

ARRIVING AT *HISTORY*

MATHAF: ARAB MUSEUM
OF MODERN ART

One man's passion for collecting has led to the creation of the first institution of its kind in the region, designed to house the world's largest collection of Modern Arab art. **Myrna Ayad** discusses His Excellency Sheikh Hassan Bin Mohammed Bin Ali Al-Thani's devotion to regional art and the opening of Qatar's Mathaf.

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useums are generally expected to lend some form of characteristic and authenticity to their location. That understanding is heightened when the institution focuses on the host region's culture. After all, does one not understand a culture better when there is an exploration or survey of its past? Winston Churchill was right: 'the farther backward you can look, the farther forward you can see'. William Shakespeare was also spot on: 'what is past is prologue'. Indeed so.

The Qatari Museums Authority (QMA) strategy is well on track: in 2008, Doha opened the IM Pei-designed Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) and by late 2013 the city hopes to unveil Jean Nouvel's National Museum of Qatar (NMQ). It is interesting to note the Gulf state's cultural priorities in terms of the role that museums are expected to play in the country's development: Religious (MIA), the nation (NMQ) and the Arab world, all through Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art. It is an ethos that the country's key cultural protagonists are totally committed to: "We are proud that Qatar is now revealing these artistic achievements in unprecedented depth and breadth, just as our MIA



Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art. Night time exterior rendering. ©L'Autre Image Production 2010.



Doha's Mathaf is communicating and legitimising – to the entire world – that Middle Eastern art has a history, and an exceptional one at that.



Above: Installation view of *Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art*. Left to right: Ala Bashir. *Masks Marching*. 2003. Oil on canvas. 390 x 290 cm; Shakir Hassan Al-Said. Title unknown. 1999. Mixed media on panel. 262.6 x 228.4 x 3.5 cm; Dia Al-Azzawi. *Majnun Layla (Temptation)*. 1995. Acrylic on canvas. 161 x 200.7 cm. Photography by Myrna Ayad.

Facing page: César Gemayel. Title Unknown, Undated. Oil on wood. 23.1 x 34.5 cm.

opened vast new perspectives on our centuries-old heritage,” added Her Excellency Sheikha Mayassa Bint Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani, QMA Chairperson.

Among many other facets, Doha’s Mathaf is communicating and legitimising – to the entire world – that Middle Eastern art has a history, and an exceptional one at that. “Collectors and curators are increasingly drawn toward the work of Contemporary Arab artists, which is a very welcome development,” added His Excellency Sheikh Hassan Bin Mohammed Bin Ali Al-Thani, Vice Chairperson of the QMA Board of Trustees and Founder of Mathaf, “but today’s artistic activities can truly flourish only if they are connected meaningfully to the important history that lies behind these achievements.”

Without a doubt, Mathaf is gathering the Arab world together; not solely through its exhibition of the finest examples of Modern Arab art,

but also through a genre which tells the story of the Arab world – a necessary narrative never before given ample attention. Or, as Bashar Al-Shroogi, Director of Dubai-based Cuadro Fine Art Gallery put it: “[With Mathaf] I think we have just come of age as an Arab nation. Doha is communicating the voice of the Arab world with a whole new vocabulary, and one that can and will make the world stop and take note.”

This vision is largely due to the passion of one man: His Excellency Sheikh Hassan Bin Mohammed Bin Ali Al-Thani. With the support of the Qatar Foundation, and under the guidance of Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned, Mathaf’s development was taken under the wing of the QMA in 2005, the year of its foundation. What is especially laudable is the transformation of an impressive private collection – driven by a love for beauty, history and a sense of Arab pride – into a public gift for the people.

