

"Modern Art From The Middle East" Cuts Through The Noise

by **ANDREW KOENIG** | Apr 19, 2017 7:42 am

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YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY PHOTO

Marwan Kassab Bachi, "The Three Palestinian Boys," 1970, oil on canvas.

The sprawling canvas of Marwan Kassab Bachi's "The Three Palestinian Boys," featured in the "Modern Art from the Middle East" exhibition at the [Yale University Art](#)

[Gallery](#) until July 16, shows three young boys who seem palpably scarred by the Arab-Israeli War of 1967. They look almost like burn victims, whose taut, pink skin has been grafted on. Their eyes have shrunk down to small black holes. One of the boys' faces is cut out of the frame entirely. These children do not look like children: They appear in their baggy clothes to be at once oversized and emaciated.

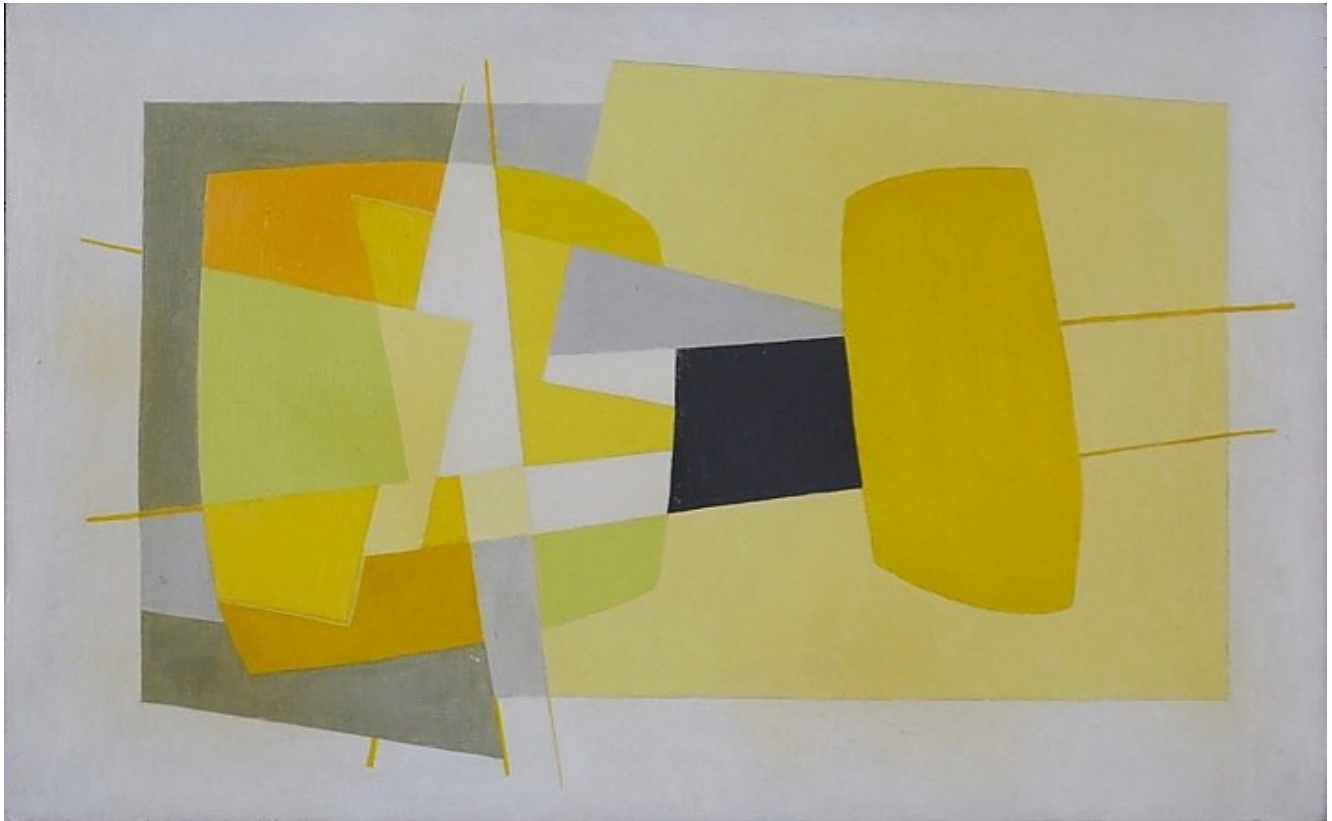
In the next room over, the distortions of Christian Boltanski's "Gymnasium Chases" similarly turn the human face into a site of violence. Blown-up and overexposed black-and-white photos of Jewish high school students, who later died in the Holocaust, look ghostlike, already dead.

