

MIDDLE
EAST
PAVILLIONS



THE RULE OF EXPECTATIONS

Six pavilions. Six vastly different countries. One 'Middle East'. Are they perpetuating public preconceptions of regional geopolitics or moving away into a more international sphere? **Anna Wallace-Thompson** assesses this year's national representations and asks: what exactly is the yardstick of success? And more importantly, what are they trying to prove?

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et's face it – there's a lot of baggage that comes with being a Middle Eastern pavilion at the Venice Biennale. If you have had a permanent space there since time immemorial, it confers an undeniable gravitas, the sense of being an established and serious player in this great art pantheon. Certainly there is less pressure – less to prove, indeed – not having to be the new kid. But, if you are one of the latter, or your country has a turbulent political situation never far from the headlines, participation is always going to be a double-edged sword. Amongst all the fanfare and celebration ('How glad we are to see this country finally take part, How great it is that these artists have a chance to have their voices heard', etc), there is an insurmountable mountain of expectation. The art does not only reflect the lives and experiences of the artists who created it, but somehow it also becomes representative of their nation as a whole.

To further complicate matters, analysing 'Middle Eastern participation' is intrinsically problematic due to the diverse nature of the region. We are dealing with North Africa, the Levant, Turkey, the Gulf and Iran – how does one create a meaningful discourse between such disparate elements when all the nations involved have challenges, struggles, hopes and aims as vastly different from each other as they are geographically and culturally unique? Nor does it seem that success is measured solely by how closely a pavilion achieves its own declared objectives – there are the audience's expectations to deal with as well, and it is at this intersection that so much is at stake.



This spread (from left): Sahand Hesamiyan. *Sulook II*. 2015. Stainless steel. 690 x 280 x 280 cm; Installation view of (on the left) Bani Abidi's *Security Barriers A-L*. 2008. Inkjet prints, 28 x 44 cm each. (On the right wall) Wafaa Bilal's *Space Junk*. 2015. Archival inkjet photograph. 120.5 x 181 cm and (in the centre) *Canto III*. 2015. Bronze sculpture with gold finish. 94 x 68.5 x 38 cm; One of the censored works by Reza Aramesh. *Action 144: Friday April 25, 2003 at 07:55*. 2015. C-print mounted on archival board with museum glass. 63.5 x 94 cm.

THE NUMBERS GAME

Two pavilions with particularly ambitious presentations are Iran and the UAE, choosing to showcase works by 40 and 15 artists respectively. Specifically intending to not act as an overview of art from the country itself, the very concept of Iran's *The Great Game*, curated by Marco Meneguzzo and Mazdak Faiznia, is titillating and exciting, an allusion to the 19th century British-Russian rivalry over Central Asia, and simultaneously smart and intriguing. The extensive list of artists, from Iran, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Central Asian republics and the Kurdish region reads like a who's who of today's most innovative and thought-provoking names. They include Adel Abidin, Shahrar Ahmadi, Farhad Ahrarnia, Reza Aramesh, Wafa Bilal, Pوران Jinchi, Babak Kazemi, Huma Mulji, Imran Qureshi, Sara Rahbar, Rashid Rana, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Parviz Tanavoli amongst many, many others.

Sadly, the lead-up to the Pavilion's official opening was fraught with difficulties,

with rumours of late shipments, customs problems and the inevitable domino-effect of delayed delivery and installation (with the latter continuing for several days after the official opening). When the show finally opened, eyebrows were raised not only by the pavilion's unfinished state but also by the hurried donning of headscarves by those women, usually residing in Iran, upon the arrival of visiting Iranian officials.

There was also the matter of the censorship of a series of photographs by Aramesh, on display alongside his superb video work, *Action 141: Not What Was Meant*, as well as a sculpture. The C-prints, from the *Action 144: Friday April 25, 2003 at 07:55* series, refer to an event witnessed by two Norwegian journalists, of four Iraqi prisoners being paraded naked through Baghdad. These photographs had black tape applied over the framed glass to cover the backsides of the naked men. It was these sorts of details that reminded one that, despite the opening up of the arts scene in Iran (the appearance of major works of

international art on Tehran billboards made headlines in the press during the Biennale), the struggle between conservative forces in the Iranian government and the supporters of the liberal arts is still very much alive.

