

Contemporary Current

*By: Lina Lazaar Jameel,
Specialist at Sotheby's in Post War and Contemporary Art*



Mahmoud Saïd, *Le Port de Marsa Matrouh*, 1948, Oil on canvas, 57.7x76cm - Courtesy of Sotheby's Auction House.

Mahmoud Saïd has been a prominent fixture in the sales of Sotheby's since 2010 when Lina Lazaar Jameel curated a sale in London presenting a supreme group of works including both landscape and figurative painting by Saïd from the renowned Elkayem Collection. The most fertile art is often created at times of great ferment, and for artists in the Middle East, where the crossroads of traditions and cultures come together at a time of spiritual conflict, this is a promising junction. Whether

inspiration focuses on what is within, or acts as a prism for the world at large, the timeless and universal language of art can help define a culture.

It is one of the paradoxes of my career that I turned to the art market at an international auction house to show Middle Eastern art to the broadest audience rather than to the museum world which reaches a potentially larger public. Sales of art at auction act as the barometer of the art market, and Sotheby's plays an integral part in the

expanding vision and commitment to the development of the arts and culture in the Gulf for decades.

From our beginnings in 1744 in London auctioning books and manuscripts, we now operate across 40 countries selling some of the oldest, rarest and most extraordinary artworks in 70 different collecting categories. The company has always been an innovator and became the first international auction house with our move to the United States, and the first in Asia. We were among the first to provide services to clients in the Middle East and today the auction house is committed to supporting the regional arts scene by providing a platform for artists who are helping the region to shape its unique identity. As such, my role involves sourcing works that demonstrate the exciting vitality and immense variety of the artists working across the MENA region today. Sotheby's auctions present outstanding examples of works to a global spread of buyers by artists who are well known and already celebrated in the wider international market, as well as those whose works have long been appreciated within the region but have yet to achieve international acclaim. Notable among the most important artists who are represented is Mahmoud Saïd. Our sales continue a tradition of focusing international attention on his work as a pioneer of Egyptian Modern Art. Sotheby's most recent offering is his 1948 work *Le Port de Marsa Matrouh*. Painted during the crucial year following the artist's resignation from practicing law and his dedication to his true calling, the oil on canvas is an inimitable image, characteristic of his opulent method. Saïd visited Marsa Matrouh annually, which he immortalized via his extensive oeuvre. In this work, Saïd fondly depicts this personally inspirational city via an exquisite palette of colors that are archetypal of his pioneering style. The work is significant for its dynamic representation of Saïd's grasp of light, and also offers a glimpse into the artist's personal haven; its documentary nature presents historical evidence of this seaside city before the development of the Egyptian coastline. Mahmoud Saïd - who, along with a majority of artists of his time, was educated in European Fine Art schools - applied his Western art training to his depiction of subjects both local to his homeland as well as in figurative works that included the nude. (Full details of Saïd's career were discussed in the previous

article). Subsequent generations of Arab artists have continued to be inspired by the themes that shaped Saïd's work, though an increasingly conservative context is a factor in the subjects and themes they focus upon. Perhaps as a result, artists of the generation following him were greatly influenced by the foundations of their culture and religion – Sufism, the traditional architecture, poetry and calligraphy. A number of well-established artists who draw on the more traditional materials and techniques of their respective cultures, the craftsmanship and the beauty of Islamic heritage, include Monir Farmanfarmanian, who works with mirrors and mosaics, Rachid Koraïchi with textiles and Nja Mahdaoui with canvas and ink. All three have their works included in the most important Middle Eastern museum collections and have long commanded strong prices when sold internationally. The market for their works has grown exponentially over the course of the last decade, so it is at this time of great buoyancy for the art market that their rarest and most ambitious works are highly sought after by collectors and fetch extremely strong prices.

