Taking It to the Street

The Arab world is in the midst of a frenzied art boom, with record-breaking auctions, spectacular museums—and artwork that is largely unthreatening. But since protests have erupted in the Arab street, the art of royal patronage is being challenged by the art of homegrown revolutionaries

By Noah Feldman Oct. 25, 2012 2:44 pm ET

RADICAL PERSPECTIVE | To protest the blockade of Cairo's Tahrir Square, graffiti artists created trompe l'oeil paintings on the barriers.

AP Photo/Nasser Nasser

NOT SINCE THE STORIED DAYS of the eighth-century caliph Harun al-Rashid has the Arab world seen an art boom like the one going on in the Persian Gulf right now. Indeed, the region is witnessing what is surely the fastest, most expensive arts race the world has ever known.

In Abu Dhabi, on Saadiyat Island, the royal family is building a Frank Gehry –designed Guggenheim museum that will reportedly be 12 times the size of the Frank Lloyd Wright flagship in New York City. Nearby, on the same island, will be a new branch of the Louvre, designed by Jean Nouvel. Into the bargain will come a national history museum, by Norman Foster's firm, and a museum of maritime history, by Tadao Ando. There will also be a performance center, by Zaha Hadid, and a campus for New York University's educational venture in the country.

Photos: The Revolutionary Art of the Middle East

And that is only one emirate. In Qatar, the emir who brought you Al Jazeera has already erected the successful Museum of Islamic Art

designed by I.M. Pei. A Qatari national museum is being designed by Jean Nouvel. A museum of Orientalist art, with a collection of 900 works depicting the Arab and Muslim worlds by European artists, is also in the works. Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art is under operation, though it's still not close to completion.

These museums need art to fill them. The Gulf solution? Buy it! In 2011, the Qatar Museums Authority, under the redoubtable leadership of the emir's daughter, Sheikha Mayassa Al Thani, spent more than $250 million for a single Cézanne, *The Card Players*. If the number alone doesn't boggle your mind, consider this: The price is nearly double the previous auction record for a work of art. This price for a single painting makes Abu Dhabi's borrowing deal with the Louvre look like a bargain: The city paid $525 million for the Louvre name and another $750 million for works from its Paris collection.

These buildings and acquisitions would amount to a spectacular transformation anywhere. But the explosion is far more astonishing when you consider that the Arabic-speaking part of the Gulf has essentially no indigenous tradition of visual or plastic arts. Islamic art has a rich and ancient history—but none of it in the small fishing towns or nomadic encampments that the emirates were until 50 years ago. Next door to Wahhabi, art-despising Saudi Arabia, these erstwhile backwaters have become cosmopolitan centers of global art and architecture almost overnight.

Yet for all the glitter and glamour of this moment, so far it has not heralded any meaningful change in the cultural or artistic environment in the Arab world. The reason is simple: Almost none of the art being acquired, exhibited, bought and sold in the Gulf challenges the cultural values or ideals of the royal patrons who are fueling the boom.

Consider the blockbuster shows that have so far been mounted. Qatar just took down a major retrospective of Takashi Murakami. Murakami is a

serious artist, whose theory of the "Superflat" opened the door for a comparison of manga with classical Japanese scroll painting and printmaking, but the show was promoted with a quote from Marc Jacobs, the fashion designer with whom he'd collaborated on Louis Vuitton handbags. Mathaf, billed as an Arab museum of modern art, had Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang as the centerpiece of its first major solo show. Cai's preferred medium is fireworks. Although his art may be read in part as a comment on the creative destruction of capitalism, no one would confuse his political stance with that of, say, Ai Weiwei.

The region's noncontemporary art is similarly unchallenging. *The Card Players* presages cubism, but Qatar bought it because the other four paintings in the series are in the Met, the Musée D'Orsay, the Courtauld and the Barnes. Orientalism may potentially be controversial—except the emirs see it as a valuable window into a vanished Arab and Islamic culture, not an out- growth of colonialism.

The conservatism of the art boom finds its origins in the competition among the emirs to broaden their ties to the global economy. Oil is the mainstay, but all the principalities would like to diversify. Always a trading region, the Gulf is neatly wedged halfway between Europe and Asia—a crossroads of East and West.

The museums, then, are intended as homing beacons for global capital. For this kind of signaling, the labels—Louvre, Guggenheim, Pei, Gehry, Nouvel— matter more than the art or the architecture. The emirs once competed for the best falcon, the fleetest thoroughbred. Now competing for the best French Impressionists, they mean to show themselves as men of the world in the fullest economic and cultural sense. They apparently anticipate that nothing in the work that they will acquire and show will undercut the legitimacy of their form of rule—on any dimension.

Away from the comfortable Gulf monarchies, however, provocative new art is being made in the Arab world—a striking counterpoint to the more banal

work anointed by royal patronage. The Arab Spring was accompanied by an outpouring of art that is revolutionary in the most literal sense: It was made by participants in active revolt against regimes that were successfully swept away.

Some of the most powerful and hopeful art of the Egyptian revolution came in the form of gigantic trompe l'oeil paintings on the concrete barriers that blocked protesters' access in and around Tahrir Square and elsewhere in Cairo. By depicting the closed space as if it were already open, the artists were capturing the essence of the revolutionary imagination, which is capable of believing that things actually can be as everyone knows they should be. These giant unsigned works, produced collectively, may have marked the first time in Arab history that the visual arts had a major impact on public consciousness.

