

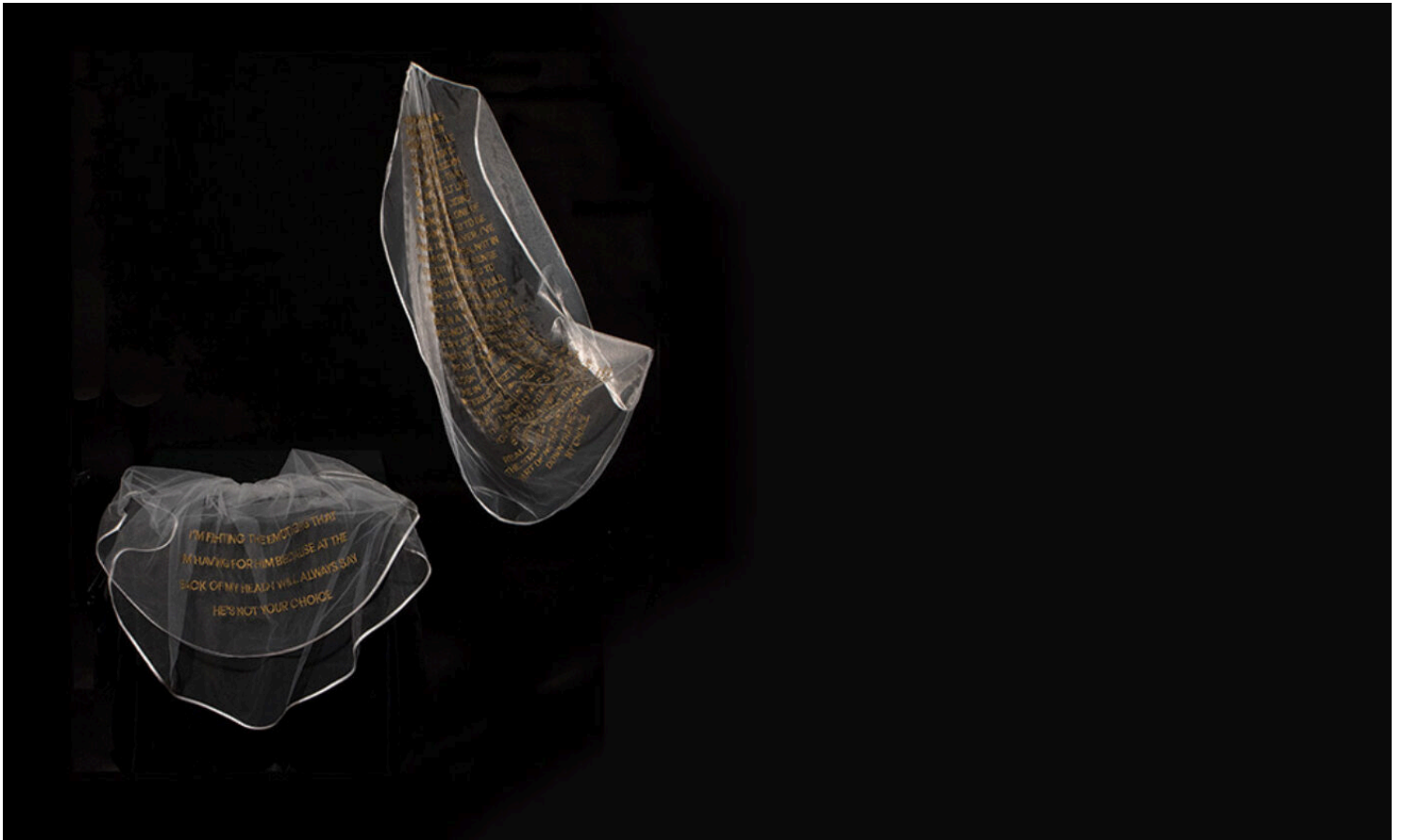


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INTERVIEW ([HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/FORMAT/INTERVIEW/](https://bombmagazine.org/format/interview/))

Amani Al-Thuwaini and Andrea Hasler

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(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/20A0132.jpg)

Amani Al-Thuwaini, *He's Not Your Choice*, 2016, digital embroidery on wedding veils, dimensions variable. Images courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

Working from Kuwait City and London respectively, the two artists each make sculptures and installations that, in distinctive ways, critique the desire for and fixation with high-end fashion and luxury goods—by way of destabilizing their allure, status, and promise.

