

review exhibitions

this week's essential reading

'A plan to spread Dada worldwide'
by Jason Farago, The New York Times

'Thinking about how art can circulate beyond the museum is no less important for today's artists, who can exploit a global communication network the Dadaists could only dream of'



Clockwise from top left, **Study for a Monument (2013-16)**, by Abbas Akhavan Courtesy David Heald / Guggenheim; **Trembling Landscapes – Beirut (2014)**, by Ali Cherri Courtesy Guggenheim; **Flying Carpets (2011)**, by Nadia Kaabi-Linke Courtesy Thomas Brown / Guggenheim; **Untitled (Ghardaïa) (2009)**, by Kader Attia, a scale-model city made of couscous Courtesy David Heald / Guggenheim

Absence and couscous

The Guggenheim in New York focuses on migration and anxiety in the Mena region, writes [Andy Battaglia](#)

The first sculpture in an exhibit of Middle Eastern and North African art at the Guggenheim Museum in New York is a scale-model city made not of wood, clay or foam but, rather, a colossal mound of couscous. It was cooked and put there, all 349 kilos of it, by the French-Algerian artist Kader Attia.

The buildings in his mini-metropolis on a hill come in different shapes and sizes, some domed, others with slanted roofs. Their designs, rendered in couscous that has stuck together but started to crack in places, are simple and austere, with an elemental elegance that looks both ancient and modern at once.

By their side, on the white walls of the gallery they occupy, are two large photographs of the French designers Le Corbusier and Fernand Pouillon, both noted for their contributions to the canon of modernist architecture. Many people know of Pouillon and most are familiar with Le Corbusier – but how many, especially in the United States, know the ancient Algerian city of Ghardaïa?

Very few, sadly, even though its legacy is celebrated in a way in the West. Ghardaïa was a big influence on Le Corbusier, Pouillon and others of their modernist ilk, who took ideas from its historic buildings and turned them into architecture that came to serve an aesthetic of 20th century futurism, with all vestiges of the past seemingly excised. Except they weren't, obviously, if connections could be made to provenance from eastern origins.

In the wall text, Attia's interest in Ghardaïa is explained by way of its status as unacknowledged and under-known, even though it has been designated a Unesco World Heritage site. The region of its origins, the sculpture seems to say, has much to tell the rest of the world.

The exhibition, featuring art from the Guggenheim Museum's own collection, gathers 17 works under the title *But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise: Contemporary Art of the Middle East and North Africa*. It is part of a museum programme – the Guggenheim UBS Map Global Art Initiative – to widen its focus in particular parts of the world, with other areas including Latin America and South and South East Asia.

The exhibition's stated theme focuses not on violence or turmoil or disruption, as many other shows of Mena art in the United States have, but instead on geometry, which widens and refracts in different ways. Some of those point to political matters, to be sure, but through different sets of directions than are often on display in the US. Geometry and the logic within it were born in the region, states a block of wall text that greets visitors to the show, and the artists involved are particularly "attentive to the migration of ideas and peoples in an age of anxiety that has witnessed civil liberties and freedom of movement come under repeated attack".

Movement is manifested in numerous ways. A nine-part series of drawings by Susan Hefuna, grouped under the title *Building*, feature two sheets of translucent tracing paper – each overlaid with black ink ethereally visible through both layers in a way that was inspired by the artist walking circuitously through the gridded streets of New York City.

Scratches on Paper, by Mohammed Kazem, is a long scroll hung vertically and curled up at the bottom on the floor, with tiny cuts punched with scissors that summon the rhythm and sound of their making.

An arrangement of four big prints by Ali Cherri features aerial maps focusing on geologic fault lines beneath Beirut, a foreboding of what even

minor stirrings of them could conjure for the civilization above. The sense of rupture summoned by Cherri's maps is violent and catastrophic, but at a deeper and more inescapable level than that of worldly hostilities. It is also of a kind that is parcelled out indiscriminately across the globe, however peaceful or serene other areas sitting atop fault lines might be.

Study for a Monument, by Abbas Akhavan, plays in both registers: the particularly human and the planetary in nature. Splayed out across the floor, on white sheets that suggest a resting place for dead bodies or botanical specimens, are bronze casts of plants from riverside locations in what used to be Mesopotamia. The metal is blackened with char and green from oxidation; they look rotten and long-since decayed. The feel of it is environmental and all-too-human at once, owing to global coordinates from an ongoing war zone in what is now Iraq.

Sara Raza, organizer of the exhibit and the Guggenheim UBS Map curator for the Middle East and North Africa, said in an interview that her aspiration for the show was to go beyond geography and focus most prevalently on "the migration of people and ideas that can be applied to anything anywhere". Forging connections of the kind is especially important in the US, she said, to recalibrate a relationship with the region that has for so long been mostly military in nature.

"Definitely now there is more need to explore other parts of the world, for political reasons and for cultural stability and security as well," Raza said. "There is a need to understand and have some sort of dialogue that has evolved."

A series of painted photographs by Rokni Haerizadeh, Iranian by birth and now based in Dubai, lends the exhibition its title, by way of a quote from the German philosopher and cultural critic

Walter Benjamin. In *But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise*, the artwork itself, photo-prints of stills taken from YouTube videos and news broadcasts, is painted over to transform it from real documents to surreal communiqués. An odd fish features in an image of people being rescued from a flood; strange hybrid donkey-rabbit creatures ride bikes on an illuminated street.

Nearby, casting shadows suggestively, is a large sculptural installation by Nadia Kaabi-Linke, with glimmering stainless steel bars and hundreds, maybe thousands, of strings of black rubber suspended from the ceiling. The effect is one of space mapped out, with extra dimensions inferred.

Ostensibly, the shapes within the grid relate to patterns on the rugs of African and Arab vendors in Venice who illegally sell products on the streets, and who have to, when the police come, scoop up their wares in their carpets and flee. The connection is not at all evident to the viewer, aside from a mention of it in a label on the wall, but it's clear that what is there to be seen is hiding something else, an immanence of some kind.

The same goes for *Bank Bannister* (*Banque Bannister*), a sculpture consisting of shiny brass and empty space, by Hassan Khan. It's a model of a railing that led to the Cairo headquarters of Banque Misr, the first Egyptian-owned bank with roots back to 1920. The bannister, going up or down, or perhaps both at once, doesn't have any stairs attached to it, or anything at all. It seems to hover above the floor and give guidance to a place where much can be seen in what can't be seen at all.

● *But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise* runs at The Guggenheim, New York, until October 5.

Andy Battaglia is a regular contributor to The National.