

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s 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 countries including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the exhibition is drawn from the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation based in Sharjah, UAE. The paintings, sculpture, drawings, and prints on view here reflect the wide range of nonfigurative art practices that have flourished in the Arab world over the course of four decades.

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 and educational exchanges that exposed them to various modernisms, including various modes of abstraction, and led them to consider their roles within an international context.

The featured artists—a varied group of Arab, Amazigh (Berber), Armenian, Circassian, Jewish, Persian, and Turkish descent—sought to localize and recontextualize 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 Arabic calligraphy,

Islamic decorative patterns, spiritual practices, geometry, and mathematics, they expanded abstraction's vocabulary, thus complicating its genealogies and origin and altering how we view non-objective art.

At its heart, *Taking Shape* raises fundamental questions: How do we study abstraction across different contexts, and what modes of analysis do we use? Looking critically at the history and historiography of mid-20th-century abstraction, the exhibition rethinks art historical canons and expands the discourses around global modernisms.

Acknowledgments

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List of artworks

1

Saliba Douaihy

(Ehden, Lebanon, 1915–New York City, 1994)

Untitled

1963

Oil on canvas

Saliba Douaihy is one of Lebanon's most prominent abstract painters. Born into an old, storied Maronite family of distant French extraction, he received formal

training (dictated by the Maronite patriarchy) that was classical to the point of rigidity—emphasizing figurative, religious subjects. Early on, he apprenticed with the academic Lebanese painter Habib Srouf before continuing his studies in Paris at the École des Beaux-Arts, where he won prizes for his drawings and paintings. Returning to Lebanon in 1936, he opened his own studio. By the 1940s, he began developing his interest in modern art, mainly through experiments with color.

In 1950 he emigrated to New York, where he met artists—such as Mark Rothko, Hans Hofmann, and Ad Reinhardt—whose abstract styles transformed his own practice. In 1955, Douaihy returned to Lebanon where he created work for churches. He returned to New York in 1963 and became a U.S. citizen. Several churches in Lebanon and in the U.S. commissioned murals and stained-glass windows from him, including Our Lady of

Lebanon Maronite Cathedral in Brooklyn and Our Lady of the Cedars of Lebanon in Boston.

2

Adam Henein

(Cairo, 1929–2020)

The First Blush of Morning

1986

Gouache and gum arabic on papyrus

The First Blush of Morning demonstrates Adam Henein's practice of interweaving commonly held themes and motifs—motherhood, prayer, birds, and boats among them—with references to specifically Egyptian imagery such as pyramids, obelisks, Pharaonic kings, and hieroglyphs. Part of a larger series, this work was painted on papyrus and, like the artist's sculptural pieces, conveys a simplicity of form.

Born into a family of silversmiths, Henein graduated from Cairo's School of Fine Arts in 1953 and traveled to Upper Egypt to work in Luxor, where he became immersed in the region's sculpture and architecture traditions. He continued his training at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, before relocating to Paris in 1971. Returning to Egypt in 1996, the artist established his home and studio near Giza, which is a center for traditional arts and architecture, and opened the Adam Henein Museum in Cairo in 2014.

3

Madiha Umar

(Aleppo, Syria, 1908–Amman, 2005)

Untitled

1978

Watercolor on paper

In this work, Madiha Umar deploys coiling, crescent-shaped forms that evoke the gestural movements of

writing and could derive from a number of different Arabic letters. Umar is often considered a progenitor of the Hurufiyya movement, which emerged in the mid-twentieth century when Arab, Persian, and Pakistani artists began synthesizing Islamic calligraphy with inspiration from modern art in the West.

Born in Syria, Umar was raised in Iraq, where she became a naturalized citizen. She was the first Iraqi woman to receive a government scholarship to study in Europe and moved to London to attend the Maria Grey Training College for teachers before returning to Baghdad in 1933. In 1942 she relocated to Washington, DC, with her husband, an Iraqi diplomat, and began exploring how to incorporate elements of calligraphy into abstraction. In 1949 she had her first US solo exhibition of paintings inspired by the Arabic alphabet. That same year, she published her influential text “Arabic Calligraphy: An Inspiring Element in Abstract Art,” in which she discusses the design principles

underlying various scripts, arguing that “each letter is able, and has a personality dynamic enough, to form an abstract design.”

She received a BA in education at George Washington University in 1952 and an MFA at the Corcoran School of the Arts in 1959. She later returned to Baghdad, where she became involved in the One Dimension group founded by Iraqi artist Shakir Hassan Al Said, whose work is on view in the first-floor gallery.

4

Hussein Shariffe

(Omdurman, Sudan, 1934–Cairo, 2005)

Dream Walkers

1959

Oil on canvas

Made while Hussein Shariffe was in art school in London in 1959, the year before he returned to Sudan, *Dream*

Walkers exemplifies the artist's vibrant, expressionistic paintings, which are often marked by his reflections on Sudan's political history and his experiences in Europe. At first glance, this painting appears to contain simple geometric shapes, but upon closer look the shapes become the simple, dreamlike figures of the work's title. This work's horizontal orientation suggests a clip from a movie—an effect underscored by the brown border framing the scene.

The great-grandson of Al-Mahdi, a major religious and political leader, Shariffe grew up in one of Sudan's most influential families. He attended Victoria College in Alexandria, Egypt, then studied history at Cambridge University in England. He later pursued an MFA at London's Slade School of Fine Art, where he studied under the artist Lucien Freud. In 1960 he returned to Sudan to teach at the College of Fine and Applied Art in Khartoum. In the 1970s Shariffe turned to filmmaking in the hope of reaching larger audiences, and in 1972 he

became head of film for Sudan's Ministry of Culture. Following his exile from Sudan during a period of political instability, Shariffe moved to Cairo, where he continued to paint and make films.

5

Ufemia Rizk

(Born Jaffa, Palestine, 1943)

Multiple Dimension

1979

Oil on canvas

Ufemia Rizk combines thoughtful, personal introspection with a desire to explore more metaphysical themes. In her paintings she often combines geometry and gestural abstraction to present personal, idiosyncratic reflections on the physical world around her. Born in Jaffa in 1943, Rizk

studied at the American University in Beirut, the Sorbonne in Paris, and the Turkish-born painter Fahrelnissa Zeid's private art school in Amman, Jordan.

6

Aref El Rayess

(Aley, Lebanon, 1928–Beirut, 2005)

Untitled

ca. 1960s

Oil on fiberboard

A master of multiple media including tapestry, sculpture, and painting, Aref El Rayess experimented with abstraction in multiple forms. Influenced by his travels across West Africa, he incorporated folkloric and mystical motifs into his work. Initially a self-taught artist, he held his first exhibition at the American

University of Beirut in 1948. He then moved to Paris, where he befriended the French actor and mime artist Marcel Marceau and enrolled in the studios of André Lhote, Fernand Léger, and Ossip Zadkine, while also studying at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. After living for several years between Senegal, in West Africa, and Paris, he returned to Lebanon, only to receive a government scholarship in 1956 to continue his training in Rome and Florence. In 1963 he returned to Beirut, where he taught at Lebanese University and served as President of the Lebanese Artists Association of Painters and Sculptors.

7

Etel Adnan

(Beirut, 1925–Paris, 2021)

Autumn in Yosemite Valley

1963–64

Oil on canvas

Growing up in Lebanon, Etel Adnan was immersed in a medley of languages including Greek, Turkish, Arabic, and French and developed great linguistic aptitude. This multilingual childhood fed her artistic desire to create abstract landscapes in order to, in her words, “humanize the environment.” In *Autumn in Yosemite Valley*, she arranges geometric patches of bright color and textured paint.

8

Huguette Caland

(Beirut, 1931–2019)

City II

1968

Oil on canvas

Spanning more than five decades, Huguette Caland’s career was strongly marked by her fierce dedication to freedom and movement. The daughter of Bechara el-Khoury, the first president of independent Lebanon,

Caland trained with Italian painter Fernando Manetti in Beirut. In 1970 she moved to Paris, leaving her family behind. In 1997 Caland moved to Venice, California, where her home served as a gathering place for local artists. She remained there until returning to Beirut in 2013.

After studying philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris, where she composed her first poems in French, Adnan pursued graduate studies at the University of California, Berkeley and at Harvard University. Abandoning the use of French in protest against France's hostilities in Algeria, she turned to visual art and also to transcribing Arab poets, reading Sufi poetry, and creating vibrantly colored artist's books. Between 1980 and the early 2000s, Adnan lived in California with her partner, Simone Fattal, whose painting *Celestial Forms* is on view nearby. In 2014, Adnan received France's prestigious Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres.

