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Manar Abu Dhabi and the role of art in times of conflict

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Ayesha Hadhir, Rawdha Al Ketbi, Shaikha Al Ketbi, Dawaran (2023), Manar Abu Dhabi 2023. Courtesy of the artists and DCT Abu Dhabi. [Colin Robertson]

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by Naima Morelli naimamorelli

What is the role of art in times of conflict? I gave this some thought during the art light festival, Manar Abu Dhabi, curated by Reem Fadda and Alia Zaal Lootah from 15 November 2023. The festival runs to 30 January 2024.

Reem Fadda makes really good pasta with zucchini. “I used to do it from scratch, even the pasta itself, you know, but now I don’t have that kind of time,” said the director of the Cultural Foundation Abu Dhabi over dinner for the launch of Manar Abu Dhabi. “I actually learned to make pasta a few years ago. You know, before Covid we got this thing called Second Intifada.” She laughed bitterly. “We were under Israeli curfew, so we had a lot of time on our hands.”

Generally speaking, in the art world you are not supposed to mention politics casually over dinner. At least not in the western art world. Not if you don’t know who is on the other side of the table. And these days, in the art world nothing has been as divisive as the war in Gaza. “Don’t talk about politics. Just stick to the art and you’ll be fine,” has been the mantra over the past couple of months.

Travelling around different art weeks in London and Paris last month, it’s very clear that most institutions, art fairs, curators, collectors and participants want to steer clear of politics. In Europe, the art world decided to be as neutral a territory as it could get, unlike the publishing world which saw authors and

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organisations taking different positions, as in the case of the Frankfurt Art Fair and Lucca Comics in Italy.

Luciana Abait, Aqua (2021), Manar Abu Dhabi 2023. Courtesy of the artists and DCT Abu Dhabi. [Colin Robertson]

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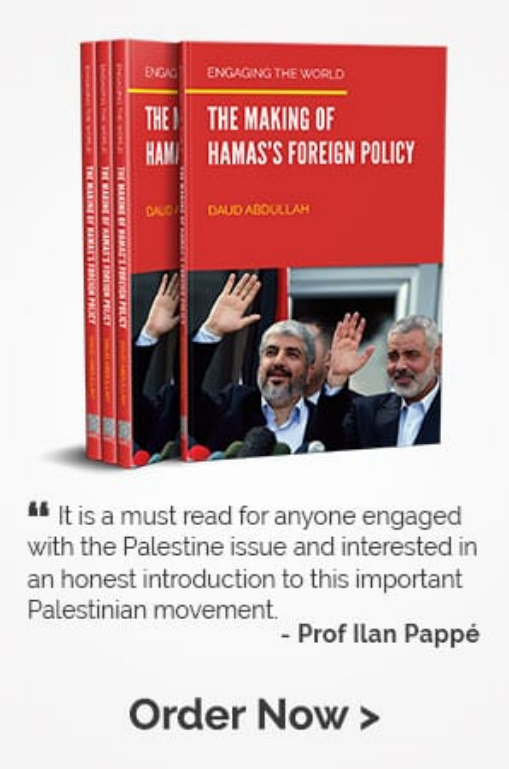
However, in Arab countries like the UAE, is it possible for the art world to keep within its own bubble? While some of the public would like art events to reflect current affairs, others want art to provide solace; a healing for humanity to counter the horrors of war.

Art as entertainment, art as a path forward

When I first learned about the first edition of Manar Abu Dhabi themed “Grounding Light”, my mind went immediately towards the idea of art as entertainment. In the Gulf countries, we often see art as decoration to highlight their most scenic spots. And while this is the main intention, seeing the names and reading about the artists’ research, I realised that



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there are multiple levels for reading such works.

Take the abstract videos with a 90s look by Palestinian artist-activist Samia Halabi for example. While she is keeping abstraction and activism separate, her practice is infused by collective hope and necessary optimism.

Another example is the work of Taiwanese artist Rain Wu, which will be revealed in December at the Jubail Mangrove Park. Her immersive installation called “One with the Soil, One with the Cloud” about ephemerality, is inspired by a conversation with her taxi driver during her time in Palestine.

What’s more, site-specific commissions and light sculptures, projections and immersive artworks cater not only to tourists. “It is first and foremost for locals,” Fadda explained. “That is the meaning of public art.” She is also artistic director of Public Art Abu Dhabi, and wants to develop art appreciation among the local UAE population.

The most impressive works are definitely those on Lulu Island. This was taken over completely by artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, who created “Translation Island”, a series of ten large-scale interactive multimedia artworks, connecting the viewer with the landscape through the use of audio, video and light technology. “I say that the size of the artwork is inversely proportional to that of my ego,” noted the artist while walking on the path of lights.

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Another extremely impressive work is the lunar landscape on Fahid Island created by land artist Jim Denevan. Called “Self Similar”, this is a monumental land art installation consisting of 448 pyramids and mounds, another place beyond space and time. Both artworks are capable of bringing the viewer into a world of beauty, and possibility, where utopia and a different world are still possible.

Jumairy, Luciferin Shores, Manar Abu Dhabi 2023. Courtesy of the artists and DCT Abu Dhabi. [Colin Robertson]

Abu Dhabi’s universalist utopia

Back at our dinner, Reem Fadda was frequently peeking at her phone, waiting for a call. “A friend is coming, I want to save her a seat.” That friend, Galit Eilat, duly arrived. Fadda welcome her and space was found for her to sit. The curator introduced her to the artists loudly:

“Rain, meet Galit.”

