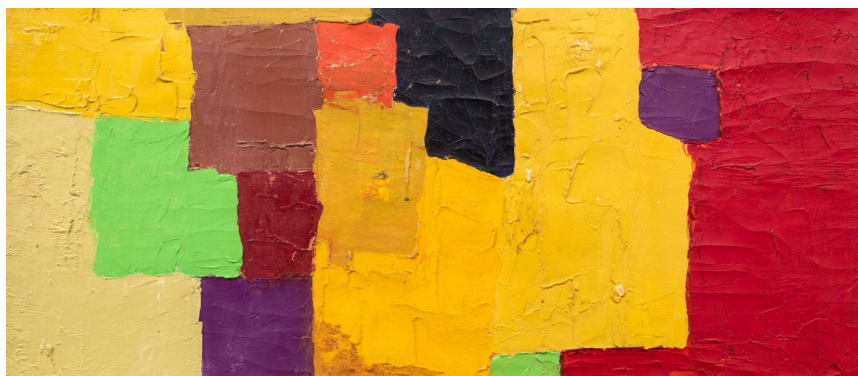

Taking Shape - Alserkal Avenue

04 February 2020 Danna Lorch

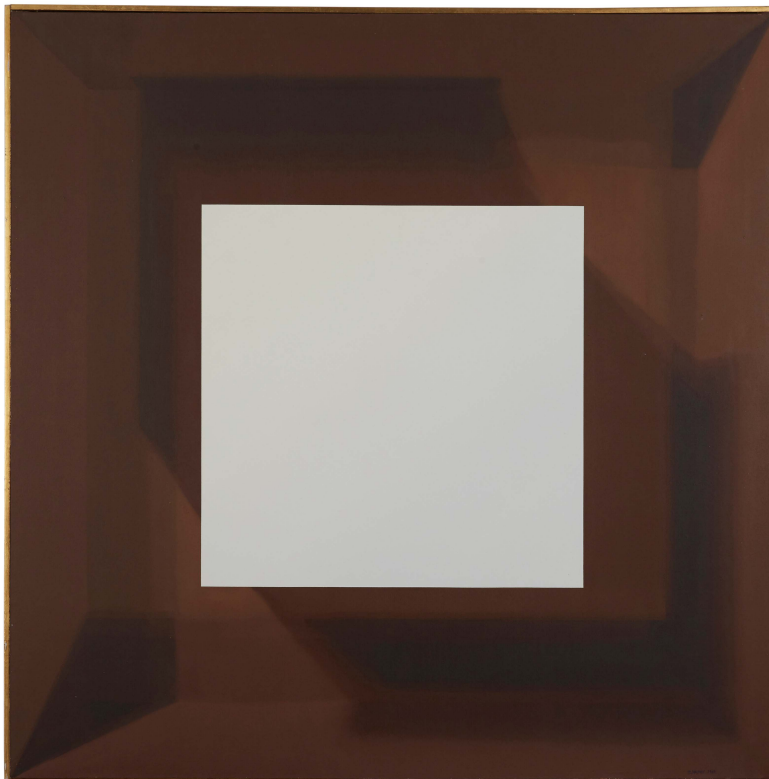


Anyone familiar with the UAE art scene has appreciated the fruits of [Barjeel Art Foundation](#), the Sharjah-based organisation established by Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi in 2010 to manage and exhibit his personal art collection. Al Qassemi has acquired a magnificent collection of modern and contemporary Arab art, and made the work and its underlying art history accessible to the public through numerous initiatives, most recently with Sharjah Museums Authority.

In the Arab world, the 1950s through 1980s was a vividly tumultuous era encompassing the overthrow of European colonialism, the rise of Arab nationalism, the oil boom, war, and large-scale forced migrations.

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

Now, 90 pivotal works of the era form the collection are on view in New York City at New York University's [Grey Art Gallery](#) in *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s*. Artists include Etel Adnan, Shakir Hassan Al Said, Kamal Boullata, Huguette Caland, Ahmed Cherkaoui, Saloua Raouda Choucair, Rachid Koraïchi, Mohamed Melehi, Samia Halaby, and Hassan Sharif. Rejecting the figurative, many of the works here were created in reaction to the times, and with critical messages to convey through Islamic geometry, mathematics, lettering, calligraphy, mystical rituals, and other traditions both rooted in the region and beyond.