9

Saliba Douaihy

(Ehden, Lebanon, 1915–New York City, 1994)

Untitled

ca. 1960s

Oil on canvas board

Saliba Douaihy

(Ehden, Lebanon, 1915–New York City, 1994)

Untitled

1965

Acrylic on canvas

Known for his minimalist aesthetic, Saliba Douaihy worked in a precise, hard-edge style grounded in his keen interest in color and form. Investigating space and depth, he explored notions of the sublime through the most basic, elemental shapes. These works epitomize his 1960s practice, which was deeply inspired by

American artist Josef Albers. Above his canvas is dominated by a vast swath of blue, spliced with red, yellow, green, and black. Although Douaihy's asymmetrical shapes lie on a single flat plane, in layering them one atop the other, he creates a nuanced illusion of depth.

10

Saloua Raouda Choucair

(Beirut, 1916–2017)

Composition in Yellow

1962–65

Oil on fiberboard

Saloua Raouda Choucair is widely considered Lebanon's first abstract artist. Acclaimed for her pioneering vision and deeply intellectual approach, she found sources of inspiration in mathematics and science, Islamic art, architecture, geometric patterns, and spirituality. Choucair used an algorithmically generated method to transform simple spaces and lines into increasingly

complex abstract forms. Drawing on her academic background in mathematics and physics, as well as her Druze faith, she grounded works like this in irregular geometric shapes to capture what she saw as the essence of Islamic heritage.

In the mid-1930s, Choucair studied natural sciences at Beirut's American Junior College for Women, and in 1942 she trained in the studio of Lebanese artist Omar Onsi; in 1946 she attended Lebanese painter Moustafa Farroukh's art classes at the American University of Beirut. Moving to Paris in 1948, she enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts and in the studio of Fernand Léger, where she created her first non-figurative works. Her inclination toward geometric shapes and Arabic letterforms led her to organize the Atelier de l'Art Abstrait with other avant-garde artists. In 1951 she returned to Beirut, where she lived and worked until her death in 2017.

Saloua Raouda Choucair

(Beirut, 1916–2017)

Interform

1960

Wood

Saloua Raouda Choucair draws upon two essential elements of Islamic design—the straight line and the curve in this wood sculpture. Dynamic yet balanced, *Interform* is made of solid planes and voids that generate a sense of architectural presence and spatial rhythm.

Before making this sculpture in 1960, Choucair focused on painting, taking classes at the American University of Beirut and then traveling to Paris to study with Fernand Léger at the École des Beaux-Arts. Her sculpture, she said, is based on “Arabic verse and Arabic music, founded on movement and silence.” Throughout these works she employs interlocking modular puzzles, connecting them through spiritual and intellectual dimensions.

12

Menhat Helmy

(Helwan, Egypt, 1925–Cairo, 2004)

Space Exploration / Universe

1973

Oil on canvas

Born in Helwan, Egypt, Menhat Helmy received her early education at Cairo's High Institute of Pedagogic Studies for Art before moving to London to study etching at the Slade School of Fine Art between 1952 and 1955. She was a professor of fine arts at Helwan University in Cairo and an honorary professor of etching at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence, in addition to serving as a member of the Printmakers Council in the United Kingdom.

Marked by socialist ideas and revolutionary themes, Helmy's early work depicts workers, farmers, and elaborate rural scenes. In later abstract works, such as

this one, Helmy employs geometry to create intricate conceptual compositions.

13

Samir Rafi

(Cairo, 1926–Paris 2004)

Untitled

1959

Oil on burlap

Best known for his Surrealist approach to painting Egyptian daily life, Samir Rafi was a prominent member of the Contemporary Art Group, an artist collective founded in 1946 by pioneering artist Hussayn Yusuf Amin that sprang from an anti-colonial, nationalist consciousness inspired by folk symbolism. Its members often depicted workers and urban scenes. As a youth, Rafi had studied with Amin, who organized Rafi's first exhibition in 1943, when Rafi was 17 years old.

Rafi attended the School of Fine Arts in Cairo and continued his training at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he earned advanced degrees in art and a PhD in art history. In the 1940s and 1950s, he actively participated in the Egyptian art scene, exploring Surrealism as a member of the group Art et Liberté and experimenting with printmaking and decorative arts.

Rafi's turn toward abstraction may have been an act of self-censorship to avoid the government crackdowns on dissent that led to the imprisonment of other Egyptian artists. This work nods ambiguously towards perspectival space. It equally hints at figuration, though the human form is no longer recognizable in a dizzying entanglement of abstracted limbs and organs. The work suggests that the social world has fostered an environment in which the human body cannot be separated from an idealized object world.

Saadi Al-Kaabi

(Born Najaf, Iraq, 1937)

Composition

1967–72

Oil on canvas

Saadi Al-Kaabi deploys simplified color planes and dynamic contours to create abstract forms. In *Composition*, he applies thick, highly textured layers of earth-toned paint. Evoking an aerial view of landscape, he concentrates darker tones at the center, with lines and shapes extending out toward the painting's edges.

A member of the second generation of Iraqi modernist artists, Al-Kaabi graduated from Baghdad's Institute of Fine Arts in 1960. In his art he often engages with a broader Arab-world discourse concerned with fashioning new national identities by looking to the past in search of cultural authenticity. His signature style first emerged in the 1970s, when he married figural forms and geometric

shapes with symbols of Iraq's history. Since then he has continued to draw together modern aesthetic influences with those from earlier Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian, and Islamic art to explore nuances of the human condition.

Al-Kaabi served as the president of the Iraqi Plastic Artists Society between 1986 and 1990. In the 1980s, he destroyed his personal archive of press clippings covering his career in an attempt to circumvent his success and begin a new chapter. He currently lives and works in Los Angeles.

15

Najat Makki

(Born Dubai, 1956)

Window

1987

Henna and acrylic on paper

A pioneer in the art scene of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Najat Makki has worked in a wide range of media over the past three decades. In her work—which is influenced by the Egyptian artists Mahmoud Mokhtar and Hamed Nada—Makki captures Dubai’s landscapes and heritage.

The first Emirati woman to receive a government scholarship to study abroad, Makki traveled to Cairo in 1977 to attend the School of Fine Arts, receiving a BA and MA in relief sculpture and metalwork. Back in the UAE, she worked as an art teacher for the Ministry of Education. Later in life, she returned to Cairo for further study, earning her PhD in visual arts at the School of Fine Arts in 2001.

16

Nabil Nahas

(Born Beirut, 1949)

Untitled

1983

Acrylic on canvas

This untitled painting of 1983 derives from a series of black canvases featuring dripped vertical white marks that Nabil Nahas began painting after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Resulting in death and casualties on both sides, the attack caused a buildup in tension throughout the region.

Nahas grew up in Cairo and Beirut and attended college in the United States, where he earned a BFA from Louisiana State University in 1971 and an MFA from the Yale School of Art in 1973. Nahas currently lives and works in New York.

17

Asma Fayoumi

(Born Amman, 1943)

Ritha' Madina (Requiem for a City)

1968

Oil on canvas

Though born in Jordan, Asma Fayoumi's artistic career coincided with the emergence of a school of Syrian abstraction led by Italian painter Guido La Regina, who taught at Damascus University. Alongside several artists who became critical figures in Syrian art's transition from realism to contemporary forms of abstraction, Fayoumi attended the university's College of Fine Arts.

With her first solo exhibition in Damascus in 1966, Fayoumi made her mark on the regional art scene. *Ritha' Madina* (Requiem for a City) exemplifies her early work, which focuses on abstract representations of architectural forms and street views. Inspired by Arabic poetry, her layered imagery packs an emotional punch through its dynamic composition, bold colors, and strong gestural marks. In her recent work, Fayoumi

focuses on Syria's recent political turmoil as well as on the depiction of mythical, often female, figures.

18

Ibrahim Ismail

(Born Kuwait City, 1945)

Earthquake, Agadir

1967

Oil on canvas

A major figure in Kuwait's art world, Ibrahim Ismail is best known for segmented landscapes rendered in vibrant colors and his paintings of daily life, including old marketplaces, street corners, and shops and themes that center on Kuwaiti heritage or deal with political events. With its vibrant purples, yellows, blues, greens, oranges, and pinks, *Earthquake, Agadir*, conveys the chaos unleashed by a major tremor. The painting likely references the 1960 earthquake in Agadir,

Morocco, which caused the deaths of thousands of people and left many others homeless.

After graduating from Kuwait's Teachers Institute in 1968, Ismail attended the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts. A member of the Kuwaiti Society for Formative Arts, he represented Kuwait at the first Arab Biennial, held in Baghdad in 1974. Also known as a writer, in 1990 he published a book on the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait titled *Hitler Once Again*.

19

Néjib Belkhodja

(Tunis, 1933–2007)

Abstraction Number 45

1964

Oil on canvas

A central figure in Tunisian modern art, Néjib Belkhodja often referenced structural elements from the Medina

of Tunis, one of the first Arab-Muslim towns in the Maghreb. In *Abstraction Number 45*, he plays with its sleek classical dome shapes, archways, and rooflines.

