



A TALE OF *ONE CITY*

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's rendition of the 14th Istanbul Biennial is a meditation on the permeability of salty water and the diffusion of ideas. Inspired by the 19th-century esoteric thinker Annie Besant, who believed in capturing specific thoughts in shapes and colours, the biennial encompasses some 30 venues, spreading out to some of the remotest corners of the city, including the Black Sea coast. But don't fret, some of the works – such as Andrew Yang's at the military zone in Riva and Lawrence

Hande Oynar reviews the 14th Istanbul Biennial: *Saltwater (A Theory of Thought Forms)* as well as the third edition of ArtInternational and looks at how, by coinciding with each other, both benefit.

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Weiner's wall installation at Casa Garibaldi – are not meant to be seen, anyway. Like the mysterious workings of censorship (self-imposed or otherwise), certain works are conspicuous by their absence.

Of those works that are meant to be seen, *The Channel*, on display in Istanbul Modern, brings together some of the key pieces that hold the biennial together, and also poses open-ended questions about the very definition of art and the artist. Painted in soft blue, *The Channel* represents

the Bosphorus and the constant motion of saltwater that touches and shapes the city in invisible as well as visible ways. It also represents the metaphorical waves initiated by different winds of thought. Furthermore, we learn that it also refers to the channels of our neurological system, in which sodium travels and is absorbed by cells to sustain life. In fact, it does exactly that: a piece of rock salt by Tacita Dean, an essay by Leon Trotsky (published in Arabic script during his stay in Istanbul), a digital drawing of a shipwreck



Facing page: Andrew Yang. *IO-XO Calling a Dialogue Concerning Two World Systems*. 2015. Installation with sound recording, cymbals, books, do. Dimensions variable.

Left: Adrian Villar Rojas. *The Most Beautiful of All Mothers*. 2015. Site specific installation with organic and inorganic materials. Dimensions variable.

found in Yenikapı and dating back 8500 years, drawings of neurons by Santiago Ramón y Cajal (a neuroscientist who always wanted to be an artist), and colourful abstract prints by theosophist Besant, whose 1909 book *A Theory of Thought Forms* also gave the biennial its subtitle, are displayed here next to each other in this porous corridor.

While *The Channel* makes us ponder upon what constitutes art and how art permeates life, Christov-Bakargiev has in fact designated another painting at Istanbul Modern as “the core of the biennial”: Cildo Meireles’s vertical diptych, *The Project Hole to Throw Dishonest Politicians In* (2011). The two canvases have a three-centimetre gap between them and an imaginary hole stretches from the formidable Brazilian parliament building in the upper canvas down to the burning core of the Earth in the second one. This dichotomy between observed and unseen, fact and fiction,

and – indeed – life and death points to the grey area between the seen (science, mathematics) and unseen (spirituality, creativity) that the curator (or the “drafter”, as she chose to describe her role in the exhibition) has been relentlessly trying to explore since her acclaimed documenta (13) in 2012.

Three prominent works in Büyükada, the largest of the Prince’s Islands, further obscure this distinction between fact and fiction. It feels like a treasure hunt to walk around old wooden mansions on the island, many of them in ruins, and come across Ed Atkins’ *Hisser*, a poignant lament over a life cut short by a sinkhole or Adrian Villar Rojas’ striking herd of massive polyurethane animals. *The Most Beautiful of All Mothers* has them placed alongside each other carrying organic burdens (each has various matter strapped to its back – from fruit to branches and saddles) at the dock of the famous Trotsky House. Trotsky lived

on the island in exile from Soviet Russia for four years between 1929–33 and communicated with the world only through letters he wrote. William Kentridge’s multi-channel video installation inside the magnificent Splendid Palas Hotel imagines a comical romance between the Russian theorist and his secretary in these dark times. Interestingly while the Venice Biennale takes on Trotsky’s reading of *Das Kapital* as source material (alongside Lenin, Engels etc), the Istanbul Biennial allows us to see him as a human being struggling to express himself.

