

THE
ATKINSON

Exhibition Catalogue

Zahed Taj-Eddin
ANTIQUITA

13 June - 10 October 2026

The Atkinson, Southport



F O R E W O R D

Zahed is a gentle, quiet, contemplative man. His voice comes through his artwork. Beautiful bronzes and fragile ceramics that echo ancient stories, formed with techniques as old as the myths themselves, carry big messages that need to be heard. Tales that began to be told millennia ago are as relevant in today's world as they were to our ancestors. The myths first recounted in the ancient world of gods, goddesses and mythical creatures served as cautionary tales and lessons to be heeded. It appears that we do not learn from history and continue to repeat our mistakes.

However, amongst this darkness there is also hope and humour. Who can look at a shabti wearing a baseball cap and carrying a bag of goodies from a well-known retailer and not smile. The message is clear, though thousands of years apart our forebearers were no different than us. People will always be people, worried, angry, scared, brave, curious and funny.

ANTIQUITÁ is an exhibition that was thirty years in the making. Look closely at the sculptures, hear what they are whispering to you, take a moment to think and reflect. Perhaps you will identify with their message or maybe you will simply enjoy a beautiful work of art. Zahed is an archaeologist, artist and storyteller. A perfect storm in an imperfect world. May he continue to teach us that a dignified resilience is mightier than any amount of shouting and bullying and that quiet determination can outlast those who look to control and bring suffering on people they believe to be weaker than them.

Joanne Chamberlain

Curator, Heritage & Participation Officer, The Atkinson

E S S A Y

A Polymath

Dr Eleni Vassilika

A soft-spoken man, Zahed Taj-Eddin surprises one with his measured answers both to the banal and to the profound with a depth and articulation that leaves one thinking that he has known the questions posed all along. Zahed is both a contemplative and an inquisitive man to his core. Trained both in chemistry and in sculpture and fine art, he has straddled these two seemingly incompatible disciplines over decades. Having started life and his studies in Aleppo, one of the most beautiful and continuously inhabited cities since antiquity, Zahed has absorbed the essence of and empathy for the numerous cultures that lived and coexisted there. The drumbeat of history includes civic and religious strife, which turns the settled into emigrants. Zahed moved to Germany where he repeated his studies in chemistry, thence to England where he furthered his studies in ceramics and conservation thereof, plus book binding for good measure. After a spell as a shop keeper near the British Museum, Zahed made the courageous decision to return to academic education at a time in his life nearing middle age, when others might begin their slide into complacency. Following his Master's at UCL in ancient artefacts, and a further certificate in education, Zahed made the brave decision to pursue a PhD in the ancient artisanal manufacture of Egyptian faience, a proto-silicious material. With his understanding of chemistry, Zahed experimented on replicating this ancient technology in what archaeologists refer to as archaeometry. His tenacity earned him his doctorate.

However, what is as significant, is his marriage of his manual artisanal skill at sculpting and his profound knowledge of materials, media and their chemical behaviours. Zahed moves effortlessly between producing sculptures in different media and techniques from blue, glassy faience, to terracotta and bronze. He is a modern-day alchemist producing the human figure (*homunculus*) that is meant to convey a message.

In the idiom of an ancient culture, Zahed's human figures may subtly depict a myth of imminent destruction due to human *hubris*. As in antiquity, his fe/male figures are timelessly idealising, slightly blurred and lacking signs of age. They are the essence of each gender, compromised by greed, warding off evil or celebrating triumph. There is a message in each title. The shabtis, follow the ancient Egyptian tradition of obedience and civic service. When the Nile inundated, men and women 'answered the call' from the pharaoh to dig the irrigation channels and to plant the seeds of growth. This collaborative exercise to render food security had a drawback and that was that death was no excuse for non-participation. Therefore, the shabti figures, often one figurine for every day of the calendar were inserted in the tomb, to answer the call on behalf of the deceased. Zahed's mythical image of Europa and the bull, is one of kidnap and rape, but also of Europa's agency as she transforms herself into a queen, a mother and metaphor for the astral goddess Astarte. The bull is an ancient metaphor for omnipotence in most cultures

ranging from Mesopotamia to Egypt and throughout the Mediterranean. In Zahed's sculptures, the bull figures prominently, diminished when locked in its own herd or when confronted by a courageous sheep, even a group of sheep who have the temerity to climb its back. The ethical, even political, subtext cannot be overlooked. When both bull and sheep stand on a slice of watermelon tilted in the sheep's favour, we understand the meaning without the title 'Gaza'.

