

THE NORTH WIND DOETH BLOW

As if the global situation were not already alarming enough, President Trump has dramatically recast his country's attitude to the Middle East and Muslim world.

Julie Baumgardner looks at the complex identities, outlook and art of Middle Easterners in America.

In the United States right now there's an uneasy chill in the air for Muslims, both American and foreign-born alike. Not only is the unconstitutional executive order's so-called 'travel ban' to people from seven Muslim-majority MENA countries a thinly veiled agenda to restrict 'Muslims' but it is also challenging the very essence of what it means to be American. A campaign promise by the head of a new executive seemingly intent on tweeting his way through a slapdash playbook of ignorance, prejudice and alternative facts, President Trump's recent actions have helped prompt the return of the almost medieval Orientalist view identified by Edward Said: "Not for nothing did Islam come to symbolise terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians."

Peoples of Middle Eastern and North African descent have been dispersed in extensive diasporas across the globe for centuries. In the United States alone, there are an estimated 3.5 million people of Arab descent (immigrants and native US-born) and around one million of Persian heritage (again, immigrants and native US-born). These communities are feeling the heat right now and it is not yet at all clear

how events will play out for them. Cultural identity is under the spotlight like never before, including in the work and creativity of the many artists from the region who are based here – some of them for most of their lives – but others as much more recent arrivals as well. "It has been said that identity is a diasporic issue," says Dr Fereshteh Daftari, "I do not agree." The Iranian curator, who is now based in the United States, last month unveiled the *Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet: Contemporary Persians* show of 23 fellow Iranian contemporary artists "who have chosen self-expression over silence," at Toronto's much buzzed-about Aga Khan Museum (see page xx). "When your identity differs from what is mandated in your country, you are just as eager to express it as when you face stereotypes that do not fit with who you are when you live in exile. Thus, themes are often shared across boundaries," adds Dr Daftari.

A SENSE OF BELONGING

Even so, how can one splice an identity? It's a question currently perplexing the United States (as well as the West in general) and one that



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represents a resurfacing of concerns that have been at the forefront of liberal politics since the 1990s. When considering the diversity of artists 'from the Middle East,' there's an apparent schism between curatorial and art market perspectives of how to contextualise and receive these representations. "Shirin Neshat, YZ Kami, Farooz Zahedi – these are global artists," says preeminent Iran-born powerhouse art dealer Leila Heller. "But I hate to marginalise those artists who become global and find importance in the major museums. They are still influenced by their upbringing." Heller has maintained a large 'Middle East meets West' operation in New York for some thirty years, she opened a major gallery in Dubai in 2015, and has introduced many Iranian artists to the international art circuit. She balances her roster of Western blue-chip artists like Tony Cragg and Wim Delvoye with iconic British-Iraqi visionary Zaha Hadid, Egypt-born global star Ghada Amer, buzzy Tehran-born Hadieh Shafie and New York doyenne of Iranian descent, Rachel Lee Hovnanian. "You cannot say these artists are 'Middle Eastern artists,'" Heller continues, "but of course they are. How can they erase their heritage?"

In the art institutions of the United States the traditional presentation gambit has been to follow art historical, ie. Western, classifications of Middle Eastern art and put it under the rubric of Islamic art. Dr Christiane Gruber of the University of Michigan sees difficulties with this approach in that it "was defined in an otherising way of what made Islamic art different from Western art. The problem in America and Europe is that art history is a European field, born in Europe for European art and with non-European art added later. When Islamic art is put in the major surveys, it's sandwiched between Medieval and Renaissance, and there's the problem of making Islamic art perennially medieval in a moment of no progression." Most major institutions now have designated curators for MENA works, but such regional designation might do little more than echo Western attitudes of provincialism, exotification and tokenism towards the region. "We erect these taxonomies and categories but they limit us intellectually on how to flexibly think through the materials," adds Dr Gruber.