The venue itself, in Venice's historic Jewish Ghetto, is impressive. Vast and airy, it accommodates room after room of artworks and each section is divided by large sail-like screens. The sheer size and scale may have contributed to the installation delays, with spaces leading off in every direction like a warren of tunnels. Furthermore, in my opinion the individual works suffer from being amongst so many others and I could not easily distinguish between the main exhibition and a sub-show, *Iranian Highlights*.

The sheer volume of work, with little in the way of wall text to contextualise the pieces, either with each other or the exhibition's theme, as well as sporadic captions, means that the potential power of such pieces as Bilal's golden Saddam bust, or the more delicate, poignant and nuanced *Silent Shadow*

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by Indian artist Hema Upadhyay, could have been brought more to the fore. The Pavilion is, however, a remarkable testament to the efforts of the many individuals, galleries and supporters who had worked tirelessly to pull it together, and that was heartening to see. The standard of artwork on the whole is of a superb calibre.

The other ambitious multi-artist pavilion, that of the UAE, presents over 100 works arranged in anti-chronological order in *1980–Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates*. Rather densely arranged in order to create synergies between various artists’ practices

or to highlight certain developments within individual careers, the number of works means that space is certainly tight. Wall panels and sunken recesses within a raised floor create niches and nooks, and, at the exhibition opening, after a protracted period spent waiting for the arrival of officials, the crowd had swelled to such a size that visitor numbers had to be carefully monitored to allow for satisfactory movement within the space and the protection of the works, many of them rare and on loan from private collections and the artists themselves. The selection of works is intriguing, ranging from pottery and

assemblages to more traditional media such as painting and photography. Especially valuable is the insight given into the decades-long practices of such artists as Abdul Qader Al-Rais, Najat Makki and Hassan Sharif, with works dating from as far back as the 1960s serving to contextualise their practices within the canon of the Emirati arts scene.

Unlike with Iran, the UAE Pavilion seeks to present an impression of art in the Emirates. “This year, with a more historical perspective, what is celebrated is not the individuality of each of the artists, but rather the long-term connectivity among them and their



Facing page:
Installation view of Huma
Mulji's *Arabian Delight* at the
Iranian Pavilion. 2008. Rexine
suitcase, taxidermy camel,
metal rods, wood, cotton wool
and fabric.
105 x 144 x 155 cm.

This page:
Exterior view of the permanent
space of the UAE Pavilion in
the Arsenal
Inset: Mohammed Kazem.
Tongue. 1994.



determination to create and establish a strong artistic environment in the UAE," comments participating artist (and 2013's UAE Pavilion solo representative) Mohammed Kazem. "What needs to be clarified is that the Contemporary arts scene didn't develop in the last decade or so thanks to international pressure, as is widely believed, but that there was art here before." And a scene there most certainly was, from founding fathers such as Sharif and Al-Rais to the initiatives of collectives like the Emirates Fine Arts Society and the Flying House. In order to develop, present and document (in the form of an excellent catalogue) this art scene, curator Hoor Al-Qasimi has delved deep into the historical archives of Emirati art, an impressively ambitious undertaking. One might ask if the Biennale environment is the right place for such a museum-style

group retrospective and that perhaps it is asking too much of the viewer, already inundated with visual stimuli, to then focus on a display as conceptually condensed as this? However, enthusiastic and knowledgeable tour guides are on hand to help guide visitors through the exhibition and one hopes that thought is being given to sending it 'on the road' when the Biennale ends later this year. Audiences back in the UAE as well as abroad would learn a lot about the Emirati arts scene from Al-Qasimi's efforts, and the exhibition would really flourish in more generously proportioned venues that allow it the space to breathe and expand.

WAR AND PEACE

National identity is all well and good, but what to do when one has the overbearing

shadow of ongoing war to contend with? Syria, whose presence in Venice this year is spread across two venues – the Cinema della Chiesa del Redentore and the rather more distant Island of San Servolo – presents a hodgepodge of works that seek to create synergies between Syrian artists and authors from Italy, Ukraine, Spain, China and Albania. There are installations by non-Syrian artists too, such as Felipe Cardeña's *The Temple of the Spirit*, a brightly coloured tent with the word 'Revolution' embroidered on its side. Whilst interesting, to my mind the Pavilion as a whole does not convey well its curatorial concept, as I was not sure what the dialogue was that the curators sought to create between the Syrian and non-Syrian artists, and contextual information and text was thin on the ground. As it is, located on an island

