CONTEMPORARY ARAB ARTISTS AT BALTIC
This resource has been developed as part of the Arab Artist’s in Residence programme at BALTIC. It is designed for use in secondary schools, to give young people the opportunity to learn more about contemporary art and to increase their knowledge and develop their understanding of Arab art and culture.

The resource provides an introduction to the Arab Artist in Residence programme, contextual information about contemporary Arab art and countries, as well as suggestions for further sources of information. In parts two, three and four, you will find images of works by individual artists who have taken part in the residency programme. The images are accompanied by text, questions for learners and suggested activities for use in the classroom.

The resource is in presentation style, for use with PowerPoint or as a printed handout. It is designed to be flexible and adaptable.

**Part One**

**Context:**
- What is contemporary art?
- The Arab Artists in Residence programme at BALTIC
- Sensitivity
- Looking at artists work in the classroom
- Cross curricular opportunities

**Background Information:**
- Defining and describing the Arab world
- Contemporary Arab art

**Further Research**
- Useful links and additional resources
- Acknowledgements

**Part Two**

Contemporary Arab Artists:
- Adel Abidin

**Part Three**

Contemporary Arab Artists:
- Samar Maakaron

**Part Four**

Contemporary Arab Artists:
- Mahmoud Khaled

**Part Five**

Contemporary Arab Artists:
- Samar Maakaron
CONTEXT
Contemporary art is the term used to describe art of the present time, created by artists who are living and working today. Contemporary art is often about ideas and concepts, as well as the practical use of materials and techniques, or the visual appearance of the work.

Artists often work with ideas that reflect their observations, feelings and opinions about their surroundings and the wider world. Contemporary artists represent their ideas in many different ways, including drawing, painting, sculpture, installation, photography, video, new media, performance and sound.
The Arab Artist in Residence Programme at BALTIC

This resource has been designed to explore the work of artists who are undertaking residencies at BALTIC, from or with a connection to Arab countries. Artists in residence will typically spend a four week period at BALTIC.

The artists selected for the residency programme create work which is above all personal and reflects their own ideas, interests and beliefs, as with any other artists.

Artist’s work may include references to their heritage which are direct and indirect, overt and subtle.

What is a residency?

An artist:
- Works with an organisation or gallery for a set period of time
- Works away from their usual environment

Scope of this resource

This resource aims to:
- Make a contribution to developing young peoples’ awareness and understanding of Arab culture
- Focus on the work of the individual artists taking part in BALTIC’s Arab Artist in Residence Programme

The resource has been informed by studio sessions held with young people from secondary schools in Gateshead during the residency period. Sections will be added as the residencies take place.

Sensitivity

Many of the works in this resource deal with sensitive issues, such as identity, politics, conflict and religion. The text accompanying each artwork includes suggested ways in which to discuss these topics with learners.

Discussion of these artworks can provide an engaging and stimulating context in which to consider the issues raised; at the same time, it will be necessary to ensure planning and support is in place to respond to learners’ concerns both inside and outside the classroom.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION
Islamic, Middle Eastern, Arab?

What word do we use to describe this part of the world? The term ‘Islamic world’ is one that is thrown about without much definition, and the Arab countries are often conceived as being at the heart of this world. But this implies that in those diverse parts of the world that are heaped into this category, everything from how people live their daily lives to how people structure their societies is determined by Islam. This is misleading. Furthermore, less than one quarter of the global population of Muslims reside in the Arab world. The ‘Middle East’, referring to a region spanning south-western Asia and north-eastern Africa, is a more specific term and regularly includes non-Arab countries such as Turkey, Israel or Iran.

The term has come in for criticism because it has its roots in European and American involvement in the region. The Arab world is the most specific and includes only countries where there is a shared language: Arabic. But even within this more narrowly defined area there is a huge amount of diversity.

The countries of the Arab world, straddling two continents, have a combined population of over 300 million. In the UK there are around half a million people whose roots lie in the Arab world, but there are no clear figures because ‘Arab’ is not a category in the national census.

Many of the modern borders of the Arab world were laid down by European imperial powers. One commonly related account concerns the border between Iraq and Jordan. Gertrude Bell, a British consul, is said to have been drawing on tracing paper, when she turned to talk to somebody, moving accidentally, and thereby adding a considerable amount of territory to the newly formed country of Jordan.

