



ESSAYS

On Samia Osseiran Junblat: A Modern Artist in Retrospect

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An Artist's Evolution

In a 2022 solo show at Galerie Tanit for Nevine Bouez, Samia Osseiran's works from early and recent periods were displayed side by side.¹ At the gallery, one can see clearly that the artist is retracing her own evolution. Osseiran revisited her works from 1990, an aquarelle on paper, depicting figures rendered in abstraction and in black and white, with textures, shades, and shadows creating depth. A rendered solar orb appears. The theme was revisited in 2018, but this time in thin ink lines (ink on paper). The forms are repeated, and the solar orb reappears, but there are no shades or renders. The effect is flat, but the design is there. One witnesses the artist's conceptual shift from permanence to impermanence, allowing herself to embrace uncertainty. In an unpublished text, Lebanese art advisor Fadia Antar writes: "Between 2018 and 2020, with all the nostalgia of her older periods, [Osseiran] draws herself a retrospective. All her past experiences and influences manifest in her current works. It's fascinating to see how those shaky lines revive the old abstracted rocky gardens she brought from her years in Japan. Here, the organic forms reveal figures or phantasmagorical creatures, and there she plays with the shades and intensities of black, suggesting nuances, gradations, and rhythms."²

Samia Osseiran Junblat is one of the artists who stood the test of time, and was able to continue her practice throughout Lebanon's tumultuous history. In its modern era, Lebanon was a wellspring of creative talent in various domains. The Lebanese of the twentieth century endured many local and regional crises, but the most devastating was the Lebanese Civil War (1975 – 1990). The war specifically impacted the generation that had at its peak an important creative imprint in the region. Artists of the modern era were cultured, educated, and well-traveled. The female artist in Lebanon held a high status in the Arab World, and in fact, many gallerists and art critics of the war era were women.³ According to the research of Helen Khal, there was no shortage of female representation in the crop of leading artists in Lebanon in the 1980s. Lebanon was home to “the largest number of women artists to be found in any one country of the Arab World,” and in her study “listing the twelve leading artists in Lebanon, it was found that one-third of them were women.”⁴ Even during the Civil War era, in Lebanon's open society, and especially in the cosmopolitan capital Beirut, the female artist was celebrated; more so, arguably, than in the neighboring Arab states at the time, specifically during the 70s, 80s, and 90s. During that era, issues of women's rights, in art or any other professional sector, brought about questions of gender roles in traditional familial or societal settings. “Did her [the woman artist's] status as woman influence her role as artist? Conversely, did her role as artist engender any change in her status as woman?” Khal asks.⁵ The interchangeability of role and status for women is not a foreign concept to the region's history, though Khal focused on women with the occupation of an artist or creative agent.

As Khal explored twelve female artists in detail in her book, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*, she added quotes and works by an additional twenty-four female artists, including Osseiran, which offer rare insight into a shift in the artist's perspective. “Art for me has always been a self-expression and a means of communication in the human sense. Words are not sufficient, and one picture can convey all that has to be said. I once believed in the classical concept of time and space and the idea of permanency; but because of events in my life, this has changed and has been replaced now by the idea of change and impermanency,” Osseiran is quoted. “All this is reflected in my work.”⁶

Creating in a Time of Turmoil

Growing up, Osseiran witnessed a number of unfolding crises. During the 1967 war, she was only 23 years old, a fresh graduate completing her studies in Italy. Right before she moved to Japan, the 1973 Arab-Israeli War began. Then, as she earned her diploma from Tokyo, the Lebanese Civil War also erupted. During this period, Beirut could no longer retain its status as an artistic hub. Few exhibitions were held as most of the galleries closed, and many artists fled the turbulence. Bursaries usually awarded to artists were no longer available.⁷ Confronted by these setbacks, Osseiran, as well as other artists from her generation, had to find ways to remain relevant in times of war, and not to fall into oblivion.⁸ Artists that remained had less and less contact with the international art community, and grew more isolated.⁹ Nevertheless, these artists managed to maintain a level of artistic output during and after the Civil War, and their works are a testimony to perseverance and resilience in challenging times. They offered an artistic and even historical record of the experiences of the people of Lebanon during one of the most difficult chapters in the nation's history.

