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8 Highlights from Omar Kholeif's Focus: MENAM Section at The Armory Show 2015

Discover art from the Middle East, North Africa, and the Mediterranean

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If you veer to the far left-hand corner of the Armory Art Show on Pier 94, you will stumble upon the fair's [Focus Section 2015](http://www.thearmoryshow.com/exhibitors/focus_menam.html) (http://www.thearmoryshow.com/exhibitors/focus_menam.html), on the Middle East, North Africa, and the Mediterranean (MENAM), a cluster of 15 inspiring booths.

Let's begin by looking more closely at the name MENAM. From its title, the program proposes to shift emphasis from the Middle East to the Mediterranean region, a subtle way of gearing curation away from any geographic or political prejudices or constraints. The allusion to the Mediterranean is also otherworldly in that it harks back to a time of trade routes and histories of cultural exchange. In other words, Omar Kholeif, MENAM's curator, starts off on the right foot.

Kholeif, curator at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, presents MENAM in collaboration with [Edge of Arabia](http://edgeofarabia.com/) (<http://edgeofarabia.com/>), and [Art Jameel](http://aljci.org/) (<http://aljci.org/>). Galleries from Beirut, New York, Jeddah, London, Istanbul, Cairo, Athens, Dubai, and Paris showcase some of the most coveted established and emerging artists of the region. Mr. Kholeif is also an expert in video and new media works, perhaps explaining MENAM's emphasis on the latter. Almost every other booth on display, contained an eye- (and ear-) catching video installation.

This year's Focus section is important, first and foremost because it is a forum in which contemporary Arab artists, with different political ideologies and cultural narratives, can sit alongside each other and have their works intelligently inform one another's. And secondly, because, at a time of heightened political anguish in the Levant, frankly, it is a cultural breath of fresh air.

In this sub-sectioned Armory atrium, we found that the artist's platform a broad spectrum of bustling talent, which, not surprisingly, is anchored in political commentary.

Here are some of our MENAM highlights:

[Mona Hatoum](http://www.artnet.com/artists/mona-hatoum/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/mona-hatoum/>)'s *Turbulence (Black)* at **[Alexander and Bonin](http://www.artnet.com/galleries/alexander-and-bonin/)** (<http://www.artnet.com/galleries/alexander-and-bonin/>). (New York). Hatoum, who is featured in the Guggenheim's permanent collection, has fashioned thousands of black glass marbles together in a spherical form. The piece itself functions as a sort of dark hypnotizing whirlpool in the middle of the focus section. You are visually drawn to what, at first glance, resembles a black hole. The work interplays seduction and danger; it is visually stunning yet could collapse with the displacement of one marble. Hatoum has always engaged her audience in this duality of fear and fascination. It is an intriguing aesthetic experience that is inviting yet also quite impenetrable, and thus "turbulent."

[Wafaa Bilal](http://www.artnet.com/search/artworks?q=wafaa%20bilal)' (<http://www.artnet.com/search/artworks?q=wafaa%20bilal>)s *Canto III* at **Lawrie Shabibi (Dubai)**. Bilal's Saddam Hussein golden bronze bust, inspired by monuments erected in Baghdad, is outstanding. The Iraqi artist is known for his controversial and extreme political works: in one past installation, "Domestic Tension," he locked himself in a room with a web-controlled paintball gun, and invited internet users to shoot at him, and in another, "3rdi," Bilal surgically fixed a camera on his head to transmit web images. With the busts on display at the Armory, Bilal re-contextualizes Saddam's iconography and brings to light the age-old verity that rulers seek to immortalize their own image. What's more intriguing, he asked American war veterans to help him make the smaller busts...

[Ahmed Mater](http://www.artnet.com/artists/ahmed-mater/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/ahmed-mater/>)'s *Cowboy Code* at **Athr Gallery (Jeddah)**. Saudi artist Ahmed Mater juxtaposes value systems with this large-scale text installation in the form of a Ten Commandments script. The work is physically made up of baby gun caps, like the ones Mater played with as a child in Saudi. He and his friends would watch westerns and imitate cowboys on TV. Excerpts from the text include: "A cowboy is free from racial and religious intolerance," and "A cowboy is a Patriot." The cowboy code is directly contrasted against the Hadith, an Islamic code bequeathed by Prophet Muhammad; fragments include "He cautioned never to be extreme or fanatic."

