



بارجيل  
مؤسسة للفنون

BARJEEL  
ART FOUNDATION

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Maraya Art Centre, Level 2  
Al Qasba, Al Taawun Road  
Sharjah, UAE  
+971 6 556 6555  
[barjeelartfoundation.org](http://barjeelartfoundation.org)

## RE: Orient

INVESTIGATING MODERNISM IN THE ARAB WORLD 1950s-70s

A repertoire of images has shaped understandings of Arab societies. Among these, Western illustrations of the Orient—a colonial term now deemed pejorative used to describe peoples, places and customs of the ‘Far East’—laid the groundwork for romanticised, mono-centric perceptions of countries in the Levant, North Africa, Arabian Gulf and Iraq. Depictions of idealised landscapes, opulence and violence became insignia that captured the agendas of Western observers more than the cultures themselves.

Examining art production between the 1950s and 1970s, which for many Arab countries marked a pivotal period of transition from French and British imperialism, provides a glimpse into the subjective framework within which artists were operating. The residue of colonial rule engendered a wave of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and ‘60s with the rise of Pan-Arab movements such as Nasserism, steered by the populist rhetoric of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and secular nationalist Ba’ath parties in Iraq and Syria. The shift toward independence also gave way to forms of political domination and division.

Art making often connects subjective experiences with the prevailing socio-political and cultural circumstances, and modernism in the Arab world epitomised a dynamic exchange of ideas. Modern-era artists with roots in Arab countries fused traditional approaches, re-appropriated ancient symbolism, and employed Western avant-garde styles such as Cubism, Fauvism, Surrealism and Dadaism to comment on daily life, politics and existential concerns. They were actively involved in the global dialogue and interpretation of modernism.

This exhibition starts with the prefix RE:—a symbol signifying a ‘reply’ to an original message, and representing the ongoing, open-ended dialogue about past and present notions of otherness and the contrived categories that trap artists in narrow interpretations of identity and politics. RE: Orient is a conversation, persisting to this day, about the development of art in the 30-year period. As research of modern art in the Arab world evolves, the inherent nuances and guiding paradigms for modernity are continuously reviewed, replenished and reoriented. – Mandy Merzaban