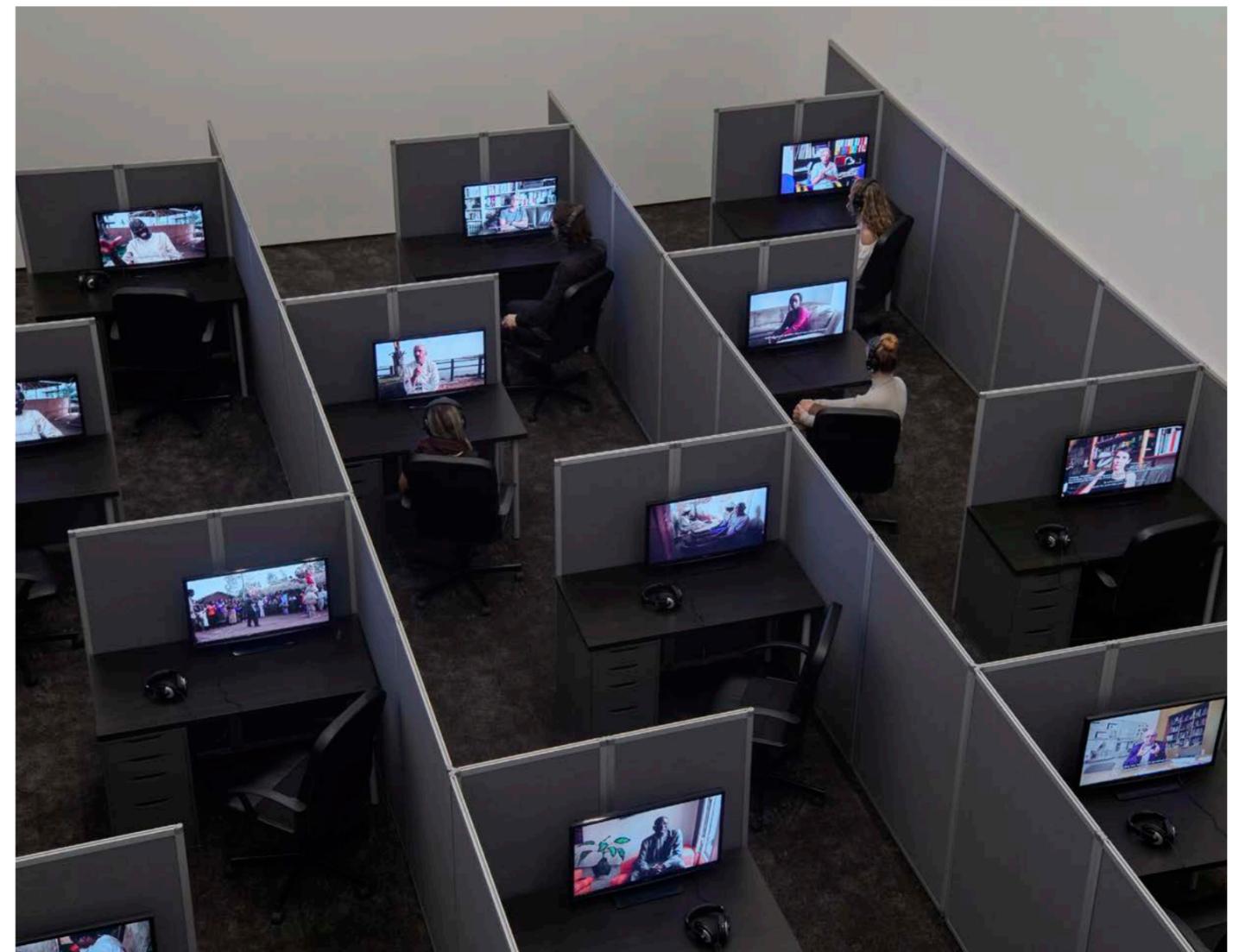


Meanwhile there seems to be little distinction in the curatorial representations of where Middle Eastern artists work and live. “Many artists have engaged with ideas of religion, violence and war, or issues of gender imbalance, and some of the most interesting of these have looked at alternative ways of telling or constructing history,” explains Sylvia Van Vliet-Ragheb, co-founder along with Randa Fahmy Aboul Nasr of Syra Arts in Washington, DC. “Other compelling practices are those that deal with notions of migration and movement, and of homeland and exile, which characterises the lives of so many of the artists we work with.” Curatorially, there is a simmering debate between honouring the geographic rubric versus a regional effacement for “global art practices.” Some curators utilise the geographic region of these artists’ heritage to contextualise their practices, while others eschew that notion by elevating these practices to global status, bringing their formal and conceptual concerns in line with the

international art conversation. Sara Raza, now the UBS Map Curator Middle East and North Africa at the Guggenheim, says, “artists have adopted numerous methodologies that aren’t symptomatic of the Middle East – their practice is more international.”

