

Zhivago Duncan makes a break for it accompanied by liberated Sino-Arab rocking horse (Photo Aaron Hawks)





# Cam... FIRE? FLASH!

*One 400kw generator, two AK47s, ammunition, timber, wood clamps, a drill, four boxes of assorted screws, two camels, one 4x4 truck, one projector, one hundred and twenty cans of spray paint, and a giant bulldozer = Zhivago Duncan's new exhibition at Dubai's JAMM Gallery. Here, the artist gives Harper's Bazaar Art an exclusive account of a two-week road trip through the Jordanian desert in search of that 'sweet something for the soul...'*

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Photography by Aaron Hawks for Harper's Bazaar Art Arabia

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am from many places. I am Syrian-Danish, was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, lived in Saudi Arabia, Hawaii, France, Malta, California, Bulgaria, and now Germany. I speak seven languages half-way, and in my

native English, I have an accent. I'm connected to so many different landscapes, you'd think it'd be hard to see any roots. But it goes back to the desert. Some of my earliest memories were formed on the weekends I spent with my parents and brother in the deserts of Saudi. We lived in Riyadh and used to take trips into the dunes. I could see even then that the desert was full of power and deceit. The way it could seduce and punish. On one trip, when I was about four, my brother Moby, who was two-and-half, broke away from us in the sand dunes and started running away with a can of Coke in his hands. He ran into the sand hills, then we watched as he came scurrying back towards us in a panic, his thawb and keffiyeh flapping in the wind, while still gripping the can. As my brother got closer we realised something had happened. He had spilled the Coke on himself and attracted a swarm of huge black desert ants. My mother brushed them off. They were all over his body, in his nose and ears, feasting on the sugary syrup that was all over him. I thought to myself how amazing that a place so dry and void could become so alive with a few drops of Coca-Cola.

I decided it was time to go back to the desert, time to revisit that part of my life. Like the way I'd seen Coca-Cola bring life to the sands thirty years ago, I wanted to see what I could bring now. I would go to Wadi Rum, where red sands spill onto beige sands that run into multicoloured mountains. It would be a return to home, a location not so distant from those desert weekends from my childhood in Saudi, but also a break into unfamiliar territory, as life had taken me a long way from the desert. It would be a 10-day trip. The convoy would include our host in Jordan, Sirin Masri, Bedouins, Jordanians, Egyptians and our photographer, Aaron Hawks. We would move fast, full-throttle – make the work, then make tracks. I wanted to react to the desert viscerally and spontaneously, no distortion, no hesitation. We packed to be versatile, ready to make any kind of work, in any conditions,



(Above) Zhivago Duncan

(Below Left) Night lamp in the desert

(Far Right) 'Patina of Time'

depending on what struck me at any given time. One 400kw generator, two AK47s, ammunition, timber, wood clamps, a drill, four boxes of assorted screws, two camels, one 4x4 truck, one projector, one hundred and twenty cans of spray paint, and a giant bulldozer.

When we got to Wadi Rum, we were met by a band of 4x4s and immediately loaded into one of the trucks and our convoy was off, into the open landscapes, with a massive sand cloud. We were flying through the sand and rocking up and down the hills. Our leader was Mufleh, ex-military, figurehead of the Bedouins of Rum. He would take us from spot to spot in Wadi Rum. I was tuned out, the land was engraving itself in my mind, keeping log of all the potential terrain I would like to incorporate in my work.

At a farm in Rum, over a glass of camel milk, we decided that we would drive down to the town of Aqaba and pick up last-minute supplies. Outside of a shop where we were looking for cold canned coffee for Ahmad, I noticed two beautifully-aged mechanical coin-powered animal rides. One, a cat with wonky eyes and the other, a white horse crouched on a fibreglass mound of grass. They both were clothed with a timeworn patina, scars from years of children climbing up and down them. I was looking and admiring these worn-down mechanical fetes when all of the sudden a sound came out of one of them. It was in Mandarin, I believe, it came from the horse. 'Come and ride me, kids' in a high-pitched Chinese lady voice. I smiled; it tied it all together. ►











(Above) 'Phoney Calligraphy'

(Below) Gas mask off and snout fired up - Zhivago takes a break mid-shoot



**'WE MOVE  
FAST, FULL  
THROTTLE  
– MAKE  
THE WORK,  
THEN MAKE  
TRACKS...'**





(Left) Gun in hand, Zhivago sets up 'Folklore'

(Below left) Folklore boom!

