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## INTRODUCTION: “No Longer a Horizon, but Infinity”

In 1964 the Algerian weekly *Révolution africaine* published “Éléments pour un art nouveau” (Elements for a New Art), an essay by the painter Mohammed Khadda that contended with the role of the artist in post-independence Algeria and in the formation of a socialist state.<sup>1</sup> In the text, Khadda argued for a function of art beyond propaganda or agitation.<sup>2</sup> The history of painting, he wrote, had been one of successive revolutions and of a continuous liberation that eventually culminated in the emergence of abstraction, allowing painting to become an art unto itself, no longer reliant on a physical subject. In Khadda’s account, the birth of abstract art was tied to the moment Wassily Kandinsky created “the first nonrepresentational work” in 1910—most likely a reference to *Untitled (Study for Composition VII, Première abstraction)*.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not we attribute the beginning of abstraction to Kandinsky’s watercolor alone, discussing it prompted Khadda to make compelling observations about abstraction’s potential. “There was no longer a horizon, but infinity,” he wrote.<sup>4</sup> Transcending the limits of representation, of physical reality, and thereby the bounds of a metaphorical “horizon,” the artist would be able—in Khadda’s imagination—to tap into an infinite range of “creative” experiences and expand what art could achieve.<sup>5</sup> The promise of nonobjective abstraction, purporting, as it does, values of multiplicity, plurality, and heterogeneity, would be to encourage a more genuine expression of individuality than had been hitherto possible. The place from which Khadda’s thoughts emerged is one that is shared across geographies of decolonization: a breaking away from the entrenched colonial vision and a questioning of what it means to formulate a distinct national identity.

*Taking Shape* presents a selection of works from the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, all produced between 1955 and 1987—a period shaped by decolonization, the rise and fall of Arab nationalism(s), socialism, rapid industrialization, several wars and subsequent mass migrations, the oil boom, and new state formations in the Arab/Persian Gulf region. The foundation, established by Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi in 2009, serves as a catalyst for critical conversations about regional modernisms in addition to providing resources for the preservation of modern art of the Arab world. The present exhibition, which brings nearly

Mohanna Durra, *Transparency*, 1970 (detail, p. 171)

ninety paintings, prints, drawings, and mixed-media works to the Grey Art Gallery from January 14 to April 4, 2020, serves as a node in a growing field of contemporary artistic, curatorial, and art-historical practices dedicated to rethinking the canon of abstract art. It seeks to investigate the tenets of modernism's development in North Africa and West Asia during the second half of the 20th century. On view are works by artists from Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates and by artists of Arab, Amazigh (Berber), Armenian, Circassian, Jewish, Persian, and Turkish descent.

Across the region during this period, artists grappled with problems of authenticity, national and regional identity, and decolonization of form, making a pointed—if elusive—commitment to freedom, both political and aesthetic. They split their attention among the prevailing and competing modernisms of the Cold War while mining Mesopotamian, ancient Egyptian, and Islamic histories and heritage for site-specific modernisms. Their work 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 at large. Collectives such as the Baghdad Group for Modern Art (established 1951), for example, deliberately referred in their formal language and aesthetics to pre-Islamic archeological objects and manuscript illuminations by Yahya ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti, a 13th-century Iraqi painter best known for illustrating the earlier poet al-Hariri's famous collection of stories, the *Maqamat*. Their experiments precipitated a calculated reinterpretation and revival of local motifs, such as the crescent moons common in Mesopotamian reliefs around 3000–2000 BCE and the simple geometric shapes, including circles, triangles, and zigzag lines, used in ancient cuneiform tablets to signify both humans and inanimate objects.

Similar experiments took place elsewhere in the Arab world: in 1965 members of the newly formed Casablanca School instigated their movement toward the decolonization of Moroccan culture, emphasizing the critical need of studying and reintroducing aspects of local history and Amazigh heritage into the making of modern art. In Egypt and Iraq, Sufi philosophy and devotional rituals found expression in the work of such artists as Shakir Hassan Al Said and Omar El-Nagdi. References to Arabic and Chinese calligraphy appeared in that of Rafa Nasiri, an Iraqi painter and printmaker, and Algerian artist Rachid Koraïchi. Islamic architecture and geometric patterns informed the practices of Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair and Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata. In other words, during this period there was a deliberate turn toward the region's material and immaterial heritage: a visual lexicon was being shaped by artists in a quest for authenticity, formed around questions of selfhood. These careful attempts at establishing continuities with, or at least connections to, local art histories were

further impacted and complicated by the artists' experiences of traveling more widely, training in Western European, American, Japanese, and Soviet institutions; and participating in dialogues with their peers internationally. This fluency of exchange, understood alongside the artists' bids for authenticity and reclamation of heritage and history, presents a challenge to the canonical construction of uninterrupted lineages and the possibility of mapping the history of abstraction along neat geographic lines.

The curatorial approach of this exhibition is to investigate what abstraction signifies art-historically in the context of 20th-century North Africa and West Asia as well as the Arab diaspora. At its heart, the project raises a fundamental question: how do we study abstraction across different contexts, and what models of analysis do we use? The inherent breadth of signification and plurality of meaning encompassed by the very term "abstraction" may account to some degree for the tendency to gloss over, or simply circumvent, the theoretical challenge of a concise definition and necessity for contextual specificity on the part of art historians. While designations such as "pure abstraction," "concrete art," and "nonobjective art" attempt to distinguish among the various streams of 20th-century abstraction, they overlap in their scope and are inextricably linked to particular moments in the history of European and American modern art—as are the terms applied to later developments, such as Abstract Expressionism (c. 1940s), Lyrical Abstraction (c. 1940s), Color Field painting (c. 1940s–50s), Op art (c. 1960s), Minimalism (c. 1960s–early 1970s), and so on. Another set of questions then arises: how applicable are these terms when construing other histories of abstraction within a global art history? And is it possible to reconcile a predominantly Western art history, predicated on a European Enlightenment, with other, contiguous, global histories of art to move toward a more complex account of modernism?

