

Far From Home, an Arab Summer

'Here and Elsewhere,' Contemporary Work From the Middle East

By HOLLAND COTTER JULY 17, 2014

Most of our New York museums give us gussied-up versions of what we already know. The New Museum was created almost 35 years ago to do the opposite, to give us art we barely knew existed. With “Here and Elsewhere,” it thrillingly fulfills that mandate.

Hidden behind that noncommittal title is a potentially volatile subject: what the museum advertises as contemporary art “from and about the Arab world.” I winced at the description. After decades of postcolonial consciousness raising, we’ve grown leery of shows that lump sundry unlike cultures together, as this one does with artists from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates, not to mention Europe and the United States.

Is it possible, under such circumstances, to avoid stereotypes? Where, within an all-purpose “Arab” theme, should emphasis fall? Should a show play up newsy politics or thwart expectations and play them down? Emphasize individual sensibilities or define overarching trends? To what degree should the market dictate the choice of participants? (A few artists in “Here and Elsewhere” — Kader Attia, Yto Barrada, Susan Hefuna, Wael Shawky — have shown in New York, though most are making local debuts. Several others declined the invitation to appear in an “Arab” context.)

In reality, there’s no right way to go. But if shows like this are the only way, given the provincial nature of the New York art world, that we get to

learn about what's happening across the globe, so be it. And let it be the New Museum doing the job.

It had already shaped a cogent model in its 2011 "Ostalgia," a survey of art from Eastern Europe. "Here and Elsewhere" is in that league, thanks to having the same curator, Massimiliano Gioni, who was named artistic director of the museum on Thursday, and an in-house team: Natalie Bell, Gary Carrion-Murayari, Helga Christoffersen and Margot Norton. It's a big show, intricately pieced together on all five floors of the museum, and starts on the street-level facade with a large-scale photograph of an ultra-plush Abu Dhabi hotel. The image was installed by the cosmopolitan collective called GCC, made up of eight artists scattered from Dubai to London and New York who make it their business to focus on the preposterous wealth concentrated in a few hands in a few oil-rich countries on the Persian Gulf. (Portraits of the collective's members dressed as sheikhs are visible above the ticket desk.)

In a lobby gallery, a Saudi artist named Ahmed Mater hits the same target on a more modest scale. In a set of cellphone videos, he documents the physical transformation of the holy city of Mecca, as it turns itself into a deluxe pilgrim-tourist destination. Old buildings crash down, new ones rise, and an immense crane-hoisted gold spire topped with a crescent moon seems to float, miraculously, in midair as it is lifted atop the world's tallest clock tower in this capital of corporate religion. In the same gallery, though, we see alternative economies. Since the early 1980s, the Dubai artist Hassan Sharif has been making small, rough look-alike sculptures from scrap materials — cardboard scraps, bits of colored plastic, discarded flip-flops — and displaying them like goods in a market devoted to useless things. In 2010, another artist, Abdullah Al Saadi, who lives in the United Arab Emirates, undertook a kind of low-budget personal pilgrimage in the form of a 20-day walk through his homeland in the company of a pet dog and a donkey, with every step captured in 151 watercolors.

The works in the lobby galleries introduce themes that will echo on

floors above. Surely, pilgrimage is the correct word for the arduous and illegal treks to Europe by the African and South Asian immigrants who appear in videos by Bouchra Khalili on the fourth floor. We never see their faces, only their hands tracing on a map the impossibly tangled routes they took in search of jobs, freedom and families.

And in various pieces throughout the show, public architecture and politics are inseparable.

In 2008, the Syrian artist Hrair Sarkissian shot empty plazas in Damascus where, until the revolt against Bashar al-Assad began, criminals were hanged. Photographs by Ziad Antar and Fouad Elkoury depict a war-strafed Beirut as a city of ruins, while Marwan Rechmaoui replicates, in sculptural miniature, the high-rise he once lived in there. In a fantastically detailed architectural model, Wafa Hourani gives the overcrowded Palestinian refugee camp Qalandia a utopian spin, imagining it in the future as a place of order and peace, with lamp-lit homes and sweet music wafting through the night. That future, of course, is a fantasy. Today, Qalandia is at a contested checkpoint between Jerusalem and Ramallah where violent clashes flare.

