

# review the exhibitions

this week's essential reading

'Inventing Impressionism' review by Martin Gayford in *The Spectator*

'What is mainly on display at the National Gallery is a selection of Durand-Ruel's stock: a fraction of the 1,000 Monets, 1,500 Renoirs and so forth that passed through his hands'

Clockwise from this image, the London-based artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan and one of his installations investigating sound; *Cowboy Code (Hadith)* by Ahmed Mater; and Mona Hatoum's *Turbulence (black)*. Roberto Chamorro / The Armory Show



## Weapons grade

The Armory Show in New York is one of the world's biggest and most influential art fairs – and this year's edition had a special focus on work from the region. Andy Battaglia reports

The setting for The Armory Show, a gleaming international art fair with more than 100 years of history in New York, is on Manhattan's far west side, a world away from many other worlds nearby. Visitors making their way to the show last weekend would have strolled from the closest subway at the edge of Times Square through the Theater District, past the studio where crowds line up for tapings of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, by a stable where horses and buggies go after a day's work in Central Park and all the way to the mouth of the Hudson River, to the gate of some otherwise grimy piers.

White tents rise up for the occasion, to keep the entryway warm and usher in an audience to look at art put on view by nearly 200 galleries from 28 countries. All the art is for sale – the reason, it would seem, for signs marking preferred spots for limousines to drop off and pick up. But it's there to be looked at too – to be ogled, observed, pondered, heard, touched, experienced, considered, contemplated, ignored, appreciated and so much more.

Seeing art at an art fair is a dream and a nightmare at once. There's no escaping the shopping-mall sensation of it, the indisputable absurdity of wandering pathways surrounded by booths in what seems like a never-ending maze. But then there's no evading the ease and efficiency of it either, the chance it offers to cram what might be several days' worth of gruelling gallery-going into one

leisurely afternoon. The people are generally pretty and intriguing to watch, and the sandwiches are good, too.

A fundamental question rises to mind very soon after entry: how is it that there is so much art in the world? Knowing the finite number of works by, say, Picasso, one would think that most would have found a permanent home. It's not the case, though, as evidenced by not just a few but dozens of works by Picasso – and Miro, de Kooning, Frankenthaler, Fontana, Beuys, Bearden, Ruppersberg, Judd. Those are all on the "modern" pier, as opposed to the "contemporary" one with works of more recent vintage. There, the canon is less established and more open to different perspectives.

A prominent part of The Armory Show this year is Armory Focus: Middle East, North Africa, and the Mediterranean, on a cross-section of the world the fair has taken to calling MENAM. "I don't know if anyone else has used the term," said Omar Kholeif, curator of the Focus portion of the show. "I have to go trademark it." (It seems he has time so long as he doesn't come upon opposition from either Menam restaurant in Iceland or a river in Thailand.)

Kholeif lives in London, where he is a curator of the Whitechapel Gallery and an editor of *Ibraaz*, an online forum for publishing and video activities devoted to visual culture from North Africa and the Middle East. In New York, he assembled 15 MENAM-minded galleries to show in a designated

space at the front of the contemporary pier, with special projects and presentations arranged elsewhere as well. Some were sprawling and big, such as panel discussions on topics including "MENAM in a Globalized Economy" and CULTURUNNERS, a project sited in a roaming black RV parked outside the fair. Others were small enough to fit inside a crisp packet.

Actually, the art was the crisp packet itself – or rather 5,000 of them made especially to infiltrate the fair in a seemingly innocuous fashion. The creator was Lawrence Abu Hamdan, based in Beirut, took sound as his subject. "All of my work has to do with listening as politics," he said, before describing the purpose of the crisp packets as a sort of secret surveillance device. His inspiration was new technology that allows researchers using high-speed video to measure extremely minor vibrations in an object's surface and, going by those vibrations' patterns, deduce the sounds that created them. In that way, a crisp packet captured on camera can act as a listening device waiting to be enlisted after the fact – as can a plant, a box of tissues, a glass of water and so on.

So there were 5,000 silver bags of crisps moving around the fair, free for the taking but not without a price of a certain kind. "You have the right to remain silent," a label on the bags announced. "Anything you do say in the vicinity of this object may be recorded for training and monitoring purposes." The artist himself opted for a more curious perspective. "There's something sinister about it," he said, "but there's also something beautiful. For the first time, we're hearing the world from the perspective of objects."

Abu Hamdan likes the way that crisps crunch in the head of a person eating them, effectively blotting out all external sound as chewing transpires, and a similar phenomenon plays out in other work of his in the show. In the booth for Galeri Non from Istanbul, a series of paintings that are part of a project titled *The Freedom of Speech Itself* depict large-scale representations of vocal utterances on canvases covered in sound-deadening paint. The type of paint, Coat of Silence, is used in restaurants and theatres and other public places to flatten sound rather than reflect it.

"The paintings are static works of art but also active elements that condition the space in which they're exhibited," Abu Hamdan said. "You can hear it – this dried-out, isolated quality to my voice as we're speaking." He was right: the sound changed significantly in the presence of paintings that prove to be even more abstract than first impressions suggest.

Other work in the MENAM Focus area rewarded close attention. Kholeif, the curator, said he "wanted to think about histories of abstraction and conceptual art as opposed to art about conflict", in reference to the well-regarded recent Arab art show *Here and Elsewhere* at the New Museum in New York. To that end, Mona Hatoum's *Turbulence (black)* cut a striking figure in the form of thousands of black marbles arranged in a circle on the floor. It was a forbidding void and an enticing invitation at once, beckoning the viewer to dive in while repulsing a pointed stare at the same time.

The booth by EOA Projects gallery in London resounded in black and white, with a video installation by Mounir Fatmi that united designs of ancient Arabic calligraphy with echoes of spinning spiral art by Marcel Duchamp, as well as an arresting light sculpture by Rashed Al Shashai that evoked an arrow, a tree and a sign of pure abstraction with simple lines on the wall.

Elsewhere in the fair but affiliated with the MENAM programme was a mini-exhibition devoted to Iranian artist Parviz Tanavoli, whose work makes up a prized part of the collection of the Grey Art Gallery at New York University. The Grey has the largest holdings of modern Iranian art outside that country and some 80 works in its collection are by Tanavoli. The artist struck up a friendship with Abby Weed Grey in the early 1960s and she provided him with decades of patronage and support.

The 20 works by Tanavoli on view resounded with their elaboration

and simplicity, drawing on aspects of historical Arabic folklore and design while hewing towards modernist distillation. Sculpture and jewellery showed alongside prints and paintings, including *Last Poet of Iran*, a stark and fertile assemblage of totemic stick figures in animated states suggestive of many different acts at once.

Back in the main MENAM Focus area, heavily trafficked by the many thousands who made their way to the fair through the snow and the cold, a monumental work by the Saudi Arabian artist Ahmed Mater covered the bulk of a large wall. It comprised many hundreds of tiny plastic toy gun caps, the red kind that snap when toy guns are shot, and the arrangement of spaces between them ushered a message into the room.

With words in English and Arabic side by side, it spelt out a so-called "cowboy code", from folkways in the horse- and silence-intensive American West, and Islamic codes alluding to statements or actions of the Prophet Mohammed. The missives on the cowboy side were clear, in their American context: "a cowboy never takes unfair advantage – even of an enemy"; "a cowboy always tells the truth"; "a cowboy is a patriot" etc. The messages on the other side were more elusive to those with no Arabic, but it was easy to imagine a lot of meaningful communion at work in the surroundings, somewhere in the middle of worlds.

Andy Battaglia is a regular contributor to *The National*.