



'Baya': A curatorial extravaganza in the making at Sharjah Art Museum

Three Women and a Palm Tree (1947) by Algerian artist Baya Mahieddine. 'Lasting Impressions: Baya Mahieddine,' is being held at the Sharjah Art Museum from February 24 to July 31, 2021. (Courtesy: Dalloul Art Foundation)

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Art lovers can look forward to an unusual visual feast this week. Sharjah Art Museum is all set to organize its much-delayed annual exhibition under its 'Lasting Impressions' series.

Featured at the exhibition will be more

than 70 works of Baya Mahieddine, one of Algeria's most prolific modernist artists, who passed away in 1998 aged 66.



Two Women with Vase and Yellow Background (1997).
(Courtesy: Dalloul Art Foundation)

Known simply as Baya, her career spanned nearly half a century, and her work became pivotal to the formation of a distinct North African modernism in the arts, while also being linked to international postwar movements, like Surrealism and Art Brut.

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Baya created whimsical and dreamlike compositions, largely dominated by female characters. Her oeuvre is

marked by vibrant colors, ornamental patterns, and overall, a distinctive visual vocabulary. Her idiosyncratic practice, however, largely remains uncategorizable within the established art-historical canon.

Baya's life is exceptional too as are her works. Born in the Algerian suburb of Bordj El Kiffan in 1931, she was orphaned at the age of five, and as a teenager was taken to Paris by her affluent adoptive French family.

In post-war Paris, the 16-year-old Baya exhibited her work in 1947 at Galerie Maeght to great acclaim, gaining recognition from some of the leading avant-garde artists and theorists of Europe's at the time like Pablo Picasso and Andre Breton, among others.

Later on, as she continued her practice back in Algeria in her birth city Blida, Baya was also acknowledged by Algeria's intellectual and artistic circles, despite leading a reclusive life. She exhibited frequently during her lifetime, and following her passing in 1998, her work appeared on the country's postage stamps on several occasions.



The Hoopoe (1975). (Courtesy: Kamel Lazaar Foundation)

With around 70 original works from different periods right from her first exhibition in Paris— generously loaned to the museum by various institutions and private collectors, and galleries in the UAE, France, Middle East, and Algeria, this exhibition aims to complicate the art-historical categorization of Baya’s practice and seeks to foreground her unique personality and inherently transnational approach to painting.

The exhibition is part of the ‘Lasting Impressions’ series, held annually at the Sharjah Art Museum and curated this year by Alya Al-Mulla and Suheyla Takesh, under the guidance of Manal Ataya, Director-General of Sharjah Museums Authority (SMA).

The aim of the 'Lasting Impressions' series is to focus on prominent Arab artists who had a prolific career and left a lasting impression on the development and evolution of modern art in the Arab world.

The excitement that the run-up to the show – opening on February 24 -- has generated in the art fraternity is palpable when you speak to those involved in putting together this landmark show.

Very unique style

Speaking to Al Arabiya English, SMA Director-General Manal Ataya, says: “I have been involved in this exhibition more than usual because I love her work and she is one of those true great artists who until now have been relatively overlooked so far. She has a very unique style through which she tells interesting stories. There is a timeless quality about them that connects the viewer in a way that is appealing and inviting with her choice of vibrant colors and pattern.”



Manal Ataya, Director-General of Sharjah Museums Authority (SMA). (Supplied)

“All her life, her work carried the same kind of motifs, symbolism, and the central character is always a woman -- perhaps a kind of self-portrait of Baya herself.”

Ataya said she had interviewed renowned art scholar Salwa Mikdadi, who has specialized in the modern and contemporary art history of the Arab world, who had met Baya in Algeria in the 90s. this interview can be read in the publication that will accompany the exhibition giving greater insight into the life of Baya.

Both the Curators Al Mulla and Takesh are excited for the publication to come

out and say it will be one of the highlights, covering her life, history, the artistic period in Algeria at the time, etc.

The Mikdadi interview they say is “quite valuable, with a lot of very new details one will not come across online or elsewhere.”

