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New Museums

The world's first Arab Museum of Modern Art and Qatar's plans for its cultural future

Speculation about the museum boom in the Middle East has been dominated by the projects' staggering scale. This rapidly evolving tale of ambition is narrated with names and numbers: Frank Gehry has designed a fifth Guggenheim (the largest to date) and Jean Nouvel is tackling the Louvre (exclusive use of the French museum's name in the region was won for a reported US\$1.3 billion). These are just two of the six new museums – each designed by a Pritzker Prize-winning architect – on the US\$27 billion dollar Saadiyat Island development in Abu Dhabi, which is due to open next year; further up the Gulf, at the heart of Dubai's Culture Village, a Zaha Hadid-designed opera house and gallery complex is currently under construction. Until recently the audacity of these projects diverted attention from the more long-term question of the collections (and audiences) that will fill them. But the inauguration of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar, at the end of December has pushed issues of collecting to the fore. The new institution's three inaugural exhibitions of modern and contemporary art – which together comprise almost 150 artists – testify to the challenges of writing of art history outside the West, providing one of the most significant opportunities to think about non-Western art in the museum since 'Magiciens de la Terre', Jean-Hubert Martin's 1989 survey at the Centre Pompidou.

As a public museum based around a private collection, Mathaf (Arabic for 'museum') is a rare thing in the Arab world, where most modern art collections are privately owned but kept behind closed doors. In place of a starchitect design, the institution temporarily occupies a former school, a 5,500 square-metre building that has been subtly renovated by French architect Jean-François Bodin. Mathaf is situated west of downtown Doha, in the low-key Education City, home to several Qatar branches of US university campuses; the 15-minute drive out there takes you past a smattering of skyscrapers – bulbous, mirrored or zigzagging – and a camel-racing stadium. The collection is that of Mathaf's founder, Sheikh Hassan, a member of the ruling Al-Thani family

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which has been in power since the early 19th century, and consists of some 6,000 art works spanning 1840 to the present (making it the most extensive collection of modern Arab art in world). Aside from the obligatory café and shop, the site comprises two floors of exhibition space, a library and education department; its screen-wrapped white façade is reminiscent of scaffolding, as though to emphasize that this is an institution-in-progress. This is an important concession in an area that has few art schools or well-established studios, museums and commercial galleries, and suggests a more considered path than that which is currently being taken by the emirates of Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

Mathaf is one of four new museums in Doha overseen by the state-run Qatar Museums Authority. The first was I.M. Pei's stunning Museum of Islamic Art, an impeccably installed building that opened in 2008 and sits on a manmade island 60 metres off the Corniche. Nearby, and due to open in 2013, is a Nouvel-designed National Museum, a series of low-lying, interlocking pavilions that mimic a desert rose. An Orientalist Museum is also on the horizon (part of its unparalleled collection is currently on view at the Museum of Islamic Art, and in the travelling exhibition 'From Delacroix to Kandinsky: Orientalism in Europe'). This cluster of new exhibition spaces both institutionalizes and problematizes the art-historical roles traditionally assigned to art of the Middle East.

Why, then, are Mathaf's cosmopolitan ambitions constricted under its designation as the 'Arab' Museum of Modern Art (rather than the Doha MoMA, for example)? Though acting director Wassan al-Khudairi notes that the institution aims to provide an Arab perspective on modernity (rather than a collection and exhibition programme limited to Arab art), its name quietly asserts a language- and ethnicity-based viewpoint that clearly excludes Turkish and Iranian artists (who are all but absent from the three vast survey shows). The subtitle of 'Sajjil' (To Record), one of the three opening shows, is 'A Century of Modern Art', but – with more than half of the selected artists coming from Egypt and Iraq, and only a handful from the Gulf – the story seems far from complete. Spread across Mathaf's 12 double-height galleries, the sweeping survey rarely includes more than a single work by a selected artist, and is ordered into ten thematic categories (nature, abstraction, calligraphy, and so on). In this the exhibition conforms to the tried and tested stereotypes of exhibiting art from the region, as seen in both the New York MoMA's much-criticized 'Without Boundary' (2006) and, since opening in 2005, the Istanbul Modern Art Museum's installation of its permanent collection. This is

undoubtedly an important early step to writing a largely unwritten history, but Mathaf's approach seems also to testify to a certain unwillingness to take a second stride. While it purposefully sets out not to write a national art history, its allegedly looser boundaries nevertheless often turn out to be more restrictive than they first appear.

The counterpoint to this thematic survey of 20th-century works is the first ever large-scale presentation of contemporary art in Qatar. Co-curated by curatorial consultants Sam Bardouil and Till Fellrath, 'Told / Untold / Retold' comprises 23 specially commissioned works by some of the more widely-exhibited artists affiliated with the region – Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, Lamia Joreige, Mounir Fatmi and Kader Attia. Installed in a fluid, three-part labyrinth in a temporary exhibition hall (built for a forthcoming Takeshi Murakami show) in the grounds of the Museum of Islamic Art, the show explores story-telling in different tenses while insisting on an idea of 'transmodern reality' (think Nicolas Bourriaud's 'Altermodern' theory). Some works push beyond the dominant aesthetics of large-scale glitz and the oppressively symbolic, in particular the paintings by Jeffar Khaldi and a new installment of Khalil Rabah's ongoing 'United States of Palestine' project. Still, at the opening the organizers were frustratingly vague about what will become of these commissions – none seem to belong to the Mathaf collection yet, nor is there any guarantee of this happening. In the same exhibition hall, 'Interventions' is curated by art historian Nada Shabout and features five solo presentations of old and newly commissioned work by senior artists already included in Mathaf's permanent collection. The central argument here, as in an accompanying two-day academic conference, is against a reductive account of Middle Eastern art as merely derivative of the Western Modernist project.

But the largest challenge cited in the conference and three inaugural exhibitions is what is yet to be done. With little awareness of 20th-century art and limited local audiences, lack is routinely cited as a condition of production in the region. Whether, and how, the perception of this absence continues is pressing for both Mathaf and the other soon-to-be-completed institutions in the Gulf. As architecture critic Shumon Basar has noted, the oil-rich Gulf states often fail the Western critic's litmus test of what passes for a 'good city', in that Enlightenment values or forums, political representation and cultural institutions do not appear in their familiar guises or, sometimes, at all. That many commentators in the West continue to display some resistance to the Gulf's museum boom points to a current refusal to differentiate between the aspirations of these new institutions and those of the resorts that are being developed

in tandem with them. At one Mathaf-hosted panel discussion, one of the curators of 'Told...' recited a touching anecdote about his epiphany, three days before the opening, that the exhibition might also appeal to the workers currently building the gallery walls around him. While this should be judiciously weighed against the general thoughtfulness of Mathaf's overall project, the comment did point toward the next set of questions. How serious Doha's intentions are to develop broader understanding and local audiences, or to continue to loosen the Mathaf collection's own boundaries, remains to be seen.

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