

SELECTIONS

ARTS / STYLE / CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND BEYOND

31



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• THE ART OF WARNER BROS. CARTOONS • THE SECRET PLAYLIST • VENICE AND THE WORLD'S FUTURE •
• MARVELS OF DESIGN IN MILAN • ANDREE SPEER-SEMLER • PIONEERING THE ARAB WORLD'S WHITE CUBE • IN THE LIBRARY WITH IFTIKAR DADI •

THE SECRET PLAYLIST

Selections explores the way in which music influences 10 contemporary artists' studio practices in a special series curated by Danna Lorch

RIFFS AND RECORDS: MUSIC'S ROLE IN REGIONAL ART

by Danna Lorch

Visiting an artist's studio is pure voyeurism. There is an intimacy to stepping into a secret and tenuous world of half-formed work built on creative chances, to viewing pieces the artist is unhappy with and might soon destroy, and encountering the makings of an upcoming exhibition before it is installed in its final manifestation under a gallery's commercial lights. It is rare to get the chance to watch an artist at work, much less to hear the music that she or he plays in the studio, which in many cases betrays obsession, vulnerability or just taste that clashes with a carefully constructed public persona.

The ten contemporary artists with roots in the Middle East profiled here have shared their private playlists and revealed the myriad ways that music influences their respective practices. Whether they work to the modern hum of the radio, an iPhone playlist or a soon to be obsolete CD player, these artists are in continuity with others who came before them, who were also moved by musical compositions.

Paul Klee's father was a music teacher, his mother was a singer and his wife was a pianist. A pivotal 1914 journey to Tunisia – with its diaphanous light, geometric patterns and bold colours – was what gave the Swiss-German painter the courage to move into abstraction. As a result, Klee went on to literally translate musical compositions onto the canvas, a technique that heavily influenced the Bauhaus school. Several decades on, modern Arab artists Mahmoud Said and Ahmed Sabri painted traditional musicians as a way to capture sensual longing while recording tradition.

According to writer Saeb Eigner, Paul Guiragossian's father was blind and yet played the fiddle perfectly. In response, the Armenian-Lebanese painter's 1985 *Les Musicians* reifies musicians as almost holy – an attitude that holds sway in the region when it comes to venerating performers and their ability to speak for society.

In more recent times, artists including Chant Avedessian, Youssef Nabil and Huda Lutfi have famously referenced the Egyptian songstress Umm Kulthum, arguably out of nostalgic longing for a more glamorous time that marked a flowering of Arab culture. Iranian artist Reza Derakshani frequently integrates original music into his exhibitions, while Dia Azzawi's most recent show at Meem Gallery in Dubai featured a remarkable carved work, entitled *Mural for Silent Music*.

In the following pages we open studio doors around the world and treat our ears to a secret playlist. From Hassan Hajjaj, whose series *My Rock Stars* stems directly from the vibrant North African music scene, to Nicène Kossentini, who is so affected by sound that she can only work in complete stillness, to Nada Baraka, who sheepishly confesses to playing a single song on repeat to drain a melancholy mood into her *Fractals*, we examine artists' tremendous sensitivity to music and their "it's complicated" relationship status when it comes to incorporating musical influences into their various practices.