It's unexpected artistic and political connections like this one that make "Modern Art from the Middle East" illuminating. Timing was certainly on the gallery's side as well. The exhibition featuring artists from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq had been in the works for more than a year, but when it opened on Feb. 24, its concurrence with the Trump administration's travel ban — Syria and Iraq were among the banned countries — seemed uncanny.

"The simultaneity was strange," said Joellen Adae, the gallery's director of communications, but "helpful in getting people interested."

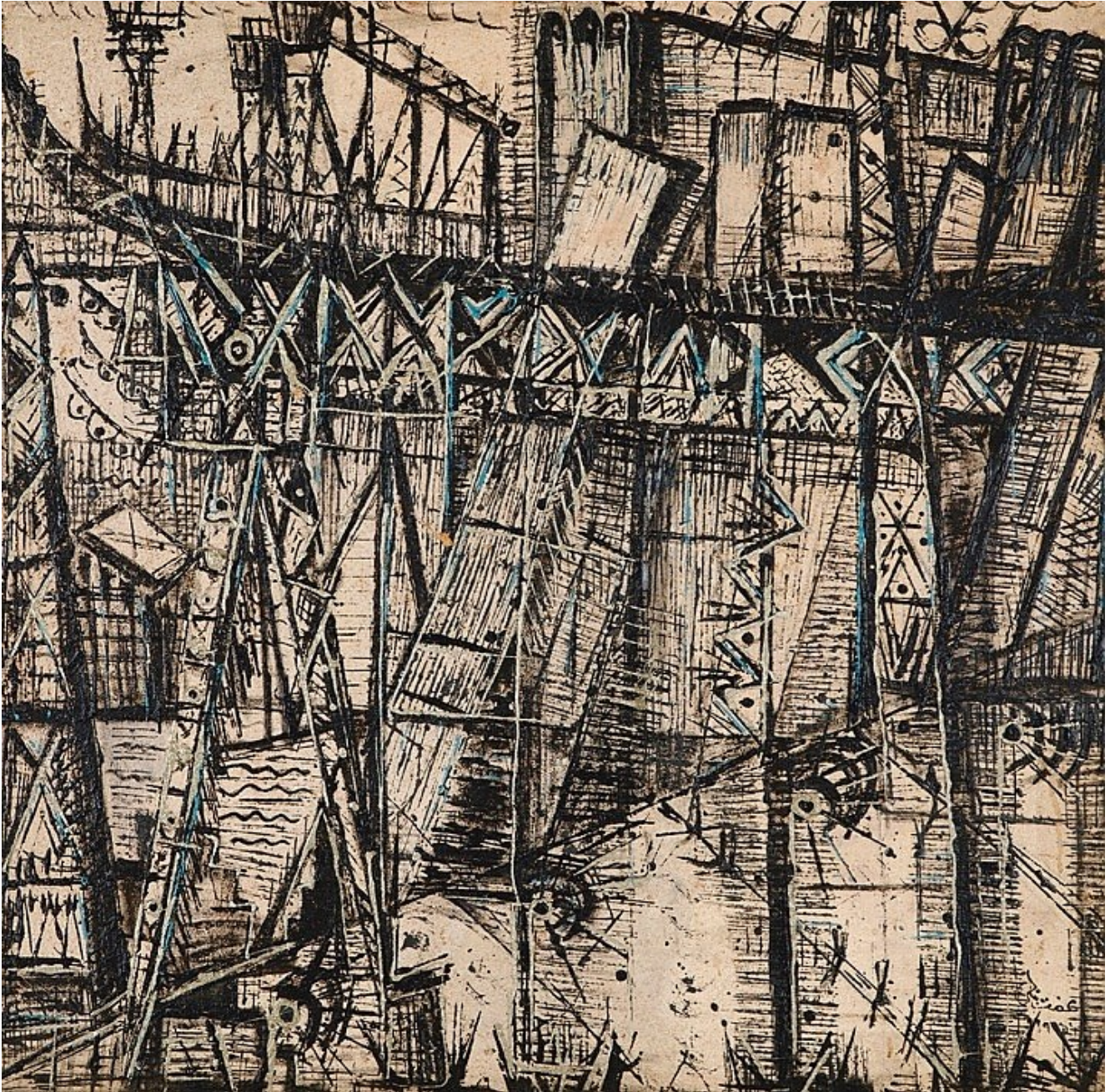
"Modern Art from the Middle East" is helpful — a corrective against preconceived notions about Middle Eastern versus Western culture. Many of the artists in the exhibition were born into lives of privilege in European colonial mandates and protectorates in the Middle East. A great number of them studied in Italy and France and brought European styles back to their home countries. In the hybrid forms developed by these artists, the dichotomy between Eastern and Western culture breaks down. Porous borders and artistic exchange with Europe, in fact, allowed the featured artists to make the works that they did.

