

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s

Grey Art Gallery, New York University

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Main Text Panel and Individual Object Labels

Main Text Panel

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World explores mid-20th-century abstract art from North Africa, West Asia, and the Arab diaspora—a vast geographic expanse that encompasses diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. Comprising nearly 90 works by artists from countries including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the exhibition is drawn from the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation based in Sharjah, UAE. The paintings, sculpture, drawings, and prints on view here reflect the wide range of nonfigurative art practices that flourished in the Arab world over the course of four decades.

Decolonization, the rise and fall of Arab nationalisms, socialism, rapid industrialization, wars and mass migrations, and the oil boom transformed the region during this period. With rising opposition to Western political and military involvement, many artists adopted critical viewpoints, striving to make art relevant to their own locales. New opportunities for international travel and the advent of circulating exhibitions sparked cultural and educational exchanges that exposed them to multiple modernisms—including various modes of abstraction—and led them to consider their roles within an international context.

The featured artists—a varied group of Arab, Amazigh (Berber), Armenian, Circassian, Jewish, Persian, and Turkish descent—sought to localize and recontextualize existing 20th-century modernisms, some forming groups to address urgent issues. Moving away from figuration, they mined the expressive capacities of line, color, and texture. Inspired by Arabic calligraphy, geometry and mathematics, Islamic decorative patterns, and spiritual practices, they expanded abstraction’s vocabulary—thus complicating its genealogies of origin and altering how we view nonobjective art.

At its heart, *Taking Shape* raises a fundamental question: How do we study abstraction across different contexts, and what modes of analysis do we use? Looking critically at the history and historiography of mid-20th-century abstraction, the exhibition rethinks art-historical canons and expands the discourses around global modernisms.

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s is organized by the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, and curated by Suheyla Takesh and Lynn Gumpert. Major support for the exhibition is provided by the Barjeel Art Foundation. Additional generous support is provided by the Charina Endowment Fund; the Violet Jabara Charitable Trust; the Grey’s Director’s Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends; and the Abby Weed Grey Trust

Individual Object Labels

Note: List is alphabetical by artist last name.

Shafic Abboud

(Bifkaya, Lebanon, 1926–Paris, 2004)

Cela fait quarante jours (It's Been Forty Days) (Portrait of Christine Abboud), 1964

Oil on canvas

No. 26

Upon his return from Paris to Lebanon in September 1964 to prepare for his solo exhibition at Beirut's Centre d'Art Contemporain, Abboud suffered an extended period of creative anxiety—the “forty days” referenced in this work's title. During that time, he felt an irresistible urge to temper his abstraction and paint in a more figurative style—a conflict clearly visible in this portrait of his four-year-old daughter Christine playing with a doll near the window of their house in the Achrafieh neighborhood. Visible beside her are the colors of the French flag—blue, white, and red.

Note: Not on view at the Grey Art Gallery, NYU

Shafic Abboud

(Bifkaya, Lebanon, 1926–Paris, 2004)

La boîte à images (The Box of Images), 1975

Oil on canvas

No. 72

Shafic Abboud consistently explored the material properties of his various media, ranging from oil painting, ink, watercolor, and ceramics to artists' books—creating a versatile body of work that reveals his interest in and response to international modernism. In this work in oil on canvas, he layers multiple images, bringing them into a single space—the “box” of the title. Coating hues of green, orange, pink, purple, and blue one atop the other, he suggests a box overflowing with images as it rests on a table or counter.

At Beirut's Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA), Abboud studied under Lebanese painter César Gemayel, whose teacher Khalil Saleeby had been a friend and colleague of American painter John Singer Sargent. In 1947 Abboud traveled to Paris, where he continued his training in the studios of André Lhote and Fernand Léger. In 1952 the Lebanese government granted him a scholarship to study drawing and engraving at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris; in 1959 his work was included in the first Biennale de Paris. In 2011, the Paris-based Institut du Monde Arabe hosted a major retrospective of his work that traveled to the Beirut Art Center (BAC) the following year.

Shafic Abboud

(Bifkaya, Lebanon, 1926–Paris, 2004)

Untitled, 1966

Oil on canvas

No. 36

Shafic Abboud's painterly gestures dominate this untitled composition, creating a lively scene. Its orange-and-red background appears to emanate from the canvas; at the left are hints of a mysterious figure. Such formal explorations of color and light were fundamental to the artist's practice.

Note: Not on view at the Grey Art Gallery, NYU

Hamed Abdalla
(Cairo, 1917–1985)
Al-Tamazzuq (Torn), 1975
Acrylic and mixed media on canvas
No. 173

Working in mixed media, Hamed Abdalla draws our attention toward this painting's light, bright center of frantic action—while playing with cracks in its blue background to reveal a black layer underneath, extending the sense of rupture across its entire surface.

Born into a family of farmers (*fellahin*) on the outskirts of Cairo, Abdalla grew up in a modest household. Beginning his education in a Qur'anic school, he studied the art of calligraphy and became fascinated with drawing. His father enrolled him at the School of Applied Arts in Cairo, but Abdallah's refusal to adopt a strictly realistic style resulted in his leaving the institution. He developed an artistic vocabulary merging the language of Western modernism with Egypt's past and present, extending from Pharaonic, Coptic, and contemporary folk culture to reflections on contemporary political unrest. In 1945 Abdalla married Tahia Halim, a fellow artist, and in 1949 they left for Paris. In 1951, a joint exhibition of their work was mounted in Paris. After returning to Egypt that year, they taught art in their private studio in downtown Cairo. In 1956 the couple divorced, and Abdalla began to split his time between Copenhagen and Paris, where he passed away in 1956.

Yvette Achkar
(Born São Paulo, 1928)
Untitled, c. 1980
Oil on canvas
No. 183

Yvette Achkar is considered one of Lebanon's leading modernists. She once described the act of painting as tottering between the peak of a wave and a bottomless hollow, meaning that each work is more about self-discovery than embodying a concept or theme. This untitled painting exemplifies her abandonment of structure and emphasis on clashing forms. Basing its composition in geometry, she experiments with a vibrant palette.

Achkar graduated in 1952 from the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA) in Beirut, where she studied with the Italian painter Fernando Manetti, and the French painter Georges Cyr. In the late 1950s, she received a scholarship from the French government to study art in Paris,

and while there she exhibited in Italy, Yugoslavia, and Germany. In 1959 alone, she participated in biennials in Alexandria, Paris, and São Paulo. During the 1960s, she consolidated her figurative nudes and geometric abstractions into a single expressive style grounded in color and line—as seen in the painting on view here. From 1966 to 1988, Achkar taught painting at ALBA and the Institute of Fine Art, Lebanese University.

Etel Adnan

(Born Beirut, 1925)

Autumn in Yosemite Valley, 1963–64

Oil on canvas

No. 24

Growing up in Lebanon, Etel Adnan was immersed in a medley of languages—including Greek, Turkish, Arabic, and French—and developed great linguistic aptitude. This multilingual childhood fed her artistic desire to create abstract landscapes in order to, in her words, “humanize the environment.” In *Autumn in Yosemite Valley*, seen here, she arranges geometric patches of bright color and textured paint.

After studying philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris, where she composed her first poems in French, Adnan pursued graduate studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and at Harvard University. Abandoning the use of French in protest against France’s hostilities in Algeria, she turned to visual art and also to transcribing Arab poets, reading Sufi poetry, and creating vibrantly colored artist’s books. Between 1980 and the early 2000s, Adnan lived in California with her partner, Simone Fattal, whose painting *Celestial Forms* is on view nearby. In 2014, Adnan received France’s prestigious Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres. She and Fattal currently live and work in Paris.

Maliheh Afnan

(Haifa, Palestine, 1935–London 2016)

Mindscape, 1961

Oil on canvas

No. 19

Obscured by a heavily textured, hazy gray, Maliheh Afnan’s haunting *Mindscape* reflects her interest in texts and writing. Born in Palestine to Iranian parents of the Bahá’i faith, she witnessed the exodus of 1948 (Al-Nakba) and moved to Beirut with her family the following year. There she received a BA from the American University in Beirut, then moved on to the Corcoran School of the Arts in Washington, DC, for her MFA. Afnan lived in Kuwait during the mid-1960s, in Beirut from the mid-1960s to mid-’70s, and in Paris for the following two decades. In 1979, she relocated to London. Although her work has been exhibited primarily in France and London, her paintings are found in numerous museum collections around the world.

Malika Agueznay

(Born Marrakech, Morocco, 1938)

L'algue bleue (Blue Algae), 1968
Wood and acrylic on wood
No. 187

L'algue bleue is a wood relief composed of organic blue forms that resemble marine vegetation against a green background. Its meandering, curvilinear shapes were inspired not only by the artist's natural environment, but also by *Ayat al-Kursi* (the Throne Verse), a highly revered passage in the Qur'an. *L'algue bleue* prefigures the artist's interest in calligraphy, which is manifested in her later work through stylized renditions of the ninety-nine names for God in Islam, and what she called "magic words," such as *salaam* (peace), *mahabba* (love), *hanan* (compassion), *tawado'* (humility), and *karam* (generosity).

A contemporary of the influential Casablanca School in Morocco, Agueznay grew up in a rural community where she learned traditional Moroccan crafts, whose aesthetic she incorporates into her work. During the early 1960s, she studied to become a paramedic in Casablanca and France before enrolling at the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca between 1966 and 1970. Finding inspiration in works by her fellow artists Farid Belkahia and Mohamed Melehi, Agueznay developed her practice during the country's post-colonial transition into autonomous nationhood. Thus, she became integral to shaping the visual language of a newly independent Morocco.

