

VIEW FROM THE MOSQUE / VIEW FROM THE SQUARE Review of Houston FotoFest Biennial 2014

By: Rupert Goldsworthy



Youssef Nabil (Egypt / USA), *Funfair, self-portrait, Paris*, 2005, hand-colored gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist and Nathalie Obadia Gallery.

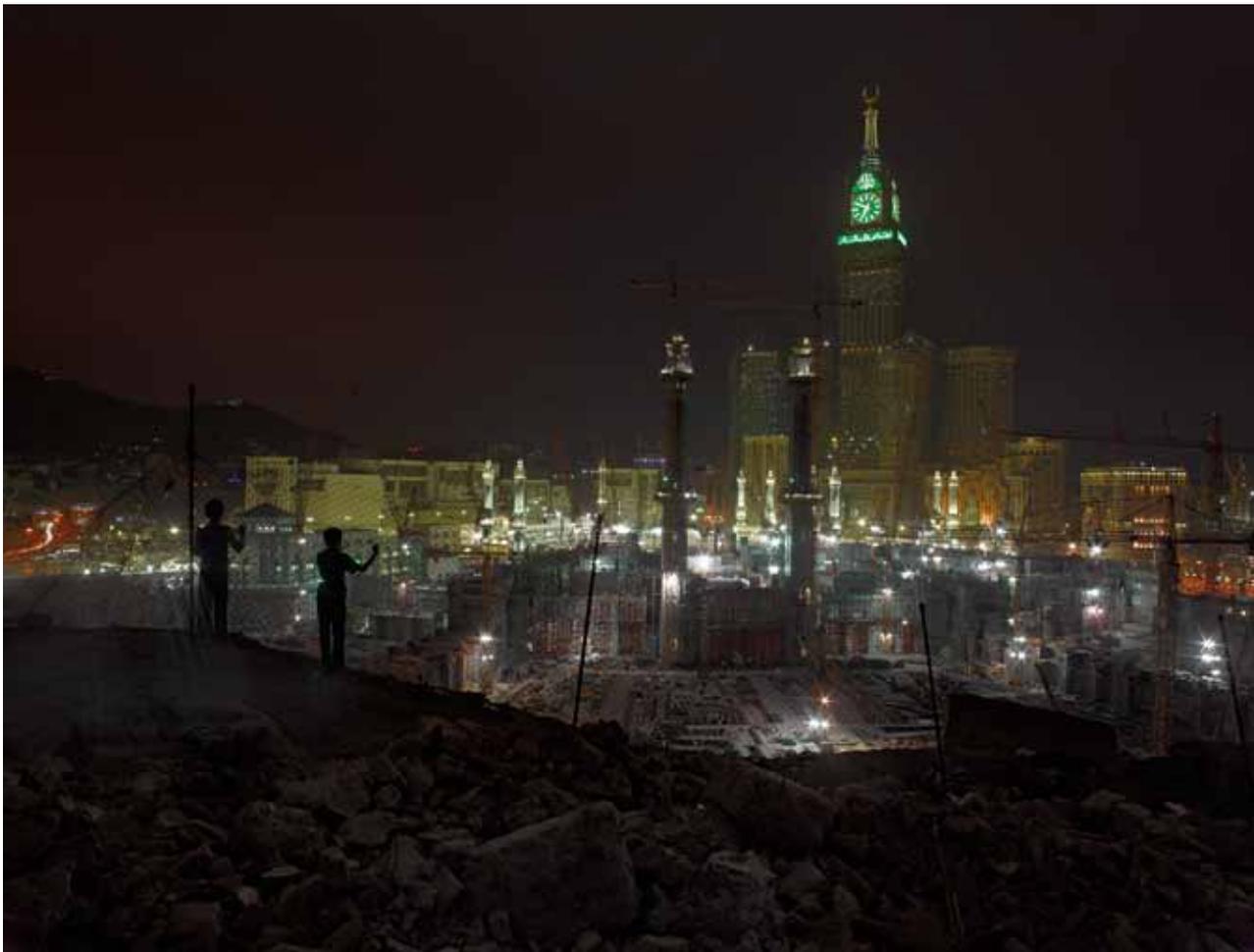
A suite of grainy, large-format black-and-white photographs shows huge groups of Muslim pilgrims in white standing in the courtyard of Al-Masjid al-Haram mosque at Mecca. The pilgrims are pictured in large orderly circular rows, as if assembled for a military parade. Their faces are faintly visible, their composure steadfast in supplication to the Ka'bah, the holiest of holy Islamic shrines. The pilgrims' faces are not like expectant, hopeful fans at a Western rock festival, instead they appear transcendent, cypher-like, transfixed by the intensity of atmosphere and by the intensity of their journeys to arrive here. These images document the movement of millions on the Hajj. These photographs seem romantic, timeless, unquestioning, uncritical, without any irony or agenda. They were taken by Saudi artist Reem Al Faisal between 1999 and 2003. Unlike traditional photojournalism, Al Faisal keeps a mystery in her subjects, deliberately making them appear anonymous and distanced, thus presenting a world unchanging and unchangeable. Al Faisal's photographs present a place and a world that non-Muslims can never enter. They get a sense of the atmosphere but will never be inside this location. This glimpse inside the holiest and most mystical place in Islam is a good location from which to begin a discussion and review of this year's FotoFest Biennial in Houston. Titled "View From Inside: Contemporary Arab Photography, Video, and Mixed Media Art", the exhibition presents forty-nine artists from the Middle East and North Africa, a geography defined loosely by the curators as the area where Arabic is the predominant language. This region reaches from Morocco to Iraq, thus passing over Israel and not including Farsi-speakers Iran.

Houston's FotoFest Biennial organization, now in its thirty-first year, is a well-oiled machine. And the parallels between Houston's oil rich spires rising out of the desert and the Middle East's oil-billion skyscrapers soaring above the desert are palpable. Money and oil remain a theme behind this year's Biennial. The Gulf States and Saudi Arabian artists bring photographs and video that document an economic world exploding in bloom. Artists from other Arab countries present a homeland bursting into political turmoil.

