

Rapping and wrapping in modern Arab art

By Jay Merrick

Wednesday, 29 December 2010

In a now legendary 1980 BBC radio broadcast about modern art, the cultural historian Robert Hughes coined a brilliant phrase – “the shock of the new” – to describe the artforms that began to erupt from Europe and Russia at the end of the 19th century.

That shock-wave, in the form of the newly completed Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, has finally surfaced in Doha, capital of the petrodollar rich emirate, Qatar. Nobody knows how Qataris, and others from the Islamic world, will react to the 250 artworks on show – not even Sheikh Hassan Al-Thani, from whose previously private hoard of 6,000 modern paintings and sculptures these works have been drawn.

The new Euro 8m museum inhabits the shell of an otherwise unremarkable ex-secondary school in Doha’s vast Education City remodelled by the French architect Jean-Francois Bodin. His approach to Mathaf has been so assiduously low-key that we can call this anti-iconic architecture, complete with fabric-wrapped designer scaffolding jutting from the main facade. Conceptually, the building is a work in progress, a kind of pop-up architecture.

The building, and the artworks it contains, are a radical experiment in cultural engineering in a region where there is no significant tradition of modern art. The very idea of creating art that specifically ruptures historically established perceptions and Islamic iconography is literally foreign to most Arabs – most, but certainly not all. There is, perhaps surprisingly, an active contemporary arts scene in Dubai; but it is Mathaf that may effectively begin to imprint the range and ambition of Arab modern and contemporary art on the minds of western art-lovers and academics.

The museum will also serve as a credible reference-point for art investors and traders who already operate in this part of the world. Sotheby’s, for example, last week sold \$5.6m worth of contemporary Arab calligraphic art at an auction in the egregiously grand Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Doha; the take was more than expected by Sotheby’s charming and articulate Middle East director, Edward Gibbs. The Sotheby’s, Gagosians and Joplings of the art world will wait to see if Mathaf can create a perception of Arab modern art as an emerging market force which might ultimately compete with, say, the often brilliantly provocative – and increasingly profitable – effusions of 21st century Chinese art.

But in a country whose hyper-revenues will be further boosted by the production of a record 77m tonnes of natural gas in 2011-12 – that’s the equivalent of 8m barrels of oil a day – the most important issue is whether



© MATHAF: ARAB MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

*Dia Azzawi - Red Sky with Birds, 1981
Oil on canvas, 120 x 200.2 cm*

Mathaf can stream new and culturally unexpected ideas into the world-views of younger Arabs. This cohort would certainly have been familiar with the sleekly hip rappers The Narcycyst and Omar Offendum, whose sets pulsed and alliterated through the dust-veiled night air outside Mathaf even as the Emir of Qatar took a closer look at what Sheikh Hassan had concocted, with the support of the Qatar Museums Authority and the Emir's culturally adventurous daughter, Sheikha Al Mayassa.

The old school building has been very simply rearranged by Jean-Francois Bodin: its original central playground and two flanking courtyards were converted into atria, providing a big reception space with shop and cafe segments, and double-height galleries capable of taking large-scale artworks and sculptures. The rest of the galleries form a narrative of different volumes of space, some compressed, others more relaxed in atmosphere. It's rather maze-like, a starkly different experience to the sterile white cubes for art finessed like perfect dental implants into the urban gums of so many cities.

There is not the faintest whiff of bling to Mathaf. It's the uniquely low-key flipside to other massive art projects in the Gulf states, most notably the Louvre Abu Dhabi, designed by Jean Nouvel and due for completion in 2012. Having been chosen to host the 2022 World Cup, Qatar now has the ultimate bragging rights in the region in terms of international profile, and an eventual audience of billions. Mathaf is not part of this national brand strategy, and represents something else entirely: a hugely ambitious education programme financed by the Emir, whose scale and scope – everything from state-of-the-art medical schools to imported branches of British public schools – is remarkable in a country whose population is currently only 1.5 million.

The big idea is that increasingly well-educated and culturally inquisitive Qataris will be increasingly likely to value cross-cultural internationalism as part of the ethos of umma, the word that glorifies the community of Islam. Thus, Mathaf was conceived as a place where, as Sheikh Hassan puts it, "ideas cut across chronology, and [artistic] discontinuity and rupture are part of the story".

But is Arab modern art any good? Why did Arab artists – most of whom were part of a diaspora in Europe – pursue modern art? What can their imagery and forms contribute to the canon of art as a whole in the 21st century? Despite the engrossing mixture of work in Mathaf's opening show, Sajjil (the word means "act of recording") it will be hard for many western cultural tourists, sated by successive and increasingly ironic shocks of the whatever, to get a sense of artistic traction.

But, then, this art was primed by creative forces that had little to do with the advent of European and American industrialisation, or objections to historic decadence. It arose, to a significant extent, from reactions to colonial domination, unwanted territorial changes, and the way western artists had already framed the "exotic" orient in the 19th century with appalling condescensions such as John Frederick Lewis's lurid 1858 painting, *The Kibab Shop*.

The brusquely combative curator of Mathaf's opening exhibition, Nada Shabout, says Arab modern art should not be seen solely as a submission to the imperialism of European modernism and its "superior originals", but as an expression of renewed Arabic creative energy that values historical resonances. And there is no doubting the formal and emotional power of works by artists including Ramsis Younan, Gazbia Sirry, Farid Belkahlia, Ibrahim el-Salahi.

But if Mathaf is to succeed, it will have to do so in a Qatari, and regional, here and now in which, as the museum's director Wassan al-Khudhari told me, there's currently no place for younger artists to work freely and experimentally: "We're trying to create a place for art so that people can be proud of making art. It's about finding a value in art, and it's going to take time. Younger people are encouraged to do art, but it's still seen as a hobby. We're not sure what the reaction to Mathaf will be. Our target audience is young people because they ask more questions – they engage. Their reaction may be positive, or negative. But even

negative is a reaction. The only real problem would be no reaction.”

Mathaf may succeed more quickly if it mounts the kind of starkly contrasting pair of exhibitions that opened in a big box of a building near I.M. Pei’s magnificent Museum of Islamic Art at the same time as Mathaf’s show was being previewed. Here, one encountered riveting tensions in artworks such as Khalil Rabah’s 2010 fiercely political *The United States of Palestine Islands*, featuring a big image of an American aircraft carrier planted with crops grown in the Gaza strip; and Walid Raad’s surreal tableaux in which one views a war-damaged wall through the frame of a perfectly executed facade. The works of established masters of Arab modern art were virtually alongside them: this was where the most telling and fertile artistic discontinuities and ruptures spoken of by Sheikh Hassan were to be experienced.

That important sense of rupture and confrontation was also evident at the Ritz-Carlton, where some of the calligraphic art auctioned by Sotheby’s generated an equivalent sense of fractious radicalism. Works such as Afshin Pirahashemi’s untitled diptych, and Hassan Meer’s desolately poetic image, *House II*, are clearly rooted in contemporary Arab tensions, yet their emotional power are surely universally recognisable – and vastly more meaningful than Cesar Gemayel’s beautifully executed 1923 painting at the Mathaf show, *Tendre Epanchments*, which portrayed a face stunningly like the young Margaret Thatcher’s, in the style of Rossetti. Alas, Gemayel’s model has a faraway gaze on her face that would not have looked out of place in that repugnant *Kibab Shop* painted by John Frederick Lewis 65 years earlier.

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