Syrian Artists at the 2009 Venice Biennale

Fred H. Lawson

Two Syrian artists exhibited their work at the 53rd Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, more commonly known as the Venice Biennale. Issam Darwich and Yasser Hammoud displayed four paintings as part of a multinational project entitled "The Mediterranean, a Sea of Art." The exhibition, fittingly housed at the Palazzo Zenobio in the Dorsoduro district, opened to the public on 7 June 2009. It grew out of a larger collaboration between Italian and Syrian artists called "Mediterranean Convergence," which was organized to celebrate the 2008 designation of Damascus as "The Capital of Arab Culture."

In one room on the second floor of the building hung three canvasses by Darwich: "The Presence of Absence," Numbers 1, 2 and 3. Each painting features an empty woman's outfit, two on clothes hangers and one draped over an overstuffed chair. All three strongly suggest that there is a body inside, despite the fact that none is visible. In Number 1, an elegant western-style suit stands at the forefront, with a steel-gray sea and sky beckoning through an open window in the background. Number 2 counter-poses a frilly party dress, lounging in a blue velvet armchair, with a vase of blue-white flowers resting beside it on a satin covered table. A pink nightdress billows in the breeze of another open window in Number 3, half straining toward the outside world but at the same time twisting against the persistent outward pressure. According to the accompanying catalogue, the ghostly images draw attention to the persistent absence of women in contemporary life.

In answer to questions posed by the curators of the exhibition, the artist explained that despite a history of conflict between Syria and Europe, the people of both countries have the ability to build on their common humanity to achieve mutual benefit. Particularly in the context of the current global economic crisis, Darwich continued, it is vital to show that art can transcend the uncertainties of the marketplace.

Issam Darwich was born in Damascus in 1952, and was awarded a diploma from the 'Azm Isma'il Center for the Fine Arts in 1979. In addition to acting as an art critic in
local publications, he established the Ishtar Gallery in Damascus in 1987, the Gallery Bilad al-Sham in 1989 and a second Ishtar Gallery in 1991. His work has been displayed at the French Cultural Center in Damascus (1991), the Ajial Gallery in Beirut (1995), the Art Center in Manama (2000), the Dar al-Mashriq in 'Amman (2001) and other venues. Examples of his paintings can be found in the permanent collections of the Syrian National Museum, the Dummar Museum of Fine Arts in Damascus and the Presidential Palaces in Damascus and Latakia.

Directly across the grand baroque music hall, on the floor of a room symmetrical to the one that held Darwich's paintings, lay the three panels of Yasser Hammoud's "Illuminations 2." The canvases are dominated by heavy blackness, broken by swirls of bright yellow. The panel that holds the artist's signature is reminiscent of a tunnel, through which light is flooding toward the viewer. The catalogue remarks that the overall effect is intended to illustrate the underlying "harmony of the microcosmos and the macrocosmos."

"Light generates form," the artist remarks in the catalogue. The wisps of light in the panels on display show how intrinsic intuition of the sense of the divine produces creativity in the midst of primordial blankness. Asked about the long-standing cultural connections between Europe and Syria, he observes that European art and literature have had a profound impact on Syrian artists, just as Syrian philosophy and Sufism have affected Europeans, resulting in a constructive dialogue.

Hammoud was born in Tartus in 1963 and received a degree in interior design from the Fine Arts faculty of the University of Damascus in 1987. He has taken responsibility for a number of prominent public projects, including a mural at the northern entrance to the city of Damascus, one at the eastern entry into Latakia and a sculpture standing in a central square of Aleppo. Beginning in 1994, he supervised the realization of the mausoleum of President Hafiz al-Asad in Qurdaha. Among his own exhibitions is "To the Children of Gaza," which was held at the People's Gallery in Damascus in the first quarter of 2009.

Besides Darwich and Hammoud, the exhibit included paintings on canvas by the Italian artists Gastone Biggi, Sergio Lombardo, Concetto Pozzati and the Finland-born Hannu Palosuo; paintings on coarse cloth by Salvatore Emblema; formed acrylics by Turi Simeti; and sculpture by Franca Pisani. The bilingual Italian-Arabic catalogue, published by Christian Maretti Editore, is available from the publishers for 30 euros.

Palazzo Zenobio, which the catalogue calls Ca Zenobio, is the former Collegio Armeno dei Padri Mechitaristi. This Black Benedictine order was founded in the early eighteenth century by a friar named Mechitar to serve the Armenian communities of Venice and
Constantinople. Tourists rarely get to see the breathtakingly over-decorated grand music hall, one of the triumphs of the high baroque architect Antonio Gaspari (1656-1723). The building continues to be occupied by an obscure Armenian religious society, perhaps related to the Mechitaristi.

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