



# breaking the mould

timo nasseri

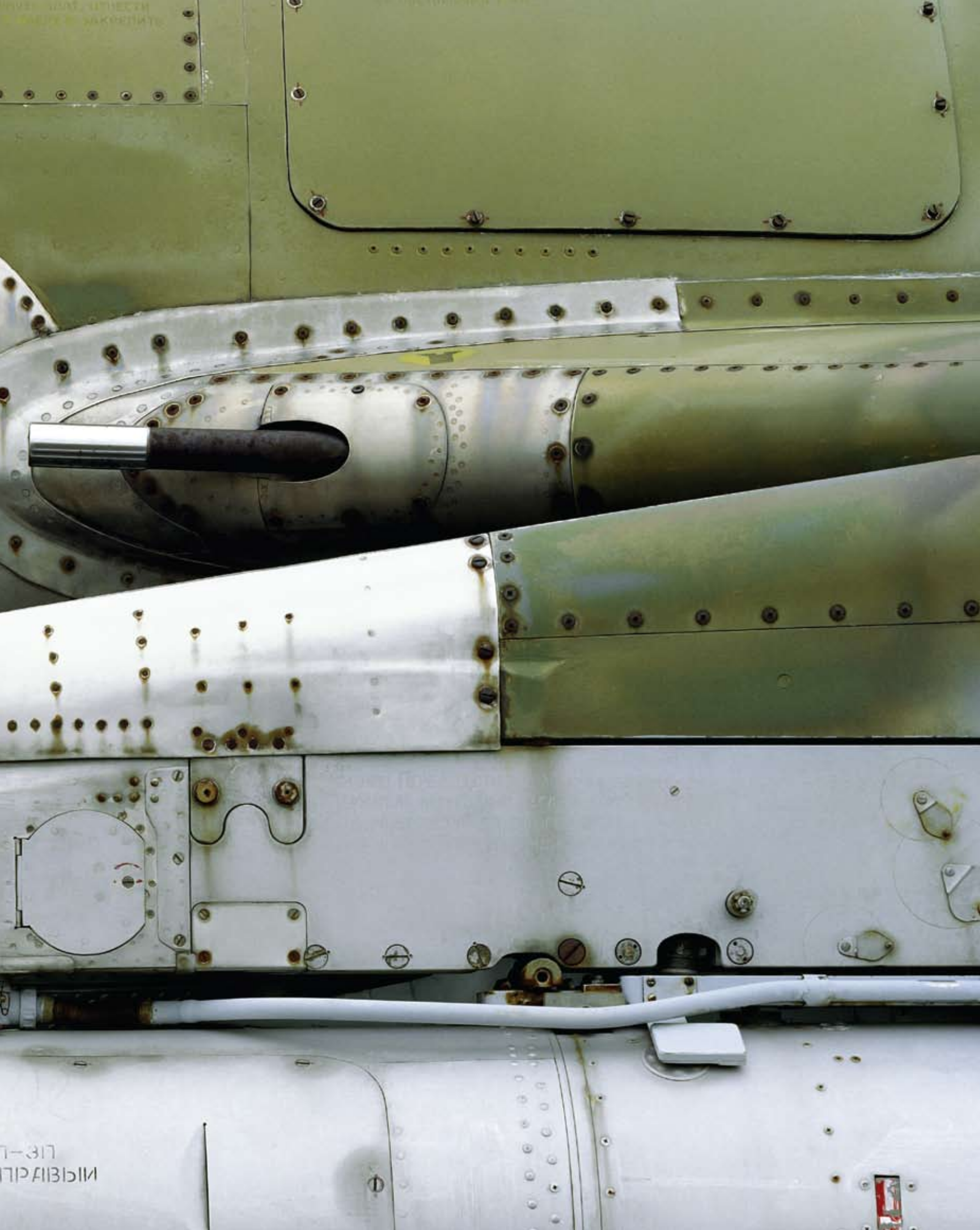
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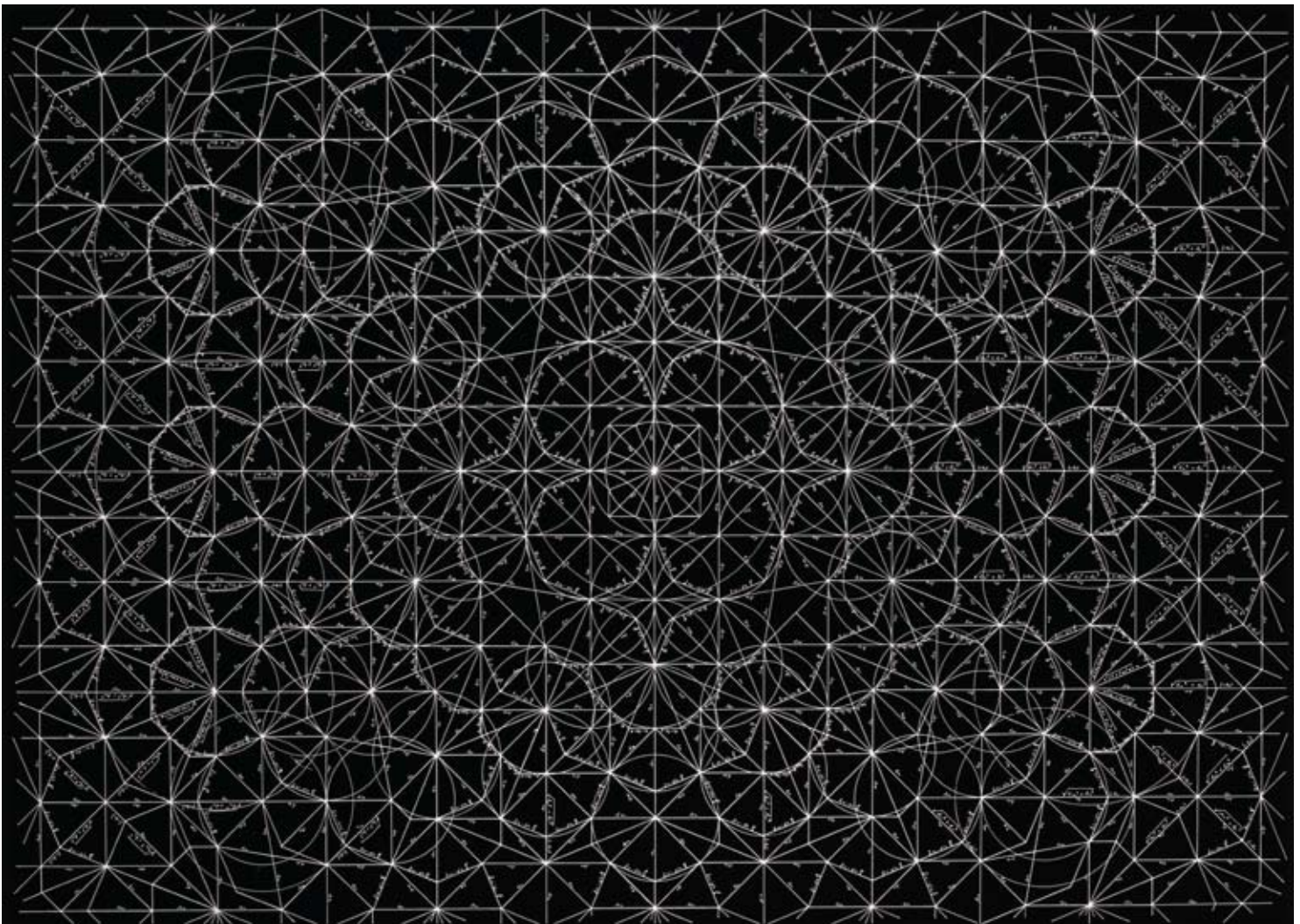
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## profile

Encompassing photography, drawings, installation work and sculpture, Timo Nasser's artistic journey has led him across the world, from hospital operating theatres to military trade fairs and beyond. In his Berlin studio, he is now exploring some of the motifs inherent in Islamic architecture, examining the interface between shape, form and perception, and stretching the boundaries in a way that is becoming emblematic of his unique style.