The Algerian artist Rachid Koraïchi has endeavored to revive the arts and crafts traditions of the region by fusing ancient techniques and contemporary practices with dramatic effect. The descendant of an old Sufi family, the artist produces pieces that belong firmly within the Sufi tradition, though also incorporate intriguing aspects of modernity and universality. In *Scrutateur de l'Arrière Passion* (*Scrutineer of The Hidden Passion*) from circa 1985, he unites contemporary and ancient Arabic calligraphy with symbols, glyphs and ciphers drawn from a wide variety of other languages and cultures, organizing them into a fascinating description of the diverse world that surrounds us.

The graphic interpretations of calligraphy by Nja Mahdaoui, Tunisia's most renowned contemporary calligrapher, have provoked interest from contemporary artists across the world. The stunning ornamental letter landscapes that he creates in his compositions and his disregard for the literal use of Arabic symbols achieve a heightened visual impact. His 2011 work *Sada* or *Explosion* is arguably among his most powerful works



Rachid Koraïchi, *Scrutateur De L'arrière Passion*, Circa 1985, Acrylic on paper laid down on canvas, 200x300cm - Courtesy of Sotheby's Auction House.

to date. Produced in the wake of the upheavals in Tunisia during December 2010 and the Arab Spring, with its dark hues and dense composition, it reflects the profound and emotional impact of this historical event on the people of the region. In contrast to the more tradition-oriented works of the aforementioned artists, today's generation of talented artists who are in the midst of cultural and religious upheavals are producing works that are more overt in incorporating their political and social critiques.

One such artist is Iraqi-born Ahmed Alsoudani, who has carved a distinguished reputation in the international art market. The technique and style in his impactful works, many of which manage to bring a certain beauty to the horrors of war, have earned his reputation as one of the most talented and original painters of the 21st century, and he is still only in his thirties. His work occupies a rich pictorial seam between abstraction and

figuration that is filled with allusions. Untitled from 2011 is a fascinating example of the artist's more recent achievements. His technical brilliance and astonishing powers of imagination are displayed to full effect. The painting stands as a potent indictment of war, bemoaning the senseless damage wreaked on humanity by conflict and corruption. The violent beauty and sense of chaos that characterizes the painting is observed from an intensely personal perspective – one that stems from his own experience of living in Iraq during the Iraqi and Gulf Wars. Alsoudani's work is bought by a very international spread of collectors, and his paintings fetch some of the highest prices among Middle Eastern artists on the art market, commanding prices from £20,000 for his acrylic and oil works on paper, up to £600,000 for his large-scale canvases.

Some of the most forceful art derives from the particulars of human experience, and whereas the works of Alsoudani are associated with war and displacement,



Nja Mahdaoui, *Soda*, *Graphemes series*, 2011, Indian ink on canvas, 200x200cm - Courtesy of Sotheby's Auction House.

collectors will be drawn to the technically brilliant and intellectually virtuosic work of the works of Manal Al-Dowayan and Batoul Shimi, which are centered around human rights - in particular women's rights - informed by their own experiences.

Saudi-born artist Manal Al-Dowayan's installation works have not previously appeared at auction but have been shown to significant acclaim. Her installation work titled *Suspended Together* was displayed at several major international shows, including *Edge of Arabia* in Dubai in 2011 and at the 54th Venice Biennale the same year when I curated the Pan-Arab pavilion, *The Future of a Promise*. One of the most important and celebrated installation works of her career to date, *Suspended Together* is magnificent in scale, epic in the grandeur of its conception and possesses an utterly elegiac beauty. The eternal symbolism of the dove is, in this work, rendered inexorably more profound and complex, as the wings and body of each bird are

stamped with an exact reproduction of a permission document: an official form of paperwork that allows a Saudi woman to travel only when issued by their male guardian.

