

## COLOUR AND MATERIAL

by Valerie Reinhold

**Selections** explores 11 contemporary artists' creative approaches to colour and material in a special series curated by Valerie Reinhold

"After our trip to Venice, I asked you what you would remember. Do you recall what you said to me then?" My grandfather often has unusual questions: twenty years have passed and his memory is clearly more vivid than mine. "Colours and shadows, that's what you said," he grins. Colours and combinations of colour have this wonderful power: they can trigger specific memories or thoughts.

Artists really started to experiment with colour in the late 19th century, putting it at the centre of their practices. Reacting against the norms of the time, they explored new ways of expressing what they saw and felt. The use and rendering of colours became crucial to the impressionists in their depiction of light and the passage of time, and to the divisionists and pointillists in their investigations of new topical theories. Up until the 1960s, colour was one of the main focuses of many prominent art movements – from Henri Matisse and the fauvists to Barnett Newman and the colourfield painters.

Colour still plays an important role in contemporary art, which is arguably more engaged socially, if not politically: combined with surprising and sometimes non-traditional materials, colour becomes a new vector for ideas.

India artist **Anish Kapoor** has profoundly changed our perceptions of sculpture with his use of non-traditional materials and colours. The investigation of materials and colours is also at the centre of the work of French artist **Jean-Michel Othoniel**. From the colour inherent within his materials, he has developed a rich and large chromatic palette through which he conveys the transformative nature of things.

Lebanese painter **Nabil Nahas** invites us to share a concrete and physical experience.

His large-scale paintings resemble pieces of coral. Bursting with vibrant blues, greens and purples, some seem to have been extracted from the depths of the ocean.

French photographer **Sidney Regis** sublimates water, his preferred medium, and questions the very notion of perception. His photographs, all taken underwater while free diving, unveil a world we didn't even know existed.

**Farhad Moshiri** also plays with our perceptions, through violent contrasts between soft words and sharp knives or candy-like colours and serious subjects. The Iranian artist uses mixed media and reinterpreted images to rethink popular culture.

Colours are dancing on **Nadim Karam's** paintings. The Lebanese artist and architect experiments with pigments and their reactions to each other. The outcome, always a surprise, symbolises "the network of thoughts that are flying between us."

Saudi artist **Mallah Malluh** uses everyday objects to encode messages that reflect upon the impact of wealth and globalisation in her native country. Also very socially engaged, **Hoda Tawakol** plays with colours and textiles to investigate gender issues in her native Egypt and the perception of women in the Middle East.

Made of colourful paper, the works of **Hadieh Shafieh** tell a whole different story. Rolls of paper, sometimes hiding snatches of Farsi poetry, are stacked together to create intricate compositions that owe as much to Eastern as to Western cultural heritage.

Flamboyant Dutch designer and artist **Marcel Wanders** combines cultural and historical influences and pays homage to life, travellers and cultural union with his latest installation at the Oita Prefectural Art Museum.

Finally, Japanese-American artist **Jacob Hashimoto** builds tiny kites, often adorned with bright colours and intricate patterns, to create playful, airy three-dimensional installations. His works are clearly impregnated with Japanese influences, but also with so many diverse elements borrowed from Eastern and Western cultures that he seems to embody the spirit of the new global generation.