Shakir Hassan Al Said
(Samawah, Iraq, 1925–Baghdad, 2004)
Untitled, c. 1970
Oil on wood
No. 54

Shakir Hassan Al Said
(Samawah, Iraq, 1925–Baghdad, 2004)
Al-Muntassirun (The Victorious), 1983
Mixed media on wood
No. 125

One of Iraq's most prominent artists, Shakir Hassan Al Said associated the act of art making with spiritual practices. Drawing inspiration from Islamic Sufism as well as Western philosophy, he sought "truth in all its dimensions." After initially pursuing a degree in social science, Al Said studied painting at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad, under the tutelage of Iraqi artist Jewad Selim. Together they founded the Baghdad Group for Modern Art in 1951, which looked to develop a distinctly Iraqi visual language: one that married international modernist styles with elements drawn from the country's heritage. Al Said also trained in Paris at the Académie Julian, the École des Arts Décoratifs, and the École des Beaux-Arts. In addition to Sufism, he drew inspiration from the theoretical approaches he encountered in Paris, including structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction, phenomenology, and existentialism.

In his 1966 "Contemplative Art Manifesto," Al Said called for a meditative and transcendental approach that understood art making as an act of contemplation, not creation.

Testing notions of form, matter, time, and the physical world in general, he scratched, carved, burned, and even punctured surfaces, creating amorphous compositions to conjure up the universe itself. In incorporating Arabic letterforms, he aimed “expose the unity of two worlds that are simultaneously inhabited, namely, the ‘linguistic’ world of thought and the ‘plastic’ world of sight.” In 1971, driven by his interest in Sufism and metaphysics, Al Said founded the One Dimension (Al-Bu’d al-Wahid) group—which aimed to blur the lines between the self and the cosmos and to produce work from a transcendental understanding of the oneness and eternity of all.

Shakir Hassan Al Said
(Samawah, Iraq, 1925–Baghdad, 2004)
Untitled, 1963
Oil and plaster on wood
No. 23

Shakir Hassan Al Said viewed the Arabic letter as a vehicle for negotiating new art forms. In this untitled work in oil and plaster on wood, he suspends letter-like elements atop an earth-toned background.

Dia al-Azzawi
(Born Baghdad, 1929)
Composition, 1976
Oil on canvas
No. 78

While at first glance this painting appears completely abstract, its composition hints at human figures resting alongside one another. Through muted tones and a carefully balanced arrangement, Dia al-Azzawi infuses the image with serenity and stillness.

After receiving a degree in archeology from the University of Baghdad in 1962 and a diploma from the city’s Institute of Fine Arts in 1964, Azzawi worked as an archeologist and curator. His visual art often references ancient Mesopotamian and Islamic history and ethnography as well as modern Arabic literature. He participated in several art movements including New Vision (Al-Ru’yah al-Jadida) group in 1969, which he co-founded; the One Dimension (Al-Bu’d al-Wahid) group; and the Plastic Artists’ Society—as its secretary, he established the pioneering Al-Wasiti Festival in 1972.

In 1975, Azzawi left Iraq in response to the rise of Ba’athism, a nationalist movement that promoted state control over cultural institutions and standardization of artistic production. Moving to London, he served as adviser to the Iraqi Cultural Centre, where he curated numerous exhibitions. There he became deeply affected by international politics and events in the Arab world, and through his work gave visibility to the Palestinian cause and predicaments faced by the people of Iraq. Although known primarily as a painter and draftsman, Azzawi works in a wide variety of media, ranging from monumental sculpture to graphic design and both two- and three-dimensional printing. In his recent retrospective, more than five hundred works, spanning more than half a century, were shown at two venues in Doha, Qatar.

Ezequiel Baroukh
(Alexandria, Egypt, 1909–1984)
Composition, c. 1955
Oil on cardboard
No. 5

Densely packed with colorful geometric forms, Ezequiel Baroukh's *Composition* reflects his fascination with Cubism and abstraction. An Egyptian Jewish artist, Baroukh began his studies at the French Lycée in Alexandria before studying at the Academy of Art in Rome. In 1940 Baroukh joined both the surrealist Art and Liberté movement and the Alexandrian Artistic Group, where he organized art events and exhibited his work, which then featured figurative imagery.

In the early 1940s, Baroukh and other Egyptian Jewish artists were active in Alexandria's and Cairo's intellectual circles, where they connected with exiles from Fascist Italy and elsewhere in Europe. Following his move to Paris in 1946, his work evolved from figuration to Cubism and then to abstraction, as seen here.

Farid Belkahia
(Marrakech, Morocco, 1934–2014)
Aube (Dawn), 1983
Pigment on vellum
No. 133

In Farid Belkahia's striking *Aube* (Dawn) of 1983, sinuous, organic lines hover before a rainbow-hued circle that represents the rising sun at dawn. Deliberately rejecting canvas as a support, the artist constantly experimented with novel techniques. Here he turned to materials commonly used in traditional crafts, painting on vellum using organic pigments and dyes such as henna and saffron. With its intertwined tracings of abstracted human forms, *Aube* resembles works by Belkahia that evoke Gaston Bachelard's psychoanalytic readings of the elements (water, earth, air, and fire), which were published in the 1940s.

In the mid-1950s, Belkahia attended the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he encountered European modernism. From 1959 to 1962 he lived in Prague, where he studied scenography at the Akademie Múzických Umění (Academy of Performing Arts) and created politically charged, expressionistic works that referenced current events such as the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62) and the Bay of Pigs invasion (1961).

Returning to Morocco in 1962, six years after the country's liberation from French colonial rule, Belkahia was appointed director of Casablanca's École des Beaux-Arts, where he set out to define a distinctly Moroccan modernism. With several colleagues, including Mohamed Melehi and Mohamed Chebaa, whose works are on view nearby, he co-founded the Casablanca School—an avant-garde collective, which aimed to root artistic modernism in local Moroccan culture. In 2016 his retrospective was held at Mathaf (Arab Museum of Modern Art) in Doha, Qatar.

Néjib Belkhodja
(Tunis, 1933–2007)
Abstraction Number 45, 1964
Oil on canvas
No. 25

A central figure in Tunisian modern art, Néjib Belkhodja often referenced structural elements from the Medina of Tunis, one of the first Arab-Muslim towns in the Maghreb. In *Abstraction Number 45*, he plays with its sleek classical dome shapes, archways, and rooflines to create an abstract composition.

Belkhodja studied at the Institut des Beaux-Arts in Tunis and began exhibiting locally in 1956. Continuing his artistic career in Rome and Paris, he was influenced by the art of Robert Delaunay and Wassily Kandinsky. He exhibited in Europe and across North Africa and in Egypt. In 1987, Belkhodja joined the architect Slah Smaoui in designing and constructing the picturesque village of Kèn, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea about an hour south of Tunis. In 1991, he held a joint exhibition in Tunis with Iraqi artist Dia al-Azzawi, whose *Composition* is on view nearby.

Fouad Bellamine
(Born Fez, Morocco, 1950)
Untitled, 1973
Mixed media on fiberboard
No. 65

Fouad Bellamine's untitled painting of 1973 resembles a desert landscape. Executed in mixed media, including some areas with a sand-like texture, the work has a soil-like, earthy quality. Bellamine often turned to Morocco's landscape for inspiration, using it to interrogate notions of identity through a sense of place. The dark purple and blues found here in the composition's upper half signal the artist's transition into a minimalist aesthetic while also revealing his sensitivity to the interplay of light and shadow. An early work, this painting was made only one year after Bellamine began exhibiting his work in Rabat.

Born in Fez, Morocco, in 1950, he attended the Casablanca School of Applied Arts and quickly found his style, inspired by the light of Fez and its weaving alleyways and colors. In 1973, he began teaching plastic arts at Rabat University, leaving in 1984 to accept a grant to study in Paris. There he received an art diploma from the Sorbonne, writing a thesis on the concept of murals in contemporary painting.

Abdallah Benanteur
(Mostaganem, Algeria, 1931–Ivry-sur-Seine, France, 2017)
The Garden of Saadi, 1984
Oil on canvas
No. 155

Perhaps titled in honor of Saadi Yacef, a leader of Algeria's National Liberation Front during the country's war of independence, Abdallah Benanteur's four-part canvas serves as a window into an abstract scene resembling a lush garden. Committed to articulating a new role for Algerian art, Benanteur ascribed to socialist decolonization rooted within a broader international context. In his artistic production, he alludes to both Algeria, his homeland, and France, where he spent much of his adult life.

Abdallah Benanteur

(Mostaganem, Algeria, 1931–Ivry-sur-Seine, France, 2017)

Lumière du sud (Southern Light), 1960

Oil on cardboard mounted on wood

No. 184

Observing, reminiscing about, and imagining the world around him, Abdallah Benanteur uses subtle gestures of color, form, and texture to create shimmering abstract landscapes. *Lumière du sud* is a near-monochromatic representation of sunlight. Here a vibrant range of browns and oranges evokes the heat and blossoming tones of the late-afternoon sun. Yet even as he captures the intensity of southern light, Benanteur transcends graphic specificity, and employs subtle yet pulsating color effects.

Abdallah Benanteur

(Mostaganem, Algeria, 1931–Ivry-sur-Seine, France, 2017)

To Monet, Giverny, 1983

Oil on canvas

No. 123

An early pioneer of Algerian modernism, Abdallah Benanteur wholeheartedly defended abstraction against the claims of figurative art. Titling this work in homage to the French Impressionist painter Claude Monet and his garden at Giverny, he combines romantic Impressionism with a variety of lively gestural techniques.

Benanteur spent his childhood in the port city of Mostaganem, painting and learning about music, poetry, and mysticism from his uncle and his father. After graduating from the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Oran in 1948, he moved to Paris in 1953 to begin his career as a painter and stayed on to live in France. Also a noted printmaker, he produced more than 1,500 artists' books, often collaborating with Algerian poets and Sufi mystics.

Following the establishment of the new Algerian state in 1962, Benanteur opposed the government-led approach of the National Union of Plastic Art (UNAP). While disentangling art from any purpose in the revolution, he believed that history would find in what seems "gratuitous" art a testimony to the nation's real values. Referring to the postwar period as a second Arab Renaissance (*Al-Nahda*), he argued that it is not through art that the artist should express his concern about the public life of the nation. Rather than represent the world, the artist must live in it and engage with it in all its forms. In the 1970s, Benanteur was appointed professor at the *École des Beaux-Arts* and the *École des Arts Décoratifs* in Paris. In 2003 a retrospective of his work was held at the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris.

