

# BRIGHT NARROW SPACES

ABRAAJ  
PRIZE-WINNING  
MULTIMEDIA ARTIST  
SHEZAD DAWOOD  
IS ONE OF THE MOST  
COMPLEX AND DYNAMIC  
YOUNG TALENTS AT  
WORK TODAY

SARA RAZA REFLECTS ON  
DAWOOD'S MULTIFACETED,  
DYNAMIC PRACTISE IN  
CONVERSATION WITH THE  
ARTIST...

*"The world consists of the unity of the unified, whereas the Divine Independence resides in the Unity of the Unique." IBN ARABI\**



(Left) 'Until The End Of The World' (Installation view) (2008) Courtesy: Mathaf: Museum of Modern Art, Doha

Inspired by Sufi mysticism, Shezad Dawood's artistic practice has revealed itself in recent years as offering a relatively uncharted and unexpected take on contemporary Islamic cosmology. Embracing a multifaceted practice, the London-born and based artist provides nourishment for new revelations in contemporary visual culture that draw from the legacy of Islamic Sufi doctrines as a means of exploring his longstanding interests into the study of post-migratory aesthetics concerning race, ethics and their subsequent impact on local culture and globalisation. In attempting to articulate his practice, it is important to note that there is no apparent separation between the scared and the profane. Instead, the desire to explore and dispel the very cosmos in which modern civilisation resides is given precedence over perceived morality and sets the pace for the following discussion on the oeuvre of this astute young artist.

Dawood studied at Central St Martin's and the Royal College of Art before completing his PhD at Leeds Metropolitan University. He has operated as both a platform initiator, collaborating with other arts and cultural practitioners, as well as managing a number of large-scale projects independently within the UK and internationally. He has exhibited throughout the UK at the Tate Britain, Whitechapel Gallery, ICA and the Saatchi Gallery as well as internationally in Asia, Middle East and North America. Entering a highly significant moment in his artistic career as an Abraaj Art Capital 2011 award-winning mid-career artist, offers audiences an insight into the evolution of his practice at the prestigious Modern Art Oxford (MAO) in England earlier this spring.

At MAO he debuted his most ambitious project to date, 'Piercing Brightness', a challenging and dense display of experimental film, kinetic sculpture, performance and painting produced over the course of the last three years, brought together like a constellation on and against harmony and tradition. Nothing short of spectacular, Dawood traversed theories, histories, disciplines and varied geographical terrains from the Indian Subcontinent, North Africa and the heart of multi-cultural England, which he interwove, sliced and cut putting forward new possibilities for acquiring knowledge on the duality of both revelation and intellectual intuition. This is perhaps best captured within the centrepiece of the exhibition 'Trailer' (2011), an extended science fiction experimental film trailer, which functions as a clever prelude to an actual film entitled 'Piercing Brightness', yet to be completed.

Set in the Lancashire city of Preston, 'Trailer' was developed since 2009 as part of a commission for the UK-based public art curatorial project 'In Certain Places', with Dawood spending considerable time researching archival materials on the history and urbanism of Preston and meeting with various groups from a variety of different social and religious demographics as well as paranormal investigators to develop the context for the film's narrative about covert extraterrestrial 'aliens' inhabiting the city within the body of terrestrial beings. However, embedded within the film's narrative lies a much wider discourse on the issues of otherness, race and migration and the transformation of the city as a possible whole world within a city, with its parts held together akin to a body and its organs.

Exactly 100 members of the city's community participated in 'Trailer' as extras as well the casting of a local English actress as the central protagonist. In addition a group of masked and hooded teenagers on bikes, young Chinese men and women as alien beings and their middle-aged Muslim South Asian accomplice are centrally cast to reveal the layering and montage of other racial and marginalised social sub/counter cultures which reside at the core of youth and immigration debates in the UK. The number 100 also echoes the artist's interests in the projection of unity whereby the number reiterates Sufi sentiments on multiplicity, concerning the projected image of unity. For Dawood, this concept opens up a discussion on the hierarchy, being and the desire of a collective system striving towards unravelling an alternative divine truth, or system of beliefs.

Interestingly, the notion of collectivity can further read as a circularity of ideas that dominate not only the conceptual rigour of the film, but also follows through within the physical architecture of the social space and how its inhabitants surf and circle through. An example of this comes from a visually powerful scene of two hooded bike riders, circling two extraterrestrial white-robed characters as they walk through the main square. Their actions mimic the act of circumambulation within the Muslim rites of 'tawaf', the circling of pilgrims around the sacred Ka'bah, in Mecca.