Al-Thuwaini sees globally pervasive brands and their homogeneity as a threat to local traditions and the survival of time-honored crafts. Hasler literally turns luxury accessories inside out, exposing their “bare flesh,” alluding to the killing of animals for leather and fur and hinting at the complex emotions that underlie all forms of human craving.

Ukrainian-born Al-Thuwaini and Swiss-born Hasler met at a workshop in London a few years back and discovered their mutual interests. Recently, they set up a video call between Kuwait and England to catch up on their latest endeavors, exchange images of new works, discuss the dowry tradition as a contemporary ritual, reflect on local customs in the face of universal branding, and more.

Andrea Hasler

We both make works that are concerned with hyper-consumerism, how luxury goods symbolize status in different cultures and fashion brands are influencing behavior and local conventions. We do different things with those observations, but there are quite a few cross-references between our works.

Amani Al-Thuwaini

I also think we’re both connecting the past and the present, looking at how luxury is embodied through a “vessel.” I’m interested in the traditional container of the dowry chest, while for you, it’s the body that functions as the vessel.

AH

I remember your exhibition in London exploring the custom of dowry in Kuwait and other Arab countries. Are you still working with this topic?

AAT

Yes. My MFA thesis at Goldsmiths University was a critique of contemporary Kuwaiti dowry vessels and their lack of craft, functionality, and personalization. I’m continuing to explore different aspects of the tradition.

AH

Tell me again who gives the dowry to whom.

AAT

The dowry gift is given by the groom and his family to the bride.

AH

That’s so interesting! In Switzerland, in a traditional, heteronormative system, the bride’s parents prepared a sort of leaving package that they then gave their daughter to start a new life with her husband. Today, as in most European countries, we don’t have dowry obligations any longer.

AAT

In Arab countries, it's still an important part of the culture. The point of the dowry in Kuwait is to spoil the bride. The dowry is a gift that includes money—to give the bride a certain economic independence—along with other more personalized and symbolic items meant to welcome her into the family of the in-laws. The types of gifts are also symbolic of the status of the groom's family. When you gift somebody something, it says a lot about yourself.

AH

Does the groom himself choose the items for the dowry, or are they picked by the future mother-in-law?

AAT

Traditionally they were chosen by the mother-in-law because the marriages used to be arranged by the parents. But nowadays, the couple has a relationship beforehand and the man is involved in deciding the dowry because, unlike in the past, he knows his future wife well.

After creating these previous installations about dowry, I'm now thinking more about the changes I want to see for this traditional vessel, this gift package. The dowry in Kuwait has become a consumer product, influenced by the ubiquitous Western luxury brands, like Gucci, Chanel, and so on. I'm trying to bring back the preciousness of the gift, the symbolism and artistry. I want to make it more personal rather than more universal.

As you know, besides my art practice I now also have a dowry business. I design the dowry furniture, arrange the presentation, and create the gift items. I try to put the emphasis on the design object and on the customization parts. I have lots of ideas I want to work with, but people are not quite ready yet.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/1_cmyk_TG_flat.jpg)

Amani Al-Thuwaini, *Present Tense*, 2017, screen-print and foil on cowhide leather, stretched synthetic leather with drawer knobs, prayer rug corners and plexiglass, 96 × 58 inches. Photo by Aidan Brooks.

AH

Who are your clients?

AAT

These days, it's mostly the men who come to me for the preparation of the dowry they want to offer to their brides. Yesterday I had a guy coming to choose colors, flowers, and personalized items. He was very nervous; he wanted everything to be perfect. He asked me what I would recommend for gifts, and he mentioned that his future bride likes the color maroon so he wanted to add maroon to everything. When a mother-in-law comes as a client, she's much more formal and distanced. If you are the gifter, you're emotionally involved. It's interesting to see men showing their feelings.