“It was a journey I started on my own, it was a dream and a hope. In fact, it was a dream for this entire region to have such a museum.” - His Excellency Sheikh Hassan Bin Mohammed Bin Ali Al-Thani, Vice Chairperson of the QMA Board of Trustees and Founder of Mathaf

FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC

It began almost three decades ago. Sheikh Hassan – a painter and a photographer in his own right – was a student at the College of Fine Arts at Qatar University. Frustrated at the lack of information on Modern Arab artists, he decided to seek out the protagonists himself and discover their contribution to the genre. This process was initiated and facilitated by renowned Qatari artist Yousef Ahmad, whose classes Sheikh Hassan had attended. The professor-student relationship became a friendship which led to the creation of the Orientalist Museum in Doha in 1992. Driven by a deep desire to learn more, Sheikh Hassan began to collect, a passion which took him all over the region but especially to Egypt – a nation steeped in history and home to highly respected museums of Modern Arab art. He met the artists, befriended them, bought their works and supported their careers.

Among the many artists Sheikh Hassan met was Taheya Halim, a key figure in the Modern Egyptian art movement and who, having pursued an art education in Paris and Denmark, derived inspiration from Egypt’s lush countryside, its southern cities and the overall political and economic climate which characterised the country from the 1960s until the 1980s. During a visit to her studio, Sheikh Hassan was especially taken by Halim’s *The Pyramid*, *The Civilisation*, *Symbolism Through Ants* sculpture, a seminal work inspired the Aswan dam. He pleaded with

her to allow him to purchase it for his collection but she refused, saying she wanted to donate it to Egypt’s Museum of Modern Art. When she died in 2003, she had left the piece to him in her will. Such was Sheikh Hassan’s rapport with artists.

In 1994, he established the Arab Museum of Modern Art – a renovated villa which housed his growing collection of Modern Arab art, under the curatorship of Ahmad. The Museum



MUSEUM





Facing page: Paul Cuiragossian. Title unknown.
1957. Oil on canvas. 73 x 60.2 cm.

Above: Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art.
Installation view of inaugural exhibition. *Sajjil: A
Century of Modern Art*. Left to right: Dia Al-Azzawi.
Works from *We Are Not Seen But Corpses (The
Massacre of Sabra)*. 1993. Etching and lithograph
on paper. 100 x 70 cm each. Edition 36 of 60;
Sami Mohammed. *Sabra and Chatilla*. 1982.
Bronze. 61 x 58 x 29 cm; Abdallah Benanteur. *Le
Triomphe No 1*. 1993. Polyptych. Oil on canvas.
195 x 130 cm, 195 x 97 cm, 255 x 194 cm,
195 x 97 cm and 195 x 130 cm respectively.



This page: Dia Al-Azzawi. *Wounded Soul a Fountain of Pain*. 2010. Horse: bronze. Basin: metal and crude oil. Roses: resin. Horse: 270 x 110 x 160 cm. Basin: 200 x 200 cm. Photography by Myrna Ayad.

Facing page: Two works by Ahmad Nawar. On wall: *Ascension* (Triptych). 2010. Acrylic on canvas. 200 x 600 cm. Foreground: *Defiance 2*. 2010. Bronze. 437 x 158 x 79 cm. Photography by Myrna Ayad.

was Sheikh Hassan's inaugural attempt at making his collection accessible to the public. "He really wanted to see the works hung and a lot of people wanted to understand what he was doing," says Wassan Al-Khudairi, Acting Director and Chief Curator of Mathaf, "this was where the educational element of the collection began, by opening it up to the people."

Outraged by the increased sanctions which challenged artists in Iraq during the late 1990s, Sheikh Hassan sent canvases and paint and also invited Iraqi artists to Doha for "informal residency programmes", an initiative which, adds Al-Khudairi, "was his way of supporting the cause of the struggle of art in Iraq, by telling the artists 'take refuge in Doha, be who you are here, take a moment to just be.'" Sheikh Hassan's residency programmes may not have been his first form of artistic compassion, but they are, by all means, the mark of a patron. "He's not just a collector," adds Al-Khudairi, "there is a long-term investment and commitment to the artist." Some of the works created in Qatar are signed 'Doha' and of the many who visited, works by eight Iraqis – Dia Al-Azzawi, Ismail Fattah (*Canvas 1.3*), Shaker Hassan Al-Said, Ala Bashir, Salem Al-Dabbagh, Saadi Al-Kaabi,



There is a fervent desire to locate, distinguish and identify Mathaf as a museum *in and of the Arab world.*

Mahmoud Al-Obaidi, Nazar Yahya, and one Sudanese, Ibrahim El-Salahi – form *Doha*, one of 10 subthemes in Mathaf’s inaugural exhibition, *Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art*.

