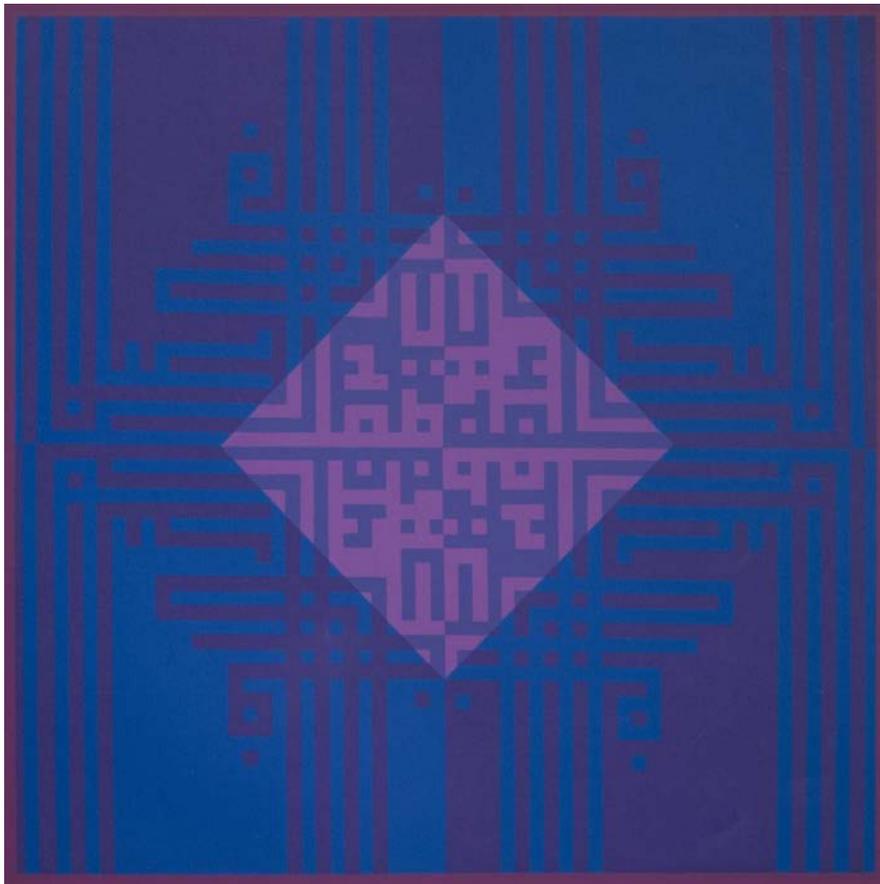


FEBRUARY 25, 2020 EVA ZANARDI

## Rethinking Mid-Century Abstract Art from the Arab World



COLLECTION OF THE BARJEEL ART FOUNDATION, SHARJAH, UAE  
**Kamal Boullata (Palestine), *Fi-I Bid Kan-al-Kalima (In the Beginning Was the Word)*, 1983. Silkscreen.**

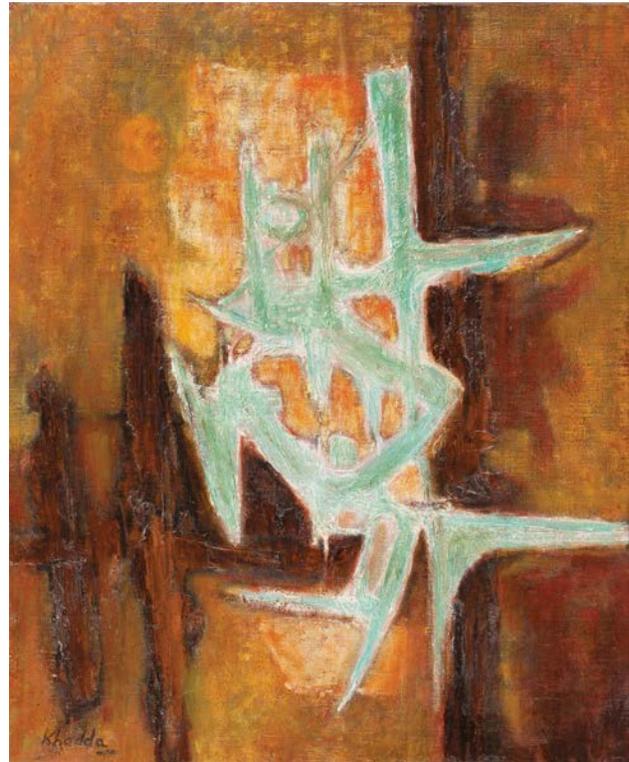
New York University's Grey Art Gallery and the UAE-based Barjeel Art Foundation present *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s*, the first exhibition to comprehensively analyze the development of abstraction in the Arab world. Curated by Suheyra Takesh and Lynn Gumpert, *Taking Shape* investigates the principles and implications of abstraction in the context of the Arab world from the 1950s through the 1980s. This period was shaped by decolonization, socialism, the rise and

fall of Arab nationalisms, the oil boom, rapid industrialization, multiple wars and subsequent mass migration, and new state formations in the Arabian/Persian Gulf.

