

# canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

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# GOING GLOBAL

OCTOBER GALLERY

Defying outdated perceptions of indigenous folk art, London's October Gallery has positioned itself at the very frontier of the international art scene. **Richard Rawlinson** meets its directors and looks at how they got it there and why.



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entral London's Bloomsbury is home to the British Museum, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts and the University of London, as well as other cultural and educational establishments. It also gives its name to the group of celebrated early 20th-century writers and artists, such as Virginia Woolf and Duncan Grant, who lived and worked there. Now Bloomsbury's bohemian and academic heritage is being given a further boost by an institution which is fast becoming a star of the international art scene: October Gallery.

The gallery has, since 1979, occupied a former Victorian school on Old Gloucester Street. I am greeted by Chili Hawes, Founding Director, and Elizabeth Lalouscheck, Artistic Director, who lead me through the large, high-ceilinged rooms – main gallery, theatre, café – to the charming Club Room, all leather armchairs, Oriental rugs and shelves lined with desirable art and photography books. It's an impressive and congenial environment and one that befits a gallery which has, in recent years, sold works to a prestigious line-up of clients: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Centre Pompidou, Paris and Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, among others. Exhibiting at Art Dubai in 2008, 2009 and 2010, the gallery also attracted the attention of many private collectors, including the Emir of Qatar's wife, Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned.

I ask Lalouscheck how she and her team have managed to propel the gallery to the forefront so effectively. "We coined the term, 'the *Transvanguard*,'" she replies. I'm immediately intrigued and slightly perplexed. After all, as a description of a Post-Modernist art movement, this term hardly has the resonance of, say, Neo-Pop or New Classicism. In fact, it sounds more like a farming district of South Africa or perhaps a brand of hiking boot.

Left: Elisabeth Lalouscheck, Artistic Director of October Gallery, at artist Huang Xu's opening in 2009. Right: Chili Hawes, Director of October Gallery, admiring a work by Romaldo Hazoum. Photography by Jonathan Green.

Facing page: from left to right: Gerard Quinn, *Le Richard (The Rich Man)*, 2007. Mixed media installation, wood, metal, doll and wire. 172 x 33 x 5 cm. Courtesy Robert Devereux Collection; Karel Nel, *Stellar Grammar*, 2007. Mixed media installation with Atlantic Ocean salt crystals and five million year-old carboniferous dust on a wooden base. 243 x 241 cm. Untitled orange vase by artist Magdalena Okonko; Gerard Quinn, *Chevalier (The Knight)*, 2001. Mixed media installation, wood, leather, doll, metal and wire. 175 x 25 x 25 cm. Also from the Robert Devereux Collection. Photography by Jonathan Green.



"We coined the term,  
"the *Transvanguard*!"  
– Elizabeth Lalouscheck, Artistic Director



## IT'S ALL IN THE NAME

The similar-sounding term, *Transavanguardia*, was apparently first used in *Flash Art* magazine in 1979 to mean "beyond the Avant-garde". But somewhat revealingly, whenever the slightly briefer *Transvanguardia* is found online, it is indeed in the context of the October Gallery's specialisation in "the trans-cultural Avant-garde" or, to put it another way, Contemporary art from around world. The gallery has certainly made this term its own.

I explore this idea further with Lalouscheck; "The *Transvanguardia*, or the trans-cultural Avant-garde, is not so much an instantly recognisable style of art, but more the collective name for disparate art forms, whether sculpture from Africa or painting from Asia," she explains. So is it the visual arts equivalent of World Music, which embraces everything from reggae to flamenco? "We pioneer Contemporary art beyond the sphere of the more familiar Western Avant-garde," Lalouscheck continues, "and have been instrumental in bringing global attention to international artists such as Kenji Yoshida from Japan, El Anatsui from Ghana and Rachid Koraïchi (*Canvas 4.3*) from Algeria."

Founding Director Hawes adds that October Gallery's emphasis on Contemporary art from beyond Europe has not been without its difficulties over the last three decades. "We leased the old school premises as a derelict wreck. It was riddled with dry rot and had a tree growing out of the roof," she says. "Our vision was ahead of the times and it has been a struggle to secure finances and to educate people. But things are changing. There's growing interest in the trans-cultural Avant-garde."

