



Above: Randa Mirza, *Al-Lât*, 2015, marble, 63 x 19¾ x 19¾".
Right: Ginane Makki Bacho, untitled, 2011, metal shrapnel.
From the series "Shrapnel Cedars," 2012–16.



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NASSER RABBAT ON ART IN BEIRUT

THREE YEARS AFTER the Islamic State's brutal offensive in Iraq, and with no end in sight to the civil war raging in Syria after six years of conflict, the future of the Middle East looks increasingly precarious. At the same time, the West has made a dramatic turn inward, with potentially disastrous consequences for its role in the international community. Now, when art's critical engagement and resistance are needed more acutely than ever, *Artforum* invited art historian Nasser Rabbat to reflect on two recent exhibitions in Beirut that offer a glimpse of a more cosmopolitan future—and of the role of art in confronting fundamentalism and fascism.



Above: Ginane Makki Bacho, *untitled*, 2012, metal shrapnel. From the series "Shrapnel Cedars," 2012–16.

Right: Ginane Makki Bacho, *Trucks with Prisoners*, 2012–16, iron, metal. Installation view, Saleh Barakat Gallery, Beirut, 2016. Photo: Agathe Champsaur.



DESPITE BEING RAVAGED by an unresolved civil war that raged for fifteen years, from 1975 to 1990, and plagued by a dysfunctional political system, Beirut—chaotic, crowded, and dirty—is still the most vibrant city in the Middle East. Paradoxically, the very vacuum of power that hampers the city in so many ways also allows its culture and art to thrive. In the interstitial spaces between the various sectarian communities that share the city—Sunni, Shi’ite, Maronite, Druze, Orthodox, Armenian, and the heterogenous mix that occupies the cosmopolitan center—freedom of expression is still possible, and is sometimes even nurtured. Indeed, the artistic pulse of the entire region can be gauged in Beirut’s galleries, theaters, cafés, and universities; no other neighboring city, not even cultural heavyweights such as Cairo, Istanbul, and Tehran, can compete with Beirut, for the simple reason that none of their populations enjoy the degree of liberty afforded Beirut’s.

It is no surprise, then, that Beirut is where art is coming out the clearest and loudest against the Islamic radicalization that has swept across the Middle East in the past twenty years. Yet this defiant art must contend with a range of increasingly sophisticated aesthetic practices that serve the ideology of radical Islam itself. The Sunni caliphate, also known as the Islamic State (IS), for instance, has proved itself a master of staged morbid spectacles. Choreographed-reality scenes of public executions—often including such medieval methods as beheading, caging, burning, or throwing from high places—have deplorably become the visual signature of IS’s brutality and ruthlessness. In their pursuit of maximum effect, IS’s unknown yet sophisticated imagemakers have employed filmic and stage techniques and a flagrant aesthetic of cruelty that seem to have been lifted from Hollywood horror movies and ultraviolent video games. Online parades of gruesome killings and suicide missions have become IS’s best recruitment tools among disenfranchised, computer-game-reared youth in the Middle East and the West, as well as an all-too-effective means of intimidating their enemies, evidenced by the fact that well-

equipped military units in Iraq and Syria have often retreated or surrendered in the face of far smaller IS squads.

In order to preserve its social relevance, contemporary art in the Middle East must confront the widespread fetishization of sectarian violence head-on. This will in turn necessitate the dangerous work of delving into the religious taboos that have long marred our understanding of Islamic history, despite the fact that sporadic recent attempts by artists or authors to creatively revisit controversial themes in the religion’s past have been severely quashed, often with accusations of blasphemy or apostasy. Indeed, the stakes of such artistic courage extend well beyond the confines of the art world to the very future of the Middle East: Engaged artistic practice can serve as the vanguard of the broader social and cultural responses to radicalism that the region must mount to reclaim its stability and normality.

