

## London fair showcases Arab art

Dunia El-Zobaidi

London

**S**ix art galleries based in the Middle East participated in the Art16 fair presenting paintings, sculpture, photography and visual art that reflected Arab society and culture. It was a major exposure for Arab art in an event that brought together 100 galleries from more than 30 countries displaying more than 1,000 artworks in London on May 20th-22nd.

Doha-based Anima Gallery showcased Qatari artist Ali Hassan, who presented a series about the desert and the palm tree. Commenting on his work, the gallery's art expert, Ghada Showley, said the artist uses calligraphy and Arabic letters to represent Arabic culture and society.

Hassan's pieces *Face One* and *Face Two* show vague facial features that could represent anyone in the Arab world. "There is no facial expression as they represent everyone. So many Arabs are expressionless but yet we have so much to say," Showley said.

Berlin-based Lebanese artist Mohammad Basalbak's *Beekeeper* series represents an autocrat who collects the masses illustrated by the bees. "He takes honey from them but he knows if they are all together they can attack him so his head and hands are covered with gloves. He is protecting himself against the masses he is oppressing," Showley commented.

**"Today, art works are like the news."**

Palestinian visual artist  
Walid al-Wawi

A native of southern Lebanon, Basalbak moved to Beirut when the south was bombed and then to Berlin to flee bombing in Beirut. His *Heap* series represents the suitcases people leave behind.

"People in the Arab world don't have a place anymore. They just keep moving. All the memories and souvenirs are left behind," Showley said.

Lahd Gallery in Saudi Arabia presented Patrick Altes's painting *The Hanging Gardens of Babylon*, which

is part of a triptych.

"Babylon does not exist anymore except in the memories of people. However, we can create our Garden of Eden wherever we are through the accumulation of all the places and the people we have met. It is a dynamic process. I have tried to create a place of contemplation and inner harmony," Altes said.

Referring to the French conquest of Algeria, Altes uses the idea of the peaceful Garden of Eden to help bridge gaps between countries. "Post-colonialism manifests itself in so many forms," he said. "I like to make links between people. I belong to a group of people that have a hard time viewing Algeria as a free country. My blood is half French, half Spanish but I consider myself Algerian."

**The event brought together 100 galleries from more than 30 countries displaying more than 1,000 artworks at Olympia, London.**

Mark Hachem, owner of Mark Hachem Gallery in New York, Paris and Beirut, presented works of photographer Yves Hayat, who wants to find political links between luxury and violence, psychological problems and war. *Les Icônes sont fatiguées* shows musical icons with their eyes closed to show they are tired. *Parfums de Révolte* uses a Chanel bag as a symbol of luxury and consumerism.

"Most wars are fought for ideology but Hayat reminds us that it is for finance, business and power, too," Hachem said.

Tamara Chalabi, co-founder of the Ruya Foundation in Iraq, spoke of introverted Iraqi artist Ahmad Abdul Razzaq, who conducts "a permanent dialogue with himself".

Influenced by ancient Mesopotamia, he talks about his own inner violence. The "Stop" sign in his work is meant to tell his inner voices to stop hounding him. He uses mystical and mythical creatures in his imagination.

Nadine Hatton, an Iraqi-Australian visual artist living in Berlin, looked at images of Iraq taken by US soldiers but she could not find any pictures without soldiers or violence so she kept the shadows of the soldiers and focused on the



*Dreamers*- 105 x 110 cm- Acrylic on canvas- 2015 by Anas Homsi

landscape.

Jamal Penjweny's photography *Saddam is Here* shows a photocopy of Saddam Hussein held by Iraqis. Penjweny said he was curious about the responses it triggered and found some were afraid, some were upset and some were proud. The message he delivers is that Saddam is omnipresent; he may be gone but the destruction of Iraq remains.

Iraqi photojournalist Julia Adnan's multimedia project *You May Go* imagines a world without bor-

ders and passports. Her father immigrated to Switzerland and she has never been able to get a visa to visit him. She asks people in Iraq where they dream to go and has a picture of their dream place enlarged.

Palestinian visual artist Walid al-Wawi from Maraya Art Centre in the United Arab Emirates talks about displacement and hybridised identity in the Middle East.

"There is a cultural enforcement of identities. We get a sense of nationalism in a place we don't actu-

ally belong to in a practical sense. I try to tie the string of vague belonging and actual belonging," said Wawi, who grew up in the UAE.

"Today, art works are like the news. There is a lot of sensationalism and a need that things should talk to you emotionally before logically," he said. "I think that is deceiving. I want to strip any emotion out of my work. I want to strip it to just a problem and a solution."

Dunia El-Zobaidi is a regular Arab Weekly contributor in London.