

ArtReview Asia



Charles Lim

Venice Biennale. Oh Buoy



Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck *Modern Entanglements*

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The instrumentalisation of art by politics has long been fertile ground for intellectual digging. Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1984) is one of many texts spotlighting how American abstractionists were drafted as Cold Warriors, brandishing the banner of individualism in the face of Soviet collectivism. Venezuelan artist Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck mines this familiar territory in new ways, using strategic appropriation and a crafty 'stand-back-and-let-facts-speak-for-themselves' posture to tinker with the communication dynamics behind two burning issues – the Israeli nuclear arsenal and our increasingly virtual monetary system.

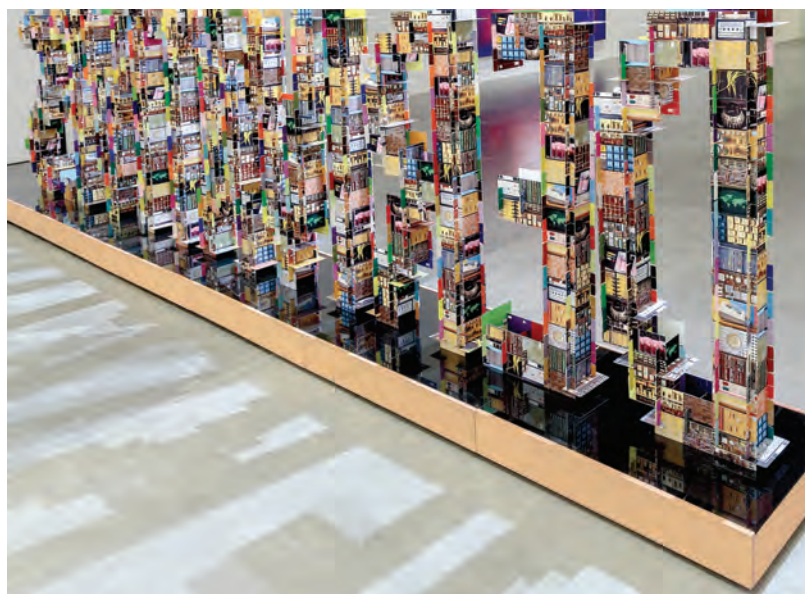
Three 250 × 350 cm billboards constituting the *Israeli Nuclear Arsenal* series (2004–13) corner the viewer in an onslaught of bellowing graphics appropriating visual cues from the 1960s to the 80s. Here, advertising has been enlisted to literally broadcast the nuclear arms Israel and the US worked hard to keep secret. *Waldorf Astoria, 1961* displays excerpts from a conversation between US president John F. Kennedy and Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion at the New York hotel, the text cradled in the cloud-like forms of Rothko's *Number 14* (1960), made 'grainy' – a nod to the CIA PR machine that paid

magazines to amplify interest in American abstractionists. The layered references – the nuclear-esque clouds, Rothko's Jewish heritage, the Waldorf Astoria's proximity to MoMA (home of Rothko's solo show that same year) – conspire in a potent mini-narrative, like a Situationist *dérive* ravelling history up in advertising.

If the *Israeli Nuclear Arsenal* shouts about a stockpile intended to remain under wraps, *Eames-Derivative (Small Version)*, part of the sprawling *Cultural Diplomacy: An Art We Neglect* series (2006–13), whispers a twisted propagandist tale. In Balteo Yazbeck's hands, Charles and Ray Eames – husband-and-wife darlings of American design – are embroiled in nothing less than our teetering global financial system. Feisty marketeers for corporate giants like IBM, the Eameses devoted their talent to humanising the conquering techno-capitalist message. Balteo Yazbeck (aided by co-conspirator, Iranian art historian Media Farzin) pairs a recreation of the Eameses' *Computer House of Cards* – sets of interlocking picture cards sporting close-ups of IBM computers, designed for the company's 1970 Osaka World's Fair pavilion – with a wall-text timeline. The text, voicing some invisible institutional authority, matter-of-factly plots,

from 1944 to 1971, the twin rise of the computer and a monetary system newly untethered by Richard Nixon's curtailing of the gold standard. The shaky house of cards nearby spells out the looming word 'DERIVATIVES', leaving little doubt as to the Eameses' complicity.

Balteo Yazbeck may not be an artist for everyone. His work reads both fast and slow: it starts with an instant impact – a throbbing Israeli Nuclear Arsenal logo at the core of a James Turrell-like billboard, the imposing yet precarious house of cards – yet there is a density to his entangled stories that takes some fathoming. His deft rehistoricising of such heavy issues oddly magnifies their relevance. To wit: a curious entry in the list of works in the Dubai show details a mixed media work titled *Israeli Nuclear Arsenal*, dated 1967, of variable dimensions, from the Israeli Defence Forces collection, appearing courtesy of nuclear technician-cum-whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu who, in 1986, leaked information about the Jewish state's nuclear weapons program to the British press. Of course, no such work appears in the show. But one gallery-goer on opening night disagreed: "Of course the work is here. It's invisible, but around us." *Kevin Jones*



Eames-Derivative (small version) (detail), 2006–13, collaboration with Media Farzin, 1,242 custom-made slotted cards, silk thread with metal fixtures, 5 framed vintage magazine advertisements, three narrative wall labels, vinyl wall lettering, glass and wood platform, dimensions variable. Courtesy Green Art Gallery, Dubai