

GREY ART NYU GALLERY

For Immediate Release

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EXHIBITION RETHINKS MID-CENTURY ABSTRACT ART IN MIDDLE EAST AND BEYOND

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s

On view at New York University's Grey Art Gallery
January 14–April 4, 2020



Mohamed Melehi (Morocco)
Composition, 1970. Acrylic
on wood, 47 1/4 x 39 3/8 in.
Collection of the Barjeel Art
Foundation, Sharjah, UAE

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s

explores the development of abstraction in the Arab world via paintings, sculpture, and works on paper dating from the 1950s through the 1980s. By looking critically at the history and historiography of mid-20th century abstraction, the exhibition considers art from North Africa and West Asia as integral to the discourse on global modernism. At its heart, the project raises a fundamental art historical question: How do we study abstraction across different contexts and what models of analysis do we use?

Examining how and why artists investigated the expressive capacities of line, color, and texture, *Taking Shape* highlights a number of abstract movements that developed in North Africa and West Asia, as well as the Arab diaspora. Across these regions, individual artists and artist collectives grappled with issues of authenticity, national and regional identity, and the decolonization of culture. Drawn from the collection of the **Barjeel Art Foundation** based in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, the exhibition features

nearly 90 works by a diverse group of artists such as Etel Adnan, Shakir Hassan Al Said, Kamal Boullata, Huguette Caland, Ahmed Cherkaoui, Saloua Raouda Choucair, Rachid Koraïchi, Mohamed Melehi, and Hassan Sharif, among others. On view are works produced by artists from countries including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and United Arab Emirates. Curated and organized by Suheyla Takesh, Curator at the Barjeel Art Foundation, and Lynn Gumpert, Director of the **Grey Art Gallery at New York University**, the exhibition will be on view from **January 14 through April 4, 2020**.

Exhibition

Taking Shape investigates the principles and meaning of abstraction in the context of the Arab world during the 1950s through the 1980s, a period that was significantly shaped by decolonization; the rise and fall of Arab nationalism(s); socialism; rapid industrialization; multiple

wars and subsequent mass migration; the oil boom; and new state formations in the Arab/Persian Gulf. By the mid-20th century—and in parallel to growing opposition to Western political and military involvement in the region—many artists in the Arab world began to adopt a much more critical viewpoint toward culture, striving to make art relevant to their own political, cultural, and historical contexts. New opportunities for international travel during these years, and the rise of the circulating exhibition, also gave way to new forms of cultural and educational exchanges that allowed artists to encounter multiple modernisms—including various modes of abstract art—and to consider the role of the artist in the contemporary international landscape. “Via a critical examination of abstraction in the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, the exhibition invites a (re)consideration of the attribution of abstraction’s emergence to a single historical moment.” Takesh explains. “In its own way of emulating the artistic practices of the time, the exhibition is also a vantage point on how contemporary discourse on global modernisms and decentralized genealogies of abstraction is unfolding or, in a nod to the title of the show, taking shape.”

Lynn Gumpert adds, “The Grey Art Gallery takes great pride in partnering with the Barjeel Art Foundation. It is very appropriate that, as a university museum, the Grey broadens vistas and looks closely at art made over the four decades in question by individuals that come from so many different nations, with different belief systems and histories. We chose an exhibition title, *Taking Shape*, that recognizes and conveys to the public that our approach to abstraction in the Arab world is not static—even with regard to the art of this defined time frame—but is, rather, in formation.”

A major facet of abstraction in the Arab world is linked to a fascination with the artistic and formal potential of the Arabic letterform. In a departure from classical Islamic calligraphy, a new art movement called **Hurufiyya** was born, which engaged with the Arabic language as a visual and compositional element. Formal explorations of Arabic alphabets emerged concurrently in several parts of the Islamic world in the 1950s, and Iraqi artist **Madiha Umar** is often cited as a progenitor of the movement. Umar’s work features manipulated letterforms, deconstructed and overlaid on top of each other to create curvilinear compositions that echo the swirls and rhythms inherent to the script and the gesture of writing itself. While classical Arabic calligraphy is traditionally associated with religious Islamic texts, Hurufiyya artists transformed Arabic letterforms into abstract compositions that could be more readily appreciated by diverse audiences. As scholar Nada Shabout notes,

“Liberating the [Arabic] letter from calligraphic rules detached it from the sacred and allowed it to be seen for its plastic qualities.” Yet many artists, including Egyptian **Omar El-Nagdi** and Sudanese **Ibrahim El-Salahi**, did not completely divorce themselves from religious or spiritual undertones. El-Nagdi’s artistic explorations between the early 1960s and late 1970s were inextricably linked to Islamic thought and Sufi rituals, characterized by rhythmic abstractions that bear formal semblance to the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, *alif*, also the first letter in the word *Allah* (god). El-Salahi’s rhythmic articulation of Arabic alphabets and abstraction of African sculptural forms in his 1964 work *The Last Sound* references the final sound of a soul’s passage from the corporeal plane to the spiritual plane, and underscores the artist’s commitment to creating art through a spiritual process. Distinct from other artists presented in the exhibition, the Palestinian painter **Kamal Boullata** engaged not just with individual Arabic letters, but whole phrases, which were often well-known verses derived from Islamic and Christian sacred texts.



