DIA AZZAWI

DIA AZZAWI
SOMETHING DIFFERENT

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Meem Editions

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Dia Azzawi, studio visit, Beirut, 2014

Foreword

There is a lot to discuss in relation to this new body of work. Dia is known foremost as a painter, followed by his work as a printmaker, however, it was only until the opening of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, that his sculptures became more recognized as a stand alone body of work. In relation to textiles, Dia had worked on kilims, produced in Jordan, in the mid-1990s, and a painting was converted into a textile wall hanging in the early 1980s for Riyadh airport (Royal Pavillion, Riyadh), however, tapestry is something completely different to his oeuvre. These areas are looked at in detail further in this book.

It was in Doha in November 2013 that Dia and I started to discuss the possibility of him producing tapestries and turning *Sabra Shatila*, the original acquired by the Tate Modern in 2012, into a tapestry based on an offer by Dr Ramzi Dalloul to fund the production of the work. I was tasked with the research into which weaver to use which led me to look at the works of Picasso for the Rockefellers, tapestries by Miró, Calder, Chilidia, Braque, Delaunay and Chagall. One master weaver's name and workshop came up again and again and this was Yvette Cauquil-Prince and Ateliers Pinton in Aubusson, France. I embarked on an extensive research adventure, securing as much printed material as possible: books, catalogues and independent opinions. We reviewed numerous projects with weavers in Spain, Belgium, France, England, China, Scotland and Turkey. In our opinion the atelier that best translates a painting into a tapestry is Ateliers Pinton. The next step was getting there, easier said than done.

Dia took a flight from London to Limoges, followed by a one-hour drive to Aubusson; I travelled from our family home in Antibes by car. At the time it made sense to drive on paper, in practice maybe not as it turned out to be nine hours one way via Marseilles – via Lyon, Saint-Étienne, and Vichy – but a stunning drive nevertheless. We met at 10 am at the atelier and were both impressed by the incredible level of craftsmanship on display, how the human touch can do what no computer or automated machine can do: bring a breath of freshness into the work, making it come alive aesthetically. From a distance it is hard to see the difference between the original painting and the tapestry, close up one realizes that this is a different work altogether, perhaps in its own way even more beautiful.

Aubusson has been home to the French tapestry industry for six hundred years and Ateliers Pinton are the recognized masters of this art form. Working with Lucas Pinton and with Dia has given me incredible insight into an art form that has recently seen a kind renaissance, evident at Frieze and Frieze Masters, in October 2014, and the article relating to this subject in *The Art Newspaper* at that time.

I made my way to Antibes via the Djamel Tatah show at MAMA Saint-Étienne, and the vineyards of Côte Rôtie, Condrieu and Château Grillet, personal favourites of mine and incredibly scenic, but then all hell broke lose between Orange and Valence when I had a monumental car crash, writing off the car and doing a bit of damage to yours truly. I think the size of the replacement car, being a Renault Twingo, did more damage to myself than the car crash a few hours earlier, as the vehicle was clearly not designed for someone 6 feet 4 inches in height. With all this taken into account, the journey was a complete adventure, worthwhile on all counts. Seeing the atelier, meeting Lucas

Ateliers Pinton studio visit, Aubusson, July 2014

Dia Azzawi, studio visit, Beirut, 2014

Pinton, the owner and part of the family that founded the Ateliers, meeting the master weaver, and seeing what could be done with our project, was a worthwhile experience I will never forget.

The incorporation of the sculptures in the exhibition proved a lot easier and less adventurous from my side, however, I did have the pleasure to see the prototype for *Imaginary Plant* in the mountains outside Beirut with Dia. The sculptural works cover a range of subjects and display Azzawi's idiom in the best way. We have exhibited a few of Dia's sculptures previously, and I have even carried Azzawi's works as hand luggage over the years! I was once asked to take a small work to a mutual friend as a favour to another friend (no names will be mentioned), being told in advance that it was small and would fit in my hand luggage, only to find it just about fit and was 60 kg!

I would like to thank Dia Azzawi for having the faith in me to do this and for branching into a new medium. What is being exhibited is clearly 'Something Different' to what Azzawi is best known for. I would also like to extend my thanks to the writers Tom Flynn and Michèle Giffault who have contributed brilliant and interesting insights into Azzawi's sculpture and the art of tapestry, and to Georgina Adam and Lucas Pinton for making these introductions. To Samar Faruqi, Meem's Director of Research, for editing the publication and for providing an introduction to this collection in her interview with Dia; Noura Haggag, Meem's Creative Director, for designing a great book; Meagan Kelly Horsman for helping me curate and run the logistics of the project; and Vinosh Hameed for coordintaing all the shipments and other organizational details of the exhibition. I would also like to thank, in Beirut, Kaissar Rizkallah for all his help, support and advice. In Amman, Jordan Saver Jalal for the production and logistics regarding the shipment of the works from Amman, and to Sargon Geworgis for all his help with the London works. I would also like to thank Anthony Dawton and Matthew Lazarus for photographing the works for this exhibition.

Charles Pocock
Managing Director, Meem Gallery
New York, 2 March 2015

Dia Azzawi: Expanding the Imaginary

Tom Flynn

In the great deserts of the world an act of creation has been unfolding for millennia, delivering forms of unfathomable crystalline diversity and visual splendour. The processes that bring them about are not human in origin, but rather products of nature, of little more than the serendipitous force of the wind on gypsum, baryte and other hard minerals. The floral characteristics of these natural objects has earned them the name of desert rose and they can be found in the vast, sandy regions of Mexico, North America, North Africa and the Middle East.

As observers, we find the desert roses visually compelling, but our appreciation is also mixed with a sense of wonder that a power beyond that of humankind could bring forth such dazzling formal complexity. This is the very point where art and nature overlap and few are more sensitive to the potential of this threshold zone in stimulating fresh creative thinking than Dia Azzawi.

Azzawi has been experimenting with a new body of forms inspired in part by desert roses (see pp. 97 – 109) and other forms found in nature. This is a natural outcrop of his restless intellectual curiosity, which spans everything from European modernist painting to Arabic calligraphy, from Moroccan garden design to Mesopotamian architecture, from ancient Middle Eastern poetry to the sculptural qualities of modern automobile design. Thus the works that emerge from his studio are at once profoundly personal and idiosyncratic and yet grounded in an awareness of humanity's deeply embedded propensity to appreciate a shared formal vocabulary. This would seem to reinforce the universality of visual culture, transcending local variations. Azzawi's work plays imaginatively on this dialectic.

The claim to an atavistic connection to regional ancestry has become a contentious issue in cultural discourse. On one side are those who argue for the significance of material cultural heritage as an umbilicus that connects the people of a particular nation or region to their archaic forebears in that part of the world. In this formulation, cultural heritage is said to reinforce a sense of local identity and connectivity to the past. Opposing this view is a position which holds that culture is ever in flux, that identity is not fixed but hybrid, that cultural heritage is universal and speaks of our shared humanity and moreover that any claim to regional connectivity or nationhood is problematic in its implications. Like many artists, Azzawi holds these positions in creative tension, acutely conscious of his Arab identity and the influence of ancient culture in his work, and yet sensitive to the power of art to replace conflict with connectivity. The cultural critic Stuart Hall has spoken of identity as 'neither continuous nor continuously interrupted, but constantly framed between the simultaneous vectors of similarity, continuity and difference.'[1] This aptly describes the trajectory of Azzawi's career to date, his work reflecting both the continuity of his Arab identity and the simultaneity of Western and Middle Eastern influences on his thinking.

Some time ago, Azzawi stumbled upon the photographic work of the early twentieth-century German sculptor and designer Karl Blossfeldt, reinforcing his belief in creativity as a universal impulse whose reach often extends beyond human agency. Blossfeldt's great opus, *Urformen der Kunst* (Art Forms in Nature) of 1928, exerted a profound impact on his contemporaries, aligning him with the 'New Objectivity' school of inter-war German

[1] Stuart Hall, quoted in Ruth Frankenberg, and Lata Mani, 'Crosscurrents, Crosstalk: Race, "Postcoloniality" and the Politics of Location,' in *Cultural Studies* 7.2 (1993): 292 – 310.

Blessed Tigris
(2006)
Polyester resin
600 * 140 cm
British Museum,
Great Hall, London

[2] Karl Nierendorf, 'Introduction to *Urformen der Kunst* (Art Forms in Nature),' in Hans C. Adam, *Karl Blossfeldt: The Complete Published Work* (Cologne: Taschen, 2014), 51 – 53.

[3] Samir al-Khalili, *The Monument: Art, Vulgarity and Responsibility in Iraq* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), 11. Al-Khalili is a pseudonym of Iraqi academic Kanan Makiya, the Sylvia K. Hassenfeld Professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at Brandeis University.

[4] Zaha Hadid, foreword to Saeb Eigner, *Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran* (London: Merrell, 2010).

[5] The visual correlations between Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and the postcard photographs taken by Dakar-based French photographer Edmond Fortier in 1905 – 06, found in Picasso's archive, are discussed in Anne Baldessari, *Picasso and Photography: The Dark Mirror* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), 45 – 84.

[6] 'Picasso Speaks,' *The Arts* (New York, May 1923), 315 – 26; reprinted in Alfred Barr, Picasso (New York, 1946), 270 – 1.

avant-garde photography while drawing attention to the often unacknowledged debt that architects, artists and designers owe to the natural world. Writing in the introduction to Blossfeldt's photographic collection in 1928, the Berlin art dealer Karl Nierendorf noted:

> Just as nature, in its endless monotony of origin and decay, is the embodiment of a profoundly sublime secret, so art is an equally incomprehensible second creation, emanating organically from the human heart and human brain: a creation which from the very beginning of time and throughout the ages has had its origin in the yearning for perpetuity, for eternity, and in the desire to retain the spiritual face of its generation — doomed to be engulfed in the whirlpool of time — in stone, bronze, wood and painted images that are independent of birth and death.[2]

Today, in an era witnessing geopolitical upheaval in the Middle East and rampant materialism in the West, the need to assert the spiritual face of humanity is arguably more urgent than ever. Later in the same passage, Nierendorf refers to 'the unity of the creative will in nature and art', an idea that Azzawi seems to have made central to his practice. There is an ideological dimension to this as well, insofar as it equates with what Samir al-Khalili has termed 'the moral universe of art', a sense in which 'political freedom and the flourishing of the arts are seen as natural corollaries'.[3] Azzawi has spoken of the moral responsibility he personally feels towards Iraq, where he was born in 1939. It is also a yearning for the cultural hinterland from which he emerged as a mature artist in the 1970s, much of which has since been decimated by war and ethnic strife. Despite this he retains an unshakeable belief in the potential of creativity to build bridges between people and cultures. In this regard he is continuing a tradition that is as ancient as the Arab world itself. As the architect Zaha Hadid has noted, 'For millennia, the art of the Middle East has bridged the cultural divide between East and West. This work teaches us that these worlds are not mutually exclusive, but rather layered upon each other and profoundly interlinked.'[4]

That layering is nowhere more apparent than in Azzawi's work, which has long drawn inspiration from Western modernism, particularly a feeling for Fauvist colour and Cubist form. His sensitivity to European art is not a form of ventriloquism, however, any more than Picasso's art can be seen as a blank re-deployment of African masks, ancient Iberian sculpture or ethnographic photography.[5] Like many of his European Modernist forebears, Azzawi sees the entire visual field as amenable to reinterpretation; the cultural origins of the elements alighted upon are secondary to their aesthetic potential. As Picasso phrased it: 'When I have found something to express, I have done it without thinking of the past or the future.'[6] That attitude was shared by many of Picasso's contemporaries, some of whom borrowed from Arabic influences, one example being Paul Klee's use of Arabic script in his work following his visit to Tunisia in 1914.[7] A similarly fertile cultural interchange is apparent in some of Azzawi's recent sculptures, which rephrase Blossfeldt's magnified plant forms into new, totemic configurations. In doing so he unwittingly reveals an empathy with the English critic John Ruskin who found 'the forms most frequent in nature to be the most natural, and the most natural to be the most beautiful.'[8] See, for example, Azzawi's *Kinda Obelisk* of 2004 (p. 115), whose ascending tiers, overlapping skins and bud-form pinnacles pay subtle homage to Blossfeldt's images of the twig of the Pacific dogwood (*Cornus Nuttallii*). Other works in the current exhibition can be seen as meditations on the crystal efflorescence of the gypsum desert roses, whose blade-like protrusions have been smoothed and remodelled here into soft concavities and gently rolling contours. Azzawi encountered the gypsum flowers in the deserts of Qatar in the mid-1990s. 'After seeing them I tried to make a different version of them, but a shape related to them in some way.'[9] This calls to mind the concept of 'self-similarity' in the abstract fractals developed by the Polish-born mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot in the 1970s.[10] Unlike the drab colouration and jagged texture of their desert counterparts, however, Azzawi's objects have a sensual, haptic quality, demanding to be held in the hand, their luscious, shiny surfaces rendered in bright primary colours that intensify their visual appeal.

The thread of sensibility connecting Azzawi to Blossfeldt can be pursued back even further to the work of the nineteenth-century German biologist Ernst Haeckel. Haeckel's *Kunstformen der Natur* (Art Forms in Nature), published between 1899 and 1904, was an equally epoch-making confirmation of the artful universe. Haeckel's lithographic plates revealed the structure of radiolarians and other microscopic sea creatures recovered during deep-sea expeditions in the 1870s. The symmetry and ornamental intricacy of these creatures as presented by Haeckel mesmerized his contemporaries such that many of the forms found their way into painting, sculpture, architecture and manifold applied art contexts. Some of the radiolarians published by Haeckel bear striking similarities to the desert roses that have influenced Azzawi's work. As Irenaus Eibl-Eibesfeldt has noted, Haeckel himself maintained that 'nature works here much like an artist, and even postulated that protoplasm has an inherent "artistic drive".'[11] In March 1899, the French architect René Binet wrote to Haeckel:

> About six years ago I began to study the numerous volumes written on the Challenger Expedition in the library of the Paris Museum and, thanks to your work, I was able to amass a considerable amount of microscopic documentation: radiolarians, bryozoans, hydroids, etc. … which I examined with the utmost care from an artistic standpoint: in the interest of architecture and ornamentation. At present, I am busy realising the monumental entrance gate for the exhibition in the year 1900 and everything about it, from the general composition to the smallest details, has been inspired by your studies.[12]

Despite the historical distance separating them, Haeckel, Blossfeldt and Azzawi represent a continuum that springs from a mutual fascination with what the German critic Walter Benjamin described as 'one of the deepest, most unfathomable forms of creation – from the mutation in which the element of genius has always resided – the collective creative power of Nature'.[13] Just as Binet used Haeckel's discoveries, Azzawi has incorporated the visual stimuli he found in Blossfeldt into a range of objects, some of which contain the latent potential for architectural applications.

Among the many lamentable outcomes of the political upheavals ravaging the Middle East in recent decades has been the departure of many of the region's most prominent artists and their dispersal to more secure locations around the world.[14] While Iraq's cultural diaspora is a tragedy for the country and for its artists, who have been made to feel like exiles from their homeland, their resettlement elsewhere does have many positive consequences both for them and for their adopted countries. Azzawi, who has been resident in London since 1976, is now widely regarded not only as a leading exponent of the contemporary art of the Middle East, but also as a passionate advocate for pan-Arab culture in general and an energetic supporter of a younger generation of Arabic artists. To be sure, his presence in London has allowed him

[7] Venetia Porter, ed., *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* (London: British Museum Press, 2006), 16.

[8] John Ruskin, quoted in Lewis F. Day, *Nature and Ornament: Nature, the Raw Material of Design* (London: Batsford, 1929 ed., 1908), 1.

[9] Interview with the author at Azzawi's studio, 19 February 2015, London.

[10] John D. Barrow, *The Artful Universe: The Cosmic Source of Human Creativity* (London: Penguin, 1997), 59 – 63.

[11] Irenaus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 'Ernst Haeckel: The Artist in the Scientist,' in *Art Forms in Nature: The Prints of Ernst Haeckel* (Munich: Prestel, 2010), 20.

[12] Olaf Breidbach, 'Brief Instructions to Viewing Haeckel's Pictures,' in *Art Forms in Nature: The Prints of Ernst Haeckel* (Munich: Prestel, 2010), 15.

[13] Walter Benjamin, 'New Things About Plants,' quoted in David Mellor, ed., *Germany: The New Photography, 1927-33, Documents and Essays* (London: Arts Council England, 1978), 13.

[14] Although war, ethnic conflict and invasion have driven many artists away, others have remained, as the Iraq Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013 demonstrated, the country's representation on that occasion being drawn from those artists still living and working in Iraq. See Jonathan Watkins, and Tamara Chalabi, eds., *Welcome to Iraq*, Exhibition catalogue, Ikon Gallery / Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Iraq, Birmingham and Baghdad, 2013.

[15] Jewad Selim, quoted in Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *The Grass Roots of Iraqi Art* (Jersey: Wasit Graphic and Publishing, 1983), 7.

[16] Richard Westmacott, 'On Polychromy in Sculpture, or Colouring Statues,' in *Journal of the Society of Arts*, Vol. 7 (4 March 4 1859): 226.

[17] Quoted in Tom Flynn, *The Body in Sculpture* (London: Orion, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1998), 139.

[18] Pablo Picasso, reported by Christian Zervos in 'Conversations avec Picasso,' in *Cahiers d'Art*, Vol. 10, 1935, quoted in Elizabeth Cowling and John Golding, eds., *Picasso: Sculptor/ Painter* (London: Tate Gallery, 1984), 105.

access to European museums and galleries, which has coloured his own creative project. Equally important, however, is the increasing visibility of his own work in major public collections, which is serving to expand European awareness of Iraq as a source of culture rather than how it is currently so often presented in the media: as predominantly a place of sectarian division and political instability. Azzawi's contributions to the British Museum's groundbreaking *Word into Art* exhibition of 2006 are a case in point, allowing visitors to encounter the work of one of the region's most important voices, and moreover one now happily domiciled just a few miles north of the museum. Even those of his works that allude to traumatic historical events and the unsolved problems of the Middle East, such as the bronze *Wounded Soul* series (2010, pp. 20, 28 – 29) and the bronze 'winged' standing figure entitled *The Target* (2010, p. 121) have a moving nobility of purpose. This latter work recalls something of the mood of the work made by the post-war British sculptors who became known as the Geometry of Fear generation, in particular Lynn Chadwick and Kenneth Armitage. It also hints at an oblique connection with the art of ancient Assyria, echoing an observation by Iraqi sculptor Jewad Selim that artists of the region 'speak through the drama of the wounded beast'.[15] However, the presence of so much joyous colour in many of Azzawi's paintings and sculptures is testament to his unbreakable optimism, Iraq's political troubles notwithstanding.

The importance of colour is critical to Azzawi's creative project. It has long been apparent in his painting, but it is also clear from his recent sculpture. We take coloured sculpture for granted today but it is well to recall that until the modernist period of the early twentieth century to apply colour to sculpture was to disobey one of the fundamental edicts laid down by the academy. Some nineteenth-century writers equated the practice of colouring sculpture with an earlier stage of human development. Richard Westmacott, for example, a professor at the Royal Academy in London, stated baldly that, 'the further we go back towards *barbarism* in art, or to the infancy of art, the more surely do we meet with coloured sculpture.'[16] By the late Victorian period, however, a wealth of archaeological evidence had begun to alter attitudes towards the colouring of ancient architecture and sculpture, although it would still take time for the possibilities to become fully clear to artists. Rearguard academic pronouncements such as that made by Westmacott thus speak as much of a sense of ethnic superiority engendered by Western imperialism as they do about any aesthetic preferences. By the modernist period at the turn of the century, much had changed. prompting Gauguin to advise, 'Have before you always the Persians, the Cambodians, and a little of the Egyptian. The great error is the Greek, however beautiful it may be.'[17] Not only had abstraction been fully integrated into artistic practice, but the conservative strictures against the use of colour had also been swept aside by the avant-garde. In 1935, Picasso could look back and pour scorn on the previous academic generation, asserting that:

> Academic training in beauty is a sham. We have been deceived, but so well deceived that we can scarcely get back even a shadow of the truth. The beauties of the Parthenon, Venuses, nymphs, Narcissuses, are so many lies. Art is not an application of a canon of beauty but what the instinct and the brain can conceive beyond any canon.[18]

Azzawi's coloured sculptures currently fall into three distinct but interrelated groups, which might be summarized as those forms that began as meditations on the desert rose; the works inspired by Blossfeldt's photography, and a series of brightly painted geometrical compositions that hover playfully between architecture, furniture and abstract sculpture. His totemic sculptures in brightly coloured polyester resin or wood, such as *Homage to Khalil Hawi* and *Homage to Unknown Poet* (2014, pp. 80 – 83), have an affinity with certain elements found in the graphic reconstructions of ancient architecture produced by the nineteenth-century German architects Gottfried Semper and Jacques-Ignace Hittorff in the 1830s. Hittorff's lithographic plates suggested that the exterior of Greek temples at Selinunte in Italy and elsewhere were likely to have been painted in bright polychrome colours or covered with coloured stucco. As Robin Middleton has pointed out, Hittorff 'sought to persuade his audience to imagine a Greek architecture of rich and ravishing beauty; the mechanical smoothness of white marble made soft with a coat of pale yellow paint, the surface modulations made lively with patterns of bright blue, green, red and gold paint…'[19] To the nineteenth-century mindset, architectural approaches of this kind chimed with a speculative vision of the sun-drenched environments of the Mediterranean and Aegean where the unbroken white marble surfaces of ancient temples were thought likely to have had an uncomfortable, dazzling effect on the eye if not muted by colour. Conversely, Azzawi's monumental *Blessed Tigris* (p. xvi) provided a welcome flash of polychromy when displayed within the relative monochrome interior of the British Museum's central court during the 2006 *Word into Art* exhibition. Perhaps this is why his larger scale coloured sculptures sit so fittingly within the built environments of the modern Middle East while also having the potential to brighten the gloomy urban landscapes of northern Europe where colour is so often lacking.

