

canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

YEAR IN REVIEW
2015

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Is New York becoming the new international hub for Middle Eastern art? Mahnaz Fancy examines the factors that led to what was a bumper year for Middle Eastern art in the Big Apple in 2015.

Somewhere between the late 20th century rise of oil-rich economies in the Gulf and an early 21st century resurgence of political and social upheaval across the Arabic-speaking world, Contemporary art from the Middle East captured the international art world's attention. Since then, a new generation of Arab, Iranian and Turkish artists' creative expression has progressively drawn new audiences. After years of looking over to London as the leading international hub for this exciting emerging art scene, 2015 marked what felt like the long-awaited ascendance of New York as a new international arts convergence point for the Middle East. From a dedicated Focus section at last year's Armory Show, to critically-acclaimed solo exhibitions at several major museums, and an unprecedented number of gallery shows, artistic production representing the cultural diversity of the Middle East was suddenly visible on an impressive level throughout this US art capital.

Given that the year also marked a decade since the commercial market for the region's Contemporary and Modern art began its meteoric rise, the moment offers an opportunity to examine how this art scene has evolved and to what its future might look like.

CURRENTS AND TIDES

In order to examine the future we must first quickly look to the past and how we got to where we are now. In fact, while it is true that organisations such as the Sharjah Biennial, Ashkal Alwan, Townhouse Gallery and Al-Mamam Foundation have nurtured and supported contemporary artistic practice in the region since the 1990s, it wasn't until the convergence of Christies' first Dubai sale and the first iteration of Art Dubai in 2006 that Contemporary Middle Eastern art was recognised on an international level. A new art market and emerging art world were born with the discovery that the new generation of Arab, Turkish and Iranian collectors were more interested in Contemporary art by artists who shared their transnational sensibilities than the Islamic, Arab Modernist and Orientalist art so often preferred by their parents' generation.

Catapulted by the exuberance of these new collectors and art patrons, the dynamic exchange between the region's creative community and their international peers, and multi-billion dollar state investment into cultural sectors in Qatar and the UAE, the Middle East Contemporary art scene has evolved rapidly over the last decade. New museums have been erected across the region in Doha, Rabat and Beirut in the last two years; several more are eagerly awaited, including Abu Dhabi's Guggenheim and Louvre. During this same period, Ashkal Alwan's Homeworks, and the Sharjah Art Foundation's March Meeting and Art Dubai's Global Art Forum have matured into influential meeting points for creative communities from the Middle East, South Asia and North Africa to engage with their international peers. Furthermore, Dubai itself has grown into the commercial

centre of the regional Contemporary art sector and an international art capital in its own right.

Even as this development has turned the Gulf into an influential cultural centre for this rapidly expanding regional cultural scene, a shifting nomenclature (from Middle East to MENA, MENASA, MENAM and West Asia) betrays that there are no fixed geographical boundaries to this emerging art scene. Instead, the Middle East and Arab art world functions as more of a transnational circuit that a nomadic tribe of artists, curators and other art professionals traverse fluidly through as they move between the region's older cultural capitals of Beirut, Cairo, Istanbul, Kuwait City, Marrakesh, Ramallah, Sharjah, Tehran and Tunis and to newer art hubs in Abu Dhabi, Doha and Dubai. As many members of this creative community continue to move beyond the region, settling in London, Paris and New York as exiles and émigrés, these international art capitals also have been incorporated into the circuit.

Furthermore, as a growing number of New York art professionals have joined this circuit over the last few years, the distance between New York and London has gradually collapsed. It was unsurprising that whispers of "It feels like Dubai!" were heard at the New Museum in New York throughout the 2014 opening night of *Here and Elsewhere*, the city's first museum-wide exhibition of Contemporary art from and about the Arab world. It may have been the balmy July weather, or that, in their inimitable cheeky manner, the GCC collective had created a photo-mural to transform the façade and lobby of the museum into an opulent Gulf hotel, or it may have simply been that the last time many of the guests had been collected in one place at the same time was at Art Dubai earlier that spring.

