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# BEING DIA AL-AZZAWI: A LEBANESE PERSPECTIVE

by SELECTIONS MAGAZINE (HTTPS://SELECTIONSARTS.COM/AUTHOR/SELECTIONS-MAGAZINE/)



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Today, Dia al-Azzawi is a renowned figure, celebrated not only for his artistic accomplishments but also for his political engagement and tireless dedication to giving a voice to those who still await justice. A deep love for his Iraqi homeland is palpable in his work, and his life as an exile in London since 1976 is well documented. However, this special issue dedicated to Azzawi's illustrious career aims to present a different perspective – one that casts a spotlight on Lebanon, a country that played a pivotal role in his artistic journey and continues to inspire him to this day.

From the first visit onwards, Lebanon was more than just a place on the map for Azzawi; it was a revelation, a sanctuary of artistic freedom. Its capital city represented freedom, a stark departure from the socially conservative atmosphere of Baghdad. Azzawi vividly recalls Beirut's status as a prominent cultural and artistic centre of the time. It was here that he had the opportunity to forge connections with numerous Lebanese artists, fostering a rich tapestry of artistic exchange and collaboration. Moreover, his time in Beirut provided a unique window into the works of other visionary artists from across the Arab world, including Sudanese artist Ibrahim El-Salahi, and the works of Egyptian sculptor Adam Henein. This cultural immersion broadened the artist's

perspective in ways that Azzawi acknowledges would have been inconceivable in the isolation of Baghdad. We use cookies to personalise content and ads, to provide social media features and to analyse our traffic. We also share information about your use of our site with our social media, advertising and analytics partners who may combine it with other information that you've provided to them or that they've collected from your use of their services

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In Beirut, there wasn't only unparalleled artistic freedom, but also an atmosphere in which open press and critics with diverse artistic and cultural backgrounds thrived. This environment not only nurtured his creative spirit but also inspired him to push the boundaries of his creativity. Among those who left an indelible mark on his journey was Waddah Faris, "a true instigator of art in every sense", who Azzawi believes epitomised the creativity and richness of Lebanon in the vibrant 1970s.

From the cultural apex of the 1960s and 1970s to the civil war that would eventually unfold, Lebanon's influence on Azzawi did not wane with time; it evolved, continuing to shape his artistry in profound ways. The country's tragic events, such as the Tel al-Za'atar massacre of 1976 and the Sabra and Shatila massacre of 1982, served as powerful catalysts, inspiring some of his most iconic and emotionally charged works. These works stand as testaments to Azzawi's unwavering commitment to portraying suffering and resilience, transcending borders to speak to the universal human experience.

Returning to Lebanon after the end of the civil war, Azzawi encountered a different country from the one he had known. He recalls, "In 1991, when I landed at Beirut airport, I could not believe what I saw: a ruined and dark country. It was a shock that I could not bear. When I remembered the days of old, I was amazed at the destruction caused by its people who were fighting one another under the banner of religious sectarianism despite the openness of their society."

The trajectory of Lebanon in the ensuing post-war years has echoed that of Azzawi's homeland of Iraq in many ways. For Azzawi, the parallel is clear. "There is no difference between the two countries today," he says. "The bad model of Lebanon was brought by those who came on American tanks. Both have had their wealth plundered, and both have become more sectarian, as opposed to national. The politicians are not ashamed of working for neighbouring countries, nor are they embarrassed by the language of revenge or acceptance of outsiders over any loyalty to the Arab nation."

Through all the years and in various ways, Lebanon has profoundly influenced Azzawi's art. And in turn, Azzawi has honoured that inspiration with an unwavering dedication to being a beacon of truth, justice, hope, and the enduring power of art.