AH

You are making these installation-type ensembles for your dowry business and then you are also making art installations, which I understand are different.

AAT

Yes, but they cross-pollinate each other. My experiences with my business customers become part of my research. My art installations respond to what's happening around me in society. Extravagance and indulgence are part of the pre-marriage rituals. A gift should be something unique, not just a commodity. When including a luxury item in a dowry arrangement, I present it in a way that's unfamiliar. I create a kind of hybrid between the personal and universal. In my art installations I try to connect ubiquitous luxury accessories with local traditions and rituals.

AH

You disassemble the traditional dowry chest, for instance, or take apart a Gucci bag, transforming it into a new sumptuous object or ensemble. When I made my work with luxury handbags—deconstructing them as commodities—I proceeded in the opposite direction. I kind of destroyed their appeal.

AAT

I'm kind of flipping them inside out. Some elements of the handbag are still there, but the prominent part is the inside—the flesh so to speak.

AH

Yeah, if you strip the leather off a handbag, what's left is the flesh of the animal underneath. When you talk about flesh, it's meant symbolically—in terms of a reversal of the parts—whereas in my work I actually present textures invoking raw flesh.

The dowry used to come in a chest, right?

AAT

Initially, it was just money, which was given to the father of the bride because in the past there was usually no direct interaction with the bride. Starting at the time when Kuwait had lots of trade with India, the dowry became influenced by Indian fabrics and changed into a bundle of fabrics given to the bride so she could sew her own dresses. In this sense, the dowry has always been related to trade, fashion, and consumer patterns.

AH

When exactly did brands like Rolex and Chanel come into the tradition?

AAT

The brands came after the Gulf War, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the boom of the oil industry. People traveled for fun or to study abroad, and they had lots of money and began bringing European commodities and brands to Kuwait. Also, because the government's relationship with the UK was very strong at a certain point, anything from London became very popular. In the '90s, everybody started wanting to own stuff from abroad. Whatever was from Europe, and especially London, was considered the most desirable. And the dowry tradition shifted accordingly.

I'm showing you my most recent work, which is an embroidered fabric. I've just finished the embroidery, but I still have to make the installation. Social media is an important reference for me in terms of fashion and culture. I'm looking at the influencers and power holders in that arena. And

I see a lot of problems. For this new piece, I was looking at images of weddings. In Kuwait, the wedding ceremony is set up by the women. The aisle is the stage and all the chairs are facing it, so everybody is looking toward the center of the room rather than the front.



Amani Al-Thuwaini, *West Eastern*, 2017, UV print on leather and bag handles, 31.5 x 29.5 inches. Photo by Aidan Brooks.

AH

It's like a catwalk?

AAT

Yes, and it's also the dancefloor. Let me show you this piece here. (*unfolds a large embroidered textile*) It's quite big, so let's look at each element separately. This is the first scene.

AH

Wow. It's a figurative work. It looks like embroidery on white fabric and appliqué with different textiles.

AAT

Yes, it's embroidered with thread and fabric. This scene shows the wedding guests. Here I'm playing with hierarchy, with who's important and who's getting the attention. Weddings in Kuwait are large, elaborate affairs, and they need many workers. The people who do the work are often

immigrants, and they're usually underpaid and looked down on. There's a lot of discrimination based on race and economic status. So in this work, I dressed the valet parking guys in gold.

AH

What would they be wearing normally?

AAT

They would wear regular brown cotton uniforms while the guests would walk around in all these amazing colorful outfits. I gave the workers the golden outfits as a symbol of importance and attention. The second scene is the bride getting ready in her room with her helpers. You can see a cityscape of Kuwait in the background.

AH

All her helpers are in gold, and their clothes are embroidered.

AAT

It's hard to see on the screen, but the outlines have little beads.

AH

Are you making this yourself?