Art-historical discourse is imbricated with accounts of formal experiments originating in Europe that gradually and nominally made space for the "minor arts" and non-Western "crafts." Western artists such as Theo van Doesburg, Max Bill, Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Naum Gabo encountered forms and objects from different parts of Africa, Asia, and Oceania (a broadly construed "Orient") and assimilated them into the idioms of Western abstraction. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that several distinct genealogies of abstraction can be identified if one looks directly at premodern artistic traditions from Africa, South Asia, the Far East, and the so-called Islamic world. Some of these strains were inspired by mystical practices involving transcendental spiritual devotion and contemplation. Others were shaped by specificities of language and symbolic signification, as in Arabic and Japanese calligraphy, magical number systems, and Amazigh body art.<sup>6</sup> To differing degrees, these genealogies also informed

the development of modernisms locally and, through various forms of exchange, around the world. Art historians and curators, like artists since the midcentury, struggle to find an adequate language for discussing modernism in the non-West—one that conceptually presides outside of art-historical frameworks that largely rely on a Eurocentric telling of modern art's origins. One can go as far as to ask whether “abstraction” is even an operative term to use in describing the product of a spiritual-cum-esoteric Sufi experience aided by paint and a brush, or whether graphic symbols, letterforms, or cognitive processes can even be abstracted. The present exhibition, and the accompanying essays in this book, address some of these questions through art-critical and -historical interrogations that seek to elucidate what abstract art is and which works of art can be examined through the paradigm of abstraction.

While the exhibition examines the essence and terminology of abstraction, the selection of nonrepresentational works on view reflects the highly divergent contexts in which these pieces were created. Although the full title of the exhibition, *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s*, employs the contentious geopolitical term “Arab world,” I would argue that the use of this nomenclature serves as a critical and historical heuristic for the study of modernism in the second half of the 20th century. “Arab world” is more of an ethnolinguistic designation than a strictly geographic one. While it accurately represents neither a territorial nor a demographic makeup of the region, it is politically salient and useful in evoking the period of decolonization of the 1950s and 1960s as well as in pointing to the historical moment in which pan-Arabism peaked in regional politics. It also intimates a discursive departure from the canon and time frame commonly associated with the Islamic world in art-historical scholarship, placing the region in close dialogue with modernity and modernism.

The region witnessed an internal reorientation in the mid- to late 20th century in that it started breaking away from its colonial past and grappling with how to see itself. It moved toward decolonizing education, shifting the nature of international academic and cultural exchange, and placing more focus on Global Southern alliances. This period was also marked by active introspection and an openness to various means of recuperating the past for the future. In the early 1900s, for instance, painters and sculptors from the region were predominantly trained in the tradition of academic realism in European institutions such as the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome and the École des Beaux-Arts or Académie Julian in Paris. Some artists were privately tutored by European artists in their home countries.<sup>7</sup> The first school of fine arts in the region was endowed by Prince Youssef Kamal in Cairo in 1908. At that time, the curriculum was modeled on the European prototype of the art academy, and European instructors were employed in the classrooms and studios. Painting was taught by Italian Orientalist painter

Paolo Forcella, known for his portraits of local people and his idealized, academic representations of Cairene architecture and interiors. Soon, the region witnessed a wave of nationalist movements that emerged in opposition to the West's political and military involvement. This opposition was marked by events such as the Iraqi Revolt against the British in 1920, the Great Syrian Revolt against the French between 1925 and 1927, and the Arab Revolt against the British administration of Mandatory Palestine between 1936 and 1939 as well as the coming to prominence of Arab nationalism, pan-Arabism, socialism/communism, and other such ideologies in parts of the region. During this time, many artists in the Arab world began to adopt an increasingly critical viewpoint toward the wholesale import of Western culture, striving instead to develop practices that were relevant to their own contexts both politically and historically. Increased international travel and opportunities for exhibiting and studying abroad ensured that artists were exposed to different tenets of postwar art. The early Cold War years also gave rise to the traveling exhibition as a medium of transnational cultural exchange,<sup>8</sup> allowing artists to encounter multiple modernisms, become cognizant of the role of artists in international networks of political resistance, and consider the varying lineages and political potentialities of modern abstract art. The turn to nonrepresentational abstraction in this pivotal moment of decolonization, therefore, needs to be understood not only as part of a broader project of political and intellectual freedom, rooted in formal experimentation and predicated on prevalent understandings of abstraction, but also as a moment of overturning established educational systems and artistic idioms: a holistic rejection of colonialism in configuring how we see.