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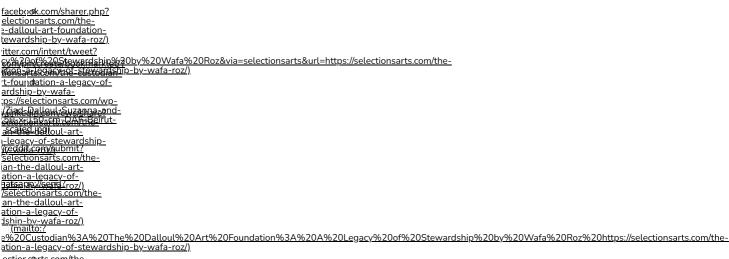
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RIMA NASSER: CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE CRITERIA YOU USE WHEN SELECTING RESEARCH PROJECTS AT THE DALLOUL ART FOUNDATION? WHAT FACTORS ARE CONSIDERED WHEN DECIDING WHICH PROJECTS TO SUPPORT?



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Mohamed Melehi, Untitled, DAF Bei. ... I would like to receive news and special offers.

WAFA ROZ: At DAF, our research selection criteria are meticulously crafted to resonate with the foundation's overarching mission and strategic goals. Our primary focus is on the MENA region and the Arabian Peninsula, excluding Turkey and Iran.

We take the history of the artworks and their respective artists as a lens through which we can read the region's complex history and the countries that comprise it. Preserving the artworks we house at DAF also means preserving their respective history and safeguarding the cultural heritage of the Arab region.

First, it is paramount to research the biographical details and exhibition histories of the artists whose works form part of the DAF collection. We carefully explore the themes, topics, and realities represented or narratives relayed by the artist in each piece while broadening our scope to the artist's wider oeuvre. In doing so, we contribute to archiving the region's history through its artistic productions.

Second, we carry out our process with the aim of educating and innovating. We target research projects that enhance the foundation's educational goals. We envision multifaceted research projects that can be expanded into other forms of exposure.

For example, we recently launched a project investigating a wide selection of *Untitled* artworks available at DAF. In addition to researching the history of 'picture titling', we decided to mount an exhibition named *UNTITLED* Abstractions, featuring a selection of 154 abstract artworks from DAF, all of which are untitled.

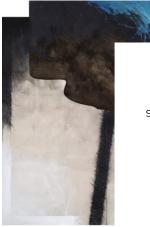
We showcased different styles of abstract art from the Arab region, with the intention of understanding the importance of a title or the lack thereof. As an extension to the project were contracted as a spice of talks and discussions invitige of holds. We are searcher in Value and analytics participation of the province of the provi

This project provided a platform to debate, or to even challenge the visual language used to converse about art. In doing so, we focused on a critical issue that concerned educators of art history: "How do we analyse artworks?" and "How do we write a visual analysis (formal and contextual) of an artwork?" The answers are found in the pedagogical methods through which we 'read' artworks. DAF wanted to provide a space for innovative ways of reading art. After completing our research, we have written 'visual analysis' texts for more than 60 artworks featured at the *UNTITLED Abstractions* exhibition. We plan on expanding our visual analysis writing to cover all the untitled abstract works, and most titled artworks, that we house at DAF. In essence, this initiative captures the multifaceted mission we aim for at DAF.

Third, we take the feasibility of a research project into consideration, specifically when retrieving primary sources. For instance, we once discussed mounting an exhibition investigating the history of art salons across the region. We had to inquire about prized artworks presented during those salons. We suggested visiting institutions that hosted such salons in countries such as Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt, in order to collect archival material. Due to its large-scale logistical and financial requirements, the project was deemed unfeasible, at least for the time being.

However, in other cases, we were able to work our way around some challenges related to location. In one of our projects, we studied artist practices by visiting their workshops and conducting filmed interviews. We then collected archival data that covered and contextualised their oeuvre. DAF reached out to Arab expat artists, mainly those residing in Europe, through videographers present in their respective countries, and we were able to film several artists working in their own studios. We conducted virtual interviews with them, from our DAF offices in Beirut through Zoom. This project, among many, remains in progress.

