

A SEA FULL OF HOPE

The 42nd edition of ARCOmadrid (22–26 February 2023) saw artists of different geographies gather in a specially curated section of the fair focused on the Mediterranean.

Words by Gustavo Egusquiza



ARCOmadrid is one of the annual calendar dates that make the Spanish capital a key stop on the international art circuit. For over four decades, the fair has been woven into the evolving fabric of Madrid's art events and institutions, a cultural landscape that includes the Museo Nacional del Prado, Museo Reina Sofia and Museo Thyssen, among others, and has positioned the city as one of the world's art epicentres. At the core of the fair this year was a specially curated section titled *The Mediterranean: A Round Sea*, designed to bring together issues affecting the different art scenes of the countries that border the Mediterranean, from south to north and east to west.

Identity in the Mediterranean world can be complex and multifaceted. Approaching this subject within the context of an art fair is therefore a rather challenging endeavour, but curator Marina Fodikis, supported by Bouchra Khalili, Hila Peleg and Pedro G Romero, assembled a stunning and thought-provoking exploration of the Mediterranean Sea and its role in shaping the myriad cultural, historical and political identities of the region. Nineteen galleries with as many artists from the countries that surround this sea shaped Marina Fodiki's curatorial approach in a layout designed by Andrés Jaque.

No contemporary consideration of the Mediterranean can ignore the largest

issue currently facing the countries along its shores: that of the seemingly unending flow of migrants and refugees attempting to cross its waves as they flee inequality, armed conflict and political instability at home. Over the last decade, an estimated 25,000 people have perished in the tempestuous waters of what can be an unforgiving tract of water. In terms of how this continuing crisis played out at this year's fair, the curatorial premise hinged on highlighting how, despite all this chaos, grief and loss, there is always room for hope. Fodikis and her colleagues affirmed that, while the region is still a scene of strife, it remains an important intercultural global meeting point – a place where waves not necessarily collide, but actually meet.

Morbid curiosity was not on the agenda. "An art fair should not be a place to illustrate the struggles and pain of others and make money from these circumstances," said Fodikis, "but a place to exhibit the culture of others and give them voice, agency and strength". For the curated section, she invited her selected galleries to present work drawn from across the region that reaffirmed the Mediterranean as a site of cultural exchange and interaction.

Among the artists featured were Anna Boghiguian, with a captivating work based on the cosmopolitanism of the Greek-Egyptian poet Cavafy and



which placed the exhibition firmly at the heart of an open and embracing Mediterranean. Her fellow Egyptian artist Iman Issa, who deploys a variety of forms and strategies to investigate the political and personal associations of history and language, created poetic displays through her juxtaposition of text and object. A more anarchic approach was taken by Greek artist Jannis Kounellis, an exponent of *Arte Povera*, who seeks freedom from linguistic norms and conventional materials by using propane torches, smoke, coal, meat, ground coffee, lead and sculptural objects such as street signs in his work.

Potent reminders of the harsher realities of life were never far away. French-Algerian photographer Mohamed Bourouissa used his mastery of recycled metal car parts to highlight how today's society generates exclusions, while the Palestinian, Jumana Manna, reflected on how power is articulated, focusing on the body, land and materiality in relation to colonial inheritances and histories of place. Meanwhile, Turkish artist Nilbar Güres, who explores notions of human power, social gender roles, relationships, identity and culture in her work, vividly demonstrated the raw violence faced by the LGTBQ+ community in Turkey.

The continuum of history and creativity in the Mediterranean was also on display. Inspired by the mechanical designs of Ismail al-Jazari, a 12th-century

Arab engineer and craftsman, Egyptian artist Huda Lutfi created a variety of imaginary curing devices and textual formulas which negotiate notions of inner healing and repair. For her, the actual making of these pieces brought about not only emotional relief, but also a playful and open process spurred on by the surprises of experimentation. A metaphor, perhaps, for the richness and diversity encompassed by the Mediterranean basin.

Beyond providing an opportunity for the shared intensities of this geographic area to converge and for the prevailing fragmentation in the region to be healed, the exhibition achieved a further important objective. It envisioned the creation of a temporary place where participants could perform time, history and contemporaneity in whichever way they wish – beyond imposed restrictions and the cultural assumptions. A place in which to speak and, no less important, where art resurrects and enables a new form of intercultural exchange and critical dialogue. This contemporary agora aimed to host an idealised Mediterranean, a multi-layered laboratory for cross-fertilisation. A forum where the focus was rightly less on presenting a general overview of artistic production in the region and more on those issues needing attention around a contradictory and conflictive sea that is never calm.

