

WAR AND

DESIRE

BASHAR

ALHROUB

Between playfulness and the bitter truth:

“War and Desire in the Dialectic of Life and Death”

Introduction: Palestinian artist Bashar Alhroub is currently preparing for a new project entitled “War and Desire”. He will present a new collection of sculptures and paintings that showcase the history of military as a childish game that lacks innocence. This “plastic bag”, outside of which laws and values simply do not exist, contains a holistic military corps. This bag permits you to playfully manipulate it, with infinite possibilities in an imaginary game of power and violence between art and the daily lives of Palestinians in their occupied lands.

In his new experimentation, Alhroub tries to employ the idea of “visual hybridization” as an aesthetic tool for his new artwork. Here, Alhroub presents a collection of “composed-hybrid” 3D structures trying to coexist in a beautified context. A beauty that reminds us of heritage aesthetic designs whose roots go back to Arabic popular arts, particularly the effect of the repetition of shapes borrowed from Arabic and Islamic art.

Alhroub arranges and distributes these military figures according to mathematic calculations between the shape and space. Hence he creates a 3D structure that instantly makes us recall the decorative structures used in popular décor art. The latter was largely influenced by global esthetics manufactured in China, Taiwan and other countries that depend on human power for both simple and developed industries.

This prompts us to question the aesthetic influence of globalization on the public taste in Arabic societies in general and in the Palestinian society in particular.

The Palestinian economy is a special case in that it is an “occupied economy”, as defined by Palestinian economic researcher Nour Arafah in her study on the “Legend of Palestinian Economy”. Moving towards cultural economy, we notice that as a visual multi-medium artist, Alhroub deliberately used this material –if we want to define the “green soldier toys” or “action figures” as a useable material or subject. We must assert here that the artist used these figures for a conceptual purpose, in that he attempts to study the possible aesthetic use of these small military figures. Consequently, the artist employs them as units/particles to form structures based on the physical relations between the particle and the whole. This is similar to a structured architectural work. Alhroub adopts this aesthetic strategy, which works well with his idea and implementation, throughout his artistic career as a conceptual multi-medium artist. We can also notice that these forms develop as a holistic sculptural project maintaining an unstable geometric relationship between the unit and the group. This strategy is the aesthetic base proposed in this context as a geometric law that presents the 3D work in a semi-tense state between the particle and the whole.

Alhroub’s works represent metaphorical concepts of violence and eroticism as an aesthetic state. It highlights the complex relation between desire and violence as mainly military actions with origins from the history of war, triumph and defeat. With these hybrid works, Alhroub tries to establish a tense relationship between the sculpture and the viewer/ the recipient/ the dealer. Looking at sculpture (number 1), presented in the form of a missile, if one recognizes it as a missile from first glance, one cannot ignore the fact that the artist used the color “pink” or “magenta”, a color symbolizing femininity, desire and romance. The color pink, promoted through western marketing

programs in the beginning of the 19th century in the United Kingdom, has today become a feminine color par excellence. Should one consider the artist's choice of color and shape simply a coincidence? Or did he mean to link the color, as an economic geo-political gender symbol, to the writing of war's history as a dominating masculine mission? Perhaps the artist meant to present a feminine missile, if one looks at it from a humoristic aesthetic perspective. This brings us to sculpture (number 2) where Alhroub created the shape of a romantic heart and painted it bright red. Thus, he reformulates the military game to become an object of desire and eroticism. What does the infusion of a series of plastic military subjects into shapes derived from war and love mean? Alhroub's hybrid works now lie in the erotic aesthetic center that deepens the tension between violence and desire as a military act. Here, an act which the artist built through his attempts to simulate childhood, similar to a father who sets the playing strategies with his son "Omar" in the game of war. What came out from these innocent strategies!?

This is an open question to the Arabic audience. The viewer is now obliged to deal with subjects that make him/her nervously confront eroticism, violence and childhood. But, if these works were introduced in the context of daily relation to Palestinian society with violence and occupation, can they be interpreted differently?! Or perhaps these works should be studied within the context of international art history to be able to understand the artistic character of the work. For instance through its historical context that dates back to the 70s? To better understand this example, one must recall the works of the American photographer David Levinthal. He was the first to use military subjects to re-examine the history of the Second World War by re-producing scenes from the war that destroyed Europe and caused the deaths of millions of people. Can we draw a link between the works of Levinthal and Alhroub as parallel trials to re-examine violence and war through the re-composition of scenes in an artistic work that re-investigates history? Both artists worked on turning the scene into a

theatrical oeuvre and re-producing it as an independent scenario that simultaneously projects into the past and the future.

