



# Reflections

contemporary art of the  
Middle East and North Africa

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a nationwide uprising that ousted the dictator, President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, in January 2011. This dramatic and unexpected turn of events triggered similar uprisings across the Arab world as people in countries from Morocco to the Gulf took up the powerful chant of the Tunisian revolution: *al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam* (the people want the overthrow of the regime). In what was optimistically labelled 'the Arab Spring', mainly by outsiders, popular uprisings succeeded in ousting President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen and in Libya, after Western military intervention, they led to the overthrow and death of Muammar Gaddafi. Elsewhere, in Bahrain and in Syria, similar uprisings were met by ferocious government repression. In Syria what had begun as peaceful protests evolved into armed revolt and then into civil war, tearing the country apart – a development that also characterised the aftermath of the uprisings in Yemen and in Libya.

These grim outcomes did not, however, prevent mass protests from breaking out across the region in 2019. In Algeria and in Sudan the loss of authority of long-entrenched leaders and their cronies led to their downfall, followed by the arrest of many who had been at the heart of the apparatus of power. In Lebanon and Iraq hundreds of thousands took to the streets to protest against governments seen as corrupt and unresponsive, demonstrating that the spirit of revolt lives on, as does the tendency of power to corrupt.

Visual artists, no less than their counterparts in the fields of literature, theatre or film, have been part of this ferment of ideas, alive to the issues and engaged with debates about the new directions of their countries and of the region. Naturally, they varied in their stances and in their responses to the unfolding political dramas and slower social transformations that were changing the landscape around them. Nor were they necessarily reacting only to public events. As artists, many had a more individual creative purpose, expressing their own inner feelings, communicating a sensibility to the world, but driven by their life experiences. Sometimes these experiences captured a common project, informed by larger developments that their contemporaries and their countries were undergoing. At other times the artists grappled through a range of media with aspects of their

Left:

**Jaber AlAzmeH**

(born Damascus, 1973)

*The Mask Has Fallen*, 2012

Photograph on cotton rag paper

H: 30 cm W: 45 cm

2017,6009.3. Funded by Art Fund

The poet and intellectual Alma Entabli holds the Syrian ruling party's newspaper *Al-Ba'th* upside down in a series called *The Resurrection* (the literal meaning of *al-Ba'th*), showing contempt for the official line put out in this and other media. On it she has written *saqata al-qana'* (the mask has fallen).

Right:

**Mohamed Abla**

(born Belkas, Egypt, 1953)

*The Flag*, 2011

Mixed media on paper

H: 77 cm W: 104 cm

2012,6035.1. Funded by CaMMEA

The artist evokes the exhilaration of the mass occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo. In January and February 2011 it became the focal point and catalyst of the Egyptian revolution.



# Syria

'One, one, one!

The Syrian nation is one

Syrian blood is one

The Syrian future is one.'<sup>264</sup>

(Syrian protest song)



## Youssef Abdelke

(born Qamishli, Syria, 1951)

*Figures (No. 2)*, 1991–93

Pastel and collage on paper

H: 145 cm W: 105 cm

2011,6002.2

For the artist and cartoonist Abdelke, who grew up in a political family, politics has always permeated his work. During the 1970s his cartoons hit their mark and he spent periods in prison in Syria before moving to Paris, 'attracted', as he says, 'by anything that might satisfy [his] burning thoughts of painting.' Later he studied at the École des Beaux Arts. This painting is one of a series of recurring compositions of three standing figures whose appearance suggests patriarchy, patronage and corruption. The one in the centre is a menacing character, who is flanked on the left by a man holding his own tongue, while on the right, the figure who appears only in silhouette is shadowy and mysterious. Abdelke was not able to return to Syria until 2005, but during the uprisings against Bashar al-Assad from 2011 he came under suspicion again, and was briefly arrested in 2013.<sup>265</sup>

**Jaber AlAzmeH**

(born Damascus, 1973)

