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## London's Saatchi Galley shows Middle Eastern Art

By MEERA SELVA  
The Associated Press  
Thursday, January 29, 2009; 2:05 PM

LONDON -- Hirsute, paunchy men recline voluptuously against each other, dressed in flimsy scraps of pink. In another room, shimmering rows of veiled women modeled from twisted and scrunched aluminum foil kneel in anonymous submission.

The exhibition "Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East" opens Friday at London's often-controversial Saatchi Gallery, with a set of hard-hitting, graphic works.

"This new generation of artists are producing work that is totally different to what Arab and Persian artists did even three or four years ago," said Irene Momtaz, a London-based art collector and gallery owner. "They are much more political and daring than they used to be and there is so much anger there it is incredible."

Traditional Islamic art has focused on calligraphy and geometric patterns, but the works in the Saatchi show are more global in their outlook. Many focus on themes of sexual hypocrisy, the invisibility of women and violence.

One of the first pieces a visitor to the gallery sees is Iraqi artist Ahmed Alsoudani's "You No Longer Have Hands," a painting of a tangled black ball with an oversized nail leaning against a menacing-looking wall — a perfect metaphor of powerlessness and fury.

Syrian-American Diana Al-Hadid's "The Tower of Infinite Problems" shows two towers, lying toppled and splintered on their sides, evoking both New York's Twin Towers and the Tower of Babel, the biblical tower that was meant to reach the heavens. Iranian artist Shirin Fakhim's "Tehran Prostitutes" features puppets in ill-fitting cheap lingerie with comically spherical breasts and kitchen implements for heads.

SLIDESHOW

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A woman walks past a sculpture by Syrian-American artist Diana Al-Hadid entitled 'The Tower of Infinite Problems 2008' at an exhibition of New Middle East Art at the Saatchi gallery in London Thursday, Jan 29, 2009. (AP Photo/Alastair Grant) (Alastair Grant - AP)

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Gallery owner Charles Saatchi, who made his fortune in advertising, has a history of mounting provocative shows. His 1997 "Sensations" show prompted a political firestorm in New York when it moved there in 1999. Then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani was so offended by a portrait of the Virgin Mary adorned with elephant dung that he temporarily cut off funding to the Brooklyn Museum.

Cartoons of the prophet Muhammad printed in a Danish newspaper triggered violent protests in Muslim countries in 2006, and a British publisher Gibson Square delayed publication on "The Jewel of Medina," a novel about one Muhammad's wives, after its offices were fire-bombed

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last year.

In this context, staging an exhibition that includes Ramin Haerizadeh's "Men of Allah" series of paintings of overweight men in female clothes and suggestive poses seems brave \_ or foolish,

Saatchi Gallery chief executive Nigel Hurst said the exhibition was not designed to infuriate, and merely represents how the artists feel about their cultures.

"We don't have a curatorial agenda. We buy work we find interesting \_ the artists throw up their own trends," he said "Artists reflect the worlds they live in, whether they live in [Iran](#) or Baghdad or the diaspora in America, and this exhibition just reflects that."

Oreet Ashery, an artist and fellow at London University's Queen Mary college who has worked on representation of the Middle East in art, disagrees.


"A show like this can't really represent how all Iranians, say, feel about the Middle East," she said. "It can only represent the visions of a curator. So we have to ask why did the curator buy these images. They are all bleak, and artists in the Middle East are not more despondent than artists anywhere else."

Momtaz, who has followed the Middle Eastern art scene since the 1960s, sees it differently.

"The fact that some of these artists still live, in Iran, [Lebanon](#) and feel able to produce these works shows that a change is coming," she said.

The exhibition runs at the Saatchi Gallery from Jan. 30 to May 6.

On the Net:<http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk>

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