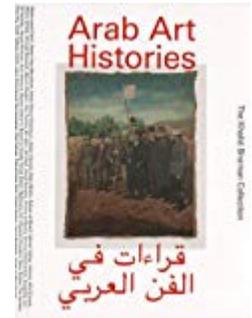


**Sarah A. Rogers, Eline Van Der Vlist, eds..** *Arab Art Histories: The Khalid Shoman Collection*. Amman: Khalid Shoman Foundation, 2014. 464 pp. \$45.50, paper, ISBN 978-90-821484-0-4.



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Darat al Funun, which translates into “a home for the arts” in Arabic, is a platform for visual art in the Arab world that Suha Shoman founded in 1988 in Amman, Jordan. Its multiple buildings, devoted to art studios, research spaces, and exhibition spaces, host a wide variety of arts programming. In spring 2015, for example, beyond a group show featuring artists such as Adam Henein and Etel Adnan, Hamdi Attia presented an installation documenting the results of a workshop with youth and teens, Emily Jacir selected a series of films to be shown, and cultural consultant Dr. Faisal Darraj invited a guest speaker to discuss the role of the intellectual. Darat al Funun is intrinsically intertwined with the Khalid Shoman Collection, a collection started by Khalid and Suha Shoman devoted to contemporary art in the Arab world. The collection is built along the patrons’ personal interests, and shows a particular devotion to Palestinian artists and artists that have been interested in Palestine, although it also attests to the breadth of contemporary creation across the Arab world. In 2002, Darat al Funun

was incorporated into the Khalid Shoman Foundation, a nonprofit established in memory of its patron. *Arab Art Histories* is devoted to the Khalid Shoman Collection and uses the collection as a jumping-off point to consider possible art histories that cross national lines, while also bringing together the personal recollections of the large community of artists, arts administrators and curators, and researchers who have worked at Darat al Funun, sometimes on extended residencies, and been inspired by the site.

I spent seven months at Darat al Funun as a recipient of its doctoral research fellowship in 2013, and I spent the time writing intensively. It is a rare opportunity to spend the necessary breaks looking at Mona Hatoum’s work, or stretching your legs by walking to a sculpture by Ismail Fatah. My time there pushed me to reimagine how my research on Moroccan modernism fit into the broader history of art in the Arab world as well as the politics of the region. It is this personal reckoning with the foundation’s impact upon one’s own life that the book *Arab Art Histories* encour-

ages. Comprising academic essays, a series of brief “reflections” written by artists and curators who have worked with Darat al Funun, and many reproductions of the works in the collection, at its best moments the book recreates the feeling of being there in Amman, within layers of art history of the Arab world (as interpreted through the eyes of the Shomans), experiencing new resonances and conversations.

As Kristen Scheid points out in her essay, the collection, given its breadth, allows us to consider broader trends of art production in the Arab world, to “transcend the conventional confines of studies of modern and contemporary Arab art, the majority of which have addressed art of one nation, one era, or one gender” (p. 195). This is the particular strength of the essays included in this book. Each one jumps across the typical boundaries from modern to contemporary and across national lines, weaving them together in new narratives and arguments, whether in Scheid’s article on how Arab bodies are created in art or Anneka Lenssen’s essay on different ideas of how audiences and publics are constituted, particularly in relation to the site of the café. Lenssen, for example, locates the works of contemporary artists such as Lara Baladi, Moataz Nasr, and Mona Hatoum in their respective social and political spaces with the same thoughtful precision that she brings to the work and context of modernist artists like Fateh al Moudarres and Ahmad Nawash. Beyond Sarah Rogers’s introduction to the book and to the collection, there are also articles by Saleem Al-Bahloly and Ulrich Loock and an essay on the work of Palestinian modernist painter Nicola Saig by Stephen Sheehi.

These art histories are book-ended by arguments on Arab modernism by Faisal Darraj, a philosopher and literary critic based in Amman who acts as a cultural consultant at Darat al Funun, and by Hassan Khan, a practicing artist based in Cairo. Both essays are rooted in deep criticism of the project of Arab modernism,

though from different angles, and the presence of the articles in this book suggests an urgency to these debates, to these ways of seeing art histories and understanding both how art objects have interacted with their own time and how we can see them today. Darraj gives a precise and critical history of political, social, and cultural modernity with help both from *Nahda* intellectuals and writers as well as from select pieces in the Khalid Shoman Collection. He locates Arab modernity in the mid-nineteenth century with the Arab *Nahda* as a movement of intellectuals in response to Western modernism, whether an anti-Ottoman embrace of the West or a rejection of the West with a turn to “Islamic roots.” For Darraj, because these dual movements were both in response to Western movements, the project of Arab modernity “was in crisis from the outset” (p. 81). Leveling particular accusations against the practices of Arab authorities, he asks, “Did Arab modernity defeat itself, or was it defeated due to a lack of the necessary social conditions for its development?” (p. 87). Khan’s essay is similarly polemical, though rooted in his own personal position as a practicing artist. He writes about his “visceral hostility” towards artworks associated with an Arab art history in which “the artist has been deeply implicated in the construction and maintenance of the status quo ... wherein the fictionalization of glorious pasts goes hand in hand with the abandonment of the possibility of occupying a critical position within the social order” (p. 417). He nonetheless finds an unexpected “enchantment” in engaging with particular modernist artworks within the collection, pulling the works out from most of the sociopolitical contexts that they are often read within to see the “idiosyncrasy” and “air of intrigue” that he can find in his personal interactions with them (pp. 418-419).

These essays, in other words, do not attempt to give an overarching history of Arab art. They instead follow hunches and ideas through the holdings of the collection to offer up a variety of rich and consciously partial art histories. Pulling

at threads as they lead from one artist to the next, the scholars in this volume present an elastic vision of the Khalid Shoman Collection, which, because it is wide-ranging but nonetheless built according to personal interests, allows us to approach the art history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with fresh eyes. These essays, which constitute the most significant contributions to current art historical scholarship within the book, are interspersed with thirty “reflections.” These are written by esteemed artists and curators, and the brief texts by people who are so well known and influential in the region’s cultural production suggest how significant Darat al Funun has been for so many people with ties to the region. These are love letters to the space and to Suha and Khalid Shoman (written in English, Arabic, and French). They are often quite personal, and all the more meaningful if a reader comes to this book with a prior knowledge of Arab art and its key figures. Along with images for each of the artists in the collection (organized chronologically by birth date), reading this book can be a dizzying yet exhilarating experience—at times, the academic essays are literally cut by forty pages of reflections and images. This kaleidoscopic structure, in which academic work is in direct dialogue with the artwork and the Darat al Funun community, feels like a recreation of the verve of the foundation in text. Darat al Funun has been a pioneering institution in the Arab world and this book is an important tribute to the work that it has done and continues to do.

*Erratum: This review has been amended to correct the year of Darat al Funun's founding, which was 1988, not 1993.*

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