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### 2015 Armory Show fair puts focus on Middle Eastern artists

Geoff Edgers



Artists at the Vallois gallery prepare for the Armory Show at Pier 94 in Manhattan on March 2.  
(Yana Paskova/For The Washington Post)

NEW YORK — The golden Saddam Hussein statues hadn't arrived, but Wafaa Bilal decided it was time to come up with a price tag. The 2015 edition of the Armory Show fair would open Thursday to the public.

"I'm thinking \$80,000 to \$100,000," Bilal said casually to the director of his Dubai-based gallery, as if he were discussing which toppings to put on a pizza.

"It's got to be that," said William Lawrie, settling the issue.

Bilal, 48, was born in Iraq, where he says he couldn't study art because of Hussein's oppressive regime. After time in a refu-gee camp, he arrived in the United States in 1993 and today is a professor at New York University. He's also one of 27 artists in the

Armory's special "Focus" section, featuring a group of 15 galleries representing artists from Egypt, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates and other areas of the Middle East, North Africa and the Mediterranean.

"Focus: MENAM," as it's officially called, serves dual purposes. For some of the selected artists, it's hard to connect with buyers, network for institutional support and get attention from museums and galleries. The Armory Show, a fair and market spread across 200,000 square feet in the Pier 94 and 92 buildings on the Hudson River, provides access to it all — to art authorities and the public — over a four-day art market in one of the world's great art centers. For the Armory Show, a business not a charity, the program has other benefits. By creating the Middle Eastern focus, it is connecting with a region where oil-rich collectors have been spending hundreds of millions of dollars on art and recruiting U.S. museums to open satellite institutions.



Artist and gallery owner Daniel Templon chats with The Armory Show director Noah Horowitz amidst preparations at Pier 94 in Manhattan. (Yana Paskova/For The Washington Post)

The 2015 Armory Show marks the first partnership between Art Jameel, an organization funded by the Saudi-based distributor of Toyota and Lexus, and Edge of Arabia, a nonprofit group partially based in London that connects the art scenes of the Middle East and the West.

"We didn't do this because of funding, but we've been able to meet some very important people," said Noah Horowitz, the Armory's executive director. "We're also trying to work with artists and galleries that don't already have mega visibility."

That description fits Aleya Hamza, who runs the Gypsum Gallery in Cairo. She couldn't afford to fly her artists, Doa Aly and Mona Marzouk, to New York. What mattered is that their work made the trip.

"Generally, I don't like having them bracketed as the artists from the Middle East," Hamza said. "Right now, there's hype about them in New York, but when the hype is over, what happens to them?"

Being pigeonholed is a small price to pay, she conceded, to promote artists from a place the market is minuscule, museums don't collect contemporary art and there is almost no foundation support.

"The Armory Show is an equal playing field, and in the next few days, we're going to see whether these artists can prove to be as interesting as American artists," said Heba Elkayal, an Egyptian-born art history student at Columbia University helping Hamza. "This is a great opportunity to show off how complex the art being produced in the Middle East can be."

Horowitz said there was discussion about whether to group the Focus artists together. Ultimately, he decided it made sense. With more than 2,000 artists in the Armory Show, he wanted to make it easier for people to see galleries participating in the program.

And for Stephen Stapleton, a co-founder of Edge of Arabia, one of the sponsors of the initiative, which includes a symposium, it's Horowitz who has made much of the difference. At 35, the Armory's leader has a PhD in art history from the Courtauld Institute of Art in London and isn't afraid to call out the shortcomings of the glitzy side of the art market .

"It's always been curious to me," Stapleton said. "Art fairs are the least creative fairs of all industry fairs. You go to a boat fair or a car fair, and they're much more creative. You go to an art fair, it's like everybody is scared to stand out. Noah knows it actually should be a place where new things happen. We had crazy ideas. We're bringing a modified RV to the fair and doing these trips through New York. Noah understands you have to think outside the box."

Lawrence Abu Hamdan, selected as the Armory's commissioned artist for the show, has taken that to heart. Hamdan, a sound artist born in Jordan and living in Beirut, is doing two projects. In the Focus section, he's displaying an older piece, "The Freedom of Speech Itself," which is meant to make a political statement about the way people are monitored through voice prints. As the commissioned artist, he has created a series of works.

One is a conceptual piece that he unveiled this week by slicing open a cardboard box. Reaching, he grabbed a bag of potato chips and smiled. A closer look at the crinkly packaging revealed a small label offering a warning:

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO REMAIN SILENT, ANYTHING YOU DO SAY IN THE VICINITY OF THIS OBJECT MAY BE RECORDED FOR TRAINING AND MONITORING PURPOSES.

The idea came to Hamdan after learning Massachusetts Institute of Technology researchers had found a way to extract sound from everyday objects, including tissues, a glass of water and a plant.

"These," he said, holding up one of the 5,000 bags of chips being distributed for free throughout the Armory Show, "will be a new kind of vinyl records. It's both sinister and beautiful. The leaves from a plant or a potato chip bag or a tissue, each have their own sonic color. That's the beautiful side. The sinister side is that everything we see around has the potential to record our every word."

A few booths down from Hamdan, Bilal looked over at smaller, concrete busts of Hussein being stacked on a shelf. These were not the \$80,000 editions. Bilal has strong feelings about war in the Middle East. His brother died during a U.S. missile strike in Iraq. A past project found the artist confined to a room for 30 days where people could fire a paintball gun at him. He is unwilling to compromise if it detracts from his point.

The Saddam busts are an example. These candle holders, bookends and paper weights would be sold for \$3,000 to \$5,000. The cost of making them? Bilal said he has been paying American veterans \$6 an hour. That's less than minimum wage, he said proudly.

Many veterans, Bilal explained, don't have proper health care or jobs when they get home. Did he feel badly that they were being paid so little for their work? Of course not.

"That's what exploitation is all about," he said.