Within two decades following the end of the Civil War, Saleh Barakat, art expert and founder of Saleh Barakat Gallery and Agial Art Gallery, curated a show commemorating the artists that remained diligent during the calamity, titled *The Road to Peace: Painting in Times of War, 1975 – 1991*, which opened at Beirut Art Center in 2009.¹⁰ In this show, two artworks by Osseiran were exhibited, oil on canvas pieces titled *War I* (1986) and *Anguished Faces*

(1986) that depicted abstracted, tormented faces screaming with pain and injustice. The frieze-like representations are monochromatic, contrasted only by bold gestural strokes on the canvas. *War I* (1986) is a square canvas divided in half by a horizontal line. In the upper register, abstracted faces crowd the space with expressions of turmoil and pain. The lower register is blank, with the exception of black strokes of paint on the canvas. In *Anguished Faces* (1986), the frieze of tortured faces fills a rectangle with a black outline, taking up more than two-thirds of the canvas, with the upper and lower parts also blank. Curator Barakat chose twenty artists for this show, with the intention to “highlight a period of the Lebanese art scene that has been kept in the dark for a long time,” he writes.¹¹ “Most Lebanese artists have produced some art related to the war, but I only selected those who have tackled the topic of the war perseveringly and over a sustained period, leaving a massive body of work commemorating and archiving this gloomy period of the contemporary history of Lebanon.”¹² Besides Osseiran, these artists included Laure Ghorayeb, Ghada Jamal, Hassan Jouni, Odile Mazloun, Saloua Raouda Choucair, and Mohamad El Rawass.

Among other notable artists with whom Osseiran shared exhibitions were Etel Adnan, Huguette Caland, Bibi Zogbe, and Helen Khal. They were featured in a curated exhibition titled *Féminités Plurielles* by Galerie Tanit (2018), which touched upon the issues of gender in modern and contemporary art in Lebanon.¹³ The show was curated by Naila Kettaneh-Kunigk, the founder of Galerie Tanit. This group exhibition showcases a selected collection of nineteen modern and contemporary artists. The exhibition tackled various social topics, each explored, elaborated, and presented by women artists through their distinct artistic approaches. In the initial section of the exhibition, pioneering women who pursued their passions for adventure, travel, and discovery are highlighted, during a time when these aspirations were nothing more than unattainable dreams. They narrate their journeys through their paintings and artworks.¹⁴ Osseiran’s works were exhibited and celebrated in this show, which placed emphasis on her experiences and education in Japan, including a series of untitled drawings of ink on paper (1974 – 1975).¹⁵ These drawings display renderings of landscapes, rocks, and textures using a hatching technique. In some, a hatched solar orb appears. The effect is minimalist and yet powerful. The exhibition catalog highlighted a utopian universe, brought to life through the works of Osseiran, who, following her time in Japan, traces a journey towards a landscape of dreams and fantasies, amplified by the finesse of textures.¹⁶

A celebration of women as pioneers in Lebanon and the Arab World from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries confirms what Khal witnessed in the 80s in the region; that women make up a substantial and indispensable component of the Arab art scene. Their lives, journeys, and experiences are, in the end, their stories; and these women were brave enough to narrate them in their creative outputs.

