



Art Radar

Contemporary art: trends and news from Asia and beyond

“But Still Tomorrow Builds into My Face”: exploring history, conflict and identity at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai

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A group exhibition revisits the disappearance and loss of cultural and other types of heritage in the Middle East.

Eight artists from Europe, the United States, North Africa and the Middle East engage with notions of collecting, power, history, conflict and identity, while exploring the ongoing disappearance and erasure of cultural as well as other types of heritage, especially taking place now in the conflictual territories of the Middle East.



Taus Makhacheva, 'Tightrope', 2015, 4K video, duration: 73:03 min. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

“**But Still Tomorrow Builds into My Face**” runs until 19 May 2016 at **Lawrie Shabibi** in Dubai. The exhibition is curated by independent critic and curator **Nat Muller** and includes the work of eight artists hailing from different parts of the world, and united in one purpose: exploring the “timely topic” of the disappearance and loss of cultural and other types of heritage. As the press release writes,

The works explore the relationship between collecting, power, history, conflict and identity. By snatching away subjects from the jaws of time and permanent loss, and by fixing them in memory, the works become poetic and political acts of preservation.

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"But Still Tomorrow Builds into My Face", 2016, installation view. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi.

Talking to *Art Radar*, Nat Muller explains about the significance of holding an exhibition on such a topic now, located in the Middle East, where in recent years especially, there has been an ongoing destruction of cultural and historical heritage:

Much of the world, but especially the Middle East, seems to find itself at a crossroad. What the show does in a forceful way is query who controls history and the artifacts of time. History is an incredible geo-political resource of power: who controls time, controls history and the future. It is very much an exhibition about identity too: by what and how will we be remembered?



"But Still Tomorrow Builds into My Face", 2016, installation view. From left to right: Pia Rönicke, 'The Pages of Day and Night' and Persijn Broersen & Margit Lukács, 'Stranded Present'. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artists.

Nat Muller goes on to explain that, although the issue of cultural loss and destruction of heritage is a timely topic, the exhibition is not meant to be a tool for creating awareness:

I am in general not really interested in the "functionality" of art. Art, and the perception of it, operates on many levels, so reducing it to a mere tool that is instrumentalised is reductive. In other words, this is not an awareness-

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raising campaign. It is true that the show addresses a timely topic, but that is only part of the story. It makes a much more layered and universal argument about loss, memory and history, but does so through beautifully poetic works. This confusion of the political with the poetic is intentional. In addition, the show is very much about the challenging position of art and the artist in the face of adversity and how they can offer resistance and resilience, but also how this position is very much at risk. As such, many of the works incorporate something ephemerality.



"But Still Tomorrow Builds into My Face", 2016, installation view. From left to right: Nadia Kaabi-Linke, 'Archive of Tunis Banalities' and Pia Rönicke, 'The Pages of Day and Night'. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artists.

The violence and the poetics of loss

The title of the exhibition was inspired by the poem *The Pages of Day and Night* by Syrian poet Adonis:
Before the time of day – I am

Before the wonder of the sun – I burn.

Trees run behind me.

Blossoms walk in my shadow.

But still tomorrow

Builds into my face

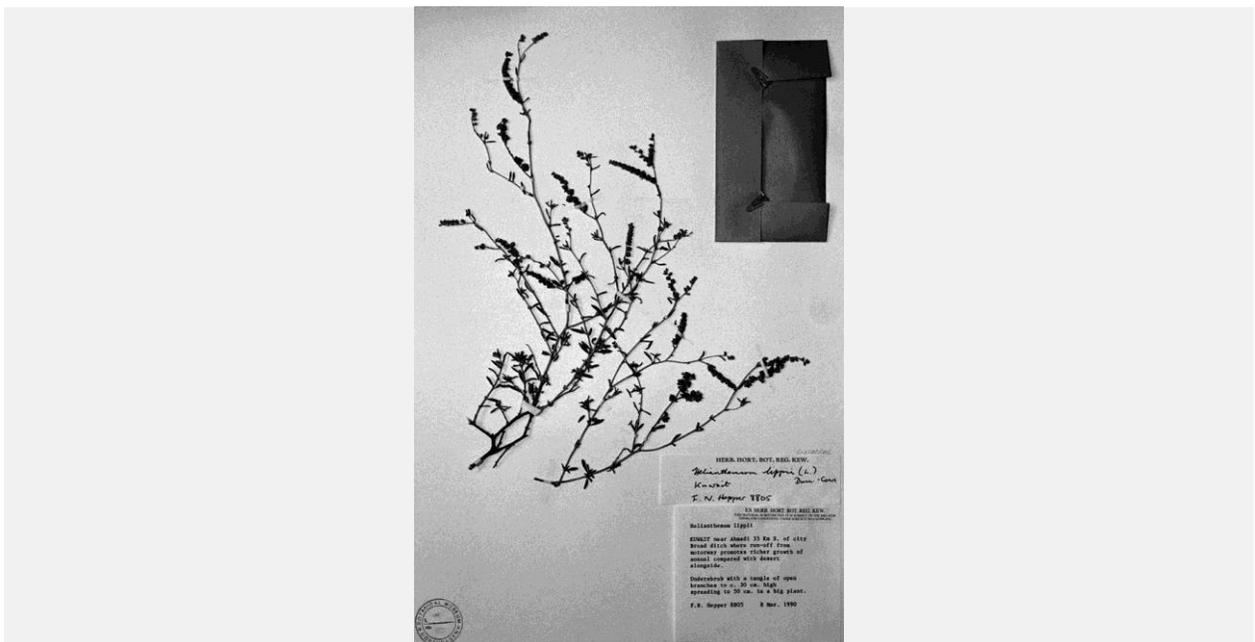
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Pia Rönnicke, 'The Pages of Day and Night', 2015, set of 14 black and white prints on paper, photogravures, 36.5 x 51.1 cm (each). Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