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This spread (clockwise from top left):
 Guests at the opening of the exhibition; Abdullah Al-Saadi. *The Circle And The Line 1*. 1999. Mixed media. 46 x 29 cm; Installation view of the exhibition; Hassan Sharif. *Colourful File No. 2*. 2006. Plastic cover, jute rope, paper and cloth. 35.5 x 24 x 10.5 cm; Archival photograph of the *Al Tashkeel* exhibition at the Emirates Fine Art Society Exhibition in 1981; Abdul Qader Al-Rais. *Self-portrait*. 1973. Oil on canvas. 68 x 48 cm.

All images courtesy: the National Pavilion of the UAE



“It is about showing the audience how people seek to achieve peace through many different ways – some by taking lives, other by saving them, for example.”
Hany Alashakar

a 20-minute boat ride from Venice proper, the Syrian Pavilion takes some getting to and will probably be missed by many visitors. Being present at the Biennale at all is perhaps Syria's greatest achievement and a milestone in itself, given events at home. Next time round, perhaps a model akin to this year's Iranian Pavilion might work well for Syria, with galleries helping with funding and using their own networks to promote the artists and the pavilion itself.

Back to the Giardini, and to say that the Egyptian offering this year caused mixed reactions would be an understatement. One curator simply pursed his lips and offered “No comment” when I asked for his thoughts. The white minimalist interior, bright green Astroturf spelling out ‘peace’, and plethora of interactive tablets with animations of butterflies/bunnies and spiders/explosions, was simultaneously bizarre and cute, perhaps a naïve plea for a better world? In one sense Egypt is to be lauded

for not focusing on the doom and gloom so omnipresent elsewhere, but the combination of the beautiful architecture of its permanent pavilion (bestowed in 1952), and a series of dramatic and hard-hitting offerings in recent years (from 2013's Mohamed Banawy and Khaled Zaki to the heartbreaking elegy to the late Ahmed Basyony in 2011) meant that, for many, upon entering the Pavilion, the memory of Ahmad Askalany's 2009 offering still held strong. Juxtaposed with works by Adel El-Siwi,



Above: Installation view of the Pavilion with (on the wall) works by Mauro Reggio and (on the floor) Andrea Zucchi's *Heliopolis*. 2015. Acrylic on shaped cardboard on canvas. 480 x 270 x 30 cm
 Right: Felipe Cardeña. *The Temple Of The Spirit*. 2015. Mixed media. 400 x 400 x 300 cm.



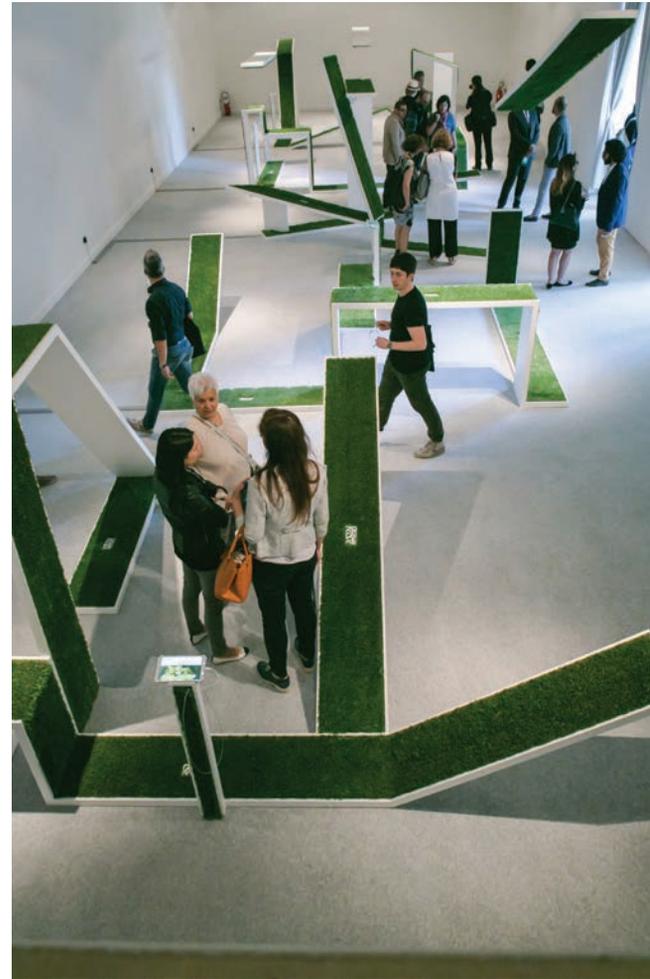
the utterly immersive experience created by Askalany's elegant raffia sculptures, was still, six years later, at the back of many a mind. Such is the power of a good pavilion when it gets it right and cuts through all the white noise. When it comes to the arts in Egypt, we are always ready for something bold, but on entering the quiet space my reaction, like that of many visitors, was "Is this it? Is there more?" Perhaps so, if one makes the effort. "One of the biggest issues with interactive art installations is the engagement of the audience itself," says curator Hany Alashakar. "If you don't interact, you will not get the full experience and you may misjudge the work. The greatest strength