Zahed dedicates much of his artistic output to woman. In antiquity the mother goddess of one culture was syncretised with the goddess of many others. Thus the Egyptian goddess Isis was the queen of the divine pantheon and merged with Juno, with Diana (protector of women and childbirth), Demeter and Ceres (agriculture and fertility). This avatar for womanhood was a paragon of many qualities, particularly as a mother, intercessor and saviour, not unlike the Mariolatry of the Virgin Mary. Zahed has replaced the muscular, wasp-waisted male bull leaper, with a fuller female figure grasping the bull by the horns or performing acrobatics on the bull's back. His female figure may raise her hands against the falling bombs or escape danger on horseback taking others with her. She bears the dead or wounded male on her shoulders, as a soldier would, but in some images, she too succumbs to exhaustion and death. For Zahed, it is the women who hold steadfast during wars and lead the way.

In addition to subtly communicating metaphor through his art, Zahed is an able teacher. Anyone who has watched his films about producing faience objects, sculpting in clay or preparing sculptures for the bronze foundry will be amazed at his capacity to gently explain the method and reasoning for certain techniques responding to mechanical requirements. Zahed's soft spoken and unscripted fluid explanations as he works away will also include the ancient iconography and symbolism of his works. One feels as if one is transported in time to the side of an ancient sage.

Dr Eleni Vassilika

Archaeologist, art historian, researcher and retired museum director

E S S A Y

Zahed Taj-Eddin: An Appreciation

Marius Kociejowski

Any artist worth his salt will be at all times a step ahead of the one who writes about him. I've been dragging my feet for it has been over a decade since the publication of my essay 'The Goat That Stood upon the Bull's Spine' about the Syrian sculptor Zahed Taj-Eddin. Admittedly I had almost decided not to include him in my book because I thought (erroneously, as it turned out) our friendship would stand in the way of revelation. At the behest of my wife, however, I made the attempt and when I went to record a conversation with him in his studio almost immediately we entered another dimension in which all familiarity was set aside and we achieved what I like to call a necessary distance. Paradoxically, this freed us up to become as strangers speaking intimacies.

What transpired on that afternoon was nothing less than a baring of the soul, a telling of things that had been kept hidden from even the people closest to him. I should think the humiliation Zahed suffered as a young man at the hands of regime thugs was no small factor regarding his earlier reticence. Still, the torment of which he spoke was not so much for himself as for the fate of his country. The events of March 2011 thrust Syria into a civil war that would continue for the next fourteen years, a time of immense suffering not only for those upon whose heads the bombs fell but also for those who had to observe it from a distance.

The years that followed were punctuated by hope one minute and despair the next, the situation in Syria changing with such rapidity that the many books written about the conflict no sooner reached publication day than they were already out of date. The emergence of ISIS and its less than ambiguous relationship to the Syrian regime put a seal upon things. The effect this had on Zahed was not always easy to measure, not when the horror itself was immeasurable, but one thing was clear: Art was one thing that enabled him to weather the situation.

"There is still a sense of beauty in the world. Maybe the making of these things creates or, rather, regenerates it and in doing so removes some of my pain and gives me hope. Where it definitely does help me is that it is killing time."

The 'killing of time' was meant in the metaphysical sense. Time did as time does, the war ended, and a seemingly invincible regime was swept aside in a matter of days.

There is a famous line from the mediaeval Syrian poet al-Ma'arri: 'Take care where you walk because you walk upon the dead.' When I asked Zahed how his art had changed in recent times, he showed me his latest sculpture — a woman carrying the body of a man over her shoulders. 'That summarises a lot of my work at the moment. I still have hope in

the strength of this woman who can hold onto that space and carry on. She is walking out of Gaza's ruins — still defiant, still upright, still walking forward — carrying that tragedy. Life moves forward despite all the pain, despite everything.'

It would be a mistake to think of his art as belonging to our history alone. What those modern/ancient sculptures of his address is not a single slice but, rather, the whole of human history. It is not for nothing that he has been described as 'an archaeologist of the present' — because how better to cope with tragedy on such a scale than to approach it at a necessary distance. Only then will timelessness become an antidote to time.

It is to be hoped that people reading the above will not get the impression that Zahed's art is wrapped in airless gloom. Nothing could be further from the truth, for even in the worst of times he has retained his sense of humour. The interaction between the rebellious goat — Zahed's alter ego — and the bull and whichever regime it represents, is presented with a comic edge. Al-Maghut knew comedy could be a lethal form of dissidence. So, too, does Zahed, because what al-Maghut did with words, he does with form.