TEXT BY JAMES PARRY  
IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Previous pages: *MIG*. 2005. C-print.  
129 x 188 cm.

Facing page: *One And One III*. 2008.  
Ink on paper. 60 x 80 cm.

**T**imo Nasserri is something of a rarity: he is actually from Berlin. Almost everyone else one meets in that city seems to have moved to the German capital from elsewhere, almost always since reunification in 1990. Suddenly Berlin became the place to be, both for Germans moving across into the former East from the ex-West Germany, and for outsiders drawn to the newly unified city. Yet Nasserri was born here in 1972, and has lived here ever since. "It's my home, where I grew up, and so I feel this is where I belong, at least for the time being."

As the son of a German mother and an Iranian father, Nasserri's background is an obvious source of interest, yet he is curiously prosaic about it. "I don't feel Iranian," he admits, "but I am interested in exploring that side of my family history. But I'll do it at my own pace. It's not something that burns away inside me." This response characterises Nasserri's very matter-of-fact approach to life and to his work; in street argot, he is 'sorted'.

His artistic career started with a degree in photography from the Berliner Lette-Verein. "At first I was really into people and portrait-style photos, but the final projects for my degree were moving me towards a particular aspect of photography, that of medicine. I would go into hospital operating theatres and take images of surgical procedures, opened-up bodies, surgeons' hands and instruments and so forth. It was a rather abstract type of work, what with the green of the blankets and robes, the red of the blood, the opaque white of the gloves. I only worked at night, and it was a very challenging time but one that totally absorbed and fascinated me. It was quite cathartic, I guess."

#### Journeys in Photography

After graduation in 1997, Nasserri worked in commercial photography, mainly in advertising and fashion for magazines. But he found the ephemeral 'throw-away' nature of that type of work distinctly unfulfilling: "The worst thing was trying to produce something very good in the full knowledge that a week later, everyone would be binning it. It just seemed such a waste of my energy and creativity." Nasserri therefore began to do his own work, of a decidedly documentary ilk, undertaking commissions across the world in countries like Bolivia and Kyrgyzstan on behalf of aid agencies and NGOs, recording their development projects.

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"It was an exciting time, but I decided that I wanted to do art," he recalls. "The second Gulf War had started by then, and I was sitting up all night watching the news and documentaries about American military hardware and war equipment. I found the way in which the subject was

presented quite fascinating. Basically, the 'best' equipment is the one that kills the greatest number of people or causes the most destruction." Inspired to find out more, Nasserri started visiting air shows and military museums to examine some of these machines of death and destruction in person. "What I found especially interesting was the way in which these objects – airplanes, rocket launchers, missiles and the like – had a very defined aesthetic. In an abstract sense, they looked beautiful, very sleek and with clean lines. Yet, on closer examination, you could detect hints of their real character, essentially one of calculated destruction. Their context was markedly different to their appearance, and that's what began to fascinate me."

# profile

The result was *Jet-Skin*, a photographic series (2003/4, exhibited in 2005 at Galerie Schleicher + Lange, Paris) comprising close-up images of parts of the exteriors of fighter planes. Focusing on the detailed mechanics of their construction – the panels, nuts, bolts and rivets – Nasseri succeeded in presenting the abstract beauty of these aircraft in a way that also intimates their more sinister intent. The viewer is immediately struck by their elegance and clinical integrity, but then suddenly a detail betrays their real purpose; signs saying ‘Danger: Launch Area’ here, or ‘Gun Pack Sling Here’ there. On a macroscopic level, Nasseri’s close-ups deliberately mask or avoid depicting the overall shape of the aircraft, and in some respects the details convey an almost animate quality, the gun-metal grey of the wings or fuselage resembling the smooth skin of a shark, for example.

