

## Exchange Challenges: The Artist-in-Residence Program by the ORYX Foundation

*By: Anna Fech*



Ahmed Badry, *The Provisionary that lasts*, 2013, mixed media, 165x68x443cm.

Climbing the stairs to the second floor a cheerful yellow 'Welcome' sign, written in different languages, greets the arriving guest. Upon entering the apartment a well stocked-fruit bowl and a bar of Swiss chocolate await in the living room where the view from the balcony over the impressive mountain ranges of Central Switzerland are enough to make the artists forget, even for a short moment, how tired they are from the long distance flight. These artists are taking part in the artist-in-residence program by the ORYX Foundation, initiated by the AB Gallery. They hail from countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Oman or Pakistan and are delighted that this will be their home for the next two or three months. We are in Emmenbrucke, a suburban area of the city of Lucerne in Switzerland that became a leading industrial centre of the region at the turn of the century. Such growth created an increasing demand for workers that was initially covered by the rural exodus and, later on, by immigrants from abroad.

The area has maintained its industrial and multicultural charm until the present day and within this Swiss 'Chelsea' the residency program is situated. *"The location outside the centre is ideal for inspiration, developing and producing art works"* explains the Ahmed Badry *"What I like about the place"* Khaled Hafez elucidates *"is the gigantic size of the gallery space and what you can do with that as an artist. I also like the idea that the apartment is almost in the same place as the gallery."* Both Cairo-based artists spent their residency together in the autumn of 2013. The gallery is situated on a hill, in an inconspicuous former factory building just next to a yellow church, a landmark feature famed as one of the most beautiful spots in the area that can be seen from afar. The church's bell-ringing everyday at 7 am sharp may well have waken up many of the artists, not yet accustomed to Swiss working times.

### Across Borders

This is also the time when gallery directors' Heidi and Franz Leupi start work. They have dedicated their lives to art specifically from the Middle Eastern region.

*"Art is like a virus."* Heidi says *"I believe that everyone is infected. When my virus broke out it turned into a passion."* Having established their first Gallery in 1996 in Switzerland, mainly representing European artists,

they also organised exhibitions in destinations such as Singapore, Mexico City, Los Angeles, Germany and Las Vegas. One of these destinations raised their interest towards the MENA region. Getting involved in an exhibition that took place in Dubai in 2004 they became aware of the exciting art scene there, *"However, it was one that received very little attention in the Western world"* Franz noticed. From that moment on the Middle East became the couple's regular travel destination leading to a broad network of artists, art lovers, curators and collectors developing, after a time, into close friendships. In 2008 the exhibition Across Borders took place, showcasing works by Arab and Iranian artists that marked the turning point of their gallery program. *"The exhibition awoke a desire inside of me to bring together people from different cultural backgrounds"* Heidi remarks. The Leupis moved to the suburban area of Lucerne and renamed the gallery with the exhibition's initial's AB. *"Art connects people from different cultural backgrounds and it was precisely with this connection in mind that we founded the AB Gallery"*. After a while it was noticed the need to go beyond the usual activities of a traditional white cube gallery, since the public wanted to engage more with the region. The ORYX Foundation was founded to organize regular discussions on current political topics as well as taking care of the artist-in-residence program. Ever since twenty-four artists from nine different countries have been invited to work and live for up to three months in the studio of the foundation.

### Source of Inspiration

Samira Hodaei, a young artist from Iran, was the first to get the chance to participate in the program *"I remember, when I came to Switzerland in 2010, it was the first time for me travelling alone plus it was a tough time in Iran. So I experienced a big contrast."* Sara Shabanazad, another Tehran-based artist explained *"Switzerland is a neutral country, or so it seems therefore it creates an environment that enables catharsis of all previous bases at least it was for me. This extraordinary event made the transition from the stuffy, suffocating environment of Iran to peaceful Switzerland with a bang"*. Many artists from the MENA region live in the diaspora. However, the program wants to support mainly young talents who



**Samira Hodaci, Heavenly paradise**, 2013, installation of 30 pieces - mixed media on canvas, 50x50cm. Courtesy of AB Gallery.

still work in their home countries giving them the extraordinary opportunity of experiencing a different cultural environment. Actually, in 2015 a special kind of an award in cooperation with the ZENITH Magazine from Berlin will be launched for this purpose. The challenging situation might also become a great source of inspiration once the cultural shock is overcome. Sara, for example, implemented the impressions from the 'Fastnacht' - the annual carnival in Lucerne - in her banner works. Simeen Farhat was fascinated by the multilingual Swiss environment and included letters from different alphabets in her sculptures that originally had consisted only of Farsi letters. Saudi artist Tala Al Zeid described that his painting style became more expressive "*My hand was more free and my art had greater movement.*" A banal problem that

everyone comes across travelling from one country to another encouraged Ahmed Badry to create a new work series: The provisionary that lasts. It deals with creative temporary solutions for people from Egypt or other Middle Eastern countries. On his first weekend in Switzerland he could not find an proper adapter to charge his computer, to overcome this problem he invented a dangerous, but working, solution by connecting the Swiss socket and the Egyptian plug with two nails. This eventually became for him a symbol of "the connection between two worlds".