Once he had cracked the mystery behind the making of Egyptian faience, he got the last laugh when he constructed one at over two metres in height, the biggest faience ever made. And then one looks at the shabtis he made — interspersed among ancient ones inside museum cabinets — the difference between them being that Zahed's had been released from the eternal drudgery of having to attend to the souls of the dead. Once freed, they became a part of consumer society, with their shopping bags and mobile phones. Is one meant to laugh or cry? Ultimately, that is for the public to decide. Tears and laughter are Zahed's stock-in-trade.

Marius Kociejowski is a British author and poet. His essay 'The Goat That Stood upon the Bull's Spine' was published in *Gods Zoo: Artists, Exiles, Londoners* (Carcanet, 2014).

C R I T I C A L E S S A Y

The Artist-Archaeologist

Excavating Myth and Conflict

Zahed Taj-Eddin is not only inspired by archaeology. He is, in a profound sense, the archaeologist as artist, the artist as archaeologist. Born in Aleppo, one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, he grew up beneath the weight of centuries and within the shadows of political constraint. Shaped equally by his training as an archaeologist and conservator and by the tragic history of his homeland, his work demonstrates that the past is never lost but persistently resurfaces in the present, while simultaneously affirming the enduring value of beauty, art, and intellectual pursuit.

At first encounter, his sculptures — with their fractured surfaces and rough patinas — evoke votive figurines from Mesopotamia, fertility idols from Anatolia, fragments of Egyptian temples, echoes of Phoenician, Etruscan, and Minoan bronzes. They also resonate with the stylised figures of the Scythians and the Amlash culture of northern Iran. These traditions, born of the Bronze Age and the archaic world, distilled gesture into archetype. Although Taj-Eddin carries this legacy forward, his sculptures take on contemporary archetypes: bulls as domination, sheep as obedience, goats as rebellion, horses and deer as aspiration and beauty, and women as the central force of balance, regeneration, and wisdom.

Taj-Eddin often achieves his aim by means of 'interventions', which are simultaneously serious and satirical. His modern shabtis — crafted using the same techniques as those employed in ancient Egypt — are set alongside ancient ones. Thus situated, whether it be in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Manchester Museum, the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, or the august setting of Two Temple Place, they blur the boundary between artefact and artwork. These modern shabtis have been liberated from the onerous task of serving in the Afterlife and are now invited inside museum vitrines where, next to Bronze Age relics, they appear with their mobile phones, shopping bags, and protest signs.

Taj-Eddin's work addresses current issues unflinchingly. In his bronze *Sheep Go to Lampedusa*, a herd of sheep squeezed tightly together evoke the dangerous journeys made by refugees as they cross the Mediterranean. In *Europa, The Myth*, Zahed revisits the Greek tale of Europa and the bull. Yet he transforms this classical scene of possession into one of reclamation. His Europa does not appear as the helpless captive of divine desire, but as a figure of agency and poise — sovereign, playful, and assured, as if aware that her story will outlive her captor.

Domination, displacement, obedience, and rebellion are not closed chapters but recurring cycles in history. These sculptures are mirrors, reflecting not only what we once were but what we continue to be. Cast in bronze, they are as enduring as any ancient idol.

A R T I S T S T A T E M E N T

In the Artist's Words

My journey began in Aleppo, a city where history runs so deep it seems etched into every stone. This sense of living with such a rich past has shaped my artistic vision: I see myself not only as a sculptor but as an archaeologist of the present, excavating fragments of memory, myth, and trauma. My sculptures are artefacts of the here and now — objects that bridge the ancient and the contemporary, embodying both the enduring archetypes of human culture and the crises of our present moment.

The materials central to my practice, ceramic and bronze, carry both the scars and the resilience of history. The fractured textures and rough patinas of my sculptures evoke newly unearthed relics, yet the forms remain alive. In this tension between ruin and vitality, my work enacts what I call 'excavations of the present': a slow remembrance set against the accelerated amnesia brought on by war and the media.

Ultimately my art asks us to witness and to question, as well as to celebrate beauty, art, and the intellect. One of my archetypal figures is the goat — a figure of rebellion — which urges us to stand against silence, to resist the inexorable march of domination, and to acknowledge that the ruins are already here. What matters now is how we choose to read them, and whether we can imagine a future beyond the shadows they throw.