## Taking to the Air

After *Jet-Skin* Nasseri created his first sculptures, *Helicopters*. His starting point was the nomenclature used for USA military helicopters, many models of which are named after Native American tribes. “I found this whole concept so strange,” he recalls; “Why would helicopters be named after people? I decided to explore this idea through my art.” The outcome was Nasseri’s iconic and beautiful *Apache* (2006) and *Comanche* (2006). The shapes of the helicopters were fashioned from polystyrene, coated in resin, painted and then covered in feathers from a variety of different birds – goose, duck, pheasant and guinea fowl. The kaleidoscopic effect of the feather arrangements is very striking, especially when viewed from above, and chimes an obvious chord with the traditional feather head-dresses of certain Native American

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tribes. Beyond the evident analogy between helicopters and birds as things that fly, is Nasseri's recurring interest in the concept of military machinery 'dressed up' or camouflaged in some way, in this case by soft plumage.

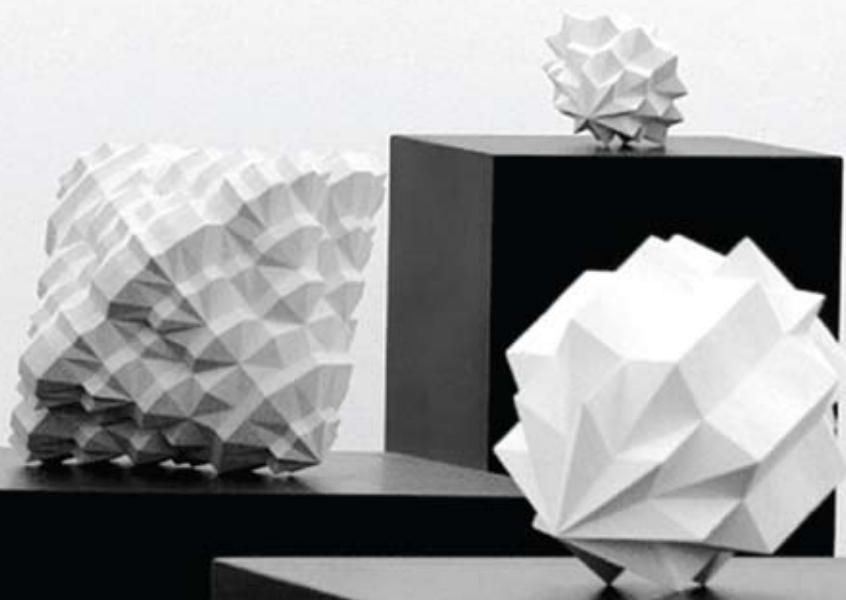
Nasseri subsequently turned his attention to another area of military hardware, that of military rockets. He was drawn to the fact that, in Iran, terms such as *Noor* (Light), *Ra'ad* (Lightning), *Shafagh* (Twilight) and *Shahab* (Falling Star) are used to denote particular types of missile. "I wanted to explore this aspect too, but chose not to do it with the rockets themselves but through calligraphic sculptures carrying the same names." The works are the names, in fact; letters carved from polystyrene, given many coats of resin, painted and then varnished. The black or silver paint and varnish convey the sense of hard-wearing military hardware and defined practical

purpose, but also hint at the more ethereal qualities suggested by the celestial names.

Whilst most of these sculptures are wall-mounted, a monumental group of free-standing Farsi letters create the word *Fadjir* (Dawn) and can only be read easily from above, their legibility much less apparent – impenetrable, perhaps – to those viewing the piece from ground level. "I was intrigued to see if a native speaker would be able to work out what the letters spelt from their vertical shapes, rather than from seeing them one-dimensionally from above," explains Nasseri.