Belkhodja studied at the Institut des Beaux-Arts in Tunis and began exhibiting locally in 1956. Continuing his artistic career in Rome and Paris, he was inspired by the art of Robert Delaunay and Wassily Kandinsky. He exhibited in Europe, across North Africa, and in Egypt. In 1987, Belkhodja joined the architect Slah Smaoui in designing and constructing the picturesque village of Kèn, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea about an hour south of Tunis.

20

Mohanna Durra

(Amman, 1938–2019)

Transparency

1970

Oil on canvas

Mohanna Durra is hailed as one of Jordan's first painters to experiment with abstraction. This work exemplifies his geometric compositions and the technique of layering color to produce depth and texture and to convey a sense of motion. In this work the outer colors are relatively subdued, and they become progressively brighter as they move toward the center, where Durra spotlights individual lines, shapes, and planes.

Born in Amman, Jordan, to a Lebanese father and a Turkish mother, Durra studied early on with Russian artist George Aleef and Dutch artist William Hallowin. Their artistic principles informed Durra's early practice, which centered on how light could be used to evoke dramatic movement and energy, as well as his preference for figurative subjects and portraiture at the time. During his four years at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, Durra developed an interest in abstraction.

Returning to Amman in 1958, he embarked on a career as a diplomat, shuttling between Amman and Rome. Upon his return to Jordan in 1970, he helped found the Jordan Institute of Fine Arts, and in 2002 the Government of Jordan issued a postage stamp bearing an image of one of his paintings.

21

Ezekiel Baroukh

(Alexandria, Egypt, 1909–Paris, 1984)

Composition

ca. 1955

Oil on cardboard

Densely packed with colorful geometric forms, Ezequiel Baroukh's *Composition* reflects his fascination with Cubism and abstraction. An Egyptian Jewish artist, Baroukh began his studies at the French Lycée in Alexandria before studying at the Academy of Art in Rome.

In 1940, Baroukh joined Egypt's surrealist Art and Liberté movement and the Alexandrian Artistic Group, where he organized art events and exhibited his work, which then featured figurative imagery. At this time, Baroukh and other Egyptian Jewish artists were active in Alexandria's and Cairo's intellectual circles, where they socialized with exiles from Fascist Italy and elsewhere in Europe. Upon Baroukh's move to Paris in 1946, his work evolved from figuration to Cubism and then to abstraction, as seen here.

22

Huguette Caland

(Beirut, 1931–2019)

Bribes de Corps

1971

Oil on canvas

While working in Paris, Huguette Caland explored an array of disciplines and began making the abstract paintings and drawings for which she is best known. Some of the artworks highlight the sensual nature of human bodies—a theme rarely found in socially conservative Lebanon. In her minimalist composition *Bribes de Corps*, Caland draws out the erotic sensuality of curved contours, covering her canvas with a pulsing orange-red. Stopping short of pure abstraction, her paintings retain legibility, serving as nuanced representations of femininity and the female form.

23

Abdallah Benanteur

(Mostaganem, Algeria, 1931–Ivry-sur-Seine, France, 2017)

Lumière du sud (Southern Light)

1960

Oil on cardboard mounted on wood

Observing, reminiscing about, and imagining the world around him, Abdallah Benanteur uses subtle gestures of color, form, and texture to create shimmering abstract landscapes. *Lumière du sud* is a near-monochromatic representation of sunlight. Here a vibrant range of oranges evokes the heat and blossoming tones of the late-afternoon sun. Yet even as he captures the intensity of southern light, Benanteur avoids geographic specificity, employing pulsating color effects to achieve an aesthetic that transcends place.

24

Ramsès Younan

(Minya, Egypt, 1913–Cairo, 1966)

Composition No. 3

ca. 1962–64

Oil on canvas

In this work Ramsès Younan employs somber brown tones to conjure up an evolving geological structure.

Completed only two years before the artist's death in 1966, the painting imparts a haunting mood. Although Younan focuses here primarily on geology, close examination reveals parts of human figures, alluding to the codependency between humans and their environments. Younan's work frequently features tortured or dismembered bodies as a commentary on repression and in support of women's rights.

A painter, writer, and critic, Younan was born in Upper Egypt (along the Nile south of Cairo). He studied at the School of Fine Arts in Cairo before working as a secondary-school art teacher in Tanta and Port Said. In the late 1930s he returned to Cairo and met the poet Georges Henein, who is considered the founder of Egyptian Surrealism. Younan co-founded the Surrealist journal *La part du sable* and the group *Art et Liberté*, active from 1938 to 1946, through which Egyptian artists and writers aligned themselves with the revolutionary spirit of French Surrealism. An anarchist,

Younan was forced to flee Egypt in 1947 and emigrated to France, where he worked at Radio France. His protests against France's role in the Suez Crisis led to his return to Cairo in 1956.

25

Simone Fattal

(Born Damascus, 1942)

Celestial Forms

1973

Oil on canvas

Straddling the worlds of visual art and literature, Simone Fattal creates sculptures, nonfigurative ceramic works, paintings, collages, and text-based artworks. Born in Syria, she studied philosophy at the École Supérieure des Lettres in Beirut and later at the Sorbonne in Paris. Returning to Beirut in 1969, she began her career as a painter, exploring Sufi and other religious texts as well as the local landscape—and

developing an elegant gestural style. Drawing on a rich vocabulary inspired by her knowledge of Arab history, ancient and modern Arabic literature, and women's history, Fattal creates abstract renditions of nature and the human form. The white palette mixed with shades of pink of this painting exemplifies her early work.

In 1980 Fattal moved to California with her partner, Lebanese-American artist Etel Adnan, whose painting *Autumn in Yosemite Valley* is on view nearby. Two years later, Fattal founded Post-Apollo Press (1979–2014), a publishing house inspired by the spirit of exploration and adventure characteristic of the Apollo space program. At the press, she published experimental poetry, prose, and works in translation. In 1989 she enrolled at the San Francisco Art Institute, turning her attention back to the visual arts, in particular ceramics and sculpture.

Seta Manoukian

(Born Beirut, 1945)

Across the Town, from the series *Bedsheets*

1970

Oil on canvas

In *Across the Town*, from her *Bedsheets* series, Seta Manoukian creates a wild vortex of swirling, dynamic forms laid on in thick, textured brushstrokes. Born in Lebanon to parents of Armenian descent, Manoukian began her training early with celebrated Armenian-Lebanese artist Paul Guiragossian. At the age of 17, after winning an art competition organized by the Embassy of Italy in Beirut, she left for Perugia, where she took a three-month art training program. Later she enrolled at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, remaining in Italy for four years. Her engagement with artists, journalists, and writers there coincided with her growing interest in social and political issues.

Soon after her return to Beirut to teach at Lebanese University in 1975, the Lebanese Civil War broke out. During this time, Manoukian volunteered with children in underprivileged neighborhoods, teaching drawing and painting. She published two books compiling their artworks, *War through the Eyes of Lebanese Children* and *Taches rouges et bleues*. After moving to Los Angeles in 1985, Manoukian began pursuing spirituality, meditation, and Eastern philosophies, eventually traveling to Sri Lanka in 2000 to study Buddhist philosophy and becoming an ordained Buddhist nun in 2005.

27

Hind Nasser

(Born Amman, 1940)

Ayla

1975

Oil on wood

Hind Nasser painted this abstract landscape—perhaps titled after the Arabic name for the ancient Jordanian city of Elath, today known as Aqaba—just before starting her art training with the celebrated Turkish painter Fahrelnissa Zeid in 1976. At Zeid’s art school, located in her house in Amman, Jordan, Nasser worked alongside other women artists, including Ufemia Rizk, whose *Multiple Dimensions* is also on view in the gallery.

After graduating from Beirut College for Women (now Lebanese American University) in 1961 with a degree in politics and history, Nasser helped develop the cultural scene in Jordan. She founded a children’s club in Amman focused on theater and visual arts and the Jordan Crafts Council to support traditional local crafts. She also co-founded the Jordan Museum for Archaeology. In 1995, she established the Jordan Arts and Crafts Center, followed by Gallery 14, which presents fine art exhibitions.

28

Abdallah Benanteur

(Mostaganem, Algeria, 1931–Ivry-sur-Seine, France,
2017)

The Garden of Saadi

1984

Oil on canvas

Possibly titled in honor of Saadi Yacef, a leader of Algeria's National Liberation Front during the country's war of independence, Abdallah Benanteur's four-part canvas serves as a window into an abstract scene resembling a lush garden. Committed to articulating a new role for Algerian art, Benanteur ascribed to a socialist decolonization that was rooted within a broader international context. This belief is reflected in his artistic production—in which he often alludes both his homeland Algeria and to France, where he spent much of his adult life.

