

A SPACE TO SHOW

ROSE ISSA PROJECTS

Determined to ensure that the Middle East has its say, Rose Issa has opened a dedicated space in London, Rose Issa Projects. With a diverse and exciting line-up of artists, she strives to fulfil her own demand that those with real talent be given the chance to shine. **Sue Pennell** examines the whys and wherefores of Issa's bold plan.

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ose Issa dismisses the idea that her space is a gallery. "A gallery? No," she smiles, "I opened not as a gallery, but as a project space. Two and a half years ago, we were working from home – curating, editing, publishing and designing. My flat was not large enough, so we took this ground-floor place where works can come and go to Germany, Italy – wherever – and to public institutions in Britain and elsewhere. Here, we work and have room to do small-scale projects." Located on busy Kensington High Street in upmarket West London, Rose Issa Projects (RI Projects) is both modest and functional. Yet it is from here that RI Projects directors Issa and Omar Mažhar and their team work tirelessly to fulfil her long-held ambition of giving visibility to the myriad talented and unique Middle Eastern artists, many of whom remain largely unknown outside their own cultures.

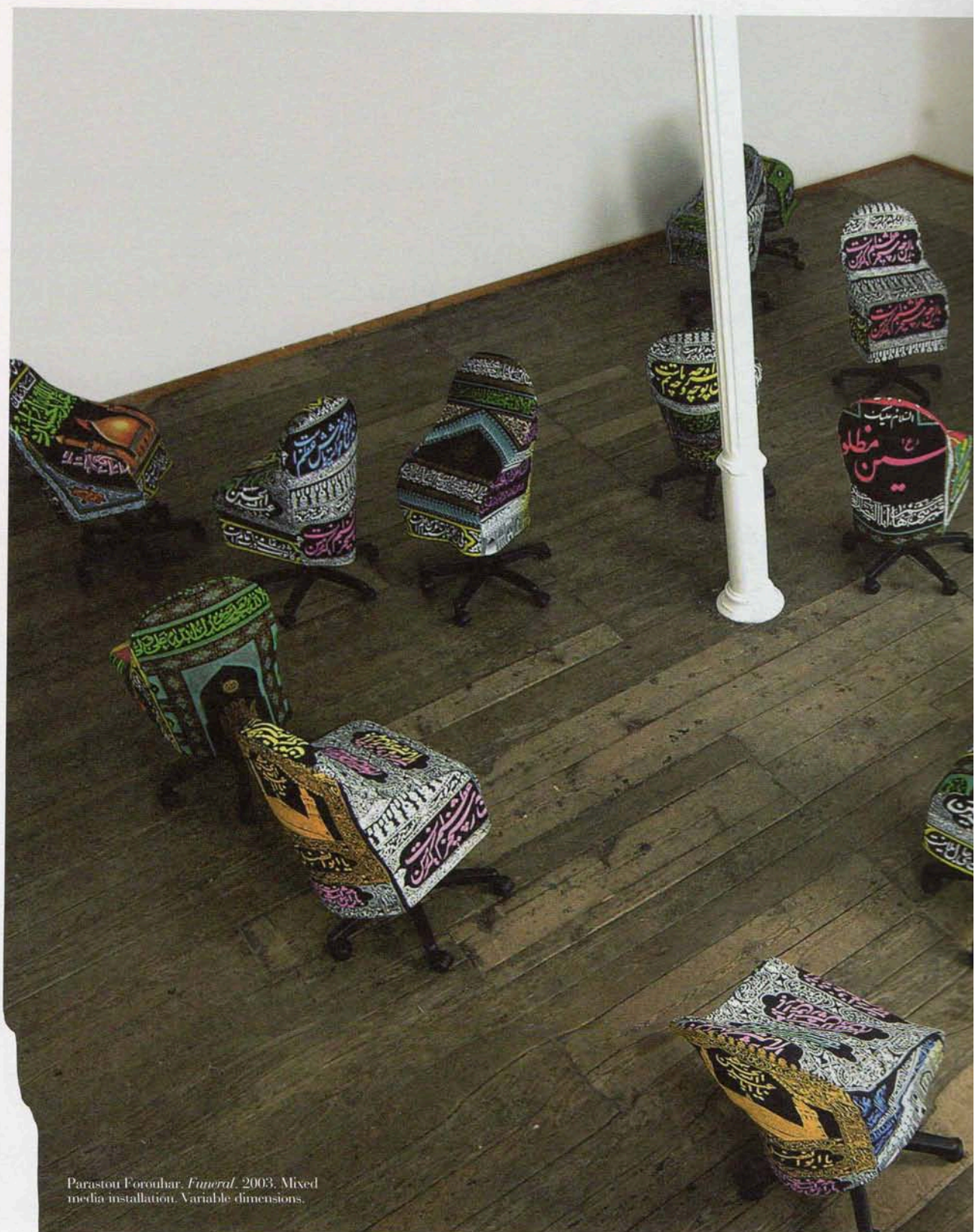
Issa has long been an established and respected figure on the Middle Eastern art stage, but the seeds for RI Projects were sown in the 1980s amidst the tumult and trauma of invasion, war and resistance across the region. A mathematics student in Paris at that time, she responded to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon by audaciously organising her first film festival. It was then that she discovered that nobody knew much about the Middle Eastern situation, or indeed about the artists whom she so liked, admired and respected. She subsequently came to London in 1986 to launch the cultural centre that was to become the Kufa Gallery. "There was a huge community of intellectuals in exile," she recalls, "and I wanted to introduce artists to each other because we all came from different countries at war. Sometimes I did an exhibition, but it was more important to lobby and to meet the artists and writers. It was so very successful because there was a need, a hunger, for us to know more about our own culture, more about our own creative people."

