



Australian artist Vincent Fantauzzo (right) pokes out his tongue after his striking portrait of Aboriginal child actor Brandon Walters (left) won the 2009 Archibald People's Choice Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney yesterday. Walters, who played the young boy Nullah opposite Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman in Baz Luhrmann's film 'Australia', was born and raised in an indigenous community near Broome, Western Australia in 1996. — AFP

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. Plus 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 easing 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." Mustapha Tili, NYU Center for Dialogues Founder and Director,



added, "The divide between the United States and the Muslim world is rooted in hard political issues such as the question of Palestine, the war in Iraq, relations with Iran, and other points of contention. Muslim Voices: Arts & Ideas aims to help change perceptions, foster mutual understanding and respect between the two sides, and pave the way for the solution of the hard issues."

Politics and tensions aside, at the end of the day the festival, the organizers claim, is a "celebration of the extraordinary range of artistic expression in the Muslim world." 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 stirring. On Wednesday, Christie's in New York celebrated an unexpectedly strong 93.7-million-dollar sale of contemporary art. This was not even a quarter of the 348-million-dollar haul at the same auction 12 months ago, when Wall Street was surging and high-rolling tycoons in Russia, Asia and the Middle East were still at large. But by today's meager expectations, the auction—with a total at the higher end of the pre-sales estimate of 71.5-104.5 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 Gorny, international co-head for contemporary art, declared, while his colleague, Amy Cappellazzo, quipped that the sale "felt vaguely like a year ago." In reality, the figures were respectable, but could not mask the market's continuing doldrums. Ninety-one percent of lots at Christie's contemporary art night sold, including 30 at more than a million dollars. The total haul was considerably better than the 47 million dollars achieved at a cautious contemporary art auction at rival Sotheby's on Tuesday—a total that missed even the low end of a targeted 52-72 million dollars.

Auctioneers indicated they were playing safe with strategies of luring bidders to realistic prices and well-known artistic brands. Gorny said that Christie's had worked on "understanding where the buyers are and reaching out to those buyers." Sotheby's contemporary art specialist Anthony Grant described the lots on auction as "lean," 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 102

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 81.5 million dollars. A Picasso painting and a Giacometti sculpture failed to sell. The auctioneers' 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 Rotter, head of the contemporary art department at Sotheby's. "There are fewer works on the market and much less speculation," said Robert Manley, contemporary art department chief at Christie's. — AFP