ARTIST: AMIR H. FALLAH

ARTWORK: *A WALK AMONG THE LIVING*

MUSIC: *SEASONS (WAITING ON YOU)* FROM FUTURE ISLANDS' 2014

ALBUM SINGLES

by Danna Lorch

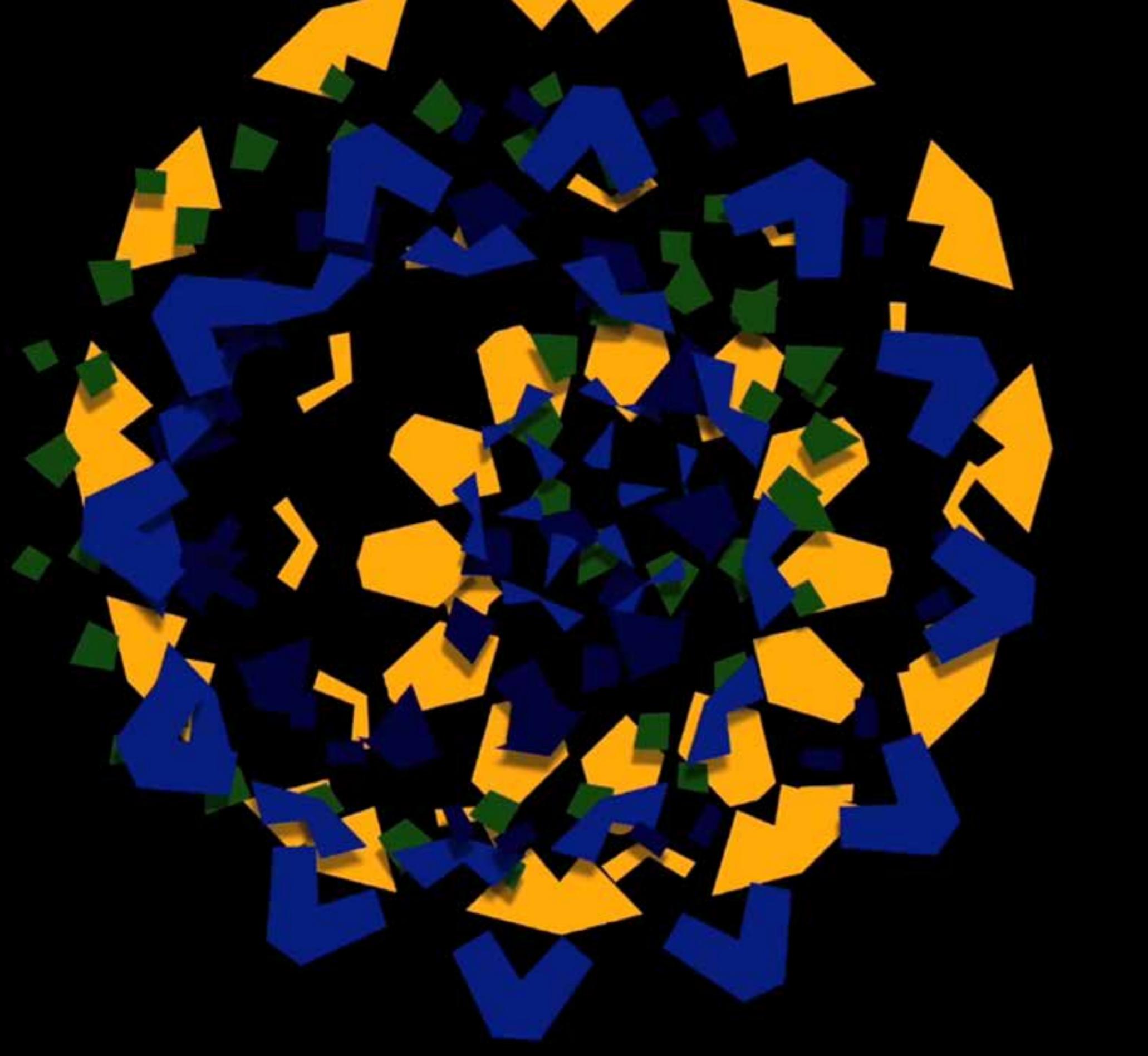
Both as founder of Beautiful Decay, a zine turned online art blog, and as an artist, Amir H. Fallah has always been drawn to the bizarre, and has an eye for finding the ugly strangely comely. His alternative portraits, which never show a subject's face, are microcosmic shrines to our material culture and the collections that a person amasses during a lifetime. Fallah seldom sleeps. He is a masterful colourist, and his art is more vivid than dreams could ever be. He works through the Los Angeles nights and into the damp mornings from a home studio in his garage.

