

review

baring the middle east

The Saatchi Gallery's *Unveiled show* – currently the most momentous exhibition of Contemporary Middle Eastern art in London – made a tremendous statement in the English capital and may have sent shockwaves through some of its hard-hitting works.



TEXT BY ALEXANDER BARAKAT
IMAGES COURTESY OF THE SAATCHI GALLERY

Carrying an exotic Orientalist title, *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*, is an exhibition of overwhelming proportions, comprising 80 artworks spread across 12 galleries within the Saatchi Gallery. Showcased works cover a broad range of media – painting, sculpture, textile, photography, print and various types of installations – by a total of 21 artists; 11 of whom reside in Europe or the USA. Suffice to say, you can take the artist out of the Middle East, but you cannot take the Middle East out of the artist.

Journeys Within

Unveiled's first gallery, devoted to Lebanese artist Marwan Rechmaoui, whose conceptual works pertain to the socio-political identity of Beirut, showed a work that emphasised the relationship shared between conflict and space within the city itself. Treading towards Gallery 2, one is beguiled by a particular aspect of the exhibition – the predominance of painting and prints. Gallery 2 featured works by Iraqi artist Hayv Kahraman, whose refined aesthetic provides a hybridised environment where Persian miniature, Chinese wall scroll and Italian Renaissance painting techné intertwine and also depict religious symbolism and aspects of gender.

Works by cutting-edge artist, Laleh Khorramian, intricately layered topographical monoprints, were featured in Gallery 8. Khorramian's purpose is to create stop-motion animations that uncannily act as filmic narratives, often creating Surrealist and fantastic scenarios that are sometimes later shot or recorded on film by the artist herself. Gallery 11 – a focal point of *Unveiled* – contained the immense works of Iranian Shadi Ghadirian on C-print. Her *Like Everyday* series exemplifies various female archetypes that presumably exist

within Iranian society by personifying them through household items positioned upon the face of each chador, thereby marking their identity. Gallery 11's most enduring work, however, asserts itself in Ghadirian's *Qajar* series – an expression of female gender in comparison to the bridge between traditionalism and modernity in Iran, which manifests itself in what can be perceived as a 'modern' object being held or placed within the background of a 'modern' woman that is captured within a century-old backdrop and clothing appropriate to the depicted period.

Iraqi artist Halim Al-Karim hid in a hole in the ground in the desert for nearly three years during the first Gulf War, and described his experiences as "living in a black box" that placed time, history, the present and the future into perspective. His



trptychs on lamda print are meant to elucidate universal themes such as the destruction of humanity, society and memory, which is represented through the tri-faceted imagery of political leaders, archaeological artefacts and even representations of women. However,

some of the most intriguing prints are those that adorned the walls of Gallery 10. Ramin Haerizadeh's *Men of Allah* series bases itself upon Qajar period theatre, painting and photography – a theme derived from male social groupings within a religiously segregated society and the homoeroticism present within them, as well as classical standards of Qajar male and female beauty. Haerizadeh leads a continuation of the Qajar period photographic portraiture into the modern day through a re-conceptual process. He provides a romanticised

Above: Diana Al-Hadid. *The Tower of Infinite Problems*. 2008. Polymer gypsum, steel, plaster, fibreglass, wood, polystyrene, cardboard, wax and paint. Part 1: 241.3 x 442 x 251.5 cm. Part 2: 160 x 210.8 x 266.7 cm. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London. © Diana Al-Hadid, 2009.

Facing page: Marwan Rechmaoui. *Beirut Caoutchouc*. 2004–2008. Engraved rubber. 3 x 825 x 675 cm. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London. © Marwan Rechmaoui, 2009.



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representation of traditional notions of Persian sexuality through an original method of scanning and distorting realistic images of himself. *Men of Allah* is a dialogue with Shirin Neshat's *Women of Allah* series that Haerizadeh was inspired by, and in a sense, has created a unique gender polarisation of Neshat's series.

Grand Statements

Installations provide critical material for *Unveiled. Qalandia 2067* by Palestinian artist Wafa Hourani offers a glimpse of the artist's vision of the site a century after the Six-Day War.

Composed of a variety of mixed media ranging from sound to light, it is a physical testament to the illusion of space and the notion of an 'open air prison' within Palestinian refugee camps. Hourani's monumental work reaches far beyond the mere political response that is common amongst Palestinian artists from the 1980s participating in the Intifada, by reflecting an area of Palestine through the media by means of an alternate accessible space outside of Palestine.

