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Foreword for RE:Orient *Salwa Mikdadi*

The decades between 1950s and 1970s witnessed a surge of optimism following the independence of several Arab countries from European colonial domination. Beginning with Syria and Lebanon in the 1940s, Egypt, Libya, Iraq, Tunisia and Morocco achieved independence soon after while other Arab countries gained their freedom in the sixties to early seventies. This optimism buoyed by the 1956 nationalisation of the Suez Canal and the short-lived unification of Syria and Egypt (United Arab Republic) in 1958 was overshadowed by disillusion after the crippling Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. From an art historical standpoint, the backdrop of social and political turmoil epitomised a pivotal period of transition in region.

The artists in this exhibition belong to the second generation of Arab artists; they benefitted from newly established infrastructure for arts and education. Well versed in their cultural history and literary traditions, these artists actively engaged in critical discussions and debates around authenticity and modernism in Arab culture. They espoused social reform and freedom through the arts.

By the end of the seventies, artists of this period were disenchanted with their governments' policies, the failure of the social state in Egypt and the Arab modernist project (hadatha). The modernist discourse that peaked in the sixties brought artists and writers together more so than in any other period. Writers such as Jabra Ibrahim Jabra critiqued art, artists collaborated with poets such as Dia Al Azzawi and Adonis while Fateh Al Moudarres wrote poetry, plays and novels in addition to painting.

The history of the region's art boasts many new beginnings that took place during these three decades (1950-1970), among them, the first Egyptian, Syrian and Iraqi Pavilions at the Venice Biennial. Meanwhile, a significant number of artists studied abroad with state issued scholarships, others attended newly established schools of art.

As reflected in their biographies, artists represented in this exhibition were founding members of major art collectives and associations in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and later across the Arab world. In the absence of curators, Arab artists organised exhibitions and were active members of these associations.

While, there were few collaborations on art projects between the artists; formal and informal artist collectives, groups or associations provided important platforms for peer review, for assisting emerging artists and for creating a space for discourse within which artists, as well as novelists, poets, journalists and others could mingle and debate.

Wars and regime changes sent many Arab artists into exile to the West and neighbouring Arab countries. The seventies saw the last of the group exhibitions organised by the Union of Arab Plastic

Artists, (1974 Arab Biennial). By 1967 Arab nationalism, socialism and secularism were seen as failed state ideologies and political Islam was on the rise.

The exhibition does not claim to present a comprehensive survey of the period, neither does it offer a predetermined concept or impose thematic parameters, rather it encourages an appreciation of each work independent of the other. It seeks to reframe art of the period on each artist's terms, style and influences.

The artworks highlight the interests of the collector while also providing insight into discrepancies in the availability and sale of modern Arab art. For example, abstraction, an important development during this period was not as popular in the first years of the Gulf art fairs in comparison to abstract expressionist art.

The limited number of women in the exhibition is neither intentional nor representative of the period; it is possibly due to the fact that fewer women artists from the modern period are available or presented through galleries and auction houses. It is of note that the Barjeel Collection is growing fast with more pieces regularly added to further shape the foundation's reservoir of artwork.

Almost half of the artworks in *Re: Orient* were made by artists early in their career, when most were thirty-five years old or younger. Such exceptional works provide us with clues on the influences that shaped the artists' oeuvre in the following decades.

The exhibition is a unique opportunity to look back on three decades of art production in the Arab world that were a critical signpost in the history of artistic production. We are grateful to the Barjeel Art Foundation for making it possible to study an important selection from this period.

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