29

Abdallah Benanteur

(Mostaganem, Algeria, 1931–Ivry-sur-Seine, France,
2017)

To Monet, Giverny

1983

Oil on canvas

An early pioneer of Algerian modernism, Abdallah Benanteur wholeheartedly defended the value of abstraction in contrast to figurative art. Titled in homage to the French Impressionist painter Claude Monet and his garden at Giverny, this work renders Impressionistic subject matter with a variety of lively gestural techniques. The painting's characteristic Algerian-blue background was reputedly inspired by the artist's love for his native country.

Benanteur spent his childhood in Algeria's port city of Mostaganem, painting and learning about music, poetry,

and mysticism from his uncle and his father. After graduating from the École des Beaux-Arts in Oran in 1948, he moved to Paris in 1953 to begin his career as a painter and stayed on to live in France.

Following the establishment of the new Algerian state in 1962, Benanteur opposed the government-led approach of the National Union of Plastic Arts. While disentangling art from any purpose in the revolution, he believed that history would find in abstraction a testimony to the nation's real values. Referring to the postwar period as a second Arab Renaissance (Al-Nahda), he argued that the artist should not express his concern about the public life of the nation through art. Instead of representing the world, the artist must live in it and engage with it.

30

Shafic Abboud

(Bifkaya, Lebanon, 1926–Paris, 2004)

La boîte à images (The Box of Images)

1975

Oil on canvas

Shafic Abboud consistently explored the material properties of his media, ranging from oil painting, ink, watercolor, and ceramics to artist's books—creating a versatile body of work that reveals his interest in and response to international modernism. In this work, he layers multiple images, bringing them into a single space—the “box” of the title. Coating hues of green, orange, pink, purple, and blue one atop the other, he suggests a box overflowing with images as it rests on a table or counter.

At Beirut's Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts, Abboud studied under Lebanese painter César Gemayel, whose teacher Khalil Saleeby had been a friend and colleague of American painter John Singer Sargent. In 1947 Abboud traveled to Paris, where he continued his

training in the studios of André Lhote and Fernand Léger. In 1952 the Lebanese government granted him a scholarship to study drawing and engraving at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris; in 1959 his work was included in the first Biennale de Paris.

31

Shafic Abboud

(Bifkaya, Lebanon, 1926–Paris, 2004)

Cela fait quarante jours (It's Been Forty Days) (Portrait of Christine Abboud)

1964

Oil on canvas

Upon his return from Paris to Lebanon in September 1964 to prepare for his solo exhibition at Beirut's Centre d'Art Contemporain, Shafic Abboud suffered an extended period of creative anxiety—the “forty days” referenced in this work's title. During that time, he felt an irresistible urge to temper his abstraction and paint

in a more figurative style. Abboud's inner conflict is visible in this portrait of his four-year-old daughter Christine playing with a doll near the window of their house in Beirut's Achrafieh neighborhood. Visible beside her are the colors of the French flag—blue, white, and red.

32

Shafic Abboud

(Bifkaya, Lebanon, 1926–Paris, 2004)

Untitled

1966

Oil on canvas

Shafic Abboud's painterly gestures dominate this composition, creating a lively image. Its orange-and-red background appears to emanate from the canvas; at the left are hints of a mysterious figure. Such formal explorations of color and light were fundamental to the artist's practice.

33

Kamal Boullata

(Jerusalem, 1942–Berlin, 2019)

From left to right:

Fi-I Bid Kan-al-Kalima (In the Beginning Was the Word)

Al-Zahir-al-Batin (The Manifest, The Hidden)

Al-Alif wa-l-Ya

La Ana Illa Ana (There Is No 'I' But 'I')

Lam Alif

1983

Silkscreens

An internationally celebrated artist, writer, poet, and scholar, Kamal Boullata worked between picture and text. He is best known for his vibrant geometric silkscreens and paintings incorporating popular

religious verses and Sufi and Arabic proverbs, pushing their calligraphic forms to the brink of illegibility. In his abstract constructions, he integrated letterforms drawn from Kufic, the oldest Arabic script, and from modern experiments based on Islamic calligraphy. Carefully plotting the graphic organization of his chosen words, Boullata used color and design to convey symbolic content. His gridded compositions, which were inspired by his study of the mathematical grids underlying Christian icons, reflect his interests in both Islamic mosaics and 20th-century Western visual art. In time-honored Islamic tradition, the grid represents a pattern that could be multiplied into infinity.

Boullata incorporated not only individual letters but entire phrases. He often sourced these from Christian and Islamic sacred texts, sometimes adding a witty spin on the original meaning, although the words themselves are difficult to read. For instance, in *La Ana Illa Ana* (There Is No 'I' But 'I') Boullata played on Islam's central

proclamation of faith, *la Ilaha Illa Allah* (there is no God but God).

Born to a Palestinian family in Jerusalem, Boullata trained early on with Khalil Halabi, an iconic Palestinian painter. Later he graduated from the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome and the Corcoran School of the Arts in Washington, DC. Author of the groundbreaking 2009 book *Palestinian Art, 1850–2005*, Boullata also wrote extensively for periodicals and academic journals, with a particular focus on Arab histories and art. He received a Fulbright Senior Scholarship to research Islamic art in Morocco, where he resided from 1993 to 1996.

34

Miloud Labied

(El Kelâa des Sraghna, Morocco, 1939–Rabat, Morocco, 2008)

Composition

1973–75

Oil on canvas

Here Miloud Labied conveys a strong sense of organic movement via earth tones, loose brushstrokes, and swirling lines. In repeating primary shapes such as the circle, he references fertility and the perpetual cycle of life and death, connecting his art with notions of the eternal.

35

Farid Belkahia

(Marrakech, Morocco, 1934–2014)

Aube (Dawn)

1983

Pigment on vellum

In this work, sinuous, organic lines hover before a rainbow-hued circle that represents the rising sun at dawn. Deliberately rejecting canvas as a support, Farid Belkahia experimented with novel techniques. Here he

turned to materials commonly used in traditional crafts, painting on vellum (made from the skin of a calf) using organic pigments and dyes such as henna and saffron. With its intertwined tracings of abstracted human forms, *Aube* resembles other works by Belkahia that evoke Gaston Bachelard's psychoanalytic readings of the elements (water, earth, air, and water), which were published in the 1940s.

In the mid-1950s, Belkahia attended the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and later lived in Prague, where he studied scenography at its Academy of Performing Arts. Returning to Morocco in 1962, six years after the country's liberation from French colonial rule, Belkahia was appointed director of Casablanca's École des Beaux-Arts. There he set out to define a distinctly Moroccan modernism. With several colleagues, including Mohamed Melehi, whose work is on view nearby, he co-founded the Casablanca School, which aimed to merge European innovations with local Moroccan culture.

36

Jilali Gharbaoui

(Jorf el-Melha, Morocco, 1930–Paris, 1971)

Composition

1969

Oil on paper

A leading artist in Morocco's modernist movement, Jilali Gharbaoui began his artistic journey in a secondary school in Fez. He continued his training at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and then spent a year in Rome.

Although Moroccan modernism was then dominated by the Casablanca School, Gharbaoui did not align himself with that group. While his earlier works are relatively figurative, his later paintings, which draw upon Amazigh (Berber) symbolism, are grounded in the artist's gestural brushstrokes and the paint's materiality.

In *Composition* black outlines evoke Amazigh tattoos, which were worn by men and women as tokens of beauty and amulets for protection and well-being. Throughout his life, Gharbaoui suffered from mental illness, and in 1971 his body was found on a bench in Champs de Mars in Paris; it was repatriated to Morocco, and he is buried in Fez. Despite his short life, Gharbaoui's work is celebrated worldwide.

37

Ahmed Cherkaoui

(Boujad, Morocco, 1934–Casablanca, 1967)

Les miroirs rouges (Red Mirrors)

1965

Oil on jute

Ahmed Cherkaoui

(Boujad, Morocco, 1934–Casablanca, 1967)

Alea

1965

Oil on jute

38

Mohamed Chebaa

(Tétouan, Morocco, 1935–Casablanca, 2013)

Untitled

1974

Acrylic on wood

With his fellow members of the Casablanca School, Mohamed Chebaa showed his work in Morocco's first open-air exhibition in Jemaa el-Fna, Marrakech's public square, in 1969. Considered a turning point in the history of modern Moroccan art, this exhibition was marked by the bright, color-rich paintings that have become synonymous with Chebaa. This style is exemplified in the bold and colorful geometric language seen here, in which the artist draws on architectural and topographical drawings as well as the abstract visual traditions seen in Morocco's local artisanal crafts.