Samia Halaby (Palestine), *White Cube in Brown Cube*, 1969, Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in. | Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE

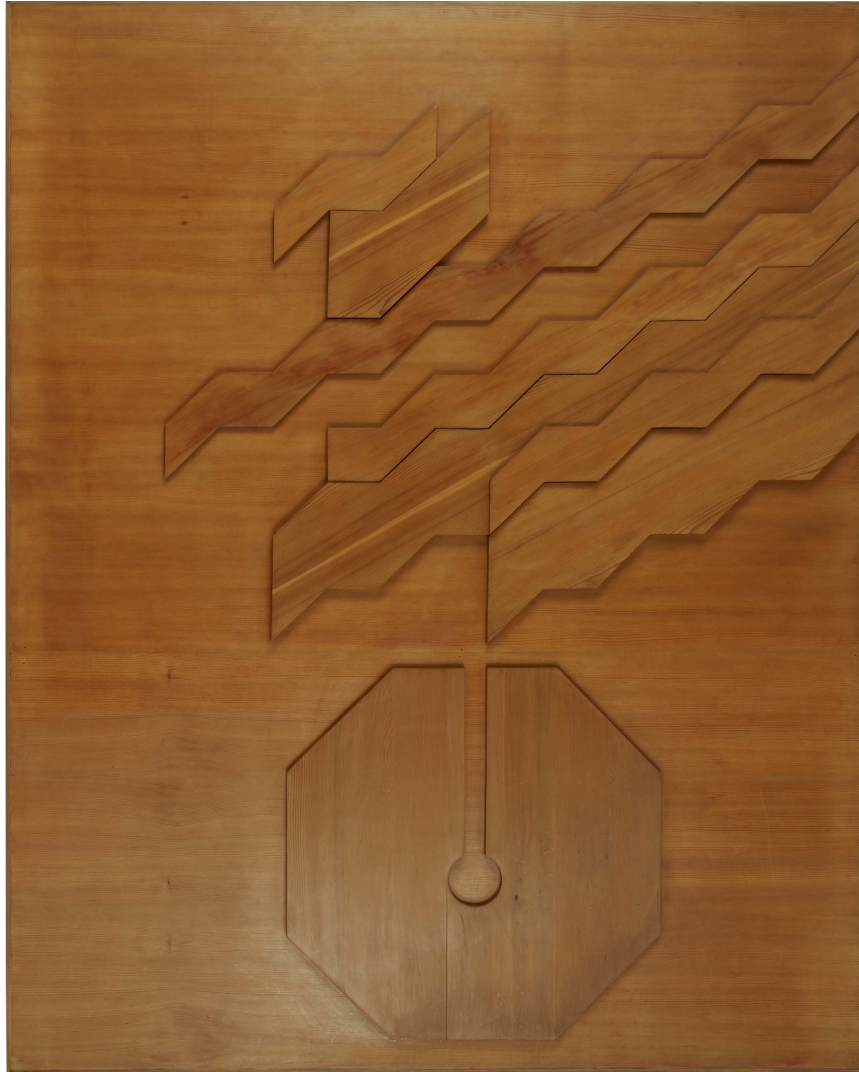
Debuting at a tense time when Western media and politics make it far too easy to “otherise” those from the Middle East—it quietly, yet firmly, defies convenient labels, demonstrating the true diversity of Abstraction, as well as lived experiences from another fraught era for the region. To that point, the show is not installed chronologically, by gender, or country, and visitors instead encounter the works grouped into overlapping contiguous histories with groupings on topics such as The Hurufiyya Movement of the 1950s, The Casablanca School (an avant-garde artistic collective founded in 1965 and invested in decolonising North Africa), and investigations in Islamic geometry.

For the past few years, Al Qassemi has been lecturing on Arab art at prestigious American universities including Yale, Georgetown and currently Boston College, and hosting a series of cultural majlis’ for students and young professionals. This show feels like Barjeel’s resulting gift to an American audience at a time.

