



PART TWO
CONTEMPORARY
ARAB ARTISTS
AT BALTIC
ADEL ABIDIN



INTRODUCTION

ADEL ABIDIN

Adel Abidin undertook the first residency, as part of the Arab Artists in Residence programme at BALTIC during October and November 2008.

Adel Abidin was born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1973. He studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad, before moving to Finland in 2000. He completed a Masters degree at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki, Finland, in 2005.

Abidin has exhibited widely throughout Europe, the Middle East and North America. In 2007 he represented Finland at the 52nd Venice Biennial, a major international exhibition of art. Abidin lives and works in Helsinki, Finland.

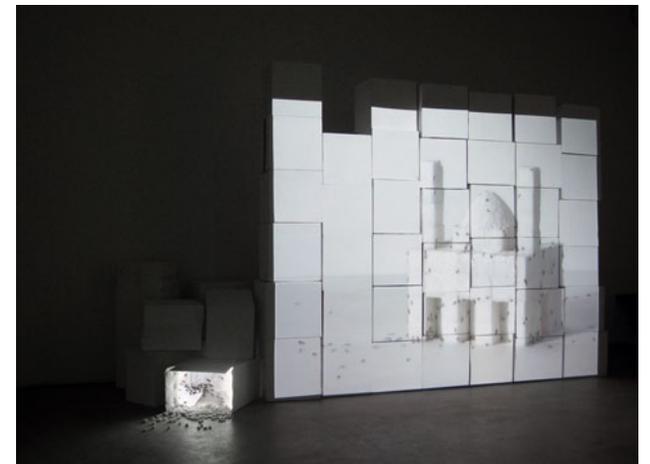


ABOUT THE WORK

“The main topics I deal with are of a political nature. This is sometimes attributed to the fact that I am of Iraqi origin, but I believe we truly live in political times, regardless of geographical position...” Adel Abidin.

Adel Abidin creates work in a range of different media, including video, video installation and film. He began his art career creating paintings, but changed to working with the moving image following his Masters degree in Helsinki.

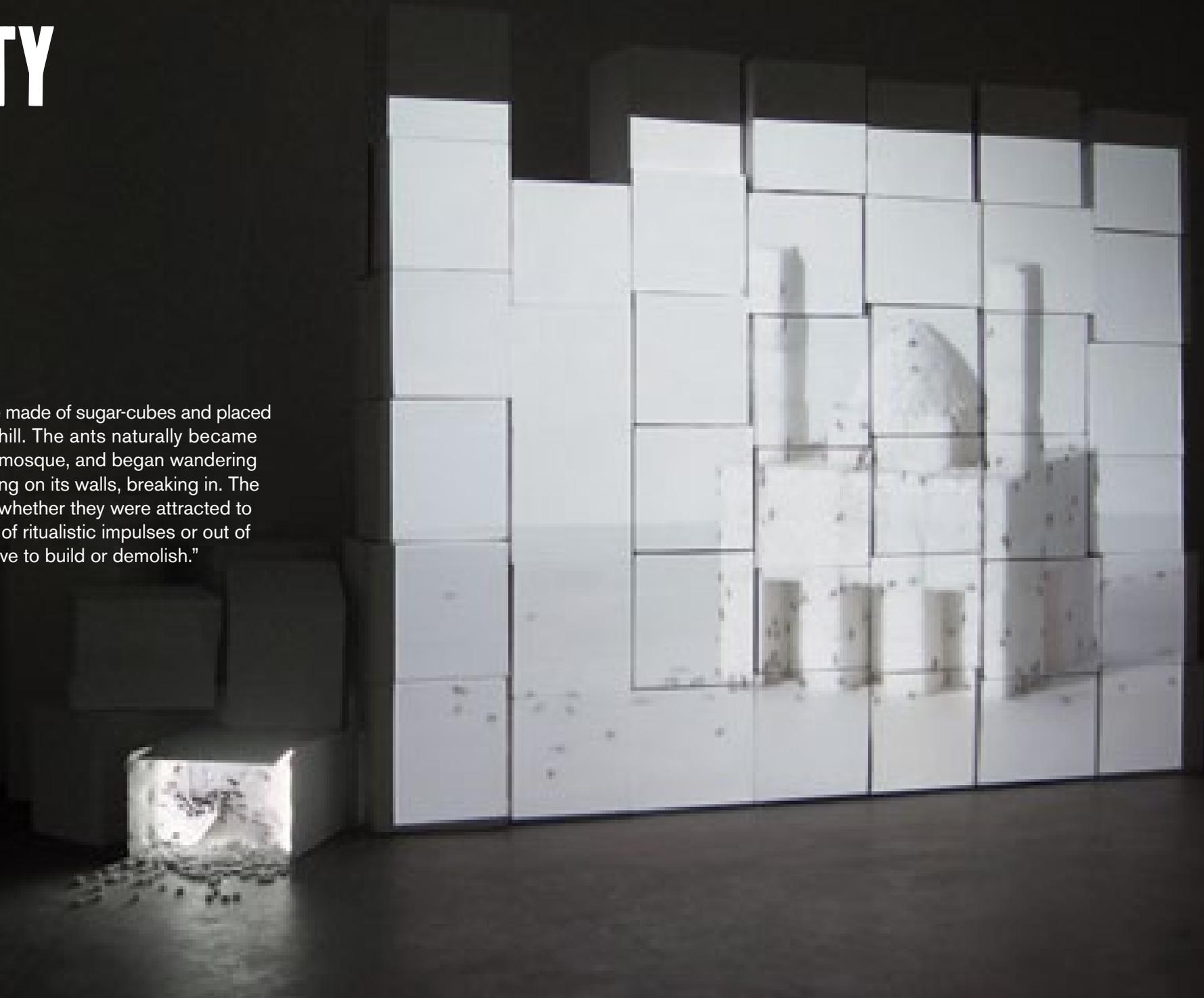
His work deals with political subjects, including identity, nationalism and religion. Abidin uses humour, sarcasm and irony when addressing these subjects, and reflects on his personal experience of both his upbringing in Baghdad, and his life in exile in Finland. The following slides present documentation of six art works by Adel Abidin.



