



Taking Shape

Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s


This exhibition explores mid-twentieth-century abstract art from North Africa, West Asia, and the Arab diaspora—a vast geographic expanse that encompasses diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. Comprising nearly ninety works by artists from countries including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the exhibition is drawn from the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation based in Sharjah, UAE. The paintings, sculpture, drawings, and prints on view here reflect the wide range of nonfigurative art practices that flourished in the Arab world over the course of four decades.

Decolonization, the rise and fall of Arab nationalisms, socialism, rapid industrialization, wars and mass migrations, and the oil boom transformed the region during this period. With rising opposition to Western political and military involvement, many artists adopted critical viewpoints, striving to make art relevant to their own locales. New opportunities for international travel and the advent of circulating exhibitions sparked cultural and educational exchanges that exposed artists to multiple modernisms—including various modes of abstraction—and led them to consider their roles within an international context.

The artists featured in this exhibition—a varied group of Arab, Amazigh (Berber), Armenian, Circassian, Jewish, Persian, and Turkish descent—sought to localize and recontextualize existing twentieth-century modernisms, some forming groups to address urgent issues. Moving away from figuration, they mined the expressive capacities of line, color, and texture. Inspired by Arabic calligraphy, geometry, and mathematics, Islamic decorative patterns, and spiritual practices, they expanded abstraction's vocabulary—thereby complicating its genealogies of origin and altering the viewer's understanding of nonobjective art.

At its heart, *Taking Shape* raises a fundamental question: How do we study abstraction across different contexts, and what modes of analysis do we use? Examining critically the history and historiography of mid-twentieth-century abstraction, the exhibition rethinks art historical canons and expands discourses around global modernisms.

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s is organized by the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, and curated by Suheyla Takesh and Lynn Gumpert. Major support is provided by the Barjeel Art Foundation. Additional generous support is provided by the Charina Endowment Fund; the Violet Jabara Charitable Trust; the Grey's Director's Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends; and the Abby Weed Grey Trust. At the McMullen Museum, the exhibition has been underwritten by Boston College with major funding from the Patrons of the McMullen Museum.



The question of decolonizing culture and formulating an authentically Moroccan modern visual language lay at the core of ideas that spurred artists Farid Belkahlia, Mohamed Chebaa, and Mohamed Melehi, along with art critic Toni Maraini and anthropologist Bert Flint, to form the avant-garde artists' collective known as the Casablanca School in 1965. Much of their activity took place through the curriculum and programs of the city's École des Beaux-Arts, which had come under Belkahlia's direction in 1962. As part of their pedagogical framework, members of the group promoted their commitment to the study of local culture and traditional forms, materials, and crafts, as well as to the reinterpretation of the function and value of those forms and materials in a contemporary context. During the 1950s and early 1960s the school followed a French curriculum, but in the mid-1960s analytical inquiries into local heritage generated a new and alternative educational model—one that explored the potency of homegrown visual and material traditions that responded to the demands of modernity. The faculty reexamined its syllabi and introduced classes on local history and the practices of weaving and carpet, jewelry, and ceramic making.

Mohamed Melehi (Asilah, Morocco, 1936–Paris, France, 2020)

Untitled, 1975, cellulose paint on wood

In this work, Mohamed Melehi employs curvilinear lines that evoke ocean waves, landscapes, and elements of Arabic letterforms. Aiming to create an authentically Moroccan visual language, the artist merges Western modernist approaches with elements derived from Morocco's culture.



Mohamed Melehi (Asilah, Morocco, 1936–Paris, France, 2020)

Composition, 1970, acrylic on wood

This large-scale, hard-edged painting featuring curvilinear fields of vibrant color, with four waves overlapping at the center, reflects Mohamed Melehi's fully developed approach to abstraction.



During the 1960s, Melehi co-founded the Casablanca School. For a 1969 exhibition at Jemaa el-Fna, Marrakech's main public square, the group covered the walls of nearby buildings with their paintings, asserting that art could be part of everyday life.

After graduating from the Institut National des Beaux-Arts in Tétouan, Morocco, in 1955, Melehi moved to Spain and enrolled at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de Santa Isabel de Hungría in Seville. After continuing his training at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid, he studied sculpture and engraving in Rome and Paris. In 1962 he received a scholarship to attend Columbia University in New York City, where he befriended many American artists, including Jim Dine, Jasper Johns, and Frank Stella.

At the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, Melehi's work was on view in the International Meeting of Sculptors public art exhibition. For the occasion, Melehi created a three-dimensional sculpture that was installed on the "Route of Friendship," the road uniting the Olympic venues. Melehi received solo exhibitions at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York (1984–85), Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris (1995), and London's Mosaic Rooms (2019).

Malika Agueznay (Marrakech, Morocco, 1938–)

L'algue bleue (Blue Algae), 1968, wood and acrylic on wood

L'algue bleue is a wood relief composed of organic blue forms that resemble marine vegetation against a green background. Its meandering, curvilinear shapes were inspired not only by the artist's natural environment, but also by *Ayat al-Kursi* (the Throne Verse), a highly revered passage in the Qur'an. *L'algue bleue* prefigures the artist's interest in calligraphy, which is manifested in her later work through stylized renditions of the ninety-nine names for God in Islam, and what she calls "magic words," such as *salaam* (peace), *mahabba* (love), *hanan* (compassion), *tawado'* (humility), and *karam* (generosity).



A contemporary of the co-founders of the influential Casablanca School, Agueznay grew up in a rural community where she learned traditional Moroccan crafts, whose aesthetic she incorporates into her work. During the early 1960s, she studied to become a paramedic in Casablanca and France before enrolling at the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca between 1966 and 1970. Finding inspiration in works by her fellow artists Farid Belkahia and Mohamed Melehi, Agueznay developed her practice during the country's postcolonial transition into autonomous nationhood. Thus, she became integral in shaping the visual language of a newly independent Morocco.

Farid Belkahia (Marrakech, Morocco, 1934–2014)

Aube (Dawn), 1983, pigment on vellum

In Farid Belkahia's striking *Aube (Dawn)* of 1983, sinuous, organic lines hover before a rainbow-hued circle that represents the rising sun. Deliberately rejecting canvas as a support, the artist constantly experimented with novel techniques. Here he turned to materials commonly used in traditional crafts, painting on vellum using natural pigments and dyes such as henna and saffron. With intertwined tracings of abstracted human forms, *Aube* resembles works by Belkahia that evoke Gaston Bachelard's psychoanalytic readings of the elements that were published in the 1940s.



In the mid-1950s, Belkahia attended the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he encountered European modernism. From 1959 to 1962 he lived in Prague, where he studied scenography at the Akademie Múzických Umění (Academy of Performing Arts) and created politically charged, expressionistic works that referenced current events such as the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62) and the Bay of Pigs invasion (1961).

Returning to Morocco in 1962, six years after the country's liberation from French colonial rule, Belkahia was appointed director of Casablanca's École des Beaux-Arts, where he set out to define a distinctly Moroccan modernism. With several colleagues, including Mohamed Melehi and Mohamed Chebaa, whose works are on view nearby, he co-founded the Casablanca School. In 2016 a retrospective was held at Mathaf (Arab Museum of Modern Art) in Doha, Qatar.

Mohamed Chebaa (Tétouan, Morocco, 1935–Casablanca, Morocco, 2013)

Composition, c. 1970, wood (bas-relief)

Mohamed Chebaa was a founding member of the avant-garde Casablanca School. Known for his bold and colorful geometric imagery, Chebaa worked in acrylic on canvas, as well as woodcarving. After obtaining a diploma from the Institut National des Beaux-Arts in Tétouan, Morocco, in 1955, he continued his training in Rome.



After returning to Morocco in 1964, he began teaching at the École des Beaux-Arts, developing the Casablanca School's network and pedagogy throughout the 1960s. Although strongly invested in a specifically Moroccan methodology, the Casablanca School maintained connections to other modernist movements. Connections that were recognized, for example, in 2019 in the *Bauhaus Imaginista* exhibition in Berlin that juxtaposed the German Bauhaus movement's ideology and teaching methods with those of the Casablanca School.

Mohamed Chebaa (Tétouan, Morocco, 1935–Casablanca, Morocco, 2013)

Untitled, 1974, acrylic on wood

With his fellow members of the Casablanca School, Mohamed Chebaa showed his work in Morocco's open-air exhibition in Jemaa el-Fna, Marrakech's public square, in 1969 (see photograph). Considered a turning point in the history of modern Moroccan art, this exhibition was marked by the bright, color-rich paintings that have become synonymous with Chebaa—as exemplified in the bold and colorful geometric language in this work. Here the artist draws on architectural and topographical drawings as well as the abstract visual traditions in Morocco's local artisanal crafts.



Ahmed Cherkaoui (Boujad, Morocco, 1934–Casablanca, Morocco, 1967)

Alea, 1965, oil on jute

Ahmed Cherkaoui is known for his large canvases and burlap collages, which are at the same time both abstract and teeming with symbols. He created a distinctive aesthetic, often arranging his vibrant motifs and forms symmetrically against a dark background, enhancing the illusion of depth, as seen here and in *Les miroirs rouge* (*Red Mirrors*) (also in this gallery).



The central symbol in Cherkaoui's *Alea* closely resembles the Tifinagh letter *yaz* (or *aza*), which means "free man." (The Tifinagh alphabet is used to write Tamazight languages, a group of related dialects found in Amazigh communities.) The same symbol is found on the official Amazigh flag, which was designed in the 1970s and formally adopted in 1997. Embellishing the traditional letterforms, Cherkaoui merges his Moroccan and European education into a single work, casting his "free man" in a new context.

Ahmed Cherkaoui (Boujad, Morocco, 1934–Casablanca, Morocco, 1967)

Les miroirs rouges (Red Mirrors), 1965, oil on jute

Ahmed Cherkaoui is known for his large canvases and burlap collages, which are at the same time both abstract and teeming with symbols. He created a distinctive aesthetic, often arranging his vibrant motifs and forms symmetrically against a dark background, enhancing the illusion of depth, as seen here and in *Alea* (also in this gallery).



Born in Boujad, Morocco, at the foot of the Atlas Mountains, Cherkaoui developed a visual language inflected by his childhood education at a traditional Qur'anic school and by his mother's Amazigh tattoos, worn by descendants of the nomadic Berber tribes in North Africa. Later, he was influenced by European artists such as Roger Bissière and Paul Klee, and by the French movement known as Art Informel. After studying graphic design at the Académie des Métiers d'Art in Paris from 1956 to 1959, Cherkaoui spent a year at the Akademia Sztuk Pięknych (Academy of Fine Arts) in Warsaw and held his first solo show in Paris. Among numerous international exhibitions of his work was one held in 1996 at the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris.

Jilali Gharbaoui (Jorf el-Melha, Morocco, 1930–Paris, France, 1971)

Composition, 1969, oil on paper

A leading artist in Morocco's modernist movement, Jilali Gharbaoui began his artistic journey in a secondary school in Fez. He continued his training at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and then spent a year in Rome. While Gharbaoui's earlier works are relatively figurative, his later paintings, which draw upon Amazigh symbolism, are grounded in the artist's gestural brushstrokes and the paint's materiality.



In *Composition*, black outlines evoke Amazigh tattoos, which were traditionally both tokens of beauty and amulets for protection and well-being. Throughout his life, Gharbaoui suffered from mental illness. In 1971 the artist's body was found on a bench in Champs de Mars in Paris; it was repatriated to Morocco, and he is buried in Fez. Despite his short life, Gharbaoui's work is celebrated worldwide.

Mohamed Hamidi (Casablanca, Morocco, 1941–)

Untitled, 1971, oil on wood

To create this work, Mohamed Hamidi divided his composition into two parts; each contains a graphic abstraction evoking female or male genitalia. Born in Casablanca, Hamidi studied at Casablanca's École des Beaux-Arts before relocating in 1959 to France, where he enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. After graduation, he worked as an assistant to French fresco painter Jean Aujame. Upon his return to Casablanca, Hamidi became a professor at his alma mater.