of this year's pavilion, in my view, is the physical interaction between the audience and the simple virtual reality of the tablets on display. It is about showing the audience how people seek to achieve peace through many different ways – some by taking lives, other by saving them, for example. Here, the viewer becomes part of that decision-making process."

Outside the confines of the main Arsenale and Giardini sites, in the city proper, was the Iraqi Pavilion. Presenting *Invisible Beauty*, the Pavilion was commissioned by the Ruya Foundation, as in previous years. This in itself has been contentious, given that

Tamara Chalabi, founder of the Foundation, is the daughter of the Iraqi politician Ahmed Chalabi, known for his involvement in what many have criticised as the dismantling of the Iraqi state. Political issues aside, in recent years the official purpose of the Iraqi Pavilion has been to provide voice to artists who might otherwise remain unseen or overshadowed by the mainstream media's depiction of the country as a war-torn nation paying the price for Saddam Hussein and the bloody legacy of the American Invasion. Whilst these realities are hard to ignore, the re-emergence of the Iraqi Pavilion in 2011 after an absence of over three decades has

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This page (clockwise from top):
President of the Biennale Paolo Baratta
and Director of the Egyptian Academy in
Rome Dr Gihne Zaki interacting with the
Augmented Reality app for iPad; Guests at
the opening of the exhibition; Detail of the
Augmented Reality app for iPad.

*All images courtesy the National Pavilion
of Egypt*

“Artists are completely absent in what we [outside of the region] know of Iraq, so the art is completely invisible.” *Philippe Van Cauteran*

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meant that, as far as the Venice Biennale is concerned progress has hopefully been made in combating these stereotypes. The first return brought us *Acqua Ferrita/Wounded Water*, and with it the criticism that the participating artists – all big names in the international circuit, including Adel Abidin, Halim Al-Karim, Ahmed Alsoudani and Walid Siti – did not reside in Iraq. The next offering, in 2013, saw curator Jonathan Watkins visit Iraq to connect with local artists and through an extensive submissions process, select names unknown outside of Iraq itself. Even then, there was grumbling about the choice of a non-Arab curator, although the process was repeated this year with the selection of Philippe Van Cauteren of the S.M.A.K. Museum for Contemporary Art in Ghent.

