

## IN THE EYE OF THE THUNDERSTORM: EFFERVESCENT PRACTICES FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND ASIA

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An image that properly describes what are, in some cases what it should be, aesthetics' and art's positions and privilege towards political chronicle and history as well: they are totally "inside", embedded in the core, and nevertheless they remain "outside".



Rashid Al Khalifa. Untitled, 2014, pastels, enamel on chrome-plated stainless steel, 150x150cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Art and artists are at the very center of a turbulent, violent even catastrophic occurrences, which haul them off and involve them to the extreme. In other words, they live in a dimension obsessed, sometimes dictated, by history, but at the same time are still individual, independent, on their own as sole facts. They act as observers in order to keep a proper distance enough to develop a critical regard and a critical afterthought, a space for creativity and for debate, processing both chronicle and history, scrutinizing the present as well as the past. Considerations such these are especially current and proper when they refer to the contemporary artistic/creative practices happening within the Arab world - or we can confidently say the Arabic-speaking countries, as each state and each regions has its cultural specificities - which in recent years look more vital, vibrant and blossoming than ever before as regards the political, military and cultural fronts; in fact a *turmoil*, that has taken this area of the world by force and by surprise like a thunderstorm.

Today in critical terms we hear and read expressions like *glocal*, *areas of the center and areas of the periphery*, and similar expressions developed and propagated by art publications and artsy broadcast channels, that would indicate quite an elitist attitude from a strata of critical media. Indeed, there are facts and some grey areas: an area that witnesses the coexistence of some of the new capitals of art and culture, some of the centers of the world's power, and the theatres of the most dramatic and bloody conflicts of the new millennium. There are places where civilizations' models, *future* and *past* intertwine with each other, without conciliating with each other on the background of territories which face hard times in looking for their *present*. And, most important, there are the artists who observe, are ironic about, inhabit, persevere, resist, elaborate, sublimate, act, taking tenaciously care of a space for creativity, an area of reflection and a dimension for efficiency. Their practices must not to be regarded as a commodity, a privilege, or as an isolation from a tough entourage of the real world, but must be regarded as total consciousness of their own "languages", at the crossroad among history, traditions, hopes, expectations and, certainly, claims.



1. Obaidi, The Replacement, 2014, mixed media installation, Courtesy fo the artist.

2. Khaled Hafez, Tomb Sonata in 3 Military Movements Goddess, 2010, mixed media and video installation, 750x200cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The artists selected for this exhibition reflect and represent, *sui generis*, the complexity and the variety of the researches that take place now in totally different contexts which, on the other hand, have in common the fact of being facets of the same crystal called "Arab speaking world" (with the exception of Pakistan where the spoken language is not Arabic but which, nevertheless, share with the Arab countries some significant aspects of the culture and the history): from Bahrain to Egypt, from Kuwait to Iraq. They (Rashid Al Khalifa, Sadik Al Afriji, Obaidi, Shurooq Amin, Khaled Hafez, Haytham Nawar, Obaidi, Alia Al Farsi, Ahmed El Shaer, Simeen Farhat, Haytham Nawar), using in many cases a language filled with a faked optimism generated by Pop imaginary, do not hesitate to tackle burning and complex topics, such as war, powerful people's raise and fall, women issues. They move nimbly among different media, from painting to video and installation, from language to image, so that to include narratives, dramas and even unique epics, that feed diversified projects, always in dialogue with western gazes and expressive means.

These artists have been selected mostly in the generation of the forty-fifty-year-olds, a mid-carrier generation which is reaching the top of its artistic maturity and its life experience, and which is-for this very reason-the privileged witness of a time and a space where changes and instability move in excessive speed, sometimes jeopardizing the erasure of local memory and cultural heritage, traditions and landscape.

*In the Eye of the Thunderstorm: Effervescent Practices from the Arab World and Asia*, curated by Martina Corqati, is commissioned by Contemporary Practices Journal, a publication - or rather a textual project space - that has for ten years positioned itself as tireless and open-minded watchdog on the reality of the artists who are acting in this area of the world. Not forcibly accommodating towards aesthetical and commercial trends, this journal has confirmed itself as a rich and demanding scenario for polycentric observations and debates, open both to the theoretical and critical analysis, more academic than journalistic, and to the researches on actual personalities, their practices and their evolution during time.



1. Sadik Al Fajji, Seasons Of Lost Baghdad, 2014, drawing on canvas, detail.

2. Alia Al-Farsi, faces series, 2014, Mixed media on canvas, 100x100cm. Courtesy of the artist.

#### IN THE EYE OF THE THUNDERSTORM: EFFERVESCENT PRACTICES FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND ASIA

**Artists:** Rashid Al Khalifa, Sadik Al Afriji, Alia Al Farsi, Shurooq Amin, Ahmed El Shaer, Simeen Farhat, Khaled Hafez, Haytham Nawar, Obaidi

**Commissioner:** Omar Donia

**Curator:** Martina Corqati

**Organization:** ArsCulture **In collaboration with:** Contemporary Practices Art Journal

**With the support of:**

- Art Bahrain, Manama, Kingdom of Bahrain
- Ayyam group of Galleries, UAE, Lebanon & UK
- Horcynus Orca Foundation, Messina, Italy
- Semmel Concerts, Germany
- Transart Institute, NY, USA
- Department of Visual Culture, The American University on Cairo, Egypt
- Meissen Couture, Dresden, Germany
- Commercial International Bank (CIBI), Cairo, Egypt
- Planetary Collegium, Plymouth, UK
- Deborah Collton Gallery, Texas, USA:
- Art Sawa, Dubai, UAE.

