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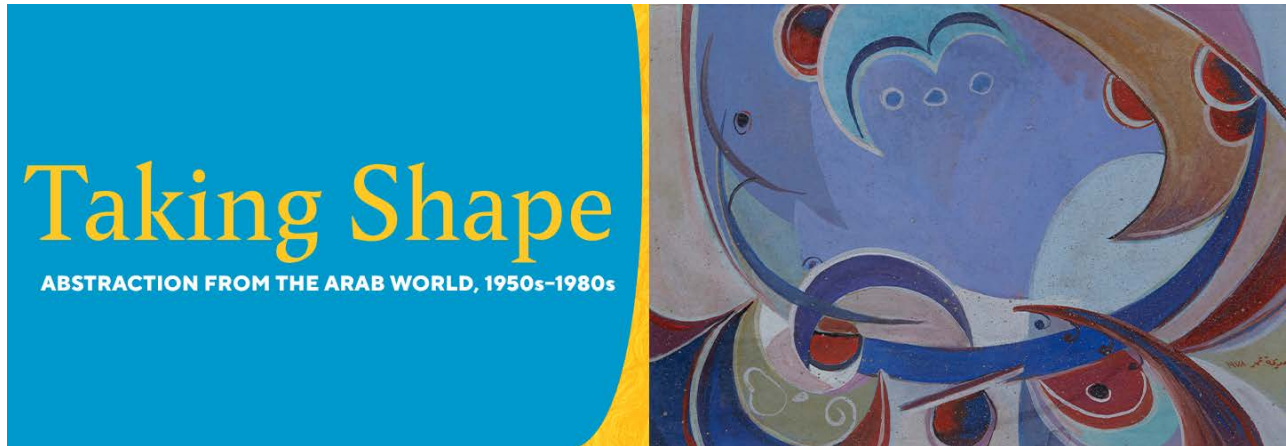
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EXHIBITION RETHINKS MID-CENTURY ABSTRACT ART IN MIDDLE EAST AND BEYOND

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s on view at The Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University September 22 – December 4, 2022

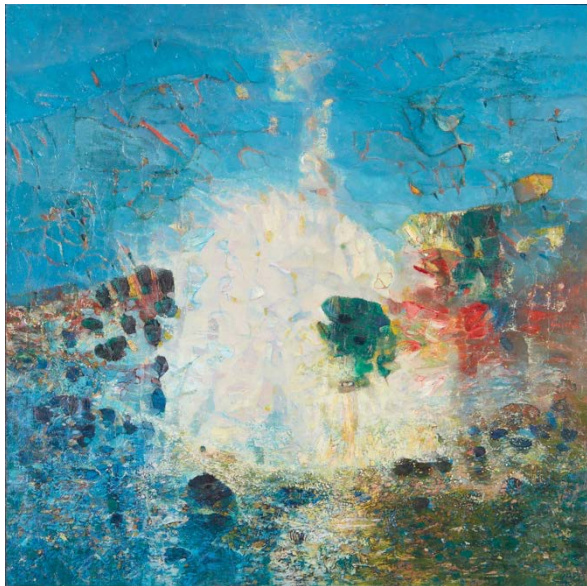
From September 22 – December 4, 2022 the Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University will present [Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s](#). The exhibition explores mid-20th-century abstract art from North Africa, West Asia, and the Arab diaspora—a vast geographic expanse that encompasses diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds.

Comprising nearly 90 works by artists from Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the Arab diaspora, the exhibition is drawn from the renowned collection of the [Barjeel Art Foundation](#) based in Sharjah, UAE. The paintings, sculpture, drawings,

and prints on view reflect the wide range of nonfigurative art practices that flourished in the Arab world over the course of four decades. Examining how and why artists investigated the expressive capacities of line, color, and texture, *Taking Shape* highlights a number of abstract movements that developed in the region and charts how individual artists and artist collectives grappled with issues of authenticity, national and regional identity, and decolonization. Looking critically at the history of mid-20th-century abstraction, the exhibition rethinks art historical canons and expands the discourses around global modernisms.

Taking Shape is the newest chapter in The Block's exploration of global modernisms, and the exhibition aligns with the museum's commitment to focus on understudied, overlooked and even suppressed art histories. The exhibition will illuminate a lesser-known corner of 20th century modern art as abstraction was embraced by artists throughout the Arab world. *Taking Shape* also looks at how abstraction was central to a rich conversation about creating works of art that united artists internationally.

"While these artists shared a common language of non-representational imagery, they often responded to specific cultural contexts and traditions," notes Lisa Corrin, Ellen Philip Katz Executive Director. "We are grateful to the Barjeel Art Foundation for



Abdallah Benanteur, "To Monet, Giverny," 1983. Oil on canvas, 47 1/4 x 47 1/4 in. Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation

sharing these works, so critical to enhancing our knowledge of artistic production. These beautiful works capture the spirit of experimentation that made abstract art of the 50s–80s so exciting and that make it a touchstone for so many artists working today. We believe it is crucial that art museums continue to question how and by whom art history has been written in the past and to pursue opportunities to expand our understanding about art's histories. Exhibitions like *Taking Shape* are key to adding depth and broadening our perspective on the ways global visual arts, cultures, and politics are intertwined and connect to our contemporary moment."

