



REVIEWS

Modern Iraqi Art: A Collection Meem Gallery, Dubai

Isabella Ellaheh Hughes

005 / 29 July 2013



Faiq Hassan, *Family*, (no date), gouache on paper, 55c, x 37cm. Courtesy of the artist and MEEM Gallery, Dubai.

Bucking the usual Dubai summer trend of exhibiting up-and-coming artists or pulling work from the inner bowels of gallery storage, Meem Gallery instead chose to present a group exhibition of exceptional art historical depth in their current show, *Modern Iraqi Art: A Collection*. Although the title deceptively implies that the entire exhibition is dedicated to Modern Iraqi Art, in fact, there are quite a few contemporary artists presented in this large group exhibition that spans works from the 1950s to the 2000s.

The exhibition features three generations of artists, beginning with Modern masters, including Jewad Selim and Faiq Hassan, amongst others. The former is widely considered to be the founder of Modern Iraqi Art. Selim has

one work in this exhibition, an untitled and undated small watercolour, ink and pencil on canvas, most likely from the 1950s. Primarily comprised out of a mint-green and gray wash, with Selim's characteristically surreal, yet suggestively anthropomorphic figures, in this case, a rooster, a woman and some mammalian creature sketched on in black ink. This small work exemplifies Selim's signature style, most famously translated into the sculptures he is generally known for, making this humble, sketch-like work a welcome perspective into the artists practice in comparison to the works of his that are usually exhibited.

Comprised solely out of paintings and mixed-media works belonging to three private collectors based in Europe, walking into Meem's traditional, white gallery space, one felt, in the context of this exhibition, as if one had been transported temporarily into a museum exhibition. This was due to the classic presentation of these hanging works, displayed rather traditionally and grouped closely together in relation to colour tones and historical movements, rather than conceptual ideas and ideological themes. This approach is refreshing as most gallery shows in Dubai rarely focus on aesthetics in a classical sense. Indeed, rarely does one find presentations of important movements within the larger history of Modern and Contemporary Art from the region in a commercial gallery setting.

One highlight of the exhibition was a work by Mahmoud Sabri, whose *Untitled* (c.1950), is an intimate rendering of oil on canvas of three men sharing food at an outdoor establishment given the hinting architectural details in the foreground. Their faces are emotive and somber, shaded by dark hues of greens, blues, grays, browns and blacks; colours that dominate the painting. In the case of Sabri, who opposed the Ba'thists regime that came to power in Iraqi in the 1960s and lived in exile afterwards, this work is important as it was created in Iraq before he spent the majority of his career abroad.

Ismail Fattah, who studied under Jewad Selim in the 1950s before studying abroad in Europe in the 1960s has numerous works on display, the strongest being an untitled oil on canvas from 1964, an unusual representation of the nude female form. In this work, the female body is shown in three different ways on the same canvas comprised primarily out of muted gray, black and white tones. Although the forms are readily identifiable, Fattah manages to maintain a distinctly esoteric quality due to his abstract rendering; his three figures focusing on different perspectives: side-lying bust, full body and frontal.

As this show was installed primarily with a focus on aesthetics and the grouping the different generations together, Modern works flow seamlessly to the contemporary ones, with an undated and untitled, large mixed-media work, comprised out of pages of Arabic text repetitiously and meticulously ripped out and pasted onto canvas by Hannah Malallah taking center stage in its austere beauty in the contemporary section. Another contemporary work that stood out was an untitled painting from 1996 by Halim al-Karim, best known in recent years as a prominent photographer, one often forgets that he began his career as a ceramist and works in other mediums beyond photography. This acrylic on canvas works takes on earth tones and references his background in ceramics as the thick coats of paint appear to have been inscribed and molded into seamless bio and anthropomorphic shapes and forms.

The catalogue accompanying this exhibition is notable for the wealth of historical information it offers on the Iraqi Modern and Contemporary Art movements, filled with a plethora of images of actual posters from exhibitions in the 1960s and 1970s, historical photographs of important artists and events, such as the First Arab Biennale in 1974. There are informative texts, with a foreword by Dr. Nada Shabout and introductory essay by Charles Pocock.

However, the one pitfall of the entire exhibition is nevertheless the catalogue; as one moves to the individual artist sections, generic bios are presented (that appear to be written by different authors). A worthy critical analysis would have added much needed texture to the contents of the exhibit. Regardless, this was an inviting experience for specialists and the general public alike.

TAGS

Iraq

Exhibitions

Gulf

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isabella Ellaheh Hughes

Isabella Ellaheh Hughes is an independent curator and critic based between Dubai and Honolulu. She has curated exhibitions for a variety of museums and non-profit organizations in the US and UAE and is also a frequent public speaker on subjects pertaining to cultural diplomacy, the Middle Eastern art scene and contemporary art. Serving as the Dubai Editor for *ArtAsiaPacific*, she has also contributed to *Frieze*, *Persianesque*, *Contemporary Practices* and *Brownbook*. Specializing in contemporary art with an academic interest in the rise of transculture and focus on art from the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific, Hughes has a BA in Art History from Boston University and an MA in Museum Studies from Johns Hopkins University.

Copyright © Ibraaz 2017

[Terms & Conditions](#)
