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# BLOUIN ART+AUCTION

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE FOR ART COLLECTORS

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## MIDDLE EASTERN ART: INSIDER PICKS

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WORLDWIDE EXCLUSIVE  
KAZUO SHIRAGA'S  
GUTAI SCRAPBOOK

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AT HOME WITH  
COLLECTOR  
CHRISTOPHER TSAI

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MULTIPLES MARKET  
MUSHROOMS

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# SHIFTING SANDS

23 MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST WHO TRANSCEND BORDERS WHILE TACKLING SUCH THEMES AS IDENTITY AND EXILE



BY TRENT MORSE

**T**he topics of wealth and conflict are seemingly unavoidable in discussions of the Islamic world. When it comes to the region's art scenes, headlines focus on either the investment in world-class museums and the establishment of auction-house outposts in the Gulf states, or the looting and the loss of cultural heritage elsewhere in the greater Middle East and North Africa (MENA). What's overlooked in this dyad is the artists from the area themselves, and their art.

This year, and especially this month, offers some of the best opportunities to appreciate the variety of these artistic practices, with their nuanced intertwining of the political and the aesthetic, the personal and the art historical. At the Armory Show in New York, March 5 through 8, visitors will see the work of more than two dozen MENA artists highlighted in the Focus section, organized in partnership with two of the most influential nonprofits in the sector, Art Jameel and Edge of Arabia. Two weeks later, Art Dubai plays host to 92 galleries presenting the work of more than 500 artists from both the modern and the contemporary eras. At the Sharjah Biennial,

running March 5 through June 5, participants come from all around the world, but curator Eungie Joo is privileging artists active in or with ties to the region. Further down the road, when the 56th Venice Biennale opens in May, the group shows in the pavilions of Iraq (curated by Philippe Van Cauteren, artistic director of s.m.a.k., the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent) and the United Arab Emirates (curated by Sheikha Hoor bint Sultan Al Qasimi, president and director of the Sharjah Art Foundation) will be augmented by "In the Eye of the Thunderstorm," an official collateral exhibition of art of the Middle East commissioned by Omar Donia, founder of *Contemporary Practices* art journal.

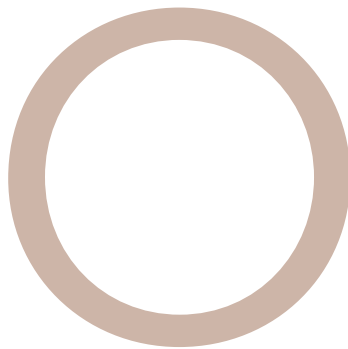
To understand the diversity of the voices that make up this community, *Art+Auction* polled six leading experts on MENA art for their picks of artists poised to break through on a global scale. Their choices range from a nonagenarian Iranian painter once immersed in the New York School to a pair of 30-something Palestinian photographers who fill their installations with images of displacement. Some of these artists might seem to play to expectations by producing works that riff on Islamic traditions or that grapple with violent conflict, while others are shattering stereotypes by working in modes of Neo-Expressionism or by embracing a truly transnational contemporary idiom. All are worthy of a closer look.



The young Iranian artist Golnaz Fathi's *untitled*, 2013, in acrylic, pen, and varnish on canvas.



# ARMORY ANGLE



MAR Kholeif, curator of the Whitechapel Gallery in London, has been chosen to curate the Focus section of this year's Armory Show in New York, which spotlights art from North Africa, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. Kholeif highlights a few favorite artists from that show.

Amman-born, London- and Beirut-based **Lawrence**

**Abu Hamdan**, who is the Armory's commissioned artist this year, is one of the most important young figures in art today. His work addresses the politics of listening and questions how governments and institutions use technology to present versions of the truth. "The Freedom of Speech Itself" and *Conflicted Phonemes*, both 2012, are two bodies of work—involving graphics, sculpture, audio, and video documentaries—that seek to visualize how accent tests have been used by state regimes and governments to define an individual's asylum or refugee status. His new project for the Armory explores the way surveillance is embedded in everyday objects. I hope it will boggle people's minds.

Other highlights from Focus include a stunning work by **Mona Hatoum** called *Turbulence (black)*, 2014, a giant sculpture made from thousands of glass marbles laid directly on the floor, which compels us to question our experience of the ordinary and everyday. Making its North American premiere after debuting in Hatoum's solo show at the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, the work will take over the whole booth of New York's Alexander and Bonin gallery.