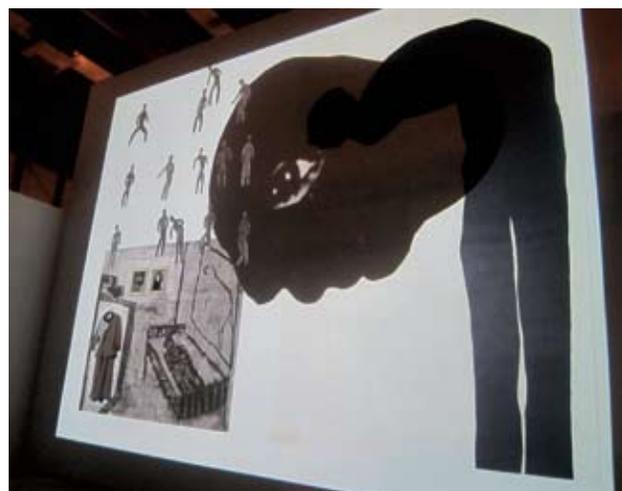
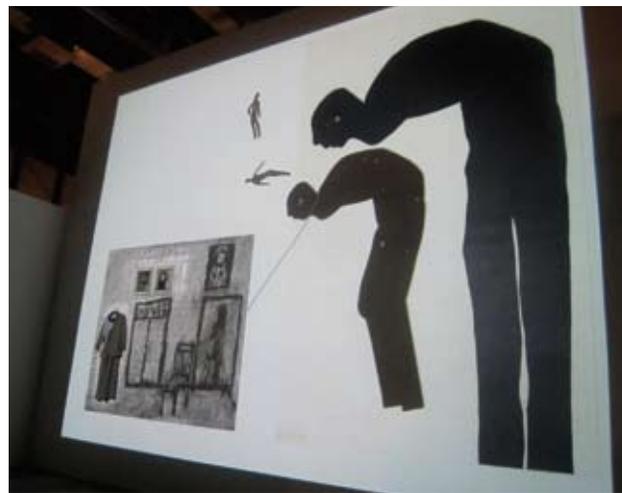
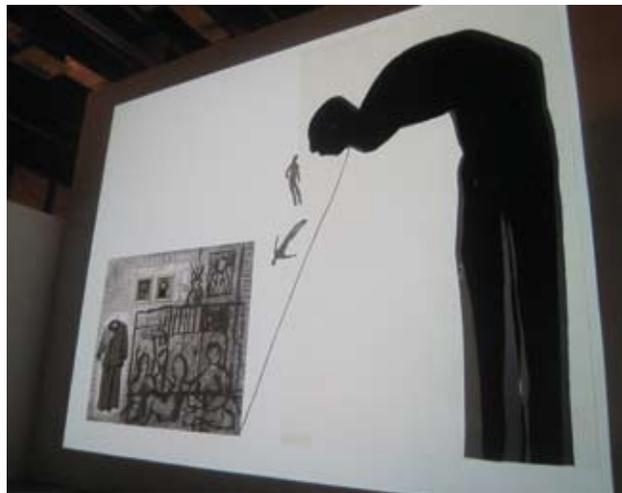
Doha doesn’t just pay homage to a powerful body of work borne out of political unrest, nor does it solely suggest Sheikh Hassan’s benevolent patronage: it says something about the Qatari capital’s position as an international artist’s hub, a place where art has been – and will continue to be – created, nurtured and exhibited.

Up until the early 2000s, the idea of making his collection accessible to the public – on a grander level – had been brewing in Sheikh Hassan’s mind. “It was a journey I started on my own, it was a dream and a hope,” he says, “in fact, it was a dream for this entire region to have such a museum.” By this time, Sheikh Hassan had utilised the expert advice of specialists in the field of Modern Arab art and his collection began to move towards what would be appropriate for a public institution. By 2004 the collection totalled 6300 works – the earliest piece dating from the

1840s and the latest from the present day. In the same year, Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned granted the creation of Mathaf and so began the restoration, registration, storage, database entry and all other elements required for the establishment and management of a government-owned museum. Only a minute fraction of this vast holding is currently exhibited.

