Muslim Voices: Arts and Ideas Fest to begin in NYC

By Fatima Al-Qadiri

How often does a festival come along boasting over 100 Muslim artists performing over a ten-day period? The answer is almost never. However, a rare occurrence is about to take place in New York City from June 5th to the 14th, across multiple venues and spanning artists from several countries, including Kuwait. Thanks to the organizers, Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), Asia Society and New York University Center for Dialogues, the Muslim Voices: Arts and Ideas festival is a platform that promises to be a vehicle of cultural exchange between the US and the much-misunderstood Muslim world.

Perhaps the latter statement can be considered as naive and oversimplifying a preconceived Great Divide. But truthfully, this festival is a chance for many locals and tourists of New York City to witness and appreciate a great array of cultural acts from across the globe that bear the indelible mark of Islam. Perhaps the festival’s timing couldn’t be better: a fresh Obama administration ushering in a new era of greater diplomacy and dialogue with Muslim countries makes this festival all the more pertinent to ensuing tensions that have intensified since 9/11.

This notion is echoed in a statement by the organizers, “No more pressing issue faces the world today than the profound lack of understanding between Western and Islamic societies,” said Asia Society President Vishakha N. Desai. “Most non-Muslim Americans have very limited exposure to and even misconceptions about Islam, the world’s second-largest religion.” Museum ThB, NYU Center for Dialogues Founder and Director.

For all lovers of Islamic art and music, this is an exceptional time to be in New York City. And one exceptional event I’m looking forward to experiencing is Kuwaiti artist Sulayman Al-Bassam’s adaptation of Richard III, playing from Tuesday, June 9 to Friday, June 12 at the BAM Harvey Theater in Brooklyn. I’ve booked my ticket for the June 11th performance, when there will be a post-show Artist Talk between Sulayman Al-Bassam and Margaret Litvin, a specialist in modern Arabic drama and political culture from Boston University. For more info, log on to www.muslimvoicesfestival.org/.

Art market claims to detect signs of life

The art market go-go days of a year ago are a distant memory, but Christie’s and Sotheby’s say their spring auctions demonstrate life is starting. On Wednesday, Christie’s in New York celebrated an unexpectedly strong $38.7 million dollar sale of contemporary art. This was not even a quarter of the $348 million dollar total at the same auction 12 months ago, when Wall Street was surging and high-selling tycoons in Russia, Asia and the Middle East were still at large. But by today’s meager expectations, the auction—total at the higher end of the pre-sale estimate of $75.5-104.5 million dollars—was considered a success.

The audience of carefully groomed men and women in high heels even applauded at the end. “There was definitely magic in the air,” Brett Gorvy, international co-head for contemporary art, declared, while his colleague, Amy Cappellano, quipped that the sale “felt vaguely like a year ago.” In reality, the figures were respectable, but could not match the market’s continuing delirium. Ninety-one percent of lots at Christie’s contemporary art night sale, including 30 at more than a million dollars. The total bond was considerably better than the 47 million dollars achieved at a contemporary art auction at rival Sotheby’s on Tuesday—total that missed even the low end of a targeted 50-72 million dollars.

Art auctions indicated they were playing sale with strategists of buying holders to realistic prices and well-known artist brands. Gorvy said that Christie’s had worked on “understanding where the buyers are and reaching out to those buyers.” Sotheby’s contemporary art specialist Anthony Grati described the lots on action as “tough,” while auctioneer Tobias Meyer said that works had been chosen from “artists who have a very solid collecting background.” But they also insisted that they had detected light at the end of the tunnel. “It’s moving and shifting around us, but the ground feels a little more solid now.” Meyer said. Last week’s sales of impressionist and modern art had a similar story. Christie’s brought in 100 million dollars, within the target range of 87-125 million dollars. Sotheby’s had a miserable evening, netting only 61.4 million dollars, far below the low pre-auction estimate of 83.5 million dollars. A Picasso painting and a Giacometti sculpture failed to sell. The auctioner’s struggles are in dramatic contrast to this time last year, when a Francis Bacon painting sold for 86.2 million dollars, beating the artist’s auction record by 30 million dollars. “This is obviously a very different market,” said Alex Lopez, head of the contemporary art department at Sotheby’s. “There are lower works on the market, and much less speculation.” said Robert Masiy, contemporary art department chair at Christie’s. —AFP