

# A Closer Look

From Sydney, Dubai and Lahore, three artists probe and disturb accepted norms of society



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## Jason Phu

*I was at yum cha when in rolled the three severed heads of Buddha: Fear, Malice and Death, 2015, watercolor and ink on rice paper, 69 x 137 cm. Courtesy the artist and Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.*



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## Areej Kaoud

*The Artist Hard at Work, 2016, performance during Art Dubai, 2016. Courtesy Daniella Baptista and Art Dubai.*



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## Waqas Khan

*Between the Palms I, from "The Breath of the Compassionate," 2016, archival ink on paper, 140 x 100 cm each. Courtesy the artist and Sabrina Amrani, Madrid.*

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### Areej Kaoud

DUBAI

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### Jason Phu

SYDNEY

The 2015 Sulman Prize, presented by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, was awarded to Australian-born Chinese-Vietnamese artist Jason Phu last summer. His award-winning work *I was at yum cha when in rolled the three severed heads of Buddha: Fear, Malice and Death* (2015) is a watercolor and ink work on rice paper. Spanning just over one meter wide, the composition features three haphazardly rendered Buddha heads flanked with Chinese and English texts. In awkward translations, they tell of a nonsensical story about the three religious icons making an uninvited appearance at *yum cha* (Cantonese dim-sum lunch)—in tandem with the work's title—and the absurdities they go on to utter. Such straddling, or clashing, of cultural identities lies at the core of Phu's cheeky corpus of paper drawings, ceramics and installations.

A child of immigrant parents, the 27-year-old credits oral traditions as one of the most important channels through which he learned about his cultural lineage while growing up in Australia. Words, as a result, have become a central element in his drawings—as seen in artwork titles or part of the imagery—and these scribbles complement the illustrations that are executed in an off-the-cuff style. Amused at how the length of his whimsical titles has become problematic for curators, the artist admits that the habit will only intensify given that the act of storytelling is inextricably linked to his practice.

Phu has recently set up a studio in the southwestern Chinese city of Chongqing, where he hopes to deepen his skills in Chinese calligraphy. A recent work *Silky Sunny Sun-dried Skinny Sexily Sexy Stunning Summer* (2015) is a large ink-on-rice-paper piece that incorporates illustrations of mundane wash products with random Chinese excerpts of descriptions, instructions and marketing jargon found on the bottles. Some of the words are translated and form the title's childish alliteration. Even adding a cluster of red seal marks to the periphery of the composition as if this were a classical Chinese painting, Phu proposes his humorous take on the quotidian.

EMMA O'NEILL

Interested in how the body and the mind work together to construct notions of language, belonging and security, Palestinian artist Areej Kaoud experiments with performance art and readymade sculptures as a way to provoke interaction between artwork and audience.

Intersecting public and private spaces, Kaoud's works force viewers to acknowledge unique physical and visual interpretations.

A product of this year's Art Dubai Artist-in-Residency program, Kaoud's *Brigade D'Urgence* (2016) questions how repetitive body movements and unforeseen gestures simulate narratives of emergency disaster scenarios. The artist staged a total of seven performances throughout the duration of the fair. Each piece featured a line of people dressed in emergency gear and marching in unison, with every person blowing a whistle and shining a flashlight into the crowd. Compelling viewers to gauge the security of the space, Kaoud's work at the fair combined discomfort and tension with curiosity—something most definitely observed by those who peered their heads out of the gallery booths, wondering what was going on.

Expanding on her work in performance, Kaoud similarly activates space and experiments with the interchangeable meaning of a work through a curatorial practice. In March 2015, she initiated "CollaCurating," a collaborative series at Dubai's Tashkeel in which she works one-on-one with an established artist to explore how artwork installations become spaces for interaction. In the first iteration, entitled "CollaCurating: Sculptural Perspectives" (2015), Kaoud partnered with multimedia artist Manal al-Dowayan. Instigating a conversation through artworks, Kaoud used al-Dowayan's neon-lit Arabic phrases as the starting point of the exhibition. Kaoud's own readymade sculptures, including a repurposed aluminum teapot lid, *This Is Not a Sunset* (2014), reflect the emitted light of al-Dowayan's *We Were Together Speaking Through Silence* (2010) to form a visual exchange between the object and the overwhelming neon presence. Set within the dimly lit installation space, al-Dowayan's neon tubes transfer a channel of energy onto Kaoud's surrounding works. By recontextualizing her sculptures among those by al-Dowayan, Kaoud challenges presupposed ideas of her practice, opening it up to wider interpretations.

SUZU SIKORSKI

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### Waqas Khan

LAHORE

Lahore-based artist Waqas Khan prefers thick archival paper for his monochrome abstract ink drawings, and not just because it is historically accurate. The robust sheets are sturdy enough to support the weight of both of the artist's hands as he leans in for hours at a time applying thousands of centimeter-long strokes one by one in permanent ink. In a trance-like meditative state, the student of Sufism makes each mark in time with his own exhale, forming corkscrewing geometric webs and waves of singular gestures.

Khan's celestial networks of dots and lines convey an infinite, repetitive vastness that is at once overpowering and soothing. Viewers, he has said, should have the urge to get close to the hypnotic configurations, which are sometimes presented as a diptych angled outward like an enormous open book.

Trained at Lahore's National College of Arts in printmaking and Mughal miniature painting, Khan took cues from traditional Islamic art before forging his own views on material, process, line, form and color. Increasingly large-scale and often executed in red or black ink, his patiently handcrafted drawings of radiating lines in biomorphic, curvilinear shapes have earned him spots in the collections of London's Victoria & Albert Museum and British Museum as well as New Delhi's Kiran Nadar Museum of Art.

In *The Breath of the Compassionate IV* (2014), two white spheres overlap on a black ground, like an eclipse of transparent moons. Ragged, eroded edges on one side of an intricate red circle in *Between the Palms I* (2016) convey the fleeting perfection of Khan's sublime spirals, as though their lines are slowly disintegrating with the passage of time. Lower on the paper, an island of stray lines drifts away, lost.

It's no wonder that Khan's work, with its eternal vortices of concentric markings pulling viewers into the mystical void, has drawn comparisons to the similarly transcendent work of minimalists such as Agnes Martin. Without a smear or blotch in sight, his perfectly imperfect coils march deliriously onward.

SIOBHAN BENT