Kamal Boullata
(Jerusalem, 1942–Berlin, 2019)

Fi-I Bid Kan-al-Kalima (In the Beginning was The Word), 1983

Al-Zahir-al-Batin (The Manifest, The Hidden), 1983

Al-Alif wa-l-Ya, 1983

La Ana Illa Ana (There is No ‘I’ But ‘I’), 1983

Lam Alif, 1983

Silkscreens

Nos. 129, 132, 131, 128, 130

An internationally celebrated artist, writer, poet, and scholar, Kamal Boullata worked between picture and text—and is best known for his vibrant geometric silkscreens and paintings incorporating popular religious verses and Sufi and Arabic proverbs, pushing their calligraphic forms to the brink of illegibility. In his abstract constructions, he integrates both letterforms drawn from Kufic, the oldest Arabic script, and modern experiments based on Islamic calligraphy. Carefully plotting the graphic organization of his chosen words, Boullata used color and design to convey symbolic content. His gridded compositions—inspired by his study of the mathematical grids underlying Christian icons—reflect his interests in both Islamic mosaics and 20th-century Western visual art. In time-honored Islamic tradition, the grid represents a pattern that could be multiplied into infinity.

In contrast with other artists who work with Arabic calligraphy, Boullata incorporates not only individual letters but entire phrases, which he often sourced from Christian and Islamic sacred texts, sometimes adding a witty spin on the original meaning, although the words themselves are difficult to read even for Arabic speakers. For instance, in *La Ana Illa Ana* (There is No ‘I’ But ‘I’) Boullata plays on Islam’s central proclamation of faith, *la Ilaha Illa Allah* (there is no God but God).

Born to a Palestinian family in Jerusalem, Boullata trained early on with Khalil Halabi, an iconic Palestinian painter. Later he graduated from the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome and the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design in Washington, DC. He adopted the square as a central site for experimentation in his work while living in the U.S. in the late 1960s. Author of the groundbreaking 2009 book *Palestinian Art, 1850–Present*, Boullata also wrote extensively for periodicals and academic journals, with a particular focus on Arab histories and art. He received a Fulbright Senior scholarship to research Islamic art in Morocco, where he resided from 1993 to 1996.

Huguette Caland
(Beirut, 1931–2019)

City II, 1968

Oil on canvas

No. 44

Spanning more than five decades, Huguette Caland's career was strongly marked by her fierce dedication to freedom and movement. The daughter of Bechara el-Khoury, the first president of independent Lebanon, Caland trained with Italian painter Fernando Manetti in Beirut. In 1970 she moved to Paris, leaving her husband and teenage children behind. Thus liberated, she could explore an array of disciplines and begin making the abstract paintings and drawings for which she is best known. These highlight the sensual nature of human bodies—a theme rarely found in socially conservative Lebanon.

In 1997 Caland moved to Venice, California, where her home served as a gathering place for local artists—and she remained there until returning to Beirut in 2013. In 2018 a retrospective of her work was on view at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Art in New York.

Huguette Caland
(Beirut, 1931–2019)
Bribes de Corps, 1971
Oil on canvas
No. 164

In her minimalist composition *Bribes de Corps*, Huguette Caland draws out the erotic sensuality of curved contours, covering her canvas with a pulsing orange-red. Stopping short of pure abstraction, her paintings retain legibility, serving as nuanced representations of femininity and the female form.

Mohamed Chebaa
(Tétouan, Morocco, 1935–Casablanca, 2013)
Untitled, 1974
Acrylic on wood
No. 71

With his fellow members of the Casablanca School, Mohamed Chebaa showed his work in Morocco's open-air exhibition in Jemaa el-Fna, Marrakesh's public square, in 1969. Considered a turning point in the history of modern Moroccan art, this exhibition was marked by the bright, color-rich paintings that have become synonymous with Chebaa—as exemplified in the bold and colorful geometric language seen in this work. Here the artist draws on architectural and topographical drawings as well as the abstract visual traditions seen in Morocco's local artisanal crafts.

Mohamed Chebaa
(Tétouan, Morocco, 1935–Casablanca, 2013)
Composition, c. 1970
Wood (bas-relief)
No. 52

Mohamed Chebaa was a founding member of the avant-garde Casablanca School, which emerged from the city's École des Beaux-Arts in the mid-1960s. Seeking to detach modern art from the legacy of French colonialism, Chebaa and his contemporaries strove to relocate it squarely in the culture of Morocco itself. Known for his bold and colorful geometric imagery, Chebaa worked in acrylic on canvas, as well as woodcarving. After obtaining a diploma from the Institut National des Beaux-Arts in Tétouan, Morocco in 1955, he continued his training in Rome.

Back in Morocco, he began teaching at Casablanca's École des Beaux-Arts, developing the Casablanca School's network and pedagogy throughout the 1960s. Although strongly invested in a specifically Moroccan methodology, the Casablanca School maintained connections to other modernist movements. For example, the Berlin exhibition *Bauhaus Imaginista* of 2019 directly juxtaposed the German Bauhaus movement's ideology and teaching methods with those of the Casablanca School.

Ahmed Cherkaoui
(Boujad, Morocco, 1934–Casablanca, 1967)

Alea, 1965

Les miroirs rouges (Red Mirrors), 1965

Oil on jute
Nos. 34, 29

Ahmed Cherkaoui is known for his large canvases and burlap collages, which are at the same time both abstract and teeming with symbols. He created a distinctive aesthetic, often arranging his vibrant motifs and forms symmetrically against a dark background, enhancing the illusion of depth, such as seen in both works here.

The central symbol in Cherkaoui's *Alea* closely resembles the Tifinagh letter *yaz* (or *aza*), which means "free man." (The Tifinagh alphabet is used to write Tamazight languages, a group of related dialects found in Amazigh communities.) The same symbol is found on the official Amazigh flag, which was designed in the 1970s and formally adopted in 1997. Embellishing the traditional letterforms, Cherkaoui merges his Moroccan and European education into a single work, casting his "free man" in a new context.

Born in Boujad, Morocco, at the foot of the Atlas Mountains, Cherkaoui developed a visual language inflected by his childhood education at a traditional Qur'anic school and by his mother's Amazigh tattoos, worn by descendants of the nomadic Berber tribes in North Africa. Later, he was influenced by European artists such as Roger Bissière and Paul Klee, and by the French movement known as Art Informel. After studying graphic design at the Académie des Métiers d'Art in Paris from 1956 to 1959, Cherkaoui spent a year at the Akademia Sztuk Pięknych (Academy of Fine Arts) in Warsaw and held his first solo show in Paris. Among numerous international exhibitions of his work was one held in 1996 at the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris.

Saloua Raouda Choucair
(Beirut, 1916–2017)
Interform, 1960
Wood
No. 162

In this wood sculpture, Saloua Raouda Choucair draws upon two essential elements of Islamic design—the straight line and the curve. Dynamic yet balanced, *Interform* is made of solid planes and voids that generate a sense of both architectural presence and spatial rhythm.

Before working in sculpture in the 1960s, Choucair focused on painting, taking classes at the American University of Beirut and then traveling to Paris to study with Fernand Léger at the École des Beaux-Arts. Her transition to sculpture enabled her to explore movement and silence inspired by Arabic verse and music. In her sculptures, Choucair often employs interlocking modular elements, connecting them to one another like a puzzle.

Saloua Raouda Choucair
(Beirut, 1916–2017)
Composition in Yellow, 1962–65
Oil on fiberboard
No. 20

Saloua Raouda Choucair is widely considered one of Lebanon’s first abstract artists. Acclaimed for her pioneering vision and deeply intellectual approach, she found sources of inspiration in mathematics and science as well as Islamic art, architecture, geometric patterns, and spirituality. Choucair used an algorithmically generated method to transform primary spaces and lines into increasingly complex abstract forms. Drawing on her academic background in mathematics and physics, as well as her Druze faith, she grounded works like *Composition in Yellow*, seen here, in irregular geometric shapes to capture the essence of Islamic heritage.

In the mid-1930s, Choucair studied natural sciences at Beirut’s American Junior College for Women, and in 1942, she trained in the studio of Lebanese artist Omar Onsi; in 1946 she attended Lebanese painter Moustafa Farroukh’s art classes at the American University of Beirut. Moving to Paris in 1948, she enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts and in the studio of Fernand Léger. Her first non-figurative works date from the early 1950s, when she was studying with Léger. At the same time, her inclination toward geometric shapes and Arabic letterforms led her to organize, with other avant-garde artists, the Atelier de l’Art Abstrait. In 1951 she returned to Beirut, where she lived and worked until her death in 2017. In 2011 the Beirut Art Center (BAC) honored her with a retrospective, as did Tate Modern, London, in 2013.

Saliba Douaihy
(Ehden, Lebanon, 1915–New York City, 1994)
Untitled, c. 1960–69
Oil on canvas board
No. 12

Known for his minimalist aesthetic, Saliba Douaihy works in a precise, hard-edge style grounded in his keen interest in color and form. His works on view in the exhibition, including this one, *Untitled*, epitomize his 1960s practice, which was deeply influenced by American artist Josef Albers. Here his canvas is dominated by a vast swath of blue, spliced with red, yellow, green, and black. Although Douaihy's asymmetrical shapes lie on a single flat plane, in layering them one atop the other, he creates a nuanced illusion of depth.

Saliba Douaihy
(Ehden, Lebanon, 1915–New York City, 1994)
Untitled, 1963
Oil on canvas
No. 165

Saliba Douaihy is one of Lebanon's most prominent abstract painters. Born into an old, storied Maronite family of distant French extraction, he received classical formal training—one that placed great emphasis on figurative, religious subjects. Early on, he apprenticed with the academic Lebanese painter Habib Srour before continuing his studies in Paris at the École des Beaux-Arts. During his four years in Paris, he won prizes for his drawings and paintings. Returning Lebanon in 1936, he opened his own studio. By the 1940s, he began developing his interest in modern art, mainly through experiments with color.

