H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lynn Gumpert, Suheyla Takesh. *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s-1980s.* New York: Grey Art Gallery, January 14–April 4, 2020. Exhibition

Suheyla Takesh, Lynn Gumpert, eds. *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s.* Munich: Hirmer Publishers, 2020. Illustrations. 256 pp. $45.49, cloth, ISBN 978-3-7774-3428-5.

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Since the waning multiculturalism of liberal establishments past was eclipsed by the "nativism" of a resurgent radical right in the United States, the task of resisting the siren call of insular xenophobia has fallen in part to curators who—luckily for those of us who affirm the value of cultural exchange over border walls and militarized police—have lately dedicated ample exhibition space to non-Western modernisms. Modern and contemporary art from the Arab world has only recently slipped past the gatekeepers of canonical art history and begun decking the hallowed halls of art institutions around the globe.[1] The Barjeel Art Foundation, which has long sought to foster this development, is becoming a household name across the Northeast.[2] By organizing exhibitions, lending works, and participating in numerous pedagogical initiatives, Barjeel has consistently demonstrated its ambition to unsettle the myopic and Eurocentric historiography of modern art.[3] The steadily growing interest of Western art institutions in coeval modernisms and Barjeel's evident drive to acquaint Western audiences with modernism from the Arab world have culminated, most recently, in ***Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s-1980s*** at New York University's Grey Art Gallery.

Taking Shape, curated by Suheyla Takesh and Lynn Gumpert, continues to challenge the Orientalist vision of the Middle East and North Africa as a discrete, homogenous region, as well as the antiquated idea that modern art is fundamentally Western. Composed of approximately ninety works by artists from the Arab world—including artists from Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—the exhibition importantly highlights the work of

Amazigh, Armenian, Circassian, Jewish, Persian, and Turkish artists from the region in a bid to counter the inaccurately homogenizing discursive force of such geographical designations.[4] Furthermore, although gender is not an organizing feature, the exhibition is replete with works by women artists, some well established in the art-historical record and others less known. By foregrounding the Arab world's reflexive mediation of various modes of abstraction emanating primarily from Europe, the exhibition succeeds in decentering New York as the proclaimed capital of mid-twentieth-century abstract art. The strong showing of Algerian, Emirati, Jordanian, Qatari, Moroccan, Sudanese, and Tunisian artists, moreover, serves to broaden the cultural geography of the postcolonial Arab world beyond Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad.

The period under consideration is not easily placed in a coherent historical narrative. Abstraction—here defined as "non-figurative," "non-representational," or "non-objective" art and associated with the struggle for freedom—is the thread the exhibition uses to bind the discordant histories of the Arab world from the 1950s through the 1980s.[5] Within this framework, although sculptures, drawings, and various types of prints are exhibited, preference is given over to painting as the medium *par excellence* of abstraction. While it is clearly informed by the twists and turns of decolonization, the exhibition is organized neither chronologically nor geographically. Rather it unfolds without any rigid overarching logic across two floors. Upon entering, one encounters above the reception desk an abstract painting of bedsheets by Lebanese-Armenian artist Seta Manoukian, whose conspicuous gray-hued brush strokes set the tone. Thereafter, visitors are shown constellations of artists whose abstractions share a general formal orientation—for example, toward the geometric—or particular formal conventions. For example, despite the distinct political and aesthetic concerns of 1950s Iraq and 1960s Sudan, the exhibition groups together three works of Hurufiyya—works of modern art that incorporate Arabic letterforms—by the Iraqi founder of Baghdad's Modern Art Group, Shakir Hassan Al Said, with the calligraphic abstractions of Sudanese Khartoum School founders Ibrahim El-Salahi and Ahmad Shibrain (see figure 1; https://tinyurl.com/y2kx332z). As one proceeds through the exhibition, a broader constellation of independent modernists and modernist schools that sought to develop new visual idioms with recourse to abstraction coalesces.

