



••• NAVIGATE

By Sara Elkamel. April 1, 2018.

Categories: Culture

## That feverish leap into Arab modernism



Courtesy: Art Dubai. Photo by Photo Solutions

Thousands of art patrons, collectors, artists and global citizens poured into the lavish Madinat Jumeirah Resort in late March, eager to consume this year's edition of Art Dubai. The three massive halls, which were showcasing contemporary artwork from 78 galleries worldwide, were by far the busiest part of the international fair. The lights were bright and the crowds colorful and animated. Across the resort, smaller crowds trickled into Art Dubai Modern, a section dedicated to exhibiting work by 20th century masters from the Middle East, South Asia and Africa. The walls were painted a rich grey, and a few of the galleries handed out thick catalogs to prospective collectors. As visitors moved into "That Feverish Leap into the Fierceness of Life," a non-selling exhibition annexed to the modern section, the space started to

feel less and less like an art fair and more like a miniature museum.

In museums the world over, modernism is typically represented by Western masters. Even in the Abu Dhabi Louvre, which opened in November 2017 amid [controversy](#) and anticipation, and includes 12 galleries which its Scientific, Curatorial and Collections Management Director Souraya Noujaim says set out to “tell the story of humanity,” the modern collection contains the usual suspects: Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, Rufino Tamayo and so on. And that’s not just a Louvre thing; in top museums the world over, modernism is generally represented by western masters. This is what made “That Feverish Leap Into the Fierceness of Life” so satisfying: it offered five different representations of modernist art; all of them Arab.

In the exhibition, supported by the Saudi-based [Misk Art Institute](#) and curated by the eminent duo Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, 75 artworks were laid out across five interconnected rooms; with no specific route to be followed and no premeditated sequence. Visible throughout the collection was unquestionable formal and stylistic diversity, both within and across the five featured groups.

Presenting paintings coming out of modernist groups in Baghdad, Riyadh, Casablanca, Khartoum and Cairo, the show emerges as a makeshift museum of “other” modernisms, in effect disturbing the overriding Western-centric narrative of the movement. This exhibition, Bardaouil tells me, resolved to “refute the notion of a monolithic expression of modernity.”

In a small, 1948 ink on paper drawing by seminal Egyptian artist Abdel Hadi Al Gazzar, beastly figures fuse together, creating a multi-faced monster that is at once unsettling and charming. A stone’s throw away were Moroccan artist Mohamed Melehi’s vibrant formalist paintings, rendering abstract waves in bright, flat colours that emit a certain exuberance. By allowing these works to co-exist in both space and time, the show did not intend to put forward a homogenous Arab modernism, but rather invited us to observe the various ways in which modernity manifested in the

Arab world.

“The idea for this exhibition is to say that there is not one Arab modernism, similar to that there is not one European modernism, or one American modernism,” says Bardaouil. By bringing these works together, Bardaouil and Fellrath curated a show that feverishly asserted: Modernity happened in more than one place at the same time, and in very different ways.

“If we were to talk about one commonality [among these five modernist groups], we would be back to the title of the show,” Bardaouil says. “Art was not a hobby or a side-thing. It was really a matter of dynamic, passionate embrace of art as a vehicle for change.” The title comes from the 1951 manifesto of the Baghdad Modern Art Group, in which a group of Iraqi artists asserted: “If we fail to fulfil ourselves through art, as through all other realms of thought, we won’t be able to make that feverish leap into the fierceness of life.”

Members of the five groups showcased here were evidently trying to search for ways to “fulfil” themselves through exploring new artistic languages—in both practice and discourse—amid changing sociopolitical contexts. Artmaking, Bardaouil says, became a tool for reflecting on the key issues of the time, “whether it was postcolonial realities, the role of tradition versus modernity or the dialogue between the international and the local.” For almost all the featured groups, this process involved drawing heavily on the local vernacular, including the natural environment, cultural and Islamic motifs and everyday life.

The curators admit that the selection in the exhibition is non-comprehensive. To adequately represent modernist movements in the Arab world, they say they would need “three floors in a museum, a humongous budget and endless time.” I would be really interested to see what Bardaouil and Fellrath would do if given all of the above, but for now, I introduce the five works I found most moving in “That Feverish Leap into the Fierceness of Life.”

## Riyadh



Courtesy: Courtesy of the Mohammed Alsaleem collection

One of the most striking pieces in the show was the oil painting *Desert Spring* (1987), by Mohamed Al Saleem, a pivotal member of The House of Saudi Arts, founded in Riyadh in the late 1970s. Hues of pinks and creams extend across the piece, while a, darker, central, flower-like vein disturbs and invigorates the horizon.

Similar to other modernist groups featured in this exhibition, members of the House of Saudi Arts turned to the country's natural landscape for inspiration. In a 1976 exhibition statement, recently published in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (2018), Saleem writes: "Shadow and prismatic colors are natural phenomena that exist naturally. It would better befit an artist, instead of re-creating something that already exists, to search for undiscovered values, which is what I have attempted in my quest for the natural distinct features of our Saudi environment."

