



Egypt's Museums XVI: Competition in Qatar

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On 30 December 2010, Mathaf: The Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar opened its doors to the public for the first time with three blockbuster exhibitions: "Sajil" (Arabic for "document"): A century of Modern Art, "Interventions" and "Told/Untold/Retold." The inauguration of Mathaf, which holds over 6000 works from the 1840s to the present in its collection, triggered great interest on both the regional and international art scenes because of its immense potential as a facilitator for scholarly research on modern Arab art as well as contemporary artistic production. Its preview on 14 December 2010 drew attention away from the openings of the 12th International Cairo Biennale and the plethora of parallel exhibitions running in Cairo, which opened on 12 and 13 December, inviting a myriad of Egyptian artists and curators to Doha.

The Arab world has witnessed a cultural renaissance over the past two decades with the emergence of numerous art festivals, funds, galleries, art schools and historical and contemporary art museums, especially in the Gulf region.

Since the 1990s, the United Arab Emirates has successfully positioned itself as the new Arab cultural hub. Sharjah initiated an international art biennale in 1993 and developed a complex of galleries and artist studios, which also hosts the Sharjah Art Museum. In 1998, the city was named Arab Cultural Capital of the year--an UNESCO and Arab league initiative to promote Arab culture. Sharjah has awarded the "Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture" ever since.

In 2004, Abu Dhabi followed suit by announcing its massive development plan of Saadiyat Island (Island of Happiness). Due for completion in 2018, the island's cultural district will include Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi, Performing Arts Centre, Maritime Museum, Sheikh Zayed National Museum in addition to a huge Biennale Park. Yale and New York Universities are also opening up art programs in Abu Dhabi.

Qatar is the scene's most recent newcomer. In December 2008, it opened its Museum of Islamic Art based on the collection of al-Thani--the Qatari Royal Family. The planning of Mathaf, however, has been underway for two decades.

Sheikh Hassan bin Mohamed bin Ali al-Thani, Qatari art patron and Vice Chairman of the Board of Trustees at the Qatar Museums Authority, acquired the first piece in Mathaf's collection in 1986 form an art exhibition in Doha. Over the years, his personal collection expanded and by 1994, he was ready to share it with a wider Qatari public. Hence, he installed the artwork in a villa and founded a private museum, which also acted as an informal artist residency program, hosting Baghdadi artists

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was, however, directed by Qatari artist Youseef Ahmad. Sheikh Hassan continued to acquire artwork from an extensive network of resident artists.

In 2004, the museum became a national institution for the first time when it was adopted by the Qatar Foundation (QF) as an educational resource for the Qatari people. Artworks were loaned to exhibitions in the West such as "Modernism and Iraq" that were held in 2009 at Columbia University's Wallach Art Gallery in New York City.

Formal plans to build a museum of modern Arab art--the first of its kind in the region--only began in 2008 when the Qatar Museum Authority took on a shared responsibility with the foundation for the museums construction.

Mathaf was scheduled to open in 2011. But with Doha's selection as the 2010 Arab Cultural Capital, the process was expedited. A former school building in Doha's Education City was re-designed by the French architect Jean-François Bodin and chosen to temporarily host the collection.

"*Sajil*: A Century of Modern Art" showcases the museum's collection for the first time. The works of over 100 Arab artists including Chafic Abboud, Adam Henein, Louay Kayyali and Ramses Younan were selected from the collection by guest curator Nada Shabout and exhibited in the school.

Contrary to dominant Western art history, which mostly neglects modern Arab art or reduces it to being derivative of Western modernity, "*Sajil*" refrains from imposing a linear narrative and invites audience members and scholars to experience the work and look into the meanings and roots of modernity. "*Sajil*," thus seeks to "return the agency to the artists and their negotiations of making culture and history." What it proposes is a discourse rather than a narrative.

In parallel to the opening exhibitions, Mathaf hosted a conference titled "Modern Arab Art: Objects, Histories, and Methodologies," which was organized by the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey (AMCA). The idea was to use Mathaf's collection as a catalyst for investigations into the roots of Arab modernity and the contexts from which it stemmed.

Mathaf's approach echoes the attempts of a growing group of artists, scholars and practitioners to reexamine the history of Arab artistic modernity. Last October Cairo's Townhouse gallery organized *Speak, memory*--an international symposium on archival initiatives that aimed to reactivate cultural memory of the Arab world. In 2008, Lebanese researchers Rasha Salti and Christine Khouri started The History of Arab Modernities in the Visual Arts Study Group, which researches the production, exhibition and reception of modern Arab art from the 1950s to 1970s.

Equipped with technical expertise, massive funds and a strong network of artists throughout the Arab world, Mathaf is also playing a key role in the conservation of artwork. In 2010, Mathaf's conservation department faced difficulties when working on a painting by Iraqi artist Jawad Selim. Nevertheless, Azzawi, who had supervised the residency program of the private museum, and knew Selim, advised them well on the pigments that Selim used to facilitate the painting's cleaning.

"Interventions"--an exhibition of works by five influential modern Arab artists, Dia Azzawi, Farid Belkahlia, Ahmed Nawar, Ibrahim al-Salahi and Hassan Sharif, selected from the museum's collection--is also on display. Shabout, who curated the exhibition, commissioned one new work from each of the artists for the exhibition.

Egyptian curator Sarah Rifky confirms that the highlight of the Mathaf was the "Told/Untold/Retold" contemporary art exhibition. The exhibition's curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath commissioned new work from 23 participating artists. "Told/Untold/Retold" included artworks by some of the most established contemporary artists in the Arab world and its diaspora. From Egypt, Amal Kenway, winner of the Grand Nile Prize in the 2010 International Cairo Biennale, Lara Baladi, winner of the

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invited.

"Told/Untold/Retold" is by far the most ambitious exhibition of contemporary Arab art to date with production grants ranging between US\$50,000 and US\$150,000.

Baladi, who exhibited a multimedia installation titled "Qabr al-Zaman" (The Tomb of Time) at "Told/Untold/Retold," explains that the experience was liberating. Artists were asked to produce their "dream works," she adds. In addition to generous funding grants, the curators fought for technical requirements of participating artists. There were no compromises in terms of space as is common in biennales, explains Baladi. In fact, the temporary exhibition space was constructed around the works as they were being installed in the courtyard of Doha's Museum of Islamic Art.

Mathaf's opening has been a positive experience as confirmed by many artists and curators. In terms of supportive infrastructure Mathaf and other rising Gulf institutions surpass old artistic centers such as Cairo and Beirut. However, concerns persist about the museum's strategy in terms of audience cultivation and the promotion of Arab artistic production. Pending announcement of future programming, artists and practitioners will continue to speculate about Mathaf's role in the Arab world.

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