We corresponded at odd hours while he was preparing around the clock for *The Caretaker*, his first solo show at an institution, which opened at The Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City on 28 May, following his participation in *We Must Risk Delight*, an collateral event presenting work by 20 Los Angeles artists at the Venice Biennale, and a solo show at Charlie James Gallery. "I rarely work in silence," he wrote. "I either blast music or listen to a podcast or book on tape. Once I start painting, I have to have something playing in the background. I spend a lot of hours painting tight patterns, so music helps me forget about the cramping in my hands and focus on what's in front of me."

In this case, Fallah played Future Islands' *Seasons (Waiting on You)*, as he conceived *A Walk Among the Living*, a painting that is part of the large-scale installation at Nerman. It represents journalism professor Mark Raduziner and his possessions, including a collection of more than 300 prickly cacti.

Amir H. Fallah, *A Walk Among The Living*, 2015, 6 x 4 feet, acrylic, collage, colored pencil, and oil paint on paper mounted to canvas. Courtesy of the artist and The Nerman Museum

thethirdline.com



ARTIST: NICÈNE KOSSENTINI

ARTWORK: HEAVEN OR HELL

MUSIC: COMPLETE SILENCE OR PHILLIP GLASS' 1976 OPERA

EINSTEIN ON THE BEACH

by Danna Lorch

Nicène Kossentini's ground floor studio holds a three-metre library of books and a simple desk. She considers the sand and the sea in her native town of Sfax, Tunisia, to be a literal extension of her space. At the moment she is preparing for an exhibition in September at the Italian contemporary art centre Muratcentoventidue, and a solo show in October at Sabrina Amrani Gallery in Madrid. When she works, she requires absolute silence beyond the natural song of the tide's ebb and flow.

When she is not teaching university courses, Kossentini compartmentalizes her studio days into two portions: "The time for reading where I also need silence, and another for music when I close

Nicène Kossentini.
Heaven or Hell, 2012.
One channel video.
00-05-11 min. Ed. of 3.
Courtesy of Sabrina
Amrani Gallery and the
artist, Sabrina Amrani
Gallery, Madrid

my eyes and listen. I can hardly bear to hear music while doing something else. I listen mostly to minimalist repetitive music – Steve Reich, Arvo Part, John Adams, etcetera – with high enough volume, often with headphones."

She remembers listening to an infinite loop of Phillip Glass' opera Einstein on the Beach while she edited her animated video Heaven or Hell, which presents rotating geometric patterns and words excerpted from the Qur'an. Perhaps Kossentini subconsciously found parallels from the breakdown of the meaning of arias when absorbed recurrently, as Heaven or Hell questions the meaning of language once it has been uprooted from its original source, while addressing the Arab Spring as an abstract future. Kossentini collaborated with sound artist Alia Sellami to add a composition alternating military boots pounding on streets with the wild applause of a crowd.

sabrinaamrani.com



ARTIST: HASSAN HAJJAJ

ARTWORK: HASSAN HAKMOUN

MUSIC: GNAWA IMPULSE'S 2001 ALBUM LIVING REMIXES

by Aya Ibrahim

Completely at home amid the street culture in Morocco, where he was born in 1961, and the urban sprawl of London, the city to which his family relocated to during his childhood, Hassan Hajjaj produces photographic and collage work that is fresh and versatile, drawing inspiration from fashion, logos, social icons, street photography and interior design.

Heavily influenced by the club, hip-hop and reggae scenes of London, as well as by his North African heritage, his work fuses both these interests and demystifies them. He has been exhibited all over the world with his most recent shows including My Rock Stars at the Newark Museum in New Jersey earlier this year and 'Kesh Angels' at Taymour Grahne Gallery in New York in 2014. His feature film, *Karima: A Day in the Life of a Henna Girl* premiered at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on May 13 and is part of Art Basel's June film programme.

All of Hajjaj's work draws on the beats and rhythm of distinctive music, which is something that he considers as intertwined with his practice. When he works in his London studio, often shooting colourful portraits of his subjects, he always has music playing. For this image of musician Hassan Hakmoun, he was listening to the Gnawa Impulse album. This album mixes gnawa music, one of the major musical currents in Morocco that is derived from ancient African and Islamic spiritual religious songs, with hip hop, drum and bass and reggae.