Raed Yassin's *Ruins in Space* at **Kalfayan Galleries (Athens)**. Yassin's mixed-media mouthpiece installation features the image and record-playing of famed Egyptian singer, Um Kulthum. In November 1967, at the Olympia music hall in Paris, Kulthum belted her famous song *Al-Atlal (The Ruins)*, which she then dedicated to her Korean counterpart, singer Lee Nan Young. The copy of this record featured in Yassin's installation is entrancing, as is the story detailing the relationship between Kulthum and Nan Young. While at the booth, also be sure to check out smaller paintings by Adrian Paci, who represented Albania in the 2014 Venice Biennale.

[Shafic Abboud](http://www.artnet.com/artists/shafic-abboud/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/shafic-abboud/>)'s paintings at **Galerie Claude Lemand (Paris)**. The selection of paintings at Claude Lemand's booth are, for lack of a better world, beautiful. Abboud's works are coupled with the paintings of Dia Al-Azzawi, both foremost Arab modernists and iconic figures in Arab contemporary art. Abboud's and Al-Azzawi's brilliant colors shock and awe. Be sure to dwell on Abboud's *Les cafés engloutis* and *Le Marché St. Pierre*. For other show-stopping works by one of the greats, check out **Meem gallery's** booth. They boast expansive and captivating Marwan canvases.

Lamia Joreige *Beirut, 1001 Views* at **Taymour Grahne Gallery (New York)**. Joreige's video installation presents a scenic recording of Beirut and aims to retrace a collective memory blemished by civil wars. The artist dwells on the interlaced notions of time, collective experience and individual narratives. Her exhibition at Taymour Grahne Gallery, "Records for Uncertain Times," opened last week and runs through April 9.

Lawrence Abu Hamdan *The Freedom of Speech Itself* at **Galeri NON (Istanbul)**. This year's important Armory Commissioned Artist, Abu Hamdan, explores the power of voice fingerprints and examines the relationship between free speech and government policies. Grab a potato chip bag on your way out of the booth. An installation of its own, the silver potato chip bags serve as "visual microphones," and measure our sonic footprint, based on the reverberations of sound onto objects. And it's based on a study at MIT, so it's legit.

[Huguette Caland](http://www.artnet.com/artists/huguette-caland/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/huguette-caland/>), solo presentation at **Lombard Freid (New York)** and **Galerie Janine Rubeiz (Beirut)**. Caland, daughter of Lebanon's first President, presents explosive, abstract works inspired by her California garden and textiles from Lebanon (see [The 10 Best Contemporary Artworks at the 2015 Armory Show](http://news.artnet.com/art-world/10-best-contemporary-artworks-at-the-2015-armory-show-273727/) (<http://news.artnet.com/art-world/10-best-contemporary-artworks-at-the-2015-armory-show-273727/>)).

Also not to miss:

The abstract drawings of **Susan Hefuna** at [Pi Artworks](http://www.artnet.com/galleries/pi-artworks/) (Istanbul), **Nil Yater**'s video installation *Le Chevalier d'Eon* at Galerist (Istanbul), **Jumana Manna**'s video installation *Blessed Blessed Oblivion* at CRG Gallery (New York), **Mounir Fatmi**'s video installation *Technologia* at [EOA Projects](http://www.artnet.com/galleries/eoaprojects/) (London), **Saloua Raouda Choucair** and **Saba Innab** at Agial Art (Beirut) and finally, **Setareh Shahbazi**'s photographic suite at Gypsum Gallery (Cairo). (see [Don't Miss Our Critics Picks at the Sprawling, Exciting Armory Show 2015](http://news.artnet.com/art-world/armory-show-2015-273797/)).

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