This theme of circularity can also be understood as a concept for bringing everything back to its original source from which it never truly ever departs. It's further probed within Dawood's 'New Dream Machine' (2011) footage which also featured at MAO. The 'New Dream Machine' project - for which the artist was awarded the prestigious Abraaj Art Capital Prize in 2011 - is a re-appropriation the work of late British artist and writer Brion Gysin, who abandoned the nationalist fervour surrounding the Vietnam war in repressive America for the more liberal →



(This page) 'Piercing Brightness' Production still (Courtesy UBIK Productions Ltd. Photo by Richard Harrowing) (Below) 'Piercing Brightness' Film still sequence (Courtesy UBIK Productions Ltd)



city of Tangiers, Morocco, where he became part of the bohemian beat generation of artists, writers and poets. It is in Tangiers that Gysin realised the original Dream Machine, which Dawood later re-appropriated exaggerating the original scale of the object and redesign to produce a perforated electrical motor-operated kinetic steel sculpture with flickering fluorescent lights, that induced a trance-like state on its viewers. Dawood's take on Gysin's original work expanded on the idea of the readymade as a means of exploring post-object art and the history of Tangiers, where he returned in February 2011. There, he held a concert at the Cinematheque de Tangiers, inviting musicians Bachir Attar and Duke Garwood to lead the Master Musicians of Jajouka around his New Dream Machine amidst the thick of the Arab Spring that took hold in neighbouring North African countries of Tunisia, Egypt and later Libya. The concert was captured on 16mm film by Dawood's studio and serves as an archive to this epic historical moment of revisiting history and time. It also makes explicit the Sufi influences that resided within Gysin's work, yet have rarely been probed within that context, until Dawood made that connection more revelatory.

Earlier works also explore post-object art, which Dawood combines the study of light as a spiritual entity. The epic daylight aluminium 'Triple Negation Chandelier' (2008) series, which premiered at the 53rd Venice Biennial's 'Making Worlds' in 2009 was clearly inspired by the first Islamic Shahada (declaration) 'La ilaha illa 'llah'. The Arabic text, in bright neon light in white, pink and blue editions, circled the hollow chandelier proclaiming that there is no divinity but the Divine. In its simplest form the piece echoed the Sufi doctrine that there is no reality or substitute to absolute reality, thus negating all that which is not God.

A similar thread runs through '99 Names' (2007) an installation series depicting the 99 names of Allah in neon-Arabic lettering, intentionally entangled in tumbleweed and encased in glass atop aluminium plinths. 'The Protector', 'The Judge' and 'The Majestic' (all 2007) all refer to all divine nouns and their subsequent sacred attributions associated with God. Simultaneously, this body of work also references the artist's earlier ideologies concerning the American frontier the pinnacle of the Wild West where cowboys and Indians roamed freely and his interest in the Western genre of Hollywood films as signified by the tumbleweed. Within the context of this particular work the actual American Frontier, which was only dismantled in the late 19th century acts as a singular border ideology

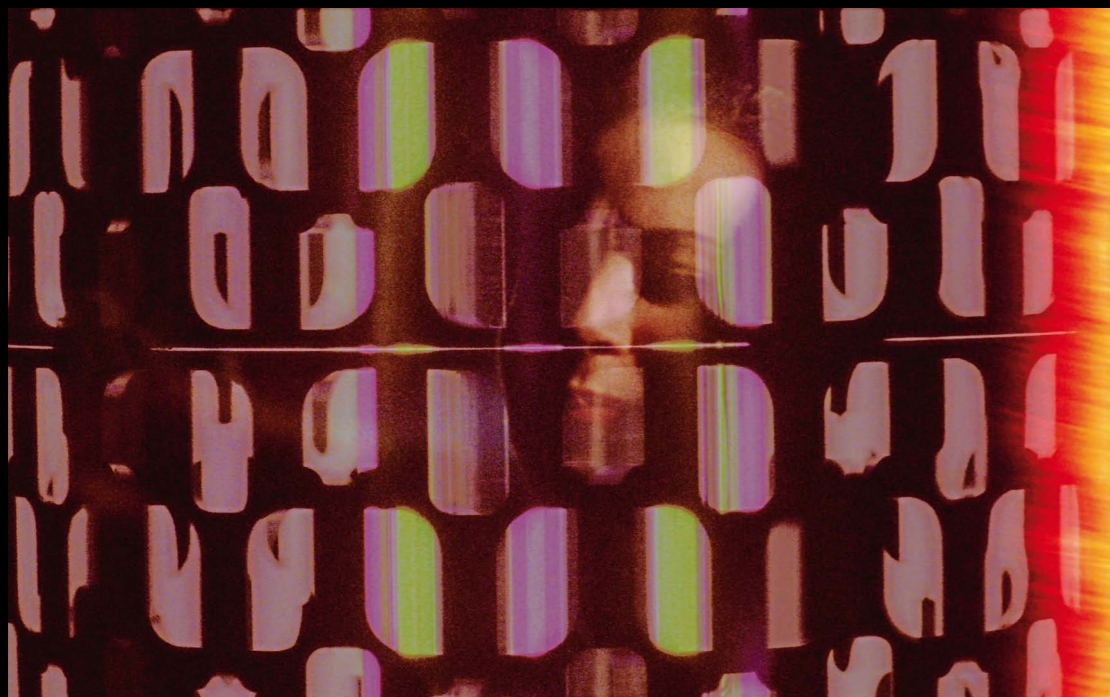
that was devoid of social or political governing bodies. This concept is applied and reworked here by Dawood to suggest the duality between the sacred, that which is God, alongside the profane lawlessness of the Frontier as a means of dispelling the disparity between civilisations, East and West and "them" and "us" rubrics.

