





# 57TH VENICE BIENNALE

13 MAY-26 NOVEMBER 2017

*VIVA ARTE VIVA*

**CURATOR:** CHRISTINE MACEL

## **THE MIDDLE EAST IN VENICE**

**56**

TUNISIA, LEBANON, IRAQ, IRAN, EGYPT, TURKEY AND UAE;  
TRIBUTE TO MARWAN AND HASSAN SHARIF IN THE  
MAIN SHOW

## **THE BEST OF THE REST: A LOOK AT THE INTERNATIONAL PAVILIONS**

**88**

ARMENIA, ITALY, NEW ZEALAND, SOUTH AFRICA, USA,  
GREAT BRITAIN, ZIMBABWE, GERMANY

## **MAIN SHOW: THE CANVAS VIEW ON WHAT'S HOT AND WHAT'S NOT**

**106**

## **EDITOR'S PICK: RISING STARS**

**112**

TAUS MAKHACHEVA  
LIU YE  
FIRENZE LAI  
RAFAEL MEGALL  
NEVIN ALADAG  
HASSAN KHAN

## **VENICE OFF-PISTE: THE BEST OF THE COLLATERALS**

**126**

INTUITION AT PALLAZZO FORTUNY  
JAMES RICHARDS AT THE SANTA MARIA AUSILIATRICE CHURCH  
PIERRE HUYGHE AT ESPACE LOUIS VUITTON VENEZIA



# THE MIDDLE EAST IN VENICE

**Tim Cornwell** pays a visit to the Middle Eastern pavilions at the 57th edition of the Venice Biennale, and gives us his verdict on the best and brightest, while **Fari Bradley** focuses on Tunisia as the ultimate highlight.

# EGYPT

**Title:** *The Mountain*

**Commissioner/Artist:** Moataz Mohamed Nasr Eldin

**Curator:** Ministry of Culture

**Venue:** Giardini

 #egyptianpavilion #moataznasr #themountain



**T**here is a niche in contemporary art for large-scale, panoramic screen works in high definition, and screening rooms for films are now commonplace in exhibitions of other art forms. A question that can be reasonably posed is whether these works of 'visual art' truly go beyond, or even rival, the groundbreaking Surrealist films that date back to the 1930s. I say this because Egypt opted for the four-screen immersive film installation, *The Mountain*, by Alexandria-born multimedia artist Moataz Nasr, about a mythical village plagued by a threat we cannot see, in the Giardini di Castello (the oldest permanent building designated for the Middle East at the Biennale). In a way, it's fitting since the first time Nasr participated in the Biennale was back in 2003, and the main theme then was Dreams and Conflicts.

The film begins with Zein, a young, university-educated woman played by Theraa Goubail, who returns to the village in Upper Egypt where she grew up. Here, the villagers live in fear of the dark, haunted by an unseen demon who inhabits the mountain overshadowing them and descends to the village at night. Zein resolves to confront their fears, just as she challenges social norms by appearing without a headscarf at a village assembly, telling the shocked local Sheikh to "forget about my hair and clothes, and focus on more important matters." The film is cast in an accompanying book in the form of an essay on fear, said to be the least acknowledged of our primal instincts shaping relationships, opinions and actions.

To allow the viewer to really 'step' into the 12-minute fantastical fable, the artist brought in mud from Egypt and used it to build an entrance to the pavilion and cover the walls and interiors in a style that mimicked the village houses in the film. As a whole though, the show is conventional and hardly artistically dangerous, its ambiguous ending aside. Different shots of different scenes play on the screens, but the central

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Moataz Nasr. *The Mountain*.  
Image courtesy of the artist  
and Leila Heller Gallery,  
Dubai, New York



Moataz Nasr on the set of *The Mountain*.  
Image courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller  
Gallery, Dubai, New York

narrative stays clear. The rural setting serves to inoculate the film from any reference to – or reflection on – Egypt's recent crises centered on urban unrest, for instance.

The work may be of a high standard in terms of film direction but in some respects, it is an empty vessel. Modern sources of fear, insecurity or moral choices are resolutely sidestepped. The work deals with, as Professor Khaled Sorour, head of the Fine Arts Sector in Egypt, writes, "the idea of fear as seen from a natural and humble Egyptian community." Egypt is

proud of being "the first and only" country from the region to be awarded an independent pavilion by the Biennale, he observes, with Nasr "lifting Egypt's image as an ambassador of Egyptian art and creativity." There's not much room in this reading for a subversive edge, especially given the kind of works the artist is known for in the past, such as his symbolic installation of ceramic figures of Egyptian protestors at Tahrir Square in 2012, after the uprising of the previous year, or his intricate arabesque maps of wooden matches in 2015. 