

FINAL

Artistic endeavor as a bridge to coexistence

International art biennale in Israeli Arab city of Sakhnin aims to promote dialogue while addressing questions of identity, place, time and individuality in an age of global culture

By Ines Ehrlich

Re-Orientation, the Mediterranean Biennale scheduled to open in Sakhnin on May 13th, 2013 is an international contemporary art exhibit set to make history by being the first such event to be held in an Israeli Arab city. Known primarily for its soccer team, the Galilee city will host the works of leading Israeli, Arab and international world-renowned artists alongside homegrown artists from Sakhnin. It is the second Mediterranean biennale following in the footsteps of the 2010 biennale held in Haifa, which aimed to create a platform for dialogue through art. **Belu-Simion Fainaru**, Israeli artist, curator and artistic director of both the previous and current biennales, says he **hopes that by bringing the event to Sakhnin rather than to one of Israel's natural cultural hubs will present a platform for dialogue between diverse cultures and communities through the prism of cultural and artistic influences.**

Sakhnin, declared a city in 1995, currently boasts a population of some 30,000 comprising a mixed population of Muslims living alongside Orthodox Christians, Catholic Christians, and members of the Sufi sect. Due to the lack of any cultural venues in a city still struggling with its urban and municipal infrastructure, the exhibits will be displayed at various locations throughout the sprawling city. The somewhat incongruous venues include a butcher's shop, private homes, the Old Mosque, the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, the City Council Building, the Sakhnin Heritage Museum (founded and run single-handedly by Amin Aburaia with a zero figure budget), and many other locations yet to be finalized ahead of next month's opening. The budget for the event will primarily be funded by Mifal Payis, the National Lottery and Lottery Council for the Arts, which regularly funds cultural, educational and sports activities throughout the country.

Artworks include paintings, sculpture, photography, video installations and architecture by some 50 artists hailing from the US, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Morocco, Algeria, France, Germany, Cyprus, Romania, Poland, Italy and Russia, as well as from countries such as Iran, a country that has no diplomatic ties with Israel. Each of the artists portrays a mix of local culture contrasted by stark contemporary influences that ultimately make bold global and regional statements. World renowned artists include Rome-based Jannis Kounellis one of the most influential figures of the Arte Povera (poor art) who will be exhibiting an installation of 12 timeworn wooden chairs encircling a pile of men's shoes, a work that has been exhibited in numerous exhibitions worldwide. Displays will also include those of the provocative French-Moroccan artist Mehdi-Georges Lahlou; NY based Iranian visual artist Shirin Neshat; installation artist Daniel Buren and artist Marina Abramović; Ethiopian photographer Michael Tsegaye, and Maimouna Patrizia Guerresi, an Italian photographer, sculptor, video and installation artist who's mesmerizing images of robed African men and women with only their hands, face and feet visible examine the concept of the 'mystical body,' and women's role in Islamic society. The portrayals of fine art photographer and video artist Almagul Menlibayeva take viewers to the Steppes of her native Kazakhstan with images that blend the nomadic aesthetics of post-Soviet and contemporary Kazakhstan.

To facilitate visitor's orientation throughout the city, a first set of brand new street signs has been put up, a novelty in a city where until now homes were located solely by the names of their occupants. This is just one of the small steps of progress the city has been making ahead of the international event which is generating much pride among the local inhabitants. A warm welcome was lavished on the pre-opening group of visitors from the Tel Aviv Museum of Art tour program which visited the city on special invitation. The group was personally greeted by Sakhnin's Mayor, Mazin G'Nayem who is hosting the event. Sitting around the board table sipping thick, hot, black

coffee the group listened intently to Mazin G'Nayem's impassioned aspirations for his city. Further endorsement of the City Hall's enthusiasm for the event was the photograph of the "Pride of Sakhnin," its veritable soccer team, which was temporarily put aside to make way for one of the biennale's exhibits. Also present was Dr Gazal Abu Raya, the City Hall's spokesman, and the famed local artist Mahmoud Badarni, whose utopian images adorned the walls of the office much to the Mayor's delight who noted how refreshing it was to look at works of art rather than sketches of municipal infrastructure. Signage for the artworks, artists' profiles and maps of the venues throughout the city were still missing in the frenzy to get ready for the big day, but the group was assured that all would be in order before the grand opening.

Arab women's' empowerment, which is taking its first strides in breaking away from the traditional role of women in Muslim society, will also be given special emphasis at the biennale. The Onda Traditional Embroidery and Handicrafts Project launched by Al-Zaahraa in partnership with the Democracy and Workers' Rights Center (DWRC), is another visitor stop throughout the city where besides the traditional handicrafts created on the premises visitors can view the works of Polish photographer Jadwiga Sawicka depicting images of women's garments. The Al-Zaahraa organization strives to empower women by providing education and employment. The biennale organizers are also holding art-oriented and peace education workshops to harness women as natural partners in promoting mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue. One such workshop involved the joint production of a video led by Berlin based artists Anna Anders and Maria Vedder, in which women are depicted using their hands in traditional roles such knitting, stitching, plaiting hair or kneading dough, this video will be projected on a screen as part of the exhibition.

The Mediterranean Biennale is the brainchild of Fainaru and Bar Shay who have been tirelessly working on this event for two years in close cooperation with the Sakhnin City Hall. Fainaru, who will also be exhibiting his artworks, says he truly believes that holding an international art event of this kind will engender coexistence and promote dialog by means of artistic endeavor. He adds that the biennale will present opportunities for Israelis to learn more about Arab culture by observing everyday life in the city and by making direct contact with its inhabitants. He is convinced that by doing so many of the misconceived perceptions between the Arab and Israeli populations will be erased and that their many common attributes will come to the fore.

Fainaru explains the meaning of the name given to the event. He says that Re-Orientation is a subject that links the concept of orient with the concept of new direction and social change. "The concept of Re-Orientation constitutes an aspiration to search for new expressions and change that would set a course to enable conversation on the subject of the "East" and its influence on daily life in our region in order to engender the creation of an original local culture that draws its inspiration from the region." He adds that at the same time it also promotes discussion and reference to questions of identity, place, time, and individuality in an age of global culture while relating critically to place, original personal identity, and local culture.

With the impressive lineup of artists exhibiting in this first ever Sakhnin event, art lovers from all over Israel and the region are expected to flock to the city in droves. It's hardly surprising therefore that several foreign ambassadors to Israel have expressed their desire to demonstrate their support of this endeavor by attending the opening event.

Re-Orientation – 2nd Mediterranean Biennale in Partnership with the National Lottery and Lottery Council for the Arts, Hosted by the Sakhnin City Hall

May 13th – July 13th, 2013

Artistic Director: Belu-Simion Fainaru

Curators: Belu-Simion Fainaru, Avital Bar-Shay