

LEBANON

Title: Šamaš - Sun Dark Sun

Artist: Zad Moulata

Commissioner: The Lebanese Ministry of Culture

Curator: Emmanuel Daydé

Venue: Arsenale Nuovissimo

 @shamash_2017
#shamash_2017 #zadmoulata

There is art at the Venice Biennale and there are showstoppers. Taking on the Arsenale on the festival's first day - a series of curated pavilions in giant interlocking spaces in the former military warehouses of Venice - stretches the appetite for contemporary art to the limit. One brash installation after another, one encounters art in the age of the iPhone, where artists (or nations) seem to compete to provide the best instagram snap. In this vein there are standouts, one of which is the Lebanese pavilion, easily the most compelling of the Middle Eastern pavilions this year, with its prehistoric, eerie and almost apocalyptic vision of the past and the future. The country that was once the war-torn stepchild of the region is now the closest place there is to a haven for artists from Syria and Iraq, and its gallery scene is thriving along with a level of freedom that is the envy of artists elsewhere in the region.



Zad Moultaqa, *Šamaš*. Photography by Marzio Emilio Villa.
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Though Lebanon has been represented at Venice before (three times, in fact, the first in a 2007 group exhibition), it's never a sure thing. The Lebanese Ministry of Culture withdrew their participation in 2011 because of political instability, only to have eminent filmmaker and photographer Akram Zaatari make a comeback in 2013. Then nothing during the last Biennale and now, it's the first time that the Lebanon pavilion is situated in the impressive Arsenale Nuovissimo, a short boat hop from the main Arsenale.

Some 30 single-standing speakers line the sides of a high-roofed warehouse, which is turned into a seemingly archaic yet futurist unearthly place of worship. In near pitch darkness they sing a strange elegy in a strange language to the monumental and mechanical totem pole that Moultaqa has erected, their pillar of miracles - which is, in this case, a massive aero-engine. A mosaic of 150,000 gold coins glimmer on the wall, creating an effect akin to the interior of a Byzantine church, though the place has the feel of pre-Christianity. Then, the whirring of an engine roars through the building and, all of a sudden, it is as if we were gathered for prayer and communal shelter in a city about to be bombed, at once fearing violence and worshipping the "screaming machine".

Visual arts openings do not make for respectful audiences and in the opening live performance of the Lebanese pavilion, the shuffling of restless art lovers was a distraction. Even so, it could not spoil the ethereal quality of the piece - Lebanese visitors compared the prehistoric setting to the Temple of Bacchus at Baalbek. The exhibition is by Zad Moultaqa, the French-Lebanese artist/composer who first came to Paris from Beirut as a 17-year-old music scholar and pianist. The work is

satisfying on many levels: as a high-impact piece of visceral power, as a soundtrack worthy of the concert hall, and one with historic and intellectual underpinnings. The message, says both Moultaqa and curator Emanuel Daydé, is a cry against "endless war" dating back millennia, not so much in Lebanon as across the wider Middle East and Mesopotamia. Born in 1967, Moultaqa heard his first bombardment of Beirut at the age of eight. And in a radical approach to musical invention, he admits to using the 'stretched' sounds of engines as inspiration in some of his works.

The Rolls-Royce Avon MK 209 engine, which took six months to acquire, was originally used in a prototype for a British Electric Lightning fighter jet in the 1950s. Visually, it also references the basalt column on which was inscribed the Code of Hammurabi, the king of the Babylonians, thereby cleverly equating the first codes of law with a modern instrument of war, and it is topped by the royal protector, the god of sun and justice *Šamaš*, from whom the pavilion derives its title. The music for the show is entitled *Šamaš; Soleil Noir Soleil* (Sun Dark Sun), inspired by the ancient Akkadian texts. It laments the devastation of Abraham's city of Ur four millennia ago, but in fact, it's an invented language that could be equally of the past as of the future.

"The general message is that violence has been here for 4,000 years. That is the main theme," the artist says, "and the voices that you hear are the voices of the engine." Even the title, *Šamaš*, is a palindrome, in which the end is a beginning, while the music is described as a "diabolical melody", a siren song of war, echoing the incessant drone of air attacks, in a cycle of civilisation and destruction, which is quite fitting for such a historical oeuvre. ■



Zad Moultaqa, *Šamaš*. Lebanese Pavilion, Venice. Engine.
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