The dialectical interplay of modernity and tradition in works of abstraction from the Arab world, however, is a consistent refrain of the exhibition. As guests read the introductory wall text they are confronted by a 1968 work of oil on canvas by Syrian artist Asma Fayoumi, titled ***Ritha' Madina*** (***Requiem of a City***). The title clearly signals Fayoumi's inspiration by the Arabic poetic tradition of city elegy, typified by Abu Ya'qub al-Khuraymi's canonical ninth-century "Elegy for Baghdad." By placing the work at the beginning of the exhibition, the curators endow it with the aura of ***nasib***—the nostalgic prelude of Arabic odes in which the poet reminisces over the ruins of an abandoned encampment before setting off—whose affective echoes are audible in both the pre-Islamic elegiac poetic tradition and the later city elegy.[6] Fayoumi's rendering of the city elegy in an abstract visual language cues visitors into the profound ways artists from the Arab world drew on the region's own rich cultural heritage to localize international modes of abstraction. Moroccan artist Farid Belkahia's embrace of vellum and pigments like saffron in his 1983 work, ***Aube***, similarly speaks to many of the exhibited modernists' active engagement with traditional craft mediums and the popular arts. According to catalogue contributions by Iftikhar Dadi and Anneke Lenssen, these modes of cultural production were pejoratively deemed "artisanal" throughout the colonial era.

On the first floor, works are nestled into three alcoves surrounding a central area dedicated, in large part, to the display of Hurufiyya. The mid-century Hurufiyya movement and its afterlives are the exhibition's center of gravity, the centripetal force that anchors the show's exploration of abstraction's multiple histories in an art practice that emerged from the Arab world. An untitled 1978 watercolor, which abstracts numerous Arabic letters into a whirlpool of curling lines, by Madiha Umar, the Syrian-Iraqi pioneer of Hurufiyya, is the exhibition's first example. Next, Egyptian artist Omar El-Nagdi's rhythmic meditation on the letter ***Alif*** is placed side by side with works by Al Said, El-Salahi, and Shibrain mentioned above. Sprawling out between the first two alcoves are silkscreens by the late Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata, which abstract lines of scripture and other Arabic texts into geometric grid-like mosaics. On the way to the third alcove, one finds a script-reminiscent but illegible net of brushstrokes by Jordanian-Iraqi artist Wijdan grouped with works by Lebanese artist Yvette Achkar, Egyptian artist Hamed Abdalla, and two Algerian artists—Mohammed Khadda and Rachid Koraïchi. While both Abdalla's inverse figuration of the word "***al-tamazzuq***" (rupture) and Koraïchi's interspersal of Chinese and Arabic calligraphy retain some fidelity to the letter, Achkar and Khadda depict bold but illegible symbols hovering over warm terrain-like backgrounds (see figure 2; https://tinyurl.com/y36m5kyn). Finally, opposite the work of the Casablanca School in the third alcove are thirty round etchings by Lebanese artist Hussein Madi, each of which contains a hypnotic pattern of abstracted letterforms. Not all of these can be considered Hurufiyya in a strict sense, but—as Nada Shabout explains in her catalogue contribution on the subject—the movement opened up a space for artists to experiment from near or far with the plasticity of scripts. Salah M. Hassan's catalogue essay on the place of calligraphic abstraction in Sudanese modernism, Hannah Feldman's discussion of Khadda's "sign" paintings in revolutionary Algeria, and Anneka Lenssen's study of both Iraqi artist Jamil Hamoudi and the College of Fine Arts in Damascus speak to the numerous transformations the tradition underwent as it traveled across the Arab world.

In the first alcove, landscape works by Egyptian Art and Liberty group founder Ramses Younan and Jordanian artist Hind Nasser frame the impressionistic paintings of Algerian artist Abdallah Benanteur—one explicitly titled ***To Monet, Giverny***. On the opposite walls, a brooding, dark-hued "mindscape" by Palestinian artist Malihe Afnan hangs beside a still life by Léger-trained Lebanese artist Shafic Abboud and a portrait of a dejected city-dweller overlaid with enigmatic seashell-like spirals by the Egyptian Contemporary Art Group's Samir Rafi. Interestingly, neither Art and Liberty nor the Contemporary Art Group championed abstraction as such. It could very well be argued, furthermore, that juxtaposing Younan and Rafi under the umbrella of abstraction renders invisible the divergence of their aesthetic trajectories long before the exhibited works were created. Although Rafi was associated with Art and Liberty for a time, members of the Contemporary Art Group distinguished themselves from 1946 on by engaging the folkloric aspects of everyday life in their artistic production. The wall text, which suggests that Rafi may have turned to abstraction in this 1959 work to avoid persecution by the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser, demonstrates that abstraction was rarely an end in itself for such artists.[7] A color-field painting by American-born, Lebanese artist Helen Khal signals the exhibition's transition away from the relatively nebulous modes of abstraction described above toward the hard-lined and geometric.