**”WHEN I PUT GREEN, IT IS NOT GRASS. WHEN I PUT BLUE, IT IS NOT THE SKY.”**

HENRI MATISSE



ARTIST: **NADIM KARAM**

by Danna Lorch

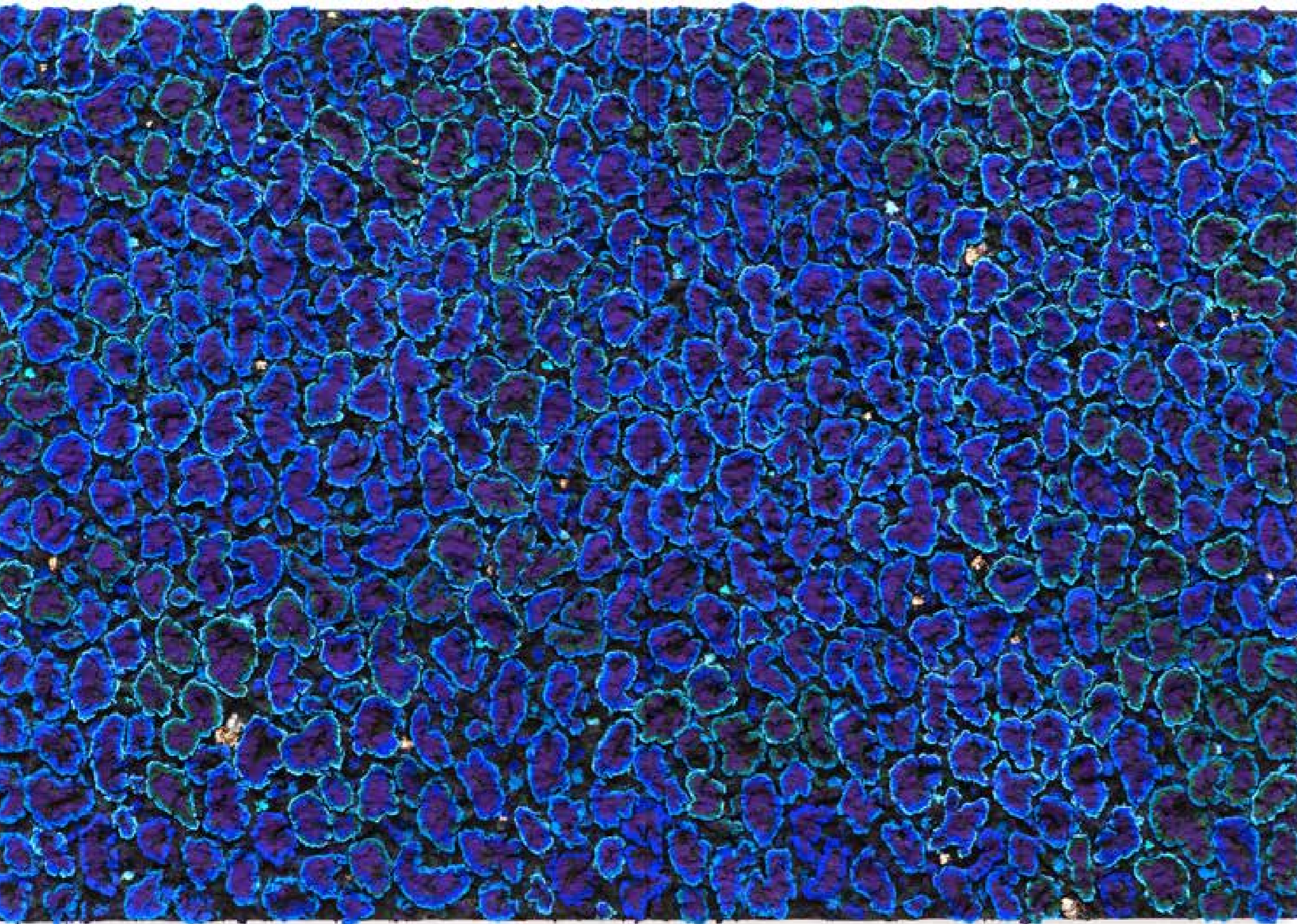
Architect and artist Nadim Karam believes that cities were built one brick to skyscraper at a time on small dreams. He refers to his public art installations as *Urban Toys*, because their presence is meant to remind city dwellers to awaken from the haze of daily routine and dream with wild abandon. Many of the Beirut-based artist's sculptures are profiles of elephants, giraffes or playful humans cut from polished steel. "Using colour in this instance is not a necessity," he believes, "because it might take you away from the strengths that define the profile itself."

For Karam, colour is strongly associated with personal history. He studied architecture in Japan, where he was influenced by minimalist Zen design principles found in temples and gardens. "There is a haiku that speaks of looking at the snow in wintertime and it reminds you of all the colours that will be in the field when spring comes," he says. "This explains how a monochromatic scheme can suddenly remind you of the memory of colour."

