

The Middle East makes a showing at the Venice Biennale

June 2, 2011, by CHRISTOPHER LORD



The Pavilion of the United Arab Emirates at the 54th International Art Exhibition - la Biennale di Venezia features "Second Time Around. Photo Courtesy Three PR

If the art world has a true spiritual home, then it is the Venice Biennale. Now in its 54th outing, the event is as much a pulse-check of where contemporary art is heading as a biennial barn dance for the international scene's big players to meet, network and ruminate.

The doors open today for industry insiders - a horde of curators, collectors, critics and artists who regularly make their pilgrimage to the red-roofed wonder-on-the-sea that is Venice, before the exhibition opens to the public on June 4. The Biennale is host to a record 89 national participations this year and six of these are from countries in the Middle East.

Swiss critic and art historian Bice Curiger has been appointed visual arts director for this year's Biennale. This means in addition to creating an expansive show of works that sums

GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK

up her vision for the Biennale, she is involved in the selection and approval of the applications from national participants.

Organised according to national pavilions - a debated remnant of the Biennale's more competitive origins - the pronounced Middle Eastern presence comes from the UAE, Egypt, Iran, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, who each have a space to present some of the foremost talent in their respective countries. Curiger's vision for the Biennale has culminated in a theme titled ILLUMInations, and her acknowledgement of the event's importance as a space of inter-nation dialogue explains the overwhelming Middle Eastern presence in the event this year.

"ILLUMInations will focus on the 'light' of the illuminating experience," Curiger explains. "Focusing on the epiphanies that come with intercommunicative, intellectual comprehension."



The Pavilion of the United Arab Emirates at the 54th International Art Exhibition - la Biennale di Venezia features "Second Time Around. Photo Courtesy Three PR

The UAE's appearance at the last Biennale signified that the Emirates was ready to be taken seriously as a fixture on the international art scene. The UAE made a double debut in 2009, with both a national pavilion and a platform curated by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, used partly to showcase the cultural projects being developed across the country. Under the direction of Tirdad Zolghadr, the 2009 national pavilion functioned partly as an exploration of national identity. Second Time Around, as the UAE's 2011 participation has been dubbed, will be no less exciting.

At the curatorial helm is Vasif Kortun, a Turkish curator, who has selected three significant Emirati talents. Artist and designer Reem al Ghaith exhibits this year,

GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK

presenting a work specially produced for the participation, alongside the photographer Latifa bint Maktoum, known for the dream-like scenes she crafts. Joining them is Abdullah al Saadi, from Khorfakkan, whose work hums with exuberance for the rural environment around him. Al Saadi participated in the Sharjah Biennial this year, with some fantastic painted works he'd created following a grand hike through the mountains of the Northern Emirates.

If there were ever a tough act to follow, the popping, whirring, huffing and puffing of artist Ayse Erkmen's machine - an insane spaghetti of multicoloured pipes that is Turkey's national presentation this year - would certainly be it. But while the UAE pavilion just next door may be a more sober affair, it's better off for it and shows maturity in its second Venice presence.

Both the UAE and Saudi pavilions opened for their industry preview yesterday in Venice's bare-brick Arsenale space. The fact of two GCC representations at Venice points to the increasing importance of the Gulf in the art world.

Second Time Around is an exacting approach to presenting our blossoming art scene to the world. Kortun chose simply to present three fine Emirati talents - there is no all-abiding curatorial theme. Yet between these artists, we get a multiplicity of voices that present us with surprising and expressive analyses of the way the UAE is evolving.



The 2011 pavilion features works by three artists, including photographs by Lateefa bint Maktoum, above, and an installation by Abdullah al Saadi.

The designer and artist Reem al Ghaith initially looks to be treading on familiar ground: breezeblocks discarded in a tangle of electrical wires, sand tossed about and ripped up, and "Do Not Cross" signs in Arabic form an industrial installation that seems to bubble up

GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK

from its sedate white container. But rather than a straightforward bemoaning of how much concrete has gone up in the Emirates, Dubai: What's Left of Her Land presents the viewer with a spectrum of impressions - silhouettes of construction workers, distortions of scale and several carefully suspended tools through which the artist attempts to freeze a moment in the UAE's current history.

"It was important that this work can travel," Al Ghaith explains. "This is a documentation of a land, and I want to share that. People think they know how Dubai has grown because of what they see in the media, but this is the icon of it and how it really looks."

Abdullah al Saadi takes an altogether different approach. Ten years in the making, the exhibit presents the artist's notes, carvings in rocks and assorted data from life on his sweet potato farm in rural Khorfakkan. From pages torn out of his sketchbook through to clay sculptures, Al Saadi repeats over and over the outline of the fruits of his harvest. This meticulous approach to his work points to a meditative attempt to engage with the land around him. Aloof from theorising, there's a raw amazement at just how fertile Al Saadi finds his country of birth - both in terms of crops and the unmanicured beauty of natural forms. He's a sort of Henry David Thoreau of the Northern Emirates.

