

## Raafat Ishak: Ascents and Descents

*By Elizabeth McDowell*



**Avenue of Superfluous Complaints**, 2010, Synthetic Polymer on MDF, Installation, NEW010, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 12 parts, each 50x50cm each - Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

Raafat Ishak's *Responses to an immigration request from one hundred and ninety four governments*, 2009, stems from a project that began in 2006, when the artist sent a standardised letter to all existing governments requesting citizenship (aside from his birthplace, Egypt, and residence, Australia) and he received ninety seven replies. The result of this project is an exhibition of one hundred and ninety four paintings, each depicting a country's flag in a mutation of its true colour, juxtaposed with an abbreviated Arabic transcript of that government's response to Ishak's request for citizenship.

This work is currently on view at the 54th International Venice Biennale for the first pan-Arab exhibition of contemporary art to be held at this event. This large-scale project was created and first exhibited in Melbourne, Australia, and was recently acquired by the Barjeel Foundation in Sharjah. Following Venice, the project will be presented at the MOA, Vancouver, for *Safar/Voyage* curated by Fereshteh Daftari. Such broad global presentation exemplifies the international resonance

with Ishak's iconic work, which is an idiosyncratic execution of concepts and ideas inherent throughout his practice.

Ishak's project began as an investigation into global immigration laws and trends, attitudes towards assimilation, and the artist's desire for change. The aim was to speculate on the nature of human movement whilst analysing the mechanisms which facilitate or hinder the need to move: a subject close to home for Ishak whose personal experiences as an immigrant are subtly expressed through an objective stance towards statehood and the implications of homeland.

Raafat Ishak was born in Cairo, Egypt, and arrived in Australia in 1982, at the age of 14. Although Ishak came to Australia by choice, the transition was not seamless: shuffled from place to place, he lived in three different houses with extended family before graduating from secondary school. Ishak describes himself as neither Egyptian nor Australian. He does not have a sense of

belonging to a particular place; for him, memories combine with assimilation to disallow one singular identity.

He began experimenting with painting as a teenager and continued this interest completing a Bachelor of Fine Art in painting at the Victorian College of the Arts. After a number of years focused on his studio practice, he had his first major solo exhibition *And Government* in 1995 at 200 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, Melbourne. From the outset, Ishak has had an interest in organisational principles which has in part transferred into his affiliation with various collaborative organisations and projects. Ishak was one of the founding members of *Ocular Lab*, an artist's collective which served as a platform for connecting concerns and ideas within a cross-generational forum, and exchanging this knowledge through dialogue and art practice. Ishak revelled in the opportunity for collaboration, experimentation and performative projects: "I am interested to explore the potential for collective action and absence of authorship."<sup>1</sup> His suite of five paintings exhibited in the 2006 Adelaide Biennale was a testament to this; each painting a collaboration with a different artist (Ole Jørgen Ness, Sean Loughrey, Alex Rizkalla, Damiano Bertoli, and Tom Nicholson).<sup>2</sup>

After ten years, Ishak made a return to university where he completed post-graduate studies in architecture and conservation. This interest infiltrated Ishak's studio practice, as photographs of the urban environments of Cairo, Melbourne and Castlemaine formed much of the source material for his paintings.

With deft precision, Ishak paints onto panels of MDF, a type of particle board commonly used to fabricate the framework for buildings. On these raw, flat surfaces, he merges architectural spaces, demonstrated in his large-scale installation *Mount Rupture* exhibited at the 2006 TarraWarra Biennial. The undulations of the TarraWarra valley are morphed into the modernist architecture of a grand stadium. *Mount Rupture* is an invented mountain. For Ishak, this mountain is a device to reference the actions of ascent and descent, a notion further articulated in his integration of sports stadia



**Organization for Future Good Steps**, 2008, City of Melbourne Laneway Commission - Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne – Australia

as sites of celebration, disappointment and worship.<sup>3</sup> Ishak aims to represent a place as it is experienced as opposed to how it is perceived. In particular, he employs stadium architecture as a built environment where social structures are manufactured and identity is blurred. *Three tears for white trash*, 2007, constructed of multiple large MDF panels, painstakingly painted with a continuous white line, features the mass of faces across a football stadium crowd. Individuals become unidentifiable, as all meld in a frenzy: they appear as a camouflaged whole, tribe-like, captured in a moment of euphoria. Ishak's sculptural installation commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Arts for *New 010, Avenue of Superfluous Complaints*, 2010 presents these crowds of nameless faces on 50cm square MDF plinths painted on each side. The tone of the



**Mount Rupture on the verge of a conclusive appearance**, 2006, Acrylic on MDF, 210 Panels, 27x27cm each (Overall 270x567cm),- Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne – Australia.

paint is matched to zoning colours of urban planning charts: the figures' outlines coalesce and can be read as topographical charts, "Ishak's crowd is a map of collective behaviour; as a map is an ideal representation of territory." <sup>4</sup> Carefully manipulating the space, Ishak's cubes were positioned in pairs at equal intervals, creating a corridor that mimics Australia's Avenues of Honour (tree-lined streets at the entrance to regional towns, each tree planted for a soldier who had enlisted and was a resident of the locale). With this grand entrance and exit, Ishak pays homage to a cultural pride of place.

