

Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW UNTITLED (12TH ISTANBUL BIENNIAL)

by brian boucher, 11/7/11

ISTANBUL At least since Lucy Lippard organized the 1966 exhibition “Eccentric Abstraction,” artists have demonstrated that minimal, abstract forms can convey messy, human content. This idea is the primary thrust of “Untitled (12th Istanbul Biennial),” curated by Jens Hoffmann and Adriano Pedrosa. Including around 130 artists, mostly contemporary but some from as far back as the 19th century, the exhibition emphasizes Latin America and the Middle East.

Inspired by Felix González-Torres, whom they hold forth as the practitioner par excellence of their theme, the curators have titled the show in the manner the Cuban-American artist named his works. It includes five untitled group shows, each subtitled with a theme suggested by his pieces: “Passport,” “History,” “Death by Gun,” “Abstraction” and “Ross,” the last being the name of the artist’s lover, who died of AIDS.

The group presentations each offer anywhere from a dozen to 30 historically and geographically disparate artists. For example, “Untitled (History)” includes vitrines containing custom-made plastic rulers in varying sizes by Cevdet Erek (b. 1974). Instead of measuring space, the increments often designate ways to gauge time, thus dryly commenting on the recording of history; “They’re rulers for making timelines,” the artist told me. One work, *Ruler Coup*, bears lines indicating 1923, 1960, 1971 and 1990—the dates of government overthrows in the artist’s native Turkey—and ends with 2009, the year the piece was made. Another features merely “zero” at one end, and at the other, “now,” with no markings in between, suggesting that methods for marking out history may be arbitrary. *Untitled (TIME)*, a short video from 2010 by American artist Mungo Thomson (b. 1969), runs together at breakneck speed every published cover of *Time* magazine, providing a hallucinatory history lesson.

About 50 solo presentations by many of the same artists in the group shows, and treating similar themes, are arranged in individual rooms. For example, Israeli artist Dani Gal (b. 1975), near the “History” show, presents his *Historical Record Archive* (2005-ongoing), comprising hundreds of record albums of speeches by historical figures, from Adolf Hitler to Angela Davis, arranged in rows on the wall. The piece offers a vision of history as commodity, of politics and resistance as entertainment.



Photo: Detail of Yazbeck and Farzin's Detail of Alexander Calder's performing mobile *Orange Fish* (1946) at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008, C-print, vinyl text and narrative wall labels, installation: 691/2 by 63 inches overall.

Neighboring the abstraction section was a collaborative room by Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck (b. 1972, Caracas) and Media Farzin (b. 1979, San Diego) that, through photos, sculpture and wall text, reveals pseudo-meaningful coincidences between the histories of modern art and the Middle East, uncovered through research inspired when Yazbeck detected similarities between the shapes of Iraqi oil fields and elements from Alexander Calder’s mobiles. One wall text points out two crucial developments, both from 1931: Duchamp suggested the name “mobiles” to Calder, and Iraq became independent. A 2008 photo shows a Calder mobile hanging in front of portraits of Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. Another work points out that in the days of Nelson Rockefeller’s involvement with MoMA, a museum employee, later fired, sent gag invitations to an opening at The Museum of Standard Oil. There’s an inviting ambiguity between the serious and the satirical.

Among other highlights was, accompanying the “Ross” exhibition, a room of ceramics by the Ardmore Ceramic Art Studio (est. 1985) of South Africa. The artist collective creates eye-poppingly beautiful and detailed plates, vases and figures devoted to AIDS education, either via stories told comic-book style, for example on the plate *Spread of HIV/AIDS* (2002), or with text remembering Ardmore members felled by the disease. Using the Zulu tradition of storytelling, the pieces aim to counteract shame and ignorance. This biennial is sited in two former maritime warehouses, eschewing the far-flung, dramatic venues included in many past biennials. Minimal, white-cube interiors were designed for the event by architect Ryue Nishizawa. Thus, in its presentation, the exhibition smacks a bit of MoMA-goes-to-the-Middle East and suggests a measure of standardization. Perhaps this is natural for a booming city, with new galleries, museums and art foundations popping up left and right. And it’s a quibble about a show light on spectacle and with a preponderance of strong work.