AAT

I'm making it in a workshop. I need a technician to help me with many details.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Amani_Artwork-2_final.jpg)

Amani Al-Thuwaini, *Staged*, 2019, embroidery on linen, four panels, 52 x 44 inches. Photo by Aidan Brooks. Courtesy of Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Center, Kuwait City.

AH

At the moment, there are several fabric panels with these scenes. Will they be hanging in a space?

AAT

No, it's going to be a large, deconstructed handbag—displayed on the wall like an oversized sewing pattern—with a chain on the side.

In the panel with the dancefloor, the waiters are in gold and the wedding guests are in black and gray. The bride is in white. It's a wedding custom to hire women to walk around and spray fragrances and incense in the space. Usually the women are from Ethiopia because they are very good at making these particular celebratory sounds. (*imitates the sound*)

AH

It's like a tongue trill. Is the dowry gift presented at the wedding?

AAT

No, that happens prior to the wedding ceremony, at a separate event to which a lot of guests are invited as well. People dress up and take pictures with the gift. And nowadays, they immediately go on social media. The photos are all about who and what is most presentable.

AH

Speaking of the golden figures in your embroidery, coincidentally, I've just recently started using gold in my work. You've seen some of my previous works involving "raw flesh" made out of resin and wax. My new sculptures are still about what's underneath our skin, but I'm adding a gold layer to the flesh. I'm using gold because we immediately associate it with preciousness, and then I upend that expectation by applying it to what look like intestines.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/0006-3.jpg)

Andrea Hasler, *Burdens of Excess*, 2018, deconstructed leather bag, polystyrene, wax, silicone, 18 x 12 x 11.5 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Gusford Gallery, Los Angeles.





Andrea Hasler, partial installation view of *Avant/Après No.5*, 2019, plastic, silicon, wax, Swarovski diamantes, baby bottle teats, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Time+Space Artist Residency, New York.

AAT

In one of these sculptures, there's a large clump of intestines on two pairs of golden legs.

AH

It's two pairs of legs, a man's and a woman's, but the sculpture only stands straight with the woman on her tiptoes. It's part of an ongoing series called *Irreducible Complexity*, which I started about seven years ago. The title comes from Charles Darwin's theory of how a system can only be reduced down to a certain point before it loses its balance. In the previous sculptures in this series, the flesh was sculpted with wax, and I've exhibited them quite a bit over the last few years. And the longer I looked at them, the more I wanted to give them a layer of "luxury." With some of them, only half of the body part is gold, and others—like the one that looks like an intestine growing out of a child's legs—I made completely gold. The contrast interests me. Flesh can be repulsive. We're not used to seeing our insides, so it often provokes strong reactions. But then the gold is trying to make that into an acceptable thing, something deluxe even.

AAT

I see it also being about the surface and the soul.

AH

Yes, the surface and what's underneath. Only the skin divides the inside from the outside. If you take that off, it's just flesh, a reminder that all humans are equal because inside we all look all the same. Adding the gold creates a division.

AAT

We instantly classify and discriminate. The value of gold is deeply ingrained in our perception. Here in Kuwait, people spend a lot of money investing in gold, still today.

I mentioned earlier that besides observing daily life, I often look at social media for reference. What are your references?

AH

A lot of my references are also from social media. I'm looking at the imagery people put out in the world, which signals how they want to be seen. But to be honest, the initial starting point for my art practice was analyzing people's shopping behaviors. (*laughter*) I spent a lot of time just walking around the high-end boutiques in London and observing how people shop, whether they were window shopping or actually purchasing. I grew up in Switzerland, where people tend to underplay their wealth. When I moved to London many years ago, I was amazed by people's frankness in their obsession with luxury goods and fashion brands.

