

# Shifting WINDS

A survey of the Guggenheim New York's *But a Storm is Blowing From Paradise* reflects upon a complicated region, one in a constant state of flux and upheaval. **Sarah Hassan** reports on the exhibition's aim to dispel of the Middle East's imposed geography

Sara Raza's highly anticipated curatorial debut at the Guggenheim in New York, *But a Storm is Blowing From Paradise*, was living up to its name on opening day. Unseasonably cold weather cast a cloud over the city as a stream of reporters, collectors, artists and other fashionably dressed guests pushed through the revolving doors of the iconic rotunda on 5th Avenue to the sound of thumping electronica and Middle Eastern drums. It was an exciting occasion; the British-born Raza was embarking on a two-year residency at the Guggenheim to spear head the third phase of the UBS MAP Global Art Initiative for Middle East and North Africa. With an impressive list of curatorial credits that have allowed her to leave her mark in practically ever corner of the globe, Raza and her keen and sympathetic eye towards the socio-political engagements of contemporary artists from the MENA region, seemed the perfect choice to lead the hallowed institution to more fertile and compelling grounds.

Once an underrepresented area of art, not just in permanent collections of storied museums, but in the homes and portfolios of private collectors, contemporary Middle Eastern art is having a renaissance of sorts thanks to the ever-growing interest in the region and the wealth and quality of work being produced by country nationals. More often than not, these artists tackle the complex, confusing, and at times, sobering topics of place, identity, religious freedom, sexism and geography, that have allowed an impressive array of art to enter the private and public markets for collectors, connoisseurs and museum bystanders. One of the more successful shows in recent memory to bring together a wide array of artists from the region and their work was the New Museum's massive undertaking in 2014, *Here and Elsewhere*, which showcased an astounding array of mediums addressing such concerns and contemporary anxieties. When one is aware of the scope of art being offered by artists of the Middle East, news of a major institution dedicating space in their permanent collection to such an area is worth celebrating.

Yet this fact alone is what makes *But a Storm is Blowing From Paradise* somewhat tricky and problematic. To the innocent onlooker, entering the museum's 'tower' galleries was no different than entering the space of any other white-walled contemporary art gallery with inconvenient internal architecture and bright lighting. Greeted by perhaps the most impressive piece in the show, a graceful hanging metal structure entitled *Flying Carpets* by Nadia Kaabi-Linke, one is immediately drawn in to the geometric shadows cast on the floor, so much so that a guard seems to chastise visitors for standing directly underneath it every few minutes. Sandwiched in a corner beside Kabbi-Linke are the multi-media works of paper by the Iranian artist, Rokni Haerizadeh, whose hand-painted photographs lend their name to the exhibition's title. The effect of the surrounding works is immediate—the palate of this show is subdued, slightly cold and highly intellectual. Upstairs, the ancient Algerian city of Ghardaïa is composed entirely of couscous by Kader Attia, the effect not unlike a sprawling sandcastle. In two floors alone, the stylised tropes of Orientalism have sneakily made their way into seemingly distant works. Two of the more successful works in the exhibition share the floor with Attia, first the heartbreaking *Study for a Monument* by the Tehran-born Abbas Akhavan, who rendered native flora and fauna to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in cast bronze and positioned them



Iman Issa. *Heritage Studies* no. 10. 2015. Copper, aluminum, and vinyl. 55 x 235 cm. Edition one of three. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Guggenheim UBS MAP Purchase Fund 2015.91 © Iman Issa



