

‘Tea With Nefertiti’: Letting a cultural icon tell her own story

DOHA, QATAR

Exhibition returns works to the Middle East and questions art’s essence

BY ALANA CHLOE ESPOSITO

You can’t take tea with Nefertiti: but if you could, the queen of ancient Egypt might seize on the opportunity to lament that she has come to represent a narrative of “cultural otherness,” or so surmise the curators of “Tea With Nefertiti,” at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art.

With the iconic limestone and stucco bust of Nefertiti created by Thutmose in 1345 B.C. as their starting point, Till Fellrath and Sam Bardaouil have put together an exhibition that examines artworks spanning thousands of years and various continents through three lenses: that of the artist, the museum, and the public.

While the bust of Nefertiti is not included in the show (it is in Berlin), it serves to inspire critical reflection on visual culture. “Tea With Nefertiti” is, in the words of Mr. Bardaouil, “an invitation to let Nefertiti tell her own story.”

That story unfolds through a juxtaposition of works by 26 contemporary artists with pharaonic, Coptic and Islamic archival documents, and modernist paintings and sculptures by Egyptian and European masters, including Georges Sabbagh, Mahmoud Moukhtar, Alberto Giacometti and Amedeo



WAEEL MANSOUR/MATHAF: ARAB MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (ABOVE AND BELOW); MATHAF: ARAB MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (LEFT)



Ghada Amer’s 2007 “Le Salon Courbé,” above, recreates a refined Egyptian living room in which all is not as it seems: apparently abstract embroidered patterns covering the furniture spell out the word “terror” in blood-red Arabic letters. The exhibition also features works that combine the ancient with the new, such as Ai Weiwei’s Neolithic vase covered with the Coca-Cola logo, left, and Vik Muniz’s 2010 “Tupperware Sarcophagus,” below.

Europe, but later switched to “effendi,” claiming him as one of their own after his sculpture “Egypt Awakening” rendered him a national hero?

By delving into these often overlooked curiosities, the curators seek to deconstruct the mechanisms of visual display that shape how one perceives artwork. “No curation is neutral,” said Mr.

Bardaouil as he led members of the press through the exhibition. By that he meant that any artwork derives ideological narratives from the context in which it is displayed. Placing an object on a pedestal in a museum creates a system of hierarchies. The object no longer represents its maker’s creative process, but the curator’s vision and the host institution’s mission. No artwork illustrates this as well as the bust of Nefertiti, which since 2005 resides alone in a palatial room at the Neues Museum in Berlin.

The exhibitions supporting archival documents suggest that many of the filters through which one interprets art are rooted in several 19th-century historical trends. The concurrence of European colonial power and the modernization of archaeological practice, for instance, benefited Western museums, which were amassing collections with objects

found and expatriated by European archaeologists. As the museums developed, a canon of art history emerged that classified art from the colonies according to ethnicity and geography. This led to the notion of the Middle East as exotic, an association that continues to influence “Western” perceptions of art from the region.

Ultimately, the exhibition puts forth the idea that, when inserted into a carefully constructed display, art becomes a useful tool for appropriating the past and controlling the present, or even the future. Such an intellectually weighty premise raises the bar for exhibitions that focus on Arab art, which tend to revolve around clichéd motifs that reinforce stereotypes even while intending to dispel them. “Tea With Nefertiti” potentially adds nuance to the discourse.

To the delight of many who lent pieces

for the exhibition, it also constitutes an unprecedented opportunity for works originating in or inspired by Arab lands to return to the Middle East.

“I am happy that for the first time we are lending pieces from our collection back to the region,” said Regine Schulz, director of the Roemer and Pelizaeus Museum in Hildesheim, Germany, home to one of the largest collections of Egyptian art. “It is so important that this show opened here, rather than in Paris or New York. Doha is not Egypt, but it nonetheless presents an opportunity to view the art from another perspective.”

Debuting the exhibition in Qatar did present certain challenges, however. Initially, the curators feared the Qatar Museums Authority might shy away from possibly controversial aspects of the exhibition: Emily Jacir’s video depicting Egyptian Museum personnel carelessly cleaning treasured hieroglyphics (“A Sketch in the Egyptian Museum,” 2003), for instance, implies that cultural treasures might be better off where they are until museums in Egypt can properly care for their collections.

Yet this fear proved unfounded. Mathaf embraced the exhibition in accordance with its mission to promote Arab art while sending a message that it is engaging with the international art world.

More broadly, “Tea With Nefertiti” exemplifies the Qatar Museums Authority’s drive to not only hold world-class exhibitions but to present the country as a hub of cultural production and knowledge creation.

Other exhibitions on view in Doha include a selection of Arab modern art from Mathaf’s permanent collection; an exhibition celebrating Arab contributions to Renaissance-era Western discoveries at the Museum of Islamic Art, whose park features Richard Serra’s monumental steel sculpture “7”; Yan Pei-Ming at the Katara Art Center; and an exhibition at the Orientalist Museum documenting a 16th-century European’s travels through the Ottoman Empire.

Collectively, these shows can be seen as an attempt to position Qatar as a prominent cultural hub that values tradition while looking outward — an ambitious goal and one that has yet to be fully realized.

“Tea With Nefertiti,” constitutes a step in that direction. It is due to become the first museum exhibition conceived and curated in an Arab country and exported internationally, with an opening scheduled at the Paris Institut du Monde Arab in April, and plans to travel later to Brussels, New York and South Korea.

Modigliani.

