



Depoliticizing Arab Art: Christie's and the Rush to “Discover” the Arab World

by Maymanah Farhat

The May 2006 opening of Christie's Dubai marked a new era for modern and contemporary Arab art. Establishing record prices for several pioneering artists, the inaugural auction affirmed the growing popularity of art from the region. With sales reaching well over \$8.4 million, many observers of the field predict the auction could generate a greater place for Arab art in the international market. Some have even gone as far to claim that the record prices will serve to further legitimize Arab artists in the global art scene. Since market values do often dictate the momentum of the international art world, there may be some truth in these remarks. Given the social history of art however, the introduction of the major international auction house to the Arab world should be measured with caution.

The expansion of the Christie's conglomerate to include the Middle East is a prime example of globalization, a logical step in the latest campaign to assert American and European political and economic dominance. This attempt to corner the Middle Eastern art market is part of a larger trend, one distinguished by a sort of rush to «discover» art and cultural production of the region. Many view the field as uncharted territory and are dashing to partake in its «emergence.» The notion that exhibitions of contemporary Arab art are a newly introduced phenomenon to the international art world is erroneous. Many seminal Arab artists have been exhibiting their work in Western venues since the mid-twen-

tieth century.

Evident in the abundance of exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern and «Islamic» art held in the United States and Europe in recent years, Arab art has emerged as a fashionable commodity among Western scholars, art institutions and the art market. An increase in institutional fellowships for academics researching Arab art and culture also appear to be on the rise, with more opportunities being presented at top universities annually. This comes as no surprise at a time when parts of the Arab world have expressed significant resistance to Western hegemony. Provided the geopolitical context in which this new found interest has materialized the profusion of academic, institutional and market interest in Arab art must be examined.

Although such exhibitions as the Station Museum's «Made in Palestine» (2003), Noorderlicht's «Nazar: Photographs from the Arab World» (2004) and the British Museum's «Word into Art» (2006) presented the proper sociopolitical and art historical contexts needed for viewers to gain a clear understanding of Arab art, these examples are few among recent exhibitions.

Reflected in the politically and culturally biased ways in which Arab art has been represented in several other major exhibitions over the past five years, it has become evident that there is an underlying need to co-opt contemporary Arab visual culture in order to censor and further suppress the Arab voice. Notwithstanding the space Arab art has been given in major American and European museums and institutions, an examination of curatorial statements and exhibition catalog essays provides clues into some of the ideological frameworks from which this rush to «discover» Arab art originates. With statements such as:

We [Europeans] do not understand that you can go directly from a tent to a skyscraper, from a camel to a six-cylinder. And yet for artists of the Arab world this process is a matter of course, and this concept is important in the way the cultural side effects illuminate it. (1)

1. Dieter Ronte, «The Other Languages» (2006) pg. 50
Languages of the Desert exhibition catalog, Bonn Museum of Art, Germany.

2-Saunders, Frances Stonor. 1999. The Cultural Cold War. pgs 252-258
The New Press: New York.

The Arab world is reduced to an «archaic» (a term used to describe the region earlier in the catalog by a different curator) land that is just emerging into modern times. These

blatantly racist projections of Arabs not only maintain notions of Western superiority and Middle Eastern inferiority, they work to reduce the importance of the art exhibited and silence the creative voices of those represented. In the end the presenting of Arab art only serves to reinforce the exact stereotypes that have been used to justify the exploitation of the region for political and economic gains by several Western governments.

This is not the first instance in modern history that the political sphere has been entangled in cultural activity. Since the art market has been used to define art as a luxury good, mainstream art exists as a direct reflection of a particular cultural and sociopolitical reality, one defined by dominating economic interests and the political agendas of those in power. Capable of transforming political culture, revolutionary art movements throughout the twentieth century were constantly struggling to remain autonomous.

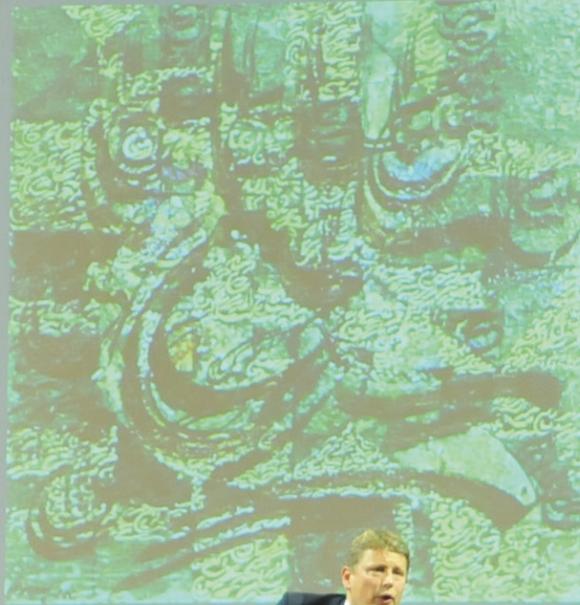
Frances Stonor Saunders' The Cultural Cold War revealed the heavy-handed involvement of the American government (more specifically that of the CIA) in financially supporting and promoting the work of certain cultural and artistic practitioners during the Cold War. Besides the funding of publications and academic research, one of the most famous examples presented by Saunders is the manipulation of the art world to serve US foreign policy (mainly anti-communist political campaigns) through the co-opting of Abstract Expressionist artists and the promotion of their work. The American movement bore resemblance to the Russian Constructivist School of the early twentieth century, but was devoid of its revolutionary political content. Decades later, we find similar formulas being used to combat any evidence of political dissent from the Arab world and its diaspora.

