

AGENDA

LEBANON

FILM

‘Sector Zero’
Metropolis Cinema Sofil, Ashrafieh
March 28, 8 p.m.
01-204-080
The Ecrans du Reel documentary film festival continues with Nadim Mishlawi’s award-winning feature film debut on the odd, and neglected, history of the Beirut district of Karantina. In Arabic with English subtitles.

ART

‘Iran in Pictures’
Beirut Art Center, Off Corniche al-Nahar, Jisr al-Wati
March 28, 8 p.m.
01-397-018
Negar Azimi’s lecture will explore three iconic Iranian photographs and explain how they played an important role in the discourse of human rights in that country.

Charles Khoury
Janine Rubeiz Gallery, General de Gaulle Avenue, Raouche
Until March 28
01-572-202
This solo exhibition displays the paintings and sculptures by Lebanese artist Charles Khoury.

‘The Creative Space’
Beirut Art Center, off Corniche al-Nahr, Jisr al-Wati
Until March 30
01-560-583
Works by aspiring independent fashion designers will be exhibited and put up for auction.

‘Introspection: the Universal in the Personal’
Cynthia Nuhra Art Gallery, Elias al-Hrawi Avenue, Furn al-Shebbak
Until April 5
01-281-755
This show features the works by Chawky Frenn, playing with the innocence of the doll.

‘New Retrospective’
QContemporary, Beirut Tower, Zeitoune Street, BCD
Until May 5
03-300-520
This solo show features the works of Belarusian artist Ruslan Vashkevich.

PERFORMANCE

‘Mafi Metlo Show: Reloaded’
Palais des Congres, Dbayyeh
March 28, 8 p.m.
01-999-666
This Lebanese stage comedy is organized by the NGO Roads for Life. Proceeds will help provide training for the Lebanese Red Cross and paramedics.

MUSIC

‘Bach, du Multiple a l’Unique: la Polyphonie’
Municipal Library, USJ Street, Monnot, Ashrafieh
March 30, 7 p.m.
01-203-026
Led by musician and composer Joelle Khoury, this workshop will discuss the masterpieces by Johann Sebastian Bach.

‘Tangomania’
UNESCO Palace, Verdun Street, Verdun
March 30, 7:30 p.m.
70-789-906
Michael Ashjian will deliver a show of musical compositions and photo clip projections for the release of his first album.

‘Tatiana Primak-Khoury’
Hariri Auditorium, University of Balamand, Al-Koura
March 31, 7 p.m.
06-930-250
Tatiana Primak-Khoury will perform her tribute to Beethoven, Debussy and Kosenko.

JUST A THOUGHT

The money’s the same, whether you earn it or scam it.

Bobby Heenan (1944-)
One-time American wrestling manager

INTERVIEW

The art of the melodrama scam



Scam made flesh and blood, and mediated: Moments from “A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination.”

‘A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination’ is a profound study in power of narrative image

By Jim Quilty
The Daily Star

DUBAI: If you have an email account, chances are you’ve received a scam mail. A random trawl through your spam filter will likely turn up some samples of this opportunistic species of spam. The scam missive always takes the form of a plea, one written by someone (claiming to be a public figure, perhaps not) who casts himself (or herself) as being in dire personal straits and having access to immense wealth. The afflicted correspondent asks you to deposit a few hundred bucks in an overseas bank account, in exchange for which you will be compensated with a cut of his or her wealth – made useless by present extenuating circumstances in extracting him or her from these present difficulties.

Lebanese artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige have transformed this sometimes amusing species of Internet fauna into a profound study in the power of the image in narrative. “A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination” is one of five works in the exhibition “Spectral Imprints,” curated by Rotterdam-based curator Nat Muller. In a show dominated by works whose media revisits handicraft practice – porcelain, decorative textiles and hand-made paper – “A Letter” is unique inasmuch as it is a video installation. Yet, like the other pieces in the exhibition, the artists say, their work ultimately derives from a centuries-old practice. “A Letter” is comprised of two components. Arrayed in an anteroom outside the video projection, stacks of unadorned rice paper pamphlets record 45 scam mails – selected from the thousands the artists say they’ve been collecting since the 1990s.