Ibrahim El-Salahi (Sudan)
The Last Sound, 1964
 Oil on canvas, 47 7/8 x 47 7/8 in.
 Collection of the Barjeel Art
 Foundation, Sharjah, UAE

New artist groups arose across the Arab world during this period to address the issue of how to localize and recontextualize existing 20th-century modernisms. The **Baghdad Group for Modern Art**, founded in 1951, sourced Mesopotamian archeological objects and locally-found motifs—such as ancient cuneiform symbols—to inform their aesthetic. **Shakir Hassan Al Said**, one of the group’s most prominent members, also displayed an affinity with Hurufiyya. In the 1960s, when Al Said became interested in Sufism and the spiritual potentialities of art, he published the “Contemplative Art Manifesto,” in which he advocates for a meditative and transcendental approach to art. Al Said’s work during this period manifests his practice of scratching, carving, burning, and otherwise altering the artwork surface to create amorphous compositions that appear to reference the cosmos itself.

The **Casablanca School** in Morocco, an avant-garde artist collective founded in 1965, promoted inquiry into local heritage to cultivate authentic visual languages and material palettes suited to their cultural and political contexts. Formed by artists including **Mohamed Chebaa**, **Farid Belkahia**, and **Mohamed Melehi**, among others, the school’s philosophy centered on its commitment to the study of local Islamic and Amazigh culture, which its members saw as inherently tied to nonrepresentational modes of expression. Through examination of Morocco’s traditional geometric painting, engraving, mosaic ornament, and carpets, as well as Islamic patterns and Amazigh tattoo symbols, the Casablanca School’s turn to abstraction was driven by a desire for a methodology that had historical relevance and recalled the local culture that existed prior to colonization. Chebaa’s highly geometric works evoke architectural plans and schematized topographies; his 1970s work *Composition* is rendered as a wooden relief sculpture, underscoring the school’s link to artisanship and crafts. Belkahia turned to the craft traditions of the medina for his work, using natural dyes painted on vellum and animal skin rather than oil on canvas to create his contemplative compositions. The brightly colored curvilinear compositions of Melehi reflect both the form and movement of sea waves and the gesture of inscribing Arabic calligraphy.



Saloua Raouda Choucair (Lebanon)
Interform, 1960. Wood, 23 5/8 x
 12 5/8 x 4 1/2 in. Collection of the
 Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah,
 UAE

Similar to that of the Casablanca School, the work of the **Aouchem group** based in Algeria sought to reinterpret local symbolism and body art through abstract compositions. The group, whose name means “tattoo” in Arabic, was active for a short period from 1967 until 1971. While not a signatory of the Aouchem manifesto, **Mohammed Khadda** echoed the group’s central ideas of contemplating the mystical dimensions of runes and symbols of Amazigh culture. His works feature graphic signs evocative of calligraphic pictograms, painted over a surface of earth tones.

For many 20th-century artists in the Arab world who were making nonfigurative work, geometry and mathematics were guiding principles. These artists often drew inspiration from Islamic decorative patterns, architecture, carpets, and textiles. Lebanese artist **Saloua Raouda Choucair** developed her own unique language of abstract, interlocking forms that had no specific reference to objects, place, or language. Choucair’s geometric canvases and organic sculptures reveal a deeply intellectual and holistic approach that combines influences from mathematics, philosophy, science, architecture, and spirituality. As Suheyly Takesh notes, “Mathematics served as a practical tool for artists in search of these paragons, both for its precision and for its potential to curtail human error.” The geometric still lifes by Palestinian artist **Samia Halaby**, produced following the artist’s trips to Egypt, Syria, and Turkey in 1966 to study Islamic architecture and geometric design, explore how the color of painted volumes affects the illusion of depth. Lebanese artist **Saliba Douaihy**, a contemporary of Choucair’s who emigrated to the U.S. in 1950, produced hard-edged and brightly colored geometric compositions that

were also influenced by landscape. Douaihy cites the Mediterranean Sea as a source of inspiration for many of his minimalist abstract paintings. **Etel Adnan**, another Lebanese painter, also created works influenced by landscape, particularly locations that held personal significance. Writer Kaelen Wilson-Goldie notes the significance of abstracted landscapes among these artists: “It may be the Arab world’s particular take on the art of landscape that it must be abstracted because it has been lost—lost to Adnan and Douaihy, lost more recently to generations of Palestinians and Iraqis and Syrians.”

