

© 2019 Condé Nast. All rights reserved.

Out of Place

Artists from the Middle East, North Africa, and their diasporas, at the New Museum.

[Andrea K. Scott](#) August 25, 2014 Issue



The Palestinian artist Wafa Hourani imagines the refugee camp Qalandia as a thriving neighborhood, in the exhibition "Here and Elsewhere."

What does art of the Arab world look like in 2014? The question at the heart of this summer's most vital show sounds like Edward Said's nightmare, an invitation to reduce a nuanced and inevitably provocative subject to a cliché. The last major exhibition in New York to touch on similar themes, at *MOMA*, in 2006, was a milquetoast affair, criticized by some of its participants for soft-peddling politics. No one will lob that accusation at the New Museum's ambitious artistic director, Massimiliano Gioni, and his curatorial team; at times, the sprawling "Here and

Elsewhere," which fills five floors with works by forty-seven artists, feels ripped from the headlines. In July, the West Bank artist Khaled Jarrar, whose film "Infiltrators" documents the travails of Palestinians trying to cross into Israel, was himself turned back at the Jordanian border. As a result, he missed his flight to the U.S. and a scheduled appearance at the museum.

Roundups of Middle Eastern art in the West are often accused of courting the oil-rich, art-crazed collectors of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Qatar. The show tackles the issue up front with GCC, a nine-person collective (or, as they prefer to be called, "delegation"), named for the Gulf Coöperation Council, whose photomural transforms the museum's lobby into an absurdly opulent hotel interior. (A vending machine dispenses gold ingots.) Nearby, the classic Orientalist trope of the Bedouin is winningly updated by Abdullah Al Saadi, who is based in Khor Fakkan, in the United Arab Emirates. His hundred and fifty-one watercolors and single video detail a three-week-long trek in the company of a dog and a donkey.

The title "Here and Elsewhere" is borrowed from a 1976 movie co-directed by Jean-Luc Godard, who set out to make a pro-Palestinian documentary and ended up musing on the ethical quagmire of representation.

Museumgoers may feel as if they've stumbled into a film festival: you could spend an eight-hour day watching video works and still have five hours to go. One of the most moving is one of the simplest, "The Mapping Journey Project," by the Moroccan artist Bouchra Khalili, in which offscreen narrators describe the circuitous routes they travelled to various parts of the world, as their hands are seen tracing the trips with a pen. A Sudanese man describes a harrowing voyage from Libya through the shark-infested Mediterranean. Hoping to find work in Italy, he ended up as a displaced person in Turkey instead.

As the casualties rose in Gaza this summer, one sculpture gained poignancy. "Qalandia 2087," an elaborate architectural model by the

Ramallah-based Wafa Hourani, reimagines a Palestinian refugee camp as a utopian zone of playgrounds, cafés, and landscaped courtyards—there's even a glitter-paved aquarium, stocked with fish. It's a potent reminder that art really can be a matter of life and death. ♦

Andrea K. Scott is the art editor of Goings On About Town and has profiled the artists Cory Arcangel and Sarah Sze for the magazine.