The exhibition was put together by two non-Arab curators, FotoFest co-founder Wendy Watriss, an

American curator and former photojournalist, and independent curator and art historian Karin Adrian von Roques, a German, who has worked in the Middle East for much of the past 20 years. The show's title "View From Inside" suggests the sense of being inside the Arab world, yet the view is mediated by eyes from the West for an American audience. Lead curator Von Roques explains the Biennial's mission and the selection of work for this show: *"As I looked through the works, it became evident how many Arab artists are working with conflict-charged themes—how many deal with the aftereffects of distressing political events such as civil war, or how the loss of one's native country has brutally and abruptly changed the life of many an artist—all of which became perceptible in the works. What is common to many of the themes is that the events they build on have often been brought about by drastic changes. In fact, if we wanted to have a heading for the Biennial that linked all the themes, then the title could be 'Change' because so many of the artists are responding in their works to change. This is change brought on by political conflicts, by war and destruction, by exile and the loss of one's homeland, and by disenfranchisement and repression. But there are also changes that come from the breakneck speed with which cities have risen out of the desert and the modern transformation of society that has been promoted by so many Arab states, above all the Gulf States, over the past ten to fifteen years."*

FotoFest 2014 attempts to track some of these momentous changes across the Arab World for an American art audience, to give Texan viewers a broad report from this region, and to go beyond the U.S. news media's rather clichéd scripts and demonizations, and present an alternative view of this desert world. To do this, the show features eleven artists from Egypt, ten from Saudi Arabia, six from Palestine, five from the United Arab Emirates, four from Lebanon, four from Morocco, two from Iraq, two from Syria, two from Qatar, one from Oman, one from Bahrain, and one from Yemen. The show was spread over four locations in Houston's warehouse district. The forty-nine artists picked for this Biennial cover many subjects. I will discuss four strong themes of the show: works that focus on the issues of religious law; the body; history; and the spiritual. These themes are broad, and they are my

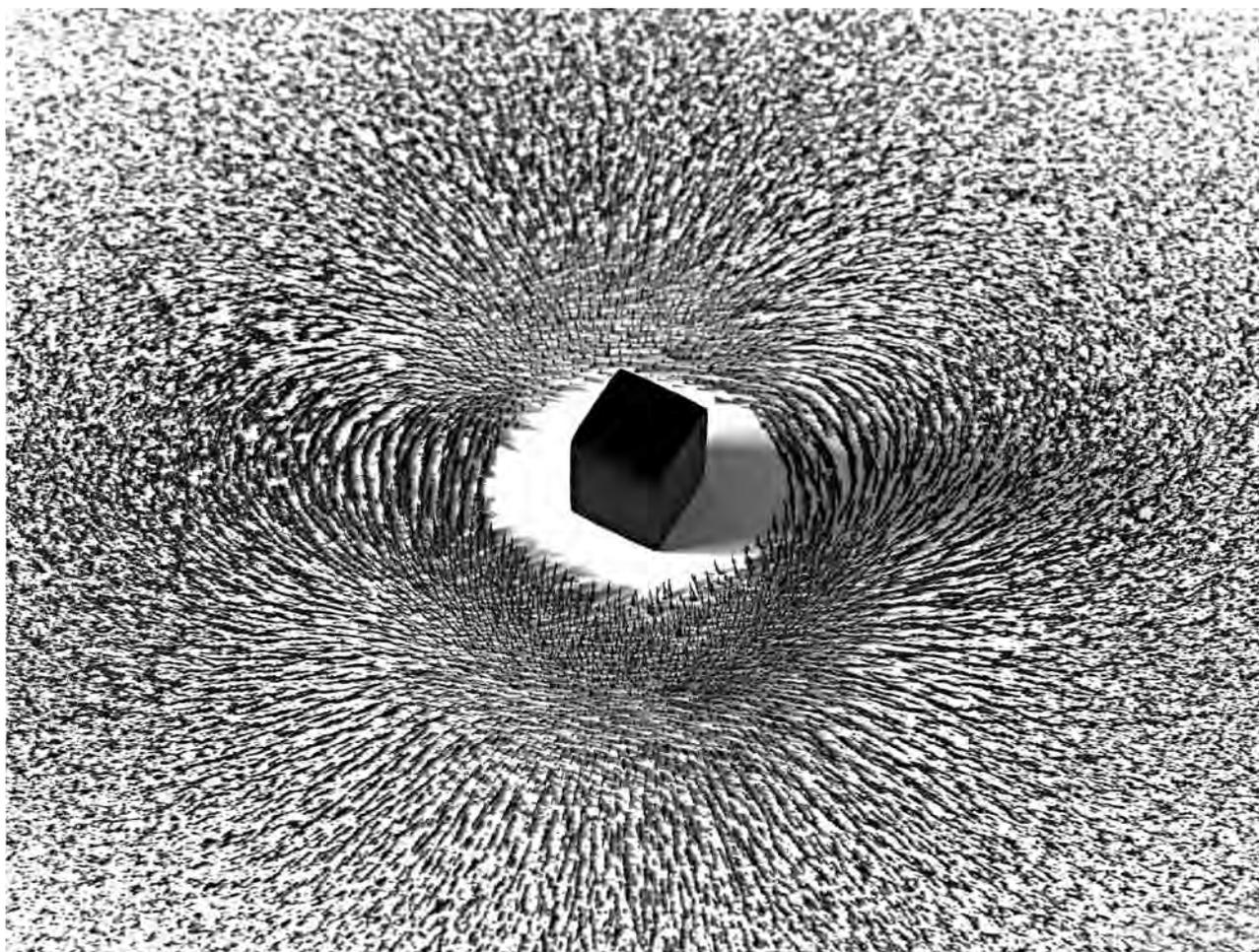


Ahmed Mater, *Later be past*, 2013, digital print on archival paper, 250x300cm. Courtesy of the artist.

particular choices to discuss for this review. The show itself, although spread over four spaces, was not installed around any categorical or thematic logic. One strong theme in this exhibition is law and the current legal, economic and religious status of the holy city of Mecca. Some of the most interesting works in FotoFest 2014 focus on Mecca's history and the city's vulnerability. The issue of trespass and intrusion at Mecca remains a flashpoint in Islamic culture. Having survived violent political attacks in 1979 and 1987, the city is now fast becoming packed full with high-rises which appear to irreverently dwarf the Ka'bah, looming above it and the throngs of pilgrims and locals. This theme of transgression and the law also intersects with the themes of several other pieces in this exhibition. It intersects with works about the wall between Palestine and Israel,

and also about taboos around the body and the burkha. Certain boundaries must never be transgressed. Some artists in this show touch on these areas of potential transgression against religious laws, and the panics and violence that may occur in response.