Rose Issa in her gallery with a work by Susan Hefuna. (Detail) Untitled, 2008. Embroidery on felt, 91.5 x 158 cm. Photography by David Levenson.




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GALLERY



Parastou Forouhar, *Funeral*, 2003. Mixed media installation. Variable dimensions.



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In the years that followed, Issa worked as an independent curator, promoting films and staging exhibitions of Middle Eastern artists, both in Britain and throughout Europe. But frustrated by the lack of conceptual and artistic control, and by the long-winded negotiations and restrictions she encountered, she began to think of a new approach, one through which she could organise solo shows of artists she liked, rather than waiting for someone else to take the initiative. RI Projects was born.

MEANS AND METHODS

It was imperative for Issa that her new initiative should serve as both a catalyst and a platform. She wanted it to simultaneously move, shake and support, and to give visibility to artists who expressed understanding of themselves and their culture through a variety of different media, as well as via their own unique aesthetic concept – individuality is key. Yet it was not easy at first. "We worked very hard in those early days," she explains, "and it took five years to earn our independence. I couldn't find sponsorship – it was only friends that helped me – and for many years, I sold work for nothing. Even if we made some sales, we never covered the cost of an exhibition."

Today, it is not only international collectors and art aficionados of Middle Eastern art who visit 269 Kensington High Street. With so much

currently happening in the regional art market and prices on the rise once more, Issa is always pleased to see a very varied and cosmopolitan public coming to her door. "Not all of them are very knowledgeable about Middle Eastern art", she notes, "but they still come, wanting to learn and find something fresh." She has also noticed a recent, and decidedly welcome, change in terms of visitor profile: "Frankly, two years ago, a lot of the people who came to us were speculators, rather than collectors, or people generally interested in good artwork. They've now moved onto other things." There's ironic relief in her voice – these are, after all, sentiments being echoed by gallerists and curators across the post-recession world.

Good artwork is found by extensive legwork. Issa makes frequent visits to the Middle East – to Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia – identifying new talent and revisiting more established artists, as well as meeting those who are part of the worldwide Diaspora. However, it's a two-way process, with artists also seeking her out. "It happens by word of mouth," Issa explains; "Artists we like recommend other artists for us to see. You go to a gallery, or you meet an artist through another artist who says, 'by the way, I met so-and-so, who is fantastic', and so it goes on." This networking – or creative 'cross-fertilisation' as one regional observer calls it – is fast becoming a hallmark of Issa and her team.