The brightly coloured works also speak of Azzawi's openness to the aesthetics of contemporary design and how its elements can be ushered productively into the realm of sculpture. The work entitled *Toy Like No. 2* (2014, p. 87) comprises a simple red cube raised on orange stud feet, the cube intersected by a blue and green-painted planar form, itself pierced by a black-and-white banded cylindrical shape that suggests a handle of some kind. This is abstract sculpture, but with a gentle nudge towards figuration. When viewed in profile the work takes on a vaguely equine form, the constituent parts of which have been distilled into a kindergarten-like configuration, suggesting a miniature postmodern hobby horse. Some of these brightly coloured works have the visual appeal of the Memphis furniture designed by Ettore Sottsass and his associates in the 1980s. If scaled up, one can see how a work such as *Toy Like No. 1* (2014, p. 85), which stands in an uncertain zone somewhere between sculpture, architecture and furniture, could take its place in an open public space, inviting one to sit on its lower ledge and enjoy the shade provided by the central pillar and the vertical 'screen' that unites the oval base with its pyramidal pinnacle. And yet its true dimensions deny such functionalism; its visual appeal stems instead from its proximity to the tradition of Surrealist objects.

Qualities of ambiguity and strangeness are equally apparent in the sculpture entitled *Toy Like No. 3* (2014, p. 89), which comprises a saddle-like upper element of phallic outline mounted on a cube raised on four bubble feet. From the front surface of the cube (or is it the rear?) emerge two pointed shapes that provide a sharp counterpoint to the soft edges of the 'saddle' surmount. The formal contradictions at play here call to mind the objects made by Henry Moore, Giacometti, and their Surrealist contemporaries in the 1930s although the polychrome decoration of Azzawi's works places them into a category that is entirely their own.

[19] Robin Middleton, 'Hittorff's polychrome campaign' in R. Middleton, ed., *The Beaux-Arts and Nineteenth-Century French Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984), 187.

A Surrealist sensibility is also discernible in *White Obelisk* (2014, p. 111), the verticality of which encourages a figurative reading. Like Picasso's experiments in the late 1920s, such as his *Bathers* (*Study of a Monument*) of 1928, *White Obelisk* distils any descriptive elements into elegantly arranged geometrical abstraction, leaving us to switch between the playful ambiguity of possible interpretations: figure/obelisk, obelisk/figure.

It is interesting to observe the contrast in semantic charge between the brightly coloured works and the white monochrome compositions, which reveals Azzawi's sensitivity to both natural and applied polychromy. In the former category is one of the most beautiful of the recent works—the white relief entitled *Mural for Silent Music* (2014, p. 112), which comprises a series of abstract elements arranged within an enclosing rectangular frame. There is a sense of rhythm and flow here that we might connect to Azzawi's love of Arabic calligraphy, which has been a constant source of inspiration in his painting and sculpture. The soft edges of the forms are also suggestive of human limbs, and there is even a landscape quality at play here. The compacting of harmonic elements into a bounded frame recalls Joseph Cornell's boxes, but more pertinently, perhaps, the work of Russian-born American sculptor Louise Nevelson, who also drew on ancient precedents, in her case the Pre-Columbian art of Mexico and Peru.[20] The art historian Barbara Braun has spoken of how the 'calculated geometry' and uniform colour of Nevelson's assemblages amount to 'a metaphor of the archaeological mystique.'[21] Azzawi's *Mural* resonates in a similar way, its various components are discreet and yet architectonically connected, its straight and sinuous lines, soft and hard-edged contours rhythmically intertwining to create an atmosphere of light, colour and space. *Mural for Silent Music* might be read as a metaphor of the combined mystique of music, sculpture, landscape and calligraphy.

The diversity of forms and techniques on display in Azzawi's sculpture speaks not only of his openness to a broad range of historical and stylistic influences, but also of his willingness to experiment with technological applications in conceiving and making his work. On a recent visit to his London studio I was struck by the broad range of his interests and activities. On one side of the room was a table teeming with a multitude of clay maquettes rehearsing the endless possibilities presented by the desert rose. Nearby was an easel supporting a canvas on which an acrylic painted abstract form was beginning to emerge, its hatched contours revealing the extent to which an instinct for sculpture underpins so much of what he does ('When I paint, I feel plastic,' he says.) He guides me from one project to the next, speaking with infectious enthusiasm about the possibilities of various materials and processes, no matter whether it be the immediate, malleable potential of clay or the new avenues being opened up by 3-D printing and other technologies.

Technology and new media have become important tools for artists of the Iraqi diaspora. The Internet has been deployed with notable criticality by Wafaa Bilal, but many artists of the region are using digital image manipulation and other electronic applications to open up expressive possibilities and innovative processes for fabricating three-dimensional objects.[22] Azzawi is adept at a range of software suites, using Photoshop and Publisher applications to sketch out designs. These can then be translated via 3-D printing technology into sculpted objects made from polyester resin and other lightweight synthetic media.

Dia Azzawi is at the height of his powers. His voracious curiosity and appetite for visual stimuli is boundless. Whether it be the art or architecture of the ancient or modern Middle East, the work of Western Modernist painters, sculptors, botanists and scientists, or the sensual lines of modern motor cars, all are susceptible to incorporation and reinterpretation in his painting, drawing, sculpture, or designs for tapestry. Azzawi takes his place in a long and noble modern tradition of painters who were also sculptors, and sculptors who were also painters; the names of Gauguin, Degas, Matisse and, of course, Picasso, immediately suggest themselves. Azzawi is all of these and more. His irrepressible creative vitality allows him to build deep and meaningful connections across cultures, and in doing so he connects those of us fortunate enough to experience his work.

[20] Barbara Braun, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World* (New York: Abrams 1993), 306 – 310.

[21] B. Braun (1993), 310. Coincidentally, Nevelson's first solo exhibition, in New York in 1941, was at the gallery of Karl Nierendorf, who penned the influential introduction to Blossfeldt's *Urformen der Kunst* of 1928. See Arnold B. Glimcher, *Louise Nevelson* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972), 19.

[22] Anthony Downey, ed., *Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in North Africa and the Middle East* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014). See also Wafa Bilal, *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2008).

Contemporary Dialogues with Textile
Tapestry and the Work of Dia Azzawi

Michèle Giffault

This series of three tapestries represent a turning point in the already abundant and diversified works of Dia Azzawi. As is the case with many recognized artists who have a strong understanding of creation and who have experimented with the many forms of artistic expression available, a curiosity for new forms of artistic expression develops. However, the artist's gestures remain their own but are tempted by new media, different forms, even new uses.

Rich with his numerous experiences, an artist nourished by Occidental art of the twentieth century, where many figurations both suit and seduce the artist, Dia Azzawi encounters the multi-secular, universal art of tapestry. In his work he honours the art of the past, from ancient times to more recent history; he has understood – and wishes to pass on – this wealth of human research that has no boundaries of time or place. The connections and the echoes can only but enrich the most contemporary vision of art.

His is a committed art, one that serves not one cause in particular, but the human race in general. The titles of his works are but proof that Azzawi's art is not only an outcome of research in general but of careful investigation, narration and illustration. Always determined to ignore nothing of the past or subjects relating to more recent events, and to use both to nourish his work, Dia Azzawi explores different artistic expressions. In the same way that he has devoted himself to sculpture, he has expressed the desire to produce models to be visually transcribed into tapestry. He offers us works that will undoubtedly leave their mark on the art of weaving.

Tapestry and the Ateliers Pinton

When one is an artist as productive and renowned as Dia Azzawi, why turn to a new medium, and in particular to weaving? How is one drawn to tapestry? The attraction to tapestry must arise from a feeling of familiarity, sensuality, proximity and the comfort that it evokes and inspires. It was in observing and admiring in a public building, tapestries woven by the Ateliers Pinton, Felletin, Creuse, in France, a weaving centre for many centuries, that Azzawi experienced the desire to know more about the medium and quite naturally turned to this continually thriving workshop.

The Ateliers Pinton represent more than a half a century of textile history and knowledge, in both the creation of carpets and mural tapestries, works created by artists in often exceptional formats from all over the world. The Pinton workshop is the largest and oldest workshop in the region to maintain all the traditions and it operates alongside individual or delocalized workshops.

Of the well-known tapestries in the world, one of the most notable, and largest (measuring more than 250 metres^2), hangs in Coventry Cathedral, woven after a cartoon by Graham Sutherland (1962). Others include John Coburn's curtains for the Sydney Opera House (commissioned in 1970); *Music and Dance* (1991, 150 metres^2) in the major theatre Espace Carpeaux, à Courbevoie, near Paris, cartoon by Daniel Riberzani; *UNESCO* (1956) by Le Corbusier, a wool tapestry that welcomes the public to UNESCO's prestigious building. All these tapestries were woven in Pinton's studio in Felletin.

Jenin Jenin (2015, detail)
Triptych
300 * 456 cm
(300 * 152 cm each)

[1] René Huyghe, *Exposition à la Maison de la Pensée française* (1952).

[2] Claude Faux, *Lurçat à haute voix* (Julliard, 1962).

Aubusson-Felletin and the revival of tapestry

Admittedly, there are many places in the world where weaving prevails using ancestral techniques. However, in this small region of France energy and money has been invested so that the technique of tapestry weaving remains at the service of contemporary and universal art. The official text to which we contributed for the Inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, that became effective from the Autumn 2009, reads as:

> A centuries-old tradition, the craft of Aubusson tapestry consists of weaving an image using processes practised in Aubusson and a number of other localities in the Creuse region of France. This craft produces mainly large decorative wall hangings but also rugs and pieces of furniture. Aubusson tapestry can be based on an image in any artistic style, prepared by a paper 'cartoon' (template) designer. Weaving is done manually by a *lissier*, or weaver, on a loom positioned horizontally, working on the reverse side of the tapestry, and using yarns that are hand-dyed in-house. This process is time consuming and expensive. The Aubusson tapestries are a gold standard throughout the world, to the extent that Aubusson has become a common noun in some languages. The production of tapestries in Aubusson and Felletin provides enough work for three small businesses and ten or so freelance artisan weavers, thus creating a significant volume of related work (wool production and spinning, marketing, by-products, museum exhibitions and tourism).

Dia Azzawi thus discovers the magic world of tapestry, as did many artists before him, particularly those of the twentieth century, a century that marks the renaissance of tapestry. The Pinton studios collaborated with the biggest names of the time, Fernand Léger, Alexandre Calder, Sonia Delaunay, Victor Vasarely, Pablo Picasso, Le Corbusier, Jean Lurçat, and numerous American artists. In the field of modern art the commissions of the art editor, Marie Cuttoli, lent a new energy to the weaves of the 1930s, despite the difficulties of transcribing the work of art into tapestry—this was particularly the case with the works of Picasso and his close friend Joan Miró, and with the works of Jean Cocteau and Léger. The movement continued to grow and re-establish itself before and during the Second World War.

It could be said that in the beginning of the twentieth century, approximately fifty tapestry painter-designers were involved in the renaissance of woven art, to the extent that René Huyghe considered the display of such works the main event in art for this century.[1] It is to Jean Lurçat – comissioned by the government and a pioneer of the movement to establish a revival of the medium – that one owes an understanding of tapestry as a collective material, heavy in signification and a serious object.[2] Yet there exist as many artists as there are personalities and as many reactions to the approach of tapestry, this according to the character of each person and to their expectations. All unravels either in mutual respect or in a certain distance in the confidence offered.

It is only natural to think that the simplest drawings are the easiest ones to transcribe into tapestry, however, nothing could be further from the truth. An example is the work of Sonia Delaunay. When viewing her oeuvre, one can sense that she had immediately considered the composition in relation to the characteristics of textile, its weave and texture. In other cases, the particularities of the cartoon can and often provide a challenge for the workshop.

To have one's work woven into a tapestry is neither an easy undertaking nor an insignificant process. The model must respond or be adapted to several criteria with

Coloured wools in the storeroom of Ateliers Pinton, Aubusson, France

regard to the lines and strokes in the tones used. It should be added that the creation of such a work requires the skill of more than one weaver, and often involves the work of four hands or more.

From planning to action

The life-size painting, produced by the artist, the cartoon, drawn in the past on fabric or a sheet, can be a gouache, oil on canvas, varnished even, or an enlargement on photographic paper. It can also be coded and numbered. The cartoon is always turned inversely to that of the painting as the tapestry is woven on the reverse side. To look under the warp to weave requires great visual, manual and intellectual skill.

Transposing paint on paper to dye on wool is not so easy but the colourist (*assortisseur*) can give, or make together with the rosary or *chapelet* a chain of coloured wools knotted at the junction of each colour and representing the exact shade of each colour used in each tapestry. That is why, in a workshop, the storeroom is such a sumptuous treasure of coloured wools. The particularity of the Pinton workshop is that they employ their own *assortisseur*, which guarantees quality and ensures a direct and continuous dialogue with the artist. These colour references allow the newcomer to choose his or her own and unique palette of colours. In order to remain true to the colours of the cartoon, the yarns are dyed for each weave, even if a series is woven. The dyeing takes place in the workshop and can therefore be tested and adjusted when needed.

In the dyeing process, the wool is hung in skeins on a thick wooden rod called a *lissoir* and is then inserted vertically into the vat—the wool used is Australian or from New Zealand and is of top quality, smooth and

soft. The rod is then hung over the boiling, bubbling cauldron which heats to more than 100° C; the wool is lowered into the vat, then lifted and turned so that the dye takes to the heart of the yarn. Over and over the dyer turns each skein by hand. Finally, the wool is dried by the ambient temperature of the vat, without a dryer or any other machinery.

In Aubusson-Felletin, weavers use *low-warp* looms

In Paris, in the Gobelins workshops (Mobilier National, for the state), the weavers work at upright looms (*haute-lisse*) and use wool for the warp. In Aubusson the looms are horizontal (*basse-lisse*) and the weavers are bent over their work. The warp is mounted onto two horizontal wooden rollers (*rouleaux* or *ensouples*). Weavers work on the reverse side of the work and cannot see the overall tapestry until it is completed and cut off the loom. Weaving bobbins, full of coloured wool or silk, are called *flûtes*. Since the end of the eighteenth century, cotton has been used for the warp as it lends an improved drape to the finished tapestry once hung.

In the setting up process heddle bars (*barres de lisse*) are attached to alternate threads on the warp. The weavers press on treadles (*marches*) under the loom to open these alternative threads so the *flûtes* can be passed through from the right to the left (*une passée*) and, when the other treadle is pressed, passed back again (going back and forth is a *duite*). After some *duites*, the weaver packs the weft (*trame*) down hard with his wooden comb; the warp is no longer visible and the woven picture is completed. The weaving of about one square metre of tapestry takes approximately one month.

Once the weaving is finished, the small slits of the tapestry – where changes of colour occur – are sewn by hand (*couture des relais*). Finally, the finished tapestry is cut from the loom, and a solemn moment known as '*la tombée de metier*' takes place. This ceremony is a mixture of artistic know-how and recognition of the finished work; it has a social role within the community. The ancient quality of this art, and its firm place within the art world, gives way to an almost ritual-like ceremony where those involved, the artist, weavers and general public, discover the transformation of the work of the artist into another form using other materials. The crowd gathers, awaiting the surprise in discovering for the first time the metamorphoses, the presentation of the right side of the tapestry.

French law (financial law) states that tapestry editions must be limited to six copies, usually one for the workshop and one for the artist. A true Aubusson or Felletin tapestry is *always* handmade: you can see the *bolduc* on the reverse, a small piece of paper or fabric bearing the name of the artist, the title, the dimensions of the tapestry, the name of the workshop and sometimes the date.

The first tapestries of Dia Azzawi

The initial examination of the model (cartoon) immediately enables the evaluation of the feasibility of its weaving. Too many geometric, rigid lines, departing in all directions, could create a visual awkwardness as certain elements cannot be achieved by the warp and the weft, themselves crossing right angles. Neither is it easy to keep in one's mind that it is woven on the reverse and from the side edge in order to keep the warps parallel to the ground once hung, thus ensuring a better fall of the fabric.

The chosen format for Azzawi's tapestries is ideal. A square measuring 2 x 2 metres is appropriate with an object exhibited within an interior, a work that will meet the eye daily and with familiarity. The warmth, thickness, physical weight, and the depth of the subject of the work's meaning are lent to the tapestry by the density of its weave, which is technically expressed in *portées*, and depends on the mounting of the warp on the loom and the number of warps per centimetre. It is with these factors held in mind that the atelier decided to weave the Dia Azzawi series in 14 *portées*, or 5 warp threads per centimetre. A weave with this number of warps per centimetre balances a strong visual appearance and allows for a sensitive weave, far removed from that of a fabric that aims to resemble a drawing. It allows for certain parts of the diptych to be woven with a varying number of warps thereby creating contrasts.

As previously mentioned, the wool yarns are chosen for each tapestry in the workshop together with the artist, with the advice of the *assortisseur*. Neither weaver nor designer, he does, however, master the weaving techniques that can be used. He is the translator of the terms used in each phase of the work; he gathers the wishes of the artist and translates them into colour and weave. The importance and necessity that the artist should come to the studios to participate in the various choices and decisions is obvious: this is what Dia Azzawi undertook in the preparation for his tapestries. A reciprocal investment in the project is the key to its success.

Oriental Window

2 x 2 m, 14 portées, or 5 warp threads per cm, 5 wool threads on the bobbins. Approximately forty shades in colour or mixtures of colours.

Dia Azzawi mainly uses abstraction, however, he does so in a language that is common, perceptible and easily assimilated by all. In a straightforward manner, and as an international artist, Azzawi does not resort to titling his works anecdotally but maintains the spirit of the subject. In his conflation of two cultures he draws such energy that it emanates from his very being, he does not impose but transforms vitality into sensitivity. He understands the artist's role of transmission, the importance of awakening the consciousness of the viewer by creating works that are somehow strong and beneficial. He refuses to see the founding civilizations of the Middle and Near East wiped away, but does so with a spirit of confidence and enthusiasm. His rhetoric is resolutely optimist.

Certain difficulties were encountered with *Oriental Window* (p. 145), which created both tension and anxiety when defining the cartoon. It is during these moments of questioning that the evaluation of what can and cannot be undertaken is assessed and this is the point at which the discussion should imperatively start in order to preserve the balance of desires and resolutions. Without this dialogue mistakes and inaccuracies will occur. It is in this sense that the statement that a tapestry is nothing more than a copy of a painting takes on new meaning. The technical problems encountered with the weave of *Oriental Windows* provides an example of these potential problems. The metallic blue-green of the cartoon is vibrant and glistening. Despite the addition of shiny fibres, such as silk, rayon or acrylics, the matt quality of wool cannot render the artist's intention. In this particular case, the solution was found by the dyer who achieved an original colour that found a comfortable place among the others.

Indeed, here one can recall Victor Vasarely, Sonia Delaunay or even Robert Delaunay in the masterful, unique, large work *Rythme N° 1*; here we have geometrical abstraction at its fullest, however, there is no clash in the woven rendering of this work. Additionally, certain weaves can create distortions of the form – although some can be left as decorative elements as was the case with Calder – that do not fit in with a

Coloured wools in the storeroom of Ateliers Pinton, Aubusson, France

Jenin Jenin on the loom, Ateliers Pinton

formal geometric composition and are viewed as errors or defects. So there you are, there is no user's manual for the designer! It is the role of the cartoonist and the weaver to adapt the composition with honesty, cooperation and coordination. In the weaving of geometric lines, the tapestry cannot interpret everything without introducing deformations and meaningless renderings.

