

## Culture

# Suspended Accounts tells forgotten Palestinian history

Karen Dabrowska

London

Using archives and self-narrative to tell unwritten history is at the heart of insightful creations displayed in the *Suspended Accounts* exhibition by Palestinian artists and finalists in the A M Qattan Foundation's Young Artists of the Year Award at the Mosaic Rooms in West London.

The nine finalists for the biennial award, which is open to artists under 30 of Palestinian descent from any part of the world, were asked to manage their history through arts, curator Viviana Checchia said.

"It is a way for artists to assume responsibility and personally take control of the narrative in their own context. In the exhibition there are accounts which are not part of the main Palestinian narrative.

"It is basically informing us about chapters in the history of Palestine that we are not aware of such as the case of the Palestinian children sent to a boarding school in Russia. The exhibition relates to history: using the archives and making it alive and relevant."

The finalists were shortlisted from among 50 artists who sent proposals in response to the curatorial statement about the use of the archive in "self-historisation", Checchia said.

"They were given a budget of \$1,000 each to create their own project for the award. From April to September they met on line and discussed their work and there was input from scholars and art critics from all over the world."

The outcome was an array of paintings, installations and documentary-style films.

The winner, Bashar Khalaf, presented a series of paintings *A Shadow of the Shadow* in which he said he sought to bring the vision of

established Palestinian artist Suleiman Mansour into the present. Each painting in Khalaf's series sits in dialogue with a specific painting by Mansour alongside it.

"He is giving the audience the opportunity to see the talented painters creating beautiful paintings in Palestine. This is a reference for the new generation," Checchia said.

Finalist Hamody Ghannam has spent his life in Wadi Nisnas, a small segment of what was left of Haifa's old city following the *nakba*, referring to the Palestinian forced exodus upon Israel's establishment in 1948.

He recorded interviews with residents from the neighbourhood as they tried to preserve their identity and the Arabic language. His installation is an archive room that contains boxes with the names of Palestinian families in Hebrew. Visitors walk through the room and hear the interviews about those memories.

Noor Abed's film *Penelope* was inspired by the Greek epic *The Odyssey*. It explores ideas of futility, homeland and time. Abed's heroine is a sewing fish. There is a sense of belonging and displacement.

In *The Odyssey*, Penelope pretends to be weaving a burial shroud for her husband and says she will choose a suitor when she finishes. The Greek hero Odysseus struggles for ten years after the end of the Trojan War in the sea battling mystical creatures before he returns home.

Farah Saleh's interactive video dance installation *A Fidayee Son in Moscow* portrays a day in the Interdom, a school built in 1933 in Ivanovo, north-east of Moscow to host the children of revolutionary parents from all over the world as a form of solidarity between nations.

Saleh's brother went to the school with the children of China's Mao Zedong and Yugoslavia's Josip Tito. After the 1982 Israeli war on Lebanon, the Palestinian leadership was scattered across the Arab world

A painting from the *Shadow of Shadow* series by Bashar Khalaf

and some members decided to send their sons to the international boarding school in the Soviet Union.

The video focuses on the gestures and movements the students used to do in their history, singing, physics and creative writing classes and asks the public to try these gestures themselves in an attempt to make them live the Interdom experience.

**"The artists want the audience to gain an understanding of forgotten history through their films and installations."**

It encourages viewers to reflect on the pasts of the children, left from a certain generation, and questions the future of the current ones.

Being "scattered globally" or born and raised away from the land of their parents, many of the artists sought to connect with their Pales-

tinian identity by imagining, reflecting on, or appropriating others' experiences, the exhibition's synopsis states.

"Exploring the memories of others, examining archives, imagining and constructing undocumented artefacts, questioning recorded histories and interrogating ideas of identity, the exhibition presents an insight into the practices of today's emerging Palestinian artists," the synopsis said.

A M Qattan Foundation Director of the Culture and Arts Programme Mahmoud Abu Hashhash said the project provides an opportunity to link the current problems of Palestinians with international issues. "The artists want the audience to gain an understanding of forgotten history through their films and installations," Abu Hashhash said.

