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BEING DIA AL-AZZAWI: A LEBANESE PERSPECTIVE

by SELECTIONS MAGAZINE ([HTTPS://SELECTIONSARTS.COM/AUTHOR/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.

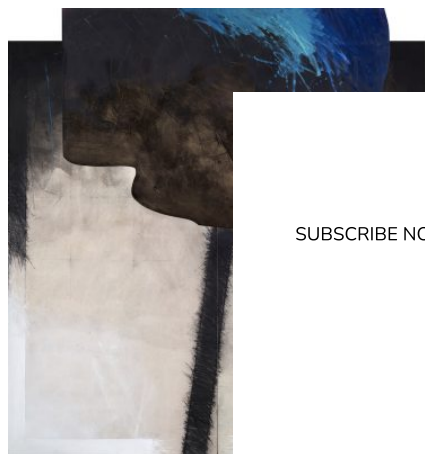
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This project provided a platform to debate, or to even challenge the visual language used to converse about art. In doing so, we focused on a critical issue that concerned educators of art history: “How do we analyse artworks?” and “How do we write 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?



Salem Al-Dabbagh, Untitled,
DAF Be

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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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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 nudity. Surprisingly, we found more than 90 artworks at DAF addressing nudity and the Nude as a genre of art. As such, I created *The Nude: Between Divinity, Sexuality, and Conflict*. The history of the nude figure in art is an interesting and challenging one. It has played with the factor of censorship, politics, and social norms. The exhibition was very imaginative one that explored the subject of nudity through text, sound, light, and video. It was a collaborative effort between DAF and the Sursock Museum. The exhibition was held in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2019.

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This experience encouraged me to curate an exhibition in 1975) featuring four chapters (see www.dafbeirut.org) It is often called Lebanon's "golden era".

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.

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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 with a time period that spanned from the 1910s to the 1970s. It featured 180 objects, including paintings, works on paper, and sculptures created by artists from the Arab world. The exhibition was held in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2022.

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. AI has created ripples in the art world, as well. There are different ways of using AI 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 common ground between different art forms and cultures. These conditions have spoken to one another through various mediums.

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RN: WHAT KIND OF INITIATIVES WITHIN THE ART COMMUNITY DO YOU SUPPORT?

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COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

WR: One of the primary initiatives we support is the Arab World Art Foundation, which focuses on showcasing and promoting contemporary art from the Arab world, particularly from the Arab region.

showcasing and promoting contemporary art from our region.

RN: AS THE HEAD OF THE FOUNDATION, HOW DO YOU SEE YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE ART WORLD?

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MAKE A MEANINGFUL CONTRIBUTION

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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