Zahed Taj-Eddin

T H E M E O N E

Mythologies

From Eye Idols to Europa, from Egyptian faience shabtis to the ruined landscape of Palmyra, the works gathered under Mythologies draw on the deep grammar of ancient civilisation. Taj-Eddin is not a revivalist. He does not reconstruct the past; he excavates it — finding in archaic forms a vocabulary alive to the present.

His shabtis, crafted using the very techniques of ancient Egypt, have been liberated from their original purpose: serving the dead in the Afterlife. Placed among genuine artefacts in museum cabinets, these figures now carry shopping bags and mobile phones, blurring the boundary between relic and commentary. In Europa – The Myth, a classical scene of divine abduction becomes one of quiet reclamation. Adam & Eve and Eye Idols reach further still, to the very origins of human representation.

Throughout these works, archaeological knowledge is never merely scholarly. Fractured surfaces and rough patinas evoke newly unearthed objects, yet the figures pulse with contemporary urgency. The museum becomes a collision between ancient and modern trauma — and a space for ironic, defiant beauty.

Works in this section



Myth 2013

Ceramic, Stoneware, 4 editions | L 135 × H 50 × W 5 cm



***The Fall of Palmyra* 2013**

Ceramic, Stoneware, 4 editions | L 66 × H 36 × D 5 cm | Edition: 2/4