#### **CRAFT AS PEDAGOGY: How an Art School Decolonized Abstraction**

The question of decolonizing culture and formulating an authentically Moroccan (qua “African”) modern visual language lay at the core of the ideas that spurred the artists Farid Belkahia, 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 Belkahia's direction in 1962.<sup>9</sup> Members of the group promoted their commitment to the study of local culture and traditional forms, materials, and crafts, as well as the reinterpretation of the function and value of those forms and materials in a contemporary context, as part of their pedagogical framework. The connection between arts and crafts in the philosophy of the Casablanca School was recently highlighted in the Berlin exhibition *Bauhaus Imaginista*, which drew parallels between the pedagogy of the two schools and their investment in vernacular modes of knowledge. On display was a 1969 issue

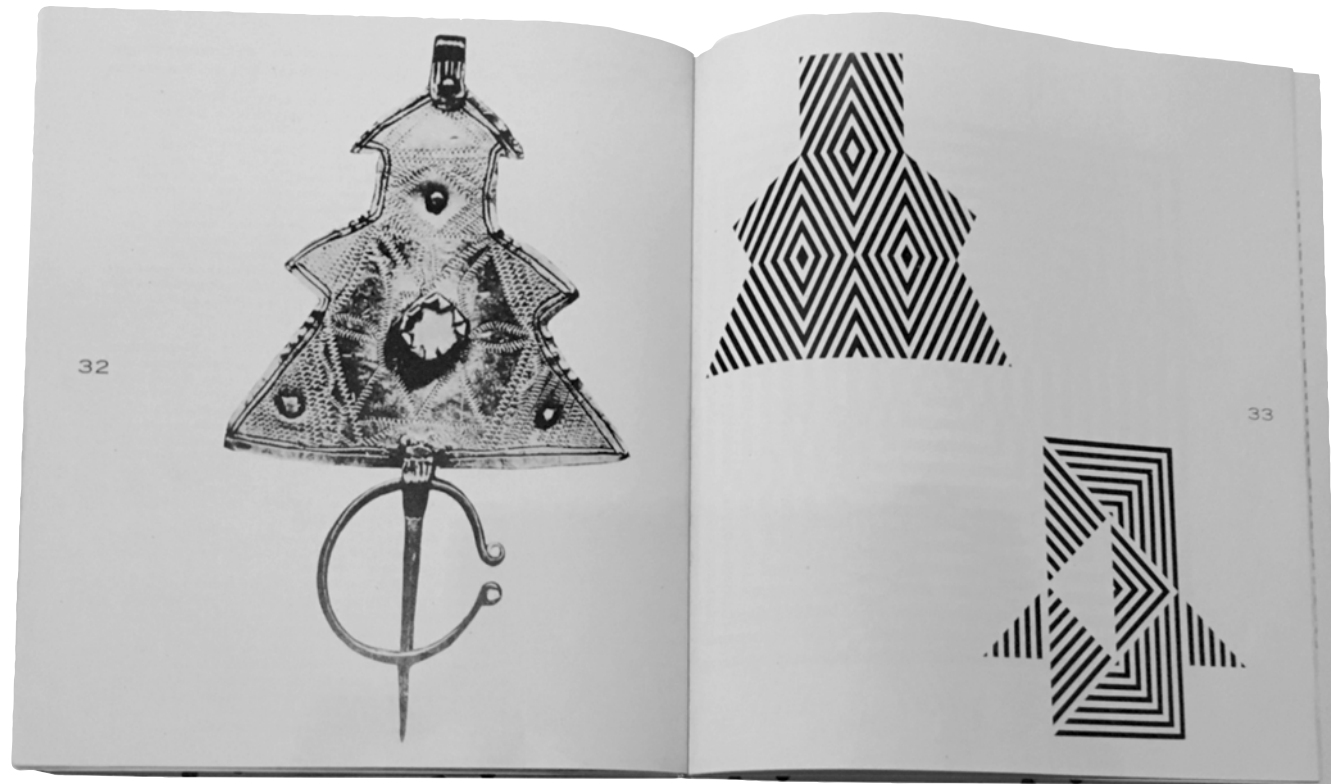


Fig. 1. *Maghreb Art*, no. 3, 1969, displayed at the exhibition *Bauhaus Imaginista*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, March 15–June 10, 2019

of *Maghreb Art*, a journal published by the École des Beaux-Arts de Casablanca, illustrating a traditional Moroccan fibula or brooch opposite student-designed graphics translating the object's form and patterns into minimalist, black-and-white compositions that could be considered geometric abstractions (fig. 1). During the 1950s and early '60s the school followed a French curriculum, but in the mid-1960s analytical inquiries into local heritage gave form to a new and alternative educational model—one that explored the potency of homegrown visual and material traditions to respond to the demands of modernity. The faculty reexamined its syllabi and introduced classes on the local history and practice of weaving, carpet and jewelry making, and ceramics.<sup>10</sup> In his 1966 text "On the Concept of Painting and the Plastic Language," Chebaa, one of the group's founders, argued that the essence of Moroccan art "was not and will never be representational."<sup>11</sup> He pointed out that local Islamic and Amazigh arts and crafts had always relied on symbols and abstraction to create visual compositions, as can be surmised from Morocco's abundance of geometric paintings, engravings, mosaics, and carpets. Local authenticity and national identity were seen by the members of the Casablanca School as inherently tied to nonrepresentational modes of expression. Chebaa noted that the group did not subscribe to a binary opposition between abstraction and realism but was interested in the cultivation

of authentic visual languages and material palettes that were relevant to the particularities of the Moroccan context at the time. The path toward abstraction was driven by the express pursuit of formal nonobjectivity and a determined departure from visual references to the physical world, but here it was not forged along the same trajectory as it was, for instance, in France with the emergence of Art Informel. In Morocco, the turn toward abstraction was a political reorientation away from the French Orientalist school of painting and toward a methodology that had historical relevance and could be identified with the local culture prior to its transformation by colonization. A statement similar to Chebaa's was made by Moroccan artist Ahmed Cherkaoui in 1967, when a journalist suggested to him that neighboring Tunisia's state painters were creating exotic and caricatured images of North Africa, flooding the art market and "blocking all 'abstract' painting." To this, Cherkaoui responded, "What does *abstract* mean? For us, the word *abstract* isn't a criterion. It's not about an opposition of concrete abstract painting, but about necessity and quality."<sup>12</sup> So, in their quest to decolonize culture in the North African context, these artists pursued abstraction not as a counterpoint to representational painting as such but to push against the very particular manifestation of representational painting that had been practiced in the Maghreb under European colonial rule. The Casablanca School's primary objective was to forge locally pertinent modes of art making, and to do so its adherents referred to Islamic and Amazigh patterns, symbols, and letterforms, most of which happened



Fig. 2. Malika Agueznay at work in 1968 while enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts de Casablanca



to be nonrepresentational and thereby contributed in part to the rise of modern abstraction in Morocco.