An ongoing interest in collaboration and architecture brought his attention to site-specific projects and public commissions. A City of Melbourne Laneway Commission, Organisation for Future Good Steps,

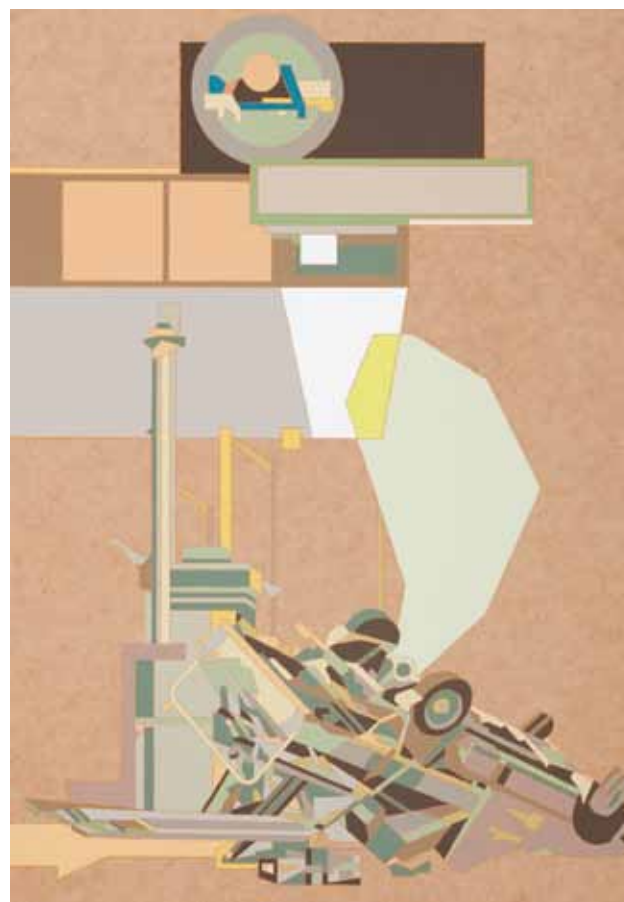
2008, is a sculptural intervention veiled as architecture. It is a non-functional vivid white staircase, a steel structure connecting two buildings in a narrow inner-city Melbourne lane. Elevated from the ground with several steps, railings and landings omitted, it is inaccessible; movement, although implied, is denied. Ishak's dysfunctional structure refers to human movement from place to place as a continuum of ascent and descent, with no fixed end point. <sup>5</sup>

Ishak's continued exploration of Modernism with specific interest in Kazimir Malevich and Marcel Duchamp has fused with his affiliation for architecture. For Ishak, the staircase is a structure symbolic of Modernism and the ascent toward knowledge. Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, 1912, which was alluded to in his laneway

commission, becomes a repeated motif and is masterfully and more directly represented in his series of paintings on canvas, *Ascent, Descent and Congratulations*, 2009. Ishak's incarnations of Malevich's Black Square, 1915, appeared in his practice as early as 1987, and have since been revisited in various forms, including three-dimensional installations and placed carefully within his intricate paintings. Ishak's resonance with this symbol is not simply due to its significance in modern art and architecture, it is also equally a reflection on his heritage and the sacred site of Islamic pilgrimage, the black stone cube of the Kaaba in Mecca: "While this motif resonates with externally generated meanings – an amalgam of archeological layers and intersecting histories – it also suggests the limits of abstraction and the meanderings of the contemporary artist." 6 Both the staircase and the black cube are integral across Ishak's oeuvre, each in their structure and their cultural and art historical significance are representative of the circulatory nature of the personal and political.

These motifs are just two in a broad repertoire that forms Ishak's own visual language or personal symbolism, presented through an overlapping of social and aesthetic systems. Seriality and repetition are devices he adopts for the layering of stories, and commonly featured forms include city spaces, public buildings, institutions, flags, banners, and modes of transport. There are also specific motifs selected to pinpoint art itself as a signifier of the movement of ideas and cultures, such as cross-sections of ornate picture frames, or more simply the wheel - a recognisable symbol of mobility, though also a reference purely to form, and a bridge between art and geometry. This imagery is combined with the scrolls and curls of ancient Arabic text often in the form of letters or statements, inspired by decorated interiors of the Middle East where art and text combine, to both embellish and communicate a message.