In 1950 he emigrated to New York, where he met artists—such as Mark Rothko, Hans Hofmann, and Ad Reinhardt—whose abstract styles transformed his own practice. In 1955, Douaihy returned to Lebanon and did more work for churches. He returned to New York in 1963 and eventually became a U.S. citizen. In 1965, one of his paintings was donated to New York's Museum of Modern Art. In the 1980s, he moved back to Lebanon, and toward the end of his life, he relocated to Paris and then back to New York. Churches that commissioned him to paint murals and create stained-glass windows include not only several in Lebanon, but also Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Cathedral in Brooklyn and Our Lady of the Cedars of Lebanon in Boston.

Saliba Douaihy
(Ehden, Lebanon, 1915–New York City, 1994)
Untitled, 1965
Acrylic on canvas
No. 33

Mohanna Durra
(Born Amman, 1934)
Transparency, 1970
Oil on canvas
No. 56

Mohanna Durra is hailed as one of Jordan's first painters to experiment with abstract art. Seen here is *Transparency*, which exemplifies his geometric compositions and his technique of

layering color not only to produce depth and texture but also to convey a sense of motion. Although at first glance this work's colors appear relatively subdued, upon closer look they become progressively brighter as they move toward the center, where Durra spotlights individual lines, shapes, and planes.

Born in Amman, Jordan, to a Lebanese father and a Turkish mother, Durra studied early on with Russian artist George Aleef and William Hallowin, who was Dutch. Their artistic principles informed Durra's early practice, which centered on light's ability to evoke dramatic movement and energy, as well as a preference for figurative and portrait painting. During his four years at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, Durra developed an interest in abstraction. Returning to Amman in 1958, he began pursuing his career as a diplomat, shuttling between Amman and Rome. Upon his return to Jordan in 1970, he helped found the Jordan Institute of Fine Arts, where he served as director until its closing in 1980. Durra currently teaches at the School of Arts and Design, University of Jordan, and is president of the Jordan Association of Fine Arts. In 2002 the Government of Jordan issued a postage stamp bearing an image of one of his paintings.

Simone Fattal
(Born Damascus, 1942)
Celestial Forms, 1973
Oil on canvas
No. 70

Straddling the worlds of visual art and literature, Simone Fattal creates sculptures, nonfigurative ceramic works, paintings, collages, and text-based pieces. Born in Syria, she studied philosophy at the École Supérieure des Lettres in Beirut, and later at the Sorbonne in Paris. Returning to Beirut in 1969, she began her career as a painter, exploring Sufi and other religious texts as well as the local landscape—and developing an elegant gestural style. Drawing on a rich vocabulary inspired by her knowledge of Arab history, ancient and modern Arabic literature, and women's history, Fattal creates abstract renditions of nature and the human form. With its white palette mixed with shades of pink, *Celestial Forms*, seen here, exemplifies her early work.

In 1980 she moved to California with her partner, Lebanese-American artist Etel Adnan, whose painting *Autumn in Yosemite Valley* is on view nearby. Two years later, Fattal founded Post-Apollo Press (1979–2014), a publishing house inspired by the spirit of exploration and adventure characteristic of the Apollo space program. At the press, she published experimental poetry, prose, and works in translation. In 1989 she enrolled at the San Francisco Art Institute, turning her attention back to the visual arts, in particular ceramics and sculpture. In the early 2000s, she and Adnan returned to France, where they still live today. An exhibition of her work was held at MoMA PS1 in New York in 2019.

Asma Fayoumi
(Born Amman, 1943)
Ritha' Madina (Requiem of a City), 1968
Oil on canvas
No. 175

Asma Fayoumi's artistic career coincided with the emergence of a school of Syrian abstraction led by Italian painter Guido La Regina, who taught at Damascus University. Alongside Assad Arabi, Faek Dahdouch, and Sakher Farzat, Fayoumi attended the university's College of Fine Arts. These artists became critical figures in Syrian art's transition from realism to contemporary forms of abstraction.

With her first solo exhibition in Damascus in 1966, Fayoumi made her first mark on the regional art scene. *Ritha' Madina* (Requiem of a City), seen here, exemplifies her early work, which focuses on abstract representations of architectural forms and street views. Inspired by Arabic poetry, her layered imagery packs an emotional punch through its dynamic composition, bold colors, and strong gestural marks. In her recent work, Fayoumi focuses on Syria's political turmoil as well as on the depiction of mythical figures, often female.

Abdel Hady el-Gazzar
(Alexandria, Egypt, 1925–Cairo, 1966)
The Light from Within the Green, 1958
Oil, pen, and ink on paper
No. 9

Born in Alexandria, Abdel Hady el-Gazzar moved with his family in 1940 to Cairo, where he joined the art club at Hilmiya Secondary School, winning prizes in school drawing competitions. The club was led by Hussein Youssef Amin, an artist who rejected Western academic approaches to art making. El-Gazzar entered medical school in 1944 but soon left to attend Cairo's School of Fine Arts. After graduating in 1950, he held his first solo exhibition at the Egyptian Museum of Modern Art in Cairo, and four years later, he earned a scholarship to study in Rome.

While in Italy, el-Gazzar participated in Bari's Monstra Nazionale di Pittura Contemporanea (National Exhibition of Contemporary Paintings), where he won the silver medal. He also exhibited works in the 26th, 28th, and 30th Venice Biennales in 1952, 1956, and 1960. A renowned and influential Egyptian artist, el-Gazzar is best known for focusing on the stark poverty of Cairo's working class and for his other political critiques.

Jilali Gharbaoui
(Jorf el-Melha, Morocco, 1930–Paris 1971)
Composition, 1969
Oil on paper
No. 45

A leading artist in Morocco's modernist movement, Jilali Gharbaoui began his artistic journey in a secondary school in Fez. He continued his training at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and then spent a year in Rome. While Gharbaoui's earlier works are relatively figurative, his later paintings, which draw upon Amazigh symbolism, are grounded in the artist's gestural brushstrokes and the paint's materiality.

In *Composition*, seen here, black outlines evoke Amazigh tattoos, which were traditionally placed on women and men's bodies as both tokens of beauty and amulets for protection and well-being. Throughout his life, Gharbaoui suffered from mental illness, and in 1971 his body was found on a bench in Champs de Mars in Paris; it was repatriated to Morocco, and he is buried in Fez. Despite his short life, Gharbaoui's work is celebrated worldwide.

Samia Halaby
(Born Jerusalem, 1936)
Two Diagonals, 1968
Oil on linen
No. 161

Samia Halaby completed *Two Diagonals* and *White Cube in Brown Cube*, on view nearby, following a visit to Egypt, Syria, and Turkey in 1966. That same year she received a grant from the Kansas City Art Institute in Missouri, where she was teaching at the time, which enabled her to pursue her interest in studying Islamic architecture. On this trip, she visited and photographed mosques and took interest in construction principles and the geometric lattices commonly found in Islamic patterns.

Born in Jerusalem, Halaby is a Palestinian artist, scholar, and art historian known for abstract works that draw on her longstanding fascination with the act of seeing and visual perception. Raised in Jaffa, Halaby emigrated with her family to Lebanon in the wake of Al-Nakba, the 1948 occupation and exodus of Palestine. During her years in the Middle East, Islamic geometric forms were part of her daily life. In 1951 she moved to Ohio, then earned an MFA in painting from Indiana University. She was the first woman to attain the rank of associate professor at the Yale School of Art, a position she held for nearly a decade.

Samia Halaby
(Born Jerusalem, 1936)
White Cube in Brown Cube, 1969
Oil on canvas
No. 49

Samia Halaby painted *White Cube in Brown Cube* during her period of geometric experimentation between 1966 and 1970. Exploring how the color of painted volumes facilitates illusions of depth and space, she found inspiration in nature, Islamic designs, and architecture. Speaking of the construction of this piece, Halaby said, "I placed a smaller white cube inside a larger brown cube and allowed the perimeter of one side of the larger brown cube to coincide with the square edge of the painting. We only see the top surface of the smaller white cube and thus it appears to float as a white square in the brown space."

Through her art, writing, and curatorial work, Halaby has long advocated for Palestinian rights. In the 1980s, she experimented with electronic media, teaching herself computer programming languages and collaborating with musicians to create live kinetic performances.

Mohamed Hamidi
(Born Casablanca, 1941)
Untitled, 1971
Oil on wood
No. 60

To create this work, Mohamed Hamidi divided his composition into two parts; each half contains a graphic abstraction evoking female or male genitalia. Born in Casablanca, Hamidi studied at Casablanca's École des Beaux-Arts before relocating in 1959 to France, where he enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. After graduation, he worked as an assistant to French fresco painter Jean Aujame. Upon his return to Casablanca, Hamidi became a professor at his alma mater.

In 1969 he participated in an open-air exhibition in the Jemaa el-Fna, the main market in Marrakech, alongside other major Moroccan artists including Farid Belkahia, Mohamed Chebaa, and Mohamed Melehi, works by all of whom are on view nearby. The exhibition at Jemaa el-Fna marks a crucial turning point in Moroccan art: Many of the works on view there were painted in bright colors—which soon became a hallmark of the Moroccan modernist aesthetic.

Menhat Helmy
(Helwan, Egypt, 1925–Cairo, 2004)
Space Exploration / Universe, 1973
Oil on canvas
No. 186

Born in Helwan, Egypt, Menhat Helmy received her early education at Cairo's High Institute of Pedagogic Studies for Art before moving to London to study etching at the Slade School of Fine Art between 1952 and 1955. Marked by socialist ideas and revolutionary themes, Helmy's early work depicts workers, farmers, and elaborate rural scenes.

In her later abstract works, such as *Space Exploration / Universe*, seen here, she employs geometry to create intricate conceptual compositions. Throughout her career, Helmy participated in international art exhibitions, winning numerous prizes. She was a professor of fine arts at Helwan University in Cairo and an honorary professor of etching at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence, in addition to serving as a member of the Printmakers Council in the United Kingdom.

Adam Henein
(Born Cairo, 1929)
The First Blush of Morning, 1986
Gouache and gum arabic on papyrus
No. 140

The First Blush of Morning demonstrates Adam Henein's practice of interweaving universal themes and motifs—motherhood, prayer, birds, and boats among them—with references to specifically Egyptian icons such as pyramids, obelisks, Pharaonic kings, and hieroglyphs. Part of

a larger series, this work was painted on papyrus and, like the artist's sculptural pieces, conveys a simplicity of form.

