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By Ariella Budick | Financial Times | 20 August 2014

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Massimiliano Gioni has brought together some unusual visions of the Arab world in this exhibition

Fouad Elkoury's 'Color snapshot, Place des Canons (Beirut 1982)', 2014

While other arts institutions spend the dog days playing and napping, the New Museum treats summer as a serious time. It has figured out that New York is full of beach- and mosquito-averse people who are happy to lose themselves in a big exhibition, so long as the galleries are cool and dry. Its latest extravaganza of unseasonable intensity is *Here and Elsewhere*, an urgent showcase of contemporary Arab art.

The show's scope is vast, its ambitions dangerously grand. Any attempt to encompass, let alone decipher, a dozen loosely knit countries and cultures might seem arrogant or shallow (or both), and the Guggenheim did embarrass itself with a scattershot survey of Latin American art earlier this year. But the Guggenheim didn't have Massimiliano Gioni, the New Museum's recently appointed artistic director, who, with a crack team of in-house curators, has assembled an exhibition that would rather be quirky than comprehensive. The show mixes youth and age, insiders and outsiders, up-to-the-minute reportage with eternal standards of craftsmanship. It careens from political rants to tight-lipped formalism, from

the intimacy of a diary to the boldness of propaganda.

The upshot isn't a clinical cross-section of a region's creative life, but a poetic wanderer's collection. We flit through Egypt, Morocco, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates, seeing those nations through the eyes of a traveller with eclectic but finely honed taste. Gioni and his crew try hard to undercut the visual stereotypes of the Arab world. They stay away from pictures of gun-waving fighters, wailing mothers and angry crowds, and avoid older clichés, too: grids of men prostrated in prayer, mysterious women in their hijabs, decorative calligraphy. Islam hovers in the background, fundamentalism hardly figures. Instead of settling for a collective Arab identity, they scour the region for its variety and individualism, bringing out subliminal resonances between disparate styles and media.

And yet war permeates the atmosphere, and Gioni's attempts to distance the show from the conventions of battlefield photojournalism can only get him so far. The show's strong suit is photography and video, which frequently take on the Middle East's destructive chaos, often obliquely but sometimes with shocking directness. From Syria comes a searing group of short films by the collective Abounaddara, which got its start on Facebook in 2011. Each week, the group posts a fragment of "emergency cinema", reporting with humanity and artistry from inside the civil war. "The Unknown Soldier", for instance, appears in four videos shot a few weeks apart in 2012. His face darkened to protect his anonymity, he describes impossible choices, ambivalence towards his comrades, the cruelty he despises in himself, and his hopes for the future. He confesses to slitting a man's throat, an act that even he finds inexplicable and that has opened a fissure in his soul. In "Children of Halfaya", a boy chats with chilling pragmatism about the lingering effects of the "breadline massacre", when warplanes bombed civilians queueing at a bakery. "Ten days later people went on the roof to hang laundry and found burnt heads and hands all around them," he says matter-of-factly.

Another Syrian artist, Hrair Sarkissian, traces the roots of today's upheavals to old acts of violence. He was 12 when, on his way to school, he saw three dangling bodies in the middle of a Damascus square, criminals who had been executed as a public spectacle. The sight implanted itself, with nightmarish clarity, in his memory. To exorcise it, he resolved to photograph that same spot, and others like it, more than 20 years later. "I was relying on photography to show me the truth – that these bodies don't exist any more . . . That they are all erased," he has said. The trick didn't work, either on his psyche or on the recurring patterns of history. Sarkissian, who lives in London, insists that these 2008 images of empty piazzas, with their banal posters and dusty palm trees, have nothing to do with the ghastliness that followed – but it's impossible not to pick up the thread connecting state violence to civil war.

Conflict is often invisible, but never far away. The Lebanese artist Fouad Elkoury, fresh from completing an architecture degree in London, returned to Beirut in 1979 to document the country's sectarian strife and its aftermath. His training taught him to alchemise the bombed-out ruins of "The Paris of the Middle East" into ironic metaphors for social decline. His image of a dry, wrecked pool at the Hotel Phoenicia evokes both the ravaged glories of the Phoenician age and Piranesi's etchings of ancient Roman ruins. All these elegies for ephemeral civilisations mingle among bullet-pocked stones.

Beirut is an especially fertile place for artists inclined to reflect on the traumas of war. In 2000, Ziad Antar procured a 1948 Kodak camera and 10 rolls of expired film. His blurred, painterly images of the St Georges Hotel, a hub of pre-war glitz, and the brutalist Murr tower, both scarred by shells, suggest the failure of photography and of memory itself. Lamia Joreige trawls the same territory with her "Objects of War". She invites survivors to choose a single memento from decades of fighting – a teddy bear, a Walkman, a guitar – and talk about it on camera. Then she displays the object and the interview together. One man talks about a watch with the face of a general he once revered and now despises. The timepiece tracks the owner's growth from unthinking worship to his realisation that today's heroes become tomorrow's fools.

In an exhibition so full of eloquent absences and elisions, Van Leo's self-portraits from the 1940s speak especially loudly. An Armenian whose family fled genocide in Turkey, Leo grew up in Cairo and became a studio photographer, specialising in showbiz glamour shots. But he also stepped in front of the camera for hundreds of cinematic pictures, transforming himself each time into a different character like a male

Cindy Sherman.

We see him as a ship's captain, bearded and suave; as a rouged and sexy drag queen in mid-transformation; as an armed and menacing B-movie gangster. These camp, risqué images show nothing of Egypt, except by their very existence; political change and a conservative tide eventually persuaded Leo to desist. As hermetic and private as these photographs are, they testify to a cosmopolitan society beyond his studio – a freewheeling worldliness that so many artists in this show seem to crave.
Until September 28, newmuseum.org