Dawood also further probes the notion of the loose border between the sacred and the profane within his interests into the esoteric or occult sciences and the cross over between pre-Islamic and Sufi doctrine evident in both his installation and paintings. Within 'The Black Sun' (2010), a brilliant white neon circle mounted on black, shares its title with the German 'Schwarze Sonne' and draws historical references from pre-Islamic Aryan/Zoroastrian principles where the sun and light are symbols of worship, as the ultimate source of nourishment to the universe. The piece also visually alludes to the powerful solar eclipse, where the moon momentarily passes in front of the sun resulting in total darkness. Furthermore, the sun and its highly symbolic pure form is also presented as a codified symbol embedded in Dawood's recent paintings, which further function as a metaphor for the science of the unseen or the 'ghaib' - that which is not visible to the naked eye. The codification of signs and symbols within Dawood's exploration of the painterly form operates on the basis of an intentional delay in allowing his audiences to pause and reflect before attempting to observe and recognise his subjects immediately. Within 'Patterns of Distanciation' (2010), an acrylic on vintage textile work, Dawood explores montage or layering techniques, where one geometric pattern or meaning partially eclipses the other, a technique that references the artist's cinematic style of montage, where elements split and fade into one another.

Looking ahead to the future Dawood is working on developing his next feature film staged between Mexico and Morocco in collaboration with London's Delfina Foundation. This new filmic work will function as precursor to opening up a much wider discussion on geographies and migration as metaphors for art, offering his audiences an insight into his journey as an artist who is intent on seeking knowledge on notions of being - even if that means abandoning the world of reality for the unseen world of illusion.

\*IBN ARABI IN ISLAMIC COSMOLOGICAL DOCTRINES, HOSSEIN, SEYYED NASR (THAMES & HUDSON 1978) PREFACE.

(Left) 'Dream Machine' Film still 2 (2011) (Courtesy Shezad Dawood Studio)



## INTERVIEW

*In association with Ibraaz.com, Sara Raza meets Shezad Dawood to discuss his practice, disconnects, reconnections and redefining artistic practise...*

**SR:** *I'm trying to look at different dislocations and disconnects within the MENASA region but also beyond, interviewing various artists who are based in the diaspora but also several of those who are contesting these ideas about territory, geography, cartography and set ideas about visual cultural practice within those parameters. So, I'd like to start by discussing your practice in general. Your practice is heavily multi-faceted, you layer many ideas, you explore many different mediums and you play with various genres in art history. Not an art history related to a particular region but often across different spaces, borders and art histories that are perhaps yet to be discovered. Could you talk about some of the challenges of criticality within your practice, working across such different platforms, both theoretical and practical?*

**SD:** Well, I think I maybe ought to start by saying something of a manifesto. It's interesting to see how the quote unquote global art world has reconstituted itself over the previous decade. Prior to that, there was a lot more interest, both theoretically and practically, in areas of hybridity and métissage and what you have seen is almost a resurgence of nationalism in the last ten years, with very reified, new, art scenes emerging, strangely in parallel with new economies. So I think there are several questions that aren't being asked, and there has been a certain triumphalism of the 'other', vis-à-vis the Euro-American art sphere. But what I put forward is that it's actually the same action of power, it's the setting up of the same binary, it's coming from the same logic, the same iteration, therefore it's actually not interesting at all - it's the system reconstituting itself and reconstituting the border, reconstituting the frame and therefore almost a certain kind of compartmentalised reading of the world continues to be advanced.

So I'd say, that's the problem we're all facing, and I think it's very important for artists, writers, curators to be thinking beyond that and yet it's also a wonderful-damning illustration of human nature, that most are not.

**SR:** *It's interesting that you mention a manifesto, because it's something I am very much interested in, artists who are proclaiming about the art world in such a way that a critic or an art historian wouldn't necessarily be able to, particularly these new histories, as you are speaking about, where*

*there is very little critical writing available at this stage, and it's all very new. There's not a historical lineage. So it's quite interesting that as an artist you would take that stance and say, these are the terms of the manifesto. It's very refreshing.*

**SD:** I think the current moment needs a far more radical incursion of thought and of systems, given the current state of economies, governments and so on. If we're still playing about in the sand-pit of various easy binaries, it's slightly onanistic - that's me trying to be polite in print. Twenty years ago there was already enough talk about a third space and obviously, with its problematics, some of the ideas around Homi Bhabha are of its time, but I think maybe without necessarily re-appropriating that syntax, but re-appropriating that line of enquiry and actually pushing it a bit further, it starts to become very important. What's important for me is a simple matter of getting out of the binary, that there are three points of intersection or contradiction before I'll actually make anything. Otherwise, I don't really feel like I'm doing my job. Maybe there's a manifesto in that as well.

