

Protesting artists, arresting art: the Venice Biennale

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Susan Platt looks at five pavilions at Venice 2011

I: The Iraq Pavilion ‘Wounded Water’

Located in the crumbling building of the Gervasuti Foundation, the Iraq Pavilion echoed the condition of the infrastructure in Iraq and focused on an urgent problem, the inaccessibility of clean water. For these six artists the theme was a provocative point of departure. In Ali Assaf's Caravaggesque video, *Narcissus*, a man leans over a slow moving stream as detritus floats down the river until the water is barely visible (see lightbox).

The artist is from Basra, a place that used to be a beautiful city. When Assaf returned he found it in ruins, its river polluted. He dedicated to Basra an installation that includes a small pyramid of dates, family photographs, and a video with stills of birds caught in the Gulf Oil Spill accompanied by an Arabic children's song about the river. The intersections of environmental disaster and family made this one of the most compelling installations in the pavilion.

In Azad Nanakeli's *Destnuej* (Purification), a man repeatedly tries to purify himself as he is first engulfed by blood and then submerged by oil.

A stunning installation of red mylar by Walid Siti evoked the dried up Great Zab river, a tributary of the Tigris (see lightbox). *Meso* filled the entrance hall of the exhibition with an intense red curtain that felt celebratory and tragic at the same time.

Ahmed Alsoundani's turbulent compositions cascade on the surface of the canvas, revealing horrible scenes of carnage, death and destruction (see lightbox). The densely crowded compositions are as abstract as a carpet and as specific as a Goya.

II: The Future of a Promise: Contemporary Art from the Arab World

What a wonderful name, at this point in history, for this exhibition of 22 artists, curated by Lina Lazaar. Ziad Abillama's sign pointing to 'Arabes' in every direction evokes the endless possibilities: the artists are based in many countries and have as many trajectories.

Taysir Batniji's, *GH 0809*, an abbreviation of Gaza Houses 2008–09, co-opts the format of real estate advertising to present listings of houses in the Gaza strip, many of them ruined, with comments such as 'building on stilts... beautiful exposure, inhabitants 27 people'. The absurdity of the listing underscores the ruinous situation in Gaza. In stark contrast, Lara Baladi dazzles us aesthetically with her digital collage *Rose* (see lightbox). As her father died of cancer, the artist spent six months documenting the residue in coffee cups from visitors to the family in a futile attempt to predict a different future. She incorporated all of those cups in a lacelike abstraction.

In Manal al Dowayan's *Suspended Together*, 200 fibreglass doves are frozen in place (see lightbox). Each one is covered with the document required for Saudi women who want to travel (with a male relative), underscoring that no matter how powerful women become, the restrictions on their travel in the Arab world still exist everywhere. Curator Lina Lazaar poses the question 'Can visual culture . . . respond to both recent events and the future promise implied in these events?' In this cross section of works, the answer is yes, but with a heavy dose of aesthetics and restraint.

III: The Egyptian Pavilion: '30 Days of Running in the Place, Ahmed Basiony (1978–2011)'

As a more direct answer to that question, the Egyptian pavilion honors young media artist/activist Ahmed Basiony (1978–2011). Basiony was a radical in his art and his politics. He was also a crucial inspiration among the younger generation of Egyptian artists. He had been filming for four days in Tahrir Square when he was killed by a sniper. A huge wall of the pavilion alternates between a video of his performance *30 Days Running in the Place*, in which the artist wears a transparent sweat suit with sensors on his body and the soles of his shoes that translated his exertion into a visual diagram, with his footage in Tahrir Square (see lightbox). The sense of futility and entrapment in *30 Days* contrasts with the action of the protesting crowds in Tahrir Square.

IV The British Pavilion Mike Nelson 'I, Imposter'

Mike Nelson's evocation of an ancient Istanbul Han (market building) is based on a work he created inside the Büyük Valide Han at the 2003 Istanbul Biennial (see lightbox). In its original incarnation, the artist set up a photographic studio in the famous 17th-century Han for three weeks, a piece I analysed in my book *Art and Politics Now*. The re-creation in Venice evokes some of the workrooms, with his darkroom and its red lighting as a focal point. His interest here, he has said, is in the materials, the glass, the metal, the textiles, not the history or the craftspeople. The piece is really about Mike Nelson the artist, which is of course why he called it 'I, Imposter.'

V Danish Pavilion: 'Speech Matters'

Curator Katerina Gregos declares 'Freedom of speech... seems more and more to be used as an empty political slogan that is subjected to a very simplified, biased and populist debate. In reality, it is an extremely complex and often ambivalent issue that is contingent on subjective political, social, cultural, religious, and personal views'.

The curator was inspired by Czech filmmaker, Svankmajer Zahrada, who used surrealist techniques to question 'power, control, hierarchy, authority, institutions, brainwashing, passive acceptance and self subjugation to an oppressive system'. Each of the 17 artists and two collectives followed different aspects of the theme including how history is told (Sharon Hayes, Zhang Dali), language (Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri) and controversial imagery (Steklios Faitakis), an 'Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar' (Taryn Simon), and the process of copyright (Agency).

For his *Pavilion for Revolutionary Free Speech* (see lightbox), Thomas Kilpper cut 32 portraits into a temporary wooden pavilion: all but one (the artist) are people who have actively played a part in perpetrating hate speech,

political right wing affiliations, leaders who are opposed to freedom. His title is 'How to get rid of 'em without fighting for revolution and emancipation'.

These are just a few of the pavilions in the 2011 Venice Biennale, which this year included 89 countries. The pavilions by participating countries, as suggested here, embraced complex intersections of ideas, artists, and media. Those that addressed concerns of our contemporary world were the most provocative, but just being exposed to cultural productions from all parts of the globe underscores the fact that art can create peaceful relationships among diverse people, in places where politicians and warriors so woefully fail to do so.