

Saloua Raouda Choucair builds reputation with show of modular sculpture at Tate

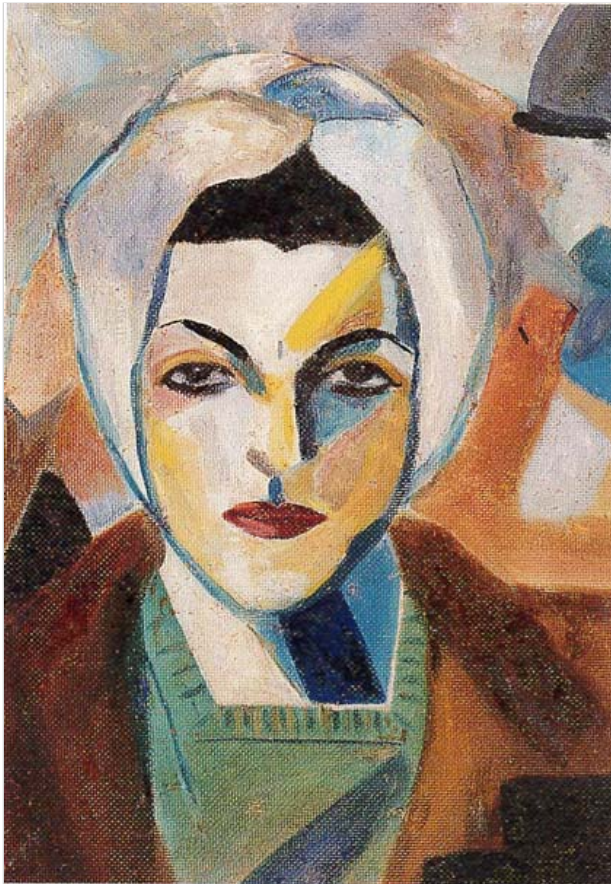
By Mark Sheerin | 04 June 2013

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Exhibition review: Saloua Raouda Choucair, Tate Modern, London, until October 20 2013



Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Self Portrait* (1943)

© Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

She has been called the Arab world's first true abstract modern artist, but for many people, a current show at Tate may provide the first sighting of Saloua Raouda Choucair. Indeed, her work appears at once familiar and exotic, both modernist in style and middle-eastern in influence. It is nothing if not cosmopolitan.

Lebanese Choucair was able to draw on both an inspirational trip to Cairo and an extended period of study in Paris. These two experiences come together in a modest sized gouache painting called *Paris-Beruit* from 1948. The structure towering through her urban dreamscape is not the Eiffel Tower, but more probably the Obelisk from Place de la Concorde.

Here was an artist as given to wielding influence as soaking it up. From about 1949, Choucair began to paint harmonious compositions of more or less chunky women, a result of joining the Atelier of Tubist giant Fernand Léger.

But as the excellent catalogue to the show points out, her women are active participants, at least one of whom is genning up on modern art with a book titled *Les Peintres Célèbres*.

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Happy #NationalBirdDay! The bird in this limestone carving is most likely a swallow but could also be a house martin. This image of the bird was used in Egyptian hieroglyphs to write the word 'great'
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It was not long, however, before Choucair lost interest in figurative art. Her painted work of the 1950s is characterised by abstract forms which mesh together in countless eye-pleasing ways. These works may echo Henri Matisse or Sonia Delaunay, but they sometimes unfold according to invisible laws of maths which owed more to Arab culture than Western fine art.

Before too long, Choucair moves on from painting altogether. Indeed most of this show, and all of its drama, stem from her lifelong engagement with sculpture and a thwarted ambition to make it as an architect.

Corbusier was a key point of reference: in particular, his Cité Radieuse in Marseille. A photo of this work in progress, taken by the artist in the 1940s, finds an echo in her complex Sculpture with One Thousand Pieces, made between 1966 and 1968.



Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Infinite Structure*, 1963-5

© Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

The Swiss architect's modular building design was certainly a guiding factor in the artist's work as the 60s and 70s wore on. This can be clearly seen at Tate in works such as *Infinite Structure*.

Minimalist in material, cubist in sensibility, the gallery has displayed this work as two towers of differing heights in order to underline the freedom of modularity.

But the Tate show culminates with an ironic twist. Other materials Choucair began to use result in a roomful of taut steel forms held in suspense with nylon. These complex, spellbinding sculptures hint at infinite geometries, and as such appear to be among her most 'Arabic' pieces.

Sadly, Choucair abandoned this avenue after a comparison with the Russian Constructivist Naum Gabo. All of which suggests that East and West meet in more common ground than you would expect.

Tate has done a fine job of introducing Choucair to a UK audience. The biographical details are fulsome without being overwhelming and the extensive range of artefacts from her studio bring her working process to life.

This even includes the painting *Two=One*, a typically modular pattern in pink, orange and red. This work may be bomb damaged after the Lebanese civil war, but it has been preserved. It is both a reminder of the precarity of life in the middle East and the occasional heroism of making art.

- Open 10am-6pm daily (10pm Friday and Saturday). Tickets £8.60-£11. [Book online.](#)

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