*Youssef Abdelke*, 2014

From the series *Resurrection*

Photographic print

H: 75 cm W: 112.5 cm

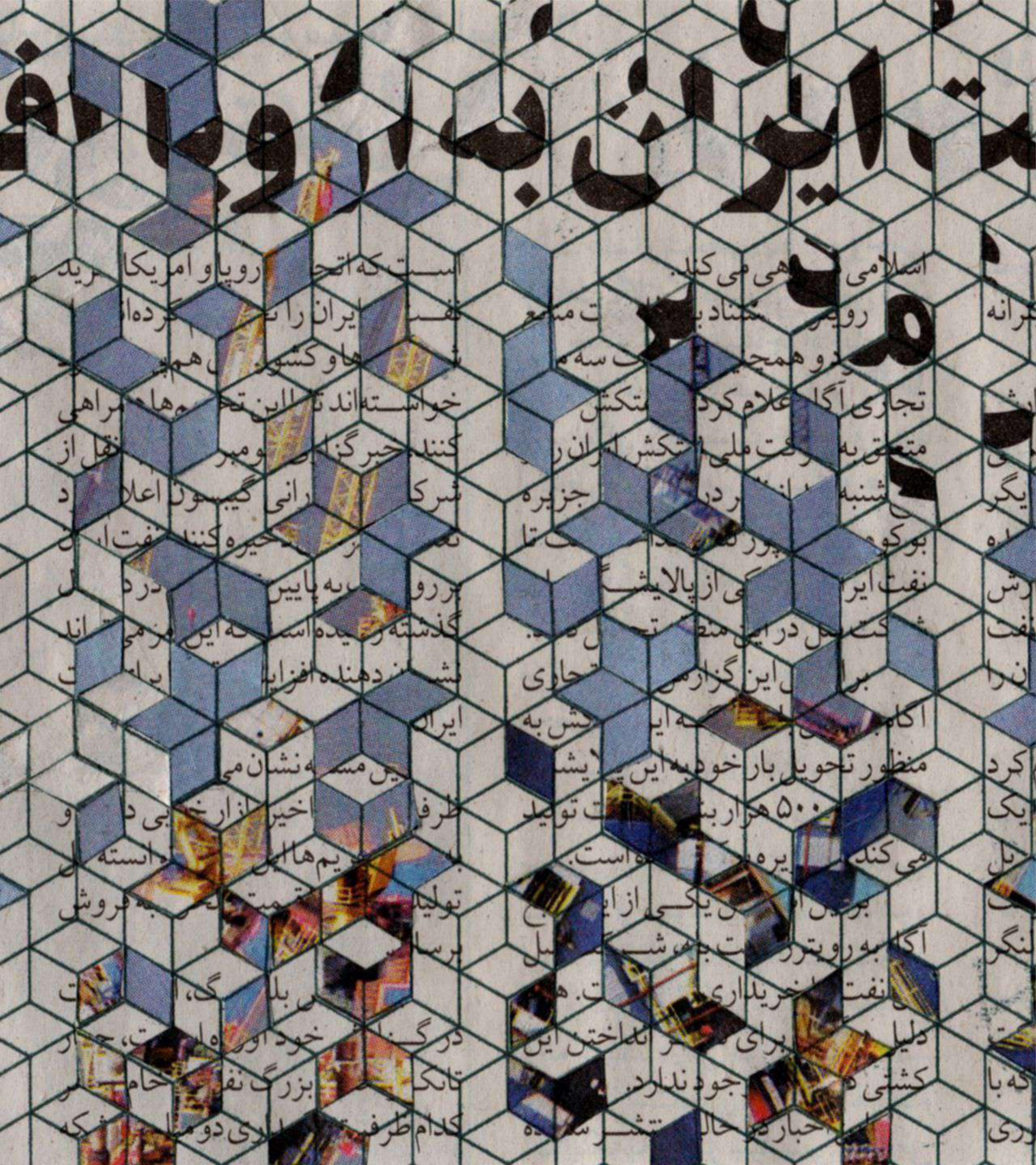
2017,6009.1. Funded by Art Fund

This is one of a series of thirty-six black and white photographs, AlAzmeH's response to the Syrian Civil War that started in 2011. In the project, he invited opponents of the regime – journalists, artists, designers, actors, gallerists, filmmakers and writers – to turn the *Al-Ba'th* newspaper upside down and make a comment that summed up 'their visions and hopes for the revolution in Syria'. The response of Abdelke, photographed

