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The Barjeel Art Foundation: Imperfect Chronology – Debating Modernism I @ The Whitechapel Gallery

The Barjeel Art Foundation

In 2010 the Barjeel Art Foundation was opened, a museum and cultural institution in the United Arab Emirates created to manage, preserve and exhibit the personal art collection of Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi.

Between now and January 2017 four consecutive exhibitions are going to take place at the Whitechapel Gallery next to Aldgate tube, hosting highlights from the BAF collection.

As the wall panel reminds us, the 22 nations of the Arab League are home to some 350 million people (same population as the USA). The aim is that the exhibitions, as a whole, will tell the story of Arab art over the past hundred years.

This is the first instalment – on show until 6 December – and it explores the emergence and subsequent development of an Arab art aesthetic through drawings and paintings from the early twentieth century to 1967, year of the fateful Six Day War which shattered many illusions about pan-Arab unity.

Entitled *Imperfect Chronology – Debating Modernism I*, the exhibition consists of forty oil paintings in one room.

The paintings

The immediate impression is that it is a very *mixed* bunch, with all kinds of schools and styles and approaches hanging side by side. There are a number of art-class level landscapes of desert and river. I chatted to another visitor who liked them, but they reminded me of the works you get pinned up to

the railings of Green Park or Hyde Park. Tourist stuff.

- **A View From the Citadel** (1921) by **Youssef Kamel**
- **Assouan les Rochers** (1949) by **Mahmoud Said**
- **Le Canal de Mahmoudieh** (1922) by **Mahmoud Said**

The earliest work is a portrait of a young woman in profile by Armenian-Egyptian artist, **Ervand Demirdjian**, titled *Nubian Girl*, made around 1910. It is very dark in the flesh – this reproduction makes it look much sleeker, reminiscent of much late Victorian Orientalising art.



Ervand Demirdjian *Nubian Girl* (Undated) Oil on canvas. Image courtesy of Safarkhan Art Gallery, Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.

Each work is *sui generis*, often in wildly clashing styles, so that the overall impression is confusing.

- **The Bathers** (1964) by Ahmad Nashaat Alzuaby, which is not bad exactly, but reminds me of maybe Picasso's blue period. Many of the works remind me of better achievements in the same style by their European originators:
- **Shakir Hassan Al Said** is 'one of Iraq's most revered artists'. His most famous work appears to be **The Articulate Cockerel** (1954)
- **Samir Rafi** is represented by **Two Sisters** (1950)

A little more interesting is something like **Assouan** (1964) by **Ragheb Ayad**, but still somehow not *finished*. Would have been interesting to see how he worked up to or worked around this kind of vision.

Inji Efflatoun

Inji Efflatoun (1924-89) was a woman Egyptian painter. She's represented here by five ink and paper works from the 1950s inspired by the *Mathbahat Dinshaway* or Dinshaway Massacre when, in 1906, some Egyptian peasants protested about British Army officers taking pot shots at local pigeons, an important source for the peasants' food. This escalated into riots in which one British officer was killed and so the British hanged a number of peasants in reprisal.