Karen Dabrowska is a London-based contributor to the Culture and Society sections of The Arab Weekly.

Scene from *A Fidayee Son in Moscow*

## Casablanca book fair draws crowds

### Moroccans still devote less than 2 minutes a day to reading, 134 to TV

Saad Guerraoui

Casablanca

The 22nd International Publishing and Book Fair (SIEL) kicked off in Casablanca with the United Arab Emirates as the guest of honour, boosting historical and cultural ties between Morocco and the Gulf state.

More than 650 exhibitors, including publishing houses, government agencies, institutes, universities and civil associations from 45 countries, are taking part in the book fair, which runs February 12-21.

There are 350 new Moroccan titles among tens of thousands of books exhibited at SIEL, which offers more than 130 activities, including thematic roundtables, retrospectives and re-creating missing cultural symbols as well as discussions between the audience and writers.

This year's fair focuses on the Moroccan experience in education, translation and literary and intellectual research, symbolically paying tribute to Moroccan researchers and authors in recognition of their contributions to the promotion of the country's culture.

Long queues at the ticket offices were clearly visible, which showed Moroccans' rising interest in the book fair.

Moroccan author Muhammad Ali Haider said the fair is one of the

rarest cultural events that relink Moroccans with books as reading is not the average Moroccan's choice pursuit.

Morocco ranks 162nd in reading, according to a report from the UN Development Programme. The budget dedicated to promoting reading is a mere 0.03% of the state budget and there is one public library for every 130,000 inhabitants in the country.

A study by the High Commission for Planning (HCP) in 2014 revealed that Moroccans read less than 2 minutes a day and spend 134 minutes watching television.

"Moroccan readers only find

out about the latest book releases when they come to the fair because the media is not playing its role as it should do," Haider said.

"In Europe, printed and visual media give literary criticism a huge importance, which is some kind of free advertising for the latest releases in the market. We lack such a thing in Morocco."

Haider blamed educational institutions and the Ministry of Culture for not doing enough to promote reading among Moroccans.

"Substantial money is spent on music festivals while financial funds are needed to promote reading among both children and

adults," Haider said, calling on the ministry to help state schools take students to the book fair.

"State school teachers used to instil the love of reading into their students by asking them to swap their own books and write summaries. Nowadays, this trend is quasi-absent as most teachers see education as a means of earning a living rather than a profession of high moral character," Haider stressed.

He expressed pessimism about the future of reading in Morocco unless everyone concerned, including schools, parents, media and government institutions, played their role efficiently and effectively.

Some exhibitors at the book fair, such as Dar Al Masar publishing house, tried to do their part by selling books for as little as 5 dirhams (52 US cents).

"We set these prices in order to encourage people to read," said El Bourri, owner of the publishing house, said. "Children's books are the best-selling items in my stand."

There is more interest in children's and religious books than any other types of material.

"Interest in religious books is not unusual at the fair," said writer Jawad Mdidech.

"The problem with most visitors is that they mainly come to SIEL to hang out. Those who are into reading look for books throughout the year," he noted, adding that easy access to information and e-books on the internet and tablets was also taking a toll on printed books.

France is participating in SIEL as part of the France-Morocco Cultural Season organised by the French Institute of Morocco and the embassy of France in Rabat. About 50 lectures, meetings and debates involving more than 40 novelists, essayists, researchers, bloggers and

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cartoonists from both countries, are scheduled to be part of the fair.

"In a tormented Mediterranean, when terror strikes every day many territories and throws on the roads of exile thousands of men, women and children, it is important to allow writers to speak, to think this new state of the world, to fight against the confusion of minds, for shared culture to prevail over the [culture shock]," said a statement from the French Institute.

German poet Volker Braun, who won the 2015 Argana prize by Bayt Achir (the House of Poetry) in Morocco, received his award during a ceremony at SIEL.

"Volker Braun has remained faithful for half a century to the essence of poetry, with verses in tune with their time, radiant with hope, always in quest for balance in a troubled world," Bayt Achir said in a statement.



Attendance at the Casablanca book fair was high, readership in Morocco is still low.