TWO SOLO SHOWS that ran concurrently in November 2016 through early January 2017 in Beirut offered just such an engagement. The first was Ginane Makki Bacho’s sardonically titled “Civilization” at Saleh Barakat Gallery. (This space itself seems to suggest the possibility of a vibrant future for the city that echoes—and perhaps even surpasses—its cosmopolitan past, having opened last year in a beautifully revamped building in the Hamra district, the old hub of Beirut, which formerly housed the Cinéma Clemenceau, famously one of the first movie houses in the Middle East to show avant-garde films in the 1960s.) The second is Randa Mirza’s “El-Zohra Was Not Born in a Day” at Galerie Tanit in Achrafieh, the traditional Christian bourgeois quarter that has also recently undergone extensive gentrification. The shows made a particularly fascinating pairing because together they suggested a full range of possible critical responses to radicalism, with Makki Bacho offering an obsessive, up-to-the-minute confrontation with IS’s bloody performances and Mirza digging deep into the history of Islam to question the view—



Above: **Ginane Makki Bacho**, *Migrant Boats* (detail), 2012–16, bronze. Installation view, Saleh Barakat Gallery, Beirut, 2016. Photo: Agathe Champsaur.

Right: **Ginane Makki Bacho**, *Execution of Prisoners*, 2012–16, iron, metal. Installation view, Saleh Barakat Gallery, Beirut, 2016. Photo: Agathe Champsaur.



so crucial to the fundamentalist dogma—that Islam was a sui generis puritan movement with no roots in the previous cultural traditions of Arabia.

Makki Bacho is a veteran artist with a fascinating biography. Born in Beirut in 1947, she lived in the city until she and her family were displaced during the civil war. She eventually moved to the United States, in 1984, where she lived for almost twenty years, working multiple jobs to raise her four sons, before returning to Lebanon in 2000. Her work before this most recent show had been largely self-referential, comprising series of paintings, etchings, and print books centered on her own life as a Lebanese woman navigating the vagaries of tradition, family life, exile, alienation, dashed aspirations, and remembrance. When an Israeli raid destroyed her apartment in Beirut in 1982 she obstinately turned this personal tragedy into an opportunity for artistic exploration. Collecting twisted shrapnel from the sites of destroyed buildings throughout the city, she formed elegant sculptures out of the material, including multiple series of miniature cedar trees, the symbol emblazoned on the Lebanese flag, which defiantly reconfirms her national identity even as it offers a literal and material testament to the violence that has shaped her country's recent history.

Continuing to work in the medium after these early experiments with shrapnel, Makki Bacho mastered the demanding methods of metal sculpture, molding her (and our) anxieties into solid, enduring forms. “Civilization,” however, marked a fundamental rupture with her previous work. Here the narrative had shifted from the personal to the regional, and violence was no longer implied by her choice of materials but rendered with shocking explicitness. A large installation that depicted IS's modes of operation and their devastating effects on their captive population in horrifying detail, “Civilization” was Makki Bacho's moment of *j'accuse*. Her critique was directed not only at the brutality of IS but also at the complicity of the Islamic world, which has been unwilling to totally repudiate this terrorist organization because of its adherence to the basic tenets of the religion,* as well as of the international community, which has remained cynically indifferent to IS's crimes except when the targets are foreign hostages, members of minority groups, or ancient monuments.

Makki Bacho spent the past three years compulsively assembling the numerous metal miniatures that constituted her show. The central installation represented every weapon in the IS arsenal, from tanks and trucks with mounted guns to motorbikes and lone foot soldiers, all welded together from bits of steel in a manner evocative of both rough carelessness and mechanical exuberance. The vehicles and figures were spread across a low, L-shaped platform covered with sand (the desert-like setting was conceived by the gallerist Saleh Barakat and reminiscent of the caliphate's terrain of action), in formations that recall the actual deployment of IS terror convoys. One end of the central platform had a number of rickety refugee boats overflowing with desperate human cargo. A second, smaller platform was filled with morbid scenes of torture, and the same platform mingled cages filled with unfortunate captives in orange jumpsuits with gallows and the most horrific scene of all: dozens of roughly welded soldiers beheading their captives, arrayed in a rigid line like some industrialized conveyor belt of death. The overall effect of revulsion provoked by the overt details of Makki Bacho's depiction of torture is tinged with a certain fascination evoked by the dramatic, albeit harsh and metallic, contortions with which she has sculpted the abstracted human body under stress. And although the artist avoids any didacticism, she clearly plays on the ambiguity of our reactions to remind us of the extent to which we have become inured to the scenes of dehumanizing violence—be they of primitive beheading, barrel-bombing, or high-tech drone killing—that pervade the media we consume today, and by whose fiery brutality we are perhaps even perversely tantalized.

