

Golden Gates

By Yasmine El Rashidi

Think of the Middle East through the filtered lens of the Media, and you think, most likely, if you are removed from its geographies and located far, a stranger, an onlooker – a likelihood, you think war.

Think of the Middle East through the filtered lens of Art, and what streams through the consciousness is a myriad of remembered images – the images that have become imprinted, also in the onlooker's mind, as visual references, proliferated, promoted, propagated, also by that vehicle that has come to be known, most-notably, for its slanted views and tailored spin. Think Middle East through art, delivered by the media, and you most likely - standing on the outside, removed from the spheres of its engagement, unattached to its mechanics – you most likely think a single word of glittering crystal in Oriental script and of a million specks of diamond dust.

It is somewhere between those realities, touching on both, veering off into infinite other tangents, that the actuality of the Middle East is nestled, embracing the spectrum of common references but as well a multitude of nuances and issues and perspectives otherwise lost through the cracks of the global engine that drives news. It is there, in the safety net of life, beneath the polished veneer of ostensible reality, that a world of one thousand different nights exists. And it is from here, the very

core, the very fabric of a cultural tapestry woven from immeasurable threads, that Daniela Da Prato once again excavates through her artists to curate an exhibition that opens gates into the glimmering centre of a region so often flippantly misread.

Through *Golden Gates*, Da Prato delivers what she sets out to achieve in offering a vantage point with which to view a diverse vocabulary of a visual language from 18 artists that transport audiences beyond the bedlam of hyped trend and into a contextual journey that is as varied as it is deep. She moves beyond the familiar, tapping through these works into what she would hope, she says, are “the concerns, dreams and evolution of our societies; and they [the works] challenge our reasoning on the environment, the role of religion, corruption, and consumer culture.”

In many ways *Golden Gates* is a success, offering augmenting perspectives to the audience of Europe to which it showed. In the work of the Iranian artists, the changing role of the social critic is illuminated, and a spectrum of work is displayed. At the one extreme we are witness to Neda Razavipour's *Daily Notes* – a series of drawings on agenda pages borrowed and inspired from daily news clippings – that reflect with the subtle casualty of the ripped page the very nature of urgency in the widening gap between reformist and conservative media, making insinuation to censorship and the tribulation of jurisdiction over the written word. At the other end of that spectrum one looks to Behrouz Rae, whose mixed media drawings strip away all layers of any cultural context and instead immerse themselves in the raw spaces of the human gut, where loss, longing, despair, are mulled. It is, for Rae, an apparent egress from realities - a creative exit for personal emancipation.

In-between Rae and Razavipour, the Iranian contingency of building blocks for *Golden Gates* dangle their toes in all states of affairs and all the isms of expression. In *Champions*, Behrang Samadzadegan's muted coffee and pencil drawings speak of the limitations imposed in the gender barriers and the pursuit of expression. While the series choose sport, or do they call it 'activity', as a means of commenting, and



Huda Lutfi, *Femme Gaultier and Egyptian Pop*, 2009
Image Courtesy of the Artist



Khosrow Hassanzadeh, *Ya Ali Madad*, 2009
Ceramic. Image courtesy of the Artist

even celebrating, the women who have entered from the peripheries, inviting themselves into spheres they are yet uninvited to, the work also speaks more broadly of expression and the inklings of individual reclamation unfolding. Simin Keramati explores a similar root from an alternate angle. In *You Are a Bad Girl I*, portraits of unrecognizable women stare into the indefinite and unknown that dictates their approval and disapproval from a landscape infinite and changing.

From the infinite to the minute, in *Red Light*, Mehran Mohajer reflects on the metropolitan space through the particularities of his photographic frame of two images and its conceptual juxtaposition with the notion of transition – the 7 second interval of the traffic light, and the opportunity to look, and then see, spaces in transition, in those 7 seconds that are missed; in the 7 seconds where change occurs.

Nazgol Ansarinia's *Sofreh I* takes us from the conceptual to the concrete with her silicon cast table that deconstructs to reconstruct again, speaking with its tablecloths of ornate daily expenses to the shifting strains of the socio-economic at fundamental levels of life. Mahmoud Bakhshi Moakhar defines another strata, in his tinsplate and iron staircase, *Mother of Nation*, brushes against the oil industry and mineral wealth, penetrated and ripped ruthlessly from the motherland, auctioned, consumed. Politics and prostitution here find their meeting ground. The economy is spoken to, and powerbrokers are singled out.

And from the harsh realities of the global economy, we depart to the digital world of Arash Hanaei, where drawings and the pixel merge in *To Find Plastic Animals At Night* - a work that in many ways can only be looked at as the playing ground of an artist exploring with the freedom and gimmick the details of the every day

and the peepholes of imagination. Hanaei's work is far removed in its visual references from what is to follow - that of Khosrow Hassanzadeh, who emerges from a source of cultural heritage to merge with tradition and modernity in an artistic repertoire that creates a continuum between past and present. In *Ya Ali Madad*, a ceramic mosaic of 208 pieces, Hassanzadeh gives us what we like best – aesthetic lure, memorial remembrances, and contemporary insinuations that make for present-day reverie.