39

Malika Agueznay

(Born Marrakech, Morocco, 1938)

L'algue bleue (Blue Algae)

1968

Wood and acrylic on wood

L'algue bleue is a wood relief composed of organic blue forms that resemble marine vegetation. Its meandering, curvilinear shapes were inspired not only by the natural environment but also by *Ayat al-Kursi* (the Throne Verse), a highly revered passage in the Qur'an about how nothing and no one is comparable to Allah (God). *L'algue bleue* prefigures the artist's interest in calligraphy, which is manifested in her later work through stylized renditions of Islam's ninety-nine names for God and by what she called "magical words," such as *salaam* (peace).

A contemporary of the influential Casablanca School of Moroccan artists, Malika Agueznay grew up in a rural community where she learned traditional Moroccan crafts whose aesthetic she incorporates into her work. During the early 1960s, she studied to become a paramedic in Casablanca and then in France and later enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca between 1966 and 1970. Finding inspiration in works by her fellow Moroccan artists Farid Belkahia and Mohamed Melehi, both represented by works on view nearby, Agueznay developed her practice during the country's post-colonial transition into autonomous nationhood. Thus she became integral to shaping the visual language of a newly independent Morocco.

40

Mohamed Hamidi

(Born Casablanca, 1941)

Untitled

1971

Oil on wood

To create this work, Mohamed Hamidi divided his composition into two parts; each half contains a graphic abstraction evoking female or male genitalia. Born in Casablanca, Hamidi studied at the city's École des Beaux-Arts before relocating to France in 1959, where he enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. After graduation, he worked as an assistant to French fresco painter Jean Aujame. Upon his return to Casablanca, Hamidi became a professor at his alma mater.

In 1969 he participated in an open-air exhibition in the Jemaa el-Fna, the main market in Marrakech, alongside other major Moroccan artists including Farid Belkahia, Mohamed Chebaa, and Mohamed Melehi, works by all of whom are on view nearby. The exhibition at Jemaa el-Fna, which featured many works painted in bright colors, marked a crucial turning point in Moroccan art.

This style soon became a hallmark of the Moroccan modernist aesthetic.

41

Mohamed Chebaa

(Tétouan, Morocco, 1935–Casablanca, 2013)

Composition

ca. 1970

Wood (bas-relief)

Mohamed Chebaa was a founding member of the avant-garde Casablanca School, which emerged from the city's École des Beaux-Arts in the mid-1960s. Seeking to detach Morocco's modern art from the legacy of French colonialism, Chebaa and his contemporaries strove to relocate it squarely within Moroccan culture. Known for his bold and colorful geometric imagery, Chebaa worked in acrylic on canvas as well as woodcarving.

After obtaining his diploma in 1955 from the Institut National des Beaux-Arts in Tétouan, Morocco, he continued his training in Rome. Back in Morocco, Chebaa began teaching at Casablanca's École des Beaux-Arts, developing the Casablanca School's network and pedagogy throughout the 1960s. Although strongly invested in a specifically Moroccan methodology, the Casablanca School maintained connections to other modernist movements.

42

Mohamed Melehi

(Born Asilah, Morocco, 1936)

Composition

1970

Acrylic on wood

Completed in 1970, this painting reflects Mohamed Melehi's fully developed approach to abstraction. This large-scale, hard-edge painting features curvilinear

fields of vibrant color, with the four waves overlapping at the painting's center easily fitting into one another.

During the 1960s, Melehi co-founded the Casablanca School, a group of avant-garde artists seeking to develop a new model for artistic practice in postcolonial Morocco. Other artists of this group with works on view here include Malika Agueznay and Farid Belkahia. For a 1969 exhibition at Jemaa el-Fna, Marrakech's main public square, the group covered the walls of nearby buildings with their paintings, asserting that art could be part of everyday life.

After graduating from the Institut National des Beaux-Arts in Tétouan, Morocco, in 1955, Melehi moved to Spain where he studied in Seville and Madrid before focusing on sculpture and engraving in Rome and Paris. In 1962 he received a scholarship to attend Columbia University in New York City, where he became friends

with artists such as Jim Dine, Jasper Johns, and Frank Stella.

At the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, Melehi's work was on view in the International Meeting of Sculptors public art exhibition. For the occasion, Melehi created a three-dimensional sculpture along the "Route of Friendship," which was installed on the road uniting the Olympic venues.

43

Mohamed Melehi

(Born Asilah, Morocco, 1936)

Untitled

1975

Cellulose paint on wood

In this work, Mohamed Melahi employs curvilinear lines, evoking the ocean waves seen in his hometown of Asilah, Morocco, and juxtaposing them with Arabic

letterforms to convey a sense of transcendence and prayer. Aiming to create an authentically Moroccan art form, he merged Western modernist approaches with elements derived from Morocco's culture.

44

Mahmoud Sabri

(Baghdad, 1927–Maidenhead, England, 2012)

Water, from the series *Quantum Realism*

ca. 1970

Oil on canvas

Among the most celebrated figures in Iraqi modernist art, Mahmoud Sabri saw nature as a “complex of processes” and sought to represent it through a color-coded system with a three-fold foundation: the quantum (the basic energy/color unit), the atom (a group of quanta), and the structural process (the graphic equivalent of nature's chemical processes, combining atoms into “substances”). Each of these foundational

elements can be found in this work, with its rigid shapes crossing over one another in bright colors. These layered shapes connect with one another to create units. The work's title, *Water*, suggests that the blue lines cutting across the canvas in both directions may allude to a water source.

In 1947, Sabri earned a degree in social sciences at Loughborough University in Leicestershire, England. After returning to Iraq, Sabri joined the Pioneers Group—formerly the Société Primitive—and worked closely with artist and educator Faiq Hassan. The group's guiding principle was to take art outside the studio and into the streets, painting directly from their surroundings. In 1960 Sabri studied at Moscow's Surikov Art Institute with Socialist Realist painter Aleksandr Deyneka, and in 1963 he moved to Prague to join the Committee for the Defense of the Iraqi People. While in Prague, Sabri published the manifesto “The

New Art of Quantum Realism,” which advocated for the application of scientific method in art.

45

Nabil Nahas

(Born Beirut, 1949)

Untitled (Kitty Hawk)

1980

Acrylic on canvas

Nabil Nahas is best known for his densely tactile, large-scale, monochromatic paintings. Primarily an abstract artist, he creates intricate patterns inspired by sources including the natural world and the geometries of Islamic art. In *Untitled (Kitty Hawk)*—named for the town in North Carolina near where the Wright Brothers successfully flew the first powered aircraft—he layers angular forms atop one another.

46

Jafar Islah

(Born Kuwait City, 1946)

Untitled

1967

Acrylic on canvas

47

Samia Halaby

(Born Jerusalem, 1936)

Two Diagonals

1968

Oil on linen

Islamic mosaics inform the composition of many of Samia Halaby's works. In this painting she draws attention to the geometric patterns of mosaics by focusing on their individual components. Halaby completed both this work and her *White Cube in Brown*

Cube, on view nearby, following a visit to Egypt, Syria, and Turkey in 1965.

Born in Jerusalem, Halaby is a Palestinian artist, scholar, and art historian known for abstract works that draw on her longstanding interest in visual perception. Raised in the city of Jaffa, Halaby emigrated with her family to Lebanon in the wake of the 1948 occupation and exodus of Palestine (Al-Nakba). In 1951 she moved to Ohio and went on to earn a Master of Fine Arts degree in painting from Indiana University. She was the first woman to attain the rank of associate professor at the Yale School of Art, a position she held for nearly a decade.

48

Samia Halaby

(Born Jerusalem, 1936)

White Cube in Brown Cube

1969

Oil on canvas

Samia Halaby painted *White Cube in Brown Cube* during her period of geometric experimentation between 1966 and 1970. Exploring how the color of painted volumes facilitates illusions of depth and space, she found inspiration in the landscapes, textures, and native trees of Palestine. These sources have informed her abstract compositions throughout her career. Through her art, writing, and curatorial work, Halaby has long advocated for Palestinian rights.

59

Miloud Labied

(El Kelâa des Sraghna, Morocco, 1939–Rabat, Morocco, 2008)

Untitled

1970s

Oil on canvas

In this somber, near-monochromatic painting, Miloud Labied arranges geometric shapes in deep blue and purple tones. At the time he completed it, in the 1970s, Moroccan artists were negotiating their roles in developing a modernist Moroccan visual language.

Labied was a member of the Casablanca School—an avant-garde movement that emerged from the city’s École des Beaux-Arts in the mid-1960s and sought to liberate art from the legacy of French colonialism. From 1958—when he had his first solo exhibition at the Oudaya Museum in Rabat—to 1962, he was apprenticed to French-born artist Jacqueline Brodskis at Morocco’s Ministry of Youth and Sports. In 1974 Labied attended the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

50

Jafar Islah

(Born Kuwait City, 1946)

The Void

1967

Acrylic on canvas

One of Kuwait's most prolific modern artists, Jafar Islah often incorporates geometric patterns drawn from Islamic art in his work. At first glance, this painting appears black, but upon closer examination, we can distinguish twenty different colors, one atop the other. These variations become increasingly visible as we approach the canvas.