RN: RESEARCH IN THE ART WORLD CAN VARY WIDELY. WHAT SPECIFIC AREAS OR TOPICS DO YOU FOCUS ON AT THE FOUNDATION, AND WHY ARE THESE AREAS IMPORTANT?



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Salem Al-Dabbagh, Untitled, DAF Be I would like to receive news and special offers.

WR: As the foundation has expanded, our primary objective has been to establish a system to archive and produce well-researched academic publications on our vast collection of artworks.

It all starts with the artworks; they inspire our curiosity and compel us to understand them. We focus on topics that allow us to better articulate the direction of the collection. The DAF collection comprises of a historically comprehensive selection of Modern art covering 15 countries in the Arab world and a selection of bold, iconic Contemporary artworks that reflect current realities in the region. These carefully selected artworks are created by artists who are currently venturing into new mediums and techniques. This helps us better understand how our collection could grow, opening inroads that expand our field of vision when we decide to further acquire art from the Middle East, North Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula. We aim to grasp the zeitgeist of our time. As such, it is necessary to conduct research on topics addressed by Arab artists. We have a vast collection of politically charged artworks.

Our collection reflects recurrent themes that include identity, cultural heritage, colonialism and modernism, political movements, collective memory, loss, exile, migration, and displacement among others. The artworks present themes that discuss the elements of different art traditions such as Islamic art, calligraphy, and abstraction. At DAF we research art history in the Arab world, from Ancient to Classical, Modern, and Contemporary.

To do so, we have to be informed about the art of ancient civilisations like the Pharaonic, Mesopotamian (Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian), Canaanite, Roman, Greek, Byzantine, and Islamic art. We also extensively research art movements and groups established by artists from Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Sudan, to name a few, during modern times spanning between the 1930s and 1970s. Such art movements uncovered the past, and artists sought out and contested national identities.

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RN: EXHIBITIONS PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE IN SHOWCASING ART. CAN YOU SHARE INSIGHTS INTO HOW THE DALLOUL ART FOUNDATION PLANS AND CURATES ITS EXHIBITIONS?



Mahmoud Saïd, Le Port de Beyrouth, 1954. 58.5 x 69 cm DAF Beirut

WR: Our exhibitions are planned around our collection. We select and display artworks solely from the DAF collection. When discussing research project themes, we try to unpack the narratives and the historical events that the artworks themselves showcase. Our approach is guided by a thematic framework that helps us curate pieces that could, for instance, present coinciding historical narratives or challenge stereotypes about art from the region.

For example, the first 'video exhibition' we produced was titled Leads and Artistic Cues from the Arab World. This was my first exercise conducting indepth research about the semiotics, signs, symbols, and iconic figures familiar to the visual lexicon of most Arab artists. I chose to curate a video

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on, slowly unfolding scent, the sun, an olive ages.

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In essence, the DAF col expression.

#### **RN: WHAT QUALITIES** THAT THE CURATORS

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WR: We ensure that the

understand the region and the dynamics of its art scene. Prior to approving any loan request, we conduct several meetings with the curators to discuss their proposed themes and assess if their curatorial proposals are of interest to us. We must ensure that the exhibitions they mount are relevant to our region, and do not conflict with our ethical stances. DAF also encourages new and upcoming curators who propose innovative themes.

For instance, we worked with art historian and curator Mario Choueiri, who co-curated the exhibition Picasso et Les avant-gardes Arabes at IMA Tourcoing in 2022. The show drew parallels between Picasso's artistic practice and that of many modern Arab artists. Besides showing the similarities in style between Picasso's work and some of his Arab artist contemporaries, Choueiri explained that the show was an opportunity to highlight Arab artists who had been unjustly overshadowed. Moreover, the exhibition explored themes of emancipation and anti-colonialism while hoping for a better and just world. Indeed, the exhibition theme and the exploration of modern art styles resonated with DAF's vision and objective.

There are numerous other examples, where we were happy to collaborate with curators organising exhibitions in the region. To list a few, I would include Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, curators of the Beirut and its Golden Sixties exhibition, which toured from the Gropius Bau Museum in Berlin, Germany, to the Musée d'art Contemporain (MAC), in Lyon, France, and lastly to Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar in 2022.