In 1969 he participated in an open-air exhibition in the Jemaa el-Fna, the main market in Marrakech, alongside other major Moroccan artists including Farid Belkahia, Mohamed Chebaa, and Mohamed Melehi, whose works are nearby.

Miloud Labied (El Kelâa des Sraghna, Morocco, 1939–
Rabat, Morocco, 2008)

Composition, 1973–75,
oil on canvas

Here Labied conveys a strong sense of organic movement via earth tones, loose brushstrokes, and swirling lines. In repeating primary shapes such as the circle, he references fertility and the perpetual cycle of life and death, connecting his art with notions of the eternal.





The word *Hurufiyya* in Arabic translates to “letterism” in English and refers to the use of letters as generative elements in modern art. An interest in Arabic script and its plastic potential emerged concurrently in several parts of North Africa and West Asia in the mid-twentieth century. Madiha Umar is often credited as the first artist to articulate ways in which Arabic letters could be deconstructed and graphically manipulated. In 1949, Umar published *Arabic Calligraphy: An Inspiring Element in Abstract Art*, in which she discusses design principles underlying various calligraphic scripts—including Kufic, Meccan, Ma’il, and Mashq. She argues that “each letter is able, and has a personality dynamic enough, to form an abstract design.”

The work of artists who contributed to what became known as *Hurufiyya* varies in the degree to which it is religiously bound. For some, these experiments served to distance the letter from its links to classical calligraphy and Islamic art, thereby secularizing the alphabet and expressing a modern (pan-)Arab identity. For others, these graphic investigations were driven by an investment in the esoteric function of language in the performance of spiritual Islamic, and specifically Sufi, rituals.

Madiha Umar (Aleppo, Syria, 1908–New York City, 2005)

Untitled, 1978, watercolor on paper

In this watercolor, Madiha Umar deploys coiling, crescent-shaped forms that evoke the gestural movements of writing and could derive from a number of different Arabic letters. She is often considered a progenitor of the *Hurufiyya* movement, which emerged in the mid-twentieth century when Arab, Persian, and Pakistani artists began rethinking traditional Islamic calligraphy.



Born in Syria, Umar was raised in Iraq, where she became a naturalized citizen. The first Iraqi woman to receive a government scholarship to study in Europe, she moved to London to attend the Maria Grey Training College for teachers. After graduating in 1933, she returned to Baghdad, where she taught at the Teachers' Training School for Women, serving as head of the department of painting and art until 1942, when she relocated to Washington, DC with her husband, who was a diplomat in the Iraqi embassy. At that time, she began exploring how to incorporate elements of calligraphy into abstraction. She was encouraged to exhibit her work by Richard Ettinghausen, curator at the Freer Gallery, and in 1949 had her first US solo exhibition of paintings inspired by the Arabic alphabet at the Georgetown Neighborhood Library. That same year, she published her influential text *Arabic Calligraphy: An Inspiring Element in Abstract Art*.

Umar traced her interest in the graphic and abstract possibilities of the Arabic letter to her discovery of Islamic calligraphy while studying art in the US. After receiving a BA in education at George Washington University in 1952, she earned an MFA at the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design in 1959. Later she returned to Baghdad, where she became involved in the One Dimension group founded by Iraqi artist Shakir Hassan Al Said, whose work is on view nearby.

Hussein Madi (Chebaa, Lebanon, 1938–)

Alphabet, 1973, etchings on cotton paper

This set of thirty etchings reflects Hussein Madi's skill across multiple media, including sculpture, painting, and graphic design. Each print's unique graphic form is grounded in Arabic letterforms and geometry. Seen as a whole, the series comprises a visual alphabet of sorts.



Kamal Boullata (Jerusalem, Palestine, 1942–Berlin, Germany, 2019)
Fi-I Bid Kan-al-Kalima (In the Beginning Was the Word), *Al-Zahir-al-Batin (The Manifest, the Hidden)*, *Al-Alif wa-l-Ya, La Ana Illa Ana (There Is No “I” but “I”)*, *Lam Alif*, 1983, silkscreens

An internationally celebrated artist, writer, poet, and scholar, Kamal Boullata’s artistic practice focused on the relationship between image and text. He is best known for vibrant geometric silkscreens and paintings incorporating popular religious verses and Sufi and Arabic proverbs, pushing their calligraphic forms to the brink of illegibility. In his abstract constructions, he integrates both letterforms drawn from Kufic, the oldest Arabic script, and modern experiments based on Islamic calligraphy. Carefully plotting the graphic organization of his chosen words, Boullata uses color and design to convey symbolic content. His gridded compositions—inspired by his study of mathematical grids underlying Christian icons—reflect his interests in both Islamic mosaics and twentieth-century Western art. In time-honored Islamic tradition, the grid represents a pattern that can be multiplied into infinity.



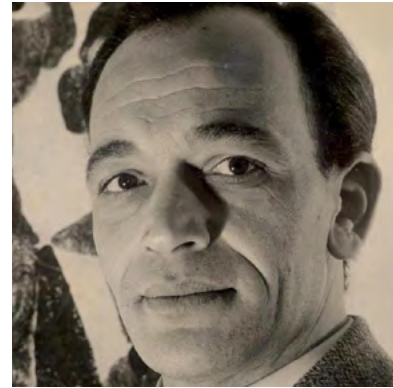
In contrast to other artists who work with Arabic calligraphy, Boullata incorporates not only individual letters but entire phrases, which he often sourced from Christian and Islamic sacred texts, sometimes adding a witty spin on their original meaning, although the words themselves are difficult to read even for Arabic speakers. For instance, in *La Ana Illa Ana (There Is No “I” but “I”)* Boullata plays on Islam’s central proclamation of faith, *la Ilaha Illa Allah* (“there is no God but God”).

Born to a Palestinian family in Jerusalem, Boullata first trained with Khalil Halabi, an iconic Palestinian painter. Later he graduated from the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome and the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design in Washington, DC. While living in the US in the late 1960s, he adopted the square as a central site for experimentation in his work. Author in 2009 of a groundbreaking book, *Palestinian Art, 1850–Present*, Boullata also wrote extensively for periodicals and academic journals, with a particular focus on Arab histories and art. He received a Fulbright Senior scholarship to research Islamic art in Morocco, where he resided from 1993 to 1996.

Hamed Abdalla (Cairo, Egypt, 1917–Paris, France, 1985)

Al-Tamazzuq (Torn), 1975, acrylic and mixed media on canvas

Taking advantage of mixed media, Hamed Abdalla draws the viewer's attention toward this painting's light, bright center of frantic action. At the same time, he plays with cracks in the blue background to reveal a black layer underneath, thereby extending the sense of rupture across its entire surface.

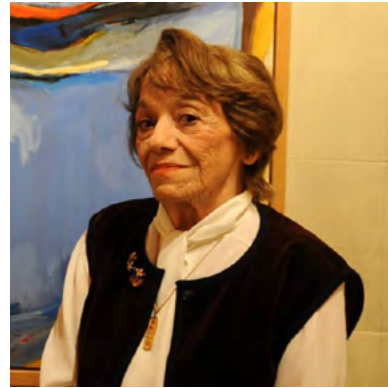


Born into a family of farmers (*fellahin*) on the outskirts of Cairo, Abdalla grew up in a modest household. Beginning his education in a Qur'anic school, he studied the art of calligraphy and became fascinated with drawing. His father enrolled him at the School of Applied Arts in Cairo, but Abdalla's refusal to adopt a strictly realistic style resulted in his leaving the institution. He subsequently developed an artistic vocabulary that merged the language of Western modernism with Egypt's past and present, from Pharaonic, Coptic, and contemporary folk culture to reflections on contemporary political unrest. In 1945 Abdalla married Tahia Halim, a fellow artist, and in 1949 they left for Paris. In 1951, a joint exhibition of their work was mounted in Paris. After returning to Egypt that year, they taught art in their private studio in downtown Cairo. In 1956 the couple divorced, and Abdalla began to split his time between Copenhagen and Paris, where he died in 1985.

Yvette Achkar (São Paulo, Brazil, 1928–)

Untitled, c. 1980, oil on canvas

Yvette Achkar is considered one of Lebanon's leading modernists. She once described the act of painting as tottering between the peak of a wave and a bottomless trough, meaning that each work is more about self-discovery than embodying a concept or theme. This untitled painting exemplifies her abandonment of structure and emphasis on clashing forms. Basing the composition in geometry, she experiments with a vibrant palette.

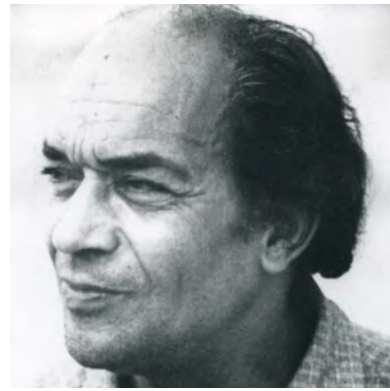


Achkar graduated in 1952 from the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA) in Beirut, where she studied with the Italian painter Fernando Manetti, and the French painter Georges Cyr. In the late 1950s, she received a scholarship from the French government to study art in Paris, and while there she exhibited in Italy, Yugoslavia, and Germany. In 1959 alone, she participated in biennials in Alexandria, Paris, and São Paulo. During the 1960s, she consolidated her figurative nudes and geometric abstractions into a single expressive style grounded in color and line—as seen in the painting here. From 1966 to 1988, Achkar taught painting at ALBA and the Institute of Fine Art, Lebanese University.

Mohammed Khadda

(Mostaganem, Algeria, 1930–Algiers,
Algeria, 1991)

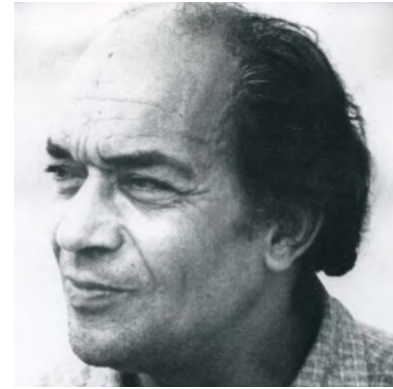
*Abstraction vert (Green
Abstraction)*, 1969, oil on canvas



Mohammed Khadda (Mostaganem, Algeria, 1930–Algiers, Algeria, 1991)

Abstraction vert sur fond orange (Green Abstraction on Orange Background), 1969, oil on canvas

In both works on view here, Mohammed Khadda places a graphic form against a background of brown and yellow hues. His quasi-calligraphic shapes call to mind pictograms and asemic writing. *Abstraction vert sur fond orange* also resembles a desert landscape with traditional flat-roofed North African buildings. Lined up as if on a horizon, these minimalist white cubes, under an indecipherable letter-like shape in the sky, evoke the artist's local topography.



A true pioneer, during the 1950s Khadda helped lead a generation of Algerian artists in their quest to combine Arab and Amazigh calligraphy with Western abstraction. He worked as a sketcher and binder for a printing company and traveled to Paris in 1953 to further his artistic education. Khadda spent ten years there before returning to Algeria in 1963, the year after the country gained independence.

This political transition sparked the founding of multiple Algerian art movements, including the Aouchem (Tattoo) Group and the École du Signe in 1967. As one of the first artists to utilize the Tifnagh alphabet in his paintings, Khadda was viewed as a ringleader in the École du Signe. Even as he advocated for an art that transcended literal and metaphorical representation, Khadda firmly believed that art should be broadly accessible. Throughout his career, he sought to reconcile his desire for a distinctively Algerian artistic practice with his quest for a universal abstraction. He also called for an artistic practice that extended beyond the political propaganda and agitation that dominated the Algerian art scene around the time of independence.