My long-term project *Desire* began with analyzing my own growing obsession with these items and the emotional toll of craving them. I became fascinated with the psychological aspect of consumerism and, subsequently, its emotional link to the object, that which is aesthetically desirable yet revolting.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/A_Irreducible-Complexity.jpg)

Andrea Hasler, *Irreducible Complexity*, 2019, wax, polystyrene, wood, metal, gold-dipped, 65 x 33 x 35 inches. Images courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

AAT

I see similar obsessions and cravings for luxury goods in Kuwait. In Ukraine, where I grew up, it wasn't like that. So I've had both experiences in terms of materialism. That's one reason why I started my own dowry business: to actively influence the Kuwaiti tradition away from

consumerism.

AH

I'm still fascinated by what makes people want to be associated with a luxury brand. Why put one's name on a waiting list for a handbag? Why a Gucci bag and not just *a* bag? We use brands to send messages to others about ourselves; we signal how we want to be seen. And as global travel increases, it's a way to become recognized elsewhere by our symbols. How you dress and which accessories you wear allows others to identify which tribe you belong to.

Hyper-consumerism in Western culture has almost replaced religion, and religious leaders have been replaced by the big fashion brands. People wait for the next season's new items almost like the fulfillment of a prophesy. In our fractured, transient societies, we still need someone to follow.

Streetwear companies like Supreme, as well as high-end brands, work with emotional codes, stimulating their followers, keeping them in limbo, so they are constantly thinking there's something else they need to become whole. You purchase and purchase yet remain unsatisfied.

AAT

It's a vicious cycle. Objects used to be passed on from one generation to another. Baudrillard's book, *The System of Objects*, explains consumerism and our attachment to objects very well. But the trend seems to be that we're becoming less attached to things as meaningful or nostalgic objects, or even as functional objects—like furniture or your grandmother's china or a carpet inherited from your family. The Ikea mentality, with its planned obsolescence, makes everything replaceable and has cultivated this desire for the brand-new.



Amani Al-Thuwaini, *Elibelinde*, 2017, stretched tufted carpet, laser cut plexiglass and digital embroidery on cotton, 83 × 69 × 1 inches. Photo by Aidan Brooks.

AH

I think we are craving ease and security in a world where certainties have vanished. Marketing strategies tap into that and keep luring us. I think hyper-consumerism has some links to what Julia Kristeva describes in *Powers of Horror*—a child's first painful realization of the loss of symbiosis

with the mother and the acknowledgment of Self and Other. I think material cravings and the resulting disappointment stem from a similar feeling of disconnection.

AAT

Humans are communal creatures. We want to be part of a group, part of the social field. If we don't conform, we might get discriminated against. In Kuwait, many people practice consumerism in ways that disregard Islam's call to moderation. Verse 29 in Chapter 17 in the Quran says: *And do not keep your hand shackled to your neck (out of miserliness), nor stretch it forth to its utmost limit (extravagantly), lest you sit down reproached (incurring blame) and exhausted (on becoming penniless).*

AH

Well said! I find it fascinating how Instagram has opened a whole new dimension of how we present ourselves. It's not so much about owning the luxury item anymore but simply to be seen with it, if only for a moment. Some people just purchase something, take it home, dress up, take pictures to document that they have it, and then go straight back to the shop to return it.

AAT

Crazy.

AH

It's not about ownership anymore but documentation. The digital persona is an illusion of the Self. I find this fascinating but also very scary.

It's also crazy how the indulgence of the one percent has affected all of us. The perverse power of the luxury brands—and the few who can afford them—brought about this whole industry of counterfeit goods, which serves the ninety-nine percent. It's a manufacturing industry based on violations of human and animal rights—for instance, it's sometimes cheaper to sell real fur labelled as fake than actual faux fur. My deconstructed leather accessories are responding to this. A handbag might have a shiny Prada logo on it, fake or not, but it's still the dead animal.

AAT

Exactly.

AH

Let's talk about your abstract work for a minute. The new embroidery you showed me is figurative but your previous works were not.

AAT

Right. My previous works were more geometric and abstract in a modernist way, which might also have to do with my background as an architect. Several of the sculptures and installations I've recently made deal with weaving as a craft and ritual in traditional Kuwaiti culture. I've always been interested in craft in general and in Sadu weaving in particular. I've studied its history for a while now. I'm reflecting on its functionality and symbolism and the value of continuity. A recent

installation was dedicated entirely to the question of how to represent the concept of a tradition's survival, playing with function versus non-function and the contemporary symbolism of our life in Kuwait.

