

Mehdi Moutashar.
Photography by Lionel Roux



Amin Alsaden.
Image courtesy of the curator



MEHDI MOUTASHAR & AMIN ALSADEN

The artist sits with the curator to discuss his inspiration, practice and current show at Doha's Mathaf, *Mehdi Moutashar: Introspection as Resistance*, which runs until 5 March 2024. Moutashar's contemporary work continues to demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of Arab-Muslim heritage, propelled into the present thanks to his endless experimentation, and an ongoing dialogue with a specific constellation of avant-garde modern and postwar movements.

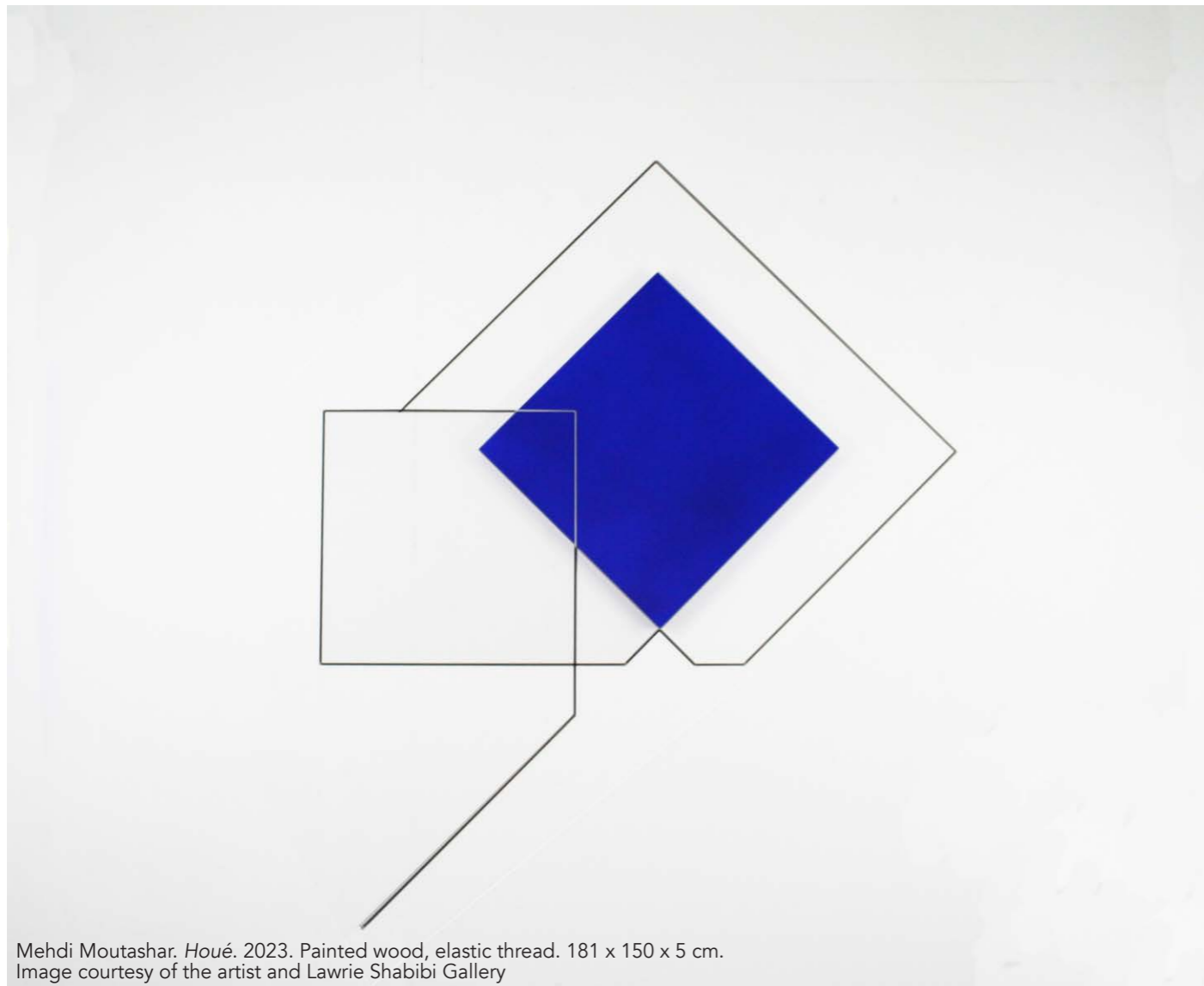
Amin Alsaden: For our exhibition at Mathaf, you have created two new site-specific installations. Your work is informed by the geometries, buildings and landscapes you grew up observing, but how exactly do you transform the references?