Drawn from the Barjeel Art Foundation's collection, the exhibition features nearly ninety works on paper, paintings, and sculptures created by a diverse group of artists including Etel Adnan, Shakir Hassan Al Said, Kamal Boullata, Huguette Caland, Ahmed Cherkaoui, Saloua Raouda Choucair, Rachid Koraïchi, Mohamed Melehi, and Hassan Sharif. Artists from Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates are represented.

*Taking Shape* was conceived as a visual journey into the creative minds of some of the Arab world's most prominent artists and their approaches to non-representational art. In her essay in the exhibition's accompanying catalogue, curator Suleya

Takesh quotes Algerian painter Mohammed Khadda's compelling observations about the potential of abstraction and his argument in favor of the freedom inherent to the movement: "The history of painting had been one of successive revolutions and continuous liberation that eventually culminated in the emergence of abstraction, allowing painting to become an art unto itself, no longer reliant on a physical subject. There was no longer a horizon, but infinity."



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**Mohammed Khadda (Algeria),  
*Abstraction vert (Green Abstraction)*, 1969. Oil  
on canvas.**



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**Etel Adnan (Lebanon), *Autumn in Yosemite Valley*, 1963–1964. Oil on canvas.**

Takesh adds, “Transcending the limits of representation, of physical reality, and thereby the bounds of a metaphorical 'horizon,' the artist would be able—in Khadda’s imagination—to tap into an infinite range of 'creative' experiences and expand what art could achieve.”

The two curators of the exhibition have brilliantly tackled the challenging, gargantuan task of contextualizing and integrating abstraction within the Arab world as an integral part of the discourse on global modernism. Lynn Gumpert explains, “When I attended graduate school for art history in the 1970s, studying 20th-century art from the Middle East or Asia at large was not an option. No one was teaching it. Until very recently [the late 1960s and early 1970s], Middle Eastern art of the 19th century was often considered 'contaminated' by the West and therefore not worthy of serious scholarship,

which was reserved for works made from antiquity to, perhaps, the 18th century at the latest. Happily, the situation has changed."

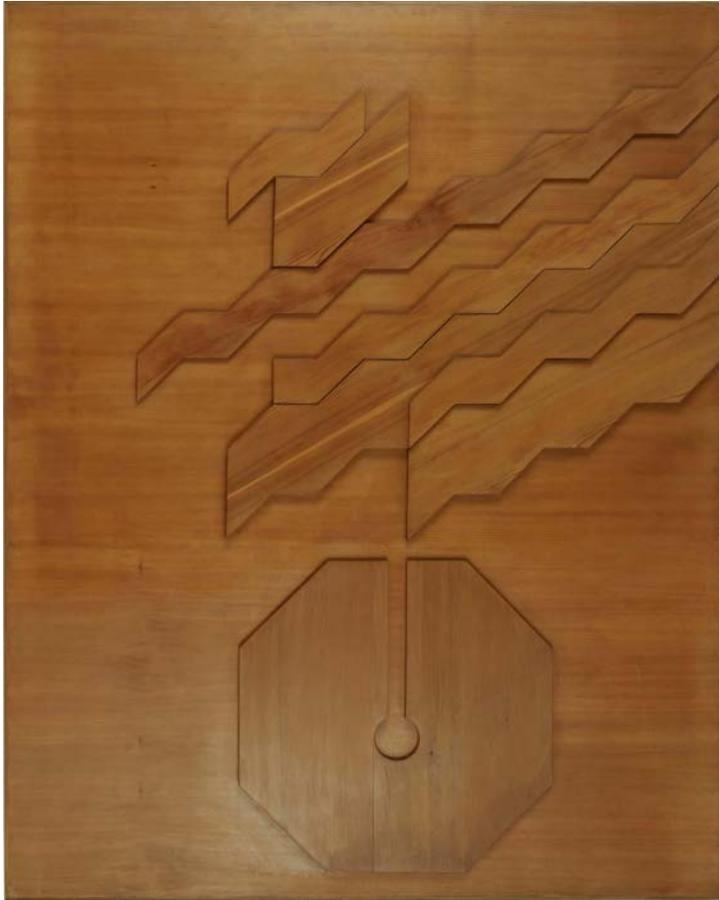
Gumpert continues, "[By] reassessing the dominance of Eurocentric frameworks, scholars have begun calling for a global art history, one that can actively tackle issues of 'quality,' translation, and decolonization."