51

Jafar Islah

(Born Kuwait City, 1946)

Colors with Black and Grey

1968

Acrylic on canvas

By setting each part of his composition slightly off center, Jafar Islah achieves a balance between perfect abstraction

and organic presence. Islah has cited Paul Klee's 1922 painting *Senecio* as an influence on this work.

Pursuing multiple influences and interests, Islah employs symbols and references from many cultures; as a result, his work does not conform to any specific style, medium, or ideology. Throughout his career, he has challenged the notion that abstraction's origins lie solely in the West; instead, he merges multiple cultural traditions into his understanding of non-figurative forms.

In 1970, Islah received his BA in architecture from the University of California, Berkeley. There, he encountered the writings of medieval Islamic philosopher Abu Nasr al-Farabi. Al-Farabi's writings introduced Islah to the concept of "less is more" that informed his minimalist approach.

52

Hussein Madi

(Chebaa, Lebanon, 1938)

Untitled

ca. 1960s

Acrylic on canvas

During the 1960s, Hussein Madi began converting gestures and symbols into purely abstract shapes. His sources included works by European artists such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso as well as Islamic art.

After graduating from Beirut's Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA) in 1962, he worked as a graphic designer and caricaturist for various newspapers in Baghdad, Iraq. In 1963 he continued his studies at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome. In 1986, after living for twenty-three years between Italy and Lebanon, he returned permanently to Beirut to teach sculpture and engraving at Lebanese University and ALBA.

53

Hussein Madi

(Chebaa, Lebanon, 1938)

Alphabet

1973

30 etchings on cotton paper

Hussein Madi has worked skillfully across multiple media, including sculpture, painting, graphic design, and printmaking. Each print in this set of thirty etchings has a unique graphic form that is grounded in letterforms and geometry—and, seen as a whole, the series comprises a visual alphabet of sorts.

54

Hassan Sharif

(Bandar Lengeh, Iran, 1951–Dubai, 2016)

Black and White

1985

Oil on canvas

This work evokes a sculptural presence in its divided canvas. Composed of near-identical quadrilateral shapes, the painting's two halves are the inverse of each other. Although Hassan Sharif textures the surface of his off-white paint, it appears void-like when paired with the black, which upon closer inspection is seen to be riddled with cream and brown streaks.

Sharif had a deep interest in everyday life, often creating assemblages with found and mass-produced objects in a critique of global consumerist culture and corporate elitism. A multi-media artist, he worked in performance, drawing, painting, installation, and sculpture. While studying at London's Byam Shaw School of Art in the 1980s, he developed an interest in the Fluxus movement and British Constructivism. A leader in the development of conceptual art in the United Arab Emirates, Sharif co-founded The Flying

House, which focuses on promoting Emirati artists, in 2007.

55

Wijdan

(Born Baghdad, 1939)

Untitled

1977

Oil on canvas

H.R.H. Princess Wijdan al-Hashemi—who as a practicing artist goes by her first name, Wijdan, and who publishes under the name Wijdan Ali—is an artist, art historian, and diplomat. Her abstract paintings often focus on tragic historical narratives, drawing upon Arabic letterforms and Islamic calligraphy. In this work, the painted forms recall tally marks, but they deliberately lack consistency or a sense of order.

Born in Baghdad, Wijdan has spent most of her life in Jordan. She received her PhD in Islamic art history from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in 1993 and has been a Fellow of SOAS since 2010. In 1979 Wijdan founded the Royal Society of Fine Arts, which established the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts in 1980. She also founded Jordan's Higher Institute of Islamic Art and Architecture at Al al-Bayt University in 1993 and the School of Arts and Design at the University of Jordan in 2002.

56

Rafa Nasiri

(Tikrit, Iraq, 1940–Amman, 2013)

Variations of the Horizon No. 5

1979

Acrylic on canvas

Rafa Nasiri was celebrated for his abstract works, which drew on nature and calligraphy for inspiration.

In this work the repeated horizons provide a means of considering nature's multiplicity rather than a naturalistic view. In parsing the horizon's variations, the artist reflects on the ever-shifting state of the world around him. The stacked shape at the bottom contains letterforms, reflecting his interest in Arabic calligraphy.

A founding member of the New Vision (Al-Ru'yah al-Jadida) group formed in Baghdad, Iraq, in response to the 1967 Six-Day War, Nasiri taught with his fellow members at several universities throughout the region. Following the Gulf War in 1991, he moved to Amman, Jordan, to teach; there he played an instrumental role in launching the printmaking studio at Darat al-Funun (now Khalid Shoman Foundation). In 1997 Nasiri moved to Bahrain to teach at the national university, and in 2003 he returned to Amman, where he lived and worked until his death.

57

Rafa Nasiri

(Tikrit, Iraq, 1940–Amman, 2013)

Untitled (Baghdad)

1975

Acrylic on canvas

Here Rafa Nasiri evokes Baghdad in an atmospheric landscape that hints at a skyline, figures, and urban streets. Marshaling somber colors and fluid, gestural lines, he creates an enigmatic abstract space. Intensely focused on the inner life, Nasiri was influenced by poetry and traditional Chinese ink wash painting, with its emphasis on brushwork and negative space.

Between 1959 and 1963, Nasiri pursued his interest in Chinese art by studying printmaking at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts.

58

Afaf Zurayk

(Born Beirut, 1948)

Human Form

1983

Oil on canvas

Human Form

1983

Oil on canvas

While abstract, Afaf Zurayk's works often suggest the human body, straddling the divide between motion and stillness, color and shadow. In the two paintings on view here, Zurayk demonstrates her mastery in depicting transitory subjects bathed in soft light. Crystallizing a moment inside the relentless passage of time, she adds weight to an instant that might otherwise be overlooked.

Born in Beirut, Zurayk graduated from the American University of Beirut with a BA in fine art and in 1972 received an MA in art history from Harvard University. She went on to teach studio art and art history at Beirut University College (now the Lebanese American University) as well as drawing and painting in Washington, DC, at the Corcoran School of the Arts and Georgetown University. She was a professor of fine art at the American University of Beirut.

59

Dia al-Azzawi

(Born Baghdad, 1939)

Composition

1976

Oil on canvas

While at first glance this painting appears abstract, its composition hints at human figures resting alongside one another. Through muted tones and a balanced

arrangement, Dia al-Azzawi infuses the image with serenity and stillness.

Having received a degree in archaeology from the University of Baghdad in 1962 and a diploma from the city's Institute of Fine Arts in 1964, Azzawi worked as an archaeologist and curator. His visual art often mines sources in ancient Mesopotamian, Iraqi, and Islamic history and ethnography as well as modern Arabic literature. He co-founded the group New Vision (Al-Ru'yah al-Jadida) in 1969 and joined the One Dimension group. As secretary of the Plastic Artists Society, he established Iraq's pioneering international Al-Wasiti Festival in 1972.

In 1975, Azzawi left Iraq in response to the rise of Ba'athism, a nationalist movement that promoted state control over cultural institutions and standardization of artistic production. Moving to London, he served as adviser to the Iraqi Cultural Centre. He became deeply

affected by international politics and injustice in the Arab world. Through his work as an artist and curator he has publicized and supported the Palestinian cause as well as that of the Iraqi people. Although known primarily as a painter and draftsman, Azzawi works in a wide variety of media ranging from monumental sculpture to graphic design.

60

Helen Khal

(Allentown, Pennsylvania, 1923–Ajaltoun, Lebanon, 2009)

Untitled (Ochre over Brown)

1968

Oil on canvas

Born in Pennsylvania to Lebanese immigrants, Helen Khal began her artistic career in the early 1940s.

Following a 1946 visit with her grandfather in Tripoli, she settled in Lebanon, and from 1946 to 1948, she

studied under the well-known painter César Gemayel at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts. Though her early focus was on portraiture and still life, she soon began experimenting with the ethereal, abstract color fields for which she is known today.

Khal composed *Untitled (Ochre over Brown)*, 1968, in golden color blocks that evoke a hazy, light-infused landscape and horizon. Scholars have pointed to Mark Rothko's color-field paintings as a source of inspiration for Khal. From the 1960s, she held a prominent place in Lebanon's art scene, as an artist, art critic, and educator. In 1963 she co-founded, with her husband, poet Yusuf Khal, Lebanon's first permanent art gallery, Gallery One in Beirut, which fostered the local artists' community. Between 1967 and 1976, she taught at the American University of Beirut and then at the Lebanese American University from 1980 until 1997. In 1987, Khal published her groundbreaking book *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*.

