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August 22, 2011
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Subversive Russian Art In New London Exhibition


Israeli Museum On The Seam Showing Arab-World Artists

By AMY TEIBEL | 08/2/11 04:41 AM ET |


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JERUSALEM -- A museum on the road separating Jewish west Jerusalem from the Arab neighborhoods in the city's east is attracting a daring group of artists from Middle Eastern nations that shun contact with Israel, trying to erode political barriers through art.

It's been a years-long process for the Museum on the Seam, which is one of the few art museums in Israel that aggressively tries to convince Arab and Muslim artists to show in its galleries.

That's not an easy task. Many Middle Eastern artists refuse, protesting Israel's policies toward the Palestinians. Many of their governments, notably Iran, make contacts with Israel illegal. In Egypt, which signed a 1979 peace treaty with the Jewish state, rules by many artists organizations forbid members to engage in any "normalization" with Israel.

Still, the Museum on the Seam succeeded in bringing in works from seven artists of Middle Eastern origin for its current 28-artist exhibition, called West End, which examines the struggle between Islam and the West. The artists hail from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Morocco and Egypt, all countries with chilly or hostile relations with Israel.

Two of the artists – an Egyptian and a Saudi – live in their homelands, although the others in the show currently live mainly in the West. But even shows by Middle Easterners living abroad are rare in Israel. They too face constraints because they return to their homelands or have relatives there, said Raphie Etgar, the museum's curator and artistic director.

The museum's exhibition, which also includes artists from the U.S., Europe and Russia, has an unusually large concentration of Middle Eastern artists. Although this is not the first time Arab artists have displayed in Israel, Israeli art historian Gideon Ofrat said it's rarely done.

In a sign of the sensitivities, most of the Middle Eastern artists in the exhibit did not respond to interview requests.

One exception was Mounir Fatmi of Morocco, who lives in Paris but said he returns often to Tangier to visit family.

"Even if I have some Arab friends who are artists (who) do not agree with me, I believe we should not deprive the audience (of) our work because of political postures from our countries," said Fatmi, who has shown twice in Israel before. "I will keep on showing as long as I have good proposals coming up."

Morocco and Israel had formal ties between 1994 and 2000, though they never made peace, when the North African country broke off relations following the launch of the second Palestinian uprising against Israel.

Fatmi's video work at the exhibit – "Modern Times: A History of the Machine" – is inspired by Charlie Chaplin's 1936 film. By linking the wheels of the assembly line in Chaplin's film to the wheels of an assembly line decorated with arabesques and Arabic calligraphy, Fatmi draws a line between the alienated industrialized man of Chaplin's work and the unrelenting pace of urbanization in the Middle East.

A neon work, titled "Moment of Glory" by Leila Pazooki of Iran, lists artists and their parallels from the other side of the globe, in a story of separation and connection between artists from east and west.

The five light boxes of Ahmed Mater of Saudi Arabia, titled "Evolution of Man," warn of the dangers of greed, morphing from a gas pump into a skeleton of a man holding a pistol to his head.

Tellingly, there are no artists from the Palestinian territories – not from lack of effort, Etgar said.

"When I approached artists in the Islamic world in the past, the response was disappointing," he said. "It was even worse when we approached Palestinians just across the road."

But in the past two years, opposition has cracked, he said.

"I think there has been an individual ripening and maturation of artists, an understanding that their contribution will be much more significant if they bring their work to our public," he said.

Helping the cause is the fact that the museum is not financed by government money, he added. The museum acquires artworks with the full knowledge of the artist, he added.

The museum, established in 1999, sits on the edge of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish Mea Shearim quarter and opposite an Arab neighborhood, Sheikh Jarrah. A Turkish-era mansion designed by a Palestinian, it became a front-line Israeli military command post after the Jewish state was founded in 1948 and Jerusalem was divided into Israeli- and Jordanian-controlled areas.

A nearby checkpoint was the lone passage between the two sectors, which were separated by a concrete and barbed-wire barrier torn down after Israel captured east Jerusalem in the 1967 Mideast war.

The mansion's facade still has the scars of bombs and bullets from the years Jerusalem was divided.

"I tried to maintain the outer facade to remind people of the possibilities available," Etgar said.