TASTY

Adel Abidin

"I built a mosque made of sugar-cubes and placed it next to an anthill. The ants naturally became attracted to the mosque, and began wandering around it, climbing on its walls, breaking in. The question arises whether they were attracted to the mosque out of ritualistic impulses or out of a baser imperative to build or demolish."



TASTY

About the work

Tasty is a video installation, produced by Adel Abidin in 2007. When an artist presents a video work in a gallery space it is typically shown on a monitor or as a projected image. A video installation will present the video in this way, but also take into account the rest of the space in which the video is shown. An installation is an art work which occupies an entire room or space, creating an environment which the viewer can walk around.

For this piece, the artist has used sugar cubes to make a small building which represents a mosque, the Muslim place of worship. He has then placed the sugar cubes next to an anthill and recorded the resulting activity to create a short video.

In the gallery space, the video is projected onto a wall made up of white cardboard boxes which resemble the sugar cubes.

One of the boxes has fallen over to reveal some spilled sugar cubes and a second video which is playing inside the box.

Abidin is using the elements of the video symbolically to comment on the religion of Islam. As with other religions, Muslims practice their faith to different extents and hold different opinions about the role religion should have in society.

Things to think about

Watch the video excerpt of *Tasty*
<http://www.adelabidin.com/index.php>

- How important do you think the sound is in this work?

In my opinion

Look at the image which shows how the video installation is presented in the gallery space. Think about the experience of the viewer visiting the space. How do you think this method of presentation is different to watching the video on a computer monitor?

COLD INTERROGATION



COLD INTERROGATION

About the work

“Since I left my home country Iraq in 2000, I am dealing daily with different questions about my identity”. Adel Abidin

Cold Interrogation is a video installation which could be seen as Abidin's attempt to express his thoughts and feelings about being questioned.

The work consists of a video playing on a monitor, inside the artist's own fridge. The fridge shows a Finnish man asking a series of questions which have been asked of the artist by different people since he has lived in Finland. Rather than answering these questions, Abidin leaves us thinking about the experience of being asked them.

The questions include:

- How did you end up in Finland?
- How is the situation in Iraq right now?
- What do you think of Osama Bin Laden?
- How does it feel to ride a camel?
- Are you with the war, do you support it?
- What do you think of the suicide bombers?
- What do you think of the Americans?

Things to think about

Watch the video excerpt of Cold Interrogation <http://www.adelabidin.com/index.php>

- Is the title of the work important?
- Does it give you any clues about the artist's thoughts and feelings?
- What difficulties might you face when you move from one country, to a new country with a different language and culture?
- Discuss this in small groups and write down your thoughts.
- If you know somebody in this situation, you could ask if they are willing to share their thoughts and experiences.

In my opinion

- When you meet somebody for the first time, how important is it to know where they are from?
- Is your nationality a useful way of describing your identity?