Exhibition Catalogue

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s is accompanied by a 256-page publication. Co-published by Hirmer Publishers and the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, the book was co-edited by **Suheyyla Takesh**, Curator at the Barjeel Art Foundation, and **Lynn Gumpert**, Director of the Grey Art Gallery, New York University. Also featured are essays by **Iftikhar Dadi**, Associate Professor in the History of Art and Visual Studies department and Director of the South Asia Program, Cornell University; **Salah M. Hassan**, Goldwin Smith Professor of African and African Diaspora Art History and Visual Culture, Director of the Institute for Comparative Modernities, Cornell University; **Hannah Feldman**, Associate Professor of Art History, Northwestern University; **Anneka Lenssen**, Assistant Professor in the History of Art department, University of California, Berkeley; **Salwa Mikdadi**, Associate Professor, Practice of Art History, NYU Abu Dhabi; **Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi**, founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation and lecturer and researcher on social, political, and cultural affairs in the Arab Gulf States; **Nada Shabout**, Professor of Art History and Coordinator of the Contemporary Arab and Muslim Cultural Studies Initiative (CAMCSI), University of North Texas; **Kaelen Wilson-Goldie**, a writer based in Beirut and New York; and **Suheyyla Takesh**. The book also includes biographical entries on each artist.

Tour

After debuting at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University, *Taking Shape* will travel to the **Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University**, where it will be on view from **April 28 through July 26, 2020**, and then to the **Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University** from **August 22 through December 13, 2020**. In 2021 the exhibition will travel to the **McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College**, where it will be displayed from **January 25 through June 6**, and will shortly thereafter be on view at the **University of Michigan Museum of Art** from **June 25 through September 19, 2021**.

Sponsorship

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s is organized by the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, and curated by Suheyyla Takesh and Lynn Gumpert. Major support for the exhibition is provided by the Barjeel Art Foundation. Additional generous support is provided by the Charina Endowment Fund; the Violet Jabara Charitable Trust; the Grey’s Director’s Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends; and the Abby Weed Grey Trust.

About the Grey Art Gallery

The Grey Art Gallery is New York University’s fine arts museum, located on historic Washington Square Park in New York City’s Greenwich Village. It offers the NYU community and the general public a dynamic roster of engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions, all of them enriched by public programs. With its emphasis on experimentation and interpretation, and its focus on studying art in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, the Grey serves as a museum-laboratory for the exploration of art’s environments.

Exhibitions organized by the Grey have encompassed all the visual arts: painting, sculpture,

drawing and printmaking, photography, architecture and decorative arts, video, film, and performance. In addition to producing its own exhibitions, which often travel to other venues in the United States and abroad, the Gallery hosts traveling shows that might otherwise not be seen in New York and produces scholarly publications that are distributed worldwide.

About the Barjeel Art Foundation

Barjeel Art Foundation is an independent, UAE-based initiative established to manage, preserve, and exhibit an extensive collection of modern and contemporary Arab art. The foundation's guiding principle is to contribute to the intellectual development of the art scene in the Arab region by building a prominent, publicly accessible art collection in the UAE. Part of this objective involves developing a public platform to foster critical dialogue around contemporary art practices with a focus on artists with Arab heritage internationally. The foundation strives to create an open-ended enquiry that responds to and conveys the nuances inherent to Arab histories beyond borders of culture and geography. By organizing exhibitions, lending artwork to international forums, producing print and online publications, and fashioning interactive public programs, the foundation serves as a resource for contemporary art by Arab artists both locally and on the global stage. By establishing partnerships with arts and cultural institutions internationally, the foundation looks to create opportunities to encourage public awareness of the importance of art to the community. In 2018, Barjeel signed a contract with the Sharjah Museums Authority to open a long-term exhibition at the Sharjah Art Museum, which features a selection of key modernist paintings, sculptures and mixed media artworks from the Barjeel Art Foundation collection.

General Information

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Hours

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11 am–6 pm
OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm
Saturday: 11 am–5 pm
Closed Sunday, Monday, and major holidays

Admission

Suggested donation: \$5; free of charge to NYU students, faculty, and staff