Rachid Koraïchi (Aïn Beïda, Algeria, 1947–)

Sans toi, ni moi ou l'hallucination nostalgique (Without You, or Me, or the Nostalgic Hallucination), Cet espace incrusté de nos destins (This Space Is Inlaid with Our Destinies), 1986, ink on clay on wood

Descended from a long line of Qur'anic scholars who adhere to Sufi Islam, Rachid Koraïchi approaches the practice of art as an extension of prayer and devotional rituals. Here Arabic and Chinese letterforms, layered one atop the other, reflect Koraïchi's interest in language, scripture, signs, and spiritual practice. Exploring links between metaphysics, spirituality, and aesthetics in his sculptures, paintings, and installations, Koraïchi created a signature visual vocabulary of symbolism and forms that reference numerous calligraphic traditions.



First trained as a calligrapher, Koraïchi began his formal studies at the École des Beaux-Arts in Algiers between 1967 and 1971. He finished his studies in Paris at the École des Arts Décoratifs and École des Beaux-Arts from 1971 to 1977. Working in a wide range of media, including painting, ceramics, textiles, installation art, metallurgy, and printmaking, he often collaborates with Francophone poets and writers, as well as North African artisans. Koraïchi's art has been exhibited extensively throughout the world, including at the 47th and 49th Venice Biennales (1997, 2001). In 2011 he won the Victoria and Albert Museum's Jameel Prize, an international award for contemporary artists inspired by the traditions of Islamic craft and design.



Sufism is often understood as the mystical, esoteric dimension of Islamic spirituality, which seeks to uncover the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct, personal experience of God. In the mid- to late twentieth century, Sufi philosophy and devotional rituals found expression in the work of several modernist artists from the Arab world, including Omar El-Nagdi from Egypt, Shakir Hassan Al Said from Iraq, and Ibrahim El-Salahi from Sudan. El-Nagdi, for example, described his work of the early 1960s and late 1970s as being inspired by the process of *tassawuf* or “becoming Sufi.” Informed by the linguistic and performative aspects of Sufi rituals, these artistic explorations often made use of Arabic script and the gestural motion of writing, linking them in art historical scholarship to *Hurufiyya*, or letterism. While the formal investigations of these artists manifested in what could be viewed as a universal language of abstraction, the works are inextricably linked to Islamic philosophical thought, Qur’anic and other spiritual texts, and to devotional rituals.

Omar El-Nagdi (Cairo, Egypt, 1931–2019)

Untitled, 1970, mixed media on wood

Omar El-Nagdi is best known for his rhythmic abstractions based on the repetition of the Indian (Eastern Arabic) numeral one, which shares its form with the first letter of the Arabic alphabet (*alef*) and the first letter in the name of God (Allah). He began using this minimal letterform to build his abstract compositions in the 1960s and 1970s—as in the untitled work here. Rhythmically repeating and layering the same symbol, El-Nagdi creates a pulsating image that channels meditative elements of Sufi practice, focusing in particular on the indivisible nature of the divine.

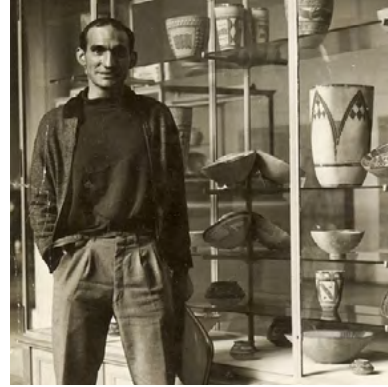


In 1953 El-Nagdi graduated from the School of Fine Arts in Cairo, where he studied under Egyptian painter Ahmed Sabri. Continuing his training in the Soviet Union and Italy, he immersed himself in the avant-garde circle around celebrated Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico, who became his mentor. Later he attended Venice's Accademia di Belle Arti, graduating in 1964. Following his return to Egypt, he was active in Cairo's art community, founding the Egyptian Mosaics Group in 1964 and becoming a member of the Liberal Artists' group (that also included intellectuals) headed by Taha Hussein. Throughout his career, El-Nagdi refused to commit to a single artistic style. Instead he drew inspiration from the diverse cultures of rural Egypt as well as from Cairo's urban district, Bab el-Shereya.

Shakir Hassan Al Said (Samawah, Iraq, 1925–Baghdad, Iraq, 2004)

Untitled, 1963, oil and plaster on wood

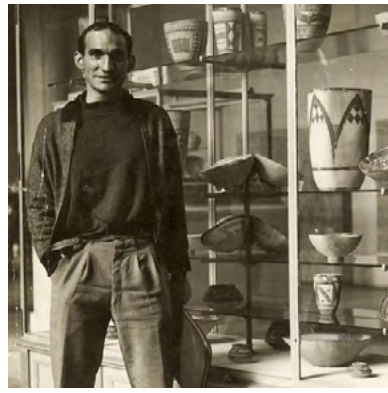
Shakir Hassan Al Said viewed the Arabic letter as a vehicle for negotiating new art forms. In this untitled work, he suspends letter-like elements upon an earth-toned background.



Shakir Hassan Al Said

(Samawah, Iraq, 1925–Baghdad, Iraq, 2004)

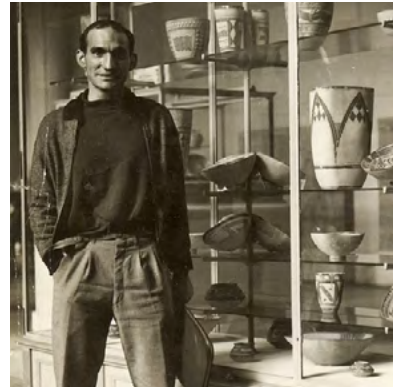
Untitled, c. 1970, oil on wood



Shakir Hassan Al Said (Samawah, Iraq, 1925–Baghdad, Iraq, 2004)

Al-Muntassirun (The Victorious), 1983, mixed media on wood

One of Iraq's most prominent artists, Shakir Hassan Al Said associated the act of artmaking with spiritual practices. Drawing inspiration from Islamic Sufism as well as Western philosophy, he sought "truth in all its dimensions." After initially pursuing a degree in social science, Al Said studied painting at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad, under the tutelage of Iraqi artist Jewad Selim. In 1951, with Selim, he founded the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, which sought to develop a distinctly Iraqi visual language; one that married international modernist styles with elements drawn from the country's heritage. Al Said also trained in Paris at the Académie Julian, the École des Arts Décoratifs, and the École des Beaux-Arts. In addition to Sufism, he drew inspiration from theoretical approaches he encountered in Paris, including structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction, phenomenology, and existentialism.



In his 1966 "Contemplative Art Manifesto," Al Said called for a meditative and transcendental approach that understood artmaking as an act of contemplation, not creation. Testing notions of form, matter, time, and the physical world, he scratched, carved, burned, and punctured surfaces, creating amorphous compositions to conjure up the universe itself. Incorporating Arabic letterforms, he aimed to "expose the unity of two worlds that are simultaneously inhabited, namely, the 'linguistic' world of thought and the 'plastic' world of sight." In 1971, driven by an interest in Sufism and metaphysics, Al Said founded the One Dimension (Al-Bu'd al-Wahid) group, which aimed to blur the lines between the self and the cosmos and to produce work from a transcendental understanding of the oneness and eternity of all.

Ibrahim El-Salahi (Omdurman, Sudan, 1930–)

The Last Sound, 1964, oil on canvas

A foundational figure in African modernism, Ibrahim El-Salahi creates intricately detailed compositions that draw on Islamic, African, Arab, and Western artistic traditions. In *The Last Sound*, he sparsely distributes muted abstract shapes across a square canvas. Intended to commemorate the death of the artist's father, the painting evokes the soul's passage from the corporeal to the celestial as it travels toward heavenly forms inhabiting the universe and beyond. With its inclusion of Arabic calligraphy, *The Last Sound* exemplifies El-Salahi's sustained engagement with *Hurufiyya*, which became popular in the 1950s and 1960s. In embracing Arabic letterforms, he strives to create an art that speaks across religious and ethnic divides.



El-Salahi studied painting at Gordon Memorial College in Khartoum between 1949 and 1951, then pursued calligraphy training in London. From 1954 to 1957, he attended the Slade School of Fine Art, where he experimented with modernist styles. Back in Sudan, he rediscovered his interest in local handicrafts and vernacular traditions. He taught at the College of Fine and Applied Art in Khartoum, and in the 1960s, he spearheaded the prominent art movement known as the Khartoum School. In 1964–65 El-Salahi moved to New York to study black-and-white photography at Columbia University. Later he traveled across the US, Mexico, and Brazil. El-Salahi's work has been exhibited across the world, including in a 2013 solo exhibition at London's Tate Modern—the museum's first retrospective devoted to an African artist.

Ahmad Shibrain (Berber, Sudan, 1931–Khartoum, Sudan, 2017)

Untitled, c. 1960s, mixed media on paper, laid down on fiberboard

Displaying a mixed array of calligraphy and abstract shapes, this piece exemplifies works from the 1960s by Ahmad Shibrain, a leading figure of modernism in Sudan. In the early 1950s Shibrain studied for two years at the College of Fine and Applied Art in Khartoum, and in 1957 he attended London's Central School of Art and Design. He co-founded



the Khartoum School in the 1960s, along with contemporaries Kamala Ishag and Ibrahim El-Salahi, whose work is on view nearby. The Khartoum School created a new visual style, *Sudanwiyya*, which incorporated abstracted Arabic calligraphy, the aesthetics of *Hurufiyya*, Islamic motifs, and local imagery to convey the cultural heritage of Sudan. In juxtaposing such local and pan-African traditions with Western influences, the group sought to forge a new visual language for modern Sudan.

In 1970 Shibrain was appointed head of the graphics department at the College of Fine and Applied Art in Khartoum, where he became dean in 1975. Under his leadership, the school served as an essential hub for contemporary art in Sudan and sub-Saharan Africa at large. In 1996 he founded the Shibrain Art Centre to showcase Sudanese contemporary and emerging artists. His works were included in the 1967 Bienal de São Paulo and a group show at the Museum of African Art in Washington, DC. He is the author of numerous books and essays.

Ahmad Shibrain (Berber,
Sudan, 1931–Khartoum, Sudan, 2017)

Untitled, 1965, oil, ink, and watercolor
on wood



Ahmad Shibrain (Berber,
Sudan, 1931–Khartoum, Sudan, 2017)

*Calligraphic
Compositions*, c. 1960s, mixed
media on paper

The brown curved mound and black
rectangular shape, seen here in *Cal-
ligraphic Compositions*, resemble archi-
tectural forms found in the oldest quarters of Khartoum.



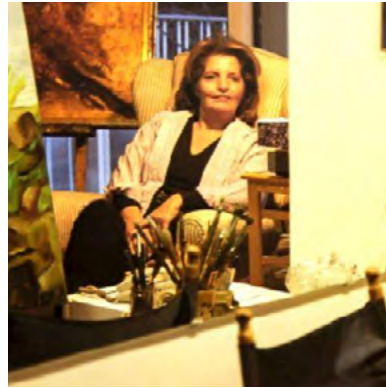


Several artists in this exhibition deploy subtle gestures of color, form, and texture, evoking intimations of landscapes. Transcending representational specificity, these works allow one to consider the landscape as a place of memory, longing, exile, and fragmentation. It is often a place shattered and destroyed, but persisting through grief and remembrance. At other times, it is an expression of a more generalized understanding of beauty. Artists draw on nature, topography, and horizons as a means to consider nature's multiplicity, and reflect on the ever-shifting state of the world around them.

Hind Nasser (Amman, Jordan, 1940–)

Ayla, 1975, oil on canvas

Hind Nasser painted this abstract landscape just before starting her training in 1976 with Fahrelnissa Zeid, a well-known Turkish artist. At Zeid's art school, in her house in Amman, Nasser worked alongside other female artists, including Ufemia Rizk, whose *Multiple Dimensions* is also in this exhibition.