Mehdi Moutashar: More than historical references, I like to think about the intelligence of space, or what has been described as the genius loci. Each space has its own qualities or character, which may be detected in the body or mind. This is something that we sometimes perceive but which, on other occasions, we cannot understand. When we enter a space, our bodies begin a dialogue with its constituent elements, but it is possible that we do not sense that connection at the time, only later.

Through my work, I try to establish a dialogue with a space, so the work becomes a tangible translation of that dialogue. As for the work's origins, I have a specific understanding of the spaces I grew up around, and I try to translate these impressions into my works. There is a background, an accumulation of knowledge, experiences and sensory stimuli, which expand over time. As years went by, I discovered that geometric patterns found in the Arab and Muslim world have a contemporary relevance far beyond our imagination. The challenge with Mathaf's new installation is that this is the first time I am using an historical grid and attempting to introduce it on a large scale, and in a contemporary way. At Mathaf, I am employing a grid



Mehdi Moutashar. *Alif*. 2004. Wood, painted wood. 114 x 342 x 110 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery



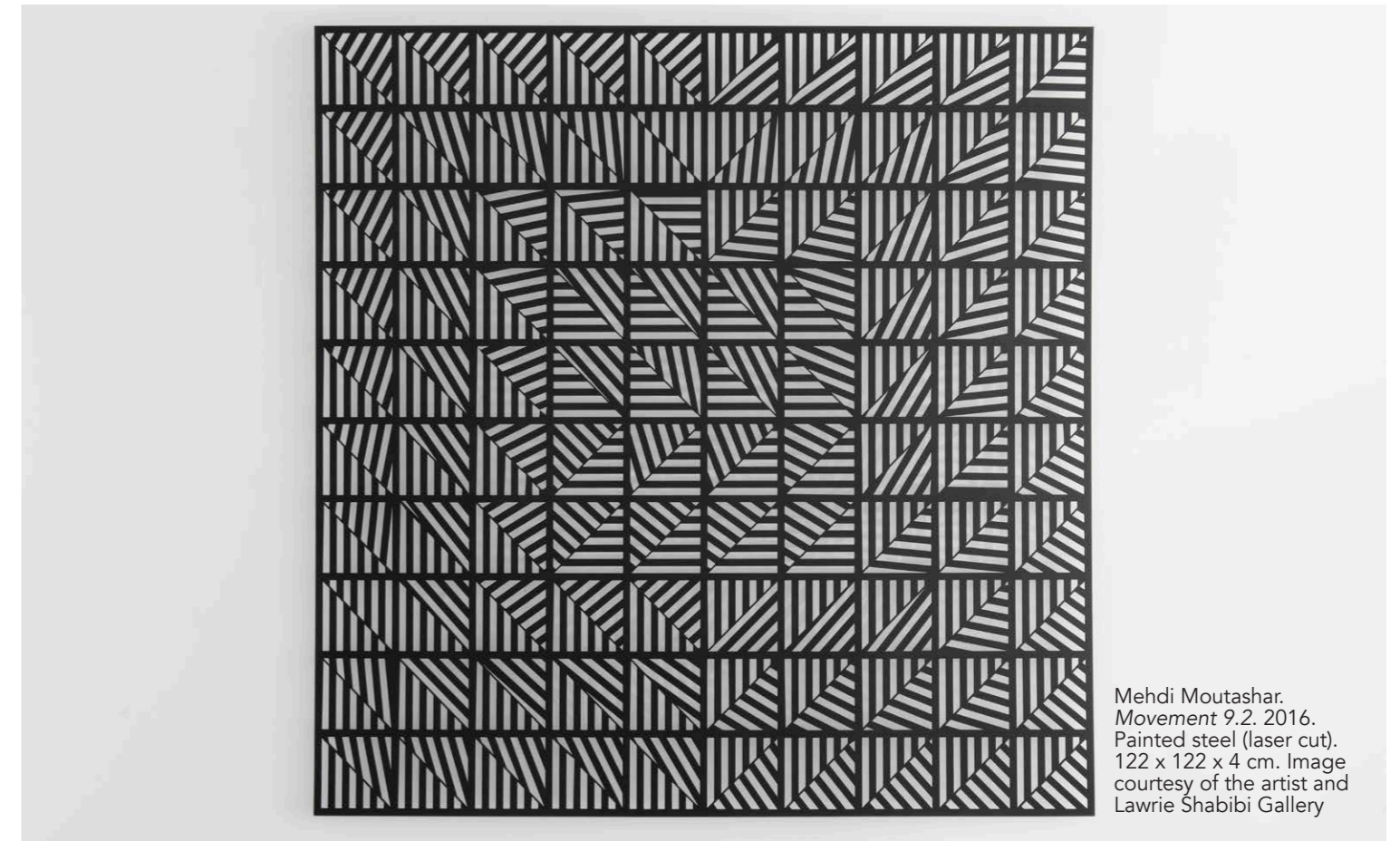
Mehdi Moutashar. *Houé*. 2023. Painted wood, elastic thread. 181 x 150 x 5 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery

