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Middle East at Paris Art Week: Business as usual in a tense climate

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Naima Morelli | 09 November, 2023

Bringing together 154 premier galleries from 34 countries and territories at the Grand Palais Éphémère, Paris Art Week transformed the capital city into a global showcase of creativity, but not of awareness as any focus on Gaza went amiss.



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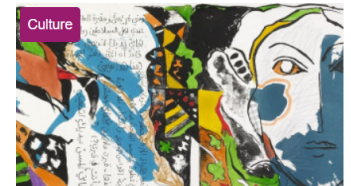
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Unquestionably one of the most important art events in Europe this year, the Paris Art Week, happened from 16 to 22 October. Given the international climate, what was expected was for shows and art fairs to have an emphasis on the situation in Gaza, but this was not the case.

There was, however, one exception, the Institute Du Monde Arab's *Ce que la Palestine apporte au Monde* — *What Palestine brings to the world* — up until November 19, which although poorly curated, still created the opportunity for a reflection through art.

The anchor of the Paris Art Week was the big fair [Paris + par Art Basel](#)

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which took the place of FIAC.

Bringing together 154 premier galleries from 34 countries and territories at the Grand Palais Éphémère from October 20–22, 2023, the fair was accompanied by smaller but significant fairs like Asia Now, AKA A fair, and Design Miami.

Despite having curated sections and talks, none of these fairs had a specific emphasis on what is going on in Palestine at the moment.

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Getting to Paris in itself already set the tone for how the week would unfold. The flight assistant announced that the plane had started the descent, and would be landing in 13 minutes in Paris Beauvais. After 30 minutes, we got a different announcement.

Paris Beauvais had been evacuated because of a bomb alert, and the pilot was waiting for the authorisation to land at a different airport in the French countryside.

We did, and the small non-civil airport was empty. Then two hours bus, one hour train, a metro line, and five hours later we finally laid our suitcase in the hotel room.

That day another six airports were closed across France and Belgium, and in the following days, they were repeatedly evacuated, along with Versailles and the Louvre.

The state of maximum alert was put in place by the French government, and walking from one exhibition to another, police were everywhere and the tension was palpable.

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We need to point out that amongst the countries in Europe, France is perhaps the one where the situation in Palestine – and what is going on in the Middle East in general – has one of the strongest reverberating effects.

A large chunk of the Arab population can influence political moves, and after the 2015 terrorist attack in France, the threat of radicalisation and terrorism is always present in the public consciousness



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and terrorism is always present in the public consciousness.

These fears materialised just a few days before Art Week when a [teacher was killed in a knife attack](#) at a school in northern France.

The scare did affect some collectors and art crowds, who kept themselves from visiting Paris.

However, the paranoia did stop at the door of the Grand Palais Éphémère and of the art galleries across town. The art world seemed determined to represent a safe space, devoid of any tension.

In this regard, it also didn't take any pro-Palestine or pro-Israel position, unlike other big events happening in Europe at the same time, such as the Frankfurt book fair or Lucca Comics in Italy.

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A show about what Palestine brings to the world

The one institution that presented a show that resonated with the current situation in Palestine, was the Institute du Monde Arabe, with the aforementioned show *Ce que la Palestine apporte au monde* ([What Palestine brings to the world](#))

This opened way before the current state of affairs, but has been since extended. From the title, this seemed to be a must-visit for all people flocking into the capital for the art week.

However, the exhibition itself was quite disappointing and didn't deliver on the title at all. There were great works by some of the best Palestinians working today, but these were a bit lost in a confusing curation.

The show opened up with a first section which presented the project of the first museum for Palestine, dubbed the Sahab Museum project.

It seemed oblivious to the fact that a museum for Palestine already exists in Birzeit. A large part of the Sahab Museum works were not by Palestinian artists and often did not even have Palestine as a theme.

