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ARABIA

ART

ISSUE 27
COMPLIMENTARY COPY

ABBAS KIAROSTAMI GHADA AMER WALID RAAD



Adrian Villa Rojas. *The Most Beautiful of All Mothers*. 2015. Site-specific installation at the Trotsky House, Büyükkada. Organic and inorganic materials. Variable dimensions. Photography by Sahir Ugur Eren

ISTANBUL

SALTWATER

A look at the Istanbul Biennial and the cognitive mapping of a city based on art, performance, memory and sea.

Zeynep Uzuner reports

As the Artistic Director of the highly acclaimed DOCUMENTA 13 with record visiting numbers in multiple locations in 2012, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's role as 'drafter', a title carefully chosen by herself, of the 14th Istanbul Biennial, was highly anticipated given the difficulties of working with such a symbolically loaded city, as Istanbul. Here, the conceptual and phenomenological focus on 'saltwater' as a transparent, durable and yet fragile material allowed Christov-Bakargiev to successfully form a larger dialogue on the city's relationship with water as seen through histories of life forms, mobility, migration, exile, commodity and people exchange. She emphasised even political and physical annihilation, not only within the historical context of Byzantine and Ottoman empires as well as Modern Turkey, but within a global context constantly dealing with political and racial trauma.

In *SALTWATER*, the physical and healing elements of saltwater, as found in the cleansing aspect of salt crystals, seawater or salt in a simple tear drop are juxtaposed with the history of a highly politicised geography and act as universal catalysts for personal transformation and the re-imagining of subjective experience in order to mobilise collective forms of healing, cleansing, mourning and empathy through art.

The 14th Istanbul Biennial encompassed 36 venues on the European and Asian sides of the Bosphorus, presented over 1500 works by over 80 international artists. It unfolded layers in Turkey's repressed collective memory at pivotal political moments by questioning issues such as the Kurdish and Turkish political conflict as well as the expulsion of the Greeks and Armenians from Turkey in the 1920s. It also mobilised universal discussions regarding politics, dishonesty and oppression as found in different historical contexts or geographies interconnected by wider seas and ranging from locations including Brazil, Australia and the US.

"The exhibition considers different frequencies and patterns of waves, the currents and densities of water, both visible and

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Russian revolutionary exile Leon Trotsky and his lush garden leading to the salty waters of the Bosphorus is the backdrop to Argentinian sculptor Adrián Villar-Rojas's monumental and surreal *The Most Beautiful of All Mothers*, a group of white fiberglass animals carrying other animals made out of clay, shells, textiles, nets and remnants walking with them out of the sea. The life of Trotsky in Istanbul between 1929-1933 is also the central theme of William Kentridge's *O Sentimental Machine*, placed in the Art Nouveau style Splendid Palace Hotel on the island. The black and white multichannel video installation acts as a metaphor to 'exile', with vintage photographs of Istanbul from the same era juxtaposed with scenes of a woman dancing and typing on a typewriter vigorously and Trotsky in uniform with megaphones drowning in water while trying to talk about his revolutionary ideals.



Clockwise: Adrian Villa Rojas. *The Most Beautiful of All Mothers*. 2015; William Kentridge. *O Sentimental Machine*. 2015. Video still; Francis Alys. *The Silence of Ani*. 2015. Video still; A view of Wael Shawky's 2015 *Cabaret Crusades: The Secret of Karbala* at Küçük Mustafa Paşa Hammam

One of the most sensorially powerful works on the Princess Island is *Neurathian Boatstrap* by Marcos Lutyens. In a padded and minimally lit boat, the artist exhibits Chladni plates, a hundred and fifty year old technology used for visualising sound, as found in Annie Besant's theories on thought forms, along with a staircase which is symbolic for the steps used in hypnosis. It's a transformative experience that aims to work with brain waves and the heightening of sensory cognition through the dematerialisation of artistic practice. None of the remnants of the work could be kept, collected, sold or re-exhibited as artworks on their own.



The use of sound as a transformative sensory realm is also carefully utilised by prominent Turkish artist Cevdet Erek, whose work is characterised by his use of rhythm and site specificity. In his 2015 *A Room of Rhythms – Otopark*, the artist transforms an abandoned car park in Tophane into a sensory space where a recording of finger snaps and the sound taken from a very old Turkish car engine played with regular intervals and minimal intervention allows visitors to interact with it on a personal level.

invisible that poetically and politically shape and transform the world," explained Bakargiev. As a result, the theoretical, archival, performance-based and almost laboratorial artistic practices were paired with notions of oceanography, marine archaeology, neuroscience and other disciplines to form new levels of consciousness and 'thought forms' — also the title of Victorian theosophist Annie Besant's 19th-century abstract watercolours that were exhibited at the Istanbul Modern as part of the Biennial. Besant's works are central to the event and serve as a gateway into the spiritual power of art in a manner similar to the paintings of Wassily Kandinsky.

Sound is also central to the work of Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates, who finds a connection between his identity and the history of Turkey by uncovering the life of prolific Turkish jazz producer and owner of Atlantic records, Ahmet Ertegun, who spent his life in the US. Gates collaborated with a Turkish musician and jazz players to hold a poem recital and concert performances on a boat on the Bosphorus in addition to setting up a ceramic workshop near the Italian Embassy.

The thread of spirituality and consciousness runs throughout the dialogue between artists' works and the historical significance of venues chosen by the Biennial team in Istanbul. This is best illustrated in Wael Shawky's *Cabaret Crusades, The Secret of Karbala*. The fourth and final part of the Egyptian artists' film series, reanimating the Battle of Karbala from an Arab-Muslim perspective using hand blown glass marionettes, story-telling and song, is screened in the abandoned and yet magnificent 15th-century Küçük Mustafa Pasa Hammam, a humid bathhouse receiving little light from cupped domes and furnished with carpets. The hammam is located next to the famous Greek Orthodox patriarchy in Istanbul in the historic Balat neighbourhood that is arguably the most powerful historical stage in which to contextualise the role of Christian Orthodox Byzantine in the Shawky's retelling of the Crusades.

The re-enactment of the relationship between memory and sound is central to Francis Alys's *Silence of Ani*, which directly references the painful historical relationship between Turkey and Armenia. The poetic black and white film shows the abandoned and ruined town of Ani near the Armenian border where young children are playing amongst ruins and hoping to call birds by playing different bird songs on whistles and flute-like instruments.

Similarly, the Princess Islands housing lavish summer homes from the era of Ottoman rulers and later Levantine families as well as modern intellectuals in Turkey, acts as one of the most prominent venues of the Biennial. The abandoned home of

Finally, one of the most visually arresting and multi-dimensional works to be exhibited in the Biennial was the 2015 installation *The Salt Traders* by Egyptian painter Anna Boghigui at the Galata Greek Primary School. The artist skillfully transformed the main hall into an imposing shipwreck scene by using large painted Egyptian sails, sound, wood, wax, paint and sound installation of waves and birds to render visible the unheard voices of the past. Just like *The Salt Traders*, the works in this edition of the Istanbul Biennial were aesthetically and philosophically impactful. They also served as a haunting reminder of history's ever-present imprint on east and west relations. ■

The Istanbul Biennial runs until November 16th. www.14b.iksv.org