- **Hanging**
- **Expectation**
- **Efflatoun study**

Marwan

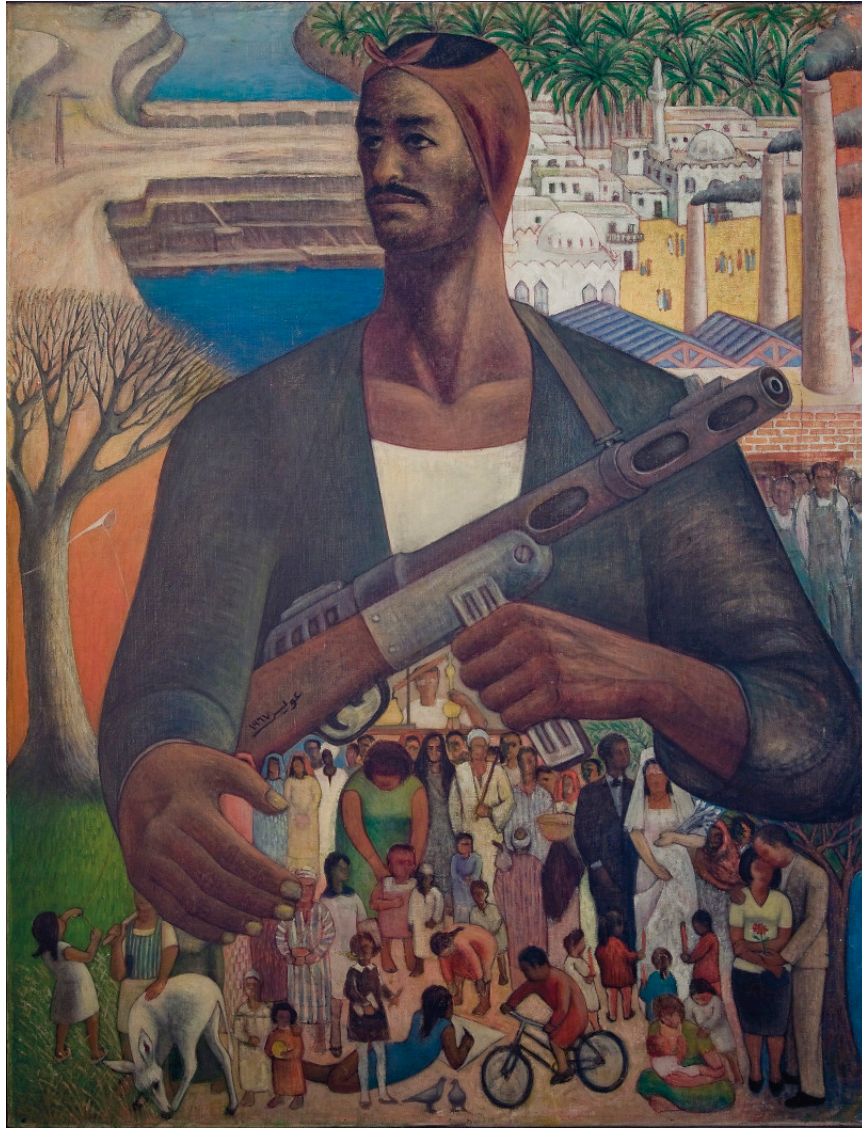
Marwan is a Syrian artist (1934) represented here by two of his characteristic, very *big* lampoon portraits, distortions, caricatures:

- **Munif al-Razzaz** (1965)
- **Der Gemahl** (1966)

These are striking images, owing a little to the satirical portraits of Weimar Germany, maybe more to French political cartoons. Looking at **Marwan's website**, his style seems to have changed almost out of recognition since these portraits from the 1960s.

Hamed Ewais

The ineptness (or deliberate naivete) of a lot of the works is captured in *Le Gardien de la vie* (1967-8) by Egyptian artist **Hamed Ewais** (1919-2011), a large-scale oil painting that depicts the looming figure of a 'fighter', weapon in hand, while underneath him throng ordinary people going about their everyday lives. Ewais is, apparently, a 'pillar of revolutionary art in Egypt', and quite obviously his work is related to / derives from / plays with, the **political murals of Diego Rivera**.



Hamed Ewais *Le Gardien de la Vie* (1967 – 1968) Oil on canvas. Image courtesy of Christie's, Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.

Not Pop

Most of the images I looked closely at dated from the 1960s and it does them no favours to compare them with the huge exhibition of **global Pop Art** from the same period, currently at Tate Modern. In the Tate, artists from South America and Europe show sophisticated, witty, satirical manipulations of images and motifs, confidently swimming in a world, a culture, informed by a deep history of figurative and realist art.

By contrast the paintings here seem to show artists struggling to master the basic means of painterly expression. I can't help thinking that the Koranic prohibition on figurative art means the Arab tradition is utterly different, a long tradition of wonderful architecture, designs, mosaics and tiling, using Koranic script, quoting words from the Koran to create beautiful calligraphy and tiles, but not so familiar – so *over*-familiar – with figurative oil painting as the exhausted west.