The second alcove fans out around an amoeba-like wooden sculpture, titled ***Interform***, by the Lebanese pioneer of abstraction, Saloua Raouda Choucair. On the surrounding walls, the irregular geometric shapes of Choucair's ***Composition in Yellow*** give way to the facade-like, minim-

alist paintings of Kuwaiti artist Jafar Islah. As one moves along, a quasi-suprematist study in depth by Moroccan artist of the Casablanca School, Miloud Labied, is juxtaposed with the bright-colored, Albers-inspired canvases of Lebanese artist Saliba Douaihy—the main subject of Kaelen Wilson-Goldie's catalogue contribution. Two oil works of oversized mosaics by Palestinian artist Samia Halaby are paired nearby with a split-canvas inverted basket image painting by Iranian-born, Emirati artist Hassan Sharif. A chaotic, neon-striped canvas by Lebanese artist Nabil Nahas and a grid-like constellation, titled *Space Exploration/Universe*, by Egyptian artist Menhat Helmy usher guests back into the central exhibition space. Upon returning, one is reminded of the palpable influence of architecture on abstraction in the Arab world by Egyptian artist Adam Henein's *The First Blush of Morning*—a 1986 work of gouache and gum arabic on papyrus, which incorporates elements from pharaonic monuments.

The third alcove is dedicated to the work of the 1960s Casablanca School and its contemporaries in Morocco. The school's cofounders, Mohamed Chebaa, Mohamed Melehi, and Farid Belkahia, are well-represented here. The geometric theme of the preceding alcove is reprised in an enormous wooden bas-relief and a boldly colored 1974 work of acrylic on wood by Chebaa, which seamlessly interweave the patterns of Moroccan textiles with architectural leitmotifs of international abstraction. Intervening between Chebaa's pieces are two similar curvilinear works of paint on wood by Melehi, whose undulating forms drew inspiration from the distinct geography of his coastal hometown. On the opposite wall, Belkahia and other members of the Casablanca School are juxtaposed with works by Jilal Gharbaoui and Ahmed Cherkaoui. While Mohamed Hamidi's abstract genitalia and Malika Agueznay's seaweed-like relief—*L'algue bleue*—resonate strongly with Chebaa's and Melehi's work, Gharbaoui and Cherkaoui embraced indigenous Amazigh letterforms and cultural symbols, such as tattoos, to produce distinctly talismanic works. Although the interpolation of abstract human forms emphatically sets his work apart, the multicolored concentric circles of the rising sun in Belkahia's 1983 work, discussed above, are indicative of his association with Chebaa and Melehi.

Unlike the relatively distinct thematic spaces of the first floor, the works on the second floor seem to problematize the very organizational frames deployed by the curators at the start of the exhibition. Visitors are welcomed into the space with a landscape by Lebanese artist and poet Etel Adnan, whose irregular rectangular forms call out to similar works on the opposite wall by Egyptian Jewish artist Ezekial Baroukh and the Lebanese artist Aref El Rayess. The earth-colored archways and jagged rooftops of Tunisian artist Nejib Belkhodja's *Abstraction no. 45* are contrasted with *Transparency*, a work of skewed blue, yellow, and white rectangles by Jordanian artist of Turkish-Lebanese descent Mohanna Durra. A similarly warped array of buildings by the late Lebanese artist Huguette Caland, titled *City II*, propels visitors around the bend. In the main hallway, urban landscapes by Iraqi artist Rafa Nasiri are placed in conversation with a minimalist desert scene by Moroccan artist Fouad Bellamine and another much softer work by Saliba Douaihy. Aerial cityscapes by Iraqi artist Saadi al-Kaabi and Emirati artist Najat Makki also echo one another across the hall. Yet another landscape by Kuwaiti artist Ibrahim Ismail breaks with the hallway's somber color palette by rendering his memory of a 1960 earthquake in Agadir in vibrant shards of color. The human forms emerging discreetly, as if unearthed by an archaeological excavation, from Iraqi artist Dia al-Azzawi's 1976 work of oil on canvas resonate with vaguely figurative works on the opposite wall, including a monotype print of human figures by Indian-born Saudi-Kuwaiti artist Munira al-Kazi, a portrait of "dream walkers" by Sudanese artist Hussein Shariffe, and a mechanical donkey by Qatari artist Jassim Zaini.