Adonis describes the cycle of time, which continues to pass and flow, as he still clings to the past. Muller explains to *Art Radar* about the connection between the title of the exhibition and the poem:

One of the artists, Pia Rönnicke, used the title of Adonis' poem "The Pages of Day and Night" for her work. When I read the poem I was struck by how beautifully Adonis describes the cycle of time passing and how tomorrow always comes even as we forcefully cling to the past. "But still tomorrow builds into my face" is a line taken from the poem. This poem is very much about growing old and our inability to fight time. I found that to be a powerful metaphor for the show.



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Pia Rönicke, 'The Pages of Day and Night', 2015, set of 14 black and white prints on paper, photogravures, print 41 x 27.5 cm (each). Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

Danish artist **Pia Rönicke** (b. 1974) engages with collections of different kinds, such as archives of letters, notes, images, newspapers, microfilm and online databases, among others. Her series *The Pages of Day and Night* consists of photogravures of plant material taken from Copenhagen's herbarium. Lawrie Shabibi explains in the press release:

Her selection is based on a cross-reference between plant samples collected during the 1760s Danish Arabia Expedition to Egypt, Arabia and Syria, and the species that were recently sent for safekeeping to the Global Seed Vault in Svalbard, Norway from the gene bank in Aleppo, Syria. The herbarium samples divulge data on plant matter as well as on the geo-political contexts they were collected in. They are what Rönicke calls, a growing "collection of anticipation".



Broersen & Lukács, 'Stranded Present', 2015, HDTV film loop, 16 min. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi, Akinci and the artists.

Dutch artist duo Persijn Broersen (b. Amsterdam, 1973) & Margit Lukács (b. Delft, 1974) work in a wide variety of media, including video, animation and graphics, to reflect on the depiction of nature in our increasingly virtual society. Their works demonstrate how reality, mass media and fiction are strongly intertwined in contemporary culture, through intricate layers of filmed footage, digital animation and images appropriated from the media. In the exhibition, their "ghostly, yet ornamental" video *Stranded Present* (2015) animates the flattened motif of 19th century illustrations of the ruins of Palmyra. The archaeological vision is brought to life as if liquid. The work was created before ISIS destroyed the historical location.

Nadia Kaabi-Linke, 'Archive of Tunis Banalities', 2009, installation of 28 works, imprints with ink and wax on papers on canvas, pigments, dimensions variable. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

Algerian artist **Nadia Kaabi-Linke** (b. Tunis, 1978) creates installations, objects and pictorial works that are embedded in urban contexts, intertwined with memory as well as with geographically and politically constructed

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identities. In the show, her 2009 work *Archive of Tunis Banalities* is a series of wall rubbings that bring images from the streets of Tunis prior to the 2011 uprisings into the gallery space.



Shahpour Pouyan, 'Monday Recollections of Muqarnas Dome', 2016, high fired glazed ceramic, 20 x 20 x 50 cm. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

Iranian artist **Shahpour Pouyan** (b. 1979, Isfahan) brings another ISIS destroyed site to the gallery with his sculpture of the tomb of the 11th century Muqarnas dome of Sharaf ad-Dawla, a Shi'ite mausoleum near Mosul, Iraq. The artist had been fascinated by the site for a very long time and planned to visit it someday. The sculpture sitting in the white cube now functions as the preservation of an image or a memorial – a monument to a lost monument.