Different countries speak their own dialect of Arabic, but all also use a standard, which is the written form of the language, enabling communication across boundaries and the creation of a shared literature. While Arabic has had a powerful unifying effect and there is much in common across the region, it is probably best to think of Arab cultures rather than one single Arab culture.

While the majority of Arabs are Muslim, about 5% are not. There are sizeable Christian minorities in all the countries that are part of the BALTIC’s project on contemporary Arab art. There were, in the past, also significant numbers of Arab Jews, but this changed when Israel was established on 78% of what used to be Palestine. Most now live in Israel and there are few remaining in their native countries.

There are also non-Arab populations such as the Kurds in Iraq and the Berbers in Morocco, who speak Arabic in addition to their native languages.
Interest in the Arab world

Interest in the Arab world is no new thing. The Arab world has long held an immense attraction for the Western world broadly, and to Britain in particular. In the past few centuries, artists, writers, scholars, and of course politicians, have been fascinated with the area. Often this knowledge characterised that which is Arab as that which is different. So, if the Arabs were childlike, irrational and depraved, ‘we’ were mature, rational and virtuous. And if ‘they’ were ignorant, ‘we’ were knowledgeable. Depicting the Arab world as traditional, mysterious and timeless, reinforced a self-conception of the Western world as modern and as the site for change and progress.

Seeing Arab and Muslim women as oppressed, dominated and trapped in traditional roles, reinforced the notion that women in the Western world were liberated and had freed themselves from prescribed roles. In other words – and as the Palestinian academic Edward Said put it in his groundbreaking book on the subject, Orientalism, published in the 1970s – ‘We are this and they are that.’

The end of the era of colonialism – during which much of the Arab world was either part of the British and French Empires or within their spheres of control – has sadly seen neither the end of Western involvement in Arab affairs nor the end of stereotypical portrayals of the Arab world.

Popular culture is the most important influence on the way in which many people perceive and comprehend the Arab world. However, in the main, popular culture offers us a diet of degrading images of Arabs – from Bedouin bandits to lecherous billionaire sheikhs and sinister terrorists, from silent and submissive women to enchanting belly-dancers.

The persistence of these images from silent film through to contemporary Hollywood blockbusters means that in American film – the most widely viewed films in the world – out of around one thousand appearances of Arabs, from the year 1896 to 2000, only twelve were positive, 52 were even handed while the rest were negative. That the negative images are so all-pervasive and the positive so minor, few and far between, has the effect of vilifying a culture and a people.
Cultural clash?

The notion that the Arab world is essentially different from ‘our world’ in an oppositional way is at work in the ‘clash of civilisations’ perspective on world affairs. This idea of a clash between ‘Western’ and ‘Islamic’ civilisation is one that gained in popularity after September 11th. While it has much popular currency, this perspective does not allow for all that is shared between these supposedly separate cultures. Nor does it allow for the diverse and important cultural and scientific exchanges between them. Indeed there are many Arabic loanwords in everyday use in English which reflect this, from mathematical terms such as algebra and algorithm to the more mundane such as alcohol and cotton.

In the story we tell and are often told about the history of ideas and of science, the Arab world plays a crucial part. The story goes, that by translating Greek and Latin works into Arabic, Arab scholars preserved European knowledge during the dark ages. However, what were the dark ages for Europe were not the dark ages for the rest of the world. Indeed, Arabic and Islamic science did much more than preserve Western knowledge, it also produced knowledge. This science was Islamic in the sense that Muslim rulers were great patrons of the arts and sciences and thus enabled stimulating and original scientific achievements. Religion and science were not opposed but mutually supported each other. The science was Arabic in the sense that for over 700 years, Arabic was the international language of science. Where great masters of Islamic philosophy and science have made their way into European literature, they are known by Latinised names. The real name of Averroes, seen as a founding figure in secular Renaissance thought, was Ibn Rushd, while the real name of Alhazen, known as the father of modern optics, was Ibn al-Haytham. The reliance of European thought on Islamic thought is little known.

Few are aware, for example, that Copernicus used many diagrams and calculations taken from manuscripts of Ibn al-Shatir, a Syrian astronomer living in the 14th century.

