

Art Review:

An artist sees signs of Neo-Orientalism in industry's restless search for a new boom to promote

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By Kamrooz Aram

That the Sotheby's autumn contemporary art auction in London last week was held under the title Contemporary Art Including Arab & Iranian Art is not surprising to me. As the market for Chinese art cools, the focus naturally shifts elsewhere, and at the moment one of the places it appears to be shifting is in the direction of Arab and Iranian art.

I should mention that a work of mine was included in the auction; it was a work that was purchased from my gallery about two months ago, and it is clear to me now that the work was purchased for the sole purpose of putting it up for auction. (I should also mention that of the 22 or so works by Arab and Iranian artists, most that sold did so at a premium, while nine works, including my own painting, were bought in. Considering these results, I did have a moment of hesitation: might I come across as bitter or attempting to publicly shame the day-trading speculator? I hope not, as the results of the auction are not relevant to my point; the auction itself is only one of the symptoms of a larger problem.)

Whatever the intentions of the seller, one thing is certain: my work is now party to the perpetuation of what I take to be the misleading and irresponsible category of 'Arab and Iranian art'. This type of categorisation is not new. The Saatchi Gallery's recent exhibition titles alone are telling: *The Revolution Continues: New Chinese Art*; *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*; and the latest, and most asinine, *The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today*.

Although I find all of this very interesting from an anthropological standpoint, I also find it troubling. Troubling because these efforts at categorisation all exhibit signs of what we might call Neo-Orientalism. The intentions are at once benevolent, generous and apparently progressive, and yet their benevolence and generosity are underwritten by a continued need/desire to control and create a mythology of the East as other. Neo-Orientalism is well-meaning but irresponsible, like the use of the term 'world music' for any kind of music that is not Western. Such exhibitions imply that all the work has to offer its audience is the ethnicity or nationality of its author. Thus, an Iranian-American artist who was born in Michigan is categorised with an Egyptian national who has never travelled more than 50 kilometres from the Nile river delta; never mind what the art has to show for itself. Only one thing matters: the perceived (and one presumes marketable) identity of the artist.

Many artists reject these categories and turn down invitations to participate in such exhibitions, though an artist can never have full control over the context of his work. On the other hand, it cannot go

without saying that many opportunistic artists don't mind this categorisation and even take advantage of it. It is a chance for them to use their otherness, to bring attention to their exotic selves, to self-Orientalise.

It might seem absurd to analyse the catalogue notes on the Sotheby's website, but it is within this context that we can find the most obvious example of the type of myth-building of which I have been speaking. It is written of me:

The artist, born in Iran and raised in the United States, grew up embodying both the Eastern and the Western identities, in a world where the East is mostly regarded 'Oriental'.

A bit simplistic, if nothing inaccurate. But then this:

It was this divide between the East and the West, the Oriental and the modern that has triggered the compositions in Aram's work.

Aside from the fact that this is a false statement, that the so-called divide between East and West did not 'trigger' the compositions in my work, and that I refute such false dichotomies altogether, I am shocked at the comfort with which the writer describes the East as 'Oriental' and the West as 'Modern', as if even now, at the close of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the East is perceived to be synonymous with whatever is outdated, backward, undeveloped. It continues:

Having been strongly influenced by Edward Said's 1978 book, Orientalism, Aram believes that to distinguish and view the Eastern literature, politics and social values as 'the other' in the West, causes a disconnection and distancing between the two cultures.

The same paragraph that has just described East as antinomic with the modern now invokes Edward Said? And finally:

Hence, Aram's paintings bring together the traditions of the two cultures which complement each other rather than compel.

This 'we are the world' understanding of my work, especially when framed by Said's writing, is misleading at best and reactionary at worst. Nevertheless, it is clear that this concluding sentence, with its platitude of cultural harmony, is meant to 'compel' the buyer.

My point is not to critique the writing of some uninformed Sotheby's specialist, but to call attention to the way in which the auction house – so often our proxy for the fine-art market itself – is complicit in, if not outright promoting, a problematic approach.

The title of the auction, Contemporary Art Including Arab & Iranian Art, not only creates a group of artists and artworks that really have little to do with one another, but also implies a gesture of charity: I'm certain that there have been any number of works by Shirin Neshat and Mona Hatoum in past Sotheby's sales. Why the sudden 'inclusion'?

My critique is not just of the auction house and the few collectors and dealers intent on capitalising on exotic names in an attempt to create the next boom market, but also of the few opportunistic artists who are willing to use their otherness to create sensational work that reinforces the Orientalist perceptions and categorisations present in such venues.

In my own work, I have been interested in the way in which Orientalist perspectives are still present in the least expected and most progressive environments, and in the way they are constructing a new mythology of 'the East'. I have often seen my work discussed in the problematic language of false binaries: 'East meets West', 'culture clash' and endless other convenient, dramatic, yet misleading catchphrases. If I draw on certain symbols or traditions in my work, I do so with the intention of challenging the condescending categories of identity which the auction house finds so easy to deploy. That this challenge is obliterated by the market's capricious casting about for a readily consumable otherness is not just damaging to my art, but to that of my peers and contemporaries, no matter where they (or their parents) were born, choose to live or pursue their artistic endeavours. My hope is that artists of Arab and Iranian descent will be respected for the content of their work, accepted as participants in the international discourses of contemporary art and not fetishised for the image of their identity.