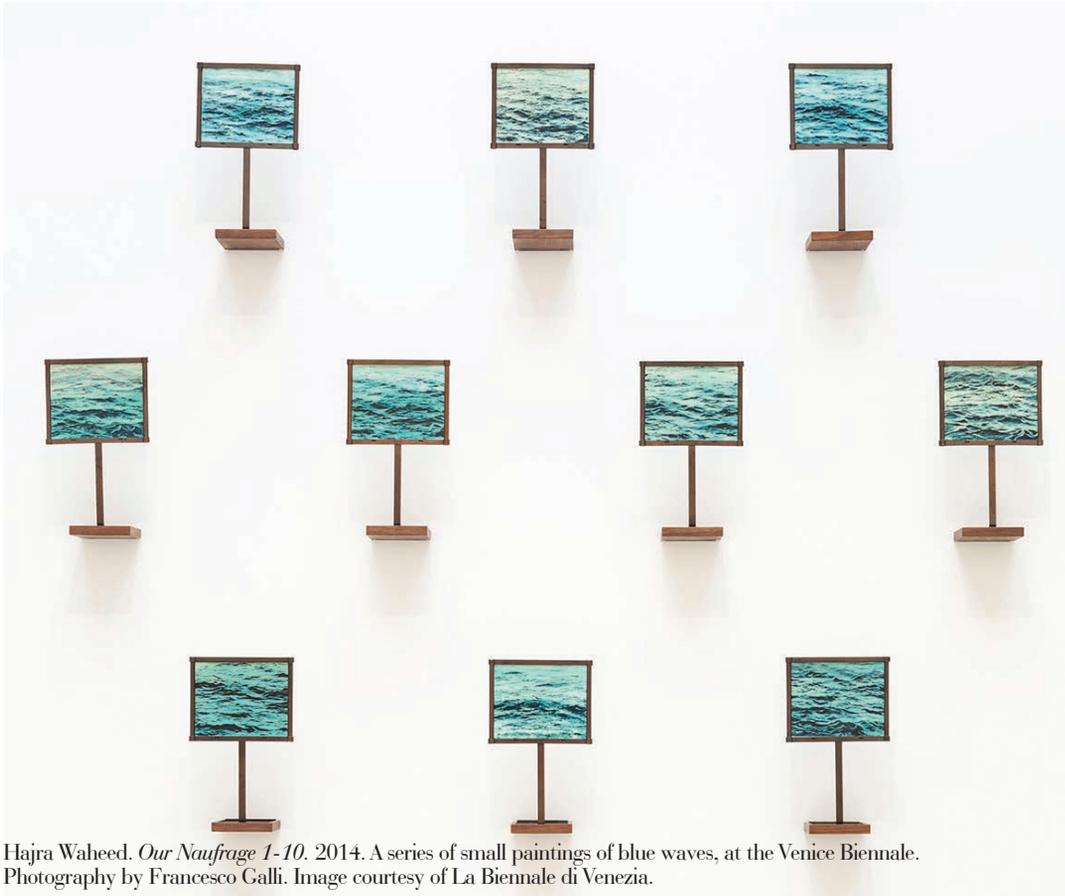


COMMENT



Hajra Waheed. *Our Naufrage 1-10*. 2014. A series of small paintings of blue waves, at the Venice Biennale. Photography by Francesco Galli. Image courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia.

LONG LIVE VENICE

Middle Eastern art specialist **Janet Rady** gives her rundown of how Christine Macel represented artists from the region in the Biennale's main show

No two visitors' experience of the Venice Biennale is ever going to be the same. With 86 national participants to take in, as well as all the collateral events and pop-ups that coincide, this is hardly surprising. And, the main exhibition, *Viva Arte Viva*, curated by Christine Macel, also split between the Giardini and the Arsenale, comprises 120 invited artists from 51 countries, adding to the volume of work to see.

Admittedly criticised for taking her curatorial cue from a rather less politicised place than her predecessor, Okwui Enwezor, Macel's humanist focus on art "designed with artists, by artists and for artists" provides a universal backdrop in which to slot the works by the many Middle Eastern artists she selected. With an affinity for the region, Macel worked with Jasmin Oezcebi, an Italian/Turkish architect, to design nine 'trans-pavilions',

organised in a narrative sequence beginning with the Pavilion of Artists and Books and Joys and Fears in the Giardini, through to the Pavilion of Time and Infinity in the Arsenale.

Within these first two pavilions, we are treated to works by familiar artists, such as Abdallah Al Saadi and the late Hassan Sharif from the UAE, as well as an expansive survey from the 1960s to the 1990s by the late, highly revered Syrian artist Marwan. Macel has also selected Canadian-born Hajra Waheed, whose strict oil industry-compliant upbringing in Dhahran perpetually informs her practice. Showing five chapters from her ongoing petite photo-collage and painting series *Sea Change* (2011), she poignantly chronicles the disappearance of nine characters over a period of time through forced migration, offering us an intimate and semi-autobiographic glimpse on love, longing and loss. A nice surprise, of which I was not previously aware, was that the French artist, Philippe Parreno, who is showing at the Biennale for the seventh time, was born in Algeria.

Down in the Arsenale, Macel filled The Dionysian Pavilion, devoted to women artists and artists addressing female sexuality, with

no less than four Middle Eastern artists, blowing away a few stereotypes. Here we see work by Nevin Aladağ (Turkey), Kader Attia (Algeria), Huguette Caland (Lebanon) and Maha Malluh (KSA). For an audience perhaps not so familiar with Middle Eastern art, the selection of new and previously viewed works is testimony to the breadth and depth of originality emanating from the region. In particular, the scale of the Arsenale provided Malluh the opportunity to create a visually striking, monumental new piece in her *Food for Thought* series entitled *Amma Baad* (which translates as 'whatever comes next'). Attracting the attention of many art critics and reviewers, the work is formed of 2,400 colourful audio tapes arranged on 30 bread trays spelling the words "fitna" (temptation), "haram" (that which is forbidden), and "jihad" – here meaning struggle. It does not take much to imagine what Malluh's intended significance of these words is.

Three other pavilions provide homes for works by each of Younes Rahmoun (Morocco) – Pavilion of Shamans, Hale Tenger (Turkey) – Pavilion of Colours and Achraf Toulab (Morocco) – Pavilion of Traditions. Previously known to me for his beautiful Persian-inspired monochromatic miniature drawings, it was gratifying to see that Toulab is now working with embroidered textiles, which one trusts indicates a progression in his practice and not a dictum from Macel to comply with her curatorial direction. Moving outside the stately halls of the Arsenale, Egyptian artist Hassan Khan was given space for his first Biennale appearance in the Giardino delle Vergini, where he staged his Silver Lion award-winning installation *Composition for a Public Park*.

With a vision of making the work more accessible, during the six months of the exhibition, artists from the main pavilions host an Open Table each week, where they meet with and engage with visitors about their practice over lunch. Opportunities to dine and converse with Cevdet Ereğ, Lantian Xie, Kader Attia, Hassan Khan or Nevin Aladağ should therefore not be missed and make a fitting end to a tour around the Middle East in Venice. 🌍