

Review of:

*Tarjama/Translation: Contemporary Art from the Middle East, Central Asia, and their diasporas* (New York: ArteEast, 2009)

Queens Museum of Art, May 10-September 27, 2009

Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, August 21-October 24, 2010

In one provincial town in Kazakhstan, bas-reliefs decorate the administrative building. This in itself is unremarkable. But, as Kazakh artists Yelena Yorobyeva and Victor Yorobyev attest in their photographic series, “Kazakhstan. Blue Period (2002-05),” the banners within those bas-reliefs underwent a significant change after the fall of the Soviet Union. Once painted red, they are now painted a precise shade of blue-green: *kok*. Indeed, as the artists document, not only is *kok* the color of the new national flag, but it also proliferates in the village landscape to appear in kiosks, on walls, painted onto crosses on new graves, or dyed into new cloth. One beguiling photograph in the series shows two girls standing proudly in a *kok*-colored doorframe. They face outward, toward the camera and into the future, while the several pairs of adult shoes on the stoop point backward and into the house interior. With utter clarity, the piece proposes that ordinary interventions have made rural Kazakhstan into a vast expositional field for asserting a post-Soviet condition. It is also the only piece in the recent exhibition *Tarjama/Translation: Contemporary Art from the Middle East, Central Asia, and their diasporas* that exhibits a direct and legible re-coding process from one state into another.

Curated by Leeza Ahmady, Iftikhar Dadi, and assistant Reem Fadda under the auspices of ArteEast (a New York-based arts non-profit), *Tarjama/Translation* brought together new work from a loosely defined region following an even more loosely defined critical interest. The use of the word ‘translation’ here is perhaps best understood not as a process, but rather as a claim to the freedom to reject the pedagogical burdens placed upon the native informant, the cultural worker, and the minority citizen in the art industries of the contemporary United States. *Tarjama/Translation* was conceived in direct response to frustration with the critical reception of modern and contemporary art from the Middle East, a reception that has become ever more confined to object lessons in tolerance, i.e. appreciating the existence of art in enemy lands. Jessica Winegar - one of the guiding voices behind the exhibition - has given a thorough critique of this “‘art as evidence of advancement and humanity’ discourse.”<sup>1</sup> She argues that most Middle East-related arts events in the U.S. are shaped by that discourse’s corollary investments in a celebratory multiculturalism that privileges art carrying recognizable signs of its difference from the Western norm while de-privileging art that meets the tastes of the global contemporary art market. As Omnia El-Shakry succinctly puts it, all art carries some marks of its location, but “only non-Western art is expected to have questions of identity function as a touchstone.”<sup>2</sup> The initiatives devoted to showcasing Middle Eastern art in the United States have only grown after 9/11, which brought in its wake a renewed sense that such anodyne cultural understanding will ultimately prevent terrorism. These discourses easily recognize

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<sup>1</sup> Jessica Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2008), 656.

<sup>2</sup> Omnia el-Shakry, “Artistic Sovereignty in the Shadow of Post-Socialism: Egypt’s 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Youth Salon,” *E-flux journal* 7 (June 2009). <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/70>

and support the kind of translational process documented in “Kazakhstan. Blue Period (2002-05),” i.e. movement from grim Socialist control to idiosyncratic expressions of personal freedom. They are less sanguine, however, about artworks that pursue conceptual interests other than the exploration of cultural transformations. As a result, the work from the Middle East on display in the U.S. is hardly representative of contemporary work valued in the Middle East (much of which tends to be right in step with tastes for big showy paintings or biennial-ready HD video).

To its credit, *Tarjama/Translation* refused to be guided by these simple identity and civilization categories; it also resisted the perceived obligation to present the consonance of supposed Middle Eastern and American values. The curators instead assembled a trans-regional sampling of artwork that span any number of unstable ethnic categories without claiming to fix them into cultural pieties. More than half the artists on the exhibition checklist hail from the contemporary nation-states of Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, or Kazakhstan. Beside work from artists supported by secular nation-states, visitors thus saw work from artists living in Islamic republics that are not Arabic-speaking (Iran), work from nations that have been dissolved (Afghanistan, Iraq), from unrecognized states (Palestine/Israel), from regions that are not “post-colonial” (Turkey, Iran), and myriad permutations of geopolitical sensibilities therein.

