



Contemporary Arab Art @ Whitechapel

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The incumbent exhibition of modern and contemporary Arab art at the Whitechapel Gallery is not in any way how I expected it to be. I am so used to seeing modern art displayed against white walls that when a slightly coloured background is introduced I am thrown a little off balance. That said, the unexpected is normally a sign of a good exhibition.

The show titled Imperfect Chronology – Debating Modernism I, is the first of a series of four exhibitions of some of the Barjeel Art Foundation’s collection of Modern and Contemporary Arab art. The foundation that is based in the United Arab Emirates was founded by Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi and contains artwork from all over the Middle East.

My mother was born in Beirut so it should come as no surprise that I have always been interested in art from the Arab world, however large exhibitions of this genre, particularly of the contemporary, are few and far between in London. This first exhibition at Whitechapel begins with a display of artwork, predominantly paintings against yellow walls, dating from the twentieth century to 1967.

Whilst the display is not particularly big (it is shown in just one room), the fact that the show will continue in three consecutive exhibitions until 2017 ensures that a 'Middle Eastern presence' will be visible in what is usually a predominantly European and American gallery for some time.

This exhibition is important as it enforces the notion that the Middle East is an important cultural world centre for the production of art. None of the images on display would be out of place in a bigger museum. It is also interesting to learn that movements like surrealism not only happened in the west but the Arab world too in the form of the Art and Freedom Group. The starting point for this exhibition is also important as it marks the end of European rule and the formation of independent states in the Middle East. As I mentioned earlier, where one would expect a display of paintings against white walls across a single line at Whitechapel, here they are grouped together in a display not too dissimilar to the salons that took place in the Middle East during this period.

This exhibition was particularly interesting to me as two Armenian works were on display (I am half Armenian). One of these, a painting titled Nubian Girl by Ervand Demirdjian has frequently been the subject of a lot of praise in online articles, whilst I wrote about the other artist's work (Paul Guiragossian) in my MA dissertation. However the artist's on display here have been picked from Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and other locations across the Middle East. My personal favourite image on display was Fatigued Ten Horses Converse with Nothing (The Martyrs Epic), 1965 by Iraqi artist Kadhim Hayder. The painting shows ten white horses that appear to be howling during a dark night that is haunted by a red hot moon. I am probably completely wrong in my interpretation of the work, however it has a ghostly quality to it that would probably either enchant or disturb you.

This display is significant as it presents the Middle East and Middle Eastern art in both an academic and cultural context, affirming its place as one of the global centres of history, culture and art. I would urge you to not just visit Whitechapel for this exhibition but for the three shows that will follow it.

A Century of Art from the Arab World: Debating Modernism I is on display at Whitechapel Gallery until 6 December