“Hi Galit.”

“Carsten, meet Galit.”

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“Hi Galit.”

“Journalists, meet Galit.”

She turned to us with a playful smile. “What? I am only doing my job: curator meet artist!” In a “parallel universe”, apparently, she and Galit are curating a Public Art Biennale in Abu Dhabi.

It is Abu Dhabi’s intention to bring utopia to the art world by having a Palestinian curator — Reem Fadda — and an Israeli curator — Galit Eilat — working together. Given the current situation, is the biennale still happening? Yes, it is. Fadda and Eilat have worked together before, and current events won’t change that because they are the best of friends. Despite everything, things look positive for Abu Dhabi’s utopian biennale.

Asma Belhamar, Chasing the dance of Alfay (2023), Manar Abu Dhabi 2023. Courtesy of the artists and DCT Abu Dhabi. [Colin Robertson]

The UAE’s vision is also obvious at the Abrahamic Family House, the only place in the Middle East hosting a mosque, a church and a synagogue in the same compound. More than

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a place of prayer, it looks like an institutional space. A political space, for sure, but fascinating nonetheless.

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Another cultural space where a universalist vision is brought about, this time in the French spirit of the Lumières, is the Louvre Abu Dhabi. Visitors have been able to the show “Letters of Light” restating the idea of the Abrahamic traditions. The exhibition showcases books from different periods in history, conduits of the birth of the three monotheistic faiths.

In the end everything speaks to the moment

While the art might not be overtly political, the artists definitely are. For some, war and displacement are something that they have thought about deeply throughout their artistic careers and productions.

On Abu Dhabi’s corniche, there is a beautiful artwork by Tunisian-Ukraine artist Nadia Kaabi-Linke called “Bait Al-Nur”. It is based on the change of the shape of the shadow at different times of the day, so that, metaphorically, we may all share the same light source, but the final shape might differ. I asked Kaabi-Linke about the situation in Kyiv.

“It’s still pretty bad,” she replied. “They are still bombing us, and I have family there. But it is nothing compared to what is happening to Gaza. I can’t help but think about the children

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of Gaza. And the worst part is that we can't even talk about this overtly in the art world."

Despite the neutrality of the art world, in nearby Dubai's Alserkal Avenue, there are shows that tackle the massacre in Palestine head-on. One is "On this Land", a show by the Palestinian Museum, Barjeel Art Foundation and Alserkal Art Foundation.

Curator and writer Nadine Khalil recently did a slow art tour at Alserkal, and she would like to see more art in the UAE that addresses contemporary concerns more directly and overtly. "At Alserkal there was only one show that talked about Palestine, but you know, in the end, everything speaks to the moment."

And ultimately, it really does. Everything speaks to the moment. In fact, the moment is composed by the horrors of war and destruction, and also in the way humans try to react with courage, beauty, hope and creation.

Ayesha Hadhir, Rawdha Al Ketbi, Shaikha Al Ketbi, Dawaran (2023), Manar Abu Dhabi 2023. Courtesy of the artists and DCT Abu Dhabi. [Colin Robertson]

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What will break us, will make us come through

Many of the artworks in Manar Abu Dhabi are very hopeful. In the Eastern Mangroves of the emirate, there is a sculpture on the sea created by a collective of young Emirati artists, Ayesha Hadhir, Rawda Al-Ketbi and Shaikha Al-Ketbi. It is a stair of light leading to a dark sky, to the unknown. A stairway to heaven in fact, with a throne at the very top.

Another work on the corniche is by Shilpa Gupta. It says in three different languages “This horizon inside of us”, reminding us that in times of despair and desperation, we need to find that light inside of us that can help us react, rebel and call for justice.

“It would be a crime of silence for me not to mention the current situation in Gaza”

Ayesha Hadhir, Rawdha Al Ketbi, Shaikha Al Ketbi, Dawaran (2023), Manar Abu Dhabi 2023. Courtesy of the artists and DCT Abu Dhabi. [Colin Robertson]

The one moment that really captured what we are going through collectively, was the performance by Samia Halabi. Now in her 80s, Halabi was a pioneer of abstract painting and

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is a central figure in Palestinian art, with a career dating back to the late 1950s accompanied by a strong commitment to the liberation of her country. She produced a beautiful abstract video piece that interacted with live sound. Sound and image intermingled as if coming from the subconscious. She also stood in traditional Palestinian dress and addressed the public. “It would be a crime of silence for me not to mention the current situation in Gaza,” she said, before proceeding to acknowledge the loss of lives, the children, the heroism of the humanitarians, the reporters, the doctors, the ambulance drivers. “Those who welcomed those whose homes had been destroyed, and those who shared their food. And so you see a background of beautiful people. I need you all to remember Palestine, to talk about Palestine. Young people keep posting TikTok, Instagram, you keep posting and keep talking.”

In conclusion she encapsulated the role of art in times of conflict: “Today you’re going to see something beautiful and it’s going to look optimistic to you. And it is not contradictory to what I’m saying. We’re angry, we are hurt, but we are still optimistic. What is in us, what will break us, will also make us come through.”

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