Ahmed Mater is currently one of the better-known contemporary Arab artists in the West. Trained as a doctor in Saudi Arabia, he came to professional artmaking in midlife. Similarly to Reem Al Faisal, Mater explores the visual culture of Islam. FotoFest includes four different bodies of Mater's work, three of which feature Mecca. His "Magnetism" series featuring magnets and iron filings reproduces the irresistible attraction of the Ka'bah. This image was the cover of the British Museum's 2013 "Hajj" exhibition. Mater's most successful and most cryptic works here are arguably his



Ahmed Mater, *Magnetism 1*, 2012, Different sizes. Courtesy of the artist.

large-format color photographs of Mecca's construction sites and its new architecture. Talking about his work "Desert of Pharan", Mater discusses the shifts in the holy city today: "*Makkah is rarely seen as a living city with its own inhabitants and its historical development through time. It is almost exclusively seen as a site of pilgrimage, as a timeless symbolic city. The denial of the real city with its typical urban problems - traffic, lack of public space, infrastructural deficiencies - allows those who preside over its destiny to implement the current plans for massive transformation.*" The Ka'bah photographed at night is now suddenly dwarfed by a huge clock on top of a highrise, and the area around the mosque complex has recently become a metropolitan sea of skyscrapers. While Al Faisal romantically documents the canvas tents of the pilgrim faithful, Mater shows another side

of Mecca, the relentless growth of the city's Las Vegas-like hotels and construction fences, and the erasure of the old communities and neighborhoods in the center of the city. In Mater's work, the holiest of holy Muslim sites now appears encroached upon by the conveniences and comforts of contemporary development. Mater's images ask what kind of taste this development exhibits in terms of urban planning laws in the city of Mecca. The images invoke a sense of a warning of an impending doom and a fear of violation.

Another Saudi artist Shadia Alem also focuses on the recent developments of this neighborhood. Similarly to Mater, Alem is bothered by Mecca's sudden development. But whereas Mater photographically documents the new buildings around the mosque, Alem's work



Boushra Almutawakel (Yemen), *What If.....?*, 2008, Silver Gelatin Prints, Courtesy of the Artist.



Boushra Almutawakel (Yemen), *Mother, Daughter, Doll*, 2010, Digital Archival C-Prints, Courtesy of the artist.

imagines a future where this development continues further. Her digital photocollages “The Supreme Ka’aba of God” and “Black Mirror Celebration” hack and paste together endless arcades, display windows and walkways into dystopian labyrinths of capitalism and tourism gone mad in the holy city. There is no way out of this maze. Alem states: *“I was born and raised in what is called the first belt around the Holy Mosque, which is the most precious and thus subjected to the most drastic change. I am a witness to the change taking place in Mecca city all through the last decade, and the disfiguration of the place”*. With her work, Alem puts in focus “those towering, reaching to the sky, glass-and-steel formations, in contrast to Al-Ka’bah, which is now sinking deep below the giant, massive, crowded skyscrapers, cranes, and scaffolds, creating a continuous battle between construction and destruction.”

Both Mater and Alem fire back a warning shot at the environmental changes ongoing in the city. This invocation of vengeful religious anger is a key element within contemporary discourse around the Islamic world. The sense of religious law and the corresponding threat of violation lingers over this exhibition like a shroud that may fall at any moment. The Ka’bah, the Wall, and the burkha are all presented in this Biennial as symbolic sites of contestation, wrapped in a sense of sacredness and potential sacrilege. Unlike the West, where so many aspects of human life appear as ripe subject matter, Arab artists showing in this “Arabic” context are constantly engaged with a sense of potential transgression. And they address these subjects carefully and with strategic tact. A major and recurring theme in this exhibition is the body and issues of identity. The political and legal status of the body is continually invoked. The title label for each work assigns a nationality to each artist, although more than half the artists featured in the show studied at universities in the West, and notions of an essentialized national identity, or discreet art practice, seem quaint in 2014.

American sociologist Benedict Anderson famously discussed the idea of countries as “imagined communities,” as constructed by ideology and unstable signifiers. In these days, the notion of transgression and of body and race become more complex in a post-national, globalized world. In the U.S. currently, there



Youssef Nabil (Egypt / USA), *self-portrait with roots*, Los Angeles, 2008, hand-colored gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist and Nathalie Obadia Gallery.

are over a million transgendered people, and as this indicates, the idea of absolute, concrete, essentialized categories of gender, race and nationality all become more complicated and prone to widespread questioning. Post-national, post-gender themes are frequently addressed in this year’s FotoFest. Many traditional Arab assumptions are thrown into question. What does the notion of the burkha construct? What does the ritual slaughter of a lamb for a wedding feast implicate? Why are there images of men - but not women - in Saudi newspaper wedding announcements? Concurrent with these issues, the exhibition frequently features images of a naked-torsoed male Arab youth - in a dream sequence, at an oasis, in the desert, or in a rowing boat at sea. The identity of both male and female today seem problematized, and thrown into question. As a



