

Arab Art in a Changing World

By: Zena Takieddine

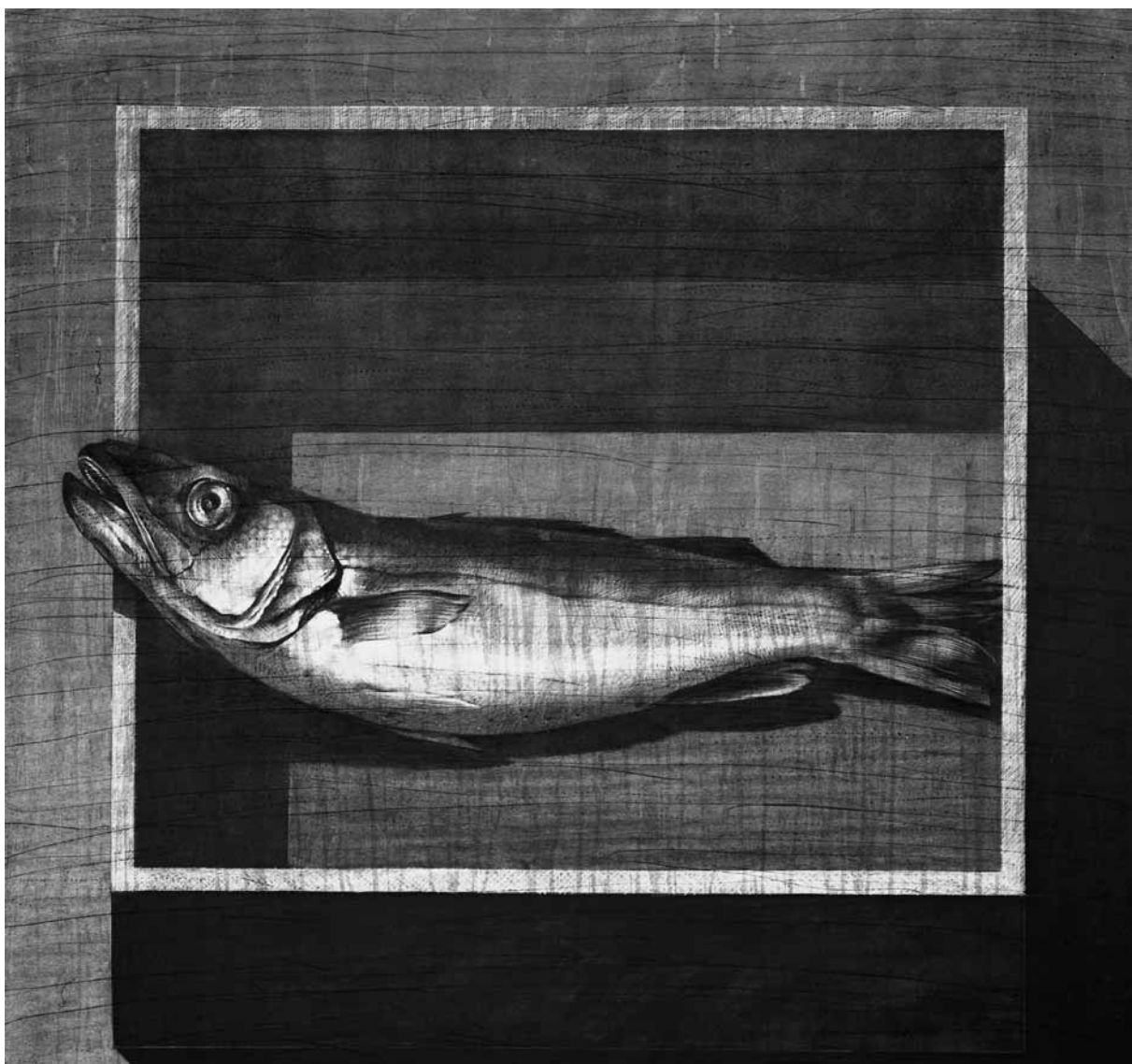


Elias Zayat Poem 2010 Oil on canvas 106 x 65

In a deeply significant conference organized by the Damascus-based Gallery Rafia and entitled, “Arab Art in a Changing World”, speakers offered a discerning gaze into the complexities of today’s art scene. The origins of Arab ‘modern art’ were revisited, starting from its derivative beginnings in the mid-19th century when the Ottoman Empire started taking on European forms of governance, industry, architecture, art, and fashion, to its zenith in the mid-20th century when the strong sense of Arabism inspired artist and the artistic expression

evolved into an original Arab voice grounded in Arab cultural concerns and identity. This golden age of pan-Arabism was followed by a collapse in voice and vision when it was dealt a devastating blow following the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. Subsequent wars, and particularly the Palestinian Intifadas and the American invasions of Iraq - with ongoing chaos in both arenas – have infused modern Arab art with a violently chiseled face. The conference speakers resurrected this historical backdrop and continued further along this track to include the evolution (or rather de-volution) of modern art into contemporary art under the current consumerist, capitalist-driven era.