The gallery has charitable trust status, with grants from various funding bodies supplemented by the sale of artworks and income from the rental of facilities. "In a multicultural capital like London, the gallery has served as a kind of cultural centre for various immigrant communities as well as residents and visitors who are interested in global art forms," says Hawes. "While the gallery space hosts exhibitions, the theatre is used for everything from academic talks and seminars to poetry readings, plays and performances of music and dance, be it Indian, African, South American, Australasian and so forth."

It is easy to see how some more cynical members of the Contemporary art establishment have traditionally failed to acknowledge October Gallery as a significant player. In the brash 1980s, for example, when the likes of London's Saatchi Gallery were introducing us to Young British Artists such as Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin, the October Gallery was considered by some to be unfashionably folksy – a place where 'New Age' types, vegetarians and yoga devotees admired the raw skills, tribal traditions and spiritual symbolism of Aboriginal Antipodean, Native American and African or Asian craftspeople.

## WORLD VISION

The gallery's recent rise to a position of global importance is testimony to Hawes's perseverance in building a team of passionate experts in their field. Originally from the USA, she has travelled widely on research trips everywhere from Peru to Fiji. Meanwhile, Austrian-born Lalouscheck has tirelessly promoted African art; another curator, Australian Rosalind King, has introduced indigenous Australian art to London, and Gerard Houghton, the gallery's British-born director of special projects, is an academic who lived in Japan for 15 years and specialises in Oriental culture.

But how exactly has the shift in acceptance come about, and how did the gallery get to the position of selling works to institutions from the British Museum to Museum Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf? Lalouscheck cites the Internet as a major factor. "It has made the world a much smaller place," she says. "People are more aware of different cultures and how each culture influences its individuals, resulting in rich and unique art forms. Tastes have broadened with the Global Village mentality of the digital age. Take Kenji Yoshida's aesthetic, for example. In his large Abstract canvases, there's a purity of form and colour, a simplicity and stillness that is distinctly Japanese."

She goes on to contrast this with works by Koraïchi and Palestinian Laila Shawa. Born to a Sufi family, Koraïchi's art is informed by the numerology, signs and ethos of that creed's mysticism and he works with many media, including ceramics,

Facing page: Wafiq Lous-Serik (2001)  
Mixed media with peepal leaves, 70 x 51 cm. Photography by Jonathan Green.

**"Things are changing. There's growing interest in the trans-cultural Avant-garde."**

**– Chili Hawes, Founding Director**







El Anatsui *In the World But Don't Know the World*  
2009. Aluminum and copper wire. 560 x 1000 cm.  
Photography by Jonathan Green



## "In a multicultural capital like London, the gallery has served as a kind of cultural centre for various immigrant communities."

– Chili Hawes, Founding Director

textiles, calligraphy and paint. Meanwhile, Shawa's silkscreens on canvas also use Arabic calligraphy, but as a graffiti-like underlay evoking the enduring troubles of Gaza.

Another October Gallery star is Anatsui, whose work reflects his West African origins. One of his site-specific installations at the 52nd Venice Biennale was a vast metal cloth woven from thousands of glimmering bottle caps. He wrapped it around the façade of the Palazzo Fortuny, transforming this Gothic landmark. Another of his works, *In the World But Don't Know the World* (2009), had a similarly dramatic impact at this year's Art Dubai.

"One of Anatsui's central themes is the erosion of inherited traditions by external forces," explains Lalouscheck; "rather than Europe engulfing Africa, this installation was a role reversal. It also showed African art as Contemporary and Avant-garde at the same time as drawing on distinct traditions."

