

Routes II Showcases Contemporary Middle Eastern Art

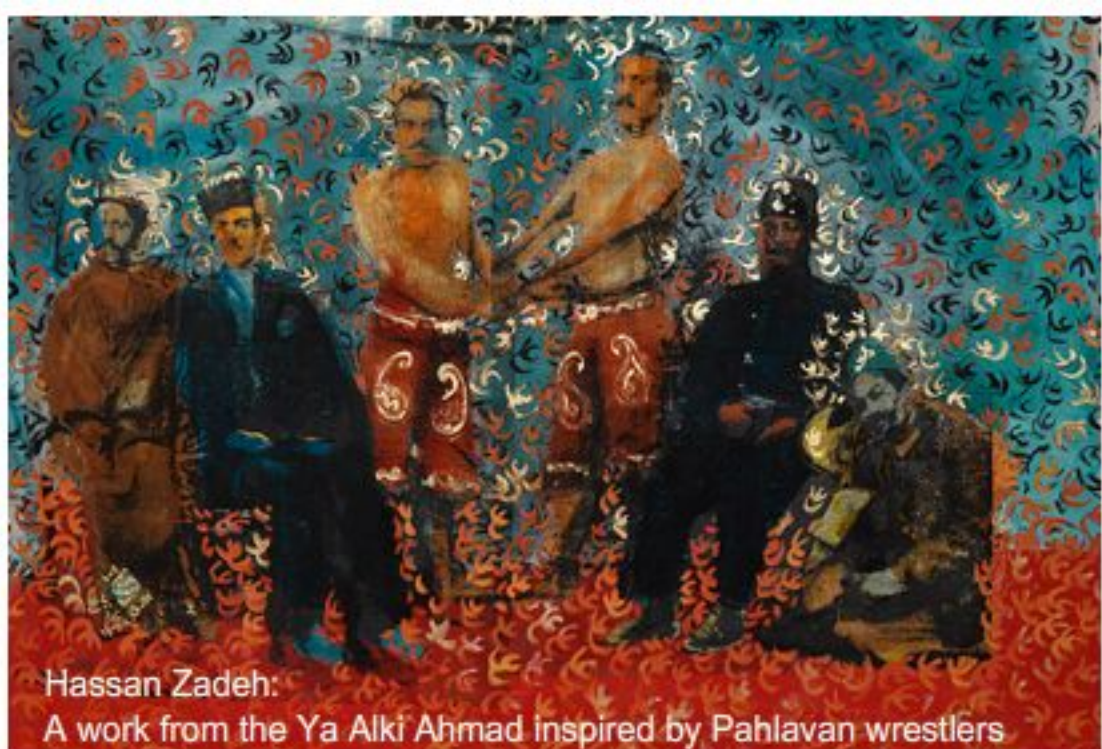
Quaint palm trees, beautiful mosques and classical desert oases step aside: contemporary Middle Eastern art does not inspire dreams but harsh reality portrayed by a new generation of artists, sculptors, photographers, printmakers and painters.

Following last year's inaugural edition of Routes, Waterhouse & Dodd, one of London's leading fine art dealers, organized Routes II in their prestigious West End gallery. The exhibition featured the work of 16 artists: 12 Iranians, one Turk, one Moroccan, one Tunisian and one Egyptian. All the works displayed were for sale with price tags ranging from £3,900 - £148,000.

"While we have taken a number of aspects into account in our selection, not least our interest in presenting a balanced overview of artists working in different mediums, the most important criteria has been to choose artists on the quality of their

work", director Ray Waterhouse explained. "Our choices have not been influenced by a wish to express any political messages, but it is the right of all artists to convey their views through their art. The works in this exhibition are inevitably a product of, and a commentary on, many aspects of the artists' lives in the Middle East, including their cultural history, artistic repression, their political views and women's role in society".

Among the most memorable works on display are Youssef Nabil's Three girls in a studio, Shadi Ghadirian's, Nil Nil series in which military objects enter the domestic sphere, juxtaposing symbols of potential violence with everyday items, Khosrow



Hassan Zadeh:

A work from the Ya Ali Ahmad inspired by Pahlavan wrestlers

Hassanzadeh's Ya Ali Madad series inspired by the prayers of Pahlavan wrestlers before a match, Samira Alikhanzadeh's unidentified subjects which are infused with philosophical questions of identity, existence and time, and Nja Mahdaoui's choreography of letters.

