

**CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE MIDDLE EAST: NEW PERSPECTIVES**

© The Art Book vol 14, 2, May 2007



*Made into Palestine* Installation Shot, New York City Sept Oct 2006,  
background left to right

John Halaka *Stripped of their Identity and Driven from their Land*, from the series *Forgotten Survivors*, 1993, 1997, 2003, Samia Halaby *Palestine*, from the *Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River*, 2003 , Rula Halawani from the series *Negative Incursions* foreground, Mary Tuma *Homes for the Disembodied*, 2000

WORD INTO ART/ ARTISTS OF THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST  
VENETIA PORTER WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY ISABELLE CAUSSE  
FOREWORD BY SAEB EIGNER,

The British Museum Press, 2006. £ 11.99 £16.99

144 Pages, 190 col

ISBN 0 7141 1164 3 (paper)0 7141 1163 5 (hardcover)

OUT OF BEIRUT

SUZANNE COTTER, SIMON HARVEY, STEPHEN WRIGHT, KAELEN WILSON-  
GOLDIE, BILAL KHBEIZ

Modern Art Oxford, 2006 £14.85

120 pages 155 col/33mono illus

ISBN 901 352 28 5 paper

PUBLIC TIME Modern Art Oxford October 2006

WITHOUT BOUNDARY/ SEVENTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING

FERESHTEH DAFTARI

with an essay by HOMI BHABHA and prose by ORHAN PAMUK

Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2006

104 pages 60col/27mono  
ISBN: 0-87070-085-5 hardcover

We urgently need alternative perspectives to the exclusive focus on war, chaos, and terrorism from mainstream reports on Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and elsewhere. Several recent shows and books presented aspects of the strong contemporary art in the region. Collectively they make a powerful case for culture as a site of resistance, international communication, and peacemaking.

The Arabic word 'love' dominated the posters of the British Museum's mesmerizing exhibition *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*. Rising high in the central court was a minaret like tower by Iraqi Dia al Azzawi inscribed with the exquisite but sad poem 'O Blessed Tigris' by Iraqi Muhammad Mahdi. The Arabic word 'heech' in large scale red, yellow, and green metal sculptures by Iranian Parviz Tanavoli punctuated a landing high above the earth bound stone mass of a Sumerian statue and a reclining lion from Knidos. 'Heech' is a Persian word that means 'nothing' according to the artist, but here it made a celebratory entrance to the exhibition.

*Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* included contemporary works on paper and ceramics, as well as a few paintings and sculpture, primarily collected by the British Museum since the 1980s. The exhibition was based on the premise of the vibrancy of the traditional art of Arabic calligraphy in the context of a sacred script, as well as the transformations of the script by individual artists as they intersect with spiritual practices, international contemporary art trends, politics, and regional traditions.

The British Museum's historical collections provided a deep resonance for the contemporary works. Venetia Porter, British Museum Curator of Islamic art and the Contemporary Middle East, reveals an international contemporary culture of which we have had only the barest glimpse. The informative and beautifully illustrated catalog carefully explains the many variations of the Arabic script (including Persian), as well as the history of the artists who use it in their work. Each work is specifically contextualized, illustrated, and Arabic or Persian text is translated. The works are divided into four sections: Sacred Script, Literature and Art, Deconstructing the Word, and Identity, History and Politics.

'Sacred Script' includes artists from Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey as well as Japan and China. They write quotations from the Qu'ran in stunningly elaborate and varied forms. When gathered in a small gallery they seemed to radiate spiritual energy. "Literature and Art" emphasized poetic and literary traditions (as well as memorization and oral recitation). Artists quote pre Islamic poets, mystics, Sufi masters, and recent poets. Artists, poets, and intellectuals of the Arab and Persian world obviously revere one another. They form a culture that crosses national boundaries physically, intellectually and spiritually.

'Deconstructing the Word' refers to the resonance of the Arabic letter forms in themselves, as aesthetic objects, nationalist signifiers, magical incantations, protections, and talismans for healing. It included artists working in ceramic, painting, drawing and even video. In the final section 'Identity, History and Politics' artists combine writing with political messages. It ranged from Iranian photographer, Bahman Jalali, and

Egyptian painter, Chant Avedissian, to artists working in more conceptual formats like Lebanese Walid Raad and Palestinian Khalil Rabah. Kareem Risan's small books evoked the burning of the Baghdad library and the effects of depleted uranium through expressionist colors, textures, lines, and cavities.

The entire project benefited enormously from a major grant from Dubai Holding which enabled color reproductions of all the works, major sculpture commissions, a provocative symposium, calligraphy demonstrations, and an entire summer of Middle East programming. The collective message of the project is reverence for calligraphy, poetry and visual art as a manifestation of humanity and a way toward peace.

In the same week that *Word into Art* opened in London, Oxford Modern Art launched its exhibition *Out of Beirut*. In contrast to the wide geographical reach of *Word into Art*, *Out of Beirut*, focused on a concentrated group of postmodern artists working in one city, Beirut, Lebanon. Fourteen artists and one collective presented videos, photography, conceptual art, and installation. The catalog as well as two performances during the opening (transcripts of which are published in a second volume) reveal that the artists of Beirut are perhaps the most committed avant-garde in the contemporary art world: they use experimental media, resist and defy institutions, and work collectively. Most important they profoundly engage and illuminate the social and political issues that are part of the fabric of life in Lebanon. They do not directly address a particular issue, rather they look at underlying causes and concepts.