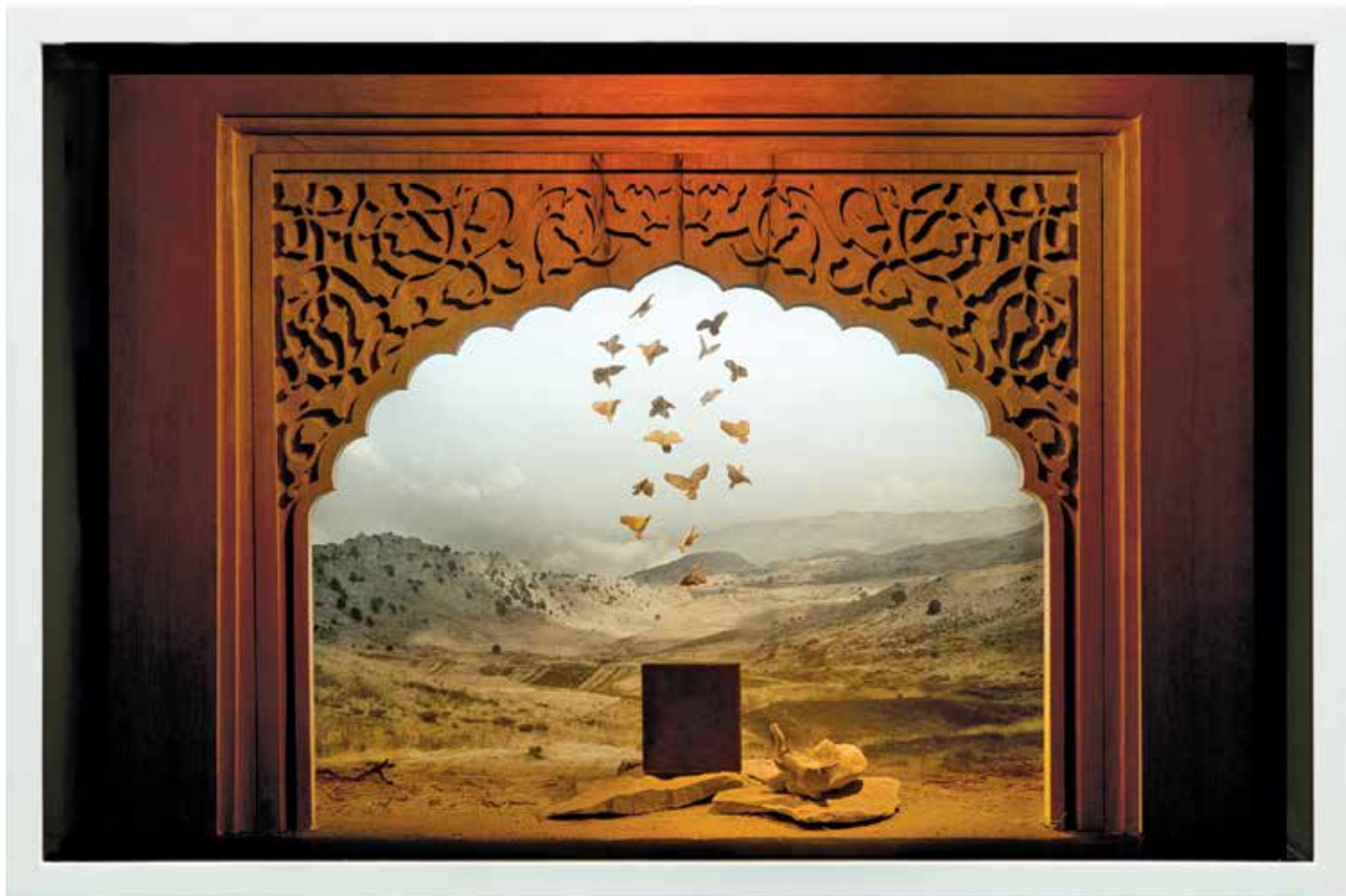
IF MAKKI BACHO'S understanding of the current wave of violence afflicting the Middle East has been shaped in part by her personal experience of the Lebanese civil war, Mirza belongs to a younger generation that did not witness the entire

