

TORONTO, CANADA

# HOME, OR SOMETHING LIKE IT

Toronto's newly-opened **Aga Khan Museum** hosts the first exhibition of Sharjah's Barjeel Art Foundation in North America. Through the Middle Eastern works on display **Jobin Bekhrad** explores the meaning of home.

‘D

DO YOU KNOW SISYPHUS?’

I'm fiddling around with a fast-dwindling drink, surrounded by Safavid-era miniatures, suspended Persian carpets, and sundry well-heeled dignitaries sweating through shimmering silk and broad-shouldered blazers. Suheyyla Takesh, the curator of what has been lauded as a groundbreaking exhibition, is telling me excitedly, yet with her usual lethargic lucidity, about its premise. The way she's asked me would make most responses on my part seem gauche, at the very least: Sisyphus? Yeah, he's alright, the bloke. She continues after a brusque mm hmm and a sip of chardonnay: "the idea for the exhibition comes from the myth of Sisyphus." Aha, I say with widened eyes, meeting the inquisitive gaze of someone beyond the sea of exquisite hairdos that I don't particularly feel like speaking to just yet. "Like Sisyphus, the artists in the exhibition are in the process of striving for an ability to remain in place, for the rights to travel, to emigrate, to return, and to feel at home." Home? I've long accepted the fate of a nomad, and given up any attempt to find a home for myself — at least in the physical sense. I'm not alone in my sentiments, though; joining me on my tangent, Suheyyla tells me of her mixed Palestinian and Crimean ancestry, and of her own feelings of displacement. There comes another of the tribe. "Nomad? Did I hear the word nomad!?" But, just as Tasleem Somji from the Museum begins to relate her tale, we're rudely interrupted by ahems aplenty and popping noises crackling out of a speaker conveniently stationed right beside my ear. Ladies and gentlemen

On July 23, 2015, Toronto's newly-established Aga Khan Museum witnessed the private opening of *Home Ground*, an exhibition of contemporary Arab art from Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi's Barjeel Art Foundation. Curated by the Foundation's Suheyyla Takesh, *Home Ground: Contemporary Art from the Barjeel Art Foundation* presents 24 works by 12 leading Arab artists who explore themes of belonging, movement, and displacement, and the struggles associated with them, in a variety of mediums.

"Things happened quite fast between Sharjah and Toronto," said Sultan hurriedly a few months back during Art Dubai; and, while things did indeed happen quickly (the Museum itself is only a mere 10 months old), this shouldn't come as a surprise to those familiar with the Foundation's vast art collection and the Speedy Gonzales approach of the Museum's Director, Henry Kim. "When I first saw the collection on display in Sharjah, I thought it was absolutely extraordinary," said Kim, who also commented on the broader significance of the exhibition. "*Home Ground* is powerful, not only for the differences it highlights, but also for the similarities it conveys about the human condition in the 21st century." In an age where "immigration, shifting boundaries, and contested

identities are everyday realities for so very many of us" — according to Kim — such phenomena are perhaps even more poignantly felt and experienced by artists from the Middle East, a region that has seemingly perpetually witnessed mass waves of immigration and emigration, and shifting human landscapes.

Many in the Emirates expressed dismay upon hearing the news that the Aga Khan Museum would find its home in Toronto rather than in Dubai; however, the location for both the Museum as well as the exhibition could not, perhaps, have been more apropos. "Where else can you find a city that has benefitted so much from immigration [and] changing ethnic identities?" asked Kim, whose feelings were echoed by Sultan, in Toronto for the first time. "We are heralding a new era in cultural relations between the UAE and Canada," he said. "I wouldn't have wanted any other city in North America to host the first exhibition of the Barjeel Foundation."

The exhibition is not — as many would understandably assume, given its importance and the size of the Museum — one of Olympian proportions (to make another Hellenic reference). In a rather modest section of the Museum's second floor are on display 24 contemporary artworks by 12 artists of Arab descent, in a variety of mediums: painting, photography, video installation, and sculpture. While some artists have become household names among collectors and even those with scant knowledge of Arab art, others,



Mona Hatoum.  
*Infinity*, 2009.  
Bronze, 61 x 34.5 x 34.5 cm.  
Image Courtesy of Alexander  
& Bonin Gallery



(Above, left) Khaled Jarrar. *Volleyball*, 2013. Reconstituted concrete from apartheid wall diameter 20 cm, weight 8 kg. Image Courtesy of Gallery One (Below) Dia Al-Azzawi. *Handala*, 2011. Bronze. 29 x 17 x 10 cm. Courtesy of Niccolò Corradini, Capital D Studio.