Born into a family of silversmiths, Henein graduated from Cairo's School of Fine Arts in 1953 and traveled to Upper Egypt to work in Luxor, becoming immersed in the region's ancient legacy of sculpture and architecture. Continuing his training at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, he relocated to Paris in 1971. After returning to Egypt in 1996, Henein founded an annual symposium on sculpture. Establishing his home and studio near Giza, which is a center for traditional arts and architecture, he opened the Adam Henein Museum in Cairo in 2014. Henein's artistic contributions have been recognized with both exhibitions and awards across the Middle East and in Europe and the United States.

Jafar Islah
(Born Kuwait City, 1946)
The Void, 1967
Acrylic on canvas
No. 38

One of Kuwait's most prolific modern artists, Jafar Islah often incorporates Islamic geometry in his work. At first glance, this painting appears black, but upon closer examination, we can distinguish twenty different colors, one atop the other. These variations become increasingly visible as we approach the canvas.

Jafar Islah
(Born Kuwait City, 1946)
Untitled, 1967
Acrylic on canvas
No. 39

Note: Not on view at the Grey Art Gallery, NYU

Jafar Islah
(Born Kuwait City, 1946)
Colors with Black and Gray, 1968
Acrylic on canvas
No. 42

Setting each part of his composition slightly off center, Jafar Islah achieves a balance between complete abstraction and organic presence. Islah has cited Paul Klee's 1922 painting *Senecio* (Kunstmuseum, Basel) as an influence on this work.

In 1970, Islah received his BA in architecture from the University of California, Berkeley. While studying there on one of the first scholarships from Kuwait University to send students abroad, he encountered the writings of medieval Islamic philosopher Abu Nasr al-Farabi. Farabi introduced Islah to the concept of "less is more" that informed his minimalist

approach. In addition, Islah absorbed from a mathematician neighbor, the concept that zero is the largest number.

Pursuing multiple influences and interests, Islah employs symbols and references from a variety of cultures; as a result, his work does not conform to any specific style, medium, or ideology. Throughout his career, he has challenged the notion that abstraction's origins lie solely in the West; instead, he merges multiple cultural traditions into his understanding of non-figurative forms. He has lived and worked in Kuwait, Denmark, Egypt, France, India, Indonesia, Italy, Turkey, and the U.S., and has exhibited widely, including at the Kuwait National Museum (1984); first Cairo Biennial (1984); and Egyptian Academy in Rome (1991). Most recently, he received a solo retrospective at Kuwait's Contemporary Art Platform (2012).

Ibrahim Ismail
(Born Kuwait City, 1945)
Earthquake, Agadir, 1967
Oil on canvas
No. 37

A major figure in Kuwait's art world, Ibrahim Ismail is best known for landscapes rendered in vibrant colors and a segmented style, as well as his paintings of daily life, which meander between public and private spaces and the people occupying them. He depicts old marketplaces, street corners, and shops, as well as themes that center on Kuwaiti heritage or deal with political events. With its vibrant purples, yellows, blues, greens, oranges, and pinks, *Earthquake, Agadir*, seen here, conveys the chaos unleashed by a major tremor of the 1960 earthquake in Agadir, Morocco, which caused the deaths of thousands of people and left many others homeless.

After graduating from Kuwait's Teachers Institute in 1968, Ismail attended the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts, where he majored in Décor Engineering. A member of the Kuwaiti Society for Formative Arts, he represented Kuwait at the first Arab Biennial, held in Baghdad in 1974. Also known as a writer, in 1990 he published a book on the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait titled *Hitler Once Again*. His work has been included in over 100 exhibitions throughout the Middle East, Europe, the United States, and Japan. In 2015 he received a retrospective at Kuwait's Boushahri Art Gallery.

Saadi Al-Kaabi
(Born Najaf, Iraq, 1937)
Composition, 1967–72
Oil on canvas
No. 41

Al-Kaabi deploys simplified color planes and dynamic contours to create abstract forms. In *Composition*, he applies thick, highly textured layers of earth-toned paint. Evoking an aerial landscape view, he concentrates darker tones at the center, with lines and shapes extending out toward the painting's edges.

A member of the second generation of Iraqi modernist artists, Al-Kaabi graduated from Baghdad's Institute of Fine Arts in 1960. Drawing together modern aesthetic influences with

others from Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian, and Islamic Art, his work explores nuances of the human condition. His signature style first emerged in the 1970s, when he married figural forms and geometric shapes with symbols of Iraq's history. Al-Kaabi often engages with a broader discourse concerned with fashioning new national identities, by looking to the past in search of cultural authenticity.

He has participated in numerous international exhibitions, including the 37th Venice Biennale in 1976, and he served as the president of the Iraqi Plastic Artists' Society between 1986 and 1990. In the 1980s, he destroyed his archive of press clippings covering his career in an attempt to circumvent his success and begin a new chapter. He currently lives and works in Los Angeles.

Munira Al-Kazi
(Born Pune, India, 1939)
Untitled, c. 1960–65
Mixed media on canvas
No. 51

Munira Al-Kazi made some of the earliest experiments in nonrepresentational painting in Kuwait—and went on to enjoy a highly successful and acclaimed career. She was born in Pune, India, to a prominent Saudi-Kuwaiti merchant family that relocated to India in the first half of the 20th century, then returned to Kuwait after the discovery of oil. Sponsored by Kuwait University's study-abroad program, she attended college at London's Central School of Art. Following her graduation in 1961, she established her studio in London.

In 1965, the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired one of her works. Quickly attracting numerous Kuwaiti collectors, her paintings were included in the inaugural exhibition of the Sultan Gallery in 1969. Al-Kazi exhibited her paintings and etchings in Europe and the Middle East until the 1970s, when she moved to Ibiza, Spain. In the early 2000s, she began incorporating digital media in her work.

Munira Al-Kazi
(Born Pune, India, 1939)
Untitled, 1962
Monotype
No. 21

Munira Al-Kazi developed an interest in printmaking while studying at London's Central School of Art and Design. This monotype exemplifies her abstract representations of human figures and groups. Monotype is a planographic printing process—the maker does not disturb the surface of the printing plate but rather lays ink directly on it, in contrast with a relief print such as woodcut or engraving. While other printmaking techniques are designed to produce multiple copies, a monotype yields only one print.

Mohammed Khadda

(Mostaganem, Algeria, 1930–Algiers, 1991)
Abstraction vert (Green Abstraction), 1969
Oil on canvas
No. 48

Mohammed Khadda
(Mostaganem, Algeria, 1930–Algiers, 1991)
Abstraction vert sur fond orange (Green Abstraction on Orange Background), 1969
Oil on canvas
No. 47

In both his works on view here, Mohammed Khadda places a graphic form against a background of brown and yellow hues. His quasi-calligraphic shapes call to mind pictograms and illegible asemic writing. *Abstraction vert sur fond orange*, seen here, also resembles a desert landscape with traditional flat-roofed North African buildings. Lined up as if on a horizon, these minimalist white cubes, under an indecipherable letter-like shape in the sky, evoke the artist's local topography.

A true pioneer, during the 1950s Khadda helped lead a generation of Algerian artists in their quest to combine Arab and Amazigh calligraphy with Western abstraction. After traveling to Paris in the course of his work in book manufacturing, Khadda spent ten years there before returning to Algeria in 1963. Following Algeria's independence from France in 1962, Khadda and his contemporaries redoubled their efforts to forge a distinctly Algerian national visual language.

This political transition sparked the founding of multiple Algerian art movements, including the Aouchem (Tattoo) Group and the École du Signe (School of the Sign) in 1967. As one of the first artists to utilize the Tifinagh alphabet in his paintings, Khadda was viewed as a ringleader in the École du Signe. Even as he advocated for an art that transcended literal and metaphorical representation, Khadda firmly believed that art should be broadly accessible. Throughout his career, he sought to reconcile his desire for a distinctively Algerian artistic practice with his belief in the possibility of universal abstraction. He also called for an artistic practice that extended beyond the political propaganda and agitation that dominated the Algerian art scene around the time of independence.

Helen Khal
(Allentown, Pennsylvania, 1923–Ajaltoun, Lebanon, 2009)
Untitled (Ochre over Brown), 1968
Oil on canvas
No. 43

Born in Pennsylvania to Lebanese immigrants, Helen Khal began her artistic career in the early 1940s, and following a 1946 visit with her grandfather in Tripoli, she settled in Lebanon. From 1946 to 1948, she studied under the well-known painter César Gemayel at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA), focusing on portraiture and still life. Soon Khal began experimenting with the ethereal, abstract color fields for which she is known today.

She composed *Untitled (Ochre over Brown)*, 1968, on view here, in golden color blocks that evoke a hazy, light-infused horizon. Scholars have pointed to Mark Rothko's color-field paintings as a source of inspiration for Khal. Since the 1960s, she has held a prominent place in Lebanon's art scene, as an artist, art critic, and educator. In 1963 she co-founded, with her husband, poet Yusuf Khal, Lebanon's first permanent art gallery, Gallery One in Beirut, which hosted exhibitions and fostered the local artists' community. Between 1967 and 1976, she taught at the American University of Beirut, switching to Lebanese American University from 1980 until 1997. In 1987, Khal published her groundbreaking book *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*.

Rachid Koraïchi
(Born Aïn Beïda, Algeria, 1947)

Sans toi, ni moi ou l'hallucination nostalgique (Without You, or Me, or the Nostalgic Hallucination), 1986

Cet espace incrusté de nos destins (This Space is Inlaid with Our Destinies), 1986

Ink on clay on wood
Nos. 138, 139

Descended from a long line of Qur'anic scholars who adhere to Sufi Islam, Rachid Koraïchi approaches the practice of art as an extension of prayer and devotional rituals. Here Arabic and Chinese letterforms, layered one atop the other, reflect Koraïchi's interest in language, scripture, signs, and spiritual practice. Exploring links between metaphysics, spirituality, and aesthetics in his sculptures, paintings, and installations, Koraïchi created a signature visual vocabulary of symbolism and forms that reference numerous calligraphic traditions, drawing on a variety of influences.