(Below) Folklore setup



That was the multicultural anomaly that I had noticed when first arriving in Amman. Upon arriving in any foreign countries, I always interrogate whoever drives me to my destination. By asking questions, I familiarise myself with local traits, trades and the disposition and power of authority. 'How are the cops here?' I asked Talal, the driver who picked me up from Queen Alia Airport.

He proceeded to tell me about the local cops, nothing special, just like cops in any uncorrupt country. The conversation then led to their vehicles and he told me that they used everything possible, from BMWs to Kias, Fords, Chevrolets, Nissans etc. When I had asked about the electrical outlets, I was told that it depends where you go. In Jordan they use English, European and that strange three-plug piece that the Italians and the Swiss use. On another occasion, while driving around, I noticed a Safeway supermarket then shortly afterwards, we passed a Carrefour - both grocery powerhouses, yet from two different corners of the world.

While making these connections in my mind, I decided to put a coin in the horse, when suddenly it began rocking out to Arabic music, swaying back and forth. Sold! I had to get this horse. I needed it, I wanted it - it was part of the body of work. I immediately got the ball rolling for a photo shoot out in one of the spots that I had seen while we were looking for our campgrounds. So we loaded the bugger in back of the SUV and drove back out to Wadi Rum, to a spot called Um Salab, a hilly red sandpatch near the seven Rum columns. When we got there, we unloaded the fiberglass prop and began to shoot as the sun went down. The idea was to imitate the concept of overdone album cover art, that LA, Joshua tree, burning man, Coachella, freaky vampires and fake blood style; all those overdone pop cultural references, all misplaced in the home of the Bedouins.

After we had done that, we went back to camp. Upon arriving, a fire had been set up everyone was gathered around the hot, ➤



