

Review of Saloua Raouda Choucair at Tate Modern



The world's first major museum exhibition of the Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair is long overdue and can finally be seen at the **Tate Modern**. Choucair, now 96 years old, has dedicated her entire life to enriching art through her interest in a vast array of subjects such as architecture, painting, science, mathematics, Islamic art and poetry. When considering Choucair's work one must look at it from a point of view that delivers the difficulties of the times she has experienced and endured as a female artist living in Beirut, the capital and largest city of Lebanon. It would be correct to assert that Beirut was and is the Paris of the Middle East. In this respect it is not shocking to see fascinating art emerging from the city and its environs. However, it would also be correct to say that, where there is political and social upheaval, art thrives; as seen in Choucair's life-long work.

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following World War I, Lebanon was placed under French Mandate. The country achieved independence in 1943 and an era of relative prosperity commenced. This was when Choucair had begun to seriously work on her art in the studios of two prominent Lebanese painters, Mustafa Farroukh and Omar Onsi. As the first abstract artist in Lebanon, her exhibition in the Arab Cultural Gallery in Beirut in 1947 was and still considered to be the first abstract exhibition to take place in the Arab world. Choucair left Beirut in 1948 for Paris to study at the *École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts* and attended Fernand Léger's studio. The years 1948 and 1949 are represented in the exhibition with several paintings of Choucair, such as *Les Peintres Célèbres* (1948-49) in which Léger-inspired female nudes can be seen reclining and drinking tea. One small detail draws my attention; there is a tiny clock on the wall in the background in *Les Peintres Célèbres*, and the time is marked with Arabic numbers. Living in Paris, for Choucair, time seemed to stay in Arabic, a way of indicating to her character, her upbringing, her mind set. In *Chores* (1948-49) women are seen doing chores such as ironing and laundry; duties seen to be fit for women in the Islamic world. The irony here is, of course, that there is a woman like Choucair painting women doing menial tasks in post-World War II Paris.

During this time, she was also deeply moved by Le Corbusier's modernist residential housing project



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that later became known as the *Cité radieuse*. This period of artistic enlightenment and awareness led her to sculpture circa 1959. The retrospective exhibition at Tate Modern provides many examples of this switch to sculpture and installation art. For example, later examples of Choucair's work such as the *Sculpture with One Thousand Pieces* (1966-1968) bear a great witness to 'function over form' where tiny pieces of wood are put together to achieve the look of a tall occupied building in great detail. Choucair's ever-lasting interest in Islamic poetry is exemplified in her sculptures titled *Poem Wall* (1963-5) and *Poem Cube* (1963-5) that are reminiscent of Islamic calligraphy in the way that the pieces of wood fit together in asymmetry to create infinity in the harmony and rhyme of unwritten words. It feels like one could add pieces to her modular sculptures that could continue on and on...

Choucair also made many water sculptures, some of which can be seen at this retrospective exhibition of four rooms. Her in-depth understanding of Islamic culture shows through in these works, as water is the source of all life in Islamic ideology; without water there cannot be life. The most intriguing fact behind all of Choucair's art is that she has worked with all mediums available to her, brass, terracotta, wood, metal, fiberglass, aluminium, clay and plastic. Having returned to Beirut after a few years in Paris, she witnessed the Lebanese Civil War which started in 1975 and ended in 1990. Most of Choucair's work reflects the damage of war and the loss of human life, but there is one particular painting that still wears war on itself. *Two=One* (1947-1951) is pierced by shards of glass from a bombing raid in the Lebanese Civil War. A fragment of glass is still lodged in the canvas and it makes us fall silent with a feeling of past and existing doom. In Choucair's case, war made her into a prolific artist who comprehends the repetitive nature of infinity as exemplified in her paintings and sculptures.

Hande Eagle

Saloua Raouda Choucair, 17 April until 20 October, Tate Modern, Bankside, London, SE1 9TG.

www.tate.org.uk

Images:

1. Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Infinite Structure* 1963-5. © Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation
2. Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Composition in Blue Module* 1947-51. © Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

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Indrė Šerpytytė, Ffotogallery

Exploring history, individual and collective memory and loss, Indrė Šerpytytė exhibits a solo exhibition at Ffotogallery. The showcase coincides with Lithuania taking up the Presidency of the European Union.



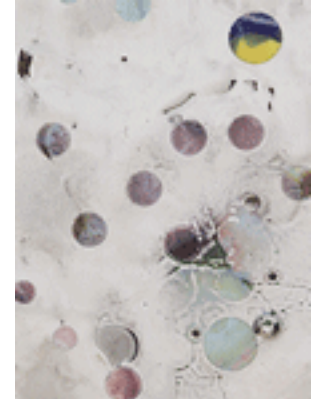
Aesthetica Art Prize Call for Entries Count Down 23 Days to Go – Poppy Whatmore

With less than a month to enter the Aesthetica Art Prize, we're continuing our countdown to 31 August with a run down of artists. Today we're focusing on 2013 Student Prize Winner, Poppy Whatmore.



In Conversation: Cornelia Parker, Aesthetica Magazine

Cornelia Parker is a British sculptor and installation artist who is interested in the potential of materials. In 2013, we spoke to Parker about her involvement with Glasstress: White Light / White Heat.

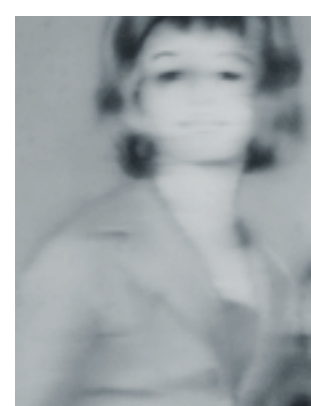
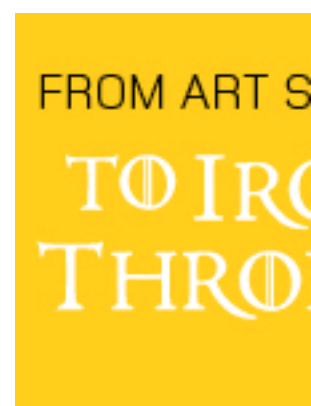
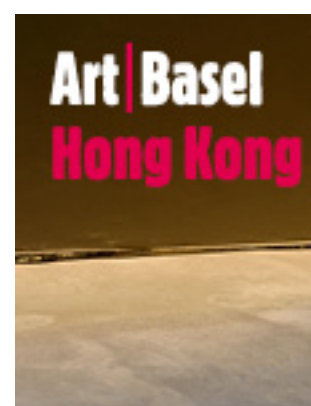


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