For example, how do you transpose the shiny veneer of a work on paper to the nearest possible colour in wool or in silk? This question has been the preoccupation of many artists and has allowed for significant advances. One can quote the characteristic case of Mario Prassinos, resolutely an abstract artist, who understood after the weaving of his first tapestry, which was woven directly from an oil on canvas painting, that one was required certain modifications in order to allow the translation of the artist's intention. He opted for the use of a lead pencil, abandoned the use of colour to use numbers that referred to the colour of his choice which lent a great rigour to his designs. As a result, the majority of *cartonniers* worked in this manner to avoid ambiguity. Each created his own *chapelet* or rosary that varied from thirty to around one hundred colours without mentioning the mixtures of different colours that could be made on a bobbin.

My Garden

2 x 2 m, 14 portées, or 5 warp threads per cm, 5 wool threads on the bobbins. Approximately forty shades in colour or mixtures of colours.

The weavers had much enjoyment toying with the numerous possibilities of the use of various weaving techniques and proved very spontaneous in the rendering of this weave (p. 143). To use one's technical vocabulary to render the smooth passage of colour, even if this is not entirely visible in the finished tapestry, is the expertise of the weavers, bent over their looms—they are the first to feel and understand what the tapestry is to look like. In this tapestry it is a window, opened in joy onto a garden that is to be shared, a gift of intimacy.

'Man is an animal that thinks with his fingers,' noted Maurice Halbwachs (*La mémoire collective*, 1950), an apt statement in relation to the art of tapestry that remains entirely manual and requires considerably more time than industrially produced series of weaves. We cannot forget this idea because it is akin to the founding of the social, historic and even aesthetic memory. There is most definitely a connection between the model and its fulfilment. This is not an enclosed garden, closed for a hermit but an explosion of colour that one deduces can change according to the time of day, the sun, the seasons. Indeed, the impression of movement of what is to become, creates joy and a feeling of freshness.

Jenin Jenin (triptych)

14 portées, or 5 warp threads per cm, 5 wool threads on the bobbins. Among forty or more shades, mixtures of colours, grey to green arrives at pure colour, the red for signature.

This is a work of art that marries well with the art of tapestry and for the delight of all concerned, weaver and the general public (pp. 128 - 141). Face to face with this triptych of significant size, one cannot help but think of Picasso's monumental *Guernica*: the same theme of denunciation, human brutality and its effects, the similar treatment in both the forms and the colour palette—a tapestry was also made of this work by De La Baume-Dürrbach, after Pablo Picasso (1937), low warp tapestry, 1976, 3.30 x 7 m, for the Unterlinden Museum, Colmar, France, and the Rockefeller collection, New York.

[3] Quoted in Sheila Gibson Stoodley, 'Dream Weavers,' *Art and Antiques*, September 2009, Accessed 25 February 2015, http://www.artandantiquesmag.com/2009/09/dream-weavers/.

Picasso gave advice to weavers, friends and neighbours not to *imitate*. The same attitude can be found in this new work, but with another form of expression. Commenting on Picasso and his decision to create tapestries, Kykuit Curator Cynthia Altman said: 'He wanted to bring appreciation of modern art to everyone, and tapestries are more portable and less fragile than the originals.'[3] One could add that tapestry erased the distance created by paintings.

Jenin Jenin was created in response to a brutal attack; it is not a work of revenge but one of denunciation, of pain, and of a desire for peace. The representation of symbols is proof of this. This is not the wounded dove of peace of Apollinaire but one that soars, like those of Picasso, Eluard or Cocteau. The bird flies off to tell Noah that the waters have withdrawn and that the ark can make land, that calm is restored to life on earth. The visual resources have a shared aesthetic, understandable to all who grasp the gravity of the work's content and message.

The black-and-white colouring of the cartoon evokes the cold, death and the threat of the attack. This confrontation produces a metallic effect, that is all the more attractive to the eye in that it is not frequent, generally speaking, but relatively common in the works of Dia Azzawi. This opposition is very recent in tapestry, as it does not appear until the middle of the twentieth century with the large areas of one colour and geometric figures of the Cubists. However, it is difficult to reproduce in a weave, creating an artificial effect. It is therefore necessary to use shades of grey, different shades of the same colour which has prompted research and experimentation by art teachers, art schools and the directors and weavers of tapestry studios. For example, many trials were undertaken for the works of Agam and Adam. These specific weaving tests have produced techniques that have served us well in the past and are still used today by many artists and even in their use of colour. These techniques have found a firm position in the range of weaving techniques available to the weaver and constantly reappear in weaves some sixty years after their development. Proof, once more, that tapestry is not a 'fixed' art, but on the contrary one that is in constant and discreet evolution.

So, the *piqués*, pure shades that are combined in the woven area, and the *chinés*, ranges of different colours on the five yarns of the bobbin, were used. The use of dark grey was used for the dark colours, echoing techniques of the Middle Ages where black was replaced by similar but less aggressive colours. A silver thread is woven here and there to lighten the matt quality of the wool. Silk is used to similar effect in the face or the dove. All of this creates a strong emotional impact and a direct relationship with the theme. It can be compared to a return to the fundamentals of tapestry, inspired as early as the Renaissance by engravings and prints. The alchemy of moving from lines to the quest for volume and colours occurs. Indeed, the lines and the drawings are conserved with precision and lead to contrasts with the darkness of time, the poetry of human life and the lyricism of a statement.

In this same manner, the white of the background was rendered using a tone similar to that of undyed virgin wool, more natural and soft, and mixed in with grey yarns. This unified background assists in lessening the image of horror. The interlacing threads of the *keffieh*, a magnificent headdress that originates from the depths of the desert, indicative of Arab identity and therefore of recognition, appears as barbed wire. The static elements do not move downwards towards the earth. It appears as if time has come to a standstill if one could not recognize the life in the dove (the theme of the bird appears frequently in Azzawi's works); the language becomes powerful with the representations of the dove and the oval, a language that is universal and can be understood all over the world. Despite the harsh shades, the lack of movement in the forms, there remains the gentleness in the androgynous form – humanity in search of a dream – who dreams, eyes almost closed, and who continues to hope.

With this important set of tapestries Dia Azzawi, more than ever before, comes across as a true 'citizen of the world'. The majority of artists that have be drawn to tapestry, including amateurs that have collected tapestries to adorn their interiors, often continue their relationship with the medium, it takes them over and becomes a strong and irrepressible part of them and their art. Perhaps this will be the case for Dia Azzawi, with the promise of new weaves, woven with passion. As Cocteau once said, 'a masterpiece is a painting, a poem, a statue, a film, music that has the power to metamorphose he who looks or listens as if they were a masterpiece.'[4]

Translated from French by Susanne Cussell Bouret,
Tapestry and Textile Conservator

[4] Jean Cocteau, *Démarche d'un poète* (Paris, 2013).

Jenin Jenin on the loom

Azzawi working on *Jenin Jenin*, Scrubs Lane studio, London, 2002

Interview with Dia Azzawi*

Samar Faruqi

It seems that you have been working more with sculpture in recent years. When would you say that you really started to explore the medium in depth and what were the reasons for that shift?

From the beginning I had a lot of interest in sculpture. I had about ten pieces which were exhibited in one of my shows in 1967 at the Iraqi Artists Society. At that time, I put more emphasis on painting, but when I went to London I started to work more on sculpture, specifically after the eighties, and most of these pieces were done in terracotta. I would use acrylic and paint these sculptures. Some of these works were exhibited during the opening exhibition *Four Artists* at the Arab World Institute [Institut du Monde Arabe] in Paris, in 1988.

I kept making pieces but not that many; the exhibition I had was in 2005 in Amman where I exhibited some work, about four or five pieces using for the first time a new material, polyester resin. Also before that I did, using the same material, a large sculpture (6 metres high) under the title *Blessed Tigris* [see p. xvi]. It was specially created for the exhibition *Word into Art* [2006] which was held at the British Museum, its shape echoes that of the ninth-century minaret found in the ancient city of Samarra, the sculpture is inscribed with a poem by the celebrated Iraqi poet Muhammad al-Jawahiri. There was not really a shift but more a need to explore the medium and how it was something that could add greater visual richness to my work as a painter.

At the start of your career did you have to consider the commercial implications of working with painting more than sculpture? Would you have more success selling a painting than a sculpture?

There was more success with painting because I put more emphasis on painting. This is why maybe now after 2010, when I did the large sculpture [*Wounded Soul, Fountain of Pain*] for the opening of the Museum of Arab Art in Doha [in the exhibition *Interventions*] that gave me the opportunity to a new experience in using the modern technology of scanning a small model then enlarging it into the size which was exhibited (3 x 3.50 x 2 metres). After that I went back to some of the old pieces which I had created and enlarged them in the same way. This technology was something that I was not initially used to, and it gave me more confidence to put more emphasis in creating more works [sculptures]. In a way it is easier for me to realize the work, making a small model into a larger size like the two sculptures, which was done in five months, which was absolutely fantastic if I compare that with the normal way of enlarging sculptures.

When you exhibited your sculptures in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, how were they received by audiences?

Actually, I sold some of those pieces; audiences were very welcoming at that time. The pieces were more reliefs than three-dimensional sculptures though.

Have you held many exhibitions dedicated to sculpture?

No, this is the first exhibition focused on sculpture. Before, most of the works I exhibited were either prints or paintings.

Wounded Soul, Fountain of Pain
(2010)
Horse: bronze
290 * 110 * 160 cm
Basin: metal and crude oil, roses in polyester resin
200 * 200 cm
Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha

How important is it to you to form a link between the themes you explore in painting with sculpture? Would you say that sculpture is an extension of your paintings? Or do you consider it an entirely different area of your work?

At the beginning, it was more related to painting, but for the time being it has become more independent in the way that it differs completely to what I am doing in painting. Now I have put more emphasis on the shape, how it works within the space, how I would like to display a three-dimensional work in comparison to a painting. From the beginning of the eighties I was more interested in using acrylic colours in terracotta sculpture, which in a way became like a painting in 3-D. But now when I use colour, I colour the whole sculpture instead of painting on it.

Do find that you communicate your ideas differently through sculpture? Is it different to when you create a painting?

It's completely different. Because when I work with sculpture I am looking for the relationship between the shape and the light, how the piece works if I want to see the work from different angles, which is different to what I do with a painting. Also, I feel that sculpture is more related to the environment in contrast to painting. I love to have, for example, an open space. This cannot be done when working on a painting but it can with sculpture. Specifically in the last three years, I have been doing a lot of work, which I have never exhibited before, a lot of small models, some of which I am enlarging to make large pieces. All these pieces which I am doing now … the large one, this is for my exhibition in 2016, for the retrospective which will be held in Doha. The works that I am exhibiting now, at Meem Gallery, some of them are more inspired by the desert rose (pp. 97 – 109). I have done a different interpretation of this phenomenon, which is something you can find in the desert, it is very common, but now it's become very rare. The relationship with this phenomenon, it in a way reflects my presence in Doha and my continuing visits to the city, and maybe it is unconscious, this desire to point to the necessity of developing local identities within a global context. Most of the pieces which I'm exhibiting are in polyester resin but there are four pieces in bronze.

Do you draw inspiration from any artists in particular when creating your sculptures or are you led more by your paintings and drawings?

No, most of my work is very much related to my historical research and also my fascination with Sumerian sculpture and primitive art in general. For example, one of the themes I am working with is the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The German photographer Karl Blossfeldt, who is best known for his close-up photographs of plants and living things, inspired me a lot in creating various shapes which I call 'imaginary plants' (see pp. 117 and 119). Also another theme is the Tower of Babylon; both will be the centrepiece of my retrospective in Doha in 2016.

So it's not that you are looking at other artists' work and their treatment of sculpture?

No, not in that way. I believe art is the accumulation of experience, knowledge and observing new trends in culture in general.

The horse features in your earlier paintings of the 1960s in relation to the tragedy of Karbala and the martyrdom of Hussein; it also has a strong presence in your recent sculptures, notably *Wounded Soul, Fountain of Pain*. I remember you once telling me that in your recent works the horse represents Iraq; did working on its form in a different medium lead you to a different interpretation of the horse?

Most of the time I use the horse to relate to Iraq. The sculpture I did for the museum was about Iraq after the US invasion in 2003, it was a great tragedy which forced me to go to my past and use it. The tragedy of Karbala and what had happened in Karbala to the martyr, for example, had happened to more than hundreds of Iraqi academics, doctors, professionals and specialists in various aspects of life; they were assassinated by evil death squads, this is the cream of society who were killed by unknown people! Nobody knows who killed them, it's the same as Al Hussein in a way. It was all these people who were doing their best to make Iraq better ... killed, which means something is happening, this is like an accident or something, I don't know what, I cannot explain it but for me it was really a protest about what is going on in that sense.

At what point did you make that connection? Was it when you were working on *Wounded Soul*, or was it prior to that?

Yes, immediately I started thinking about it in comparison to this tragedy.

Many of the sculptures you are including in this exhibition seem more abstract, more simplified in form. Can you talk about what has led you towards greater abstraction, which is something I think is also present in your recent paintings?

No, they are not really [that abstract] because what I tried is using this phenomenon which is a very abstract form (depending on the way you look at it) created by nature not by human beings, and this maybe make the works more reflective of the environment rather than in the primitive way [of exploring abstraction].

So you're very much inspired by nature.

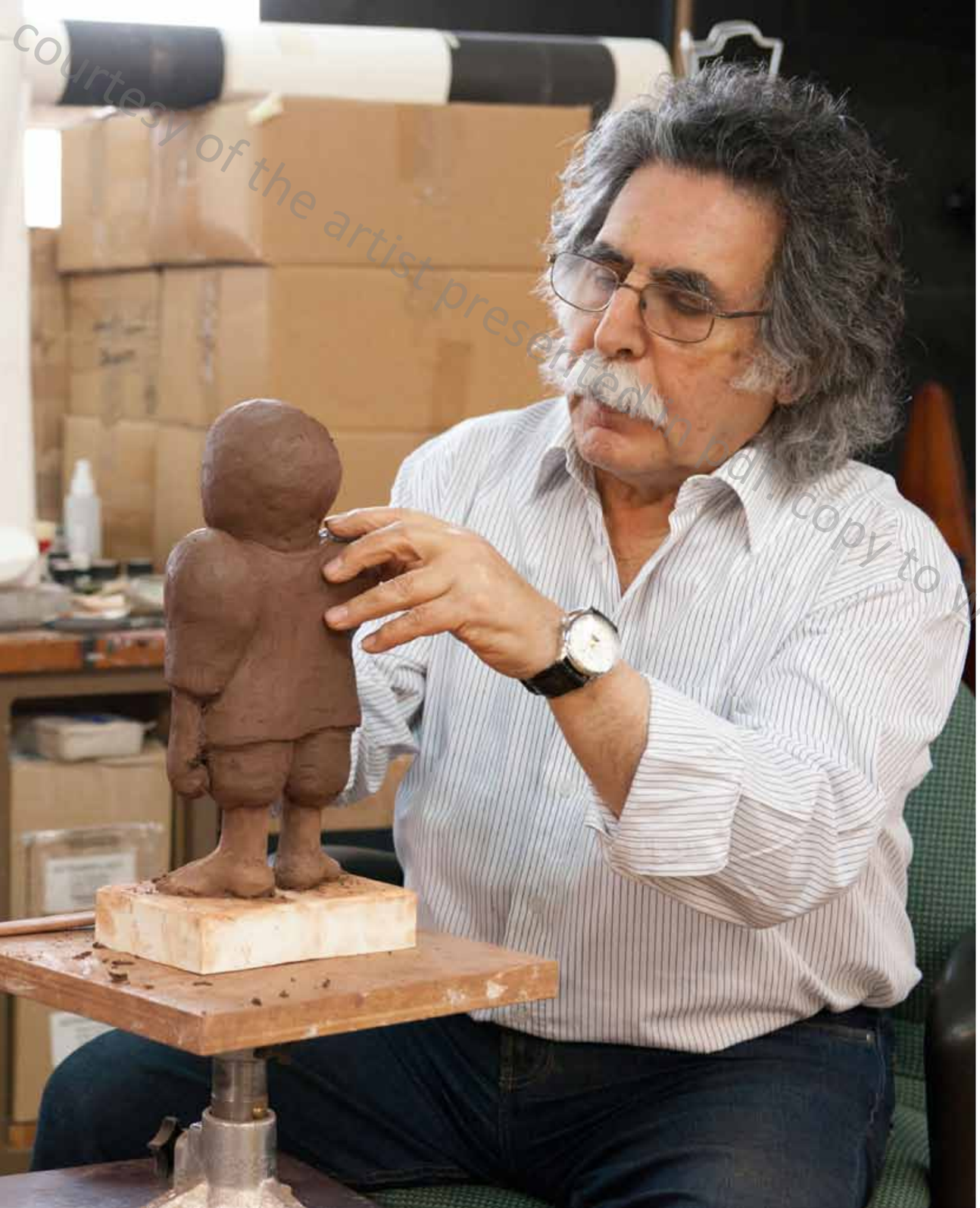
Very much by nature, but by nature in two very different aspects: some of the works are of the desert rose, while others, which I have become more involved with, are imaginary plants, which is influenced by … when I started work on the idea of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, I had to create a sort of a plant or a garden which does not exist in a way. I had to try to create something different based on forms that are not available.

Some of the works are presented in solid colours – black, white, yellow or red – while others include a range of colours and look more like toys or, to an extent, three-dimensional interpretations of your paintings. Do the two groupings represent two different phases in this medium?

They are different. In using colour some of the work is more related to how much I can add some feature to the shape of the sculpture. For example, I kept some of the work in white, which I tried to relate to marble in a way. With the others I try to give the idea of stone or granite … it is all about how I can give the shape, which is more as you said abstract, a depth so that it can relate to the light, the space where I am displaying the sculpture. It's different to when I work on sculptures in bronze, which is completely different because of the colour of the bronze I am using. It creates a different atmosphere, a different relationship with the viewer. Maybe the works in polyester resin are more related to a kind of industrial production as opposed to the individual handmade work.

With your choice of black I can understand how you relate it to stone or granite and white to marble, what led to the choice of using yellow and red?

The bright colours which I use, this is maybe



Azzawi working on the model for *Handala*, London, May 2010
Photography by Chris Wood

more related to my fondness of colour rather than other things. I love colour, and maybe I thought I could make these works more attractive, richer [in appearance] … I can't say exactly.

Moving on to the tapestries. Can you discuss what prompted you to explore weaving and what aspects of the process of creating the tapestries have stood out for you?

I became aware of tapestries as a way of expression in the beginning of the eighties when I was asked by an interior designer to work with a German tapestry weaver. Later that work was hung in the Royal Pavilion in Riyadh airport, also in my exhibition held in Kuwait in 1983 which included eight different sized tapestries.

I do a lot of design, I work a lot with Illustrator and Photoshop and when I was in Amman I met an Egyptian guy who had a small shop where he made small kilims for tourists. When I approached him, I showed him a design [I made] and he said he could weave it for me. This guy was actually a brilliant weaver so I gave him some of the pieces which I designed using Illustrator and I gave him a print and he enlarged the pieces. In a fantastic way he enlarged the pieces to the size of 2 metres, 3 metres, I don't know how he managed to do it, because the design was not that big but he managed to complete it in a fantastic way. Tapestry is related to my interest in design rather than painting. I use a lot of colour, yes, but rarely do I relate it to my paintings.

At that point when he made these samples for you, at that stage was it something that you knew you wanted to explore further? Did you ever think you would exhibit your kilims or tapestries?

No, it was just for me. It's like when I first tried sculpture or when I made prints. This for me was really a way of adding some richness to my vision, to my thinking, to my work and when I did all this work I kept it in storage since 2005. For the first time now, I have used one of my paintings, *Jenin Jenin* (pp. 128 – 141), which is included in the exhibition, to be made into a tapestry, but most of the work I specifically designed by Illustrator and then sent it to the weaver to make it [into a tapestry].

What in the process of designing tapestries has stood out for you and has it altered the way you approach the compositions of your paintings or drawings? Or do you keep it completely separate?

I try to separate, but it's not easy [laughs]. Some of them are related to my work as a painter, specifically the new one, which will be exhibited, which is very much related to my painting in that sense. But in a way in a different medium, instead of acrylic which I can change many times until I feel happy with it, with tapestries I am a bit limited in a way because of the colour they [the atelier] can use, or the way they produce the line or the shape, in that way it is different from painting but as a composition it is more related to my painting.

Although you have clarified that with the tapestries it is more about design, loosely your tapestries are based on your paintings so how do you select which paintings, or which painting compositions, will work as tapestries? For example, for this exhibition you have selected two works *Oriental Window* and *My Garden*, which are similar in that they are both quite abstract and colourful, while *Jenin Jenin* is figurative and monochromatic.