First trained as a calligrapher, Koraïchi began his formal studies at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Algiers between 1967 and 1971. He finished his studies in Paris at the *École des Arts Décoratifs* and *École des Beaux-Arts* from 1971 to 1977. Working in a wide range of media, including painting, ceramics, textiles, installation art, metallurgy, and printmaking, he often collaborates with Francophone poets and writers, as well as North African artisans. Koraïchi's art has been exhibited extensively internationally, and he participated in the 47th and 49th Venice Biennales (1997, 2001). In 2011 he won the Victoria and Albert Museum's Jameel Prize, an international award for contemporary artists inspired by the traditions of Islamic craft and design.

Miloud Labied
(El Kelâa des Sraghna, Morocco, 1939–Rabat, 2008)
Untitled, 1970s
Oil on canvas
No. 68

In this somber, near-monochromatic painting, Miloud Labied arranges geometric shapes in deep tones. At the time he completed it, Moroccan artists were negotiating their roles in developing a modernist Moroccan visual language.

Labied was a member of the Casablanca School—an avant-garde movement that emerged from the city’s École des Beaux-Arts in the mid-1960s and sought to liberate art from the legacy of French colonialism. From 1958, when he had his first solo exhibition at the Oudaya Museum in Rabat, to 1962, he was apprenticed to French-born artist Jacqueline Brodskis at Morocco’s Ministry of Youth and Sports. In 1974 Labied attended the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Labied participated in exhibitions in Morocco, Egypt, France, Portugal, and Denmark. In his Rabat apartment, he displayed paintings by his friends alongside his collection of Art Deco furniture.

Miloud Labied
(El Kelâa des Sraghna, Morocco, 1939–Rabat, 2008)
Composition, 1973–75
Oil on canvas
No. 67

Here Labied conveys a strong sense of organic movement via earth tones, loose brushstrokes, and swirling lines. In repeating primary shapes such as the circle, he references fertility and the perpetual cycle of life and death, connecting his art with notions of the eternal.

Hussein Madi
(Chebaa, Lebanon, 1938)
Alphabet, 1973
30 etchings on cotton paper
No. 66

This set of thirty etchings reflects Hussein Madi’s skill across multiple media, including sculpture, painting, and graphic design. Each print’s unique graphic form is grounded in Arabic letterforms and geometry—and, seen as a whole, the series comprises a visual alphabet of sorts.

Hussein Madi
(Chebaa, Lebanon, 1938)
Untitled, c. 1960s
Acrylic on canvas
No. 13

During the 1960s, Hussein Madi began converting gestures and symbols into purely abstract shapes. His sources included works by European artists such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso as well as Islamic art.

After graduating from Beirut’s Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA) in 1962, he worked as a graphic designer and caricaturist for various newspapers in Baghdad. In 1963 he

continued his studies at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome. In 1986, after living for twenty-three years between Italy and Lebanon, he returned permanently to Beirut to teach sculpture and engraving at Lebanese University and ALBA. Today he often exhibits in Beirut, and in 2003 he participated in the 50th Venice Biennale.

Najat Makki
(Born Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 1956)
Window, 1987
Henna and acrylic on paper
No. 151

A pioneer in the UAE art scene, Najat Makki has worked in a wide range of media over the past three decades. In her work—which is influenced by the Egyptian artists Mahmoud Mokhtar and Hamed Nada—Makki often addresses Dubai’s landscapes and heritage.

The first Emirati woman to receive a government scholarship to study abroad, Makki traveled to Cairo in 1977 to attend the School of Fine Arts, receiving a BA and MA in relief sculpture and metalwork. Back in the UAE, she worked as an art teacher for the Ministry of Education. Later in life, she returned to Cairo for further study, earning her PhD in visual arts at the School of Fine Arts in 2001. She has exhibited widely in the Gulf region and is an active member of the Dubai Cultural Council, Emirates Fine Art Society, and GCC Art Friends Group.

Seta Manoukian
(Born Beirut, 1945)
Across the Town, from the series Bedsheets, 1970
Oil on canvas
No. 190

In *Across the Town*, from her Bedsheets series, Seta Manoukian creates a wild vortex of swirling forms through dynamic brushwork laid on in thick, textured strokes. Her later work is calmer and more introspective, grounded in pliant organic shapes.

Born in Lebanon to parents of Armenian descent, Manoukian began her training with celebrated Armenian-Lebanese artist Paul Guiragossian. At the age of 17, after winning an art competition organized by the Embassy of Italy in Beirut, she left for Perugia, where she took a three-month art training program. Later she enrolled at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, remaining in Italy for four years. Her engagement with artists, journalists, and writers there coincided with her growing interest in social and political issues.

Soon after her return to Beirut to teach at the Lebanese University in 1975, the Lebanese Civil War broke out. During this time, Manoukian volunteered with children in underprivileged neighborhoods, teaching drawing and painting. She published two books compiling their artworks, *War through the Eyes of Lebanese Children* and *Taches rouges et bleues*. After moving to Los Angeles in 1985, Manoukian began pursuing spirituality, meditation, and Eastern philosophies, eventually traveling to Sri Lanka in 2000 to study Buddhist philosophy and becoming an ordained Buddhist nun in 2005. She currently lives and works in Los Angeles and continues to paint and practice Buddhism.

Mohamed Melehi
(Born Asilah, Morocco, 1936)
Untitled, 1975
Cellulose paint on wood
No. 74

In this work, Mohamed Melehi employs curvilinear lines that evoke ocean waves, landscapes, and elements of Arabic letterforms. Aiming to create an authentically Moroccan visual language, he merges Western modernist approaches with elements derived from Morocco's culture.

Mohamed Melehi
(Born Asilah, Morocco, 1936)
Composition, 1970
Acrylic on wood
No. 53

Completed in 1970, this painting reflects Mohamed Melehi's fully developed approach to abstraction. This large-scale, hard-edge painting features curvilinear fields of vibrant color, with four waves overlapping at the work's center.

During the 1960s, Melehi co-founded the Casablanca School, a group of avant-garde artists seeking to develop a new model for artistic practice in postcolonial Morocco. Other artists in *Taking Shape* who belonged to this group include Malika Agueznay and Farid Belkahia. For a 1969 exhibition at Jemaa el-Fna, Marrakech's main public square, the group covered the walls of nearby buildings with their paintings, asserting that art could be part of everyday life.

After graduating from the Institut National des Beaux-Arts in Tétouan, Morocco in 1955, Melehi moved to Spain and enrolled at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de Santa Isabel de Hungría in Seville. After continuing his training at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid, he studied sculpture and engraving in Rome and Paris. In 1962 he received a scholarship to attend Columbia University in New York City, where he became friends with artists such as Jim Dine, Jasper Johns, and Frank Stella.

At the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, Melehi's work was on view in the International Meeting of Sculptors public art exhibition. For the occasion, Melehi created a three-dimensional sculpture along the "Route of Friendship," which was installed on the road uniting the Olympic venues. Melehi has received solo exhibitions at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York (1984–85); Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris (1995); and, most recently, London's Mosaic Rooms (2019).

Omar El-Nagdi
(Cairo, 1931–2019)
Untitled, 1970
Mixed media on wood
No. 57

Omar El-Nagdi is best known for his rhythmic abstractions based on the repetition of the Indian (Eastern Arabic) numeral one, which shares its form with the first letter of the Arabic alphabet (*alef*), which is also the first letter in the name of God (Allah). He began using this minimal letterform to build his abstract compositions in the 1960s and '70s—as in the untitled work seen here. Rhythmically repeating and layering the same symbol, El-Nagdi creates a pulsating image that channels meditative elements of Sufi practice, focusing in particular on the indivisible nature of the divine.

In 1953 El-Nagdi graduated from the School of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1953, where he studied under Egyptian painter Ahmed Sabri. Continuing his training in the Soviet Union and Italy, he immersed himself in the avant-garde circle around celebrated Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico, who became his mentor. Later he attended Venice's Accademia di Belle Arti, graduating in 1964. Following his return to Egypt, he was active in Cairo's art community, becoming a member of the Liberal Artists' group of intellectuals and artists headed by Taha Hussein, and founding the Egyptian Mosaics Group in 1964. Throughout his career, El-Nagdi refused to commit to a single artistic style, instead drawing inspiration from the diverse cultures of rural Egypt as well as from Cairo's urban district, Bab el-Shereya.

Nabil Nahas
(Born Beirut, 1949)
Untitled (Kitty Hawk), 1980
Acrylic on canvas
No. 160

Nabil Nahas is best known for his densely tactile, large-scale monochromatic paintings. Primarily an abstract artist, he creates intricate patterns from natural objects, such as starfishes and cedar, olive, and palm trees. His major sources of inspiration include nature and the geometries of Islamic art. In *Untitled (Kitty Hawk)*, seen here—named after the town in North Carolina near where the Wright Brothers successfully flew the first powered aircraft—he layers angular forms one atop the other.

Nabil Nahas
(Born Beirut, 1949)
Untitled, 1983
Acrylic on canvas
No. 127

This untitled painting of 1983 derives from a series of black canvases featuring dripped vertical white marks that Nabil Nahas began painting after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Nahas grew up in Cairo and Beirut and attended college in the United States, where he earned a BFA from Louisiana State University in 1971 and an MFA from the Yale School of Art in 1973. He has exhibited extensively in the U.S. and internationally, and his works are in the collections of many major museums. Nahas currently lives and works in New York.

Rafa Nasiri
(Tikrit, Iraq, 1940–Amman, 2013)
Untitled (Baghdad), 1975
Acrylic on canvas
No. 185

Here Rafa Nasiri evokes Baghdad in an atmospheric landscape that merely hints at a skyline, figures, and urban streets. Marshaling somber colors and fluid, gestural lines, he creates a mysterious abstract space. Intensely focused on the inner life, he was influenced by poetry and traditional Chinese ink-wash painting, with its emphasis on telling brushwork and negative space. Between 1959 and 1963, Nasiri pursued his deep interest in Chinese art by studying printmaking at Beijing’s Central Academy of Fine Arts.

