

# Damascus transforms into a multimedia



Brazilian Luciana Lyrio weeps as she diligently and tenderly wraps naked plastic girl dolls in medical gauze and towelling. Salvaging them from trapped spaces inside bird cages hung from the courtyard trees or from the courtyard lawns where they lay abandoned, Lyrio's performance, 'Consolation' was an act to restore the dignity of women who have suffered oppression and violence throughout time.

## There is something kooky going down in Old Town Damascus.

LAUREN WILLIAMS, BALADNA  
Stationed at five locations in old houses, galleries and cafes, the Living Spaces All Art Now festival is transforming the city into a digital and multimedia playground all this week.

Over 180 video, installation, performance contemporary artists from over 48 countries, including 15 local Syrian artists have converged on the city for the event, determined to challenge, provoke and change their audience's perception of the world.

Entering the unassuming gates of the pristine Maktab Anbar palace complex on Tuesday for opening night, visitors took an Alice in Wonderland journey into a highly conceptual artistic field.

In the central courtyard, audiences gathered around Brazilian Luciana Lyrio as she - weeping - diligently

and tenderly wrapped naked plastic girl dolls in medical gauze and towelling. Salvaging them from trapped spaces inside bird cages hung from the courtyard trees or from the courtyard lawns where they lay abandoned, Lyrio's performance, 'Consolation' was an act to restore the dignity of women who have suffered oppression and violence throughout time.

In the adjoining foyer, Greek-born, Netherlands based Maria Lalou carefully calculated the value of 100 clear glass pigs. The artist, who blows and casts the fragile glass swines herself, has worked in glass for many years and is interested in themes of consumerism and sustainable environment.

Transporting her fragile cargo in hand luggage across borders using different means of transport including hitchhiking, air and train, Lalou told Baladna that her complex conceptual work 'Pig Therapy' is a comment on the consumerism in the 21st Century and contemporary nomadism.

"The work is a kind of triptych, involving a voyage, the calculation process and the transformation of objects to tell a story," she said.

The pigs' journey and their valuation will be filmed and screened as a documentary at the completion of the project.

"I wonder how many pigs I will have left at the end," she laughed.

The Living Spaces Festival was

conceived by Syrian sister duo Abir and Nisrine Boukhari in 2005. Having launched last year as a strictly video work festival, the second installment has seen the event expand and diversify to include installation and performance, in addition to lectures and speeches from internationally reknown guests.

Creative Director, the classically trained graduate of Damascus University, Abir said the idea evolved organically, after she and her sister began to recognise the potential for a contemporary arts platform in Syria and an interest in engaging the plethora of public space in the country.

Having completed studies in business, literature, cultural management in and curation in Cairo, the Netherlands and elsewhere, her pioneering vision began to take form as she networked with other international contemporary arts organisations through the All Art

**THE LIVING SPACES FESTIVAL WAS CONCEIVED BY SYRIAN SISTER DUO ABIR AND NISRINE BOUKHARI IN 2005 AFTER THEY BEGAN TO RECOGNISE THE POTENTIAL FOR A CONTEMPORARY ARTS PLATFORM IN SYRIA**



# playground

Now group.

Humble in her description of the impact the festival has had, Abir admitted the festival is helping to change the perception of Syria as culturally antiquated and has stimulated genuine enthusiasm amongst Syrian artists and audiences alike.

"I had a question from a director in the Netherlands, who asked me if it was true that there was no possibilities for contemporary arts in Syria and I wanted to show how wrong that view is," she said.

"There are artists here who are genuinely enthusiastic and who want to learn."

Abir said, with a growing budget and support from the likes of The British Council, the Gothe Institute and various embassies, the next

step is to better utilise public space in Syria, particularly in Damascus, and introduce a living culture of contemporary arts to the broader community.

"It's not even about the spaces, it's about getting in there and doing it and seeing how the audiences responds," she explained.

"It about participation."

Their mission, All Art Now state, is to "discover new alternatives and unseen spaces to the traditional

ones."

The festival, the group said, is showing "things that are completely missing in the art scene here."

"This is a wonderful introduction for a Syrian audience and an important guide for artists."

Jordanian video artist Rosanne Muhsen screened her work 'Paralisation' at Matbak Anbar last night.

She said the festival has transformed the arts scene in Syria.

"This festival shows how Syria is opening up."

"And it gives young artists a chance to screen their work and participate."

"I love it."

Australian film maker Joy Suliman, who is visiting Damascus for the first time this month, said she never expected to see such a high calibre of work here.

"I'm blown away," she said.

"You can really feel that something special is happening here. There's a real enthusiasm, a real energy."

"It's exciting to be part of."

**OVER 180 VIDEO, INSTALLATION, PERFORMANCE CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS FROM OVER 48 COUNTRIES, INCLUDING 15 LOCAL SYRIAN ARTISTS HAVE CONVERGED ON THE CITY OF DAMASCUS, DETERMINED TO CHALLENGE, PROVOKE AND CHANGE THEIR AUDIENCE'S PERCEPTION OF THE WORLD**

*The festival will continue at Alkishla Gallery, Jabri House, and Sham-Mahal Art Cafe and concludes on Sunday. Call All Art Now on 011 2217622 for more details.*



Greek-born, Netherlands based Maria Lalou's complex conceptual work 'Pig Therapy' is a comment on the consumerism in the 21st Century and contemporary nomadism