**SR:** *And also given the fact that critics, curators, art historians, are censoring themselves, that there is self-censorship in the*

*UK, particularly when we're dealing with these ideas of new mediums and new worlds, if you like. There is always, already, that self-censorship that is perhaps something I have fought within my work and therefore why I always, as a writer and curator, refer to the artist, the artist's work, the artist's manuscripts, the artist's thoughts.*

**SD:** Sure, that's very generous of you, but maybe that's being a bit too generous to artists across the board. I think, for me, it's always being able to think outside of a centre. It's funny, people would often ask, well, you grew up and went to school in England, how is it you end up speaking so many languages? And for me it's always been a very simple logic of the fact that I grew up between two languages and therefore, you're not as ossified in one system, you have an ear for two different systems, two different modes of syntax. And a mode of syntax never fully translates, it's always a détournement. So if you have two, the logic for anyone with half a brain, is three, four, five, six.

**SR:** *I am also interested in this idea of cultural labour as well, between ideas, between curators, between artists - because I know you work collaboratively, as part of your core practice, there is this division of cultural labour, there is no curator or historian*

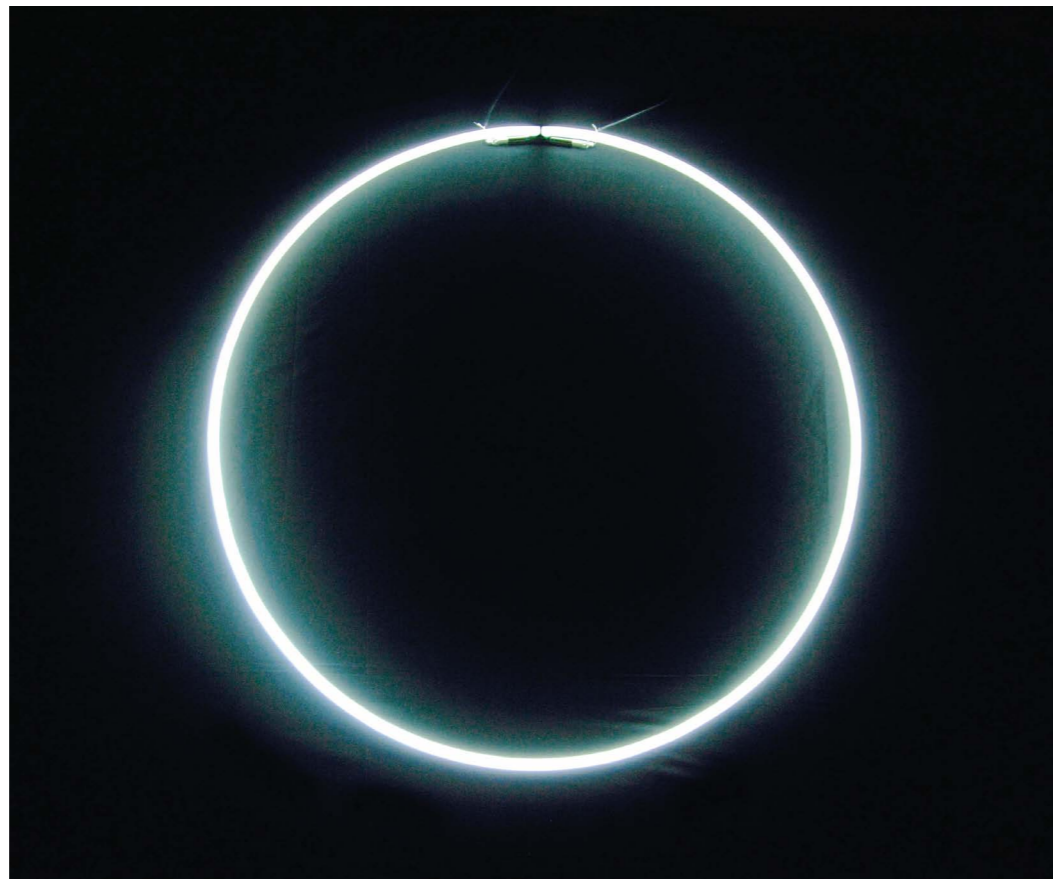
*dictating one's practice, but rather it more becomes a coherent, joint effort.*

**SD:** I think I would add to that that ideally, I shouldn't be dictating my own practice – I can step in as a catalyst, particularly in, say, with my larger film projects, where it's really about stepping into a space, or creating a space for various possibilities to manifest, which if I knew them in advance, there'd be no point kicking off. **SR:** *There's always that element of chance and fate, exploring the unknown. I know that you are very interested for example in magic and Sufism, these are concerns of yours and there's almost the element of delving into the unknown, or playing with the idea of sleight of hand.*

**SD:** Well, I think interestingly, when you talk about two contexts... in my conversations, I've noticed recently that to talk about magical Sufism, except in conceptually minimal terms, is really a bit of a no-no in the Euro-American sphere. Whereas to not talk about it when I'm with curators, writers, and artist friends in, say, Morocco, they think you're mad. And I love that gap. That for me becomes the space in which I like to play and operate as an artist. That's what you play for.

