



# BREAKING NEWS

*by* Lina Attalah



*Gaza is under the enraged attacks of the Israeli Defense Forces (1). The Egyptians are taking to the streets in protest to their government's rather mild response to the offensive. Their anger is tamed, however, by a very well-trained security apparatus. Just about the same time, Tunisians bloggers are debating ways of getting away from the state's scrutiny over their cyber space. The Iranians, in the meantime, are still frightening the world with their would-be nuclear program. While Dubai retains the title of the "City of the 21st Century" by the Arab World.*

The Middle East breeds on *Breaking News*. In many imaginations it remains a conflict zone, in which only those few brave nomadic Westerners dare to set foot. But inside, that zone is divided into both spoken and unspoken conflicts, warfare manifested in bombs and missiles on one hand, and ideas and expressions struggling to emerge on the other. Complex lives webbed into dynamic processes of historic development, histories of making, and of destruction, and of remaking...

Some do the hard work of attempting to make sense of these complexities, and eventually their work offers a challenge to the dominant imagery of the region. This was the case in Paris' heart of Le Marais ['the marsh' in French], housing installations, sculptures and paintings by 17 artists from Egypt, Iran, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates in October 2008. The show was organized by F&A Projects, a platform aiming to promote artwork by artists from the Middle East, North Africa and Iran in the international art market, which is ripe with ideas for new models and experiences that can well accommodate the art emerging from the region. Convened by a curator with a solid interest in, and persistent curiosity about the Middle East, the artists speak to each other and beyond about the stories of their lives and where they come from.

(1) At the time this article was written, the Israeli ground and air offensives were still on-going in Gaza. It was not known what the fate of the attacks would be by the time this text gets published.

Daniela da Prato, the curator and founder of F&A Projects, has both a well-defined and democratic concept. Through the show, she tries to give an original overview of local contemporary art practices in the region,

without injecting any thematic presumptions. Her “news,” manifest in the exhibited works, stand to confront and eventually “break” the prevalent discourses of power and media. Through the openness of her curatorial concept, artists delve into their diverse ventures.

A series of socially conscious and historically sensitive artwork is the product. Through their work, artists explore their beings and identities through the interlaced webs of the social, the political and the economic. Their cultural production is one that calls on engagement and interaction, through which it can develop to encapsulate documented change.

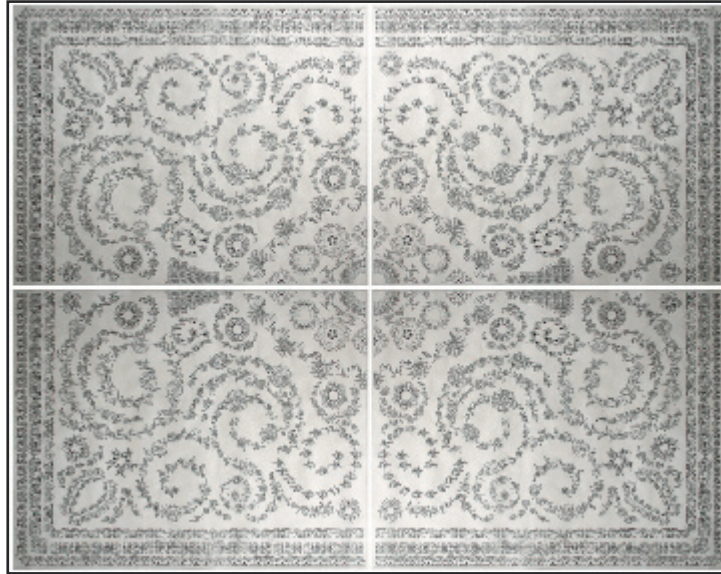
Iranian artist Nazgol Ansarinia borrows a witty technique in attempting to trace the ‘complexities of social existence in Iran’. While the Iranian carpet is one important interface of Iranian culture to the world, Ansarinia makes use of the intricacies of its weavings to create patterns in her artwork that conveys more than just the aesthetic beauty of an object belonging to everyday life. While from a distance her series looks familiar, a closer look reveals surprises. Her concept bears the lucidity of using the very tool that exoticizes Iranian culture to reveal how non-linear, unromantic and loaded with ideas it is. This is how Ansarinia taps into the “everydayness” of this culture.