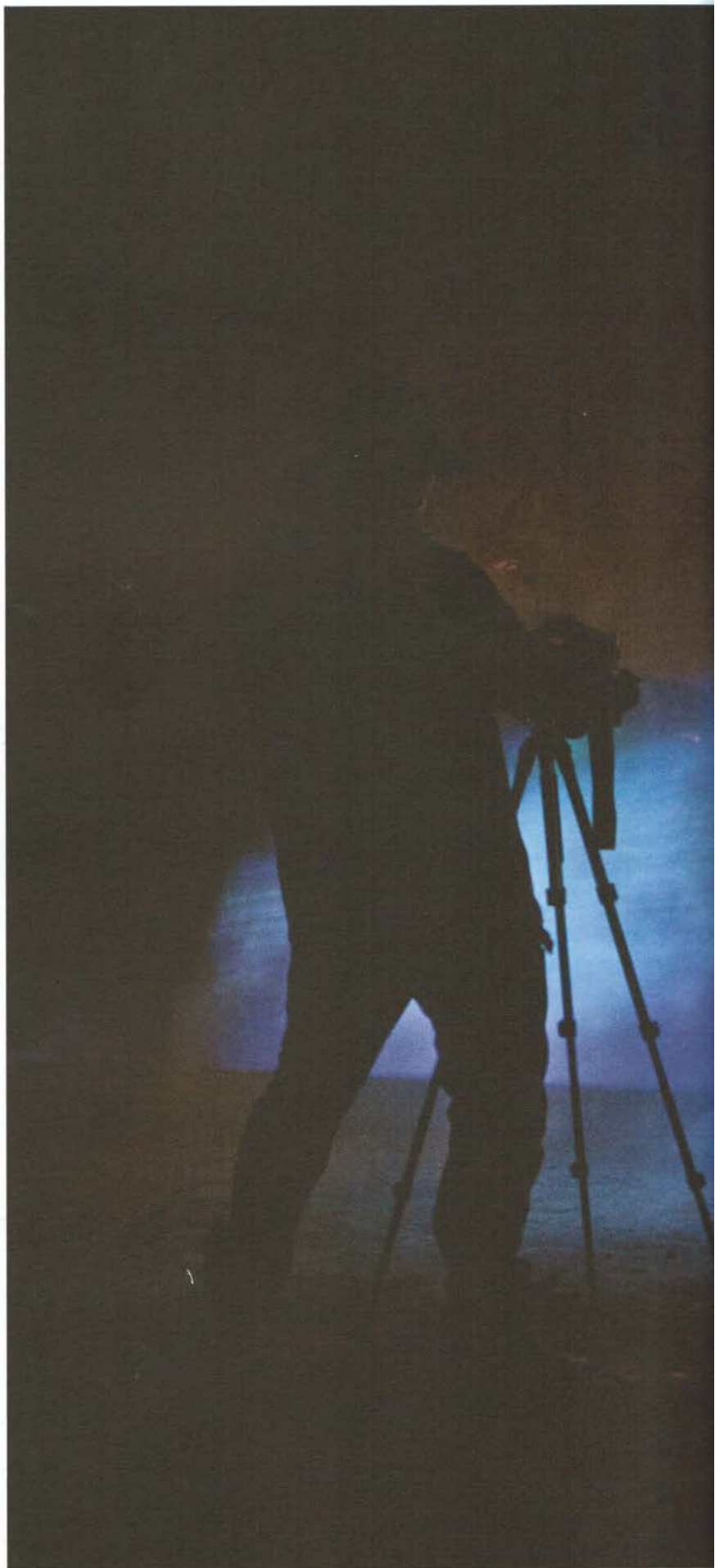
**(Right)** 'Titan'. 'I had a dream where a JCB loader was dumping a load of sand very slowly while a projection was cast on the vale spilling out of the blade...'

breezy coals. Our camp was set up in the middle of a mountain formation called Al Rahbi, with pathways and dunes lit by torches that lead to the cooking area and to where we would feast in the evening. We had been told about Zarb, and we were all starving. Zarb is a meat dish, cooked for four hours buried in the sand with hot coals, it usually consists of lamb, chicken or camel. We had lamb on our first evening. While sitting at a makeshift table three meters away from the fire, one of the Bedouins was beautifully playing the Oud. Wanting to record that beautiful sound, I realized my tape recorder was misplaced, I later found it in the back of the pickup truck in which we rode. And sat right next to the talented musician, he realised my appreciation for the sounds and began to play directed at me, I felt like I was his only audience and also thought I was recording the whole thing. Only to find out the next day I had four seconds of it, a malfunctioning machine meant I fell back on the notion that some things are just made for a moment in time and need to just echo out endlessly.

All of a sudden, there was commotion, and they were carrying over this massive double-decker pot of subterranean meat. We feasted.

The next day, we headed back out to Aqaba, while scoping the city for our next spots and potential pieces. Aaron, and I had seen some beaten up old Mercedes Benz on the side of the road. When we went to find the defeated old car, an elderly gentleman came out to inspect us as he was intrigued by our activities. The car belonged to him and Ahmad, our smooth operator, had made friends with the man within the first few words exchanged. He permitted us to take photos of the old beast and then invited us inside for tea. He lived on this beachfront property apparently worth millions, it was in his family for years and he was not ready nor willing to give it up. It was pure, family is pure and family in these regions is everything. The place looked as though it was set up to host parties with a plethora of antique props, tables and nargilehs. He went around and switched all the lights on, and suddenly this beautiful huge white marble wonder appeared. Decorated with light and fake grass, this water fountain represented quintessential ideals of purification. It ►

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**(Above)** 'Aaron and I had seen some beaten up old Mercedes Benz on the side of the road. When we went to find the defeated old car, an elderly gentleman came out to inspect us as he was intrigued by our activities...'

stood bang in the middle of a covered pathway that lead to the 'party area'. Its' sound and stature contrasted immensely against the dry wall and fluorescent light that the space was composed of.

