



Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi on 'male chauvinism' in art: 'Women represent women better'

'Their work has not been catalogued, has not been documented, has not been stocked by galleries. There's an element of male chauvinism: it was seen as being of lesser value,' Al Qassemi tells us



Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi is out to sort out gender parity in the art world in the UAE. Courtesy Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi



Melissa Gronlund
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Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, Sharjah art collector and cultural figure, is on a mission to redress the gender imbalance of the art world. "In US museums, only 13 per cent of the art on display is by women," says Al Qassemi.

“If you’re thinking pre-20th century, I understand, because women didn’t have the same opportunities as men. But in the 20th century, there is no excuse not to have equal representation.

“Now at the Sharjah Art Museum we are 27 per cent women, which is one of the highest ratios in the world. I’m going to push to 50/50 if possible, but it’s hard,” he says.

Al Qassemi runs the Barjeel Art Foundation, a major collection of modern Arab artworks, many of which are semi-permanently installed in the Sharjah Art Museum in an exhibition *A Century in Flux: Highlights from the Barjeel Collection*.

A buying spree of 20th century female artists

The foundation also has its works on tour. It opens a show in January at New York University’s exhibition space the Grey Art Gallery in Manhattan, called *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s to 1980s*.

Al Qassemi’s aim is to get equal representation for both male and female work in his collection and exhibitions, and to do so, he has been on a buying spree of 20th century female artists.

This is where education has to start. You need to educate your own people before you educate others.

Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi

Through Twitter, for example, Al Qassemi discovered Egyptian artist Menhat Helmy, who studied etching at the Slade School of Fine Art in London in the 1950s, and later taught in Cairo and Florence, Italy. Her grandson helped Al Qassemi buy a stunning painting from 1973: a dark blue abstraction, one-metre-by-one-metre squared, depicting the night sky.

Over the past few months, Al Qassemi has been travelling across the Arab world, researching women artists in exhibition and auction catalogues, via calls on social media, and through word of mouth. The efforts have resulted in 50 acquisitions that will go on show at the Sharjah Art Museum this November – representing both male and female artists, and some of them by talented women most have never heard of.

Barjeel has also acquired work by the Iraqi artist Naziha Salim, sister of well-known painter Jewad Selim, who founded the Baghdad Modern Art Group. Naziha studied at the Institutie of Fine Arts in Baghdad, where she also later taught, but her work has always been somewhat eclipsed by that of her brother.

'There is an element of male chauvinism, it was seen as being of lesser value'

Other artists attained include Algerian Djamila Mohamed; Syrian Leila Nseir; and Egyptian Zeinab Abdel Hamid, whose painting sat in Christie's archives for almost a decade after it failed to sell in the late 2000s.

"It's been a lot of fun, learning about these artists, but it's also been very frustrating," says Al Qassemi. "When you ask about them, their work has not been catalogued, not been documented and not been stocked by galleries. There is an element of male chauvinism, it was seen as being of lesser value."



Naziha Selim is the sister of Jewad Selim, and an important artist in her own right. Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi hopes to give her work its due so that she will no longer be known as the “sister of”. Here is an untitled work from 1963 that he acquired. Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

Al Qassemi also went through the roster of the Fahrelnissa Zeid school in Amman, which the Turkish-Jordanian painter set up to educate women in art in the 1970s. Al Qassemi went through the names of the artists who studied there to find out who continued to create art after they graduated, and then tracked down the paintings.

Regionally, the greatest female engagement in the art world can be found in Lebanon, Egypt and Amman, he tells us. “In Lebanon, the women were largely emancipated from the early 20th century. The church played a major role in educating women and allowing women opportunities. Egypt also had a strong Christian community – not the only reason, but an important reason. The most

surprising one for me was Amman. And it is because of the Fahrelnissa Zeid school, which taught an entire generation of women. They became pioneers and they taught others – they carried it forward.”

Revisionist curating: bending the past towards the desires of the present

Al Qassemi is taking advantage of the transition period to install the rooms for Barjeel at the Sharjah Art Museum. The show at NYU will temporarily take away from Sharjah some of the major works by women artists such as Etel Adnan, Huguette Caland and Saloua Raouda Choucair, in its exploration of modern Arab abstraction.