If one structure attempts to assert itself as a monolith here and another one there, you find there's a corridor in-between and if you can step into that corridor, you can see the strengths and weaknesses of both and you're in a position to short-circuit them, in a creatively constructive way. That chance factor, whether it's in my larger collaborative projects, or it's making my textile works in the studio, is always a conversation, because the textiles are pre-existing. I've never seen the appeal of a blank canvas, because it's that idea of asserting your subjectivity on the world. The world is pre-existing and it's greater. So, I think it's how we negotiate with the world, I think that's more my approach. I think it's slightly myopic to negotiate with the world almost as sort of pre-Magellan or pre-Columbus entity and imagine it as something much more contained and containable. There lies madness. But that seems to be the case, if one is advancing the Middle East region or MENA, or MENASA or 'Euro-Med'. You know, it's like – God, how many names will they have to come up with for things that are supposedly worthy and yet isn't the flip-side of that stronger border-controls, fortified Europe, bigger immigration controls, restrictions on the movements of people? Democracy was a joke at its conception – it's not just recently that it's become a joke. It's because there's a lack of rigour in the interrogation of the term and that's the key as well – all we can do in the sphere of art practice is to raise those questions in terms of art practice but also to know that they relate to a wider whole.

**SR:** *This idea of a corridor, it's both conceptual and physical in a sense, in terms of a continuous dialogue. But yet there is that idea of disconnect as well – you are trying to bring*



*these elements together, but of course you mention much wider issues here, like borders, the kind of portability or false portability of people that is now becoming a serious issue as well. But your practice is maybe taking a more subtle approach and is radical in the sense of its conceptual thinking, but also in terms of its end result. There is always that softer sense to it, it's not like something militant, and it is a considered choice of yours.*

**SD:** I think that one can sit as we are sitting now and be very strident about particular ideas and thinking and of course, that feeds into the back end of the work, but I think the work as it goes through that negotiation with say, myself, with the particular materials, with particular groups of collaborators – it becomes something else, it opens it back out. I think if it were just me asserting something, it would become somehow weaker. It's almost like the trend in the last five years for political artworks and in a way, for me, it becomes important to look at that in the same way that you had a trend for five years for Chinese art and it's really as much leveraged by the market-place. You know, work that sells for £1million one week, and £100,000 a couple of years down the line, because that bubble has burst. And it's really important to see these things in a wider, longer-term context – where softness, exchange and unexpected revelations play a part. Because only then do we start to see what's behind the structure of things.

**SR:** *I wouldn't necessarily say that your work isn't political; it's political with a small p rather than a capital P.*

**SD:** Really? It's political in the way I got about it. For me, political is enacting the collaborative. It is about that negotiation with the world, it's

not, 'Oh, here's a film about refugees', which I find problematic – because if I go off and work with refugees and then leave again, what have I actually affected?

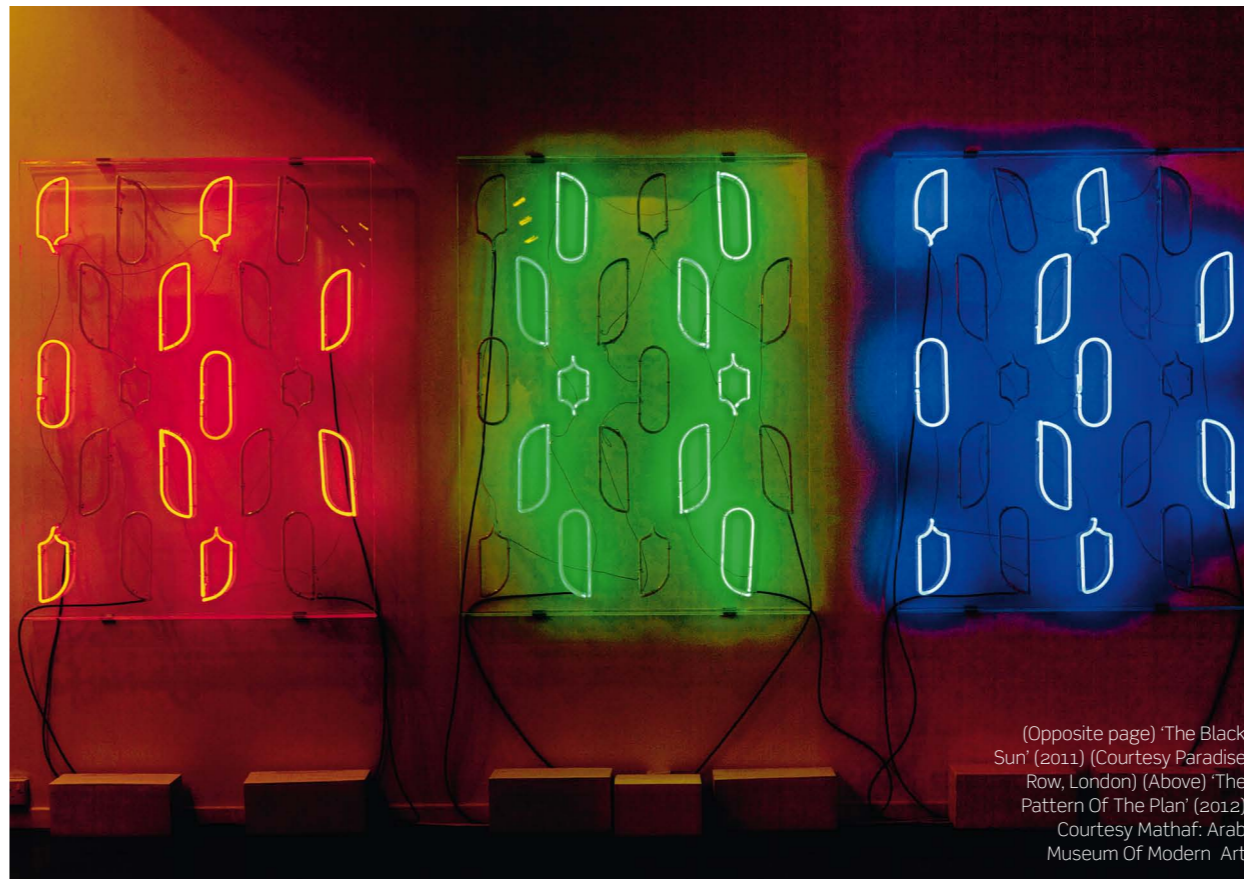
**SR:** *You did actually do a work with displaced children, didn't you, in Italy?*

