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ART BOOKS | MARCH 2024

Helen Khal: Gallery One and Beirut in the 1960s

This is a lavishly illustrated monograph, published as a sort of epilogue to a previous exhibition, enhanced by rarely seen archival materials and color reproductions.

By Maymanah Farhat



HELEN KHAL

*Gallery One
and Beirut
in the 1960s*

Edited by Carla Chammas, Rachel Dedman, and Omar Kholeif
Helen Khal: Gallery One and Beirut in the 1960s
(Sternberg Press, 2023)

Before the economic crisis hit Lebanon in 2019 and the Beirut port explosion brought further devastation the following year, the Lebanese art scene was in the midst of a revival. Beginning in the mid 2000s, there was a widespread push for greater research and documentation in the region, led by a small network of galleries, which started a reexamination of Lebanese modern artists. Helen Khal (1923–2009), a key figure of Beirut’s modern art scene, has long been one of the few neglected artists from this period, despite the many individuals, foundations, galleries, and nonprofit art spaces that are actively working to situate Lebanon within the wider framework of global art history. If you were fortunate enough to spend time in Beirut during the early days of this revisionist movement, you would likely encounter Khal at an exhibition opening or some other art related event. Khal was a beloved elder and a walking encyclopedia of Lebanese art history. During her career she was a gallery founder and director, an art critic and writer, a practicing artist, a professor, and a friend and champion of at least three generations of the country’s artists. Khal’s rich life experiences and prolific output are outlined in *Helen Khal: Gallery One and Beirut in the 1960s*, a lavishly illustrated monograph published as a sort of epilogue to the exhibition *At the still point of the turning world, there is the dance*, which opened at Beirut’s Sursock Museum as the 2019 economic crisis was unfolding, causing the book to be delayed.

For this accompanying publication, the exhibition’s curators, Carla Chammas and Rachel Dedman, teamed up with cultural historian and curator and arts administrator Omar Kholeif to produce a record of the exhibition that is enhanced by rarely seen archival materials and color reproductions of some of the many artworks that defined the “golden era” of Lebanese modernism. The exhibition examined the artists, styles, and creative concerns of the era through Khal’s role as an artist, gallerist, and critic. Most importantly, however, were the deep connections she formed with so many of her peers: her closest friend, the artist and fashion designer Huguette Caland, who was her studio mate in Beirut before moving to Los Angeles; poet and painter Etel Adnan; and abstract painter and former lover Chafic Abboud. These connections are made evident with reproductions of Khal’s personal photographs and letters.

The book’s design has a heavy emphasis on illustrations and reproductions of archival documents. In addition to personal photographs and letters, there are newspaper clippings, manuscript pages, and announcements, all of which encourage the reader to

dig through Khal's archive in order to piece together the exhibition's narrative. This material is dispersed between the included texts, which appear in designated sections, and complements the significant photographic documentation of the exhibition that appears midway. Khal's color-field paintings and 1960s atmospheric portraits of her children are featured prominently among the book's images, reminding the viewer of her own engagement with the aesthetic experiments of the time.

The included texts move between Khal's life, her career, the artistic circle she maintained, and the larger context of art production in Lebanon. Carla Chammas, an independent curator and co-founder of the now-shuttered CRG Gallery in Manhattan contributes, "A Journey of an Exhibition," a brief essay on how this project came together. Chammas reflects on the process of researching for the exhibition, which included the rediscovery of midcentury works by Khal and her peers that had not been shown in decades. CRG Gallery was the first commercial art space in the United States to show the work of Khal's friend and modernist peer, the Lebanese sculptor Saloua Raouda Choucair, who was also featured in this exhibition.

Dedman, a longtime curator known for producing well-researched projects on otherwise obscured subject matter, expands in her essay on Khal's life, modern art and the artist's role, and on how Khal and her female peers viewed their own engagement with modernist aesthetics, and the relationships she nurtured. Dedman begins with the gallerist's birth in 1923 to a Lebanese family in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and describes her bout of tuberculosis as the impetus for her first experiments with art. Traveling to northern Lebanon in 1946, Khal, born Helen Joseph Shayboub, became familiar with an art school in Beirut that she later enrolled in after deciding to stay in the country. In the capital, she met Lebanese poet Yusuf Khal, whom she married and moved with to New York, where she studied at the Art Students League before returning to Lebanon in 1955. Gallery One, which the Khals co-founded in 1963, would become one of the first art spaces to show a range of modern artists in the country. Khal's involvement with the gallery was instrumental, but short-lived due to a painful divorce. Dedman's essay emphasizes the difficulties of being an artist and a mother in Lebanon (for example, the fact that custody of her two sons was given to her ex-husband), and later delves into the works of the exhibition's other artists, such as Caland and Abboud, as she describes their close relationships with Khal.


Dedman's sections on Khal's time in New York and later in Washington, DC, during the Lebanese Civil War, are very brief, yet invaluable to the current scholarly movement reexamining American art history given that she is virtually unknown outside of a small circle of Arab-American artists, collectors, and curators. This leaves the reader to

wonder if the delayed timeline of the project and the circumstances surrounding it inhibited the extent to which the book could be developed.

Kholeif contributes the book’s final text, “All Things Unsettled, Remain,” a meandering treatise on creativity and collectivity overrun by art speak and references to European post-structuralist philosophers. This is unfortunate considering there is an abundance of theoretical writing from the Arab world that could have supported his attempt to “scrutinize and develop a methodology for this context [the modernist period in Lebanon].” The essay ventures into the history of Lebanese art as it intersects with various political events and is impacted by the country’s distinct sociocultural and economic conditions yet the book would have benefited from the expertise and insight of a Lebanese historian. Nonetheless, the larger project importantly places Khal at the center of a dynamic creative community that has yet to be fully recognized or understood.

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