In the Iranian ensemble we are given the diversity of artists with their mediums and languages, with their contexts and stories. We are given depth and nuance, and we are given authenticity in the form of expression and the choices of personalized references and artistic particularities.

In the sweeping gesture, however, of the rest of the region - that passes in Golden Gates through Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, Palestine and Dubai – our grounds are slightly more shaky. In the work of Huda Lutfi we are offered her usual precision as an excavator and bricoleur, as artist and historian, with a series of Gaultier perfume bottles collaged with intricate weavings of Egyptian female pop stars. *Femme Gaultier and Egyptian Pop* speaks to the layers of the feminine and to time and age and the act of concealing. In Zena el Khalil's *Queens and Kings*, odes to Beirut find their way in glimmering kufeyyas that overwhelm tiny dolls, and decorated portraits that tell stories of memory and memorializing fable with stories of her own. These are, for Khalil- a young woman harrowed by images of an unlucky homeland - Beirut's Kings and Queens.

In the work of Hassan Sharif and Hale Tenger, we are given, respectively from Dubai and Istanbul, tangible realities of malleable proportion exploring truths through whimsical constructs of realities and tinted through a personal lens. In alternate ways and with different nuance, they both speak, from their disparate vantage points, of economic upheavals that create the injustices of politics and artificiality. They offer the backdrop that illuminates on the shifts of geo-politics and the veins of the global economy that are infiltrating



Amal Kenawy, *Untitled*, 2009
Copper gold-plated 24cts. Edition 1 of 3

themselves into the very core of landscapes near and far. Moving along. Like Wael Shawky, who in many ways grieves the current state of his homeland with its fragmented landscape and social hierarchy, Wafa Hourani veers in similar spirit, recreating observations, navigating mediums to magnify realities and explore dream and illusion in a journey through the past to examine the future. In *Darwin Was Palestinian*, the state of living conditions on the West Bank are examined and renditions imagined. Memories are explored, realities dissected, projections of trajectory foretold. They are works valid, pertinent, telling of a generation expressing, as best they can, through the tools and mediums that outlets their own.

It is in the final ensemble of work that *Golden Gates* perhaps falls short. In the paintings of Khaled Hafez we are introduced to an appropriation of visual references that seems to strike in discord with an artist we well



Mehran Mohajer, *Red Light 0*, 2009
Image courtesy of the Artist

Mehran Mohajer, *Red Light 6*, 2009
Image courtesy of the Artist

know. In *Sacred Walls*, which borrows from images of pilgrimages as celebrated on the walls of Upper Egyptian homes, one is stopped and prodded to raise the question of the source of pressure in the production of this work. For Hafez, a painter best-known for his appropriation of Ancient Egyptian references into canvases expertly layered with both texture and time, we are forced, here, to ponder if in finding belonging amidst a group to represent the Middle East, a painter was not steered toward a visual language more appropriate for the setting, albeit not his own.

In Amal Kenawy's polished gas mask lined with crystals and layered in 24-carat gold, and that speaks of her concern for the direction of the world she inhabits, it must be said that the intent appears too much in the spirit of Damien Hirst – this from an artist who is as

agile and skilful conceptually as she is technically, one is dazzled initially, but then also a little let down. And in the choice of Susan Hefuna, so many questions are raised: About *Golden Gates*, about an artist, and about the necessity of discourse in the sphere of the production of art. Hefuna long ago catapulted herself into the realms of the elite ranks of artists from the Arab world, despite her duality as German-Egyptian, the latter of which seems to be her lesser half. Her *mashrabiya*'s speak of issues relevant and strong. Her vision at the time of conception of this series that draws on traditional wooden lattices, was sincere – of course. But we cannot help but question the motive in displaying, yet again, the same work from Hefuna that we have seen, repeatedly, between four walls in spaces across the bounds of both cultures and times. And we cannot help but wonder, for Hefuna, will there be more? Will she be freed from the



Hassan Sharif, *Plastic Sandals*, 2008
Image courtesy of the Artist

bounds she appears to be trapped in, somewhere in the engine of the art world, that is giving her little space for breath, making her make more of the same. And amidst it all, we are forced, again, to raise the question of how as a region we can break free from the context of Western stereotypes and the visual references they have set as the calibers to who we are – the ones we fall into and turn back to, time and again, in a subconscious effort to please, or perhaps sell. We are, through *Golden Gates* with its triumph and little flaws, called to the question of how to work collectively as artists and curators and critics to re-contextualize our very context, and to

illuminate on the depths and layers and diversities of the cultural geographies out of which we are inspired and driven to explore.