



Ayman El Semary *Deeping Quite*, 2008
Acrylic, prayton, acrylic oxides on canvas, 59.1 x 59.1"
2008

Signs – Contemporary Arab Art

Arab Art in Focus: A Short Survey

Karin Adrian von Roques, curator

For a long time the Arab art scene fell under the radar screen of the western world. Only a short three years ago, hardly anyone spoke of modern and contemporary art from Arab countries. But, lo and behold, it has now come into the range of the international art world. How was it possible that interest in Arab art took so long to develop—in contrast to contemporary Russian and Chinese art that found their way into galleries and museums and thus onto the market in the early 1990s?

Visits to international art fairs like Art Basel, Art Cologne or the FIAC proved that, although excellent works by Arab artists exist, they were as good as unrepresented there. Questioning the reasons for this, I set out some years ago to find the answer. My study included taking a poll among the leading gallery owners at the fairs. The answers showed me that very vague ideas exist about the quality of Arab art, including the prejudgments of it. “Don’t the artists as a rule just imitate European art and western art styles?” Or: “Could art even develop there with the Islamic ban on images?” were some of the frequently posed questions.

Again and again those questioned—among whom were representatives from the galleries Ropac (Vienna), Lelong (Paris) and Marlborough (London)—pointed to the lack of a market and the lack of a cultural infrastructure for the visual arts and specifically for Arab art in many Arab countries. Peter Huber of the Galerie Art & Public in Geneva stated for example: “Above all, in the U.S. and in central Europe, a market for visual arts has developed. Because there is a tradition of investing in art, a market could be established. Nothing comparable exists in the Arab countries for the reason that painting, for instance, does not lie within their tradition.” Many gallerists, however, also expressed a fundamental interest in Arab art. “In order to deal with the art of Arab artists, however,” Thaddaeus Ropac from the Viennese Galerie Ropac said, “you need the necessary background knowledge, since they come from a totally different cultural environment. You have to familiarize yourself with the foreign culture. That demands an enormous effort, which galleries alone cannot do on their own. Normally museums take over the groundwork, specialists such as art historians or curators.” He pointed to the role of the Guggenheim in New York in the case of Chinese art.

Hassan Massoudy O ami ne va pas au jardin des fleurs, le jardin des fleurs est en toi – Kabir, 2009
Ink and pigment on paper, 29.5 x 21.7"



Since the poll that I set up around 10 years ago, the situation for Arab art has decidedly changed over a relatively short period. Ever since then, the demand for Arab art has steadily risen. Of crucial importance for this increased interest was, for one, the past years' art auctions that took place in leading auction houses. Christie's opened an office in Dubai in 2005 and already one year later in May organized an auction of modern and contemporary Indian, Iranian, Arab and western art that attracted much attention. For the first time, Arab artists had an international platform. The result exceeded all expectations. Shortly afterwards Sotheby's followed suit, but mounted their auction "Modern and Contemporary Arab and Indian Art" in London in October 2007, thus simultaneously testing whether the western market would react to what was being offered. This auction, too, was a success.

On the other hand, spectacular projects of the past years on how to build up and extend a cultural infrastructure in the Gulf region—among which were the establishment of a branch of the Louvre and of the Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi—contributed to the fact that worldwide interest in Arab art and culture has grown. A master plan completed in January 2007

foresees the building of five museums, a biennial park with pavilions for fairs and for art and cultural events, as well as a Performing Arts Center, hotels and galleries on the island Al Saadiyat in Abu Dhabi. But also in other countries, such as in Dubai or Qatar, plans exist for building museums, universities and academies. In addition to this, many new galleries have been built these past years, not only in the Gulf region but also in other Arab nations such as Morocco and Egypt.

And beyond this, the Sharjah Biennale of the Emirate Sharjah has, over its many years existence, blossomed into an international event. It attracts an increasing amount of visitors to this region (as does the Dubai Art Fair since 2007), above all gallerists, collectors and friends of art.