Back in the city, at the Kılıç Ali Paşa Hammam, the only venue located in the historical part of Istanbul, the third instalment of Wael Shawky’s *Cabaret Crusades* tells of even darker stories from the greater Arab world. The 120-minute film, *The Secret of Karbala*, shows us the endless wars and political manoeuvres involved in the history of



Jerusalem from an Arabic point of view and ends with the conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders in the 13th century. With current conflict raging just beyond Turkey's south-eastern border, we are reminded that violence is never too far removed from this geography.

Coinciding with the centenary of the Armenian Genocide, like the concurrent Venice Biennale, this one also features works commemorating the Armenian heritage of Turkey. The topic of the Armenian Genocide is, of course, a touchy one within Turkey – some went as far as to call its inclusion a scandal, while others have applauded the bravery of organisers in highlighting this important moment in history. What is most important is that works such as Sonia Balassanian's silent stone sculptures, Paul Guiragossian's abstract

forms, Aslı Çavuşoğlu's drawings (made with a rediscovered pigment extracted from bugs by Armenian masters) and Francis Alys' bird-song filled, monochrome film shot on the border between Armenia and Turkey all pay homage to a culture nearly eradicated.

The 14th edition of the Istanbul Biennial is not easy to see. It will take at least three full days to navigate around the city and float over its salty waters, but so much longer to muse on the complex historical, socio-political and artistic context in which it is based. If you were in town not to merely see but to buy art, ArtInternational, Istanbul's more international art fair also took place on the water, at the inlet of the Bosphorus known as the Golden Horn during 6–8 September.

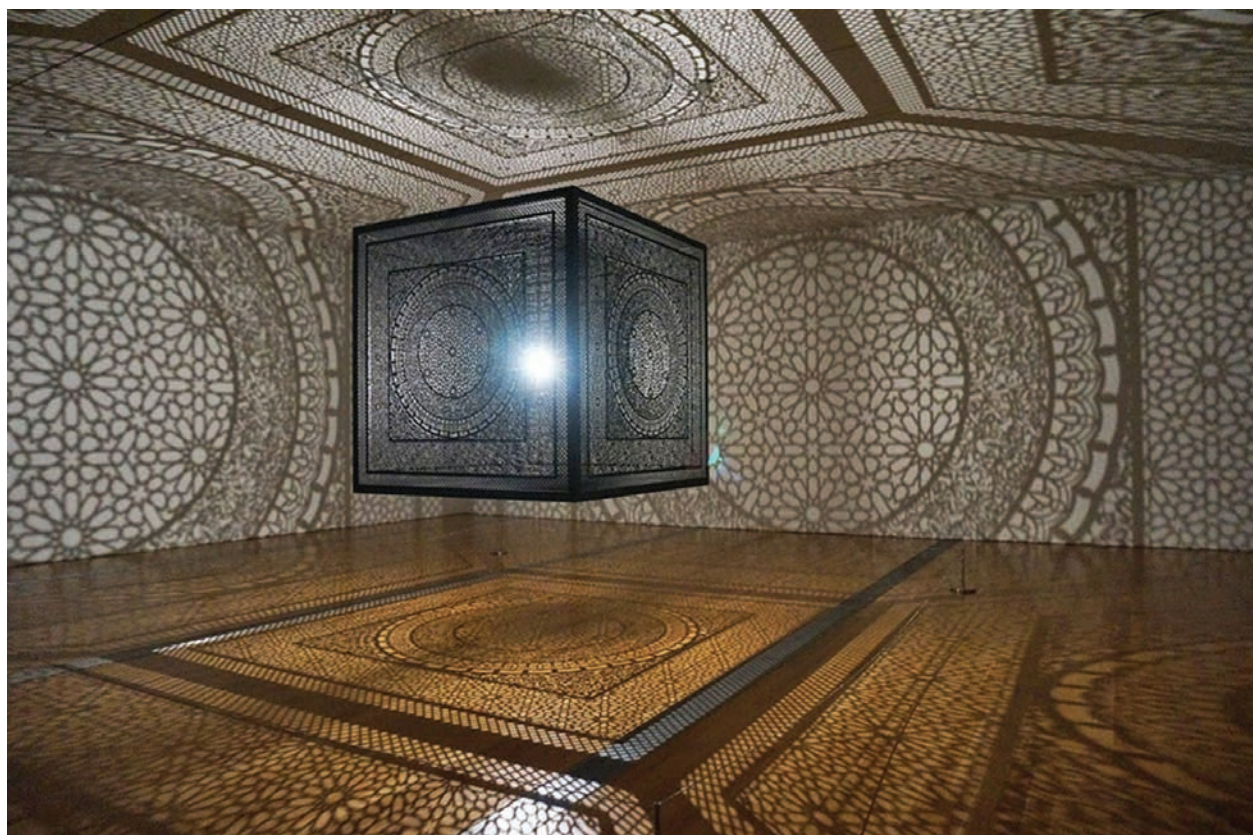
Some 87 galleries from 27 countries showed works by over 400 artists, and a total of \$30.2