If Vorobyeva and Vorobyev asserted the post-socialist sensibility of people in the ex-Soviet Bloc, then the work of Egyptian artist Khaled Hafez offered a different testimony about the condition of being “post.” His video installation *Revolution* is a kind of vampy enactment of lingering Socialist and Muslim dreams in Egypt and their continued predication on drama and violence. Meanwhile, British-Iranian artist Mitra Tabrizian’s 2004 film *Predator* works outside the timeliness of cause and effect altogether. It plays with the now well-worn journalistic tropes that ‘explain’ terrorism, following an alienated and impoverished Muslim teenager whose neediness, we understand, makes him an easy pawn for fundamentalist warlords who arrange for him to kill a writer. Where Tabrizian departs from the standard tale of motives is in her staging of the story line. She shoots her scenes in sumptuous and impeccably lit detail and scripts the sparse dialogue in English so as to further prevent the projection of alterity or authenticity onto the characters. After twenty-six minutes of beautiful suspense, the film’s rapid, bloody resolution offers a sense of relief without emotional affect.

Other pieces in the exhibition could be experienced simply as art qua art. Pouran Jinch, an Iranian born artist based in New York, arranges calligraphed fragments of the Qur’an into beautiful compositions in his small canvases varnished in a smooth layer of Elmer’s glue. John Jurayj, an American-Lebanese painter, translates photographic images of war-torn Lebanon into a pastiche of abstract expressionist marks and 1980s neon sensibilities. If any particular work of translation can be supposed for these pieces, it would have to center on notions of the artist’s privileged individuality in which he or she translates the immaterial contents of mind and experience into materialization as art.

But why give these works the imprimatur “translation?” *Tarjama/Translation*’s curatorial apparatus did not really step up to the challenge of articulating a specific value or function

for “translation” within the evaluative discourses of the contemporary art world. Many texts accompanying the exhibition itself were excerpts from previous essays and contexts whereas the curatorial statements in the catalog are a cacophony of different authoritative discourses. Ahmady’s essay treats the figure of the artist as a great humanist interpreter, rendering the world’s surface appearances into deep meaning. Dadi’s essay highlights the act of translation as a means to map the dislocations and antinomies of an incompletely realized region he describes as “characterized by nationalist ideological fantasies and widespread political repression that persist despite their increasingly hollow status.”<sup>3</sup> He proposes that if modernism may be understood by its confidence in the possibility of a completely smooth translation of material (built form, visual language, planning rubrics, etc.) from one setting to another, then the *contemporary* acts of translation on view should be seen in the absence of pretense to perfectability, i.e. as processes that assume failure within structures for communication. Fadda for her part, however, sees the verb ‘translate’ as a responsibility to non-didactic action and an endeavor that can bridge breaks in social systems and correct misinterpretations.

The incoherence of “translation” as a framework for an exhibition ultimately meant that visitors to the exhibition looked elsewhere for coherence. Notably, quality – that old standard of aesthetic judgment – reemerged as a contender. As *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter described in his August 13 review, the merely basic and broad connections between artists left the visitor “still pretty much on your own in finding a focus.”<sup>4</sup> For Cotter, that meant directing attention to individual artists in search of the good ones. Evincing a similar outlook, Ahmady wrote that the exhibition was, at root, a showpiece for “internationally recognized artists, each practicing an exceptional command of aesthetics and genres specific to themselves.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, responses to the *Tarjama/Translation* project – both before and after its conception – ultimately privileged a form of art that claimed to require no translation. It may seem an uninspiring outcome that genre- and quality-centered systems of evaluation might be deployed to cope with heterogeneity. Yet such responses should also be seen as a symptom of exhaustion with a second trend in exhibitions of non-Western art, particularly those with ambitions to communicate internationally rather than domestically: for artists from regions that do not completely share political or economic interests with the United States, overt criticality has been *de rigueur*. In fact, Egyptian artist and critic Hassan Khan’s recent curatorial project “A New Formalism,” a collaboration with Bidoun Projects for the March 2010 Art Dubai, also demonstrated a desire for formally rigorous artistic constructions rather than one-note social statements. There, Khan showcased only art that made arguments about art, one that built itself through sustained engagement with itself.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, to allot oneself a space to show art that speaks the language of art is to forestall the problematic desire to extract from contemporary art from the Middle East, Central Asia, and its diasporas a kind of

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<sup>3</sup> Iftikhar Dadi, “Translation and Contemporary Art,” exhibition catalog (New York: ArteEast, 2009), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Holland Cotter, “Art in Review: Tarjama/Translation,” *New York Times* (13 August 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Leeza Ahmady, “Translation as Significance,” 12.

<sup>6</sup> Jim Quilty, “Let’s try having an argument. About art. Hassan Khan discusses Art Dubai’s ‘A New Formalism,’” *The Daily Star: Lebanon News* (27 March 2010)

[http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_id=1&categ\\_id=4&article\\_id=113176#ixzz0kQxQScdu](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=4&article_id=113176#ixzz0kQxQScdu)

ethnographic testimony that offers ‘cultural understanding’ or ‘cultural criticality’ for liberal consumption. What remains to be seen, however, are whether, and how, these curatorial strategies (or lack thereof) might rearrange normative cultural experiences into new topographies of global talent.

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