VACUUM



VACUUM

About the work

Vacuum is a video installation, made up of a video projection and a large sheet of cracked safety glass. The viewer is presented with the humorous sight of the artist, standing alone in a vast landscape in Finland, hoovering up the snow. Abidin stands on the frozen sea and slowly uncovers a small patch of ice. He struggles with the seemingly impossible task of hoovering up all of the snow, and trying to make a difference to the country in which he lives.

It is surprising to see somebody hoovering outside, as this is normally a domestic activity done inside the home. People who are seen hoovering in public places would normally be working as cleaners, a job which is typically low paid and can often be undertaken by immigrants to a community.

Things to think about

Watch the video excerpt of *Vacuum*
<http://www.adelabidin.com/index.php>

- What are your immediate feelings about the art work?
- Look at the image which shows how the video installation is presented in the gallery space.
- Why do you think the artist has chosen to use a sheet of cracked glass?

In my opinion

Abidin says that he suffered through the winter in Finland.

- Is the weather important?
- In what ways do you think the weather affects people's lives?



JIHAD

JIHAD

About the work

Jihad is a video piece which shows a man dressed as a mujahid, a Muslim fighter, wearing a scarf across his face. The man is standing in front of the American flag which is painted on the wall.

This scene refers to images often seen in news coverage on television and in newspapers, including that connected with the war in Iraq. After reciting a message from the Qur'an, the sacred book of Islam, this man picks up a guitar and sings a famous American folk song called '*This land is my land*', originally sung by Woody Guthrie. The word 'jihad' is originally from an Arabic word meaning 'effort'.

Muslims believe that there are two types of jihad, one relating to an inner struggle with oneself and the other meaning a struggle to protect Islam. The word is sometimes translated as meaning 'holy war' in the discussion of radical Islamic fundamentalists who believe that society should be run in strict accordance with Islamic law. The term 'holy war' is used to describe the war they wage against non-Islamic societies.

Things to think about

Look at a still image of the work.

- Have you seen an image like this before?
- What do you think about the man in the image?
- What do you expect to happen?

Now watch a video excerpt from Jihad <http://www.adelabidin.com/index.php>

- What are your feelings about the work?
- Was the video different to your expectations?
- Do we know the nationality of the man in the video?

In my opinion

It can be argued that the way in which Arabs are represented by the Western media is biased and conforms to a negative stereotype, by frequently presenting Arabs in the context of terrorism.

The Council for Arab British Understanding have produced a range of teaching resources, including 'Stereotypes in Action', which are available on their website.

www.caabu.org

CONSTRUCTION SITE



CONSTRUCTION SITE

About the work

Construction Site is an installation, centred around a video which shows a close up scene of an Iraqi girl playing with small stones and chipped concrete in a street in Baghdad. We can only see the feet of the girl, who is wearing pink sandals, and her hands as she pours stones from one plastic spoon to another, and sings a song. The video is presented as part of an installation. A pile of rubble lies in front of the monitor, which has been placed on the floor, forcing the viewer to crouch down to see the screen.

Things to think about

Watch a video excerpt from Construction Site <http://www.adelabidin.com/index.php>

- The artist has chosen only to show the girl's hands and feet.
- The video communicates a sense of what the girl is doing and how she is feeling without ever showing the viewer her face.
- When an artist decides how to create a piece of work, as well as deciding what to include, it can also be important to decide what to leave out.

In my opinion

The girl is singing a song in Arabic, her native language. These are the lyrics of her song:

*Dear moon, Why do you appear like a song
about loneliness,
when he has been gone for so long?
My memories are coming back to me,
like colourful rays of time, making it easier for me
to express my longing for him,
when I feel so empty inside.
The rays follow me wherever I go,
The colourful rays will lead me there one day.*

- How do you think the lyrics relate to the girl in the video?
- Does it matter whether you understand the lyrics of the song when you watch the video?
- Do they change your thoughts and feelings about the work?

COMMON VOCABULARY

قتل جماعي

QATIL JAMAA' IY

GENOCIDE

COMMON VOCABULARY

About the work

Common Vocabularies is a video installation which shows a seven year old Iraqi girl learning how to pronounce a series of words. The words that the girl is saying are written on a series of cards in Arabic and English. They include death, no water, occupation, abduction, and no electricity. All of the words relate to growing up in a country during a period of time when a war is taking place, in an environment that can be dangerous and violent.

In 2003 a coalition of forces led by the USA and the UK invaded Iraq. The decision to go to war was controversial and many people argued against it. Sanctions against Iraq had been in place since 1990, shortly before the Gulf war, which means that trade between Iraq and other countries was very limited. This effected the living conditions in Iraq by severely restricting the availability of food, everyday goods, equipment and medicines. Sanctions were lifted in 2003. The USA transferred power to an Iraqi government in 2004, though foreign troops are still present in the country.