"It is a lively album," Hajjaj says, "and normally when I am working, I will shoot with the rhythm of the beats of the tracks, so the images and the movement of the sitter is all in time. It is like a dance between the camera and the sitter and the music."

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thethirdline.com

Hassan Hakmoun,
by Hassan Hajjaj.
Courtesy of the artist





*Stephanie Neville,
Fantasy Flowers,
2013, Silk satin,
30×30 cm approx.
Courtesy of the artist*

ARTIST: STEPHANIE NEVILLE
ARTWORK: *FANTASY FLOWERS*
MUSIC: *MY WAY* FROM LIMP BIZKIT'S 2005
COMPILATION ALBUM *GREATEST HITZ*

by Danna Lorch

Stephanie Neville is a South African expat who works from her home studio in Sharjah. While completing her Bachelors in Visual Arts at UNISA – The University of South Australia – she has staged two ironically titled solo shows, 2012's here/not here and the 2013 Confessions of a Bored Housewife, both of which probed at the common social pattern of husbands traveling to other geographies of the Gulf, while wives wait alone at home in the U.A.E.

If one insists on labels, Neville could be referred to as a feminist textile artist in the vein of Ghada Amer and Tracy Emin. Her highly confessional work does not weave a fairy tale, and the woman she presents is no princess waiting to be rescued by a knight. Turn her work over and you'll encounter a meadow of tangled knots. But that's the point. "Relationships are messy," she notes. "This is unfinished because there are interruptions, ins and outs. I'm not a tidy person and the roughness suits my character."

She remembers sitting on the floor of her studio while listening to the Counting Crows ballad Time and Time Again in 2012, embroidering a portrait of her husband while he was away on a business trip, the in-and-out movement of the needle symbolic of the cycle of his departures and returns. Her Fantasy Flowers reference the Victorians' delicate language of blooms yet represent the female form as defiantly self-sufficient, even in married relationships. While she hand-stitched petals from silk and satin fabrics one would find in a women's lingerie shop, she blasted Limp Bizkit, admitting, "The music I listen to is so angry. I guess it's all the expression in the songs that calms me down."

stephanieneville.com



Asad Faulwell,
Les Femmes D'Alger, acrylic, oil,
pins and photo
collage on canvas,
72 inches×180 inches,
2014. Courtesy
of the artist and
Lawrie Shabibi

ARTIST: ASAD FAULWELL
ARTWORK: *LES FEMMES D'ALGER*
MUSIC: THE MARS VOLTA'S 2008 ALBUM *THE BEDLAM IN GOLIATH*

by Danna Lorch

Asad Faulwell is not ashamed to admit that he plays the same albums on repeat in his Los Angeles-based home studio. For several years running, the selection has consisted of anything by The Mars Volta. "My work involves a lot of pattern and obsessiveness," he says, "and I would say that my listening habits are the same as my working habits. I tend to listen to albums that I like over and over again, sometimes up to 20 times in a month."

In Faulwell's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, you'll notice the women's runny mascara first, and the colour next. The stitching is painted so realistically that you'll want to run your fingers along the work's surfaces to determine that there is no thread involved. Faulwell's version of the work with a famous title is a far cry from the series by Eugene Delacroix and Pablo Picasso, whose *Version O* was auctioned off at Christie's New York for nearly \$180 million in May, breaking a world record.

Faulwell's work, which has recently been acquired and exhibited by the Orange County Museum of Art, is an ongoing homage to the women who fought in the Algerian War against the French, yet were never recognized with a monument or other public honour by the Algerian people.