million was reached (a fair record) in sales – \$1.3 million of this was made in the first two hours of the VIP preview. The honour of most expensive sale went to Yayoi Kusama's painting, *Blue Sky in the Midnight* (2015) at Victoria Miro Gallery, fetching \$912,000.

While local galleries seem generally happier with sales at Contemporary Istanbul, ArtInternational attracts a growing number of high-profile collectors from Europe, the Middle East and this year especially from China. Since Turkish collectors like dealing with gallerists they are familiar with, most international galleries employed local art people to overcome the language barrier. That may be the reason why first-time galleries mostly interacted with international visitors. Foreign participants interviewed agree that the fair holds promise

From left to right: Sonia Balassanian. *Heads*. 2015. Tufa stone. Dimensions variable; Ash Çavuşoğlu. *Red/Red*. 2015. Armenian and Turkish red on worn-out papers and worn-out handmade notebooks. Dimensions variable; Anıla Quayyum. *All the Flowers Are for Me*. 2015. Stainless steel. 152.4 x 152.4 x 152.4 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Aicon Gallery, New York.

Photography by Sahir Ugur Eren. All images courtesy Istanbul Biennial unless otherwise specified.



for the future and that it is important to establish relationships with local collectors to tap into the local market's potential.

Among local galleries, artSümer and Galeri Nev Ankara had the strongest booths, with solo presentations by sculptors Erdal Duman and Mehtap Baydu respectively. Duman's perspective on the tragedy of war in the Middle East and Baydu's depiction of the socially engineered female figure in Turkish society dealt with some of the major issues under discussion in Turkey today. It was also the first time Victoria Miro participated at the fair, bringing works by Idris Khan, Elmgreen & Dragset and Grayson Perry, whose tapestries and sculptures were recently exhibited at the Pera Museum in an extensive show. Other international galleries with eye-catching works included Galerie

Paris-Beijing with Liu Bolin's camouflage photos, Aicon Gallery with Anıla Quayyum's stainless steel cube inducing shadow play, Galerie Lelong with a selection of Jaume Plensa sculpture (which Turkish collectors are so fond of), and Paul Kasmin with Taner Ceylan's latest oil painting *Satyr II*. With Stephane Ackermann at its helm, the artistic programme included an impressive installation by Hera Büyüктаşçıyan (via RAMPA Gallery) entitled *Falling Waters*, displaying dark blue curtains draped from the stage in one of the theatres at the congress centre.

Even though nearly 35,000 people reportedly visited the three-day long fair, the relaxed layout of the fairgrounds and the quality of the booths made for a better experience than its rival, the more established

Contemporary Istanbul. This year, by pulling the date forward to the opening weekend of the biennial, ArtInternational benefited from the art professionals, journalists and collectors already flocking to the city. However, the other kind of traffic, Istanbul's infamous congestion at all times of the day and the lack of convenient public transportation, made it impossible to see a satisfying portion of both events in just two days. For the next edition of the biennial, there needs to be a synchronicity between the two organisations so that art lovers both local and international can keep their sanity. 📍

Saltwater (A Theory of Thought Forms) ran from 5 September–1 November. ArtInternational ran from 4–6 September.