As regards art, something like a new dawn seems to reign in many Arab states. This is motivation enough to become increasingly engaged in the work of Arab artists. The question is allowed in this context as to what characterizes contemporary Arab art and what distinguishes it from Western art? Is there a pictorial world that can only emerge against a background of Islamic traditions? What are the sources of inspiration for



Khaled Al Saai *Elevated Spirit*, 2008-2009
Mixed media on canvas 57 x 71"



Georges Fikry Ibrahim *The Farmer*, 2006
Mixed media on paper, 33.9 x 93.3"

Arab artists? What role do Islam, the history of the region or the after-effects of Europe's colonial policy play in them? How much do they reflect biographical situations such as exile or global nomadism.

Ever since 9/11, public reportage on, and interest in, Islam and Islamic countries has been high. Whilst conventional wisdom suggests that knowledge leads to greater understanding between peoples and closer relations between countries, this has not been the case in this instance. As the dialogue and the reportage has almost exclusively centered on negative political and religious topics, the more humanizing issues from daily life and everyday culture have been neglected. It is obvious that more about the art and culture of Arab countries must be brought to the world's attention. Thus, in Europe the first larger museum exhibitions devoted to Arab art took place, which was an initial contribution to opening up this cultural region. It is especially contemporary art that has the potential to initiate a dialogue on current themes and concerns.

Understanding another culture comes about with a willingness to leave behind habitual ways of seeing things and dare a change in perspective. Yet alien cultures are often looked at without any reflection or deeper understanding taking place. The Muslim East provides an historical example. For centuries it sparked the imagination of Europeans to wild fantasies, which led to whole waves of various oriental flavors-of-the-month. All of which had little in common with the "actual existing" East. Various motives lay behind these historical fantasies: for example, a longing for an intact world of archaic cultures, or the quest for new meaning in times of crisis.

A widespread prejudice exists in the idea that the Muslim world is "backward and backward-looking" and has not continued to develop. According to this view, modernism never took place and consequently no modern or contemporary art has evolved. Islamic modernity is negated or ignored according to the motto: "the more Western, the more modern". This kind of thinking reduces the Muslim East to classical Islamic art, the art of the arabesque, of miniatures and calligraphy, which were felt to be typically Oriental. Somehow a no-man's-land that no one wants to know about in any detail lies between this epoch and the present.

Yet in Muslim countries, just as in Europe, processes of development and change have taken place: the fight to improve political and social conditions, the struggle with global political power constellations and – above all since the 19th century – with the increase in Western influences and new technologies. These transforming processes also affect art.

There has never been any history of art in Arab countries, any development in art comparable to the West. Painting and especially sculpture – for centuries an integral part of European art tradition – are uncommon forms of expression in Arab culture. Instead, it is poetry that occupies a central place within Arab consciousness. The word per se enjoys high prestige and high esteem. This is linked to the Koran, the Islamic book of revelation, whose poetic language and especially its rhythm were meant to be heard rather than read silently. The Islamic prohibition of images has also played an important role in the fact that the visual arts have developed quite differently in Arab countries from the way they have in Europe. Many Europeans understand the Islamic ban on images as meaning that fundamentally no images at all may be produced.

The development of an Arab art in the sense of global modernism began early in the 20th century, as a direct result of the increase in reciprocal influences between East and West. The profound changes of the period made themselves felt in all areas in the Western as well as the Eastern world, up to and including the art scene. While in the West, the evolving abstraction in painting was viewed as a revolutionary development, artists in the Muslim world turned more and more to figurative painting. The ideal of contemporary European art, i.e., the rejection of merely reproducing the world of appearances, corresponds to the aesthetics of Islamic works of art. The aesthetic revolution in Islamic art, if you like, had already taken place many centuries earlier.

In Arab countries artists began to paint in the style of European painting. Many had been in Europe and come into contact with, and been influenced by, different art movements such as Impressionism or Expressionism. Artists from Lebanon, Egypt, Syria and Morocco became the trailblazers for other Arab artists. In the 1930s in cities like Beirut, Cairo and Damascus, but also in Rabat, the first groups of artists formed that became engaged with the tendencies and techniques of European art as well as with their own cultural background. Without the influence of foreign cultures, above all of the Muslim East, Western modernism as it stands today would not be conceivable, in the same way that the development of Arab modernism is inconceivable without the various influences from the West.