ONE DIALECT

The Mathaf team prefers for the art to speak for itself, rather than for the structure to speak on art’s behalf. Jean-François Bodin of Bodin Associates and Architects was commissioned to convert a former high school into Mathaf, a 5500 square-metre building. Much attention is paid to semantics. For a start, *mathaf* literally translates to ‘museum’ in Arabic. And within Mathaf are Mahal (shop), Maktaba (research library), Maqha (coffee shop) and Manara (which means ‘beacon’ and is the museum’s education wing). But perhaps the



This page: Sadik Kwaishalfraji. Three stills from *The House That My Father Built*. 2010. Multimedia installation consisting of an acrylic on canvas painting, 640 x 400 cm, several ready-mades and a film animation projected on a 700 x 900 cm surface. Photography by Myrna Ayad.

Facing page: Buthayna Ali. *F "Why?"*. 2010. Multimedia installation consisting of 22 cement and rubber slingshots of heights ranging from 77–200 cm. Photography by Myrna Ayad.

most interesting play on words is the museum's name – Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art – which does not necessarily mean that the museum will only exhibit Arab art; the inclusion of the word 'Arab' is for geographic purposes, making the point that this is a museum rooted in, but not exclusive to, the Arab world. And aside from Sheikh Hassan's patronage of artists from every single Arab nation, there is a fervent desire to locate, distinguish and identify Mathaf as a museum *in and of* the Arab world. "Mathaf is an Arab perspective on modernity; there are cross-references right across the spectrum. Anyone can be included," adds Dr Nada Shabout, Mathaf long-time advisor, Guest Curator and Associate Professor of Art History and Director of the Contemporary Arab and Muslim Cultural Studies Institute at the University of North Texas.

It's fair to say that Mathaf is the Modern art component of the Arab world's amplifier – it is speaking on behalf of Arab communities, as if to say 'Here we are and this is our history'. "In the 25 or so years that I have been collecting, I can tell you that we have not given Modern Arab art the attention it deserves," says Sheikh Hassan. In the same way that he has patronised artists whose homelands were (and still are) rife with political conflict, and through the same effective use of semantics, Mathaf chose the word '*sajjil*' for its inaugural exhibition. Much is lost in translation, but *sajjil* literally means to record, to document, to register; it is a demand, an order, a call for action. After numerous deliberations, *sajjil* was selected not solely for its powerful meaning but also because it is part of the name of the 1964 poem by famed Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish: *Sajjil Ana Arabi* (Record, I am an Arab). "We adopted the title from Darwish because we feel that Arab art has been as marginalised as the Palestinians," ex-

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plains Shabout, “it’s our way of saying ‘Arab art is here, come look at me, understand me, study me, I’m here.’” Perhaps what is most captivating is a verse in the poem: *My roots/Were entrenched before the birth of time/And before the opening of the eras*. While the Arab region has contributed to civilisation through myriad aspects, Mathaf is now giving the world a snapshot of almost 200 years of Arab art.