No, but that's what I'm saying. This is the first time I have produced a painting as a tapestry.

Jenin, this is a work which I did in 2004, it's because of the topic of the painting, the massacre in Jenin, the Palestinian camps, that I preferred not to use any colour in a way – black and white – and I kept it as it is. But for me, maybe I wouldn't do it again, in the sense to produce the painting as a tapestry. I prefer to do the work from the beginning as a tapestry, even if it is related in its composition to a painting, I prefer to design the work and to produce it within the limitations of the weaver's ability to produce the work.

What prompted you to make *Jenin Jenin* into a tapestry?

I think maybe because I did the same with *Sabra Shatila* for example. With *Sabra Shatila*, because of the kind of colour I used in it, it made it very difficult to exhibit it for long [periods] of time, which wasn't effective. And then a Palestinian friend, Dr Ramzi Dalloul, who was planning to build museum in Beirut, approached me to produce the work as a tapestry to give to the museum at the same time so it could be exhibited anywhere. So I thought this was a fantastic idea. We approached many sources, one in China, one in North England, one in France and Spain and the best weaver we found to produce the work was in Spain. To produce the painting [as a tapestry] they could make it maybe around seventy per cent [accurate], which gave me the idea to produce one based on *Jenin*. I don't think I would do it again with other paintings. I would only produce works that were designed to be tapestries, not paintings that are made to be tapestries.

With *Oriental Window* and *My Garden*, those were designed to be tapestries?

Yes.

Artists like Marc Chagall, Fernand Léger and Pablo Picasso had their works woven into tapestries, did their interest in the medium impact your decision to work with tapestry?

Maybe it gave me some idea but as far as I know most of these works were produced from paintings. As far as I know, the work of Miró and Léger, most of these works were very much related to their work, either a sketch or a painting which were then produced [as tapestries]. It's not designed specifically to be a tapestry.

Picasso's *Guernica* was made into a tapestry.

Yes, with *Guernica* what happened was at that time Rockefeller used to buy from Picasso and then I think after the Second World War finished, the prices became higher and higher and it became difficult for Rockefeller to buy a piece like *Guernica*. This why he asked Picasso to make it into a tapestry so that he could give it as a gift to the United Nations. Most of the tapestries that Picasso had made were related to his work.

And that's where you differ, as you mentioned earlier, because you treat it as an entirely different process.

Yes.

Did you always intend to exhibit these works with your sculptures?

This is more because of the curator of the exhibition, Charlie Pocock. Ideally I would have the tapestry as an exhibition [on its own].

So you never intended to exhibit your tapestries with the sculptures, it just came about this way?

Yes, this is why for example I will include drawings, which I did for the sculpture, as a way to balance the relationship between the tapestry and sculpture.

You've suggested including the drawings to create a link between your sculpture and tapestries. From a curatorial perspective how do you see your sculptures and tapestries working together in the same space?

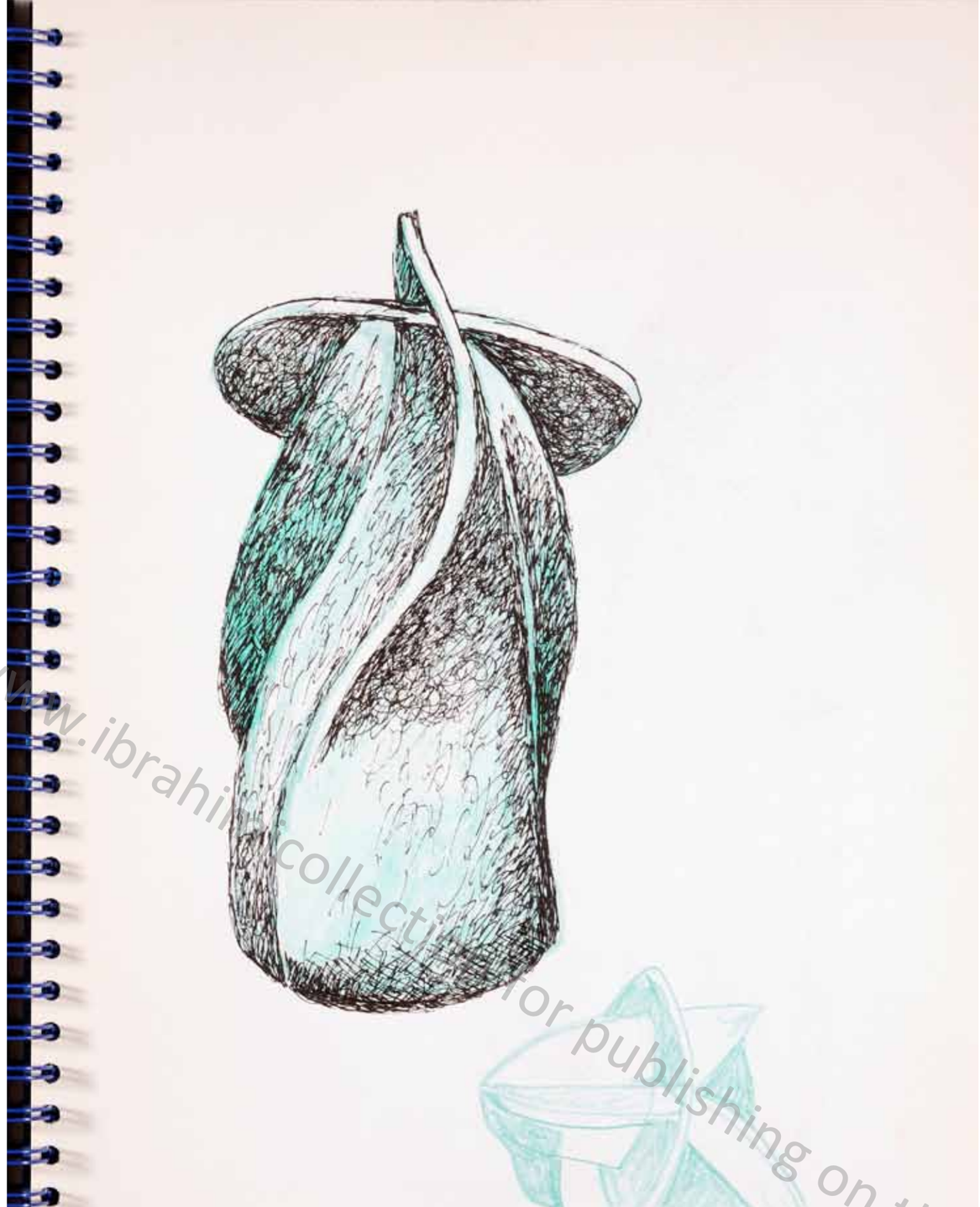
I have to be there and try to find a way because of the nature of sculpture: the colour, the shape, and also people will go around the sculpture to see the work. The tapestries hang on the wall. Also there is [the difference] in the media I am using so this is why I am thinking that the best way to demonstrate the relationship between the three-dimensional work and two-dimensional work is to put more drawings next to the tapestries. And also one of the pieces is a 2 x 3 metre relief that will be part of the exhibition. In a sense, it is both two dimensional and three dimensional but its not [fully] three dimensional—it's a piece which can hang on the wall rather than a piece which the viewer can go around.

You mentioned that when you make a sculpture in a specific medium you almost envision how you want it displayed so with bronze you think of it as a more natural material, whereas the polyester resin is more industrial. If you had an exhibition of your bronze sculptures do you have an ideal place you would like them exhibited, or with the polyester resin sculptures, is there an ideal place? Do you think the polyester resin sculptures suit Meem Gallery as a space better?

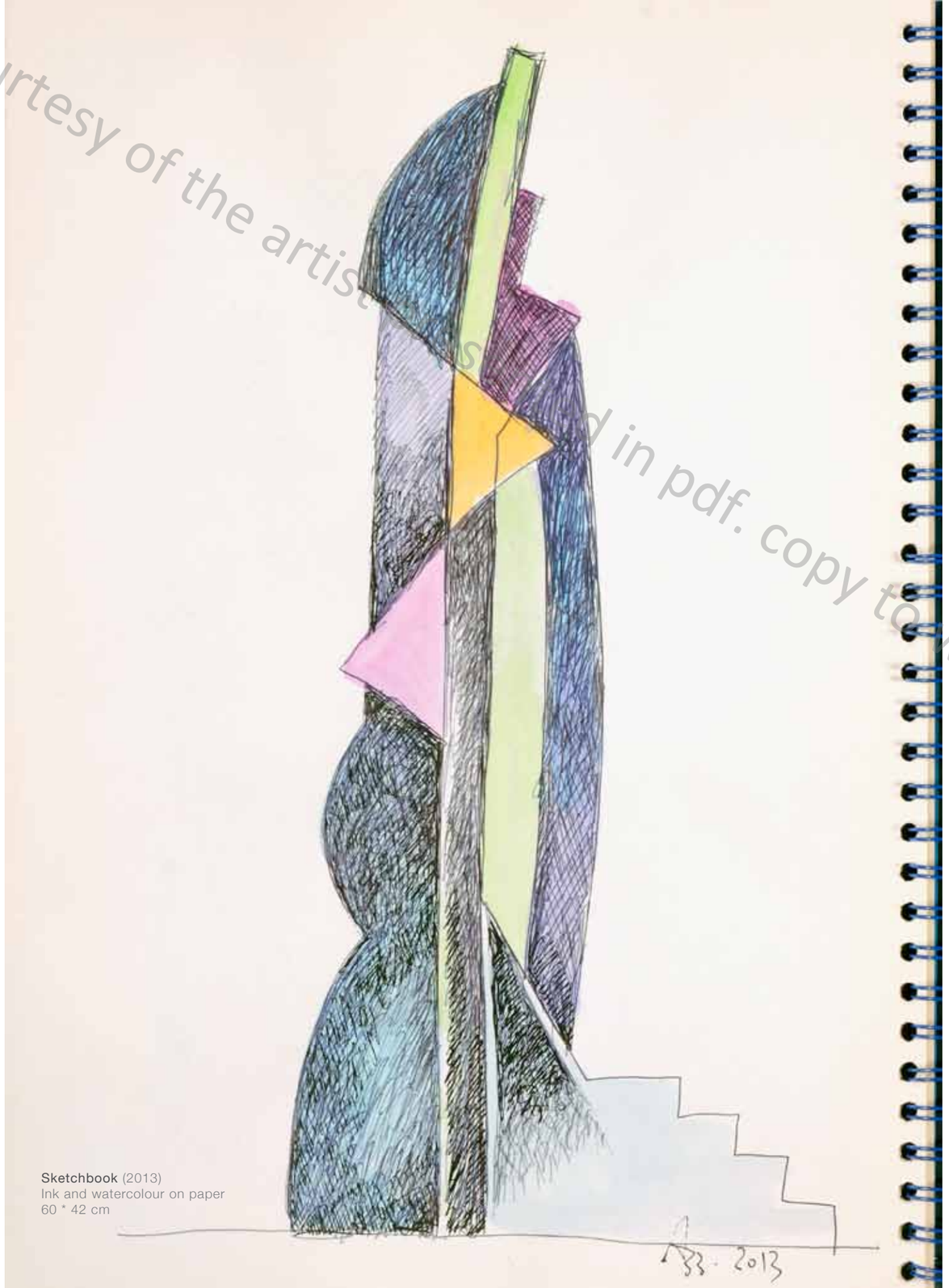
No, maybe because the different material gives a different impression also. I prefer, for example, if I have the opportunity to display work in marble [I would rather] have an exhibition in that medium than put it together with other materials. I mind putting marble next to bronze but not next to polyester resin because the medium is completely different.

* The interview took place on 12 January 2015 when Dia Azzawi was in Doha.

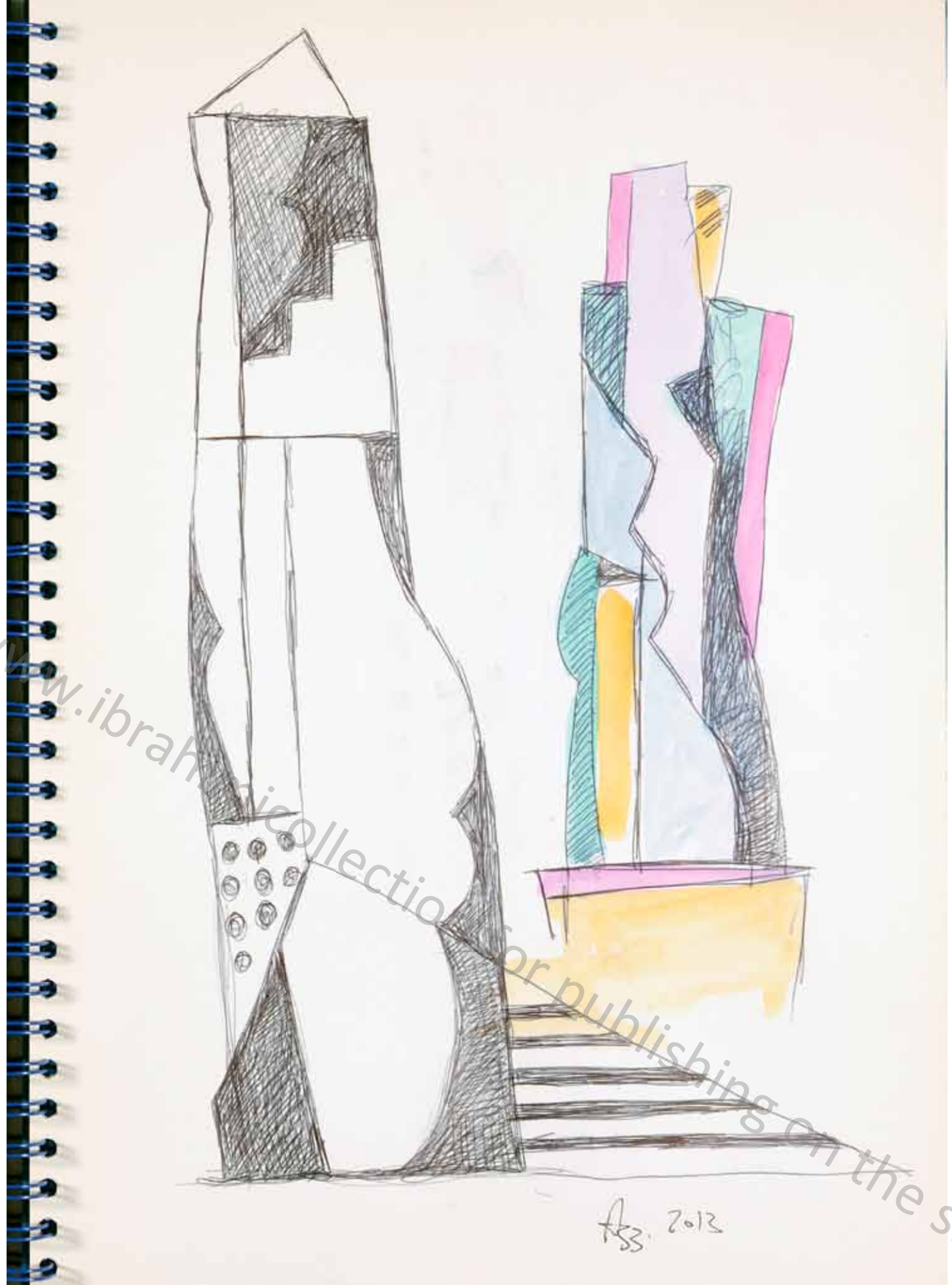
Wounded Soul, Journey of Destruction (2010)
Interventions exhibition, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha
Bronze
250 * 350 * 140 cm

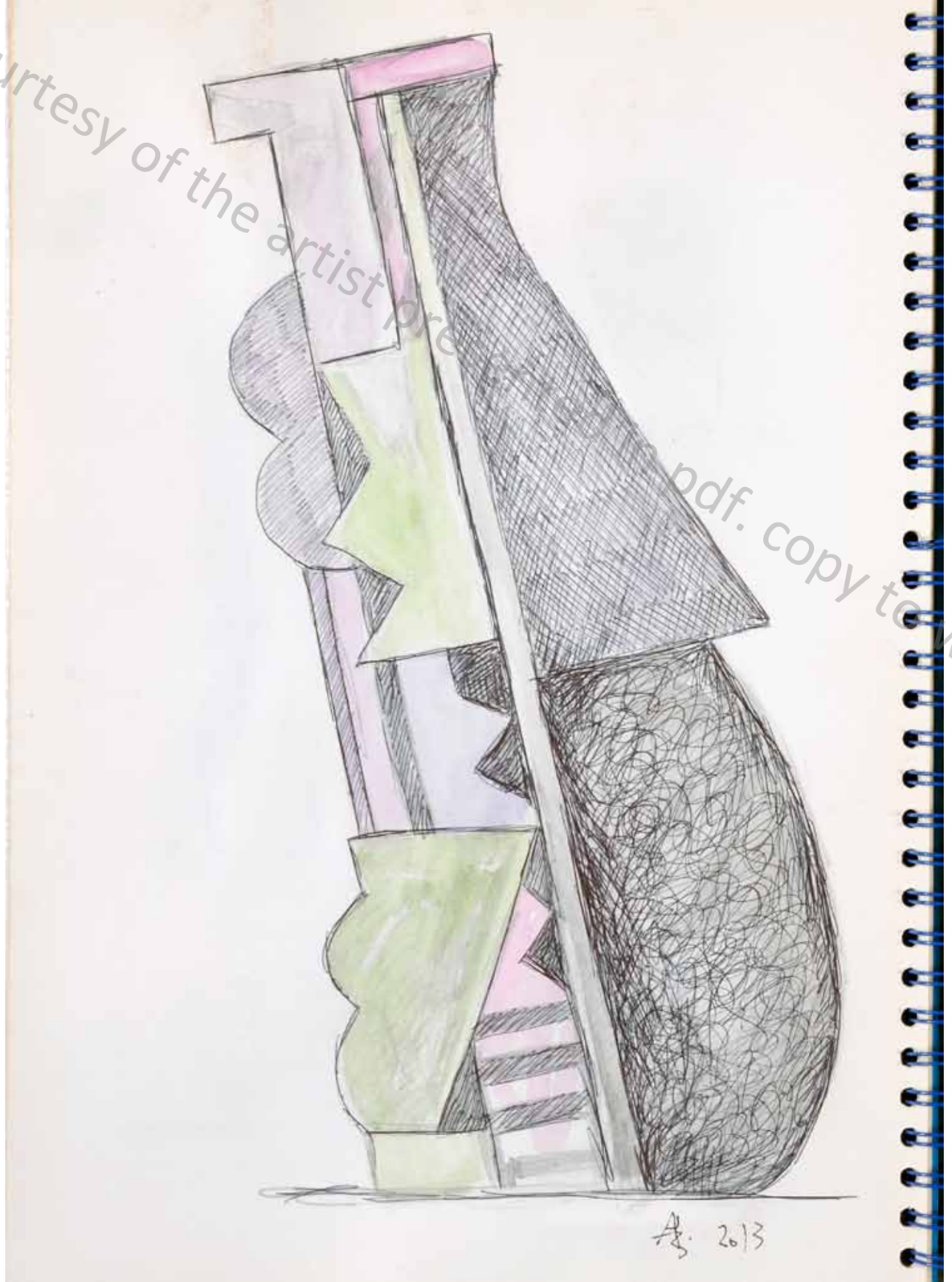


Sketchbook (2012)
Ink and watercolour on paper
60 * 42 cm



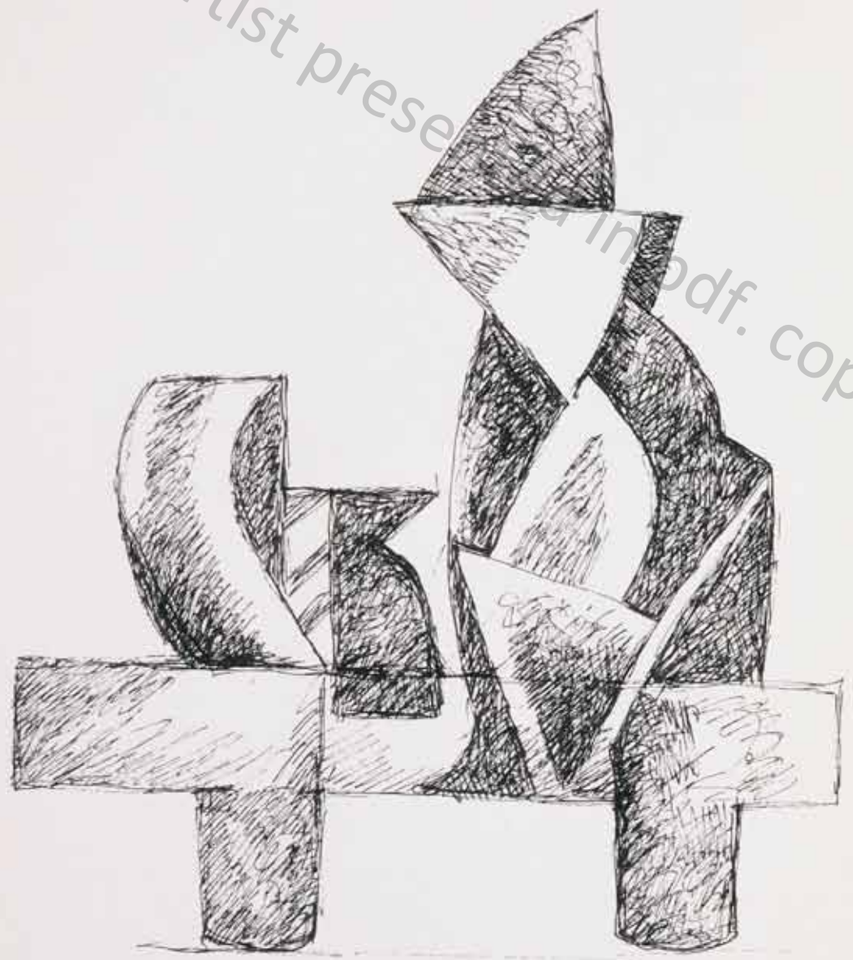
Sketchbook (2013)
Ink and watercolour on paper
60 * 42 cm





