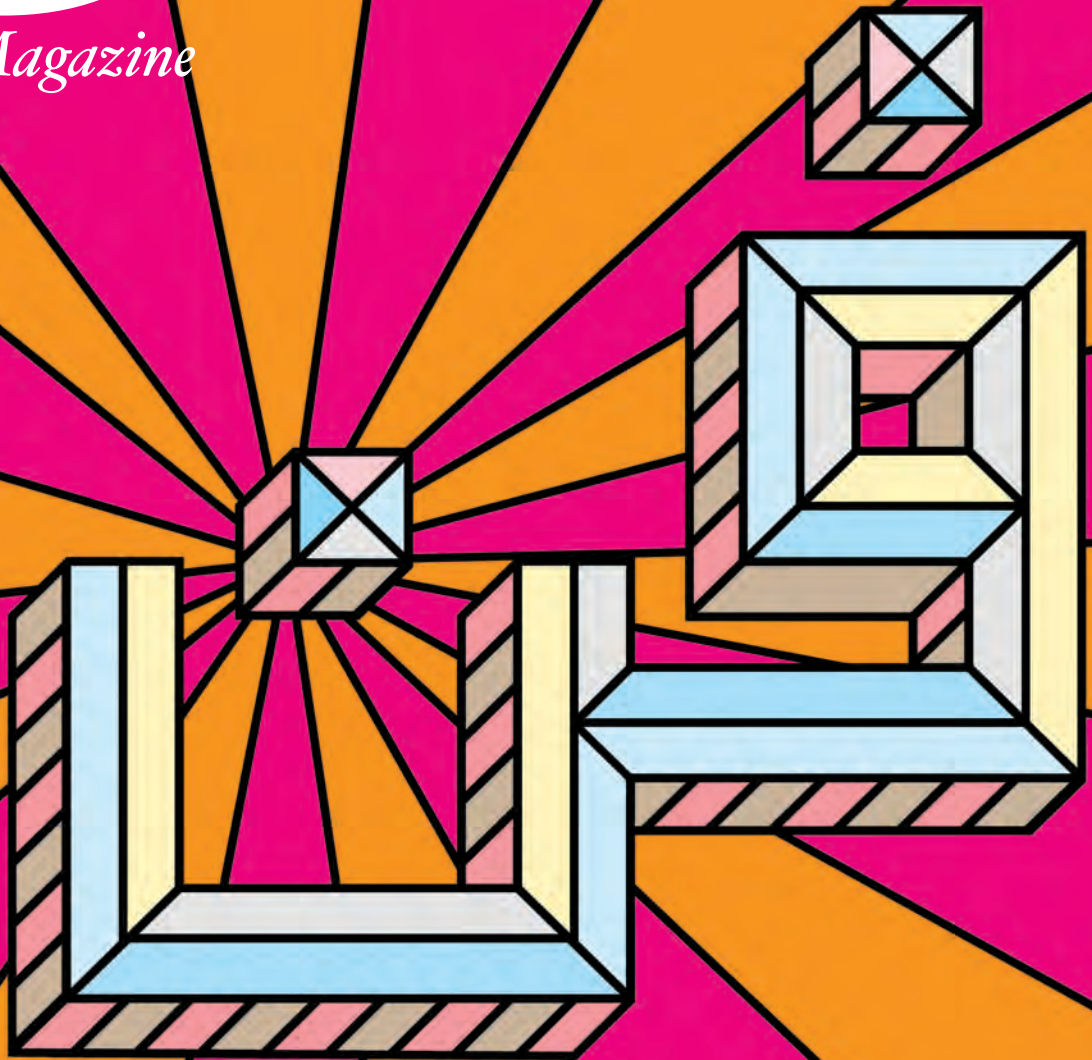




Oasis Magazine



The Arts



Saudi Designer Yusef Alahmad on the cover, SALT: the Turkish Recipe for Art, Bubble Gum-Like Installation in Beirut, AFAC: Arab Fund for Arts & Culture, *Comic Relief with Turkish artist Cem Dinlenmiş*, Discover Japan's Arts Scene with WhyWander, *Gallerist Rose Issa*, Creating An Arts Hub in Dubai: Abdelmonem Alserkal, & more



ROSE ISSA – portrait by Nick Harvey

She Rose to the Challenge

WORDS BY MAHA MAJZOUB | PHOTOS COURTESY ROSE ISSA PROJECTS

For three decades, Rose Issa has fearlessly championed visual art and film from the Arab world and Iran

Labeling oneself a “longtime advocate of Middle Eastern arts” suddenly appears to be in vogue. It’s unnerving that this label is, more often than not, being used as a tool for self-glorification and even as an indicator of wealth and social status – kind of like doing charity work for the glitz and glamor aspect of it. Yet, with a bit of digging, it isn’t so hard to separate the wheat from the chaff, as advocating the arts is effectively a fulltime job that requires getting your hands dirty and is glamorous for maybe five minutes. Enter Rose Issa, a self-effacing, veteran advocate of Middle Eastern arts, if not the grand dame of Middle Eastern arts.

A curator, writer, producer and gallerist, Issa, a Lebanese-Iranian, has been leading the fight for visual art and film from the Arab world and Iran for some 30 years. She may not have won every single battle she’s waged, but she never laid down her sword.