The notion that the Islamic world had a golden age and then passed into steady decline is commonplace and creates the impression that what is of interest is historical not contemporary. A case in point is Iraq – whenever art in Iraq is spoken about it is in the sense of ancient Mesopotamia and the country’s rich antiquities, but rarely in the sense of Iraq’s rich contemporary culture. In the wake of the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, several museums were destroyed and looted, and the loss of the priceless collection of ancient artifacts at the National Museum of Iraq captured the world’s imagination. Meanwhile, the destruction and looting of the priceless collection of the Iraqi Museum of Modern Art, was barely registered outside Iraq.

Interest in the Arab world does not necessarily alter stereotypical and misleading views of it. The question is in the nature of that interest – whether we are attracted only to those works which fulfill already existing notions of the Arab world or if we are willing to be challenged. One Syrian art dealer who sells a lot of work to non-Arabs says, “You have to know very well what to pick. What sells are usually paintings with an obvious Eastern flair: scenes of Bedouin life, Arabic letters, and long, dour female visages.” It is only by moving beyond this that we will be able to appreciate the diversity and richness of Arab history and culture.
**Country Profiles**

**Lebanon**

Lebanon is an economically stable country on the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. It is bordered by Syria to the north and east and Israel to the south.

Lebanon has a unique political system known as Confessionalism, a power sharing mechanism based on religious communities. There are 128 seats in the Lebanese Parliament. There are 64 seats representing Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, Protestant and other Christian groups. There are 64 Muslim seats representing Sunni, Shi’a, Druze and Alawite. Political parties are formed around these religious groupings, of which Hizballah is the most well known. Lebanon’s complex politics are made even more so given the tensions with Israel on its southern border.

When compared to the rest of the region, Lebanese society is very modern and similar in many aspects to Mediterranean culture. It is often considered as Europe’s gateway to the Middle East and vice versa. The country has large percentages of Muslim and Christian followers. Some Lebanese consider themselves Arabs whilst others do not.

**Egypt**

Egypt is a country in North Africa. The country’s population live mainly by the River Nile as the Sahara Desert dominates the rest of the landscape. Egypt is well known for its ancient civilisation and archaeology, including The Pyramids and The Rosetta Stone.

Egypt’s capital city, Cairo, is Africa’s largest city and has been renowned for centuries as a centre of learning, culture and commerce. Egypt is the recognised cultural trend-setter of the Arabic-speaking world, and contemporary Arab culture is heavily influenced by Egyptian literature, music (including the renowned singer Umm Kulthum), film and television.

**Iraq**

Iraq is a country in the Middle East spanning mountainous and desert regions, with a coast on the Persian Gulf.

The country contains the important religious sites of Karbala and Najaf and is a centre of pilgrimage for Shi’a Muslims. The Euphrates River flows through the country. It is the longest and most significant river in the region.

Although Iraq has become known in recent years for the conflict afflicting the country, it has been identified as being home to the earliest civilisation on Earth and the place where writing and the wheel originated.
The field of art and culture in the Arab world is complex and includes artists from culturally diverse backgrounds and differing perspectives. Recent and ongoing events in the region are a major factor in world politics and ever present in the media. Popular perceptions of a clash between ‘Western’ and ‘Islamic’ civilizations and of ‘us’ and ‘them’, emphasise difference in discussions about art and culture. Galleries and museums both in the Arab world and abroad are investigating this topic through exhibiting art. In the last two decades in particular, artists have highlighted the processes by which cultural boundaries are created.

The international contemporary art world follows a certain understanding of the artist as someone who is able to question such definitions and divisions through their work. Perhaps the most helpful way of approaching the subject is to look at artists as individuals who explore different ideas and issues, using different materials and with very different aims. There are a number of very well known contemporary artists from Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Jordan. Emerging artists from the region also play an important part in the international art world.

Some artists look directly at identity. Mona Hatoum, an artist of Palestinian origin, for example, examines the idea of dual nationality. The work of Palestinian artist Emily Jacir, such as Ramallah/New York (2004-5) explores the idea of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Contemporary Arab Art

Nisrine Boukhari

Muhammad Ali

Samar Maakaroun

Muhammad Ali
The Atlas Group, take a different approach; formed in Lebanon in 1999 to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon, they have produced the Atlas Group Archive. The public part of the project includes installations, screenings, essays and lectures.

The Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari has produced a large number of films in addition to co-founding the Fondation Arabe pour l’Image, Beirut. His artwork interweaves documentary and personal stories to examine the complicated social, political, and cultural issues of a country shaped by conflict.