The Formative Years

Personal tribulations in Osseiran’s life affected her practice, not only in matters of style but also in choices of subject matter. Osseiran does not shy away from visually expressing her anguish, grief, or regret any more than she does her joy, rapture, and tranquility. Her education and experiences in Lebanon, Italy, and Japan also served to enrich her creative flow. Her oeuvre includes a wide range of themes, styles, and mediums. Samia was born in 1944 into a political family, her father being Adel Osseiran, who held an important status in Lebanon’s political scene as Head of Parliament and one of the founding fathers of the nation. Her brother Abdullah was killed in 1972 for political reasons, which deeply saddened her. Her closeness to her family is reflected in the attention she gives them in her body of work. She married Jamal Junblat in 1979, and moved to her current residence in Saida, South of Lebanon.¹⁷

Samia drew from an early age and has shown an affinity for art since childhood. Eventually, Osseiran enrolled in the Lebanese American University (LAU), which was then known as the Beirut College for Women, where she earned a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts in 1965. She continued her studies in Florence, Italy, earning a Master of Fine Arts in 1967 from the Pius XII Institute. Upon returning to Lebanon, she completed a course in Graphic Art in 1970 at the John F. Kennedy Center in Beirut. Additionally, she taught briefly at her alma mater, LAU. Later in her life, she received a scholarship to continue her studies in Japan. At the University of Fine Arts in Tokyo, she obtained a diploma in Graphic Art in 1975.¹⁸ Given her skill in drawing, Osseiran is described by gallerist Naila Kettaneh-Kunigk and Fadia Antar as “more of a graphist [graphic artist] than a painter.”¹⁹ Needless to say, she is “a well-traveled and highly cultured person, with a large palette of work.”²⁰

As Osseiran established a name for herself in both Lebanon's vibrant art scene and abroad, joining her contemporaries in many exhibitions in France, the United Kingdom, and Lebanon, including at least seven group shows by the LAU Alumni Association, her early works were also displayed in solo shows.²¹ During these early years of her career, her solo shows included the Mazzuchelli Gallery and Lo Sprone Gallery in Florence in the 60s; the American University of Beirut Art Gallery, Gallery One, and Alex Manougian Art Center in Beirut in the 60s and 70s; and Shinsaibashi Gallery and Tokyo American Club in Japan in the 70s.²² Her most prestigious exhibitions also include eleven participations in The 32nd Salon d'Automne at the Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock Museum in Beirut in 1986 and 2003;²³ as well as *Liban: Le Regard des Peintres* at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, France in 1989.²⁴

Samia Osseiran's creative scope extends to the literary domain as well, as she is also a poet. She published a book of poetry in 1990 titled *Paintings, Drawings, Poems, 1989 – 1990*, elegantly illustrated with her own art. She states in the prologue: “I did the paintings at about the same time I wrote the poems. I feel that they complement each other by rendering my expression fuller, although the paintings do not purport to represent the poems. [...] Again, the drawings do not directly illustrate any particular poem.”²⁵ Yet, the synchronicity of her words and her paintbrush reveal a mind at work through creative pulses. She works from intuition, intellect, and an almost existential pursuit of meaning. The titles range from inquiry, such as *What is the Question of the Day?*²⁶ to melody, such as *Music That Surged Up My Soul.*²⁷ In some poems, she explores the role of characters, like *The Flautist*²⁸ and *A Lady.*²⁹ The tone is reflective, calm, meditative, and deep. The book is an amalgamation of both childlike inquisition and deep reflection, revealing a maturity in both language and intellect.

Artistic Mediums

Samia's vast oeuvre and the evolution of her style emerged as a demonstration of her exploration and experimentation. Her education in Japan spurred in her landscapes that show Zen gardens, Japanese lanterns, and configurations of rocks rendered with an ink pen, often using a minimalist crosshatching technique. In these rock compositions, the image of the sun as a solar orb also appears again. Fadia Antar remarks that the archetype of the solar orb is recurrent in other female Arab artists' works as well, including Etel Adnan, Huguette Caland, and Helen Khal. “These are not direct references to the sun as a sun. These are spiritual references,” Antar shares. “It is more about feminism, spirituality, and other layers of life.”³⁰ Indeed, the solar orb, the sun, or the stellar object appears in Osseiran's works in various color choices. Hauntingly, it often occupies a focal point in the composition of the painting. Notably, Osseiran shared painting sessions with Helen Khal.³¹

She also painted using watercolor, most famously in her painting titled *Dusk on Two* (1974).³² In this painting, we see the return of the solar orb, only this time it is pitch black and ominous. There are two abstract figures set apart at the edges of the painting and are cropped. The figure on the right is also dark, and contained within the black, grey, and purple areas of color, demarcated by lines. On the far left, the figure is a light shade of purple. The contrast in color between the two figures is significant; perhaps it is a representation of the living mourning the dead, or two people separated by death.

