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"Italia/Arabia"
CHELSEA ART MUSEUM
556 West 22nd Street
December 10, 2008–February 7, 2009

Beginning in the 1940s, Italy saw a notable influx of Arab artists—particularly from Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. Some of the most prominent painters in post–World War II Beirut, Aleppo, and Cairo launched their careers, and dynamized their countries' respective artistic scenes, after apprenticeships to modern Italian painters. The extent to which the Italian teachers, in turn, absorbed lessons from these students is uncertain. But in "Italia/Arabia," the juxtaposition of Renato Guttuso's *Tetti di Alcamo* (Roofs of Alcamo), 1976, featuring a row of humble village buildings serried together, painted two years after Louay Kayyali's similar *Untitled*, 1974, reveals such connections with unspoken poignancy.



Louay Kayyali, *Then What, 1965*, oil on canvas, 70 1/2 x 74 4/5".

Still, in light of Guttuso's Sicilian heritage, the Arab and North African valences of his imagery bear a more nuanced etiology, one that points to the complex and layered history of exchange between Italy and the Arab world. The influence of Massimo Campigli's stylized, folkish archaism on the paintings of Fateh Moudarress, a Syrian artist who studied in Rome, is undeniable. But Campigli's own inspiration by noncanonical (specifically Etruscan) motifs destabilizes the notion of any cultural "original," whether Italian or Arab (indeed, the Etruscans themselves were, and are, often imputed with "Oriental" origins).

While many of the exhibition's juxtapositions speak for themselves, they would have been well served by brief biographical background on each artist. Are Faramarz Pilaram's geometric affinities with the paintings of Alberto Magnelli aleatory or the result of conscious contact or study? What the show's thoroughly illustrated catalogue does not flesh out in this regard remains the domain of future scholarship. What, specifically, about the Italian postwar scene—poised between an adventurous modernism and a gritty, antifascist realism that sought to recuperate something of Italy's academic gravitas—attracted young Arab artists? "Italia/Arabia" at least poses the question, by pairing images otherwise rarely brought together.

— Ara H. Merjian

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