**SD:** Yes but not refugees by any means, and not even displaced. They were just immigrants, in the case of the children I worked with, second or third generation immigrants living in Milan. And in fact it was two girls – one of Moroccan descent and one of Egyptian descent, and I was quite interested that they were girls, but playing the roles of Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's 'Waiting For Godot'. But that was more a look at ideas of translation and syntactical breakdown. I was less interested in displacement. I think displacement is almost part of the human condition. If we start to flag it up as something particular, as has been done for hundreds of years – you know, migration is something that other people do to Europe or America, it's a slightly insane view, because you're taking a slice of history that's maybe 200 years old.

One of my favourite research subjects that neatly inverts this notion is that in seventeenth century North Africa, in what is now Morocco, you had one of the first proto-type democracies, which was the Independent Pirate Republic of Rabat Salé. And it's very interesting, because it was run by a pirate council who were freely elected, usually based on how good a pirate they were.

**SR:** *Weren't they Kazakh?*

**SD:** People came across from everywhere. It became a kind of Mecca (I'll just throw that in there for fun) for mavericks. And what interests



(Opposite page) 'The Black Sun' (2011) (Courtesy Paradise Row, London) (Above) 'The Pattern Of The Plan' (2012) Courtesy Mathaf: Arab Museum Of Modern Art

me about it is how could one create that space today, even virtually, perhaps? I was just in Morocco doing a project at the Apartment 22 and was there talking to a number of artists friends and we actually wrote a manifesto for a Republic of pirates, based on a shared interest in this particular republic. But it lasted for about 50, 60, maybe even 70 years and what was interesting is that in the seventeenth century, Christianity was the repressive religion and so a lot of Europeans, particularly French and Dutch for some reason, would convert to Islam, go renegade and become pirates. Ethnicity, in fact, was no barrier to advancement. There was a Dutch captain who sat on the council, obviously he was no longer Johannes Krebbe or whatever, he was now Bin Abdullah Ali Bin Suleiman, or whatever. But I liked that free movement of exchange, for me that's almost pivotal to the current breakdown we're experiencing. Until you have the free movement of peoples, nobody can speak of democracy.

**SR:** *There's also that 'going native' track; one has to avoid it.*

**SD:** I think, instead of going native, one has to go maverick, where the subjectivity just becomes mutable. In a way, one might say that it's dishonest but I think that to live in the current conditions is dishonest and actually to start to take them to task and to play with them, is crucial. I think that act of play, of free play – and to go back to that idea of working across different contexts, media etc – starts to enact something political, enact it rather than to reify it as a temporary subject of the work.

**SR:** *The project that you mentioned at Apartment 22 is not your first engagement with North Africa. I'm well aware – we all are –*

*that you were awarded the Abraaj Capital Art Prize in 2011. I wanted to speak to you a little bit about this kinetic engagement that you explored, particularly the sculpture that you created for this project, but also this wider idea of maverick engagement with various disparities, people who are travelling and also ideas about travel and music, of an 'ideal' festival that you brought forth with this project. Could you please share?*

**SD:** Yes – let me try and condense that into some sort of intelligible response. The whole project for which I won the Abraaj Capital Art Prize was something I had been developing for many years. And it was one you have as an artist, that's one of a number of dream projects that sit on the shelf and every so often you take them down, dust them off and try again and see if anybody will help you realise them. Obviously I have an interest in Beat culture, Brian Gysin and William Burroughs but I was particularly

**“I THINK, INSTEAD OF GOING NATIVE, ONE HAS TO GO MAVERICK, WHERE THE SUBJECTIVITY JUST BECOMES MUTABLE...”**

fascinated with this link to Tangier at a particular moment, which is largely ignored in the history of Beat culture. It's interesting that the whole Beat generation fled the more repressive regime in the States to go to Tangier, not far from Rabat Salé, interestingly enough. But you had a very repressive regime in Morocco at the time, which gets largely ignored. But also what gets ignored – and I've been a fan of Gysin since I was a teenager – you mentioned something earlier about folding methods and I'm very into that idea of cut-ups, which even feeds into my films, but I'm also interested in the point at which Gysin was interested, impassioned and deeply influenced by Sufism. You can see it in his early drawings, before the dream machine came about, and in some of his paintings; the patterning of the dream machine is Islamic. And yet that seems to be slightly – even now with Gysin plucked from the dustbin of art history, with shows at the New Museum and the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris – you've still got this kind of marginalia of his time in Morocco, which is obviously pivotal.

