

DIARY

PLAYING WITH FIRE

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Left: Jeffrey Deitch, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, with artist Cai Guo-Qiang. Right: The “Black Ceremony.” (All photos: Cathryn Drake)

WHILE SOME IN THE ART WORLD continued the party in Miami Beach, an adventurous few chose to dry out on an eastern peninsula on the Persian Gulf, in the sleepy kingdom of Qatar. The occasion that Sunday was the opening at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art of Cai Guo-Qiang’s splendid exhibition “Saraab,” which the artist put together during a fifty-day residency in the fall.

Getting around Doha invariably entails a cruise along the Corniche, and on the drive to the museum that morning we inched past a panorama of the city skyline, freshly punctuated by Jean Nouvel’s sleek, bullet-shaped Tower Qatar. Farther on was the construction site for the new National Museum, a spectacular spaceshiplike composition of discs by the French architect, and the brand-new National Convention Center—inaugurated that day—adorned with a sculptural tree-root facade and a Louise Bourgeois arachnid.

Everything popping out of this stark desert looks extraterrestrial. Blessed with the richest population and the largest natural gas field on the planet, Qatar is characterized by contradictions: It is ruled by voracious, consummate connoisseurs of cosmopolitan culture and yet dominated by the most conservative Muslim society outside of Saudi Arabia. The Nouvel tower makes an apt metaphor, its strident modern shape cloaked in a decorative *mashrabiya* design.



Left: Francesco Bonami, dealer Ludovica Barbieri, and artist Yan Pei-Ming. Right: Artist Abbas Akhavan and QMA chief officer Roger Mandle.

“The only certainty in life is that everybody will have a taste of death,” Cai stressed at the press conference. The Mathaf courtyard and lobby were arrayed with sixty-two gigantic stones imported from a Chinese mountain and inscribed with passages from the Koran taken from an Islamic cemetery in Quanzhou, the artist’s hometown and the origin of the Silk Road. For his other Middle Eastern project, in Egypt’s Siwa Oasis, the kids flew kites; in Doha, his local collaborators played with fire. Here was a pattern of exploded blossoms in ocher, inspired by Iznik ceramics displayed in the Museum of Islamic Art; there an animated frieze of traditional women’s abayas rendered in textile and gunpowder. “Cai hates the terms *fireworks* and *performance* applied to his work,” Mathaf curator Deena Chalabi advised me. “He prefers *explosions* and *social projects*.”

On the way to the Al Mourjan restaurant for a Lebanese feast, curator Sara Raza translated one of the inscriptions from Cai’s stones: “If you die in a foreign land, you die a martyr,” which seemed ominous in the context, where immigrants comprise as much as 85 percent of the population. A giant antelope mascot holding an Olympic torch stood in front of the restaurant to signal the Arab Games, which were starting the next day. Our visit also

coincided with an international OPEC conference—“the Olympics of energy,” as someone put it—so the country was buzzing. Yet my dining companion, Omar Sharif, who lives down the Gulf coast in booming Dubai, noted that it was “*too* quiet here.”

At the opening of the exhibition that evening, the only signs of the Emir, Sheikh Hamad, and his glamorous first lady and second wife, Sheikha Mozah, were the imposing portraits by Yan Pei-Ming in the Mathaf’s lobby. But the ebullient founder of the museum, Sheikh Hassan, was around shaking hands, and a few artists of the Middle Eastern and North African diaspora were in attendance, among them Khaled Ramadan, Adel Abidin, and Ibrahim Salahi. The museum’s chairperson, Sheikha Al Mayassa, presided over dinner at a white tent across the road. She was dressed in a simple all-black abaya, as were all of the Qatari women; the men wore long white *jellabiyas*. In fact everything, down to the black table linens and abstract centerpieces, was black or white.



Left: Mathaf’s Deena Chalabi and director Wassan Al- Khudhairi and Art Dubai’s Antonia Carver. Right: Curator Sara Raza and artist Ibrahim Salahi.

