



# Exhibition unravels futures of promises

Venice Biennale's Pan-Arab exhibition, *The Future of a Promise*, curated by Lina Lazaar brings 'freedom' into play as it enquires into the two concepts in the title. Lazaar says she is fascinated with the Middle Eastern notion of promise

TUBA PARLAK - VENICE

**F**reedom is the freedom to say two plus two makes four and if that is granted all else will follow, notes George Orwell through his protagonist in his "1984," a narrative of an unpromising future that invalidates all that has been once heralded about its arrival.

The Venice Biennale's Pan-Arab exhibition of contemporary art, *The Future of a Promise*, similarly cannot help but invoke "freedom" into play as it enquires into the two concepts in the title by merging them into one big problematic as to the state of affairs in today's Arab world.

The project exhibits a wide range of works from installation, performance and photography, to video, sculpture and painting, all dealing with the future shape of old promises in one aspect or another, with the participation of 22 artists from a selection of Arab countries.

### Translating a 'promise' into visual art

The exhibition taking place under the curatorship of Lina Lazaar, a specialist in Sotheby's London in post-war and contemporary art, is pro-war and contemporary art, is supported by Abdul Latif Jameel Community Initiatives and Abraaj Capital, three newly partnered organizations deeply committed to help flourish the contemporary art practice in the Middle East.

Speaking to the *Hürriyet Daily News* in a telephone interview, Lazaar said she was fascinated with the way the concept of promise was perceived in the Middle East, hence the idea of curating artwork under that theme.

"In [the Middle East] the culture of promise is an important concept, it becomes once you give your word, it becomes your duty and your honor. The works of arts questions this concept in two levels. In the first level the exhibition enquires into how the abstract concept [of promise] could be translated into visual arts. And in the second level, it questions whether promise as is traditionally conceived in the Middle Eastern cultures means



This photo shows a detail from Taysir Batniji's 20-panel work exhibited in the *Future of Promises*. The work displays a house in the North of Al-Shati refugee camp.

anything in 2011," she said.

The exhibition at the Venice Biennale is the largest art project ever to bring together artists from Arab worlds. "Also, it is the biggest collaborative art event in Europe in the sense that it brings together as many works from as many artists and countries," she said.

She said the proposal for participation in the biennale was submitted in December 2010, long before the Arab Spring. Nevertheless, the works on display are hugely related with the key issues the Arab world has had to deal with for long.

### Future as a possibility, freedom as a must

The Israel-Palestine conflict is one of the key issues of the exhibition; in which concepts of freedom, future and promise gain more solid shapes. One of the most striking pieces in the exhibition is "The Promised" (Al Maw'oud) by Ayman Baalbaki, which depicts a Palestinian freedom fighter covered in traditional guerilla head scarf against the backdrop of a typically Middle Eastern floral designed cloth. In the context of a fight for the promised land, Baalbaki's fighter, stagnant almost to the point of burial under the abundance of the cloth that is surrounding him, with his eyes, only visible facial detail, are half closed, is like an embodiment of disillusionment, a version of the pos-

sible futures of a promise.

Emily Jacir's installation "Embrace" is a direct reference to the unresolved Israel-Palestine issue. The artists work consists in a conveyor belt that is reminiscent of a baggage claim belt, which starts turning around when somebody approaches it, concretizing futile promises in the vicious circle of the belt. The limitation of movement the spin-around suggests follows the vicious circle imagery and do so in complete resonance to Baalbaki's stagnant fighter.

Manal Al-Dowayan's installation "Suspended Together" completes the stagnation imagery at an aerial spot, although the work is of a completely different context, with the bunch of doves displaying travel permission documents donated to the artist by many leading women from Saudi Arabia. In order to travel, all Saudi women need a permission document issued by their appointed guardians.

Concept of freedom, or more frequently its lack, is an integral part of the questioning mechanisms employed in the individual works, while the overall body of the exhibition presents different horizons and underlines diversity as is prevalent in the highly heterogeneous Arab world. • HDN



A striking piece in the exhibition is 'The Promised' by Baalbaki (above). Lara Baladi's 'Rose' (below) is a digital collage of coffee cups used for fortune telling in the Middle East.