Youssef Nabil is now based in New York but grew up in Cairo recalling the golden age of Egyptian cinema. Discovering when a child, that most of this favourite Egyptian film idols were no longer alive, a desire was

kindled to meet those who remained and to immortalize them for himself by photographing them. He began his professional photography career aged 20 by staging tableaux in which his friends acted out melodramas recalling film stills from Egyptian cinema.

Shadi Ghadirian still lives and works in the city of her birth, Tehran. She is a renowned artist who has achieved success in solo shows, group exhibitions and also at auctions. She stepped into the international

limelight in 2001 with the series Qajar and Like Everyday, her compelling images linked to her identity as a Muslim woman living in Iran. Her first series of portraits were inspired by old plate-glass photographs from Iran's Qajar period (1794 to 1925) which she discovered while still a student at Akshaneh, a historical archive in Tehran.

Khosrow Hassanzadeh is one of the artists of the moment; in 2009 alone his works have been widely shown across Iran and

exhibited at the British Museum, the 53rd Venice Biennale and the Chelsea Art Museum in New York. Born in Tehran into a traditional family of fruit sellers, in 1979 he became a revolutionary and Badiji soldier fighting the war on drugs near Afghanistan. He returned to Tehran completely disillusioned and in 1989 took up studies at the Faculty of Painting at Tehran's Mojtama'se-Honar University. The Hi Ya Ali Madad series combines painting and printing techniques and were

Nja Mahdaoui:
a example of his
'choreography of
letters'



Shadi Ghadirian's, Nil Nil series in which military objects enter the domestic sphere



executed with highly charged acrylic colours and silkscreen on canvas.

Samira Alikhanzadeh continues to live and work in Tehran after studying painting as an undergraduate at Azad University and then completing her masters in fine art at the same university. She exhibits regularly in Tehran and has taken part in many group exhibitions internationally including *Murmuring Dreams* and *Masques of Shahrazad* at

the Mall Galleries in London.

Her early work featured many windows focusing on the effects of light on interiors when filtering through windows. The methods have changed in her current works but she retains the concept of looking through windows as she takes the position of an observer by creating window-like openings to the interiors within her compositions.

Nja Mahdaoui is one of the most celebrated living contemporary

artists and calligraphers in Tunisia. His work is internationally renowned, especially since winning the international competition for the external design of some of Gulf Air's fleet to mark its 50th anniversary. Mahdaoui considers himself 'an explorer of signs' and has been described as 'a choreographer of letters'. His work is based on the shapes associated with Kufic script and Arabic letter forms, but he does not set out to write meaningful texts. Famous for his meticulous work in ink on parchment, Mahdaoui stresses the visual impact of his compositions which he refers to as 'calligrams' (beautiful writing).

The interest in Middle Eastern art is not confined to Waterhouse & Dodd. It should be viewed in the context of the recent major Saatchi Show Unveiled in London and the equally well received exhibition of Iranian art entitled Iran Inside Out at the Chelsea Art Museum in New York, as well as numerous smaller shows and auctions of

Samira Alikhanzadeh: acrylic & mirror fragments on painted board





Yousif Nabil:
Three girls in a studio

Middle Eastern art across the globe. In addition, several new publications on the subject recently hit the book shops including Contemporary Art in the Middle East produced by Black Dog Publishing.

Much of the recent popularity of Middle Eastern artists is a direct result of the burgeoning cultural development infrastructure in their native region. Large stretches of the barren sands of the UAE are quickly becoming the future homes for some of the world's biggest museums, including the Louvre and the Guggenheim. In Qatar, the

Museum of Islamic Art has attracted many visitors who may have not otherwise gone to the Gulf.

It is important to note that this kind of 'golden Age', assisted by globalization is not fleeing. The growth of platforms the world over, which includes the construction of dozens of independent galleries in the Middle Eastern capitals like Dubai, means Middle Eastern artists will hold fast to their status as immovable fixtures of the global art scene. What we have witnessed thus far is only the beginning.