The show included 19 works on loan from DAF's collection and a four-part docuseries Beirut: A Cultural Hub (1955-1975), produced by DAF.

Another recent example is working with anthropologist and professor Kirsten Scheid, who curated the exhibition Partisans of the Nude, currently showing at the Wallach Gallery, Columbia University, in New York. The exhibition featured 12 seminal artworks on loan from DAF depicting Nudes. Moreover, we are collaborating with the curator of the Venice Biennale, Adriano Pedrosa, who visited us to select works from DAF.

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Jumana Bayazid El-Husseini, Untitled, 1970. 115 x 89.5 cm DAF Beirut

WR: There are two projects that come to mind. One was titled The Nude: Between Divinity, Sexuality, and Conflict, (Part 1, Part 2, Part 3), (Videos are available on the DAF Website www.dafbeirut.org) and the other is a docuseries film titled Beirut: A Cultural Hub. Both were by-products of the initial video exhibition we had worked on

In the first collaboration, we aimed to challenge underlying assumptions about art across the region. I proposed to tackle the subject of nudity and nude art, which we saw our collection speak to. I wanted to tackle an issue that challenged preconceived assumptions. We looked into Modern and Contemporary artistic practices, from the Arab world, that included pudity. Surprisingly, we found more than 90 artworks at DAE addressing pudity and the Nude as a

genre of art. As such, I ( Conflict. The history of nature of the nude figur interesting and challeng played with the factor c graphics, voice, and so (

This experience encoura 1975) featuring four cha www.dafbeirut.org ) It s Lebanon's "golden era".

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ty, Sexuality, and mpared the symbolic chibition was very ginative one that xt, sound, light,

ultural Hub (1955siteis often called ☑ I would like to receive news and special offers ned to mount an

exhibition on this subject in collaboration with the Sursock Museum. However, the collaboration never materialised due to the tragic August 4 blast in 2020. The Sursock Museum closed, and many left the country.



Biennale de Lyon

Later, in late 2021, we were approached by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, who were selecting artworks for their exhibition, Beirut and the Golden Sixties, for the Lyon Biennale of Contemporary Art: Manifesto of Fragility. They requested to borrow several works from the DAF collection to be showcased while asking us to propose a collaborative work for approval. I suggested we transform some of our filmed life-history interviews into a documentary series with narrative and archival footage.

On an academic level, I was delighted to curate a comprehensive exhibition on Modern art from the Arab world. The show was arranged chronologically withisea times period biatespannesh from the 1920 starther 1920 start the 1920 start the 1920 start at the 1920 start the 1920 advertising and analytics partners who may combine it with other information that you've provided to them or that they've collected from your use of their services

Anthropology and Art History students a selection of Modern art from the MENA region as part of her MENA: Modern art course that she was offering at AUB.

#### RN: RESEARCH OFTEN UNDERPINS THE CREATION OF EXHIBITIONS. COULD YOU DESCRIBE THE PARTICULARITIES OF THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED AT THE DALLOUL FOUNDATION THAT MAKE THE FOUNDATION UNIQUE?

WR: Our research is quite inspiring and our collection has a lot to say. Starting with a close look at the DAF collection, our pieces invite us to delve into the history and context they reflect. During our research, we unfold exciting topics that make us want to share with our audience. Given the collection's diversity, we can amass a substantial selection of artworks that reflect nearly most of the topics addressed in the region.

WR: Yes. we are interested in further investigating digital art. Although the attention around digital art and NFT has subsided, nonetheless, the art market continues to explore the incorporation of digital art and blockchain into its activities. Al has created ripples in the art world, as well. There are different ways of using Al in art, such as in prompt art that generates images through text. In short, we are keen on experimenting with innovative trends and showcasing more of our contemporary art collection. With regard to different art forms, we would like to investigate street art, installation art, and public art.

