



# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



## My Rock Stars Experimental: Hassan Hajjaj Creates a Global Stage

BY [JENNA FITE](#)

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“HE’S VERY INTERNATIONAL, I think, in how he draws in different strands but creates something that is unique.”

I am speaking with Dr. Linda Komaroff, Curator and Department Head of the Art of the Middle East Department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, about [My Rock Stars Experimental, Volume 1](#), a video installation by Moroccan artist and photographer Hassan Hajjaj. Komaroff has brought more than two-hundred works of contemporary Middle Eastern art to LACMA, making it one of, if not the largest collection of this type of art in the United States. *My Rock Stars Experimental, Volume 1* is one of her latest acquisitions, and I’m curious to find out what sparked her interest.

“It just has a certain energy to it. He manages to capture the intensity of the colors of North Africa, even when he’s not working in North Africa. This video, I believe, was all shot in London, but it has the same kind of high, exaggerated colors.”

The work itself is a three-channel video which displays nine separately filmed performances by people Hajjaj knows and admires, his own “rock stars.” The performers pose against brightly colored backgrounds dressed in traditional fabrics mixed with contemporary flare. Komaroff explains that the performers are positioned to turn towards whoever is performing so it appears as if they were filmed at the same place and time. Hajjaj sets up his backgrounds on the street, some sequences show leaves blowing by, or a dog wandering on set.



**WATCH: An excerpt from My Rockstars Experimental, Volume 1**

The group of performers is wonderfully eclectic. There are two British-Jamaican Muslim women known as “Poetic Pilgrimage,” Jose James is a singer from New York, the Nigerian singer-songwriter who calls herself “The Venus Bushfires,” and the London-based Moroccan musician Simo Lagnawi, a renowned performer of Gnawa, traditional African-Islamic spiritual songs and rhythms. In the excerpt above, Venezuelan singer Luzmira Zerpa performs the merengue, “El dia que yo me case” (“The day I get married”).

“It’s an international group of performers, I think what ties them together is that Hassan Hajjaj admires their

That energy in Hajjaj’s work is what drew me in too. The vibrant colors and his choice in subjects; I was instantly mesmerized. His still frames from this project, as well as [Kesh Angels](#), reminded me of the portraiture of [Malick Sidibé](#) and [Seydou Keita](#), two photographers I came to admire during my time as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Mali. They, alongside other African portrait photographers, were influencers of Hajjaj’s own style. According to Komaroff, he draws on not only their style, but their method, working with a studio set up outside to take in natural light.

Interestingly enough, Komaroff sees Hajjaj’s work, and contemporary Middle East art in general, as having a close relationship to the type of art she studied in graduate school—historical Islamic art. “When I saw the video, it made me think, wow if music videos existed in 15th century Morocco, this is what it would look like. I saw it as being very much tied to earlier traditions, so it’s exciting for me to see a completely contemporary art medium, which is a music video, but tied to something I was very familiar with.”

In the context of LACMA’s Islamic Art Collection as a whole, it is essential. She believes, “it provides a perfect link between the past and present.”

My Rock Stars Experimental, Volume 1 is [an ongoing exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#).