Things to think about

Look at video stills from Common Vocabulary <http://www.adelabidin.com/index.php>

- What do you think it might be like to grow up during a time of war?
- What do the words on the cards tell us about what day to day life might be like?

In my opinion

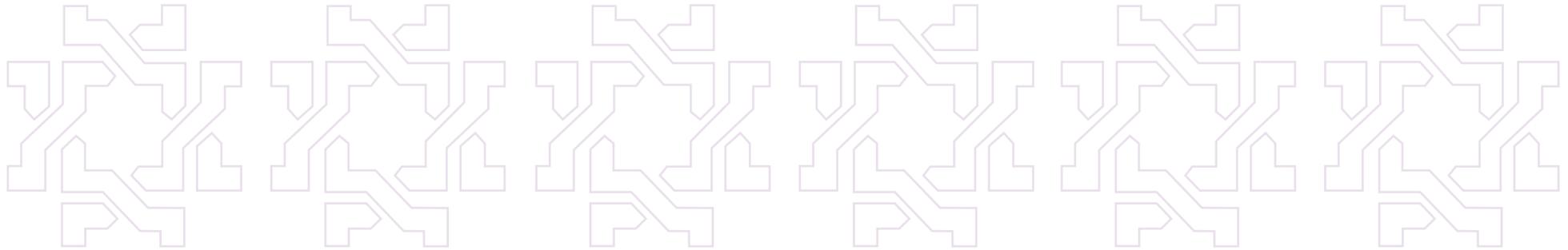
- How are the cards presented with the video?

For further information about the life of children and young people in Iraq, see the links at the end of this resource.

LITERACY KEY WORDS



HERE'S ONE I MADE EARLIER...



For this activity, small groups of learners will be given a word and asked to make a short video clip which represents that word. It could last anything from 30 seconds to five minutes! Each video clip could be based on filming small models or images made from clay and paper, or it might involve speaking and acting out a scene in front of the camera.

Before the activity...

- Assemble a range of materials, such as coloured paper, black and white card, pens, pencils, plasticine, modelling clay, cardboard, string etc.
- Give each group of learners one word from the list, along with the definition of that word. You could use the list provided, choose words of your own, or ask learners to choose their own words.

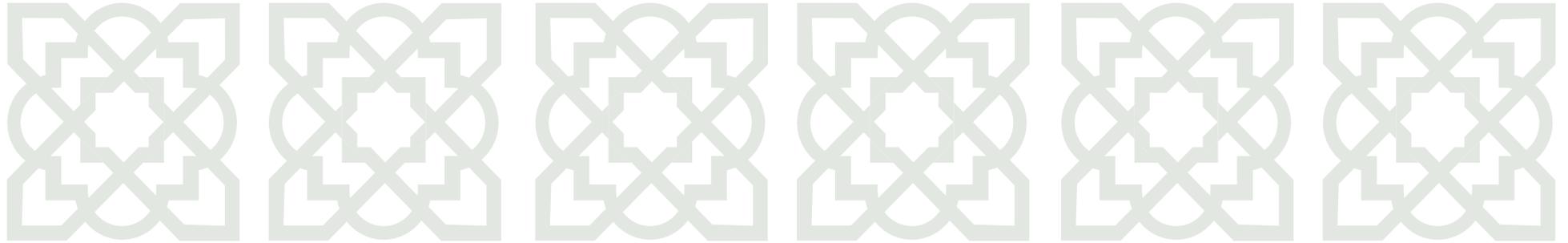
The activity...

- Discuss the meaning of your word with the rest of your group. Have you heard the word before? What things does the word bring to mind? What does the word mean to you? Does it relate to any aspect of your life or life in your community? Write down your ideas.
- Now think about how you might make a video clip to represent your word. What objects, scenes or scenarios might symbolise the word and convey your ideas about what the word means? Use a material, such as paper or modelling clay to help you think of ideas. Try to make or draw different objects or scenes that you have been talking about. Try to come up with lots of ideas and then think about which will work well and which will not. Remember that you don't have to decide what to do straight away.

Here are some possible ways to work...

- Build a box from card, in which you can create a scene from plasticine models, or objects and people cut out of paper. If you would like some of your objects or images to move try attaching them to sticks or transparent thread.
- Write a script for a scene which your group will act out and make props to go with it.
- Work in your group to finalise your ideas, and make or organise everything you will need to start shooting your video.
- Use a simple video camera to record a short video of between thirty seconds and five minutes.

HERE'S ONE I MADE EARLIER...