Similarly, Algerian artist Kader Attia's installation *Ghost* epitomises the extent of religious politicisation within the Middle East. His 200 aluminium foil female bodies engaging in prayer are trapped in an interminable sphere outside of temporality, stripped of their own individual and creative expression. These submissive figures do not possess any form

Right: Rokni Haerizadeh. *Typical Iranian Wedding* (right panel). 2008. Oil on canvas. 200 x 300 cm (each panel). 200 x 600 cm (overall). Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London. © Rokni Haerizadeh, 2009. Left: Rokni Haerizadeh. *Typical Iranian Wedding* (left panel). 2008. Oil on canvas. 200 x 300 cm (each panel). 200 x 600 cm (overall). Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London. © Rokni Haerizadeh, 2009.



of identity, and as a collective whole compose the ultimate emblem of conformity existent within Middle Eastern society. Sculptural works also provide an interesting facet to *Unveiled*. Syrian sculptor Diana Al-Hadid's monumental work is nothing less than the "impossible architecture" that she describes it to be, and may be a testament towards the colossal towers being erected in the Middle East that materialise notions of globalisation and modernisation in the region. Iranian sculptor Shirin Fakhim's *Tehran Prostitute* series may seem absurd at first glance, but in actuality alludes to the increasing crisis of human trafficking ignored by most amongst the general public within Middle Eastern societies.

While politics is a vivid theme in *Unveiled*, it is a theme with many sub-themes that take on a global outlook; in other words, the subject matters are universal. Manifestations of political conflict, socio-political issues, infrastructural destruction, history and tradition feature predominantly. Blunt or metaphoric, the artworks undoubtedly tell all, and beauty

surfaces too, as does sarcasm. All is not dark and gory, but rather, this is a contemporary take on what was (and still is) dark and gory by 20- and 30-something Middle Eastern artists. At a time when the Middle East is stereotyped as a region rampant with political upheaval, *Unveiled* sheds light on an otherwise underpublicised aspect: its art. Eyebrows may be raised at the controversial artwork exhibited, namely those by Al-Hadid and Haerizadeh, each of whom tackles sexuality in the Middle East (an otherwise 'no-no' topic), but context is vital; are these not the artistic contemporary voices of our times? Is their work not a reaction, an expression, a statement? If this is the case, let us not stereotype the stereotypes and, instead, treat this show as an articulation of each individual's status quo by some of the Middle East's foremost Contemporary artists. 📍

***Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* runs until 9 May. For more information, visit www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/unveiled**

modern compatriots

Phillips de Pury & Company's *Perspectives: Arab and Iranian Modern Masters* at their gallery at the Saatchi Gallery, complements the Contemporary works on display in the concurrent *Unveiled*.



TEXT BY ANNA WALLACE-THOMPSON
IMAGES COURTESY OF PHILLIPS DE PURY & COMPANY

The evening of 13 January was a monumental night at the Saatchi Gallery. With *Unveiled* showcasing Contemporary Middle Eastern art, *Perspectives: Arab and Iranian Modern Masters*, curated by Lulu Al-Sabah, Director, Middle East at Phillips de Pury & Company, brought Modern Arab and Iranian artists to the fore.