AZ 2013

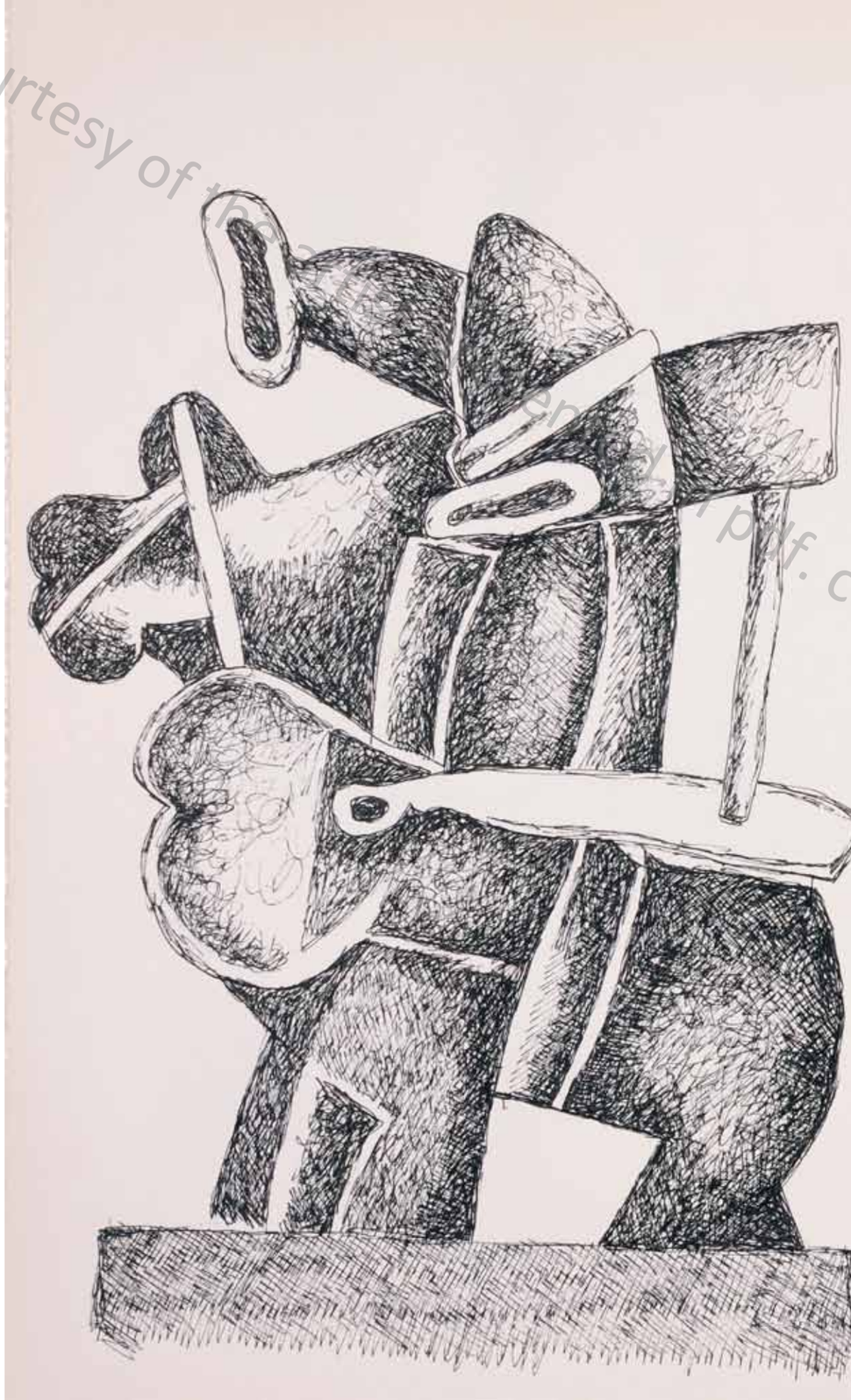
AZ 2013



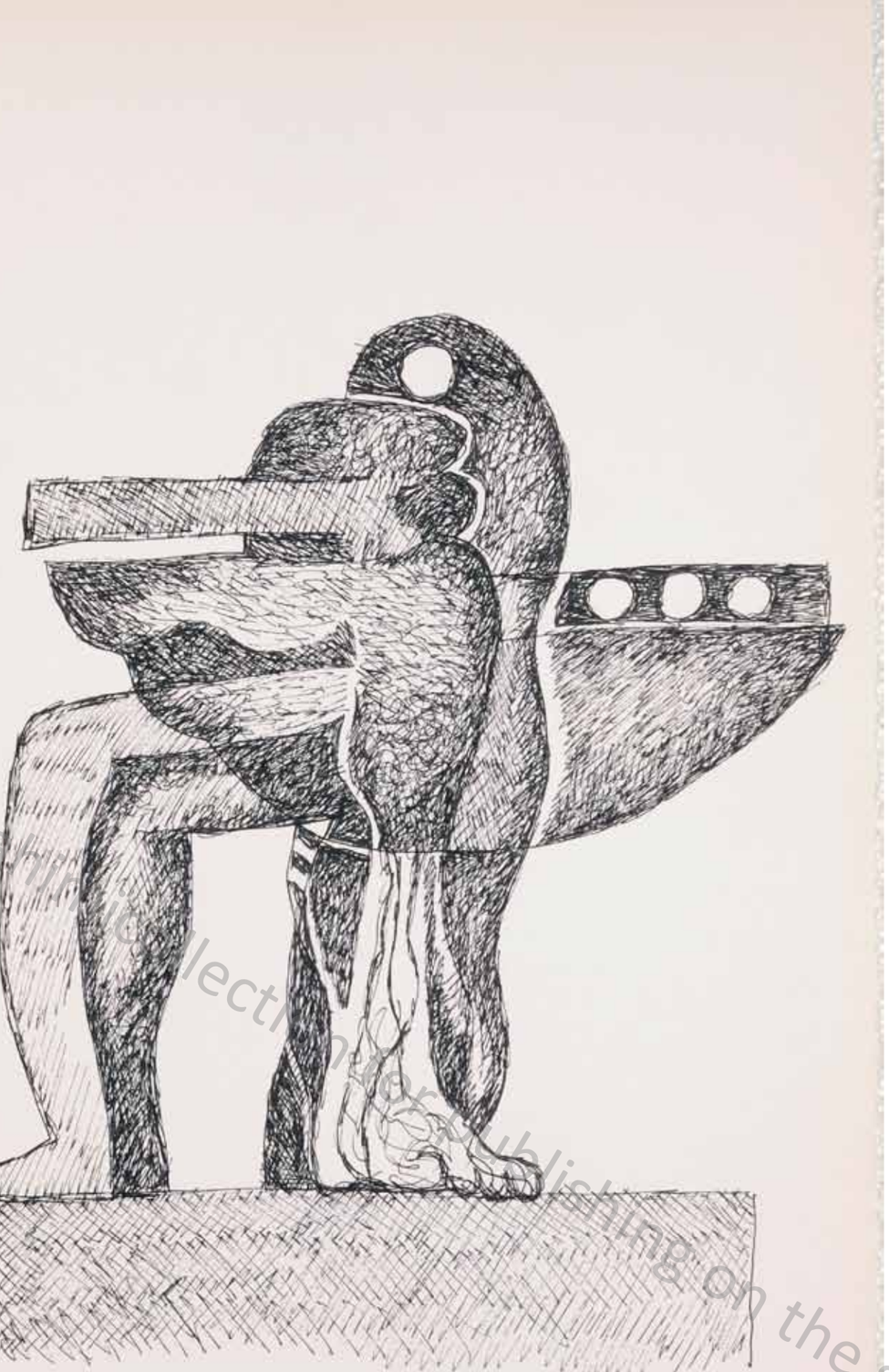
12.18/
2014

Sketchbook (2014)
Ink and watercolour on paper
60 * 42 cm

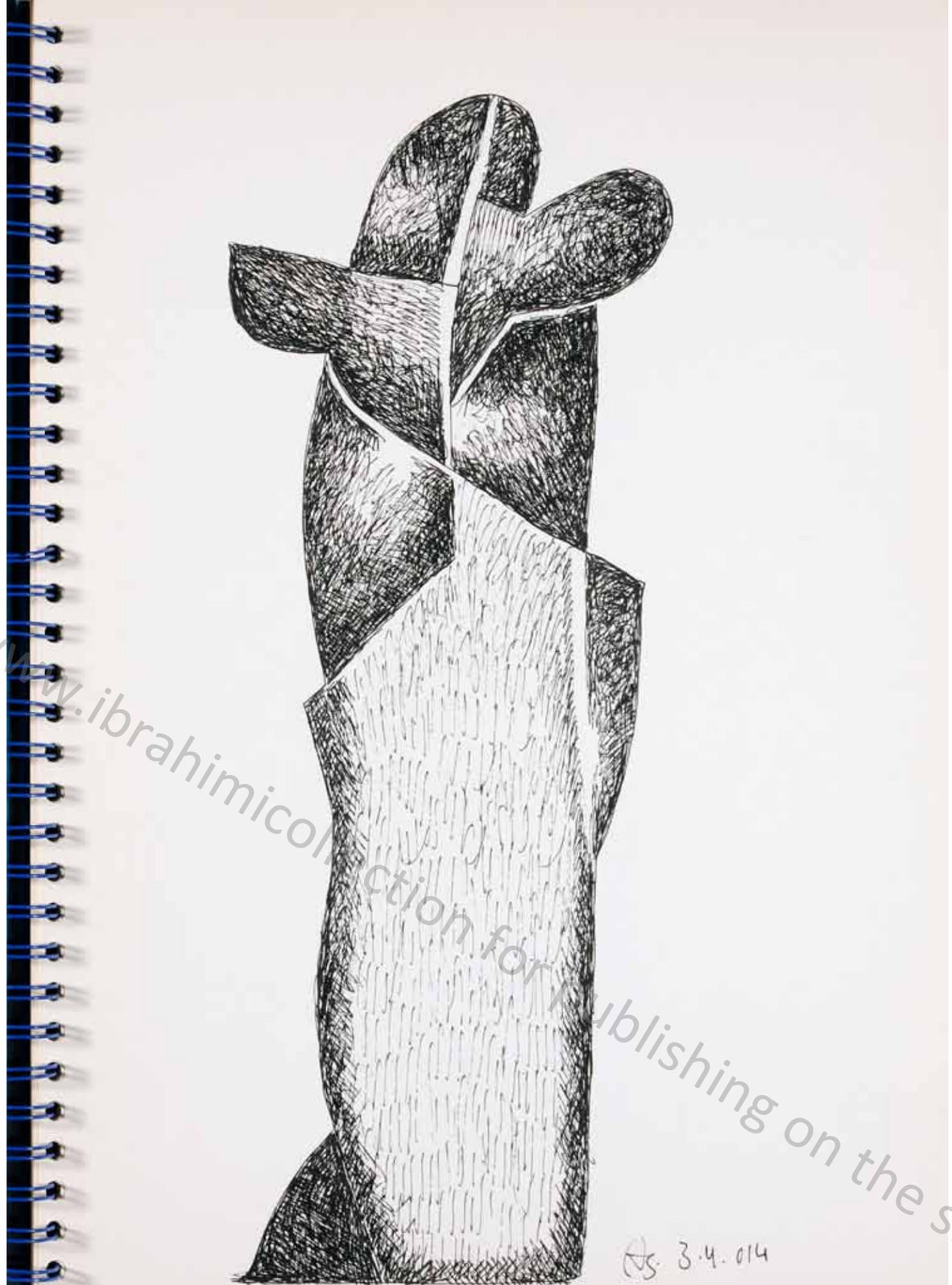
12.10/4
2014

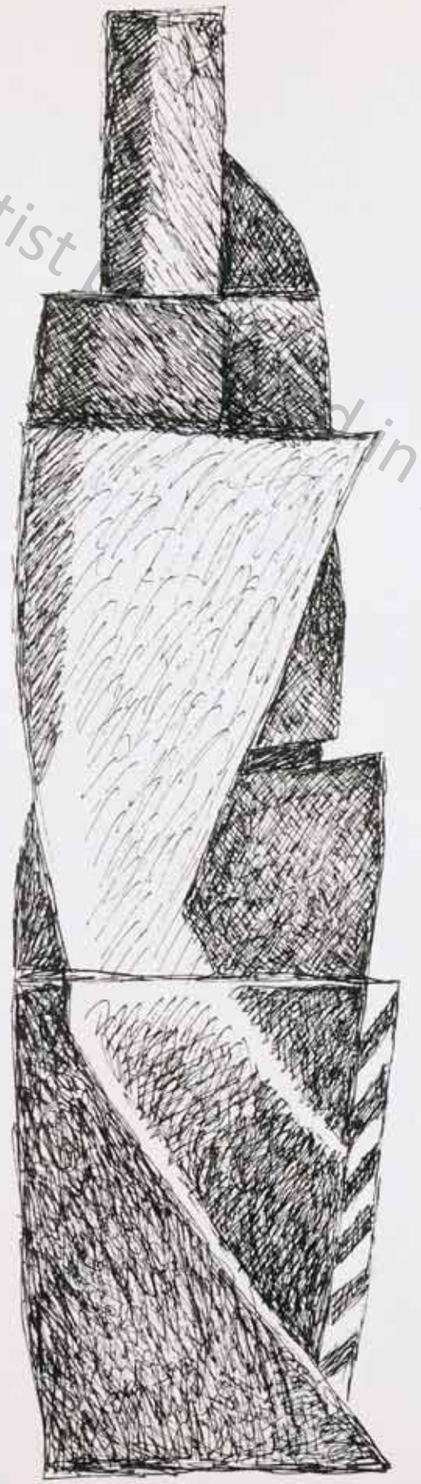


10.4.2014

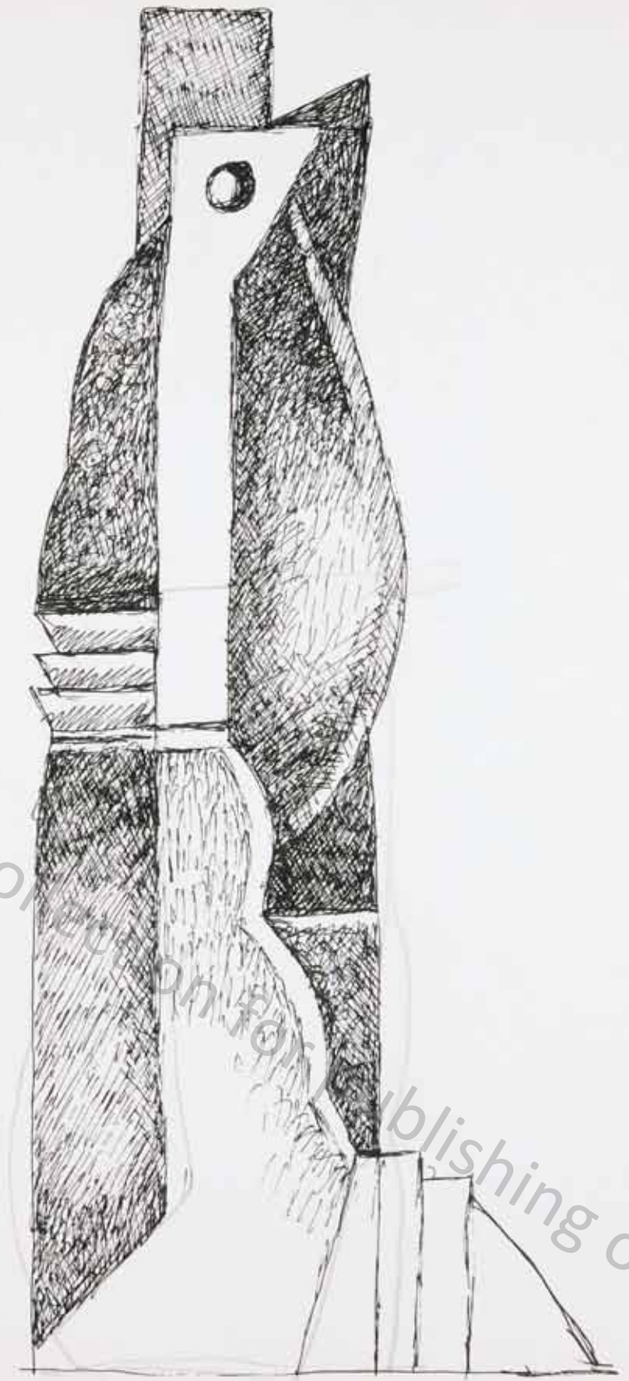


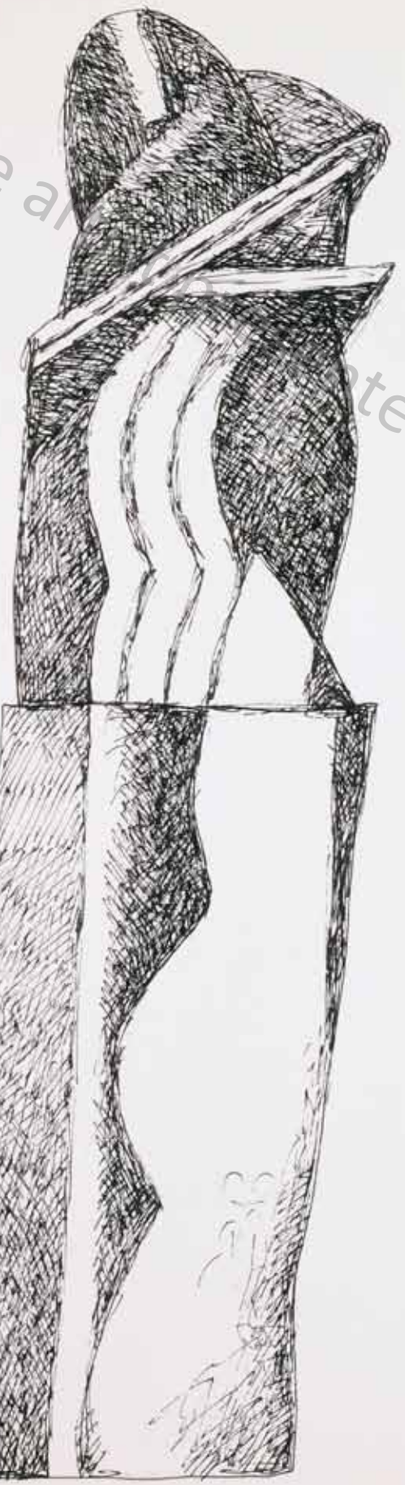
10.4.014

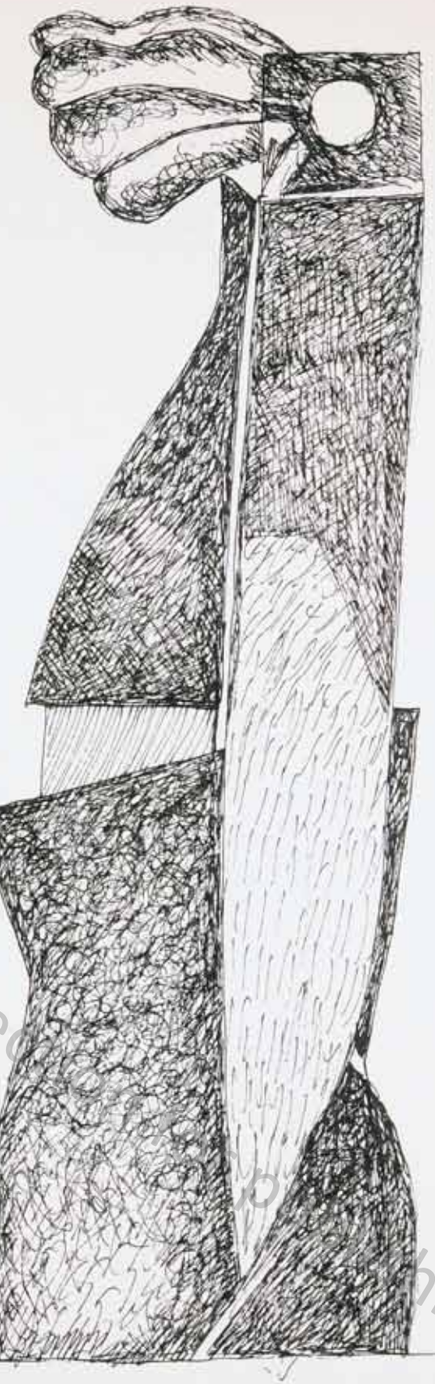


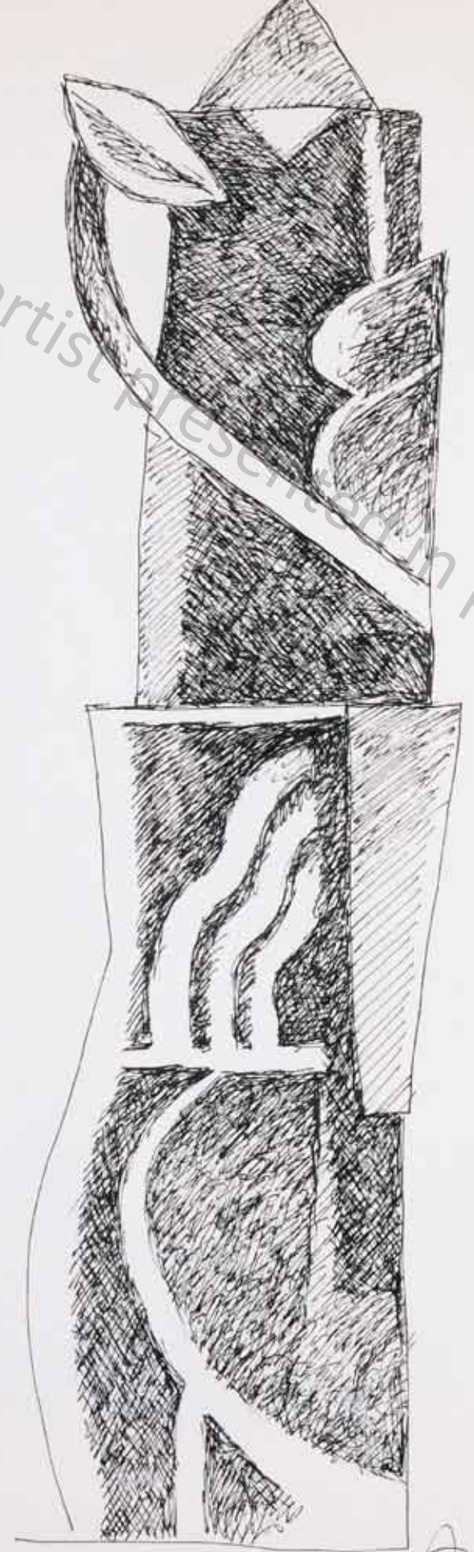


AZ 3.4. 6/4