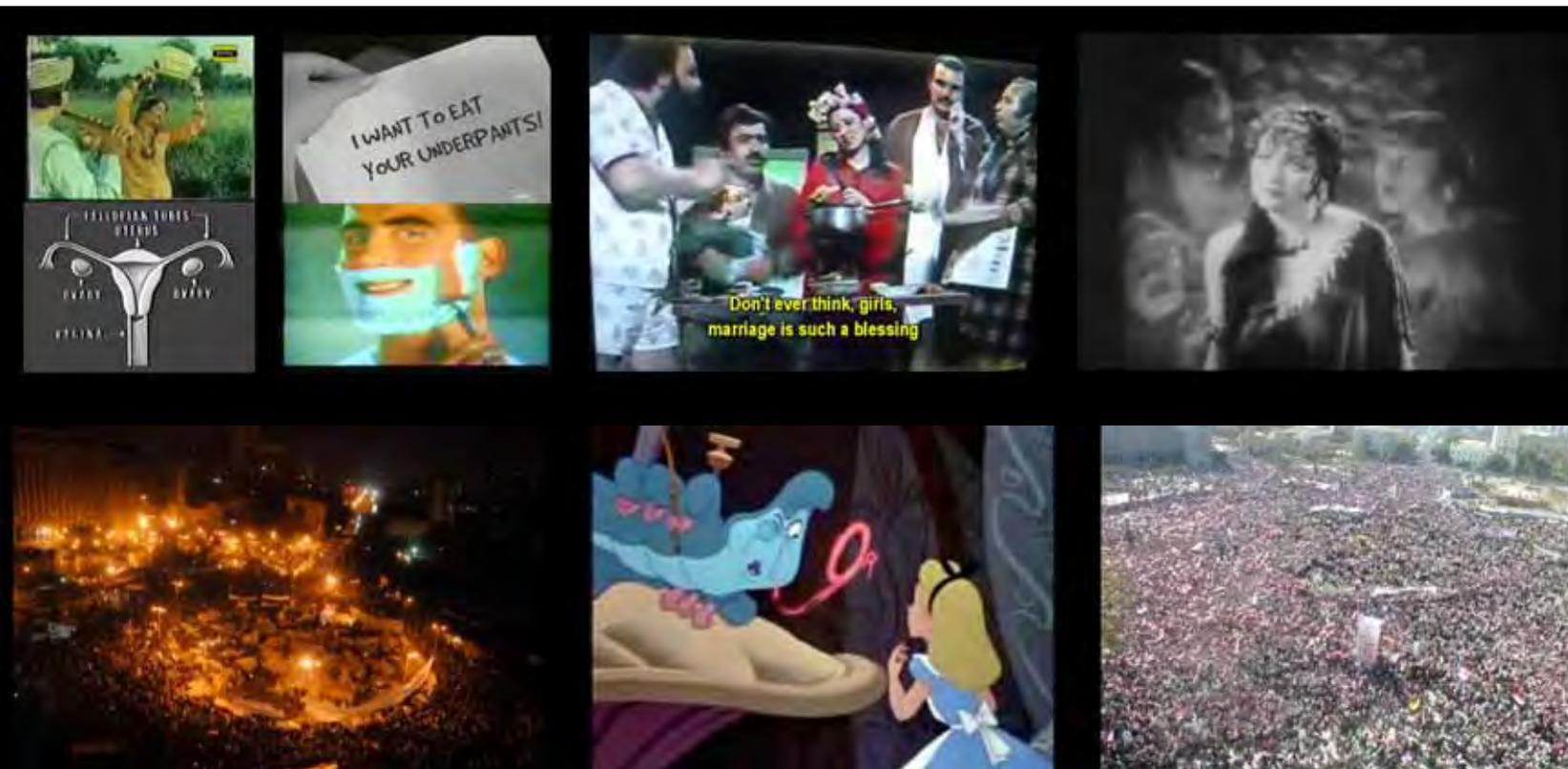
DIARIES.

corollary, there are frequent references to an imagined or experienced “Arab” past, of an absent or lost father or mother, symbolic of a homeland and era where everything was less complicated, more traditional, more regional and nostalgic in flavor. What does this lost figure represent? What scripts and narratives does its invocation perform? The house, the home, the body, even Mecca, all seem under attack in a way that conjures primal, foundational fears of identity loss.

The Yemeni artist Boushra Almutawakel produces one of the wittiest and most playful series of works in what is otherwise a weighty and sometimes hand-wringingly tough Biennial. Her subject is the hijab. Almutawakel and her husband slowly trade outfits in a series of seven black-and-white photographs. She begins in a niqab, only her eyes are visible, then her partner’s clothes slowly morph him into a similar - but male - veiled and hidden figure. Correspondingly, her own dress becomes less strict. The effect is humorous, poignant and thought-provoking, yet elusive in meaning. In another series,

Almutawakel, her daughter and even the daughter’s doll disappear behind veils. (This image almost seems to recall actress Sally Field’s daughter and her doll in the famously Arabophobic 1991 Hollywood movie “Not Without My Daughter”).

Almutawakel does not want her photos to simply serve the stereotyped ideas that predominate in the West, and she argues that often women who wear the hijab are not necessarily subject to repression. She says she was inspired to make her series on the veil by a lecture on women given by feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi, who remarked that women who wear a veil hide their true identity just like those who hide their faces under makeup do. This prompted her to begin an ongoing project on the subject. She says, *“Until then, I had been reluctant to create work on the hijab, or veil, primarily because it is such a powerful iconic image that conjures such strong emotions. Also I felt it had been used and overused, and I wanted to stay clear of creating stereotypical, clichéd work. After 9/11, however, I felt compelled to create*



Lara Baladi (Egypt), *Alone, Together, ... In Media Res*, 2013, 3 Channel Video Installation, Courtesy of the Artist.

images about the veil, particularly since Islam, Muslims, and their beliefs and way of life had taken center stage internationally. I found that we, as Arabs and Muslims, are either demonized or romanticized. Part of this paradoxical portrayal is the way Middle Eastern women have been portrayed artistically and/or in the media: as exotic, beautiful, and mysterious, or as helpless, opposed, and ugly. Part of this portrayal, in many cases, has included the hijab.” As Almutawakel notes, the debate around the burkha in Europe has become weighted and freighted with political positioning. Her work leavens the subject with a subtle surrealism. The lightness of touch and wit in both of Almutawakel’s works belays much deeper themes, and highlights the ludicrousness of doctrinaire belief systems in both the Arab world, and uninformed Western colonialist presumptions about gender and liberation in Arabic countries.

Sometimes with an exhibition of this kind, viewing six hundred works by forty-nine artists, one is drawn to works that speak most clearly and succinctly to key

themes that other artists only manage to allude to. Although this exhibition discludes Israeli and Iranian artists, it includes some Middle Eastern artists who are not Muslim - some are Christian or Druze. Another community featured in this show on the Arab world are a silent minority, much present in the Middle East, who have no public voice - the guest workers.

A work which also riffs off binary presumptions of life in the Arab world, somewhat similar to that of Almutawakel, is that of Khalifa Al Obaidly, a Qatari artist who presents a suite of photographic portraits of migrant workers in the Gulf States with barcodes painted on their foreheads. Al Obaidly’s series “Tagged” addresses the abject status of immigrant workers in the Middle East. Qatar is a county of circa 4,500 square miles, with around two million inhabitants. Less than 15% of the population is Qatari. For the last ten years, non-Arabs have made up the majority of the country’s population - the government refers to them as non-Qatari. Of the



Enlightenment, Spiritual series, 2011 photography printed on fine art paper, Edition of 5, 140x110cm. Courtesy of the artist.

population, the four largest ethnic groups are non-Qatari Arabs (40%), Indians (18%), Pakistanis (18%), and Iranians (10%). The other prevalent ethnicities are Nepali, Filipino, and Sri Lankan. Many are working in construction or in domestic jobs. Al Obaidly's barcode points to the dehumanization and interchangeability of the non-national worker. Globalization and the chase for social and economic progress produce an itinerant economic class: the invisible guest-worker working in dangerous, exploitative and fuzzy legal situations. Their legal and economic status, and their access to social justice, is often unclear, but the statistics do not

look good. In one of the very few works in the show to address this key fact in wealthy Arab countries, Al Obaidly succinctly highlights this awkward intersect in the culture. What status and agency does the non-national citizen have in contemporary Arab countries? This allusion to a non-unionized, vulnerable, economically-fragile, often demonized, non-national subclass in the Arab World flags and intersects with another theme in this exhibition in poorer Arab countries - the Arab Spring and its connection to Cold War era liberation struggles. A number of works in this year's Biennial reference the iconography of democratic



Spiritual Silence, *Spiritual series*, 2011, photography on fine art paper, edition of 5, 140x110cm. Courtesy of the artist.

struggles in Latin America, leftist movements in 1960s-1970s Palestine, and May 1968 in Europe. These connections all reappear like rekindled ghosts.

