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# In London, A Space Offering a Nuanced and Provocative Perspective on Arab Culture

Significant Egyptian modernist Hamed Abdalla's first UK show at The Mosaic Rooms, 'an Arab intelligence operation, hiding in plain sight'



For a decade now, The Mosaic Rooms has been fronting an Arab intelligence operation, hiding in plain sight at a busy intersection in London's Earl's Court. A primary aim of the organization is to counter the profoundly reductive view of the Middle East that currently dominates the press. Against the collapse of vast territories into a flat terrain of religious fanaticism and political violence, it constructs new topographies of critical understanding, traversing the rich, heterogeneous worlds of contemporary Arab culture (with borders recently extended to include Iran). A free space of inquiry dedicated to this civilizing mission, The Mosaic Rooms (a project of the **A.M. Qattan Foundation** <<http://qattanfoundation.org/en>> ) is privately funded, expressly non-partisan, and non-religious – and therefore possibly unique. Through a multifaceted programme of exhibitions, performances, films, panels, distinguished lectures and literary events (the Syrian poet Adonis and Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif, for example), it offers an expert guide to regions which, in the words of the Foundation's Chair, Omar Al-Qattan, 'have been so much at the centre of attention yet so absent in their substance and humanity'.



Currently on view is 'ARABÉCÉDAIRE', the first UK solo exhibition of the Egyptian modernist painter, Hamed Abdalla (1917–85). The introduction of a significant artist unfamiliar to British audiences exemplifies the commitment of The Mosaic Rooms, under the direction of Rachael Jarvis, to advance a more nuanced, as well as provocative, perspective on Arab culture. Constructing a cosmopolitan itinerary that combines art, inquiry and archives across borders and nations, the exhibition provides points of connection and cultural translation from East to West, but also questions the divide that continues to artificially separate domains of art history.

This is the first stage of an ambitious three-part programme titled 'Cosmic Roads: Relocating Modernism', launched in celebration of The Mosaic Rooms's 10th anniversary and smartly curated by Morad Montazami. Featuring arts of Egypt, Iran and Morocco, this pairing of modernist with contemporary artists – the usual focus of the gallery's exhibitions – constitutes an expansion of The Mosaic Rooms's already wide

cultural remit and is an opportunity to rethink the roots of Orientalism in the post-colonial contexts that have so powerfully shaped the complexities of these regions.



Although not explicitly cited, Edward Said's seminal book *Orientalism* (1978), resonates as a premise against which Abdalla proleptically militates. Born into a peasant family in upper Egypt, Abdalla, a self-taught artist, emerges in this exhibition (and the accompanying catalogue) as a remarkable amalgam of philosopher (referencing Immanuel Kant and Plato), cultural anthropologist, historian, activist and renegade. Adapting a vocabulary of Western modernism, his artworks actively stage the thoroughgoing entanglement of East and West, at times reversing the direction of appropriation by insisting on the primacy of Egyptian precedents. With his 'Creative Word' concept, he announced a new pictorial language of art – what he termed 'Letterist Expressionism' – founded upon calligraphy and Arabic, rather than its mere translation.

The exhibition unfolds over three rooms as a geographic and imaginative journey, its varied content organized according to themes referenced by letters: L for Lovers; N for Nubia; R for Revolution; C for Caves; L for Letterism; K for Klee. Through maps which act as relays between places and personal archives of study, the wide-ranging artworks – from intimate drawings and lithographs to various-sized paintings – reflect the international character of Abdalla’s researches and artistic commitments, as well as their unexpected configurations, including visits to the subterranean caves of France and the Norman mosaics of Palermo.



Hamed Abdalla,  
*Hob (Desire)*,  
1963,  
combustion on  
silver paint, 83 x  
67 cm.  
Photograph: the  
author

While a preoccupation with cubism, abstraction and colour is immediately visible in certain paintings, the work remains resolutely grounded in Egypt's long past and turbulent present – extending from Pharaonic to Coptic and contemporary folk culture – to reflections on 20th-century political unrest. The result is a grassroots' modernism shaped by an activism that renders it distinct from the work of more celebrated artists of the cultural elite, such as Fahrelnissa Zeid, who similarly looked to ancient and folk traditions in her reinvention of modernism in Turkey. Abdalla also experimented with a radical range of materials and artistic processes: in *Hob (Desire)* (1963), silver paint fired by a blowtorch bubbles to the surface in a Richard Serra-like image of graphic and material intensity, like scarred skin oozing oily black blood.



Hamed Abdalla,  
*al-Tamazouq*  
(Tear), 1973,  
acrylic on paper  
and canvas, 92 x  
73 cm. Courtesy:  
Hamed Abdalla  
Family  
Collection

These experiments in what the artist called the 'Creative Word', in which figure and calligraphy are bound together in highly emotive, gestural forms – triumphant, imploring, doubled over, abject – are among the most moving of the works on view. While figure and abstraction might be invoked to describe this operation, it is the union of icon and logos – the incarnation of the word, in its biblical sense – that gives insight into what is distinctive about Abdallah's practice. A comparative view with the exhibition of one of modernism's foremost exemplars – 'Picasso 1932 – Love, Fame, Tragedy' currently on view at Tate Modern – illuminates a further difference, beyond sculpture as primary referent in that show. Both exhibitions thematize sensual love, but Abdalla is more expansive than Picasso in investigating its many modes. From

marital partnership (in the first room) to carnal coupling (in the last, basement), where a video loops images of fornication throughout the ages, the totality of Abdalla's investigations reflect the erotic basis of knowledge (in the ancient Greek sense) as a form of cosmic striving. It is this bridging of worlds, through the universality of the erotic, that negates the orientalizing othering of the Middle East and a Eurocentric narrative of modernism. What further territory needs to be staked in this alternative cosmos is the inclusion of women as more than erotic muse (the catalyzing role of Abdallah's artist-wife is a start), but creators in their own right. The forthcoming dialogue with works by artists Mona Hatoum and Susan Hefuna of Townhouse Cairo – the contemporary exhibition paired with this show, which opens in July – promises just such a possibility.

*Hamed Abdalla, 'ARABÉCÉDAIRE' runs at The Mosaic Rooms, London until 23 June. It is the first in a three-part series of exhibitions, 'Cosmic Roads: Relocating Modernism' **presenting modernist artists from Egypt, Iran and Morocco.***

**<https://mosaicrooms.org/event/arabecedaire/>**

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