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It contradicted the title in the sense that it showcased more what the world wanted to bring to Palestine, rather than the artistic contribution to the art world by Palestinians. The collection was for years stored at the Institute du Monde Arabe, and it was bound to be brought to Gaza.

The second section of the show was better than the first, as most of the artworks were finally tied or inspired by Mahmoud Darwish's poem, *Eloge de l'ombre haute* ([Praise for the High Shadow](#)) which he declaimed before the Palestinian parliament in exile in Algiers, in February 1983.

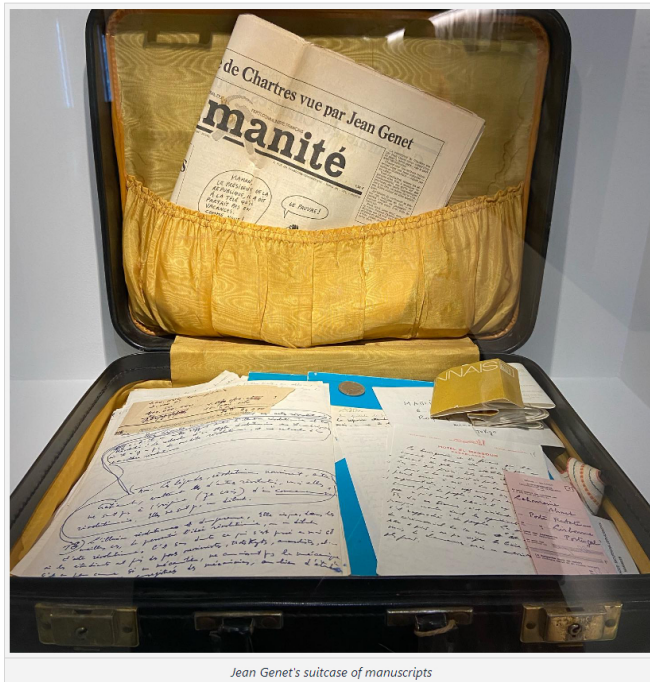
The last section, showcasing mostly photos, had great contemporary works by Palestinian artists like Safaa Khatib, Hazem Harb, Steve Sabella, Taysir Batniji, and striking photojournalism by Eman Mohammed, Maen Hamman, and others, as well as orientalist pictures from the end of the 1800-beginning of 1900.

Each piece in this section was extremely powerful in itself, but sadly the works were a bit lost in the overlapping of too many themes.

It needs to be said that *Ce que la Palestine apporte au monde* was very well-attended. But precisely because of this, such a poor curation seems like a missed opportunity to inform audiences about the richness of Palestinian art to shift the French perception of Palestine at a time when it is most needed.

Finally, another show at the Institute, collateral to the main one, was an interesting collection of documents regarding two special suitcases by French writer Jean Genet.

The story goes that 15 days before his death, in April 1986, Jean Genet gave his lawyer Roland Dumas two suitcases of manuscripts, containing his writing on his encounter with the Palestinian people.



Jean Genet's suitcase of manuscripts

The Palestinian struggle later became a major concern for Genet and the central subject of his testamentary book *A Captive in Love*.

It also resulted in a powerful testimony of the massacres in the refugee camps of Sabra and Chatila, published in the *Review of Palestinian Studies*.

