

'The Undaunted Women of Kabul,' Lela Ahmadzai, 2003-2015. Focuses on the religious-political conflict in Afghanistan, especially on issues of gender, treatment of women, and the influence of the war on various parts of society. (Photos: Artists noted)



LOOKING for art in 'out of place' places

• By CARL HOFFMAN

Have you ever walked into a butcher shop expecting to see works of fine art? Or would you imagine viewing artworks by important international artists hanging on the walls of a car repair garage as mechanics remove the dents from the chassis of a 20-year-old Toyota Corolla? How about admiring a painting while you hold your nose in the middle of a shop full of day-old fish?

Well, at this very moment, an exhibition is going on that is unlike anything ever seen in this country before.

Mediterranean Biennale 2017 has begun, with some 250 photographs, videos, paintings, drawings, sculptures and installations by 60 artists from 25 countries – including some you might not expect to be showing artworks in Israel, such as Kuwait, Bahrain, Afghanistan and Iran. Its pur-

pose, according to organizers of the event, is “to promote peace through art activities for building a mutual trust in the area” and “to bring a new approach in the area through artistic activity, hoping to create a base for human dialogue and coexistence between communities that live in conflict, promoting peace education, tolerance and non-violence.”

This regional exhibition of art is the creation and brainchild of two Israeli artists, Belu-Simion Fainaru and Avital Bar-Shay, who established AMOCA, the Arab Museum of Contemporary Art, two years ago. This year's production is the third Mediterranean Biennale, following the first in Haifa in 2010 and the second in Sakhnin in 2013.

Fainaru says that the current show is different from the previous exhibitions. “We have more artists from the region this year. Works by artists from Jordan, Lebanon, from Bahrain, from Syria. That's the difference.”

Asked how he and co-director Bar-Shay were able to get works by artists in countries that have no diplomatic relations with Israel and consider themselves our enemies, Fainaru replies, “It was not easy. Some refused. Some didn't answer us at all. Some didn't want the bad press in their countries. In this part of the world,

politics are involved, so it's not easy even to get the works of art here. We have to get them through European countries, not directly from the countries of origin. This is a problem both getting the artworks here and returning them later. We can't ship things back and forth to Bahrain, but we can ship the artwork to and from a European country, which can ship things back and forth to Bahrain. It's a very complicated system.”

In that case, how do they even manage to contact and persuade artists from Lebanon or Iran to participate in an Israeli art exhibition?

“We find a way to contact them,” says Fainaru. “Sometimes we contact them physically in places in Europe. There, we have many possibilities. Other times we try through



'Future Monuments | Forbidden Histories,' Nathalie Anguezomo Mba Bikoro, 2015. Dealing with the story of the suppression of Africa through the collective memory of the Holocaust and its part in world culture and memory.



'War Without War,' Meinrad Schade, 2000-2017. Schade traveled to far-flung locales such as the former Soviet Union and diverse countries in the Middle East; in a series of photographs, he tells the little stories of daily life in areas that were once at the heart of the fighting.

Portraits of 'controversial leaders' on the wall of a Sakhnin butcher shop: (from left) the PLO's Yasser Arafat; Libya's Muammar Gaddafi; and Russia's Vladimir Putin. (Carl Hoffman)

email. Some answer, others do not answer at all if they see that someone from Israel is trying to approach them. So it's a lot of success, but it's also a lot of failures. We cannot make miracles. But the people who participate know who we are and want to participate. And they are not afraid. It is hard work, but we try to overcome politics. We don't discuss politics. We want to communicate through art and expression. And if they are interested, we find a way. We find a way to put things together.”

The theme of Mediterranean Biennale 2017 is “Out of Place,” which organizers say refers to “issues of identity, place, time and individuality in an era of global culture.”

However, the idea of being “out of place” could just as easily describe not just the artworks but particularly where the artworks are placed. They are, in fact, almost everywhere and anywhere except in places where you would expect to find them. The 250 works on display are not to be found in galleries or museums but rather restaurants, repair shops,

food stores, a law office, a Beduin tent, an 18th-century mosque and a very noisy factory. In its underlying goal of “restoring art to the public,” this year's Biennale aims to present art directed toward the community, art that “bridges cultures, emerges from the museum walls, integrates into the city and turns the city into a museum.”

With that as its leitmotif, “Out of Place” is spread across 15 locations in the Sakhnin Valley, including sites in Misgav, Sakhnin city, Arrabe and the village of Deir Hanna. You can visit as many of these “destinations” as they are called as you want or you can take in the whole experience in a day. Entrance to all sites is free of charge.

Each station is devoted to a particular art form. A few feature several videos from different artists, all running on continuous loops, while others feature photographs or paintings. What is shown in each locale is determined through coordination between Biennale organizers and the locale's owner. Displayed on the wall of a Sakhnin butcher shop, for example – as a butcher wields a cleaver to

chop beef at the store counter – are three framed photographs of equal size and appearance, hung side by side. The first shows Yasser Arafat, the second Muammar Gaddafi, and the third Vladimir Putin. All three of these figures have their eyes closed and look asleep. Orly Nakler, a publicist for the Biennale, explains, “Jewish-owned places did not want to display these pictures because they said they were too political. Arab-owned places did not want them because they said they were disrespectful. But this butcher agreed to put them up on his wall.”

Similarly, in the law offices of attorney Ahmad Musry – up a few flights of stairs in a little building behind a garage – hang three large works by Israeli photographer Ange-

lika Sher. One picture depicts several female IDF soldiers eating watermelon at a long table that evokes images of Jesus's Last Supper. Another shows the same soldiers grouped around a luminous newborn baby, reminding one of images of the birth of Jesus. These works were displayed first in a church and then at Sakhnin College, only to be taken down both times as a result of protests and pressure. They now repose in Musry's small conference room.

A car repair shop displays images of Syrian children wounded by war in Aleppo, one small girl missing a leg. There are also images by Gabon artist Nathalie Anguezomo Mba Bikoro depicting African women sewing Holocaust-evoking Stars of David – made of local fabrics – into their bare arms. A marble factory displays works by Afghanistan artist Lela Ahmadzai and Swiss photographer Daniel Buetti, both shown in Israel for the first time. A restaurant, which incidentally serves the best coffee I have ever tasted, hosts work by Jordanian artist Hazem Alzoubi, while a nearby fish shop displays a somewhat impressionistic painting of the Ka'aba Stone in Mecca by Hamra Abbas from Kuwait. Several videos by various artists run continuously at a popular coffee and narghila hangout, and a few explicitly non-figurative artworks grace the anteroom of the Old Mosque of Omar in Deir Hanna, built in 1735.

Most of us in Israel never visit these places or have much contact with their residents. Says co-director Avital Bar-Shay, “Changing that situation is the essence of the Mediterranean Biennale.”

The Biennale will run until December 16. For a list of all exhibition locations, opening times for each site and directions: www.mediterraneanbiennale.com