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**Dia al-Azzawi (Iraq), *Composition*, 1976. Oil on canvas.**

Taking Shape highlights a number of abstract movements that developed in North Africa, West Asia, and the Arab diaspora, including the late 20th century pan-Arab Hurufiyya movement, the Iraq-based Baghdad Group for Modern Art (founded in 1951), the Casablanca School in Morocco (founded in 1965), and the Algeria-based Aouchem group (founded in 1967).



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**Mohamed Chebaa (Morocco), *Composition*, c. 1970.**

**Wood (bas-relief).**

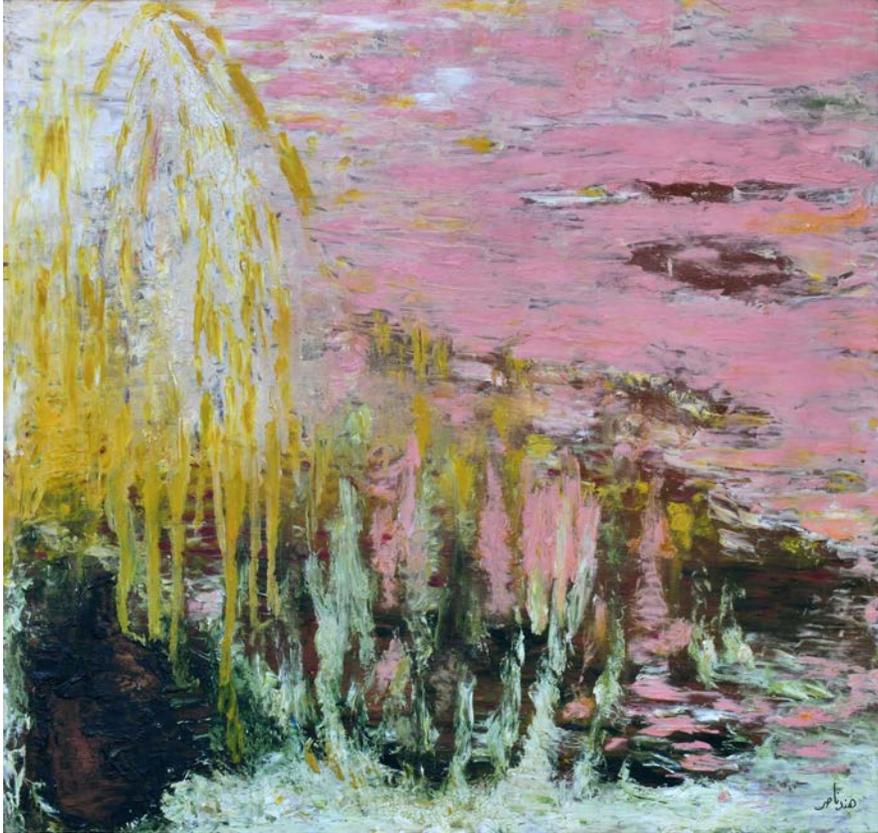
Furthermore, *Taking Shape* is groundbreaking for honoring the contribution of women within the Arab World of abstraction. Nearly half of the artists featured in *Taking Shape* are women. They comprise a multifaceted array of talented creators and innovators which include a princess, the first winner of the Miss Jordan pageant, and the daughter of the first president of postcolonial Lebanon.

Notable highlights of the riveting exhibition include works by pioneering female artists Saloua Raouda Choucair, one of the first abstractionists in the Arab world, and Madiha Umar, who is widely recognized as the first artist to abstract the form of Arabic letters in visual art. The exhibition also features Yvette Achkar's non-directional color fields; Etel

Adnan's vibrant abstract landscapes; Huguette Caland's erotic, semi-abstract bodyscapes; Menhat Helmy's cosmic sacred geometries; Munira Al-Kazi's sophisticated, subdued abstractions; and Jordanian Wijdan Ali's paintings inspired by Islamic calligraphy.

*Taking Shape* is an extremely rewarding exhibition, though it demands a serious attention commitment from the viewer. The extensive and careful curation of museum-level artworks and the array of styles presented within the umbrella of abstraction in the Arab world result in an extremely informative, gratifying, and unique experience.

*Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s* is on view at New York University's Grey Art Gallery through April 4, 2020.



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**Hind Nasser (Jordan), *Ayla*, 1975. Oil on canvas.**