About the Exhibition

Taking Shape explores the principles and meaning of abstraction in the context of the Arab world during the 1950s through the 1980s; a period marked by decolonization, the rise and fall of Arab nationalisms, socialism, rapid industrialization, wars and mass migrations, and the oil boom transformed the region during this period. With

rising opposition to Western political and military involvement, many artists adopted critical viewpoints, striving to make art relevant to their own locales. New opportunities for international travel and the advent of circulating exhibitions sparked cultural-educational exchanges that exposed artists to multiple modernisms—including various modes of abstraction—and led them to consider their roles within an international context. Across North Africa, West Asia and the Arab diaspora individual artists and artist collectives grappled with issues of authenticity, national and regional identity, and the of culture.

The featured artists—a varied group of Arab, Amazigh (Berber), Armenian, Circassian, Jewish, Persian, and Turkish descent—sought to localize and recontextualize existing 20th-century modernisms, some forming groups to address urgent issues. Moving away from figuration, they mined the expressive capacities of line, color, and texture. Inspired by Arabian calligraphy, geometry and mathematics, Islamic decorative patterns, and spiritual practices, they expanded abstraction's vocabulary—thus complicating its genealogies or origin and altering how we view non-objective art.



Mohamed Melehi, "Composition," 1970. Acrylic on wood, 47 1/4 x 39 3/8 in. Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation

“Though abstract, these diverse works reflect the larger cultural, intellectual and spiritual negotiations of the Arab world in the 20th century,” notes exhibition curator Suheyla Takesh of the Barjeel Art Foundation. *Taking Shape* illuminates these broad horizons, introducing visitors to the diverse schools and movements that developed within and across these nations in a time of heightened international dialogue and diaspora”



Omar El-Nagdi, "Untitled," 1970. Mixed media on wood, 47 x 47 in. Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation

Participating Artists

Shafic Abboud, Hamed Abdalla, Yvette Achkar, Etel Adnan, Maliheh Afnan, Malika Agueznay, Shakir Hassan Al Said, Dia al-Azzawi, Ezekiel Baroukh, Farid Belkahia, Néjib Belkhodja, Fouad Bellamine, Abdallah Benanteur, Kamal Boullata, Huguette Caland, Mohamed Chebaa, Ahmed Cherkaoui, Saloua Raouda Choucair, Saliba Douaihy, Mohanna Durra, Simone Fattal, Asma Fayoumi, Abdel Hady el-Gazzar, Jilali Gharbaoui, Samia Halaby, Mohammed Hamidi, Menhat Helmy, Adam Henein, Jafar Islah, Ibrahim Ismail, Saadi Al-Kaabi, Munira Al-Kazi, Mohammed Khadda, Helen Khal, Rachid Koraïchi, Miloud Labied, Hussein Madi, Najat Makki, Seta Manoukian, Mohamed Melehi, Omar el-Nagdi, Nabil

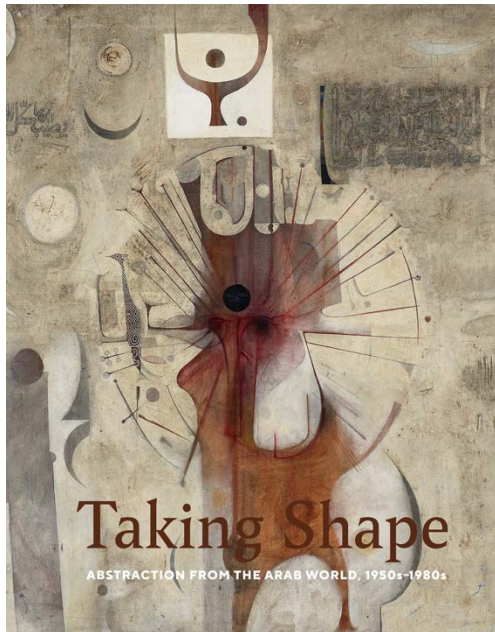
Nahas, Rafa Nasiri, Hind Nasser, Samir Rafi, Aref El Rayess, Ufemia Rizk, Mahmoud Sabri, Ibrahim El-Salahi, Juliana Seraphim, Hassan Sharif, Hussein Shariffe, Ahmad Shibrain, Madiha Umar, Wijdan, Ramsès Younan, Jassim Zaini, Afaf Zurayk.