Bint Maktoum is known as much for her haunting images of a world interlaced with dreams as the talent incubator she set up in Nad Al Sheba, Tashkeel. The artist has gone back into the field to produce a series of new images that continue her interrogations into "the relationship between person and place".

"It's strange to see land now on the horizon. I'm used to looking to the end of the earth, to infinity, when I look out to sea," she says, referring both to the dredged islands off the coast of Dubai and one of her images depicting a woman, suitcase in hand, standing at the sea's edge. "This woman is a sort of breaking point in this image," she explains. "So many people are coming to Dubai who bring their own views and culture, so now I'm thinking about how we fit in all this - both Emiratis and also those who have grown up in Dubai and call the city home."

A couple of doors down from the UAE pavilion, two Saudi artists Raja and Shadia Alem have attempted to encapsulate the fabric of peoples, cultures and chants that define their hometown of Mecca. In this vast, dark space, a polished oval mirror - painted black - greets the viewer on the way in. But stroll around the other side of the oval, and thousands of metal orbs are revealed on the floor, which reflect projections of the patterns found in the architecture of Mecca - scattering light across the floor of the pavilion, as well as the visitors to the space, with what looks like flecks of gold. Meanwhile, the sound of chants and footfall from the streets of the holy city reverberate through the exhibition hall.

As Saudi Arabia's first entry in the Venice Biennale, this is a strong starter - enigmatic and bold. We might not learn much about the country's art scene, but we feel one step closer to its street-level cultural life.

GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK

Iran and Syria both return with national exhibits, with Syria's roster including Sabhan Adam - known for his painted depictions of grotesquely elongated and sour-faced figures - while Iran brings four artists living and working in the country, notably photographer Mohsen Rastani. Both countries have been quite tight-lipped about just what their pavilions will include when they open to the public on Saturday.

Iraq returns to the Biennale as a national participation for the first time since 1976, with a six-artist show under the theme of "Wounded Water". With the architect Zaha Hadid and the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture as patrons, each of the six artists - notably Helsinki-based Adel Abidin and painter Ahmed Alsoudani - will create works on-site that respond directly to the thematic idea of water.

The Egyptian pavilion is particularly poignant this year with the entire space dedicated to the performance artist Ahmed Basiony, who was killed in the protests in Cairo in January. Prior to his death, Basiony had taken part in an exhibition in the Palace of Arts in Cairo in which he wore a suit covered in small sensors. He would run on the spot for an hour a day, for 30 days, and the sensors would react to his sweat, creating a bloom of colours on projected video screens around the artist.

Video documentation of 30 Days of Running in the Space will be brought to Venice, alongside footage from the uprisings in Tahrir Square.

One of this year's most ambitious projects, and a symbol the Middle East's firm presence at the Biennale, is The Future of a Promise - a 22-artist show that spans the creative output of 18 different countries in the Arab world, which opened yesterday.

The Future of a Promise has been brought together in the Maggazini Del Sale, the network of evocative 700-year old salt warehouses that sit on the water's edge in the Dorsoduro district. In this red brick space, curator Lina Lazaar has had the grand task of crafting a truly pan-Arab show.

"The formation of the show started in December," says Lazaar, who earned her stripes organising the first Arab and Iranian contemporary art auction in Sotheby's London branch in 2007. "I was thinking a lot about this idea of giving one's word to somebody and why that is so important in the Middle East. I was concerned with how I can try and translate that relevancy of promises and commitment in Arab societies into visual art."

Lazaar's final selection of artists for the show is suitably expansive, and serves to showcase a broad outlook of very contemporary artwork from across the region.

The exhibition has been organised concurrently with Edge of Arabia, the initiative set up to promote and exhibit the foremost names in contemporary art from Saudi Arabia. As a result, a number of prominent Saudi artists are featured, including Ahmed Mater and Abdunasser Gharem. In addition, there are works by Lara Baladi, photography by Taysir Batniji and a fantastic video work by Yto Barrada, among others.

Lazaar is keen to emphasise that this show has many dimensions beyond the recent political events that have swept across the Arab world.

GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK

"Perhaps 2011 is one of many promises, but it's certainly not the sole one. There's also a promise of an artwork being explored here; that very interaction between a piece of art and the viewer," she says.

"I find it frustrating to think that there's an artwork there and it's not talking to me - whether it's too abstract, too heavily grounded in theory or as a continuum of art history. The minute that a work offers suggestions, an exchange, then in that is a message and a promise. The works in this show do that on a physical and conceptual level, and I think it's what makes the show very exciting."

With the recent events across the Middle East as a backdrop, international curiosity in these national contributions is high. But beyond that, the pavilions speak for themselves - expressions of the wealth of creative output coming out of the region right now.

<http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/the-middle-east-makes-a-showing-at-the-venice-biennale#full>