In the final alcove of the exhibition space, an additional black-and-white paint-drip work by Nahas and a hazy gray dreamscape by Palestinian artist Juliana Seraphim contrast with two bright works of colliding diagonal lines by Hussein Madi and Palestinian artist Ufemia Rizk. The sharp lines of the latter two works suddenly give way to the sensuous abstract human forms of Lebanese artists Afaf Zurayk and Caland. Syrian artist Simone Fattal follows closely on their heels with her cloud-like pastel-colored 1973 work of oil on canvas, titled *Celestial Forms*. The stark contrast between these last three works' soft mode of abstraction and the modes of abstraction pursued by other women artists on display—even by Caland in her other exhibited work—is a testament to the diversity of women's thematic and formal concerns, deftly described by Salwa Mikdadi in her catalogue contribution. The exhibition ends on an interesting note with a small 1958 work, titled *The Light from within the Green*, by another member of the Egyptian Contemporary Art Group, Abdel Hady el-Gazzar—who embraced a more figurative and even realist style in his best-known works.[8] This work and many others' albeit subdued practice of figuration raises questions about the "move away from figuration" alluded to in the exhibition's introductory text. In his catalogue contribution, Dadi argues instead that the move toward abstraction was a reaction on the part of some artists to the imbrication of realism—not figuration per se—with colonial, Orientalist knowledge production.

How do we study abstraction across different contexts, and what modes of analysis do we use? According to the introductory wall text, these are the central questions raised by the exhibition. Perhaps intentionally, no preliminary answers are provided. Although the exhibition identifies the struggle for self-determination as central to the appeal of "non-figurative" and non-representational art, its presentation of the Arab world's admittedly heterogenous schools of abstraction does not encourage any sustained comparative historical investigation of the aesthetics of decolonization. The exhibition does well to foreground the work of artists who deployed indigenous folk symbols and scripts to decolonize abstraction, and it is most successful when organized around a concrete network of artists—like those of the Casablanca School. However, despite detailed wall texts situating each artist in their local context, the particular historical struggles of the exhibited artists are often obscured by their juxtaposition under the broad banner of abstraction. Due to the sheer immensity of abstraction as both an art practice and an art-historical category, moreover, there is understandably no room in the exhibition for the many artists who saw modern abstraction not as freedom from traditional or colonial modes of seeing but as a form of flight from the promising reality of national liberation. Given that many of these works were produced at the height of the cultural Cold War, the exhibition misses an opportunity to account for how artists in the Arab world resisted the active recoding of abstraction by imperial powers as a universal index of intellectual modernity and freedom—the social realist works of Hamed Ewais, recently exhibited by Barjeel elsewhere, are just one example.[9]

In addition to containing stunning reproductions of the works on display, the exhibition catalogue does an excellent job filling in some of these historical and thematic gaps.[10] A foreword by Gumpert, an introduction by Takesh, and essays by Dadi, Feldman, Hassan, Lenssen, Mikdadi, Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi, Shabout, and Wilson-Goldie unpack the multiple histories of abstraction elaborated, interrupted, and interrogated by the exhibited artists. Alongside a handful of trenchant works of historiographical revision, which dwell on the incongruity of Western art-historical discourse with the modes of abstraction on display, the catalogue includes several essays devoted to abstract art practice in Kuwait, Sudan, and Algeria. The extensive program of events planned by Barjeel and New York University around the exhibition—including walkthroughs, lectures, film

screenings, and even a symposium on Arab abstraction—promised to further clarify the historical stakes of abstraction in the Arab world. Although many of the events were canceled due to the growing threat of the novel coronavirus in New York, the organizers were able to swiftly migrate much of their exhibition content and programming online. In addition to sharing a video walkthrough of the exhibition and all its wall texts on the gallery's website, a companion symposium, "Taking Shape: New Perspectives on Arab Abstraction," was restaged as a three-part Zoom webinar.[11] As a whole *Taking Shape* is an invaluable, in-depth, and nuanced introduction to abstraction from the Arab world, one that we should all hope to see reworked and extended in the near future.