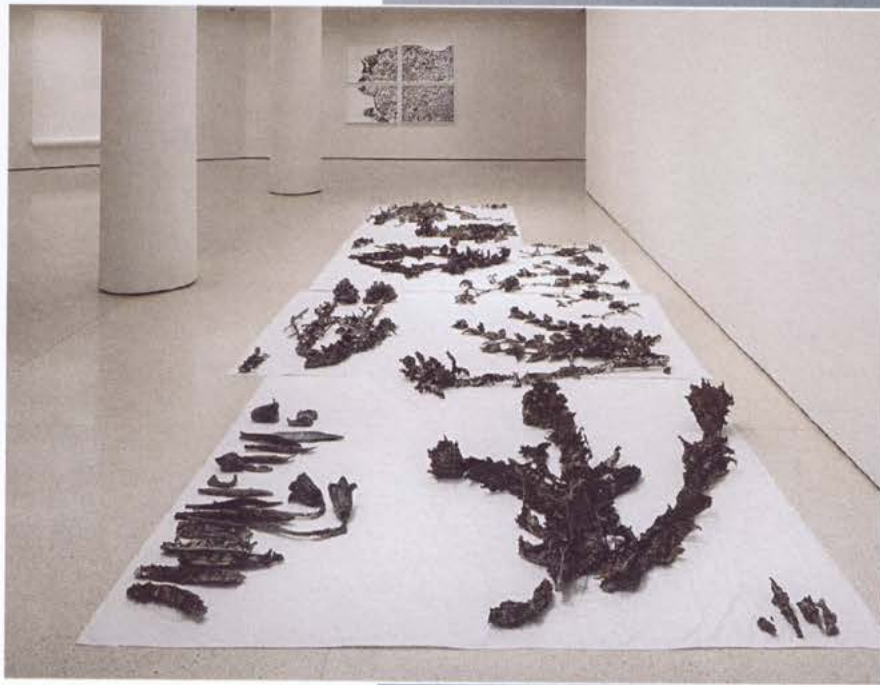
over white sheets, echoing the haunting effect of conflict-riddled areas where funeral displays are as stark and unsympathetic as the disasters endured by the natural world. Second, the beautiful dual video projection of *A Brief History of Collapses* by Mariam Ghani shows the crumbling, bombed-out interior of the Darul Aman Palace in Kabul, first erected in 1929, juxtaposed beside the Neoclassical-inspired Museum Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany. The cool voice of a narrator, reciting a laundry list of facts about each structure, washes over the space to a tantalising degree, allowing the viewer to contemplate the innate beauty of gradual destruction to once lofty structures.

Raza's ambition is clear from her curatorial statement and her intentions are noble; however, the bulk of the exhibition seems to suffer from a majority of blank space and curious choices. The sheer fact that these works will be a part of the museum's collection for future generations to encounter and work with is indeed grand and appropriately timed, yet something falls flat in the final array of art on offer.

Perhaps it is the soothsayer in every artist to anticipate the troubles of their time, yet contemporary Middle Eastern art has always championed understanding in the region amidst turmoil and confusion. "I really hope that there will be a turn in the way in which artworks that deal with complex global issues will open a more transnational dialogue with other narratives around contemporary visual discourse," Raza wrote from New York. "Also the fact that there are many artists who have lived, studied and worked in major metropolitan North American and European cities, yet have been overlooked in terms of major museum acquisitions, several have not been actively collected by American institutions before, despite having contributed to the visual cultural discourse and essentially being part of an international dialogue."

With this show, Raza believes she has accomplished an "idea-driven narrative which has helped to dissolve geographically imposed rubrics," something many Middle Eastern artists can appreciate and support in their own work. Yet one cannot help but be curious over the conversations that will take place in the museum in the years to come, and if those imposed geographies will cease to dictate the quality of understanding over Middle Eastern art. Ultimately, this is just a small taste of the artistic breadth that the region offers. ■

*But a Storm is Blowing from Paradise* runs until 5 October 2016 in New York. [guggenheim.org](http://guggenheim.org)



Nadia Kaabi-Linke. *Flying Carpets*. 2011. Stainless steel and rubber. 420 cm x 13 m x 340 cm. Edition two of two. (First edition commissioned by the Abraaj Group Art Prize) Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Guggenheim UBS MAP Purchase Fund 2015.92 © Nadia Kaabi-Linke  
Above: An installation view of *But a Storm is Blowing in Paradise* capturing the work of Ali Cherri (behind) and Abbas Akhavan. Photography by David Heald