The celebrated documentary film “The Square” (2012) screened during the exhibition’s run as an adjacent program at Houston’s Museum of Fine Arts. The movie catches many of these cross-cultural liberation themes, the sense of heroism, fear and hope against odds, the struggles between President Moubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Egyptian youth hungry for political transparency, democracy, economic parity and social justice.

Works in the Biennial frequently reference the brutality of the army and police in ongoing Middle Eastern struggles. And unlike films such as “The Square”, in a fine art photography and video context these themes are handled in a more challenging, less neatly-tied manner than the linear, narrative-centric orthodoxy of the documentary cinema tradition. Politics and history are areas where FotoFest 2014’s lead curator, Karin von Roques is in her element. As a member of the West German 1968 politicized generation, von Roques is only too aware of the sense of history repeating, and of a world where the Berlin Wall suddenly divided an



Razor Wire, Between Two Rivers series, 2008, digital print on archival paper, Edition of 5, 50x75cm. Courtesy of the artist.



After The Vote, Between Two Rivers series, 2008 Digital print on archival paper, Edition of 5, 50x75cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Shadows of Black, Between Two Rivers series, 2010, digital print on archival paper, Edition of 5, 50x75cm - Courtesy of the artist.

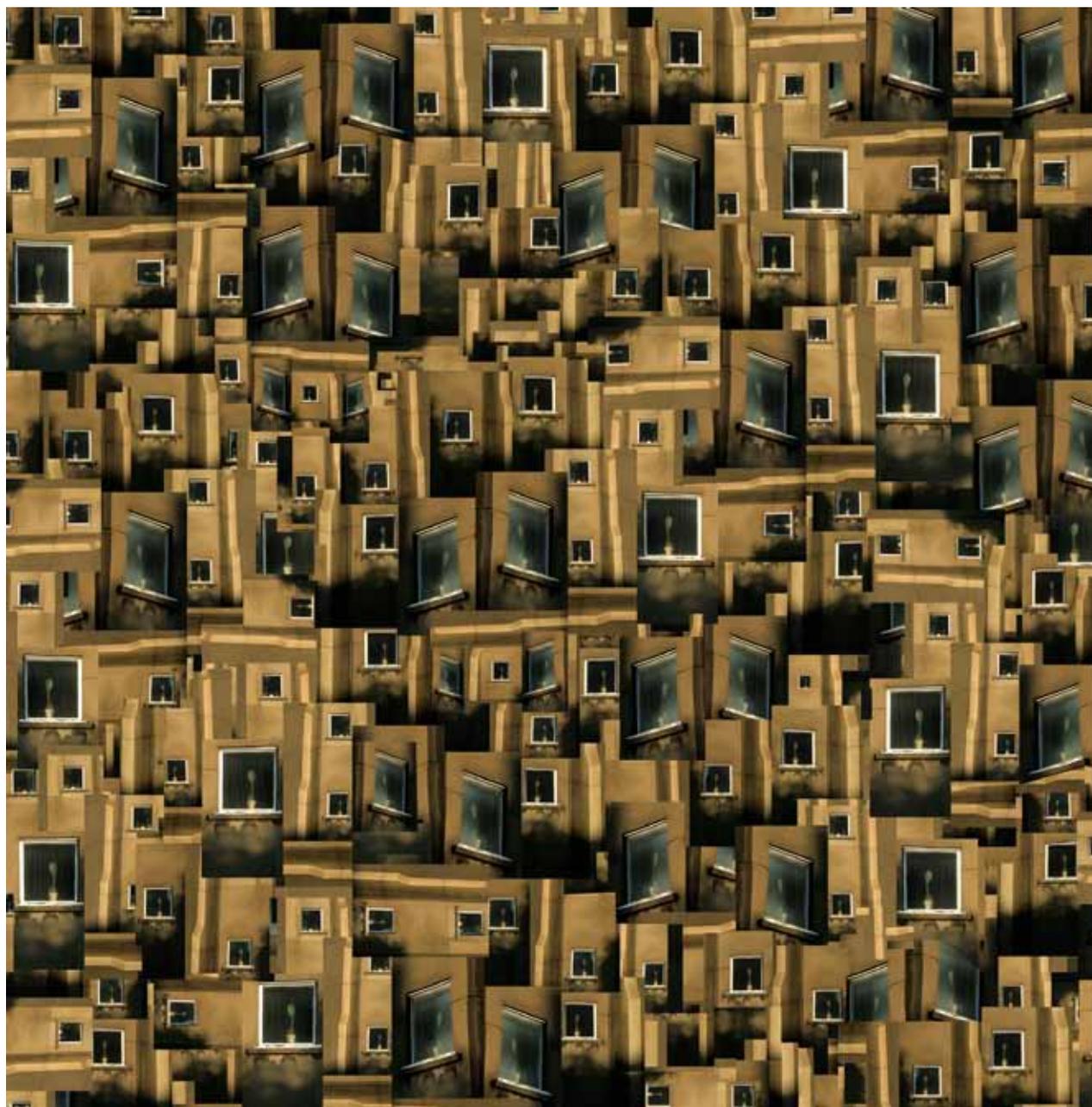


Alfraji Sadik, *untitled*, 6 minutes video, edition of 3 + 1 AP. Courtesy of the artist.

entire society caught in an exploding technological and sociopolitical context.