in Damascus on 18 August 2011, was simply to make a sign. (For AlAzmeH's portrait of Alma Entabli, see p. 28.) AlAzmeH recalls that, despite the difficulties, the early days of the uprisings were an exciting moment. This was at the peak of the phase of civil society activism, and the image and the word were highly effective tools. The making of these portraits created an extraordinary bond between artist and sitters, and AlAzmeH describes how 'the portraits were made secretly, quickly and simply when I was still in Syria and in a more creative approach when I had the chance, especially after I left the country'. AlAzmeH gained a degree in fine arts and visual communications from the University of Damascus in 1996, and became a professional photographer two years later. He now lives in the Gulf.<sup>286</sup>







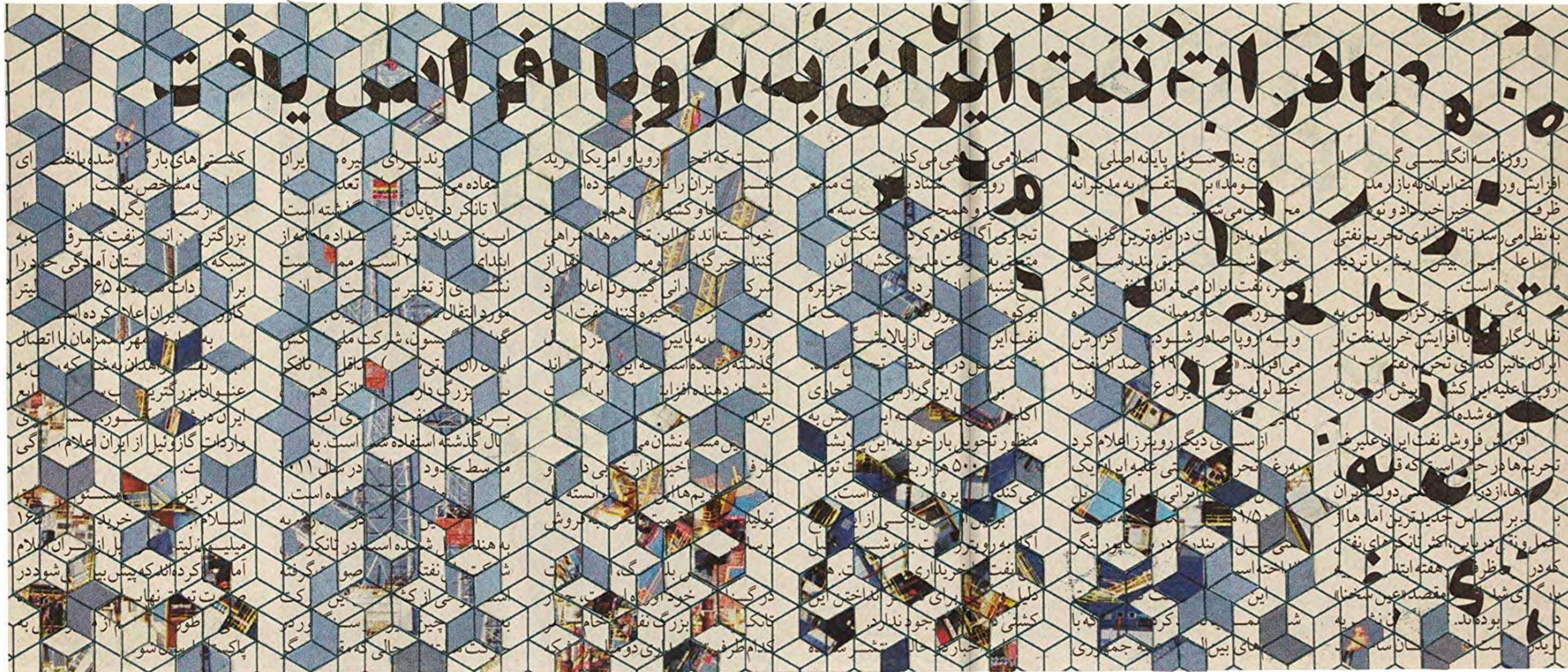
# Abstraction, geometry and script

**'Every line, thin or thicker, short or longer, vertical or horizontal carries intense emotions, a game, in which the unspoken is delicately whispered to the paper.'**

