

Three Inaugural Exhibitions at the Arab Museum of Modern Art (Mathaf)

BY Sara Raza [from Mar/Apr 2011](#)



In clear hopes of familiarizing the world with the basics of Arabic, West Asia's first major modern Arab art museum has been simply named "Mathaf," the Arabic word for "museum." Originally conceived in 2003, the space opened its doors to the public on December 30, 2010, in Qatar's capital, Doha. The Mathaf boasts a permanent collection of more than 6,000 works spanning the late 19th century to the present day from the private holdings of the Qatar Museum Authority's (QMA) vice-chairperson, His Excellency Sheikh Hassan bin Mohamed bin Ali al-Thani, who is overseeing Mathaf's development with QMA chairperson Her Excellency Sheikha al-Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. Enthusiastically assembled over the past 20 years by Sheikh Hassan, who avidly sketched and undertook art-history classes at Qatar University as he forged relationships with artists throughout the region to form an understanding of local and diasporic contemporary art, the collection is among the region's most esteemed archives of art from the Arab world as well as from Iran and Turkey.

French architect Jean-François Bodin was charged with transforming a school, located in Doha's Education City area, into a museum, and the result is a remarkable example of recycled architecture that purposefully complements the building's former identity as a space for learning and exploration. Elegant and well-planned though it is, it should be noted that Bodin's building is only a temporary venue for the Mathaf—the final location, architect and design for the museum are still being determined. Working alongside Sheikh Hassan and Sheikha al-Mayassa is long-term curatorial advisor Nada Shabout, associate professor of art history and director of the Contemporary Arab and Muslim Cultural Studies Institute at the University of North Texas, as well as acting director and chief curator Wassan al-Khudhairi and Deena Chelabi.

The Mathaf inaugurated its gallery spaces with three concurrent exhibitions: "Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art," comprising curated highlights from the Mathaf collection; "Interventions: A Dialogue Between the Modern and the

Contemporary," an exhibition of five new commissioned works by modernist pioneers still practicing today; and "Told/Untold/Retold: 23 Stories of Journeys through Time and Place," a contemporary exhibition of newly commissioned work from Arab artists organized by former Chelsea Art Museum (CAM) curatorial duo Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath.

"Sajjil" (Arabic for "act of recording"), designed to showcase the breadth and variety of the Mathaf collection, was made up of more than 200 paintings, sculptures and works on paper, selected by Shabout, al-Khudhairi and Chelabi with a view to historicizing the modern art movement in the Arab world. The exhibition played to Shabout's credentials as a scholar of modern Arab art through the inclusion of 20th-century pioneers such as Turkish-born Iraqi Jewad Selim (1919–1961), founder of the Baghdad Modern Art Group and head of the Department of Sculpture at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad; Turkish-born Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901–1991), who relocated to Amman to form the Fahrelnissa Zeid Institute of Fine Arts; and Syrian painter Madiha Umar (1908–2005), who trained in England, Iraq and the United States and was part of Baghdad's One Dimension Group, a school of artists who were radical in their exploration and abstraction of Arabic calligraphy.

Despite such diligence and respect to the region's titans, the constraints of working with a preexisting private collection were a clear challenge in curating the exhibition. First-time viewers were denied full insight into the formation of modern Arab art movements and the importance of city centers such as Baghdad or Cairo, which were major epicenters for the development of modern art movements that had profound influence across West Asia and North Africa. Furthermore, an appraisal of the Turkish Ottoman legacy in the region and its pan-Islamic significance to the development of modern Arab art was largely missing from the narrative.

The most curatorially rigorous component of the exhibition was the section entitled "Huroufiyah" ("abstract letterform art"), which brought works

together under the umbrella of experimentation with Arabic text and letter. Collectively, the grouping powerfully emphasized a recurring theme in modern Arab art that lent the exhibition a helpful sense of historical continuity. Dubai-born Hassan Sharif, founder of the "Group of 5" collective in the 1980s, offered an outstanding example of the form with *City* (1981), a black-and-white etching of Arabic text and numbers within an abstract urban façade.

Following on from "Sajjil," "Interventions," also curated by Shabout, functioned as a bridge between the modern and the contemporary by spotlighting active veterans of the Arab world such as Sharif and Iraq's Dia Azzawi. Although "Interventions" consisted mainly of sculpture steeped heavily in modernist tropes, the exhibited paintings best highlighted the evolution of personal artistic journeys. Azzawi, one of the most widely acclaimed Iraqi modern artists practicing today, referenced war-torn Iraq with several new works including a triptych of abstract paintings, *Victim's Rose* (2010), riddled with punctures in the canvas resembling bullet holes. Two parallel mixed-media installations depicting lame, arrow-strafed horses, *Wounded Soul, A Journey of Destruction* (2010) and *Wounded Soul, Fountain of Pain* (2010), were inspired equally by seventh-century BCE reliefs in the Northern Iraqi Palace of Nineveh and contemporary Iraqi life post-9/11. Despite living in exile in London for a number of decades, Azzawi's sympathies and artistic themes demonstrably lie with his native country.

The explicitly contemporary component of the inaugural Mathaf exhibitions, "Told/Untold/Retold," was designed in a similar zeitgeist-tapping vein to curators Bardaouil and Fellrath's "Iran Inside Out" project, which originated at the CAM and travelled to Dubai's Farjam Collection in 2010. The exhibition highlighted an array of geographical, political, social and personal concerns within West Asia and North Africa as well as the diaspora of well-known artists from the region, from the widely shown Lebanese artists Walid Raad, Lara Baladi and Akram Zataari to younger practitioners such as

Palestinian photographer Steve Sabella and Iraqi painter Ahmed Alsoudani. Syrian artist Buthayna Ali's *Y "Why!"* (2010), an installation of 22 varyingly sized cement and rubber slingshots, stood out sharply from the other works on display. The work grapples with the issue of forced migration within the 22 Arab states due to war and unrest: the large sculptures tread a very fine line between the playful and the menacing. Palestinian mixed-media artist Khalil Rabah covered similar ground with *Bioproduct* (2010), an installation centered around a model of an aircraft carrier that doubles, according to informational placards, as a mobile farm and factory for strawberry jam and tomatoes. This satirical work is a continuation of Rabah's exploration into the loss of land and governance in Palestine, and builds on the artist's *United States of Palestine Airlines, London Office* project (2008), in which the artist created a fictitious Palestinian airline company.

In contrast to the hopeful, fantastical or allegorical, Iraq-born New York-based artist Wafaa Bilal embeds his work in plain, quotidian reality. Bilal has in recent years made a name for himself as a performance artist who subjects his body to physically painful scenarios such as tattooing and paintball attacks, and for the exhibited work *3rd i* (2010–) he has transformed his own body into a recording device by having a camera surgically inserted into the back of his head to comment on our current surveillance age.

As adventurous works such as these confirm, the curators of "Told/Untold/Retold" offered artists *carte blanche*, perhaps deliberately disappointing those viewers who were in search of art rooted in obvious neo-orientalist frames of reference. The exhibition was instead a more personal showcase for artists who are, first and foremost, worldly, and who produce a stew of works that engage with current global thinking on contemporary visual culture rather than simply fitting an idea of what should be housed in an Arab museum.

The Mathaf is in its infancy, but with a strong team and vision it is poised to

make a significant contribution to the shift of museum dynamics in West Asia: the QMA is taking on an active custodial role within the contemporary Islamic world, setting its sights on Doha's transformation into a major cultural capital within the region. Coming good on such promise is entirely contingent on a sustained program of exhibitions as historically rigorous, thematically varied and curatorially adventurous as these first three.