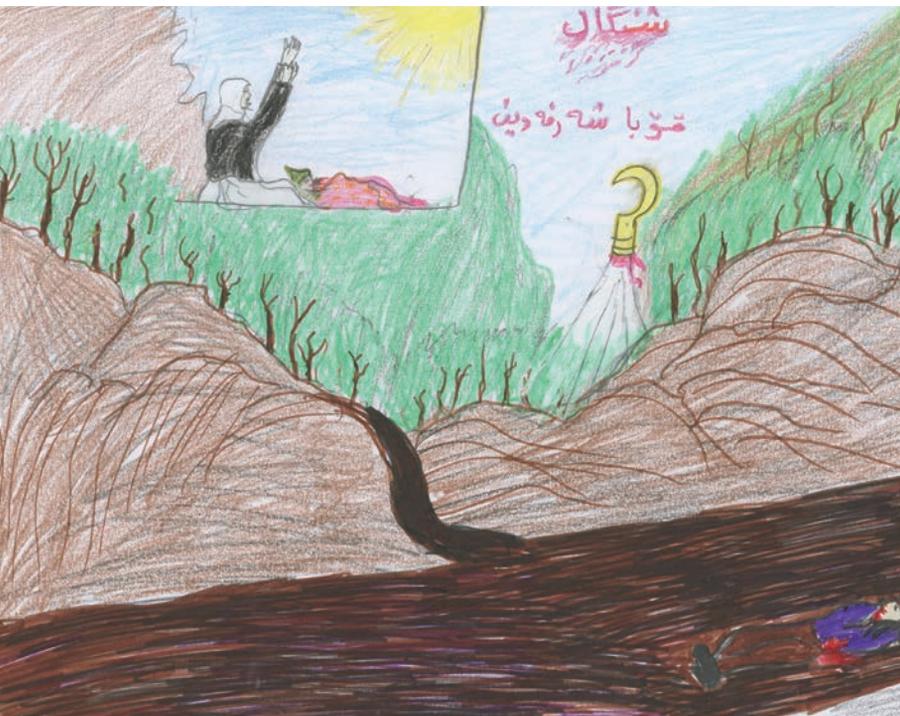
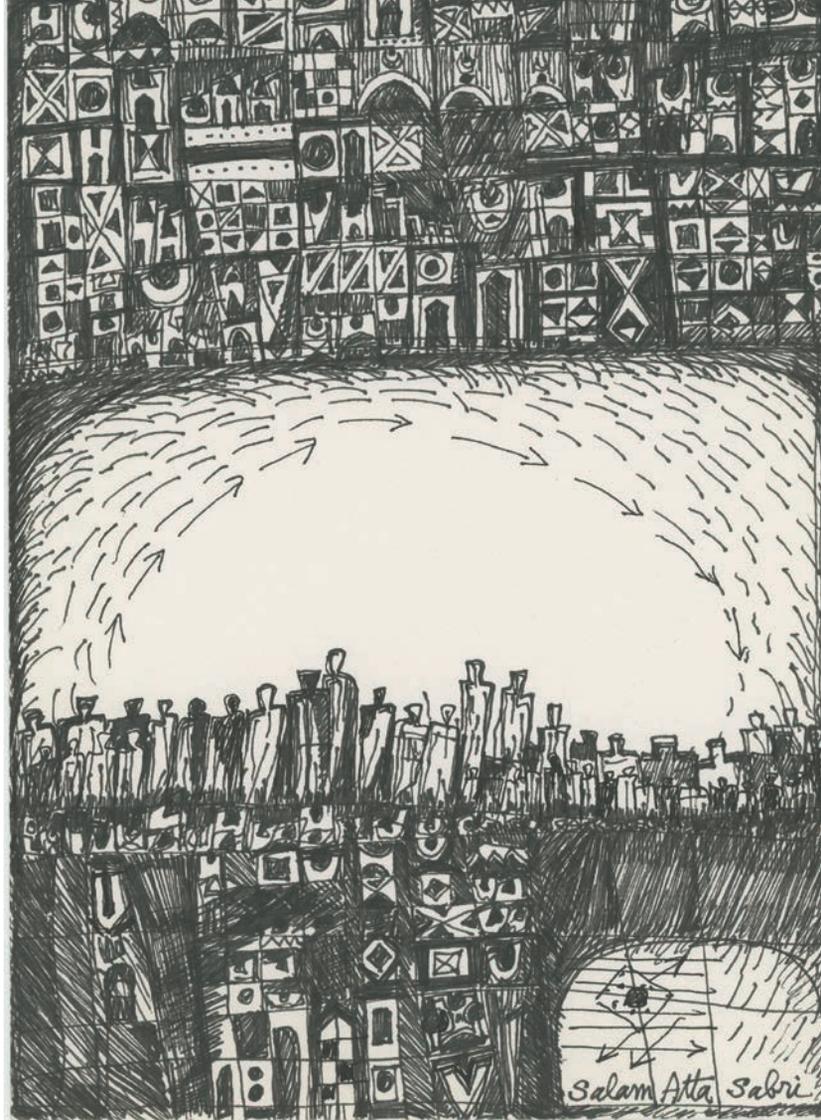
It is in this light that *Invisible Beauty* got its name. “Artists are completely absent in what we [outside of the region] know of Iraq, so the art is completely invisible,” says Van Cauteren. In spite of the creative, hard-hitting work being produced by many Iraqi artists, he points out