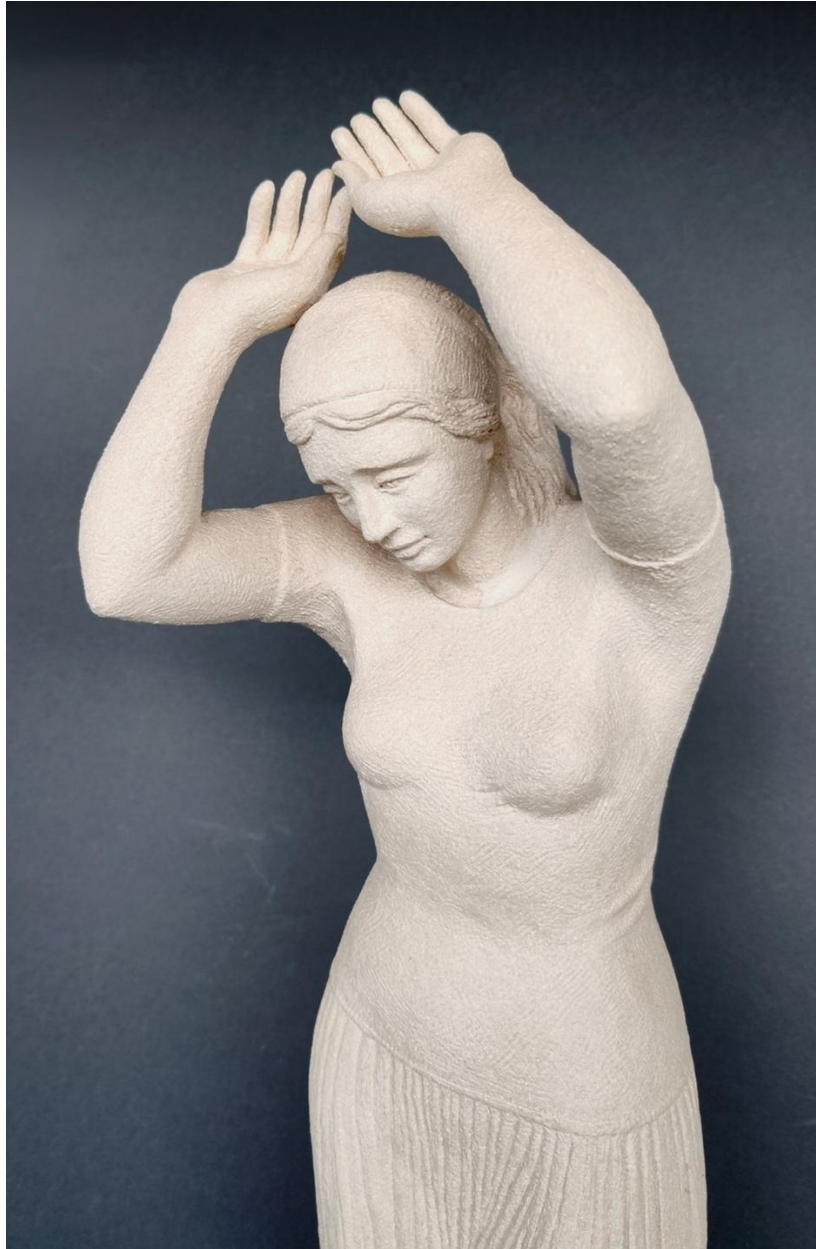


***Shattered* 2026**

Ceramic, Stoneware | H 25 × D 70 cm

***The Music* 2014**

Ceramic, Stoneware | H 60 × W 22 × L 25 cm

***Stop the Bombs* 2013**

Ceramic, Stoneware, 4 editions | H 71 × L 19 × W 19 cm

***Europa*** 2005

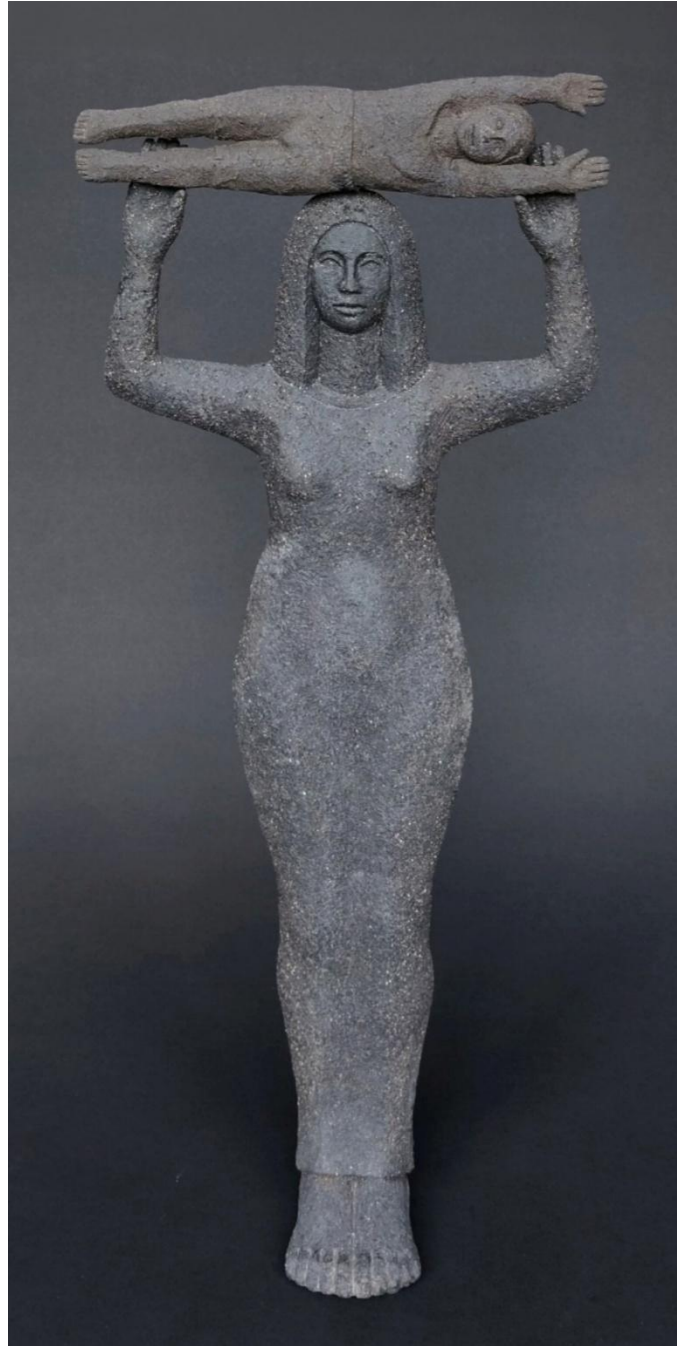
Ceramic, Stoneware | H 29 × D 39 cm

***Europa – The Myth* 2014**

Bronze, 8 editions | L 31 × H 30 × W 12 cm | Edition: 3/8

***The Alchemist* 2015**

Bronze, 8 editions | L 28 × H 28 × W 20 cm | Edition: 1/8

**Isis 2025**

Ceramic, Stoneware | L 14 × H 52 × W 23 cm



***Mother of Knowledge* 2025**

Bronze, 8 editions | L 11 × H 45 × W 22 cm | Edition: 1, 2/8



***Adam & Eve* 2023**

Ceramic, Stoneware | L 23 × H 32 × W 17 cm

***Eye Idols* 2023**

Ceramic, Stoneware | H 32 x D 50 cm

***Nu Shabtis* 2013**

Egyptian Faience | L 40 × H 25 × W 40 cm

***Planet Corona*** 2020

Ceramic, Stoneware | D 28 cm

T H E M E T W O

Allegory & Animals

In Taj-Eddin's symbolic world, the bull dominates, the sheep obeys, and the goat — his alter ego — refuses. These archetypes draw on a long tradition of political allegory in Arabic literature, from the eighth-century fables of Kalilah wa Dimnah to the satirical poetry of al-Ma'arri, in which animal imagery gave artists a language to speak truths that direct speech could not safely carry.