After graduating from Beirut College for Women (now Lebanese American University) in 1961 with a degree in politics and history, Nasser helped develop the cultural scene in Jordan. She founded Beirut College's alumnae club, a children's club in Amman focused on theater and visual arts, and finally the Jordan Crafts Council to support traditional local crafts. She also co-founded the Jordan Museum for Archaeology. In 1995, she established the Jordan Arts and Crafts Center, followed by Gallery 14 for fine art exhibitions.



Video: Hind Nasser discusses abstraction
https://youtu.be/D9C58_V8v8U

Samir Rafi (Cairo, Egypt, 1926–Paris, France, 2004)

Untitled, 1959, oil on burlap

Best known for his surrealist approach to painting daily life in Egypt, Samir Rafi was a prominent member of the Contemporary Art Group, an artist collective founded in 1946 by pioneering artist Hussayn Yusuf Amin that sprang from an anti-colonial, nationalist consciousness inspired by folk symbolism. Its members often depicted workers and urban scenes.



As a youth, Rafi had studied with Amin, who organized Rafi's first exhibition in 1943, when he was seventeen.

Rafi attended the School of Fine Arts in Cairo and continued his training at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he earned advanced degrees in art and a PhD in art history. In the 1940s and 1950s, he actively participated in the Egyptian art scene, exploring surrealism as a member of the group Art et Liberté, and experimenting with printmaking and decorative arts. He was also a writer; his numerous published articles include one on the influence of the Egyptian revolution of 1952 on art.

In this painting, overlapping oval spirals and shapes possibly indicate intertwined bodily forms. Rafi's turn toward abstraction in this period may have been an act of self-censorship in order to avoid government crackdowns that led to the imprisonment of other Egyptian artists such as Inji Efflatoun, who painted "controversial" subjects like peasants and struggling workers.

Shafic Abboud (Bikfaya, Lebanon, 1926–Paris, France, 2004)

Cela fait quarante jours (It's Been Forty Days)
(Portrait of Christine Abboud), 1964, oil on canvas

Upon his return from France to Lebanon in September 1964 to prepare for his solo exhibition at Beirut's Centre d'Art Contemporain, Abboud suffered an extended period of creative anxiety—the “forty days” referenced in this work's title. During that time, he felt an irresistible urge to temper his abstraction and paint in a more figurative style—a conflict clearly visible in this portrait of his four-year-old daughter, Christine, playing with a doll near the window of their house in the Achrafieh neighborhood. Visible beside her are the colors of the French flag—blue, white, and red.



Shafic Abboud (Bikfaya, Lebanon, 1926–Paris, France, 2004)

La boîte à images (The Box of Images), 1975,
oil on canvas

Shafic Abboud consistently explored the material properties of various media, ranging from oil painting, ink, watercolor, and ceramic to artists' books—creating a versatile oeuvre that reveals his interest in and response to international modernism. In this work he layers multiple images, bringing them into a single space—the “box” of the title. Coating hues of green, orange, pink, purple, and blue one atop the other, he suggests a box overflowing with images as it rests on a table or counter.

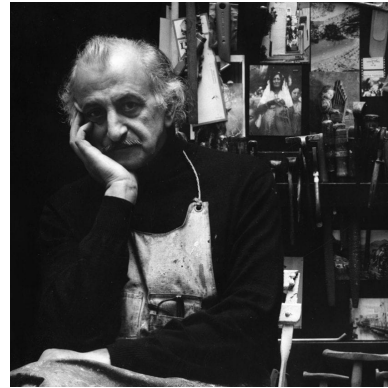


At Beirut's Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA), Abboud studied under Lebanese painter César Gemayel, whose teacher Khalil Saleeby had been a friend and colleague of American painter John Singer Sargent. In 1947 Abboud traveled to Paris, where he continued his training in the studios of André Lhote and Fernand Léger. In 1952 the Lebanese government granted him a scholarship to study drawing and engraving at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris; in 1959 his work was included in the first Biennale de Paris. In 2011, the Paris-based Institut du Monde Arabe hosted a major retrospective of his work that traveled to the Beirut Art Center the following year.

Shafic Abboud (Bikfaya, Lebanon, 1926–Paris, France, 2004)

Untitled, 1966, oil on canvas

Shafic Abboud's painterly gestures dominate this untitled composition, creating a lively scene. Its orange and red background appears to emanate from the canvas; at the left are hints of a mysterious figure. Such formal explorations of color and light were fundamental to the artist's practice.



Helen Khal (Allentown, Pennsylvania, 1923–Ajaltoun, Lebanon, 2009)

Untitled (Ochre over Brown), 1968, oil on canvas

Born in Pennsylvania to Lebanese immigrants, Helen Khal began her artistic career in the early 1940s. Following a 1946 visit with her grandfather in Tripoli, she settled in Lebanon. From 1946 to 1948, she studied under the well-known painter César Gemayel at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA), focusing on portraiture and still life. Soon Khal began experimenting with the ethereal, abstract color fields for which she is known today.



She composed *Untitled (Ochre over Brown)*, in golden color blocks that evoke a hazy, light-infused horizon. Scholars have pointed to Mark Rothko's color-field paintings as a source of inspiration. Since the 1960s, she has held a prominent place in Lebanon's art scene, as an artist, art critic, and educator. In 1963 she co-founded, with her husband, poet Yusuf Khal, Lebanon's first permanent art gallery, Gallery One in Beirut, which hosted exhibitions and fostered the local artists' community. Between 1967 and 1976, she taught at the American University of Beirut, switching to Lebanese American University from 1980 until 1997. In 1987, Khal published her groundbreaking book *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*.

Abdallah Benanteur (Mostaganem, Algeria, 1931–
Ivry-sur-Seine, France, 2017)

Lumière du sud (Southern Light), 1960, oil on
cardboard mounted on wood

Observing, reminiscing about, and imagining the world around him, Abdallah Benanteur uses subtle gestures of color, form, and texture to create shimmering abstract landscapes. *Lumière du sud* is a near-monochromatic representation of sunlight. Here, a vibrant range of browns and oranges evokes the heat and blossoming tones of the late afternoon sun.

Yet even as he captures the intensity of southern light, Benanteur transcends graphic specificity and employs subtle yet pulsating color effects.



Ramsès Younan (Minya, Egypt, 1913–Cairo, Egypt, 1966)

Composition No. 3, c. 1962–64, oil on canvas

In *Composition No. 3*, Ramsès Younan employs somber brown tones to conjure an evolving geological structure. Completed only two years before the artist's death, the painting is steeped in a haunting mood; a close examination reveals parts of human figures.



A painter, writer, and critic, Younan was born in Upper Egypt (along the Nile south of Cairo) and studied at the School of Fine Arts in Cairo, then began working as a secondary school art teacher in Tanta and Port Said. In the late 1930s he returned to Cairo and met the poet Georges Henein, considered the founder of Egyptian surrealism. Younan co-founded both the surrealist journal *La part du sable* and the Art et Liberté group, active from 1938 to 1946, through which Egyptian intellectuals and artists aligned themselves with the revolutionary spirit of French surrealism.

Younan's work frequently features tortured or dismembered bodies as a commentary against repression and in support of women's rights. An anarchist, Younan was forced to flee Egypt in 1947 and emigrated to France, where he worked at Radio France. His protests against France's role in the Suez Crisis of 1956 led to his return to Cairo. He continued to publish as an art critic and theorist until his death.

Abdallah Benanteur (Mostaganem, Algeria, 1931–
Ivry-sur-Seine, France, 2017)

To Monet, Giverny, 1983, oil on canvas

An early pioneer of Algerian modernism, Abdallah Benanteur wholeheartedly defended abstraction against the claims of figurative art. Titling this work in homage to Claude Monet and his garden at Giverny, he combines romantic impressionism with a variety of lively gestural techniques.



Benanteur spent his childhood in the port city of Mostaganem, painting and learning about music, poetry, and mysticism from his uncle and his father. After graduating from the École des Beaux-Arts in Oran in 1948, he moved to Paris in 1953 to begin a career as a painter and remained in France. Also a noted printmaker, he produced more than fifteen hundred artists' books, often collaborating with Algerian poets and Sufi mystics.

Following the establishment of the new Algerian state in 1962, Benanteur opposed the government-led approach of the National Union of Plastic Art (UNAP). While disentangling art from any purpose in the revolution, he believed that history would find in what seems “gratuitous” art a testimony to the nation's real values. Referring to the postwar period as a second Arab Renaissance (Al-Nahda), he argued that it is not through art that the artist should express his concern about the public life of the nation. Rather than represent the world, the artist must live in it and engage with it in all its forms. In the 1970s, Benanteur was appointed professor at the École des Beaux-Arts and the École des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. In 2003 a retrospective of his work was held at the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris.

Abdallah Benanteur (Mostaganem, Algeria, 1931–
Ivry-sur-Seine, France, 2017)

The Garden of Saadi, 1984, oil on canvas

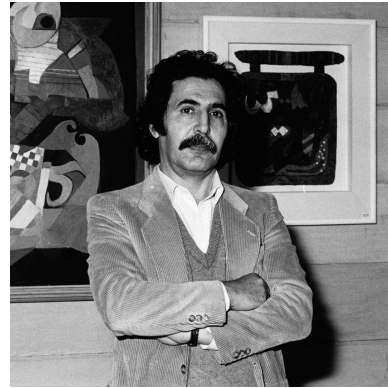
Perhaps titled in honor of Saadi Yacef, a leader of Algeria's National Liberation Front during the country's war of independence, Abdallah Benanteur's four-part canvas serves as a window into an abstract scene resembling a lush garden. Committed to articulating a new role for Algerian art, Benanteur ascribed to socialist decolonization rooted within a broader international context. In his artistic production, he alludes to both Algeria, his homeland, and France, where he spent much of his adult life.



Dia al-Azzawi (Baghdad, Iraq, 1929–)

Composition, 1976, oil on canvas

While at first glance this painting appears completely abstract, its composition hints at human figures resting alongside one another. Through muted tones and a carefully balanced arrangement, Dia al-Azzawi infuses the image with serenity and stillness.



After receiving a degree in archaeology from the University of Baghdad in 1962 and a diploma from the city's Institute of Fine Arts in 1964, Azzawi worked as an archaeologist and curator. His visual art often references ancient Mesopotamian and Islamic history and ethnography as well as modern Arabic literature. He participated in several art movements including the New Vision (Al-Ru'yah al-Jadida) group in 1969, which he co-founded; the One Dimension (Al-Bu'd al-Wahid) group; and the Plastic Artists' Society—as its secretary, he established the pioneering Al-Wasiti Festival in 1972.

In 1975, Azzawi left Iraq in response to the rise of Ba'athism, a nationalist movement that promoted state control over cultural institutions and standardization of artistic production. Moving to London, he served as adviser to the Iraqi Cultural Centre, where he curated numerous exhibitions. There he became deeply affected by international politics and events in the Arab world, and through his work gave visibility to the Palestinian cause and predicaments faced by the people of Iraq. Although known primarily as a painter and draftsman, Azzawi works in a wide variety of media, ranging from monumental sculpture to graphic design and both two- and three-dimensional printing. In his 2016–17 retrospective, more than 350 works, spanning more than half a century, were shown at two venues in Doha, Qatar.

Fouad Bellamine (Fez, Morocco, 1950–)

Untitled, 1973, mixed media on fiberboard

Fouad Bellamine's untitled painting of 1973 resembles a desert landscape. Executed in mixed media, including some areas with a sandy texture, the work has a soil-like, earthy quality. Bellamine often turned to Morocco's landscape for inspiration, using it to interrogate notions of identity through a sense of place. The dark purple and blues found in this composition's upper half signal the artist's transition into a minimalist aesthetic while also revealing his sensitivity to the interplay of light and shadow. An early work, this painting was made only one year after Bellamine began exhibiting in Rabat.