The trend towards modernism and the development of the visual arts in Arab countries did not run their course without tensions and conflicts between different groupings. Some wanted to hold on to the cultural heritage such as classical calligraphy; others wanted to demonstrate that modernization

and renewal were necessary and that the modern Arab world was well aware of the global aesthetic discourse. Conflicts sharpened when tradition was newly interpreted or criticism of the system became noticeable. In such cases, confrontations with conservative movements that opposed the new ideas occurred, and in worst-case scenarios governments sought to prevent the new developments in art or even suppress them by force. Some countries promoted their sanctioned state art, and this made the production of modern, contemporary art a perilous undertaking, which could often only be carried out underground.

Not least of all, a deep-seated mistrust towards the colonial and imperialist West played a role in the conflicts, and not without reason. These misunderstandings arose partly from the experience of colonialism. On the one hand, Western art was admired. But certain circles saw a kind of ‘neo-colonialism’ in the new forms of expression. In the field of art, as elsewhere, a fear of a loss of one’s own tradition and one’s own identity existed, and artists who were assumed to be too much influenced by Western culture and Western moral concepts were regarded with suspicion. Meanwhile in the West, these selfsame artists were accused of being imitative. This dilemma has continued up to the present. Time, as well as global aesthetic correlation, will be needed before contemporary art finds acceptance in the culture of the individual Arab societies.

The Arab artists who were experimenting with modernism soon fell between two stools. Their art was recognized neither in their own country, nor really in the West. Even those who lived in the West had difficulty getting their art seen and accepted. In their native land they could not reach a wide public because they had few opportunities to exhibit, since museums and galleries were scarce. In many Arab countries even today, the infrastructure that would make it possible to give contemporary artists more widespread publicity is lacking. In addition, educational opportunities are scarce, and few collectors focus on building up a collection of contemporary Arab art. Despite all these difficulties, modern Arab art is asserting itself. And, as explained in the beginning, the situation has not changed till a short time ago.

After World War II the situation changed in favor of a freer association with the “forbidden” image. Artists experimented more, tried out new forms, techniques, materials, became increasingly liberated from European models, reflected their own history critically, their own circumstances. They took up traditional genres and modes, such as calligraphy or the ornamental, interpreting them in a new way, translating them into a contemporary vocabulary of forms and symbols. They

likewise began to do work involving the human figure. Artists reproduced it in all possible variations, rendering the question of “figurativeness” or “abstraction” obsolete.

The question posed at the beginning, namely whether contemporary Arab art is distinguishable from Western art, implies the question of what a work of art is expected to accomplish. The French impressionist painter Pierre Bonnard believed that a work of art should depict an autonomous world. In this spirit one Emirati artist, Ebtisam Abdul Aziz, said: „Art is a visual, nonverbal language. It is an international language, transcending space and time, and expressing our existence and style. This projecting of aesthetic consciousness, in a unique, modern and universally comprehensible presentation, turns the visual language of visual arts into a link between cultures and nations makes it a medium for an international artistic infusion.” The crucial aspect is how something is depicted rather than what. The issue here is the autonomy of the work. And Arab artists are as much at pains as Western ones to achieve this. Vis-à-vis its Western cousin, the sole distinction of contemporary Arab art would then be its thematic context. Its social, cultural, political and religious environment plays a role in the choice of means, the composition of a picture, the configuration of a video, a sculpture, an installation. To understand a work of art we must ask what the artist is formally and thematically undertaking. With the new media and the technical possibilities art now has, the emphasis has shifted today. The question as to a national identity seems no longer to make sense. The new communication media, for example the Internet and globalization, facilitate the crossing of borders. Yet even though the world has shrunk, an individual access to life still remains, the confrontation of the single artist with himself, his society, the problems of his time and place, all of which he will formulate in his works. A work of art is communicated not least through a universal language.

In an amazing variety, the works of contemporary Arab artists reflect all these networked concepts across personal, social and political spectrums. However, a recourse to their own traditions and a formation by their surrounding environment remain in place and shine through their works. Their artistic works make clear, an artistic avant-garde has been established that in its engagement with its own and with foreign cultures has gone its independent way, according to which artists follow the postulate of artistic autonomy as represented in the context of Western art. There is no educational price to pay for access to the visual discourse of our Arab contemporaries. What it requires is aesthetic and personal assurance on eye-level terms. We see expression as a globally recognizable quality.

