



New NYUAD exhibition 'Ways of Seeing' urges visitors to be more critical

The show is the first in Abu Dhabi by renowned curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath



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“We want to encourage museum visitors to not take at face value what they’re presented with,” says Till Fellrath, one of the two curators behind NYUAD Art Gallery’s new show, *Ways of Seeing*. “It’s been pre-chosen by a curator or a museum to tell a pre-chosen story. A museum visitor needs to understand the bigger context or understand what else could be there.”

Taking its cue from *Ways of Seeing*, an influential book and TV series from the art critic John Berger in the 1970s, this confident, subtly star-studded show asks viewers to ratchet up the level of critique they bring to art galleries. Museums, by their selections and the information they provide, advance certain agendas, ratify power relationships between nations, or, in the case of gender, validate the idea that the role of women is confined to particular sectors. The act of seeing is not a neutral one, urge Fellrath and his collaborator, Sam Bardaouil.



Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath in front of an art work by Hassan Sharif Victor Besa / The National

The result is an exhibition that is *about* seeing itself. Many artworks make you look twice: the show opens with an installation of what appear to be gold bars, but which are actually bricks of charcoal coloured gold (an installation by Alicja Kwade). A painting by the Austrian painter Markus

Schinwald depicts a 19th-century woman of high status with a bizarre metal instrument passing through her mouth; the woman and the implement are a fiction, designed to make one realise exactly how accepting we are of strange realities in historical paintings. Men in coloured tights – hey, why not? If the painting says so... Judging from what we see in national galleries, we might, indeed, suspect that everyone in the past was an aristocrat, so absent are images of workers or those in the lower class.

“The connection between seeing and knowing is a political act. This idea has been seminal to our thinking in all the shows we do,” Fellrath continues. Over the past ten years, the German-born curator and former economics professor has collaborated with the Lebanese art historian Bardaouil as Art Reoriented. The pair have become renowned for their well-researched shows that respond less to internal debates in the art world than to social and political currents outside of it. *Ways of Seeing* is no exception: this is the third iteration of the show, which first appeared in Istanbul at a time of Turkish social unrest, and then travelled to Brussels. Around a third of the works for the NYUAD version have been changed, with new entrants such as Lateefa bint Maktoum’s photographs tracking the rapid pace of development in Dubai and Hassan Sharif’s immense sculpture, *Knots* (2012–16), of woven ropes that, improbably, stand erect on their own.

Berger’s 1972 work sought to expand the study of images beyond those on display in art galleries, critiquing advertising alongside canonical painting. This multi-disciplinarity is reflected in the NYUAD show’s breadth – video, film, sculpture, painting, installation – though the exhibition, sensibly for its size, does not expand its thesis beyond the realm of the art gallery.

The show departs from Berger in other ways as well; I’d even suggest a gentle rebuke of the writer here, as seminal in England as he was. Though *Ways of Seeing* was groundbreaking, it was also simply Anglophone art criticism playing catch up to the German tradition of art history, which had always considered high art and everyday images alike in relation to their social and political context.

Where Bardaouil and Fellrath’s *Ways of Seeing* shines best is in a grouping drawn from German Conceptualism that pinpoints critique not as a factor of curation or a certain kind of attentive viewing, but as a mode of the artwork itself: in a powerful trio formed by an installation by Gustav Metzger, a partially hidden work by Hans-Peter Feldmann, and a gripping photograph by Thomas Struth of visitors at the Hermitage.

Here the social implications of art rise to the surface like fresh apples in water. Feldmann’s work appears to offer the visitor chocolate bars, though a brass plaque reading ‘NO’ stops would-be tasters. Sequestered in room of its own, though, it’s up to the visitor to decide what to do, forcing a

choice between flagging sugar levels and the chance to show one's class credentials by following the gallery's social norms. Contrary to what you might expect – that seasoned art-goers will not touch the art – I am tempted to think that those who are most *au fait* with gallery conventions would hazard a quick snack; it's a bit bourgeois to follow the rules, and 20th and 21st art century art history is awash with interactive art projects.



The linen cover artwork called 'To Crawl Into' by Gustav Metzger. Victor Besa / The National

The late Gustav Metzger's *Historic Photographs: To Crawl Into – Anschluss, Vienna, March 1938* (1996/2018) is a case in point. The installation is a large piece of yellow fabric lying on the floor 3 x 4 meters across. Underneath is a photograph of Jews cleaning a town square in Vienna during the time of the Nazi annexation, watched over by members of the Hitler Youth. (Metzger and his brother were themselves saved from Germany by the Kindertransport; their parents died in concentration camps.) To experience *Anschluss, Vienna*, one has to crawl underneath the cloth, thereby assuming the same crouching, submissive position of the Jews in the photograph: a forced act of radical empathy. "If you crawl, though," says Fellrath, "You cannot see what is happening. You become part of the exercise of public humiliation, but you cannot see the full photograph, and you cannot see yourself taking this position. You lose the wider view."

What you see isn't what you get

It is precisely this wider view that *Ways of Seeing* reinstates. Gender, for example, is an area where representations benefit from a second glance. In *Glimpse into a New Painting* (2018), the Egyptian artist Ghada Amer arranges thread in expressive, explosive squiggles on canvas, using the traditionally female craft of embroidery to edge her way into action painting, a genre of art associated with masculine, cowboy-like claims of artistic genius. Other pairings examine gender in relation to histories of colonialism. A 2008 self-portrait by Cindy Sherman as a tanned South American heiress faces the painting *The Water Carrier* from the late 19th century, in which an Arab woman,

with slightly cocked hip, balances an earthenware jug on her head – a classic Orientalist painting, mixing suggestive overtones with recognisable though generic Middle Eastern poses. The juxtaposition of the water carrier and Cindy Sherman is well-crafted. Sherman has made it her lifelong project to show how the image of a woman is constructed. By using herself as the model, she seamlessly inhabits archetype after archetype, so that the “real” Cindy Sherman is nowhere to be seen; here, it is clear that the woman of the Orient is as much a fiction as the roles that Sherman plays.

At other times, the show relies too heavily on trompe l’œil trickery: from an admittedly astonishing painting of droplets of water that appear to hover on raw canvas, by the Korean artist Kim Tschang-Yeul, to one of David Claerbout’s gorgeously accomplished, signature videos comprised of different moments from one photograph, which appear to stretch out the photograph’s singular moment in time. James Turrell shows the languorously beautiful *Alta (pink)* (1968), in which a projection of coloured light in a corner assumes the look of a volumetric sculpture. These works make you look twice, but to what end? It is when Bardaouil and Fellrath draw out art’s own capacity for self-critique that they help the audience invoke their own.

Ways of Seeing is at the New York University Abu Dhabi Art Gallery until November 17

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