Growing up under dictatorship in Syria, Taj-Eddin learned the necessity of allegory as a subversive tool. In Dialogue, a sheep approaches a bull to ask for its freedom. The encounter is unequal; freedom is not granted. Yet the sheep walks away with its head held high — resistance lying not in victory, but in the dignity of asking. Gaza extends this language further, where a watermelon — long a symbol of Palestinian identity — becomes the precarious ground on which power and defiance are balanced.

In Sheep Go to Lampedusa, a herd pressed tightly together recalls the desperate sea crossings of refugees, set aboard an ark that echoes both Noah and Babylonian myth. These sculptures are not closed chapters. They speak to recurring cycles — domination, displacement, rebellion — that endure across centuries.

Works in this section



The Herd 2013

Bronze, 8 editions | L 59 × W 21 × H 10 cm | Edition: 1/8



Pride 2014

Ceramic, Stoneware | H 29 × D 39 cm

***Dialogue*** 2013

Bronze, 8 editions | H 22 × L 44 × W 12 cm | Edition: 4/8



***Confrontation* 2026**

Ceramic, Stoneware | D 50 × H 8 cm



***Going in Circles* 2021**

Ceramic, Stoneware | D 19 × H 15 cm



***The Sheep Go to Lampedusa* 2015**

Bronze, 8 editions | L 39 × W 22 × H 16 cm | Edition: 4/8



***Siege / Worship?* 2021**

Ceramic, Stoneware | D 25 × H 13 cm

***Tangled* 2013**

Bronze, 8 editions | L 24 × H 34 × W 20 cm | Edition: 5/8

***Moment of Victory* 2013**

Ceramic, Stoneware | H 55 × L 55 × W 19 cm



***Gaza* 2024**

Ceramic, Stoneware | L 34 × H 21 × W 10 cm

***Victory* 2025**

Ceramic, Stoneware | H 32 × L 36 × W 9 cm

T H E M E T H R E E

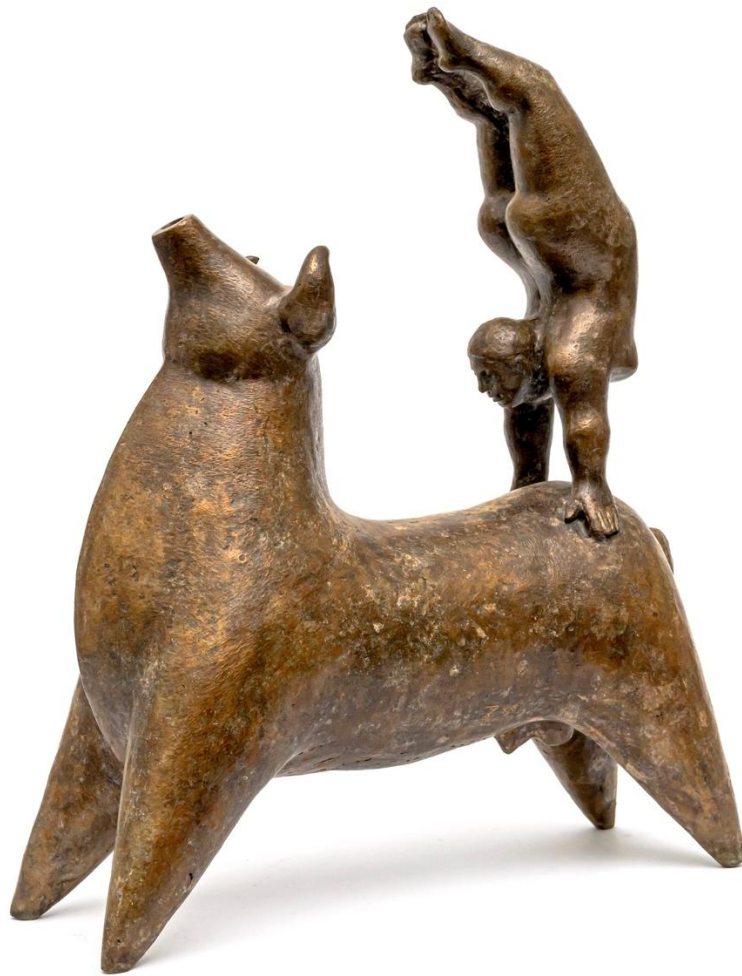
Eternal Females

The female figure stands at the heart of Taj-Eddin's practice. His women are creators, survivors, healers, and carriers of wisdom — counterforces to the bulls of domination and the cycles of war. They embody what endures: not triumph, but persistence; not power, but balance.

