

Shangri La: Imagined Cities

BY Allison White



Despite its rich cultural and ethnic diversity, Los Angeles often fails to reflect the scope of its internationalism in its contemporary art programming. The city's engagement with art and ideas connected to the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia (MENASA) is especially lacking. This void makes the LA/Islam Arts Initiative a particularly noteworthy happening, which has been presenting a full slate of exhibitions and programming this winter season. Organized by the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA), the Initiative's current program is anchored by two exhibitions at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery: "Doris Duke's Shangri La: Architecture, Landscape, and Islamic Art" and its commissioned complement "Shangri La: Imagined Cities," a group show of eight contemporary artists with predominantly Middle Eastern origins.

Curator Rijin Sahakian positions "Imagined Cities" as a deliberate counterargument to "Doris Duke's Shangri La." The latter exhibition is centered on 60 traditional Islamic art objects from the late American philanthropist's Shangri La estate in Hawaii, which she had acquired

during her travels throughout the Middle East and North Africa in the 1930s. (The show also features a handful of works by contemporary artists who had residencies at Shangri La, and whose works echo the motifs that are represented in the exhibited collection's traditional items.) These vibrant, opulent pieces—from blue and white stonepaste tiles, carved wood and ivory-inlaid tables to ruby-filled bracelets and ornately-designed silk garments—are displayed in brightly-lit, white-walled gallery spaces. In contrast, the various video pieces and works on paper in "Imagined Cities" are hung on dark gray walls and make heavy use of a more washed-out palette.

The wall text for "Imagined Cities" notes that, today, it is impossible for people to travel to the places from which Duke forged her collection; these cities now exist only in the imagination. "Imagined Cities" is a platform for contemporary artists from those parts of the world, and it seeks to complicate viewers' notions and impressions of such people and places. Furthermore, the exhibition makes an unambiguous break from the aesthetics and stories of "Doris Duke's Shangri La." Sahakian uses Los Angeles-based conceptual artist Charles Gaines's text, *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism* (1993), as a jumping off point, highlighting the importance of investigating artists working in the margins.

George Awde's photographic series "Untitled" (2007–14), consisting of 24 large inkjet prints and 60 smaller Polaroids and prints, is situated in the first gallery and speaks directly to the present-day landscape and people of the Middle East. "Untitled" captures young men in their 20s, situated in spare interiors and exteriors throughout the Lebanese capital of Beirut and the country of Syria. Portrayed primarily in a state of idleness, these men convey a sense of hopelessness and even desperation. They stare blankly out of windows, into the distance, or directly at the camera, simultaneously shaped by and withdrawn from their surroundings.



ADRIAN PACI, *The Column*, 2013, video still. Courtesy the artist and Kaufmann Repetto, Milan.

Adrian Paci's film *The Column* (2013) examines the transport of high-value objects from the East to the West. The film follows the journey of a marble slab from its beginnings at a quarry in China to its final form as a carved Roman column. A crew of Chinese laborers completes the carving while aboard a cargo ship. Scenes of breaking and chiseling are interspersed with glimpses of the workers' lives between shifts—a cook chops and washes cabbages for a meal, and men watch television in their cramped sleeping quarters. One can imagine that the artisans Duke commissioned 80 years ago to adorn her personal Shangri La—hailing from India, Morocco, Iran and Syria—likely had similar experiences.