Issa’s first brush with the arts occurred while living in Paris – and fresh out of graduate school – in 1982, the same year Israel launched an offensive on Lebanon. As an allergic reaction to European misconceptions of the Arab world and culture during the Israeli invasion, she organized the first Arab

AYMAN BAALBAKI, "WAKE UP",
MIXED MEDIA INSTALLATION, 2012





Film Festival in Paris, which was themed around the notions of occupation and resistance. The festival struck a chord. At the time, no other platform representing Middle Eastern talent in Europe was in existence. From there, Issa would impart her knowledge in Arab and Iranian film on the Cannes Film Festival and later major film festivals across Europe such as the London, Berlin and Rotterdam festivals. Over the course of more than two decades, Issa also curated Arab and Iranian film seasons in the UK, where she's been based for the past 25 years, as well as across the globe.

In tandem, Issa heavily fostered Middle Eastern visual art, beginning with the launch of the very first gallery of contemporary art from the Middle East in London in 1986. The Kufa Gallery was an ambitious project she embarked on with Iraqi architect Mohamed Makiya. The absence of support on the part of the local authorities cut the gallery's years short, but Issa sought other venues to give a voice to artists from the region. Her collaboration with public institutions such as the British Museum, the Barbican, the Victoria and Albert Museum and Leighton House Museum offered regional artists alternative platforms for exposure.

Through the numerous exhibitions she's curated, Issa introduced to Western audiences many of the artists who have since become stars of the international scene, including Chant Avedissian, Ayman Baalbaki, Hassan Hajjaj and Monir Farmanfarmaian, to cite a few. The aforementioned names are some of the 21 artists she currently represents at her eponymous project space, a small commercial gallery she started in 2008 on Great Portland Street, London. There, she also manages her publishing arm, Beyond Art Production, which publishes monographs and comprehensive catalogues addressing the present concerns and trends of the visual arts scene of the Arab world, Iran and Turkey.

It is authentic artistic voices that Issa seeks, whether through Rose Issa Projects or any other project she aligns herself with, steering clear from simply concentrating on young, emerging artists from this part of the world. Farmanfarmaian, for instance, is 86 years old. For her, the age factor doesn't matter; the quality of the work does. Issa's life's mission has been to track down and expose any kind of artistic flair from the Arab world and Iran. "I have tried to give visibility to film-



Monir Farmanfarmaian, *Zahra's Image*, mirror mosaic and reverse glass painting, 185X135 CM, 2009

makers and visual artists from our region," Issa remarks. "Of course, 30 years ago, few, if any, institutions had the courage to undertake that. But also very few individuals were ready to invest their time and efforts into those projects, which were not financially rewarding."

Issa is unmistakably not in it for the money or the fame. She thirsts instead for finding new artists and witnessing positive changes for the Middle Eastern arts. If you ask the worldly, silver-haired art guru what she is currently looking forward to, you'll grasp that she isn't resting on her laurels any time soon. "More publications, more discoveries," she would say, her exotic, green eyes welling up with gusto.

We tried to tap into Issa's expertise and wisdom. Below is how the conversation went.

What are your likes and dislikes of the Middle Eastern art scene?

What is wonderful is that now – finally – many, even in countries with no art infrastructure such as Saudi Arabia, dare to express themselves, exhibit, talk, write, make films... However,

it does not mean that quality is in numbers. The good artists, like everywhere else, are rare.

What do you think is missing?

The infrastructure: libraries, universities, books, cinemas, art spaces, museums... Also missing are patrons of the arts and good advisors as well as international exchanges of ideas. But most of all what's lacking is a passion for justice and a better sense of focusing on what is important rather than the trivial, building rather than destroying.

What are the opportunities?

In most countries in the Arab world, or even Iran, and soon Turkey, we are concerned with war, instability, insecurity, mercenaries, religious divide, survival... Art is no longer a priority; there is a brain drain that profits the West and the opportunists. The Gulf is trying to build, but despite the funds and the many projects, we have yet to see anything... There's little transparency on what is going on...

What about the challenges?

The more sincere you are the more dangerous you may become. Nevertheless, one has to say what has to be said, rejecting double standards and filtering out opportunists. Visibility ought to be given to the most talented artists, filmmakers, thinkers, musicians... The challenges include critiquing, survival, building and rebuilding, as well as encouraging students to study and research about their own culture, and not telling them what to do. We have to take initiatives, challenge stereotypes and misconceptions and of course open our eyes and have the courage to act.

The Middle Eastern art fairs you won't miss for the world...

There aren't that many... The most vibrant for the moment is Dubai; the rest – Abu Dhabi, Beirut, Marrakesh – are still trying to find their way...

The Middle Eastern art fairs/events that have promise...

I am less interested in art fairs, more so in biennales and beautiful small exhibitions. I favor travelling to discover artists as well as pursuing ideas that are exciting and publishing instructive publications. This is important.

The perks of being a curator, producer and gallerist concentrating on contemporary Middle Eastern art today...

One ought to have the passion to represent something they believe in, coupled with taking the time to meet beautiful minds and talents and opening challenging new doors. This gives the general public the chance to discover new visions and new voices.

The downside of being a curator, producer and gallerist concentrating on contemporary Middle Eastern art today...

Having little time for your own personal life.

When choosing artists to collaborate with, how can you tell if the collaboration will reap commercial profit or that the artists' work will be well received?

I never know how things work in terms of success... but I know a talented artist when I see one. So all the artists with whom I collaborate are promising.

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