

Art Review:

Art Dubai

Nervous anxiety, Middle-Easthetics

By JJ Charlesworth



Fayçal Baghriche, Souvenir, 2012, illuminated terrestrial globe, motor, 40 x 75 cm. Courtesy Campagne Premiè...

If 'Middle East nervous anxiety' was the theme of a panel discussion on the opening day of Art Dubai art fair, its proposition – that in the globalising (art) world, regional tags like 'Middle East' are becoming increasingly anachronistic terms – was a good way to surf the uniquely international art moot that was this year's edition of Art Dubai. Galleries from the Emirates get to hang out with a big contingent of European galleries eager to reach the region's growing collector base, while Asian galleries have a chance to connect with Western visitors who might not head as far as New Delhi or Singapore. Add to that a bunch of galleries invited as a special focus on the nascent West African art scenes, and ArtReview found itself asking – is this what the artworld of the future will look like? Who are all these people? Which national dress is that? Can art transcend cultural, ethnic and economic differences? And why is my gin and tonic so expensive, even by London standards?

Armed only with a thirst for knowledge and a malfunctioning digital camera, *ArtReview* dived into the global mix. Here are few of the pearls it bobbed back up with.

ONE: Imagine there's no countries

Art fairs are a great place to see unrelated works spark visual conversations. Algerian-born Fayçal Baghriche's speedily rotating illuminated globe, *Souvenir* (2012), was displayed prominently at Berlin's Campagne Première, while not far away, at Galerie Chantal Crousel, was Melik Ohanian's *Futuring (Cosmos)* (2008), a transparent, bubble-filled orb. A utopian desire for placelessness and the effacement of national boundaries? It was certainly a subtext to many exhibits, perhaps reflecting the artworld's awkward, complicated sense of its own cosmopolitanism. Let's all try to get along.

TWO: Neomedieval

Mind you, while many artists were trying to find common ground, or present the currency of particular artistic traditions (especially in many calligraphic works on paper, or through mining the deep history of Islamic pattern), some were doing nasty things to their own cultural backstory. Step up Belgian provocateur Wim Delvoye, with his breathtakingly weird fusions of modern machinery and Gothic architecture, whose intricate lunacy seemed to mutter something creepy-sarcastic about the redundancy of Western cultural heritage. Europe? That's so *over*.

THREE: Well-oiled

No doubt in deference to local sensitivities after the Arab Spring, it was noticeable that art about geopolitics was not very much in evidence. A quiet and brilliant exception was Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck's photo-work *Chronoscope* (2009–11), a static reworking of footage from the 1950s CBS current-affairs talkshow of the same name. Bow-tied pundits discuss oil trouble between the West and the Arab world – uncanny echoes from the past that revealed how little (bar the absence of communists) has changed in the West's preoccupation with this part of the world.

FOUR: Out of sight

ArtReview's imaginary award for most self-referential, institutionally parodic art-fair project commission went to Ahmet Ögüt's Intern VIP Lounge, an exclusive space for all the unpaid interns working at the art fair. *ArtReview* had special access to the shadowy downstairs space, and found interns lounging and chatting, drinking free coffee and playing ping-pong, away from the hard graft of er... interning for nice international art galleries. Spoofing nicely the current anxiety over 'slave labour' in the cultural industries, Ögüt's Lounge struck *ArtReview* as a deft comment on how the artworld views work, pay and aspiration – especially when presented in a city largely built with the unrelenting effort of a mass of cheap, imported labour.