PATRONAGE VS GRASSROOTS

Here and Elsewhere was just a taste of things to come in 2015 – something that many in New York had been waiting for and working towards for years. Contemporary Iranian, Turkish and Arab art was actually first shown in New York museums around the same time as in London, but somehow these exhibits never received the attention or credit that their London counterparts did – at least in the mainstream media. One of the main factors for this may have been the advantage London has in its proximity to the region and its established market for Islamic and Middle Eastern art and therefore a history with regional collectors.

The British Museum's 2006 exhibition *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* and the Saatchi Gallery's 2009 show *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*, persuaded London-based collectors to lend their support. A whole ecosystem quickly grew out of this moment: the Delfina Foundation and The Mosaic Rooms were founded and, soon thereafter, the Tate Modern's acquisition committee for the Middle East and North Africa was formed, followed by the biennial city-wide festival of contemporary Arab culture *Shubbak* being launched by London's mayor.

In comparison, New York's early museum exhibitions *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* (2006) curated by Fereshteh Daftari at the Museum of Modern Art and *Tarjama/ Translation* (2009) organised by ArteEast and curated by Leeza Ahmady, Iftikhar Dadi and Reem Fadda at the Queens Museum felt like they were ahead of their time. Without the support of London's art patrons, New York's engagement with Contemporary Turkish, Iranian and Arab art was instead led by an intrepid community of artists, scholars, curators, and art professionals. Setting a very different tone from the start, they started

by building a network amongst their local colleagues to create a meaningful place for regional art in the New York art world's conversations on Contemporary art. They also sought to promote a view of the Middle East and its art world that steered clear of the stereotyping tendencies of the US media.

A GROWING CHORUS OF VOICES

The earliest efforts in New York were led by pioneering gallerists like Leila Heller and Carla Chammas, who both championed artists from the region in their rosters of international artists from as early as 1982 and 1990, respectively. Heller's 1984 groundbreaking collaboration with Jeffrey Deitch, *Calligraffiti*, deserves notice for bravely placing works by modern Iranian artists such as Charles Hossein Zenderoudi alongside those by New York street artists like Keith Haring. Around the same time, a growing number of regional artists, such as Shirin Neshat, Ghada Amer, Walid Raad, Nabil Nahas and Nicky Nodjoumi, settled in New York and garnered the attention of some of the city's most prestigious international galleries, contributing new examples for how Iranian, Middle Eastern and Arab artists could participate in the Contemporary art conversations in this city.

ArteEast and *Bidoun* magazine arrived on the scene between 2003 and 2005 and set about nurturing greater exchange between the Middle Eastern arts sector and New York's art professionals, contributing important efforts for broadening the audience for contemporary regional art practices. Momentum continued to build steadily as Guggenheim Abu Dhabi curators began building a transnational collection from their New York offices. By 2012/13

some of the foremost Avant-garde artists in the Middle East art scene were being shown in New York spaces, from Hassan Sharif's micro retrospective at Alexander Gray Associates and Michael Rakowitz's *The Breakup* at Lombard Freid Projects in 2012 to Khalil Rabah's *Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* at e-flux and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *The Lebanese Rocket Society* at CRG Gallery in 2013.

Around this same time, several museum curators from London's Tate Modern, which was at the vanguard of the international art community's engagement with Arab and North African art, relocated to New York. From Sheena Wagstaff, who joined the Metropolitan Museum as Head of the Modern and Contemporary Art department in 2012; Stuart Comer joining the Museum of Modern Art as Chief Curator of the Department of Media and Performance Art in 2013, and Jessica Morgan becoming the new director of the Dia Art Foundation in 2014, this collective shift of curatorial expertise from London significantly expanded New York museums' capacity to exhibit and collect Arab, and Middle Eastern Contemporary art. By the time Taymour Grahne Gallery opened in September 2013 – focused on international art but with a significant amount of artists from the Middle East and North Africa – New York's role as a new hub for Contemporary Middle Eastern art felt inevitable.