Signs – Contemporary Arab Art at Sundaram Tagore Gallery presents for the first time a selection of seven Arab artists. For all of them, calligraphy plays a vital role in their consciousness and their work. Five of them—Hassan Massoudy, Khaled Al Saai, Ali Hassan, Yousef Ahmad and Ahmad Moualla—are devoted in their work to a further development of this tradition. The other two, Ayman El Semary and Goerges Fikry Ibrahim, quote this tradition in their works. With its complex intellectual and spiritual significance, calligraphy represents an important source of inspiration for the creative work of many Arab artists, and it offers a lively pointer to their identity. Their originality makes considerable use of this source.

Calligraphy was originally developed in order to transmit the word of God in written form. The perfect word of Allah should be written down in a commensurately perfect script. The basis for traditional calligraphy, which prescribes the rules for the script’s proportions, was laid down in the 10th century by vizier Ibn Muqlah. Legibility of the text and line aesthetics required a method of proportioning. Through Ibn Muqlah’s established geometric rules, the alif, the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, was designated as the scale unit, its length defined by points, and from then on used for every Arabic system of calligraphy. Mastering the art of calligraphy often required years of continuous training and years of practice. Learning the various writing styles demanded strict adherence to the established rules. Many of the artists who came from classical calligraphy soon freed themselves from its strict rules and found their own individual artistic expression or turned to freeform painting. The resulting art is fascinating and diverse.

Iraqi-born Hassan Massoudy is one of these. Massoudy selects poems and quotations of international poets and philosophers and writes them at the bottom edge of a sheet of paper. From these he finally filters out a few central words in order to convey a monumental form and thereby approximate the word with an image. Massoudy does not attempt to render a poem or epigram in a specific style of script but rather to capture its ineffable meaning and make it visible. According to Massoudy, every work of calligraphy conceals an image, which he seeks to transmit through colorful, concrete, written characters. In his calligraphic compositions, the artist lets his feelings guide him as he seeks to give expression to his inner mental state. In order to achieve the richest possible variety of forms, Massoudy has enlarged his range of writing implements and today works mostly with palette knives of varying widths. Words originally written horizontally are shifted to the vertical, thereby not only gaining in monumentality and achieving a new form of meaning, but also creating a new aesthetic impact. Massoudy

writes with sweeping gestures, quick and precise. With him, calligraphy becomes a body language that conveys his innermost thoughts.

Khaled Al Saai, born in Syria, studied calligraphy and painting. As with Hassan Massoudy, Arabic calligraphy is for Al Saai a medium for expressing feelings, thoughts, and sensations without becoming tied to the language. He works especially with Arabic letters, their shapes, and their symbolic, religious, and musical origins. It is these various meanings, as well as the formal possibilities of the various writing styles, that impact on Khaled Al Saai's creative processes. On his numerous trips through Arab countries, Europe, and the US, he has been inspired by cities and countryside, by landscapes and architecture, by the bustle of people in the street, and by the change of seasons, always anxious to realize his impressions through calligraphic creations. In each case he chooses a writing style that provides the best sensorial and emotional match for his impressions. Letters and words are not arranged on a straight or horizontal line but rather written densely or detached, superimposed over or below the other, interlaced or labyrinthine in the imaginary space of the canvas. Letters interwoven in this way follow their own peculiar rhythm. Highly individualistic landscapes emerge as well as pictures that depict personal feelings and sensations. Khaled Al Saai exhausts the possibilities of Arabic script and turns it into abstract characters in order to convey the impressions of his journeys and feelings as well as its abstract essence.

The Qatari artist Ali Hassan focuses almost exclusively on the Arabic letter *nūn* (the letter "n" in the Latin alphabet) in his works. Worked out on a large scale as a determining element of his pictures or in variegated modifications within the widest range of compositional structures, this letter is the main protagonist in Hassan's work. Hassan's choice of this single letter from the Arabic alphabet is hardly a capricious act. Each of the 28 Arabic letters holds a symbolic meaning that in mystic circles has developed into a form of cabbalistic science. The letters themselves form an important part of this symbolic language, not just in mystical and profane poetry and prose, but in calligraphy as well. For example, the letter *nūn* plays a role in sura 68, titled *nun wa qalam* (*N* and the quill). This sura has inspired the broadest interpretations by mystics. For some, it points to the godly quill that inscribes all our fates upon a tablet. For these, the quill is an important instrument in the hand of the calligrapher, whose holy task it is to transcribe the word of God. In addition, some letters are also the beginning letters of holy names and, too, possess a numerical value. Such are the considerations that have contributed to a complex system of the letters' nexus of meaning. Like Ali Hassan, many Arab

and Iranian artists are conscious of the meaning of individual letters and refer to them in their work.