Things to consider when shooting your video:

Light:

- Position the camera and whatever is being filmed so the light is behind the camera.

Filming:

- Allocate one person in your group to be in charge of filming. They should operate the camera and communicate clearly with the rest of the group to say when filming is starting and ending.
- Avoid camera shake by resting the camera on a table, sturdy object or use a tripod to prevent the image from wobbling around.
- When you are operating the camera have a close look to see what is and what is not included within the frame of the camera. Think about the composition of the image you are filming.

Sound:

- Take it in turns to shoot each groups video whilst the rest of the class is silent, so the camera does not pick up any unwanted sound.
- If people are speaking in your video, try to speak loudly and clearly. Be confident.

Your videos can now be edited. If you do not have the facilities to do this in your school, you can still watch what you have filmed by plugging the video camera straight in to a monitor.

Take it further...

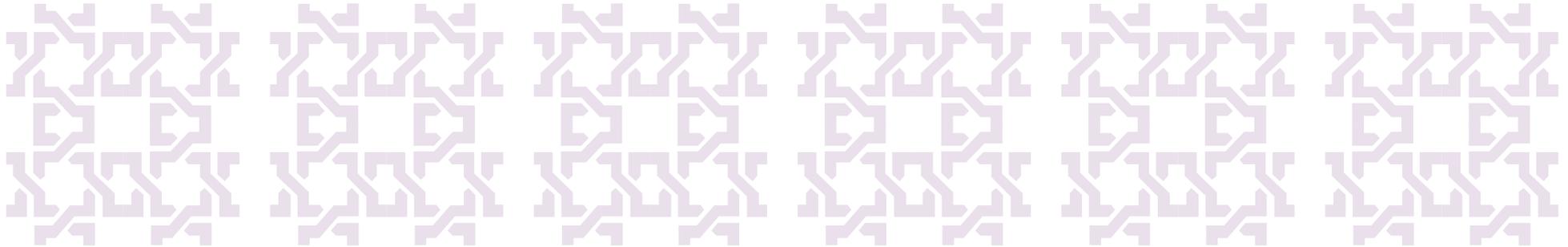
Working individually, consider how you would present the video clip your group have produced.

Design a video installation which will incorporate your video clip, to be shown in an art gallery. Your video could be shown on a monitor or as a projected image. A video installation also takes into account the rest of the space in which the video is shown. The video could be combined with physical objects, projected on to different surfaces, or displayed at different angles and heights.

Create a miniature room or gallery space using card or use the inside of a cardboard box.

Use coloured paper, pens, pencils and any other materials you feel are appropriate to present your idea for how to present your video clip.

HERE'S ONE I MADE EARLIER...



Things to consider:

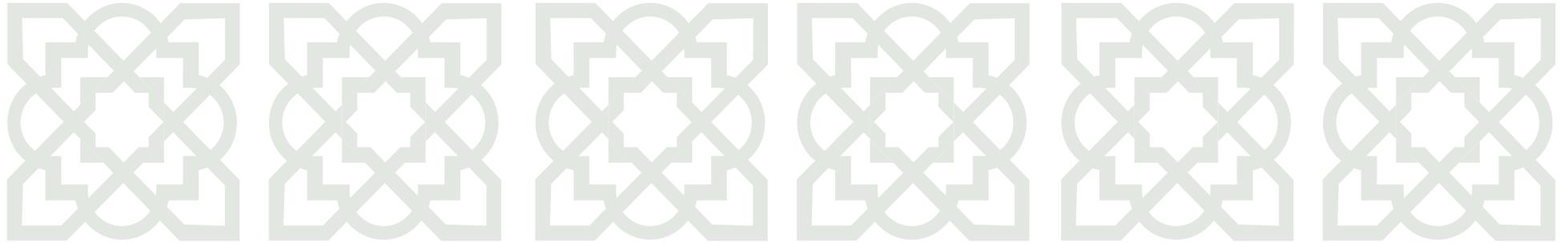
- The size of the video image. Will you present your video on a TV screen, project it on a small scale or to fill an entire wall? Where will the viewer be when they are looking at your video? Will the size of the projected image be larger or smaller than the viewer?
- Will you display your video at eye level, or will it be near the floor, the ceiling, or in a corner? How will you decide?
- Will there be any other objects or materials in the space?

- Is sound an important element of your video?
- Will your video be shown in a space with white walls? Will you change the colour and lighting of the space?

When you have finished, put your miniature room or gallery next to those made by other people in your group. Look at your ideas for presenting the same video. Discuss the differences and similarities between them. Which do you feel works well and why?



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