

## Rose Issa

While she continues to support Arab art in London, she is giving a platform to new voices in Dubai

In 1982, Rose Issa, a young mathematician-turned-journalist, was studying for her MA in History and Literature, when news broke that her home country of Lebanon had been invaded. With her love of the arts and knowledge of the media she hatched a plan to support her fellow compatriots through an event involving Arab film and art. 'I discovered that a lot of Europeans didn't know much about the Arab world or about the filmmakers and artists that I considered as our representatives', she explains. 'Within two weeks, I had organised the very first Arab Film Festival in Paris, with the theme of occupation and resistance. The aim was to shine a positive light on the Arab world.'

Three decades later, aged 62, Rose Issa is now considered a doyenne of Arab and Iranian art and film, responsible for introducing many of today's luminaries to Western audiences. She counts Iranian film director Abbas Kiarostami, Iranian businessman Farhad Moshiri and Algerian Rachid Koraichi, amongst some of her greatest supporters. With the mission to promote the work of artists, young and old, her criteria is simple; 'if their work is good and needs to be out there, my job is to make it happen; to be the catalyst.'

After founding the first film festival, which promoted Arab film, Issa went on to advise the Cannes Film Festival on Arab and Iranian film. As a result, festivals all over Europe started to seek her expertise, and over the course of the next 20 years she advised the London Film

Festival and festivals in both Rotterdam and Berlin. 'I always tried to promote visual art and film in Europe, and give another image of the Arab world or Iran, in a time where there were very few representations,' she says.

Going on to establish the Kufa Gallery in London with Iraqi architect Mohamed Makiya, Issa realised that artists would benefit more in public museums than private ones and went on to work freelance for a string of London-based institutions including the Zamana Gallery, the Barbican, the British Museum, and Leighton House Museum.

Finally, in 2008, Issa launched her eponymous art space, establishing a packed annual agenda with bi-monthly exhibitions, solo shows and group photography exhibitions, as well as additional seasonal shows. She has continued with her dedication to Middle Eastern art not only as a curator, but also as an author, editor and art critic, whilst her publishing arm, Beyond Art Productions, has produced many key texts on contemporary art and cinema from Iran and the Arab world.

This year's Art Dubai sees Issa represent the works of, amongst others, Iranian artist Hossein Valamanesh, who emigrated to Australia in 1973. Although his works have been included in most major public Australian art collections, this will be the first time they have been shown in the Middle East. Other featured artists include Iranian Farhad Ahrarnia who re-examines the idea of cultural constructs as

ideological 'stitch ups' through larger-format works which combine embroidery, digital photography, sewing needles, silver-bronze shovels and dustpans; Ayman Baalbaki, born in Lebanon in 1975, who produces works which register the impact of nearly 20 years of war, and British-Moroccan artist Hassan Hajjaj who successfully captures the atmosphere and upbeat rhythm of north African street iconography with great warmth and humour.

Issa's mission still remains as fervent as it was in the 80s; to promote the artist's voice rather than the official voice the media would like us to hear. 'I am not interested in something that is simply good or colourful, or abstract art. It's very valid, but life is short and you have to decide what you want to represent.'

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01. The Rose Issa Project space, in a terraced house on Kensington High St in London  
02. A bead and string installation by Iranian Farhad Ahrarnia from his 2008 series 'Heroes'