Violence, real or threatened, recurs in the show. It's there in a 2011 video by Hiwa K, who inserts himself as both performance artist and documenter in antigovernment protests in northern Iraq; in a film by Marwa Arsanios that recreates a scene of a terrorist bomb-planting from the 1966 film "The Battle of Algiers"; and in "Infiltrators," a 2012 film by Khaled Jarrar, which records repeated efforts by Palestinians to breach the wall that defines the border with Israel. Mr. Jarrar, who lives and works in Ramallah, was scheduled to come to New York for the exhibition but was reportedly grounded at the last minute by Israeli authorities. An exhibition of his films will open at Whitebox Art Center on the Lower East Side on July 24.

Even when conflict stops, the memory of it continues, which is the subject of Lamia Joreige's "Objects of War," a series of video interviews with survivors of Lebanon's decades-long state of crisis. For each video,

Ms. Joreige asked the person interviewed to talk about a single item that most immediately evokes the country's civil wars. One man chooses his dead father's driver's license; another a candle; another a pack of batteries that powered a portable radio. (All the objects are displayed in the gallery.) The writer and artist Etel Adnan chooses a copy of her 1977 novel, "Sitt Marie Rose," which she wrote, at lightning speed, about a woman who died in the conflict.

Ms. Adnan, who was born in Beirut in 1925, and now lives in France and California, also has paintings in the show. But her most engrossing contribution is the typescript of her extraordinary book of poems "The Arab Apocalypse," replete with hand-drawn symbols and annotations.

Despite the prominence of photography and film, this is very much a show about touch. It's the distinguishing feature of the terra cotta sculptures by the Syrian artist Simone Fattal; of the churning paintings on Egyptian themes — Nefertiti, Constantine Cavafy — by Anna Boghigui; of Mazen Kerbaj's witty, nerve-racked visual diary of life in Beirut during the 2006 war with Israel; and of Rokni Haerizadeh's painted-over YouTube stills of political demonstrations, in Europe and America as well as the Middle East with their half-human, half-animal figures. Such work gives the impression of having been done under tremendous psychic pressure, as much of what's in the show was, though not everything.

Suha Traboulsi's cool minimalist-before-Minimalism abstract paintings from the 1940s predate her turbulent career as a performance artist. The Moroccan artist Mohamed Larbi Rahali attended art school in Morocco in the late 1960s but dropped out, preferring to work as a boat mechanic and fisherman. In 1984, after doing some doodles on the interior of a discarded matchbox, he decided that art might be for him after all. In the past 30 years, he's produced thousands of matchbook pictures and assemblages, which he refers to collectively as "Omri" ("My Life").

The exhibition's title, "Here and Elsewhere," is lifted from a 1976 film, by Jean-Luc Godard and collaborators, which was initiated as a pro-Palestinian political tract but ended up questioning the truth-telling role

of images and acknowledging the role of fiction in shaping history. Artists have always understood this dynamic. The show's youngest participant, Fakhri El Ghezal, born in Tunisia in 1981, photographs generations-old family mementos to create a wry and probing "who am I?" self-portrait. And a professional photographic portraitist Hashem El Madani, who opened his studio in Lebanon in 1947, chronicled the illusions of an entire era: In his day, conservative morals prohibited men and women from kissing on camera, but same-sex smooches were allowed, and that's what we see in his poignant double portraits.

And now Mr. El Madani himself is a historical monument and the subject of a beautiful video homage by Akram Zaatari, an artist who, with Mr. Elkoury and Walid Raad, established the Arab Image Foundation, a vast archive of photographic images from and about someplace called the Middle East.

The history of that someplace — even of any small part of it — is immensely complicated and its art still little seen here. (This may change. The Metropolitan Museum recently posted a notice that it was seeking a curator specializing in 20th- and 21st-century art of the Middle East, North Africa and Turkey.) To appreciate this show fully, a little homework can't hurt. But really all you need to do is be willing to linger, read labels and let not-knowing be a form of bliss. In return, you'll get wonderful artists, deep ideas, fabulous stories and the chance, still too seldom offered by our museums, to be a global citizen. Don't pass it up.

"Here and Elsewhere" runs through Sept. 28 at the New Museum, 235 Bowery, at Prince Street, Lower East Side; 212-219-1222, newmuseum.org.

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