Esteemed Turkish video artist **Nil Yalter**—a pioneering feminist artist who was born in Cairo in 1938 and has lived in France for many years—will be showing both recent and historic works in the booth of Istanbul's Galerist. I am also thrilled that Meem Gallery of Dubai will be showing early work by another artist whose career spans decades, the Syrian figurative painter **Marwan Kassab Bachi**. His imaginings of a conflicted world are as beautiful as they are disconcerting.

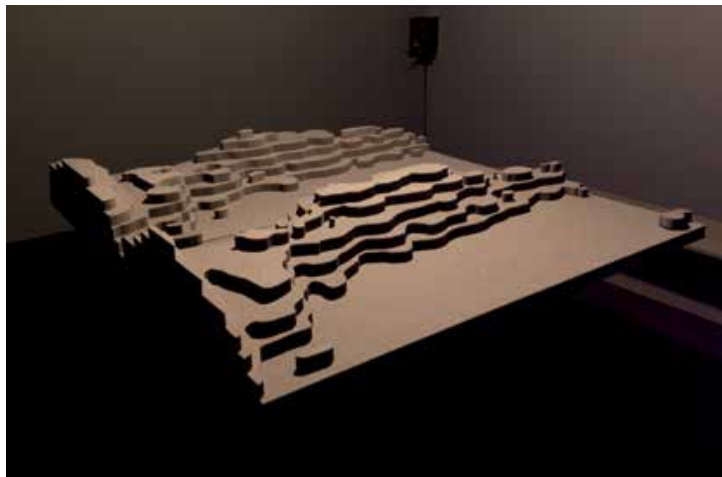
And I'm very excited to be showing a beautiful series of abstract drawings and a large-scale sculpture by Egyptian artist **Susan Hefuna** that evoke and extend a spirit that one can arguably see in the work of the Venezuelan artist Gego. We're also showing one of my all-time favorite artworks, *Circle of Confusion*, 1997, by Lebanese duo **Joana Hadjithomas** and **Khalil Joreige**. It's a giant aerial view of Beirut composed of more than 3,000 photographic fragments, which visitors can pull apart and take away with them.



Omar Kholeif



Clockwise from top left: **Mona Hatoum's** *Turbulence (black)*, 2014. A still from *Harem*, 1979, by **Nil Yalter**, a recently rediscovered video that grew out of an early performance work. **Lawrence Abu Hamdan's** *Freedom of Speech Itself*, 2012, creates topographic maps of different speakers' voice patterns to visualize the link between language and geography. Visitors can remove pieces from **Joana Hadjithomas** and **Khalil Joreige's** *Circle of Confusion*, 1997, an aerial view of Beirut.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: GEORGE DARRÉL | MONA HATOUM | ALEXANDER

# INFLUENCE ACROSS GENERATIONS



M

AYMANAH FARHAT is artistic director of Ayyam Gallery, of Dubai, Beirut, and London, and co-editor of Jadaliyya Culture. Currently she is curating the group show “Ten,” opening May 5, to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan.

One of the stronger points of “Here and Elsewhere,” the New Museum’s sweeping survey last year of contemporary art from the Arab world, was a significant display of assemblages by Emirati artist **Hassan Sharif**, long considered a pioneer of Conceptual art in the Gulf and a mentor to numerous artists. Sharif’s works introduced American viewers to the experimental yet subversive side of Middle Eastern art while also demonstrating the concentrated focus on form that has characterized the region’s painting and sculpture since the mid 20th century. Offering a disconcerting view of consumerist culture, Sharif’s installations and objects are made from the inescapable waste of globalization. Plastic bottle caps, copper wire, tin cans, and other cast-offs form the contours of abstract sculptural works that transform everyday trash into spectacular objects with an emphasis on mass, volume, tactility, and color. He will be included in the UAE pavilion at the Venice Biennale in May.