Another meditation on the social and political aspects of the experience of femininity today is the work of Batoul Shimi, one of Morocco's leading female artists. Her work has not previously been offered for sale at auction yet we believe that it will appeal to the international collecting audience. Her exquisitely carved editions of gas canisters and pressure cookers symbolize the anxieties experienced by a modern woman in twenty-first century Morocco. In Shimi's talented hands these domestic objects are elevated to the status of major artworks imbued with moving and poignant symbolism. It is of course the fusion of rich cultural heritage and artistic dynamism in the MENA region that has led to artists producing works of an

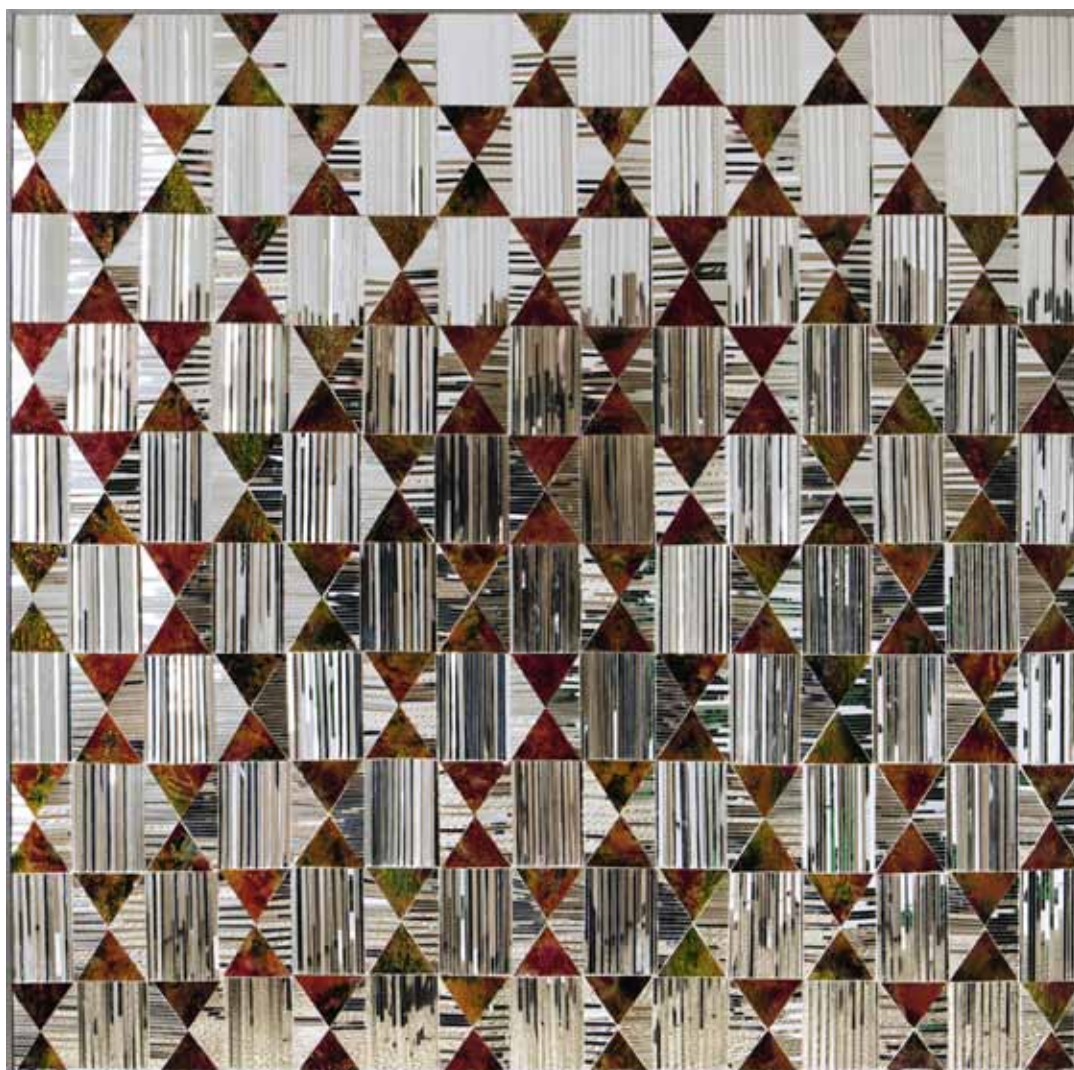


Ahmed Al Saudani, Untitled, 2011, Acrylic charcoal and gesso on canvas, 157.3x248.3cm - Courtesy of Sotheby's Auction House.