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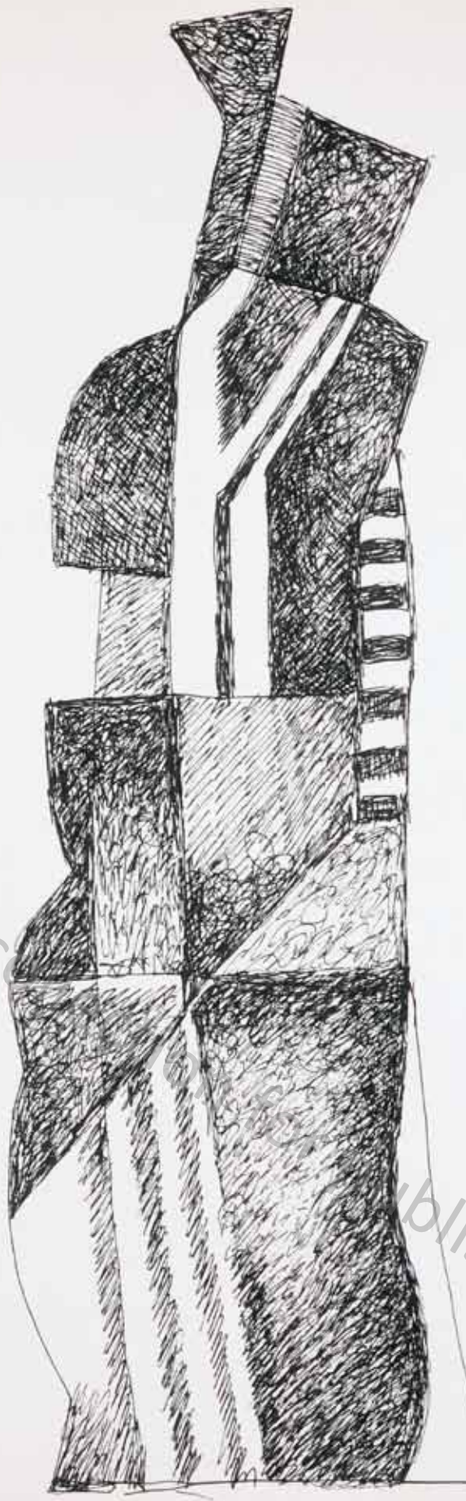

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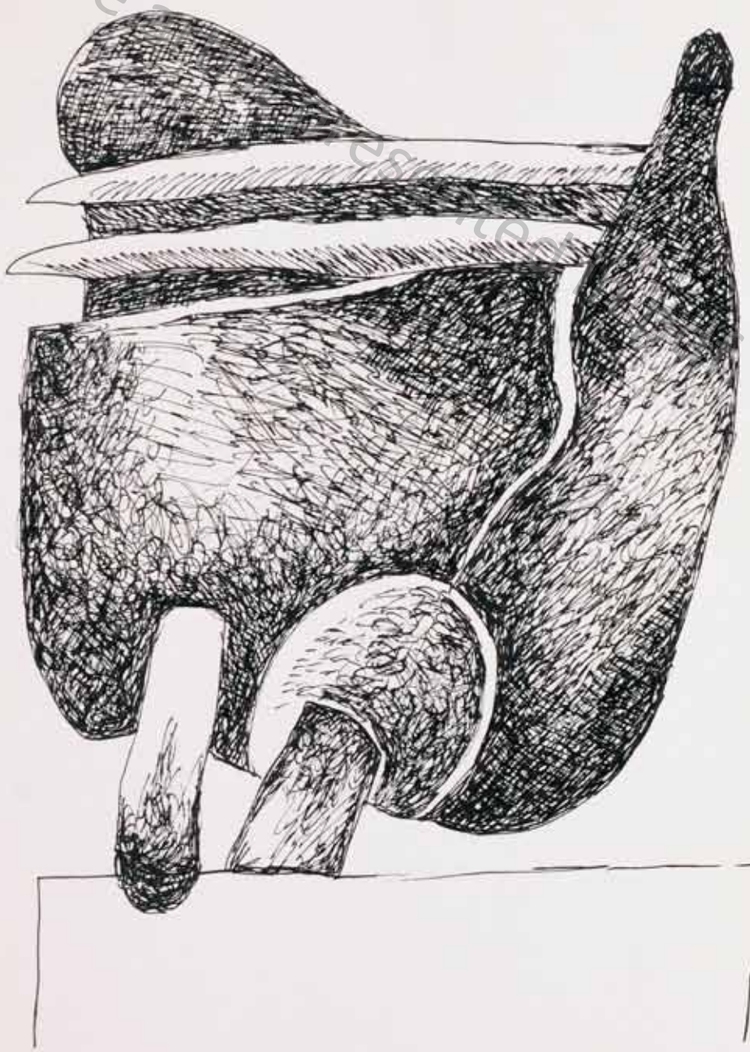

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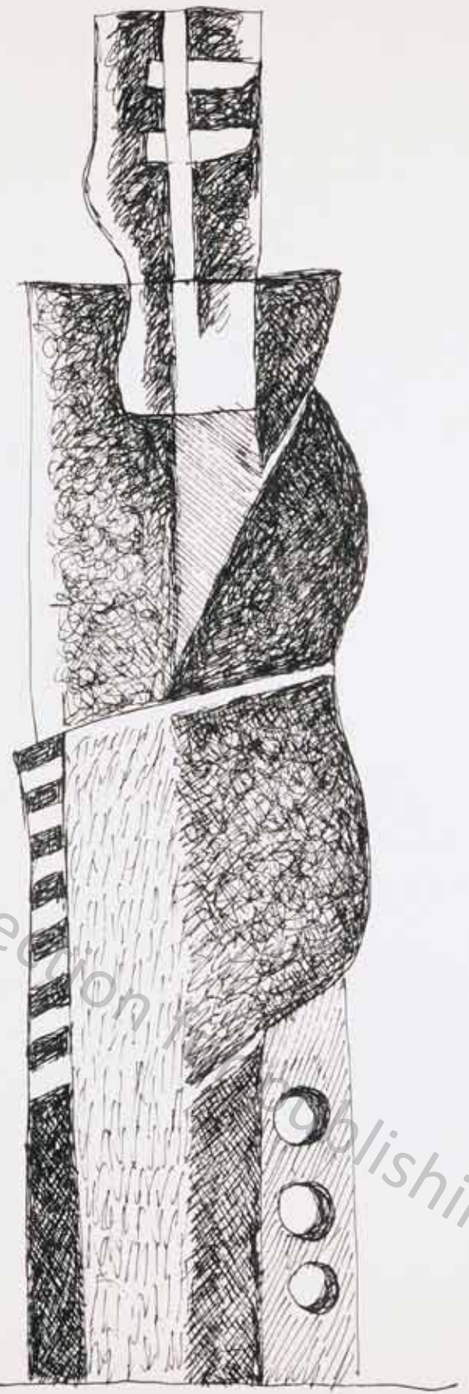

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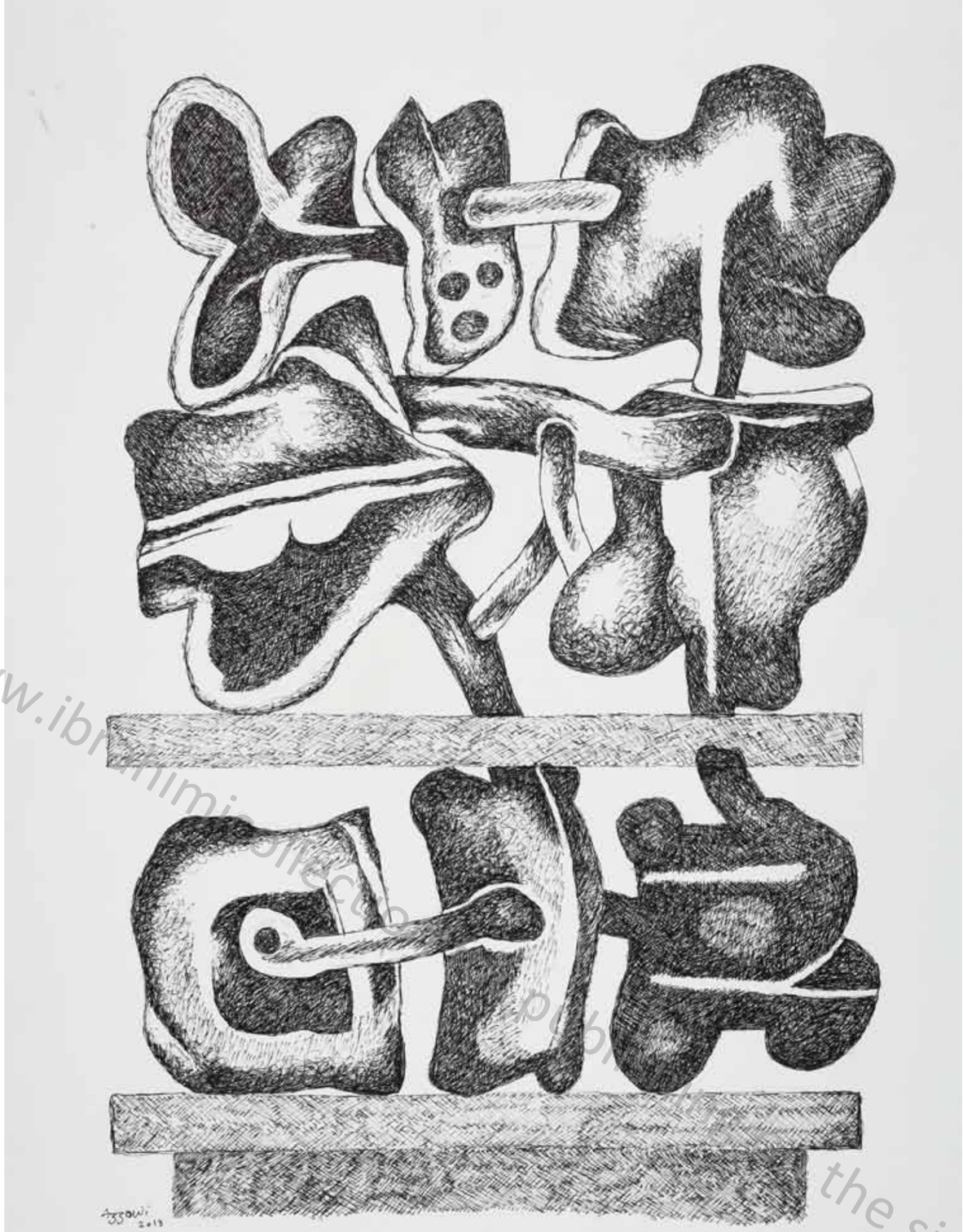
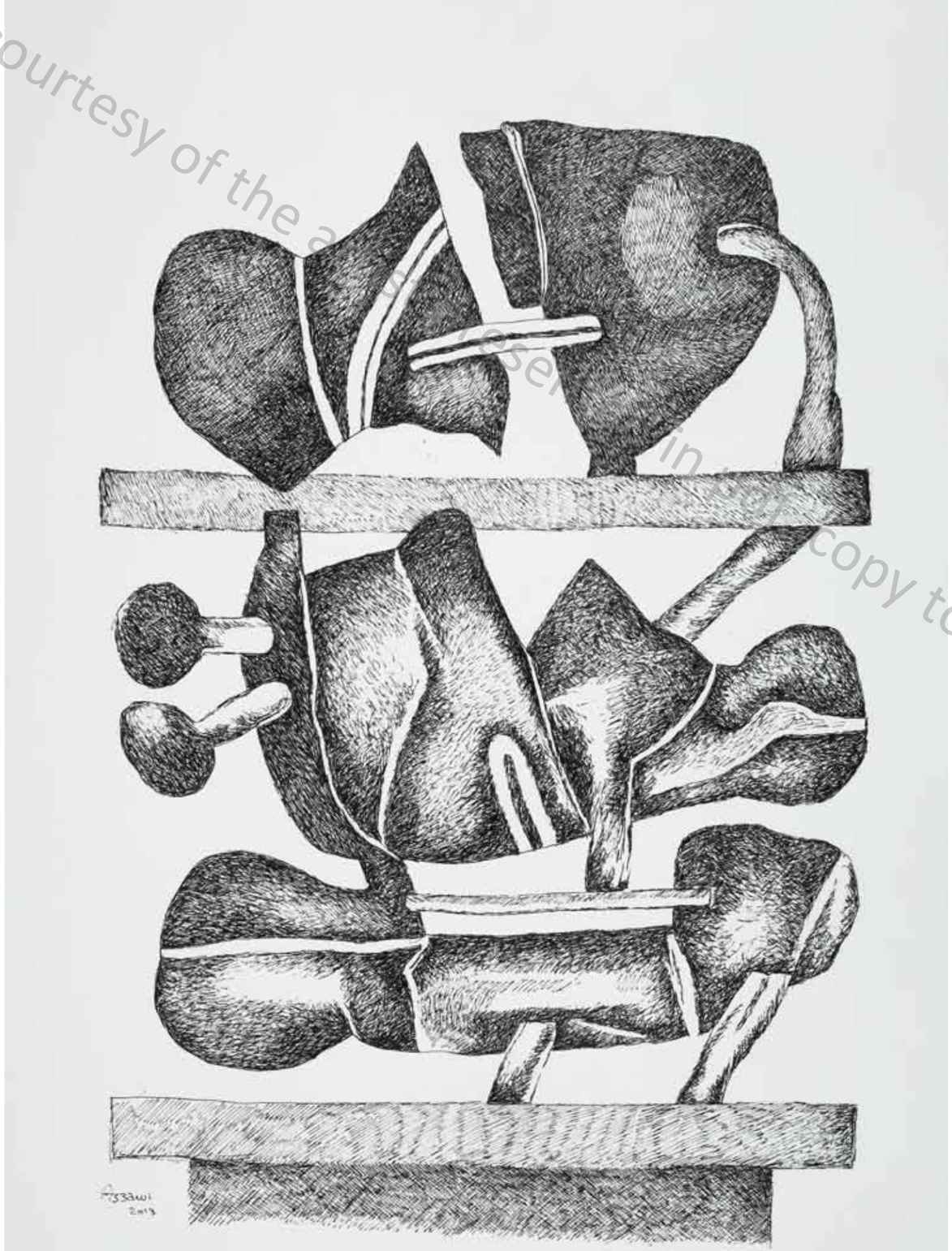
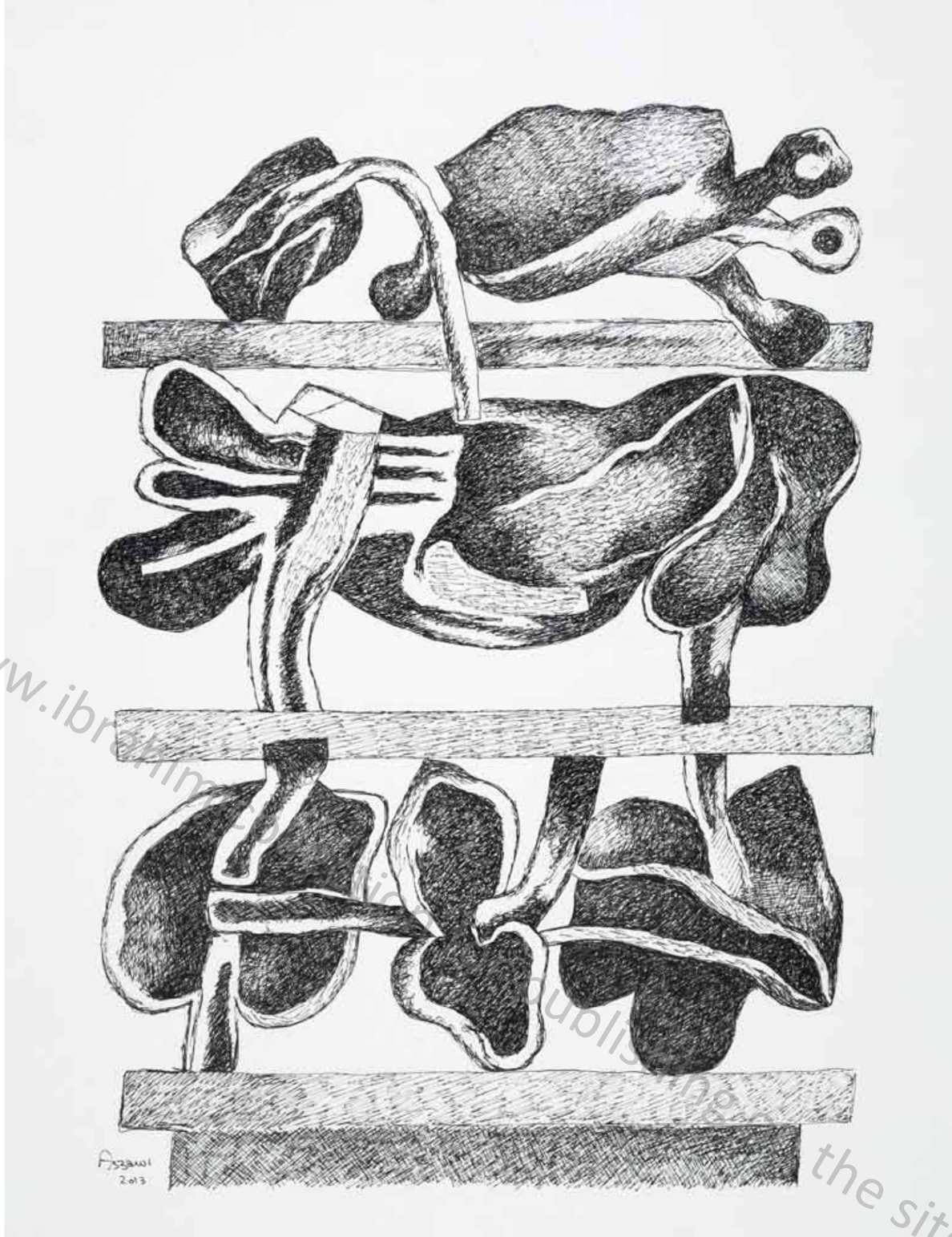
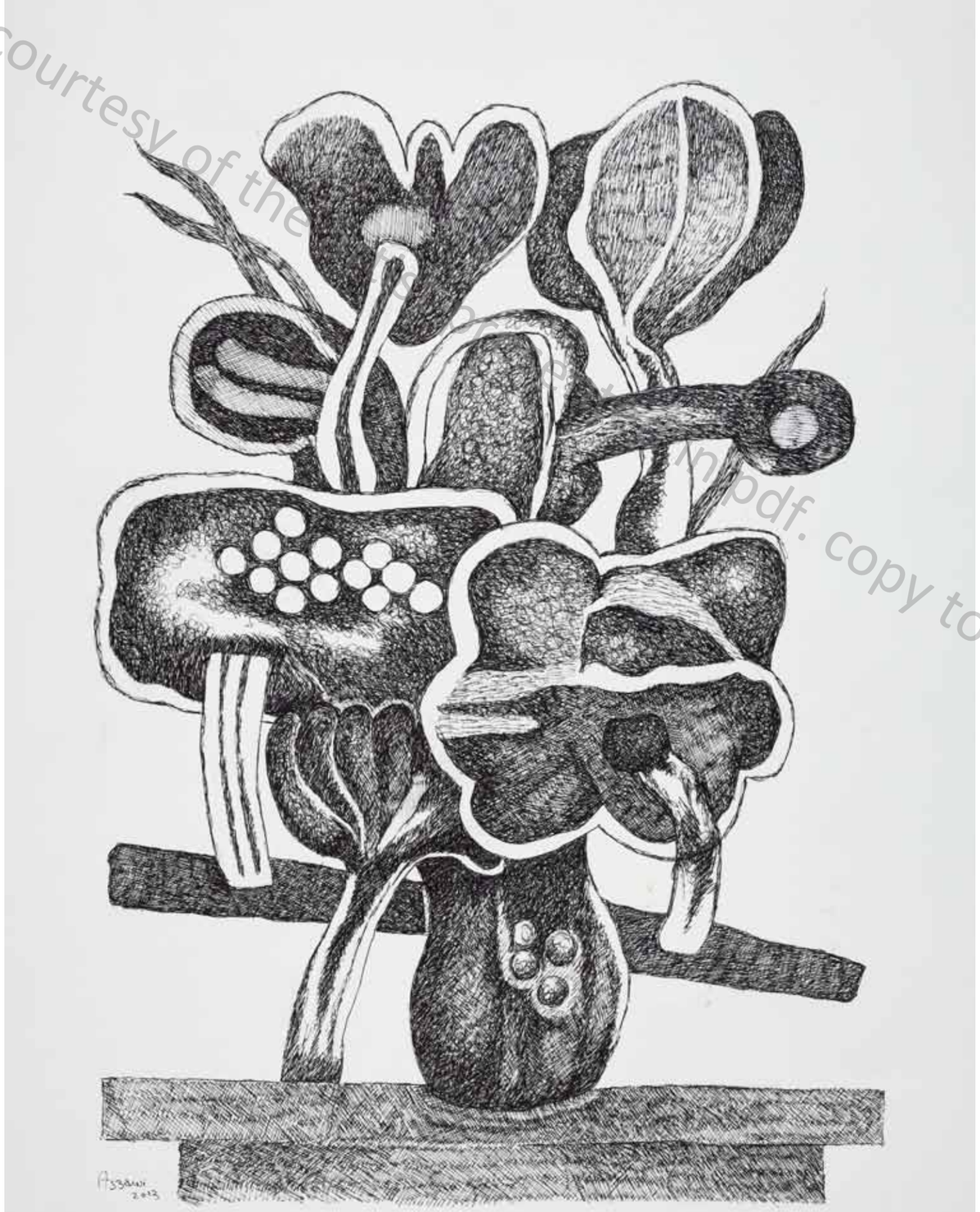
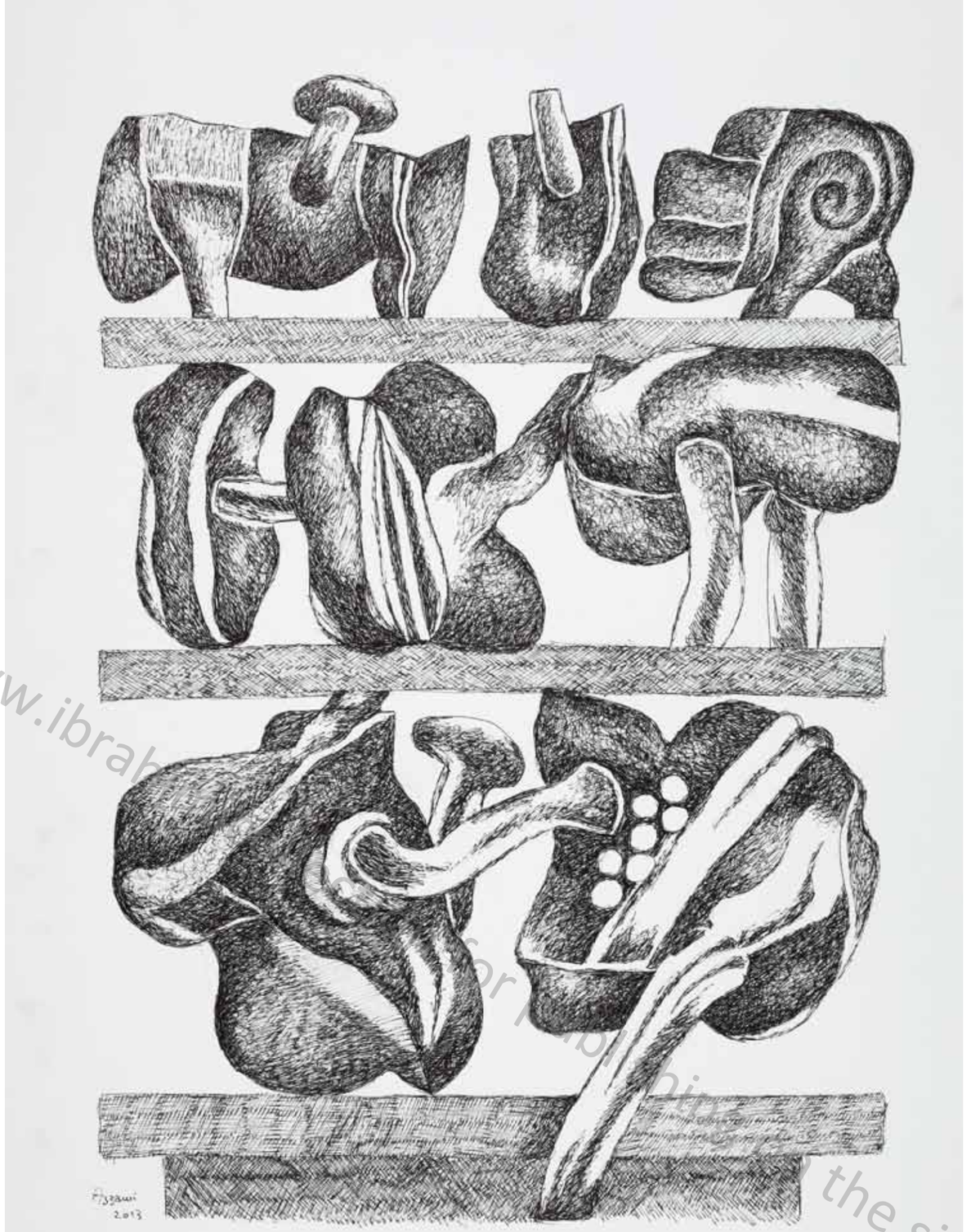