Alya Al Mulla, Curator, Sharjah Art Museum, speaking to Al Arabiya English, said that ‘Lasting Impressions’ series began in 2010 and that the Baya show is the 11th in the series.



Alya Al Mulla, Curator, Sharjah Art Museum. (Supplied)

“Among the female artists that we have recently featured were Najat Makki (2011), Thuraya Al Baqsami (2017), Ismail Shammout and Tamam El-Akhal (2018) -- wife and husband – in a joint exhibition.

“Usually, an exhibition of this size and scope requires a lot of time. We started planning for it at the end of 2018 when

we had finalized the artist and started to look up information and began our research. And in 2019, Suheyla Takesh was officially appointed as co-curator for the show along with me.”

Suheyla Takesh, who is the Curator at Barjeel Art Foundation, came on board as an independent curator to co-curate the Baya exhibition during the summer of 2019.

“We have a strategic plan to make sure that whichever artist is selected for the year, their exhibition works alongside all the other activities that are going on in the Museum as well,” says Al Mulla.



Woman with Two Peacocks and Aquarium (1968). (Courtesy: Barjeel Art Foundation)

“For the Baya show, apart from the 70

works or so, we have a timeline of her life from the time when she was born till she passed away – the major milestones that have happened. There is also the one-hour-long video interview done in 1993 by Mikdadi. There are some personal items of the artists that are very special, catalogs of her exhibitions as well as posters. The Educational and Public Programs alongside the exhibition will be in the form of seminars, virtual online talks, and workshops which are being finalized.”

Panel discussion on Arab women artists

One of the first events has already been announced. On the occasion of International Women’s Day on March 8, 2021, Sharjah Museums Authority has organized a panel discussion that will highlight the contributions of Arab women artists. Panelists will give an overview of the history of Arab women artists and discuss challenges they face globally.

When invited to co-curate the show, Suheyla Takesh says she agreed immediately, “because I love Baya so much, was familiar with her work and knew a little bit about her biography.”

About how Baya's works can be categorized, Takesh says: "That is a very interesting question, one that Alya and I asked ourselves throughout. You know, Baya is very unique in this way that she did not wish to be categorized in any established art historical movement, style, or you know in any way be part of this art historical canon.



Suheyła Takesh, Curator at Barjeel Art Foundation, and Independent Curator for 'Lasting Impressions: Baya'. (Supplied)

"When she had her show in 1947 in Paris, a lot of people did refer to her as

a surrealist for example, and there were many other labels attached to her like Art Brut, Art Naïve, a self-taught artist -- all kind of things. But Baya did not care much about labels and how she is viewed, or what kind of category she is placed in within art history. Because she was kind of so independent and so unique, she put a term for herself: 'Look, my art is Bayaism!'

"I found that really special and also kind of radical at that stage when she

- Home
- News
- Business
- Energy
- Opinion
- Life
- Video
- In Translation

the recognition by the public or the scholarly community. So, I think that's the beauty of Baya that she is not easily categorizable and that she did not want to be placed in any one box. We cannot ascribe any one title to her."



The Baya show which was supposed to happen last year was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but Al Mulla is excited that it is happening now.

"We want people to come to the museum. Seeing the works in the space itself is an experience. That's what we want to happen. Because of the pandemic, the exhibition is on for five months instead of the usual three months from February 24 to July 31,



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2021. The public will have enough time to visit and see the exhibition. Hopefully, people will come and enjoy and feel comfortable,” says Al Mulla.

“People are quite excited. Baya has never had a survey show where so many of her works are being shown at one place in the region outside of Algeria. It is a kind of first for everyone and that is something the audiences in the UAE have never seen before. It is going to be a rich experience for the viewer. That’s the selling point.”