The speakers of the conference were from all over the Arab world. They offered an opportunity for deeper understanding and awareness of the highs and lows of Arab art and the fate of art today. Leading a particularly compelling panel in the conference were three of Syria’s eminent artists: Elias Zayyat, Ihsan Antabi, and Youssef Abdelki. Interestingly, the speakers were from consecutive generations, embodying in themselves the evolution of modern art in Syria, like rally runners passing on the baton. Zayyat, a professor of oil painting and an art historian, entered the world of art in the 1950s where he studied in Bulgaria and in Egypt (in the Union period) before returning to Damascus and becoming a founding member of the Faculty of Fine Arts. Antabi, a professor of Visual Communication, is a graduate of the Damascus Faculty of Fine Arts from the year 1969, with subsequent art specialization from Paris in 1975. Abdelki is a graduate of the Damascus Faculty of Fine Arts from the year 1976, which he followed with a doctorate from Paris University 8 in 1989, and is among the most prolific artists and discerning art critics in the Arab world today. As for the audience, it included artists, critics and art students from Syria and the rest of the Arab world, with notable Egyptian and Iraqi intellectuals.



Yousef Abdalki, 150 X 147.2CM, 2008, Oil on Canvas

Remembering Roots

In the Arab context, the path of ‘modern art’ is often said to have begun with an inferiority complex vis-à-vis the relationship with Europe and the West. It is as if painting did not exist in the Arab world before those first ‘pioneers’ travelled to Italy and France for artistic training. Perhaps it is in defiance of this attitude that Elias Zayyat choose to open the panel with a recollection of the famous medieval artist al-Wasiti. A 13th century miniaturist immersed in an Arab Islamic culture, Yahya bin Mahmoud Al-Wasiti

Painted everyday life with an eye for detail and for humor. His subjects were neither for the glorification of rulers nor the propagation of faith, but rather, a playful visual documentation in 50 vignettes which appear in the literary work of Maqamat al-Hariri. His paintings creatively broke through page margins and borders, and he sought to include as much diversity as possible, from the thriving cities bustling with life, to the sea-faring travelers and the wandering Bedouin nomads.

Defining 'Modern Art'

The general understanding of modern art is linked to the evolution of painting and sculpting in the European context. The familiar sequencing of art history from Gothic to Renaissance to Baroque to Neo-Classical, and so on, are the bulk of art history; while 'modern art' emphasizes the deliberate break from this accumulation of history and tradition. The genius of Modern art is marked by a break from Christian religion, Royal patronage, Academy endorsement and elitist tradition. The artists broke free. Color, line and form became worthy of exploration in and of themselves, calling for a visceral relationship with the materials of art. Subject-matter and grand-narratives disappeared under the new autonomy of the modern artist.

From where did this impetus to break with tradition come? The artists of Europe had been seeking exposure to art from other cultures. The influence of Japanese prints on Degas, linear Arabesques on Matisse, African masks on Picasso, and so on, cannot be over-emphasized. So how European and how modern is so-called 'modern' art after all?

Syria - A Mixing Pot For Cultures

But, before calling on our analytical faculties, Ihsan Antabi presented a film of his creation, which unfolds colors and shapes he has collected from the world around him. In an aesthetically pleasing, harmonizing sequence, Antabi traces the threads that connect earth with art and life-styles. He goes to the source of colors and to the source of geometric forms. The film opens with the music of Nineveh, the earliest musical piece ever recorded, and travels back and forth in history in a way that surpasses chronological time. Antabi does not compartmentalize and separate landscape, architecture, pottery, sculpture, textile, fashion, and the myriad of tangible and intangible cultural expressions that lie in-between. Rather, his images overlap and fade into each other.