The artist, Yousef Ahmad, who also comes from Qatar, was one of the first artists who, starting with calligraphy, freed themselves the most from this discipline and in their style very consistently found their way to freeform painting. After an education in calligraphy, Yousef Ahmad's artistic development oscillated between calligraphy and painting. From the beginning, he tried to unite the two disciplines, in contrast, for instance, to Hassan Massoudy or Khaled Al Saai. What has emerged are works infused with artful lettering and painting. In his early works he used other typical elements from Islamic art besides calligraphy, such as arabesque or geometric forms. The legibility of letters, word and text has played an increasingly smaller role, while a play on forms, experimentation and the use of unusual colors and materials is foregrounded. Here the collage has proved to be a fitting means of arriving at certain aesthetic effects. Words and letters are only recognizable from their form and are released from their original meaning. Yousef Ahmad separates calligraphy from writing and language, transforming it into signs of its own mysterious expressiveness. In a further stage, the letters are completely disengaged from form and become movement and rhythm. The rhythmic signs fill the canvas, dance across the picture plane, combine with it, immerse themselves in it and let new, larger forms grow out of it.

The Syrian artist Ahmed Moualla also studied classical calligraphy but turned at first, somewhat contrary to Yousef Ahmad, to freeform painting. He painted large canvasses with expressive and sometimes socially critical themes. During his studies in graphics and visual communication in Damascus and Paris, he sought other forms of calligraphy and developed new types of scripts. As an aficionado of Arabic poetry, Moualla had a vision one day of a room entirely devoted to Arabic poetry. In his consideration of how the interior of such a room should be designed, calligraphy again became the focus of his attention. Since then it has played a central role in his most recent work. Of particular interest is the relationship between painting and the art of writing, especially how these two disciplines can be artistically united so that their traditional and cultural connections are made apparent. Moualla places special emphasis on transcending the graphical and decorative boundaries of Arabic script, taking up the rhythms of Arabic calligraphy and—with the possibilities offered by painting—transferring it into a new aesthetic. The legibility or illegibility of the cited words and text passages thereby becomes a game. Moualla says: "I think I have succeeded in placing the calligrapher and the painter on the same level, far

removed from Sufism and metaphysics. I for myself refer entirely to modern painting in which the types or shapes of the characters, by virtue of their mere existence, suggest a playful color change. The entire process is not based on a calligraphy that wants to paint pictures or painting that seeks to write calligraphy. It is a process that hopes to revive Oriental art within modern art.

The Egyptian artist Ayman El Semary has produced a picture series that he calls “Sleepless”. The starting point of this series actually has a banal origin: during nights when he tossed and turned and couldn’t sleep, he imagined how his restless body must look from a bird’s-eye view. He had an assistant draw the contours of his body in the sequence of movements of different positions. Abstract compositions were the result that are moving in their simplicity and produce picture worlds all their own. The colors he uses reinforces this impression. He namely draws inspiration from the colors that in Cairo are typically found on house walls and on balcony frameworks: a washed-out pink, a pale blue, a chalky green. Some of his works display written characters that do not represent texts, but can be understood as single, unconnected words like snatches of thought that circulate in your mind during a sleepless night.

Ayman El Semary often takes up small, everyday circumstances and brings them together in strange contexts. Frequently the symbols he uses are freed from their original context and imbued with new meaning. In many of his works, he invokes his roots in ancient Egyptian and Arabian culture.

Egyptian-born artist, Georges Fikry Ibrahim, has developed a special technique for using collage in his large-scale works. Many layers of different kinds of paper are placed on a support, painted, and often decorated in gold leaf. Figures and articles from the world of objects are made so abstract that the scenes can only be guessed at. Thus only a second glance reveals the dancing world in his work “The Nubian Dance”, or the rural scenes of “The Farmer” and “The Carriage of the Farmer”. The dominating colors, like red and fuchsia in his paintings, are often so luminous that they very aptly capture the feeling of being alive, of dancing and rejoicing.