Young Women (1974). (Courtesy: Barbara Farahnick-Mathonet)



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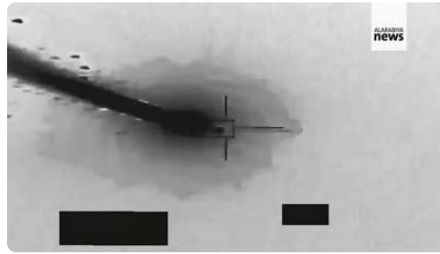


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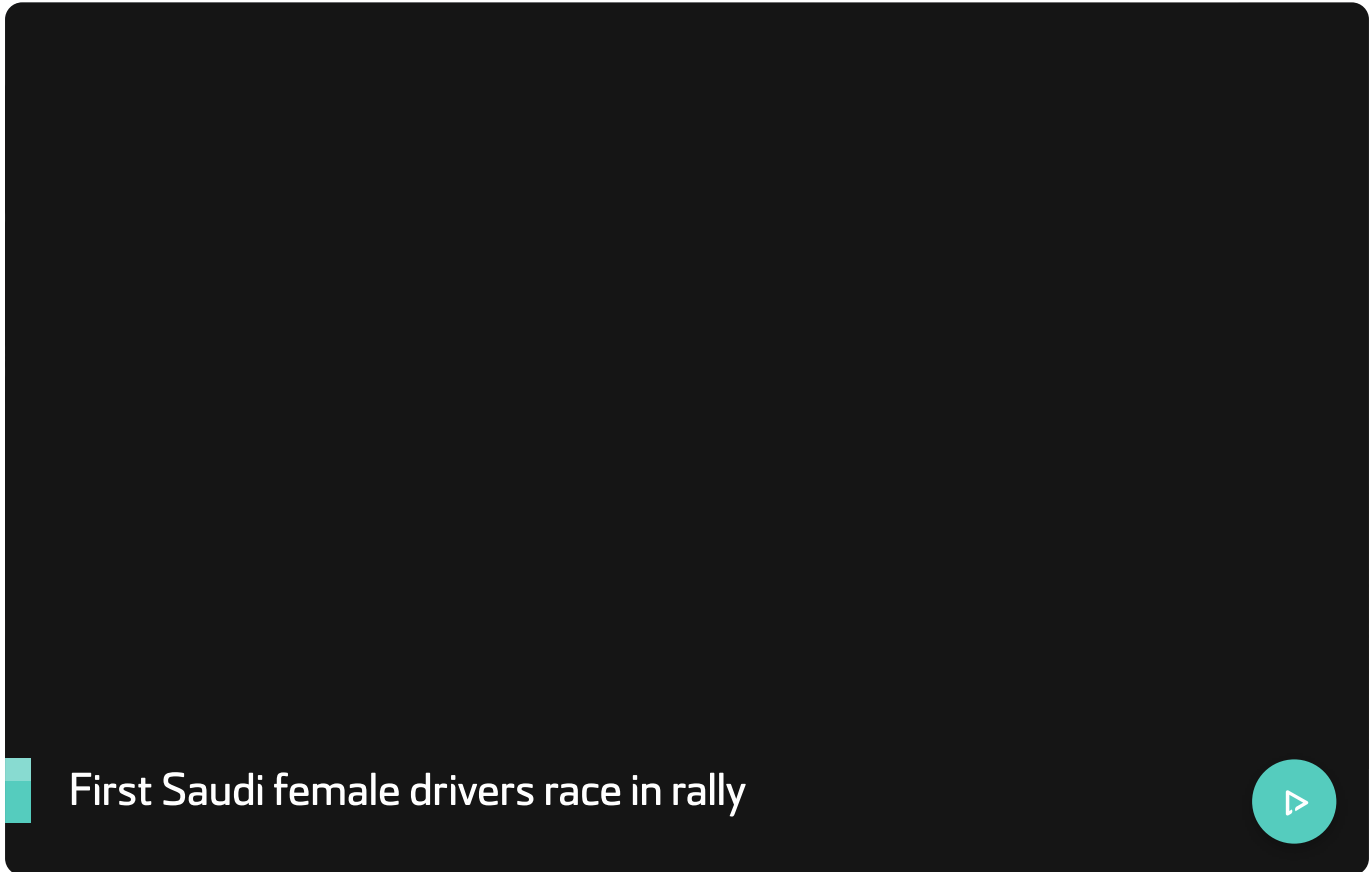


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