As Antabi highlights the familiar threads of color, texture, and abstraction in art, he also strings together the leitmotifs of Syrian cultural expression with the minimalist appreciation of the modern artist from Europe. He easily connects the works of Brancusi, for example, with the carving of ancient Palmyra, and



Saad Yagan *The Cafe* oil on canvas 40 x 60 cm private collection

implies an "instinctive inheritance of art." More than anything, Antabi calls on the value of "experiential living, before theory, before historicizing."

The Rise of Europe

How does so much local antiquity, history and identity meet the demands for Europeanization, also known as modernism? Government officials in Istanbul and the provinces - Arab, North African and Caucasian - were by the 1860's adopting European modes of dress, speech and architecture, not only in their offices but also in their private homes. This movement towards secularization of government institutions and submission to European market demands arises as a hall-mark of modernization.

It can be argued that modernity is a process of desanctification and commercialization. This is how the portable painting came to be. It is fundamentally alien from the 'traditional' arts of calligraphy, miniatures painting, textile-weaving, wood carving etc, which is part of "our own heritage". "The portable painting is a European product. It was not

originally created in our land. Let us just be clear about that,” says Youssef Abdelki.

And how did the ‘portable painting’ enter the history of modern art? Abdelki explains, “[It] emerges under certain economic and historic causes, meaning the rise of the bourgeoisie and European capitalism which succeeded in desacralizing and consuming everything in life, even the most refined and spiritual of products. Before the end of the 18th century, paintings could not be transported. The Sistine Chapel ceiling, like the mosaics of the Umayyad Mosque and the great Sphinx of Egypt, could not be moved around and sold. Thus, the development of portable pictures as an art form is a manifestation of the political success of the European bourgeois. This is a huge turning point in man’s relationship to art. After all, an artist who paints for mercantile distribution is quite different from the artist who paints with devotion to an idea he believes in, or for a space he holds sacred.

The Realization of Modern Art

In the wake of the Ottoman Empire’s final days, Arab artists travelled to Europe, particularly to France, to study a style of art that was otherwise foreign to them. As such, the first generation of Arab modern artists were in the phase of skill acquisition. The likes of Tawfiq Tariq (Damascus 1875) and Michel Kirche (Damascus 1900) prided themselves on learning the art of oil painting, portraiture, landscape, perspective, shading, illusions of volume and mass. It was a period of technical foundation. After these pioneers paved the way, a mature modern Arab art was born in the 1960s. In Syria, as well as elsewhere in the Arab world, artists were no longer imitators, but mature visionaries forging creative art forms to carry meanings relevant to Arab identity. The dream of the 60s shone vibrantly, and the artists of the 60s were people of purpose as well as creative individuals. They felt a desire to capture what is locally true, in their own individualistic way, in order to recall the depth of shared history and express the sense of unity which political realities seemed keen on breaking. A sensitive artist like Louay Kayyali captured the dignity of the everyday people he portrayed, while an intellectual formalist like Mahmoud Hammad



Elias Zayat *The Fall of Icar* 2009 Oil on canvas 130 x 110 cm
Private collection

catapulted the Arabic letter, shape and line into the visual discourse of abstract expressionism. Whether figurative or abstract, several unique individual styles emerged as part of a shared impassioned drive to bring Arab identity into the expression of modern art. “This need to use art to create identity is the fate of all ‘Third World’ countries,” says Abdelki, “not just Arab countries or just Syria.” This is also why the term ‘modern art’ in the Arab world means something entirely different to how it started in Europe.

Search For Identity

The grand project of the 1960s in Syria, and much of the Arab world, revolved around the desire to create an artistic and visual identity that was different from the West; a modern art that reflected home, a modern art that carried the essences of Arab-ness, Islamic-ness, and Eastern-ness. The sources of inspiration for the modern Arab artists converged around issues of freedom, autonomy, authenticity, heritage and a desire to protect and celebrate traditional beauty,



Louay Kayyali Congruence 96 x 116 cm oil

albeit in a novel medium – the portable picture. In the conference, Elias Zayyat referred to a newspaper clipping from 1979 which documented the world-wide recognition of significant Syrian painters. The clipping, written by the journalist and art critic Nazih Khater (from the Lebanese newspaper *al Nahar*), reported an exhibition of contemporary art in the Paris Grand Palais (Paris, France) where these artists were recognized in their day, and continue to be recognized today, as truly perceptive and innovative painters who reformulated heritage in methods inspired by abstract and expressionist modern art, to reflect Arab society and culture. Of these artists, the following six were highlighted in the conference:

Nasir Chaura calls on the ornamented and

stylized calligraphic line under the influence of modern geometric abstraction. Unlike many other calligraphists experimenting with modern art, Mahmoud Hammad creates a whole new visual language that is abstracted from the Arabic calligraphy while also completely shedding its folkloric garb with avant-garde expression. Nazih Nabaa creates a whole new cast of allegorical women steeped in a multi-faceted, innovative and transformative Arab Syrian mythology. Elias Zayyat takes the Byzantine tradition of iconic paintings into bold bursts of colors and figures which often reflect contemporary social and political issues. Fateh Moudarres draws simplified faces on earthy textures, almost like Arabian funerary steles, as if harking back to a pre-Islamic and pre-Christian Arab sensibility.

