

## Political Artworks Reflecting the Middle East's Unrest Electrify Art Dubai

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DUBAI— A little boy holds a kite reel; next to him, a girl holds the kite's string as another flings her arms up to the kite in the hope of catching it. This is no idyllic setting replete with a green field, a red kite, and a bright shining sun. The children are made of corrugated iron, the kite's string of barbed wire, and the kite of the traditional Palestinian keffiyeh and hessian cloth. The buttons on the children's clothes are bottle caps. These are children of Sabra, the Lebanese refugee camp that is home to Palestinian artist Abdul Rahman Katanani.



Dubai gallery Artspace brought Mohammed Taman's "Angels of Hell," 2011, to Art Dubai / Courtesy Artspace, Dubai

Inspired by the tragic events which took place in Gaza in December 2009, "Kite" reflects on Gazan children and their only playground: the sky. "Despite conflict, depression and agony, these people are full of optimism and hope," Agial Art Gallery founder Saleh Barakat says of the Palestinians depicted. Perhaps what is most ironic about "Kite" is its seemingly weightlessness — the children look as though they're flying and yet their physicality, along with the power of the artwork's message, carries significant weight. "The Palestinian cause is summarized in this artwork," adds Barakat. "It's full of poetry." Katanani, whose grandparents fled Palestine in 1949 to Lebanon, lives in the Sabra camp where his home-cum-studio is located. "Through 'Kite,' he is showing the condition of his life," says Barakat. "There is no blame or bitterness, there is simply hope."

A poignant relationship exists between 'Kite' and the artwork facing it at Galerie Chantal Crousel, "Divisier la Division (Divide the Division)," a neon work by Claire Fontaine that flashes the same statement in Arabic and Hebrew. An artist couple in which one half is Italian-Jewish and the other Scottish, Claire Fontaine "are totally against the problems between Israel and Palestine, and are not at all happy with the way things have been handled," says the gallery's Chantal Crousel. Interestingly, the duo has exhibited in both Palestine and Israel, and in speaking both languages through this piece they are saying "just eradicate the divisions and make one country," according to the dealer. The gallery represents key names in the art world, many of whom are known to make poetic political statements, among them Mona Hatoum. "We think being alive means playing an active role in life," adds Crousel.

"Playing an active role" has been recently reserved for the Tunisians and Egyptians, one of whom, Egyptian artist Mohammed Taman created two works following his country's revolution — painting them with one eye, after the other was lost to a rubber bullet during the protests. Fellow Egyptian artists Nadine Hamman and Khaled Hafez also took to the streets, demonstrating in Tahrir Square. "The people of the revolution were from all walks of life," says Artspace founder Maliha Al-Tabari, "and I really wanted a political booth for Art Dubai — we're in tough times now and people are not just concerned with pretty pictures, so to speak."



Abdul Rahman Katanani's "Kite," 2011, at Agial Art Gallery of Beirut / Courtesy Agial Art Gallery, Beirut

While the artworks are thoroughly moving and reflective of contemporary political struggles, one wonders if regional audiences following the news would seek out pieces which tackle the conflict at hand. "This is going to go down in history books," says Al-

Tabari. "People want to acquire a memento of these times because these events are going to be marked in our calendars." The Palestinian-born gallerist approached CNN weeks ago, informing them of Hafez's intention to rework his "Revolution 11.02.2011 — The Sniper and the Sky War." When CNN crew flew to Cairo to document the unfolding events, the network interviewed Hafez and shot his work being shipped to Dubai, taking more footage of the work arriving at Art Dubai. As part of the news network's "Inside the Middle East" series, which will be aired in three weeks, CNN also interviewed Hamman. "This is one of the first works done after the revolution," says Al-Tabari, "and it should go to an institution in the Gulf." Next to Hafez's sizeable work is a painting of a wailing Umm Kulthum, the legendary Cairo singer, by George Bahgory. Enough said.

Interestingly, Iraqi-born Sama Alshaibi began her career as an opera singer before becoming an artist. "I've had all the labels there are in America," she laughs, "'illegal,' 'refugee,' and 'green-card citizen.'" Her works deal with issues of displacement, inspired by her family fleeing Iraq during the 1980s and venturing to Amman and Abu Dhabi and finally the United States, a country she says her mother felt would be safe. "Ironically, my grandfather took his family to Iraq from Palestine in 1948 believing it was safe," says Alshaibi, who is showing at Selma Feriani Gallery. "Since my father pursued his doctorate in the U.S.A., my mother felt it would be safe for us in the 1980s, but it's interesting to see how the U.S.A. has since waged war on Iraq."

Where does Alshaibi believe is safe today? "I don't know if a safe place exists," she says. Two of her brothers are musicians and another is a filmmaker who is currently working on a documentary that tackles hate crimes in the U.S. In a paradoxical twist of fate, her filmmaker brother was recently a victim of a hate crime. Alshaibi's interest is in the body's relationship to land and identity. Most of her artworks — both video and photography — include herself in her aim to project notions of humanity and power struggles. "Who has the bomb and who has the rock in this theater of competition?" she asks. "My works are my viewpoints, as I have always had to negotiate my identity but through my art I have my own voice."

Responses to political conflict may well prevail in works by Middle Eastern artists for years to come as more events continue to unfold in this troubled region. Artists who belong to vast Diasporas or those who live in the region share a common denominator — as one Middle Eastern collector noted, "Being Arab is almost a genetic disposition, we have to react to political turmoil and, thankfully, most of our artists do it in very poetic ways."

**-Myrna Ayad, Canvas Daily, [ARTINFO](#)**

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