

ART

MARIA HASSABI'S PREMIERE LEAGUE

By EMILY MCDERMOTT



ABOVE: MARIA HASSABI, PREMIERE, 2013. PHOTO COURTESY OF MARIALENA MAROUDI

Life can become a living performance, but most people eventually disappear backstage. Whether relaxing in a dressing room behind the curtain, drinking coffee in a café, or reading a book in bed, solitary moments give us time to take a break and breathe. However, many performance artists never stop performing. For Maria Hassabi, taking a break just means more work—more critical thinking, more dancing, more experimentation.

In her Chelsea studio, two large Oriental area rugs divide the floor space and two oversized chandeliers hang from the ceiling. Inspirational images hang on the wall adjacent to a black leather couch. Despite the fact that these props, which were used in prior performances, surround her, Hassabi says she does not consider herself a performance artist.

"I don't call what I do performance art," she says. "I don't really care about titles...I'm an artist. I perform. I make shows."

The Cyprus-born artist moved to the U.S. to attend the California Institute of the Arts in 1990. Following graduation, she moved to New York in pursuit of art. "There was an ability in the city," Hassabi recalls. "You went crazy in New York. Everything was there." Now, nearly 10 years later, the self-proclaimed jaded New Yorker performs around the world.

But despite the cultural shifts she experienced, Hassabi never contemplates her Egyptian childhood. Rather, she draws inspiration from the spectacular now. "I don't know if it's just having a busy life, but I never look back," she says. "I don't know if it's my personality; I just don't reflect."

As she sipped tea and smoked hand-rolled cigarettes, Hassabi spoke about her upcoming performance, PREMIERE, and her role as an artist. PREMIERE will debut on November 6 at The Kitchen as part of New York's performing arts festival, Performa 13.

EMILY MCDERMOTT: For PREMIERE, what was your inspiration?

MARIA HASSABI: It was really playing with the idea of "premiere"—all of the things that you go through—the struggle, the excitement, all of it. It's the moment when the audience gets to validate that anything is a work of art. A lot of what I'm dealing with in PREMIERE is what I value as a work of art, what the expectation of a work of art is.

MCDERMOTT: What can we expect to see in PREMIERE?

HASSABI: Five people taking their time. The setting is quite intense, quite present.

MCDERMOTT: In one of your performances, there were no chairs, and you forced people to move and create space. Will it be something to that effect?

HASSABI: People are asking me, "Should I bring a pillow?" [laughs] I'm like, "Don't worry. You're getting a seat this time." "Premiere," for me, is such a theatrical term, so I didn't want to mess that up. You are in the theater; you are taking a seat.

MCDERMOTT: What makes you refer to yourself as a director/choreographer instead of a performance artist?