the struggle that many artists living in the country face in not creating ‘beautiful’ work in a more traditional sense, as perceived by a largely conservative public. “I am interested in those artists who challenge the orthodox standard of understanding in Iraq, artists who focus on being artists more than on their formal aesthetic capacities. These kinds of artists suffer a double invisibility, not just internationally, but also in their own country.” *Invisible Beauty* features a mix of artists from Iraq and the Diaspora, spanning two generations. They range from the hauntingly poignant, intricate pencil on paper works of Salam Atta Sabri to the black-and-white photographs of Akam Shex Hadi, as well as Latif Al-Ani, one of the founding fathers of Iraqi photography.

As can sometimes happen in Venice, the artworks have to vie for attention with the architecture of the space in which they are shown, in this case a beautiful 16th-century building. While Sabri’s *Letters from Baghdad* were plentiful enough to create an inviting and immersive experience, rising in multiple

rows to great effect from floor to ceiling, the more nuanced nature of most of the work on display means that it doesn’t always ‘pop’. In addition, the entryway, with an open door to a kitchen in one’s line of sight, makes for a rather informal air. One of the most engaging pieces, however, is a series of video works by Wales-based Rabab Ghazoul. Focused on the Chilcot Inquiry, it cleverly combines footage from the enquiry with that of everyday people listening to its deliberations, enabling Ghazoul to raise questions about the “banal language encoding the geopolitics of war.”

In another alcove is *Traces of Survival* – drawings by refugees selected by international megastar Ai Weiwei. His inclusion in the Iraqi Pavilion has been the undisputed elephant in the room, with many artists incensed that somebody with no apparent link to the Middle East in general, or Iraq in particular, was chosen to take part. His own struggles with the Chinese government notwithstanding, the questions were inevitable. “Why Ai Weiwei?” mused Iraqi artist Mahmoud Obaidi, as we spoke during



This spread (clockwise from left): Installation view of the exhibition. Photography by Mathias Depardon; Latif Al-Ani. *Tourism Promotion Film*. 1962. Black and white digital print on Hahnemühle Baryta Fine Art paper. 25 x 25 cm; Salam Atta Sabri. *Letters from Baghdad*. 2010–12. Pencil on paper. 29.7 x 21 cm; A drawing by an 18-year-old girl from the *Traces of Survival: Drawings by Refugees in Iraq Selected by Ai Wei Wei* depicts the death of her friend after she was raped on Mount Sinjar. The text refers to a holy Yezidi shrine, which is visited in an attempt to save the mountain. The girl can be seen praying in the upper left hand corner.

