

The Other Sky

3 November–4 December 2014

JAMM presents *The Other Sky*, a group exhibition of Arab and Iranian artists, across different generations, expressing a preoccupation with the politics of movement and an engagement with the aesthetics of globalisation: Movement across places, the oldest of human liberties, has been reframed in the modern era in terms of the 'flight' metaphor. This metaphor, however, is associated less with social and political liberties and more with the scientific revolution and the history of aviation. Globalisation is always 'on flight,' steamrolling throughout the entire earth, on the wings of a plane, compressing distances and expanding human fields. Flight is a new dimension of the human conditions drawing alternative topographies of simultaneity, embedded in cosmopolitan histories.

Yet there's another sky, at lower height, almost above our heads when we look up. In this other sky, under which millions live, behind many fences, cages, borders and transit points, physical and otherwise, flight is no longer the grand metaphor of freedom, but the haunting presence of an aspiration, of a dream of liberation. Embodied in artworks all of whose central theme is birds, artists from the broader Middle East question the reality of different skies which exist in plain view before our eyes, and from whose injustices it is no longer possible to turn away. Varying from each other in degrees of gravity, all the works in this exhibition draw a silhouette around the slow flight trajectory of human freedom towards a territory of possibility.

Celebrated modernist Hussein Madi presents his signature paintings and sculptures of birds in which traditional symbols first encountered the almost ecstatic magic of abstraction, pointing towards a different understanding of symbols whose meaning has changed over time. Jamal Abdul Rahim, one of Bahrain's most celebrated sculptors presents his whimsical sculptures of birds using heavy materials such as bronze, marble, granite and lapis lazuli, deliberately giving a formal grammar to the difficulties of flight. More contemporary Arab artists, Manal AlDowayan and Abdulrahman Katanani, turn to the figure of the bird to speak, respectively, of the plight of women rights in Saudi Arabia and the living memory of the reality of Palestinian refugees stranded in camps in Lebanon.

Iranian artists converse with their Arab peers through similar strategies to parse the historical: The sound and video artist Azadeh Nilchiani presents a video work depicting the contemporary realities of migration and Yashar Samimi Mofakham is showcased with a multimedia work narrating the harsh realities of Iran today. The painter Behnaz Ghasemi, following her fascination with the skies, brings forth the presence of time and light in birds that almost chirp to the eye. *The Other Sky* is not a lamentation over impossible flight, but a temporal moment opening towards the necessity of art to participate in the political through its own process of extending the language of resistance and representation of conflict. Flight from darkness is not negation, but acknowledgement of the blurred lines of reality.

The flight of a bird, is in Islamic literature—a mystical tradition that both Arabs and Iranians share, a metaphor for the divine journey of the soul to God, and hence, a ubiquitous presence that escapes the boundaries between places; a fragile in between space where realities under conflict can be narrated, endowing the interrupted voices with a memory site. In *The Other Sky*, artists from a region in transition and turbulence denounce through manifold strategies, the invisibility of those that as Paul Celan noted, are 'unsheltered even by the traditional tent of the sky.'

Arie Amaya-Akkermans

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About the artists

Jamal Abdul Rahim: Born in 1965 in Muharraq, the painter and sculptor is one of the leading artists from Bahrain. The artist received his artistic education in India and returned to Bahrain, where he consolidated his bright palette and formal vocabulary shaped by the colours of the Middle East, expressed in a humorous realistic style, inscribed with references to art history. His celebrated bird sculptures, sculpted in heavy materials, and his expressionist paintings, have been widely exhibited in the region and elsewhere in Europe and Latin America.

Hussein Madi: Born in 1938 in Chebaa, the Lebanese artist is one of the Arab world's most distinguished and pioneering artists. Madi studied at the Académie Libanaise Des Beaux-Arts in Beirut, and then spent a long period in Rome, before settling down in Beirut in 1986. The artist is considered one of the pioneers of modernism in Lebanon, using traditional forms that he metamorphosed into abstraction. His work has been showcased in international venues such as The British Museum and the Venice Biennale. A retrospective of his work was held at the Beirut Exhibition Center in April 2014.

Manal AlDowayan: Born in 1973 in Dhahran, Al Dowayan studied art between London, Dubai and Bahrain. The artist belongs to a new generation of conceptual artists from Saudi Arabia that has been exhibited internationally to critical acclaim. Working across different media, Al Dowayan investigates the role of women in Middle Eastern societies and her work has been collected by prestigious institutions including The British Museum and the Mathaf Museum of Modern Arab art. She is a former resident of the Delfina Foundation and currently a fellow at New York University Abu Dhabi.

Abdulrahman Katanani: Born in 1983 in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camp in Lebanon, the Palestinian self-taught artist received a master's degree from the Lebanese University and his work, depicting the realities of life in the Palestinian camps, through the use of stories from everyday life told in the raw materials of the same camps, has been exhibited in the Middle East and Europe. He was awarded prizes at the Salon d'Automne of the Sursock Museum in Lebanon. He has held artistic residencies in Paris, including the Cité Internationale des Arts.

Yashar Samimi Mofakham: Born in 1979 in Tehran, the Iranian artist is known primarily as an expert printmaker and runs his own studio in Tehran with his colleague and partner, Tarlan Rafiee. He has also written extensively about contemporary art and has been involved in curating art exhibitions. Samimi Mofakham has been collected and exhibited across the Gulf region and Iran, as well as in Armenia, Australia, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and the US.

Azadeh Nilchiani: Born in 1979 in Tehran, Nilchiani studied sculpture at the University of Tehran. After relocating to Paris, she studied art at the ENSAD, music at Orleans National School of Music, sound art and electro-acoustic composition at the Pantin National School of Music and obtained a master's degree in music and multimedia at the University of Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée. Her work, spanning across sculpture, video, sound-art and film, has been showcased in exhibitions and festivals in her native Iran, France, Mexico, Greece, Korea and the United States, among others.

Behnaz Ghasemi: Born in 1977 in Mashhad, in the cosmopolitan North-East of Iran, Ghasemi studied art in Dubai, Mashhad and London. She won a competition of the municipality of Tehran for outdoor sculpture in 2013. Ghasemi's practice, at the borderline between painting and photography, investigates landscapes in time and plays with the viewers' perception, stretching the limits of her format and bringing forth renditions of nature based entirely on light. Her work has been exhibited in both Dubai and Tehran.

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