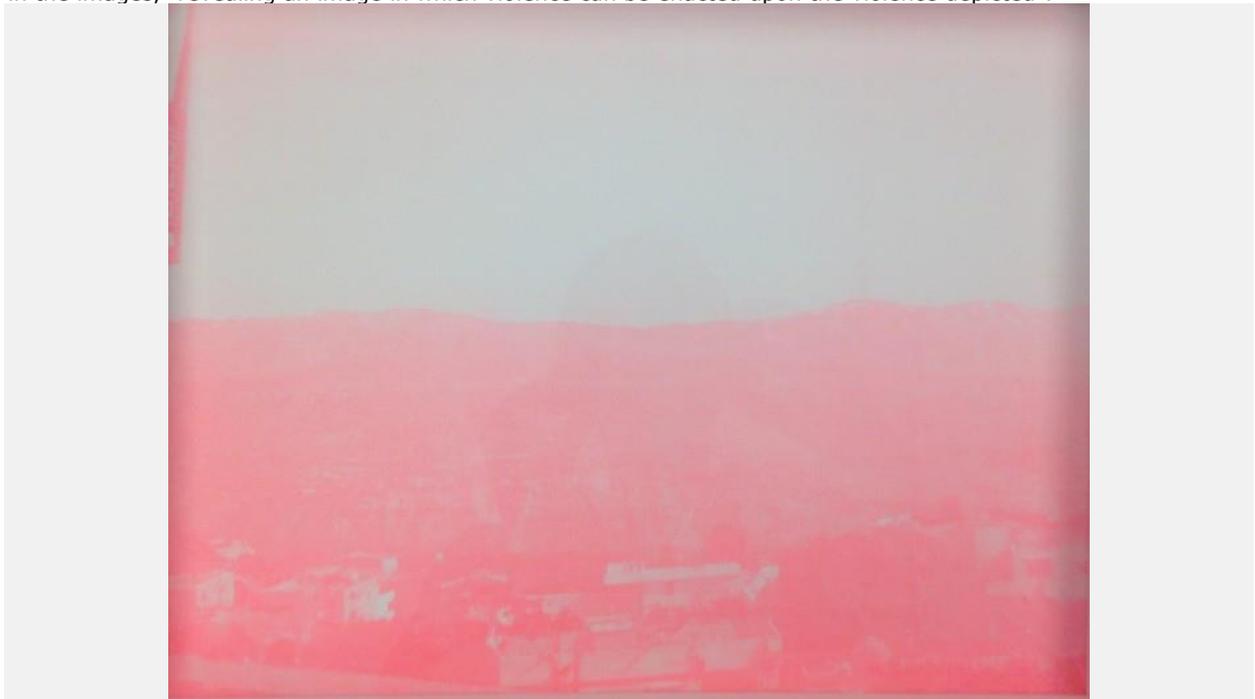
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Yazan Khalili, 'The Day We Saw Nothing in Front of Us', 2015, scratching on photography, 66 x 100 cm.
Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

The exhibition unfolds following a contradictory path, which sees both the violence and the poetics of loss and absence being addressed through the artists' works. This dynamic is particularly well illustrated by Palestinian artist Yazan Khalili and Lebanese-American artist Daniele Genadry.

Yazan Khalili (b. 1981) presents *The Day We Saw Nothing In Front of Us*, a series of photographs showing the landscape in the Palestinian occupied territories. The artist has scratched out the Israeli settlements on the horizon in the images, "revealing an image in which violence can be enacted upon the violence depicted".



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Daniele Genadry, 'Afterglow.15.33.', 2013, screenprint on mylar. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

Daniele Genadry (b. 1980, Baltimore) constructs visual experience through memory and movement. She uses multiple viewpoints, decentralised images and shifting frames to "address the distance necessary to merge a documented moment with the narrative passing geographies". In her screenprints on mylar in the exhibition, she captures landscapes from photographs taken over the span of ten years in the same town in Mount Lebanon. The prints appear ephemeral, the landscapes fleeting and faint, transforming through time. The images, according to Lawrie Shabibi, question "what seeing and not seeing might actually mean".



Taus Makhacheva, 'Tightrope', 2015, 4K video, duration: 73:03 min. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

The last artist in the exhibition, Dagestan's **Taus Makhacheva** (b. 1983, Moscow), creates performance-based works that question traditional forms of history-making as well as cultural and gender norms. She works primarily in video and photography, producing narratives that humorously criticise everyday life, while trying to reconcile the contemporary with the nostalgic, the local with the global and tradition with progress.

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"But Still Tomorrow Builds into My Face", 2016, installation view. Taus Makhacheva, 'Tightrope'. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

In the video *Tightrope* engages with the production of history in the post-Soviet era. A tightrope walker, transporting artworks by various Dagestani artists, crosses a canyon in the highlands of the Caucasus' mountains. As Lawrie Shabibi explains in the press release, *This balancing act highlights how art history is threatened by amnesia and how an equilibrium can be found between the fragile balance of post-Soviet subjectivity and a traditional, national and contemporary narrative. Moreover, as with all the works in the exhibition But Still Tomorrow Builds into My Face, it asks what the role and the position of the artist is in these tumultuous times.*

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Shahpour Pouyan, 'Monday Recollections of Muqarnas Dome', 2016, high fired glazed ceramic, 20 x 20 x 50 cm. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

Nat Muller shares her perspective on how the issue of the loss of cultural and historical heritage can be addressed in various ways and how artists can contribute to it:

One of the main issues now is inadequate international legislation to counter the black market of looted cultural heritage. There has to be a strong ethical code for trade when it comes down to the provenance of artifacts. What is dramatic, and specialist have called it the largest cultural emergency of our times, is that some sites of antiquity are forever lost. The artists of today are producing the cultural heritage of tomorrow. It reminds us that our historical scope needs to be larger than just the present.

C. A. Xuan Mai Ardia