Karam's current body of work, *Stretching Thoughts*, "is about how our heads telecommunicate the network of thoughts that are flying between us." Each figure in the series, which is comprised of paintings, works on paper, a book and most recently sculptures, is depicted with a tangle of poems, exchanges, songs and fears, waving in willowy wires above the head. Stretches of colour on paper are created through experimentation with pigment, a material that Karam is attracted to for its unpredictability. "I do not necessarily know what it's going to give me," he says. "I throw colours onto a flat canvas and see how they react to one another. Then I come back in the morning to observe how they have dried in fantastic relationships. It's the interconnection that interests me."



Nadim Karam, *Journey on the Edge*, mixed media on canvas, 205×205cm, 2015, courtesy of the artist

ARTIST: **NABIL NAHAS**

by India Stoughton

The coral-like protrusions on Nabil Nahas' fractal paintings look like they have grown in an alien atmosphere — in some barren stretch of the desert, or the uncharted depths of the ocean, perhaps. In fact, each is painstakingly formulated over a period of weeks, using a paintbrush and a special blend of acrylic paint and ground pumice stone. Eternally experimenting with colour, material and composition, New York-based Nahas began his striking fractal series in 1991, after a huge storm hit the Hamptons, washing up hundreds of starfish onto the beach. Inspired by this natural geometric pattern, the Lebanese artist began incorporating the creatures into his paintings, casting moulds and laying them across the canvas to create a thickly textured surface, then painting on top of it.

"Pumice allows me to create very vibrant colours, because unlike sand it's very porous, so when the paint dries it looks like dried pigment. It looks as if it might blow away — but it doesn't," he laughs. Nahas' rich, pure colours are daubed seemingly at random onto the canvas. Having built up layer upon layer of colour and texture, he then uses contrasting hues to draw delicate lines around his most prominent shapes, creating a vibrant, eye-catching composition.

"Ultimately, they're all about optical mixtures — the way I apply colour," he says. "I don't have any pre-established system. I work totally by instinct and then it's trial and error. Essentially, colours have a certain amount of electricity in them, and you want to heat them up to a max, where they really take their full intensity by the proximity of the other colours, before they start jumping and creating after images."

The combination of the unusual colours and the distinctive texture of Nahas' fractal paintings make it difficult to judge depth. Often, the palettes he chooses blend utterly unexpected hues. "I push the limits," he acknowledges. "I try to go for ugly — colours that are not attractive, that should not look good together, but then I find a way to reconcile the whole thing, and this is where I get surprising results."



ARTIST: **MARCEL WANDERS**

by Valerie Reinhold

"It is meaningless to build an art museum if you are going to imitate others," says Ryu Niimi, director of the new Oita Prefectural Art Museum in Japan. No wonder then, that he commissioned flamboyant Dutch designer Marcel Wanders to create a site-specific installation for the museum, designed by Shigeru Ban.

**Valerie Reinhold: What is the concept behind *The Eurasian Garden Spirits*?**

**Marcel Wanders:** I was honoured to be one of the two artists invited, with Reiko Sudo, to realise a site-specific installation for the foyer. There are many layers: I thought of it as a symbol of the cultural union and exchange between Holland and Japan, as well as an homage to the free spirits of the first travellers. The installation also had to fit in the space – the foyer connects the inside and outside and I wanted to bring the garden inside. And as it is a 'transition space,' where people enter the museum, I wanted to make an interactive installation that people could touch and feel.

**VR: The seven elements are five metres high, and yet seem very light...**

**MW:** You're right. They seem overwhelming, yet they are made of air and will move with a gentle push! To me, the air and wind are like breathing and evoke liveliness and an open-minded attitude at the core of the Dutch mentality.

**VR: The shapes remind me of Brancusi...**

**MW:** Yes, I chose classic and timeless shapes. I see them as a symbol of new life, of a face. We can easily project ourselves on them.

**VR: How did you combine the colours?**

**MW:** I used endless amounts of colours! They are combined to work together and give a vibrant effect. Each of the seven sculptures has different tones: one is more blue, one is more pink... They each have their own identity and personality. Together they stand for diversity.

**VR: Where did you find your inspiration?**

**MW:** I find inspiration everywhere! For this artwork, I would say I was inspired by the historical narrative of Dutch explorers first arriving in Japan in the 16th century. But I included many different typologies – the intricate patterns are a mix of 17th century vanitas reinterpretation, graphic designs, morphic features and photographic elements.



