

In an Arab art exhibition, land, signs and bodies are all contested turf

By Mark Jenkins September 20

The most traditional object in “Between Two Rounds of Fire, the Exile of the Sea,” the American University Museum’s survey of recent Arab art, is a woman’s head rendered in pinkish marble. It’s harshly worn, as if eroded over millennia, yet it retains strength and grace. The head might have been recently excavated from a long-lost site, or freshly damaged by Islamist militants opposed to art they deem heretical.

In fact, sculptor Athar Jaber abused the piece himself by submerging it in acid. The Belgium-based artist, who is of Iraqi descent but grew up surrounded by Italy’s Renaissance heritage, is addressing violence against women, according to the curatorial statement by Karim Sultan, director of the United Arab Emirates-based Barjeel Art Foundation.

In medium and appearance, Jaber’s piece is not typical of the exhibition. Yet the ferocity it evokes is characteristic. This art was shaped by decades of war in some of the eight countries and territories represented. Specifically, the show takes its title from a poem written by Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008) in response to the 1976 massacre at the Tel el-Zaatar Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. But the implications are far wider, reaching across North Africa and the Middle East.

In his essay, Sultan divides the art into three categories: territories, signs and bodies. All three are seen as contested turf, and sometimes one grouping bleeds into the other.

Much of the work is photographic or photo-derived. That reflects its modernity, of course, but also the artists’ concern with technology — specifically the mechanisms of war and surveillance. Fighter planes are a motif, and aerial vantage points are common. In the drone’s-eye views of North Africa and the Middle East, everything is potentially a target.

Akram Zaatar’s contributions are a composite photo of a 1982 bombing of a Lebanon hilltop and an image from the same year of a Syrian fighter, enlarged and simplified into a near-silhouette amid halftone dots. Taysir Batniji’s wispy renderings of Palestinians under surveillance or interrogation are pencil drawings but also emphasize their photographic origins.

In Huda Lutfi’s collage-painting, the words “Democracy is coming” curve above a woman and below five military jets. Shakir Hassan al Said’s mixed-media piece, titled “The Victorious,” simulates a battered chunk of concrete wall but has an openness that Sultan interprets as spiritual. Mona Hatoum’s “Infinity” constructs the double-loop symbol for eternity out of bronze toy soldiers atop a table. What’s endless, apparently, is war.

Many of these artists are based, at least part of the time, in Europe or the United States. So it's hardly surprising that exile is a recurrent theme. Nedim Kufi offers two pairs of vintage family photos, identical except that a boy is missing from one set. Sadik al Fraji's animated video, "The House My Father Built," tells a story of isolation and loss.

That tale is recounted in black-and-white, which is common here, even in works not derived from photos. Asim Abu Shakra's painting of a cactus is in shades of gray, while Jafar Islah's abstraction imprisons a small color field within gray and black. Etel Adnan's large wool tapestry, colorful and untraditional, looks unusually exuberant in this context.

Sultan argues that none of the art is polemical and that "an austere distance is maintained throughout." That's arguable, since so much of the work involves Lebanon or the Palestinian territories. Conflict with Israel is implicit in such images, even if not directly stated.

Endless war requires an eternal enemy, but Israel isn't the only contender. There's also, for one, the patriarchal society. In Hayv Kahraman's painting on interlocking wood panels, which seems gently domestic at first glance, women pierce and cut one another's bodies. About a third of the artists are women, and it wasn't necessarily war in Lebanon, Iraq or elsewhere close to home that propelled them to London or Los Angeles.

One of those women is Zineb Sedira, whose large-format photos are among the show's most intriguing entries. They appear to show ravaged landscapes, sometimes with tread marks that might have been left by tanks. The title of the series gives a clue, but the pictures should be seen before they're explained.

Conflict is the subject, but the where and the what are unexpected. Immediate and yet metaphorical, Sedira's pictures may appear to be as simple as tracks in the dirt, but turn out to be as complicated as the region this show encapsulates.

IF YOU GO

Between Two Rounds of Fire, the Exile of the Sea: Arab Modern and Contemporary Works From the Barjeel Art Foundation

American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, 4400 Massachusetts Ave. NW. 202-885-1300. american.edu/museum.

Dates: Through Dec. 17.

Admission: Free.

