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By Mike Collett-White
LONDON | Thu Jan 29, 2009 7:45am EST

(Reuters) - Lurid figures of Iranian prostitutes and images of semi-naked men posing provocatively are among works at a new London exhibition of Middle Eastern art that may test the tolerance of some.

British collector Charles Saatchi has filled his new gallery with over 80 paintings, sculptures and installations from the Middle East representing a vibrant art scene that he hopes will challenge people's assumptions about the region.

The works, gathered over the last four years by the Baghdad-born impresario, touch on sensitive topics. They depict the horror of conflicts past and present, explore suppressed sexuality and examine a woman's place in the Muslim world.

The 19 artists in "Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East," which runs at the Saatchi Gallery from Friday until May 6, are from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Ramallah and beyond. Some still live in their native countries while others have emigrated to the West.

"Our sense of the Middle East is so dominated by reports of war, the tensions and the troubles," said Rebecca Wilson, the gallery's head of development.

"But over the last two to three years many galleries have been opening in Tehran and Beirut. There are flourishing artistic communities we are not really hearing about."

One of the most striking works on display is "Ghost" by French-Algerian artist Kader Attia, comprising more than 200 life-sized figures of Muslim women in hijabs bowing in prayer, each made out of aluminum foil.

Only when the visitor reaches the far end of the gallery and looks back does it become clear that

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the forms are empty shells.

Iran's Rokni Haerizadeh uses biting satire to send up the hypocrisy he sees in his society.

The large "Typical Iranian Wedding" diptych shows women at a marriage on one side celebrating in subdued fashion, while the men in the right-hand panel carouse with abandon.

In "Beach At The Caspian," men in their bathing suits frolic by the sea as women covered from head-to-toe wait on them.

WAR, ABUSE

Iraqi artist Halim Al-Karim hid in the desert, where he spent three years, to avoid being drafted into fighting during the first Gulf War, and according to the gallery, only survived because a Bedouin woman brought him food and water.

His blurred photographs, in sets of three, include "Hidden Prisoner 1993," featuring Sumerian artefacts kept in museums in glass cases, reminding the artist of friends and family held as political prisoners at Abu Ghraib jail under Saddam Hussein.

Ramin Haerizadeh's "Men of Allah" series shows manipulated photographs of two semi-naked men cavorting and striking sensuous poses in what one review of the show described as "overtly homosexual images."

"Ramin has said he sees these works as his private dreams that he can't show in public," Wilson said. "Well, now he can."

Shirin Fakhim uses every day objects like cooking utensils to depict Tehran prostitutes who combine Western hooker fashion with more demur Islamic dress. Saatchi Gallery said that in 2002 it was estimated that there were 100,000 prostitutes in Tehran.

Iranian-American Sara Rahbar made an American flag with fragments of Persian fabrics, and sees her work as an expression of tolerance between people.

The Middle East is being touted as the "next big thing" in contemporary art, taking over from China where artists have seen values for their works skyrocket.

"After (China's) Tiananmen Square (protests in 1989), the awareness was increased and that's the same with Middle Eastern art," Wilson explained. "There is a sense of discovery. The art world loves to jump on the next new thing."

(Editing by Paul Casciato)

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# Son rallies loyalists for Gaddafi's Tripoli fightback

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By Andrea Shalal-Esa  
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