



Nada Shabout's *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*

Reviewed by Maymanah Farhat

Nada Shabout's book Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics (2007) begins with the assumption that modern and contemporary Arab art is a "neglected field" and sets out to remedy a lack of scholarship by answering the following questions: How was Arab art formed? What were the driving forces behind the changes in aesthetics from Islamic to Arabic? These questions are explored in three sections: Part I, Background and Definitions, Part II, Modern Arab Aesthetics, and Part III, The Arabic Letter in Art.

For Shabout, it is paramount to outline the initial evolution of Arab art through the historical legacy of Islam for two reasons: "First, by understanding the process of development of Islamic art and the forces, or underlying structure, behind the formation of its unique aesthetics, the changes in aesthetics that led to the development of Arab art will become evident. Second, Islam remains a vital element

in shaping Arab societies."

The author explains how the transition from "traditional arts" to the more modern forms seen in Arab art occurred with "the Arab's modern, secularized conception of the world," resulting from the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of art education under colonial rule. Shortly after, an initial stage of imitating Orientalist paintings was quickly abandoned during national struggles, when other forms of Western art began to take hold and artists looked to their own surroundings and culture for subject matter. Shabout points to a classification coined by Arab art historians who refer to an initial period called "the learning stage," which was then followed by "the self discovery stage."

Shabout's analysis of modern Arab art in Part I is explored through several brief paragraphs on national scenes—those of Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Morocco, Sudan, and Jordan, with a few sentences on Syria. This discussion is roughly fifteen pages long. The author jumps from early twentieth-century Egypt to 1950s and 60s Iraq and ends with the Jordanian art scene of the 1990s. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait that are home to a number of modern artists and have had small but significant art scenes are completely left out. Although, Shabout's description provides a number of historical facts, the amount of detail left out and the mere handful of artists mentioned leads one to believe that she conducted minimal field research in the Arab world. The two main sources used for this historical account are Egyptian artist and historian Lilane Karnouk's *Modern Egyptian Art: The Emergence of a National Style* (1988) and Jordanian artist and historian Wijdan Ali's *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (1997). Those familiar with these texts can identify their heavy influence and borrowings in Shabout's study. In fact, Ali's book is the basis for much of the framework of Shabout's *Modern Arab Art*, while the majority of the works discussed are reproduced with images provided by Ali.

Part II examines some of the intellectual and sociopolitical issues that faced Arab art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Shabout identifies modern Arab art as being divided into two broad schools: the figurative and the abstract. She argues that artists of the first school "primarily adopted themes involving nationalist or mythological subjects by converting the oral tradition into stylized visual narratives." While the abstract school "acquired a formalist outlook" that "can alternate between a geometric pattern inherited from a traditional Islamic design and a cursive char-

acteristic of Arabic script.” The author goes on to state that figurative art had a brief history in modern Arab art, yet it became rooted in public taste. This overlooks the many figurative painters that were modernist pioneers, especially those active in places like Egypt and Syria, notably Gizbia Sirry, Hamed Oweis, Louay Kayyali and Fateh Moudarres. In fact, although Shabout argues that abstraction still attracts young Arab artists today, it is figurative art that many cutting-edge painters have turned to such as Khaled Hafez in Egypt, Aymaan Baalbaki and Tagreed Darghouth in Lebanon and Safwan Dahoul and Khaled Takreti in Syria. In actuality, figurative painting never ceased to exist in the modern period, as contemporary artists build upon a longstanding tradition. Shabout’s argument of favoring abstraction only holds true in places such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States where heavy censorship has historically curtailed figurative representations out of fear of politically provocative content.

Stressing a debate over the need for identifiable “Arab” characteristics in art, Shabout continues by describing a state of limbo that suspends the Arab world in “tradition and modernity, between past and present, [which] stems mainly from the sudden application of a superimposed modernization.” For the author, Arabs “read about, hear talk of, and see the present lived by other modern civilizations, but it is not yet within their grasp.” This statement speaks of the modern period as if it is our contemporary state, as though Arabs are just experiencing the so-called modern world for the first time. In what capacity are Arabs not “modern”? And what defines a “modern” state of being? Shabout applies a term that she herself does not define, perpetuating a common stereotype of the Arab world as “backward”—one that prevails in the West and continues to shape the ways in which our art history is viewed. Throughout her study, Shabout jumps from the modern period to the present day, providing an unclear definition of the phase she initially sets out to illuminate.