that I am calling a double magic square. The magic square is typically divided into nine smaller squares, but here we have two magic squares overlapping with each other, and rotated 45 degrees, which creates a complex and dynamic grid. For the outdoor installation, I am dealing with a long space, Mathaf Park, so I wanted to create a sense of movement by simply shifting a series of objects across that landscape. In this instance, there is both space and time, because time is embodied in our movement in space and in our relationship with the installation.

So your work is quite playful, even though it is almost mathematical in its precision, and there is movement when you do not necessarily produce kinetic art.

The possibilities of geometry are immensely enjoyable, sort of like a child playing with air using a kite, or drawing on sand with a stick. There are endless possibilities in space, and each one of us has the capacity to experiment with that. I am only exploring some of these possibilities in my work, and I want to reveal the

invisible potential of the spaces in which I intervene. Movement emerges by placing two lines next to each other. Josef Albers once said that you do not need a machine to produce movement – you just place one colour next to another and that sparks movement. By placing elements next to each other, a dialogue begins and the composition becomes alive. There are biological, sensorial and physical aspects to life, although we cannot fully comprehend the movement these aspects create around us. But we can try to account for that movement, and maybe translate it into art. I only programme – using my intelligence, senses or simply the state of being alive – certain kinds of relationships, then the works begin to produce particular types of movement, some of which I do not intend but which suggest themselves to the viewer nonetheless. Movement generates a human interaction or response, and this for me is the ultimate purpose of the artwork. I am only suggesting a game or puzzle to the viewer – it is up to the viewer to interact with that. The interaction might not happen immediately, but could take place at another point in the future.



Mehdi Moutashar. *Movement 9.2*. 2016. Painted steel (laser cut). 122 x 122 x 4 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery

Aside from animating spaces, you have a strong personal connection to architecture, something that might not be evident in photographic documentation of your work, which tends to emphasise its more graphic qualities.

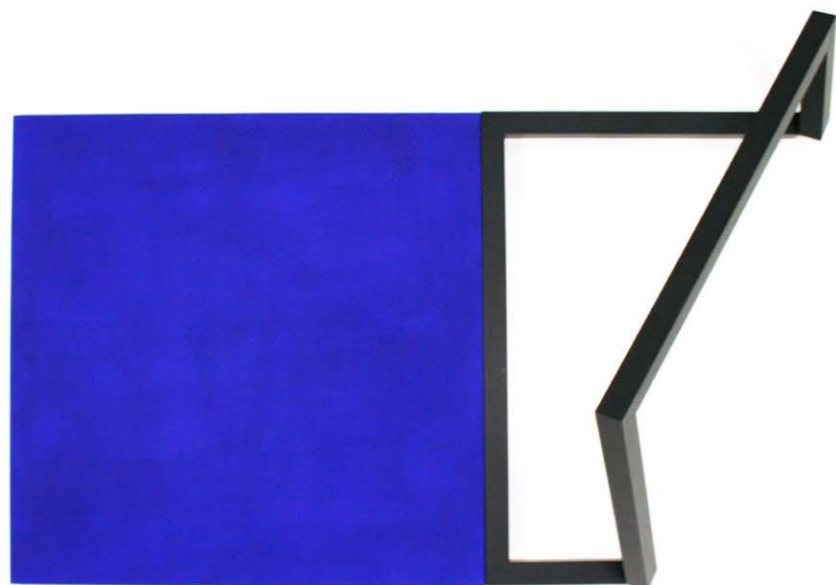
My relationship with architecture started when I was a child and developed when I studied art, and then when I travelled to places such as the Alhambra in Granada, Ibn Tulun Mosque in Cairo and the Gothic architecture of Europe, all of which taught me about the unique qualities of space. I remember, at the beginning of my career, the bond I developed with the architecture of historic Baghdad, when I encountered the impressive portal of Al-Madrasah Al-Mustansiriyah.

