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# Art in Review

By [HOLLAND COTTER](#), [KEN JOHNSON](#) and [KAREN ROSENBERG](#)

TARJAMA/TRANSLATION

[Queens Museum of Art](#)

New York City Building

Flushing Meadows-Corona Park

Through Sept. 27

The group exhibition “Tarjama/Translation” at the Queens Museum of Art is, geographically speaking, hard to get a grip on. The show’s amorphous-sounding subtitle — “Contemporary Art From the Middle East, Central Asia and Their Diasporas” — doesn’t begin to convey the size of a map defined by 27 artists born or living in Afghanistan, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Lebanon and Morocco, as well as in England, Germany, France, the Netherlands and the United States.

But the shapelessness is to some degree deliberate. Why, the curators seem to ask, apart from marketing convenience, do we persist in packaging artists by their nationalities, as often as not fictional constructs, as if that were all we really needed to know about them? If the participants in this show have any single thing in common, it is something basic and broad: they all work in urban centers, some with complex historical links, in an intensively networked and interconnected world.

Once that useful point sinks in, however, you’re still pretty much on your own in finding a focus — the meandering installation doesn’t help — which means that you direct attention to individual artists, and that’s O.K., because there are good ones here. A few, like Emily Jacir, Pouran Jinch, John Jurayj and Michael Rakowitz, exhibit regularly in New York. Others — Nazgol Ansarinia and Mitra Tabrizian — are newly familiar from “Iran Inside Out” at the Chelsea Art Museum.

Lara Baladi, a strong presence in “Snap Judgments” at the [International Center of Photography](#) in 2006, looks good here with a giant tapestry version of a photo collage packed with images of action heroines. So does the team of Yelena Vorobyeva and Viktor Vorobyev with pictures of a

contemporary Kazakhstan, where everything once colored Soviet red is now post-Soviet blue.

And it's a treat to encounter the artist Khalil Rabah, a Conceptualist and a superbusy man. He's not only publisher of "The United States of [Palestine](#) Times," a fictional newspaper, but also founding director of the nonexistent, but nomadic, Palestine Museum of Natural History and Humankind, and — it hardly seems possible — chief executive of the brand-new United States of Palestine Airlines.

The bulk of the art chosen by the show's three curators — Leeza Ahmady, Iftikhar Dadi and Reem Fadda, working with the nonprofit ArteEast — is film and video. Some of it is straightforwardly political. In one video Wael Shawky strides through a European supermarket intently reciting the Koran. In another an Egyptian compatriot, Khaled Hafez, acts out the roles of revolutionary leaders gone bad.

Most of what they've chosen, though, is elusive and indirect. Alexander Ugay, a young Kazakh of Korean descent, used vintage cameras and hand editing to produce jittery, ghostly evocations of the Soviet-era space race. Rahraw Omarzad, a teacher at Kabul University and founder of the Center for Contemporary Arts Afghanistan, presents a series of beautiful short videos in which his students act out silent vignettes, each a moral tale of personal freedom.

But, getting back to action heroines, the one thing you shouldn't miss — it's unlikely you could — is "The City and the Secret Panther Fashion" by the veteran Turkish artist Gulsun Karamustafa. This fabulous little film is about a cultish, clandestine sorority of city gals who meet in heavily curtained apartments for a single purpose: to dress up in leopard-print attire. Lounging around on beds and floors, they preen, and drink, and schmooze.

Ms. Karamustafa — and I do hope we'll see more of her — intends, among other things, a spoof on the harem fantasy, that silly old Orientalist thing. But you don't need a translator to tell you that. True wit, hard-won, is a universal language. HOLLAND COTTER

KAL SPELLETICH

California Investigative

Healing

CRAIG BALDWIN

Mock Up on MU

Jack Hanley

136 Watts Street, TriBeCa

Through Sept. 5

Despite the supposed secularism of the art world, many artists subscribe to one or another form of New Age belief. Often, however, their works undercut any apparent piety with self-effacing humor or comical exaggeration, as the San Francisco artist Kal Spelletich does in an amusing show of interactive sculptures ostensibly designed to promote well-being.

