



# Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East

By Janet Rady

FOR anyone who has been following the rise in interest in contemporary Middle Eastern art over the last three years, the current exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery may come as no surprise. The auction houses and art fairs in London and the Emirates have fuelled commercial desires to invest in this rapidly emerging market, a trend which has been endorsed by a string of London galleries opening their doors to artists from this turbulent region.

In his new Chelsea space, Charles Saatchi has devoted this exhibition to almost 90 works comprising installations, paintings and photography by 21 artists (of whom only 19 are on display) from Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon, Syria and Algeria, most of them in their 20s and 30s.

The exhibition has attracted considerable media attention, receiving a variety of reviews (68 are listed on the Saatchi website), ranging from the blatantly ignorant to those critically analytical of the artists whose work is unashamedly described as 'the other'. These Western journalists have once again fallen into the unfortunate trap of perpetuating the culturally biased stereotypes that stick to this locale like the glue used by these artists in their work.

Thus, the critics have homed in on the images of Shadi Ghadirian's *chadori*-clad (not to be confused with the *burka*, much cited in these articles) women whose faces are replaced with domestic utensils ('Like Everyday Series', 2000-2001), or Katia Attia's truly inspirational installation of serried rows of 240 praying figures (who, it turns out, were modelled on men), sculpted in the void with aluminium foil so that only their exterior form remains ('Ghost', 2007).

More grist for mills of these misguided journalists comes from their focus on politically charged scenes, such as Tala Madana's portrayal of the interior of a plane used to destroy the twin towers on 9/11 ('Tower Reflection', 2007) or the Lebanese artist Marwan Rechmaoui's miniature replica of his former apartment block, prior to its evacuation during the 2006 Israeli conflict *Spectre* ('The Yacoubian Building, Beirut', 2006-2008) – described by one reviewer as 'flat and dreary'.

Censorship, too, plays an unequal role in the eyes of the 'superior', freedom-loving critics, who emphasise the diasporic tendencies of the artists and the need for those still living and working in their native land to be so discreet to the point that one artist has to wear a balaclava, supposedly to obscure his identity.

It doesn't help that these journalists have taken as their reference point works by Western artists with whose oeuvre

they are understandably more familiar, prompting them to label this alien work as 'blatantly derivative'. Thus, Philip Guston appears as the inspiration for Nadia Ayari's painterly 'Beirut' (2007), depicting a line of figures standing guard over the Dome of the Rock (albeit transposed to Beirut). Marlene Dumas can claim her fame as antecedent to Tala Madani's cartoon sloppy hirsute men. Not to be forgotten, YBA Sarah Lucas got there first with her prostitutes, and the darling of Iranian art world, Rokni Haerizadeh's 'Shomal (Beach at the Caspian)' (2008) apparently resembles Eric Fischl's suburban parodies dotted with black veils.

But can all this criticism be laid squarely at the feet of the journalists? The danger of jumping on any artistic bandwagon is that when a collection is formed so hastily, it cannot possibly be comprehensive or representative of the best artists or their work. Middle Eastern artists have been creating innovative and powerful pieces for several years now. They may or may not be addressing the religious and socio-political issues that define their

world; the choice is theirs. Saatchi, however, via his small band of advisors, seems to have set out on a pre-defined journey, confined to finding works that fit his criteria from easily accessible galleries and fairs (not an inconsiderable number of these works were on show only too recently in Dubai), and to determine his vision of what Middle Eastern art ought to look like. One can only hope, however, that this one-man view of the 'other' culture will, via the global medium of art, go sufficiently far as to begin to break down the West's deeply embedded prejudices towards the region, for if it does, it will be a truly laudable achievement.

**Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East (January 30 to May 9, 2009) is held at the Saatchi Gallery, Duke of York's HQ, King's Road, London SW3 4SQ. For more information, visit [www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/unveiled](http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/unveiled)**

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**Marwan Rechmaoui, 'Beirut Caoutchouc', 2004-2008 and 'Spectre' ('The Yacoubian Building, Beirut') 2006-2008 (above) Photo courtesy of The Saatchi Gallery, London - Photography credit: Stephen White**