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## Midcentury Middle East

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### A revelatory exhibition in New York shows how and why postwar Arab artists embraced abstraction.

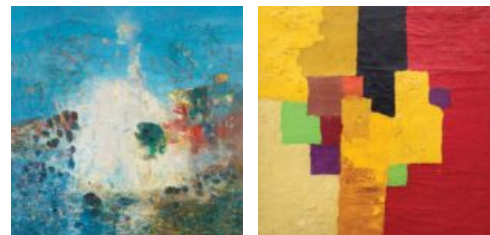
The emirate of Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates, has made itself a major player in the burgeoning Gulf States contemporary-art scene, along with neighboring Dubai and Doha, Qatar. The Sharjah Biennial attracts artists, dealers, collectors, and curators from all over the world, while the Sharjah Art Museum presents an important collection of Middle Eastern modern and contemporary art. The Barjeel Art Foundation is a more personal project, comprising the collection of Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, a member of the ruling family. Formerly housed in its own building, the Barjeel now shows some of its holdings within the Sharjah Art Museum, as well as sending works abroad on loan. Currently, the Grey Art Gallery at New York University is the beneficiary of the Al Qassemi largesse—as is the American public, which gets a chance to experience a little-known but fascinating chapter in the history of modernist abstraction. “Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World: 1950s–1980s” presents nearly 90 works by artists from countries including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and the U.A.E., examining them in various contexts, such as decolonialization and regional politics, issues of identity and authenticity, and the history of abstract art. Curated and organized by Suheyra Takesh, Curator at the Barjeel Art Foundation, and Lynn Gumpert, Director of the Grey Art Gallery, the exhibition will be on view through April 4.

“The Grey Art Gallery takes great pride in partnering with the Barjeel Art Foundation,” says Gumpert. “It is very appropriate that, as a university museum, the Grey broadens vistas and looks closely at art made over the four decades in question by individuals that come from so many different nations, with different belief systems and histories. We chose an



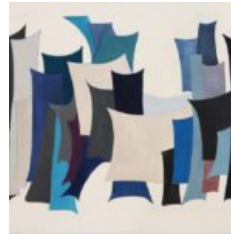
Huguette Caland (Lebanon), *City II*, 1968, oil on canvas, 31 ½ x 39 ¾ in., Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE

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exhibition title, ‘Taking Shape,’ that recognizes and conveys to the public that our approach to abstraction in the Arab world is not static—even with regard to the art of this defined time frame—but is, rather, in formation.”

Some of the artists in the exhibition, such as Etel Adnan (still living and working in the Bay Area at the age of 94) and Saloua Raouda Choucair (who died at 100 in 2017), will be known to American audiences, while others will come come as revelations. In any case, the question arises as to what is specifically Arab about the very diverse abstract work on view here. Without a doubt, there are elements in traditional Islamic art that could be thought of as abstract or are conducive to abstraction. Arabic calligraphy, which takes the letters of the alphabet and elaborates them into a line-based art form, is one antecedent. Another is the geometric ornamental detail and tile work of classic Islamic architecture. Explicit or implicit references to these earlier motifs can be found in quite a few of the works in “Taking Shape.” A non-Islamic influence on North African art is the graphic vocabulary of the indigenous Amazigh people (also known by the derogatory term “Berber”), which is expressed in runic characters and tribal tattoos (aouchem). In 1967, several Algerian artists banded together to form the Aouchem Group, dedicated to the proposition that “the sign, always magic, is more powerful than the bomb.” Moroccan artist Ahmed Cherkaoui’s oil on jute *Les Miroirs Rouges* (1965) echoes an Amazigh design that supposedly can be attested as early as the ancient Roman period. In Cherkaoui’s rendering, it acquires a mysterious yet modernist semiotic power akin to that of the works of Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García.



The authors of the insightful exhibition catalogue suggest another reason why abstraction may have appealed to Arab artists post-World War II. The history of literal depiction in painting in the Arab world up until that point had been deeply intertwined with colonialist perceptions, epitomized by the so-called Orientalist school of painting, whose inception coincided with the French conquest of Algeria in the 1830s. Many Arab artists, therefore, rebelled against the whole idea of painting their own milieu. In 1966, the artist Néjib Belkhouja wrote, “The Tunisian and his country cannot be painted as they are; they are shown exactly as the colonizer sees them; thus they are reduced to the most specious of appearances for the sake of tourists, cheap folklore, and bazaar Orientalism. There is no stranger alienation than that of the man who continues to paint himself as his colonizer taught him to see himself, and who deceives himself in deceiving others.”

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The purity of abstraction, then, offered a retreat into authenticity, made even more attractive by the fact that the aesthetics of the pre-colonial Arab past were much closer to modernist abstraction than to academic representation. It should be pointed out, though, that abstraction didn’t necessarily mean the rejection of French heritage; by 1983, two decades after independence, the Algerian painter Abdallah Benanteur felt comfortable enough to execute a luminously beautiful canvas titled *To Monet, Giverny*, an homage to the Impressionist waterlily series.

The sinuous, dynamic line of the Arabic alphabet, a heritage to all Arab artists whether Muslim or Christian, pervades many of the artworks in this exhibition, sometimes overtly, sometimes subtly, sometimes subliminally. The operative

Arabic phrase is *istilham al-harf* (“seeking inspiration from the letter”), and a whole school of modern art called *Hurufiyya* or “*lettrism*” arose in the late 20th century and continues to be influential today. The Arabic script is literally present in Sudanese artist Ibrahim El-Salahi’s *The Last Sound* (1964), in the form of Qur’anic verses inscribed amid the suns and moons and other, more abstract shapes suspended in a flattened space. The downward-slanting rhomboid forms in Moroccan artist Mohamed Chebaa’s wooden bas-relief *Composition* (circa 1970) recall the more angular versions of Arabic calligraphy, while his fellow-countryman Mohamed Melehi’s joyously colorful acrylic on wood *Composition* (1970) very distantly echoes the more curvaceous variants of the script. The importance of calligraphy in Sufi practice dovetailed nicely with some artists’ search for spirituality, a concern that they shared with many of their fellow-abstractionists in Europe and the U.S., from Kandinsky through Jackson Pollock and beyond.

One artist featured in “*Taking Shape*,” the Lebanese Saliba Douaihy, went the whole journey from academic verisimilitude to early-modernist representation to full abstraction. Douaihy’s introduction to art was liturgical, through the Maronite Church which sent him to Rome to study sacred art. He designed stained-glass windows for churches in places as far-flung as Lebanon, Brooklyn, and Boston, and also painted realistic studies of Lebanese village life and landscape. Living in New York, he met Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, and Hans Hofmann. Eventually, he abstracted his painting to the point where he was laying down huge expanses of pure, dense color bordered by lines that occupy the extreme edges of his compositions. After initially rejecting his earlier, representational works, Douaihy wrote, “I have come to appreciate them, because they were the springboard from which I leapt into the world of abstract modern art.... The broad line comes to represent a single complete expanse without division or interruption. Most of my abstract paintings today depict lines, which represent the Mediterranean Sea. I am in reality a Mediterranean artist, and the beauty of my new abstract works is that I have dispensed with classical curves. The simplification of space in my work is Arabic in nature, as in Arabic calligraphy.”

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By John Dorfman

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