

An Arab in Venice

By Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

VENICE: "You welcomed me twice: once as a dancer, once as an immigrant," says Malu Guttierrez, a Peruvian living and working in the Italian city of Genoa. "Maybe one day you will welcome me a third time, as a citizen."

"I got used to you, I was changed by you," says Alice Chan, a young woman who speaks Italian to her grandmother – who answers her granddaughter in Chinese.

"I am a tenant of a citizenship that was given to me as a favor, not as a right," says Simohamed Kaabour, who moved to Italy from Morocco 17 years ago and describes the time until he was eligible for a European passport as belonging to another world, an invisible country.

Guttierrez, Chan and Kaabour are three of the five subjects featured in Bouchra Khalili's 19-minute video "Words on Streets," 2013, part of an ongoing, three-part project called "The Speeches Series," which she started in 2012.

Born in Casablanca, Khalili has an abiding interest in the movements of 21st-century migrants. For nearly a decade, she has been making videos, installations and works on paper exploring ever-more complicated variations on the most classic of journeys, leaving one's country behind to strike out in search of a better life.

Khalili's subjects do not inhabit a world of romantic longing and boundless ambition. They do not adhere to the American dream. Rather, they give shape and substance to the shadowy underworld of illegal immigration, where status is almost always alien, and the passage clandestine, dangerous and brutally expensive.

"Words on Streets" is premiering this summer in a small building located at the far end of the Arsenale, Venice's former shipyards. Alongside the Giardini, a sprawling public garden, the Arsenale serves as one of the two main sites for the Venice Biennale.

Now in its 55th edition, the biennale typically consists of three parts: national pavilions, collateral events and the main exhibition. The latter's blockbuster group show is usually (but not exclusively) assembled by a single curator, whose task has shifted over the years from taking the pulse of the art of our time to formulating an argument about the place of art in the history of ideas.

In 2003, the Italian-American curator Francesco Bonami decided to break the biennale down into parts. He enlisted a small army of colleagues – including French curator Catherine David – then about six years into her multifaceted "Contemporary Arab Representations" project – to take on a

part of the international exhibition, entitled “Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer” and divided it into ten sections.

David’s contribution introduced the world to the work of seven artists from Lebanon, Egypt and Palestine – including Walid Raad, Tony Chakar, Bilal Khbeiz and Paola Yacoub. Most had already exhibited internationally, but this was one of the most mainstream presentations of Beirut’s contemporary art scene, which had been slowly building in coherence and critical impact throughout the postwar period.

A decade later, that show seems to have generated some false hope.

The Venice Biennale’s current exhibition, curated by another Italian-American, Massimiliano Gioni, and titled “The Encyclopedic Palace,” includes nearly twice the number of artists as the shows in 2011 and 2009, but Khalili is the only Arab artist participating.

This comes a year after the 13th edition of Documenta – the twice-a-decade international art event that is as brainy and serious as Venice is flashy and fashionable – gave artists from the region more visibility and voice than ever before.

This might not be a bad thing, and not only because countries from the Middle East are taking up residence among the national pavilions in increasingly high numbers.

Gioni’s exhibition is preternaturally focused on outsiders, visionaries and misfits. In room after room, work after work, he champions artists and nonartists alike who make art obsessively, desperately, and often for the sole purpose of trying to both understand the world and make peace with their (often conflicted, troubled or traumatized) place within it.

So the show moves from a wounded soldier, Levi Fisher Ames, who carves tiny wooden figurines to recover from the aftershocks of his injuries, as well as an unspecified illness, to a pioneering woman, Hilma af Kint, who was so far ahead of her time (and so out-there spiritually) that she willed that her work be kept secret until 20 years after her death. With or without that delay, they might have been the first examples of abstract painting in the world.

There are votive offerings from a 14th-century chapel and ceremonial Haitian voodoo flags. There are Shaker gift drawings from the 19th century as well as chalk drawings by the theosophist Rudolf Steiner and collages by the psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung. The show is strewn with invalids, prisoners and mystics.

As such, Khalili’s work is tasked with giving outsiders a different spin, and it represents one of the few instances in which the politics of the real world bursts into in the biennale.

“Words on Streets” is also deceptive. With an emphasis on citizenship, it follows the first chapter in “The Speeches Series,” which focused on languages, dialects and the movement of ideas as encased in liberation speeches by Aimé Césaire, Abdelkrim al-Khattabi, Edouard Glissant, Malcolm X and Mahmoud Darwish.

The third and final chapter, which Khalili is shooting now in New York, takes up the explicit cause of the working class, which is where “Words on Streets” ends.

Each of Khalili’s five subjects for the Venice piece contributes to a conversation about identity

and belonging that becomes progressively more political in nature. It moves through the mechanisms of establishing a new life, struggling for legal status and, eventually, fighting for workers' rights, trade union membership, an end to discrimination and the capacity to not only find a place in the world but also to make it big enough for the experience of dignity, respect, autonomy, the pursuit of pleasure and some time to rest.

Holding up the dreams and desires of the region and the downtrodden everywhere – it's a lot to pin on one piece of art. In this context, though, it works, even as a single, solitary gesture.

"The Encyclopedic Palace" remains on view through Nov. 24. For more information, please visit www.labiennale.org.

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