FOLIO spoke with Suheyla Takesh, Barjeel Art Foundation’s curator and co-organiser of *Taking Shape* about the show, the plurality of Abstract movements from the Arab world, and tough choices.

Danna Lorch: How did the concept for this show come about, and what do you hope the audiences will take away from the exhibition?

Suheyla Takesh: This project has been a long time coming. In 2017, Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, the Founder of Barjeel Art Foundation, and Lynn Gumpert, Director of the Grey Art Gallery and co-curator of the exhibition, began a conversation about the possibility of working together.



Mohamed Chebaa (Morocco), *Composition*, c. 1970, Wood (bas-relief), 98 3/8 x 59 in. | Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE

In curating the exhibition, we aimed to consider work from North Africa and West Asia as being integral to the discourse on global modernism. At the same time, we wanted to interrogate the very term “Abstraction” and its use in art historical scholarship, and grapple with methodological challenges of studying abstraction in non-Western contexts.

Can you speak to the plurality of Abstract movements that came about throughout the Arab world and in its Diaspora?

You've aptly noted that there has been a plurality of non-representational movements that emerged in the region around the mid-20th century. In fact, it has been a real curatorial challenge for us to think through such a varied set of works, produced—at times—in highly divergent contexts. For many of the artists, the turn to abstraction at mid-century was a bid for authenticity in a time of decolonisation, and a means to reclaim local heritage and history for the formulation of site-specific modernisms. This was a pivotal moment, when not only political systems in the region were being overturned, but educational models were being rethought, cultural exchange took on new forms, and generally, increased focus was being placed on Global Southern alliances.

So, some of the movements and/or schools featured in the exhibition can be seen as part of a broader project of political and intellectual freedom. Other experiments in abstraction were carried out by individual artists interested in things like spirituality, scientific principles, optical illusions, and other more specific areas of inquiry.

Mohamed Melehi (Morocco), *Composition*, 1970, Acrylic on wood, 47 1/4 x 39 3/8 in. | Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE

How did the curatorial duo narrow the works in this show down to 90 from the Barjeel Art Foundation's permanent collection?

It took us several months to arrive at a semi-final selection, and frankly, it kept expanding and slightly shifting until we could no longer make changes to the book design. In 2018, Lynn Gumpert, the co-curator of the exhibition, came to Sharjah along with Ally Mintz, who served as project manager on the exhibition and publication.

Together, we visited Barjeel Art Foundation's storage facilities, as well as the Sharjah Art Museum where a large section of our permanent collection is on display, and Sultan's private home in Dubai to look at individual artworks, make notes, take photos, jot down questions, and begin research. In 2019, the Foundation also acquired several new works for the exhibition, as a result of being introduced to artists and artist estates in places like Amman, Cairo, and Beirut. These exciting new additions include works by Menhat Helmy, Asma Fayoumi, and Seta Manoukian, among others.

Ibrahim El-Salahi (Sudan), *The Last Sound*, 1964, Oil on canvas, 47 7/8 x 47 7/8 in. | Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE

Which work was the starting point for all the others? Which haunts you the most?

I have developed a real affinity with virtually every work in the exhibition. Perhaps one way to answer this question, is to refer to the image that was selected for the cover of the [exhibition's accompanying] book. We had multiple conversations on which work to place on the front. Ultimately, Ibrahim El-Salahi's *The Last Sound* (1964) was selected, not only for its superb compositional quality, which combines African forms with Arabic calligraphy, but also for its emotional significance. The work was painted shortly following the passing of the artist's father, and imagines the soul's voyage from the physical world to the heavenly realm.

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s-1980s runs at Grey Art Gallery in NYU until 4 April and will travel to the following places:

April 28–July 26: Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University

August 22–December 13: Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University:

McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College: January 25, 2021 – June 6, 2021

University of Michigan Museum of Art: June 25, 2021 – September 19, 2021

About Danna Lorch

Danna Lorch is a freelance arts & culture writer. Previously living in Dubai for seven years, she is now based in Boston, Massachusetts. Recent bylines include Architectural Digest, Smithsonian Magazine, and The Art Newspaper. She holds an MA in Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard University.

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