

MUSTAPHA AKRIM

Morocco

Nicholas Schoen & Samuel Warren

Addressing social and political issues, Mustapha Akrim (b. 1981, Sale, Morocco) belongs to a new generation of visual artists in Morocco. He received his diploma from the Institut National des Beaux-Arts de Tétouan in 2008 and has lived and worked in Rabat and Sale ever since. His first solo exhibition took place in 2011 at L'Appartement 22 in Rabat, and he has recently participated in workshops and residencies in several countries, including Jordan, France, South Korea, Namibia, and—with the award of a Mellon Creative Residency at Haverford College—in the United States. For the 2014 Marrakech Biennale, Akrim produced a commissioned work, the sculpture *Two Powers* (Fig. 1). The related drawing of the same name is included in this exhibition.



Akrim deals with issues of labor and lack of opportunity within his home country, in particular problems of unemployment, poor education, and a need for freedom of speech. Morocco has a high rate of unemployment, especially among the population of recent college graduates who protest daily in opposition to their plight. In his works, Akrim uses specific articles from the Moroccan Constitution in order to shed light on these existing societal issues. One of his earliest and best-known works takes as its subject *Article 13*, which states: “All citizens have equal rights of education and employment.” Akrim challenges the validity of the guarantee by literally rendering it concrete—an overt reference to the construction work of his father, the sort of work that Akrim had to turn to for lack of any other career opportunity.

Conceptually similar to *Article 13*, Akrim’s *Article 25 (2) (Arabic version)* is also rendered in concrete. It reads, “All citizens have the freedom of thought, ideas, artistic expression, and creation,” and is taken from the most recent draft of the Moroccan Constitution, which was promulgated in 2011 at the behest of the present King, Mohammed VI. Intended to lend an air of liberalization to the Moroccan monarchy in the face of the arrival of Arab Spring protests, the new constitution, claims Akrim, is just as meaningless as the old; its words are lofty but its effects are few. *Article 25* is of special interest to an artist eager to express himself freely in a country where censorship exists, and artists (and all Moroccans) must still tread carefully. In addition, Moroccan arts education is minimal, and the arts receive little funding. Like *Article 13*, *Article 25 (2)* is cast in concrete, referencing the difficulty many Moroccan artists encounter in earning a living. Its zero-like shape refers to the empty promises of the Moroccan government.

Two Powers is a charcoal drawing of a large sculpture of the same name, cast in asphalt and exhibited at the sixteenth-century Palais Badi for the 2014 Marrakech Biennale. The sculpture is an enlargement of a coin minted in Tétouan in the year 1195 of the Islamic calendar (approximately 1780 C.E.) (Fig. 2), which features a Qur’anic text warning against the excessive accumulation of wealth: “This is the (treasure) which ye buried for yourselves, taste ye then the (treasures) ye buried.” The work is a comment on the competing allures of money and religion in the Islamic world. In the sculptural version, the asphalt gives off a distinct smell of oil – “black gold,” our era’s version of yesteryear’s lucre.