DEFYING LABELS

Naturally, there is much opportunity for artists to vocalise their own perspectives of what their identities are, and in the process advocate for these to be rewritten into American art histories, narratives and public reception. Take California-based Ala Ebketar’s contemporary reimagining of Persian miniatures, where the religious text has been diffused to the point of erasure; Cairo-born, New York-based Youssef Nabil’s spectral cinematic photographs evoking imaginary realities of the paradoxes of the Middle East; and Tehran-born, Michigan-based



Parisa Ghaderi, whose manipulated old portraits of anonymous Iranians (currently on view at the Los Angeles Craft and Folk Art Museum’s biennial *Focus Iran 2*) create a sense of alienation and contradiction. Lalla Essaydi, whose gorgeous, posed self-portraits evoke the iconic women subjects of art history, overlaid with Islamic calligraphy or bullet shells, has ascended to instantly recognisable status in the art world for her visual messages fusing feminism and Islam, reframing a perception to many in the West that the two cannot suffuse. Edwynn Houk, who runs his eponymous photography gallery and represents Essaydi, explains: “People seem to identify with the work under a set of special labels. Probably the first one is just being a woman, and then certainly as a Muslim artist might be next, and then as a someone from Africa, particularly nowadays to balance the distribution and representation of people from other parts of the world, of non-majority positions.”

The work of Jameel Prize-winning Afruz Amighi exemplifies the current debate over curatorial considerations for MENA artists in the diaspora. Born in Tehran and raised in New York by Iranian parents of Jewish and Zoroastrian heritage, Amighi tackles the tension between traditional Persian geometric motifs, current political turmoil and global ideological concerns through her hanging welded steel objects. When illuminated, these cast shadows to create a very contemporary sculptural relief diptych, forming a double layer of aesthetics and meaning, echoing ritual and cultural memory. Her work is mutually rooted in global art-making practices as well as Persian cultural identity, but does working and living in the West automatically make her practice global? This remains a notion still directed by Western tastes and patronage, which exert certain demands and restrictions. Sultan Al Qassemi vividly expressed this concern on a panel at Dubai’s Alserkal Avenue back in 2014, highlighting how Western market concerns almost “require” MENA



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artists to depict suffering women in a hijab or other religious dress, or young armed men on the verge of battle.

Artists necessarily blast their way through this, of course. Not least in Raza’s exhibition *But a Storm is Blowing from Paradise* at the Guggenheim in New York last year (and touring to Shanghai this spring), a display of highly potent work by MENA artists, some diasporic and others who still live in the region, such as French-Algerian Kader Attia and Lebanese duo Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. The show also included the Cairo-born, New York-based cross-disciplinary intellect, Iman Issa, recently awarded the 2017 Vilcek Prize in fine arts. Her stunning and haunting *Heritage Series*, future relics of memorials past, reframes shapes and objects that in

history held deep symbolic meanings, such as a column from the Alhambra’s Courtyard of Lions or a hexagon found at a site of worship in Afghanistan. Many of Issa’s sculptures emerge from religious or political contexts, yet the artist herself has said that they should not be seen in this light – rather, more as studies for propositions. Still, the smouldering force of these works is undeniable. “I don’t think their [geographic taxonomies] are really relevant,” says Raza. “With the way that people are moving around, the way ideas travel, the advent of technology, we can’t really pinpoint people to a place anymore.” Yet so many of the artists in her show did cite their tied-to-place heritage as critical to their practice. So, by labelling an artist as being global we perhaps efface any “Middle Easternness” in their work, peddling



the dumb liberal idea that identity is both totalising yet unimportant to context. As Van Vliet-Ragheb thoughtfully explains, “Art can only be understood in the light of the realities and mindset of the artist at the moment of time and we understand it from the perspective of our own time and place.” That much is immutable.

Meanwhile, the harsh realities of the Trump presidency are having an immediate impact on the art world. The current (as at time of press) travel restrictions are preventing artists from attending their exhibitions, including Shahpour Pouyan for the Aga Khan show. The ban also affects the physical exchange of artworks from one country to the next; the *New York Times* recently reporting that the Metropolitan Museum of Art

was concerned about its potential to disrupt or restrict loans to and from the affected countries. “Works of art cannot be shipped from Iran, for example, because the couriers for them wouldn’t be allowed visas,” explains curator Omar Kholeif, who works with many affected artists. Art professionals generally are concerned about both their colleagues’ and their own ability to travel, research and participate in much needed bridge-building fellowships, workshops, conferences and other programmes. If there’s any belief in art having the power to positively inform diplomacy and cultural consciousness, then the unrestricted exchange of artistic productions between nations – especially those in need of understanding each other – must be an absolute priority. 📍