Because I grew up in the countryside, there was also a complementary and reciprocal relationship with the landscape, which is something that became very important for me in the spaces I inhabit. I can either feel comfortable and have pleasure in being in a particular place, or feel pressure in other locations, where I cannot live. I visited the Palace of Versailles 42 times just to discover why I was never comfortable in that space, and found out it was because this is a space that was built for political reasons, not for poetic ones. That is the opposite of visiting Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, where the relationship with space is completely different and, you could say, of a spiritual nature. When you enter the Mosque of Córdoba, you feel like you are in a garden or an orchard, you are at ease and do not want to leave that space. Few people have discerned the centrality of space to my work.

What else is at the core of your practice, but might be misconstrued when your work is viewed only in images or without prior knowledge of your intentions?

It is difficult to answer this question, because while we used to think that the relationship with an artwork must be an immediate one, which either happens on the spot or not, I came to discover that this is not the case. The same work can be seen by some viewers at a particular point and they might not get it or feel comfortable around it at the time. But they can revisit it a year later, or remember it on their own, and an unexpected exchange begins with the work then. So, for me, it is a question of having a relationship with a work, because I do not believe there is one single type of interaction with art or a finite response. This is similar to the relationship you establish with a person, because an artwork has layers that reveal themselves over time. You might discover some qualities only later, so we should not privilege the visual or even direct encounter. There is no absolute truth about each work, but there is a discovery that unfolds over time and the relationship has a lot to do with the abilities and receptiveness of the viewer. The honest response to your question is that I cannot foresee or control how viewers might interact with my work.

This open-endedness is mirrored by a restlessness that I detect underneath your exquisitely conceived work. Perhaps this has to do with your endless experimentation, which is the ethos of modernity. What kind of questions are you attempting to answer through your practice?



Mehdi Moutashar. *Two squares, one folded at a 67-degree Angle*. 2007. Painted wood, painted aluminium. 100 x 175 x 65 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery

There is a fundamental question, and perhaps the most important one. When you take a blank piece of paper, this is an object that already comes with its own history and parameters. Within its space, a child might draw a bird, Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab might have written a magnificent poem, and the police might scribble notes from an interrogation. Or, this paper might fly away in the wind. Therefore, it is always a question of space and how you sense and inhabit that space. For me, geometric patterns are not decorative, as some art historians might claim, but when you think of how these surfaces were born, you will realise that they were a way of filling space and proving that the divine exists everywhere, that there is no void where God could be absent.

Compositional space for me is an expression of the space of life at large. Ibn Muqla, a famous 10th-century calligrapher, made significant contributions to the development of Arabic calligraphy, especially when he came up with Al-Khat Al-Mansub, or the proportional script, which revolutionised how writing is composed by devising a measurement system that we still use today. Another important figure, the 7th-century Abu Al-Aswad al-Du'ali, played a critical role in developing Arabic grammar and introducing Al-Harakat, or the diacritics that accompany letters and which make the language intelligible; the same word can have multiple meanings depending on these diacritics or the accents used to animate the word, which are ultimately visual signs that exist in space. Similarly, in order to discover or understand space, we need to find a way of measuring it and turning it into a known entity, not an ambiguous domain. This is why I introduce geometry, as a way of knowing space.

You are clearly informed by, and indebted to, Arab knowledge and the aesthetic traditions of the region stretching from Southwest Asia to North Africa. Your trajectory has not been strictly shaped by Western art, even though your work is clearly

in sync with contemporary artistic production. This is why I wrote in your latest monograph, published this year by Méridiane and Bernard Chauveau, that I see your career as a prolonged act of resistance, primarily against reductive readings or expectations. But I wonder if you see yourself as an artist engaged in a struggle, and how you might define that in your own words.