In the video projection, a line of six people are wedged into the frame, standing shoulder-to-shoulder like suspects in a police lineup. Of various ages, races and genders, they all stare straight ahead without speaking. The frame gradually shifts from right to left so that over the course of two hours all 45 figures appear in the lineup. Before the projection screen hangs a second screen of gauze-like consistency, not unlike a sheet of mosquito mesh. It is “into” this screen that individual figures from the lineup appear to address onlookers. Scam aficionados will immediately recognize the content of the figure’s earnest delivery. Pitch done, the figure gradually de-materializes, giving the onlooker a few seconds to digest the plea before another figure emerges from the line to speak. “If you listen, there are patterns,” Hadjithomas said on the opening day of the exhibition. “Usually they are in a state of confusion and they don’t know what to do. They chose you

because they really trust you. There is also a religious aspect – so they’re Born Again Christians or devout Muslims. Either they’re sick or their father is sick or has just died so it’s really urgent and they really need someone to give them their money. “It has all the ingredients of a Hollywood melodrama. If you really listen to them, you have the son of so-and-so, the son of the rebel leader or the wife of the president. [Each scam letter] picks a real world,” she grinned. “If you listen for two hours you feel you really understand more about international conflict. “For me,” Hadjithomas continued, “these [letters draw upon the] imaginary of colonization, because you have to believe. If you have to believe in corruption, where is it possible [that such corruption can be found]? It’s not possible in Europe, for these people who are writing. It is possible in places like Russia, Africa, Middle East and Asia.” The 45 figures in “A Letter” are played by non-professional Beirut resi-

dents, all chosen because they happen to come from the countries from which the scam mails’ authors claim to originate. The challenge, Hadjithomas said, “is to make you believe. How do you make an actor work in a way that you believe in him. You know that he’s play-acting but you’re still tempted to believe it. “You know there are an awful lot of people who send money in response to these scam mails. More than \$200 million every year is exchanged, sent, lost – so it’s something that works on people, even if you know it’s a scam.” Like the other four exhibits in “Spectral Imprints,” “A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination” was among the 300-odd project applications submitted for the 2012 edition of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize. Announced six months before the opening of ArtDubai, each of the five winners was allotted \$120,000 to realize their project, all working in more or less close collaboration with Muller. The exhibition of “Spectral Imprints” was one of several parallel activities

held under the aegis of ArtDubai. The strength of Hadjithomas and Joreige’s work lies in the irony at the heart of it. Putting aside the contemporary vernacular medium that makes it at once exotic and cheesy, the Internet, scam belongs to the age-old tradition of the confidence swindle. “We discovered that it’s [based on] a very old swindle made in the 18th century called ‘The Jerusalem Letter,’” a version of which is included among the exhibit’s collection of scam, Hadjithomas said. “If you compare them, you see it’s the same model of narration. “Little by little, while re-reading [these scams, we saw them] evolving. It began in Africa. Then it came to Russia. Then it came to Iraq, then Tunis and Egypt and Libya. You have a sense that it was very clear that it was depicting recent history in a different way.” By clothing these scams in the flesh and blood of performance, the artists suggest that the scam is as much a narrative genre as more “legitimate” fiction forms, demonstrating that any narrative, no matter how bogus, can be more effective when it provokes empathy rather than alienation. This lesson was well utilized by an anonymous young man in middle-class attire who used to accost foreigners on Beirut streets with a personal tale of misfortune – he was an AUB student from Damascus, he said, who’d had his wallet stolen – before asking for a donation to pay for a taxi home. Yet “A Letter” isn’t simple re-enactment. The double-screen mediation creates a space where empathy can coexist with critical reflection. “You know nearly all of [scam mails] are written in Nigeria. While we were casting, a guy came to read his text and he did it really well – better than the text we gave him. We asked him whether he knew these scams. He told us, ‘I used to write these scams before coming to Beirut.’”

For more information about the **Abraaj Capital Prize winners**, see www.abraaj-capitalartprize.com/recipients

18th-century Japanese paintings to be shown in U.S

By Brett Zongker
Associated Press

WASHINGTON: A 30-scroll set of nature paintings from the 1700s, considered a Japanese cultural treasure, is being shown in its entirety for the first time outside of the country at an exhibit in Washington. Created more than 250 years ago by artist Ito Jakuchu and nowadays owned by Japan’s royal family, the “Colorful Realm of Living Beings” consists of intricate paintings of birds, flowers, insects, fish and other animals on vertical silk scrolls. It opens to the public Friday at the National Gallery of Art and will be on view through April 29. For only the second time in 120 years, the nature paintings are paired with Jakuchu’s “Sakyamuni Triptych.” In this piece, three Buddhist deities overlook the bird-and-flower paintings to serve as the exhibit’s centerpiece. The pairing, curators said, evokes the original religious context of the nature paintings as objects of worship. Since 1889, the fragile silk scroll paintings have been held in separate locations. The nature paintings were donated to Japan’s royal family, the world’s oldest monarchy, and held by them ever since. The Buddhist triptych is held at the monastery where Jakuchu originally left his works. Though his masterpieces are kept mostly out of view to help preserve them, Jakuchu has become Japan’s most famous pre-modern artist, said guest curator Yukio Lippit, a Harvard University professor of Japanese art. While his works were famous around the time they were painted, his achievements were later forgotten to a certain extent. “Awareness of the painter has risen again only in recent years,” Lippit said, proceeding to note that, outside Japan, the U.S. is one of the only places where Jakuchu’s works have been recognized and presented. In 1904, the Japanese pavilion at the St. Louis World’s Fair featured a room adorned with his works. This special four-week exhibition celebrates the centennial of Japan’s gift of 3,000 cherry trees to the U.S. in 1912