It is also worth noting that Alhroub has already produced multi-medium works such as paintings, sculptures and photography. All his works grapple with the same ideas and themes. Levinthal used the camera as a drawing tool. He used a Polaroid camera, which is known for its aesthetic value which makes us recall drawing and coloring but at the same time reminds us of a time where photography developed at a fast pace as a visual language. The artist pushes us, the audience, to confront these questions and to deal with its compositions. Alhroub hybridizes these figures with a thermal aggressiveness that makes them melt and fuse into new shapes. These shapes fall into an environment that further complicates the relation between modernity and heritage as “metaphorical aesthetics”. This raises another intellectual question about the “nature” of these works and their direct and indirect relations to both the international and Arabic art history. In this context, one should underscore two points. Firstly, there is the history of shape metaphor in modern art and the beginning of post-structuralism intellect as well as its influence on the understanding of the creativity process. Second, one should recall distant yet important experiences in international art, which were and remain the basis of an aesthetic project. This is a project that is based on abolishing the remnant space between imagination and reality thus creating a tense relationship between the two. A relationship that feeds on such a tense imagination that it could reach utmost levels of fantasia and lunacy. This is where we must point out the great works of the legendary Spanish artist, Francisco Goya, particularly his famous series “Los Caprichos”. In this series, the artist visually documents the fall of society in Spain during the French occupation of 1808. It is clear that violent fantasia in arts has historical roots and is reflected by the artist’s relation to society and his position towards the reality he is living.

As aforementioned, Alhroub fuses together repetitive units whose roots

go back to traditional crafts in ancient cultures. These cultures had a natural or “colonial” presence in Palestine and the Arab world. We can therefore consider the repetition and decoration in Alhroub’s works as a contemporary style with borrowed aesthetic designs from Islamic and Arab arts. A conclusion that leads us to claim that this is an inherited aesthetic that allowed the artist to place all his thoughts in the context of post-modernity. To be more analytical, we believe that Alhroub’s new work is but a continuation of an obsession that has occupied several international artists. Such artists were involved in artwork that investigates the history of violence as a manly game in human societies. As a Palestinian artist, Alhroub has arranged these figures to appear as if in an erotic crisis with Freudian implications. He produced figures that construct a scenario close to aesthetic nightmares. Is he trying to express the psychological state of Palestinians who have been oppressed for over 100 years? Or is it an expression of the ongoing state of nervousness that dominates the aesthetic obsession of the artist through his own personal experience with the violence that surrounds him as a human being?

We need to think out of the box and contemplate these works differently. The general view tries to create a typical narrative of the conflict by producing evident daily “stories” about the Palestinian reality. On the contrary, Alhroub attempts to deepen this tension and provide out-of-context inquiries about violence as a culture and a personal psychological state of a person in his geographic and political context. His sculptures, although neatly built and colored, are based on the brutal relationship between violence and desire in their human and social states. His method takes the typical narrative to far away ends. He openly attempts to rearrange relations using a style based on the tense geometrics of shape and partition. He utilizes a method that depends on the repetition of the unit as an open infinite decorative shape. It is crucial to realize here that Alhroub produces works that are not sculpted within the “industrial” concept of the word. Rather his works are composed with thermal violence, where he melts the ends

of his materials and then amalgamates them in a calculated manner. It looks as if this shape is trying to fill in a space that is clearly similar to decorative subjects that we can recognize through our daily relation with our environment. The artist employs these similar and repetitive “military” figures in an almost innocent way for aesthetic purposes, which can be an aesthetic metaphor from popular art. Indeed, Alhroub insists on producing a space and making its cornerstone “desire”, a taunted work existing as a structure.

