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CULTURE

THIS NEW YORK GALLERY IS EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY & ABSTRACT ART

Existing within a history of colonialism, decolonisation, and even more recently, identity politics, abstract art in the Arab world has existed at the intersection of calligraphy and politics for decades.

BY NADINE FAHMY - 24 Feb 2020

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Calligraphy is so deeply embedded in Arab communities' lives that it has become something of a banal sight to most who **live in its direct proximity everyday**. But the history of the evolution of Arabic calligraphy finds itself intertwined with the origins of abstract art in the Arab world - and even its evolution beyond the region - for centuries.

Whether for its aesthetic malleability as an alphabet which naturally lends itself to create forms out of every letter, or the social and political meanings it carries, Arabic calligraphy and art have almost never been separate; leading even to the development of an entire art movement devoted to the intersection between calligraphy and modern, abstract art: *hurufiyya*.

An exhibit in New York University's Grey Art Gallery titled *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s-1980s*, takes on the evolution of that art form and its variations, gathering nearly 90 works by artists from across the region, including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The artists also come from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds, - including Amazigh, Armenian, Jewish and Persian - and from different time periods, to highlight the traces of similarity - and of difference - that exist within the region's rich history of calligraphy art.



Existing within a history of colonialism, decolonisation, and even more recently, identity politics, abstract art in the Arab world has existed at the intersection of calligraphy (and politics) for decades. The exhibit's description explains that Arab abstract artists draw inspirations from "Arabic calligraphy, geometry and mathematics, Islamic decorative patterns, and spiritual practices," to "the point that they re-defined and complicated the genealogies and origin of so-called "abstract" art.

The exhibition is drawn from the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation based in Sharjah, UAE, curated by Suheyla Takeh, and Lynn Gumpert of the Grey.



Algerian artist Mohammed Khadda's Green Abstraction, reflecting an infusion of cubism and Berber calligraphic forms.

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Omar El Nagdi's "Untitled" work features a symbolic repetition of the Arabic numeral for 'one' (wahed), which shares its form with the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, alef.



Syrian artist Madiha Umar's watercolour features motifs of Arabic calligraphy and ancient Mesopotamian crescent moons.



Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata is heralded as one of the pioneers of the hurufiyya movement. His works are often abstracted as to make the words seem illegible, but are often also sharp, clear and jarring, as in the case of the last work to the right, which depicts at its centre, the Arabic word la', meaning no.



One of Kamal Boullata's works.



Autumn in a Yosemite Valley by Lebanese artist Etel Adnan; an abstract configuration of the Californian valley that recalls Arabic calligraphy letter forms.

Pioneering late Lebanese artist Haguette Caland's City II. Her art draws inspiration from "Byzantine mosaics and handwoven rugs that blanketed the walls of her native Beirut and childhood home."



Often dubbed one of the fathers of African modernism, Sudanese artist Ibrahim El Salahi's art incorporates fragments of Arabic calligraphy, and as Barjeel Art Foundation puts it, "evokes a transnational, African-influenced surrealism."

Untitled work by Jordanian artist Wijdan, who was heavily influenced by Islamic art.

Jilali Gharbaoui's "Composition," from 1969. His paintings, like those of Cherkaoui, are inspired not by Arabic itself but by the North African Tifinagh alphabet.

Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair's Interform.

Moroccan artist Ahmed Cherkaoui's Red Mirrors.

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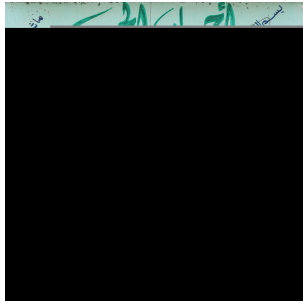
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