Contemporary highlights include Vik Muniz’s life-size mummy made in Tupperware (“Tupperware Sarcophagus,” 2010); a video by William Kentridge tracing the history of the Egyptian collection at the Louvre (“Carnets d’Egypte,” 2010); and Ghada Amer’s re-creation of a refined Egyptian living room (“Le Salon Courbé,” 2007). In that living room, seemingly abstract embroidered patterns covering the elegant furniture spell out the word “terror” in blood-red Arabic letters, while the English definition of the same word is revealed through a close inspection of the wallpaper.

The pièce de résistance is perhaps “The Body of Nefertiti,” a video by the collective Little Warsaw, which featured in the Hungarian Pavilion at the 2003 Venice Biennale. For that project Little Warsaw, comprising Andras Galik and Balint Havas, did the unthinkable: They sculpted a bronze body and placed it under the original bust of Nefertiti, rendering the statue complete. Hailed by art critics as remarkable and decried by many Egyptians as offensive, this controversial piece ties the exhibition together.

Arranged as they are according to the perspective of the artist, the museum and the public, the seemingly disparate artworks begin to relate to one another.

Questions emerge. Why, for instance, does an unsigned 10th-century Fatimid bowl constitute a decorative object, while a Neolithic vase is elevated to the domain of contemporary art when Ai Weiwei adorns it with the Coca-Cola label? Why did the Parisian gallery Bernheim-Jeune always call Mahmoud Moukhtar an “Egyptian artist” in its publications, while Picasso, whom it also represented, was simply described as “artist”? What does it mean that Egyptian publications initially called Georges Sabbagh “monsieur” because they saw him as an outsider living in



From birth control to cancer therapies, a lack of drugs in Iran

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duced a “standing authorization” that lets American companies sell certain medicines and supplies without first seeking a license from the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control, the spokesman added. “If there is in fact a shortage of some medicines in Iran, it is due to choices made by the Iranian government, not the U.S. government,” he said.

Concerned that hardships caused by the sanctions are overshadowing their message about the dangers of Iran’s nuclear program, both London and Washington have aimed to communicate such views to ordinary Iranians through social media and online forums in recent weeks. Tehran’s plan to enrich uranium has fueled Western fears that the clerical leadership is intent on developing a nuclear weapons capability.

Tehran says it is seeking only a domestic nuclear energy program.

A spokesman for the British government, who did not want to be identified by name, said the situation was being “compounded by the Iranian government’s economic mismanagement.”

Critics inside Iran, even within the government, have accused officials of negligence by embarking on costly economic overhauls at a time of rising uncertainty and reduced government revenue.

Facing a slump in the amount of foreign reserves caused by sanctions against Iran’s oil exports, analysts say there is a tug-of-war between factions over who can gain access to the country’s oil revenue, and government departments are losing out. The amount of foreign reserves held by Iran is not known, but analysts say it could be as little as \$40 billion, with about a third of that stuck in

foreign accounts and inaccessible.

Iran subsidizes the purchase of dollars at the rate of 12,260 rials to the dollar for importing essential items including medicine and basic foods. The open market exchange rate is about 30,000 rials.

Last month, Health Minister Marzieh Vahid Dastjerdi said that only a quarter of the \$2.4 billion earmarked for medicine imports had been provided for the current year and that there was a deficit of foreign currency for shipments.

“Medicine is more essential than bread,” she said on state television. “I have heard that luxury cars have been imported with subsidized dollars, but I don’t know what happened to the dollars that were supposed to be allocated for importing medicine.”

A person at a government pharmacy in Tehran, who declined to be identified, said that low stocks of vital drugs were

being exacerbated by “strategic stockpiling.” Of 20 units of medication, two were available to the public and the rest “reserved” for those who have influence or good connections, the person said.

Some importers also complain they can no longer obtain the government’s subsidized dollar rate because some medicines have been taken off the priority list. Instead of struggling on, many businesses have decided to close.

On Friday, Mohammad Abdzadeh, director general for supervision of medicine, told the Fars news agency that \$130 million of shipments had begun and would be completed in two weeks.

“After these special shipments we will proceed normally with imports, and I hope we will no longer see any further shortages like those of the last one or two months,” he said.

Some have benefited from the crisis:

There is a growing market in Iranian and Chinese alternatives to drugs in short supply, for example.

But while Iran has trumpeted domestic production of medicines in a drive toward self-sufficiency, doctors and pharmacists say they are reluctant to use many of them.

“Doctors just don’t want to take the risks with local drugs. In some cases they are jeopardizing the health of patients,” said a Western businessman who exports pharmaceutical products to Iran and visits the country regularly. “The price for imported medicines may be 10 times more, but they’re still going to prescribe them if they can.”

There have even been reports of unwanted pregnancies because of the shortage in effective contraceptives.

A brand of contraceptive manufactured by the German pharmaceutical

giant Bayer that had been widely sold in pharmacies is now nowhere to be found, said a man who asked to be identified only as Ahmad, and who imported the drug until the volatile currency situation led him to stop.

“There are now some birth control pills in the market from China. They just don’t work,” he said. “I’ve heard of several cases where women on those got pregnant. This is not a joke. It’s really serious.”

One Tehran resident said there was a shortage of Western-made condoms in Iran because they were now classified as a luxury product and no longer on the priority list. “We are still able to buy Chinese brands,” the unmarried 30-year-old wrote in an e-mail, “but even those are twice the previous price.”

Zahra Hosseinian reported from Zurich.