As an archaeologist, Taj-Eddin has held in his hands figurines of Inanna, Astarte, Hathor, and Isis — ancient talismans of life and protection. These are not inert relics to him but ancestral presences, returning in his studio as bronze and ceramic women who embody cycles of care and resistance. In *Isis and Mother of Knowledge*, the goddess of rebirth reappears. In *Destination Unknown* and *Boat Journey*, women move forward through displacement with quiet dignity. In *Baraka/Plenty*, the gesture of offering and shelter becomes an act of resistance in itself.

Woman of Gaza and *Departure* speak of bearing witness to devastation while continuing to move — not despite tragedy, but carrying it. In an era of accelerated forgetting, these figures insist on another temporality: they slow us down, remind us that the present is layered and sedimentary, and affirm that beauty, care, and endurance are not incidental to history — they are history.

Works in this section



Bull Leaping 2017

Bronze, 8 editions | H 32 × L 41 × W 12 cm | Edition: 2/8



***Unknown Destination* 2017**

Bronze, 8 editions | L 30 × H 29 × W 16 cm | Edition: 2/8

***Connection*** 2020

Ceramic, Stoneware | L 40 × H 28 × W 10 cm



***Baraka / Plenty* 2018**

Bronze, 8 editions | H 32 × L 12 × W 12 cm | Edition: 3/8



Departure 2024

Ceramic, Stoneware | L 50 × H 35 × W 14 cm

***Harmony* 2025**

Ceramic, Stoneware | L 60 × H 37 × W 15 cm

***Boat Journey* 2020**

Ceramic, Stoneware | L 40 × H 13 × W 12 cm



By the Horns 2018

Ceramic, Stoneware | L 34 × H 31 × W 13 cm



Bull Leaping 2 2026

Ceramic | H 28 × L 27 × W 11 cm

***Woman of Gaza* 2024**

Ceramic, Stoneware | H 31 × W 14 × L 13 cm

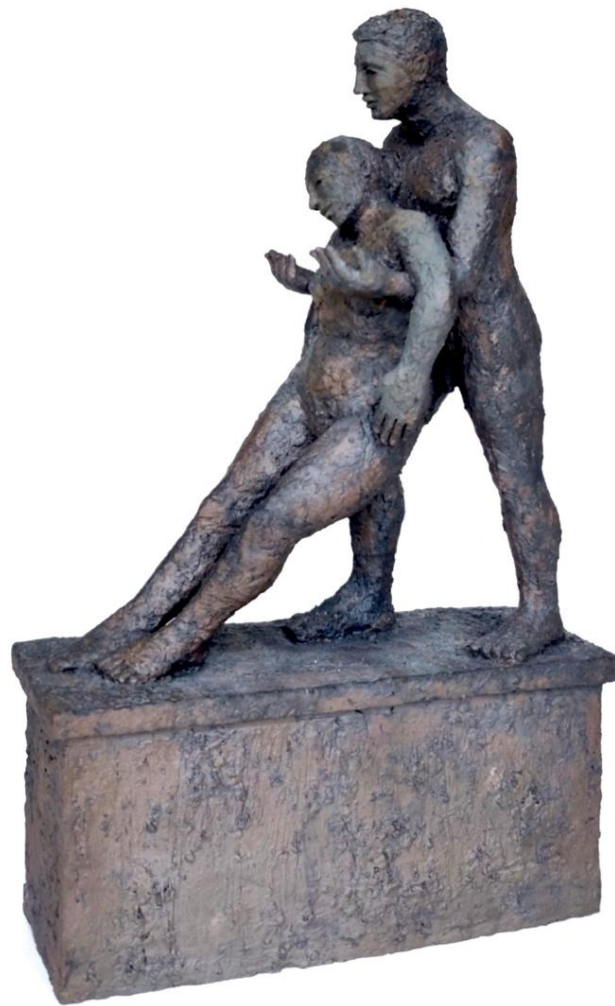
***Funeral* 2013**

Ceramic, Stoneware | H 37 × L 25 × W 11 cm



An Egyptian 1996

Ceramic, Stoneware | H 30 × L 22 × W 22 cm



Support 2020

Ceramic, Stoneware | L 22 × H 35 × W 12 cm

B I O G R A P H Y

Zahed Taj-Eddin



Born in Aleppo in 1965, Zahed Taj-Eddin studied Fine Art and Sculpture at the Fatehy-Mohamad College of Fine Art in Aleppo, and holds a BSc in Applied Chemistry from the University of Aleppo, an MA in Artefact Studies from UCL's Institute of Archaeology, and a PhD from the University of Westminster, where his research focused on ancient Egyptian faience technologies. He currently serves as an Honorary Research Associate at UCL, collaborating on research in ancient vitreous technologies and experimental archaeology.

