Individualism versus identity

Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East, Saatchi Gallery, London

***Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* is an exhibition which claims little beyond its title. There is no obvious reason why this particular group of artists should be brought together in the same exhibition. To claim that somehow they represent art practices in the Middle East would be misleading, there are no obvious stylistic connections or over-riding concerns among the work of the various artists on show. Paradoxically, this liberates the exhibition, and allows the visitors to relate more to the individual works on display. This show does what it says on the tin, and does it successfully.**

In contrast to Catherine David's *Contemporary Arab Representations*, a series of exhibitions in various cities around the world that ran for several years from 2001, *Unveiled* does not assume the burden of representation, and does not expect the artists to give an insight into Arab culture; cultural ambassadors they are not. What they do is give us free-standing art works that can (mostly) speak for themselves. This is a breath of fresh air.

Take for example the two works by Marwan Rechmaoui 'Beirut Caoutchouc' and 'Spectre', previously exhibited as part of *Contemporary Arab Representations*. It's the first time I've seen his work shown outside of that context and liberated from the company of Deleuzian texts and yet another grainy video of someone's aunt, and it is like seeing the artworks for the first time. 'Caoutchouc' is a large-scale map of Beirut reproduced in black rubber in relief, which represents the city in a surprisingly novel way. Common to the work of most Lebanese artists of his generation, the problem of knowing the city is a central theme in Rechmaoui's work, yet his take on it is very personal and specific. The abstract conventions of map-making are subtly manipulated, allowing us to look beyond the physical city.

In 'Spectre (The Yacoubian Building, Beirut)' Rechmaoui creates a scaled-down version of an iconic modernist building in Beirut in concrete and glass. The building is depicted at a specific point in its history, after it was evacuated during the Israeli attacks on Lebanon in 2006, bearing the traces of its decades of existence in a troubled city. The artist faithfully depicts the smallest details, such as the heavy metal doors that became common during the civil war, but this is far from a process of pure documentation. Through the tension between the building's abstract repetitive form and the little details that Rechmaoui chooses to highlight, the story of the decline of a city and the fate of its inhabitants is told cleverly and sensitively.

Rechmaoui's works are representations of his unique and personal way of looking at the city, and his ability to translate that into material form without excessive expressionism but with the subtle hints that allow us to see the city through his eyes. Isn't this the unique skill of the artist? By contrast, Diana Al-Hadid's works take expressionism to a new high, vigorously melting the symbols of modernity into twisted lumps of plastic. If

Rechmaoui’s works are masterpieces in under-statement, Al-Hadid’s works are loud and garrulous. Curiously, they seem to be less personal precisely because of this quality.

‘The Tower of Infinite Problems’ and the other pieces on display by Al-Hadid, are large shards of metal and plastic, constantly at odds with gravity and at various stages of collapse and ruin, some have completely surrendered and lie waiting, presumably, for the inevitable crawl of green that is the fate of all ruins. The works are masterfully produced, but that has long ago ceased to be a quality to be praised in art. What is genuinely disturbing about the shattered towers is not Al-Hadid’s unique vision, but the fact that images of catastrophe have become too common today to arouse any interest, in me at least. Rather than seeing an artist struggling with the world around her, all I could see is yet another Virilio-inspired take on modernity and the implications of taking technology to an extreme.

Al-Hadid, as a Syrian-American artist, is trying to give expression to the two cultures that she belongs to and to highlight issues such as cultural conflict. But the impression that I get, and perhaps this is the one fault line that can be traced though the entire exhibition, is that this is someone who has accepted those categories such as culture uncritically, and her work becomes less personal because of that. To a certain extent, this is the main difference between the works of the artists who live in the Middle East and those who live in the West. The members of the first group do not have the luxury of thinking of their context in terms of abstract categories; it is above all a lived reality that they have to struggle with on a daily basis. The second group seems to have escaped the confines of that reality, but it’s a false liberation that gives their work that abstract and distant quality.

This is particularly true of the paintings of Nadia Ayari. The catalogue says of her: ‘Ayari didn’t start working with her Middle Eastern subject matter until she’d moved to America and notions of cultural heritage and identity came to the fore’. And it shows. Only someone far removed from the lived reality of the Middle East can attempt to sum it up in such a collection of visual clichés. This is Orientalism for the 21st century, rehabilitated by the fact that it is being committed by a native. All the more cause for concern. The struggle of the people of Palestine and Iraq today is not so much to get recognition for their misery, but to stop the West from portraying them as perpetual victims in such a flat manner – literally in the case of Ayari’s paintings.

Flatness, that old paradox of painting, has been revisited by two of the Iranian artists in the exhibition, Ramin Haerizadeh and Ahmad Morshedloo. Not so crassly, of course, but with thought and sophistication that re-assert the notion that art is truly universal, and an experiment began by a French artists a hundred years ago could be picked up again by someone in Iran today. Not as a distraction from life, but as a unique way of dealing with it and sharing that vision with others.

Haerizadeh’s collages are powerful in combining the conventions of collage with traditional Persian painting and crafts, using mostly his body as raw material. The effect is astonishing, producing intriguing works that on closer inspection reveal the manipulation and distortion involved in re-packaging his severed limbs and his chubby face to produce hyper-real bodies suitable for our age where the body has lost its integrity and has been appropriated by various institutions.

Morshedloo’s work is particularly powerful, not only because it declares that painting is not dead as an art form, but because of the insistence that his subjects caught in a moment of daily life are not the vacuous abstractions we have to expect from depictions of that part of the world, but are subjects in their own right regardless of how much their attire hides or reveals of them. The contrast between the naked men and over-clad women does nothing to distract from that, these are living breathing subjects. We are made even more aware of that, paradoxically, through Morshedloo’s unique perspectives and foreshortening effects. This is not crass realism, but painting at its best. The less said the better.

Finally, the last piece, which attracts the most attention from the visitors, is Kader Attia’s ‘Ghost’. The aluminium-foil empty shells that represent Muslim women in prayer, a hundred or more of them perhaps, are very powerful visually. Though to me personally the effect is not particularly due to Attia’s social ‘comment’ in as much as it is the representation of the hollow body in that most fragile and transient of materials, aluminium foil. For all I care, they could have been a group of Jedi warriors looking for their contact lenses, the effect would have been the same. There is something about the power of visual depictions that we seem to have abandoned in favour of art with a message, and perhaps that is too much of a burden. Attia’s work is an example of the power of that form of visual exploration that used to be called sculpture.

The last room in the exhibition is dedicated to old masters from the Middle East, and it suitably takes me to my conclusion. In societies where visual art was not an established tradition, those early masters embarked on what seemed to their contemporaries an alien endeavour, a career and a life in art. They did that for two reasons, one to create their own modernity in countries that were still ambivalent about it, and secondly to become fully-fledged individuals in societies where the concept was struggling to emerge against the tyranny of older institutions. In *Unveiled*, we see that struggle continue. There are artists who have to live in countries that find their activities superfluous, but in their struggle to assert their individualism they are producing thoughtful and engaging works of art. On the other hand, there are those who seem to have surrendered their individuality in favour of a formulaic and self-indulgent art that is obsessed with identity. It’s a fine line, but this exhibition will allow discerning viewers to judge for themselves

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