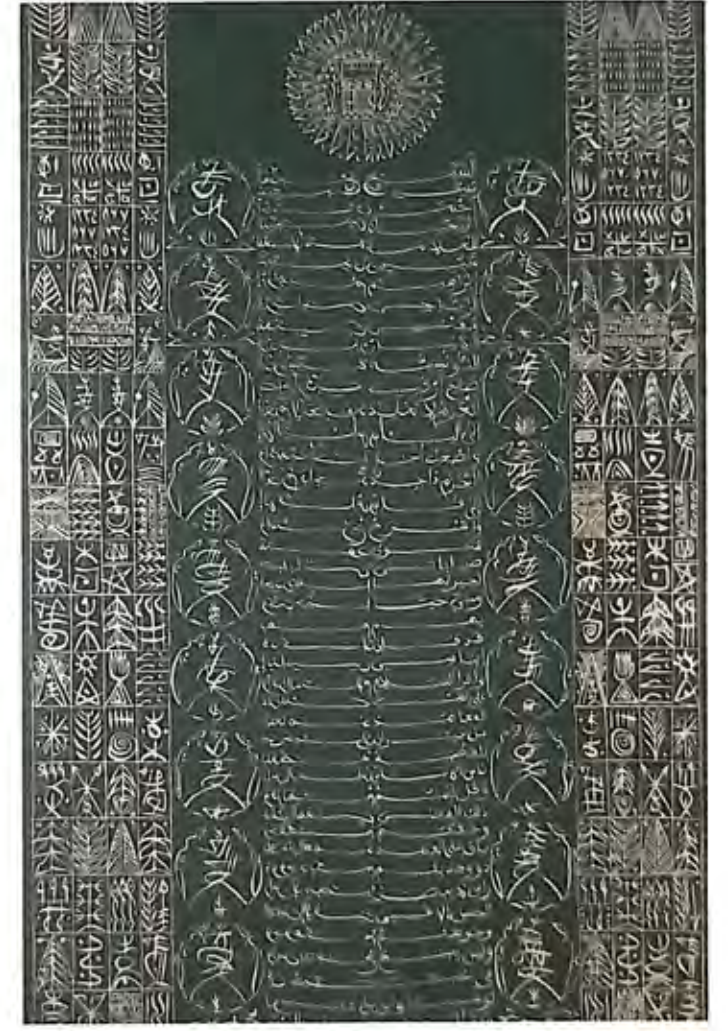
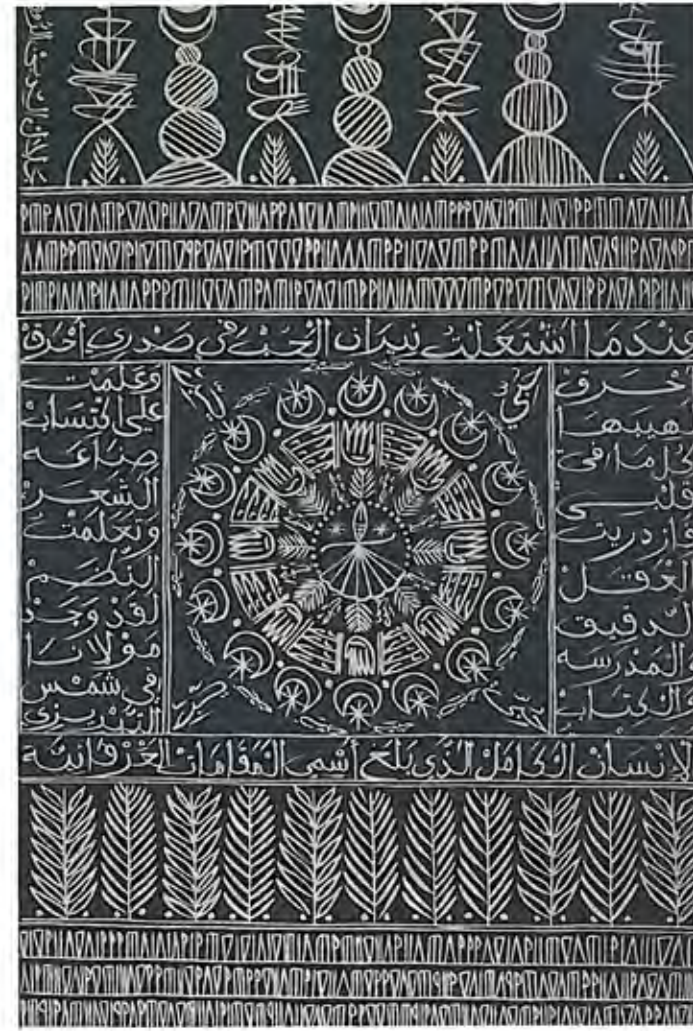
Both Lalouscheck and Hawes envisage the trans-cultural phenomenon growing much bigger still in the coming years. "We have noticed quite a few galleries springing up and specialising in Contemporary art from different regions," notes Hawes. "However, most of them focus on one region – the Middle East or Asia Pacific, for example – whereas the October Gallery is a showcase for Contemporary art from many places around the world." This positions the gallery perfectly for the trans-cultural developments currently underway in the Gulf and especially in Abu Dhabi, where the Guggenheim is scheduled to open in 2013.