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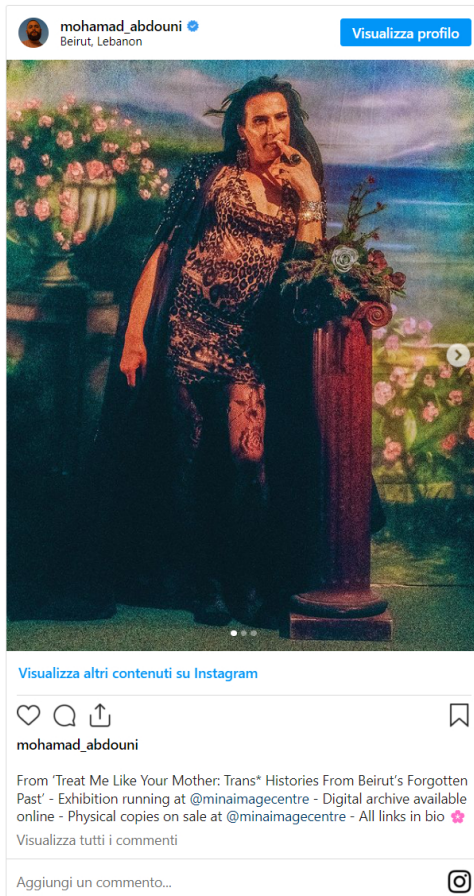
Middle Eastern presence at the Parisian art fairs

In the art fairs, the presence of Middle Eastern artists has slightly decreased compared to the past few years. This is perhaps because in September there had been Menart, another art fair which attracted the bulk of galleries of the Mena region.

However, at Paris +, in terms of Middle Eastern attention, there was one very relevant exception. This is the Beirut gallery Marfa', which presented very interesting photographic work by the Lebanese artist Mohamad Abdouni.

His current project situates the most significant trends of today's art: queer identities, AI, and the archive. His work is part of the series *Treat*

Treat Me Like Your Mother: Trans Histories From Beirut's Forgotten Past*, which draws materials from the Arab Image Foundation, focusing on Middle Eastern queer communities over the last four decades.



In his latest series exhibited at the fair called *Extended Archives*, the artist crafts fake archives, through AI. He did that by blending material comprised of personal photographs, transcriptions of their oral histories, images from the Arab Image Foundation, and the artist's past photographic work to create a manufactured extension to the real existing archive of a queer community in the Middle East.

The resulting artwork ends up raising questions about fake narratives, and the authenticity of archives.

The work was awarded the Lafayette Anticipations Prize, and this represents an acknowledgement of the importance of Arab narratives, beyond stereotypes, in the French and European art world.

The smaller Asia-focused art fair AsiaNow presented several artists and galleries from the Middle East, which included galleries from Iran and from UAE, like Ayyam Gallery from Dubai, Ab-Anbar Gallery, and Etemad Gallery from Tehran.





Of course, Middle Eastern artists were present at several booths. Very relevant are Monira Al Qadiri at Konig Gallery, presenting a series of rotating sculptures called *Orbital*, and Afghan artist Kubra Khademi.

A multidisciplinary artist and a feminist, Khademi showed silk prints with individual women giving birth to animals: crouching, lying, or standing, here they bring a goat and a chicken into the world.

Drawing a parallel with the treatment of women and domesticated animals in Afghanistan, she underlines the degradation of women as birth machines, and the focus placed on fertility as the only element of relevance in Afghan society.

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An apolitical art world

To draw conclusions from the art week, we can observe that Paris is not losing its centrality in the art world, but rather increasing traction, even compared to other art capitals such as London, which had its art week at the beginning of October.

Paris is still the epicentre in Europe for the Arab world too, and this is why it's a bit disappointing to see that the art world largely prefers to remain in its own bubble.

This has not always been the case; the Parisian art world last year was very vocal when it came to the vexations of women in Iran and Afghanistan.

Perhaps this was a theme that for the Western world was easier to agree upon, while the current situation in Palestine creates much more polarization – and this kind of polarization certainly doesn't help to sell artworks.

While there is undoubtedly goodness in being able to look away from the horrors to find solace in some beauty, if only for one instant, at the same time, we must also reckon with the fundamentally apolitical nature of the art market.

And nowadays it's the art market to direct the art world. The show must go on, sure, and in Paris, it seems to be business as usual. Gaza or not.

Naima Morelli is an arts and culture writer with a particular interest in contemporary art from the Middle East, North Africa and the Asia-Pacific region. She is also the author Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione and The Singapore Series: a contemporary art reportage

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