The overall theme of the art was a sophisticated analysis of post Civil War Lebanon, the multimillion dollar reconstruction by Rafic Hariri, and the aftermath of his assassination. Some of the art works explored amnesia, the transience of memory, and the elusiveness of "documents" that construct a history. Sadly, with the Israeli bombing campaign of July 2006 that intentionally destroyed much of the reconstruction, and killed hundreds of people, the themes of *Out of Beirut* abruptly changed their context from an analysis of a contemporary situation, to a benchmark for an already historical episode.

The catalog is an essential addition to writings on contemporary art from Beirut. It has an informative introduction by Suzanne Cotter, curator of the exhibition, essays by Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, a journalist based in Beirut, on the grass roots Heartland Collective and general perspectives on the artists' position in Beirut, a provocative exchange between philosopher/critic Stephen Wright and three artists, Tony Chakar, Bilal Khbeiz, and Walid Sadek. Simon Harvey writes on "Smuggling Practices into the Image of Beirut," an enlightening metaphor for the position and practices of these artists. It also includes essays by many of the artists in the exhibition and supplemental photographic imagery. Among the other artists, all of them living in Beirut, were Walid Sadek, Bilal Khbeiz, and Fadi Abdallah (working collaboratively), Paola Yacoub and Michel Lasserre (as a partnership), Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige (as a partnership), Heartland (a collective), as well as Akram Zaatari, Lamia Joreige, Gilbert Hage, Tony Chakar, Ziad Abillama, Rabih Mroué, Ali Cherry and the architect Bernard Khoury. Walid Raad, formerly a collaborator with Zaatari, is now based on New York, working on his own and increasingly familiar in the international circuit.

Moving from these two subtle exhibitions and catalogs originating in England, to a recent show in New York City, offers some striking contrasts. At the Museum of Modern, *Without Boundary/Seventeen Ways of Looking* was full of jarring juxtapositions and contradictions. The show's title emphasized visuality, but the introduction by

Fereshteh Daftari had the odd title “Islamic or Not.” Since the British Museum artists and exhibition all specifically avoided the concept of “Islamic art” preferring instead a national designation and a careful contextual analysis, this mixed message of formalism and Islamism immediately called attention not to the art, but to the anxiety of the Museum of Modern Art about how to frame the art.<sup>1</sup>

Fourteen of the artists have varying roots in countries in Asia and Africa, but they are primarily known today as international art stars based in London or New York: Jananne Al-Ani, Ghada Amer, Kutlug Ataman, the Atlas Group/Walid Raad, Mona Hatoum, Shirazeh Houshiary, Emily Jacir, Y.Z. Kami, Rachid Koraïchi, Shirin Neshat, Marjane Satrapi, Shirana Shahbazi, Raqib Shaw and Shahzia Sikander. But, oddly, the show also included two white male artists from the United States, Mike Kelly and Bill Viola whose work, in this context, came off as unconvincing and clichéd (Kelly inserted an Irish theme into an Asian carpet design, and Viola’s video was about ablutions)

The three themes of the exhibition resonate with narrow American ideas about “Islamic art”: formal or taxonomic (ie carpets, miniatures, calligraphy), identity (secular and religious), and faith. Two of the three categories reference religion. One exemplar of the spiritual is Kutlug Ataman, a secular openly gay Turkish filmmaker, who is most interested in constructing tensions between reality and fiction. Several artists refer to Rumi, the most familiar (almost pop) mystic for American audiences.

Shirazeh Houshiary, whose work is almost entirely abstract, does have a subtle mystical. Coincidentally, though, her work also fulfills the Museum of Modern Art’s long entrenched bias toward abstract art. Predictably, the catalog compares her with artists like Mark Rothko and Agnes Martin. In the end the Museum of Modern Art exhibition is really about formalism and aesthetics. As Daftari declares” They share a tie based not in ethnicity or religion, but in their way of revising, subverting and challenging aesthetic traditions.” (25)

In stark contrast, *Made in Palestine* first organized in 2003, and finally shown in an alternative space in New York City from March to May 2006, is a deeply illuminating exhibition and publication about a specific embattled place. It includes nineteen artists working in a range of media. Unlike the formalist emphasis that homogenized the art of *Without Boundary*, these artists, as explained in the catalog, have many different and particular relationships to Palestine.

The contrast of approaches in these books and exhibitions is revealing. In the United Kingdom thought-provoking exhibitions are based on Middle East expertise and direct conversations with the artists. In the United States, the Museum of Modern Art cannot liberate itself from its own formalist baggage. At the same time fervently committed individuals can make an exhibition of contemporary Palestinian art happen even in New York City.

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<sup>1</sup> Maymanah Farhat “Contemporary “Islamic” art in context: The Discourse of Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking” [www.arteeast.org](http://www.arteeast.org) May 2006 offered a cogent analysis of the removal of the exhibition from its political context and the perpetuation of stereotyped thinking.



Suleiman Mansour *Wall* from the series, *I Ismael*, 1997 clay on wood panels