Dusk on Two (1974) was painted two years after Samia's brother's untimely death. Earlier in 1972, she exhibited a series of black and white drawings as a tribute to him.³³ Following her father's death in 1998, Osseiran created a series of paintings depicting "flamboyant" flowers.³⁴ These were exhibited in 1999 at the UNESCO Palace in Beirut. The ode to floral references would return as well after the passing of her mother in 2007.³⁵ Specifically, she painted wildflowers and cactuses, which she exhibited at the Safana Gallery in 2008 as a tribute to her mother.³⁶

Furthermore, there appears in her body of work a fruits and vegetables series, such as paintings of brightly colored lemons, potentially to appeal to buyers who are interested in still life paintings. Though a common subject matter, Osseiran adds her own touch and appeal to the works, intentional in her selection of a color palette that does not necessarily conform to reality. Even in a series of tree trunk pieces, in pen and ink and in oil on cardboard, the artist turns this ordinary subject into something otherworldly.³⁷ In more recent works, abstracted figurations appear in bright colors and overlapping forms. Art historian Cesar Nammour quotes Osseiran, who says: "What is man in our inner vision? Is he an angel or a demon, is he real or surreal, is he materialistic or spiritual, or is he both? I have envisioned man as an organic form that grows, moves in space in different directions and dissolves. He could be all and could be nothing, a contradiction of forces and forms. He is mystery and clarity, and his life on earth remains a mystery in the pictorial sense!"³⁸ This existential questioning of the nature of man reveals a deep spiritual quest, eloquently expressed in both word and image. Spirituality seems to be one of the driving forces of Osseiran's creative process.

Portraits are also common in Osseiran's work, as she tends to paint people she knew and observed.³⁹ Often, the personality of the sitter would come through in the work. Osseiran preferred a bright color palette for her work in portraiture.⁴⁰ She expressed a fascination with faces and how they reveal human character.⁴¹ For example, in a series of portraits from 2005, she painted the subjects up close, with their faces taking up the full area of the canvas. This allowed for emphasis on details and human expressions. The subjects' eyes seem focused, looking away but with intent. Their expressions reveal their emotions and reactions to what they are looking at. The backgrounds are flat and brightly colored. Osseiran does not shy away from using unnatural colors in the details of the faces. The focus is on the subjectivity of the sitter, more than the objective rendering of precise details.

Conclusion

Samia Osseiran Junblat is one of the great female artists of her generation, highly respected and admired in both Lebanese and regional art communities. Her work is a testimony of perseverance in times of personal as well as societal difficulties. Her education and travels have enriched her cultural tastes and artistic temperament. Her creativity pushes her to explore different styles, mediums, and subject matters. In her book, she seems to be searching for higher meaning, in an endless pursuit of beauty and authenticity through poetry and image-making. She never relents, never abandons her creative practice. Her collection encompasses a

large body of work that is vibrant and diverse, which is institutionally appreciated in Lebanon as evidenced by the many entries of her works into the Sursock Museum's Salon d'Automne over the years. Additionally, her work has been shown in some of the most prestigious galleries in Beirut, including Galerie Tanit and Agial Art Gallery. Her status as an artist in Lebanon is upheld by the deep appreciation that the public has for her work. In retrospect, there is much to explore when studying and examining the art of Samia Osseiran Junblat, which deserves further attention from local and regional research institutions and academics alike.

This essay is part of Written Portraits: Arab Women, Art, & History, a series that focuses on the lives and works of Arab female artists, authored by Arab female researchers in collaboration with the Barjeel Art Foundation.