The main attraction, "Herb Alpert Upper Body Hydro-Pneumatic Pulsation Vacu Engine," is a table on which clumsily made, toylike machines are displayed. A hand crank attached to the table produces electric power when, with some effort, it is rotated. This causes some of the machines to light up or move around and a turntable to play one of Mr. Alpert's old records.

How does this promote healing? It's the cardiovascular workout produced by turning the crank. Whether Mr. Spelletich is a secret believer in New Age healing is hard to say, but taken at face value, his work appears to be a species of social satire.

That seems to be the case as well with a film by Craig Baldwin, another San Franciscan, that is also at the gallery. Titled "Mock Up on MU," the film is a feature-length montage of old B-movie clips, industrial documentaries and newly shot scenes having to do with the [Scientologist](#) L. Ron Hubbard; the occultist Marjorie Cameron; and Jack Parsons, a founder of the [Jet Propulsion Laboratory](#) who was a follower of the British occultist Aleister Crowley. It is a hoot and an excellent companion to Mr. Spelletich's daffy sculpture. KEN JOHNSON

THE FIGURE

and Dr. Freud

Haunch of Venison

1230 Avenue of the Americas, between 48th and 49th Streets

Through Aug. 22

The body has long been used to stimulate art sales; hence the sudden explosion of shows like "The Female Gaze," at Cheim & Read in Chelsea, and "Go Figure," at the uptown Gagosian Gallery. The most brazen, by a head, is "The Figure and Dr. Freud" at Haunch of Venison, a gallery owned by [Christie's](#). (For many in the art world, Freudian theory fell out of fashion with the arrival of feminism.)

Here Freud is proxy for latter-day Surrealism and Neo-Expressionism (think of David Salle,

Daniel Richter and Jonathan Meese), as well as for classic Modern and contemporary portraiture by Alice Neel, [Robert Mapplethorpe](#) and others. Oddly, there's nothing by the figurative painter [Lucian Freud](#) (the doctor's grandson).

The Oedipus complex isn't much of a stretch in a central gallery of paintings devoted to the breast, notably [John Currin's](#) "[Bea Arthur Nude](#)" (1991) and [James Rosenquist's](#) "Playmate as Fine Art" (1966), with its basketball-size areolas. Other works, typified by Nobuyoshi Araki's photographs of Tokyo sex workers, refer to various fetishes and hang-ups.

Cleverly installed sculptures create a couple of vaguely disturbing, dreamlike moments. Tony Matelli's "Sleep Walker," a painted epoxy figure of a naked, somnambulant woman, appears to be heading for a 20th-story window. And Patricia Piccinini's silicone and fiberglass woman, under attack from a hairless rodent, is enough to inspire a trip to the analyst's couch. KAREN ROSENBERG

## SELF-PORTRAITS

Skarstedt Gallery

20 East 79th Street, Manhattan

Through Sept. 4

Who do these people think they are? That is what you might wonder about the nine well-known artists who coyly toy with self-portraiture in this interesting show.

In a 1984 photograph John Coplans has his aged, hairy back turned to the camera and his head hidden from view. In photographs from 1979, 1981 and 1985, [Cindy Sherman](#) appears to play characters in different cinematic melodramas. [Andy Warhol](#) looks typically enigmatic in five paintings from the mid-'60s. A lacy pattern of thick black paint almost completely conceals Rudolf Stingel's face in a small painting from 2007.

For a large, tricky photograph from 1990, Yasumasa Morimura transformed himself into the little princess in Velázquez's painting "Las Meninas," and Robert Mapplethorpe depicted himself as a devil with horns in a 1985 photograph. In a teasingly obscure piece from 1990, "Ahh ...Youth," Mike Kelley has a photograph of himself in his younger days flanked by framed pictures of grungy stuffed animals.

A 1996 drawing on hotel stationery by [Martin Kippenberger](#) is an exception. With his shirtless, sagging body and pensive expression, he seems genuinely vulnerable. In a large 1988 painting, on the other hand, Kippenberger is wearing king-size [Picasso](#)-style briefs, and a floating blue balloon renders his face invisible — a blank to be filled in by the viewer's imagination.

Albert Oehlen, who is more commonly known for his hyperactive abstractions, painted a seemingly traditional self-portrait in 2001. Given his penchant for artistic gamesmanship, however, it is hard not to suspect a hidden agenda animating his otherwise surprisingly conventional picture. KEN JOHNSON

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