(Brigitte Caland)

Abstraction is an enduring tradition within Islamic art, along with calligraphy and geometry, while it has been, at the same time, an influential strand of international modernism. The stylistic choices made by the artists in this section are more than just ways to obscure or omit the figural. They adapt shape, pattern, line and colour to represent deeply complex, personal or conceptual subjects, as well as making straightforward meditations on the formal purity of abstraction itself. From shape to script, real or invented, these artists are aware of the power that geometric and calligraphic abstraction can have as both a symbolic tool and a straightforward visual programme, making works that appear effortlessly modern as well as redolent of a common visual heritage. Grid structures are used to invoke everything from mathematics to political assassinations. The rules and meaning of calligraphy are reinvented: it is reduced to clean lines suggestive of the shape of letters, or removed completely, leaving only abstract forms created out of diacritical marks. A rumination on the word for love becomes a pattern, and the complex stages of the techniques of illumination are deconstructed.





**Nazgol Ansarinia**  
 (born Tehran, 1979)  
*Iranian Oil Export to Europe Increased/  
 Assessment of Oil Sanctions on Iran by EU, 2012*  
 From the series *Reflections/Refractions*  
 H: 10.3 cm W: 24 cm  
 2012,6077.1. Donated by Mohammed Afkhami

A multi-disciplinary visual artist, Nazgol Ansarinia was born in Tehran where she lives and works. She graduated from the London College of Communication in 2001 before taking a Master of Fine Arts degree at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco in 2003. Working across media from monumental installations and film to tiny drawings, her subject matter focuses on Iran, including the mundanity of daily life, the degradation of the urban environment of Tehran and wider geopolitics. As with *Monir* (p. 69), it was only following Ansarinia's return to Iran that she began to take particular interest in Iranian material culture. This led to her deconstruction of Persian carpets, and a fascination with mirror-mosaic (*aina-kari*), the geometric structure of which is the basis for the *Reflections/Refractions* series. In this work, she creates a collage by reconstructing articles from two different newspapers, one of which is a copy of *Ettela'at* from 1979, which have seemingly contradictory stories: one about how Iranian oil exports to Europe have increased, the other an assessment of what effect sanctions are having on Iran. In January 2012, the United States imposed sanctions on the Central Bank of Iran, with Iran threatening to retaliate by stopping the transport of oil through the Straits of Hormuz. At the same time the European Union announced an oil embargo on Iran unless it curtailed its nuclear programme. By mixing the two stories in this geometric deconstruction, the text, while visible, is rendered meaningless.

'My work is always focused on the environment that I live in, portraying very ordinary, everyday life and my position within that context ... I'm a deconstructionist who reconstructs the torn apart elements that show something new about something so banal that has gone unnoticed!'