Al Qassemi says that *The Martyr*, from 1978, by the Syrian artist Leila Nseir, gives a different depiction of martyrdom than paintings by male artists do. Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

Women played a major role in this movement, which had a major centre in Beirut, so in a sense Al Qassemi has made things harder for himself: he has taken away some of the key female figures of Arab modernism just at the time when he wants the

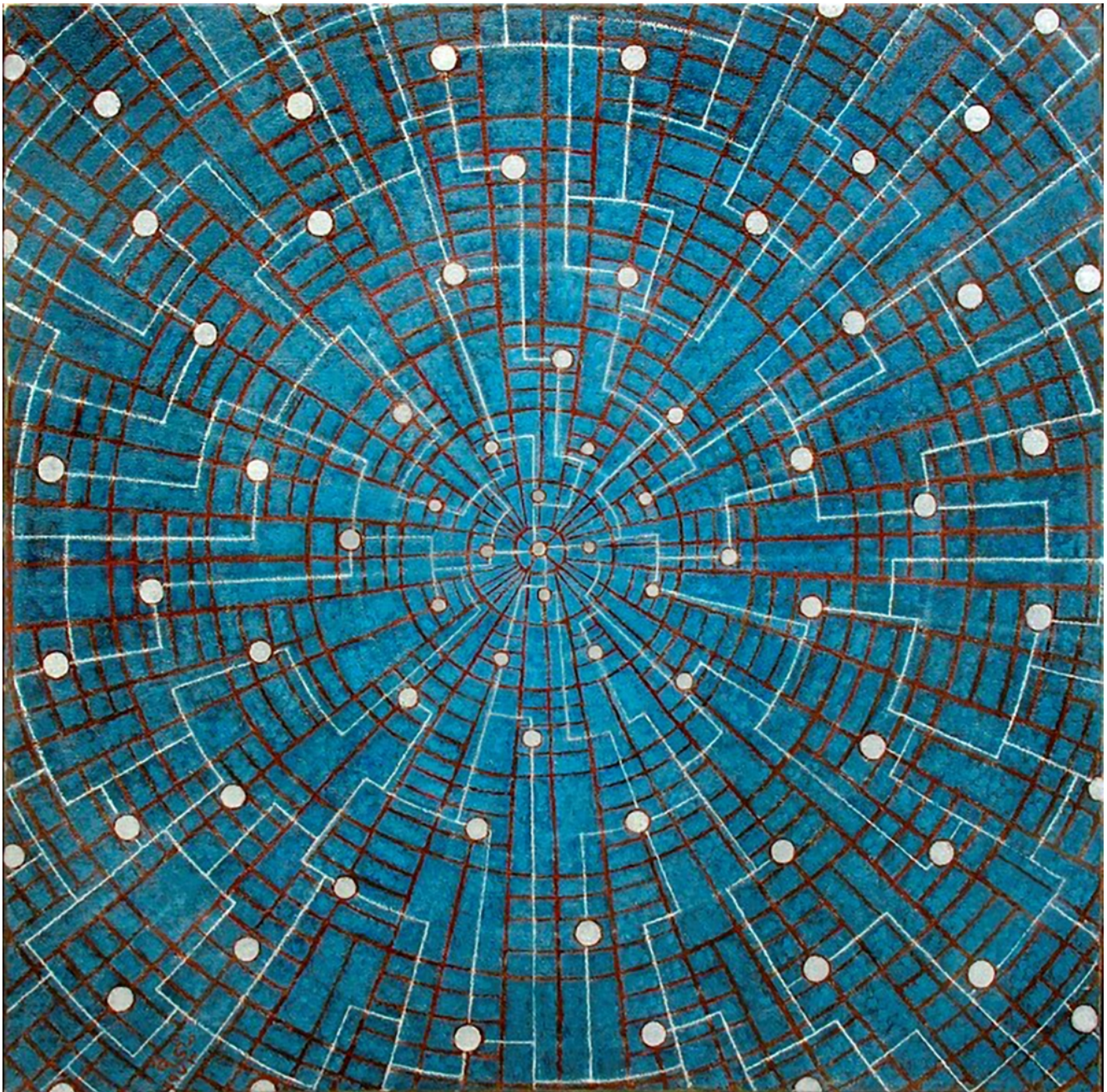
display to be more gender equal. Out of the 110 artworks usually on show, he is replacing more than half.

