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Mardin Biennial 4: Beyond Words



JOHN GERRARD, *Western Flag (Spindletop, Texas)*, 2017, digital simulation.

As the largest and most ambitious iteration of the event to date, the fourth Mardin Biennial revealed the institution's growing pains, between its aspirations and production. For instance, John Gerrard's one-year-long digital simulation *Western Flag (Spindletop, Texas)* (2017)—which depicts a black flag created from smoke emitted from the top of a flagpole at the location of the world's first major oil discovery, the "Lucas Gusher"—evokes not only the black flag of ISIS but the burning oil fields of Iraq after the first Gulf War, as a grim monument to the violence of the petro-carbon era. The work was rightly a hit with everyone, and stood out for its conceptual and technical sophistication. The fact that the modest biennial did manage to arrange the installation (with help from Istanbul supporters and technicians) was great, though it also suggested that the biennial could actually improve aspects of its production without forsaking its local characteristics. The other artist whose work everyone treated with deference is Taner Ceylan. His painting, *The Man of Sorrows* (2016), was displayed inside the Virgin Mary Church. It blended almost seamlessly into the environs and the church's other devotional imagery, except for the undercurrent of eroticism that the artist brings to his exactly executed paintings. What makes Mardin such a unique place is its history of craftsmanship, evident in its enduring architecture and artisan metalwork. It's an aspect of the city that the biennial itself could draw upon in its own production values for its next edition.

<http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/MardinBiennial4BeyondWords>