Included in the present exhibition is a 1983 painting by Belkahia executed on stretched lambskin (vellum) and marked by sinuous, organic lines and circles (p. 147). Deliberately rejecting canvas as a support, Belkahia turned to materials that were commonly used in traditional crafts. Painting on vellum meant that he could not use oil paint and had to experiment with natural pigments such as henna and saffron. Also on view in *Taking Shape* are works by other founders of the movement, including brightly colored, curvilinear compositions by Melehi that evoke ocean waves or the gestural movements of Arabic calligraphy (pp. 202, 203)<sup>13</sup> and geometric works by Chebaa reflective of architectural plans or schematized topographies (pp. 162, 163). Chebaa's *Composition* (c. 1970) is fully constructed out of wood, resembling a low-relief sculpture, and underscores the links to artisanal crafts promoted by the school. The exhibition also presents an early work by Malika Aguezmay (fig. 2), who attended the École des Beaux-Arts between 1966 and 1970 as an art student. Her work *L'algue bleue* (1968; p. 141) is a wood relief composed of organic blue forms that resemble marine vegetation against a green background. The meandering, curvilinear shapes were inspired by *Ayat al-Kursi* (the Throne Verse), a highly revered passage in the Qur'an, and prefigure the artist's interest in calligraphy, which is manifested in her later work through stylized renditions of Islam's ninety-nine names for God and what she called "magical words," such as *salaam* (peace), *mahabba* (love), *hanan* (compassion), *tawado'* (humility), and *karam* (generosity) (fig. 3).

Other prominent Moroccan artists, including Ahmed Cherkaoui and Jilali Gharbaoui, are represented in the exhibition with works made in the 1960s whose compositions appear to draw on Amazigh symbols. Some of Cherkaoui's works bear a resemblance to Tifinagh, an alphabet used to write Tamazight languages. The forms in his 1965 painting *Alea* (fig. 4 and p. 164), for example, closely resemble the Tifinagh letter *yaz*, or *aza*, which stands for the phrase "free man" and currently adorns the Amazigh flag (fig. 5). Gharbaoui, while attempting to formulate a national visual language, did not entirely align himself with the vision of the Casablanca School, claiming to concentrate in his nonrepresentational work on "the gesture of painting itself."<sup>14</sup> His 1969 *Composition* (p. 175) nevertheless appears to correspond to aspects of the movement, with visual references to the patterns and colors of traditional Amazigh carpets and woven textiles. The black outlines are also reminiscent of Amazigh tattoos, traditionally applied to women's and men's bodies as tokens of beauty and amulets for protection and well-being.

The same strategy of challenging the enduring French colonial influence on North African culture through the use of native motifs in contemporary art was

Fig. 3. Malika Aguezmay, *Mots magiques* (Magic Words), 1994. Oil on canvas, 78¾ × 39¾ in. (200 × 100 cm). Collection of Prince Bandar bin Sultan Library, Asilah, Morocco

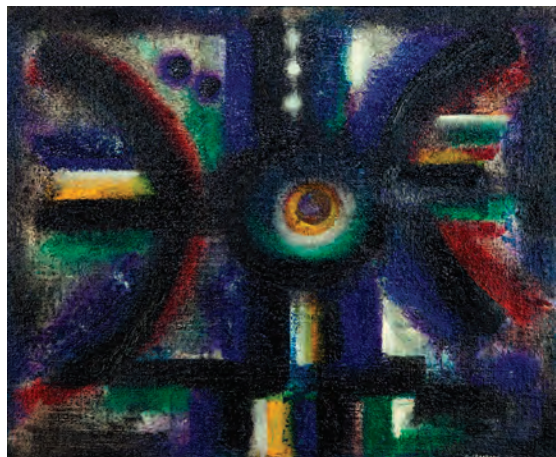


Fig. 4. Ahmed Cherkaoui, *Alea*, 1965. Oil on jute, 23 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 28 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (60 x 73 cm). Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE



Fig. 5. Amazigh flag, designed in the 1970s and adopted in 1997 or 1998 after the first Amazigh World Congress, held at Tafira, Las Palmas, Canary Islands

concurrently unfolding in Algeria. In 1967 several artists issued a manifesto declaring the formation of the Aouchem (Arabic for “tattoo”) group.<sup>15</sup> Members of the group tapped into the mythological themes of Amazigh culture and the mystical dimensions of runes, “show[ing] that the sign, always magic, is more powerful than the bomb.”<sup>16</sup> They argued that magical signs were an element of popular culture that—despite enduring transformations under foreign influence—had been at the center of local artists’ and artisans’ creative efforts “since the Roman period.”<sup>17</sup>

While not a signatory to the Aouchem manifesto, the artist Mohammed Khadda echoed the group’s central ideas, turning to both Arabic calligraphy and the Tifinagh alphabet to create locally rooted nonfigurative compositions.<sup>18</sup> In 1964, about a year after his return to Algiers from Paris, where he had trained at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, Khadda wrote, “There are so many of our culture’s treasures that must be brought to light, from the enigmatic Tassili frescoes to the humble murals of the Ouadhias tribe. We must inventory the symbolism of rugs and pottery in secular colors and signs, and that of calligraphy, miniatures, illuminations.”<sup>19</sup> Two of his works included in the exhibition, both dating to 1969 (pp. 188, 189), place a graphic form against a background of brown and yellow hues. The quasi-calligraphic shapes are evocative of pictograms and asemic writing, illegible to the viewer. *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, become part of our reception of the artist’s local topography.