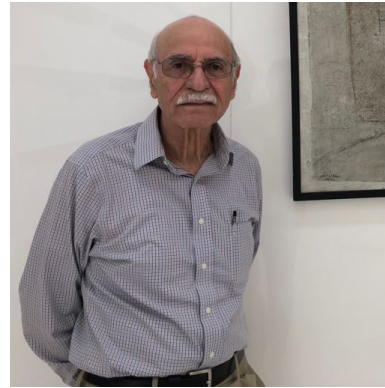


Born in Fez, Morocco, in 1950, he attended the Casablanca School of Applied Arts and quickly found his style, inspired by the light of Fez and its weaving alleyways and colors. In 1973, he began teaching plastic arts at Rabat University, leaving in 1984 to accept a grant to study in Paris. There he received an art diploma from the Sorbonne, writing a thesis on the concept of murals in contemporary painting.

Saadi Al-Kaabi (Najaf, Iraq, 1937–)

Composition, 1967–72, oil on canvas

Saadi Al-Kaabi deploys simplified color planes and dynamic contours to create abstract forms. In *Composition*, he applies thick, highly textured layers of earth-toned paint. Evoking an aerial landscape view, he concentrates darker tones at the center, with lines and shapes extending out toward the painting's edges.



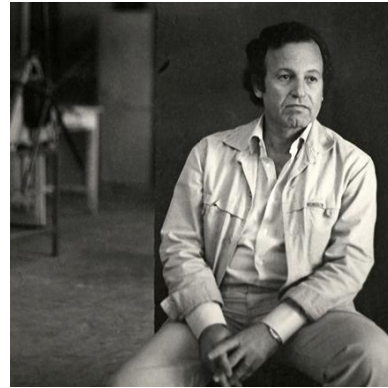
A member of the second generation of Iraqi modernist artists, Al-Kaabi graduated from Baghdad's Institute of Fine Arts in 1960. Drawing together modern aesthetic influences with others from Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian, and Islamic art, his work explores nuances of the human condition. His signature style first emerged in the 1970s, when he married figural forms and geometric shapes with symbols of Iraq's history. Al-Kaabi often engages with a broader discourse concerned with fashioning new national identities, by looking to the past in search of cultural authenticity.

Al-Kaabi has participated in numerous international exhibitions, including the 37th Venice Biennale in 1976. He served as president of the Iraqi Plastic Artists' Society between 1986 and 1990. In the 1980s, he destroyed his archive of press clippings covering his career in an attempt to circumvent his success and begin a new chapter. He currently lives and works in Los Angeles.

Rafa Nasiri (Tikrit, Iraq, 1940–Amman, Jordan, 2013)

Untitled (Baghdad), 1975, acrylic on canvas

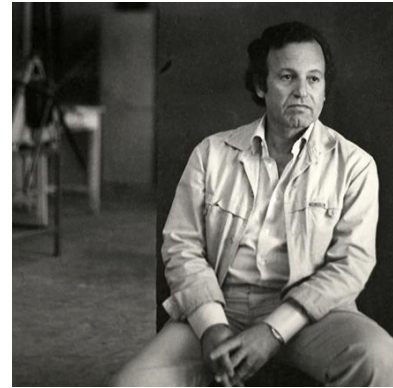
Here Rafa Nasiri evokes Baghdad in an atmospheric landscape that merely hints at a skyline, figures, and urban streets. Marshaling somber colors and fluid, gestural lines, he creates a mysterious abstract space. Intensely focused on the inner life, he was influenced by poetry and traditional Chinese ink-wash painting, with its emphasis on telling brushwork and negative space. Between 1959 and 1963, Nasiri pursued his interest in Chinese art by studying printmaking at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts.




Rafa Nasiri (Tikrit, Iraq, 1940–Amman, Jordan, 2013)

Variations of the Horizon No. 5, 1979, acrylic on canvas

Rafa Nasiri was celebrated for his compelling abstract works, which called on nature and calligraphy for inspiration. In *Variations of the Horizon No. 5* he draws on nature in the form of repeated horizons as a means to consider nature's multiplicity rather than as a naturalistic view. In parsing the horizon's variations, he reflects on the ever-shifting state of the world around him. The stacked shape at the bottom contains letterforms, reflecting his interest in Arabic calligraphy.



A founding member of the New Vision (Al-Ru'yah al-Jadida) group that formed in Baghdad in response to the 1967 Six-Day War, Nasiri taught with his fellow members at several universities throughout the region. Following the Gulf War in 1991, he moved to Amman to teach; there he played an instrumental role in launching the printmaking studio at Darat al-Funun (Khalid Shoman Foundation). In 1997 Nasiri moved to Bahrain to teach at the national university, and in 2003 he returned to Amman, where he lived and worked until his death.



Human anatomy became a charged area of investigation for a number of modernist artists interested in exploring questions of identity, sexuality, and gender theory. In the work of some, dizzying entanglements of abstracted limbs and organs suggest not only that the human is no longer recognizable, but also that the social world has fostered an environment in which the body is no longer separate from an idealized object world—and that, even more drastically, it is subject to the latter’s relentless abstracting logic.

Huguette Caland, for example, in her minimalist composition *Bribes de corps (Body Parts)*, draws out the erotic sensuality of curved contours. Stopping short of pure abstraction, her painting serves as a nuanced representation of the female form. Afaf Zurayk’s works, too, often suggest the human body, straddling the boundary between motion and stillness, color and shadow. Zurayk demonstrates mastery in depicting transitory subjects bathed in soft light. Crystallizing a moment inside the unrelenting passage of time, she adds weight to an instant that might otherwise be overlooked.

Huguette Caland (Beirut, Lebanon, 1931–2019)

Bribes de corps (Body Parts), 1971, oil on canvas

In *Bribes de corps (Body Parts)*, an early painting from a series of the same name, Huguette Caland covers the canvas with a curved, voluminous shape in pulsing orange red. Caland's exploration of sensuality and eroticism pushed the limits of abstraction and legibility of bodily forms, in order for her to, in her words, "find another type of seduction, out of the ordinary."



Afaf Zurayk (Beirut, Lebanon, 1948–)

Human Form, 1983, oil on two canvases

While mostly abstract, Afaf Zurayk's paintings are also suggestive of human forms. She based these two canvases on close-up drawings of her own fingers, hands, neck, and shoulders, made alone in her studio. All Zurayk's work is imbued with her absorption in relationships between light and shadow, solitude and darkness, inflected by her experiences during the Lebanese Civil War.



Born in Beirut, Zurayk graduated from the American University of Beirut with a BA in fine art. She then pursued graduate studies in art history at Harvard University, obtaining an MA in 1972. She went on to teach studio art and art history at Beirut University College (now the Lebanese American University) as well as drawing and painting in Washington, DC at the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design, and Georgetown University. Zurayk has published three books: *My Father: Reflections* (2010), a personal rendition of a complex relationship through photographs of her clay sculptures; *Lovesong* (2011), a celebration of love through poetry and painting; and *Drawn Poems* (2012), a portfolio of ink drawings. She was later a professor of fine art at the American University of Beirut.



Video: Afaf Zurayk discusses her technique
<https://youtu.be/sD0zrgT9zdo>


Suheyla Takesh, Lynn Gumpert, and Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi

Taking Shape Interviews

In this series of interviews, Suheyla Takesh and Lynn Gumpert, *Taking Shape*'s co-curators, and Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation, discuss the exhibition's conception and scope, as well as the historic context for abstraction in the Arab world.



Video: <https://youtu.be/poklgGOG9PE>



Twentieth-century artists throughout North Africa and West Asia expressed great interest in geometry and mathematics, and a number of artists cited Islamic geometry as a source of inspiration for their nonfigurative experiments. Most notably, Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair—in a 1951 article in the Beirut journal *al-Abhath* arguing for the importance of “essence” in literature, philosophy, and the visual arts—used Islamic geometry as an example of how an archetypal Arab artist “purifies [art] of admixtures” and rejects distorting truth through illusory, realistic painting. The legacy of Islamic geometry is manifested in the work of twentieth-century artists not only through direct references to the shapes and forms in regional architecture, carpets, textiles, and other media, but also through the study of the underlying elements of geometric designs, including symmetry, rotation, reflection, and layering. These principles were interpreted in novel ways through painting and sculpture, and while they mutated from their source in function and aesthetic, they retained a visceral connection to local architecture and crafts.

Samia Halaby (Jerusalem, Palestine, 1936–)

Two Diagonals, 1968, oil on linen

Samia Halaby completed *Two Diagonals* and *White Cube in Brown Cube*, on view nearby, following a visit to Egypt, Syria, and Turkey in 1966. That same year she received a grant from the Kansas City Art Institute in Missouri, where she was teaching, which enabled her to pursue study of Islamic architecture. On this trip, she visited and photographed mosques, examining construction principles and geometric lattices commonly found in Islamic patterns.



Born in Jerusalem, Halaby is a Palestinian artist, scholar, and art historian known for abstract works that draw on her fascination with the act of seeing and visual perception. Raised in Jaffa, Halaby emigrated with her family to Lebanon in the wake of Al-Nakba, the 1948 occupation and exodus of Palestine. During her years in the Middle East, Islamic geometric forms were part of her daily life. In 1951 she moved to Ohio, then earned an MFA in painting from Indiana University. She was the first woman to attain the rank of associate professor at the Yale School of Art, a position she held for nearly a decade.



Video: Samia Halaby discusses criticism
<https://youtu.be/BkKuhu1bWts>

Samia Halaby (Jerusalem, Palestine, 1936–)

White Cube in Brown Cube, 1969, oil on canvas

Samia Halaby painted *White Cube in Brown Cube* during her period of geometric experimentation between 1966 and 1970. Exploring how the color of painted volumes facilitates illusions of depth and space, she found inspiration in nature, Islamic designs, and architecture.

On the construction of this painting, Halaby explained, “I placed a smaller white cube inside a larger brown cube and allowed the perimeter of one side of the larger brown cube to coincide with the square edge of the painting. We only see the top surface of the smaller white cube and thus it appears to float as a white square in the brown space.”



Through her art, writing, and curatorial work, Halaby has long advocated for Palestinian rights. In the 1980s, she experimented with electronic media, teaching herself computer programming languages and collaborating with musicians to create live kinetic performances.

Néjib Belkhodja (Tunis, Tunisia, 1933–2007)

Abstraction Number 45, 1964, oil on canvas

A central figure in Tunisian modern art, Néjib Belkhodja often referenced structural elements from the medina of Tunis, one of the first Arab Muslim towns in the Maghreb. In this work he plays with Tunis's sleek classical dome shapes, archways, and rooflines to create an abstract composition.



Belkhodja studied at the Institut des Beaux-Arts in Tunis and began exhibiting locally in 1956. Continuing his career in Rome and Paris, he was influenced by the art of Robert Delaunay and Wassily Kandinsky. He exhibited in Europe and across North Africa, including in Egypt. In 1987, Belkhodja joined the architect Slah Smaoui in designing and constructing the picturesque village of Kèn, on the Mediterranean coast south of Tunis. In 1991, he held a joint exhibition in Tunis with Iraqi artist Dia al-Azzawi, whose *Composition* is on view nearby.

Saloua Raouda Choucair (Beirut, Lebanon, 1916–2017)

Composition in Yellow, 1962–65, oil on fiberboard

Saloua Raouda Choucair is widely considered one of Lebanon's first abstract artists. Acclaimed for her pioneering vision and intellectual approach, she found sources of inspiration in mathematics and science as well as in Islamic art, architecture, geometric patterns, and spirituality. Choucair used an algorithmically generated method to transform primary spaces and lines



into increasingly complex abstract forms. Drawing on her academic background in mathematics and physics, as well as her Druze faith, she grounded works like *Composition in Yellow* in irregular geometric shapes to capture the essence of Islamic heritage.