Nazgol Ansarinia<sup>49</sup>



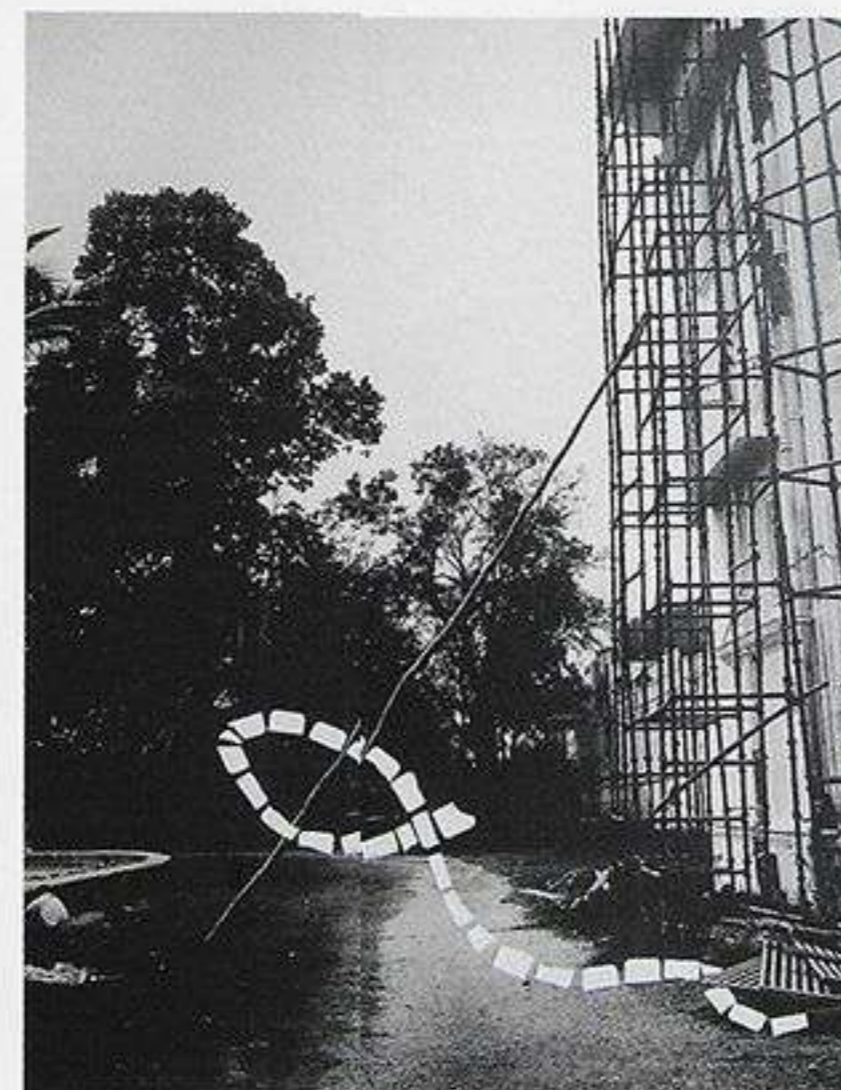