extremely high caliber that capture the attention and appeal to the tastes of the international art market. An important development is that while there is a distinct appetite from buyers in the region for works by artists from the region, the new generation of artists are no longer necessarily categorized or pigeon-holed by their region of origin, because the art speaks for itself.

This generation of artists continues to achieve greater recognition internationally, following a notable peak of enthusiasm for their contemporary voices and their representation of local culture in 2008. However, another market trend that has been gaining ground

is the pursuit of works by modern masters - pioneers of the 50s and 60s who are now regarded as the blue-chip artists of the region - whose works have an increasing appeal to collectors, both in the region and internationally. Such works offer a historical context in addition to their aesthetic qualities, and this factor undoubtedly comes into play when we curate our sales. In this respect, sales of art by Middle Eastern artists have followed the direction of sales that my colleagues have experienced with sales of other regionally vibrant art – Indian, Russian, Chinese, or indeed Western Contemporary art. Collectors are becoming more discerning; they are not in a rush to buy and are



Monir Farmanfarmaian, Variations on Hexagon, 2005, Mirror, reverse-glass painting and plaster on wood in aluminium frame, 100.2x100.9cm - Courtesy of Sotheby's Auction House.

looking carefully and researching what they want to acquire. These are good indications of a market which is growing in maturity. This demand, both in the gallery scene and at auction, for works by the second and third generations of Middle Eastern artists accompanies the broader growing interest and appreciation of the works of Modern masters in this category – such as Sohrab Sepheri, Saliba Douaihy, Louay Kayyali and of course Mahmoud Said – by major museums both in the MENA region, in particular Mathaf, and internationally.

Tate Modern's initiative of forming a dedicated Middle East committee, on which I sit, to acquire important works and commission dedicated exhibitions of Middle

Eastern artists has led to cutting-edge contemporary artists being showcased alongside established masters from the region. It has been hugely rewarding to see the impact that exhibiting on a high-profile platform such as Tate Modern has had in terms of growing public awareness for the artistic endeavors of the Middle East – particularly when presented alongside their Western counterparts.

A wonderful example is the work of Dia Azzawi whose painting *Sabra Shatila* is considered to be the *Guernica* of the Arab world, which has been restored by Tate and is on public view for first time. Likewise, the forthcoming and greatly anticipated exhibition of



Batoul S'himi, World under pressure, 2011, Installation of metal gas cylinders and pressure cookers, variable sizes - Courtesy of Sotheby's Auction House.

Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair this April at Tate Modern will be the first exhibition of her work in the UK. Choucair is an artist who one might consider to be the Louise Bourgeois of the Middle East in terms of her long career and an artistic output that has greatly contributed to the Modernist Arab art landscape. She was a lone female voice in the art scene of Beirut from the 1940s and, still producing superb works today, is renowned as a pioneer of abstract art in the Middle East. To see a dedicated exhibition of her art at such a major international museum, placing her prominently in the history of global modernism, is a development of great magnitude in raising international appreciation of Middle Eastern art whilst shedding the former ghettoized perspective.

Furthering our own endeavors in the region, Sotheby's is extremely excited to be holding an auction of Contemporary Art in Doha on the evening of 22nd April 2013, which will include a selection of outstanding works from many leading Middle Eastern artists as well as international Contemporary artists.



Manal Al Dowayan Installation- Courtesy of Sotheby's Auction House.