Two outstanding works of this genre included in “View from Inside” concern the situation in Cairo. They are by the Lebanese-Egyptian artist Lara Baladi and the Egyptian artist Khaled Hafez. Baladi presents “Alone Together...In Media Res,” a complex, densely-loaded, multiscreen video installation mashup which juxtaposes footage of Tahrir Square with clips from Charlie Chaplin’s “Great Dictator”; short grainy black-and-white clips from Western icons of former liberation struggles – Patti Smith, Karl Marx, Malcolm X, Che Guevara, and George Orwell; lectures by 1960s media guru Marshall McLuhan; scenes of rioting in Paris in May 1968; Enragés graffiti; and forbidden 1930s Betty Boop cartoons. Baladi uses these tried and trusted (and predominantly Western) poli-sci texts and talking heads

to frame current events unfolding in the Arab Spring. Baladi’s style of news media hijack video collaging recalls the “terror-kultur” style of recent well-known artists like Belgian filmmaker Johan Grimmonprez’s “Dial HISTORY” (1997) or the Swedish artist Fia Backstrom. Baladi’s collagist juxtaposition of war porn and 1960s leftwing cultural pundits presents an overwhelmed world which tries to contextualize contemporary events in Egypt, and draws connections to earlier Cold War insurrections in the West. She leaves us no clear solution to this situation. Her work reminds the audience of ideological imperatives and unresolved political histories to remember. The effect is suggestive and deliberately disorienting. The newsfeed never stops. The rhythm and repetition of certain segments of visual text become like an endless invocation to the barricades. Khaled Hafez’s “Video Diaries” is a sparer, less heavily-loaded work. It is drole, intentionally distanced,



Metamorphosis, 2012, diasec + aluminium frame, edition of 6, 160x160cm. Courtesy of the artist.

knowing, cryptic and less melodramatic in style. He documents the progress of his teenage romantic affairs, against the momentous historical events that have occurred in the Middle East during his lifetime; from live footage of Egypt's President Nasser's assassination by a soldier at a military parade, to the nationwide mourning at the funeral of beloved singer Oum

Khaltoum, to footage of the violence in Tahrir Square. The particularities of Khaled's own life are presented in the context of wider events in a way that wittily summarizes the complexities of the modern world - as if to say, life goes on, despite a landscape of endless TV terror dénouements. Life continues, it cannot be divorced or separated. "Video Diaries" is meditative



Metamorphosis, 2012, diasec + aluminium frame, edition of 6, 160x160cm. Courtesy of the artist.

and, like the best work in FotoFest, elusive in a total and assessable interpretation. Memory and time are accessible but fragmentary and ever-changing. In the era of news culture, our personal lives are lived out against an ongoing landscape of media terror. My fourth and final thematic category in discussing this exhibition concerns works about the mystical and the passing of

life. Arguably the most popular work in FotoFest this year was a video and wall sculpture installation by Iraqi artist, Sadik Alfraji. Based in Amsterdam for the last thirty years, Alfraji presents a dreamlike six-minute cartoon loop about his former home in Iraq and his father's recent death. Alfraji returns to his parents' house to trace what is left of his father.



Reem Al Faisal, Untitled, 70 x 88 cm, 2011, Photography, Edition of 16 copy.

He lists the items: *“a few objects, a grieving love that still fills my mother’s eyes, and many unfinished tales.”* His installation replicates these last remaining artifacts from his father’s home. Alfraji struggled with questions around his sense of loss. *“Where do memories come from, where do they go, how do they suddenly return, so strong and intense? When I saw my father’s room in that house, I didn’t think about anything. It was just a very silent moment.”* The structure of the film follows Alfraji’s process of mourning. *“There were only the memories, all the things around me disappeared and all the memories went up.”* Drenched in melancholy, with a heart-rending musical score, Alfraji’s video projection is simple in style and direct in emotional punch. He works with broadly-



Reem Al Faisal, Untitled, 70 x 88 cm, 2011, Photography, Edition of 16 copy.

understandable motifs - tears, the soul departing, childlike sketches of a home’s interior and the objects of a deceased relative and maternal spirits who grew up in eras before our fragmented postmodern age. The video’s prevailing storyboard motif is of a soul ascending and departing. Father is gone, the senses of loss, and grief are intense. Alfraji handles this subject in a way that speaks across language or cultural heritage. How does an adult feel when a parent dies, what part of one’s self gets lost in this separation?

And finally, related to this discussion of spirit and loss, Youssef Nabil is a young Egyptian artist, who worked at one point for well-known American fashion photographer David LaChapelle. Nabil’s images and



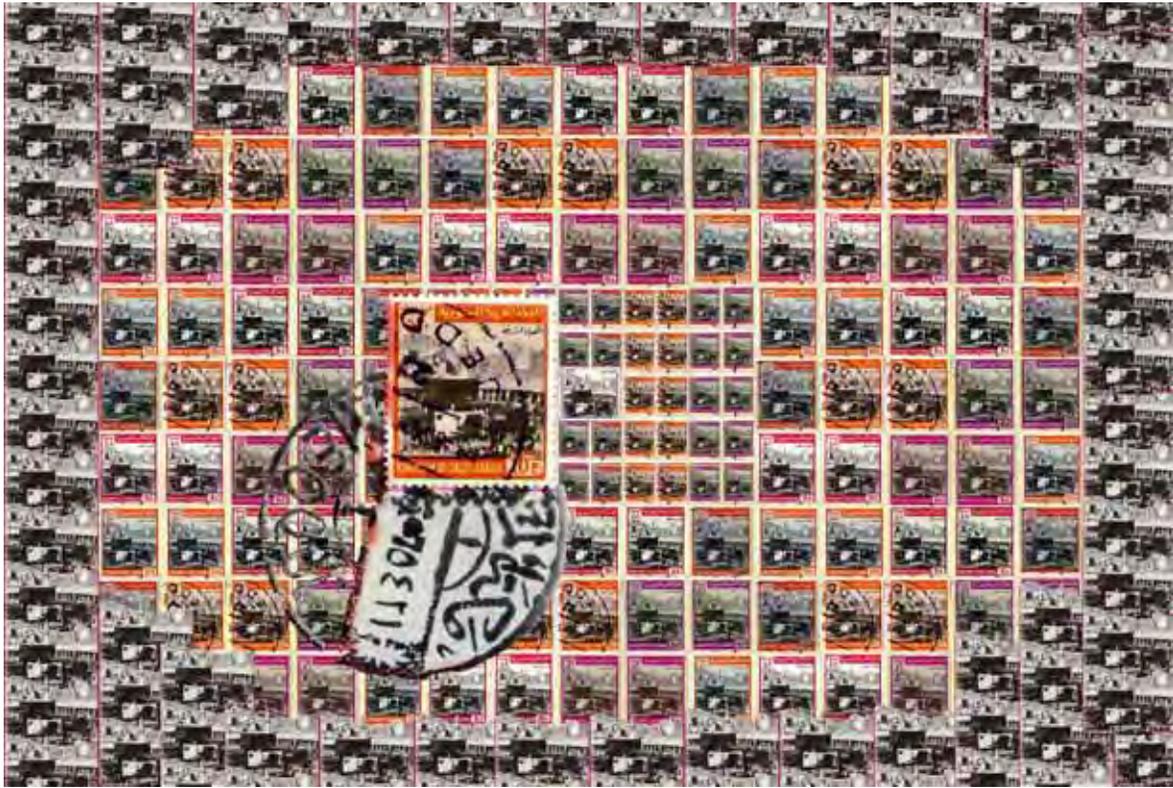
Reem Al Faisal, *Dali Mosaque*, 70 x 88 cm, 2011, Photography, Edition of 16 copy.

video inherit some of LaChapelle's kitschy stylistic tropes, including nostalgic, hand-tinted photographic retro-styling and broadly-readable motifs such as oases, funfairs, and handsome lost youths in foreign lands.