And again you've got this métissage, but it's not just about Gysin, you know, when he was in Tangier, his lover was Mohamed Hamri, the painter and writer and together they owned what would now be seen as a slightly dubiously-named 1001 Nights Cafe in Tangier, where the Master Musicians of Joujouka were the house band. It was Gysin and Hamri who introduced Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones to the musicians of Joujouka, whose history is almost pre-Islamic and relates to almost pagan cultures around Pan returning in the spring, and which therefore is related to certain nature cults and agriculture. And Brian Jones went and jammed with them and later recorded them for the cult album 'Brian Jones Presents The Pipes of Pan at Joujouka'. So there are all of these networks that seem to, interestingly, parallel my evolving networks in Morocco.

Typically, I have no genetic reason to be in Morocco except I just seem to have gravitated there, which I think is great. I think it becomes really important to break down not just the MENA region, but every region. I just think, OK, one can critique the slight absurdity of the construct of the MENA region or the MENASA region but I think one doesn't look at the flipside, which is people operating in the ghetto of Euro-America, with their constant... I mean, what have we seen in the last ten years, except really, really boring, flatulent citations of really obscure aspects of European Modernism? It feels like the end of something, not the beginning. So I think it is time to start to become a multiple subject – that is the future, really.

But to go back to the dream machine project, I think what also interests me is its relationship to the early zoetrope and early, proto-cinema, that idea of just light and movement, which is a fairly nuts-and-bolts cinematic architecture. →



**“I THINK IF ONE IS JUST CAREERIST, IT BECOMES EMPTY AFTER A TIME. IT’S ABOUT TRYING TO DO SOMETHING IN HARMONY WITH OTHERS”**

**SR:** *It was actually made in Morocco, this piece?*

**SD:** I made a lot of the tests there, like the small one that’s behind you there. But I made the giant one here in the UK with some serious steel fabricators, because it needed to have that industrial strength. Then it was shipped over to Morocco and the first part of the project, or for me, the most important, was actually, and probably why I didn’t get funding for it so long, was that it needed about \$100,000 to be spent on one night’s festivities. And I like that – that point where you slip out of the Apollonian into the Dionysian. And what we did at the Cinematheque de Tanger, thanks to Yto (Barrada), who is a good friend - we extended the stage in the Cinematheque and removed some of the cinema seats so that the audience was left in the round in that communal, ritualistic kind of mode. And then the dream machine was at the centre and we had the master musicians and cult British guitarist Duke Garwood playing the quasi-Brian Jones role. He’d actually done the soundtrack to one of my previous features and it’s all these previous connections, networks, relationships, that for me are very important. Because I think if one is just careerist, it becomes empty after a time. It’s about relationships, it’s about trying to do something in harmony with others, if that doesn’t sound too hippy and kind of naff. But I think if you can combine that with a certain level of critical rigour, it doesn’t become hippy or naff, actually it just becomes a good way of being.

**SR:** *And so you feel Abraaj gave you the chance to realise that project, you really feel it couldn’t have been realised otherwise, or perhaps it could have been realised but in a different mode?*

**SD:** Well, to be honest, we tried a good couple of other avenues first. Like I said, it had been on the cards for four years before we ever even put it to Abraaj. But I was surprised Abraaj went for it, because it was a bit less object-based than other things it had commissioned previously. Obviously in the year I won it, they also commissioned Janane Al-Ani’s film work. So it

seemed to be a good year to have tried for it. If you’re looking for a critique of Abraaj, well, as artists, it’s great that anyone would give the money for more risky projects because I think it’s those risk-taking projects that generate so much more. There is another iteration of that project, called ‘The New Dream Project’, because it’s not meant to be fixed or finite, and I showed elements of that back at Apartment 22 in November. And that was part of my show at Modern Art Oxford in April, both the machine and the film that was made of the event in Tangier, but again that wasn’t just a film as a document of an event, the film itself is edited to the same flicker rate as the machine and the audio is cut to the same rate. So, ideally the film is as much a trip film or experiential piece of filmmaking rather than just some document, because I get bored of seeing videos of an artist wiping his behind two years previously. It’s not that interesting.

**SR:** *Do you think that film is becoming the preferred choice for you as a medium, is it one of the strongest mediums you can articulate your ideas through? Are you finding more of a move towards film?*

**SD:** I think there’s a move towards film, but just because there’s more possibility in terms of finding the support for the projects I’m doing. But equally, particularly with the textile paintings, it’s really over the course of the last three to four years that they’ve grown up and they’ve really grown up in parallel with the films.

