

The Iraqi Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale: From Figuration to Abstraction

Anastasia Shanaah, screening-stipendiat

From its inception in the beginning of 20th century abstract paintings were considered self-referential. In other words they were not perceived as works of art that would reflect the ongoing reality. However, the Palestinian abstract artist Samia Halaby strongly disagrees with that perception. In fact, she argues that abstract paintings can not only “describe the space within which we orient ourselves”, but become a political statement in itself. By exploring the art works presented at the National Pavilion of Iraq at the 57th Venice biennale that touch upon the current political unrest that Iraq experiences now, I attempt to show that even abstract art cannot escape the politicized narrative when it comes to such a charged issue as the state of Iraq today. The exhibition “Archaic” juxtaposes the works of eight modern and contemporary Iraqi artists with 40 ancient Iraqi artifacts to emphasise the relevance of archaism to a contemporary Iraq, a country whose existing political, administrative, social and economic reality is arguably as “archaic” as its ancient heritage. The study will touch upon some of the modern abstract works, for instance, Jewad Salim’s *Pastoral*, presented at the Biennale as well as contemporary ones, like Nadine Hattom’s installation that changes from figurative to abstract and back.