#### THEORIZING ABSTRACTION: From Language to Form

Other artists’ groups across the swiftly decolonizing Arab world sought to develop their own discourses to negotiate the localization of 20th-century modernisms. One of the most notable of those efforts was the manifesto of the Baghdad Group

for Modern Art, published in 1951, which advocated for the consolidation of local traditions and international movements (such as Impressionism, Cubism, Expressionism, and “abstractionism”). Three works by one of the group’s most prominent members, Shakir Hassan Al Said, are included in the exhibition (pp. 142–44). He produced these paintings after the peak of the “golden age of Iraqi culture” in the 1950s, when artistic innovation had been on the rise. Al Said’s later work coincided with a period of major shifts in Iraq’s political landscape; his artistic contribution is noted for having extended the aesthetic and philosophical program of abstraction, especially under the early decades of Ba’ath Party rule in Iraq. His palette gradually became more subdued, and his stylized cockerels, faces, and gardens of the 1950s (fig. 6) gave way to more minimalist, nonrepresentational compositions. All three paintings in *Taking Shape* evince an archeological quality in their highly textured surfaces and fragments of deconstructed Arabic letterforms. They reflect Al Said’s interest in Hurufiyya (literally, “letterism”), which would be theorized as an art movement by Lebanese intellectual and critic Charbel Dagher in the 1990s and further expounded upon by art historians such as Nada Shabout and Iftikhar Dadi (both of whom have contributed to this volume).

In the 1960s Al Said became interested in Sufism and the esoteric dimensions of spirituality as well as in Western existentialist philosophy. It was the quest for “truth in all its dimensions” that captivated him in these varying systems of thought.<sup>20</sup> In 1966 he published the “Contemplative Art Manifesto,” in which he emphasized the role of honesty and sincerity in art. He advocated for a meditative and transcendental approach in which making art was understood as an act of contemplation and not of creation. To describe work produced under the rubric of contemplative art, he said that it “tends toward formless form and non-abstract abstraction.”<sup>21</sup> Using materials to interrogate the notions of form, matter, time, and the physical world in general, Al Said developed a practice of scratching, carving, burning, and even puncturing surfaces all the way through, creating amorphous compositions that visually conjured the universe itself. Driven by his interest in Sufism and metaphysics, Al Said founded the One Dimension (Al-Bu’d al-Wahid) group in 1971. The group 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. The incorporation of calligraphic

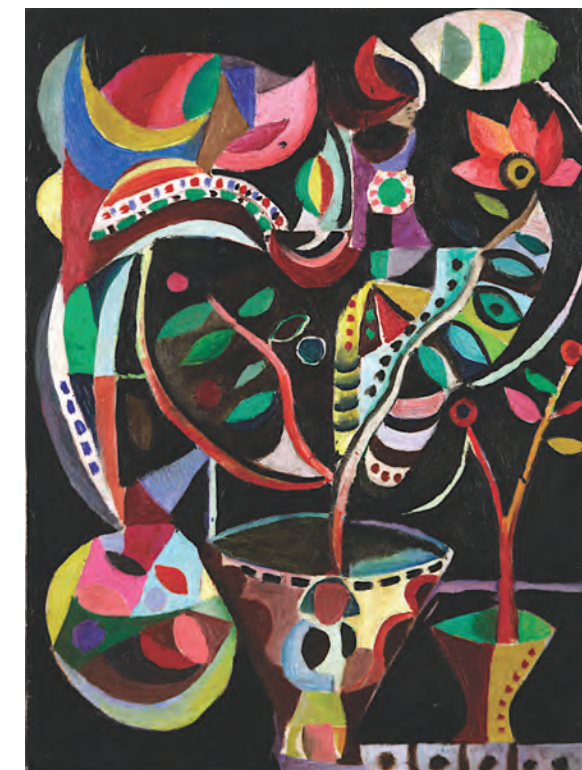


Fig. 6. Shakir Hassan Al Said, *Untitled*, 1954. Oil on paper, mounted on canvas, 25 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 19 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (64 x 49 cm). Private collection

letterforms into images was fueled by the intention to “expose the unity of two worlds that are simultaneously inhabited, namely, the ‘linguistic’ world of thought and the ‘plastic’ world of sight.”<sup>22</sup> The resulting compositions are spiritual meditations as much as they are experiments in merging and interlocking different modes of human perception and cognition.