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ART WITH DISTINCTION

For Issa, the most stimulating artists are individuals who put their time into rationalising either a concept or an aesthetic. "They need to know what they are saying and how best to go about expressing it," she says. The sudden expansion of interest in the region's Contemporary art prompted concern on Issa's part as the bandwagon started to roll a few years ago: "Suddenly everyone wanted to open galleries, but many of these people could not necessarily differentiate between a very good artist, a medium-standard one and a mediocre one. I deplore that. One should only promote the artists who one believes have real talent and are saying something worthwhile." A gleam in her eye makes it clear that herein lies the ultimate quality control.

RI Projects not only promotes "good artists" but also has enviably acute antennae designed to find creative spirits who offer something genuinely new and can excite and intrigue. British-Moroccan artist Hassan Hajjaj (*Canvas 4.3*) is one such talent. Working in different media to create funny, funky takes on Moroccan culture, Hajjaj speaks to people who know nothing about art as well as to those who do and adore it. Issa spotted

his unique talent and style early on and curated his first solo show, held two years ago at Leighton House Museum, just up the road from her current space. His work created a real stir then, and a solo show of photographs and installations, *Four Angels*, exhibited at the Kensington High Street space earlier this year, has continued the momentum. "We had people coming to see his work who had never been to a museum or gallery before!" Issa exclaims.

Whilst concerned with individuality and originality, Issa is always mindful of the bigger picture. In particular, she is keen to explain to those new to the Contemporary Middle Eastern art scene that whilst the Arab world is united by one language, the cultures within that world are vastly different. "Artists bring what inspires them and what is associated with them and how they see themselves," she explains. "Artists from the 22 [Arab] countries cannot express, or are ever going to say, the same thing. The cultures, concepts, approaches and intentions are all different." Even so, Issa maintains that, paradoxically, "what comes out at the end of it all is one culture."

Arabicity: Such a New East, curated by Issa Issa

summer as part of Liverpool's Arabic Arts Festival, allowed visitors to appreciate these differences and their ultimate unity. Egyptian artist Chant Avedissan (*Canvas 1.6*) is inspired by the cultural icons of the Arab world; Fathi Hassan by his Nubian roots. Palestinian artists Basel Abbas, Ruanne Abou-Rahme and Raeda Saadeh transform their quite tragically restrictive daily life into poetic works and video creations, whilst Ayman Baalbaki (*Canvas 5.2*), who is Lebanese, creates his own vision of what war brings through his beautiful paintings and installations. Many of the social and political landscapes against which these artists are working seem bleak and unpromising, but Issa focuses firmly on the positive outcomes, observing how "there is always a ray of hope."

WIDER SCOPE

Whilst most exhibitions are ephemeral, the printed word is permanent. RI Projects is moving fast in this direction, with catalogues and monographs already in the pipeline together with books on women artists of the Middle East and on photography. Issa is emphatic about their value as the regional art scene develops and matures: "We desperately need documentation. Many public institutions are waking up to this, but they only want to cover the younger and up-and-coming artists." She stresses that books dedicated to more established talents are just as important, and that artists should be published, irrespective of their age. "What is important is their talent, what they have to say and how they say it."

Facing page: Khalil Rabah. *United States of Palestine Airlines, London Office*. 2007. Part of an eight-piece installation. Variable dimensions.

This page: Fathi Hassan. (Detail) *Haram Aleikum*. 2009. Mixed media on board. 62 x 45 cm.







