

DISORIENTATION II

THE RISE AND FALL OF ARAB CITIES



HRAIR SARKISSIAN,
Execution Squares,
2008, lamda
print mounted on
aluminium,
125 x 160 cm.

Courtesy Kalfayan
Galleries, Athens /
Thessaloniki.

The first exhibition on Saadiyat Island, or “Island of Happiness”—Abu Dhabi’s ambitious experiment in bringing together international institutions of culture (the Louvre and Guggenheim museums), higher education (New York University) and luxury-tourism franchises from hotels to golf courses—had a decisively dour tone. “Disorientation II: The Rise and Fall of Arab Cities” expressed curator Jack Persekian’s perspective on “the unforgiving situation of loss and conflict experienced in the Arab world today” in the four decades following the death of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel-Nasser in 1970 and the subsequent collapse of his pan-Arab unity efforts. While Persekian’s catalog essay enumerates the subsequent calamities that befell the region—among them, Lebanon’s civil war (1975–90), the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) and civil strife in Jordan and Yemen—the exhibition’s unstated premise appeared to be whether the UAE itself embodies a new pan-Arab solidarity, or at least whether the Emirates offers a neutral meeting ground where individuals in a factionalized region can collectively envision a better future.

With the weight of this implicit premise hanging over the exhibition, it was difficult not to consider the works by 16 leading Arab artists in terms of the show’s eminent position as the first on Saadiyat Island. Based on a single exhibition, it is premature to assess Abu Dhabi’s tolerance of open discussions of politically inconvenient or critical truths about the UAE’s own history or that of its neighboring countries. Nevertheless, it was evident that Persekian capitalized on the opportunity to present artworks that addressed some of the most troubling incidents from regional history. Wael Shawky, for example, whose video *Telematch Sadat* (2007) is named after the German television show that featured costumed participants from competing villages in races and games, employed Egyptian

children to reenact the 1981 assassination of Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat during a military parade. The civil war in Lebanon is chillingly recalled in *Massaker* (2005), a documentary film by Monika Borgmann in which she records avowed participants in the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre as they recount their sadistic, murderous deeds in graphic detail.

A catalog of recent history, Persekian’s exhibition did not ignore current issues either. Hrair Sarkissian’s eerie photographic series “Execution Squares” (2008) were taken in Damascus, Aleppo and Latakia during the early morning hours in public squares where serious criminals are executed. Empty of cars and people, the lifeless dawn-lit scenes are tranquil, banal yet menacing. Wafa Hourani’s *Qalandia 2047* (2006) is a miniature scale model of the Palestinian refugee camp that borders an important checkpoint into Ramallah, with the buildings constructed from the artist’s color snapshots of actual structures in Qalandia. Set in the future (100 years after the camp’s residents were evicted from their homes in the partition of Palestine), the sculpture contrasts the humble lifestyle of Palestinian residents with the imagined material comforts of Israeli life (sports cars, nightclubs with disco balls and large fish tanks) on the other side of the Separation Wall. A similar bitter cynicism is found in Yto Barrada’s *Gran Royal Turismo* (2003), a miniature diorama of a small, shabby town surrounding a road-racing model set. Every few minutes, an official-looking delegation of three black Mercedes emerges from a tunnel through a hill at the back of the model landscape and tours the village. Before the cars arrive, palm trees emerge from the arid ground, the exteriors of the buildings flip around to show fresh-painted facades, and a red carpet emerges along the roadway, transforming the town into a North African Potemkin village. When the official convoy finishes its procession and disappears, so do the niceties.

Though Persekian’s exhibition does identify the despair and pessimism that marks the practice of many of the region’s artists, the exhibition also points squarely to failings in the political sphere: whether caused by radicalized religious factions, the intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or inept governance. The curator used his high-profile regional platform to present art and cultural production as a crucial component in the achievement of noble social reforms, or what the curator calls, “The inevitable defeat of rampant corruption, injustices and discrimination, and the reappearance of people with higher morals, ethics and values.” Whether future Saadiyat Island institutions, in their own exhibitions, can live up to this imperative will be the measure of Abu Dhabi’s grandiose cultural experiment. ●

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