*The Eurasian Garden Spirits*,  
an installation by Marcel  
Wanders for OPAM, 2015,  
Courtesy Marcel Wanders,  
[www.marcelwanders.com](http://www.marcelwanders.com)

ARTIST: **JEAN-MICHEL OTHONIEL**

by Valerie Reinhold

“Colour has always been present in my artistic practice and research,” starts French artist Jean-Michel Othoniel. “With my first works, made of sulfur, yellow was simply the colour inherent to the material. Colour was a way to bring light. When I started to work with glass, my first sculptures were pitch black. I wanted to convey, with the anticouleur and the use of a dense material, a feeling of obscurity. It’s only later that I discovered the sensuality of glass: my sculptures have become always more colourful – almost carnal.”

*Peony of Shame*, commissioned by the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, seems indeed to burst with colours, ranging from watery pink, to bright oranges, to deep reds. Othoniel drew his inspiration from the museum’s collection, as well as from his personal interests. “The peony is the rose of the humble, the flower of shame and the queen of metamorphosis, from a simple bud to an outrageous explosion of colours,” he says. “I am interested in showing the dark sides and, to put up with them, I make them big, extravagant.” It is also his largest and most intricate work so far. He has succeeded in translating the transparency of colour found in his watercolour paintings into glass.

One colour – gold – has even become material in Othoniel’s latest sculptures, *Rose of the Wind* and his fountain-sculpture at the Chateau de Versailles. “Gold is a colour and also a symbol of power: I found it interesting to see how a contemporary artist could reappropriate it for himself,” he explains. The fountain is like a dance, where glass beads are a fusion of gold and water, power and pleasure, and where water bursting from blue glass beads seems to change itself into liquid glass. Othoniel is a magician.



Portrait of Jean-Michel Othoniel with *Peony, The Knot of Shame*, 2015, mirrored glass, stainless steel. 118 1/8 x 118 1/8 x 78 3/4 in. photograph: Claire Dorn / Galerie Perrotin, courtesy Galerie Perrotin



ARTIST: **FARHAD MOSHIRI**

by Pendar Nabipour

Farhad Moshiri stands on a delicate line in between cultures – a line representing his interests in re-thinking popular culture, nostalgic mass-produced images, short statements and, of course, colours. While trying to create a work that carries enough intellectual value to satisfy the mind, it also carries enough aesthetically rich images and colours to satisfy the eyes.

From a distance, many of Moshiri's works have a pointillist effect, appearing as lots of colourful dots that together give shape to a larger image. In fact, they are made up of the handles of dozens of knives, stabbed into a wall to form the word "Comfort;" embroidered glass beads creating the image of a cartoon cowboy; pieces of a cut up carpet making the shape of a jet fighter. If you fall into the world of his images, you may feel either like you are in a magical sweet shop, or a decep-tive, contradictory world where soothing words hide lethal blades.

Moshiri's work appears initially straightforward, but has the power of lingering in the mind for a long time afterwards. His use of colours is fearless, sweet and personal, intimately entwined with the ac-quainted materials and found objects he uses in his work.



Farhad Moshiri,  
*Fan*, 2012, Hand  
embroidery on canvas,  
169 × 127 × 5 cm, courtesy  
Galerie Perrotin

ARTIST: **SIDNEY REGIS**

by Akili Tommasino

In his fundamental 1704 treatise, *Opticks*, Sir Isaac Newton describes how light disperses into a spectrum of colours when it passes through a prism, and concludes that pure light – the light of the sun – is composed of the full range of colours one observes in a rainbow. For his experiments, Newton made use of a camera obscura – a closed environment, which, when penetrated with light through a small opening, registers an inverted colour image.

In the photography of Sidney Regis, champion free diver-cum-underwater artist, the ocean is akin to Newton's camera obscura. Water, the transformative medium which Regis considers to be the protagonist of his work, serves as a dispersive prism instead of glass. Suspended natural and man-made detritus are sublimated into dazzling abstract forms, materialisations of refracted light.

The undulating water that animates these images illustrates the essence of colour itself, the perception of light in different wavelengths. Through the physically demanding feat of free diving, Regis submits himself to the same potent, literally oceanic forces that form his images, and in so doing, he enacts the romantic notion of discovering the laws of nature by surrendering to it in all its violence.