Last year, Sharjah-based painter **Thamer Helal** began to create monumental landscapes that reference the wide-scale destruction of his native Syria. Although abstract, the “Mountain” and “River” series is inspired by his memories of the country, from its arid central flatlands to the foothills near Damascus. In his Neo-Expressionist works, Helal uses color, texture, and brushwork to re-create the physical aspects of Syria’s natural environment, emphasizing its ability to deviate from the plans of man with regenerating force as it bears the scars of war. By doing so, Helal has redirected the recent course of Syrian painting, which nearly gave in to the circus of politics with the eruption of war.

**Safwan Dahoul**’s ongoing “Dream” series has influenced Arab artists since the late 1980s with symbolist compositions that capture an abject sense of isolation—an appropriate analogy for a region engulfed by political conflict. The withdrawn state of his recurring female protagonist intensifies with each composition, as the Dubai-based Syrian painter adds signs and spatial details that allude to permanent melancholy. Recently, this lone figure has been shown in desolate environments, lost and in search of shelter.



From top: Thamer Helal’s *Qalamoun Mountains*, 2014, is part of a new series in which the exiled artist explores memories of his Syrian homeland through landscape. Safwan Dahoul has been painting the same figures in his “Dream” series for 20 years; *Rêve 16*, 2009, sold at Christie’s Dubai in April 2013, for \$219,750. *Spoons No. 5*, 2012, is by Hassan Sharif, an influential Emirati artist educated in the West, who participated in the first wave of Conceptual art.

Maymanah Farhat



# THE IRAQI DIASPORA

**N**ADA M. SHABOUT is a professor of art history and director of the Contemporary Arab and Muslim Cultural Studies Initiative at the University of North Texas, editor of the online Mathaf Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World, and curator of "For the Love of Beauty," an exhibition set to open next year at the Crow Collection of Asian Art in Dallas. All of her selected artists here hail from Iraq but have since relocated to other countries.

Born in Baghdad in 1981, **Hayv Kahraman** is a graduate of the Academy of Art and Design in Florence, Italy, and the University of Umeå, Sweden, and currently lives near San Francisco. Through female allegorical figures that often refer back to antiquity, she confronts current social and political issues as well as the mundane domestic sphere. Stylistically, her work embodies her nomadic life through a synthesis of her visual experiences, engaging with Islamic art, ancient Greek art, Renaissance paintings, Japanese art, the Vienna Secession, and Art Nouveau collectively.

**Kareem Risan** trained and matured as an artist in Baghdad and studied with one of Iraq's main modernist painters, Shakir Hassan Al Said. He was also present in Baghdad during the U.S.-led invasion of 2003 and witnessed the destruction of the city and its heritage, which affects his work to this day. His previous interpretations of Mesopotamian iconography have recently been transformed into contemporary pictorial spaces as he has sought to express his own memories of war and ruin. Though he now lives in Toronto, Risan's colors record the immediacy of his home country's feelings of pain, anguish, and shame.

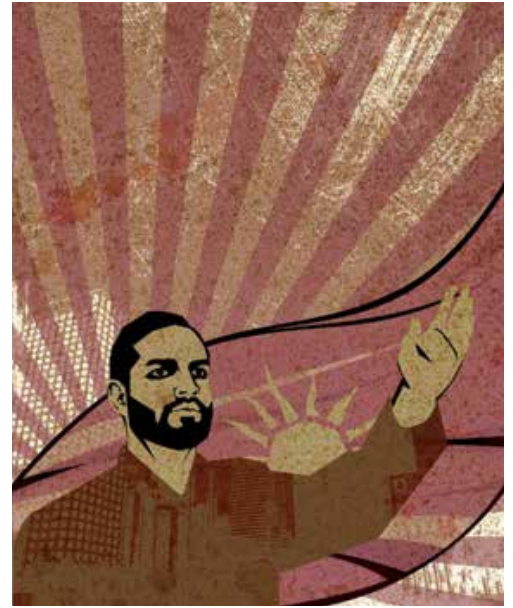
In his latest multimedia works, **Mahmoud Obaidi**, who works in both Toronto and Doha, Qatar, seems wholly at ease with his diasporic designation even as his work articulates the horrors of life in Iraq. Whether creating propagandalike images or sculptures forged from knives and swords, Obaidi invokes the theatrical as a means of exploring the psychic effects of acts of violence and the duality of his life as a global artist and an Iraqi.