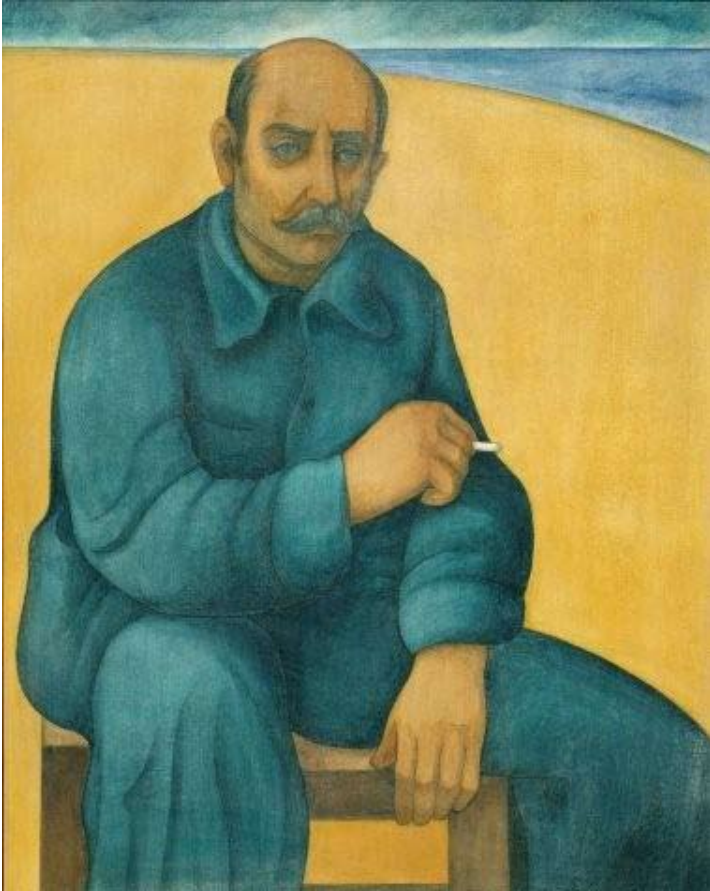
"I did an extensive tour of the Middle East in order to touch base with artists and collectors," explains Al-Sabah. "Furthermore, once I knew that [Charles] Saatchi was going to have his exhibition on Contemporary Middle Eastern art, I felt it was important that we show Modern art as well. For most visitors, this will be the first time they are exposed to art

from the region, so I felt that it was important for them to be exposed to a continuum of Middle Eastern art." Al-Sabah put herself in the shoes of a Western gallery-goer, trying to envision what it would be like for "somebody walking in, who is not from the Middle East and has not been very exposed to Arab and Iranian art, and what they might like to see."

"The gallery is one room, so I had limited space," Al-Sabah explains. "I had to fit all the important Modern Middle Eastern artists into this one space, so I had to be extremely

Above: Huguette Caland. Untitled. 1970. Oil on canvas. 134 x 196 cm.

Facing page: Left: Louay Kayyali. Untitled. 1976. Oil on canvas. 93 x 73 cm.
Right: Hussein Madi. *Tarab*. 1997. Acrylic on canvas. 130 x 140 cm.



selective and show only key examples.” With an emphasis on Iraq and Egypt (represented by Shaker Hassan Al-Said, Suad Al-Attar, Abdul Qader Al-Rassam, Madiha Umar, Ismail Fattah and Gazbia Sirry, Adam Henein and Abdul Hafiz Farghali respectively), *Perspectives* also features artists from Iran, Lebanon, Tunisia, Palestine and Libya. “For the Iranian artists,” Al-Sabah points out, “I wanted to have a few surprises, not just the obvious names that one first thinks of when thinking of Iranian Modern artists. This is why I chose Massoud Arabshahi.” A contemporary of Charles Hossein Zenderoudi and Parviz Tanavoli, Al-Sabah chose the *Saqqah Kaneh* artist due to his relative under-the-radar presence in the international art market. “Instead of putting all three of these great masters in the show, I chose Arabshahi, as audiences are already familiar with the other two.”

The rest of the artist list reads like a who’s who of the Modern Arab art world, from Etel Adnan, Huguette Caland and Hussein Madi to Nja Mahdaoui, Khaled Ben Slimane, Samia Halaby, Farid Belkahia, Ali Omar Hermes and Mohsen Vaziri-Moghadam. The exhibition also hopes to point out the unique

mixture of Western influence and local heritage, literature, “ancient traditions and political reality.” Hung freely and not in schools of thought or style, 21 works from 20 artists from nine countries, bar a couple, are for sale. Furthermore, while some of the artists have bridged the Modern and Contemporary, due to long and fruitful careers, it was important for Al-Sabah to bring together a group of works that ranged from early works right through to mid-career and recent pieces.

Al-Sabah also stresses that *Perspectives* is not meant to mirror the works at *Unveiled*, but to complement them. “The feedback so far has been great,” she enthuses. “The opening had a real buzz, and was packed. People didn’t just walk in, they took their time to really focus, read the text, look at the works.” While future plans include a larger, more focused exhibition, for “a smaller group of artists and a more specific time period” and with an education programme in the works, as well as the possibility of artists talks, and plans for Phillips de Pury to have a larger presence in the Middle East, as well as highlight art from the region in their New York and London auctions, *Perspectives* is certainly paving the way. 🇸🇦

Perspectives: Arab and Iranian Modern Masters runs until 6 May. For more information call +44 2078232363 or visit www.phillipsdepur.com