Sidney Regis,  
*Golden leaf*,  
136 × 136 cm, color  
photography on  
matte paper, courtesy  
of the artist

ARTIST: **ANISH KAPOOR**

by Valerie Reinhold

Anish Kapoor has been changing the way we think about sculpture for the past 30 years. His use of intriguing materials and his ability to engage viewers through scale, colour and shapes has deeply influenced contemporary art practices.

In 1979, a trip to India inspired London-based Kapoor to create a series of abstract shapes covered with loose pigment powder, like the ones placed in small roadside shrines. Entitled *1000 Names*, the work's bright red, deep yellow and striking blue pigments are beautiful, luscious – even deceptively delicious-looking. Yet the sensuality of the material and its rich colour cannot survive the human touch. Colour and form are undistinguishable here.

Kapoor's sculptures are not only about what we see, but also about the emotions they make us feel – the way we engage with them on a personal level. There always seems to be another hidden dimension to the work, that we, as viewers, are moved to look for. Kapoor is playing with surface, scale, colour and materials as tools to challenge our perceptions.

*Internal Objects in Three Parts* (2013-2015) is an enormous triptych of silicon and resin wall pieces. The texture and colours are reminiscent of Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, Chaim Soutine and Francis Bacon. They also echo current social and political upheaval. "Red is a colour of the earth, it's not a colour of deep space; it's obviously the color of blood and body," Kapoor once confided to Marcello Dantas. "I have a feeling that the darkness that it reveals is a much deeper and darker darkness than that of blue or black."

Kapoor's art is a process you go through. And colour is part of the experience.



1000 Names, 1982,  
mixed media and  
pigment, 45.2 x 45.2 x  
30 cm, private  
collection, Paris,  
courtesy: Anish Kapoor,  
© Anish Kapoor





ARTIST: **HODA TAWAKOL**

by Danna Lorch

Hoda Tawakol cleverly played with textiles in *Behind the Window*, her 2011 solo show at Galerie Sfeir-Semler in Beirut. To discuss women's virtue she manipulated nylons, because although they are delicate, they can be brutally stretched and yet manage to retain their wholeness. Similarly, vividly dyed hair was plaited into masks as a play on what is ordinarily concealed by the veil, and the consequent disappearance of the female wearer's face.

The artist has Egyptian roots and much of her work relates to gender in the Middle East. A playful-looking falconry hood is neon pink and large enough to slip onto a human head. While training a bird of prey, a falconer (who is traditionally male) places a hood over the animal's eyes to suppress its hunting instincts.

"The person who wears the falconry hood will also be controlled, as will his or her sexual desires," Tawakol explains. The bright colours and patterns of the hoods in the 2013 series serve as a decoy to distract the viewer from initially grasping the weightier social issues underlying the work. Tawakol's shows deserve and demand time to fully appreciate at multiple levels.

"My relationship with colour shifts back and forth," she says, "like when you eat chocolate – after a while you need something salty, and then you go back to chocolate." She finds herself intuitively returning to two colour families. "Grey is pure yet vigorous," she says, "and the pink palette from pale to fuchsia is loaded with femininity – it's lips, skin, blood, sexuality, or even oppression in relation to my work on the topic of female genital mutilation."

Tawakol is busy planning her next project, in which she will travel to Egypt to interview and photograph women before transforming their traditional jalabiya robes and headscarves into wearable works of art in a new form.



Hoda Tawakol,  
*Falconry Hood #13*  
(front), 2014, fabric,  
thread, 34 × 27 × 28 cm,  
courtesy of the artist  
and Sfeir-Semler Gallery

ARTIST: **JACOB HASHIMOTO**

by India Stoughton

In 2013, Jacob Hashimoto created a magical space at the Venice Biennale with *Gas Giant*, an otherworldly installation made up of 30,000 tiny kites, handmade using rice paper and bamboo. At once ethereal and playful, the piece contrasted swathes of pure white kites with concentrations of those adorned with vivid patterns and colours – miniature toys transformed into canvasses.