A fascination with Arabic letterforms and their potential to be translated into modern visual configurations emerged concurrently in several parts of the Islamic world in the 1950s, taken up by Arab, Persian, and South Asian (primarily Pakistani) artists who worked—it is surmised—mostly without direct contact with or knowledge of one another’s practices.<sup>23</sup> Often considered the first to articulate the ways in which Arabic characters could be used as generative elements in modern art was the Syrian-Iraqi artist Madiha Umar. In 1949, while training at the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design in Washington, DC, she exhibited a series of twenty-two paintings inspired by the Arabic alphabet in the Peabody Room of the Georgetown Neighborhood Library. The same year, she authored the text “Arabic Calligraphy: An Inspiring Element in Abstract Art,”<sup>24</sup> in which she discussed the design principles underlying various scripts (including Kufic, Meccan, Ma’il, and Mashq), ultimately arguing that “each letter is able, and has a personality dynamic enough, to form an abstract design.”<sup>25</sup> With that in mind, Umar manipulated individual letters, sometimes deconstructing them into their constituent parts or overlaying them atop one another to create complex compositions that draw on the letters’ inherent attributes, such as rhythm and “swirl.” Her untitled 1978 watercolor included in *Taking Shape* (p. 223) features a number of coiling, crescent-shaped forms, which are evocative of the gestural movements of writing and could derive from a number of different Arabic letters. Umar is thought to have been influenced by the work of Nabia Abbott, an American scholar of Arabic who researched some of the oldest Islamic manuscripts.<sup>26</sup> Other artists in the exhibition who have engaged with letterforms include Hussein Madi of Lebanon, Ahmad Shibrain and Ibrahim El-Salahi of Sudan, Hamed Abdalla and Omar El-Nagdi of Egypt, Rafa Nasiri of Iraq, and Rachid Koraïchi of Algeria.

The work of these and other artists who contributed to the Hurufiyya movement across the region and globally varies in the degree to which it is religiously bound. Art historian Iftikhar Dadi has argued that these experiments helped to “reterritorialize” the Arabic alphabet and make its aesthetic more “permeable to the outside,”<sup>27</sup> while Nada Shabout adds that through these experiments Arabic letters detached themselves from Islamic calligraphy and religious history while being liberated, at the same time, from their semantic function of forming part of a word or signifying anything at all. They thereby took on the new function of expressing a modern (pan-)Arab identity, graphically symbolizing the decoloniza-

tion of culture.<sup>28</sup> Turning Arabic letterforms, traditionally associated with religious texts, into abstract compositions certainly shifted the focus to elements such as shape, line, and color and opened up these works to the possibility of being read and appreciated by diverse audiences. Yet, these formal experiments, while distant from the art of calligraphy in its classical understanding, did not always cast off their religious or spiritual aura. Often, they were driven precisely by the artist’s investment in the esoteric function of language in the performance of spiritual Islamic, specifically Sufi, rituals. Omar El-Nagdi’s untitled 1970 work in the exhibition (p. 205), for instance, consists of repeated black strokes on a light background, calling to mind the meditative acts of continuous repetition that are common in spiritual dance, prayer, and other religious recitations. The black strokes bear a formal semblance to the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, *alif*, which is also the first letter in the name of God (Allah). Alternatively, individual strokes may be read as the Indian (also known as Eastern Arabic) numeral one, evocative of the oneness and unity of the divine in Islamic tradition. El-Nagdi described his work of the early 1960s and late ’70s as being inspired by the process of *tassawuf* (“becoming Sufi”).<sup>29</sup> Some of these Hurufiyya explorations, therefore—while manifesting what could be viewed as a universal language of abstraction—are inextricably linked to Islamic thought, Qur’anic texts, and religious rituals.

Palestinian painter Kamal Boullata’s engagement with Arabic script had a distinctive tenor. Unlike other artists in the exhibition, he incorporated into his works not only individual letters but entire phrases, which he often sourced from Christian and Islamic sacred texts, sometimes adding a witty spin to the original meaning. For example, *La Ana Illa Ana* (There Is No “I” but “I”) (1983; p. 159) winks at Islam’s central proclamation of faith, *la Ilaha Illa Allah* (there is no God but God). Reflecting on the importance of the word in Arab cultures, Boullata wrote, “The word has been the only portable tool of self-expression for people who lived as nomads.”<sup>30</sup> It is not surprising that his experiments with Arabic script featured in *Taking Shape* were carried out in the 1980s while he was residing in the United States, himself a modern nomad. In his renditions of various phrases, Boullata usually wove the words into intricate geometric compositions inspired by his early memories of the mosaics on the Dome of the Rock in his native Jerusalem as well as his study of the mathematical grids underlying the construction of Christian icons. This makes the words difficult to read even for Arabic speakers. In creating these compositions, Boullata thought of himself as “a writer of images, whereby Arabic words assume the body of an icon, whose aesthetic components reflect a contemporary language of abstract expression.”<sup>31</sup> An interesting parallel can be drawn between Boullata’s fascination with the grid as an extension of ancient Christian and Islamic artistic traditions and the Western conception of the grid as a radical device for the expression of modernity. In her foundational

essay *Grids*, Rosalind Krauss famously declared that “the grid functions to declare the modernity of modern art.”<sup>32</sup> These contrasting paths toward geometry in the work of Boullata and that of European modernists such as Malevich, van Doesburg, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Piet Mondrian expose the existence, once again, of multiple and varying genealogies of modern abstraction. While their visual manifestations may sometimes be subject to comparison, the processes, historical connotations, and stakes involved in constructing such compositions are located along distinct intellectual trajectories, informing how art historians understand (and misunderstand) abstraction.

### MATHEMATICS AND THE LEGACY OF ISLAMIC GEOMETRY

Geometry and mathematics were an important area of interest for 20th-century artists throughout the Arab/Persian Gulf, Eastern Mediterranean, and North Africa, especially when linked to the deciphering and interpreting of geometric designs in Islamic architecture, carpets, textiles, and other media. Quite a number of artists cited Islamic geometry as a source of inspiration for their non-figurative experiments. Most notably, Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair, who published an article in the Beirut journal *al-Abhath* in 1951 arguing for the importance of “essence” in literature, philosophy, and the visual arts, used Islamic geometry as an example to illustrate how an archetypal Arab artist “purifies [art] of admixtures” and deliberately rejects the idea of distorting truth through illusory, realistic painting.<sup>33</sup> While it can be cumbersome to speak of “essence” in relation to art, as it assumes the existence of an elusive ideal, it can nevertheless be helpful in examining the spiritual underpinnings of Islamic geometry. Ideas of perfection—namely, heaven, eternal life, and the ultimate perfection of God—abound in religious narratives, and mathematics has served as a practical tool for artists in search of an expression of those paragons, both for its precision and for its potential to curtail human error. Choucair’s own works—geometric canvases and organic sculptures (pp. 166, 167)—are based to varying degrees, in her own words, on principles of Islamic geometric design.

