

by NILOFUR FARRUKH

Allowing Dreams to Turn Real

Nazgol Ansarinia
Rhyme and Reason (detail)
woven wool, silk and cotton, 252 × 360 cm
2009



Nazgol Ansarina
Rhyme and Reason
 woven wool, silk and cotton, 252 x 360 cm
 2009



Vahid Sangol

The Abraaj Capital Art Prize 2009 awarded to three outstanding artists from Algeria, Iran and Iraq, unlike other prizes, is not based on an art work or exhibition but a dream proposal. These artists and their accompanying curators are chosen for their proposals and then with a purse of US \$ 200,000 are invited to make the work a reality. As Savita Apte, the Chair for the Prize explains, Abraaj Capital Prize is 'an initiative aimed at empowering artistic potential through corporate patronage.'

At Art Dubai 2009, the first prize winning entries were unveiled at Fort Island at Madinat Jumeriah, Dubai. This special outdoor venue that could only be accessed through a small bridge not only managed to give the work a distinctive display but allowed the visitor to focus on it away from the bustle of the main exhibition space.

All the three winners presented very diverse works but a common thread that runs through them is the innovative use of their chosen medium and a personal reading of cultural reference linked to their identity.

Nazgol Ansarina's art is a huge hand woven carpet installed on a raised platform. From a distance what appears like a rug with a traditional palette and timeless pattern at close quarters reveals a narrative build from everyday activities of Iranian people. Elderly women are gathered in concentric circles to emulate a dense central floral motif. Rows of people are poised on arabesque spirals. It's almost a game that the visitor gets immersed into as he/she tries to identify the people that populate Nazgol's carpet. These configurations elevate the familiar Persian Carpet into an intriguing canvas inhabited by people going about their chores. In this work titled *Rhyme and Reason* the artist attempts to show 'how competing factors, scenarios and events can co-exist within a single framework.'

Kutlug Ataman
Strange Space
 video projection, size variable

Nazgol Ansarina has worked on this project with curator Leyla Fakhr. Nazgol has exhibited extensively and was one of the finalists for the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative 2008. Leyla, who works as an assistant curator at Tate Britain, has also worked at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Arts. She has an MA in Curating from Goldsmith University.

The only video piece on display is by Kutlug Ataman. Born in 1961 in Istanbul, the artist has many laurels to his credit including the Carnegie Prize in 2004. He was also short-listed for the Turner Prize in 2004. Kutlug's work has been shown at the Documenta (2002) and the Venice Biennale (1999).

His prize winning video titled *Strange Space* was shown in a narrow cubicle placed in the garden at Fort Island. This video installation in which he uses 'narration to explore the fragile nature of both personal and collective identity' is connected to his previous work which is about the balance between local culture and the encroachment of globalization.* The video begins with a life size image of the artist, blind folded with a black cloth and barefoot, crossing the white sands of a sulphurous desert. This quest into the unknown can have many references. Deprived of the ability to see and protection on his feet as he gropes into the unfamiliar where his each step is tentative and anxious.





Kutlug Ataman
Strange Space
video projection, size
variable

ROMANA HUSAIN

The viewer watches the trek with anxiety and feels relieved as the artist nears the far edge. As the image of the artist slowly merges with the green landscape on the other side and partially disappears, the quest takes on a mysterious air. In the artist's statement, Kutlug establishes a link between the hardships of crossing a desert with protagonists of popular tales particularly romances in which the hero faces challenges in search for his beloved. He uses this experience 'as a metaphor for the encounter of modernity and tradition for their reciprocal attraction and the trauma this attraction may cause.'^{*}

The curator working on this project with Ataman is Christiana Perrella who has worked with internationally acclaimed artists and is currently curator of SACS, office for Contemporary Art in Sicily, connected to the Museum of Contemporary Art Sicily.

The collaboration between artist Zoulikha Bouabdellah and Carol Solomon has produced the work titled *Walk on the Sky*, which in many ways epitomizes the spirit of the Abraj Art Prize. Walking on a 36 meter square platform, the visitor experiences the illusion of walking among the stars. In this case it is the specific constellation of Pisces constructed from a system of light emitting diodes (LED-Flex) on the inside of a canopy that simulates the sky with its polygonal stars. When reflected on a mirror like highly polished stainless steel floor, the visitor feels he/she is afloat among stars. The concept also references the frequently used polygon star in Islamic art which finds its origin in the work of Persian astronomer Abd al-Rehman al Sufi and the physicality of the experiences echoes with Queen of Sheba's legend when a glass floor in front of King Solomon's throne mislead her into thinking it was a pool of water.



VIPUL SANGOTI

Artists and curators: Carol Solomon, Zoulikha Bouabdellah, Nazgol Ansarinia, Leyla Fakhr, Christina Perrella and Kutlug Ataman.



Zolulikha Bouabdellah
Walk on the Sky
 mixed media installation, 6 × 6 × 3 meters
 2009

Zolulikha Bouabdellah who was born in 1977 in Russia to Algerian parents was raised in Algeria before she moved to Paris in 1994. Her work was featured in the African Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale. The curator working with her is us-based Carol Solomon, an independent curator and currently Visiting Associate Professor of Art History at Haverford College, Pennsylvania, USA.

All three works which are ambitious in scale and provocative in content have been made accessible to a worldwide audience at Art Dubai. The widespread publicity and the curators' network will extend the outreach which will be further enhanced by a year-long tour program that will be accompanied by seminars. The first stop is the Museum of Art and Design in New York City, which will be followed by other prestigious venues.

It is through a well thought out enabling strategy of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize Committee that plans to address issues faced by artists from emerging economies. While there is no lack of talent in these countries it is the absence of an institutional mechanism that in the last decade has increased the artist's dependency on the gallery and auction network for international exposure. This Prize offers an alternative path of critical acclaim followed by a series of seminars which will start a conversation on the context of the work. The CEO of Abraaj Capital emphasized at the media conference that his company was keen to play a role in the cultural revitalization of the countries in the MENASA region and the Abraaj Capital Art Prize was a part of this strategic objective. To create an impact on the ground in the MENASA countries, a majority of prize winning artists must live and work in this region for at least the last ten years. Providing an opportunity only to the Diasporic artists who already have an access to the network of their host country will not achieve the objective.

* Quotes from artists' statements in the Abraaj Capital Art Prize 2009 leaflet.