“Different pictures of natural motifs (the coastline, the desert, agriculture) are elements that require different compositions; my viewpoint, the component and their rituals prompt me to think how to paint and embody my imaginative ideas,” the artist says.

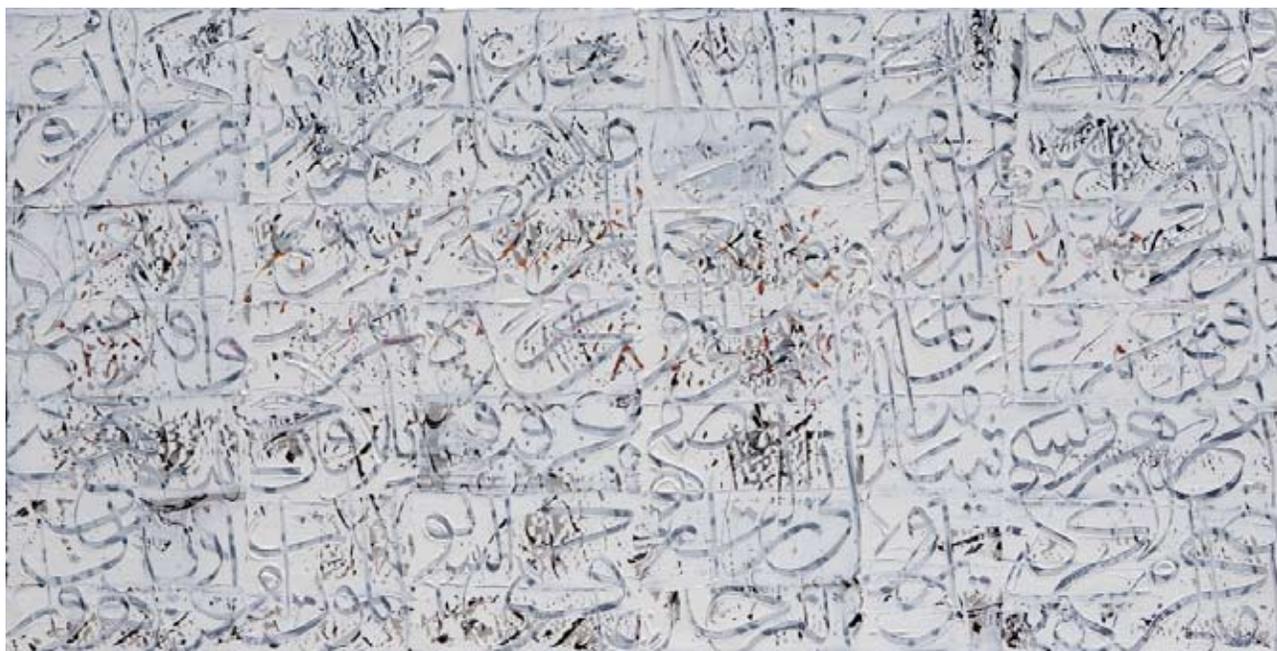
“I may need some skill and different art techniques related to the different media to embody these ideas. But in general I rely

on my natural capacity to record motifs and show emotional and spiritual aspects.”

Egyptian culture with its roots is his major theme. Ancient writing like hieroglyphics are among the cultural and philosophical symbols he uses to show the way of life in Egyptian society. There are elements of sacred architecture and art, too, such as pyramids, temples, the royal pharaohs, tombs, icons, old Coptic monasteries, Islamic architecture, folkloric elements and narrations.

But Egyptian reality is also one of his aims; it is his homeland and inspires him. He goes back to its symbols, and sometimes also its cultural, social and economic variables feature in his new works that – through contemporary media – reflect cultural and social changes. “My art is narration, expression and the memory of visual shapes,” the artist says.

Curated by Karin Adrian von Roques in accordance with The Sundaram Tagore Gallery. Text and images provided by the curator and The Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York.



Ahmad Moualla Untitled, 2009
Acrylic on canvas 39.4 x 78.7"