

Culture

Documentaries are staples of Tunis's *Human Screen Festival*

Roua Khlifi

Tunis

The *Human Screen Festival*, founded by the Tunisian Cultural Association of Insertion and Training in 2012, is dedicated to documentaries dealing with human rights issues. Festival organisers have sought to feature cultural projects evoking principles of tolerance and dialogue.

"The festival is faithful to its objectives. It aims to sensitise civil society to the importance of human rights culture," festival Director Kamel ben Ouanes said. "It is also a space that allows critics and human rights advocates to meet and talk about the real issues that Tunisia is experiencing."

"It is an opportunity to reflect on the role of cinema in promoting the principles of human rights and also valorising the importance of culture."

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The fourth *Human Screen Festival*, which ran in early September, dealt with terrorism and women's rights.

"This edition focused on two main issues," ben Ouanes said. "First, it dealt with the ways cinema and art can fight terrorism. The second issue was women's rights and the threats to women in a post-revolution era. In this context, we organised panels around these themes in addition to movie screening."

The festival featured 24 films competing in three categories: long feature films, short films and films about women's rights.

The award for best short film

was given to Tunisian filmmaker Intissar Belaïd for her *Pousses de Printemps* (*Spring Shoots*). American director Gini Reticker won for her *Trials of Spring*, a film about women's rights. *A Flickering Truth* by Pietra Brett Kelly from New Zealand claimed the prize for best long feature.

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In addition to screening films, debates and panels featuring human rights advocates and experts dealing with controversial themes were part of the festival.

Robert J. Landy, president of the jury for long features, said documentaries and cinema can help society overcome traumas, such as terrorism.

"Documentaries as a genre bring fiction too to dealing with specific themes. For instance, some of the documentaries screened in the festival used footage of the revolution but they used it to tell a story," Landy said.

"It helps to work on some of these issues by shedding light on the society living in a revolutionary culture. There is real footage of women being brutalised by police and revolution in Tunisia and in Egypt. This is the festival to have to bring the notions of therapy through art to the audience."

Amna Guellali, director of Human Rights Watch in Tunisia who served as a member of the jury in the long feature section, emphasised the role of documentaries in functioning as therapy for victims of human rights violations.

"Art, therapy and trauma are all interconnected," she said. "It is a step towards social restitution for a victim to participate in a movie in order to testify against crimes. It helps to leave the traumatism they lived behind. For the victim,



Elyes Baccar, artistic director of the festival, at the closing ceremony.

the important thing is to testify in front of a camera. This allows them to recover their voices. It helps reduce their pain.

"Victims of torture can only speak again and be heard in films, which is important from a therapeutic point of view. In systems that are repressive, massive violation of human rights leads to the dehumanisation of victims. There are social categories that are not only dehumanised but are also eliminated in genocide. To have them give their testimonies is to bring them to humanity again. Documentaries bring back the human in them by telling their sto-

ries." "It is very exciting to be here. All the films were different and powerful. There were films about the refugee's voyage from Syria to Sweden and to Netherlands speaking about their feelings about their experiences. They are very powerful," Landy said.

"The most important thing is that the festival is happening and it is happening in Tunisia in particular. It is fascinating that these documentaries are providing better understanding of what the 'Arab spring' means. I am personally fascinated by revolutionary democratic Tunisia."

Debates about the relationship between art and trauma and the image of Arab women in cinema grew heated.

"It is also a space to understand sensitive issues such as terrorism," Landy said. "A man at one of the panels asked if a terrorist is a human being. That is one of the questions to be asked, especially now. These questions will resonate with me and I think I am lucky to have this opportunity to be a part of this."

Roua Khlifi is a regular Travel and Culture contributor to The Arab Weekly. She is based in Tunis.

London gallery showcases modern Arab art

Karen Dabrowska

London

The harsh realities of life in the Arab world are highlighted in the final exhibition based on works from the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation displayed in South London's Whitechapel Gallery during the past year. *Imperfect Chronology: Mapping the Contemporary II*, the fourth installation in the series, focuses on the contradictions in Arab societies and presents works that provide a visual commentary of the changes evident in Arab world cities.