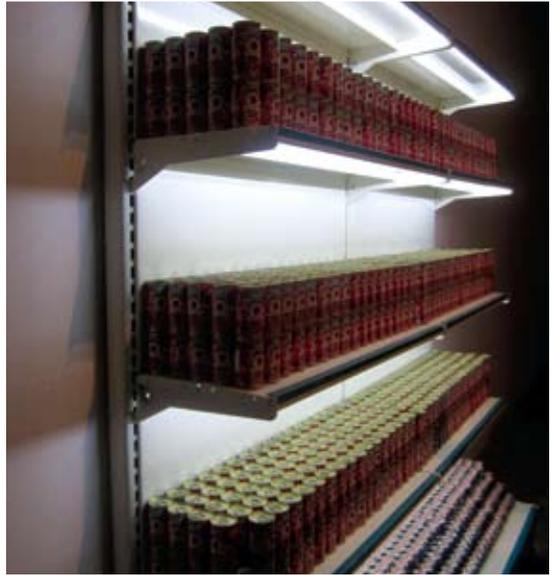
The 277 artworks shown in *Sajjil* are separated into 10 themes over 12 galleries – *Nature, The City, Individualism, Form and Abstraction, Society, History and Myth, Horoufiyah* (modern text abstraction), *Struggle* and *Doha*. Essentially, these are the themes which dominated the Modern art of the Arab world; they are what the artists experienced in the 20th century and put down on canvas or in sculpture and installations. Curated by Shabout, Al-Khudairi and Deena Chalabi, Mathaf’s Head of Strategy, the exhibition “is not chronological or biographical, because that’s not the point,” believes Shabout; “It’s about modernity as one modernity, not a parallel modernity, but an Arab engagement.” Aside from being long overdue, *Sajjil* is a narrative and narratives are naturally at the very heart of Modern Arab art. “Art needs its historical context,” adds Shabout, “to deduce, one must understand the history, the socio-politics and the culture of what was happening at the time.”



MUSEUM

Below and right: Khalil Rabah.
Works from *BIPRODUCT*, a
multimedia installation.
2010. Painting and
supermarket refrigerator.
Variable dimensions.

*All images courtesy the
respective artists and Mathaf:
Arab Museum of Modern Art
unless otherwise specified.*



“It’s a journey and it’s your own. You edit it.” - Sam Bardaouil, Co-curator of Told/Untold/Retold.

NECESSARY CHRONICLES

While Mathaf succeeds in showcasing and explaining centuries of Modern Arab art through *Sajjil*, its premiere show is a prequel to an exhibition trilogy. In the name of continuing the story, of providing a 360-degree panorama of then and now, Mathaf also stages *Interventions: A Dialogue Between the Modern and the Contemporary* and *Told/Untold/Retold* in a newly constructed 5000 square-metre hall, located at the Al-Riwaq Art Space, adjacent to the MIA. “We couldn’t convey our message in one exhibition; it’s the Arab world,” adds Shabout, “and through the three shows, we’re trying to negotiate and explore links of then and now.” Where *Sajjil* surveys the past and *Told/Untold/Retold* speaks of the present, *Interventions* discusses the in-between, through the commissioning of new works by some of the region’s recognised artists – Al-Azawawi, Ahmed Nawar, El-Salahi, Farid Belkahlia and Hassan Sharif – alongside works by them that are already in Mathaf’s collection. Thematically, the five artists share common denominators in their *oeuvres*, especially those of human suffering and concern for the effects of this on posterity. Walking through *Interventions* is like crossing a bridge between the Modern and the Contemporary, it is an eye-opener by witnesses who experienced the turmoil and development of the Arab world in the last few decades.

Viewing the works by 23 artists at *Told/Untold/Retold* following its two prequels makes

possible a more insightful comprehension of Contemporary Middle Eastern art. ‘This is where we have come to’ is the resonating emotion; it’s almost a form of artistic ancestry. Curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath of Art Reoriented, the commissioned works take their cue from – once again – the inherent act and tradition of Arab storytelling. Using this as their starting point, the works are journeys, both personal and wide-ranging; some are known (*Told*), others are futuristic (*Untold*), while a number hark at the concept of reiteration (*Retold*). Walking into the entrance of *Told/Untold/Retold* is akin to the possible climax of a fairytale – there is a choice of three pathways, analogous of the destiny which the proverbial protagonist must take. Which path leads to heroism, the monster or life’s next stage? “It’s a journey and it’s your own,” said Bardaouil, “you edit it.”

And so Mathaf’s story begins. Sheikh Hassan stands at the podium during the press preview and smiles, “I haven’t seen it in its finality although I’ve been working on it for years! You are the first to see it and I was the first to initiate it. With the support of the royal family, I am proud to be in Qatar at a time when this is happening.” We applauded him and realised that we were about to walk into history as history was being made. 🇶🇦

For more information visit www.mathaf.org.qa