*Nation Estate* video, wherein the artist imagines the contested 'Holy Land' as a brutalist, Orwellian estate, and Raafat Ishak's quaint Responses to an Immigration Request from One Hundred and Ninety Four Governments, featuring a number of framed country-specific panels and a list of — as might be surmised — humorous responses. Similar in subject matter to Nabil's piece, yet dissimilar in medium and execution is Charbel Joseph H. Boutros' *From Water to Water*, a photograph of a block of ice forged from the water of a lake to which the artist later returned it, used to bring attention to the struggle and pain endured in the cycle of movement, displacement, and returning.

(Above) Raafat Ishak. *Responses to an Immigration Request from One Hundred and Ninety-Four Governments*. 2006-2009. Oil and gesso on MDF. 194 panels: 30 x 21 cm each. Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.

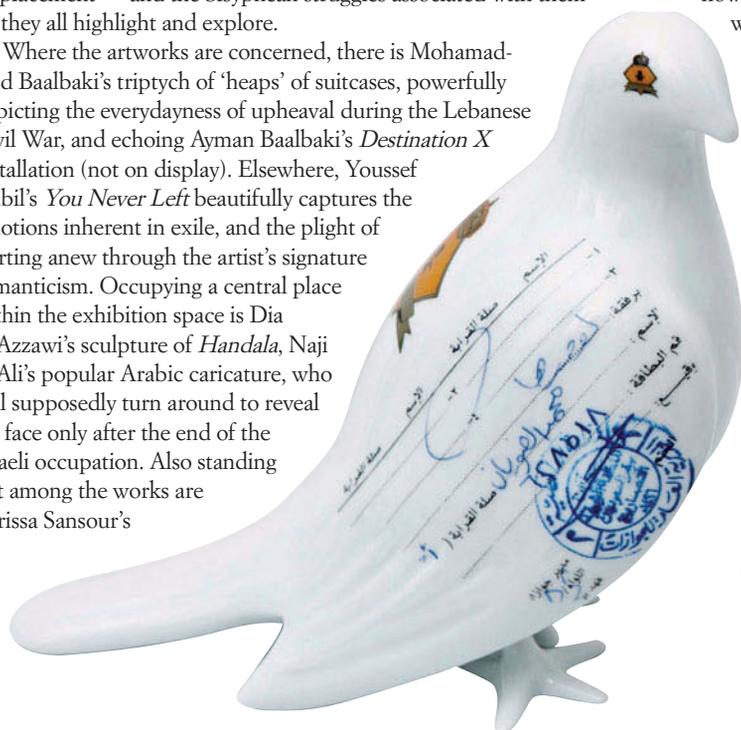
though undoubtedly significant, have enjoyed lesser fortunes abroad. Reputations, however, are besides the point here; what is important to discern in examining the works is the common thread uniting them: that is, the shared issues of identity, belonging, and displacement — and the Sisyphean struggles associated with them — they all highlight and explore.

Though the focus is on artists of Arab origin, the scope of the exhibition is certainly not limited to a particular region or people; and this, arguably, is what makes *Home Ground* so compelling and significant, aside from its unveiling in Toronto, a city which has seldom given attention to the contemporary art of the Middle East. "[*Home Ground*] is one of those great examples," said Kim, "of how you can use a collection to truly bring out meaning that will change people's perceptions about the world, both past and present." ■

(Left) An installation view of *Home Ground: Contemporary Art from the Barjeel Foundation*.

Where the artworks are concerned, there is Mohamad-Said Baalbaki's triptych of 'heaps' of suitcases, powerfully depicting the everydayness of upheaval during the Lebanese Civil War, and echoing Ayman Baalbaki's *Destination X* installation (not on display). Elsewhere, Youssef Nabil's *You Never Left* beautifully captures the emotions inherent in exile, and the plight of starting anew through the artist's signature romanticism. Occupying a central place within the exhibition space is Dia al-Azzawi's sculpture of *Handala*, Najji al-Ali's popular Arabic caricature, who will supposedly turn around to reveal his face only after the end of the Israeli occupation. Also standing out among the works are Larissa Sansour's

HOME GROUND RUNS UNTIL 3 JANUARY 2016.  
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Manal Al-Dowayan. *Suspended Together* (Standing Dove, Eating Dove). 2012. Porcelain 20 x 10 x 23 cm each. Image by Niccolò Corradini, Capital D Studio