

A VISUAL OVERVIEW: THE ARAB PRESENCE IN THE MALDIVES PAVILION AT THE 55TH VENICE BIENNALE

By: Isabella Hughes



Maldives Pavillion External view

The small, ecologically challenged archipelago nation of Maldives presented for the first time as an official pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale a large and eclectic mix of international artists and two Maldivian artist (Mohamed Ali and Moomin Fouad). Curated by the Arab-European art collective, Chamber of Public Secrets (CPS). Coming as no surprise due to the official nature of this pavilion with its endorsement from the Maldives' Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture.

The political instability that plagues the country and has made recurring headlines in recent years was virtually invisible from the curatorial conversation that grouped the presenting artists. Rather, CPS ingeniously used the ecological trouble facing the country, whose very existence is threatened by the rising sea level, as the starting point for their curatorial hypothesis, hence the apt title of the exhibition: Portable Nation. Followed by the heading "disappearance as work in progress- approaches to Ecological Romanticism."

CPS expounds on the background of the pavilion severity of the pending climate fate facing the country in detail, saying:

The Maldives is surrounded by water and everything there is about seawater, ecology and climate. It is the planet's lowest country, rising an average of 1.5m above the ocean surface, and it has the lowest natural highpoint in the world of 2.4m. A 60 cm rise in sea levels would see the entirety of the Maldives smothered by the ocean and Make the Maldivians population the first refugees of global warming.

Drawing on the relationship between the nation of Maldives and water, long with its rich history, culture and heritage that is influenced by Arab (most of the population practices Islam, while the legendary Ibn Battuta spent time in the Maldives), East African, Southeast Asian, Portuguese, Dutch, British, coupled with the fact that two of the three curators are from the Arab world (Aida Eltorie and Khaled Ramadan, the latter also is a presenting artist in the pavilion). Arab Contemporary artists, working in a variety of mediums, have a substantial representation in the pavilion.

Below is a visual tour and brief textual overview, courtesy of the Maldives Pavilion on the Arab Artists whom are participating. (<http://maldivespavilion.com/blog/>)

SAMA AL SHAIBI - SILSILA, 2013, VIDEO INSTALLATION

Silsila - Arabic for "chain: or "link" as a site specific, video installation work that depicts Alshaibi's three-year cyclic journey through the significant deserts and endangered water sources of the Middle East and North Africa region and across to the bountiful waters of the Maldives. By linking the performances in the deserts waters of the historical Islamic world with the nomadic traditions of the region, and the travel journals of the great 14th century Eastern explorer, Ibn Battuta, Alshaibi seeks to unearth a story of

continuity with the context of a threatened future. *Silsila*

Takes its inspiration from the sufi poet Assad Ali, who began each line of his poems, "I, the Desert". An excerpt from the poem calls for us to recognize our common identity: "the grains of my sand rush in asking / begging you (Allah) to keep my descendants / and nation united". *Silsila* is a story of a shared history and soon to be written future - the tales of the climate refugee and its geographic voice, and our search for connection with each other as interdependent people and nations plagued by an unthinkable future

KHALED HAFEZ - ON NOISE, SOUND & SILENCE, 2013, THREE CHANNEL VIDEO INSTALLATION (5") AND MEMORY BOX

On Noise, Sound & Silence proposes the island as metaphor for the transience of memory, steadily submerged with the passage of time and loss of resolution in the mind. The visual and sculptural elements in this work evoke a poetic voyage through the black box of recollection, that repository of experience, nostalgia and travel that accumulates within each of us as we pass from childhood, into adolescence and adulthood. Like islands sinking into the sea time threatens with the slow extinction of these defining elements that make up the self. The fragility of the island is the

fragility of memory. *On Noise, Sound & Silence* is created in two formats: Three synchronized screens each with its individual audio track and a single channel adaptation with a composite audio track. Both formats are accompanied by an installation of sculptural elements. The work addresses water in its different contexts. Filmed across different geographical locations and free of any linear narrative, the footage tackles water as a source of life, communication and transportation but also of submersion and obliteration. All identifying elements of time and place have been removed. Instead the viewer is engulfed by water on all sides and encouraged to turn inwards in this highly synthesized personal landscape.



Sama at her project



Khaled at the Maldives Pavillion

KHALED RAMADAN - MALDIVES TO BE OR NOT, 2013. VIDEO DOCUMENTARY

Khaled Ramadan releases a debut for his documentary film *Maldives to be or not*. Captured during his trip in March 2013, Ramadan notes the parodies captured between Western culture and its long tradition of romanticizing the imagery of the East. The Maldives today is wavering between the fiction of the West and reality of the East, and the islanders are at the conjunction of Edward Said's theoretical duality "West is culture, East is Nature". In 2007 Maldives became the first country to open an embassy in Second Life, the online Virtual world adding more confusion to the country's fictional reality. Ramadan's Journey to the Maldives is about the East coming into its own. He meets the Maldivian community, the Dhivehi people, which means "the islanders", not as an anthropologist, colonialist or journalist, but as a citizen of the Arab world who wants to learn about what's left of the shared history and how this amphibious nation is treating its contemporary culture in relations to its ecological strength and weaknesses.

WAEEL DARWISH - THE DISAPPEARANCE, 2013. MIXED MEDIA

The Disappearance uses large fields of flat solid color and mixed media to capture a fleeting moments in our pulsating memory and its influence on the soul. This visual experience attempts to explore the consequences on the collective memory and psyche of experiencing long periods of continuous change, inconsistencies, anticipation and suppressed action. The absence of transparency, the inability to predict the next moment and the emergence of various prediction has led to many changes around us and inside us. At the end all are human emotions and experiences. These variables have created a great loan of memory and left alone the mental abilities to absorb or explain these changes. This visual sonata of solid planes of form and color blended with gold leaf and collage, are juxtaposed with abstract figures that seem dramatically perform roles in a theatrical background.



Wael with his project in Maldives Pavillion



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