61

Fouad Bellamine

(Born Fez, Morocco, 1950)

Untitled

1973

Mixed media on fiberboard

Fouad Bellamine turned repeatedly to Morocco's desert landscape as a source of inspiration, often using it to interrogate notions of identity through a sense of place. This painting resembles a desert landscape, with a sand-like texture in some areas. The dark purple and blues found in this composition's upper half signal the artist's transition into a minimalist aesthetic, while also revealing his sensitivity to the interplay of light and shadow. An early work, this painting was made only one year after the artist began exhibiting his work in Rabat.

Bellamine attended the Casablanca School of Applied Arts and quickly found his style, inspired by the light of

Fez and its weaving alleyways and colors. In 1973, he began teaching plastic arts at Rabat University, leaving in 1984 to accept a grant to study in Paris. There he received an art diploma from the Sorbonne, writing a thesis on the concept of murals in contemporary painting.

62

Hamed Abdalla

(Cairo, 1917–Paris, 1985)

Al-Tamazzuq (Torn)

1975

Acrylic and mixed media on canvas

Working in mixed media, Hamed Abdalla draws our attention toward this painting's light, bright center of action—while playing with cracks in its blue background to reveal a black layer underneath, extending the sense of rupture across its entire surface.

Born into a family of farmers (*fellahin*) on the outskirts of Cairo, Abdalla grew up in a modest household.

Beginning his education in a Qur'anic school, he studied calligraphy and became fascinated with drawing. His father enrolled him at Cairo's School of Applied Arts, but Abdallah left because of his refusal to adopt a strictly realistic style. He developed an artistic vocabulary merging the language of Western modernism with Egypt's past and present, extending from Pharaonic, Coptic, and contemporary folk culture to reflections on contemporary political unrest. In 1945 Abdalla married Tahia Halim, a fellow artist, and in 1949 they left for Paris to study at the Académie Julian. They exhibited together in Paris in 1951. After returning to Egypt that year, they taught art in their private studio in downtown Cairo. In 1956 the couple divorced, and Abdalla began to split his time between Copenhagen and Paris, where he passed away in 1985.

63

Yvette Achkar

(Born São Paulo, 1928)

Untitled

ca. 1980

Oil on canvas

A pioneering Lebanese artist, Yvette Achkar is considered one of the country's leading modernists. She once described the act of painting as tottering between the peak of a wave and a bottomless hollow, meaning that each work is more about self-discovery than embodying a concept or theme. This painting exemplifies her emphasis on clashing forms, geometry, and vibrant palette.

Achkar graduated in 1952 from the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA) in Beirut, where she studied with the Italian painter Fernando Manetti and the French painter Georges Cyr. In the late 1950s, she received a

scholarship from the French government to study art in Paris, and while there she exhibited in Italy, Yugoslavia, and Germany. In 1959, she participated in biennials in Paris, São Paulo, and Alexandria, Egypt. During the 1960s, she consolidated her figurative nudes and geometric abstractions into a single expressive style grounded in color and line—as seen in the painting on view here. From 1966 to 1988, Achkar taught painting at ALBA and the Institute of Fine Arts, Lebanese University.

64

Rachid Koraïchi

(Born Aïn Beïda, Algeria, 1947)

Sans toi, ni moi ou l'hallucination nostalgique (Without You, or Me, or the Nostalgic Hallucination)

1986

Ink on clay on wood

Rachid Koraïchi

(Born Aïn Beïda, Algeria, 1947)

Cet espace incrusté de nos destins (This Space Inlaid with Our Destinies)

1986

Ink on clay on wood

Descended from a long line of Qur'anic scholars who adhere to Sufi Islam, Rachid Koraïchi approaches artmaking as an extension of prayer and devotional rituals. In the two works on view here Arabic and Chinese letterforms, layered one atop the other, reflect Koraïchi's interest in language, scripture, signs, and spiritual practice. Exploring links between metaphysics, spirituality, and aesthetics in his sculptures, paintings, and installations, Koraïchi created a signature visual vocabulary of symbolism and forms that reference numerous calligraphic traditions, drawing on a variety of influences.

First trained as a calligrapher, Koraïchi studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Algiers between 1967 and 1971 and then in Paris at the École des Arts Décoratifs and École des Beaux-Arts from 1971 to 1977. Working in a wide range of media, including painting, ceramics, textiles, installation art, metallurgy, and printmaking, he often collaborates with Francophone poets and writers and with North African artisans.

65

Omar el-Nagdi

(Cairo, 1931–2019)

Untitled

1970

Mixed media on wood

Omar El-Nagdi is best known for his abstractions based on the repetition of the Arabic numeral one (*wahed*), which shares its form with the first letter of the Arabic alphabet (*alef*), which is also the first letter in the name

of God (Allah). He began using this minimal letterform to build his abstract compositions in the 1960s and '70s—as in the work seen here. Rhythmically repeating and layering the same symbol, El-Nagdi creates a pulsating image that channels meditative elements of Sufi practice, focusing in particular on the indivisible nature of the divine.

In 1953, El-Nagdi graduated from the School of Fine Arts in Cairo, where he studied under Egyptian painter Ahmed Sabri. Continuing his training in the Soviet Union and Italy, he immersed himself in the avant-garde circle around celebrated Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico, who became his mentor. Later he attended Venice's Accademia di Belle Arti, graduating in 1964. Following his return to Egypt, he was active in Cairo's art community, becoming a member of the Liberal Artists' group headed by the writer Taha Hussein and founding the Egyptian Mosaics Group in 1964. Throughout his career, El-Nagdi refused to commit to a single artistic

style, instead drawing inspiration from the diverse cultures of rural Egypt and Cairo's urban district, Bab el-Shereya.

66

Mohammed Khadda

(Mostaganem, Algeria, 1930–Algiers, 1991)

Abstraction vert sur fond orange (Green Abstraction on Orange Background)

1969

Oil on canvas

67

Mohammed Khadda

(Mostaganem, Algeria, 1930–Algiers, 1991)

Abstraction vert (Green Abstraction)

1969

Oil on canvas

In both his works on view here, Mohammed Khadda places an enigmatic graphic form against a background of brown and yellow hues. His quasi-calligraphic shapes call to mind pictograms and asemic writing, a wordless, or non-semantic, form of writing. *Abstraction vert sur fond orange* also resembles a desert landscape with traditional flat-roofed buildings like those common in North Africa. Lined up as if on a horizon, these minimalist white cubes, under an indecipherable letter-like shape in the sky, evoke the artist's local topography.

During the 1950s Khadda helped lead a generation of Algerian artists who worked to combine Arab and Amazigh (Berber) calligraphy with Western abstraction; he was one of the first artists to utilize the Tifinagh alphabet, used to write Amazigh and related languages, in his paintings. While he identified Wassily Kandinsky as the originator of “nonrepresentational work,” he believed that

abstraction should not be tethered to the West or colonial occupation. He advocated for an art that transcended literal and metaphorical representation and that was broadly accessible. Throughout his career, he sought to reconcile his desire for a distinctively Algerian artistic practice with his belief in the possibility of universal abstraction.

Following Algeria's independence from France in 1962, Khadda and his contemporaries worked to forge a distinctly Algerian national visual language. This political transition sparked the founding of multiple Algerian art movements, including the Aouchem (Tattoo) Group and the École du Signe (School of the Sign) in 1967. Khaada called for an artistic practice that extended beyond the political propaganda and agitation that dominated the Algerian art scene around this time.

68

Ahmad Shibrain

(Berber, Sudan, 1931–Khartoum, Sudan, 2017)

Calligraphic Compositions

ca. 1960s

Mixed media on paper

The brown curved mound and black rectangular shape of this work resemble architectural forms found in the oldest quarters of Khartoum, the capital of Sudan.

69

Ahmad Shibrain

(Berber, Sudan, 1931–Khartoum, Sudan, 2017)

Untitled

ca. 1960s

Mixed media on paper, laid down on fiberboard

Displaying a mixed array of calligraphy and abstract shapes, this work exemplifies works of the 1960s by

Ahmad Shibrain, who was a leading figure of modernism in Sudan. In the early 1950s Shibrain studied at the College of Fine and Applied Art in Khartoum, and in 1957 he attended London's Central School of Art and Design. He founded the Khartoum School in the 1960s, along with his contemporaries Ibrahim El-Salahi, whose work is on view nearby, and Kamala Ishag. The Khartoum School created a new visual style, Sudanwiyya, which incorporated abstracted Arabic calligraphy, the aesthetics of Hurufiyya (transforming Arabic letters into abstract shapes), Islamic motifs, and local imagery to convey the cultural heritage of Sudan. In juxtaposing such local and Pan-African traditions with modernist forms, the group sought to forge a new visual language for modern Sudan.

Shibrain was appointed head of the graphics department at the College of Fine and Applied Art in Khartoum in 1970, and he became dean in 1975. Under his leadership, the school served as an essential hub for

contemporary art in Sudan and sub-Saharan Africa at large. In 1996 he founded the Shibrain Art Centre to showcase Sudanese contemporary and emerging artists.