To describe the practice of investigating and abstracting the form and lines of the desert horizon, for instance, Saleem coined the term "horizontism." While locally informed, the language that resulted from his experiments and those of his peers was in direct dialogue with other international artistic experiments, Bardaouil says. Further, Saleem's works bring to mind other abstract movements around the world. Something about *Desert Spring* is deeply reminiscent of Mark Rothko's *No. 14 (Browns Over Dark)*, which is currently on show at the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

## Casablanca

Courtesy: Courtesy of a private collection

The composition and abstraction of this 1968 oil on canvas piece, titled *Composition*, by Moroccan artist Mohammed Melehi is evocative of Saleem's *Desert Spring*. Growing up by the sea, Melehi was known for painting abstracted waves. In the same way that the Saudi modernists turned to the local environment for inspiration, members of the Casablanca School drew on shapes and colors from Moroccan visual culture and landscape to create their distinct brand of modernism. This pursuit for a local language was motivated by postcolonial sentiment; Morocco had gained independence in 1956, and its artists were keen on asserting both themselves and their national culture through creative productions. The father of the Moroccan modernists, Farid Belkahia, took over the colonial-era *École des Beaux-Arts* in the early 1960s, and turned it into an incubator for artists desperate to create a localized artistic language.

## Cairo

Courtesy: Courtesy of the Ahmed Eldabaa collection. Photo by  
Ayman Lotfy

This 1953 ink and watercolor drawing by Samir Rafi, titled *Homme à la Chaise*, was one of many extraordinary pieces in the featured collection of works by Cairo's Contemporary Art Group, which was founded in the 1940s and 1950s, a time of significant turbulence and transformation in the country. The portrait shows a slim man on a traditional wooden chair, his gaze pensive and elusive. Like many other works by members of the group, this piece puts the mundane, the everyday, on a pedestal. While the group was coming of age in a moment of escalating anti-colonial and nationalist sentiment, their work was "not about glorifying the nation, but glorifying the poor, working class Egyptians, and giving them the place to be central stage," says Bardaouil.

These artists immersed themselves in local popular culture, and brought it into their work. They often used the form of portraiture to respond to the realities and anxieties they encountered on the street, as was apparent in the showcased selection. Hussein Youssef Amin paints *The Nai Musician* (dated circa 1940s), Maher Raef depicts *Surreal Musicians* (1954) and Gazzar represents unidentifiable characters (some of them hardly human) in a series of sullen drawings (from 1946 and 1948). In all these pieces, there is a sense of secrecy, of pain even, reflecting the group's determination to tackle the human condition, head on.

In the Contemporary Art Group's [first declaration](#), signed in 1946 by Rafi, Gazzar, Raef, and others, this determination to address the "real values of existence," comes shining through. "The purpose of contemporary arts," the group pronounced, "runs contrary to the aims of those superficial arts that disregard the secret of our relationships within life."

## Baghdad

Courtesy: Courtesy of the Alia and Hussain Harba Collection,  
Iraq, Italy. Photo by Edoardo Garis

In this untitled 1963 oil painting on paper by Iraqi artist Faraj Abo, we see a milk seller delivering the day's serving to a brightly dressed woman on the street, presumably outside her house. A palm tree is visible in the distance, as is a traditional, ornamental

gate. Like works by many other artists belonging to the Baghdad Group of Modern Art, Abo's piece reduces the human figure to a set of geometric forms, all the while capturing an ordinary everyday interaction. Members of this group mined the folkloric material of Baghdad for subjects; like the Egyptian movement, many of their paintings capture people engaged in simple day-to-day activities. Also coming together and producing artwork in a postcolonial moment, Iraqi artists were keen on finding a language to express their local version of modernism.

## **Khartoum**

Courtesy: Courtesy of the Saleh Barakat collection

In this untitled ink on carton piece by Ahmed Shibrain (circa 1965), it is not too difficult to spot tribal symbols, assembled in differently shaped rings around a loosely defined face. Arabic script is reduced to abstract shapes, [a common mark](#) of the Khartoum School, of which Shibrain was a founding figure. It was made up of a group of artists who came together after taking part in an experimental art and drama workshop at the Mbari Club in

Nigeria. Shibrain's artwork, along with the other works exhibited here, reflect the Sudanese artists' decision, in the 1960s and 1970s, to imbue their artistic production with local cultural references.

At the time, artists from this group, including Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq and Ibrahim el-Salahi, found that societal changes and the tradition of fine art taught at the University of Khartoum's School of Fine and Applied Art was eclipsing their local traditions. Consuming and regurgitating curricula imported from abroad, their art was effectively devoid of local flavor. Placing tribal iconography as well as Islamic and Nubian motifs in their paintings made sure that their art mirrored a part of their culture that was "never truly inserted into what was considered to be fine art," according to Bardaouil.

Tags: art market, exhibition reviews

### Related Post

#### [The Giza Zoo as colonial archive](#)

Bryony Dunne spotlights the establishment's layered history in Istanbul show

#### [Huda Lutfi creates a captivating world of silence in AUC show](#)

Instead of the outside world of Cairo, we're seeing the inside world of Huda.

#### [A history of petro-modernism in the Middle East: Crude](#)

A show featuring contemporary artwork that engages with the oil industry's vast, messy archive

[Top](#) | [View Non-AMP Version](#) All Rights Reserved