### **The Residency Program**

Although the residency program provides many opportunities for the artists yet it is tailored the program to the artists' individual wishes. "*We are curious to observe*



Talal Al Zeid, *Spiderman*, 2013, mixed media on paper, 110x150cm. Courtesy of AB Gallery.

*the degree of interest that the artists show in what is going on around them. Do they really want to meet fellow artists from Switzerland and visit their studios? How keen are the artists on getting together with collectors? How interested are they in extending their knowledge and discovering new things through such activities as visiting museums and attending exhibitions?"* explains the program director. *"We are constantly urging our artists to make the most of their time in the residence, to learn as much as they can, to open their eyes and see things anew. But we do not put undue pressure on them. Ultimately, they can choose to do what they like."*

On the other hand the foundation is also interested in acquiring experience from their guests. The foundations urges artists to give their opinions, to discover what is

going on in their heads and to enjoy taking an active part in the creative developing process. Their apartment is directly attached to the gallery, thus the private and working space melt into each other. Everything is very close and family-like. The process of personal exchange is the most enriching part for them and one of the reasons why they put so much effort into keeping the program running. *"It is a real benefit to engage directly with people from different cultural backgrounds. Of course you could go to university to find out more, but this would never replace a personal conversation. There are so many different opinions, so many interesting things to know that made us very excited, we would like to pass on our enthusiasm, which is not easy and takes a lot of time. We both regret not having started this earlier, when we were thirty or forty years old"* Franz says.



Sadegh Tirafkan, *Human Tapestry #9*, 2011, mixed media, digital photo with hand knitted carpet frame, edof 6, 148x185cm. Courtesy of AB Gallery.

### “Three Months changed my whole Life”

A short residency might also turn into long-term cooperation with the gallery, as it became in Samira Hodaei's case where she explains. *“the Gallery believed in me from the beginning, as a young unknown artist. We build up everything together step by step. It's a very trusting situation that gives me stability and hope and makes me feel excited about future projects.”* Since Samira's first stay four years ago the gallery had worked constantly on establishing the young artist by inviting her regularly to

Switzerland, organising studio visits with collectors and expanding their network for projects that proved to be successful in Japan, Australia, Italy and Germany. One of those crucial exhibitions took place last year at the Castle Stetteldorf near Vienna, where she was able to show works alongside her mentor Reza Derakshani. But the relationship between the artist and gallery directors is more than just business, *“I found my second family here. If I could have chosen my parents, it would have been Heidi and Franz.”* she laughs. For Samira her stay

was not only important in terms of her career but also on a personal level. Suddenly, she saw the world from another viewpoint that caused a change in her lifestyle: *“The experience I got from my stay made me really grow. I chose a different life as a woman. I want to be independent, to choose my way. In my home country it means that I swim somehow against the stream.”* Every artist who stays at the residency leaves behind a unique trace in the studio. Besides the usual colour splashes, still showing contours can give us an idea of what the artists were working on whilst some others leave something very special to commemorate their stay. Talal Al Zeid, for example, who stayed in Lucerne in August and September 2013 left a painted section from the trousers he had been wearing at the studio while painting. *“Not only did I enjoy my program, and Switzerland, but it’s something I’ll remember forever, because you were like a family to me.”* he wrote. *“I can’t express my appreciation enough just in words, so I’d like you to have this canvas that tells my entire journey in this amazing experience.”*

### The Future

The future plans for the program is to expand; the foundation is building five more studios, creating a sort of artists village, which would allow artists to exchange and discuss ideas. Despite the fact that the process of bureaucracy, and waiting for plans to be approved, takes a lot of time the directors have not lost their enthusiasm and the artists are also very optimistic. *“I am sure about their potential. The gallery operates as Gallery plus Foundation model, the most famous of which are the Continua Gallery and the San Gimignano Foundation (Italy). It is an interesting model that needs careful planning and careful work with the artist. It is also a great model if operated properly as the foundation segment of the model can secure funding for interesting projects”* says Khaled Hafez.

Heidi and Franz are aware of the considerable task they have to cope with. Despite the financial sources provided by the commercial activities of the gallery, they are therefore also interested in finding partners who are prepared to participate in the ORYX Foundation. *“Our aim is to increase the support we can give to young artists from the MENA region. These are the exciting challenges that lie ahead of us in the coming years!”* explains Franz.



**Mina Nasr, Movement**, 2014, drawing on paper, 200x150cm. Courtesy of AB Gallery.

### About the Writer

*Born in Kazakhstan, Anna Fech is a writer and curator based in Lucerne/ Switzerland. She holds a Master’s degree in Art History and Economics from the Alexander-Friedrich University in Erlangen - Germany and is currently a student of the Post-Graduate Program in Curating of the Zurich University of the Arts - Switzerland. Her research investigates in the contemporary relevance of postcolonial discussion in exhibition practice related to Middle Eastern and Ex-Soviet countries.*