Right before leaving for Jordan, I had a dream where a JCB loader (bulldozer) was dumping a load of sand very slowly while a projection was cast on the vale spilling out of the blade. The video was one that I had edited some time before, a looped abstract explosion taken from a classic American cartoon from 1962. We found a local construction site where it could all be possible, Ayla, a massive development project named after the original city of Aqaba on the Red Sea. They allowed us to install and shoot 'Titan' there. We were out in the middle of the site at sundown, surrounded by hills of silica, when the massive mechanical dinosaur arrived, it was far larger than I had imagined with its toothed blade and blinding headlights; a machine that treads the line of destruction and creation. I set up the laptop, generator, and projector. Asked the driver to pick up a load of sand, we made the marker and then - bombs away. After seven times, I had my shots and it was time to go. We packed up and headed out planning for the next day.

# 'THE PAINTING WAS PRODUCED USING AK47S, SHOTGUNS AND 9MM HANDGUNS... SHOOTING AT SPRAY CANS'





(Above)  
Wadi Rum

(Right)  
Folklore night AK47



The day we had all been waiting for, the piece de resistance, which had been in the back of all our minds. 'Folklore'. A piece created with another machine of destruction and creation.

We set out to find the spot, the next spot for the next artwork. Sirin, our host, and I took a truck and drove deep out into the desert areas of the farm. Passing camel herds, through a valley of eucalyptus trees and up the rocky hills, lead by one of the Bedouins, I was looking for the perfect valley, time was running out, daylight was limited. We pass over a hill and the truck stops, I get out of the car - and this was it. A flat land in the middle of a mountainous formation called Wadi Al Maedi and it was perfect.

'Folklore' started upon arriving, we had outsourced some local carpenters to produce a series of panels on jacks, mimicking military-style targets for high-powered assault rifle practise. The five-panel painting was produced using AK47s, shotguns and 9mm handguns, shooting at spray cans installed in front of the white wooden panels. This piece tied together the abundance of matter and myth of the old-school debauchery of American heroes such as Hunter S Thompson and William Burroughs with the mysticism of 1001 Nights. By making these works in the deserts of Rum, I challenged both physical and moral truths. The price for bullets in the Middle East are sky high at the moment, due to the war in Syria. I found myself stuck between feeling guilty and innocent for similar moral reasons, as if bumming cigarettes. The panels were set out in a valley in Rum and we built structures out of the sprayscans we had

and I proceeded to shoot them with the Bedouins, the local authorities, as well as Sirin, Aaron and the Egyptian gang that we were accompanying us.

While visiting Petra on the way back to Amman, which harbours some of the finest sands and earth pigments, I came across multiple stands where Bedouins write tourists' names in bottles with different coloured sands. Using various tools and pouring techniques they garnish the bottles with camels, palm trees and other decorative patterns enhancing your personalised souvenir. Another consistent element to the stands are VISA logos. Every stand accepted Visa cards. They each stated 'we welcome VISA' which transformed the impersonal payment method into a name. I asked to have a sand bottle emptied, denied of all camels, palm trees and ornamental justice, to just have four colours and a VISA logo made to the best quality of the artisan's ability.

No longer in the sands of Wadi Rum, and contemplating the essences and actualities of my trip I have realised a few things. The adventure's evolution materialised on a parallel timeline of the understanding of our group. By the end everyone was excited and fervent to help and see what 'the crazy artist' would come up with next. The truth is, I listened to my surroundings and intuition, the works just realised themselves somehow. It turned out that we were the ants, bustling around the desert in search for that sweet something for the soul. Did we find Coca-Cola? We found the universal laws of communal understanding, the basic essence of humanity and the warm-hearted welcome we were given by the locals. Plus in Jordan, everyone drinks Pepsi. **HBA**

*Zhivago Duncan's works realized on his Jordanian odyssey will be displayed at JAMM Gallery in Dubai this March. For more details see [www.jamm-art.org](http://www.jamm-art.org)*