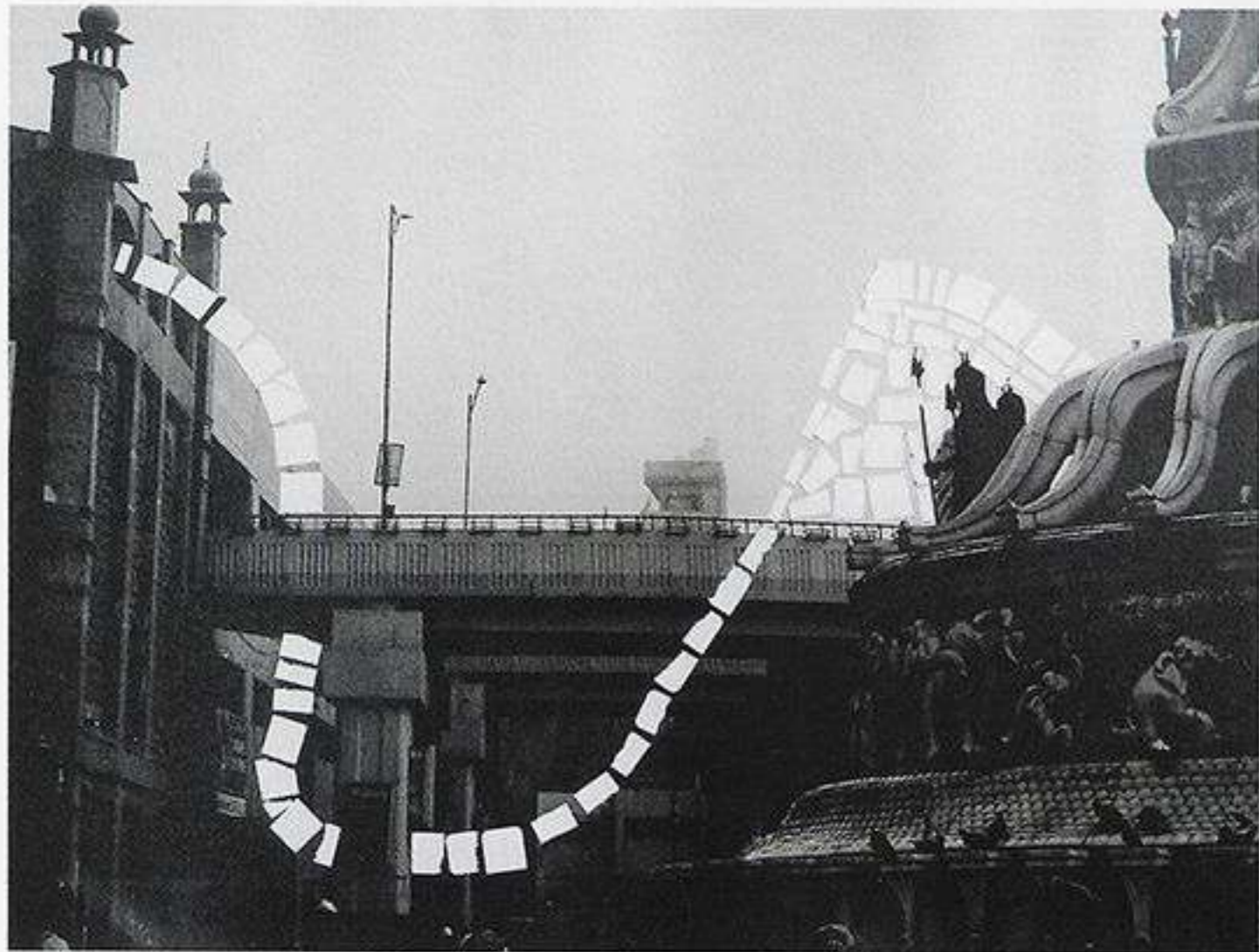
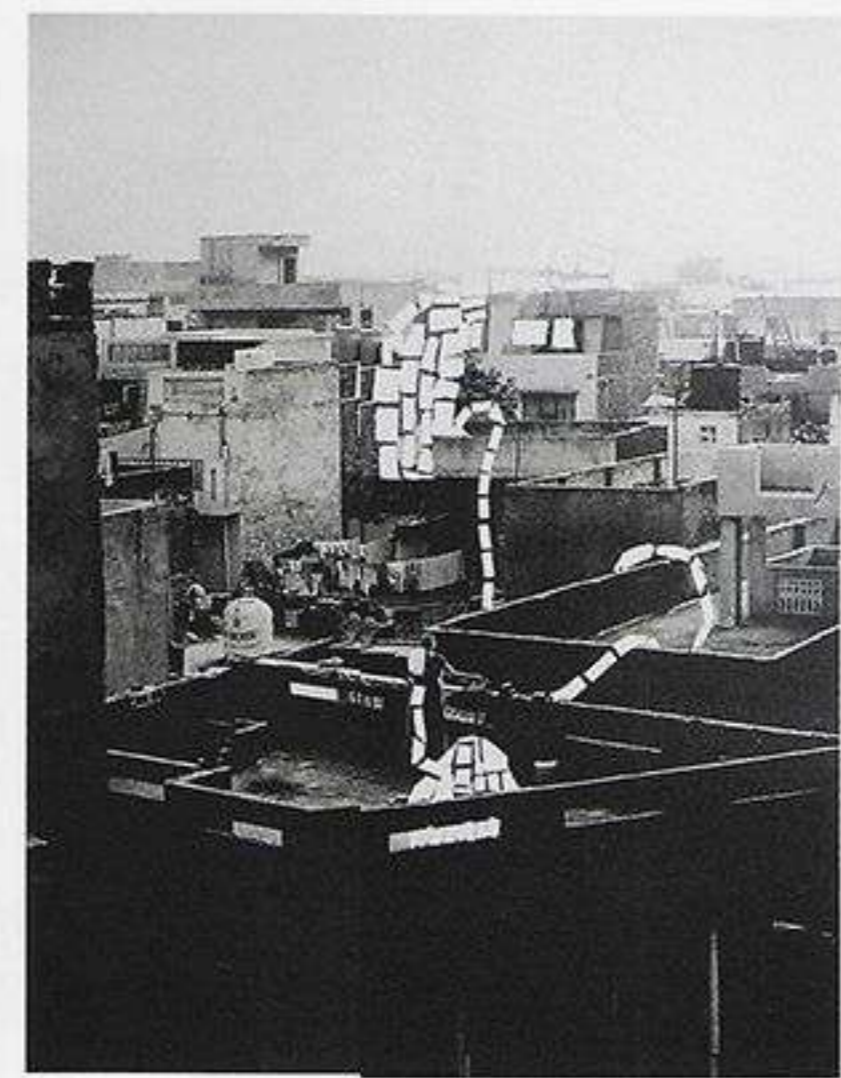
