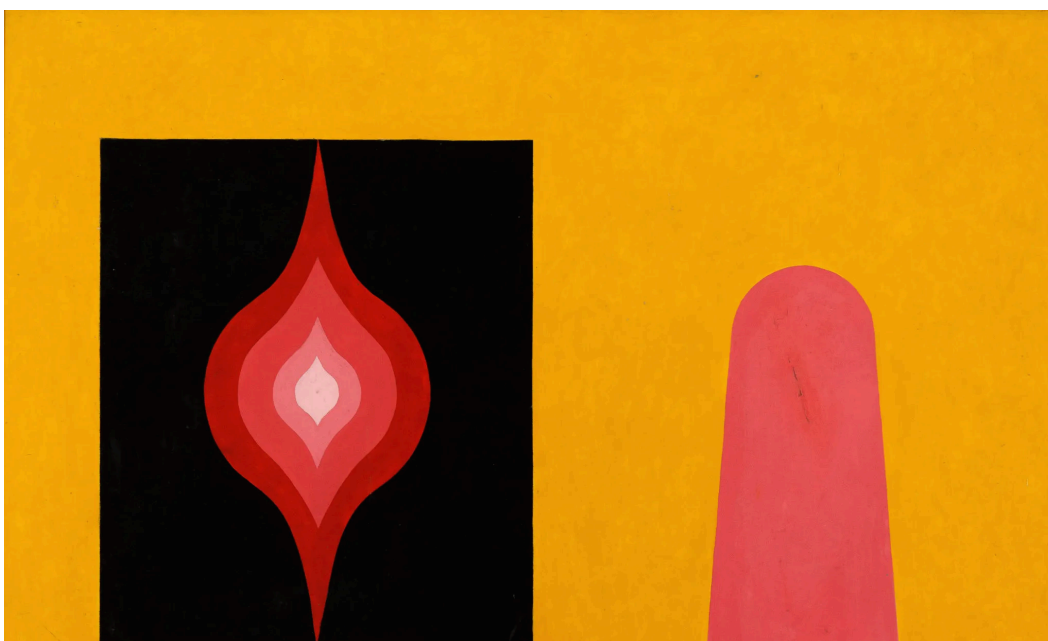



Opinion

A 'Horizon of Infinity': The Promise of Arab Abstract Art

 **Heba Elkayal**• February 7, 2020  0  4 minutes read

 **Untitled (1971)**, by Mohammed Hamidi. Hamidi was part of an influential modern art movement that started in Casablanca in the 1960s (Photo: Barjeel Art Foundation).

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World 1950s–1980s, a landmark exhibition currently on display at New York University’s Grey Gallery, presents an extensive evolutionary narrative of the development of abstraction by Arab artists.

The Algerian artist Mohammed Khadda wrote in a 1964 essay that artists must seek a new function for art as the dawn of a post-revolutionary socialist era began to emerge around him. He argued that art can have other purposes than those that aid propaganda, and that the evolution of art has allowed for new forms of art beyond the figurative. Abstract art, he wrote, has “a horizon of infinity.”

Suheyyla Takesh, lead curator of the exhibition, cites Khadda's essay in her introductory essay in the exhibition catalogue, and it seems that Khadda's proposition guided much of her intelligent curation of this selection of works drawn from the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, in Sharjah. Takesh took painstaking care to highlight Arab artists' innovation and ingenuity as they explored a post-figurative approach to artmaking by riffing, so to speak, on art forms and techniques already present in their everyday visual culture.

These forms included calligraphy and script—something taken for granted today, owing to the ubiquity of artists who have redefined the creation of font and script stylization over the past 60 years—in addition to Berber pictograms, as in the case of artworks by the Moroccan Ahmed Cherkaoui; graphic design sensibilities as evidenced by the use of words and phrases by the Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata; abstract figuration by the Lebanese artist Huguette Caland; and responses to historic works of art such as Abdallah Benanteur's work *To Monet, Giverny* (1983), a painterly reflection on Monet's impressionistic renditions of his now-famous garden and waterlilies.

Catalysts of Creation

To list what artistic detail makes each work that has been included in the exhibition a significant contributor to the genre would be a banal exercise in comparison to highlighting the sociopolitical factors and artistic coincidences that catalyzed the creation of the works on display. It is the inclusion of biographical and career details in the wall texts that serve as supporting evidence of the curator's intention to make the case that Arab abstraction developed in parallel to Western abstraction rather than as a derivative example of the genre.

There are clear markers of the artists' own sociopolitical and national locality in the works on display, and of the exchange and dialogue that happened between the various Arab states as artists studied in art schools in different neighboring countries and under the tutelage of different teachers.



The Light from Within the Green (1958), by Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar, a pioneer of Egyptian modern art (Photo: Barjeel Art Foundation).

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Yet perhaps most strongly present throughout Taking Shape is painterly evidence of the equally significant role of female Arab artists in abstraction's development. Unlike the development of Western abstract art, where women were not academically or commercially recognized early on as key players, Takesh helps the nascent (and yet-forming) canon of Arab art avoid the omission of the contributions made by female artists by highlighting the breadth and depth of their experimentation with form, color and subject.

It is the works by women, when studied collectively, that prove they took Khadda's maxim and blew it out of the water, pushing form and subject and color into an infinite number of new realms.

Women's Contributions

Take for example Samia Halaby's painting [White Cube in Brown Cube](#) (1969): The title is a facetious downplay of the actual coup achieved by Halaby of fusing the hard edges of a cuboid form to appear diaphanous. The cubes are neither quite brown nor quite white in color but rather a cloudy combination that resulted in a soft brown tinged with purple and white tinged with pink.

The experimentation with the visual effect of color on the viewer's eye and the subsequent questioning of what is color precisely is in dialogue with what artists like the American Mark Rothko did in his own work, but Halaby offers two artistic questions to tussle with—form and color—not just one, as Rothko was wont to do with color.

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Two pieces by the Lebanese artists Huguette Caland and Simone Fattal are extraordinary examples of the transition of figuration into abstract art.

With Caland's work Untitled (1971), the slightest hint is made about the form of a woman's body, the curvaceous bell shapes she's drawn hinting of the subject's behind. Shape and form are secondary to the brilliance of color

she employs to articulate a vision of abstract art as a style that presents a feminine commentary on the world.

Fattal's piece *Celestial Forms* (1973) also speaks of figuration, with shapes that can be inferred as two bodies, perhaps two female bodies, intertwined. Each artist transitions from figuration to abstraction in a different way, but both are worthy examples of the exploration of how abstract art can yield a new visual language for the declaration of the new ideas and experiences of our time.

Abstract art as a linguistic conduit by which to articulate the moments of our time is clearest in a piece by the Egyptian artist Menhat Helmy. Her painting *Space Exploration/Universe* (1973) translates the thrill of the advancements of science and technology, articulating the twinkling stars of the cosmos becoming within sight and human reach. Science is hinted at with a pattern of lines akin to those on a circuit board.

Taking Shape is a landmark exhibition not only for correcting misconceptions about the history of modern Arab art but for offering a multitude of prompts and proposals by which to view the history of a region.

Images from the Exhibition

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Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s continues through April 4 at New York University's Grey Art Gallery, at 100 Washington Square East in New York City. The exhibition will travel to

galleries at Northwestern University, Cornell University, Boston College and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

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