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Writings on the wall: This shot of the interior of a residential house in Oulalata, Mauritania is part of the *Living Under the Crescent Moon* exhibition

National Museum holds M-E festival

By **PARVATHI NAYAR**

"THERE is the diplomacy that happens in boardrooms of official meetings, where ink is put to paper, and this is where the Singaporean government is highly successful. But I think, recently, there is an emerging cultural diplomacy that is happening outside the arena of politics," says National Museum director Lee Chor Lin.

Take the Middle East, for instance, that's been featuring more prominently in our media as Singapore strengthens ties with the region. In this respect, Singapore's cultural sector is more than keeping pace with current affairs, as seen by the Singapore International Film Festival's (SIFF) continuing focus on the Middle East, or the well-timed festival *Under the Crescent Moon* at the National Museum, which looks at Middle Eastern life through many perspectives.

Ms Lee says: "SM Goh (Chok Tong) said during the visit of the Crown Prince of Bahrain that 'the (Middle Eastern) region is complex and there are many cultural traits and business practices which we are unfamiliar with'. As the National Museum of Singapore, we feel there's much we can do to bridge that cultural divide. Festivals like *Under the Crescent Moon* foster a cultural understanding between two peoples that can't be brokered in any boardroom. More than 200 invited guests — ambassadors, government officials, businessmen and artists from Middle Eastern countries were present to witness the launch of the festival by Mr Mah Bow Tan."

The Crescent Moon festival, budgeted under \$1 million, includes activities, performances, films and two thematic exhibitions — *Living Under the Crescent Moon: Domestic Culture in the Arab World*, which is organised by Germany's highly regarded Vitra Design Museum, as well as *Nazar: Images from the Arab World*, an exhibition of 18 contemporary photographers.

The first show is a colourful insight into the domestic lifestyles of the region, arranged spatially rather than chronologically. We are taken through aspects of a nomadic life — and a gorgeously patterned Berber tent from Morocco — to rural life, then city-dwelling, and finally to contemporary architecture which includes such names as Macdonald Yakeley.

While the objects are interesting, on another level, it is quite revealing to see how the materials from which they are fashioned change as the lifestyle being portrayed gets increasingly urbanised. Beginning with beautiful wooden implements, the material of choice moves to clay and stone, on to rich metals like brass and copper, but ends, unfortunately, in contemporary plastic and aluminium utilitarian ware. Apart from the artefacts, there are

also photographs, videos and models — not forgetting the reconstruction of a *hammam* or bath house — that talk of how the people of 22 countries such as Morocco and Egypt live.

As you walk through, there are charming discoveries — a tiny bowl from Damascus that's embedded with a fish on a stick, which moves when the bowl is filled with water — and some surprises, such as images of veiled men and unveiled women. Hairani Hassan, National Museum curatorial project manager explains: "The Tuareg tribe (of which around one million members still exist today), practice a matriarchal system where the woman is the head of the family. The men hide their faces behind veils called *litham* while the women do not wear veils".

Passing through an imaginatively constructed activity area for children — aptly called the "Oasis" — we come to the photography exhibit. The photographs offer both historical perspectives as well as facets of contemporary Arab life. Again, some eye-openers lurk, such as the diversity of faiths — Muslim, Sufi, Coptic — or the presence of strong feminine voices. Lalla Essayeli's pictures are particularly poetic as she places women in isolated spaces and then covers them — and their surroundings — with Arabic texts written in henna.

A deeply moving component of this exhibition is the video installation, *Strange Games and Bridges* by filmmaker Jocelyne Saab, whose movie *Kiss me not on the eyes* opened SIFF last year.

National Museum curatorial project manager Szan Tan explains the installation is conceived in the form of a ravaged garden-city, and draws its material from the tragedy of Beirut — a city that was destroyed seven times in the last 30 years. Saab's documentary material about Beirut, from 1975 to 2006, is installed in looped vignettes at two levels. The violence is implicit rather than visible blood and gore, but no less powerful for it — particularly disturbing is a video of children "play acting" war with a ferocity that seems borrowed from adulthood.

The *Crescent Moon* exhibition is a cultural initiative in that direction. It is best enjoyed as slices of life of the Arab world, rather than a comprehensive examination of a complex life and culture.

Under the Crescent Moon, at the National Museum, till May 21, 10am to 9pm daily. Admission is free. Call 6332-3659/6332-0111 or visit www.nationalmuseum.sg/crescent_moon for more details; today and tomorrow, 8pm. Ziya Azazi from Turkey offers his interpretations of the traditional sufi dances in Dervish