

ART & DESIGN N.Y.T.

Venice Biennale Pavilions for Iraq, Ukraine and Syria Reflect Strife at Home

By FARAH NAYERI

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Staged photographs by Akam Shex Hadi at the Venice Biennale feature people from communities under Islamic State attack with black fabric coiled around their feet.

Credit

Akam Shex Hadi

VENICE — When Mosul, [Iraq](#)'s second-largest city, fell to the Islamic State in June, members of the [Ruya Foundation](#), an Iraqi nonprofit that set up the country's pavilion at the last [Venice Biennale](#), considered scrapping all plans for this year's exhibition. "With all this carnage and death and rape, how could you even think of culture?" said Tamara Chalabi, chairwoman of the foundation. In the end, the plans went forward because it was "a statement," she said. "When there's so much else being destroyed, this is also one way of trying to preserve culture."

In the century since they first appeared, the national pavilions at the [Venice Biennale](#) here have acted as cultural outposts of the countries they represent. But what happens when those countries are in the middle of an armed conflict? The art often reflects the horrors at home: Artists and curators, who view portraying reality as a duty, illustrate it in a range of media, and Venice becomes a platform for geopolitical frictions.

Photo



The Ukrainian pavilion at the Venice Biennale is a glass box next to the Grand Canal. Inside, a young artist is presented on hunger strike, staring at video feeds of the homes of Ukrainian soldiers.

Credit Serge Illin/PinchukArtCentre

Conflict is certainly visible this year in the pavilions of Iraq, [Ukraine](#) and [Syria](#). Iraq and Ukraine tackle the hostilities directly: Iraq evokes the brutalities of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) in drawings, watercolors and photographs, while Ukraine illustrates its ordeal through painting, sculpture and an installation with artists who are on a hunger strike. Yet the Syrian civil war has still become a focus in Venice after the underground filmmakers' collective Abounaddara pulled out of the main Biennale exhibition, protesting that its first short was excluded from the opening week in an "act of censorship." Abounaddara also gave back the special mention that the Biennale jury had awarded it on Saturday. (A spokesperson for the Biennale curator Okwui Enwezor denied censorship and said the Abounaddara films were seen and recognized by the jury.)

"The Venice Biennale is revealing of the tensions in the world, and how nations want to present themselves," said Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate museums, who was here for the event.

The Biennale originated in 1895 as an exhibition of new art from around the world, and as artists joined, the organizers suggested that countries build their own pavilions. Belgium's came first, in 1907; today about 90 countries have dedicated pavilions. While pavilions are usually government-funded, private money plays an increasingly large role. The pavilions of Iraq, Ukraine and Syria are

completely privately funded, Ukraine's by the billionaire businessman [Victor Pinchuk](#).

A major focus of the Iraqi pavilion this year (held at Ca' Dandolo, a palazzo on the Grand Canal) is a set of drawings by adult [Iraqi refugees](#) who fled the Islamic State's onslaught. These depictions — a hooded militant shooting a mother and child, a bandaged man whose bleeding heart is shaped like Iraq — were produced when the Ruya Foundation took paper, pencils and crayons to refugees in three camps in northern Iraq. All 546 submissions were then flown to Beijing and shown to the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, who made a selection for a book published by the foundation. (That book is on sale at the exhibition and proceeds will go to the refugees.)

Ms. Chalabi, a daughter of Ahmad Chalabi, the onetime United States-backed Iraqi opposition leader, said her foundation asked to represent Iraq again after organizing the last pavilion, in 2013. The government gave approval and curatorial "carte blanche," she said, but no money. The foundation chose Philippe Van Cauteren, artistic director of the S.M.A.K. contemporary art museum in Ghent, Belgium, to put together the exhibition, and funded it with 600,000 euros (about \$675,000) from private Iraqi companies and individuals.



A work by Ehsan Alar in the Syrian pavilion shows sculpted feet in sand. The pavilion's curator says the piece represents human migration.

Credit

Ehsan Alar/Pavilion of Syrian Arab Republic

Of the five artists displayed, two have created works directly related to the Islamic State. Haider Jabbar, a young exile in Turkey, is showing expressionistic watercolors depicting a series of severed, bleeding heads, each with a case number (rather than a name) in the title. Akam Shex Hadi's elegantly staged black-and-white photographs show isolated figures from communities under Islamic State attack standing with black fabric — representing the attackers' flag — coiled around their feet.

"ISIS comes just to kill," said Mr. Hadi, an Iraqi Kurd, next to his photographs, adding that the flag was "like a snake" twisting around its victims.

Artists from Ukraine — where government forces have been fighting pro-Russian separatists since Russia's annexation of Crimea in early 2014 — have been even more spectacular in their denouncements in Venice. On Friday, activist Ukrainian artists (who were not associated with the national pavilion) occupied the Russian pavilion in camouflage and invited visitors to wear uniforms bearing slogans. All of the works in the Ukrainian pavilion itself, a glass box parked along the Grand Canal, represent the strife in Ukraine in one way or another. Inside, the Open Group collective is presenting a young artist on hunger strike, sitting at a table with a water jug and a glass and staring at nine live video feeds showing the homes of Ukrainian soldiers who have been drafted. Whenever a soldier returns from the front, the artist ends his hunger strike and another takes over. Color photographs of tables in the soldiers' homes, covered with their paraphernalia, are on the back of the grid of video screens. The Belgian curator Björn Geldhof, who was appointed by Ukraine's ministry of culture, said that for him, not referring to the military situation was "not possible." He added, "I think it would be a form of escapism."



Outside the Ukrainian pavilion is a sculpture by Nikita Kadan made of damaged items from that country.

Credit Serge Illin/PinchukArtCentre

Outside the pavilion is an encased outdoor sculpture by the Ukrainian artist Nikita Kadan, made of damaged items from eastern

Ukraine. They include concrete chunks from an apartment block that had been bombed and teacups melted into the glass shelf they once rested on.

Mr. Pinchuk, the pavilion's patron — who also sponsored Ukraine's pavilions in 2007 and 2009 — said that while Ukrainians would “not understand” if the pavilion were to keep silent about the current situation, he warned the artistic team: “Don't think you can make something anti-Russian, absolutely not.” (A spokesman for Mr. Pinchuk later said that while Mr. Pinchuk had condemned the annexation of Crimea and the fighting in eastern Ukraine, he was not otherwise critical of Russia.)

The [Syrian pavilion](#) is the least overt in representing conflict. It was entirely funded by non-Syrian (mainly Italian) sponsors, and it displays a mix of Syrian and European art. The Syrian works were chosen by Emad Kashout, a cultural official in Damascus, while the pavilion's curator, Duccio Trombadori of Italy, said that he had picked the European ones himself.

“Syria is a country that's going through a difficult period,” Mr. Trombadori said. “The intention here is to show that while politics and history are divisive, art is not.”

One work, by Ehsan Alar, shows a suite of sculpted feet in a trail of sand; according to Mr. Trombadori, it represents the migration of people. Another set, by Nassouh Zaghloleh, are dim black-and-white photographs of window views and courtyards with no clear signs of war. The pavilion also shows an unrelated selection of European pop-art collages and cityscapes, and, floating in the lagoon, a stainless-steel iceberg sculpture by the Italian-Albanian artist Helidon Xhixha that denounces global warming.

A more slicing view of Syria is provided in the [opening film by the Abounaddara group](#). In it, President Bashar al-Assad of Syria solemnly walking down a red carpet past a military formation.

Suddenly, the screen goes blank and reads: “Sorry for this technical failure. Please keep enjoying the spectacle.”