2015 AS THE WATERSHED MOMENT

Evolving from the introductory survey exhibitions of earlier years, 2015 was an important year for museum exhibitions of Iranian, Arab and North African Contemporary

art in New York. There were three important and critically acclaimed such shows, starting with Wael Shawky's *Cabaret Crusades*, which included his epic video trilogy and an installation of his sumptuously realised marionettes at MoMA PS1 from January to September. This was followed by Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian's *Infinite Possibility*, an exhibition of works spanning from 1974–2014, including her iconic geometric mirror sculptures and drawings at the Guggenheim from March to June, and the first American comprehensive survey representing two and a half decades of Raad's career at MoMA from October to January.

The MENAM focus by former Whitechapel Gallery in London's curator Omer Kholeif (now the Manilow Senior Curator at the MCA Chicago, in another example of the percolation of curators between the UK and US) at the 2015 edition of The Armory Show was the apex of this emerging art scene's rise to visibility in New York. This section showcased 15 galleries from Beirut, New York, Jeddah, London, Istanbul, Cairo, Athens, Dubai and Paris and special projects dispersed throughout the art fair and introduced new audiences to a diverse representation of contemporary regional practices ranging from established figures like Mona Hatoum, Parviz Tanavoli, Saloua Raouda Choucair, Shafic Abboud and Huguette Caland to Raed Yassin, Abbas Akhavan, Lamia Joreige, Ahmed Mater, Fayçal Baghrich, Wafaa Bilal, Joanna Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. The Armory's reputation as the premiere international art fair in New York made it the perfect platform, showing these artists on par with their North American contemporaries.

The distance between the New York art scene and the Middle East seemed to have virtually collapsed as 2015 started. The year was kicked off with the announcement that Ashkal Alwan's founding director Christine Tohmé was being awarded the prestigious

Audrey Irmas Award for Curatorial Excellence Awards by the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College (see page 71). As mentioned earlier, curators have played a particularly important role, moving between distant locales on the international contemporary art circuit as they do. Take, for example, Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath of Art Reoriented, whose early curatorial efforts at the Chelsea Museum in New York led to *Told, Untold, Retold*, the inaugural exhibition at Doha's Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art (2010), several international travelling exhibitions introducing Middle Eastern artists to audiences around the globe and also the Lebanese Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale. In 2015 they returned to New York to curate an exhibition of works by Zineb Sedira at Taymour Grahne. Meanwhile, while Kholeif settles in Chicago, Sara Raza also relocated from the UK to become Guggenheim UBS MAP Curator, Middle East and North Africa. New York's influence on the regional art scene is becoming increasingly visible – in December Leila Heller Gallery opened in Alserkal Avenue (see page 76) with Ghada Amer's first exhibition in the region in 20 years.

THE VIEW FROM HERE

Looking ahead, it seems hard to imagine that New York could eclipse London as a Middle Eastern art centre as long as the British capital remains the primary hub for auction house engagement with that market and home to these vital patrons. Instead, New York's rise as an equally important hub seems to evidence an increasingly globalised and interconnected world. Major international art centres in Europe and North America can no longer afford to ignore art from other countries and the influential role that artists and curators as nomadic cultural emissaries in this widening international art circuit for contemporary art suggests that newer

hubs are inevitable. As the centre of the Middle East and Arab art world continues to develop in the Gulf and emerging art markets continue to surge, it is also possible to imagine a time in the near future when these Western capitals can no longer command the same importance.

For the immediate moment, we should revel in the rich creativity that this dizzying circulation has produced. In the coming year or two we have much to anticipate, including a fast-approaching Marrakech Biennale curated by Reem Fadda, Raza's exhibition at the Guggenheim in New York at the conclusion of her two years as UBS MAP Curator, Art Reoriented's exhibition on Surrealism in Egypt at the Centre Pompidou, and, of course, the 2017 Sharjah Biennial curated by Christine Tohmé.

MESSAGES OF TERROR

The destruction of heritage goes back centuries, as a tool with which invading forces seek to erase opposing cultures. Armin Yavari looks back over 2015 and comments on the cycles that led us there.

For those of us untouched directly by the misery caused by armed conflict in the past 12 months, it has been easier to disengage from the carnage around us with the festivities leading up to the New Year. The customary countdown on New Year's Eve opens a window to new possibilities, fresh opportunities, and the untapped potential