In the present exhibition, two still lifes by Palestinian artist Samia Halaby (pp. 176, 177) are included from the artist’s period of geometric experimentation, between 1966 and 1970. At that time, Halaby was exploring the ways in which the color of painted volumes affects the illusion of depth. Speaking of the construction of *White Cube in Brown Cube*, Halaby said, “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.”<sup>34</sup> While the two works may not reflect a direct visual link to Islamic design, they were produced after Halaby’s trip to Egypt, Syria, and Turkey in 1966—the

year she received a grant from the Kansas City Art Institute in Missouri, where she was teaching at the time, that enabled her to pursue her interest in studying Islamic architecture of the Middle East.<sup>35</sup> On this trip, she visited and photographed mosques and took interest in construction principles and the geometric lattices commonly found in Islamic patterns. Having lived in Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Beirut until the age of 14, Halaby says that Islamic geometry was a part of her daily life, and the trip in 1966 was an opportunity to “revisit and refresh what was part of me.”<sup>36</sup> Studying the individual modules within Islamic tessellations drew her attention to the compositional strategies that were inherent in them and later informed the organizational qualities of her own geometric work, including the two paintings on view.

The legacy of Islamic geometry, therefore, was manifested in the work of 20th-century artists not only via direct references to the shapes and forms found in regional architecture and objects such as carpets, textiles, and metalwork but also through the study of the underlying principles of such geometric designs, including notions of symmetry, rotation, reflection, and layering. These principles were translated in novel ways in painting and sculpture, and while they mutated from their source in function and aesthetic, they retained a visceral connection to local architecture and crafts. In the present exhibition, artists whose work was particularly influenced by Islamic geometry include Jafar Islah of Kuwait, Hussein Madi and Nabil Nahas of Lebanon, Ibrahim El-Salahi of Sudan, Mohanna Durra and Wijdan of Jordan, and Kamal Boullata of Palestine.

*Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s* makes tactical use of the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation to explore the heterogeneity of abstraction and its many histories. Curatorially, the exhibition shares the inquiries and concerns that shaped the practices of Arab artists themselves in the second half of the 20th century, in striving to revisit local and regional artistic developments in relation to historical lineages and in finding a place from which to propose an expanded vision of modernism. The exhibition is an opportunity to better understand Arab art’s integral role in the discourse of global modernism and to scrutinize how the history and historiography of abstraction are “taking shape.” Readers and visitors are invited to (re)consider the attribution of abstraction’s emergence to a single historical moment and to understand it instead in the context of numerous Arab modernisms and articulations of independence during the period of decolonization. The coming together of the Barjeel Art Foundation, both as a collection and a site of critical inquiry, with the Grey Art Gallery at NYU is an occasion to rethink the coevalities, convergences, and divergences within the various and manifold histories of abstraction.



## NOTES

I am grateful to Sarah Rifky for her close reading of various drafts of this text and for her critical feedback and input.