#### Shaping Up

This fascination with shapes, and the ways in which they are perceived and 'read' by the viewer, has an obvious architectural dimension. No surprise, therefore, that Nasseri has also



This spread: From left to right: *Sphere III*. Plaster, wooden plinth. 15 x 3 x 9 cm; *Sphere V*. Plaster, wooden plinth. 17 x 17 x 15 cm; *Sphere VII*. Plaster, wooden plinth. 24 x 18 x 15 cm; *Sphere IV*. Plaster, wooden plinth. 15 x 13 x 13 cm; *Sphere II*. Plaster, wooden plinth. 10 x 9 x 8 cm. All 2008.

Next pages: *Epistrophy* (detail). 2008. Sculpture embedded in wall, polished stainless steel. 150 x 150 x 100 cm.





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turned his attention to aspects of Islamic architecture, and in particular, the concept of the *muqarnas*. This decorative and architectural device, which usually takes the form of an internal roof or ceiling vault comprising a myriad small niches faced with glass or glazed tiles, is common in traditional mosques and grander civic buildings across the Middle East and North Africa. As a concept, the *muqarnas* fascinates Nasserri, both in terms of structure and ornamentation. For two years now he has been working on *muqarnas* sculptures which are sunk into walls to a depth of up to a metre and a half. They follow a two-dimensional plan, with the decoration added in the third dimension. The individual plates that collectively form

the surfaces of the niches are made of polished stainless steel rather than glass, and there are up to 800 of them in each sculpture; furthermore, there are between five and eight different shapes of plate, depending on the sculpture.

The *muqarnas* created by Nasserri defy expectation. One cannot see oneself reflected, for a start. They are set into walls, rather than roofs. And their kaleidoscopic and fragmented character means that they are constantly changing form and structure, depending on the angle from which they are viewed. “It’s all about people looking at people,” he explains; “They even put their heads inside the sculpture (*Epistrophy*, 2008) to try and see themselves.”

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#### Artistic Meteorites

The *muqarnas*-inspired projects have encouraged Nasseri to extend his work further, into other aspects of Islamic architecture. In his studio in a former factory and office block in Oberschöneweide, in old East Berlin, he has been creating a series of mini-cupolas (his *Sphere* series) and a set of wall drawings based on complex geometrical patterns. The variously sized spheres mark the next stage of Nasseri's *muqarnas* journey, representing the contra-aspect of the spatial equation of his wall sculptures ("The positive-negative relationship fascinates me"), and are made in moulds. One half of each mould is made from plaster, the design generated via a computer process known as 'rapid prototyping', and from which a second mould is made of silicon. Both halves are then filled with plaster and, once set, are fixed together to form a sphere. The finished spheres are left in their natural state and are highly tactile, with a raw and industrial feel. They are intriguing and fluid in character; from some angles they can look geological in character, rather like fossils, but from other perspectives they exhibit a decidedly intergalactic quality, as if they may have arrived suddenly from outer space.

Equally engaging is stunning series of drawings (*One and One*) Nasseri has produced, working with a compass and ruler to create intricate networks of connected lines which in

turn form complex geometrical shapes. Using white ink on specially printed black paper which does not bleach, every single point in each drawing is linked to every other in a seemingly labyrinthine but intrinsically logical

mesh which is redolent of the rich heritage of mathematicians and geometers from the Islamic world. For a show in Paris in September 2008, Nasseri drew his network directly onto a wall in the exhibition space, an interesting yet natural development in view of the fractal nature of his creation: "[The drawing] has the potential for infinity. It could go on for ages, reaching out in all directions and simply extending its network of lines, on and on."

Nasseri's exploration of *muqarnas* is now pushing out into new territory. Having started by using original plans for traditional cupolas to inform the design of his work, he is now creating his own designs, experimenting with different shapes and dimensions and looking at creating long, slender-shaped *muqarnas*, rather than those based on the traditional square or circular forms. He is also thinking about going 'big': "I am really intrigued by the idea of creating a *muqarnas* space into which one could walk, like going inside a room." This interest in spaces, and the ways in which people perceive and utilise them, is coming to define Nasseri's work. Yet such is the evolution of this intriguing artist that it is hard to predict which trajectory he will take next. Suffice to say that he will doubtlessly be tackling each direction with the flair, innovation and creative conviction that have marked his artistic career so far. 

