

The Arab World on Its Own Terms and Conditions

By Durriya Dohadwala

Singapore's link with the Arab world dates back to the early 19th century when traders plied the sea routes between Asia and Europe. Those who settled here brought their culture and customs and today are part of Singapore's multicultural community. Arab art, however, is rarely seen here, especially in a contemporary context, and so the first-ever exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum, *Terms and Conditions*, promises to be a visual treat. The exhibition features the works of Middle Eastern artists, some of whom live in their home countries, while others have settled elsewhere. Through their art, they give their take on the region's political and social events and ask you to consider current and historical realities on their own terms and



Mona Hatoum's Plotting Table (1998)

conditions. The theme of territorial wars figures strongly in the exhibition. Beirut-born, Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum's minimalistic work, *Plotting Table* (1998), makes this point beautifully. You see a darkened room reminiscent of a battle room, and a fluorescent green map of the world on a wooden plotting table. The glow of lights seems theatrical; a stage on which something is about to happen. The work is thought-provoking; it asks us to consider who is doing the plotting and what geographical conflict is all about.

War brings emotional rhetoric aimed at building patriotism. Adel Abidin portrays this through his installation *Three Love Songs* (2010). The three-channel video shows three beautiful singers performing love songs in Arabic. The romantic settings and the women's expressions seem typical of mainstream music videos. However, the English and Arabic subtitles reveal the songs' violent meaning. This juxtapositioning of beauty and love with terror creates an uneasy alliance, but is reflective of the subliminal properties of propaganda, used all around the world.



Adel Abidin's Three Love Songs (2010)

Lebanese artist Raed Yassin presents his own and his nation's collective memories of the 15 years of civil war. At first glance, one sees seven Chinese porcelain vases, but on closer examination, one notices that the vases depict

battle scenes in a mixture of Islamic and Chinese aesthetics. This ambiguity is intentional as the artist wants to portray how memories are formed through layers of personal

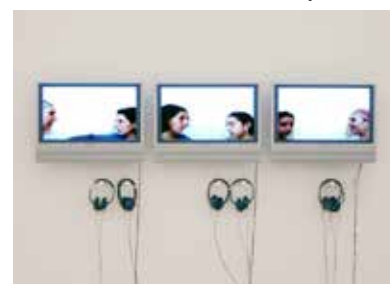


Raed Yassin, China (2012)

and documented history. Using a wide range of resources to create the work (interviews, photos and newspaper archives), Yassin drew scenes from seven battles that have had a dramatic impact on the country. He used the Islamic miniature style and then Chinese porcelain artists reinterpreted this in the styles of seven Chinese dynasties. The beautiful vases create an illusion that is far from the reality of the scenes and also represent products that can be used as decorations.

Perhaps the work that will resonate the most with Singapore's multicultural audience is Zenib Sedira's *Mother Tongue* (2002). A video triptych shows the interaction among three generations of women – a grandmother, mother and daughter – and illustrates how relationships are affected as a result of migration and globalisation. The videos show three separate conversations: Sedira and her mother conversing in Arabic; Sedira and her daughter conversing in French; and finally the grandmother and granddaughter, unable to speak a common language, reduced to communicating via gestures and glances. The work is autobiographical as Sedira's family migrated from Algeria to France then Britain, but its relevance is global and not limited to those affected by war.

The exhibition opens up new ways of looking at the Arab world. The outside-in approach of many of the Diaspora artists who utilise contemporary techniques and media makes it easy for the non-Arab world to understand and interpret the works, but at the same time deals with important social and political issues. The exhibition runs through 8 September.



Zenib Sedira's Mother Tongue (2002)

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All photos courtesy of the Singapore Art Museum