



# ON UNIVERSAL LOSS AND LOVE

**Ines Min** reviews *Songs Of Loss And Songs Of Love*, an intriguing survey of Contemporary Middle Eastern art in South Korea.

**I**t is more cinematic experience than art exhibition: *Songs Of Loss And Songs Of Love* at the Gwangju Museum of Art leads viewers through a dramatic climax and provocative denouement, replete with a soundtrack courtesy of the carefully selected video pieces that pace this group show. Curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath's first venture in South Korea contains elements that evoke their acclaimed exhibition *Tea With Nefertiti*, but progresses into a truly intimate presentation. What, at surface level, appears to be a straightforward survey of Contemporary Middle Eastern art quickly reveals itself to be a multidimensional, rich exploration of the ever-complex emotions that connect the world at large.

The show begins with some creative allowance: a fictional meeting between Umm Kulthum, the Arab world's most renowned female singer, and Lee Nan-young, the South Korean equivalent. While Umm Kulthum was in Paris for a concert in 1967, Nan-young was on her way to Seoul via the French capital. Though their paths never crossed, Bardaouil and Fellrath conjecture the potential creative output that might follow such an encounter, as depicted in the work of 18 artists. Each presents an idea or commentary about the show's titular themes, which were taken from Umm Kulthum and Nan-young's most famous songs, *Al-Atlal* (the ruins) and *The Tears Of Mokpo*, respectively.



This page:  
Installation view with  
(foreground) Ghada Amer's  
*The Words I Love The Most*.  
2012. Bronze with black  
patina. 152.8 x 152.8 x  
152.8 cm and (background)  
works from Manal  
Al-Dowayan's *If I Forget You  
Don't Forget Me* series. 2012.  
22 silver gelatin fibre prints.  
25 x 35.5 cm each.

Facing page:  
Works by Mohssin Harraki,  
(left) *Thrones O*. 2012.  
Four family trees of four  
Arabic countries: Bahrain,  
Morocco, Saudi Arabia and  
Jordan. Writing on cloth.  
Variable dimensions and  
(right) *Inconnus* 1 to 5.  
2013. Drawing. 60 x 60  
cm. Image courtesy the  
artist and Galerie Imane  
Farès, Paris.

## JUXTAPOSING EMOTIONS

While only two artists were commissioned to create new works for the exhibition, the remaining selections were thoughtfully vetted to comprise an uncannily comprehensive whole given the diversity of media and styles. "It was important that we not have a checklist [of artists to include], but solid content," said Fellrath of the show, which at its core seeks to introduce Middle Eastern art to Korea in a sort of cultural exchange. "We selected these artists because of how they approach the notions of loss and love: the loss of love, the loss of nostalgia, the loss of history or collective memory," adds Bardaouil. The result is a fine montage of sights and sounds, such as Shirin Neshat's award-winning *Turbulent* (1998) and Mona Hatoum's delicate *T42 (Gold)* (1999).

A complex orchestration is demonstrated spatially as well as in the unseen logistics of the exhibition – works were loaned from sites across the globe, ranging from Hauser and Wirth (Adel Abidin) to Seoul's own Kukje Gallery (Ghada Amer). The strong curatorial vision brings to life the interplay between loss and love, enabling artists the freedom to find fresh narratives within their pre-existing work as well as create anew. Lebanese artist Raed Yassin takes the imagined meeting a step further, expanding upon the curators' premise. He posits that a friendship would have led to collaborations; for instance, Umm Kulthum releasing a live recording of her Paris concert, becoming the first Arab singer to release an LP in Korea. Yassin's *Ruins In Space* (2014) opens the



This page: Installation view with (foreground) circular screening room playing a recording of Umm Kulthum's concert in Paris (1967) and Lee Nan-young's *The Tears Of Mopko* (1940) and in the background (on the wall) Khaled Takreti's *Mes Condoléances* (2014) and (on the floor) a work from Pascal Hachem's *Disbelief* series (2013).

All images courtesy Sam Bardaouil and Till Feltrath, unless otherwise specified.

## “Middle Eastern art may look different from that of the Korean art world, but the core is the same.”


show with fantasy-turned-reality; the actual performance is captured on vinyl, remixed with added static and a more vintage sound. The reproduction of Umm Kulthum's iconic vocals is the first of several aural cues that narrate and guide the viewer through the show. And it is this sensorial fluidity that elucidates the true genius of the exhibition.

The artworks are generally divided into the categories of 'loss' and 'love', each paired with its conceptual opposite. It is a neat conceit that expresses the dichotomy of the two emotions, yet there are surprising connections to be discovered in almost every aspect of the exhibition. Mounir Fatmi's *Save Manhattan 03* (2007), which uses a set-up of speakers and sound systems to recreate the skyline of Manhattan through shadow, transitions smoothly to Nicène Kossentini's *Boujmal* series in the next gallery, which focuses on the loss of family, the deceased and how we remember them.

### ONE AND THE SAME

The underlying inspiration of each piece can be found rooted in moments of great change, war and revolution. While this is more overtly evident in works like Pascal Hachem's sexualised *Beliefs In Self Deception: La Belle Vie* (2013), the effect of the Arab Spring, the Six-Day War and similar conflicts are undeniable in the rest. These are the results of the modern socio-political landscape and the tenuous relationship between country and man, government and people. This is best summarised in Abidin's *Three Love Songs* (2010), which shows three outwardly Scandinavian singers unknowingly singing nationalist odes to the rule of Saddam Hussein. The work is in direct contrast with the emotionally raw origins of both Umm Kulthum and Nan-young's songs and, rather than a sense of solidarity or catharsis, Abidin's video incites discomfort and speaks to blind faith and

deception. Fittingly, the exhibition's locale in Gwangju reflects the city's recent history as the site of the 1980 democratic uprising in which protesters were systematically killed under martial law. Today, Gwangju is still known as a centre of political engagement in Korea.

This, ultimately, is the message of the exhibition, which at its most philosophical demonstrates that the term 'cultural exchange' is perhaps a misnomer for a more intrinsic desire for recognition by the other. Middle Eastern art may look different from that of the Korean art world, but the core is the same. The struggle is the same. The humanity, the reactions to love and loss are the same. 

*Songs Of Loss And Songs Of Love* runs until 27 August. For more information visit [www.gwangju.museum.go.kr](http://www.gwangju.museum.go.kr)