Mohamed Fahmy, the young Egyptian artist known as Ganzeer, became a minor hero for his protest stickers and wall art. A multimedia artist and graphic designer before the revolution, he became a graffiti artist by necessity and was canonized after being arrested by security forces. His best-known wall image is of a tank with a gunner in its turret facing a boy riding a bicycle. The biker is a typical Cairene delivery boy balancing a tray of fresh bread on his head. The work is a powerful and clever gesture of revolution. It recalls the famous Tiananmen Square image of the tank facing the sole protester, but with a difference: The bread delivery boy is not a protester, but a timeless Egyptian symbol of humdrum life. Indeed, the same balanced bread tray (without the bike) can be seen in ancient Egyptian paintings—which, come to think of it, were also painted on walls.

In Tunisia, revolutionary art has been more ambivalent in its message—but no less transformative. In front of the old Cathédrale Saint-Louis in Carthage, long since desanctified, are the burnt-out hulks of cars sitting on cement blocks. Painted in wild and seemingly arbitrary colors, tagged with graffiti and elaborate designs, these are among the few still-visible

public monuments of the Tunisian revolution.

The cars, which can be seen elsewhere in Tunisia as well, were luxury vehicles favored by the Tunisian elite, torched by a revolutionary public fed up with the failure of those elites to provide economic opportunity that would lead to a life of dignity. Those who painted them, including the Tunisian artist Faten Rouissi, were commenting on the creative possibilities of collective action and the challenge of channeling frustration to build a better future. And they were praying for national unity in the aftermath of disorder.

Art produced in the midst of revolution does not always change the artistic scene. The same Jacques-Louis David whose *The Death of Marat* lionized the Jacobin ideal of the French Revolution went on to glorify imperial rule in *The Coronation of Napoleon*. But the street art of the Arab Spring has unsettled the world of contemporary Arab art because it has helped unsettle the basic facts of political life in the Arabic-speaking world. The richest oil emirs remain untouched—but nothing else in the region is.

The art of the Arab Spring is, then, disruptive in the truest sense. It challenges the collectors and the curators to think like citizens, and to ask what their futures will hold, artistically and politically. The Gulf may remain the preserve of starchitects and glossy art fairs, but the Arab Spring artists have shown us what it means to make art that isn't just outside the box, but turns the box upside down.

In the wake of revolution and with the recent riots sweeping the region, Arab artists face new challenges, including the danger of a new censorship that comes not from dictators but from grass-roots Islamic activists. In June 2012, angry fundamentalists rioted in the upscale La Marsa neighborhood of Tunis over a group show in which some pieces were allegedly insulting to Islam. The works in question did not refer to the Prophet. They were, rather, critical comments on Salafi fundamentalism—that is, on the very people who took offense.

The clashes with police, which would have been unthinkable under the secularist dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, felt like a disaster to Tunisian artists and secularists. The elected government, led by Islamic democrats, had trouble formulating a response—just as it and neighboring governments have been caught off guard by protests against the film Innocence of Muslims. In the constitutional negotiations ongoing in Tunisia, some Islamists want a blasphemy exception added to the right of free expression.

The riots and the call for a constitutional exception are troubling. But they are also evidence that in Tunisia, at least, the work of contemporary post-revolutionary artists is being taken very seriously. To the Islamists, one lesson of the Arab Spring is that art actually matters.

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Could the same ever be true in the Gulf? It seems unlikely that the new museums, as presently composed, would show an installation on the graffiti of the Arab Spring, as the Casa Árabe in Madrid did last February. The Tunisian cars and the Egyptian trompe l'oeil are unlikely to be acquired by the reigning monarchs.

But perhaps even this conclusion is too hasty. Consider Al Jazeera, founded and funded by the Qatari royal family. The channel essentially never criticizes its host government. But its mostly secular, well-educated leftist staff actively promoted the Arab Spring. The channel was as enthusiastic about the revolution as it once was critical of the U.S. invasion of Iraq—and with no apparent objection from its funders.

This suggests the possibility that some of the revolutionary air of the Arab Spring art may eventually penetrate the bubble of the Gulf art scene. A hint of this possibility was seen in the strong 2010-2011 Mathaf show

"Told/Untold/Retold." It featured narrative work by 23 Arab-origin artists—all of it completed before the Arab Spring, which began at almost the same moment the show opened.

As the name suggested, much of the show's work focused on stories of selves and families throughout the Arab world and beyond. Though personal—in some cases intimately so—the works also captured complex strands of regional and global politics. Several brilliant Lebanese video artists, including Lamia Joreige and Akram Zaatari, interwove stories that captured the movement of people throughout the Arab world over the generations, not only as refugees but as active immigrants. Others, like Iraqi-born Adel Abidin, dealt directly with dictatorship, in his case through videos of blonde torch singers singing the patriotic pro-Baathist songs of his youth. Ahmed Alsoudani, another Iraqi, showed strangely beautiful paintings that on close inspection revealed twisted and grotesque bodies mutilated by war. Palestinian artist Steve Sabella showed photographs of six Israelis and a Palestinian, each in underwear in front of a concrete wall—work that went beyond the standard images of the conflict.

Hiding in plain sight in the catalog's opening essay by Sam Bardaouil was an iconic image of revolution: a painting of an execution in the Place de la Concorde. The next Gulf show by contemporary Arab artists may make the comparison more explicit. If it does, then the distant worlds of Tahrir Square and Saadiyat Island may at last come a little bit closer.