The Sakyamuni Triptych, part of a 30-scroll set of 18th-century paintings, on display at the National Gallery of Art.

as a symbol of friendship. Other rarely seen works by Japanese artists also are on display at the Smithsonian’s Sackler Gallery of Art to mark the occasion. Four Zen Buddhist monks from the Shokokuji Monastery in Kyoto, where Jakuchu left his paintings, held a blessing ceremony Monday to complete the exhibit’s installation in Washington. They burned incense, chanted prayers dedicated to the Buddha, and one monk knelt before the Buddhist paintings. Their prayers were dedicated in part to honoring the artist’s family and calling for world peace. When he painted “Colorful Realm” between 1757 and 1766, Jakuchu’s painting style was both experimental and classical. He borrowed from traditions of Chinese bird-and-flower painting but also experimented with color. He took the traditional Japanese palette of about 20 colors and carefully mixed, shaded and layered his pig-

ments. Perhaps most notably, Jakuchu applied paint to the backside of the silk to be visible from the front in a muted way through the silk weave. “What we are witnessing on the front is due in considerable part to what’s going on behind the surface of the painting,” Lippit said. “There’s a strategic process ... to create an effect of a kind of subterranean glow and inner life to the work.” Curators have discovered new details about his techniques through conservation of the scrolls and research in the past decade. A recent analysis discovered synthetic Prussian blue dye in one of the scrolls, which would be the earliest known usage of this European-imported dye in East Asia. Earl A. Powell III, director of the National Gallery of Art, said the Japanese were eager to partner for the exhibit even after the devastating earthquake in the country just one year

ago. Japanese Ichiro Fujisaki said the exhibit was a priority because of his nation’s special relationship with the United States. Masayuki Inoue, the deputy director for cultural affairs at newspaper publisher Nikkei Inc., which co-organized the exhibit, said it was an expensive undertaking to transport and insure the historic paintings for exhibition thousands of kilometers from their homes, though he would not disclose the cost. Showing such cultural treasures from Japan would be similar to touring the works of Leonardo da Vinci or other great European painters, he said. “Even for Japanese eyes,” he said, “it may be 50 years [before] you can see this again.”

For more on “Colorful Realm of Living Beings” see National Gallery of Art: <http://www.nga.gov>

Tests show aging of Leonardo da Vinci masterpiece

By Monika Scislawska
Associated Press

WARSAW: Bark beetles and old age have damaged Leonardo da Vinci’s 15th-century painting “Lady with an Ermine,” but the masterpiece is still holding up well, according to a conservationist at the Polish museum where it is displayed. Recent tests show the chestnut board on which Leonardo painted his masterpiece has weakened after being nibbled at by beetles over the centuries, and the painting has also suffered from a dense network of cracks, said Janusz Czop, the chief conservationist at the National Museum in Krakow. One of only four existing female portraits by Leonardo, the oil painting shows a young woman in three-quarter profile wearing a sumptuous low-cut red and blue dress as she holds a white ermine, an animal also known as a stoat. Historians believe the subject was Cecilia Gallerani, the mistress of the Duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza, when she was 16 or 17. Leonardo painted it around the year 1490. “The painting is 500 years old and has been subject to all the processes of ageing,” including journeying between Poland, France and Germany through the wars and uprisings of the 19th and 20th centuries, Czop said Monday. “Still, all things considered, it is in very good condition, thanks to the technology that da Vinci used,” Czop said, noting the master painted on durable wood. Additional state-of-the-art and non-invasive tests – such as computer tomography – are to be performed to help experts decide what kind of maintenance the masterpiece requires, Czop said. The painting was recently exhibited in the Spanish, German and British capitals but Czop said those trips did not hurt it. Nonetheless, authorities have decided not to let it leave the museum again for at least 10 years.