The main struggle for me is that of questioning everything and of producing intelligent work. The thing that I have always valued about my practice is that I never leave anything – whether that has to do with my own knowledge, my materials, or the techniques used for producing the work – without questioning it. Because I am alive, I am obliged as a living person to think about everything I do. As an artist, I believe that an artwork can never be determined by history, by another person, or a movement, and that an artist must always produce original work, which is also of its moment. What matters to me most is to produce work specific to my own way of thinking. For example, I have not been able to engage with painting as a medium because I have always perceived it as a Western medium, which emerged within specific circumstances and conditions that I could not access. I need to find something more appropriate for me, my environment and my explorations. I am also in a constant struggle to understand things like space and the way we perceive the world.

I continue to wonder about materials and colours, and I am very curious about how they help clarify the subjects that I happen to be examining. Although I cannot predict how people might perceive my work, I find that to be another struggle, something that I try to understand, because I certainly want to succeed in translating my humanity into works that resonate with others.

As a way of accessing an artist's world, I often wonder about those with whom their practice might be in conversation.



Mehdi Moutashar. *Two Folded Squares*. 2019. Painted steel. 194 x 149 x 13.5 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery

Your work has been linked to movements like Geometric Abstraction, Minimalism or Op-Art, but who are the artists we can look at, past and present, to better understand what you might aspire toward?

In my youth, one of the first artists to inspire me was Paul Klee, whose work I discovered only in images back then, but these reproductions ignited my imagination. I also saw images of Alberto Giacometti's work before I went to Europe. In Baghdad, I discovered the Bauhaus, and Cubism too, and the latter movement introduced me to the idea that everything was possible in art. When I arrived in Paris, I came across the paper cut-outs of Henri Matisse and adopted him as a sort of intellectual mentor. I valued the work of Max Bill, specifically his abstract sculptures. I appreciated the French artist Pierre Soulages, and I very much enjoyed talking to him about his work. There are of course also artists like François Morellet and Sol LeWitt, who were known for their explorations of geometry.

My time in Iraq is equally important, and I must emphasise the influences to which I was exposed growing up, especially the interiors of the shrines I visited as a child in the cities of Karbala and Najaf, where I experienced an indescribable joy by gazing at the elaborate calligraphy and geometric patterns. I then saw the Abbasid Al-Madrasah Al-Mustansiriyyah when I moved to Baghdad. I met artist Shakir Hassan Al Said in 1959, when he had just returned from France; I discovered his work when I was a teenager and always respected it a great deal, because it was intelligent and poetic work, as well as highly rigorous; we remained good friends until he passed away. I respect Jewad Selim a lot, but I never had the chance to enter his world in a meaningful way, unfortunately. There was Hashem Al-Khattat, whose work in calligraphy was powerful, but we sadly did not quite appreciate it back when we studied at the academy in Baghdad, which

leaned toward Western art, and I regret not having learned more from him at the time. I met Muhammad Sa'id Al-Sakkar, another important Iraqi calligrapher, and I respect the contribution he made by introducing Arabic script into the digital sphere. As for Arab artists, I came to learn about the Egyptian Adam Henein and was intrigued by his sculptures. I admired the work of Iranian artist Hossein Zenderoudi, one of the first to integrate Arabic letters into modern art. But these are only some of the names that I can think of at the moment. There are many other artists who impacted my work directly or indirectly. I respect all artistic practices, because we are all engaged in a similar struggle, trying to find answers to the questions we are asking through our work.

You have accomplished a lot already, but what works do you still dream of creating and have not yet had the opportunity to realise?

I dream of producing works for open urban spaces, in relation to everyday public life. I want to create works that are part of daily use, for people to sit on or eat around, especially works that might be situated within gardens and where water and greenery become part of the medium, as well as the overall experience of the work. I collaborated with the architect Rifat Chadirji and his firm Iraq Consult for over four years in the early 1980s, and these were large-scale projects, and that experience became one of the most enriching of my career; but sadly that work was abandoned because of the wars the country went through. In 2010, I created a big installation titled *Houé*, which was displayed in the foyer of the Bahrain National Theatre, and I want to construct a version of this work outdoors, using bricks and glazed tiles. I continue to think about works of this nature and I have many ideas, but the form of each work will depend on the space for which it will be envisioned.