The opening of Christie's Dubai demonstrates current efforts to pacify the revolutionary aspects of Arab art in several ways. Initially, it is to gain control of the international market for Arab art so that only a specific demographic has access to the work of its influential artists. This maintains the false sense of exclusivity that is the trademark of Western art but which has been vehemently fought against by countless pioneering art movements throughout the development of modern and contemporary Arab art.

The Oil-rich Gulf region is the perfect candidate for creating this cultural divide between the wealthy ruling and impoverished classes of the Arab world. Not only do the governments of most Gulf nations consist of some of the wealthiest ruling families of the Middle East, they are also

CHRISTIE'S

LOT 4



USD 32,000

AED 117,536

BHD 12,032

SAR 119,840

KwD 8,544

QAR 116,512

EUR 24,416

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systematically aligned with American political and economic interests. Since the 1970s the «modernization» of the region has meant the emulation of American and European models. The perversion of transforming cities into lavish and excessive displays of Gulf wealth that rival those of Western nations, while major political and humanitarian crises rage in neighboring Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon, is the exact apathetic state needed to depoliticize Arab art.

The societal frameworks of Gulf nations also provide the ideal environment for the dissemination of such intentions with nationality acting as an integral factor in the distribution of wealth and the establishment of class. A large portion of working class populations in these nations consist of expatriates from South Asia and neighboring Arab countries. Ironically it is art by South Asian artists that sold for the highest prices at Christie's Dubai in May. Additionally, in the majority of regional art galleries, the art of well known Egyptian, Iraqi, Lebanese and Palestinian artists dominate the annual exhibition lineups and are among the top sellers.

Such work can be marketed by Christie's with ease towards wealthy Gulf art patrons. There is an existing interest in art by prominent artists from the above mentioned countries and a cultural familiarity that comes from expatriates working in the region that is coupled with a degree of exoticism of the working class and poor. This places the future of Arab art in the hands of the financial interests of Gulf States. The current construction of expansive arts facilities in cities such as Doha, Dubai, Sharjah and Muscat will lure generations of young Arab artists into art scenes unlike those that exist elsewhere in the Arab world today, the greatest emphasis will be on market value, the potential death of future revolutionary art movements.

The opening of the hefty auction house forms separate classifications for Arab art. With the increasing of prices for work by certain artists, a hierarchy is formed among all artists, one that will eventually enable the controlling of the art scene. The archetypical method of manipulating visual culture today is marketing. In leading international art centers such as New York, Paris and London, the promotion of an artist's work is based on a series of market hurdles, the initial and most important step being the establishment of auction records. The capability to establish auction records for any Arab artist, allows for the malleability of content, the promotion of art to fit a particular market and the further censorship of Arab art justified by the concept of «what sells.» Here lies the most dangerous aspect of placing Arab

art into the international market: the depoliticizing of its revolutionary nature.

To consider modern and contemporary Arab art revolutionary is not an overstatement. Over the past fifty years Arab artists have struggled to preserve artistic and cultural practice under formidable conditions. As several Arab nations have experienced the devastating effects of war and occupation, political unrest and state censorship, artistic production becomes a form of resistance to the oppression, violence, destruction and instability inflicted upon local communities. The sheer existence of Arab art becomes political. Using various modes of artistic production, all art from the Arab world and its diaspora reflects a profound sense of defiance and determination.

In the 1930s, with the growing popularity of the Mexican Muralist school, which fostered the move towards politically cognizant work in international art, numerous attempts to subdue the movement were made in the United States. The commissioning of leading muralist painters to create large-scale murals with local themes by American business tycoons was one way of co-opting the politically charged visual language that was making the movement influential. Murals were painted by Diego Rivera in such places as the San Francisco Stock Exchange, Rockefeller Center and the Detroit Institute of Arts. A retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art for the movement's artistic giant was also a visible testimony of the art world's attempts to tame the revolutionary momentum. Yet in light of these attempts, Mexican muralists maintained their political fervor, shaping the modern consciousness of Mexican culture and countless art movements, including numerous schools of Arab painting. Similarly, as the mainstream art world (with the political agendas it espouses) encroaches upon Arab art, artists will continue to resist by fashioning their own histories.