In Alhroub’s paintings and drawings, he reproduces the scene with a series of paintings that make up a comprehensive work through partitions colored in a rainbow spectrum. This work connects the strained scene of manly erotic attitude with “military” life and the troubled sexual relations in the taunted military community. As Alhroub introduces a strong gender question about “desire”, one must open an intellectual dialog with Joseph Mass’ad in his book “Arabs’ desiring”. In his book, Mass’ad thoroughly analyzes the relationship between imperialism and Arabs by examining the history of manhood and colonization. Meticulously, Alhroub was able to open a different argumentation with regards to the typical narrative in Palestinian culture. As recipients, we are constantly wondering about Alhroub’s strategy: Why does he continue to raise these questions from his position as a conceptual artist who brings together aesthetic in its popular perspective, and violence as a practice, a state and an experiment, in constant tension with desire, as an instinctive state of being that is close to an animal instinct? Or perhaps we should tackle the direct question: Does the human historical conflict go back to the biblical narrative of Cain and Abel, sons of Adam, and is it an ongoing historical phenomenon? Or have we overcome this history to embrace a colonial present whose roots go back to the European colonial project and all of its consequences? The artist raised these philosophical questions and ideas through his works, which are presented as structures with a grace that swings between primitive and modern ages. Is it sane to speculate that Alhroub using these figures leads the viewer to face a crisis through

which the latter tries to build a relational connection to a piece of art charged with ridiculed features? Such features cause the viewer to wonder about the issue of violence and its visual translation! If that is, in any case, even possible!

Through his works, Alhroub, the artist, reverse the balances of the relation between the ego and the “other”. He establishes a provocative visual project to make the viewer confront the heart of a philosophical question: what is the purpose of art as a cultural provocative work? In the Palestinian context, specifically in the imaginary place of “al watan”, the image is reversed for the other military Palestinian. The image was of limited colors to become an image of a Palestinian with a military appearance who puts the first lines towards the establishment of some form of super-ego. These works are hybrid military figures that were composed and fused with the know-how of al-tarazi or tailor. These sculptures were meant to represent a military strategy prepared by an “adolescent” artist, in the philosophical sense of aesthetic as a military adolescence. An artist trying to translate an imaginary nightmare into the human mind and give it a theoretical interpretation –the imagination and the imagined. He also tries to figure out how to psychologically translate imagination. This series of nightmares place the mental and moral siege on Palestinians in the heart of modern aesthetics. The artist has managed to run in the nightmare, same way Alhroub has done previously in his photographic works of the camps. Here, Alhroub “is playing” the naïve and soft game of fire –using the strategy of the dreamer artist- but with a visual intelligence and deep understanding of his artistic project.

DR. Aissa Deebi

Artist, scholar and curator

Based in Geneva

Gallery, Bangladesh; Birzeit University Museum collection, Palestine; Jordan National Gallery, Omi Art Centre, New York; and Michael Abbate collection, New York; Bank of Palestine collection, Palestine; Contemporary Art Platform .Kuwait- Kuwait and in many other renowned private collections worldwide

Bashar Alhroub

Born in Jerusalem in 1978, He completed his MFA in 2010 at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton in the UK. In 2012 Alhroub was awarded the .first grand prize at the 14th Art Asian Biennial, Bangladesh

Alhroub exhibited at various museums, biennales, and art venues including: The Aga Khan Museum, Toronto – Canada; American University Museum, Katzen Arts Centre, Washington Dc, USA; The Arab World Institute. Paris – France; Paul Valery Museum- France; Art Dubai, Dubai; Abu Dhabi Art, Abu Dhabi, UAE; Imperial War Museum, London, UK; Frieze Art Fair, London, UK; Krannert Art Museum, USA; Al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art, Jerusalem; Gallery One, Ramallah, Palestine; The Institution of Contemporary ICA, London; Jordan National Gallery, Amman, Jordan Gallery Mana, Istanbul, Turkey; Eli and Edythe Broad Museum, USA; 15th,16th, 17th Asian Art Biennale, Bangladesh; The Barjeel Art Foundation, UAE; Instants Vidéo Festival 24th Marseille, France; Centre for Contemporary Art Laznia, Gdansk, Poland; Green Art Gallery, Dubai; The Mosaic Rooms, London; Twin Gallery – Madrid; Spain

Alhroub also participated in several International artist residencies a such as Art Omi, New York; Artist residency in Matters Factory Museum, Pittsburgh, USA; Delfina Foundation Residency, London; China Printmaking Museum and Goanlan Artist village residency, China; Bag Art Camp Residency and Workshop, Bergen, Norway; “Shatna” International Artists Workshop, Jordan; .he International Artists Workshop “Braziers”, UK

Bashar Alhroub's work is also included in a number of International collections and museums including the Imperial War Museum, London; Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah; China Printmaking Museum- China; Bengal National





