

In New York, More Eyes Turn to Middle Eastern Art

Heba Elkayal / 25 Oct 2019



Nicolas Moufarrege, *Narcissix of One and Nick's of the Other*, (detail), 1983. Thread, pigment, glitter, and brooches on needlepoint canvas. 18 x 84 inches. Image courtesy CAMH. Photo by Emily Peacock.

In New York City this year, art made by Arab artists or focusing on themes about the Arab world will be a firm part of the art season's roster of gallery shows and museum exhibitions.

The number of shows, spanning both commercial and institutional spaces, points to a shift toward increased curiosity about Arab art—a field of modern and contemporary visual arts that has been largely unexplored and somewhat misunderstood by both galleries and collectors, and by academics who recognize art criticism's oversight of the field.

The art calendar starts in September with the opening of commercial gallery shows after the summer hiatus. Whereas in Europe almost all galleries close during August, galleries in New York usually have a show that opens in June and is on display through the end of summer. From September through the following June, gallery shows and museum exhibitions are supplemented by varying art fairs and global art biennials where engagement and discussion by the global art community at large helps to not only create awareness about artists, art trends and other artistic developments, but also to help situate art in the global canon.

The inclusion of an artist's work in a museum exhibition is regarded as the best seal of critical approval, often marking an artist as someone who can be regarded as serious and worthy not only of being collected, but also of being integrated into the canon. This makes some of the current and forthcoming museum exhibitions exciting news not only for the artists selected to show, but for the field at large.

Following is a selection of highlights of the year that exemplify the quality of the shows:

Hayv Kahraman: Not Quite Human

Jack Shainman Gallery, September 5 to October 26

The Kurdish-Iraqi artist Hayv Kahraman is one of the few artists originally from the Middle East to be shown frequently in New York. Born in Baghdad, she grew up as a refugee in Sweden and now is based in Los Angeles. Her paintings embody an assertive refutation of the mistaken ideas imposed on her and others like her. *(For a full review of her show, see our earlier article, "An Iraqi-Born Artist Rejects Identities Imposed on Women.")*

Wael Shawky: The Gulf Project Camp

Lisson Gallery, September 13 to October 16, 2019

Egyptian artist Wael Shawky is known for challenging and subverting the standard questions of national, religious and artistic identity in historical storytelling. His work instead reassesses these concepts as it imagines alternative narratives that refuse to indulge in the nostalgic clichés often seen in depictions of Arab political and social history.

For a project exhibited four years ago at MoMA PS1, the Museum of Modern Art's satellite space in Queens, New York, Shawky created glass marionettes in Murano, the famed glass-making district near Venice. These marionettes were used in the third installment of Shawky's trilogy *The Cabaret Crusades*, based on Lebanese historian Amin Maalouf's work *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, putting a playful and alternative spin on the history-telling of the Arabs during the time of the Crusades.

For the Gulf Project Camp exhibition at Lisson Gallery, Shawky focused on the theme of the history of the Arabian Peninsula from the 17th century to the present. Again, he concentrated on false depictions of the region historically, but he also gave attention to the transformation of the urban landscape and the role of the region's ruling families.

Shawky transformed the gallery with an immersive large-scale installation of something akin to a rocky mountain in the center of the space. On it are displayed new glass and bronze sculptures of mythical

creatures and cities, repeated throughout the exhibition in charming ink drawings, intricate wooden carvings and large Murano glass tableaus. History appears to have been turned into child-like storytelling.

His creatures—part friendly dinosaur, part omniscient observer—serve as a recurring motif in the adapted narratives of the historical events and themes that he focuses on with each series. The inclusion of the fanciful characters, looming large in both the sculptures and in the other works, perhaps softens what might be inferred as acerbic criticism of some of the dramatic changes of landscape and geopolitics in the region.

Shawky tried to make use of the scant available source material about the history of the region, including ancient poems and maps rendered by foreigners in the 18th century—some of whom never even visited the region but drew it according to their imagination. By considering the transformation of sites like Mecca through the lens of regional and global trade, migration, and the tribal relations and alliances between the ruling families today, he again offers an alternative narrative by which to consider history and contemporary politics. These panoramic depictions of cities present a semi-historical “corrected” rendering of the false maps and ideas that Shawky critiques.