Exhibition Programs:

- *Opening Conversation – Wednesday, Sept, 28, 2022 – 6:00 PM, [RSVP](#)*
At its heart, *Taking Shape* raises fundamental questions: How do we study abstraction across different contexts, and what modes of analysis do we use? This opening dialogue will feature recorded remarks from Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation, and Suheyla Takesh, curator of *Taking Shape*, and a conversation among Northwestern scholars exploring the exhibition's core questions, including **Caroline Kent** (Assistant Professor of Art Theory and Practice), **Michael Rakowitz** (Alice Welsh Skilling Professor of Art Theory and Practice) and **Sarah Dwider** (Block Museum 2021–22 Graduate Fellow and PhD Student, Department of Art History). Conversation moderated by **Hannah Feldman** (Associate Professor of Art History).
- *Taking Shape Gallery Talks – Thurs. Oct 20, 12:30 / Thurs. Dec 1, 12:30 PM, [RSVP](#)*
Learn more and look deeply at selected works in *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s* during a gallery talk led by Block Museum staff.
- *Artist Talk: Walid Raad – Wed. Oct. 26, 6PM [RSVP](#)*
Join artist **Walid Raad** (b. 1967, Chbaniyeh, Lebanon) as he reflects on his work and practice and draws connections to *Taking Shape*. In his installations,

performances, photographs and videos, Raad's works engage how historical events of physical and psychological violence affect bodies, minds, cities, and art.

- *[Online] Artist Talk: Samia Halaby – Wed. Nov 9, 6PM Zoom [RSVP](#)*
Join *Taking Shape* artist **Samia Halaby** for a talk exploring her groundbreaking artistic practice and career. Halaby (b. 1936, Jerusalem) is an artist, activist, and scholar living and working in New York. Halaby is recognized as a pioneer of abstract painting.



Exhibition Catalogue

[*Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s-1980s*](#) is accompanied by a 256-page publication. Co-published by Hirmer Publishers and the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, the book was co-edited by Suheyyla Takesh, Curator at the Barjeel Art Foundation, and Lynn Gumpert, Director of the Grey Art Gallery, New York University. Also featured are essays by Iftikhar Dadi, Associate Professor in the History of Art and Visual Studies department and Director of the South Asia Program, Cornell University; Salah M. Hassan, Goldwin Smith Professor of African and African Diaspora Art History and Visual Culture, Director of the Institute for Comparative Modernities, Cornell University; Hannah Feldman, Associate Professor of Art History, Northwestern

University; Anneka Lenssen, Assistant Professor in the History of Art Department, University of California, Berkeley; Salwa Mikdadi, Associate Professor, Practice of Art History, NYU Abu Dhabi; Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation and lecturer and researcher on social, political, and cultural affairs in the Arab Gulf States; Nada Shabout, Professor of Art History and Coordinator of the Contemporary Arab and Muslim Cultural Studies Initiative (CAMCSI), University of North Texas; Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, a writer based in Beirut and New York; and Suheyyla Takesh. The book also includes biographical entries on each artist.

Tour

The Block Museum's presentation is the final stop on a national exhibition tour that has emphasized the unique educational capabilities of academic art museums. After debuting at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University in 2020, *Taking Shape* traveled to the McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, the Tampa Museum of Art, and the Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University. [Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi](#), the founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation reflected on this group as "forward-thinking and progressive institutions." "It's important to note that we only work with university museums in America...These are medium-sized museums and they're much more


malleable than larger institutions...The other aspect is the educational aspect—every single one of these museums will have symposia, conferences and talks, and they have the students involved, which is really important" Al Qassemi told [Hadara Magazine](#).



Sponsorship

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s is organized by the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, and curated by Suheyla Takesh and Lynn Gumpert. Major support for the exhibition is provided by the Barjeel Art Foundation. Additional generous support is provided by the Charina Endowment Fund; the Violet Jabara Charitable Trust; the Grey's Director's Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends; and the Abby Weed Grey Trust. The Block's presentation of the exhibition is supported in part by the Myers Foundations and the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

About the Barjeel Art Foundation

 Barjeel Art Foundation is an independent, UAE-based initiative established to manage, preserve, and exhibit an extensive collection of modern and contemporary Arab art. The foundation's guiding principle is to contribute to the intellectual development of the art scene in the Arab region by building a prominent, publicly accessible art collection in the UAE. Part of this objective involves developing a public platform to foster critical dialogue around contemporary art practices with a focus on artists with Arab heritage internationally. The foundation strives to create an open-ended enquiry that responds to and conveys the nuances inherent to Arab histories beyond borders of culture and geography. By organizing exhibitions, lending artwork to international forums, producing print and online publications, and fashioning interactive public programs, the foundation serves as a resource for contemporary art by Arab artists both locally and on the global stage.

About the Block Museum of Art

Northwestern University's [Block Museum of Art](#) is a dynamic, imaginative and innovative teaching and learning and research resource for the University and its surrounding communities, featuring a global exhibition program that crosses time periods and cultures and serves as a springboard for thought-provoking discussions relevant to our lives today. Admission to the museum is always free and open to all.

Fall 2022 Hours – Wednesday to Friday 12PM-8PM, Saturday & Sunday 12PM – 5PM