Missile, mixed media sculpture (resin, plastic & wood)
80 x 25 X 25 cm, variation of 5, 2017

قذيفة



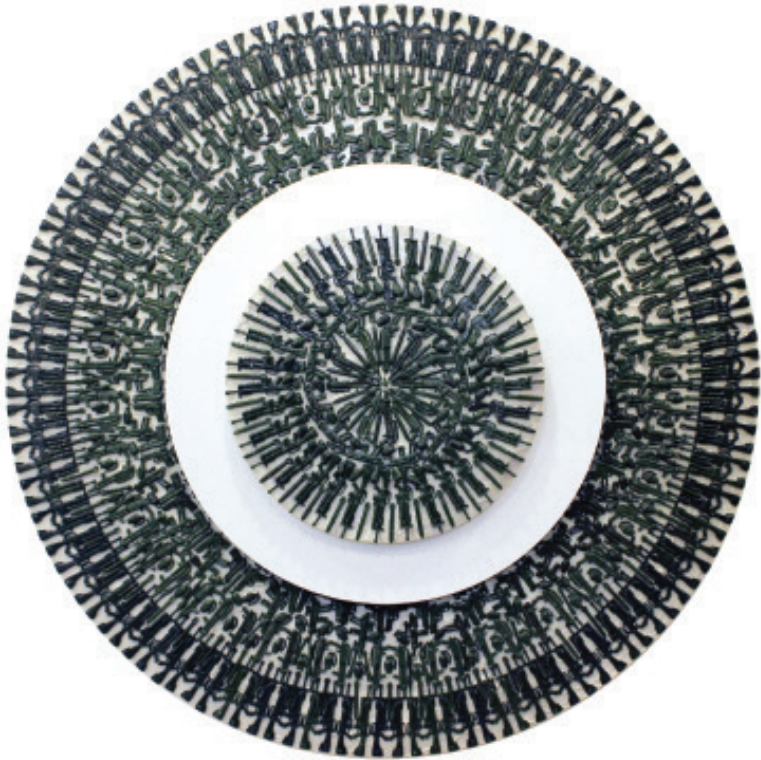
Heart, mixed media sculpture (resin & plastic)
50 x 50 X 4 cm, variation of 5, 2017

قلب



Hot Lips, mixed media sculpture (resin & plastic)
65 x 36 X 11 cm, variation of 5, 2017

شفايف ساخته



Arabesque, mixed media sculpture (resin, plastic & wood)
85 x 85 X 6 cm, edition of 5 + 1 AP, 2017

ارابيسك



Invasion, bronze sculpture, 50 x 50 X 50 cm, edition of 3 + 2 AP, 2016

غزو



Face off 1, mixed media sculpture (resin, plastic & wood)
36 x 25 X 20 cm, edition of 3 + 1 AP, 2017

وجه آخر ۱



Face off 2, mixed media sculpture (resin, plastic & wood)
36 x 25 X 20 cm, edition of 3 + 1 AP, 2017

وجه آخر ۲



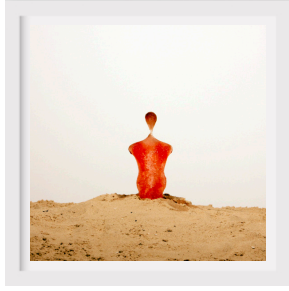
Face off 3, mixed media sculpture (resin, plastic & wood)
36 x 25 X 20 cm, edition of 3 + 1 AP, 2017

وجه آخر ۳



Face off 4, mixed media sculpture (resin, plastic & wood)
36 x 25 X 20 cm, edition of 3 + 1 AP, 2017

وجه آخر ٤





Vanishing, C- print on archival paper, each 25 x 25 cm, edition of 5 + 2 AP, 2016



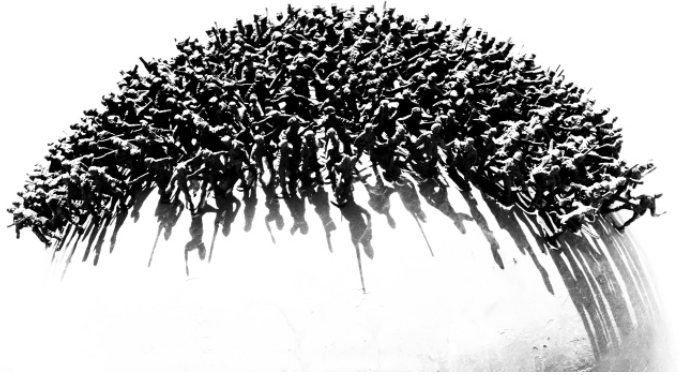
Gun, mixed media sculpture (resin, plastic & wood), 30 x 20 X 2 cm, 2017