In the mid-1930s, Choucair studied natural sciences at Beirut's American Junior College for Women, and in 1942, she trained in the studio of Lebanese artist Omar Onsi; in 1946 she attended Lebanese painter Moustafa Farroukh's art classes at the American University of Beirut. Moving to Paris in 1948, she enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts and in the studio of Fernand Léger. Her first nonfigurative works date from the early 1950s, when she was studying with Léger. At the same time, her inclination toward geometric shapes and Arabic letterforms led her to organize, with other avant-garde artists, the Atelier de l'Art Abstrait. In 1951 she returned to Beirut, where she lived and worked until her death in 2017. In 2011 the Beirut Art Center honored her with a retrospective, as did Tate Modern, London, in 2013.

Saloua Raouda Choucair (Beirut, Lebanon, 1916–2017)

Interform, 1960, wood

In this sculpture, Saloua Raouda Choucair draws upon two essential elements of Islamic design—the straight line and the curve. Dynamic yet balanced, *Interform* is made of solid planes and voids that generate a sense of both architectural presence and spatial rhythm.

Choucair's transition from painting to sculpture in the 1960s enabled her to explore movement and silence inspired by Arabic verse and music. She often employs interlocking modular elements, connecting them to one another like a puzzle.



Saliba Douaihy (Ehden, Lebanon, 1915–New York City, 1994)

Untitled, c. 1960s, oil on canvas board

Known for his minimalist aesthetic, Saliba Douaihy works in a precise, hard-edged style grounded in his keen interest in color and form. His works on view here epitomize his 1960s practice, which was deeply influenced by American artist Josef Albers. This canvas is dominated by a vast swath of blue, spliced with red, yellow, green, and black. Although Douaihy's asymmetrical shapes lie on a single flat plane, in layering them he creates a nuanced illusion of depth.



Saliba Douaihy (Ehden, Lebanon, 1915–New York City, 1994)

Untitled, 1965, acrylic on canvas



Menhat Helmy (Helwan, Egypt, 1925–Cairo, Egypt, 2004)
Space Exploration/Universe, 1973, oil on canvas

Born in Helwan, Egypt, Menhat Helmy received her early education at Cairo's High Institute of Pedagogic Studies for Art before moving to London to study etching at the Slade School of Fine Art between 1952 and 1955. Marked by socialist ideas and revolutionary themes, Helmy's early work depicts laborers, farmers, and elaborate rural scenes.



Her later abstract works, like *Space Exploration/Universe*, employ geometry to create intricate, conceptual compositions. Throughout her career, Helmy participated in international exhibitions, winning numerous prizes. She was a professor of fine arts at Helwan University in Cairo and an honorary professor of etching at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence. She also served as a member of the Print-makers Council in the United Kingdom.



Video: Karim Zeidan, Menhat Helmy's grandson, discusses *Space Exploration*
<https://youtu.be/SgcAY1vAawQ>

Nabil Nahas (Beirut, Lebanon, 1949–)

Untitled (Kitty Hawk), 1980, acrylic on canvas

Nabil Nahas is best known for his densely tactile, large-scale monochromatic paintings. Primarily an abstract artist, he creates intricate patterns from natural objects, such as starfish and cedar, olive, and palm trees. His major sources of inspiration include nature and the geometries of Islamic art. In *Untitled (Kitty Hawk)*—named after the town in North

Carolina near where the Wright brothers successfully flew the first powered aircraft—he layers angular forms one on top of the other.



Jafar Islah (Kuwait City, 1946–)
Untitled, 1967, acrylic on canvas



Jafar Islah (Kuwait City, 1946–)

The Void, 1967, acrylic on canvas

One of Kuwait's most prolific modern artists, Jafar Islah often incorporates Islamic geometry in his work. At first glance, this painting appears black, but when approaching the canvas, twenty different colors may be distinguished, one atop the other.



Jafar Islah (Kuwait City, 1946–)

Colors with Black and Gray, 1968, acrylic on canvas

Setting each part of this composition slightly off center, Jafar Islah achieves a balance between complete abstraction and organic presence. Islah has cited Paul Klee's 1922 painting *Senecio* as an influence on this work.



In 1970, Islah received his BA in architecture from the University of California, Berkeley. While studying there on one of the first scholarships from Kuwait University to send students abroad, he encountered the writings of medieval Islamic philosopher Abu Nasr al-Farabi. Farabi introduced Islah to the concept of “less is more” that informed his minimalist approach. In addition, Islah absorbed from a mathematician neighbor the concept that zero is the largest number.

Pursuing multiple influences and interests, Islah employs symbols and references from a variety of cultures; as a result, his work does not conform to any specific style, medium, or ideology. Throughout his career, he has challenged the notion that abstraction's origins lie solely in the West; instead, he merges multiple cultural traditions into his understanding of nonfigurative forms. He has lived and worked in Kuwait, Denmark, Egypt, France, India, Indonesia, Italy, Turkey, and the US, and has exhibited widely, including at the Kuwait National Museum (1984); first Cairo Biennial (1984); and Egyptian Academy in Rome (1991). He received a solo retrospective at Kuwait's Contemporary Art Platform in 2012.

Miloud Labied (El Kelâa des Sraghna, Morocco, 1939–Rabat, Morocco, 2008)

Untitled, 1970s, oil on canvas

In this somber, nearly monochromatic painting, Miloud Labied arranges deep-toned geometric shapes. At the time he completed the work, Moroccan artists were negotiating their roles in developing a modernist Moroccan visual language.



Labied was a member of the Casablanca School—an avant-garde movement that emerged from the city’s École des Beaux-Arts in the mid-1960s and sought to liberate art from the legacy of French colonialism. From 1958, when he had his first solo exhibition at the Oudaya Museum in Rabat, to 1962, he apprenticed with French-born artist Jacqueline Brodskis at Morocco’s Ministry of Youth and Sports. In 1974 Labied attended the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Labied participated in exhibitions in Morocco, Egypt, France, Portugal, and Denmark. In his Rabat apartment, he displayed paintings by his friends alongside his collection of art deco furniture.

Hassan Sharif (Bandar Lengeh, Iran, 1951–Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 2016)

Black and White, 1985, oil on canvas

This work evokes a sculptural quality in its divided canvas, possibly deriving from Hassan Sharif's practice as a multimedia artist. Composed of nearly identical quadrilateral shapes, the painting's two halves present the inverse of each other. Although Sharif textures the surface of his off-white paint, it simulates a void when paired with the black, which upon closer inspection is riddled with cream and brown streaks.



Sharif had a deep interest in everyday life, often creating assemblages with found and mass-produced objects that critique global consumerist culture and corporate elitism. Over four decades as an artist, he created performances, drawings, paintings, installations, and sculpture. While studying at London's Byam Shaw School of Art in the 1980s, he developed an interest in the Fluxus movement, intervention-based methodologies, and British constructivism. Upon his return to Dubai in 1984, Sharif continued to experiment, documenting Fluxus-inspired performances in the desert that included walking, jumping, and throwing stones. A leader in the development of conceptual art in the UAE, Sharif co-founded the Flying House in 2007.

Mahmoud Sabri (Baghdad, Iraq, 1927–Maidenhead, United Kingdom, 2012)

Water, from the series *Quantum Realism*, c. 1970, oil on canvas

Among the most revered figures in Iraqi modernist art, Mahmoud Sabri articulated an artistic theory called Quantum Realism that saw nature as a “complex of processes.” He sought to represent his theory through a color-coded system with a three-fold foundation: the quantum (the basic energy/color unit), the atom (a group of quanta), and the structural process (the graphic equivalent of nature’s chemical processes, combining atoms into “substances”). Each of these elements can be found in *Water*, with its rigid shapes crossing over one another in bright colors.

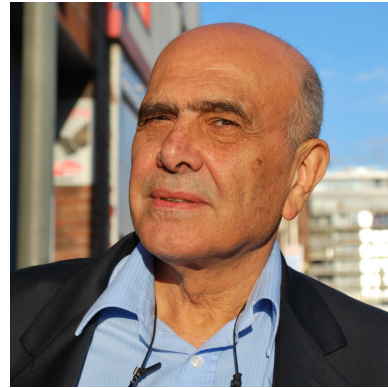


In 1947, while pursuing a degree in social sciences at Loughborough University in Leicestershire, England, Sabri participated in an exhibition at the embassy of Iraq in London, alongside other leading Iraqi modernists, including Hafidh Droubi, Atta Sabri, and Jewad Selim. After returning to Iraq, Sabri joined the Pioneers Group—formerly the Société Primitive—and worked closely with artist and educator Faiq Hassan. The group’s guiding principle was to take art outside the studio and into the streets, painting directly from their surroundings. In 1960 Sabri studied at Moscow’s Surikov Art Institute with socialist realist painter Aleksandr Deyneka, and in 1963 he moved to Prague to join the Committee for the Defense of the Iraqi People. While in Prague, Sabri published the manifesto “The New Art of Quantum Realism,” which advocated for the application of scientific method in art.

Mohanna Durra (Amman, Jordan, 1934–2021)

Transparency, 1970, oil on canvas

Mohanna Durra is hailed as one of Jordan's first painters to experiment with abstract art. *Transparency* exemplifies his geometric compositions and his technique of layering color not only to produce depth and texture, but also to convey a sense of motion. Although at first glance this work's palette appears subdued, upon closer inspection the colors become progressively brighter toward the center, where Durra spotlights individual lines, shapes, and planes.



Born in Amman to a Lebanese father and a Turkish mother, Durra studied with Russian artist George Aleef and Dutch artist William Hallowin. Their artistic principles informed Durra's early practice, which centered on light's ability to evoke dramatic movement and energy, as well as on a preference for figurative and portrait painting. During his four years at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, Durra developed an interest in abstraction. Returning to Amman in 1958, he pursued a career as a diplomat, shuttling between Amman and Rome. Upon his return to Jordan in 1970, he helped found the Jordan Institute of Fine Arts, where he served as director until its closing in 1980. In 2002 the government of Jordan issued a postage stamp bearing an image of one of his paintings. Durra taught at the School of Arts and Design, University of Jordan, and was president of the Jordan Association of Fine Arts until his death.



Taking Shape

Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s


This exhibition explores mid-twentieth-century abstract art from North Africa, West Asia, and the Arab diaspora—a vast geographic expanse that encompasses diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. Comprising nearly ninety works by artists from countries including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the exhibition is drawn from the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation based in Sharjah, UAE. The paintings, sculpture, drawings, and prints on view here reflect the wide range of nonfigurative art practices that flourished in the Arab world over the course of four decades.

Decolonization, the rise and fall of Arab nationalisms, socialism, rapid industrialization, wars and mass migrations, and the oil boom transformed the region during this period. With rising opposition to Western political and military involvement, many artists adopted critical viewpoints, striving to make art relevant to their own locales. New opportunities for international travel and the advent of circulating exhibitions sparked cultural and educational exchanges that exposed artists to multiple modernisms—including various modes of abstraction—and led them to consider their roles within an international context.

The artists featured in this exhibition—a varied group of Arab, Amazigh (Berber), Armenian, Circassian, Jewish, Persian, and Turkish descent—sought to localize and recontextualize existing twentieth-century modernisms, some forming groups to address urgent issues. Moving away from figuration, they mined the expressive capacities of line, color, and texture. Inspired by Arabic calligraphy, geometry, and mathematics, Islamic decorative patterns, and spiritual practices, they expanded abstraction's vocabulary—thereby complicating its genealogies of origin and altering the viewer's understanding of nonobjective art.