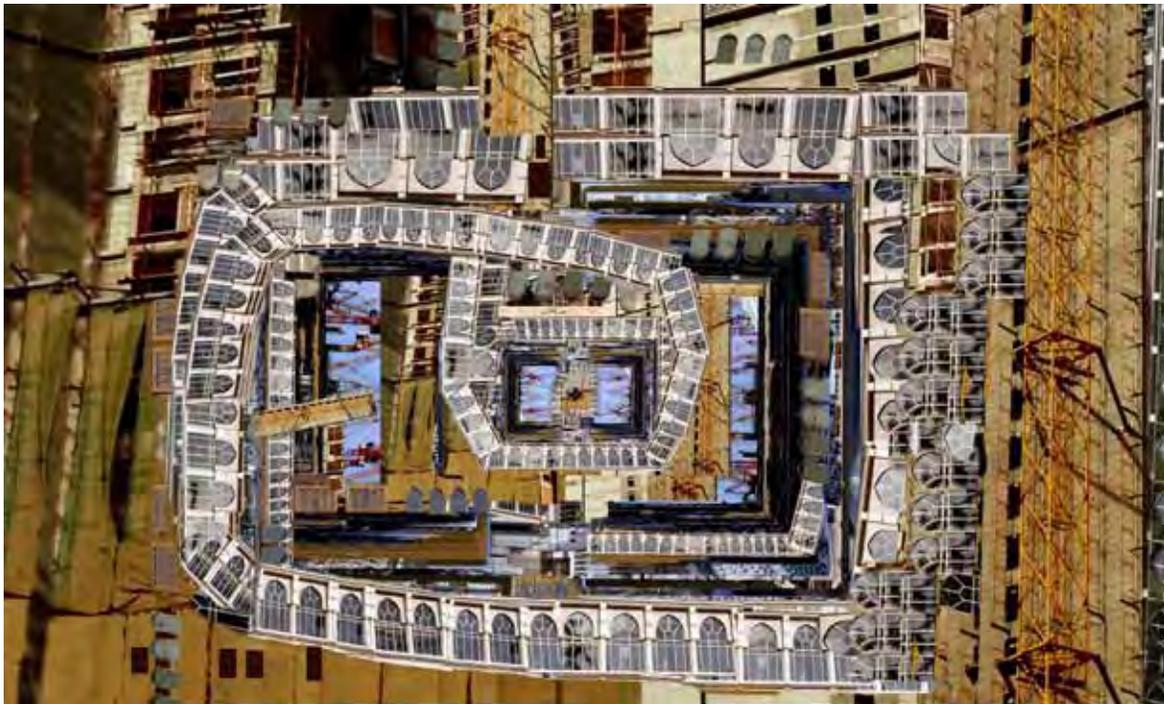
Von Roques notes in her catalog essay that Nabil creates "self-portraits where he plays a young man of Orientalist archetype: beautiful, garbed in a white robe, timeless. But Nabil complicates that flawed colonialist symbol. The artist's avatar gazes at modern cities blooming out of the desert, visits Western cathedrals, and wanders around a Parisian fair as a more contemporary youth, dressed in a black hoodie. It's a portrait of globalization that has its roots in a centuries-old aesthetic, taking as much from Ingres as Imhotep, the architect of the first Egyptian pyramids. Nabil

underlines the aimlessness of life under globalization."

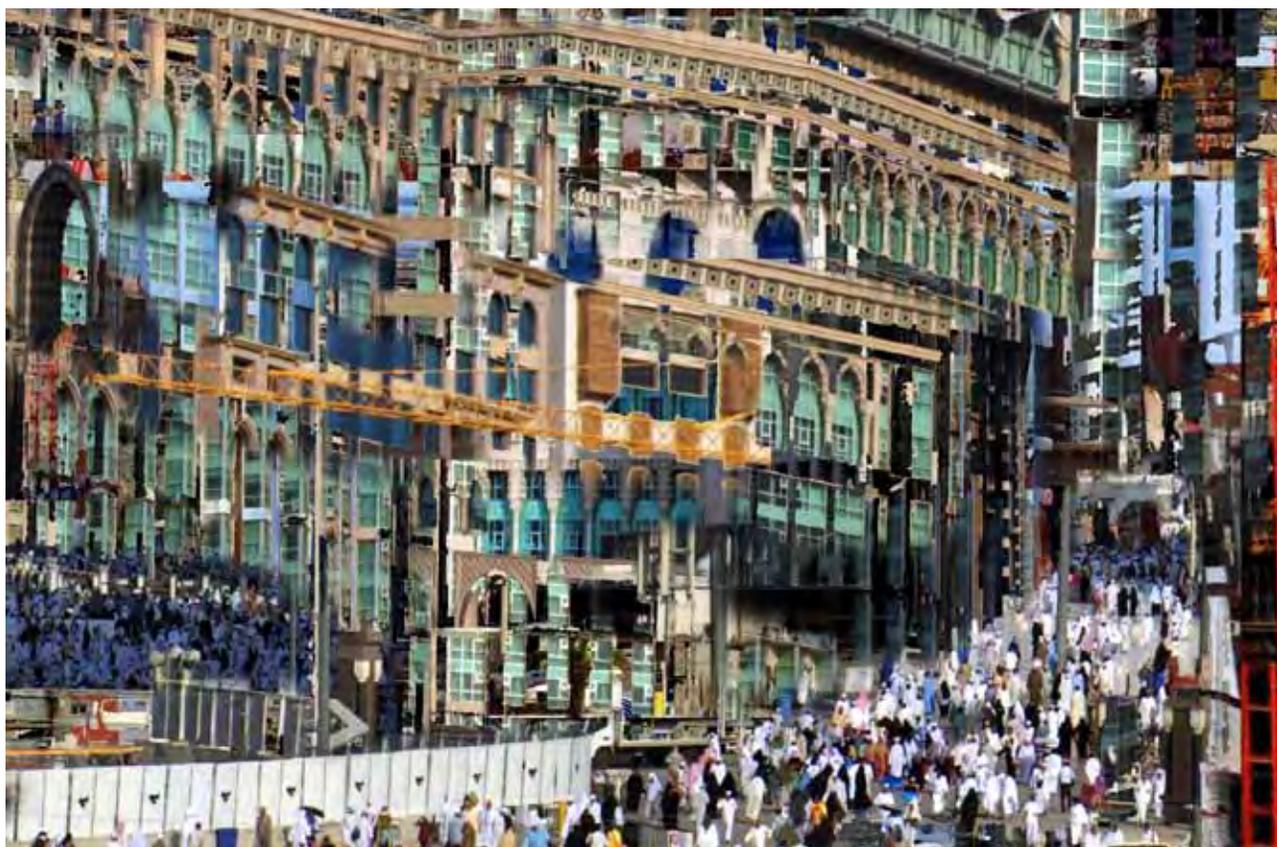
This "flawed motif" of an "Orientalist archetype" that von Roques mentions - brings us to one critique of the focus of this kind of Biennial, that it would be guilty of performing a rather labored reverse Orientalist corrective positioning. Another criticism is that the show perpetuates the generalized negative mainstream media stereotyping of all Arab culture as war-torn and tragic. American journalist Kyle Chayka reviews the show in *Complex* magazine and points out one key difficulty of curating such an exhibition: "Scholar Edward Said's 1978 book 'Orientalism' deconstructed how Western artists defined the identity of the East as an other in contrast with themselves. It's this kind of sight that the



