in the US in the same year. Now you are the winner of the most generous and prestigious prize in the world. How does it feel to have achieved so much by standing by your work and overcoming the obstacles in your way?

Kutlug Ataman: Obstacles are inspiring. My art practice has always been a strong part of who I am. Who I am is not something I can give up, even if I wanted to. Therefore creating obstacles to individuals are useless and counterproductive exercises, not just an abuse of power. Only archaic societies and ignorant bureaucrats and politicians resort to such shameful methods today. On the other hand, people who resist such obstacles are not necessarily heroic in any way. As I said, there is nothing one can do about one's identity and