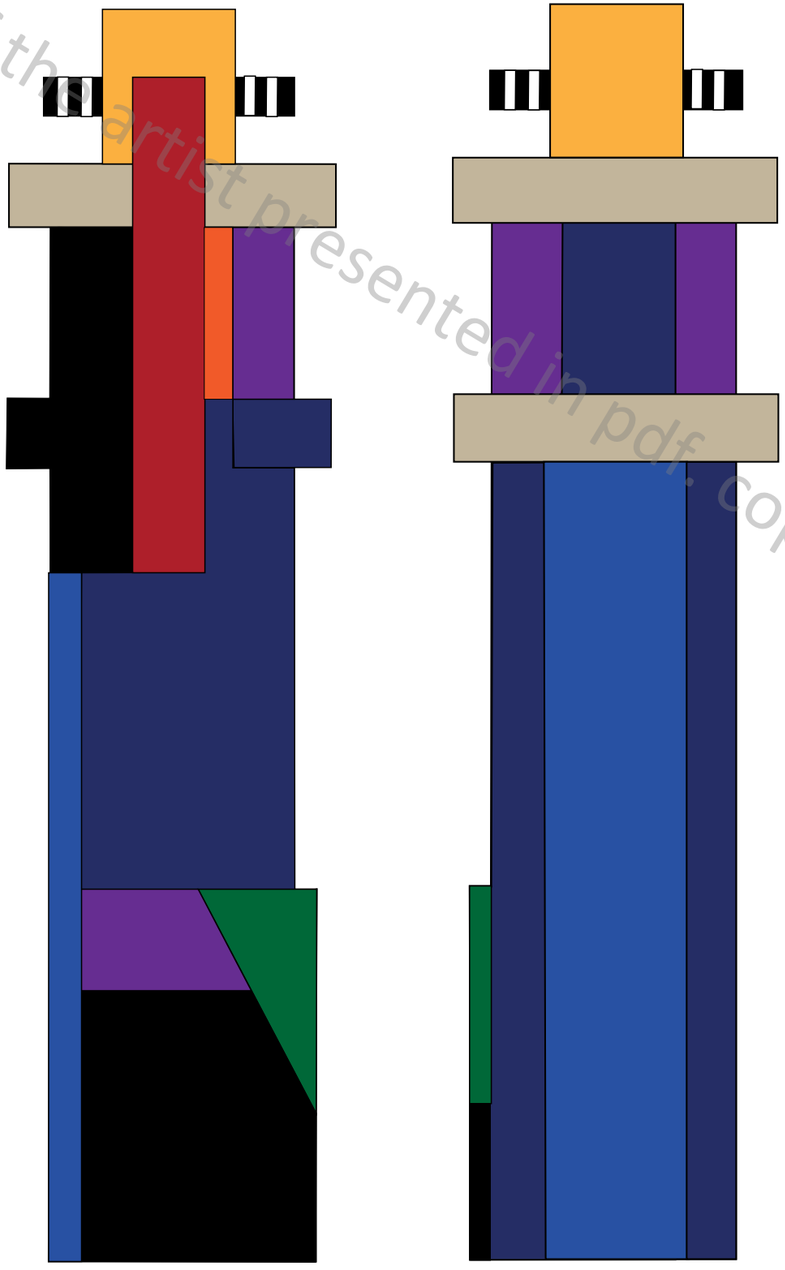
Hanging Garden of Babylon Details (2013)
China ink on handmade paper
77 * 56.5 cm



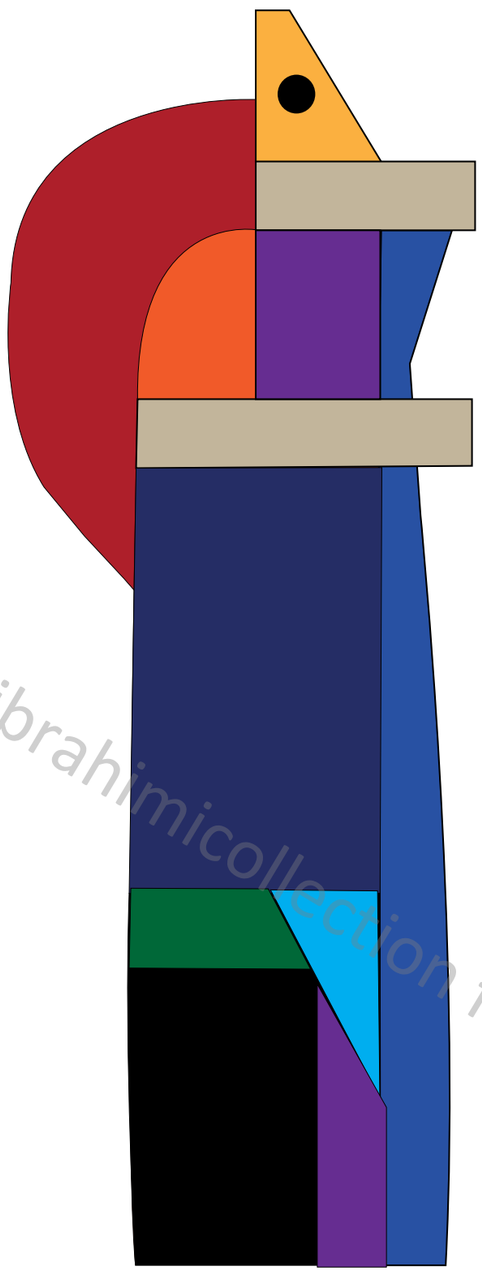


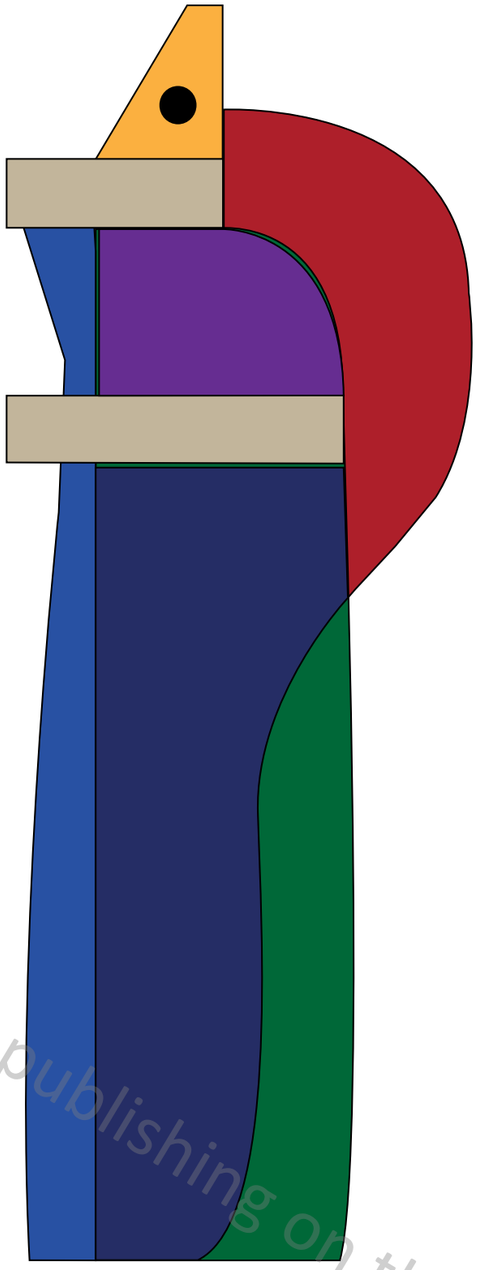






Homage to Khalil Hawi (2014)
Computer sketch
29.7 * 42 cm





SB.31 / SB.531

SB.91 / SB.591

SB.76 / SB.576

SB.16 / SB.516

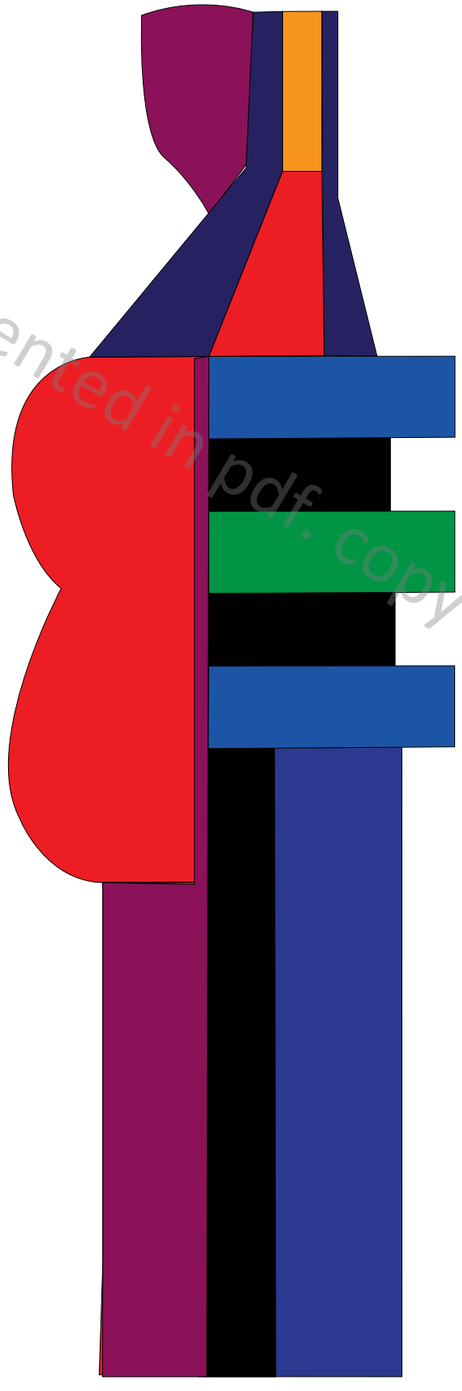
SB.49 / SB.549

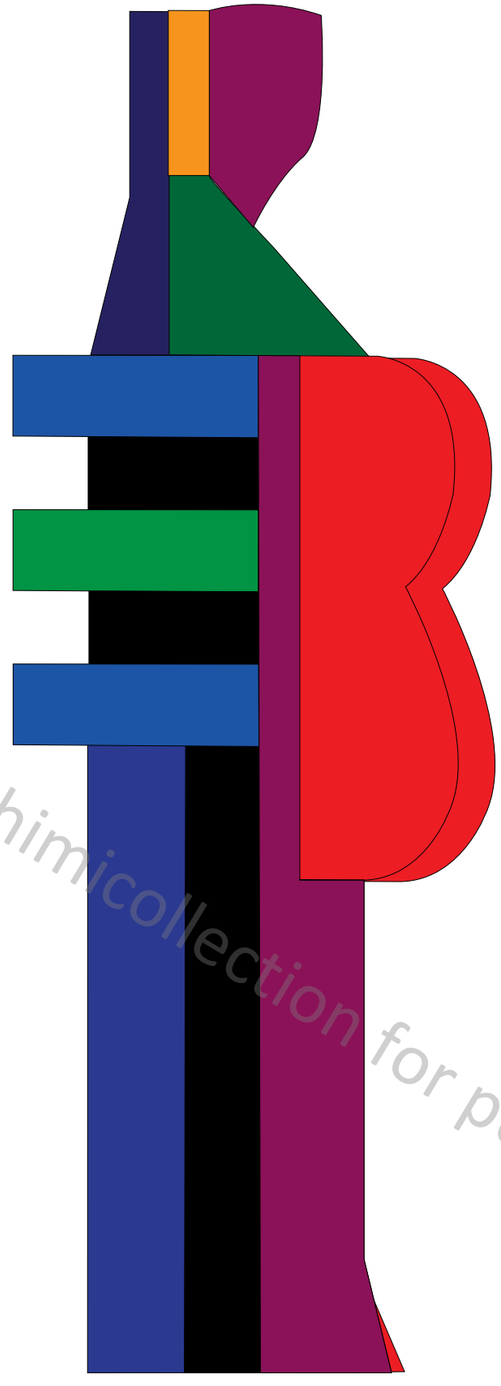
SB.74 / SB.574

SB.73 / SB.573

SB.107 / SB.607

SB.51 / SB.551





Obelisk for Unknown Poet (2014)
Computer sketch
29.7 * 42 cm

SB.31 / SB.531

SB.91 / SB.591

SB.76 / SB.576

???