**Nazar Yahya** migrated with his family from Baghdad to Jordan in the 1990s and contributed greatly to the development of the contemporary art scene in Amman. He is currently based in Houston. His work, particularly in printmaking, navigates his life experiences with materials and subjects, as well as his relationship to art-historical traditions. This includes a number of *dafatir*, or artists' books, that are highly informed by ideas associated with Islamic manuscripts.



Nada M. Shabout

From top: **Mahmoud Obaidi's** *Untitled 2 (The Replacement Propaganda)*, 2014. *Rose Book*, 2013, is part of a series of sculptures and works on paper by **Nazar Yahya**, whose work updates the Islamic tradition of artistic treatments of the Koran and other texts. **Hayv Kahraman's** oil on linen *Nabooq*, 2014, appears in her show "How Iraqi Are You?" at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York through April 4.



# BUILDING ON TRADITION

# A

NTONIA CARVER became an editor at Bidoun in 2004 and was appointed director of the Art Dubai fair in 2010. Based in the United Arab Emirates for more than a decade, Carver frequently writes about and speaks on the art of the region, most recently taking a leading role at a conference in January on “The Renewal of the Arab

World” at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris. Here she discusses the artists who will be seen at this month’s edition of Art Dubai.

In the fair’s Modern section, showing work predominantly from the 1940s through the 1980s, this is the year of **Shafic Abboud**, who is exhibited by both Agial Art Gallery and Claude Lemand, each of which focuses on different periods in the seminal painter’s practice. Working almost exclusively in abstraction, Abboud was a master of light, texture, and above all, color. Nearly 80 when he died in 2004, he has been highly influential to several generations of Arab artists. He is much sought after in the region and is also being rediscovered by European museums seeking to fill gaps in their collections of modern art beyond the usual Western suspects.

Many exhibitors in the Contemporary area are pulling out all the stops, including the German-Lebanese gallery Tanit, which is showcasing a brilliantly ambitious installation by the photographer **Fouad Elkoury**. This immersive work includes three slide shows referencing the Lebanese civil wars, with poetry by the veteran poet, writer, and artist Etel Adnan. The soundtrack features even more Lebanese talent: filmmaker Shirin Abu Shaqra and composer Cynthia Zaven. It’s definitely a museum-level piece.

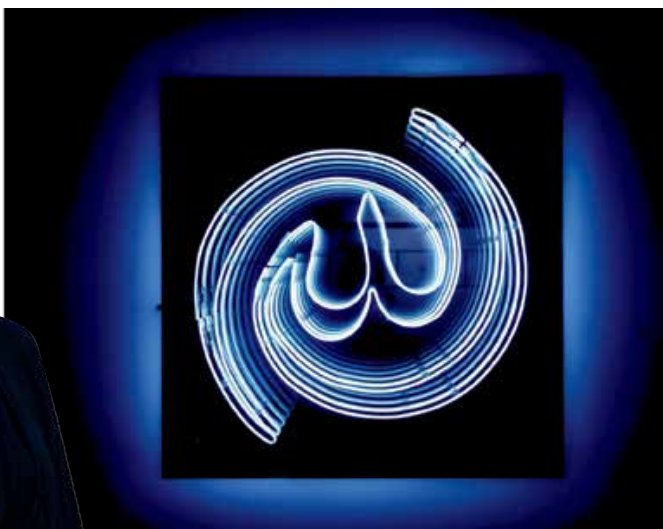
Born in Mecca in 1984, **Nasser Al-Salem** is a rising star in Saudi Arabia and is starting to make a name for himself internationally. He shows with Athr—a great gallery from Jeddah and a stalwart of Art Dubai—and just had an interesting and complex show there that referenced his areas of interest and training. His family’s business is tent-making, and he studied calligraphy and then architecture; all these disciplines feed into his practice but in very contemporary and investigative ways. There are several sculpture platforms in the Contemporary gallery halls, and Al-Salem is taking over one of these with a new, large-scale calligraphic installation in concrete that should prove a focal point within the fair.