According to Frauke Josenhans, who curated the exhibition with Kishwar Rizvi, associate professor of Islamic art and architecture at Yale, and Mandy Merzaban, founding curator at the Barjeel Art Foundation, the impetus behind "Modern Art from the Middle East" was "to assert the position of Arab modernists within the global art historical narrative." The exhibition, created in partnership with the nonprofit Barjeel Art Foundation, fills what Josenhans calls "a collection gap."



Saloua Raouda Choucair, "Composition in Yellow," 1962-1965, oil on panel.

The gallery's placement of Arab near American and European modern art allows viewers to explore the similarities among them. Not every work has an obvious Western correspondent, but many do. "Red Lines," by Assad Arabi, bears a striking resemblance to works by Paul Klee. Choucair's "Composition in Yellow" would be at home in a museum of European abstract art. El-Gazzar's "Untitled, from the Scientific Progress Series" looks like a [Russian Suprematist](#) sketch, with its spiraling mortars and cables, vortices, and dizzying proportions.



Effat Naghi, "The High Dam," 1966, acrylic on wood

Meanwhile, calligraphic lines and traces inspired by Arabic appear in many of the works, distinguishing them from their Western antecedents. Shakir Assan Al Said's "The Victorious" looks like a piece of the Berlin Wall: a cement canvas covered in graffiti, surveyor's marks, scratches, and gashes. Curlicues are shorthand for lines of Arabic. Similarly, the thick grid of interlocking lines and squiggles in Effat Naghi's "The High Dam" suggests Arabic calligraphy in depicting the building of the Aswan High Dam.



Huguette Caland, "Erotic Composition," 1967-70, ink and graphite.

In some cases, European methods are employed in innovative ways. Huguette Caland's "Erotic Composition" is a play on European modes of surrealism. With a few tiny red and pink curvilinear forms, Caland suggests labia, lips, eyes. Large gray areas in pencil make a veil pulled apart in many directions. The female figure is at once covered and uncovered.

The goal of "Modern Art from the Middle East" — to show how the Middle East repurposed European modernism from the 1950s to the 1980s — is fulfilled in works like Caland's. The main disadvantage of the exhibition is that it casts perhaps too wide a net. Its roughly 20 works cannot bear the burden of so large a topic, which perhaps should have been narrowed. The artists on display borrow from cubism, surrealism, suprematism [constructivism](#), and [fauvism](#), and it is hard to discern any unifying principle among them.

But the exhibition's wide spread may be the point: that there's no such thing as a pan-Arab manner of seeing or painting. For all the imagined monolithic unity of "the Middle East," the artists of "Modern Art from the Middle East" speak in radically different ways — as Marxists, as surrealists, as feminists. Viewers may not get a deep sense of any one artist or school, but they gain purchase on a period and a region.

And it is bracing to see such lucid artwork from the Middle East in a Western museum. When our other main lenses of understanding the Middle East — journalism and politics — are clouded with tendentious claims and outright falsehoods, these works collectively cut through the noise.

"Modern Art from the Middle East" runs at the Yale University Art Gallery, 1111 Chapel St., until July 16. Admission is free. Click [here](#) for hours and more information.

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