* This is exemplified by the byzantine argument presented by al-Azhar, Egypt's and the Arab world's highest Sunni authority, in December 2014, which refrained from considering IS un-Islamic since they have not reneged on any basic Islamic principle. See Ahmed Fouad, “Al-Azhar Refuses to Consider the Islamic State an Apostate,” *Al-Monitor*, February 12, 2015, <http://al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/azhar-egypt-radicals-islamic-state-apostates.html>.

Right: Randa Mirza, *The Golden Deer of Mecca*, 2016, copper, gold, 26 × 26 × 4".

Below: Randa Mirza, *The Year of the Elephant*, 2014, ink-jet print on canvas, ceramic, metal, neon light, dichroic lamps, halogen lamp, dimmers, glass, wood, MDF. 41 3/4 × 27 1/2 × 29 1/2".

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Left: Randa Mirza, *The Gods of Noah*, 2016, glass, television, dimmer, media player, dichroic lamp, sand, rocks, digital video, MDF, 43¼ × 27½ × 31½".

Above: View of "Randa Mirza: *El-Zohra Was Not Born in a Day*," 2016–17, Galerie Tanit, Beirut. From left: *The Gods of Noah*, 2016; *Al-Lât*, 2015. Photo: Randa Mirza.

Opposite page: Randa Mirza, *Al Hâma* (detail), 2016, copper frame, glass, dimmer, DVD player, contact speaker, dichroic lamps, neon light, taxidermied bird, Plexiglas, ink-jet print, audio, USB drive, 21¼ × 39¾ × 19¾".

conflict firsthand but has grown up in its unsettled aftermath. Her usual media are photography and video, and her art, like Makki Bacho's, is rooted in her home city, its inhabitants, and their contradictions. But Mirza, like a psychoanalyst, maintains a distance from her subject matter: She patiently observes it, critically analyzes it, and deftly represents it but does not explicitly identify with it. In the past few years, she has examined Beirut's urban spaces, the rooms of its abandoned buildings, the pastimes of its inhabitants, including its affluent children, and the composite memories its citizens carry of its civil war. Yet she always presents her findings through rigorously organized collections of images reminiscent of documentary photography, which seem to categorize and evaluate human types, behaviors, and attitudes even as they probe clandestine and occasionally taboo subjects such as sex and the body, as she did in her collaborative art intervention with Giulia Guadagnoli, in which photographed naked buttocks are examined, grouped, and interpreted, and colloquial expressions using the vulgar term for "buttocks" (*tiz*) are analyzed according to a seemingly scientific method that manages nonetheless to foreground a thinly veiled sociocultural critique.

Like "Civilization," Mirza's most recent show, "El-Zohra Was Not Born in a Day," at Galerie Tanit (realized in collaboration with Eric Deniaud, a puppeteer, and Riccardo Clementi, a lighting designer), distinctly broke from her previous body of work and turned toward the broader impact of Islam on the image of the region. Rather than examine the extreme manifestations of Islamic militancy in the present, however, she delved deep into the past, looking back to the religion's conception of its own origins. Her subject matter here was al-Jahiliyyah, as the pre-Islamic period in Arabia is known. The term itself is revealing: It is explicitly derogatory and literally means "ignorance." And in fact all of Islamic historiography is geared toward denigrating the preexisting cultural milieu within which Islam grew, effacing its achievements and connections to other cultures. The aim of this deliberate erasure is obviously to present Islam as a miraculous awakening, and the Prophet Muhammad

as delivering culture and monotheism to an otherwise uncultured people. This has been the sanctioned account for more than fourteen centuries. It was not challenged until modern methods of archaeology and historical inquiry started uncovering evidence of pre-Islamic Arabs who were very cultured indeed. But the official narrative still upheld by all Islamic religious authorities rejects such revisions and insists on the extrication of Islam's foundation from its historical context.