Featuring diverse and poignant works from artists from Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the exhibition offers an unprecedented insight into contemporary art from the Middle East.

***Imperfect Chronology: Mapping the Contemporary II* focuses on the contradictions in Arab societies.**

One of the most striking pieces is by Saudi artist Manal al-Dowayan. At first glance, her two delicate porcelain doves appear to be decorative ornaments but closer inspection reveals a more fascinating story. The doves – traditional symbols of freedom – are inscribed with the words of permission documents, signed by an appointed male guardian, that Saudi women must have to travel. Porcelain is used to comment beautifully on the role of women in contemporary Saudi society.

Curator Omar Kholeif said the exhibition is meant to outline a possible trajectory of recent Arab art at a time of hyperactivity across the Arab world.

"Our aim is to educate audiences about the genealogy of Arab art and to relate key moments that heralded the region's contemporary art. It is important not to measure the Middle East according to a European yardstick. The chronology seeks to speak about what it means to tell the history of Arab art through the lens of one specific collection. We tried not to go for a purely chronological presentation but evoke different kinds of senses," Kholeif said last January.

As visitors enter the gallery they are immersed in the sounds of an Arab city: the sermon of an imam, the music blaring out of loud speakers, the buzz of street life.

In his video, Egyptian artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan explores the cultural fabric of Cairo through its history of noise pollution. The focus is on two Muslim clerics who urge the listeners not to pollute others' hearing with shameful sounds. They criticise those who have weddings in the street and emphasise that freedom means not violating the freedom of others through unwanted noise. Ironically, the imams are filling the very sonic landscape they are trying to clear with their own noise pollution.

Sadik al-Fraji produced animation about the house of his father built and lost in the ruins of Iraq. Cartoon silhouettes pass through a sketch of a beautiful building alternatively lit by the sun and moon that disintegrates and explodes.

Qatari-American artist Sophia al-Maria devotes her 1.51-minute video to a comment on the theme of



Iman Issa's proposal for a crystal building.

the evil eye: A curse believed to be cast by a malevolent glare, usually given to persons when they are unaware. A large round multicoloured eye surveys the ritual slaughter of a lamb for the *Eid* feast, exposing the barbarity of the religiously sanctioned killing.

The exhibition is lit up by Egyptian sculptor Iman Issa's glittering column of crystal lights, which the artist proposes as a utopian monument of Cairo's Tahrir square. Behind

the lights is a photograph of the bleak, desolate square devoid of the revolutionary fervour of 2011 – the city's inhabitants need to be reminded of its former glory.

The GCC Collective, made up of eight artists based in the Gulf, produced a highly detailed miniature model of wood, brass, acrylic, glass and fabric of a hexagonal conference table used at two recent summits of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Shrinking the massive

original down to a less intimidating size this fascinating artefact is a comment on power and politics. The model is too perfect, suggesting that all that glitters is not gold. The idea of a GCC is fine in theory but how does it work in practice?

A mixed-media installation by Marwa Arsanios – *All About Aca-pulco* – explores the changing fortunes of Beirut's answer to Aca-pulco Beach. Suspended from the ceiling is a model of one of the most famous buildings of Ferdinand Dasher known as the spaceship – a symbol of the area in its heyday. Its decline from a hip beach resort to a haven for refugees is registered by a collection of photographs.

Known for her subtle subversion of familiar objects, Jumana Manna removed a limestone bench from East Jerusalem into a gallery environment and called it *The Unlicensed Porch of Jabal Mukhbar*. The sculpture reveals the complexities of life in Jerusalem where the divisions of east and west and who is allowed to roam and own land are dictated by an individual's religious and ethnic origins.

"It captured a century of aesthetic reflection by artists whose work is not necessarily about but undisputedly from the context of the Arab world," Whitechapel Gallery director Iwona Blazwick said about the year-long Barjeel Art Foundation project. "They present a cultural history with complexity, irony, beauty and dissent."

Imperfect Chronology: Mapping the Contemporary II runs through January 4th, 2017.

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