Alongside the well known artists mentioned, who regularly show in museums and galleries around the world, younger and emerging artists are supported by a growing network of organisations both in the region and around the world. For example, the Delfina Foundation in the UK facilitates artistic exchanges via a programme of artistic residencies and related public events. Recent artists included in the programme from the region have included Nisrine Boukharbi, Muhammad Ali and Waheeda Malullah.

In addition to these expanding networks, as new and emerging spaces for seeing and exhibiting modern and contemporary art open in the Arab world, there are new opportunities for debate that allow for a deeper understanding of contemporary art in the Arab world.

Contemporary Arab Art

Samar Maakaroun

Muhammad Ali

Waheeda Mallulah
FURTHER RESEARCH
About the work

In order to get the most out of these resources and encourage learners to respond to the artwork they see, it helps to be familiar with the process of looking at and responding to contemporary art.

Looking at contemporary art can be a new, surprising, and sometimes confusing experience. Don't try to form an opinion in the first few moments that you see the art; take time to consider it. Your opinions and reactions are just as meaningful as anyone else's, especially if you look carefully and think about what you see. An artwork can invoke unexpected feelings, or maybe leave you feeling nothing at all, when you think it should. It is important to remember that there is no right or wrong way to respond.

To understand contemporary art it helps to ask questions. Each artwork documented in the resource, is accompanied by text about the work and suggested questions to help you think about and discuss what you see.

The process of looking at contemporary art is explored further in the BALTIC resource Getting the Most out of Contemporary Art.

Curriculum Links / Cross Curricular Opportunities

Contemporary Art is incredibly diverse and wide ranging. It presents a range of interests and ideas which reflect the social and cultural issues of the world in which we live. Many of the ideas which contemporary art asks us to consider relate to teaching and learning across the curriculum.

These resources can be used to develop the cross-curriculum dimensions in the new secondary curriculum, especially identity and cultural diversity, global dimension and sustainable development, and creativity and critical thinking. Where an artist's work and the issues it raises links to a particular area of the curriculum, this is highlighted at the end of the resource about that artist.
USEFUL WEBSITES

Adel Abidin’s website
http://www.adelabidin.com

Amnesty Education
www.amnesty.org.uk/education

Artschool Palestine
www.artschoolpalestine.com

Attitudes to homosexuality in Egypt:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8621593.stm

Council for Arab-British Understanding
www.caabu.org

Delfina Foundation
www.delfinafoundation.com

Discover the Arab World, resource produced by the British Museum, learning pages at
www.britishmuseum.org

Egypt – further information
www.guardian.co.uk/world/egypt
www.last.fm/music/Egyptian+Hip+Hop

Information about the life of children in Iraq
on the Unicef website
www.unicef.org/infobycountry/iraq_2122.html

Iraq: War and Peace, a resource for teaching about the Iraq conflict for ages 8-16, produced by Oxfam.
www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/iraq/?4

Lebanon – further information
www.guardian.co.uk/world/lebanon
www.lonelyplanet.com/lebanon
www.lensonlebanon.org

Mahmoud Khaled
www.mahmoudkhaled.com

Muslim Women’s League
www.mwlusa.org/

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
www.ochaopt.org/

Offscreen Education Programme
www.offscreened.com

Oxfam Education
www.oxfam.org.uk/education

Perceived role of Arab Women
www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/arabs/arabwomen.html

Progress of Arab Women: a Report

Said Foundation
www.saidfoundation.org

Samar Maakaron’s website
www.samarmaakaron.com

Women’s Rights in Egypt:
womenshistory.about.com/library/ency/blwh_egypt.htm

Women’s Rights in the UK:
www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2006/jan/08/society

USEFUL READING

Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East
by Venetia Porter (British Museum press, 2006)

Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture by Ariel Levy (Simon & Schuster)

Living Dolls: the Return of Sexism
by Natasha Walter (Virago)
FURTHER RESEARCH

BALTIC links and resources

BALTIC
www.balticmill.com

BALTIC Primary and Secondary Resource Bank
http://www.balticmill.com/learning/Resources.php

Library and Archive
http://archive.balticmill.com

Quay
www.balticmill.com/quay
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Council for Arab-British Understanding (CAABU)
The Delfina Foundation
The Said Foundation

This resource and the Arab Artists in Residence Programme were made possible through the generosity of the Said Foundation.