All images courtesy the artists and the National Pavilion of Iraq

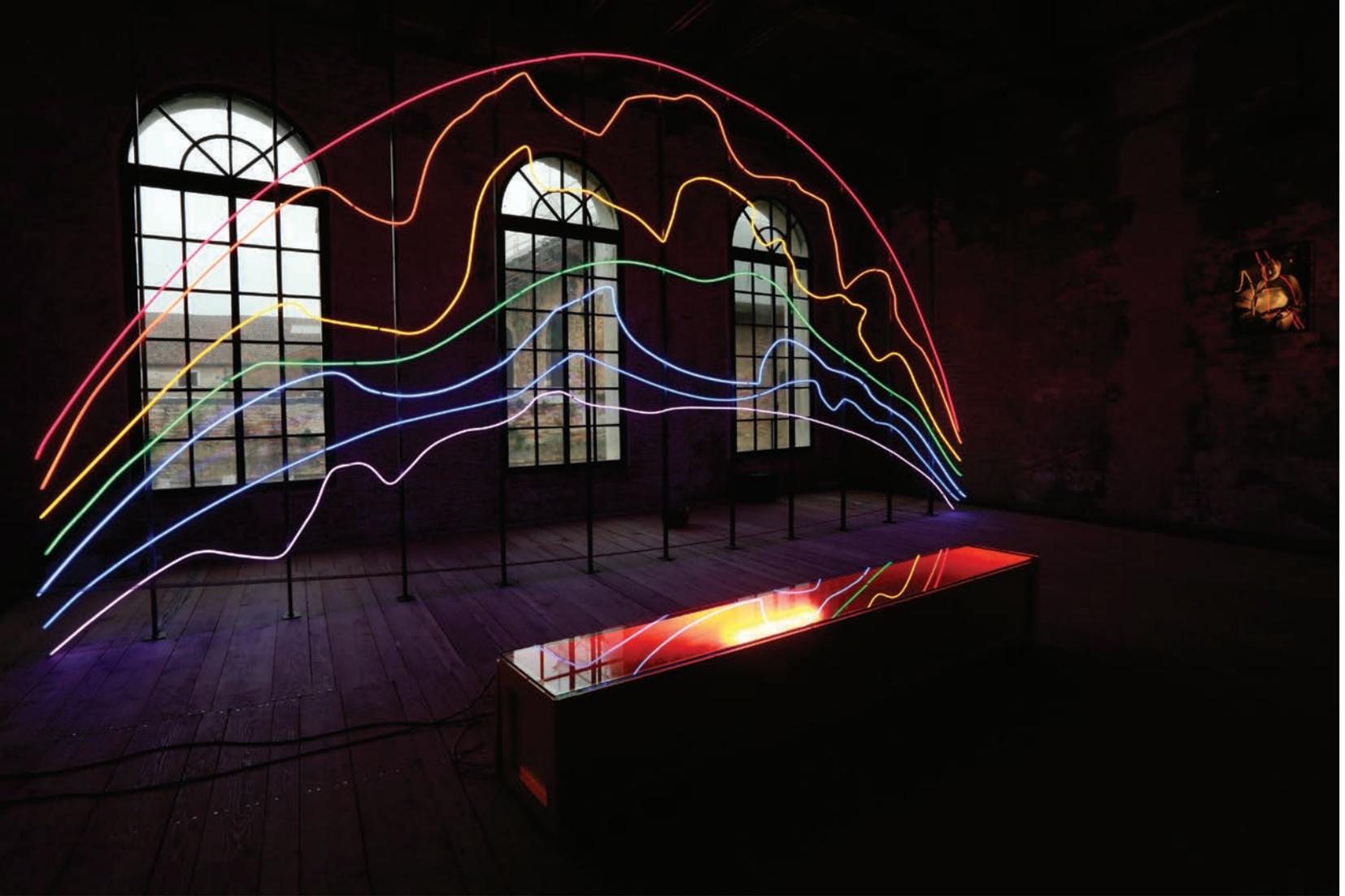
the opening of *In the Eye of the Thunderstorm* (page 96). “I really liked parts of the Pavilion, particularly the photography of Shadi,” he continued, “but I do wonder why they didn’t choose somebody from the region, an artist or political figure from the Middle East? Did they choose Ai simply because he is such an international brand?” Well yes, I think that’s precisely why they chose him. He guarantees media coverage and his presence might well entice visitors to what might otherwise be one vaporetto stop too far from the main drag. “[My involvement] is not about religion, politics, race or nationality, it’s about humanity,” explained Ai when I asked him. “We live in a time when people are still displaced from their homes due to circumstances beyond their control, where children are born on the road and at sea,

during mass migrations and in refugee camps. If we don’t overcome divisive issues such as religion, race or nationality, we will never solve this situation. As an artist, I want to see from this difficult perspective, to study this situation and to share the feelings of those who are experiencing these conflicts, to give voice to those who don’t have the liberty to become artists.” Ai’s selection process was not an easy one, and many submissions were accompanied by moving poetry. “Some [drawings] are more sophisticated than others, but every piece was made with sincerity. You could see the men and women behind the works [and] we should never lose sight of the fact that these works were made by individuals living in refugee camps,” he says. “We all have to be aware of this humanitarian crisis. If there is even one refugee

in the world, that’s a shame that all of humanity has to bear. All those unfortunate people are still a part of us. As long as there are refugees, we must speak out for them.”