In "El-Zohra Was Not Born in a Day," Mirza brilliantly subverted that official narrative by using early Arabic sources and modern archaeology to reconstruct stories about pre-Islamic Arab cultures buried within Islam's own foundational text, the Qur'an. Her instrument was a nineteenth-century contraption, the diorama, five of which (accompanied by one sculpture and one relief-like shield) constituted the core of the show. Each captured a pre-Islamic legend interpreted through its traces in the Qur'an, and each suggests that Mirza's goal is nothing less than demythologizing the origin of Islam by visually and conceptually linking it to the myths from which it emerged.

One of these dioramas depicted the attack on the Kaaba in Mecca the year of Muhammad's birth (ca. 570 CE). Framed by a Mughal cusped arch, a model of the holy shrine is set in an arid landscape with a white elephant lying next to it and birds circling above. Mirza's presentation of the Kaaba is not historically accurate—we know from textual evidence that the structure was covered with colored animal skins in pre-Islamic times—but the scene is a faithful rendering of the Qur'anic verses reporting the invasion, which describe a war elephant refusing to attack the protected House of God, and state that God ultimately destroyed the invading army by sending a flock of birds that bombarded it with petrified-clay stones (Qur'an 105: 1–5). This miracle is traditionally cast as the prelude to the more consequential one of the birth of Muhammad, who will lead his people to the true monotheistic religion, Islam. But Mirza, in her wall text, wryly notes that the invaders were monotheists themselves—Christians, actually—and that they had

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wanted to turn the Arabs away from Mecca, convert them, and induce them to visit their own kaaba in Sana'a, Yemen, named al-Qalis (an obvious alteration of *ecclesia*, the Latin word for “church”).

The boldest diorama was the one that gave the show its name. El-Zohra is none other than the Arabic version of the Roman goddess Venus, also known as Ishtar of Mesopotamia and Aphrodite of the Greeks. Her story is obliquely alluded to in Qur'an 2: 102 and elaborated on in Islamic apocrypha, although many contemporary commentators, displaying less flexibility than their medieval counterparts, deny the reference to el-Zohra and brand the whole interpretation un-Islamic. Nevertheless, as the popular literary version of the story goes, two angels, Harut and Marut, came down to Earth to learn why humans sin. They were seduced by the beautiful el-Zohra, who, in return for satisfying their desires, demanded that they teach her the magical words that would allow her to ascend to heaven. Armed with this divine knowledge, she triumphantly entered the realm of the gods, but when she wanted to return to Earth, she found that she had forgotten the words and consequently had to remain in the heavens forever, transformed into the planet Venus, while the two angels were condemned for their actions. Mirza's diorama portrays el-Zohra as a beautiful nude standing with two metallic dogs—which the artist uses to represent the two fallen angels—at her feet. Her transformation into a luminous planet is suggested by a point of radiant light that appears cyclically on the center of her body. The rest of the show tackled similar stories and projected them in ways that stunned in their simplicity and directness. In a separate gallery, Mirza placed her exacting research on view, displaying pages from all of the Arabic sources, ancient and modern, that she used in constructing her stories—a gesture at once defensive and authoritative that evinced the precarious position of any critique of fundamentalist ideology today.

Mirza's exhaustive historical research mirrors Makki Bacho's painstaking sculptural fabrication—indeed, each artist spent three years preparing her show,



the same period during which IS proclaimed Islamic fanaticism and brought it to new lows of horrifying violence. These two women artists, whose art had mostly focused on life in Beirut, rose to meet the challenge of radical Islam at the same time. Are their answers sufficient? Perhaps not, but we cannot expect two individuals to accomplish what progressive Arabic culture as a whole has failed to do, despite decades of the erosion of basic freedoms carried by various forms of fundamentalism of which IS is only the most recent and most virulent manifestation. What these two brave artists have done, however, is stand up to radicalism by using art to debunk its claims, and point the way for further resistance to its arrogant overreach. As the West tragically moves away from the principles of cultural openness toward its own version of nativist fundamentalism, their attitude of critical resistance will only become more urgently necessary, both within their region and throughout the world. □

NASSER RABBAT IS THE AGA KHAN PROFESSOR AND THE DIRECTOR OF THE AGA KHAN PROGRAM FOR ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE AT THE MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)