Many of our local rituals have changed into global expressions and become internationally commodified, which includes promotion and interaction with the ubiquitous brands. One of my works involving brands was *Dazza*, a very oversized Chanel bag.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/2500.RGB_color.V1-3.jpg)

Amani Al-Thuwaini, *Sur-re/vival*, 2019, Sadu weaving stitched around canvas and swim floats, 39-inch diameter for each float. Photo by Husam Flayhan. Courtesy of Sadu House and Sadi Studio, Kuwait City.

AH

What does *dazza* mean?

AAT

Dazza in Arabic is the dowry tradition. I called my dowry business “Dazza Lab” because I feel that as artists and designers, we are the lab, so to speak. We are responsible for questioning, transforming, renewing, or reviving traditions. My recent installation *Sur-re/vival* is an appeal to

artists and designers: We own our traditions, our crafts, and we can transform them by making them contemporary. For this work, I integrated elements and icons of global media and technology into classic Kuwaiti Sadu weaving and displayed these woven objects evoking inflatable life preservers.

It was interesting to show *Dazza* in Venice because I'm talking about a specific tradition that not many Europeans know about. Everywhere people are drawn to shiny objects. In Italy, visitors seeing my installation asked me if it was a Cinderella carriage. (*laughter*) The work prompts conversations because audiences always relate to it from their own context.

AH

Last year I showed a body of work in New York called *Avant/Après No.5* that touches on the cultural differences between East and West that you're alluding to. I worked with Chinese plastic laundry bags that had fake Gucci logo patterns. On one side, it's a fake Gucci bag, and on the other side is a photographic print of intestines sculpted from wax. It's a Chinese laundry bag that wants to be a Gucci bag—a fake of a fake.

AAT

I have Gucci logos printed on *Dazza*, too—among others, including one from a traditional Arabic oil perfume. I was thinking about how East and West come together in these settings of luxury display. For me, the two bag handles stand for the tension between desires—East versus West, local and traditional versus global and new. In Kuwait, what is our cultural identity today? It's so mixed, with many influences and traditions pulling in different directions.

These are the questions I asked myself, as someone of both Ukrainian and Kuwaiti background, which is another variant of East versus West. In Kuwait, there's a lot of othering going on in terms of origin and race. I'm trying to detach from any fixed identity, but it's a struggle in this country because you easily get absorbed into living in a certain way. I always have to remind myself to stop and reset.

Tell me about *Perishable Goods*.

AH

That was the big, fat, flesh-colored block I created on a mountain.

AAT

It's so intriguing—a lonely-looking object in the middle of a vast landscape.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/AH-Perishable-Goods-winter.jpg)

Andrea Hasler, *Perishable Goods*, 2014–19, wood, wax, resin, metal chains, installation view at Verbier 3D Sculpture Park, Switzerland, 59 x 59 x 31 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Verbier 3D Foundation.

AH

It's on top of a mountain in the Swiss Alps. Anything you place there will look forlorn. You can't compete with the scenery.

I was asked to do a piece for the Verbier 3-D Foundation, a sculpture park on the mountain above the town of Verbier. It's an area that attracts a lot of very wealthy tourists. So it was important to take into account what the area represents. What struck me is that in the summer months, there are probably four thousand people living in this town, whereas in the winter, in the high season, there are ten times as many. A lot of people fly in with their private helicopters to ski. I imagined this compressed "luxury flesh" being dropped on top of the mountain by helicopter. The bulging flesh is held together by a Gucci link chain, like a piece of luggage. But in contrast to high-end tourism, I was also thinking of disaster zones where helicopters drop aid and food parcels. In addition, the work evokes mass migration and global displacement—people being dropped into the unknown, chained together by circumstance and need.

AAT

How long was this work up on the mountain?