Notes

[1]. Barjeel, established in 2009, led the charge of bringing modern art from the Arab world to new audiences with its four-part exhibition ***Imperfect Chronology: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary*** at the Whitechapel Gallery in London from 2015 to 2017. Two 2016 exhibitions of the Egyptian Art and Liberty group's surrealistic work were yet another driving force of this most recent swell in interest. While the Sharjah Art Foundation's ***When Art Becomes Liberty: The Egyptian Surrealists (1938-1948)*** celebrated the work of Art and Liberty in Cairo and Seoul, ***Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938–1948)*** toured Europe from Paris to Stockholm through Madrid, Düsseldorf, and Liverpool. Soon after in 2018 the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) published ***Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents***, an enormous tome of manifestos and critical texts in translation that traces the evolution of aesthetic discourse across the Arab world from the nineteenth century to the present (Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, eds., ***Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*** [New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018]). MoMA PS1's 2019-20 exhibition, ***Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011***, is a similarly massive compilation of artists' responses to decades of US intervention in the Persian Gulf and Iraq, which—contrary to the periodization of the exhibition—continues until today.

[2]. In the United States, Barjeel has organized modest exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from the Arab world—including the 2017 exhibitions ***Modern Art from the Middle East*** at the Yale University Art Gallery and ***No to the Invasion: Breakdowns and Side Effects*** at Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies—and lent works to larger exhibitions, like ***Theater of Operations***.

[3]. In addition to Barjeel's exhibition work, its founder Sultan Sooud al-Qassem recently accepted a teaching position at Georgetown's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies after completing a Greenberg World Fellowship at Yale University and leading a workshop on Middle Eastern art as practitioner in residence at New York University's Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies.

[4]. There are, however, conspicuous absences: not a single work from Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen, Bahrain, or Libya is exhibited.

[5]. The historical period under consideration is a particularly fraught one that saw the anti-imperial, pan-Arab, and socialist aspirations of decolonizing states like Egypt give way to accommodation with the United States. While the republics of Syria, Iraq, and Egypt pursued non-alignment following independence and increasingly gravitated toward the Soviet bloc, the Moroccan crown, Lebanon's sectarian government, and Jordan's Hashemite monarchy enjoyed cozy relations with the West. Unlike Morocco, Lebanon, and Tunisia, which more or less peacefully achieved independence from France and Spain, Algeria was the site of a protracted war for national liberation. The path to independence for Sudan was paved in the mid-1950s when Egypt and Britain abandoned their long-standing imperial competition over Sudanese territory. Kuwait emerged from British protection in the early 1960s with booming oil fields that attracted migrant labor from across the

Arab world. It was without a doubt the age of Third-World liberation and decolonization. Qatar and the UAE, however, developed their oil industries as British protectorates until as late as the 1970s. The same period also witnessed a number of setbacks, including the consolidation of Israel's settler-colonial regime on Palestinian land, the onset of civil war in Lebanon, and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980.

[6]. For more on the transformation of the Arabic poetic tradition with special attention to the elegy and city elegy, see Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, ***The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual*** (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); and Ibrahim Musa al-Sinjilawi, ***The 'Atlal-Nasib in Early Arabic Poetry: A Study of the Development of the Elegiac Genre in Classical Arabic Poetry***, ed. Nasser al-Hasan 'Athamneh (Irbid: Yarmouk University Publication, 1999). For a discussion of poetic nostalgia and the nasib, see Jaroslav Stetkevych, ***The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasib*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

[7]. The Contemporary Art Group's 1946 manifesto declares that an artist's work "will remain stagnant and far removed from the spirit of the era so long as he confines himself to formalist values or abstract aesthetic conditions closed unto themselves." For English versions of the group's manifestos, see Sarah Dorman's translations in Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, eds., ***Modern Art in the Arab World***, 113-16. For a history of Art and Liberty and the Contemporary Art Group, see Sam Bardaouil, ***Surrealism in Egypt: Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group*** (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2017).

[8]. For more on Abdel Hady el-Gazzar, see Alain and Christine Roussillon, eds., ***Abdel Hadi al-Gazzar: Une Peinture Égyptienne***, (Cairo: Dar al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi, 1990).

[9]. For more examples of such artists in the context of Egypt, see Patrick Kane, ***The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt: Aesthetics, Ideology and Nation-building*** (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013). For the canonical account of the cultural Cold War, see Frances Stonor Saunders, ***The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Art and Letters*** (New York: The New Press, 1999). See also Greg Barnhisel, ***Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy*** (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

[10]. The exhibition catalogue is available for fifty dollars at https://tinyurl.com/y6h8yok4.

[11]. For the full schedule of events, go to https://tinyurl.com/y2hvadat. For content related to the exhibition, including recordings of the Zoom webinars, go to https://tinyurl.com/y27z89x4. For more images from the exhibition, go to https://tinyurl.com/yyf9mz5a.

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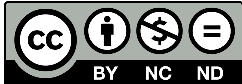

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