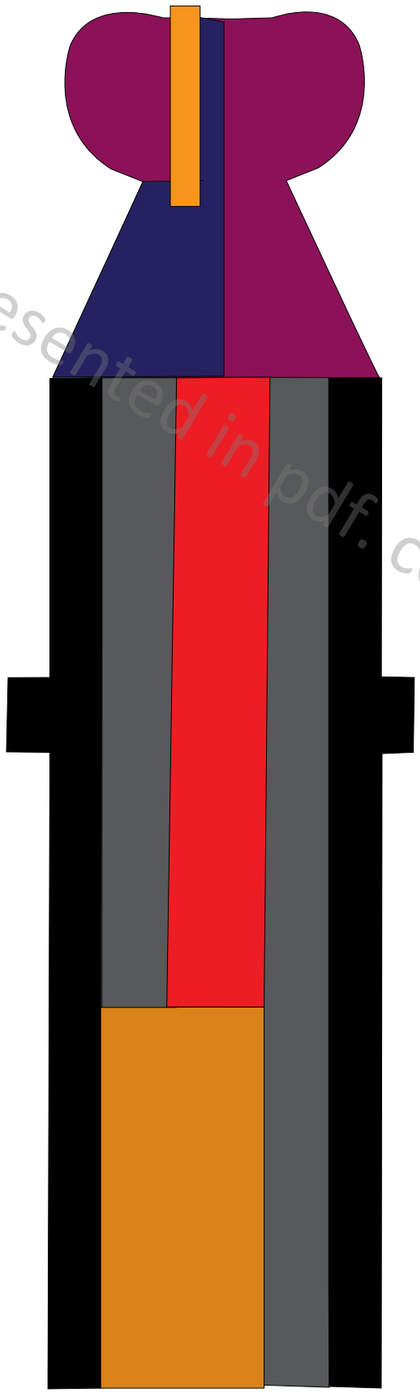
SB.16 / SB.516

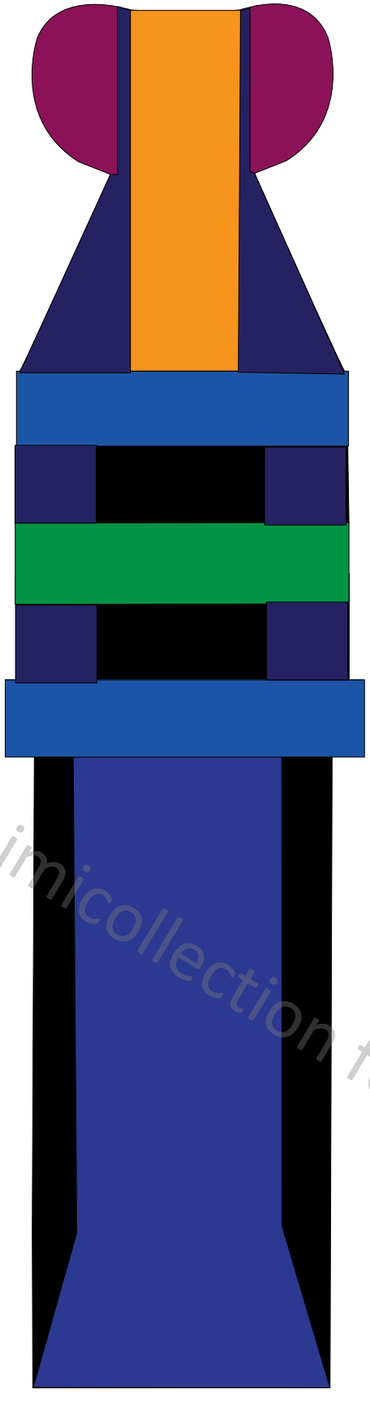
SB.49 / SB.549

SB.74 / SB.574

SB.73 / SB.573

SB.107 / SB.607

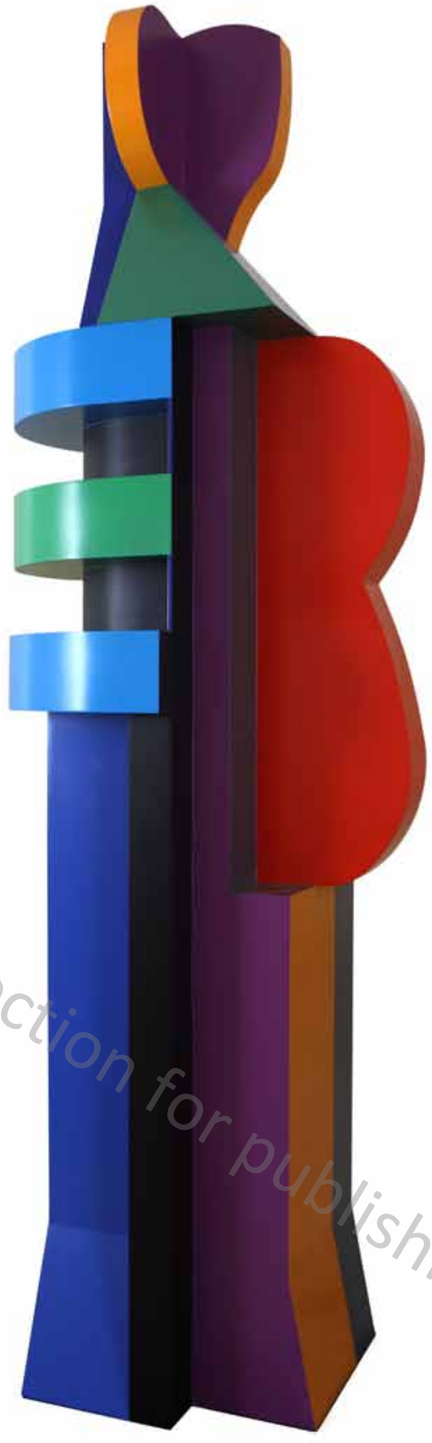




Obelisk for Unknown Poet (2014)
Computer sketch
29.7 * 42 cm

Sculptures

Homage to Khalil Hawi (2014)
Wood
230 * 85 * 60 cm
Executed by Atelier Corban (Mont – Liban)



Obelisk for Unknown Poet (2014)
Wood
235 * 75 * 55 cm
Executed by Atelier Corban (Mont – Liban)

Toy Like No. 1 (2014)
Polyester resin
44 * 32 * 20 cm

Toy Like No. 2 (2014)
Polyester resin
40 * 34 * 21 cm

Toy Like No. 3 (2014)
Polyester resin
40 * 42 * 18 cm

Abstract Form I (2012)
Polyester resin
80 * 48 * 41 cm

Abstract Form II (2012)
Polyester resin
80 * 38 * 41 cm

Abstract Form III (2012)
Polyester resin
72 * 38 * 33 cm

Desert Rose I (2013)
Polyester resin
30 * 28 * 32 cm

Desert Rose II (2013
Polyester resin
36 * 35 * 27 cm

Desert Rose III (2013)
Polyester resin
29 * 36 * 27 cm

Desert Rose IV (2013)
Polyester resin
40 * 34 * 35 cm

Desert Rose V (2013)
Polyester resin
68 * 56 * 48 cm

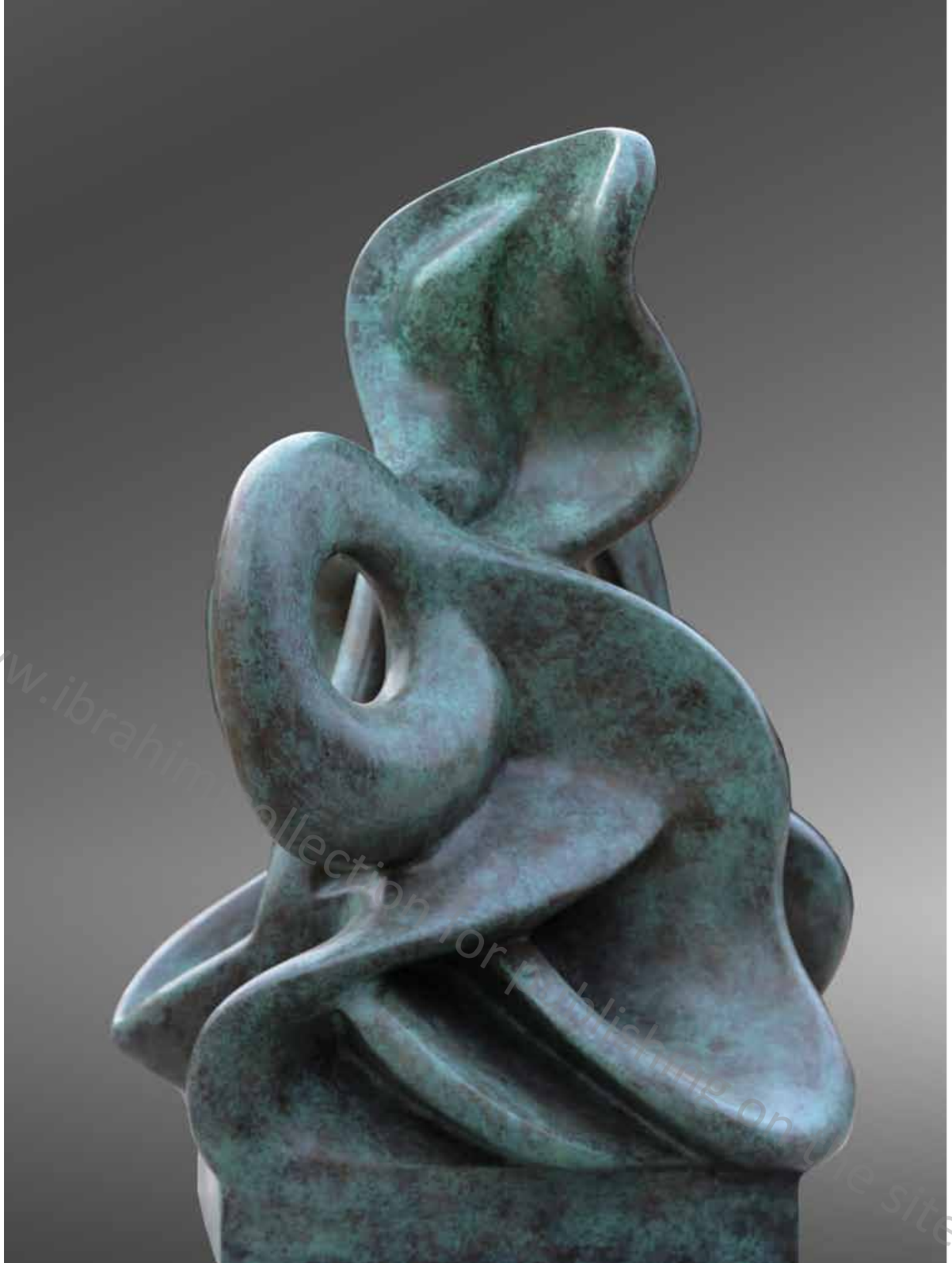
Desert Rose VI (2013)
Polyester resin
72 * 51 * 72 cm

Desert Rose VII (2013)
Polyester resin
78 * 53 * 35 cm

White Obelisk (2014)
Polyester resin
186 * 84 * 79 cm

Mural for Silent Music (2014)
Polyester resin
200 * 300 * 15 cm

Kinda Obelisk (2004)
Original bronze
65 * 16 * 15 cm
Cast by Strassacker Foundry, Germany



Imaginary Plant (2014)
Bronze
51 * 49 * 33 cm
Cast by Fonderie Sako Ohan, Beirut

Imaginary Plant (2014)
Bronze
210 * 140 * 120 cm
Cast by Fonderie Sako Ohan, Beirut

The Target (2010)
Bronze
48 * 66 * 13 cm
Edition 2/7
Cast by Strassacker Foundry, Germany

Handala (Martyr Signature) (2011)
Original bronze
29 * 17 * 10 cm
Edition of 9
Signed and numbered by the artist
Cast by Strassacker Foundry, Germany

Suspiro del Moro (2012)
Bronze
49 * 85 * 18 cm
Cast by Strassacker Foundry, Germany

Tapestries

Jenin Jenin (2015)
14 *portées*, or 5 warp threads per cm, 5 wool threads on the bobbins
300 * 456 cm
(300 * 152 cm each)
Triptych

My Garden (2015)
14 *portées*, or 5 warp threads per cm, 5 wool threads on the bobbins
200 * 200 cm

Oriental Window (2015)
14 *portées*, or 5 warp threads per cm, 5 wool threads on the bobbins
200 * 200 cm

Azzawi, Scrub's Lane studio, London, 2014
Photography by Chris Wood

Biography

Born in Baghdad, 1939

EDUCATION

1962
BA in Archaeology, Baghdad University, Baghdad

1964
Diploma in Fine Arts, Institute of Fine Arts, Baghdad

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1965
Al-Wasiti Gallery, Baghdad

1966
Dhia Al-Azzawi, Gallery One, Beirut

1967
Dhia Al Azzawi: Exhibition of Paintings & Sculpture, Iraqi Artist Society Hall, Baghdad

1968
Exhibition of Painting By Dhia Al Azzawi, National Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad
Gallery One, Beirut

1969
Sultan Gallery, Kuwait

1973
Gallery Raslan, Tripoli, Lebanon

1975
National Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad

1976
Gallery Nadhar, Casablanca

1977
Sultan Gallery, Kuwait

1978
Patrick Seale Gallery, London

1980
Galerie Faris, Paris
Galerie Centrale, Geneva

1981
Art Basel, Galerie Faris, Paris
FIAC, Galerie Faris, Paris

1982
Intercontinental Hall, Abu Dhabi

1983
Sabra and Shatila, National Council for Art and Culture Gallery, Kuwait

1984
Alif Gallery, Washington, DC

1986
Royal Cultural Centre, Amman

1988
Galerie Claudine Planque, Lausanne

1990
Alif Gallery, Washington, DC
Galleri Nakita, Stockholm
Vanazff Gallery, Gothenburg
Galerie des Art, Tunis
Galerie 50x70, Beirut

1992
Flandria Gallery, Tangier

1994
Al-Manar Gallery, Casablanca
Ab'aad Gallery, Amman
Galerie 50x70, Beirut
Al-Sayed Gallery, Damascus

1995
Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris

1996
Art Centre, Bahrain

2002
Azzawi Retrospective, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris

2003
Palestine and Mahmoud Darwish: Large Polyptychs, Drawings, Prints and Books, Cité du Livre, Aix-en-Provence

2004
Recent Paintings, Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris
St'Art - Strasbourg Art Fair, Galerie Claude Lemand, Strasbourg

2006
Prints and Sculptures, 4 Walls Gallery, Amman
New Prints, Kalemmat Gallery, Aleppo
New Paintings, Dar Al-Funoon Gallery, Kuwait
New Prints, Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris

2009
Retrospective, ADMAF, Sixth Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Festival, Emirates Palace, Abu Dhabi
Recent Paintings, Meem Gallery, Dubai
A Retrospective Collection: Works from 1979 to 2007, Espace Claude Lemand, Paris

2011
Elegy To My Trapped City, Abu Dhabi Art, Meem Gallery, Manarat Al Saadiyat, Abu Dhabi

2012
Facing History: Dia al-Azzawi and Leon Golub, Tate Modern, London
Elegy To My Trapped City, Meem Gallery, Dubai
Dia Al-Azzawi, Oriental Gardens, Recent Paintings, Espace Claude Lemand, Paris

2013
Bilad al-Sawad and Other Works, Art Paris, Grand Palais, Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris

2014
Frieze Masters, Meem Gallery, London

2015
Dia Azzawi. Something Different, Meem Gallery, Dubai

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1967
First International Triennial, New Delhi

1971
Contemporary Arab Art, National Museum, Nicosia

1972
Four Artists, National Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad

1975
Seventh International Painting Festival, Cagnes-sur-Mer
International Summer Academy, Salzburg

1976
Second Arab Art Biennial, São Paulo

1980
Salon de Mat, Paris
FIAC, Galerie Faris, Paris
Salon d'Automne, Espace Cardin, Paris

1981
Seventh International Grafik Triennial, Frechen

1984
British International Print Biennial, Bradford
First Arab Contemporary Art Exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, Tunis

1985
Musée Hubert d'Uckerman, Grenoble

1986
Salon Comparaisons, Grand Palais, Paris
Semitic Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Contemporary Arab Art, The Mall Gallery, London

1987
Third International Biennial Exhibition, Taiwan

1988
Olympiad of Art, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul
Azzawi, Jumaie, Nasiri, Kufa Gallery, London

1989
Contemporary Art from the Islamic World, Barbican Centre, London
Arab Graphic Art, NCCL, Kuwait

1997
Five Visual Interpretations, Green Art Gallery, Dubai

1998
Azzawi & Nasiri, Galerie La Teinturerie, Paris

2001
Machreq - Maghreb: Paintings and Books, Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris

2002
The Kinda Foundation Collection, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris

2003
Fondation Colas, Paris
Broken Letter, Contemporary Art from Arab Countries, Kunsthalle Darmstadt, Darmstadt

2004
Art Books and Painting, Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris

2005
Homage to Shafic Abboud, Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris
Dafatir. Contemporary Iraqi Book Art, University of North Texas Art Gallery, Denton, Texas
Improvisation: Seven Iraqi Artists, Bissan Gallery, Doha, Al-Riwaq Gallery, Manama, and 4 Walls Gallery, Amman

2006
Portraits of the Bird, Festival of Arts, Bastia, Corsica
Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East, British Museum, London
Dafatir. Contemporary Iraqi Book Art, Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota; Minnesota Centre for Book Arts, Minneapolis, Minnesota; University of Texas, El Paso, Texas; Daura Gallery, Lynchburg College, Lynchburg, Virginia

2007
Dafatir. Contemporary Iraqi Book Art, The Center for Book Arts, New York; Minneapolis Athenaeum, Minneapolis, Minnesota; NIU Art Museum, DeKalb, Illinois; The Jaffe Center for Book Arts, Boca Raton, Florida

2008
Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East, British Museum, Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC), Dubai
Iraq's Past Speaks to the Present, British Museum, London
Iraqi Artists in Exile, Station Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston, Texas
Dafatir. Contemporary Iraqi Book Art, Denison University, Granville, Ohio
IRAQ: REFRAME. Moments from 20th Century Iraqi Art, Part II, Montalvo Arts Center, Saratoga, CA

2009
Modernism and Iraq, Columbia University, Wallach Art Gallery, New York

2010
Dia Al-Azzawi and Parviz Tanavoli, Abu Dhabi Art, Meem Gallery, Emirates Palace, Abu Dhabi
My Home Land, Art Sawa, Dubai
Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha
Interventions: A Dialogue Between the Modern and the Contemporary, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha

2011
Art in Iraq Today: Part IV, Meem Gallery, Dubai
Art in Iraq Today: Conclusion, Solidere, Beirut Art Center, Beirut and Meem Gallery, Dubai
Mashreq Maghreb: Paintings, Sculptures and Prints, Contemporary Art Platform (CAP), Kuwait

2012
Meem Projects 2012. Part 1: Letters in Art. Part 2: Modern Arab Art, Meem Gallery, Abu Dhabi Art, Manarat Al Saadiyat, Abu Dhabi

2013
Meem Projects 2013. Part 1: Modern Arab Art. Part 2: Contemporary Arab Art – How Do You Sleep At Night?, Meem Gallery, Abu Dhabi Art, Manarat Al Saadiyat, Abu Dhabi
Modern Iraqi Art: A Collection, Meem Gallery, Dubai
Tajreed (Abstract Arab Art), Contemporary Art Platform (CAP), Kuwait
Painting, Sculptures and Projects Garden, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha
Re: Orient, Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

2014
Children of Gaza (in benefit of Salam ya Seghar in partnership with Save the Children), Meem Gallery, Dubai
Post-Picasso: Contemporary Reactions, Museu Picasso, Barcelona
Arab Modernities, Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris
Art Paris, Grand Palais, Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris
Sky Over the East: Works from the Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, International Museum Day, Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation, Abu Dhabi
Abu Dhabi Art, Manarat Al Saadiyat, Meem Gallery, Abu Dhabi

2015
Art Dubai Modern (with Marwan), Madinat Jumeirah, Meem Gallery, Dubai
Picasso in der Kunst der Gegenwart / Picasso in Contemporary Art, Deichtor Hallen, Hamburg

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Arab Monetary Fund, Abu Dhabi
Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris
British Museum, London
Development Fund, Kuwait
Fondation Colas, Paris
Gulbenkian Collection, Lisbon
Harba Collection, Iraq and Italy
Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris
Jeddah International Airport
Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman
Kinda Foundation, Saudi Arabia
Library of Congress, Washington, DC
Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha
Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad
Museum of Modern Art, Damascus
Museum of Modern Art, Tunis
Saudi Bank, London
Tate Modern, London
Una Foundation, Casablanca
United Bank of Kuwait, London
Victoria & Albert Museum, London
World Bank, Washington, DC

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