At its heart, *Taking Shape* raises a fundamental question: How do we study abstraction across different contexts, and what modes of analysis do we use? Examining critically the history and historiography of mid-twentieth-century abstraction, the exhibition rethinks art historical canons and expands discourses around global modernisms.

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s is organized by the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, and curated by Suheyla Takesh and Lynn Gumpert. Major support is provided by the Barjeel Art Foundation. Additional generous support is provided by the Charina Endowment Fund; the Violet Jabara Charitable Trust; the Grey's Director's Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends; and the Abby Weed Grey Trust. At the McMullen Museum, the exhibition has been underwritten by Boston College with major funding from the Patrons of the McMullen Museum.



Nonobjective art, promising values of multiplicity, plurality, and heterogeneity, encouraged a more varied expression of individuality among artists in the Arab world than had been possible previously. The work on display in this gallery not only expanded the vocabulary of abstraction at midcentury but also complicated genealogies of origin, altering how we understand the history of nonobjective modern art in general.

Artists at this time were inspired by a wide array of subjects—including mystical practices of transcendental spiritual devotion, specificities of language and symbolic signification, local landscapes and urban environments, scientific discoveries, and imaginations of outer space. The highly diverse work of these artists challenges a canonical construction of uninterrupted lineages as well as the possibility of mapping a history of abstraction along neat geographic lines.

This gallery of the exhibition invites visitors to (re)consider the attribution of abstraction's emergence to a single historical moment, understanding it instead within the context of numerous, parallel modernisms.

Simone Fattal (Damascus, Syria, 1942–)

Celestial Forms, 1973, oil on canvas

Straddling the worlds of visual art and literature, Simone Fattal creates sculptures, nonfigurative ceramics, paintings, collages, and text-based pieces. Born in Syria, she studied philosophy at the École Supérieure des Lettres in Beirut, and later at the Sorbonne in Paris. Returning to Beirut in 1969, she began her career as a painter, exploring Sufi and other religious texts as well as the local landscape. She developed an elegant gestural style. Drawing on a rich vocabulary inspired by her knowledge of Arab history, ancient and modern Arabic literature, and women's history, Fattal creates abstract renditions of nature and the human form. With its white palette mixed with shades of pink, *Celestial Forms* exemplifies her early work. At first glance, the billowy shapes resemble soft, cotton candy-like clouds, but upon closer inspection one can make out contours of the human body.



In 1980 Fattal moved to California with her partner, Lebanese American artist Etel Adnan, whose painting *Autumn in Yosemite Valley* is on view nearby. Two years later, Fattal founded Post-Apollo Press (1982–2014), a publishing house inspired by the spirit of exploration and adventure characteristic of the Apollo space program. At the press, she published experimental poetry, prose, and works in translation. In 1989 she enrolled at the San Francisco Art Institute, turning her attention back to the visual arts, particularly ceramics and sculpture. In the early 2000s, she and Adnan returned to France, where they live today. An exhibition of her work was held at MoMA PS1 in New York in 2019.

Huguette Caland (Beirut, Lebanon, 1931–2019)

City II, 1968, oil on canvas

Spanning more than five decades, Huguette Caland's career was strongly marked by her fierce dedication to freedom and personal autonomy. The daughter of Bechara el-Khoury, the first president of independent Lebanon, Caland trained with Italian painter Fernando Manetti in Beirut. In 1970 she moved to Paris, leaving her husband and teenage children, to explore an array of disciplines and to begin making the abstract paintings and drawings for which she is best known that highlight the sensual nature of human bodies.



In 1997 Caland moved to Venice, California, where her home served as a gathering place for local artists; she remained there until returning to Beirut in 2013. In 2018 the Institute of Arab and Islamic Art in New York showed a retrospective of her work.

Etel Adnan (Beirut, Lebanon, 1925–)

Autumn in Yosemite Valley, 1963–64, oil on canvas

Growing up in Lebanon, Etel Adnan developed great linguistic aptitude having been immersed in a medley of languages, including Greek, Turkish, Arabic, and French. This multilingual childhood fed her artistic desire to create abstract landscapes in order to, in her words, “humanize the environment.” In *Autumn in Yosemite Valley* she arranges geometric patches of bright color and textured paint.



After studying philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris, where she composed her first poems in French, Adnan pursued graduate studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and at Harvard University. Abandoning the use of French in protest against France’s hostilities in Algeria, she turned to visual art and also to transcribing Arab poets, reading Sufi poetry, and creating vibrantly colored artists’ books. Between 1980 and the early 2000s, Adnan lived in California with her partner, Simone Fattal, whose painting *Celestial Forms* is on view nearby. In 2014, Adnan received France’s prestigious Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres. She and Fattal currently live and work in Paris.

Maliheh Afnan (Haifa, Palestine, 1935–London, United Kingdom, 2016)

Mindscape, 1961, oil on canvas

Obscured by a heavily textured, hazy gray, Maliheh Afnan's haunting *Mindscape* reflects her interest in texts and writing. Born in Palestine to Iranian parents of the Bahá'í faith, she witnessed the exodus of 1948 (Al-Nakba) and moved to Beirut with her family the following year. There she received a BA from the American University in Beirut, then moved on to the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design in Washington, DC for her MFA. Afnan lived in Kuwait during the mid-1960s, in Beirut from the mid-1960s to mid-1970s, and in Paris for the following two decades. In 1979, she relocated to London. Although her work has been exhibited primarily in France and London, her paintings are found in numerous museum collections around the world.



Ezequiel Baroukh (Alexandria, Egypt, 1909–1984)

Composition, c. 1955, oil on cardboard

Densely packed with colorful geometric forms, Ezequiel Baroukh's *Composition* reflects his fascination with cubism and abstraction. A Jewish Egyptian artist, Baroukh began his studies at the French Lycée in Alexandria before studying at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome. In 1940 Baroukh joined both the surrealist Art et Liberté movement and the Alexandrian Artistic Group, where he organized art events and exhibited his work, which then featured figurative imagery.

In the early 1940s, Baroukh and other Egyptian artists of Jewish origin were active in Alexandria's and Cairo's intellectual circles, where they connected with exiles from Fascist Italy and elsewhere in Europe. Following his move to Paris in 1946, Baroukh's work evolved from figuration to cubism and then to abstraction, exemplified by *Composition*.

Saliba Douaihy (Ehden, Lebanon, 1915–New York City, 1994)

Untitled, 1963, oil on canvas

Saliba Douaihy is one of Lebanon's most prominent abstract painters. Born into an old, storied Maronite family of French extraction, he received classical formal training—one that placed great emphasis on figurative, religious subjects. He apprenticed with the academic Lebanese painter Habib Srour before continuing his studies in Paris at the École des Beaux-Arts. During his four years in Paris, he won prizes for his drawings and paintings. Returning to Lebanon in 1936, he opened his own studio. By the 1940s, he began developing his interest in modern art, mainly through experiments with color.

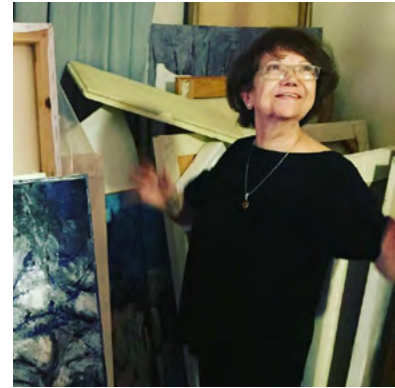


In 1950 he emigrated to New York, where he met artists like Mark Rothko, Hans Hofmann, and Ad Reinhardt whose abstract styles transformed his practice. In 1955, Douaihy returned to Lebanon and completed commissions for churches. He returned to New York in 1963 and eventually became a US citizen. In 1965, one of his paintings was donated to New York's Museum of Modern Art. In the 1980s, he moved back to Lebanon, and toward the end of his life, he relocated to Paris and then back to New York. He painted murals and created stained glass windows not only for churches in Lebanon, but also for Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Cathedral in Brooklyn and Our Lady of the Cedars of Lebanon in Boston.

Asma Fayoumi (Amman, Jordan, 1943–)

Ritha' Madina (Requiem of a City), 1968, oil on canvas

Asma Fayoumi's artistic career coincided with the emergence of a school of Syrian abstraction led by Italian painter Guido La Regina, who taught at Damascus University. Alongside Assad Arabi, Faek Dahdouh, and Sakher Farzat, Fayoumi attended the university's College of Fine Arts. These artists became critical figures in Syrian art's transition from realism to contemporary forms of abstraction.



With her first solo exhibition in Damascus in 1966, Fayoumi made her mark on the regional art scene. *Ritha' Madina (Requiem of a City)* exemplifies her early work, which focuses on abstract representations of architectural forms and street views. Inspired by Arabic poetry, her layered imagery packs an emotional punch through its dynamic composition, bold colors, and strong gestural marks. In her recent work, Fayoumi focuses on Syria's political turmoil as well as on the depiction of mythical figures, often female.

Abdel Hady el-Gazzar (Alexandria, Egypt, 1925–Cairo, Egypt, 1966)

The Light from within the Green, 1958, oil, pen, and ink on paper

Born in Alexandria, Abdel Hady el-Gazzar moved with his family in 1940 to Cairo, where he joined the art club at Hilmiya Secondary School, winning prizes in school drawing competitions. The club was led by Hussein Youssef Amin, an artist who rejected Western academic approaches to artmaking.



El-Gazzar entered medical school in 1944 but soon left to attend Cairo's School of Fine Arts. After graduating in 1950, he held his first solo exhibition at the Egyptian Museum of Modern Art in Cairo; four years later, he earned a scholarship to study in Rome.

While in Italy, el-Gazzar participated in Bari's Monstra Nazionale di Pittura Contemporanea (National Exhibition of Contemporary Paintings), where he won the silver medal. He also exhibited works in the 26th, 28th, and 30th Venice Biennales in 1952, 1956, and 1960. A renowned and influential Egyptian artist, el-Gazzar is best known for focusing on the stark poverty of Cairo's working class and for other political critiques.

Adam Henein (Cairo, Egypt, 1929–2020)

The First Blush of Morning, 1986, gouache and gum arabic on papyrus

The First Blush of Morning demonstrates Adam Henein's practice of interweaving universal themes and motifs—motherhood, prayer, birds, and boats among them—with references to specifically Egyptian icons like pyramids, obelisks, Pharaonic kings, and hieroglyphs. Part of a larger series, this work was painted on papyrus and, like the artist's sculptures, conveys a simplicity of form.



Born into a family of silversmiths, Henein graduated from Cairo's School of Fine Arts in 1953 and traveled to Upper Egypt to work in Luxor, becoming immersed in the region's ancient legacy of sculpture and architecture. Continuing his training at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, he relocated to Paris in 1971. After returning to Egypt in 1996, Henein founded an annual symposium on sculpture. Establishing his home and studio near Giza, a center for traditional arts and architecture, he opened the Adam Henein Museum in Cairo in 2014. Henein's artistic contributions have been recognized with exhibitions and awards across the Middle East, Europe, and the United States.

Ibrahim Ismail (Kuwait City, 1945–)

Earthquake, Agadir, 1967, oil on canvas

A major figure in Kuwait's art world, Ibrahim Ismail is best known for landscapes rendered in vibrant colors in a segmented style, and paintings of daily life that capture public and private spaces and the people in them.



He depicts old marketplaces, street corners, and shops, as well as political events and themes of Kuwaiti heritage. With its vibrant purples, yellows, blues, greens, oranges, and pinks, *Earthquake, Agadir* conveys the chaos unleashed by a major tremor of the 1960 earthquake in Agadir, Morocco, which caused the deaths of thousands of people and left many others homeless.

After graduating from Kuwait's Teachers Institute in 1968, Ismail attended the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts, where he majored in décor engineering. A member of the Kuwaiti Society for Formative Arts, he represented Kuwait at the first Arab Biennial, held in Baghdad in 1974. Also known as a writer, in 1990 he published a book on the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait titled *Hitler once Again*. His work has been included in over one hundred exhibitions throughout the Middle East, Europe, the United States, and Japan. In 2015 Kuwait's Boushahri Art Gallery mounted a retrospective of his work.

