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Six artists test power of public art in Amman



Public art as part of 'the utopian airport lounge' scattered across the city and along airport road (Photos courtesy of Juliana Irene Smith)

By Jonah Shepp

AMMAN - Anyone driving down the Queen Alia Airport road over the past week might have noticed a slight change in scenery.

On each side of the road, facing oncoming traffic, stands a 150-by-200 centimetre photograph of a young woman looking out over an Amman cityscape. At first glance it may look like a billboard, but this woman is not selling anything.

Rather, the two-part installation is a work by American artist Regina Mamou, part of a citywide series of public art interventions created by six Jordanian and international artists: Rami Daher, Saba Innab, Luis Berrios-Negron, Basim Magdy, Ben Washington and Mamou.

These artists have put their work on display in a number of uncommon and unlikely places across the city, from Tabarbour to Mahatta and Jabal Luweibdeh. Some of the works are static installations, while others include actions or interventions that exist only temporally.

The works are part of "The Utopian Airport Lounge", a public art exhibition curated by Ramallah-based American artist Juliana Irene Smith that explores the idea of utopia as well as the concept of non-place in Amman's urban environment.

"Non-place", Smith explained in a recent interview, is a term coined by French anthropologist Marc Augé to describe a location that people may visit but never entirely occupy - one that lacks the concreteness to be called "a place", of which the airport lounge in the exhibition's title is an example.

Smith said her interest in Amman, both as a place to make art and as a subject, comes from her perception of the capital as a city where people are always in transition and never quite settled.

"It's a transitional place, a liminal place," she said. "I think there's a want for belonging - a question of 'why don't I feel more connected to the city?'"

"The irony is that I felt a huge sense of belonging here."

Smith added that the works in the exhibition deal with several issues relevant to the city today: its separation into discrete neighbourhoods, its transportation system, and what she called a lack of ways to link people of different social backgrounds.

One question the exhibition seeks to address, as the curator put it, is: "How can urban planning and how can art function to fill those gaps more?"

Complementing the works scattered about the city, an exhibition is also on display at Makan Art Space in Jabal Luweibdeh in which photographs, sketches, text and other media document the artists' processes of producing the works and their dialogue with the curator over the exhibition.

Also as part of the project, local artist Samah Hijawi moderated an open debate at Makan on Wednesday evening regarding the role of public art in Jordan.

Smith stressed that the site-specific installations, or interventions, are the centrepieces of the project,

rather than what is on display in the gallery.

"It's more about the local audience, the audience that comes in contact" with the work, she explained.

City of impermanence

For architect and artist Saba Innab, the theme of Amman as a place of transition has great personal resonance.

Innab, a Jordanian of Palestinian origin, explained that she was born in Kuwait and came to Jordan with her family in the wake of the first Gulf War, beginning a new life in a country where she had always been a citizen but had never lived.

Amman, she told The Jordan Times on the sidelines of Monday's opening, is "a city that always changes, not because something is happening on the inside, but because something is happening outside".

Innab's installation at the Abdali bus terminal deals with the idea of Abdali as a threatened space, she explained, whose organic role as a gateway to the city centre is disappearing as the Abdali mega-project attempts to gentrify the area.

For her part, Mamou said her work came out of a project she began last year when she came to Jordan on a grant through the Fulbright Programme, in which she sought to examine the ways in which Amman residents use landmarks to navigate the city.

"What came out of the project was documentation of these landmarks: places physically in transition," she explained.

Ben Washington, an artist from the UK, pointed out that whereas in cities like London or Paris, people have become so accustomed to public art that it is now commonplace, Amman offers a fresher audience that is not as exposed to it.

Washington's contribution to the project, which he described as taking functional architectural elements and transforming them into something noticeable, is static and not temporal, but "it almost felt a little like a performance while I was constructing it", he added.

The utopian airport lounge" is supported by a number of institutions, including Makan Art Space, the European Cultural Foundation and the Goethe Institute.

The exhibition at Makan will remain in place until December 26. A catalogue of the work is scheduled to be published in February.

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