

ART REVIEW

High-Flying Art for a Wall-Building Time

By Holland Cotter

July 19, 2017

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. — Coined in the West, the term “Middle East” is a cartographic convenience, a promotional hook, and a power tool. Politically, it reduces complex populations to a containable, controllable mass of allies and aliens. Culturally, it packages diversity for easy sale. In the past two decades, “art from the Middle East” has become a hot brand on the global retail market.

Branding is a problem for artists. It can turn ethnicity into destiny and put a cap on creative freedom. At the same time, art that emerges from a specific culture and history can be hugely valuable, generating knowledge where there was none. In an ignorant, wall-building time we need art to give us as much knowledge of the larger world, including “the Middle East,” as possible.

That seems to be the thinking behind the group exhibition “No to the Invasion: Breakdowns and Side Effects” at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. The 29 artists are associated, by birth or descent, with that geographic area alternatively (if inaccurately) referred to as the Middle East and “the Arab world.” All of the art is drawn from a single source, the Barjeel Art Foundation, based in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates.



"El Shaab (The People)" by the artist Moataz Nasr. The entire work consists of 25 ceramic figures. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

The foundation was established by Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi, an Emirati financier and political commentator, and remains his personal collection. From it, the show's organizer, Fawz Kabra, has chosen some 40 works dating from 1990 to the present.

The start-date is important. By 1990, the high, utopian years of the post-colonial Pan-Arab Movement — when a united "Arab world" seemed possible — were long over. Sustained political conflict had set in. While 1990 may have seen the end of Lebanon's lacerating 15-year civil war, it also saw, with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the beginning of the first gulf war.

But while the show positions itself on the threshold of a spectacularly tumultuous era, it approaches that era through notably low-key art, work that relies for its effects more on information delivery than on visual punch. This is true of the earliest piece, a modest-sized linocut print by the Kuwaiti artist Thuraya al-Baqsemi. Done entirely in blue and white, it's a rough-cut image of two tense, alert faces, one male, one female, set above the Arabic phrase "No to the Invasion."

The history of the piece is precise. Ms. al-Baqsemi made the original print on Aug. 5, 1990, three days after Saddam Hussein's army had entered Kuwait. She intended it as a protest poster, a raised fist, and for a short time it was widely reproduced and distributed throughout Kuwait City. Soon the Iraqi Army began executing protesters in the street. Poster production stopped. The artist had to hide the printing plate.

To learn all this, the full story of what you're looking at, you have to take time to read the exhibition label. Once you do, the work comes into vivid focus, conceptually and visually. This is true with most of what's here. You can enjoy Khaldoun Chichakli's small ink drawings for the lovely things they are. But they take on a sharper character when you know that they were done when the artist was living in Europe, beginning in 1979, and homesick for his native Damascus. In the drawings, he revisited the city, one remembered storefront at a time, even as urbanization, then war, were taking their toll.



“A Carpet,” from 2012, by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige depicts the Lebanese Rocket Society, a 1960s student science project that was designated Lebanon’s official space program, and honored with souvenir carpets. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

The filter of memory gives Mr. Chichakli’s pictures the storybook look of a world that admits no disturbance. A comparable spirit, a kind of programmed innocence, was a feature of modernism everywhere, including the Middle East. That spirit, buried and forgotten under darker histories, has been revived in an installation by the Beirut artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige focusing on the Lebanese Rocket Society, a 1960s student science project that was designated — what a concept! — Lebanon’s official space program, and honored with a commemorative postal stamp and souvenir carpets.

An installation by the United States-born, Beirut-based Marwa Arsanios looks back to a modernist space-age fantasy, but one that has unraveled. Through documentary material and an architectural model, Ms. Arsanios revisits a flying saucer-shaped 1950s beach chalet at an upscale Beirut resort. In snapshots and home movies we meet its original affluent owners, tanned, smiling, lounging nearby. In recent photos, we see the chalet again; the old E.T. design is semi-intact, but the house is now a cramped four-family dwelling occupied by refugees from southern Lebanon.



“All About Acapulco” by Marwa Arsanios looks back to a modernist space-age fantasy that has unraveled. Ms. Arsanios revisits a flying saucer-shaped 1950s beach chalet at an up-scale Beirut resort. In recent photos, the house is now a cramped four-family dwelling occupied by refugees. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Ms. Arsanios’s work balances on a thin line between past and present. Work by other artists is fully in the now, or near-now. A shelf lined with small painted ceramic figures by the Cairo-based Moataz Nasr portrays participants in the 2012 Tahrir Square demonstrations in photographic detail. A multi-image screen-print by the Lebanese artist Ali Cherri is a stop-time sequence of a body blazing like a torch. In the context of this history-conscious show, it instantly evokes the memory of Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor whose self-immolation in 2010 sparked a revolution, and the subsequent, and continuing Arab Spring.



I have photos with a beard, others bald-headed... like the actors

Akram Zaatari's "Her + Him" starts out as an interview with the great Cairo portrait photographer Van Leo (1921-2002). Interspersed with it is a fictional narrative about the interviewer's grandmother. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Not everything in the show needs to be filtered through commentary. A multilayered video by Akram Zaatari, a Lebanese filmmaker, starts out as an interview — invaluable in itself — with the great Cairo portrait photographer Levon Boyadjian, who called himself Van Leo (1921-2002). But interspersed with it is a second, fictional narrative, in which the interviewer tries to track down the story of his own grandmother who, he is discovering, worked as a nude studio model when she was young.