- **The High Dam** (1966) by **Effat Naghi** looks quite good in this reduced scale.
- **Sous Bois** (1957) **Abdallah Benanteur** b.1931 is small but striking, channeling Paul Klee.

Dia Al-Azzawi

Dia Al-Azzawi (b.1939) is Iraq's most influential artist. Three of his works are here, two **untitleds** from 1964, and the powerful *Mask of the Pretenders*.

- **Dia Al-Azzawi** on the Mathaf Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World
- **Dia Al-Azzawi's website**

Azzawi is obviously a big figure with a major career and a large body of interesting work. That doesn't really come out here, only from subsequent reading. If his three paintings had been grouped together, and if there'd been a wall label making more of a case for him, I'd have grasped his importance better...



Dia Azzawi *Mask of the Pretenders* (1966) Oil on canvas. Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.

Heading West

The biographies of a lot of the artists displayed here say they travelled to western academies and schools to learn how to paint, in the 1920s, 30s, 40s. As a whole, as a group gathered here together, they seem to be investigating and working through the possibilities of figurative painting at exactly the moment when most of Western art was turning away from its figurative tradition, towards all kinds of radical experiments (conceptual art, happenings, installations, video etc).

Not much of that experimental excitement is evident here. Experimentation with oils aplenty, but

somehow it seems very *old* experimentation, Arab artists working through techniques and styles pioneered in the West, which gives a lot of the paintings a derivative feel.

- **Untitled** (1966) by **Chafic Abboud** b.1926
- **Dream Walkers** (1959) by **Hussein Shariffe**, also channeling Klee

Fatigued Ten Horses Converse with Nothing

One of the standout works is *Fatigued Ten Horses Converse with Nothing (The Martyrs Epic)* by **Kadhim Hayder** (1965).

Kadhim Hayder, *Fatigued Ten Horses Converse with Nothing (The Martyrs Epic)* (1965) Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

But it partly stands out because it is such a successful assimilation of 1930s Picasso, with maybe a pinch of Paul Nash thrown in. It has taken 30 years for this style, this vision, to be assimilated. But it's still a striking image, maybe the boldest in the show, and so a logical choice for the poster.

Mohammed Issiakhem

I've left my favourite to last, the one painting which really stood out for me:

- **Femme et Mur** (undated) by **Mohammed Issiakhem** (1928-1985)

A strange, haunting image of an old woman more ghost than human, painted in muted greys and browns, with a taut, bird-like, dark-eyed face, wrapped in multiple layers, decorated with pallid circles and motifs. Close up you can see that layer after layer of paint have been applied, which somehow give it greater depth and power, as well as ridges caused by paper or fabric stuck to the canvas. Behind her are ghostly walls covered in graffiti and initials of the OAS and FLN, political movements involved in the Algerian war of independence.

It's worth going just to admire this powerful, haunting piece.

Conclusion

I wonder if it was a mistake to present such a wide cross-section of works by so many different artists across the crucial years of the twentieth century – 1910 to 1966 – in such a small space. I've visited the

show twice, skimmed the (enormous) catalogue and read up some of the artists online. Only with that much application have I begun to understand what significant artists, movements and stories are here very briefly referred to or represented by just one piece.

Maybe there should have been more works by fewer artists so you could get to know a select few better.

Or maybe the work should have been arranged to try and show a clearer narrative about how different schools or styles of Arab art emerged in the first half of the century.

As it is, works even by one artists are shown separately: paintings by Marwan or Dia Al-Azzawi are on different walls. Why? And the works as a whole are not in strict chronological order, which might have helped.

I've started, so I will now make a point of visiting the three further exhibitions, and am looking forward to learning how 20th century Arab art – and particularly the style and techniques of some of the best of the artists shown here – changes and develops.

Related links

- [**The Barjeel Art Foundation @ The Whitechapel Gallery**](#)
- [**The Barjeel Art Foundation website**](#)
- [**The Barjeel Art Foundation page about the exhibition**](#)
- [**Barjeel Art Foundation Wikipedia article**](#)

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