Rafa Nasiri
(Tikrit, Iraq, 1940–Amman, 2013)
Variations of the Horizon No. 5, 1979
Acrylic on canvas
No. 98

Rafa Nasiri was celebrated for his compelling abstract works, which drew on nature and calligraphy for inspiration. In *Variations of the Horizon No. 5*, seen here, he draws on nature in the form of repeated horizons—but as a means to consider nature’s multiplicity rather than as a naturalistic view. In parsing the horizon’s variations, he reflects on the ever-shifting state of the world around him. The stacked shape at the bottom contains letterforms, reflecting his interest in Arabic calligraphy.

A founding member of the New Vision (Al-Ru’yah al-Jadida) group which formed in Baghdad in response to the 1967 Six-Day War, Nasiri taught with his fellow members at several universities throughout the region. Following the Gulf War in 1991, he moved to Amman to teach; there he played an instrumental role in launching the printmaking studio at Darat al-Funun (Khalid Shoman Foundation). In 1997 Nasiri moved to Bahrain to teach at the national university, and in 2003 he returned to Amman, where he lived and worked until his death.

Hind Nasser
(Born Amman, 1940)
Ayla, 1975
Oil on canvas
No. 189

Hind Nasser painted this abstract landscape—perhaps titled after the Arabic name for the ancient Jordanian city of Elath, today known as Aqaba—just before starting her art training with Fahrelnissa Zeid, a well-known Turkish artist, in 1976. At Zeid’s art school, which was located in her house in Amman, Nasser worked alongside other women artists, including Ufemia Rizk, whose *Multiple Dimensions* is on in the Lower Level Gallery.

After graduating from Beirut College for Women (now Lebanese American University) in 1961 with a degree in politics and history, Nasser helped develop the cultural scene in Jordan. She founded Beirut College's alumnae club, a children's club in Amman focused on theater and visual arts, and finally the Jordan Crafts Council to support traditional local crafts. She also co-founded the Jordan Museum for Archaeology. In 1995, she established the Jordan Arts and Crafts Center, followed by Gallery 14 for fine art exhibitions.

Samir Rafi
(Cairo, 1926–Paris 2004)
Untitled, 1959
Oil on burlap
No. 11

Best known for his Surrealist approach to painting daily life in Egypt, Samir Rafi was a prominent member of the Contemporary Art Group, an artist collective founded in 1946 by pioneering artist Hussayn Yusuf Amin that sprang from an anti-colonial, nationalist consciousness inspired by folk symbolism. Its members often depicted workers and urban scenes. As a youth, Rafi had studied with Amin, who organized Rafi's first exhibition in 1943, when he was 17 years old.

Rafi attended the School of Fine Arts in Cairo and continued his training at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he earned advanced degrees in art and a PhD in art history. In the 1940s and '50s, he actively participated in the Egyptian art scene, exploring Surrealism as a member of the group Art et Liberté, and experimenting with printmaking and decorative arts. He also wrote, publishing several articles, including one about the influence of the Egyptian revolution of 1952 on art.

Rafi's turn toward abstraction may have been an act of self-censorship, to avoid the government crackdowns that led to the imprisonment of other Egyptian artists. In the work seen here, dizzying entanglements of abstracted limbs and organs suggest not only that the human is no longer recognizable but also that the social world has fostered an environment in which the body is no longer separate from an idealized object world—and that, even more drastically, it is subject to the latter's relentless abstracting logic.

Aref El Rayess
(Aley, Lebanon, 1928–Beirut, 2005)
Untitled, c. 1960s
Oil on fiberboard
No. 15

A master of multiple media including tapestry, sculpture, and painting, Aref El Rayess experimented with abstraction and, influenced by his travels across West Africa, incorporated folkloric and mystical motifs into his work. Initially a self-taught artist, he held his first exhibition at the American University of Beirut in 1948. He then moved to Paris, where he befriended the French actor and mime artist Marcel Marceau and enrolled in the studios of André Lhote, Fernand Léger, and Ossip Zadkine while also studying at the Académie de la Grande

Chaumière. After living for several years between Senegal and Paris, he returned to Lebanon, only to receive a government scholarship in 1956 to continue his training in Rome and Florence. In 1963 he returned to Beirut, where he taught at Lebanese University and served as President of the Lebanese Artists Association of Painters and Sculptors.

Ufemia Rizk
(Born Jaffa, Palestine, 1943)
Multiple Dimensions, 1979
Oil on canvas
No. 188

Ufemia Rizk combines thoughtful introspection with a desire to explore the mysteries of the universe. In her paintings—such as *Multiple Dimensions*, seen here—she combines geometry and gestural abstraction to present personal, idiosyncratic reflections on the physical world around her.

Born in Jaffa in 1943, Rizk studied at the American University in Beirut, the Sorbonne in Paris, and Fahrelnissa Zeid’s private art school in Amman. She has had numerous solo exhibitions throughout her career, including at Katia Granoff Gallery in Paris in 1979 and at the Galerie Simon Blais, Montreal, and the Centro Culturale d’Arte San Michele, Milan, both in 1993. She currently lives and works in Montreal, Canada.

Mahmoud Sabri
(Baghdad, 1927–Maidenhead, England, 2012)
Water, from the series Quantum Realism, c. 1970
Oil on canvas
No. 180

Among the most revered figures in Iraqi modernist art, Mahmoud Sabri articulated an artistic theory, titled Quantum Realism, which saw nature as a “complex of processes” and sought to represent it through a color-coded system with a three-fold foundation: the quantum (the basic energy/color unit), the atom (a group of quanta), and the structural process (the graphic equivalent of nature’s chemical processes, combining atoms into “substances”). Each of these elements can be found in *Water*, on view here, with its rigid shapes crossing over one another in bright colors.

In 1947, while pursuing a degree in social sciences at Loughborough University in Leicestershire, England, Sabri participated in an exhibition at the Embassy of Iraq in London, alongside other leading Iraqi modernists, including Hafidh Droubi, Atta Sabri, and Jewad Selim. After returning to Iraq, Sabri joined the Pioneers Group—formerly the Société Primitive—and worked closely with artist and educator Faiq Hassan. The group’s guiding principle was to take art outside the studio and into the streets, painting directly from their surroundings. In 1960 Sabri studied at Moscow’s Surikov Art Institute with Socialist Realist painter Aleksandr Deyneka, and in 1963 he moved to Prague to join the Committee for the Defense of the Iraqi People. While in Prague, Sabri published the manifesto “The New Art of Quantum Realism,” which advocated for the application of scientific method in art.

Note: Not on view at the Grey Art Gallery, NYU

Ibrahim El-Salahi
(Born Omdurman, Sudan, 1930)
The Last Sound, 1964
Oil on canvas
No. 28

A foundational figure in African modernism, Ibrahim El-Salahi creates intricately detailed compositions that draw on Islamic, African, Arab, and Western artistic traditions. In *The Last Sound*, seen here, he sparsely distributes muted abstract shapes across a square canvas. Intended to commemorate the death of the artist's father, the painting evokes the soul's passage from the corporeal to the celestial as it travels toward heavenly forms inhabiting the universe and beyond. With its inclusion of Arabic calligraphy, *The Last Sound* exemplifies El-Salahi's sustained engagement with the lettrist movement known as Hurufiyyah, which became popular in the 1950s and '60s. In embracing Arabic letterforms, he strives to create an art that speaks across religious and ethnic divides.

El-Salahi studied painting at Gordon Memorial College in Khartoum between 1949 and 1951, then pursued calligraphy training in London. From 1954 to 1957, he attended the Slade School of Fine Art, where he experimented with modernist styles. Back in Sudan, he rediscovered his interest in local handicrafts and vernacular traditions. He taught at the College of Fine and Applied Art in Khartoum, and in the 1960s, he spearheaded the prominent art movement known as the Khartoum School. In 1964–65 El-Salahi moved to New York to study black-and-white photography at Columbia University. Later he traveled across the U.S., Mexico, and Brazil. El-Salahi's work has been exhibited widely across the world, including a 2013 solo exhibition at London's Tate Modern—its first retrospective devoted to an African artist.

Juliana Seraphim
(Jaffa, Palestine, 1934–Beirut, 2005)
Untitled, 1961
Oil on canvas
No. 176

Juliana Seraphim often described her paintings as attempts to depict her dreams, and much of her art displays Surrealist undertones. The eldest of four children, Seraphim grew up amid orange groves and white, sandy beaches by the Mediterranean Sea. During the 1948 Palestinian exodus (Al-Nakba), her family sought refuge in Lebanon. Only 14 years old at the time, the artist was deeply affected by this forced migration. Four years later, Seraphim began working for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Throughout time the colors and sensations of her childhood as well as the memory of her grandfather, who was an architect and art enthusiast, remained with her. At the behest of a family friend, Seraphim studied art with Lebanese painter Jean Khalifeh and enrolled at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA). In 1959 she spent a year in Florence, followed by another year

in Madrid on a scholarship. Seraphim went on to represent Lebanon in three international biennials: Alexandria (1962), Paris (1963), and São Paulo (1965).

Hassan Sharif

(Bandar Lengeh, Iran, 1951–Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 2016)

Black and White, 1985

Oil on canvas

No. 157

This work evokes a sculptural quality in its divided canvas, possibly deriving from Hassan Sharif's practice as a multi-media artist. Composed of near-identical quadrilateral shapes, the painting's two halves present the inverse of each other. Although Sharif textures the surface of his off-white paint, it appears void-like when paired with the black—which upon closer inspection is seen to be riddled with cream and brown streaks.

Sharif had a deep interest in everyday life, often creating assemblages with found and mass-produced objects that critique global consumerist culture and corporate elitism. Over the course of his four-decade-long career, he has created performances, drawings, paintings, installations, and sculpture. While studying at London's Byam Shaw School of Art in the 1980s, he developed an interest in the Fluxus movement, intervention-based methodologies, and British Constructivism. Upon his return to Dubai in 1984, Sharif continued to experiment, documenting Fluxus-inspired performances in the desert that included walking, jumping, and throwing stones. A leader in the development of conceptual art in the UAE, Sharif co-founded The Flying House in 2007.