# RN: CAN YOU DISCUSS THE ROLE OF CROSS-CULTURAL AND INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH IN THE FOUNDATION'S WORK? HOW DO YOU APPROACH RESEARCH THAT SPANS DIFFERENT ART FORMS AND CULTURES?

WR: Conducting cross-cultural research is necessary for us, given that most artists we house acquired their art education or trained in esteemed universities in the West. Some reside there due to exile or by choice. Notably, many Lebanese artists have migrated to the Gulf in the past three years. This diasporic movement of artists emphasises the importance of understanding influences, exchanges, and intersections within artistic creations. We conduct research on artistic productions that span across cultures and capture the growth of a global art ecosystem. One of the objectives of such research is to understand how artists borrow from other cultures and reshape or integrate various art traditions to comprise new contemporary productions we see today. Another objective is finding com

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WR: One of the primary from the Arab world, ar region.

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WR: This may sound too poetic, but one should never forget to deal with artworks as canvases of history. We must use them to challenge dominant narratives or introduce nuance to existing ones. I always advocate digging deep into the world of the artist. It can be overwhelming sometimes. Yet, it will make you a better researcher, once you have learned more about their lives, struggles, their artistic production and, in turn, the times during which they lived and created art. I also recommend integrating primary sources such as newspaper clippings, memoirs, speeches, events, marches, images, and histories that these artworks encapsulate. This could also be complemented with excessive literature review and amassing secondary sources that would create a holistic understanding of the artist and their body of work.

# RN: ARE THERE ANY UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS OR RESEARCH PROJECTS AT THE DALLOUL ART FOUNDATION THAT YOU'RE EXCITED TO SHARE OR THAT THE AUDIENCE SHOULD LOOK FORWARD TO?

WR: We plan on showcasing a few of our latest Contemporary art acquisitions, featuring artworks by young, promising artists as well as works by artists from the Gulf and KSA. Regarding research projects, we intend to explore the art history of the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula. Exploration of these areas is pivotal, given that they are important emerging art markets.

In addition, we are interested in learning about Palestinian embroidery and how it relates to mapping identities. It might sound like an already-covered topic;

however, we see potential in it. DAF has many artworks related to this theme. Collaborating with private initiatives focusing on the history of Palestinian embroidery is on our agenda.

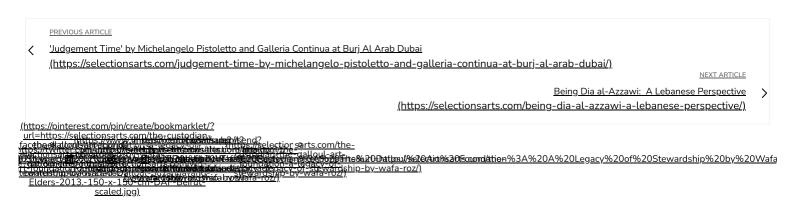
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#### RN: I UNDERSTAND THAT THERE IS A DOCUSERIES CURRENTLY IN PRODUCTION FEATURING DR. BASEL DALLOUL. CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT THIS SERIES AND HOW IT AIMS TO ENGAGE WITH ARTISTS TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF SOFT POWER? WHAT CAN VIEWERS EXPECT FROM THIS SERIES IN TERMS OF ITS APPROACH AND IMPACT ON THE ART COMMUNITY AND BEYOND?

WR: We are working on an ongoing docuseries that aims to investigate the impact of art, namely visual art from the Arab world. Our goal is to highlight "art as a form of soft power" – a tool that can shape human consciousness. Art, as such, allows both powerful and underprivileged nations or peoples to reserve a place for themselves on the world's cultural map. Via artistic

expression, knowledge is disseminated, and contemporary realities are explored. Through this project, we are looking at the art ecosystem and its key players as an instrument of socio-political criticism and commentary.

I do not want to disclose too much about the project to leave something to the imagination. But it is a promising one.



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JUNE, 2024

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