Faulwell's collages take time. "I tend to work longer hours and get more done if I have music playing," he says. "My work is produced very slowly and it takes a long time to complete, so I like listening to long compositions and complete albums." The subjects of his collages are painted in black and white to resemble stone monuments that could still be constructed, with flowers growing from them to symbolize the possibility that coming generations will blossom from the roots these women planted.

lawrieshabibi.com



Something To Believe In
by Myneandyours,
archival glicee print, on
Hahnemühle fine art
paper, 66cm x 96cm,
Limited edition of 10
Signed, numbered
by the artist, courtesy
of the artist

ARTIST: MARWAN SHAKARCHI (MYNEANDYOURS)

ARTWORK: **SOMETHING TO BELIEVE IN**

MUSIC: **THE OFFSPRING'S 1994 ALBUM SMASH**

by Danna Lorch

This digital painting entitled *Something to Believe In* by street artist Marwan Shakarchi, who also goes under the moniker Myneandyours, was inspired by a track from an album by The Offspring, a band the artist says “defined” his teenage years.

The message behind the song, the sixth track on the album *Smash*, is one of hope, and so fits well with the artist’s style. Shakarchi’s entire practice revolves around the symbol of a cloud with x-marks for eyes, which he invented when he was living in London and was in the process of establishing his career. Since moving to Dubai in 2013, Shakarchi has repeatedly used the cloud symbol as an attempt to “urge those who don’t know what to believe anymore to always believe in hope.”

The Iraqi-British artist now works out of a permanent studio in Tashkeel, where he participates in regular exhibitions and often takes part in street art festivals and local initiatives.

In this particular artwork, the lady who appears in many of his paintings is seen releasing a white dove, alongside the artist’s trademark clouds, which themselves are uplifting icons. “Music helped to shape the evolution of my thought process and to tailor the kind of person I am today,” Shakarchi says. “My outlook and my artistic approach are linked through the ideas, which also influence the style of message I try to communicate. Without the sounds of those who helped shaped me I may be a completely different person and be using a different visual language.”

myneandyours.com



ARTIST: **NIC COURDY**

ARTWORK: **KOONS // PANINI**

MUSIC: **CLAUDE DEBUSSY'S 1905 CLAIR DE LUNE (SUITE BERGAMASQUE)**

by Danna Lorch

Jeff Koons' Balloon Rabbit has inexplicably traveled back in time to Rome in the 1730s and been installed in Giovanni Paolo Panini's famous painting of St. Peter's Basilica, set beneath the gilded dome of the interior. Women in corseted gowns and men in white tights casually circle the fruit punch-colored icon. Nic Courdy is the unseen hand that merged these two pieces into one digital artwork in his downtown Salt Lake City studio, while Debussy murmured in the background.

"My first compilation that paired art history and contemporary art was a piece that used a work by Jean-Michel Basquiat and Louis-Leopold Boilly," Courdy explains. "The two works paired well together and created a tension that I enjoyed." His main project is for the digital prints to invent a new narrative with a significance that is distinct from the original works' intended meanings. Courdy streams classical music while he is in the studio, because, he explains, "the crescendo of a piece will keep me from becoming too relaxed and allow me to stay tranquil yet focused."

The Salt Lake City-based artist with Palestinian roots holds a BFA in fine art painting. At first digital art "was a mental hurdle," he says, but ultimately the medium drives his painting practice. Emergeast has recently begun to represent Courdy, who is set to begin an artist residency at the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art later this year.

Nic Courdy, *Koons Panini*, digital print on canvas, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Emergeast

emergeast.com



ARTIST: IBI IBRAHIM

ARTWORK: UNTITLED, 2014

MUSIC: MAJIDA EL ROUMI

by Aya Ibrahim

Yemeni artist Ibi Ibrahim made a name for himself at the beginning of his career by using powerful imagery to reference sexuality and gender issues in Muslim societies. His work has since evolved. Recently, after a residency at Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, he moved into a very contemporary style of abstract photography, relying much more on his own thoughts and emotions to drive him.

These photographs, which utilise an almost painterly quality of colour and texture, were recently exhibited in Dubai's Jamm Gallery. Appropriately, during his time in Paris, he says that he was listening to the music of Lebanese soprano singer Majida El Roumi. "My favourite song is *Ward el Yasmeen*," he says. "I could play this song over and over for days. To me, she is not just a musician, she is a music academy."

