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Istanbul Biennial — report

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This year, for the first time, the entire city of Istanbul has been used to show art



Adrián Villar-Rojas's 'The Most Beautiful of All Mothers'

When the theme of this year's Istanbul Biennial, "Saltwater: A Theory of Thought Forms", was announced about six months ago, it seemed almost laughable. In a country struggling to cope with more than 2m refugees from Syria, rocked by corruption scandals, anti-government protests and in economic turmoil, art luvvies wanted to ruminate on "thought forms" about the Bosphorus — or so it seemed.

This impression of art-world myopia intensified as events unfolded: in July, the Turkish government started bombing Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, known as Isis, in Syria and restarted its war with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Then in August, the refugee crisis culminated, two days before the show opened, in the shocking image of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi washed up on a beach in Turkey.

Suddenly, the saltwater theme seemed not to be so perverse after all. The essays in the exhibition's catalogue by the biennial's curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, about flows of people, waves of thought and knots of history, were, it turned out, extremely pertinent.



Still from Francis Alÿs's film on show at the Istanbul Biennial

Little of the art on show directly reflects the political ructions in the region today, however; such issues are dealt with obliquely through works about the atrocities of the past or situations in far-off places (such as Australia). Much is made of the period of Ottoman rule, in the films of Turkish artist Esra Ersen, for example, and a section of the show is devoted to the genocide of the Armenians by the Turks in 1915. It includes Francis Alÿs's mesmerising film of children playing with bird warblers in Ani — once the capital of the Armenian kingdom and home to 1,001 churches, but now an empty plain where no birds sing.

The central exhibition of the biennial is held in the Istanbul Modern Museum where the standouts are Ukrainian artist Nikita Kadan's "The Shelter", in which a parade of stuffed deer stand in front of a barricade of tyres — a comment on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine — and a series of paintings by Australian Aboriginal artist Djambawa Marawili, including one that looks like bees swarming from one country to another.

This year, for the first time the entire city, in all its magnificent architectural diversity, has been used to show art; there are exhibitions on the islands of the Marmara Sea, as well as in schools, an orphanage, a garage, a lighthouse and on an underwater stage.

One of the highlights is the third instalment of Egyptian artist Wael Shawky's *Cabaret Crusades* trilogy of films. It is screened in one of the oldest hammams in Istanbul, the 14th-century Küçük Mustafa Pasa, whose warren of Stygian chambers capped by hole-punctured domes filters a sepulchral light. Using a collection of creepy glass marionettes speaking in sonorous tones, Shawky continues his history of the crusades from the Arab perspective, opening with a flashback to the Battle of Karbala which intensified the rift between Sunni and Shia Muslims.

Apart from this, the chief magic of the biennial resides on the island of Büyükada, an hour or so from Istanbul by ferry. During the 19th century, the island was the playground of the city's elite and is still full of their ornate summerhouses. Cars are banned on the island, which is dominated by horse-drawn carriages high-stepping through its hilly streets at a fearsome pace.

With the expulsion of the Greeks and Armenians from Turkey in the 1920s, many of whom owned the houses, a number of them now lie in ruins. One such is the house in which Leon Trotsky lived when he was exiled from Russia between 1929 and 1933 — only its outside walls are still standing. Here, in a lobster pool he built in the sea at the bottom of the garden, Argentine artist Adrián Villar-Rojas has created giant concrete animals, each bearing others on their backs.

Who knows what the hippo covered in a bearskin is supposed to signify, or the rhino carrying an elk? Beasts of burden perhaps, or animals coming in two by two? Under the turquoise sky and in a shimmering sea, they are simply bodies on a beach under a fierce sun, reminding one of others not far away.



Corey Wilkes plays trumpet as part of a performance on the Bosphorus by Theaster Gates

One of the most memorable moments of the opening week of the biennial was listening to the soulful wail of a trumpet played by the American jazz composer Corey Wilkes on a boat heading up the Bosphorus towards the Black Sea. The journey was part of a performance by the Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates, who is also exhibiting his Iznik pottery-inspired plates at the biennial.

On the boat, Gates recited a poem he had written about a “Silver City”, which concluded: “Who gets to float; who sinks, who swims?” As he spoke, a vast half-built bridge uniting Asia with Europe loomed into view, suspended over the Bosphorus like a gallows.

At a press conference Christov-Bakargiev, who was also on Gates’s boat, had said: “The reason I’m not in politics but in art is because I feel art has the possibility of shaping the souls of people and in a trickle-down effect somehow shaping what will also be the policies of governments.”

Only time will tell whether the pen, pencil or sculpture is truly mighty when it comes to shaping “thought forms”.

Istanbul Biennial runs until November 1, 14b.iksv.org

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