

Artist | Brought up in Kiev, Tunis and Dubai,

Nadia Kaabi-Linke is an artist and nomad who

will not be pigeonholed. By Rachel Spence

# 'I come from everywhere'

As a shoal of banal works at every Venice Biennale testify, contemporary artists would do well to steer clear of that city as the source of their inspiration. Yet one of the highlights of the Biennale in 2011 was "Flying Carpet", a sculpture by Nadia Kaabi-Linke in an exhibition of Arab art entitled *The Future of a Promise*.

Suspended from the ceiling, "Flying Carpet" was an aluminium cage which sloped upwards as if mapping the steps of a bridge, and cast a spectacular mesh of shadows on the floor. It was inspired by the street traders who sell fake designer bags on the bridges in Venice. Kaabi-Linke listened to their painful odysseys of migration - most come from Senegal - and the difficulties of living illegally in a foreign country. Then she traced the contours of their shapes on the ground and cast the lines in metal.

The result transformed the men's particular experience into a universal expression where beauty and hope reside alongside exile, imprisonment and loss. Awarded the 2011 Abraaj Capital Art Prize, it marked out Kaabi-Linke as a rare example of an artist capable of crafting complex socio-political histories into an organic, autonomous poetry. Three years later, her career is fulfilling that promise. Not only does she have work in MoMA, but she won the Discoveries Prize at Art Basel this year. Now she has her first major solo show in London at the Mosaic Rooms in Earl's Court.

Run by the AM Qattan Foundation, the Mosaic Rooms focuses on culture from the Arab world. Born in Tunisia, in 1978, Kaabi-Linke ostensibly fits the description. Yet she chafes at such labels. "I'm very uncomfortable when I'm put into an Arabic box, or any box," she tells me as we talk in the Mosaic Rooms' main gallery.

A few minutes in her company and it's easy to sympathise. With her pale skin, long, dark, wavy hair, wearing a floaty yellow T-shirt, jeans and suede lace-ups, the lithe, easy-going 36-year-old radiates the energy of a free spirit.

her work - of which more later - we have flopped down on the gallery's floor with our cups of espresso; Kaabi-Linke's athletic akimbo pose betrays her childhood dream of becoming a contemporary dancer.

"I come from everywhere and nowhere," she explains, her make-up free face breaking into a smile, when I ask her where she considers home. Don't mistake this for hyperbole. Her Tunisian beginnings come courtesy of her father, a sports academic. But her mother, who is a chemist, was born in Kiev so Kaabi-Linke's childhood was divided between that city, Tunis and - from the age of 12 until 18 - Dubai, where her father had a job. Subsequently she studied at the Sorbonne and today she lives in Berlin.

How many languages does she speak?

"Six," she says, then adds: "My English is probably the worst," although



she speaks it perfectly with a light, anonymous accent.

Her nomadic anima fuels her art. Although now she relishes her peripatetic existence, the move to Dubai felt like a sentence of exile. "Everything broke," she remembers. "That was a really hard time. I lost all my friends." Worst of all, she had to leave her place as



in Tunis. "It's not the Dubai of today. There was no artistic structure. No music, or dance or art, especially for a girl." Tunisia, which was under an autocratic but essentially secular rule, was "much more westernised" by comparison. Kaabi-Linke spent long hours shut in her parents' apartment and for the first time found herself at a girls-only school.

Desperate to express herself, she started to draw. She was encouraged by her mother who had studied at an arts high school before turning to science.

Also crucial were the summers she spent in Kiev. "In the Soviet Union, culture was the basis of everything. They didn't have money but they did have art. So every summer it was bombardment: museums, opera, theatre."

Does she feel Russian or Ukrainian? Her mouth twists doubtfully. "Both. Eastern Ukraine is both, which the west doesn't understand. Western Ukraine is a different story."

Lest I fall into the trap of pigeonholing her as an ambassador for either post-Soviet or Arabic identity, she reminds me gently: "I have lived more than half my life in western Europe."

tells me: "In Tunisia, we have more rights as women than in France in the sense that there are equal salaries between men and women." Nevertheless, she is aware that many freedoms are still at stake. "In the Arabic world, the women work very hard. They carry the world on their shoulders but the men still dominate."

She would like to see a sexual revolution but not one that mirrors a European model. "It's more about saying 'basta': if you don't want a child, no one can tell you to have one. What happens in your body is yours. You don't belong to anyone."

Back in Tunis, she enrolled at the University of Fine Arts to study painting. Then a scholarship to the Sorbonne took her to Paris to study aesthetics and

into what she self-deprecatingly describes as "conceptual blah-blah-blah" through her intellectual exploration of the surface. "My PhD was about the invisible: the mirror, the back, what you don't see."

The Sorbonne was also where she found her German husband, Timo Kaabi-Linke, whose input she values highly. Did she meet him in a lecture?

"No," she replies with a straight face. "He was cleaning cars in a Volkswagen showroom and I was a hostess." We both begin to giggle as she elucidates. "It was one of those horrible jobs you do to earn money. Never did I think I would find my husband there!"

"He saved me and I saved him because we hated [that place] so we there we were talking about art, and about Bergson and Merleau-Ponty, in the middle of all the cars."

Timo, who curates many of her shows now, "is very critical and hard", says Kaabi-Linke cheerfully. "We fight a lot about concepts and ideas." But she is convinced that the friction between them is responsible for the minimalism that gives her work its enigmatic power. By the time they have finished quarrelling "there is nothing [left] over".

The show at the Mosaic Rooms testifies to their fruitful collaboration. Curated by Timo, it includes a video of the interrogation of immigrants applying for a visa as if they were congregants in a church singing "No!" like a hymn, in response to questions rapped out by a faceless mouth. An intriguing grid of abstract powder rubbings "Impunities London Originals" turn out to be forensic prints of the wounds suffered by survivors of domestic violence. Just perceptible against their transparent acrylic surfaces, reliefs of the City of London mutter of the invisible financial power which manipulates our daily lives.

Executed with Beckettian formality and unaccompanied by explanatory texts, these works pulsate with suppressed emotions. "I hope the work is strong enough, [even] if you don't know the story," says Kaabi-Linke, adding that she wants the spectator to experience "an awkward feeling. That's beautiful mostly [but] when you come closer, there's something, either the scar or the shadow, that's observing you."

By now, Kaabi-Linke is thoroughly animated. Her hands fly about as she darts from one idea to another, effortlessly weaving links between different histories, signs and human experiences. Such vitality seems at odds with the darkness that lurks in her art. "There's always misery," she admits. "A background of pain in my work which is like a print. It is my indexical relation to the world."

Mosaic Rooms, London, until November 29, mosaicrooms.org. Nadia Kaabi-Linke's next exhibition opens on January 22 2015 at Gallery Cristina Guerra in



Clockwise from top: Nadia Kaabi-Linke creating preparatory sketches for 'Perspectives (Bank Junction, London)' (2014); Kaabi-Linke at the Mosaic Gallery in London; 'No' (2012) by Kaabi-Linke