70

Ibrahim El-Salahi

(Born Omdurman, Sudan, 1930)

The Last Sound

1964

Oil on canvas

A foundational figure in African modernism, Ibrahim El-Salahi creates intricately detailed compositions that draw on Islamic, African, Arab, and Western artistic traditions. In *The Last Sound*, he sparsely distributes muted abstract shapes across a square canvas; the work's title refers to the Islamic practice of reciting prayers for the dead and dying. Commemorating the death of the artist's father, the painting evokes the

soul's passage from the corporeal to the celestial as it travels toward heavenly forms inhabiting the universe and beyond. With its inclusion of Arabic calligraphy, *The Last Sound* exemplifies El-Salahi's sustained engagement with the lettrist movement known as Hurufiyyah, which became popular in the 1950s and '60s. As a practicing Sufi Muslim, he views prayer as an essential component of his artistic process. In embracing local Arabic letterforms, he strives to create an art that speaks across religious and ethnic divides.

El-Salahi studied painting at Gordon Memorial College in Khartoum, Sudan, between 1949 and 1951, then pursued calligraphy training in London. From 1954 to 1957, he attended the Slade School of Fine Art, where he experimented with modernist styles. Back in Sudan, he rediscovered his interest in local handicrafts and vernacular traditions. He taught at the College of Fine and Applied Art in Khartoum, and in the 1960s, he spearheaded the prominent art movement known as the

Khartoum School. In the mid-1960s El-Salahi moved to New York to study black-and-white photography at Columbia University. While in the Americas he traveled across the U.S., Mexico, and Brazil.

71

Ahmad Shibrain

(Berber, Sudan, 1931–Khartoum, Sudan, 2017)

Untitled

1965

Oil, ink, and watercolor on wood

72

Abdel Hady el-Gazzar

(Alexandria, Egypt, 1925–Cairo, 1966)

The Light from Within the Gree

1958

Oil, pen, and ink on paper

Born in Alexandria, Abdel Hady el-Gazzar moved with his family in 1940 to Cairo, where he joined the art club at Hilmiya Secondary School, winning prizes in school drawing competitions. The club was led by Hussein Youssef Amin, an artist who rejected Western academic approaches to artmaking. El-Gazzar started medical school in 1944 but soon left to attend Cairo's School of Fine Arts. After graduating in 1950, he held his first solo exhibition at the Egyptian Museum of Modern Art in Cairo, and four years later, he earned a scholarship to study in Rome.

While in Italy, el-Gazzar participated in the Monstra Nazionale di Pittura Contemporanea (National Exhibition of Contemporary Paintings) in Bari, where he won the silver medal. He also exhibited works in the 26th, 28th, and 30th Venice Biennale in 1952, 1956, and 1960. A renowned and influential Egyptian artist, el-Gazzar is best known for paintings that center the stark poverty of

Cairo's working class and often integrate elements drawn from Egyptian folk art and mysticism.

73

Jassim Zaini

(Doha, Qatar, 1943–2012)

Untitled No. 13

1972

Oil on fiberboard

Part of the fledgling Arabian Gulf art scene of the mid-20th century, Jassim Zaini began by depicting the dramatic social changes that took place in Qatar during the 1950s and 1960s after the discovery of oil.

This work, which depicts a donkey, demonstrates Zaini's approach to rendering human and animal figures as abstract. Split into sections, the donkey's eyes appear in separate areas, and its back half is not attached to a front. Earth tones suggest a rural or desert landscape, the antithesis of modernization. The

artist's rough texturing of the paint produces a three-dimensional, relief-like surface.

Born in 1943 in Doha, Zaini was the first Qatari to pursue academic art training abroad when he enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad. There he worked with Iraqi artists Faiq Hassan and Hafidh al-Droubi. During his studies, Zaini encountered Cubism and Abstract Expressionism. After graduating in 1968, he was active in the mid-20th century Gulf art scene, and in 1980 he founded the Qatar Fine Arts Society.

74

Shakir Hassan Al Said

(Samawah, Iraq, 1925–Baghdad, 2004)

Untitled

ca. 1970

Oil on wood

75

Shakir Hassan Al Said

(Samawah, Iraq, 1925–Baghdad, 2004)

Al-Muntassirun (The Victorious)

1983

Mixed media on wood

One of Iraq's most prominent artists, Shakir Hassan Al Said associated calligraphy with spiritual salvation. Drawing inspiration from the esoteric principles of Islamic Sufism as well as Western philosophy, he sought "truth in all its dimensions." After initially pursuing a degree in social science, Al Said studied painting at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad with Iraqi artist Jewad Selim. In 1951 they together founded the Baghdad Modern Art Group, which urged fellow artists of their generation to develop a distinctly Iraqi visual language, one that married international modernist styles with elements drawn from the country's heritage. Al Said also trained in Paris at the

Académie Julian, the École des Arts Décoratifs, and the École des Beaux-Arts. In addition to Sufism, he drew inspiration from the theoretical approaches he encountered in Paris, including structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction, phenomenology, and existentialism. Between 1958 and 1965, while he was transitioning to abstraction from figuration, it was above all the Arabic letter that served as Al Said's enabler.

In his 1966 "Contemplative Art Manifesto," Al Said called for a meditative and transcendental approach in which artmaking was an act of contemplation, not creation. Testing notions of form, matter, time, and the physical world in general, he scratched, carved, burned, and even punctured surfaces, creating amorphous compositions to conjure up the universe itself. In incorporating calligraphic letterforms, he aimed to "expose the unity of two worlds that are simultaneously inhabited, namely, the 'linguistic' world of thought and

the ‘plastic’ world of sight.” In 1971, driven by his interest in Sufism and metaphysics, Al Said founded the One Dimension (Al-Bu‘d al-Wahid) group, which aimed to blur the lines between the self and the cosmos and to produce work from a transcendental understanding of the oneness and eternity of all.

76

Shakir Hassan Al Said

(Samawah, Iraq, 1925–Baghdad, 2004)

Untitled

1963

Oil and plaster on wood

77

Munira Al-Kazi

(Born Pune, India, 1939)

Untitled

ca. 1960–65

Mixed media on canvas

Munira Al-Kazi made some of the earliest experiments in nonrepresentational painting in Kuwait. She was born in Pune, India, to a prominent Saudi-Kuwaiti merchant family that relocated to India in the first half of the 20th century, then returned to Kuwait after the discovery of oil there. Sponsored by Kuwait University's study-abroad program, she attended college at London's Central School of Art. Following her graduation in 1961, she established a studio in London.

78

Munira Al-Kazi

(Born Pune, India, 1939)

Untitled

1962

Monotype

Munira Al-Kazi developed an interest in printmaking while studying at London's Central School of Art and

Design, from which she graduated in 1961. This monotype exemplifies her experimentation with abstract representations of human figures and groups. Monotype is a planographic printing process, in which the maker lays ink directly on the printing plate, in contrast with a relief print such as woodcut or engraving. While other printmaking techniques are designed to produce multiple copies, a monotype yields only one print.

79

Maliheh Afnan

(Haifa, Palestine, 1935–London, 2016)

Mindscape

1961

Oil on canvas

Obscured by a heavily textured, hazy gray tone, Maliheh Afnan's haunting *Mindscape* reflects her interest in texts and writing. Born in the city of Haifa to Iranian

parents of the Bahá'í faith, she witnessed the Palestinian exodus of 1948 (Al-Nakba) and moved to Beirut with her family the following year. There she received a BA from the American University of Beirut and then moved on to the Corcoran School of the Arts in Washington, DC, for her MFA. Afnan lived in Kuwait during the mid-1960s, in Beirut from the mid-1960s to mid-'70s, and in Paris for the following two decades. In 1979, she relocated to London and exhibited in London and Paris.

80

Juliana Seraphim

(Jaffa, Palestine, 1934–Beirut, 2005)

Untitled

1961

Oil on canvas

Juliana Seraphim often described her paintings as attempts to depict her dreams, and her art displays

Surrealist undertones. In this work, somber tones convey the haziness associated with dreaming or uncertainty. The eldest of four children, Seraphim grew up amid orange groves and white, sandy beaches by the Mediterranean Sea. During the 1948 Palestinian exodus (Al-Nakba), her family sought refuge in Lebanon. Only 14 years old at the time, the artist was deeply affected by this forced migration. Four years later, Seraphim began working for the United National Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Throughout time the colors and sensations of her childhood as well as the memory of her grandfather, who was an architect and art enthusiast, remained with her. At the behest of a family friend, Seraphim studied art with Lebanese painter Jean Khalifeh and enrolled at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts. In 1959 she spent a year in Florence, followed by another year in Madrid on a scholarship. Seraphim went on to represent Lebanon in three international biennials: Alexandria (1962), Paris (1963), and São Paulo (1965).