And, of course, Louay Kayyali, the compassionate dreamer whose light was too-soon extinguished (the article headlines the pain of Kayyali's recent death at a young age), whose portraits of common people, fishermen and newspaper boys, elderly women and young shepherds, are graced with a spiritual presence beyond the images and the media.

By the latter half of the 20th century, modern Arab art was no longer a Western derivative. "These artists individually participated in their own way to build an independent cultural identity that was Arab," said Zayyat.

Nostalgia for The 60s

The intimacy of the discussion was heightened as Ihsan Antabi offered his personal experiences in the Syrian Art Academy as a graduate of the late 60s. "Elias Zayyat and Fateh Moudarress were both my teachers," he recalls, "and it was a period of dreaming and hoping that was not just for Syria, but for the whole Arab world. The dream was alive in Iraq and Syria and Egypt. I don't say this in any way romantically. We felt we were creating an Arab identity that was grounded in our land and our traditions and our sense of beauty and our history as part of our role in connecting East and West."

The dream of the 60s is fondly remembered, and the death of that dream continues to ache. "I remember the great Jawad Salim" says Antabi. He continues, "and I wonder, what can an Iraqi artist today paint? I remember Fateh Moudarress and I witnessed the strokes of pain in his paintings after 1967. Before [the war of] 67, he painted with child-like spontaneity, the shining sun as a playful child dancing across the desert. After [the war of] 67, he painted the deceitful Trojan Horses and the Crucified Christ. We can't over-estimate its importance, this dream of the 60s. It is an essential location in the life of our modern art. Every Arab artist expressed the dream in his own unique way... And the same feeling is found in other art forms, like the poetry of Mahmoud Darwiche. I wonder, can there be a poet like Mahmoud Darwiche in the world of today?"

Age of Change

Presenting the evolution of art after the Golden Age of the 60s was Youssef Abdelki, a virtuoso of

massive charcoal drawings. His artworks have earned him world-wide acclaim thanks to their meticulous, even painful, realism. Like his drawings, his speech is accurate and sobering. "With the artists of the 70s, art takes a turn...towards criticism and cynicism." Values that were once held dear, hopes of shared Arab unity and integrity are deeply broken and artists are disillusioned. "The artist is no longer a visionary creator, but a dissatisfied social commentator," says Abdelki.

In this period, pop art also emerges with painters like Saad Yagan turning towards the burlesque and desolate. "With the artists of the 80s the world map is more complicated. The Cold War dominated world politics, dividing the world into two camps, USA vs. USSR." This ended in the 90s with a massive impact on the world, the victory of capitalism, and the simultaneous information-technology revolution. "Today the world is not clear at all," says Abdelki "with the only continuous reality being



Mahmoud Hammad Abstraction Acrylic on fabric 55 x75 cm
1987 Directorate of Fine Arts

one of exploitation.” As the editor of this magazine pointed out in the previous issue, ‘exploitation’ is often euphemistically termed ‘development’.

“We are in a state of loss, darkness, lack of vision,” says Abdelki. “There is an intellectual emptiness.” With all that has happened, and continues to unfold in world politics, “the question we need to answer today is much more challenging than it was before. How to build a new vision?”