Previous pages: *Apache*.  
2006. Mixed media,  
unique. 220 x 185 x 45 cm.

Facing page:  
*Comanche*. 2006.  
Mixed media, unique.  
190 x 175 x 40 cm.

**Timo Nasseri is represented by Galerie Schleicher + Lange in Paris and by Galerie Sfeir-Semler in Hamburg and Beirut. For more info, visit [www.schleicherlange.com](http://www.schleicherlange.com) and [www.sfeir-semler.com](http://www.sfeir-semler.com)**

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#### Poetic Statements

In *Material for a Film*, the awarded piece for the Venice Biennale, Jacir turns her attention to Palestinian poet and translator, Wael Zuaiter. The yellowed mid-20th century Italian programme notes involved are artefacts, part of the detritus that once surrounded the life of Wael Zuaiter, who was the first of many Palestinian artists and intellectuals to be assassinated by Israel during the 1970s and 1980s. A video showing a few seconds of Zuaiter's role in Peter Sellers' *The Pink Panther* captures his short movements on the camera. Zuaiter's minimal gestures are played on a short and repeating loop to indulge that human yearning for detail and repetition when loss is being expressed. *Material for a Film* is arguably Jacir's most personal piece. "Wael was one of the people to whom I felt close," she says. "He lived in Rome, I went to high school in Rome. He moved from the Gulf, I grew up in the Gulf. There's something about his character. Wael didn't publish anything. He burnt everything, all of his works, before he died. This failed figure was somehow compelling." This artwork expresses palpable sorrow and is constructed as tenderly as if a daughter might have assembled it. *Material for a Film* is a memorial in which recurring cadences outline the wounds of a poet and his nation.

In another installation/performance of *Material for a Film* at the Sydney Biennial in 2006, Jacir committed a visceral act. She learned to fire the same calibre pistol that the Mossad used to kill Zuaiter and shot 1000 blank white books. This installation was based on the one bullet, which had pierced Zuaiter's copy of *A Thousand and One Nights* the night he was killed. After her performance, Jacir arranged the 1000 books from floor to ceiling like a mausoleum. Jacir reminds us, "Wael's dream was to translate *A Thousand and One*

*Nights* directly from Arabic into Italian. He had been working on this project since his arrival in Italy. To this day, a direct Italian translation from the Arabic does not exist. All the Italian translations are from other languages."

#### Politics of Art

Among those watching Jacir closely are Arab-Americans, who view Jacir's success as a blueprint for political strategies. Since 11 September 2001, Arab-Americans, no longer content with how others categorise them, have begun reclaiming control of their image. The founding of the Arab American National Museum in Michigan in 2005 helped strengthen the voices of artists and writers and has unified the larger Arab-American arts community. Jacir's canny style and her ability to take the known and elevate it to a level of transformative public awareness, has influenced many Arab-American artists who now want to affect policies toward Palestine and perceptions of Arab culture in general.

With one foot in the USA and Italy and another firmly planted in Palestine, Jacir navigates differing but related spheres. Her life in the USA dovetails with her life in Ramallah. Both are examples of living in the bellies of beasts, but Ramallah is where her soul is nourished. Between these and other spheres, Jacir follows an infectious credo never to negotiate against herself. Most importantly, she recognises when an audience is on the verge of becoming transformed and has consistently offered to cross those boundaries with them, always with the anticipation of advancing to the next challenge. 🇺🇸

**Emily Jacir is represented by Alexander & Bonin in New York.**  
**For more info, visit [www.alexanderandbonin.com](http://www.alexanderandbonin.com)**