Guggenheim director Richard Armstrong has made it clear that his institution's Abu Dhabi incarnation will be a truly global museum showcasing works from the Middle East, Europe, North America, Africa, Asia and South America. He believes there will come a time when art acquired for the Abu Dhabi museum will be exhibited at the Guggenheim's flagship museum in New York as a reciprocal arrangement, further developing "a forceful story about Modern and Contemporary art everywhere in the world".

### RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME

Hawes welcomes such a powerful endorsement of her own life's work. "Abu Dhabi and Dubai are well-placed as international hubs," she says. "Art Dubai has been a very successful show for us. Likewise, London is a truly international centre. Most of our buyers don't live in London but visit us specifically. Our main buyers come from Europe, the USA and Middle East." She goes on to explain how the gallery also attracts London residents from different countries, particularly when it hosts shows related to their indigenous culture. London's Australian and Indian communities are especially enthusiastic supporters of their home-grown talent, she explains.

A brief discussion follows about those collectors who have been dubbed in certain art circles, the 'International Nationalists' or the 'INs': these are defined as affluent buyers, often



From left to right: Works by Richard Kozma: *Sidi Abd-El-Kader Jilali*, 2009. Lithograph, 62 x 49 cm. Edition of 70 plus seven artist's proofs. Photography by George Blake. (Detail) *Iham*, 2009. Lithograph, 61 x 40 cm. Edition of 70 plus five artist's proofs. Photography by Jonathan Green. (Detail) *Cheikh Sidi Ahmed Tidjane*, 2009. Lithograph, 62 x 49 cm. Edition of 70 plus seven artist's proofs. Photography by George Blake.

All images courtesy October Gallery.

from emerging boom economies and who, while loving to shop for prestigious international brands such as BMW and Louis Vuitton, also like to demonstrate nationalist pride by buying their own country's or region's Contemporary art. If much of their ostentatious consumption reflects their internationalism, their taste in art is the telltale sign of where their cultural and national allegiances truly lie.

The INs first hit headlines a few years ago when auction sales of Russian Modern art broke records thanks to a buying frenzy among patriotic Russian oligarchs; a trend then followed by wealthy Indian first-time collectors buying Indian art. Hard on their heels came Middle Eastern collectors, stimulating demand for works by the likes of Iran's Farhad Moshiri (*Canvas 1.5*) and Egypt's Ahmed Moustafa (*Canvas 3.5*). Hawes and Lalouscheck agree that the INs have had some impact on the global scene, but add that such neat categorisation is not possible at the October Gallery.

"We have an important Nigerian client who collects African Contemporary art, but we also have Middle Eastern and European clients who do the same," says Hawes. "I can't generalise."

Lalouscheck nods in agreement. "We seek out individuals whose work stands up in its own right and is not merely representative of a certain culture. Anatsui may be African but he is also one of the foremost Contemporary artists of his generation – anywhere." It is in large part thanks to the vision of October Gallery that the international establishment is now recognising the contribution of such artists and understanding their role in articulating international artistic dialogue. The global art scene is certainly richer as a result of the gallery's pioneering work, which has helped set the agenda for the next decade at least. □

For more information visit [www.octobergallery.co.uk](http://www.octobergallery.co.uk)