Hussein Shariffe

(Omdurman, Sudan, 1934–Cairo, 2005)

Dream Walkers, 1959

Oil on canvas

No. 10

Made in art school in London in 1959, the year before Hussein Shariffe returned to Sudan, *Dream Walkers* exemplifies the artist's vibrant, expressionistic paintings, which are often marked by his reflections on Sudan's political history as well as his experiences in the West. At first glance, this painting appears to contain simple geometric shapes, but upon closer look the shapes become the dreamlike figures of the work's title. This work's horizontal orientation suggests a clip from a movie—an effect underscored by the brown border framing the scene.

The great-grandson of Al-Mahdi, a major religious and political leader, Shariffe grew up in one of Sudan's most influential families. He attended Victoria College in Alexandria, Egypt, then studied history at Cambridge University in England. Later he pursued an MFA at London's Slade School of Fine Art, where he studied under Lucien Freud. In 1960 he returned to Sudan to teach at the College of Fine and Applied Art in Khartoum.

In the 1970s, Shariffe turned to filmmaking in the hope of reaching larger audiences, and in 1972 he became head of film for Sudan's Ministry of Culture. In 1979, he directed *Tigers are Better Looking*, adapted from a short story by Jean Rhys. Following his exile from Sudan during

a period of political instability, Shariffe moved to Cairo, where he continued to paint and make films. *Diary in Exile* (1993)—which he made with Egyptian filmmaker Ateyyat El Abnoudy—and *Letters From Abroad* (1997), his final film, both explore Shariffe’s experiences during the years he was forced to live outside his home country.

Ahmad Shibrain

(Berber, Sudan, 1931–Khartoum, 2017)

Untitled, c. 1960s

Mixed media on paper, laid down on fiberboard

No. 14

Displaying a mixed array of calligraphy and abstract shapes, this work exemplifies works of the 1960s by Ahmad Shibrain, who was a leading figure of modernism in Sudan. In the early 1950s Shibrain studied for two years at the College of Fine and Applied Art in Khartoum, and in 1957 he attended London’s Central School of Art and Design. He co-founded the Khartoum School in the 1960s, along with his contemporaries Ibrahim El-Salahi, whose work is on view nearby, and Kamala Ishag. The Khartoum School created a new visual style, Sudanwiyya, which incorporated abstracted Arabic calligraphy, the aesthetics of Hurufiyya (transforming Arabic letters into abstract shapes), Islamic motifs, and local imagery to convey the cultural heritage of Sudan. In juxtaposing such local and Pan-African traditions with Western influences, the group sought to forge a new visual language for modern Sudan.

Shibrain was appointed head of the graphics department at the College of Fine and Applied Art in Khartoum in 1970, and he became dean in 1975. Under his leadership, the school served as an essential hub for contemporary art in Sudan and sub-Saharan Africa at large. In 1996 he founded the Shibrain Art Centre to showcase Sudanese contemporary and emerging artists. His works were included in the 1967 Bienal de São Paulo and a group show at the Museum of African Art in Washington, DC. He is the author of numerous books and essays.

Ahmad Shibrain

(Berber, Sudan, 1931–Khartoum, 2017)

Untitled, 1965

Oil, ink, and watercolor on wood

No. 32

Ahmad Shibrain

(Berber, Sudan, 1931–Khartoum, 2017)

Calligraphic Compositions, c. 1960s

Mixed media on paper

No. 16

The brown curved mound and black rectangular shape, seen here in *Calligraphic Compositions*, resemble architectural forms found in the oldest quarters of Khartoum.

Madiha Umar

(Aleppo, Syria, 1908–New York City, 2005)

Untitled, 1978

Watercolor on paper
No. 83

In this untitled watercolor, Madiha Umar deploys coiling, crescent-shaped forms that evoke the gestural movements of writing and could derive from a number of different Arabic letters. She is often considered a progenitor of the Hurufiyya movement, which emerged in the mid-20th century when Arab, Persian, and Pakistani artists began rethinking traditional Islamic calligraphy.

Born in Syria, Umar was raised in Iraq, where she became a naturalized citizen. The first Iraqi woman to receive a government scholarship to study in Europe, she moved to London to attend the Maria Grey Training College for teachers. After graduating in 1933, she returned to Baghdad, where she taught at the Teachers' Training School for Women, serving as head of the department until 1942, when she relocated to Washington, DC, with her husband, who was a diplomat in the Iraqi Embassy. At that time, she began exploring how to incorporate elements of calligraphy into abstraction. She was encouraged to exhibit her work by Richard Ettinghausen, then curator at the Freer Gallery (later an NYU professor), and she had her first U.S. solo exhibition, of paintings inspired by the Arabic alphabet, at the Georgetown Neighborhood Library in 1949. That same year, she published her influential text "Arabic Calligraphy: An Inspiring Element in Abstract Art," in which she discusses the design principles underlying various scripts (including Kufic, Meccan, Ma'il, and Mashq), arguing that "each letter is able, and has a personality dynamic enough, to form an abstract design."

Umar traced her interest in the graphic and abstract possibilities of the Arabic letter to her discovery of Islamic calligraphy while studying art in the U.S. After receiving a BA in education at George Washington University in 1952, she earned an MFA at the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design in 1959. Later she returned to Baghdad, where she became involved in the One Dimension group founded by Iraqi artist Shakir Hassan Al Said, whose work is on view nearby.

Wijdan
(Born Baghdad, 1939)
Untitled, 1977
Oil on canvas
No. 191

H.R.H. Princess Wijdan al-Hashemi, who as a practicing artist goes by her first name, Wijdan, and publishes under the name Wijdan Ali, is an artist, art historian, academic, and diplomat. Her abstract paintings often focus on tragic historical narratives, drawing upon Arabic letterforms and Islamic calligraphy. In this untitled work, the painted forms recall tally marks, but they deliberately lack consistency or a sense of order.

Though born in Baghdad, she has spent most of her life in Jordan. She received her PhD in Islamic art history from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, in 1993 and has been a Fellow of SOAS since 2010. In addition to working in oil and watercolor, she uses colored Murano glass to create calligraphic sculptural forms. In 1979 Wijdan founded the Royal Society of Fine Arts in Amman, which established the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts in 1980. She also founded the Higher Institute of Islamic Art and Architecture at Al al-Bayt University (AABU), Mafrq, in 1993 and the School of Arts and

Design at the University of Jordan, Amman, in 2002. Wijdan served as Jordan's Ambassador to Italy between 2006 and 2011 and has contributed to more than twenty publications on the history of Islamic art and architecture.

Ramsès Younan
(Minya, Egypt, 1913–Cairo, 1966)
Composition No. 3, c. 1962–64
Oil on canvas
No. 159

In *Composition No. 3*, made between 1962 and 1964, Ramses Younan employs somber brown tones to conjure up an evolving geological structure. Completed only two years before the artist's death in 1966, the painting is steeped in a haunting mood. A close examination of the work reveals parts of human figures.

A painter, writer, and critic, Younan was born in Upper Egypt (along the Nile south of Cairo) and studied at the School of Fine Arts in Cairo, then began working as a secondary-school art teacher in Tanta and Port Said. In the late 1930s he returned to Cairo and met the poet Georges Henein, who is considered the founder of Egyptian Surrealism. Younan co-founded both the Surrealist journal *La part du sable* and the Art et Liberté group, active from 1938 to 1946, through which Egyptian intellectuals and artists aligned themselves with the revolutionary spirit of French Surrealism.

Younan's work frequently features tortured or dismembered bodies as a commentary against repression and in support of women's rights. An anarchist, Younan was forced to flee Egypt in 1947 and emigrated to France, where he worked at Radio France. His protests against France's role in the Suez Crisis of 1956 led to his return to Cairo. He continued to publish as an art critic and theorist until his death.

Jassim Zaini
(Doha, Qatar, 1943–2012)
Untitled No. 13, 1972
Oil on fiberboard
No. 179

Part of the fledgling Gulf art scene of the mid-20th century, Jassim Zaini began by depicting the dramatic social changes that took place in Qatar during the 1950s and '60s, after the discovery of oil. This work, which depicts an abstracted donkey, demonstrates Zaini's approach to rendering schematized human and animal figures. Split into sections, the donkey's eyes appear in separate areas, and its back half is not attached to a front. Earth tones suggest a rural or desert landscape, the antithesis of modernization. The artist's rough texturing of the paint produces a three-dimensional, relief-like surface.

Born in 1943 in Doha, Zaini was the first Qatari to pursue academic art training outside the country when he enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad, where he worked with Iraqi artists Faiq Hassan and Hafidh al-Droubi. During his studies, Zaini encountered Cubism and Abstract Expressionism. After graduating in 1968, he was active in the mid-20th century

Gulf art scene, participating in numerous local exhibitions and international biennials. In 1980, he founded the Qatar Fine Arts Society.

Afaf Zurayk
(Born Beirut, 1948)

Human Form, 1983
Human Form, 1983

Oil on two canvases
Nos. 177, 192

While mostly abstract, Afaf Zurayk's works often suggest the human body, straddling the divide between motion and stillness, color and shadow. In this diptych, Zurayk demonstrates her mastery in depicting transitory subjects bathed in soft light. Crystallizing a moment inside the relentless passage of time, she adds weight to an instant that might otherwise be overlooked.

Born in Beirut, Lebanon, Zurayk graduated from the American University of Beirut with a BA in fine art, then pursued graduate studies in art history at Harvard University, obtaining an MA in 1972. She went on to teach studio art and art history at Beirut University College (now the Lebanese American University) as well as drawing and painting at the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design, and Georgetown University, both in Washington, DC. Zurayk has published three books: *My Father: Reflections* (2010) is a personal rendition of a complex relationship through photographs of her clay sculptures; *Lovesong* (2011) is a celebration of love through poetry and painting; and *Drawn Poems* (2012) is a portfolio of ink drawings. She was later a professor of fine art at the American University of Beirut.