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Sky Over the East

Ismail Rifai explains the significance of the exhibition and the contexts it seeks to reflect

Translated from Arabic by Iskandar Shaaban

*O Sky over the East!
whose abaya floats over the tides of knowledge,
creations, dreams and visions
From above, she has witnessed a history
replete with days of glory, but with
bitterness and hindrances as well
the same sky that first distilled the legend of creation,
and first inscribed its alphabet
upon the chronicles of time.*

The exhibition's title, *Sky Over the East*, brings us back to man's timeless fascination with the image of the Orient whose glorious sun once illuminated the entire world. It calls upon us to conjure up that picture. It is a sign with which to guide our souls during this period of our history, with its setbacks, challenges and expressions of creativity that continuously attempt to articulate everything around us; the events, the aspirations and even the fears that surge through the entire Arab world.

This exhibition is an exceptional opportunity to examine the most notable symbols of that historical era, which defined the elements of the Arab visual arts landscape of the 20th-century. The work of the region's most creative minds became known as Arab Modernism. The protagonists of this movement sought to create a visual means by which to express themselves, and associate with the nascent attempt of laying the foundations for an Arab renaissance - formulating an identity while drawing influences from global artistic achievements.

Before trying to approach these works, it is important that we consider the challenges that faced Arab Modernism. It followed in the footsteps of Western Modernism that had long been established; developing tools and severing ties with age-old classical traditions. This was one of the many reasons why the West was able to make change

happen, consolidate such a decisive and historical detachment and build a body of ideas in search of something new, something different and something reborn.

However, Arab Modernism faced scepticism and rejection. People demanded an historical foundation. They wanted to follow an existing lineage to define a new aesthetic. After all, styles such as *Hurifism* that drew inspiration from Islamic elements and symbols had already provided a visual means of expression for new concepts.

The difficulty was that any achievement within the Arab visual arts scene during that historical period was always regarded in terms of an 'imported' aesthetic form of stylistic context. There was no attempt to delve into the essence of an artwork itself or discover a specific set of elements and components, which offered a proficient Arabian contribution to the formation of a new aesthetic taste. Through the artists' dedication and belief in both their talent and the historical role they played, the reality of Arab visual arts transformed from a stage of replication and direct imitation to a platform for innovation, filled with multiple visual formulations and calls for new concepts that combined the artist's inner world with universal desires in a most human dimension.

Although critical discourse was not wholly supportive of the achievement, Arab visual arts changed. It has now entered Postmodernism, with its new forms of expression. However, the aesthetic remains our focal point of interest. The creative visual component remains the catalyst that provokes our deepest feelings, pushing us to probe into different worlds more beautiful, more captivating, and more intimate than our own. Perhaps it is worth considering art, based upon a unique structure, being the deeper manifestations of human self-expression as it soars on the wings of imagination. It enables us to look at art beyond time and place and without framing it within stylistic or formalist packages.

This is why the exhibition's selection is so significant. Firstly, it presents fundamental artistic concepts that acquired their legitimacy by realising a unique visual form. It reflects the persistence, the difference and the discovery of new sources of beauty. Second, all the artworks are exhibited in a single space where each piece enriches the other, giving a clear impression of the varying artistic styles and concepts molded by the creative minds living under the vast *Sky Over the East*.

Here, under a 'sky of art' sits the primary substance of life and the initial steps taken towards discovery and a quest for the future. It does not matter whether the sky let down her diaphanous gown east or west, as long as it ignited the life force within and carried us into the world of spirituality and imagination. For this is where artists pour their souls onto clay and canvas. Here lies the charm of the rural women of Syria's Fateh Moudarres and their ability to touch our souls. His artistic interpretation and superior skill depict his ability to personify the most intimate aspects of his own identity and, in particular, his artistic spontaneity. His colour pastes are imbued with the scent of the land on which he grew up.

The work of the Algerian artist Mohammed Issiakhem ushers us into an artistic microcosm wrought with sorrow and pain. Exactly like Moudarres, it possesses flashes of genius and elements of a virtual world, although it also seeks to express a country's daily reality and political climate. With her instinctive expressive style, the Algerian girl Baya takes us to a universe woven with the spirit of childhood and colours saturated in light.

In the fertile fields of artistic expression, the reality of one's inner soul can be conveyed through a plethora of styles, each time giving life to a new form where the artist's personal mood is identified within the composition itself. The manifestation of the inner soul's existential and emotional essence can be found in the graphic, pictorial works of Ibrahim Salahi and Dia Al Azzawi. They are able to create works structured with a formulaic consistency and poetic shifts that take us to the limit. It can also be found in the legacy of Shakir Hassan Al Said. His profound Sufi inspired works are so attentive to detail and excessively accurate that they are realistic yet also abstract.

From the fading lines and flowing colours of Paul Guiragossian's 'Madonna & Child' to the delicate slenderness of Louay Kayyali, these pieces delve the depths of beauty in all its forms with a sense of sad solemnity and moments of silent contemplation.

The works converse at various rhythms, interlocking in a cohesive aesthetic system that expresses the power and magic of art regardless of its form. It reaffirms that the way we look at art as intermittent stages is nothing but a veil. It separates us from the intrinsic nature and the uniform essence that combines all arts into a single focal point. It is the soul that reveals the secrets of our inner self and carries us on a spiritual journey to the frontiers of the universe; from Mahmoud Said's miniature worlds filled with sunlight and the hum of life, to those of Hamed Nada and his dream-like characters that turn the universe upside down at will. As his figures elongate with shapes and curves, creating a presence within the logic of the work, the piece fulfils its ability to create realities parallel to our material world.

One must not neglect the artistic achievements of Hassan Sharif or Mohammed Kazem. The exhibited works signify a crucial element in our understanding of their artistic progression. As Postmodern artists, they attained an influential presence through several conceptual works that were highly acclaimed both regionally and internationally.

Moving from the one-dimensional to the three-dimensional, we are greeted by the sculptural works of Adam Henein, Ismail Fattah and Sami Mohammed. All of them seek to enrich reality and discover its limitless potential. Each artist does this by formulating his own iconography, following his own path and showing his soul in the molding of a block of clay and giving it the life he seeks.

The exhibition undoubtedly contains an abundance of notable artists. However, it is impossible to discuss all of them without running out of space. It is suffice to state that while each one differs in the time of its creation and style of expression, they all extend from the same root. It is a collective origin steeped in man's need to express his

essence and its meaning. For it was here he forged his dreams and shaped his artistic visions. Here, on this land and under this sky.