Museum director Wassan Al- Khudhairi took the stage along with Cai’s personal translator and an Arabic interpreter while images of the show flashed on background screens. “Thank you, Sheikh Hassan, for teaching me so much about Arab culture,” the New York–based artist said through three interpreters. “Now I can count myself to be half Qatari.” An endless list of acknowledgments ensued, the sentiment so charming that only a ravenous diner could lament. “I am also learning from the women around me, first of all my grandmother, who is ninety-seven.” He then thanked his mother, sister, his wife and her sisters, his daughter, and the ladies at his studio. The artist was beaming. “Thank you to the authorities for allowing us to

explode gunpowder.” At which point a nearby journalist grabbed a bread roll, whispering, “*And* the policeman in the street and the staff at the hotel.”

When the dinner—and the acknowledgments!—were finally over, I walked to the museum with Cai and Jeffrey Deitch, who had appeared just in time for the meal, looking as fresh as if he had been zapped in from Miami by a teleportation machine. He walked into each room cooing, “Beautiful, beautiful.” We entered a space full of fog, obscuring a pair of antique wooden fishing boats, from Qatar and Quanzhou, which had the effect of a Romantic painting. “It reflects my lack of clarity about the Qatari culture,” the artist explained. Next door, a camel suspended in the air besieged with falcons represented his perception of Arab culture as variously “humble and homely, or flashy and aggressive.” I asked why the obsession with death. “Because there is always the chance of an accident,” he said cryptically, “and each explosive shell destroys itself.” We ended up reclining on cushions with Italians Francesco Bonami and Fabio Cavallucci to watch the video *Al Shaqab*, in which Arabian horses were primped, drilled, groomed, and sprayed.



Left: Cai Guo-Qiang and Sheikha Al-Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani. Right: Artist Dia Azzawi and Sheikh Hassan bin Mohamed bin Ali Al Thani, founder of Mathaf.

We finally made our way to the “unofficial” afterparty at the W Hotel’s Wahm lounge, passing dark Oriental rooms defined by elaborately perforated screens, through which mingled shisha smoke and an excellent mix of chilled funk, electronica, and a few remixed Arabic classics. By that time, our intimate group was populated mostly by Mathaf staff members and visitors from the UAE. Art Dubai’s Antonia Carver chatted with Jack Persekian in a dark corner. The Gulf crowd is tight, and Carver, who came to organize the Global Art Forum with the Qataris, paid her respects: “They have a very professional and thorough

approach; it is not just about budget—although that doesn't hurt." Before long her colleague Farah Atoui and artist Abbas Akhavan were engaged in an impassioned discussion about the foibles of the protest against Persekian's dismissal from the Sharjah Biennial. By the time we left the hours were long past wee, but there seemed to be no end in sight.

The next day brought the much-anticipated "Black Ceremony," where 8,300 rounds of explosives would form smoky compositions in the desert. While VIPs filed into a white viewing tent near the museum, our entourage of mostly journalists moved on to the front line, where a carpeted stage was set up with black, thronelike chairs for the royal family, which remained empty. Sheikha Al Mayassa showed up with her husband and children, and hung out with Roger Mandle, chief officer for museums at the Qatar Museums Authority, and a few other dignitaries on the stage, which was soon invaded by TV cameras and general confusion, despite weak appeals for order over the loudspeaker. It truly felt like we were in a quaint fairy-tale Bedouin kingdom from a mythological time. A military platoon sporting purple camouflage had been mobilized for the occasion, as well as a few imported Chinese specialists, which seemed right since they invented the stuff. Everyone got earplugs, and when the rounds began to fire—what looked like a flock of birds in triangular formation, black and yellow gyrating smoke rings, a giant red-hot fireball that was felt as much as seen, a wondrous multicolor rainbow—I was quite happy to see, but not hear, the show.

— Cathryn Drake

ALL IMAGES