

ORIENTALISM AND EPHEMERA

Curated by Jamelie Hassan, *Art Metropole, Toronto; The Art Gallery of Windsor; The Ottawa Art Gallery; Centre A, Vancouver*

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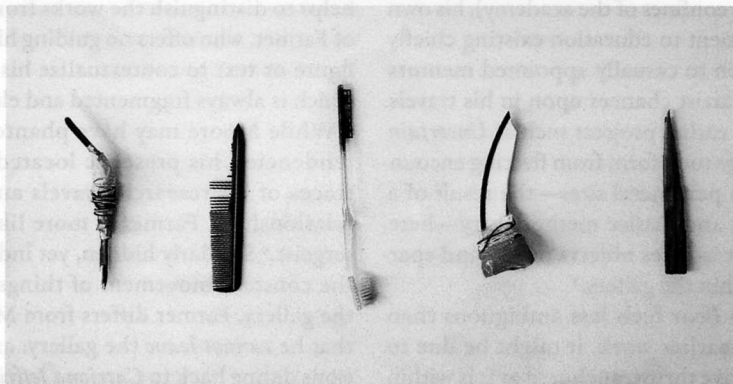
Orientalism and Ephemera, curated by London, Ontario-based artist and activist Jamelie Hassan, emerges directly out of the critical legacy of Edward Saïd, whose book *Orientalism* (1978) functions as a touchstone for Hassan's project. In a statement accompanying the exhibition, a quote from Saïd characterizes the Orient not as a threatening Other, but as "an integral part of European material civilization and culture." The show consists of a collection of ephemeral objects that demonstrate the presence of Orientalism, as defined by Saïd, within Western culture in a variety of forms; included are artifacts, souvenirs, pamphlets, postcards, catalogues, travel and commercial items, documents and photographs. Through the juxtaposition of these artifacts and selected artworks, Hassan makes visible the often-overlooked exoticism of representations of the Orient in Western popular culture.

came upon them. The collection of objects and ephemera has continued to expand and has subsequently been exhibited at the Art Gallery of Windsor, the Ottawa Art Gallery and, most recently, Centre A in Vancouver; at each successive venue, the exhibition has grown exponentially—what began as 600 square feet at Art Metropole came to occupy 6,000 square feet at Centre A—through the addition of works of contemporary artists and cultural artifacts from the collections of various individuals and institutions, including objects from the collections of the venues where the exhibition has taken place.

This is the most striking aspect of *Orientalism and Ephemera*: the way it grows and changes in each place it is shown. Although it is not uncommon for exhibitions to travel, especially when they involve an international contingent of artists (this show includes material from Cairo, Alexandria, Beirut, Jerusalem, Baghdad, Vienna, Istanbul, Paris, Barcelona and Canada), the expansive manner of this exhibition is unique and reflects the intentionally unfixed nature of Hassan's project, which exists as a cultural dialogue that is constantly being renegotiated with each venue and audience. Hassan first defines the parameters of a conversation that she then allows to take shape based upon the specific interactions of artists and communities where the work is displayed, the interactions of

tions. New items added to the show were either discovered along the way or were gifts that people gave to Hassan after seeing or hearing about the project. Yet, despite the somewhat random way items for the exhibition were accumulated, all of its artifacts are intimately connected with the political question of Orientalism originally posed by Saïd, proving that certain pernicious styles of representation of the Orient and its people within Western civilization are endemic. This is most evident in the ever-expanding collection of ephemera that Hassan presents in display cases throughout the galleries. At the Ottawa Art Gallery, one case contained a collection of souvenirs from Egypt juxtaposed with a label for Canadian Apples, a brand name packed by the Pyramid Cooperative Association, which shows a red apple grown in BC against a backdrop of pyramids. This juxtaposition of souvenirs and Western commercial artifacts is one of the most stunning aspects of the combined exhibits and highlights the pervasiveness of Orientalism in Western culture. Likewise, through her decision to showcase ephemera, Hassan draws attention to the manner in which little ephemeral details or fragments—as opposed to the monumentalism that often dominates the construction of history—play an immense role in the day-by-day assemblage of culture.

One of the most significant elements present in all manifestations of the show is a series of Muslim prayer lights that Hassan uses to symbolically and literally illuminate the Oriental representations on display. Produced in Vienna, these hanging glass lamps are typically used in structures with high ceilings, such as mosques or cafés in Cairo. In earlier versions of the exhibition, the lamps were positioned above display cases and cast light upon the ephemera displayed below; the Centre A show presents them as their own installation, mounted between two movable walls each featuring a mirror reflecting and refracting the single row of lamps. Stepping into the installation, the viewer becomes enmeshed within the play of the lights reflected in the surrounding mirrors, an effect that draws out the meditative meaning the lamps possess in their original context. The visual multiplicity of this display, resulting from the mirroring and the increase in the number of lamps exhibited, symbolizes the expansive nature of *Orientalism and Ephemera* as a project. ▶



Abbas Akhavan, *Makeshift objects*, 2008, mixed media,
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Orientalism and Ephemera began as a project in the spring of 2006, when it was presented at Art Metropole in Toronto. This initial exhibition consisted of a selection of cultural objects and ephemera primarily from Hassan's personal archive, which she had gathered over a number of years, acquiring items originating from or representing the Orient whenever she

the different elements becoming the driving force of the show.

There are, of course, a number of artifacts and objects that have been included in all versions of the show, although again in varying forms. Even Hassan's own collection, which was the starting point for *Orientalism and Ephemera*, has expanded over the course of the various exhibi-