Another one of those everyday dichotomies lived out in Iran is between what happens in the realm of reality and the barriers that prevent its expression. In *Keep Silent*, Iranian artist Simin Keramati walks us through a social convention in her most recent addition to the series Self Portrait, where talking out loud about controversies is not allowed. Her expressive portrait not only shows the socially agreed upon code of keeping silent, namely finger

on lips, but reveals facial patterns that insinuate notions of the public secret and the risk it takes to expose it. Her work sharply resonates with the contentious status of freedoms in Iran and brings out the controversy of silence in a bare and piercing way.

In contemporary Egypt, like in Iran, there are endless unspoken wars. In *You Will Be Killed*, Amal Kenawy engages with the component of violence in the predominant regime of customs and traditions. Her drawings of a woman in agony embed signals of both proactive and passive violence practiced on an everyday basis in her lifetime. Her work can be used to denote the 1960s concepts of structural violence, whereby social institutions are apt to slowly exterminate human beings by preventing them from pursuing their aspirations. Interestingly, Kenawy departs from points in memory of actual history to delve into her alternative allusions to violence, which eventually historicizes this violence, or at least structures it.

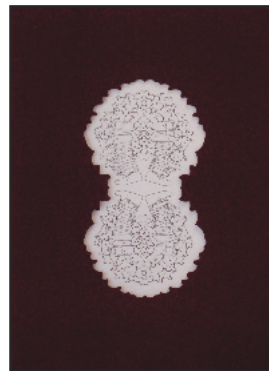
One form of violence is found in the restrictions imposed on women’s bodies in the social space, an issue adopted by Egyptian artist Huda Lutfi. In a droll installation, she incarcerates the body of the Statue of Liberty inside a bottle, and gives it the head of Um Kolthoum, the legendary Egyptian singer. Her deliberate choice of Um Kolthoum, before whom thousands of men would bend in admiration in the Egypt of the 1960s and 1970s, brings to the surface and questions the “knottiness” of this stance against women’s emancipation. One wonders what the reaction would be if such an installation were shown in one of the theatres that witnessed Um Kolthoum’s historic performances; what would one of the fanatic lovers of her voice



NAZGOL ANSARINIA, Patterns Series, 2008  
Untitled 2, digital drawings and ink on paper, 88 x 109 cm each piece (4)



NAZGOL ANSARINIA, Patterns Series, 2008  
Digital drawings and ink on paper, 43 x 32 cm each piece (2)





and performance do were he to see her trapped in a bottle? Lutfi's installation reminds us of the high relevance of some works of contemporary art to the public space and the indispensability of communicating them outside the confines of gallery spaces, putting their function into practice.

In Dubai, a city ripe with movement and business, Mohamed Kazem roams around with a GPS through which he registers numbers of different locations. He prints these numbers and overlays them on a photograph of himself reading them. His idea is to recreate relationships between time, space and people, using technology as a tool. While he likes to call his work "enigmatic", Kazem invites his viewer to unleash the conceptual purpose of a highly thoughtful process. One version of this purpose could be the re-appropriation of the power to steer history and make it redefine places and experiences.

Fatma Charfi of Tunisia tells her story through her amusing character *Abrouc*, made of silk paper. Highly malleable, we see the Aberics (plural of *Abrouc*) in different situations: once on a dance floor, where they are captured together in an on-going motion; and once in a set of tubes, where their movement is trapped. Charfi's issues are myriad, from movement to change to freedom to death. She lives those different experiences through her created character, whom she empowers to "metamorphose, to adapt himself, to wriggle, to bend, to fly away, to unfold, to exhibit all kinds of dances, to combine himself with the elements and the objects, to be an actor on stage, to become a picture, a movie, to appear, to disappear...". Charfi's

exceptionality does not stem from her issues of concern per se, but from the clever medium she uses to approach those issues. She somewhat brings the world of drama into that of visual arts, bringing about an entrancing crossover.

