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Breaking a New Path for Modern Arab Art

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PHOTO GALLERY
Breaking a New Path for Modern Arab Art

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Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Qatar

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Another view of the museum's inaugural exhibition

The opening of the Arab Museum of Modern Art also coincided with the inauguration of a new warehouse-like exhibition space located on the waterside grounds of Qatar's Museum of Islamic Art, which opened two years ago on Doha's harbor in a building designed by I.M. Pei. Filling that space are two temporary shows, one presenting an in-depth look at the careers of five key Arab modernists — Dia Azzawi, Farid Belkahlia, Ahmed Nawar, Ibrahim El Salahi, and Hassan Sharif — while the other provides a survey of the work of 23 contemporary artists with roots in the Arab world.

The contemporary exhibition, "Told/Untold/Retold" is easily the most exciting and engaging of the opening exhibitions. Organized by the independent curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, it is like a miniature biennale, with each of the works commissioned expressly for the show. Not only is the artwork consistently good, but it is all cleanly and elegantly installed, with every work getting its own purpose-built display. Not a single piece feels cramped or out of place.

The show is styled as a "collection of stories" — some told, some retold, and some untold. You can approach it from this angle or simply ignore the themes and enjoy the individual pieces, several of them masterpieces. Works by Hassan Khan, Kader Attia, Walid Raad, Amal Kenawy, and Youssef Nabil are among the most successful, emphasizing an Arab identity but occupying a thoroughly international context at the same time. A video by Khan that documents an underground music subculture in Cairo is especially memorable.

There was some talk at the opening that all of the works in the exhibition would be acquired for the contemporary art collection at Mathaf. Nobody from the museum would confirm this, but it seems to me an excellent idea that would instantly give the institution an ambitious and wide-ranging collection of contemporary art from the Arab world to complement its unprecedented modern art holdings. More importantly, and radically, such support for living artists would also help to advance creativity in the Arab world.

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