For the Asia-Pacific Triennial, Ishak's *Emergencies, accidents and congratulations*, 2009, presents his exploration of immigration and assimilation with this multilayered complex imagery, featuring iconic Australian and international architecture with repeated text and motifs. These works gather together Ishak's



**Emergencies, accidents and congratulations #5, 2009**, synthetic polymer paint on MDF, 60x42cm - Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne – Australia.

archive of imagery, and map a path of relocation, turmoil, belonging and utopian aspirations, spanning from Australia to the broader Asia-Pacific, through the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, and to Turkey. Some visual references are literal (ships, airplanes, a nation's flag) while others are obscured, all referencing locations, cultures and events: an upturned vehicle at a border crossing, wheels in various architectural forms, riot gear, "send me home" in Turkish, and a Palladio temple plan from 1580. Objects hover above one another, as though in transit themselves, each element informing the next, allowing a veiled message to quietly unfold. *Emergencies, accidents and congratulations* highlights Ishak's rigorous practice, again painted on raw MDF in a high key palette with deliberate fine brush strokes and a restrained hard-edged line. For this specific series of paintings the restricted palette of green, yellow and blue, with hints of pale pink, is





**Responses to an immigration request from one hundred and ninety four governments**, 2006-2009 (DETAIL), Oil and gesso on MDF, Installation, Sutton Gallery in 2009, 194 panels, 30x21cm each - Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne – Australia.

taken from the iconic Australian painting John Brack's *The Bar*, 1954. Ishak has become renowned for his flat surfaces and muted tones with expanses of MDF left bare, in contrast to sections meticulously layered with interlocking, fractured forms for which cubism is an ever-present influence.

Cubism, in both form and palette, is a device through which Ishak comments on the migration of ideas throughout Europe and the representation of this movement to the broader Middle East and Asia-Pacific regions. Primarily aesthetic, his pared back palette is evocative and his precision of form elegant. Ishak's multiple layering of subject matter means the ideas are elusive; they are geometric puzzles of imagery from diverse sources that form a unified aesthetic whole. Ishak does not give precedence to the message his symbolism conveys: the patterning, colour and general composition are of equal significance. His incorporation of flags attests to this as he exploits inherent abstract forms, replacing the rectangular flag configuration and

presenting the bands and symbols of colour within an oval. In this way, geometric colours and shapes from nation's flags take the form of faces or mirrors, an acknowledgment that the same colour will carry different meanings to individuals from different states. Ishak's skillful use of colour and iconography combine with his representation of public spaces to expose and explore socially structured realities. His configurations of symbolic motifs serve to question the weight of government, demographics, and religion, and provide a counter-balance to social and cultural beliefs as formative of identity. Throughout his practice, Raafat Ishak continually alludes to the promise of a future, and the paths we take and borders we cross, chasing the abstract ideal that is "the common human values and aspirations as complexities, unrealised dreams and desires, madness, peculiarities, but most of all, the need to move." 7

In 2009, Raafat Ishak participated in Cubism and Australian Art at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, and the sixth Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery/ Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. A solo exhibition of his work, Raafat Ishak: Work in Progress #6, was held at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, The University of Melbourne, 2010, and also that year Ishak participated in the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art's New 010. Ishak was a founding member of the collective Ocular Lab, in Brunswick, and in recent years has been curated into significant exhibitions such as the inaugural TarraWarra Biennial, 2006 and "Fieldwork", the inaugural exhibition at the NGV:A, Federation Square. He has also realised permanent and temporal public commissions at SBS Radio, Melbourne, and Deloitte, Melbourne, and for the City of Melbourne Public Laneways Commission. Ishak is currently participating in The Future of a Promise, at the 54th Venice Biennale and has been invited to exhibit in Safar/Voyage at the MOA, Vancouver in 2013, curated by Fereshteh Daftari (formerly curator, MOMA, NY, currently freelance specialising in Middle Eastern Art).

#### Notes

- 1- Starr, Bala, Interview with Raafat Ishak, Raafat Iskak: Recipes for aversion and strategy. Work in progress #6, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, exhibition catalogue, p.20
- 2-Nicholson, Tom, "Raafat Ishak", 21st Century Modern, 2006 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, exhibition catalogue, p.36
- 3-Lynn, Victoria, TarraWarra Biennale, 2006, Parallel lives: Australian Painting Today, exhibition catalogue, TarraWarra Museum of Art, p.8
- 4-MacDonald, Anna, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, "New 010", exhibition catalogue, 2010, p.41
- 5- Tutton, Sarah, "Raafat Ishak's Passage to Safe Harbour", Eyeline, issue # 67, 2009, p.24
- 6- Richards, Bree, "Around the world in 80 shades: Raafat Ishak's pilgrimage in paint", Art Monthly Australia, Issue 236, Summer, 2010, p.38
- 7-Richards, Bree, "Pathways in paint", The 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, exhibition catalogue, Queensland Art Gallery, 2009, p.97