The changes to the Sharjah Art Museum exhibition also highlight the problems within any bid to redress historical imbalances: to an extent this is revisionist curating, bending the past towards the desires of the present. "Ultimately, it's affirmative action," Al Qassemi says.

Though the work of many female artists was not adequately recognised, the under-representation of women in historical surveys also reflect the fact that men in the early 20th century played a greater role in shaping art history.

Women's roles in the art world

The curator of A Century in Flux, an eminent art historian, Salwa Mikdadi, is careful to note that the Sharjah display has moved towards a discussion of the role of women, which has changed since the 20th century. Today, in the UAE for example, women make up most of the professional art world and are the majority in art schools.



Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi discovered the work of Egyptian artist Menhat Helmy through a call put out on social media. He later acquired her *Space Exploration/Universe, 1973*. Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

“Female artists were absent from most of the male-dominated art groups in the early to mid-modern period,” Mikdadi says. “However, by the late 1980s women artists, critics, and gallerists surpassed their male peers on several fronts: establishing successful galleries, founding the many of the first art foundations and art institutions across the Arab world and more recently receiving recognition with solo exhibitions at major international museums. In an attempt to redress past inequities, Mr Al Qassemi will open the discourse on the reasons for the marginalisation of women artists in several Arab countries during the modern period.”

'You need to educate your own people before you educate others'

Mikdadi, in fact, was one of the first to look at the role of women artists with her show *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World*, which focused solely on female Arab artists, and toured the US from 1993 to 1995. That substantial exhibition, however, has been largely forgotten. At the time, there was little to zero interest in Arab modernism, and little scholarly work has been done today on the exhibition's history of modern Arab art.

"Salwa's exhibition was very important," says Al Qassemi. "But I wish it had come to the Middle East. This is where education has to start. You need to educate your own people before you educate others."

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captured women in their essence, but women understand better the different roles that women play in society. In Naziha Salim's painting [*The Martyr's Wife*], she is showing you the widow. Here the woman is proud, she has her head up. She's not broken; she's not weak. She's a strong person."

Al Qassemi, who also teaches the history of Arab modernism at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, says he does not want to address the gender imbalance merely for the sake of numbers. Women artists, he maintains, bring a perspective and nuance to art that is different from that of men, particularly in two subjects essential to the history of Arab modernism: daily life and political activism.

One of his new acquisitions is *The Martyr* by the Syrian artist Nseir, which depicts a female martyr being mourned by women and children. In light blue, grey and flesh tones, the scene is painted with a softness that makes the painting seem like it is mourning alongside its subjects.

"Women represent women better," Al Qassemi says, "You see women in deeper layers. I don't mean to generalise. I'm sure there are men who have

Al Qassemi says: “The reason I mention affirmative action is that when children go to a museum, when they see that women’s works aren’t represented, it reinforces this inferiority. Why should I be an artist because the world is full of male art? This needs to be broken.”

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s to 1980s will be at the Grey Art Gallery in NYU, New York, from Tuesday, January 14, until Saturday, April 4, 2020. A Century in Flux: Highlights from the Barjeel Collection is at the Sharjah Art Museum until Tuesday, May 30, 2023

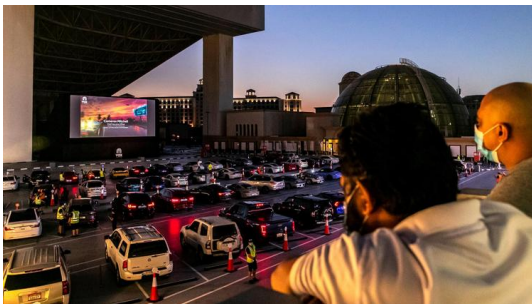
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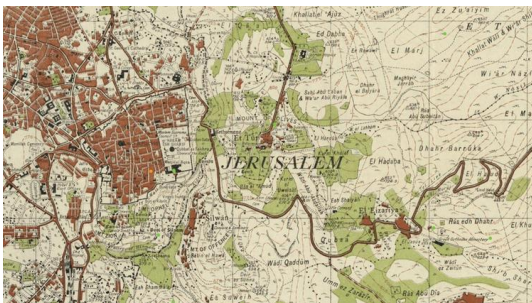
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