موسا



World Map, mixed media sculpture (resin, plastic & wood)
90 x 65 X 4 cm, 2017

خريطة العالم



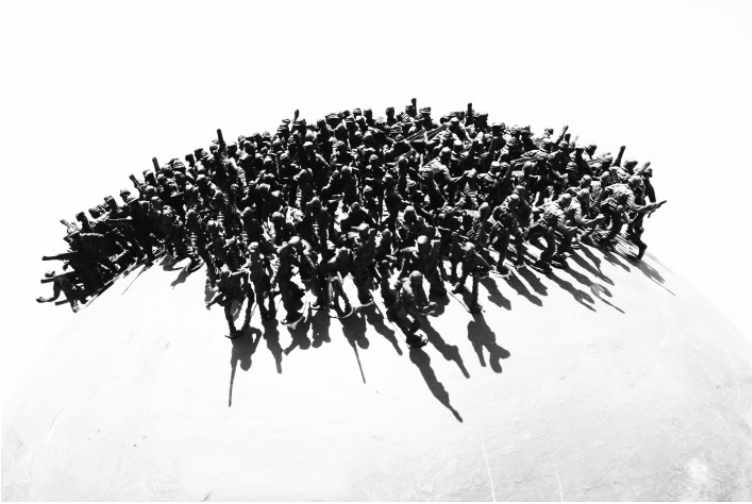
Toys # 1, C- print on archival paper, 100 x 66,5 cm, edition of 5 + 2 AP, 2016

دُمی ۱



Toys # 2, C- print on archival paper, 100 x 66,5 cm, edition of 5 + 2 AP, 2016

دُمی ۲



Toys # 3, C- print on archival paper, 100 x 66,5 cm, edition of 5 + 2 AP, 2016

دُمی ۳



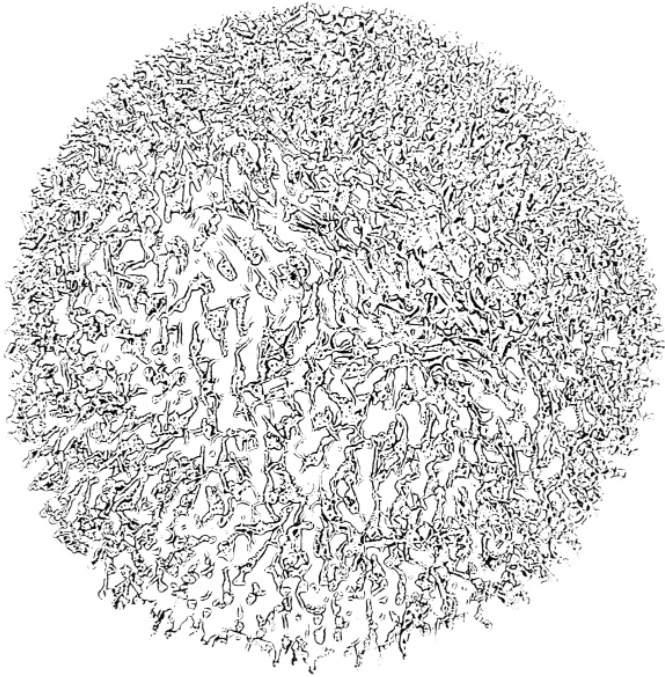
Toys # 4, C- print on archival paper, 100 x 66,5 cm, edition of 5 + 2 AP, 2016