Supermarket Art

In addition to the sense of loss and isolation, a new force has recently acquired a grip on the state of art, namely: the market. “Today, the first question to be asked about any artist is, ‘for how much do his paintings sell?’” says Abdelki. “Artists of the 60s and the 70s were never asked this. It did not matter.” In this sense, artists had freedom. They painted what they felt, they searched for meaning in what they experienced, and they forged purposes based on their own unique belief. But today, there is an art market with great demands, and it has grown in size and consumption at an incredibly fast pace. Prices have sky-rocketed callously and ridiculously. The older generation of artists who have spent their life’s work devoted to their vision, no matter the price, no matter the exile, no matter the poverty and alienation, are today left bewildered by the rise of the art market and the demise of what was once untouchable – the artist’s fiercely independent spirit. These developments are concomitant with the establishment of auction-houses, galleries and the prestigious relocation of ‘brand’ museums, financed by the abundant wealth of the Gulf states and their economic ties with British and American enterprises. With all the gloss and glamour of the ‘booming’ art scene, few are concerned with its impact on the artistic spirit. Even in the wake of the great economic crisis of 2008, bankers turned art-curators and art-collectors are cleverly creating a market of Arab art to generate more wealth. Meanwhile, the younger generation of artists are dealing with great financial attractions, temptations and possibilities. Gone are the critics, the humanists and the ideologies that gave art meaningfulness. This applies to the Western history of modern art as well. The days of looking

at the world through the eyes of Sartre, Mondrian or Kandinsky are over. Today it is the eye of the business man that views the world, accompanied by his circus of branding brandishing marketers. The result is a world dominated by mercenary art, candy art, art-for-shock-value and art for nouveau riche prestige. The meanings are gone. This art may as well be sold by the centimeter, which is indeed what is happening – much easier to measure length than to weigh a thought.

The Realism of Veterans and The Spirit of The Youth

A rustle of discontent and ruffled pride stirred the aspiring young artists in the audience. “Why this spirit of pessimism?” asks one of the conference attendees. “If I hear one more time about how great Fateh Moudarress was, I think I will die!” said another. “Enough with the past!” was the yelp of the youth. Perhaps those who were truly listening were compelled to fall silent.

And what of new art forms? Video arts, installations and internet games, these are all new media that are gaining popularity. Are the old schools of art obsolete? Here, Egyptian artist Adel Siwi responded from the audience with the telling example of photography, reminding that there are powerful contemporary photographers even though the medium of photography is nearly two centuries old. “We need to differentiate between the hail of new media and our own anxiety as Arabs facing the new languages of contemporary-ness,” said Adel. “The ‘portable painting’ is itself an imported European invention, but it has settled in the Arab landscape and it has entered our own history.... And at the end of the day, there can still be a contemporary installation that is appalling and a contemporary oil painting that is exquisite.” So, we need to differentiate between content that is contemporary (i.e. relevant) and contemporary media.

In response, Abdelki requests that a key question be asked regarding the new art forms – where are they coming from? Installations emerged in the city hubs of Europe and the United States and reflect European and American values, desires and modes of expression. “The European Union encourages our

young artists [towards installation arts], and of course it is to their own benefit... I don't see the European Union offering funds to our locally recognized artists. I don't see them encouraging and promoting the likes of Zayyat, Nabaa or Antabi. Have any of you heard even once that Tawfiq Tariq or Michel Kirche or Nash'at al-Zoghbi or Mahmoud Hammad received funding from a Western country to carry out their art? This has never happened in the entire history of modern art, not in Syria or in any other Arab country or even non-Arab country. Yet today, artists are getting financial assistance to produce installations," says Abdelki. "Isn't it curious?" The art forms they choose to support are those that reflect Western culture, Western products, Western values and Western modes of communication.

How it is possible then to evaluate an artwork's authenticity today? The answer to this question requires returning to the source of art, the artist himself. Is the artistic expression arising from the depth of the artist's personal experience? Is it reflecting the artist's visual heritage? If yes, then the artwork is sincere. If no, it is imitative and false. That is why there is great urgency in the call to protect and strengthen the truth of the artist's voice, irrespective of mode, media, or funding.

Where to From Here ?

Contemporary living is often fast, shallow and exterior-focused. Image overrides content and hype overrides value. The young artist can be swept up in this tide or take the harder path of honing his own unique vision. This requires self-respect on a very deep level. There is serious internal work to be done on the side of the artist. Clear thought, clear voice, a deep rooted presence and stubborn defiance of any sort of manipulation are the essential makings of a true artist. "Arab art in a changing world", thus shifts focus from the art product to the invisible (hence often ignored) source of the art - the artist's thoughts. Abdelki calls it 'character', and the message is, "Be aware," let it be both a warning of peril and an invitation to courage.

Abdelki concluded, "the challenge of artists today will be more difficult than that of the previous generations. Few will escape the clutches of

intellectual emptiness on the one hand and market hegemony on the other. Only the strong, the true, the stubborn and the confident will prevail in his artistic vision. And that artist is very rare."



Elias Zayyat The Children Tempera on canvas 65 x 95 cm 1970
Damascus National Museum