Da Prato tags the success of the show through a catalogue grouping artists' statements, short essays by art critics from all four countries from which the artists come,

and some pictorial elements for the artwork shown. Through the catalogue, da Prato extends the agency of the exhibition to the world of library shelves and coffee tables, thus transforming the transiency of the exhibition space into a more permanent status. The catalogue is also a chance to read thoroughly into the artists' statements, which have become a subject of great interest for art critics, beside the artworks themselves. The texts vary in terms of the value they add to the artwork and the extent to which they define the artists' state of mind. Some borrow jargon particular to the world of contemporary art, while others delve more meticulously into the peculiarities of the work at hand. While the first underline the function of text as a mediator, facilitating the communication between the artwork and the audience, the second uses text as a more subordinate tool to the artwork itself. One further

editorial addition which gives value to the publication is the inclusion of short essays by local art critics, historians and curators, who draw on the contexts from which the artists emanated.

Some works have achieved greater international exposure by being acquired by world-class collectors. Saatchi,



HUDA LUTFI, *Suma: Mother of Liberty*, 2008  
Installation, glass bottles, painted photos, collage.

whose name speaks of a whole decade of contemporary art, bought works by Khaled Hafez and Barbad Golshiri, which are being shown at the exhibition “Unveiled” in London. While Hafez’s work depicts the chaos of opposition and disparities of time and place, its function, according to him, is to reflect his theory of “cultural recycling”. In his work *Mighty Hands of Gemmis*, he connects the ancient Egyptian gods of the deceased and the ferocious to Western super-heroes diffused into the global arena through the realms of commercial film and advertising. While he tries to find the tangential points throughout the juxtaposition of Eastern and Western imagery, he cannot help but expose the mayhem that comes along. His work, however, lends itself to French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s concept of divided souls, where there is little authenticity in each of our making and more of hybridism.

Golshiri’s work is a sharper and more cynical take on his world. In *The Portrait of the Artist as a One Year Old Child*, he gives a reversed portrait of himself as a one-year-old child, to hint at the distortions of concealment, of gaps of information and knowledge about political processes back at home, which eventually annihilate those very political processes. The reversed image, quite unusual to the realm of viewing and the art of visibility, is key in relaying the disturbing effect of those distortions.

They and others make unusual use of their backgrounds and trace unexpected yet familiar objects, leading to certain contemporary narratives and challenging the powerful status quo. They actively inhabit the public sphere, with all of the chaos that comes from intense news of systematic damage to natural human courses, perpetuating behavioural norms that stand in the face of personal will and endless dissonance. Taking part in this massive and unending map of events and sentiments, they inscribe their own takes on the processes of historic development they live through, thus rendering those processes less linear and more three-dimensional. They depart from issues lived by their contemporary reality to create works that position themselves into the world landscape of art. The works of a few, moved from the space in Paris to another in London, reflect a mobility that renders their work further subject to negotiations as objects of art. Thus, while their origins reside in very specific fields, their value as objects of art and as processes of cultural production, is both communicative and universalized.

*While pursuing a career in research and journalism in the Middle East, working on an array of political and economics, Lina Attalah always keeps an eye on the contemporary art scene, for she sees in it a dynamic voice of reflection. Lina has published stories with Reuters, the BBC World Service Trust, The Christian Science Monitor, Bi-down amongst others, and she makes sure to regularly contribute to the arts and culture section of the Daily News Egypt. She is currently working on a diversity of research-based projects with creative outputs on irregular migration from North Africa to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea, the social landscape of South Sinai and the intellectual history of Cairo as lived and practiced in its coffeehouses.*





KHALED HAFEZ, *Mighty Hands of Gemmis*, 2008  
Acrylic and collage on canvas. 200 x 250 cm.



BARBAD GOLSHIRI, *The Portrait of the Artist as a One Year Old Child*, 2005.  
Print on canvas, 107 x 149 cm. Edition 3/6.