**SR:** *So there’s a duality going on?*

**SD:** There’s a real sense of layering and montage that for me, really play off against each other.

**SR:** *Do you feature your textiles within your films?*

**SD:** I have done in the recent science fiction film, just minimally. But I think what becomes more important – and my jury is still out on whether that’s something I’d ever do again – is a lot of my ideas around science fiction were being worked out in a very abstract, formalistic way in some of the earlier textile works and those helped me to get a handle on, or maybe to approach, the narrative around the film. And

then, certain uses of device in terms of colour, lighting, even certain filters, like I refurbished an old 1970s prism filter for use on the science fiction film and something in the way that refracts the image very definitely fed back into the textile works when I came back into the studio once we had finished shooting. So, there’s a very, very direct, almost visceral interplay, between the films and the painting. And I’m really enjoying that space because they both, as I say, have this layered aspect. The neons as well, I’m enjoying the shift into a greater degree of abstraction in neon because that idea of light and colour, starts to have more of a reason to be in relation to the film. With a view to what’s going to take place at Modern Art Oxford, definitely this sort of growing syncretic interplay between the neons, textiles and experimental cinema that I practice seems to be really a very exciting space for me to be, creatively. And a very challenging one.

**SR:** *It’s a very exciting time in your career and particularly for your audiences as well and for the people who have been working closely with you over the years. How did you see the recent solo show at Modern Art Oxford - as being a retrospective, a mid-career retrospective?*

**SD:** No, I think it’s more of a mid-career slice, like a slice in time, which seems to fit more, conceptually, with the whole way in which I work. So, it’s nice to finish where we started – it’s a manifesto of practice over the last three years and that syncretic interplay is something I’ve really tried to work out. And even the way the works are installed says something about a kind of methodology that for me is a very particular, but very precise, way to look at editing, montage and layering and this idea that you very rightly raised about certain different narratives and histories, even if they are often contradictory or contrapuntal, and starting to see it altogether to see new openings onto some of those corridors that we spoke about. I think that my work, if it does nothing else but détentes people through 90 degrees so they look at the world from a different vantage, has already done enough. And I hope that the upcoming show will go some way towards actually putting forward a bolder manifesto about what the practice is actually about. Because as you say, it does have this rhizomatic, liminal range and yes, hopefully, audiences are starting to more broadly understand what the practice is about. I owe a lot to the people who supported me thus far. And that’s part of that idea of collaboration, it’s not just the people I collaborate with in my films, it’s the people I have conversations with, it’s the people I talk to who give me feedback on the work and edits, who are countless, and I think it’s really important to see your practice as a much larger enterprise than just one person or one artist. **HBA**

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(With thanks to ibraaz.com)

# ‘PROFOUND, STRANGE AND BRILLIANT’

*Gallerist Nick Hackworth on Shezad Dawood*

**I**’VE KNOWN SHEZAD FOR A LONG TIME, since we were in our teens in fact. Though I only knew him slightly then, I still dimly remember some of his art from that, no doubt, formative period. We fell back in touch when, soon after graduating, I started writing as an art critic from the Evening Standard in London and re-met Shezad who was establishing himself as a presence on the London art scene. I found a person who is incredibly smart, kind and sensitive, a quality of his that is sometimes overlooked because unusually, he’s also very effective at almost everything he does. His work back then centred on identity and played with the crude signifiers of race, religion and nationality that float about in our culture.

After a few years I began thinking about starting a gallery and by some twist I ended up renting, from Shezad, a tall, thin house on Paradise Row that he had bought and renovated in which the interior, floors and all, were a brilliant white. One thing led to another and soon enough I had started the gallery with a group show, ‘Welcome to Paradise’. I moved the gallery immediately after, but kept the name. Not only did I start the gallery in Shezad’s house but he was also instrumental in brining the core group of the gallery’s artists together. It’s a beautiful thing to have had Shezad involved so closely with the gallery from the start.

In 2007 we staged Shezad’s first major solo show, ‘If I Should Fall from Grace with God’. It was a knockout show. In the centre of the large, darkened space of our main gallery glowed four of Shezad’s now iconic neon and tumbleweed sculptures. Each articulated in neon and in Arabic, one of the 99 Names of God. The names shone through the tumbleweeds carrying with them all the polyvalent promises of divinity and light and a dense, symphonic, web of references that extended from minimalism to the Old Testament.

It was whilst working on this show that I started realizing just how profound, strange and brilliant Shezad’s vision and cultural agenda was. His earlier work left me wondering if he was coming from an archetypal position of postmodern blackness, cleverly manipulating signifiers and language to expose an underlying void of meaning. These works suddenly revealed that, in my understanding, Shezad’s entire vision was based on a beautiful, smart and complex utopian vision that saw the underlying patterns and structures in human thought and culture. His work was, and is, to find threads that weave their way through disparate epochs and places and link seemingly incommensurable symbols and ideas. The revelation of unity - an exquisite and brilliant task for an artist. **HBA**



(Above) Nick Hackworth (Left) ‘The Judge’ (2007) (Courtesy Saatchi Collection London)