1. The weekly newspaper *Révolution africaine* was published by the country's then-ruling party, the Front Libération Nationale (FLN). The FLN's armed wing had been instrumental in fighting for Algeria's independence from French colonial rule between 1954 and 1962.
2. Three texts addressing the social role of art in post-independence Algeria, each titled "Éléments pour un art nouveau," were written for *Révolution africaine* by the artists Mohammed Khadda, Choukri Mesli, and Abdallah Benanteur and published in June, July, and August 1964.
3. Some scholars have dated Wassily Kandinsky's watercolor *Untitled (Study for Composition VII, Première abstraction)* to 1913 rather than 1910; Mme Nina Kandinsky donated the work to the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, in 1976.
4. Mohammed Khadda, "Éléments pour un art nouveau," *Révolution africaine*, June 27, 1964, published as "Elements for a New Art" in a translation by Vanessa Brutsche in Annela Lenssen, Nada Shabout, and Sarah Rogers, eds., *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 232–33.
5. Khadda used the word "creator" to refer to artists: "After this long process, painting became an art unto itself, and the painter, who had long been dependent on the subject, became a creator." Ibid.
6. Indigenous Amazigh women and men in North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso) have traditionally tattooed their faces, feet, arms, and other body parts as tokens of beauty, amulets for protection and well-being, and markers of social status.
7. Egyptian artists Seif Wanly and Adham Wanly were trained by Italian painter Ottorino Bicchi in Alexandria. The painter Mahmoud Said was tutored by the Italians Amelia da Forno Casonato and Arturo Zanieri, also in Alexandria.
8. For example, the first Arab Biennial was held in Baghdad in 1974 with participation from all across the Arab world. In 1978 the International Art Exhibition for Palestine was presented in Beirut, comprising almost two hundred works by artists from nearly thirty countries. Works by Arab artists also traveled to Europe and North America. In 1951 a joint exhibition of works by married Egyptian artists Hamed Abdalla and Tahia Halim was mounted in Paris. In 1954 the American Friends of the Middle East funded an exhibition of seven sculptures and twenty-one paintings and drawings by Iraqi artist Jewad Selim, which traveled to Maine, Philadelphia, and Chicago. In 1971 the Ministry of Culture of the German Democratic Republic sponsored an exhibition of twenty paintings by Tahia Halim in East Berlin, and in the same year, an exhibition of modern painting, sculpture, and graphic arts from the Republic of Iraq.
9. The École des Beaux-Arts de Casablanca was founded in 1950 by the French colonial government. The first Moroccan director of the school was Maurice Arama (1960–62). Arama was succeeded by Farid Belkahia, in office between 1962 and 1974.
10. For more on Belkahia and the Casablanca School, see Rajae Benchemsi, Salah Hassan, and Lucy Thairu, "Farid Belkahia: Eroticism in Malhoun," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 13/14 (Spring/Summer 2001): 80–85.
11. Mohamed Chebaa, "On the Concept of Painting and the Plastic Language" [in Arabic] (excerpt), *al-'Alam*, January 11, 1966, reprinted in Mohamed Chebaa, *Visual Awareness in Morocco: Writings, Dialogues, Testimonies* [in Arabic] (Morocco: Ittihad Kuttub al-Maghrib, 2001), n.p., published as "On the Concept of Painting and the Plastic Language" in a translation by Kareem James Abu-Zeid in Lenssen, Shabout, and Rogers, *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, 263–66.
12. "Six peintres maghrébins parlent: La peinture au Maghreb—Situation alarmante," *L'Action*, April 16, 1967, published as "Six North African Painters Speak Out: Painting in North Africa, an Alarming Situation (1967)" in a translation by Aubrey Gabel in Lenssen, Shabout, and Rogers, *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, 279–82.
13. For more on Melehi, see *Mathaf Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World*, s.v., "Moham[m]ed Melehi," by Holiday Powers, <http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org.qa/en/bios/Pages/Mohammed-Melehi.aspx>.
14. For more on Gharbaoui, see *Mathaf Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World*, s.v., "Jilali Gharbaoui," by Holiday Powers, <http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org.qa/en/bios/Pages/Jilali-Gharbaoui.aspx>.
15. Roughly five years after the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62), Aouchem was cofounded by the artists Denis Martinez and Choukri Mesli. The group's 1967 manifesto was signed by Martinez, Mesli, Hamid Abdoun, Mustafa Adane, Baya (Fatma Haddad-Mahieddine), Mohamed Ben Baghdad, Mahfoud Dahmani, Said Saidani, and Arezki Zerarti.
16. "Manifeste du groupe Aouchem" typescript, 1967, published in a translation by Susan Greenspan in *Critical Interventions* 3, no. 1 (February 2009): 189, and as "Manifesto (1967)" in Lenssen, Shabout, and Rogers, *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, 292–93.
17. Ibid.
18. See Mary B. Vogl, "Algerian Painters as Pioneers of Modernism," in Gitti Salami and Monica Blackmun Visonà, *A Companion to Modern African Art* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 197–217.
19. Khadda, "Elements for a New Art."
20. Shakir Hassan Al Said, "Contemplative Manifesto" [in Arabic], *al-Jumhuriyya*, June 23, 1966, published as "Manifesto (1966)" in a translation by Nariman Youssef in Lenssen, Shabout, and Rogers, *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, 252–55.
21. Ibid.
22. Shakir Hassan Al Said, "The Philosophical, Technical, and Expressive Aspects of the One Dimension" [in Arabic] (Baghdad: Matba'at al-Sha'b, 1973), 5–9, published as "The Philosophical, Technical, and Expressive Aspects of the One Dimension (1973)" in a translation by Nariman Youssef in Lenssen, Shabout, and Rogers, *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, 357–59.
23. See Iftikhar Dadi, "Ibrahim El Salahi [sic] and Calligraphic Modernism in a Comparative Perspective," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 555–76.
24. Madiha Umar, "Arabic Calligraphy: An Inspiring Element in Abstract Art (1949–50)," in Lenssen, Shabout, and Rogers, *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, 139–42.
25. Ibid.
26. See Christiane Treichl, *Art and Language: Explorations in (Post) Modern Thought and Visual Culture* (Kassel, Germany: Kassel University Press, 2017), 117.
27. Dadi, "El Salahi and Calligraphic Modernism," 555–76.
28. See Nada Shabout, "In Focus: Huroufiyah; The Arabic Letter as Visual Form," in Lenssen, Shabout, and Rogers, *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, 142–43.
29. This term is used by Anna Wallace-Thompson in *Golden Visions: Omar El-Nagdi*, an electronic brochure published online in conjunction with exhibitions of El-Nagdi's work held at Artspace, Dubai, in 2008–9.
30. Kamal Boullata, "Visual Thinking and the Arab Semantic Memory," in Kamal Abdel-Malek and Wael Hallaq, eds., *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature: Essays in Honor of Professor Issa J. Boullata* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 286.
31. "Art, History, and Growing Up in Jerusalem: Barjeel Art Foundation Speaks with Kamal Boullata," in *Tariqah*, exh. cat. in English and Arabic (Sharjah, UAE: Barjeel Art Foundation, 2014), 22–37.
32. Rosalind E. Krauss, "Grids," 1979, reprinted in Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 9.
33. Saloua Raouda Choucair, "How the Arab Understood Visual Art" [in Arabic], *al-Abhath* 4, no. 2 (June 1951): 190–201, published in a translation by Kirsten Scheid in *ArtMargins* 4, no. 1 (February 2015): 102–18, and as "How the Arab Understood Visual Art (1951)" in Lenssen, Shabout, and Rogers, *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, 145–49.
34. See Maymanah Farhat, *Samia Halaby: Five Decades of Painting and Innovation*, exh. cat. in English, French, and Arabic (Damascus: Ayyam Gallery, 2010), 356.
35. Ibid., 51.
36. Email exchange with artist, August 18, 2019.