

REVIEW: "THERE ARE TOO MANY WALLS BUT NOT ENOUGH BRIDGES" ARABIAN AND IRANIAN CONTEMPORARY ART AT A LARGE SCALE IN A SWISS MUSEUM

By: Katharina Winkler

THE EAST IN DIALOGUE WITH THE WEST - THE WEST IN DIALOGUE WITH THE EAST

"When it comes to the relationship between the West and the Arab world, Iran creativity is needed to show that mankind can profit intensely from cultural diversity. Either way, communication and getting in touch with each other are essential to any fruitful and, more important, peaceful interaction. The cross-border dialogue through art has proven itself to be a very successful approach to bring people with different backgrounds together and, eventually, to build bridges between different worlds." Said Heidi and Franz Leupi of The ORYX Foundation the organizers and curators of the group exhibition "There Are Too Many Walls But Not Enough Bridges. Art knows no borders, no religions, no language barriers. Art connects and furthers tolerance.

The language of art is universal" they further explained about their main idea behind their work during the opening on Sunday, July 26, 2015, at the KunstZeugHaus Rapperswil, near Zurich. The magnitude of the current interest in the culture and contemporary art scene of the Arab World and Iran is huge in Western Europe, which is proven by over 1000 visitors in the first week: Despite the holiday season, many came to the exhibition to discover new and exciting contemporary art from these regions. Even more, the national and international media was just as enthusiastic about this summer highlight: Numerous articles in magazines and newspapers and reports on the television and radio acknowledged this unique cultural event in Switzerland.

THE CURATORIAL CONCEPT

For many years now, the Swiss ORYX Foundation, the organizer of this extensive group exhibition, runs a successful Artist-in-Residence-Program and also, organizes cultural events in order to connect people from Eastern and Western countries with each other. In 2015, the non-profit foundation decided to celebrate its fifth anniversary with a significant museum exhibition.

For the first time, both Arabian and Iranian contemporary art was on display at a large scale in a Swiss museum on an exhibition space of about 1000 square meters and in a group that included artists from eight nations. Contrary to a scholarly approach, the curatorial intention was to reflect the foundation's past activities among others. As a consequence, art pieces from former Artists-in-Residence could be discovered as well as art works from artists who were involved in former projects with the Foundation.

AUTHENTIC INSIGHTS INTO THE ARABIAN AND IRANIAN CONTEMPORARY ART SCENE

From the moment one stepped into the light of the exhibition space one faced a very genuine spirit. Due to the fact that most of the participating artists are still living in their countries of origin, the sum of over 70 artworks conveyed a truly authentic insight into the contemporary art scene of the Middle East and Iran - undoubtedly an insight of a type and to an extent never seen before in Middle Europe. One of the first things seen was "communication": Communication is a reoccurring topic in any culture and appears in many artists' oeuvres. Herein, the "Satellite" as a tool for communication turned out to be a suitable symbol for the whole concern where four old and painted satellites by the young Saudi-Arabian artist Talal Al Zeid (1981) were positioned nearby the entrance area. The enamel paintings on his works clearly made the artist's roots in street art evident. In direct relation to these works and right behind them formed an oil painting of three satellites on stony architecture by Hassan Sharif (1951, UAE)



Bruno Müller-Mejer, From Lucerne to Mecca, 2010. Mixed media on canvas, 36 works each 33x46cm. Courtesy ORYX Foundation.

a perfect dialogue to the objects in the front. With this element, the curators managed to present the issue of communication in a fascinating way; by positioning the older Emirati artist together with the young and talented newcomer from a still developing art scene in Saudi Arabia, the visitor got the first glimpse into the Middle Eastern contemporary art scene.

ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE - UNUSUAL LIGHT, UNKNOWN SPACE, UNPREDICTABLE RHYTHM

Over the past five years, about twenty-five artists have seized the opportunity to spend two to three months as Artists-in-Residence in Switzerland. It does not come as a surprise, that many art works, which were created during those stays, reflect the experiences of the artists themselves. Some of these creative outcomes were on display at the ORYX Foundation's exhibition.

For instance, an artwork called "Dress Lucerne" by the Iranian artist Nastaran Safaei (1984) documented her stay in Lucerne, Switzerland in 2014. During that time the sculptor created a dress made from canvas with her handprints on it, which she photographed in different locations; locations she used to go to and spend time at during her residency. The large-scale drawings on paper by the Egyptian artist Mina Nasr (1983) reflect his time in the foreign culture, as well. During his time in Switzerland it occurred to him, that space means something totally different in Central Europe than it does in his hometown Cairo. As a consequence, he captured his impressions in his drawings, where giant hands, huge feet and miniature humans meet. While the Omani artist Hassan Meer (1972) however, runs an exchange program in Muscat himself, and supports the cross-cultural dialogue, also with the West, among others. Being a highly successful artist on top of that, some of his friendly paintings, "Twins" and deep photographs enriched the spirit of the exhibition, immensely.

EYE-CATCHING TECHNIQUES AND MOTIFS - SOMETHING TO MUSE ABOUT

Literally caught by eyes was the visitor by the photographs of the successful Iraqi artist Halim Al Karim (1963). One could not elude from almost being hypnotized by his powerful and majestic portraits where the eyes of his models somehow focused on the spectator. Directly on the opposite wall Samira Hodaei's (1981, Iran) unique pixel technique captured numerous visitors in a fairly different way. Uncountable little dots of glass color that she applies extensively on the canvas form highly aesthetic motifs in total. Quite frequently these are closely connected to the rich Iranian culture, such as her "Waq Waq Tree", a large installation of the Iranian wishing tree. A clear reference to the own culture can also be found in the art works of Shahriar Ahmadi

(1979 Iran) who displays his affection for the Iranian poet Rumi in his multi-layered paintings. While the paintings of the Emirati artist Mohamed Al Mazrouei (1962) are defined by an evidently different style; thick, dark and expressive lines occur frequently in his artwork while his motifs leave spectators to their imagination.

BUILDING BRIDGES - THE SWISS ARTIST AMONG ARABS AND IRANIANS

It may come as surprise that the Swiss landscape painter Bruno Müller-Meyer (1952) could be found in an Arabian and Iranian group exhibition. His art piece "From Lucerne to Mecca", which has also been exhibited at the Katara Art Center in 2012, displays 36 views of a journey he made to the Middle East in 2010. However, it would be too simple to regard this sequence as sole documentation of a trip from West to East. Splendidly he manages it to capture places that represent an indivisible connection and a shared heritage of various cultures. Therefore, his art piece can be regarded as a fitting summary to what the exhibition was about: After all, the gap between West and East may not be as invincible as it sometimes seems and once having crossed the bridge, beauty and cultural richness can be discovered, such as the Arabian and Iranian contemporary art scene.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Born in Germany, Katharina Winkler is an art historian based in Lucerne, Switzerland. From 2004 until 2010 she studied at the University of Trier, Germany and holds a MA degree in art history and English literature. For the period of two years she worked in an art gallery where she was mainly concentrating on American, British and German contemporary art. During the last few years Katharina Winkler wrote and edited several articles and catalogue entries on various artists and art themes. Working and traveling extensively in Oceania and South East Asia, her researches and interests focus on the contemporary art scene in the Middle East, North Africa and Iran.



Hassan Meer_Twins_2011_Oil on canvas_duplic_180 x 300 cm. Courtesy AB Gallery Switzerland & artist

Talal Al Zeid, Untitled, 2010, Enamel paint on satellites, 66 x 141 x 54 cm each & Hassan Sharif, Communication, 2008, Oil on canvas, 150 x 100 cm. Courtesy ORYX Foundation