Munira Al-Kazi (Pune, India, 1939–)

Untitled, c. 1960–65, mixed media on canvas

In Kuwait, Munira Al-Kazi was one of the earliest experimenters in nonrepresentational painting. She went on to enjoy a highly successful and acclaimed career. She was born in Pune, India, to a prominent Saudi Kuwaiti merchant family that had relocated to India in the first half of the twentieth century, and then returned to Kuwait after the discovery of oil. Sponsored by Kuwait University's study abroad program, she attended London's Central School of Art and Design. Following her graduation in 1961, she established her studio in London.



In 1965, the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired one of her works. Quickly attracting numerous Kuwaiti collectors, her paintings were included in the inaugural exhibition of the Sultan Gallery in 1969. Al-Kazi exhibited her paintings and etchings in Europe and the Middle East until the 1970s, when she moved to Ibiza, Spain. In the early 2000s, she began incorporating digital media in her work.

Munira Al-Kazi (Pune, India, 1939–)

Untitled, 1962, monotype

Munira Al-Kazi developed an interest in printmaking while studying at London's Central School of Art and Design. This monotype exemplifies her abstract representations of human figures and groups. Monotype is a planographic printing process in which the maker does not disturb the surface of the printing plate but rather lays ink directly on it (in contrast to relief prints, like woodcuts and engravings). While other printmaking techniques are designed to produce multiple copies, a monotype yields only one print.

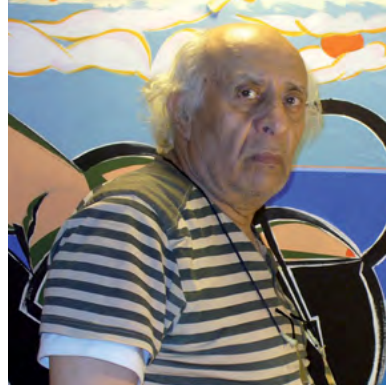


Hussein Madi (Chebaa, Lebanon, 1938–)

Untitled, c. 1960s, acrylic on canvas

During the 1960s, Hussein Madi began converting gestures and symbols into purely abstract shapes. His sources included works by European artists such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso as well as Islamic art.

After graduating from Beirut's Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA) in 1962, he worked as a graphic designer and caricaturist for various newspapers in Baghdad. In 1963 he continued his studies at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome. In 1986, after living for twenty-three years between Italy and Lebanon, he returned permanently to Beirut to teach sculpture and engraving at Lebanese University and ALBA. Today he often exhibits in Beirut, and in 2003 he participated in the 50th Venice Biennale.



Najat Makki (Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 1956–)

Window, 1987, henna and acrylic on paper

A pioneer in the UAE art scene, Najat Makki has worked in a wide range of media over the past three decades. In her work, which is influenced by the Egyptian artists Mahmoud Mokhtar and Hamed Nada, Makki often addresses Dubai's landscapes and heritage.



The first Emirati woman to receive a government scholarship to study abroad, Makki traveled to Cairo in 1977 to attend the School of Fine Arts, receiving a BA and MA in relief sculpture and metalwork. Back in the UAE, she worked as an art teacher for the Ministry of Education. Later in life, she returned to Cairo for further study, earning her PhD in visual arts at the School of Fine Arts in 2001. She has exhibited widely in the Gulf region and is an active member of the Dubai Cultural Council, Emirates Fine Art Society, and GCC Art Friends Group.

Seta Manoukian (Beirut, Lebanon, 1945–)

Across the Town, from the series *Bedsheets*, 1970,
oil on canvas

In *Across the Town*, Seta Manoukian creates a wild vortex of swirling forms through dynamic brushwork applied in thick, textured strokes. Her later work is calmer and more introspective, grounded in pliant organic shapes.



Born in Lebanon to parents of Armenian descent, Manoukian began her training with celebrated Armenian Lebanese artist Paul Guiragossian. At the age of seventeen, after winning an art competition organized by the embassy of Italy in Beirut, she left for Perugia, where she participated in a three-month art training program. Later she enrolled at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, remaining in Italy for four years. Her engagement with artists, journalists, and writers there coincided with her growing interest in social and political issues.

Soon after her return to Beirut to teach at Lebanese University in 1975, the Lebanese Civil War broke out. During this time, Manoukian volunteered, teaching drawing and painting to children in underprivileged neighborhoods. She published two books compiling the students' artworks, *War through the Eyes of Lebanese Children* and *Taches rouges et bleues*. After moving to Los Angeles in 1985, Manoukian pursued spirituality, meditation, and Eastern philosophies, eventually traveling to Sri Lanka in 2000 to study Buddhist philosophy and becoming an ordained Buddhist nun in 2005. She currently lives and works in Los Angeles and continues to paint and practice Buddhism.

Nabil Nahas (Beirut, Lebanon, 1949–)

Untitled, 1983, acrylic on canvas

This untitled painting derives from a series of black canvases featuring dripped vertical white marks that Nabil Nahas began painting after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Nahas grew up in Cairo and Beirut and attended college in the United States, where he earned a BFA from Louisiana State University in 1971 and an MFA from the Yale School of Art in 1973. He has exhibited widely in the US and internationally, and his works are in the collections of many major museums. Nahas currently lives and works in New York.



Aref El Rayess (Aley, Lebanon, 1928–Beirut, Lebanon, 2005)

Untitled, c. 1960s, oil on fiberboard

A master of multiple media including tapestry, sculpture, and painting, Aref El Rayess experimented with abstraction. Influenced by his travels across West Africa, he incorporated folkloric and mystical motifs into his work. Initially a self-taught artist, he held his first exhibition at the American University of Beirut in 1948. He then moved to Paris, where he befriended the French actor and mime artist Marcel Marceau and enrolled in the studios of André Lhote, Fernand Léger, and Ossip Zadkine while also studying at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. After living for several years between Senegal and Paris, he went back to Lebanon, only to receive a government scholarship in 1956 to continue his training in Rome and Florence. In 1963 he returned to Beirut, where he taught at Lebanese University and served as president of the Lebanese Artists Association of Painters and Sculptors.



Ufemia Rizk (Jaffa, Palestine, 1943–)

Multiple Dimensions, 1979, oil on canvas

Ufemia Rizk combines thoughtful introspection with a desire to explore the mysteries of the universe. In her paintings, such as *Multiple Dimensions*, she combines geometry and gestural abstraction to present personal, idiosyncratic reflections on the physical world around her.



Born in Jaffa in 1943, Rizk studied at the American University in Beirut, the Sorbonne in Paris, and Fahrelnissa Zeid's private art school in Amman. She has had numerous solo exhibitions throughout her career, including at Katia Granoff Gallery in Paris in 1979 and at the Galerie Simon Blais, Montréal, and the Centro Culturale d'Arte San Michele, Milan, both in 1993. She currently lives and works in Montréal, Canada.



Video: Ufemia Rizk discusses *Multiple Dimensions*
<https://youtu.be/NEfjcc0r-QE>

Juliana Seraphim (Jaffa, Palestine, 1934–Beirut, Lebanon, 2005)

Untitled, 1961, oil on canvas

Juliana Seraphim often described her paintings as attempts to depict her dreams. Much of her art displays surrealist undertones. The eldest of four children, Seraphim grew up amid orange groves and white, sandy beaches by the Mediterranean Sea. During the 1948 Palestinian exodus (Al-Nakba), her family sought refuge in Lebanon. Only fourteen at the time, the artist was deeply affected by this forced migration. Four years later, Seraphim began working for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. Over time, the colors and sensations of her childhood as well as the memory of her grandfather, who was an architect and art enthusiast, remained with her. At the behest of a family friend, Seraphim studied art with Lebanese painter Jean Khalifeh and enrolled at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA). In 1959 she spent a year in Florence, followed by another year in Madrid on a scholarship. Seraphim went on to represent Lebanon in three international biennials: Alexandria (1962), Paris (1963), and São Paulo (1965).



Hussein Shariffe (Omdurman, Sudan, 1934–Cairo, Egypt, 2005)

Dream Walkers, 1959, oil on canvas

Made in art school in London in 1959, the year before Hussein Shariffe returned to Sudan, *Dream Walkers* exemplifies the artist's vibrant, expressionistic paintings, which are often marked by his reflections on Sudan's political history as well as his experiences in the West. At first glance, this painting appears to contain simple geometric shapes, but upon closer examination the shapes become dreamlike figures. This work's horizontal orientation suggests a clip from a movie—an effect underscored by the brown border framing the scene.



The great-grandson of Al-Mahdi, a major religious and political leader, Shariffe grew up in one of Sudan's most influential families. He attended Victoria College in Alexandria, Egypt, then studied history at Cambridge University in England. Later he pursued an MFA at London's Slade School of Fine Art, where he studied under Lucien Freud. In 1960 he returned to Sudan to teach at the College of Fine and Applied Art in Khartoum.

In the 1970s, Shariffe turned to filmmaking in the hope of reaching larger audiences, and in 1972 he became head of film for Sudan's Ministry of Culture. In 1979, he directed *Tigers Are Better Looking*, adapted from a short story by Jean Rhys. Following his exile from Sudan during a period of political instability, Shariffe moved to Cairo, where he continued to paint and make films. *Diary in Exile* (1993)—which he made with Egyptian filmmaker Ateyyat El Abnoudy—and *Letters from Abroad* (1997), his final film, explore Shariffe's experiences during the years he was forced to live outside his home country.

Wijdan (Baghdad, Iraq, 1939–)

Untitled, 1977, oil on canvas

HRH Princess Wijdan al-Hashemi, who as a practicing artist goes by Wijdan and publishes under the name Wijdan Ali, is an artist, art historian, academic, and diplomat. Her abstract paintings often focus on tragic historical narratives, drawing upon Arabic letterforms and Islamic calligraphy. In this untitled work, the painted forms recall tally marks, but they deliberately lack consistency or a sense of order.



Though born in Baghdad, she has spent most of her life in Jordan. She received her PhD in Islamic art history from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, in 1993 and has been a Fellow of SOAS since 2010. In addition to working in oil and watercolor, she uses colored Murano glass to create calligraphic sculptural forms. In 1979 Wijdan founded the Royal Society of Fine Arts in Amman, which established the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts in 1980. She also founded the Higher Institute of Islamic Art and Architecture at Al al-Bayt University, Mafraq, in 1993 and the School of Arts and Design at the University of Jordan, Amman, in 2002. Wijdan served as Jordan's ambassador to Italy between 2006 and 2011 and has contributed to more than twenty publications on the history of Islamic art and architecture.

Jassim Zaini (Doha, Qatar, 1943–2012)

Untitled No. 13, 1972, oil on fiberboard

Part of the fledgling Gulf art scene of the mid-twentieth century, Jassim Zaini began by depicting the dramatic social changes that took place in Qatar during the 1950s and 1960s, after the discovery of oil. This work, which depicts an abstracted donkey, demonstrates Zaini's approach to rendering schematized human and animal figures. Split into sec-



tions, the donkey's eyes appear in separate areas, and its back half is not attached to a front. Earth tones suggest a rural or desert landscape, the antithesis of modernization. The artist's rough texturing of the paint produces a three-dimensional, relief-like surface.

Born in 1943 in Doha, Zaini was the first Qatari to pursue academic art training outside the country when he enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad, where he worked with Iraqi artists Faiq Hassan and Hafidh al-Droubi. During his studies, Zaini encountered cubism and abstract expressionism. After graduating in 1968, he was active in the mid-twentieth-century Gulf art scene, participating in numerous local exhibitions and international biennials. In 1980, he founded the Qatar Fine Arts Society.