Beyond simply bringing the artist pleasure, the music helped to trigger Ibrahim's recollections. "She was a reminder of home, my mother and beautiful memories," he says. "I am always inspired by my own emotions, and the music of Majida El Roumi is a key to bringing those emotions to the surface."

Ibrahim credits his Yemeni mother for teaching him about love, saying he relates all his emotions back to her. At the same time, Ibrahim relates El Roumi's music to a time when the Arab world was peaceful. "We moved happily between Yemen, Iraq and Libya," he recalls, "and those countries now are on the break of collapse. All I have from the past are those memories, and Majida's music is that connecting element."

ibiibrahim.com

Ibi Ibrahim, *Untitled*,
digital pigment ink
jet print on 310 gsm
Hahnemühle photo
silk paper, 60×40 cm,
edition of 5, 2014





Nada Baraka,
Emancipation, 2014,
mixed media, (collage
and painting on canvas).
Courtesy of the artist
and Mashrabiya Gallery

ARTIST: **NADA BARAKA**
ARTWORK: **EMANCIPATION**
MUSIC: **JANGO RADIO**

by Danna Lorch

Nada Baraka sometimes plays the same song over and over as she sits on the floor of her Cairo studio, piecing together painting and collage onto canvas. "Certain lyrics keep me in a melancholy mood," she explains, "which is necessary to create work that is at times bloody and grotesque. Songs left on repeat help me to work faster and remain in an uncurious state, without breaking the energy and movement around a painting."

Earlier this year, Mashrabiya Gallery in Cairo presented *Fractals*, Baraka's first solo show, to what she characterised as an enthusiastic yet largely puzzled audience, still unacquainted with contemporary art, particularly abstraction concerning sexuality. Baraka remembers, "listening to an Indie online radio station called Jango with a lot of Bon Iver and Sigur Ros" while she wrestled to give life to *Emancipation*, the largest work in the show. She created a female

form from individual paintings and collages then reassembled the fractals like joints, muscle, hair and bone onto one uneven canvas.

In spite of the political turmoil in Egypt, she says there is more support for a young artist in Cairo than in London and she is glad she returned after graduating from Central St. Martins in 2013. "In Egypt, the art scene isn't huge but it is blooming," she notes. "There are a lot of workshops, foundations opening and NGOs operating arts initiatives."

Baraka's fluid work, which sometimes references science fiction, orbits the female form. Her practice largely examines "the female body and how it continues to change, evolve – what comes out of it and how it lives in society."

nadabaraka.com



ARTIST: **HILDA HIARY**
ARTWORK: **SISTERS**
MUSIC: **JOHN COLTRANE**

by Danna Lorch

When Hilda Hiary was eight, her father gave her a piano, which now sits in the corner of her Amman studio. If she concentrates, she can still piece together compositions by Ludwig van Beethoven or Fairuz. Hiary, who spends a disciplined six hours per day in her studio and is preparing for a solo show at Amman's Orient Gallery in September, listens to jazz while she considers a work in progress or takes tea breaks with the stray cats that live in her studio. But she pulls the plug on her stereo and switches off her mobile phone as soon as she begins to paint. The act of creation is something between hypnotic trance and prayer, she explains. "When I hold the brush, I can only hear the sounds of the canvas."

Although her work explores the male form at times, the female subjects of Hiary's portraits are often pregnant with entire cities, fighting battles and teeming with energy in their bellies. "The Arabic names for the cities in the Middle East are all in the feminine form," she points out, "so I paint them as women."

In the case of *Sisters*, a painting completed earlier this year while John Coltrane's saxophone crooned sentimentally during breaks, a poetic metaphor is taking shape. "As girls, the sisters were raised together under one roof, but as they grow, they view the world differently," she says. "It could be about a dialogue between two neighbouring countries sharing the same geography, history and culture, but becoming strangers over time." But, hesitating to be too prescriptive, she rushes to add, "The painting gives me orders. It builds itself. I only move my hands and I keep giving to it until at the end I feel it is alive." ■

Hilda Hiary, *Sisters*,
acrylic on canvas.
120×100 cm. Courtesy
of the artist, Orient
Gallery, Amman

orientgallery.net