Leaving Syria in 1989, Taj-Eddin lived in Germany and Italy before settling in London, where he continues to live and work. This dual expertise — as sculptor and scientist — gives his art what he describes as 'an ongoing, ironic dialogue between modern and ancient.' His work is held in international collections, including the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Education

- 2009 – 2014** PhD, University of Westminster, London — Egyptian Faience: Ancient Making Methods and Consideration of Technical Challenges in Sculptural Practice
- 2005 – 2006** MA in Artefact Studies, Institute of Archaeology, UCL, London
- 2004 – 2005** Professional Development Certificate in Ceramic, Kensington & Chelsea College, London
- 1982 – 1993** BSc in Applied Chemistry, University of Aleppo, Syria
- 1982 – 1985** Fine Art & Sculpture, Fatehy-Mohamad College of Fine Art, Aleppo, Syria

Selected Exhibitions

- 2025** Solo exhibition, Excavating the Present, Yassin Gallery, Cairo, Egypt
- 2025** Display at Making Egypt, Young V&A Museum, London, UK
- 2024** Solo installation, Egyptian Faience: An Alchemy for Afterlife, The Atkinson, Southport, UK
- 2021** Group exhibition, V&A Museum, London, UK
- 2017** Solo installation, Shabtis: Suspended Truth, Manchester Museum, UK
- 2017** Group show, Home from Home, Contemporary Applied Arts, London, UK
- 2016** Solo show, Archaeological Investigations, Oto Reifschneider Gallery, Brasilia, Brazil
- 2016** Solo show, Nu-Shabtis Liberation & Intervention, Beyond Beauty, Two Temple Place, London, UK

- 2015** Solo show, Mythologies and Fables, Salo Nobre, House of Parliament, Brasilia, Brazil
- 2015** Permanent display, V&A Museum, London, UK
- 2014** Solo show, Nu-Shabtis Liberation, Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, London, UK
- 2014** Solo show, Mythologies, Gallery Al Markhiya, Doha, Qatar
- 2006** Solo show, Inspired by Antiquities, Archea Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 2005** Selected and exhibited, V&A Museum, London, UK

Selected Publications

- 2021** Research featured in TV documentary, Unearthed: Egyptian Blue Pigment, Discovery Channel
- 2020** Research featured in TV documentary, Unearthed: Tower of Babel — New Evidence, Discovery Channel
- 2019** Research featured in TV documentary, Egypt Unexplained Files, Science Channel
- 2017** Co-author, Shabtis: Suspended Truth (booklet), Manchester Museum
- 2015** Research featured in TV documentary, Treasures of Ancient Egypt, BBC4
- 2014** PhD publication: Egyptian Faience: Ancient Making Methods and Consideration of Technical Challenges in Sculptural Practice
- 2011** Article in Ceramic Review, issue 252: Cuneiform Tablets — Texts from the Past
- 2010** Article in Visual Communication, vol. 9, no. 3: Mechanical Reproduction in the Age of the Artwork? Faience and 5000 Moulds from 14th-Century BC Egypt

C R E D I T S

Acknowledgements

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At The Atkinson, Zahed is deeply grateful to Principal Manager David Tetlow for his vision and commitment in bringing this exhibition to Southport; to Curator Joanne Chamberlain for her care, dedication, and thoughtful stewardship of the project; and to Marketing Manager Charlotte Buckingham for her elegant publication design, editing and proof-reading. Warm thanks also go to all members of staff at The Atkinson whose work, seen and unseen, makes exhibitions like this possible. This exhibition has been made possible with the generous support of Sefton Council.

His gratitude extends to the foundries, without whose skill and craftsmanship these works could not exist: Bronze Age Foundry, London; Bronze International Foundry, Cairo; and Boulos Bizre Foundry, Beirut. Thanks also to colleagues at Culford Studios for their continued support and good company throughout the making process.

Finally, and above all, Zahed thanks his family: his mother, his sisters, Anna, Hamdi, and Saami.

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