

# SHIFTING SANDS

23 MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST WHO TRANSCEND BORDERS WHILE TACKLING SUCH THEMES AS IDENTITY AND EXILE



BY TRENT MORSE

**T**he topics of wealth and conflict are seemingly unavoidable in discussions of the Islamic world. When it comes to the region's art scenes, headlines focus on either the investment in world-class museums and the establishment of auction-house outposts in the Gulf states, or the looting and the loss of cultural heritage elsewhere in the greater Middle East and North Africa (MENA). What's overlooked in this dyad is the artists from the area themselves, and their art.

This year, and especially this month, offers some of the best opportunities to appreciate the variety of these artistic practices, with their nuanced intertwining of the political and the aesthetic, the personal and the art historical. At the Armory Show in New York, March 5 through 8, visitors will see the work of more than two dozen MENA artists highlighted in the Focus section, organized in partnership with two of the most influential nonprofits in the sector, Art Jameel and Edge of Arabia. Two weeks later, Art Dubai plays host to 92 galleries presenting the work of more than 500 artists from both the modern and the contemporary eras. At the Sharjah Biennial,

running March 5 through June 5, participants come from all around the world, but curator Eungie Joo is privileging artists active in or with ties to the region. Further down the road, when the 56th Venice Biennale opens in May, the group shows in the pavilions of Iraq (curated by Philippe Van Cauteren, artistic director of s.m.a.k., the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent) and the United Arab Emirates (curated by Sheikha Hoor bint Sultan Al Qasimi, president and director of the Sharjah Art Foundation) will be augmented by "In the Eye of the Thunderstorm," an official collateral exhibition of art of the Middle East commissioned by Omar Donia, founder of *Contemporary Practices* art journal.

To understand the diversity of the voices that make up this community, *Art+Auction* polled six leading experts on MENA art for their picks of artists poised to break through on a global scale. Their choices range from a nonagenarian Iranian painter once immersed in the New York School to a pair of 30-something Palestinian photographers who fill their installations with images of displacement. Some of these artists might seem to play to expectations by producing works that riff on Islamic traditions or that grapple with violent conflict, while others are shattering stereotypes by working in modes of Neo-Expressionism or by embracing a truly transnational contemporary idiom. All are worthy of a closer look.



# PHOTOGRAPHY AND BEYOND



From top: **Ahmed Mater's** *Midnight Hour*, 2011, from the "Desert of Pharan" series, which depicts the ongoing rampant development catering to pilgrims in the artist's hometown of Mecca. **Golnaz Fathi's** *Untitled*, 2011. **Steve Sabella** applied photosensitive emulsion to fragments of homes being destroyed in Jerusalem's Old City and reproduced vintage and contemporary images on them for his series "38 Days of Re-collection," 2014.



Karin Adrian von Roques

**K**ARIN ADRIAN VON ROQUES is a curator and art historian specializing in modern and contemporary Arab and Iranian art. Her latest curatorial project, "View from Inside: Contemporary Arab Video, Photography, and Mixed Media Art," premiered at last year's FotoFest Biennial in Houston. A variation of the show will head to the Abu Dhabi Festival on March 20.

**Golnaz Fathi** is one of the most important young Iranian artists working

today. After training as a classical calligrapher, she soon began breaking the rules of calligraphy to follow her own ideas. She is no longer concerned with the legibility of words, but uses texts and letters as formal elements or as mere gestures. Her key tools are the quill, with which she draws on the canvas, and the paintbrush. In transforming traditional calligraphy into a personal artistic language, Fathi gives herself the option of expressing her emotions in a purely visual manner.

Multimedia artist **Ahmed Mater**, who is a physician by profession, practicing in a hospital in southern Saudi Arabia, has dealt firsthand with human suffering and the efforts to relieve it. His work confronts life's ethical and spiritual questions. For the series "Illumination," he uses X-ray photographs as a starting point and enhances them to look like pages of the Koran through the traditional decorative technique of illumination, deploying a metaphor for the essence of religious ideas and meaning. In his photographic series "Desert of Pharan," Mater makes apparent what is happening in Mecca, where real estate speculators are tearing down whole city blocks to erect gigantic hotel complexes and apartment buildings surrounding the grounds of Islam's most sacred mosque, Al-Masjid al-Haram, in Mecca. His large-scale photographs document this process as it is happening.

Born in Jerusalem in 1975, **Steve Sabella** is a Palestinian photographer and installation artist. At the age of 33 he moved to London, and now resides in Berlin. His works are about growing up under Israeli occupation, discovering art and love, and finding liberation from mental exile and a colonized imagination. With his camera he sets up a distinct world and then contradicts that setup, separating the things he sees into light and dark. Through his art, Sabella grapples with life in exile, with its distorting and destructive consequences. His is an art of understanding; it is poetic and suppresses neither expulsion nor salvation.

**Hazem Harb** is another remarkable young Palestinian photographer and installation artist. He was born in 1980 in Gaza and currently splits his time between Rome and Dubai. Harb's work deals mainly with issues of war, loss, trauma, human vulnerability, and global instability, and he explores these themes using every tool at his disposal. His series "Beyond Memory," 2012, made of digitally altered found photographs, was acquired by the British Museum in 2013.