



SIGNING ON MIDDLE EAST

MUHAMMAD YUSUF HAS THE DETAILS ON AN EXHIBITION OF ARAB CONTEMPORARY ART THAT OPENED IN NEW YORK YESTERDAY

Signs: Contemporary Arab Art, a groundbreaking art exhibition from Sundaram Tagore Galleries, New York, to run from October 14 – November 14, offers a rare glimpse into the Arab art world. The first of its kind in New York, the exhibition presents the work of seven influential artists from various countries in the Middle East. Curated by noted art historian and curator Karin von Roques, it explores the role of traditional Islamic calligraphy and symbols in the contemporary Arab consciousness. Grappling with aesthetic philosophy, mysticism, tradition and issues of everyday survival and existence, all seven artists challenge convention and create new visual language.

Once the cradle of ancient civilisation, the Middle East has a compelling artistic history. For centuries, the written word has played a defining role in Islamic visual culture — a legacy that persists even today. Working with different media, including paint on canvas, collage, ink on paper, wood and gold leaf, the innovative artists take traditional Arabic script and symbols as their point of departure.

Qatari artist Yousef Ahmad distills Arabic letters into abstract shapes and gestural marks that sweep across dream-like mixed-media surfaces. Syrian artist Khaled Al-Saa'i is inspired by poetry and Sufi philosophy, and paints spacious landscapes in which words float, overlap and follow their own particular rhythm. Offering a nuanced view of the culture of the Middle East, the artists create complex con-

temporary works that draw on the spiritual depth of ancient Islamic art. Rather than singling out Arab culture as "other," the exhibition, according to Tagore, aims to further intercultural dialogue between the Arab world and the West. Having studied and lived in the Middle East over the past decade, exhibition curator Von Roques has an intimate and unique understanding of the region and its artists. She throws into relief the wide range of work emerging from the contemporary Middle East, bringing its seminal artists to an international audience.

Gallery director Tagore says: "This exhibition was developed with the prime motivation being connoisseurship rather than the more expected issues of religion and politics. I believe connoisseurship

will be the defining factor in the post-recession art world." The full roster of artists is as follows; Ahmad Moualla (Syria); Ayman El Semary (Egypt); Hassan Massoudy (Iraq); Khaled Al-Saa'i (Syria); Ali Hassan (Qatar); Georges Fikry Ibrahim (Egypt); and Yousef Ahmad (Qatar).

Established in 2000, Sundaram Tagore Gallery is devoted to examining the exchange of ideas between Western and non-Western cultures. It focuses on developing exhibitions and hosting not-for-profit events that encourage spiritual, social and aesthetic dialogues. In a world where communication is instant and cultures are colliding and melding as never before, it says its goal is to provide venues for art that transcend boundaries of all sorts. With galleries in New York, Beverly Hills,

and Hong Kong, its interest in cross-cultural exchange extends beyond the visual arts into many other disciplines, including poetry, literature, performance art, film and music.

Von Roques is a noted German curator and art historian who, having studied Islamic art, specialises in contemporary Arab and Iranian art. From 1997 to 2000, she was the director for the Hermann Hesse Museum in Lugano, Switzerland. She has curated exhibitions for numerous institutions, including the Museum of Applied Arts, Frankfurt; Kunstmuseum, Bonn; Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris; and the Cultural Foundation, Abu Dhabi.

She has had extensive experience developing Arab art collections, and currently oversees

Deutsche Bank's collection programme focused on contemporary Arab art. Most recently, she served as a consultant to Sotheby's, London, advising their Modern and Contemporary Arab and Iranian Art Department. She was a member of the international jury for the 11th International Cairo Biennale and served as a key panelist at the roundtable conference "Global Art in a Global Culture" held at Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York, in 2007.

Tagore is a New York-based art historian and gallerist. He was the first gallerist to focus exclusively on globalisation, assembling a roster of artists from around the world. A descendant of the influential Indian poet and Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore, he promotes East-West dialogues through his contributions to numerous exhibitions as well as his eponymous galleries and their multicultural and multidisciplinary events.

A candidate for a Doctorate of Philosophy from Oxford University, he writes for many art publications. He was previously a director at Pace Wildenstein Gallery in New York. He has worked with many international organisations including The Peggy Guggenheim Foundation, Venice, Italy and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. He has also served as an advisor for the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the United Nations. In 1999, he was nominated by Avenue magazine as one of the 100 Most Influential Asian Americans in the United States and was recently the subject of a 30-minute interview on CNN's Talk Asia.