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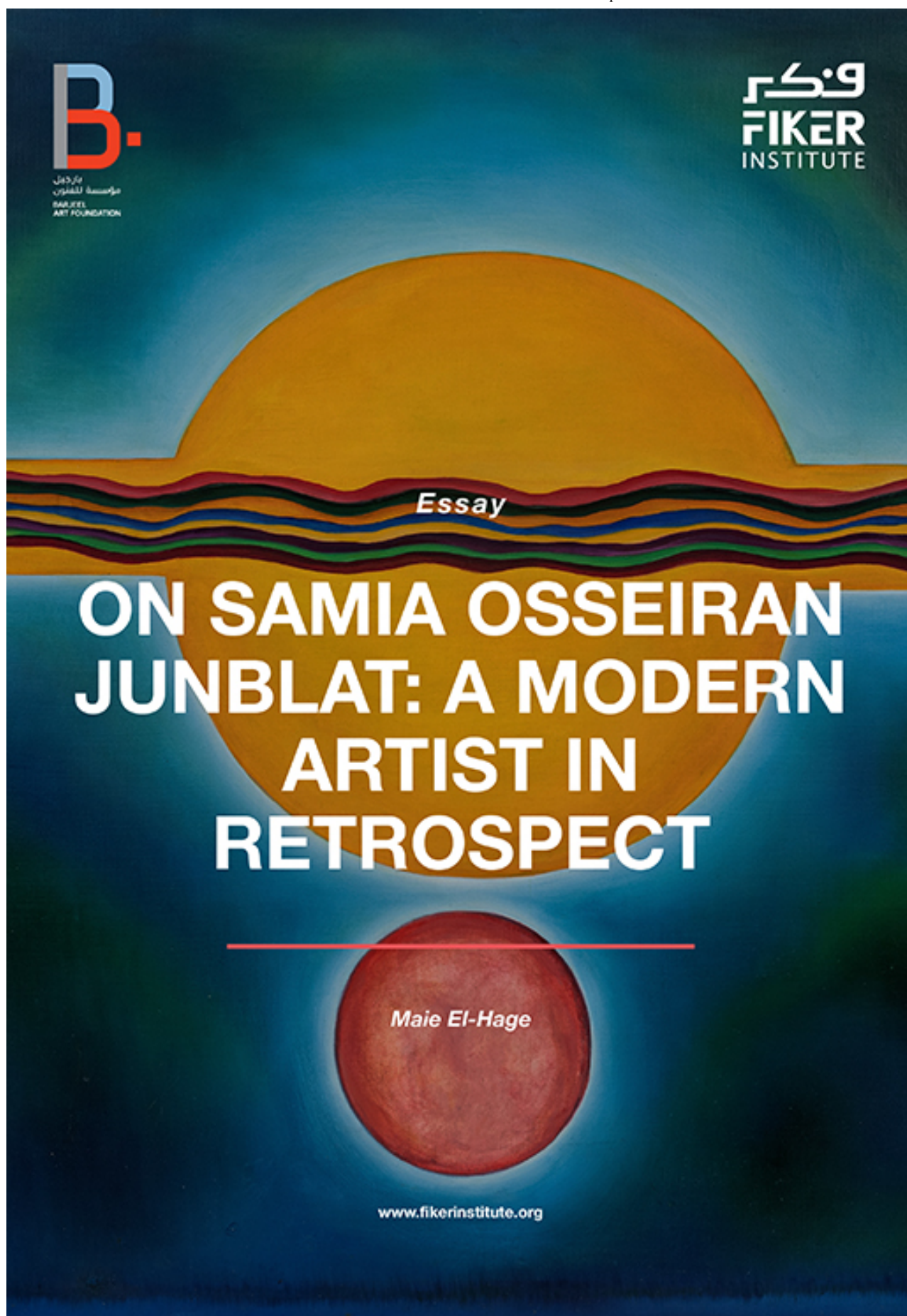
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