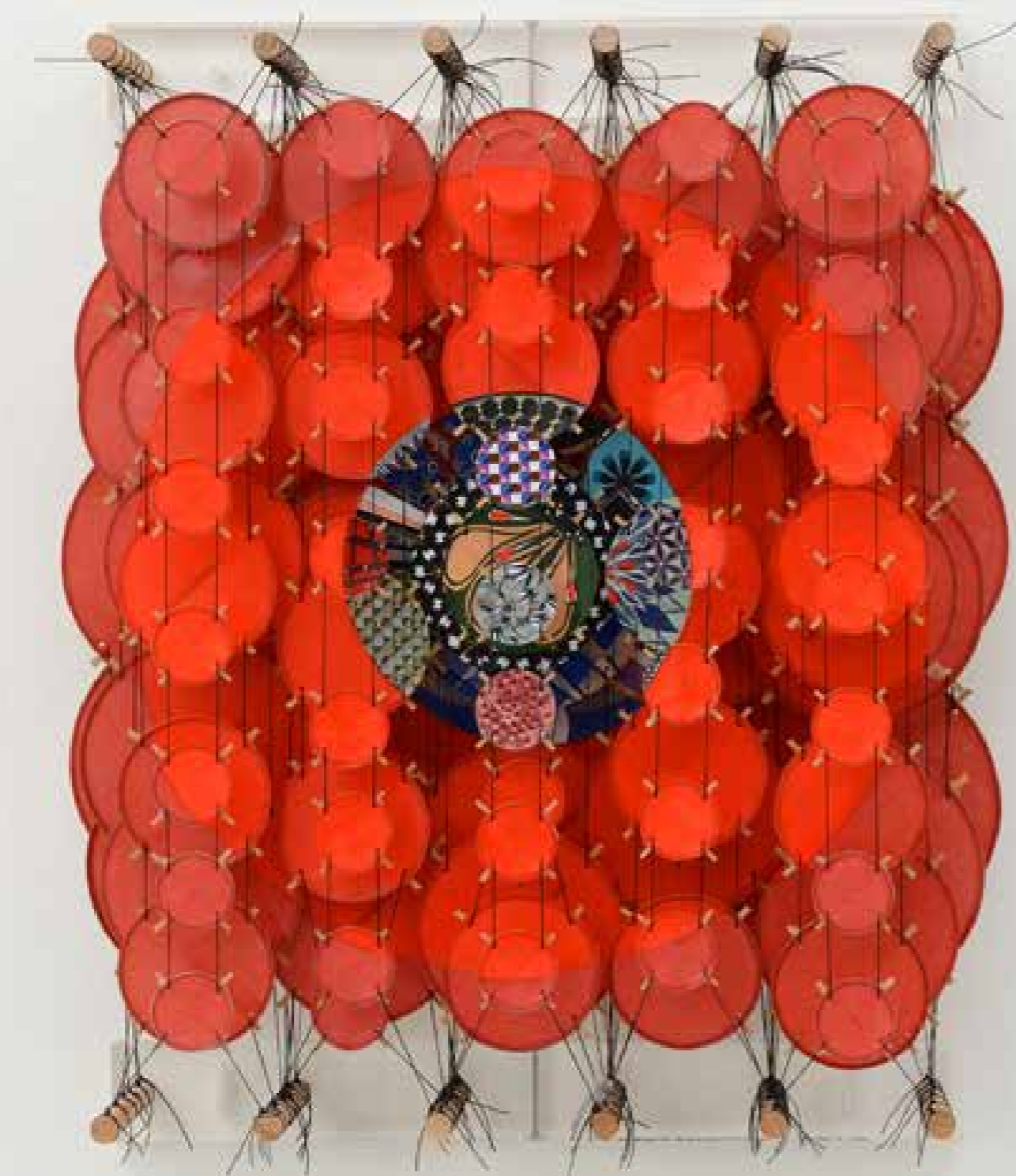
For 15 years, Hashimoto has been using kites to create kinetic sculptures, onto which he superimposes abstract designs, blending two-dimensional picture planes and three-dimensional surfaces. As a student, he used to make the kites as a means of procrastination. “I ended up accruing enough of them that I ended up looking at them as objects I could actually work with and building sorts of spaces out of them,” he recalls.

