

10 of the best exhibitions at the Istanbul biennial

Friday 14 October 2011, by [Fiachra Gibbons](#)

If anything shows the rise of Istanbul as a cultural power, it is its art biennial, which opened this month and runs until 13 November. Fiachra Gibbons selects some of the highlights

Twenty years ago it was nowhere; now [Istanbul](#) is up there with Venice and São Paulo as the art biennials that matter. Istanbul's rapid rise has been fuelled by the extraordinary [generosity of a handful of patrons](#) in a country where traditionally artists could rely on nothing but censure. The latest of the city's new private museums, the Borusan Contemporary ([borusan.com](#)) opened this weekend. Even Nobel-prize-winning writer Orhan Pamuk has been bitten by the bug: he is working on a Museum of Innocence, based on his novel of the same name.

This year's biennial, ([iksv.org/en](#)), already hailed as Istanbul's best, takes its themes from five key works by the late Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose minimalist installations carried a deeply emotional political charge. It's concentrated in warehouses (antrepo) next to Istanbul Modern, where five group shows and more than 50 solo shows are woven together by Japanese architect Ryue Nishizawa's elegant design, itself worth the trip.

The Istanbul Biennial runs to November 13 at Antrepo 3 and 5 next to the Istanbul Modern (Antrepo 4) on the waterfront at Tophane. The venues are open Tuesday-Sunday, 10am-7pm (10pm Thursdays). Entrance adults TL20 (7.50) students TL8, unlimited Biennial pass TL50

Wael Shawky, Cabaret Crusades: The Horror Show File

Thunderbirds are go, and they're going to take Jerusalem! When the history of string puppetry comes to be written, there will definitely be a place for this most magnificent epic - the history of the early crusades and their effect on the bemused Christian, Muslim and Jewish populations of the Middle East. Egyptian-born Shawky uses 200-year-old Piedmontese puppets to tell how the people from the north wreak havoc among the angelic pale-faced mixed peoples of the Orient. It is all based on Amin Maalouf's nobly even-handed classic, *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, and is an absolute joy. Another very different retelling is Ergin Cavusoglu's *Alterity* (at the Rampa gallery until 20 October), a rewarding meditation on the great Turkish film [Yol](#) and Robert Bresson's [Au Hasard Balthazar](#), which both feature donkeys in central roles.

• Antrepo 3. Cavusoglu's *Alterity* runs at Rampa, 21a Sair Nedim Caddesi, Akaretler, Besiktas, [rampaistanbul.com](#)

Kezban Arca Batibeki/Dream and Reality

Photograph: Muhsin Akgun

What it is to be a Turkish woman is the subtext of *Dream and Reality*, the impressive historical overview of Turkish woman artists at Istanbul Modern, in which both Batibeki and Sukran Moral feature (see below). In Kefes Projeleri 2, Batibeki puts her Turkish woman in a beaded cage of kitschy kitten heels and menthol cigarettes, the tabloid life of the peroxide divas that dominate the Turkish tabloids and TV screens. She must navigate a male world represented by the singers Tarkan (with his ambiguous sexuality) and the

consummate Kurdish/Turkish macho Ibrahim Tatlis, who may or may not have had his wife shot.

- Istanbul Modern (Antrepo 4) istanbulmodern.org

Sukran Moral, Bordello/Dream and Reality

Sükran Moral Photograph: Sükran Moral

It could have ended in a punch-up or an embarrassed stand-off, but when the artist Sukran Moral climbed up the broken steps of Yüksek Kaldırım in Istanbul in her stilettos in the role of a blonde hooker, something truly unexpected happened. This enclosed alleyway was for decades the most notorious street in [Turkey](#), a swarming open-air brothel, the stairway to heaven and hell, as one poet put it. Moral sat herself at the door of one brothel holding a For Sale sign, then another for an Art Museum. So far, so predictable. But as men gathered around like hungry wolves, something more interesting began to happen. The power began to shift. Men who had come for sex became more interested in the show. One man began to sing to her; another grabbed a tin ashtray and performed a zeybek dance for her like a village gallant, banging the ashtray with his hands and feet to impress her. Yet still the eternal restless male twitches in the lurking crowd.

- Istanbul Modern (as above)

Nilbar Gures/Dream and Reality

Asli Sungu's Just Like Mother and Father. Photograph: Muhsin Akgun

About seven years ago I began to run screaming from anything about women and veils. Nilbar Gures' Undressing has changed my mind on that. Wrapped like a mummy in swirls of cloth, she peels headscarf after headscarf from her head, feeling for the clasp and the edging of each to name whose it is, "Auntie Birsen, sister in law Gulizar, my Hatce, my grandmother, my mother..." It is at once a powerful meditation on memory, love, touch and comfort, remembered gestures, and intense inner lives. I am not too proud to say I cried. And I wasn't the only one. They laughed too. It has that artless quality of a child's game to it, waiting for her face to be revealed by the final flesh-coloured cloth. It is even better set with Asli Sungu's hilarious Just Like Mother & Just Like Father, where she gets her father, a domestic Ataturk in an argyle cardigan, and her mother to dress her.