OVER THE RAINBOW

And then, finally, there is magic. Turkey, just around the corner and up an impressively random escalator from the UAE Pavilion, presents *Respiro* (Italian for ‘breath’) by revered artist Sarkis. On entering through gently wafting curtains, I literally drew breath, presented with one of the most beautiful spaces in the entire Arsenale. Wooden floors spread out in either direction of the long space, a neon rainbow at either end. The walls, of warm, bare brick, are sprinkled with Medieval-style stained glass images, including details from Hagia Sophia, Istanbul’s famous rainbow



stairs, a palm cupping a hand of flame, Armenian film director Sergei Parajanov, and the grave of the artist's parents. The centre of the room is divided by two immense mirrors, covered in fingerprints by children, reflecting the rainbows back upon each other and disorienting the viewer in terms of what is real and what is reflected. It also stands out for being a single artist show, the only one among the six Middle Eastern Pavilions at this year's fair. "A solo presentation can give a more in-depth sense of engagement with an artist's practice," says curator Defne Ayas. "Given how short people's attention spans can be in these mega exhibitions, I think the format of a solo show works better when dealing with the subject of representation within the context of the Biennale. A group exhibition would need to be very tightly focused if art is still to remain the language to operate from."

In spite of its beauty, calm and serenity, *Respiro* is a deft commentary on the human condition and mankind's obsession with war and has been publicised as Sarkis's most personally challenging work to date. He has

drawn on art historical references such as Giorgione's *The Tempest* and Paolo Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano* to investigate the concept of *Kriegsschatz*, the spoils of war and human hunger for them. This is a mature and subtle investigation of the effects on a country that has had its own share of unsettling dissonances in recent history, marking two years since the Gezi Park protests and with Turkey's secular and religious factions continuing to challenge each other. "We would like to focus on the language of art and what art can do, the politics is subdued but not suppressed," notes Ayas. "Sarkis's language is not one of 'pointing fingers at', but rather one that opens up multiple readings and possibilities." Sarkis has certainly pulled this off, as his installation draws one in with its beauty, slowly revealing its many layers and surrounded by music composed by Jacopo Baboni-Schilingi. It can also be no coincidence that this year marks the centenary of the Armenian Genocide, despite the continued official denial by the Turkish state that it ever happened – and yet the idea of these rainbows, from all their

popular symbolism to the idea of "over the rainbow" – conveys a sense of hope that things may change or more enlightened voices might be heard. "Turkey remains a place of deep uncertainties," says Ayas. "In that sense, we find *The Tempest* highly relevant, the way in which the work is anticipating a storm, that suspended enigma, that particular threshold."

EXPECTATIONS AS ASSUMPTIONS

We expect a lot as an audience, and for those of us cheering on the Middle Eastern art scene, there is considerable emotional investment in events like the Venice Biennale. We want to see exposure, success, achievement. I wonder if one pitfall however with the Middle Eastern representation at Venice is the inability to be consistent – Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon all made a big splash in the last edition only to be absent, for whatever reasons, this time round. Perhaps it's time to assess what the goals are in terms of taking part in the Biennale and what messages should be conveyed? The UAE wants the world to know it has a history;



This spread:
Installation views of *Respiro* by Sarkis

Images courtesy the National Pavilion
of Turkey

“Venice has become a sort of Olympic Games of the art world.” *Till Fellrath*

Egypt wants peace; Syria and Iraq want you to hear all the unheard voices, crying out against obscurity and annihilation and pain; Turkey is using history to look to the present. Seeing the wood for the trees is not easy, though. There is so much work, so many different curatorial approaches and such vast differences between concept and execution. The Middle East is winning the uphill battle to simply be there, at the Venice table, but with a bigger presence come higher expectations. “Venice has become a sort of Olympic Games of the art world,” comments Till Fellrath, one half of Art Reoriented with Sam Bardaouil, who

together curated the 2013 Lebanese Pavilion. “This is something it shouldn’t be. There is such an over-expectation of what a National Pavilion can and should achieve that nations do themselves a disservice by lauding themselves for taking part. Being there is all well and good, but we should be tougher on ourselves and say we can still do a lot better if we want to really be taken seriously.”

One night, after a particularly long day spent shuttling back and forth across Venice to reach as many exhibitions as possible, I had just ordered an espresso at an outdoor cafe when a horn blares, deep, loud and long. As one, the patrons sitting alongside

me turn their heads and look skywards. There, sliding across the horizon, a colossal luxury cruise liner the size of a small city towers several storeys above the Venetian skyline like an invading Godzilla. It dwarfs the *Serenissima*, and I think, with all the buildings and corridors, in all the winding streets and warehouses and delicate sculptures and photographs and tears and sweat and struggle to be heard, how can any of this compete with what really seems to drive the world: money and size. It just means that we all have to continue to try harder, because after money and size, the only other universal language is art. 🇹🇷