While Shabout argues that “modern Arab art has its roots in Western and not Islamic art,” she concurrently cites Arab artists pointing to a number of European modernists whose work can be traced to non-Western, specifically Eastern and Islamic, art. This reveals a slightly different history than the one Shabout outlines. Although the use of easels and canvases were introduced through contact with the West, forms of painting not only existed during centuries of Islamic rule, they were also found in many of the ancient cultures that originated in the region.

Other issues that Shabout highlights include the state of the contemporary art market and poor art criticism and education. She argues that “today’s Arab art markets are dominated by mediocre imitations of Orientalist works that cater to bourgeois tastes or by equally insipid works in the popular Hurufiyah fashion (so-called modern calligraphic works).” This statement is not only out of touch with the majority of the Arab world’s commercially successful art spaces, which all feature modernist painting—such as Jordan’s Orfali gallery, Beirut’s Agial gallery and Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Damascus’ Atassi gallery, Dubai’s Green art gallery, Kuwait’s Sultan gallery and Egypt’s Zamalek gallery, to name a few—it also undermines the diverse nature of work sold at recent auctions in Dubai.

There is a prevailing notion that the documentation of modern and contemporary Arab art has long been neglected. And while this is true in the realms of Western academia and the international art world, this argument is easily discounted in the Arab world itself. Art criticism in the region has been prevalent since modern Arab art took hold in the 1960s. Although artists have often adopted the additional roles of critics, historians and curators, their work should not be dismissed, as it has greatly contributed to the progression of art. What can be argued is that English language texts on the subject were once few and far between. Art theory and history are perhaps absent from most Arab universities and colleges, but that does not suggest that they are missing from academia and local art scenes. With virtually every movement and school of art, there have been newspaper and magazine articles, books, catalogs or pamphlets that establish aesthetic analysis and critique. A visit to Darat al Funun’s extensive library in Amman provides adequate evidence of this. The amount of literature produced in the Arab world wanes in comparison to the prevalence of art history and theory found in the West, however, it must be acknowledged that in the US and Europe there is a business of art writing, where a heavy emphasis on the market funds and profits from these types of texts.

According to Shabout, “Arab art critics are generally either literary critics or artists themselves and possess no training in the language of visual criticism.” And while she continues by presenting a negative view of the art criticism that does exist, she correspondingly includes a footnote that reads “This generality is not meant to deny the handful of outstanding Arab art critics, such as Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, the late Buland Al-Haidari, As’ad Orabi, Shakir Hassan al

Said, Abdel Kabir Khatibi and Shirbil Daghir.” The footnote serves as a partial list of the many Arab writers, historians and art critics whose literature she employs in her own analysis, revealing a wealth of sources that stands in great contrast to her claims of a deficiency in Arab art writing. Nevertheless, the author adamantly attempts to build this argument by further stating that “the handful of studies by Arab historians and critics concerning the nature of contemporary Arab aesthetics are mainly conducted in the West, with limited access to artists and artistic production in the Arab world.” Not only is this unfounded, as there are a number of Arab writers and historians in the West whose contributions have been significant due to the well informed nature of their work that results from extensive field research and constant contact with artists, gallerists, critics and curators, it is simply intellectual cattiness at the expense of fact.

Part II ends with a look at the political contexts that shaped modern Arab art, with a focus on the art scenes of Palestine and Iraq. For the author, “another problem for Arab art occurs when political reality requires art to parallel or remain subordinate to it.” Shabout elaborates that “in general, in temporary albeit lengthy wartime situations—such as the Lebanese civil war or the Iraq-Iran war and Gulf war—art is transformed into an instrument for propaganda.” Her inclusion of Lebanon is grossly inaccurate, as those shaping the Lebanese art scene rarely enlisted to create works that functioned as political propaganda. In fact, for those artists who stayed in the country, working in isolation in spite of total devastation was the only choice. Artists such as painter Mohammed Rawas, whose mixed media collages emanate with deep psychological inferences of fragmentation and trauma or painter Mohammed Azize, who painted floral still lifes for 15 years in order to escape the ugliness of the conflict, produced works that were far from propagandistic.

While, the book is advertised as including a special emphasis on Iraq and Palestine, the Palestinian section is only five paragraphs long. Here the first inclusion of Palestinian artists is made, with references to modernist pioneers Ismail Shammout, Suleiman Mansour and Kamal Boullata. Although she outlines the intersections of art and politics in Palestine, Shabout argues that “The development of Palestinian art has largely been held hostage by its content, which affected its valuation as art in its own right even within the Arab world.” This is accompanied by a footnote that reads “This helps to explain the assimilation of many Palestinian artists who are now dispersed throughout the world and

have been absorbed into the different art trends of their host countries.” From an art historical perspective, one cannot argue that Palestinian art has been “held hostage” by politics. Beginning with painters Ismail Shammout and Tamam al Akhal, politics became essential to the modernist movement, as art became a form of resistance to the daily brutality of the Israeli occupation. That is not to say that every artist has adhered to strictly political subject matter, on the contrary there are influential painters such as Kamal Boullata and Samir Salameh, whose abstract compositions explore color, dimension and surface rather than identifiable political realities.

