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Summary

Routes II is an exhibition in London of Middle Eastern and Arab art that focuses on talent rather than geography

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A general view of the Routes II exhibition of contemporary Middle Eastern and Arab art at the Waterhouse & Dodd gallery.

Talent is more interesting than topography, according to the curators of an exhibition of contemporary Middle Eastern and Arab art at London's Waterhouse & Dodd Gallery. Following on from the inaugural Routes show last year, Routes II is an ambitious new collection of established and emerging artists and demonstrates the extent to which the region's art has moved from the cultural periphery to the international mainstream.

With works on display from the likes of Reza Derakshani and Farhad Moshiri, both of whom have exhibited in the UAE, to Mohammad Ehsai, whose art has sold for more than US\$1 million (Dh3.7m) at Christie's Dubai, the exhibition includes specially commissioned work and pieces taken from influential series. In preparation for the second instalment of Routes, the co-curator Jemimah Patterson travelled regularly to Abu Dhabi and Dubai, closely following auction sales and establishing relationships with some of the region's most promising artists.

"The Middle East is a happening place now," says the artist Khosrow Hassanzadeh, who this year alone has exhibited at the British Museum, the Venice Biennale and the Chelsea Art Museum. "There's been enough of a western hold on art and culture. Why shouldn't there be interest in the Arab world?" The opening of western auction houses in the UAE has given art that was largely ignored in the 20th century new prominence. Their successes have had a knock-on effect in the UK. Last year's Unveiled exhibition at London's Saatchi Gallery promised to lift the lid on new Middle Eastern artworks and simultaneously demonstrated the growing western interest in Arab art.

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artists in the flourishing Arab art scene.

From the outset, the Routes II exhibition refused to brand itself in this way. Despite being a curated group show, the collection includes more indigenous artists and better represents the art that is now being produced in the region. "While we have taken a number of aspects into account in our selection, not least our interest in presenting a balanced overview of artists working in different mediums, the most

Like so many other shows since, however, it insisted on grouping the work in terms of region, rather than subject, style, era or status. In short, it lumped good with bad, becoming less about the creative process and more about the Middle Eastern narrative. The gallery was filled with items designed to play to a western audience; pieces grappled with religion, war and women's role in society, but failed to connect seriously with the issues and ideas facing



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important criteria has been to choose artists on the quality of their work," says Patterson.

"Our choices have not been influenced by a wish to express any political messages, but it is the right of all artists to convey their views through their art. "We're not trying to single out Middle Eastern art. We're keen to include it in our contemporary programme as a whole. I think it's important to show our commitment outside of the Routes showcase and throughout the exhibition calendar." The works included in the Routes II collection are inevitably a product of and a commentary on many aspects of the artists' lives in the Middle East, including their cultural history, artistic licence, political views and gender issues. Refreshingly, however, such themes were not a prerequisite for inclusion.

Significantly, the emphasis isn't on giving western audiences what they expect of Middle Eastern art, but rather focusing on the organic growth of a regional body bound up with international influences and art-world discourses. "It's possible that because we are westerners we are more interested in art that has some western influence," says Ray Waterhouse, the gallery's director. "If we went for completely indigenous art it wouldn't have any relevance to us. But good artists change their style and their opinions as their lives change and they develop. So if they go and live in San Francisco or New York or Paris, they're likely to take on those influences. But all the artists we're involved in retain some of the influences from their homelands."

For artists such as Lalla Essaydi, this relationship between heritage and global influence manifests itself in a potent body of art that reflects modern culture. Essaydi's pieces touch on such issues as Arab female identity and are infused with Islamic calligraphic text - an art form traditionally reserved for men - strewn across walls and traditional regional garb. Her experiences in Morocco and Saudi Arabia are also shaped by the places she has lived in since, including the cities of New York and Boston.

For the Turkish artist Ece Clarke, global experience is central to artistic expression. Her work focuses on cylindrical forms, with a palette drawn from the Middle Eastern desert. Held together by magnets and folded intricately, her paper structures hide as much as they reveal, commenting on the unattainable and inaccessible. "The layering in my work reflects my journey and cosmopolitan outlook," Clarke says. "The Middle Eastern landscape is very inspiring. I am Turkish, but this environment is so spiritual. Living in different cultures enriches you and opens your eyes to bigger things."

For some of the artists, inspiration is derived from domestic life. "I want my art to share in the issues that confront and surprise me," says Sadegh Tirafkan, an Iranian. "I like my work to educate people about life in my homeland. Depictions in the media only show one side of things and art is a fantastic medium to promote cultural dialogue." Shadi Ghadirian's photographic series Nil Nil provides a commentary on femininity in a militarised Iran. Images of a beauty box filled with necklaces, beads and a pair of army dog tags and bullets hidden in a cigarette case suggest an incongruous partnership between warfare and women.

Challenging the concept of the male warrior, Ghadirian positions military objects in the domestic sphere, juxtaposing symbols of potential violence with everyday, anodyne items. The effect of this strange union on the viewer is powerful, with the exuberant images at once menacing and delicate. The aggression suggested by the paraphernalia is tempered by its feminine counterparts, so that the idea of violence becomes somehow more acceptable.

Elsewhere, Samira Aikhanzadeh uses subjects taken from a box of old, anonymous photographs to question the very notion of national identity. The photographs show women with long, rectangular mirrors covering their eyes. The viewer is reflected in the shards of glass, engaged in the composition and encouraged to consider the proximity of seemingly disparate backgrounds. "Works like Aikhanzadeh's demonstrate the breadth and depth of Arab art," says another artist, Hassanzadeh.

"It's important to recognise our place in the contemporary international art scene. In the end, we are artists, so it shouldn't matter where we're from. We're just artists."

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