Shadia Alem (Saudi Arabia), *Old Mecca Stamps*, 2013, Inkjet Print ,Courtesy of the Artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.



Shadia Alem (Saudi Arabia), *The Supreme Ka'aba of God*, 2011, Inkjet Print , Courtesy of the Artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.



Shadia Alem (Saudi Arabia), *The Supreme Ka'aba of God*, 2011, Inkjet Print, Courtesy of the Artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

biennial is preoccupied with. It attempts to restore the other half of Said's equation. At its best, the show demonstrates how Middle Eastern artists see themselves rather than how a framework has been forced upon them." Chayka's point about Orientalism is well-taken, the mission of any biennial addressing this subject is caught up in a tricky bind that Said points out, and such an exhibition curated by two white Western curators could come across as overly remedial and compensatory. But this sense of curatorial compromise, and of broad performative art-historical correction, is not present. A wide range of practices and voices are included. Fortunately this particular Biennial is not stuck in a cycle of preachy art-historical amelioration. Some works address these issues of colonialism and projection but never in a heavy-handed way. An unsurprising critique of the Biennial as perpetuating negative scripts about this region came from an editor of a Dubai-based magazine: Mentioning that the publication she works for was founded in response to the negative media backlash towards the

region following 9/11 and seeks to educate the world about the wealth and breadth that is Middle Eastern art and culture - which is indeed an honorable cause -, yet they saw that 15th FotoFest Biennial showed exactly what they have been battling for a decade: *"a Middle East represented by art that revolves around conflict and oppression."* The editor convolutes two important issues in her argument. Outside the extremely affluent and relatively democratic society of Dubai, across the poorer and less equal states of the Middle East, there is currently a sense of enormous political and social upheaval, and of regime change, and of potential. These shifts began as a direct result of the spread of democratizing digital communication platforms across the western part of the art world; Magreb - not Dubai. Secondly, institutional curators with integrity should not pander to dictates to deliberately put a compensatory positive spin on Arab culture. Opportunities to consider the "wealth and breadth of Middle Eastern art and culture" are currently available in a wide range

of other global exhibition settings. The central issue of our time is not focused on promoting the integration of artists and museums from Gulf States into the commercial market globally - this is the place of art fairs. To accuse the Biennial's curators of reinforcing negative cultural stereotypes about the Middle East is to obfuscate matters, and to attempt to claim victim status seems lightly grotesque. FotoFest began as and remains a forum for didactic and politically-engaged works. As FotoFest co-founder Wendy Watriss states regarding the mission of "View from Inside": *"Photography brings a language about the realities of the world into our own lives and makes us realize what other people are going through, either in our own societies or other societies, and in that process it brings a sense of humanity and caring. It doesn't allow us to be isolated and comfortable in our own lives."* At a crucial time in the history of the Middle East, FotoFest's mission is to address the changing cultural landscape of the region, not to whitewash or present a rosy-tinted view of a world that - by any stretch of the imagination - is in profound flux.

Youssef Nabil's images of *t* and spiritual wilderness tie back into central dialogs within this year's FotoFest. As discussed earlier, through images of huge gatherings of transcendent pilgrims at the Ka'bah, Saudi Princess Reem Al Faisal presents a reassuringly unchanging world where Islamic society remains steadfastly focused on correctness and a holy mystical encounter shared by the many. But Nabil's images of a lone, disenfranchised Arab man at a funfair in Paris, and his video of a youth in a row boat in a deserted sea, present a different view of ex-patriot contemporary Arab lives. He alludes to fears, ambiguities and irreversible changes within Arab culture in a globalized world. Away from the flock, Nabil's protagonist is both in splendid isolation and yet a figure that might worry traditional cultural scripts, where to belong is to be. He alludes to a more secular, post-family, post-national future for the next Arab generations. The profound sense of society-wide change and familial fragmentation that we in Europe witnessed during the 1960s and 1970s, is now starting to occur at breakneck speed in the Arab World.

The artists featured in FotoFest 2014 give us a clear view from inside of some of these immense shifts, and of what the future may hold.

About the Writer

Rupert Goldsworthy is a British artist and writer based in New York City. He has shown his paintings since the mid-1980s, and also became known during the 1990s and 2000s for running a small roving artist-run gallery project between New York and Berlin. His writing has been published in the magazines Art in America, Artcritical, Artnet and Brooklyn Rail. He currently teaches at Parsons School of Design at the New School, at the International Center for Photography, and Pratt Institute. He is the author of "CONSUMING//TERROR: Images of the Baader-Meinhof" (DMV Verlag). He has a Masters in Studio Art from NYU and a PhD in Visual Culture from NYU.

www.rupertgoldsworthy.com



Khalifa Al Obaidly (Qatar), Tagged 01-02-04-12-14-19-20-21, 2009, From the series Tagged, Inkjet Print, Courtesy of the Artist.