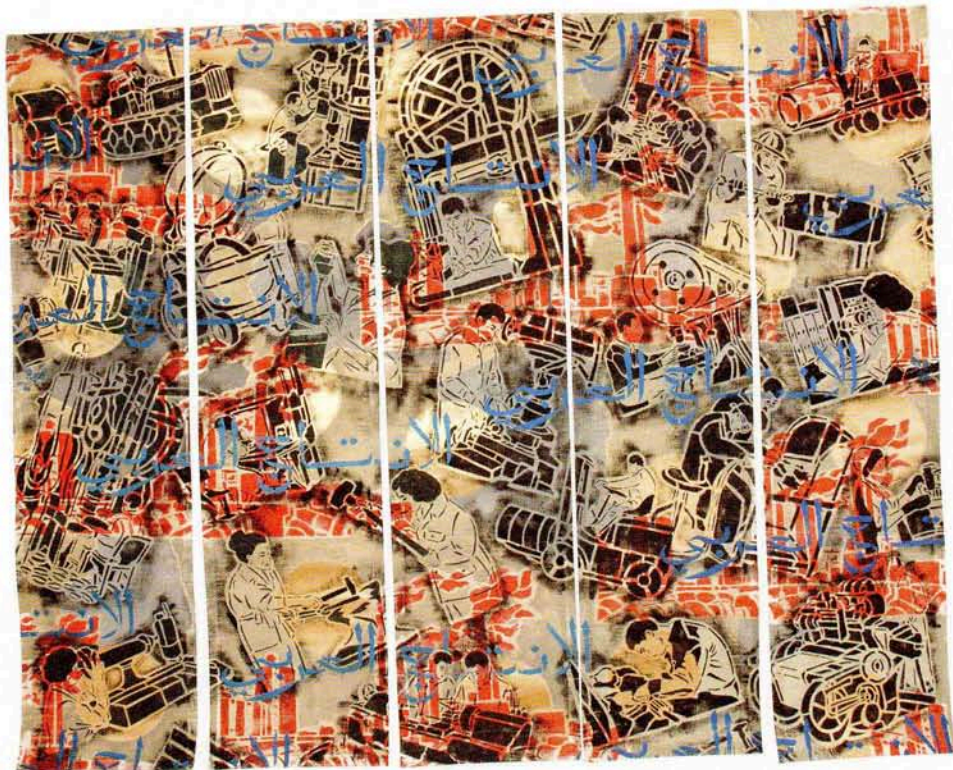
Facing page: The exterior of Rose Issa Projects in London, UK.

This page: Al Braithwaite, *Museum No 1: Hizbollah's Caviar*, 2008. Leather-bound book, brass rifle bullet and camel bone prayer beads, 35+ pages, 28.4 x 23 x 5.5 cm.



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'It is what you do with what you have and how well you can promote good artists.'



One other obvious forum for artist exposure is the plethora of museums and art institutions that are springing up all over the Middle East and especially in the Gulf. Issa is sceptical about how meaningful they will prove to be in terms of promoting artists from the region. "What is the contribution of these museums to world culture?" she asks; "What are the programmes and who are the public? Is there a public? If they're just going to bring out another Andy Warhol work or another piece by Gilbert and George, then I don't need to go to the Gulf to see that. I want to see something that the area itself is producing, work that nobody else can offer."

Meanwhile, RI Projects is busy pulling together an ambitious programme. Shows can take between six months and two years to plan, but a small space has the advantage of flexibility. Cancellations are seen as an opportunity to fit in the unexpected and accommodate works that nobody else is offering. The team's unending enthusiasm to extend the aesthetic experience of both connoisseur and novice is reflected in the late-summer exhibition of works by Susan Hefuna (*Canvas 3.6*), Ana: of *Dreams, Patience and Realisation* as it explores the themes of the knowledge of self and empowerment.

Issa continues to work as an independent curator to premier institutions across Europe and enjoys a deep-rooted working relationship with Leighton House Museum, for which she is curating a series of exhibitions this autumn and winter. These open in October with works by emerging Iranian artist, Parastou Forouhar. [Fathi] Hassan, whose work was exhibited at the Liverpool Festival this summer, follows in November and, in early 2011, work by the Turkish artist Selma Gurbuz will be showcased.

The seeds that were sown by Issa in the 1980s are now bearing fruit, but surely such success warrants a bigger, more imposing 'space' that will accommodate large-scale installations and multimedia artworks? It seems not. Issa is clear about what she is doing and why: "It's not the grandeur of the gallery or whether you have branches left and right that counts. It is what you do with what you have and how well you can promote good artists. That is the most important thing, in my view. It's not size that counts, it's the quality." 

For more information visit
www.roseissa.com

Facing page: Installation by Ayman Baalbaki at the Bluecoat Gallery in Liverpool, organised by Rose Issa Projects. *Destination X*. 2010. Mixed media installation. Variable dimensions.

This page: Chant Avedissian. *Al-Entaj El-Arabi (The Arab Production)*. 2008. Pigments and gum Arabic on corrugated cardboard. 250 x 300 cm.

All images courtesy Rose Issa Projects.