Nicolas Moufarrege: Recognize My Sign

The Queens Museum, October 6 to February 16, 2020

The exhibition of lap-size tapestries and embroidered paintings by the late Lebanese artist Nicolas Moufarrege highlights how Arab artists in the late 20th century were creating a unique visual language of their own to express their experiences. Moufarrege was gay, and expressed his sexuality in his works through text and symbolism. The works on display clearly present to viewers how Moufarrege, as an artist, was very much immersed in contemporary American art trends and observant of what was being done elsewhere. Melding pop culture, American comic book characters and Arabic calligraphy, the exhibition is a fine display of an artist fusing multiple cultural references to create a singular lexicon of his own.

During the Lebanese civil war, Moufarrege sought refuge first in Paris, then in New York. The exhibition includes nearly forty works and a variety of archival materials, along with the embroidered paintings he made as he migrated from Beirut to Paris to New York. During his time in New York, from 1980 to 1985, Moufarrege also contributed to magazines like Flash Art and Arts Magazine, writing about the East Village art scene that he was fully immersed in.

He died in 1985, early on in the AIDS epidemic, and left behind a body of work that was mainly held by his brother and sister, who live in Shreveport, Louisiana. Curator Dean Daderko of Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, who organized the exhibition, first shown in Houston, helped bring the artist out of obscurity by tracking down his siblings after spotting one small work, Banana Pudding, five years ago in a group show of artists from New York's East Village art scene of the 1980s. The exhibition's second iteration was co-organized in the Queens Museum by curator Larissa Harris, a fitting location owing to the museum's objective of showing work by immigrant artists who at one time or another engaged with the city of New York.

Said Dean Daderko: "The continuing relevance of his work is striking. In a moment when queer identity and transnational migrations are front of mind, Moufarrege's refreshing work offers us new ways to approach these ongoing issues."

[Editor's note: The author of this article served as a communications consultant for the Queens Museum in the lead up to the opening of the exhibition.]



Nicolas Moufarrege, *Le sang du phénix* [The Blood of the Phoenix], 1975. Thread and pigment on needlepoint canvas. 49 7/8 x 64 inches. Image and work courtesy Nabil Moufarrej and Gulnar "Nouna" Mufarrij, Shreveport, Louisiana.

Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991-2011

MoMA PS1, November 3 to March 1, 2020

A group show featuring over 50 artists, both Arab and non-Arab, will explore the 1991 Gulf War and its legacy of American military involvement in the region. Also under scrutiny will be the impact of sanctions imposed on Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait and their effect on civilian life; the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and their effect on destabilizing the region. Assembled by MoMA PS1's curator and chief curator, Syrian-American Ruba Katrib and Peter Eleey, respectively, the exhibition is set to examine how public consciousness has relegated the Iraq wars to the past, almost forgotten despite their continuous impact, both regionally and globally.

The highly political nature of the show, and criticism of U.S. involvement in foreign countries, is timely, but the presentation of works by Kuwaiti and Iraqi artists such as Dia Al-Azzawi, Thuraya Al-Baq sami, Tarek Al-Ghoussein and Hiwa K in conversation with Western artists Paul Chan and Thomas Hirschhorn and the anonymous Guerrilla Girls will perhaps present a very honest dialogue, and most certainly a multi-faceted one.

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

New York University's Grey Art Gallery, January 14 to April 4, 2020

Culled from the Barjeel Art Foundation collection, the exhibition seeks to explore the development of

abstraction in the Arab world through a multitude of mediums including sculpture, paintings and works on paper. Nearly 90 works by artists including Etel Adnan, Shakir Hassan Al Said, Kamal Boullata, Huguette Caland, Ahmed Cherkaoui, Saloua Raouda Choucair, Rachid Koraïchi, Mohamed Melehi and Hassan Sharif, among others, will be on display. The works are by artists from North Africa, the Levant and the Gulf. (*See the related articles "What Art Can Teach Us About the Arab World" and "New Book Showcases Contemporary Arab Artists as Survivors."*)

Offering a thorough investigation into the various points of historical influence and cultural encounters outside the Arab world with abstract art movements, the show aims to examine how abstract art was developed by Arab artists to bring it closer to their world and make it more relevant to the history, politics and social changes they were experiencing, forming an art movement and artworks that were informed not by imported ideas of what abstract art was elsewhere, but creating unique visual languages and work personal to each artist.

Taking Shape promises to offer a heavy crash course on the subject and art from the region. By introducing these artists collectively (some, such as Etel Adnan and Saloua Raouda Choucair, have already been exhibited in the United States and Europe) the exhibition can help secure the placement of these artists and their work in the larger academic discussion currently taking place in the United States on Arab art, while helping to correct inaccurate ideas about art and the region.