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Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s

FEB 2020

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Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Interform*, 1960. Wood, 23 5/8 x 12 5/8 x 4 1/2 inches. Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE.

In the spring of 1964, the Beirut-based, pan-Arab cultural journal *Hiwar* featured a portfolio of abstract paintings made between 1959 to 1964 by Egyptian artist Fouad Kamel. The journal, which was established two years prior by the poet Tawfiq Sayigh, often featured formally experimental art that diverged from the more politically committed art that dominated other Arab cultural journals. To preface the feature, *Hiwar* published Kamel's experimental text on abstract painting, titled "Meaninglessness Within and Without." In it, Kamel espouses a belief in being "unbounded by measures of reason and logic, merging movement and energy with the tremors of solid matter," and "shedding descriptive observation and visual knowledge."

On View

Grey Art Gallery

January 14 – April 4, 2020

NEW YORK

It is, perhaps, with this spirit that the work in *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s*, currently on view at the Grey Art Gallery, can be approached. At its core, the exhibition asks a fundamental question, as explained in the introductory text: “How do we study abstraction across different contexts, and what modes of analysis do we use?”

Taking Shape explores mid-20th-century abstract art from a vast geographic expanse, comprising nearly 90 works by artists from countries including Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates, all mined from the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation. To develop a show as extensive as this one—encompassing diverse cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds and environments—is an endeavor in its own right, and the exhibition looks critically at the historiography of these works. While doing so, the narrative of the show urges us to rethink art-historical canons, expanding and perhaps refreshing discourses around global modernisms, where art from the Arab world is often overlooked.



Huguette Caland, *City II*, 1968. Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 39 3/8 inches. Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE.

Taking Shape comes at a time of ongoing political upheavals, and brings to the foreground important conversations around decolonization, the rise and fall of Arab nationalisms, rapid industrialization, wars, and mass migrations, as well as the oil boom that transformed the region during this period—making international art exchange possible. The featured artists—a varied group of Arabs, Armenians, Circassians, people of Jewish, Turkish, Amazigh, and Persian descent—sought to decontextualize established notions of modernism. They moved away from figuration, and mined the expressive possibilities of color, texture, and lines.

Saloua Raouda Choucair's *Interform* (1960) is displayed on the first floor of the gallery. In this wood sculpture, Choucair draws upon two essential elements of Islamic design: the straight line and the curve. Dynamic yet balanced, *Interform* is made of solid planes and voids that generate a sense of both architectural presence and spatial rhythm. Throughout her work, in any medium, Choucair employs interlocking modular puzzles, connecting them through both spiritual and intellectual dimensions. Choucair is widely considered one of Lebanon's first abstract artists. Acclaimed for her pioneering vision and deeply intellectual approach, she found sources of inspiration in mathematics and science as well as Islamic art, architecture, geometric patterns, and spirituality and used an algorithmically generated method to transform primary spaces and lines into increasingly complex abstract forms. Drawing on her academic background in

mathematics and physics, as well as her Druze faith, she grounded works like *Composition in Yellow* (1962–65), on view here, in irregular geometric shapes to capture the intrinsically non-objective nature of Islamic visual heritage.



Omar El-Nagdi, *Untitled*, 1970. Mixed media on wood, 47 x 47 inches. Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE.

In *The Void* (1967), Jafar Islah, one of Kuwait's most prolific modern artists, incorporates Islamic patterns into a larger work of abstraction. At first glance, this painting appears black, but upon closer examination, 20 different colors can be distinguished, one atop the other. These variations become increasingly visible as the viewer approaches the canvas. On the other hand, Miloud Labied, a member of the Casablanca School, arranges geometric shapes in deep tones in his somber, near-monochromatic *Untitled (Abstract)* (1970). Instead of the mere layering of colors, Labied's asymmetrical shapes lie on top of each other on a single flat plane, yet this arrangement achieves a nuanced illusion of depth.

Hind Nasser's *Ayla* (1975), titled after the Arabic name for the ancient Jordanian city of Elath, today known as Aqaba, moves away from geometry and instead tackles local landscapes. Nasser painted this abstracted landscape just before starting her art training with Fahrelnissa Zeid, a well-known Turkish artist, in 1976. At Zeid's art school, which was located in her house in Amman, Nasser worked alongside other women artists, including Ufemia Rizk, whose *Multiple Dimensions* (1977) is in the lower level gallery. This painting, along with others in the show, demonstrates how artists from the region were observing, reminiscing about, and imagining the specificity of its geography. In the same spirit, Simone Fattal's *Celestial Forms* (1973) presents an abstract rendition of nature and the human form. With its white palette mixed with shades of pink, *Celestial Forms* exemplifies the artist's early work, which explores Sufi texts as well as the landscape of the region.

The show hosts paintings, sculptures, drawings, and prints that reflect the wide range of non-figurative art practices that reigned over and flourished in the Arab world over the course of four decades. These artists' works expanded abstraction's vocabulary, thus complicating its genealogies and origin, altering the way we view non-objective art, and urging us to expand what the Western world considers the canon to be.

Contributor

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Sahar Khraibani is a writer, editor, and designer based in Brooklyn. She is interested in the intersection between language, visual production, and geopolitics. Her writing has appeared in the *Brooklyn Rail*, *Hyperallergic*, *TERSE Journal*, and *Bidayat Mag*, among others. She currently serves as faculty at Pratt Institute.