دُمى ٤



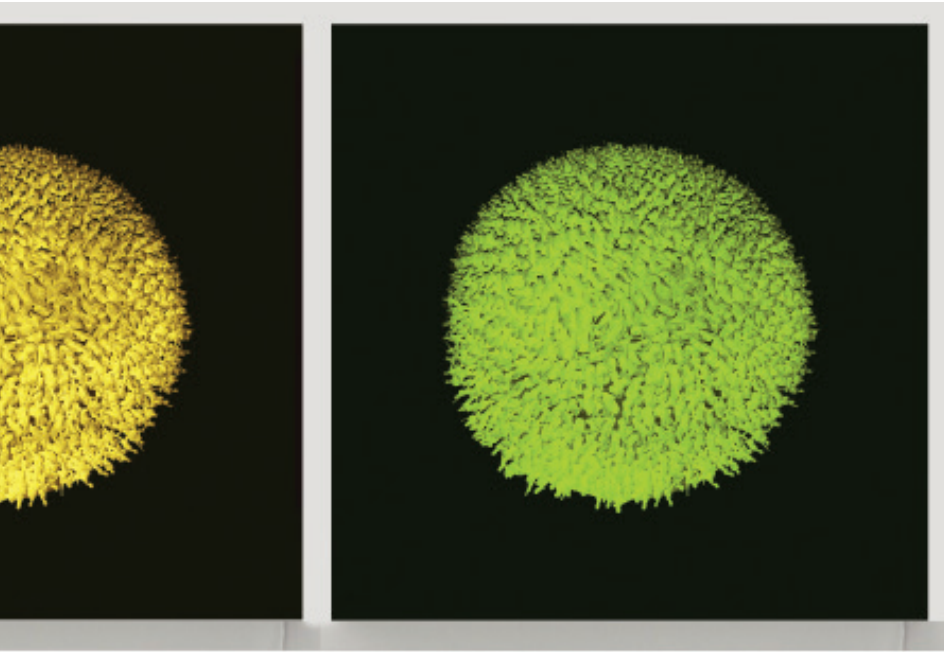
Invasion, mixed media sculpture (resin & plastic) 40 x 40 X 46 cm
Edition of 5 + 2 AP, 2016

غزو

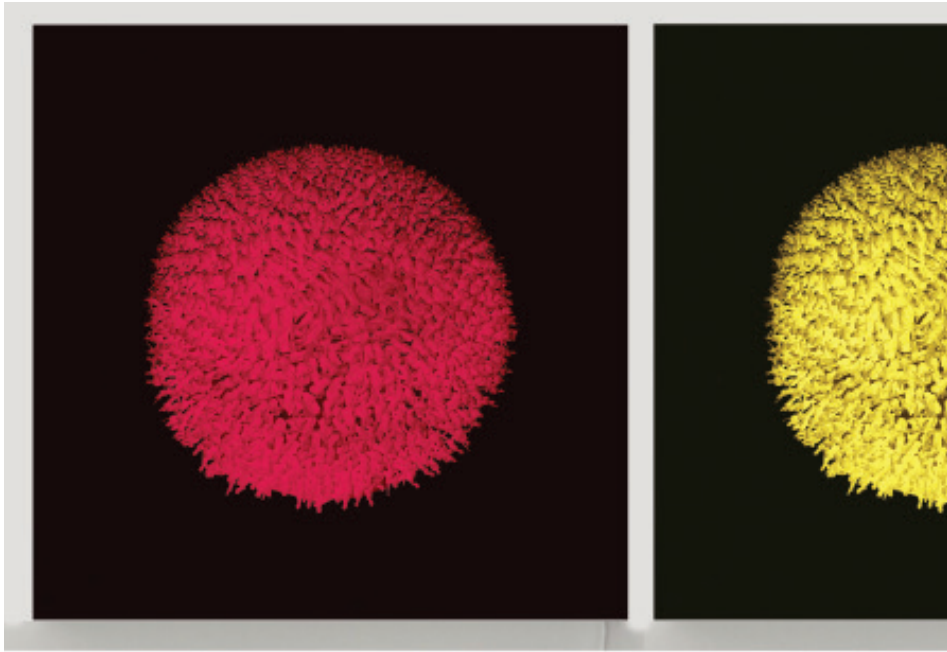


Fields of Dreams, ink on fabriano paper, 100 x 100 cm, 2016

حقول الأحلام



جاهز، استعد، ابدأ



Ready, Steady, Go, light boxes, each 25 x 25 x 8 cm, edition of 3 + 1 AP, 2016



موت إيروس



Death of Eros, 7 pieces each one 50 X 70 cm, acrylic on canvas, 2017



Death of Eros #3, 50 X 70 cm, acrylic on canvas, 2017

موت إيروس ٣



Master of the Universe, one screen channel,3 minutes,
Edition of 5 + 2 AP, 2016

سيد الكون