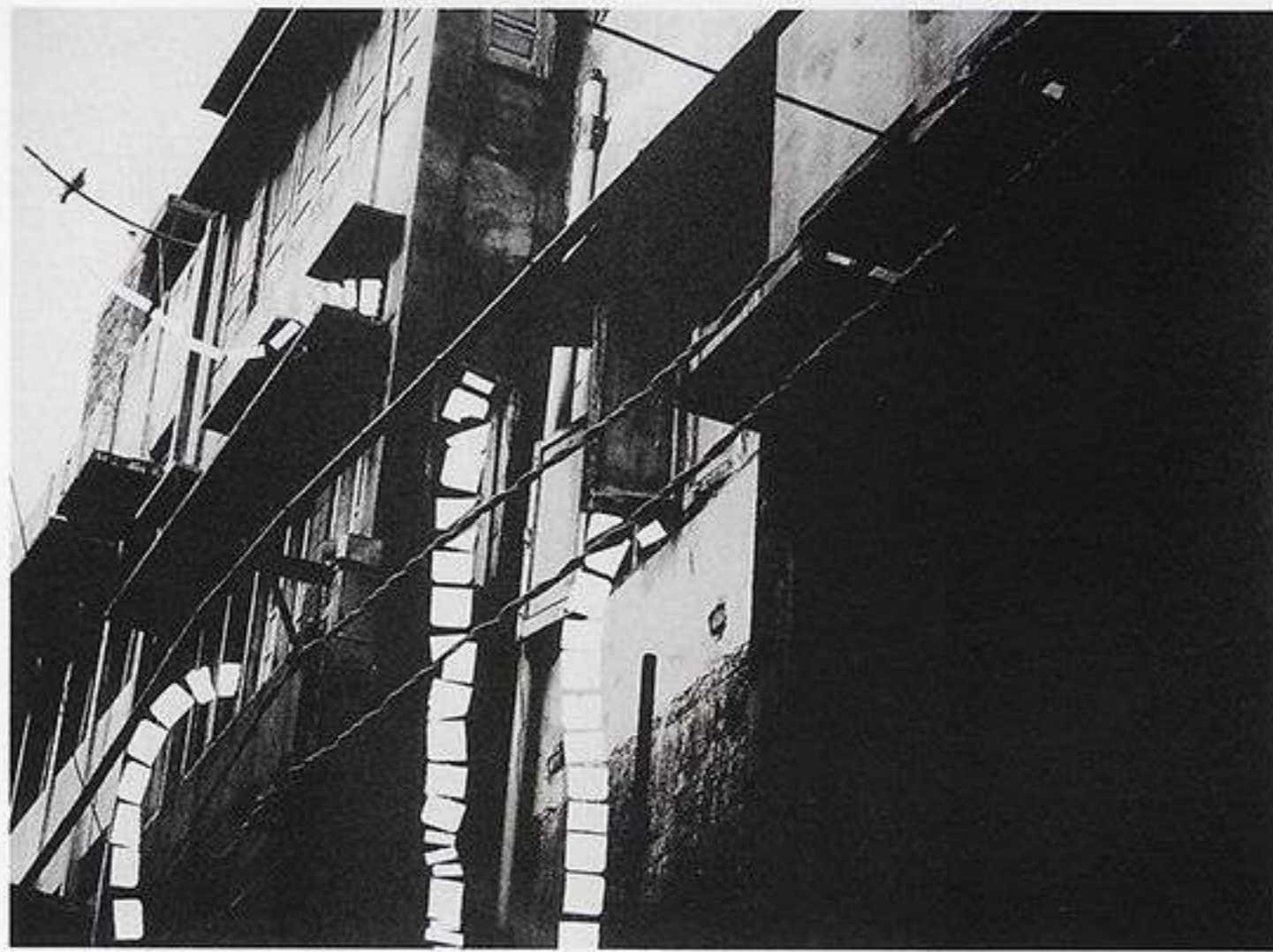
# The past is present