- Istanbul Modern (as above)

Kutlug Ataman, Mesopotamian Dramaturgies

Ataman is a fast rising star and his ongoing Mesopotamian Dramaturgies at the Arter gallery tell you exactly why. They are nothing less than a psycho-geographic history of [Turkey](#), caught between the two great rivers of east and west. It's in the film [Journey to the Moon](#) that you see Ataman's genius most clearly. It turns on a country yarn of "village crazies" in eastern Erzincan who, driven by envy, anger at a visiting politician and fear of what the people in the next village are saying about them, send a tin minaret to the moon in 1957 to put one over on the Russians who had just sent Sputnik up to spy on them. The story unfolds on one screen while on a second it is analysed with great wit and wisdom by a stellar assembly of astrophysicists, aeronautics experts, social anthropologists, a retired "journalist-secret service chief" and a headscarfed sharia lawyer. This is not just masterful storytelling; it is Turkey on the couch, working through its inferiority-superiority complex and the trauma of translating village values to super-city lives.

- Mesopotamian Dramaturgies runs at Arter, 211 Istiklal Caddesi, Beyoglu, arter.org.tr/W3 until November 16

Milena Bonilla, Untitled/History

History is more compliant and malleable than we think. Witness the 11 different versions of a shredded letter home a US diplomat wrote just before his embassy in Tehran was stormed by Iranian students, that

Nasrin Tabatabai and Babak Afraassiabi were able to reassemble. More deliciously slippery is Milena Bonilla's [hand-copied version of Marx's Das Kapital](#), bound in cloth and gold. The right-handed Bonilla copied it with her left, making it utterly incomprehensible — as good a take on socialism as you are ever likely to see. The two French artists known as Claire Fontaine took a more direct approach, wrapping the cover of Guy Debord's *The Society of Spectacle* around a brick (below).

- Antrepo 3

Taysir Batniji, *Fathers/Watchtowers*

Now again a piece of curation stops you dead in your tracks. Taysir Batniji's photographs of fathers on the walls of homes and shops in his native Gaza is neatly set next to his images of the Israeli watchtowers that hem those lives in. The result is both profound and unsettling in its ambiguity. His *Suspended Time*, an hourglass put on its side so it resembles the sign for infinity, is equally powerful and arresting. As is the treacherous beauty of Rula Halawani's photographs of Palestinian villages that have all but disappeared from the landscape since 1948.

- Antrepo 5

Dani Gal, *Historical Records Archives*

Photograph: Mahmut Ceylan

The brilliance of Dani Gal's astounding collection of LP's - of political speeches and events someone thought earth-shattering enough to consign to vinyl - is that there is no sound. All we have is the LP covers of Martin Luther King, JFK or The Six Day War, the first of the records Gal stumbled across in his native Israel. In themselves they are fascinating: early Hitler speeches from his lederhosen days, Lenin live in St Petersburg, or Vivat Regina: A Portrait of Her Majesty Elizabeth II and of Members of the Royal Family. But in denying us the sound Gal engages our imagination - what were US segregationist governor George C Wallace's Campaign Favorites? — and so you get a kind of instant collective memory constructed on the spot.

- Antrepo 3

Simon Evans

Zen diagrams of existential angst, mind maps of despair and ennui.... Simon Evans, a Berlin-based British artist, draws you into a very English world of DIY and self-deprecating cynicism - "worse than irony" as one bubble says - but then moves you beyond it into something much richer, funnier and more lyrical. Take the handwritten supermarket till receipt, a reckoning of his life that's as eloquent as Joyce on exile: "Being illegal for 12 years has made me extremely jumpy and seek solutions where I am in a better place but without the benefits."

- Biennial Antrepo 5, Antrepo 3

Letizia Battaglia, *Untitled (Death By Gun)*

One of Gonzalez-Torres's quiet masterpieces was a "stack" of information he assembled on the 460 people shot and killed in the US in a single week in 1989. Letizia Battaglia brings the reality of that into sharp focus with her unbearably tender pictures of Mafia victims in Sicily. She was Italy's first female press photographer when she began working in Palermo in 1975, and her hands shook so much her shots of murder scenes were at first out of focus. But she found a way of photographing murdered judges, reporters and prostitutes that gave them back some of the dignity stripped from them in death. The group show alongside it, *Death By Gun*, counterpoints the battlefield dead from the American Civil War shot by Mathew Brady, the father of photojournalism, with Eddie Adam's iconic *Street Execution of a Viet Cong Prisoner, Saigon*, from 1968, and Chris Burden's *Shoot*, where the American artist gets a friend to shoot him in the arm. Against this we see Mat Collishaw's sumptuous 15-panel close-up studies of what appears to be a bullet hole in someone's head. Weegee is there of course, too, as are Martha Rosler's anti-Vietnam

war photomontages, that seem all the sharper now after Iraq and Afghanistan. By then you will need a little sit down.

- Antrepo 3

View online : [10 of the best exhibitions at the Istanbul biennial](#)

Sources

Source : The Guardian, 21.09.2011