Antonia Carver

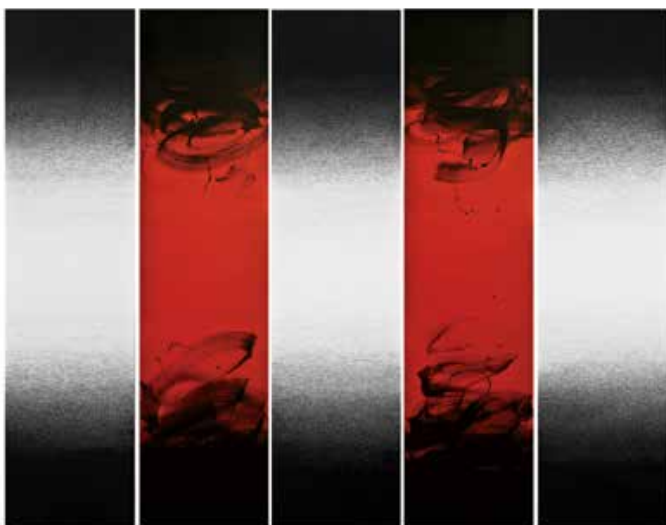


From top: *Kaak seller, Beirut, 1991*, will be part of **Fouad Elkoury’s** photo-and-video installation at Galerie Tanit’s booth at Art Dubai. The oil-on-Masonite *Season II, 1959*, by the master colorist **Shafic Abboud**. Trained in calligraphy and architecture, **Nasser Al-Salem** explores the boundaries between two and three dimensions in works such as *God Is Alive, He Shall Not Die (Blue)*, 2012, made from a neon light mounted in an infinity box.





# PHOTOGRAPHY AND BEYOND



From top: **Ahmed Mater's** *Midnight Hour*, 2011, from the "Desert of Pharan" series, which depicts the ongoing rampant development catering to pilgrims in the artist's hometown of Mecca. **Golnaz Fathi's** *Untitled*, 2011. **Steve Sabella** applied photosensitive emulsion to fragments of homes being destroyed in Jerusalem's Old City and reproduced vintage and contemporary images on them for his series "38 Days of Re-collection," 2014.

**K**ARIN ADRIAN VON ROQUES is a curator and art historian specializing in modern and contemporary Arab and Iranian art. Her latest curatorial project, "View from Inside: Contemporary Arab Video, Photography, and Mixed Media Art," premiered at last year's FotoFest Biennial in Houston. A variation of the show will head to the Abu Dhabi Festival on March 20.

**Golnaz Fathi** is one of the most important young Iranian artists working today. After training as a classical calligrapher, she soon began breaking the rules of calligraphy to follow her own ideas. She is no longer concerned with the legibility of words, but uses texts and letters as formal elements or as mere gestures. Her key tools are the quill, with which she draws on the canvas, and the paintbrush. In transforming traditional calligraphy into a personal artistic language, Fathi gives herself the option of expressing her emotions in a purely visual manner.

Multimedia artist **Ahmed Mater**, who is a physician by profession, practicing in a hospital in southern Saudi Arabia, has dealt firsthand with human suffering and the efforts to relieve it. His work confronts life's ethical and spiritual questions. For the series "Illumination," he uses X-ray photographs as a starting point and enhances them to look like pages of the Koran through the traditional decorative technique of illumination, deploying a metaphor for the essence of religious ideas and meaning. In his photographic series "Desert of Pharan," Mater makes apparent what is happening in Mecca, where real estate speculators are tearing down whole city blocks to erect gigantic hotel complexes and apartment buildings surrounding the grounds of Islam's most sacred mosque, Al-Masjid al-Haram, in Mecca. His large-scale photographs document this process as it is happening.

Born in Jerusalem in 1975, **Steve Sabella** is a Palestinian photographer and installation artist. At the age of 33 he moved to London, and now resides in Berlin. His works are about growing up under Israeli occupation, discovering art and love, and finding liberation from mental exile and a colonized imagination. With his camera he sets up a distinct world and then contradicts that setup, separating the things he sees into light and dark. Through his art, Sabella grapples with life in exile, with its distorting and destructive consequences. His is an art of understanding; it is poetic and suppresses neither expulsion nor salvation.

**Hazem Harb** is another remarkable young Palestinian photographer and installation artist. He was born in 1980 in Gaza and currently splits his time between Rome and Dubai. Harb's work deals mainly with issues of war, loss, trauma, human vulnerability, and global instability, and he explores these themes using every tool at his disposal. His series "Beyond Memory," 2012, made of digitally altered found photographs, was acquired by the British Museum in 2013.



Karin Adrian von Roques