**'Ancient architectural icons become metaphors and signifiers to express the human ambition to stamp its mark upon the environment and onto history itself.'**<sup>21</sup>

(Walid Siti, born 1954)

Place, time and memory are the central themes of this section. Symbols of the ancient world evoke the violence done to a place through war or wilful neglect: marble sculptures from Carthage are transformed into brick dust; a beheaded Venus de Milo is censored by revolutionary Iranian stamps; Egyptian sarcophagi from Gaza are inscribed with the poetry of Pablo Neruda; from Iraq, a Babylonian ziggurat lies in a burnt and desolate landscape, and idealised palm groves and birds allude to a lost world destroyed through war. While a delicate drawing of Palmyra hints at the past glories of that famous city, a haunting figure stares out from another memorable place in Syria, Ma'lula, where they still speak the same language, Aramaic, as did Jesus Christ. The memory of colonial violence haunts the streets and buildings of the Punjab, and the Apadana of Persepolis is overtaken with fantastical imagery evoking a chaotic present. Two different artists work with the verses of the Syrian poet Adonis to conjure the mysterious beauty of Petra – that 'rose-red city half as old as time' as the nineteenth-century English poet John Burgon described it. In works focusing on Arabia and the Gulf region, we see the melancholy of a ruined house in Jeddah, once the home of the great explorer Harry St John Philby, and the deserted swimming pool of the Al-Arabi Club in Kuwait City. A story of changing economies is told through a personal perspective on the Saudi oil industry and another speaks of the dramatic development of the city of Dubai.





**Hera Büyüktaşçıyan**

(born Istanbul, 1984)  
*Deconstructors Volume II*, 2017  
 Collage on paper  
 H: 29.7 or 42 cm W: 42 or 29.7 cm (variously)  
 2018,6014.1–5. Gift of Olivier Georges Mestelan

'On my very first visit to Amritsar in 2016, I felt an interesting feeling of homecoming, as if I had known this place for centuries.'<sup>99</sup>

Black and white photographs of Amritsar and Patiala are overlaid with white stickers creating

imaginary paths or pools of water. A graduate of the faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Marmara, Hera Büyüktaşçıyan makes art that highlights the invisibility of history and the aquatic nature of memory. Seeking to understand the complex history of the Punjab before and after the partition of India in 1947, as she travelled around the region she was struck by the similarities to how, in Istanbul, 'ghost buildings' recall the earlier presence of Greeks, Jews and Armenians. The buildings and the streets of Punjabi cities such as Amritsar – site of the Golden Temple and a massacre at the hands

of the British in 1919 – had similar resonance. 'I found [a similarity] between the story of the Punjab and how partition has affected it, with the narratives of Anatolia that has gone through similar divisions, exiles and disappearance.' The white cubes, which stand in for marble mosaics, bring 'a continuous interaction between the past and the present through the image ... a sense of infinity along axes of representation and time.' In the Sikh fortress at Patiala (opposite), the artist has inserted herself into the image as though magically catching a flow of water linking the present with the past.