To state that politics has held Palestinian art hostage is to suggest that an internal force has continuously dictated the content of art, such as the official restrictions imposed under the Baathist regime in Iraq. If anything, it has been the incessant destruction and violence of the Israeli occupation that has threatened to suspend the progression of art. With regards to Palestinian artists working abroad, “assimilation” has never been easy and the abandonment of the subject of Palestine has rarely been an option. Take for example conceptual artists Mona Hatoum, Emily Jacir and Mary Touma, new media artists Larissa Sansour and Aissa Deebi, painter Samia Halaby, multidisciplinary artists Nida Sinnokrot and Jackie Salloum and photographers Tarek al-Ghoussein and Sama Alshaibi—all of whom live outside of Palestine but have impressive bodies of work exploring the Palestinian situation.

Part III is the most informative section of the book and concentrates on the evolution of Arabic script, namely calligraphy, in Islamic art and its informing of modern Arab art. Here Shabout identifies the presence of such in the work of several artists including Iraqi painters Dia Azzawi and Madiha Omar, Jordanian sculptor Mona Saudi, Palestinian painter Suleiman Mansour, Lebanese painter Wajih Nahle, Egyptian painter Ahmad Moustafa and Algerian painter Rachid Koraichi. This section provides an interesting analysis of the use of the Arabic letter in modern Arab art and cites a number of historians and critics from the region. In the final portion of Part III, the author provides an in depth look at two leading Iraqi modernist painters, Shakir Hassan Al Said and Dia Azzawi. This analysis is thorough, well researched and articulate, citing the artists themselves, both through interviews and written sources. Part III appears to have been part of Shabout’s dissertation “Modern Arab Art and the Metamorphosis of the Arabic Letter” upon which the book

is based. Hence, her examination in this segment is much more advanced than those found in Parts I and II, suggesting that these first sections were simply tacked on to her dissertation in order to create a text that could be sold as a complete investigation of modern Arab art.

Shabout concludes by asserting that to understand modern Arab art “a number of issues [still] need to be explored through critical analysis” and poses the following questions: “How did modern Arab artists transform an aesthetic that for centuries remained tied to an Islamic ideal into a secular one? How did they transmute it into contemporary signs that became components of a modern vocabulary of the plastic arts?” Yet, these same questions were presented at the beginning of *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* as premises that would be addressed through in-depth analysis and art historical documentation.

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Malu Halasa and Maziar Bahari's *Transit Tehran* on contemporary photographs of Iran

Reviewed by Janet Rady

Transit Tehran: Young Iran and Its Inspirations is the result of a collaboration between the London-based, US-born editor and journalist, Malu Halasa, and the Iranian journalist and film-maker, Maziar Bahari. Both have extensive previous experience in journalism and publishing as the high quality of this publication evidences.

This is a book about the people and the place that make up Tehran today, the totality which give it its undeniably obsessive and captivating identity. It's a wysiwyg view of the sprawling metropolis, in which over 14 million inhabitants reside. But it is much more than that. It's an elemental insight into the hearts and minds of young Iranians. With 75% of the population under 35, the majority of whom are too young to remember the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and many even the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88, it is about where they come from, what motivates them and where they aspire to go.

Culturally, politically, and religiously diverse, each of the contributors, by means of thirty one essays, short stories, interviews, cartoons, photographs and photo essays, film stills capture a visceral, hauntingly honest and often contradictory, portrait of the city and its environs.

The contributors are primarily photo-journalists, reporters, anthropologists, artists and musicians - both Iranian and non-Iranian, those currently living in Iran and those outside, either by choice or by force of circumstance. Each have, in their own way, experienced the tragic results of the years of political turmoil and uncertainty in Iran. Yet each of those still with us continues, with fortitude and resilience and often with great humour, to document and challenge, not without risk, the society which binds them inextricably together.

Grounded by the inclusion of a map, timeline and a directory of key historical figures, *Transit Tehran* makes a useful reference tool, if nothing else, to those seeking top up any lacuna in their knowledge of the Country, with a quick factual fix. Essential also to the undoubted success of the book is the masterful translation of many of the contributors' texts from Farsi into English by Nilou Mobasser - not only are these a feat of incredible accuracy in translation, but they also provide for compelling reading as works of English prose in their own right.