The artist, who lives in New York, learned the technique from his Japanese father, and the kites give his work a faintly Asian feel, but his influences and interests go far beyond Japanese culture.

*In Never Comes Tomorrow*, his latest solo show at Studio La Citta in Verona, which ran from May to September, Hashimoto showed some of his smaller kite pieces inspired by influences as disparate as Islamic geometry and California hard edge painting, as well as his distinctive minimalist landscapes.

“The way that the artwork works generally is that I take a pattern, or a design, or something from popular culture, but once it gets filtered through the vocabulary of the work, the work really owns it,” he explains. “So the tenor of the work is kind of ongoing visual diary of things that I’m interested in.”

For Hashimoto, colour is both a tool and a distraction. “Because I’m not really attached to colour, I use a much broader range of colour than maybe a lot other artists use,” he says. “I don’t really have a signature palette, so I literally think, ‘Oh this’ll be great. We’ll do the whole thing pink, because nobody likes pink.’ Maybe that does signify something to me, because it’s a really hard colour to work with, so there’s a challenge there. At the same time I feel like colour is very easy to manipulate your audience with... You can kind of play with that, but I think sometimes it’s distracting from the experience that I want people to have with the work, so I tend to just think of it as value in order to create complex visuals, instead of having the colour carry lots of meaning.”



Jacob Hashimoto,  
© photo Michele  
Alberto Sereni, courtesy  
Studio la Città – Verona

Maha Malluh, *Food for Thought* 7000, 2012



## ARTIST: MAHA MALLUH

by India Stoughton

Cassette tapes are all but obsolete as a means of storing music – but not as a medium for making art. In the work of Saudi Arabian artist Maha Malluh, these plastic objects are repurposed – arranged in neat rows on wooden baking trays and presented to audiences as a visual spectacle. Abstract patchworks of pastel colours, the aesthetics of these pieces come second to their pointed commentary on the lightning pace of modern life and ever-evolving technology. Malluh uses tapes of religious lectures in her *Food for Thought* series, a nod to the fact that such recordings are now shared as MP3 files. If the tapes themselves are obsolete, what of the messages they carry?

Malluh's work focuses on globalisation and modernisation in her homeland, exploring the impact of oil wealth on Saudi Arabia's attitudes towards materials, consumerism and cultural evolution. She began working with collage, before shifting into photograms, initially working mostly in black and white. In the series *X-Rayed*, she uses cheerful, neon colours in images taken from real luggage scans to reflect on the issue of travel, borders and freedom of movement. Again using cassettes of religious lectures, she highlights the tendency of airport staff to flag baggage displaying traces of Arabic text, judging people based solely on their material possessions.





ARTIST: **HADIEH SHAFIE**

by Danna Lorch

While envisioning the 20 new pieces comprising *Surfaced*, which showed at Leila Heller Gallery in New York in the spring, Hadieh Shafie limited herself to just nine colours straight from the tube, including a nearly ink-black shade of dioxazine purple, and the c.p. cadmium orange and yellow primrose from the warm saffron family that have underpinned much of her previous work.

As part of the creative process for each piece, Shafie orders reams of paper strips delivered to her Maryland studio, of which she says: "It looks like a photo you might see from India, where textile workers are dyeing fabric and threads. I'll have 20 vats of yellow and 20 vats of blue [simmering] at once."

"I take 3000 strips at a time," she says, describing her laborious process. "I put them in a vat and then use a wide brush to paint them. I will paint thousands and thousands at one time." Once the strips are dry, Shafie sits down and begins repetitively inscribing *Eshgh* (Love) and other totemic Farsi words on each slip of paper, using onyx paint and a brush.

Although she controls the colour palette and materials, Shafie is never quite sure how the thousands of painted strips of paper she uses to create each work will blend and react, and likens her process to action painting. She reads her diptych *Sohrab 2* as an undulating text. During the conception stage, "I created a wood tool in a zig zag form and pushed the paper into it," she recalls, "then pressed it together and wrote the text on the surface of the fore edge. When I pushed it back, it created a distortion. I wasn't in control." ■



Hadieh Shafie, *Spine Yellow Primrose*, 2014, ink, acrylic, paper and hand written Farsi text *Eshgh*, 11×21×3.5 in