AH

The piece was originally commissioned for one year, but then it was recommissioned repeatedly over several years, and during this time it was slowly decaying. The fake gold chain started to rust, and the top layer of the wax melted away, revealing the resin underneath. It became like a big lump of rotten flesh. The organizers offered me a chance to repair it, but I didn't want to fix it because the whole point was its aging and death on the mountain. After four years, it was removed.

I did another iteration in the opposite climate: the Moroccan desert. There, the piece was left to change with time, and it literally melted away in the sun until only the wooden palette remained.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/AH-Perishable-Goods-No5-01.jpg)

Andrea Hasler, *Perishable Goods No.5*, 2016–19, wood, wax, resin, metal chains, sculpture left on site to change with time, installation view in Erg Chebbi desert, Morocco, 59 × 59 × 31 inches.

AAT

I also wanted to ask you about the *Louis Vuitton Survival Kit*. It almost looks like a mirrored image?

AH

No, it's a deconstructed Louis Vuitton bag but made with two bags sculpted together.

AAT

Were they real or fake Vuitton bags? With my work, the material doesn't have to be real, mostly because I work at a large scale, and my installations are intended to be confrontational. It's more like I'm creating an image.

AH

The Chinese laundry bags were all fake, but with my *Burden of Excess* series, which is ongoing, I deconstruct real bags and other accessories—Gucci, Dior, and Louis Vuitton. I showed this work at Gusford Gallery in Los Angeles, and for the installation I played with the aesthetics of a luxury boutique and its codes of chic. It was a very slick presentation—the items were sitting on plinths and sealed behind glass. The gallery was on Melrose Avenue, in the center of all the luxury shops, so a lot of people walked in thinking it was a Louis Vuitton or Dior store. The bags were displayed in the same exclusive manner so people would covet them. But when they got closer, they were revolted, seeing a pile of raw flesh that looked like a dead animal or a byproduct of cosmetic surgery. I'm very interested in that moment when desire turns into repulsion.

AAT

I wonder if the people who encountered your work while shopping for luxury brands understood that they were looking at art.

AH

It will be interesting to see how far the obsession with brands will go, especially in creating illusions with the help of social media. In the meantime, alarming numbers of people in real life don't have access to everyday necessities.

Maybe the privileged will explore the interior of the body to display luxury? If a Rolex on your arm doesn't do it any longer, maybe your liver can be encrusted with a little diamond that can only be seen on an X-ray and you then show that off on Instagram? People already get their skin tattooed with luxury-brand logos.

AAT

Did you see the work I did with henna? It's a video in which a performer applies henna to another's hand, as is the tradition before a wedding. However, in my work the drawings are of luxury-brand logos.

AH

That's brilliant.

AAT

We are branding ourselves. Tattoos are permanent, though—henna is not.

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Amani Al-Thuwaini is a Ukrainian-born Kuwaiti artist and designer. She trained as an architect in Kuwait and received her MFA from Goldsmiths University in London in 2017. She has exhibited extensively in Kuwait and shown her work in London, Prague, Dubai, Brazil, and Bolivia. She is the founder and director of Dazza Lab, a Kuwait-based company preparing dowry presentations.

Andrea Hasler is a Swiss artist based in London. Recent solo projects include *Burdens of Excess* at GUSFORD, Los Angeles; *Irreducible Complexity* at Next Level Projects, London; and *Full fat or semi-skinned?* at Bon Gallery, Stockholm. She chairs artist talks at Next Level Projects and lectures at various institutions, including the Sotheby's Institute of Art.

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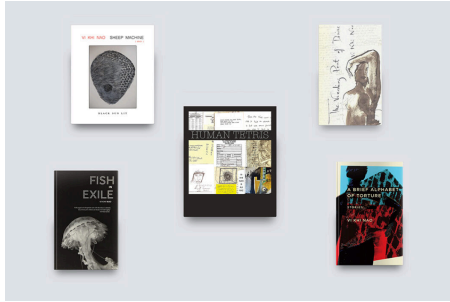
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