

"Recognise"

CONTEMPORARY ART PLATFORM, LONDON

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ON THE WEBSITE for "Recognise," a groundbreaking exhibition of art from and about the Middle East on view in London this past summer, its title is cast in the imperative: "Challenge your preconceptions. Unpick your presumptions. Dismantle your delusions. RECOGNISE!" If this was intended as a provocative entreaty to the art world, curator Predrag Pajdic succeeded in more nuanced ways in the exhibition itself, which presented conceptually challenging art by some forty artists, almost all Middle Eastern. For although increasing attention is paid to art from this region on the international level—with biennials in Istanbul and Sharjah, Catherine David's ongoing project "Contemporary Arab Representations," and the visibility of the Middle Eastern art-and-culture magazine *Bidouin*—there is still a paucity of such exhibitions in London. (Among the few prominent UK shows focusing on the Middle East in recent years, "Out of Beirut," a 2006 survey of Lebanese art, took place outside the capital, at Modern Art Oxford; and the London Institute of Contemporary Arts' recent "Memorial to the Iraq War," while courageous and pointed, included a large number of European artists.)

"Recognise" was striking for both its dedicated coverage and its adventurous location. The Contemporary Art Platform temporarily designated a disused warehouse in Finsbury Park, an area in North London populated largely by immigrants and refugees from Muslim countries. According to Pajdic, the show was primarily directed toward this transnational public—one unlikely to be found at, say, Tate Modern—and by all accounts the curator succeeded in attracting local residents with his

selection of works powerfully addressing Middle Eastern cultures. One standout was Wael Shawky, whose mesmerizing video *The Cave*, 2005, depicts the Alexandria, Egypt-based artist reciting sections of the Koran while peering into the camera as he strolls through the aisles of an Amsterdam supermarket. The piece is extraordinary for its suggestive ambiguity: Is this a talismanic performance to ward off the evil temptations of secular and capitalist European culture, or a sly gloss comparing the mindless rote learning practiced in madrassas to passive consumerism? The subtitles—an English translation of Shawky's Arabic rendition—scroll by like a news ticker, implying a correlation between religious belief and the ideology conveyed in our mass media. While this piece invites various interpretations, cynicism predominates in Shawky's other submission, *Al Aqsa Park*, 2006, a video that uses digital animation to present Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock as a flashy carnival ride. The sacred edifice is shown revolving at various angles, while a loud rumbling sound track conveys the precarious weight of the building's geopolitical significance.

Formally connected to Shawky's spinning mosque, Bethlehem-born artist Emily Jacir's *Embrace*, 2003, is a small steel-and-rubber structure cued by motion sensors to rotate with the viewer's approach. One of the few sculptures in the show, the Minimalist-like object resembles a miniature baggage carousel, establishing a personal sense of space pointedly distinct from the depersonalization typically experienced in airports. Resonating with the concerns of the Palestinian diaspora that are frequently addressed in this artist's oeuvre, the piece speaks to the anguish of dislocation, its title's bitter irony articulating how attachment becomes troubled when one is always on the move.

Needless to say, "Recognise" had little time for media stereotypes of the region as a terrorist horde. Works like Sadegh Tirafkan's mystical photograph *Men in Black*, 2004, which portrays an Islamic ritual in Tehran from an elevated viewpoint that implies a divine regard, exemplified an aestheticization of the documentary mode that has long—if often simplistically—been associated with contemporary Middle Eastern art. Meanwhile, Egyptian

artist Ayman Ramadan's video *Iftar*, 2006, which greeted visitors near the warehouse entrance, attempted to overcome religious division, but to problematic effect. Documenting poor people eating at a communal table on a street in Cairo, the contrived scene obviously resembles Leonardo's *Last Supper*. Taking as its title the name of the evening meal that breaks the daily fast during the month of Ramadan, the video proposes a common humanity by interweaving Christian and Islamic rituals. But to recognize the other through the lens of the familiar risks blurring the specificity of each by collapsing cultural difference into iconographic similarity.

The subtler accomplishment of "Recognise" lay in confronting the limits of the idea of cross-cultural recognition itself. Oreet Ashery's *Guardian of the City*, 2007, for instance, posed the difficulty of perceiving the politically inconvenient, with a slide of an orthodox Jewish man wearing a button reading FREE PALESTINE NOW flashing intermittently on a blank wall. And the seductiveness of wishful thinking in the face of unpalatable truths was elaborated in Nada Prlja's *Bin Laden Is Dead*,

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2007, a stack of free posters detailing the many premature news reports of the elusive militant's demise. Rabih Mroué's video *Face A/Face B*, 2003, charted a different route, exploring the alterity of the self by returning to the artist's childhood in war-torn Beirut, replaying audiotapes recorded in the 1980s as missives to distant relatives. Upon hearing the voice of his childhood self, Mroué describes the difficulty of recognizing it as his own. The sense of estrangement was heightened for London viewers by the artist's decision to screen the video at first without translation (a subtitled version was added during the show's run). "Recognition" here meant acknowledging the inevitable incompleteness of our own knowledge, the larger implications of which were smartly developed in this exhibition as a whole. Ultimately, the surrender of certainties is the only way to approach an infinitely complex geographic area such as the Middle East—and a welcome antidote to the cocksureness underlying the alarmist projections and extremist measures of our media and politicians. □