**Vernissage:** May 6th, at 18.00.

**Venue:** Zattere 417

**Opening hours and dates:** May 6 till November 15

**Press Contacts:** [omaradonia@contemporarypractices.com](mailto:omaradonia@contemporarypractices.com)



Shurooq Amin, Pollutoland, 2014, mixed media and video projection, 120x185cm. Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.

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## NELL'OCCHIO DEL CICLONE: RICERCHE ARTISTICHE DAL MONDO ARABO\*

Quando si scatena un uragano, il cosiddetto "occhio" è una zona di straordinaria calma, che resta apparentemente indipendente e indenne dal movimento vorticoso e violento dell'aria circostante. E questa immagine può essere efficacemente usata per descrivere quella che è, in alcuni casi che dovrebbe essere, la posizione e il privilegio dell'estetica, dell'arte e naturalmente dei suoi operatori, nei confronti della storia e della cronaca politica: essa è totalmente dentro e tuttavia fuori, dimensione partecipe ma separata che, dal centro di un sistema di eventi, di turbolenze violente, finanche catastrofiche, che la trascinano e la implicano fino in fondo, mantiene tuttavia la possibilità e la distanza per uno sguardo e una riflessione critica, uno spazio di creatività e di discussione della cronaca e della storia, presente e perfino passata.

Considerazioni come queste appaiono specialmente attuali e pertinenti quando le riferiamo alle pratiche artistiche in corso nel mondo arabo - o potremmo dire più correttamente nei paesi arabo-parlanti, dato che ogni paese e ogni regime mantiene la sua specificità culturale -, fiorenti, vitali, *cruciali* come non mai nei rivolgimenti politici, bellici e culturali che scuotono questa area del mondo: in effetti un subbuglio che ha coinvolto questa regione per forza e di sorpresa come un temporale. Oggi, in termini critici, leggiamo e ascoltiamo espressioni come *glocale, aree centrali e aree periferiche*, e similari, sviluppate e diffuse da pubblicazioni artistiche e canali dedicati, spie di un'attitudine piuttosto elitaria caratteristica di uno strato dei media che si occupano di critica.

Non a caso, esistono i fatti e alcune zone grigie: la zona in questione testimonia oggi la coesistenza di alcune delle nuove capitali del sistema dell'arte e i teatri dei conflitti più drammatici e sanguinosi del nuovo millennio. Luoghi in cui modelli di civiltà, *futuro e passato* si intrecciano senza comporsi sul palcoscenico di territori che stentano a ritrovare il proprio *presente*. E, più importante, ci sono gli artisti che osservano,

ironizzano, abitano, perseverano, resistono, elaborano, sublimano, agiscono, coltivando tenacemente uno spazio di operatività e di riflessione che non è privilegio e non è isolamento ma consapevolezza dei propri linguaggi al crocevia di storia, tradizioni, speranze, aspettative, rivendicazioni. Gli artisti presenti in mostra rappresentano, *sui generis*, la complessità e la varietà delle ricerche che hanno luogo in questo momento in contesti assolutamente differenti e tuttavia accomunati dal fatto di essere tutti sfaccettature dello stesso prisma denominato "mondo arabo": dal Bahrein all'Egitto, dagli Emirati Arabi Uniti all'Iraq. Essi servendosi in molti casi di un linguaggio riempito del falso ottimismo generato da un immaginario pop, non esitano ad affrontare soggetti complessi e scottanti, come la guerra, la caduta e l'ascesa dei potenti, la situazione della donna. Essi si muovono agilmente fra media differenti, dalla pittura al video e dal linguaggio verbale all'immagine, in modo da includere narrative singolari e diversificate, tragedie e finanche epiche che alimentano progetti diversificati ma che sempre si sostanziano dall'incontro con lo sguardo e gli strumenti espressivi di matrice occidentale. Questi artisti, protagonisti di questa mostra, sono stati selezionati soprattutto nella generazione dei quaranta e cinquantenni, generazione di mezzo che sta tuttavia raggiungendo il culmine della maturità linguistica e di un'esperienza di vita grazie alla quale tale generazione è oggi la testimone privilegiata di un tempo e di uno spazio dove il cambiamento e l'instabilità risultano talmente veloci da rischiare di radere letteralmente al suolo memoria ed eredità culturale, tradizioni e paesaggio.

*Nell'occhio del cyclone: ricerche artistiche nel mondo arabo* è un progetto organizzato da "Contemporary Practices Art Journal", una pubblicazione - o piuttosto uno spazio progettuale costituito da testi - un osservatorio plurale ed instancabile sulla realtà degli artisti dell'area. Poco ricettiva ai trend estetici e commerciali, questa rivista accademica si è proposta con pieno successo come arena di un osservazione e di un dibattito policentrico, aperta sia alla disquisizione, di taglio più accademico che giornalistico, di questioni teorico critiche, sia all'analisi delle personalità singole, del loro linguaggio e della loro evoluzione.

\*All of the artists invited for this exhibition happen to have witnessed the first cable satellite broadcast with the Iraq-Kuwait invasion, known in Western Media as *Operation Desert Storm*, a fact we think shaped their perception and was reflected on their studio practices in the following two decades. We here recommend Naomi Sakr's analytical book *Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization and the Middle East*, New York, I.B. Tauris, 2001.

\*Tutti gli artisti invitati a questa mostra hanno osservato la prima trasmissione via satellite che diffondeva le immagini dell'invasione dell'Iraq-Kuwait, nota nei media occidentali come *Operazione Desert Storm*, un fatto che, pensiamo, sia stato cruciale nel dar forma alla loro percezione e sia stato riflesso nelle loro attività a artistiche nei due decenni sequenti. Raccomandiamo l'analisi di Naomi Sakr, *Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization and the Middle East*, New York, I.B. Tauris, 2001.