

# REVIEWS

## Arab identity and international art

George Sorley Whittet

Contemporary Arab Art 1985  
Blackman Harvey Gallery, London,  
25 July to 23 August.

If in the past few years a greater appreciation of contemporary Arab art has been stimulated in London, this has been largely due to exhibitions organised by Graffiti, first in a small gallery off Oxford Street and now in association with Blackman Harvey at the latter's city gallery only two minutes walk from the Guildhall. Here in the summer some fifty recent works by nine outstanding artists, some already familiar from previous exhibitions, brought a fresh and exhilarating crop chosen by Caroline Collier. These works contrast healthily with the much-publicised expressionist crudities by some American, German and Italian painters in the past decade or so. For expressionism though it has become resurgent again in Western 20th century art has little place in the canon of living Islamic artists. Which is understandable when one remembers the Quranic proscription of the image directly reflective of the human form. Inherently the essence of Arabic art tends towards permanence, the creation of a picture or an object containing associations beyond mere decoration while possessing abstract qualities of colour and design capable of stirring emotions through the retina.

Thus **Dia al-Azzawi**, who has lived and worked in London for several years after leaving his native Baghdad, shows recent works developing from his formidable earlier concepts in solid cut-out structures; bright primary colours recall something of the social ambiance and architecture of life in the towns of Iraq. Here he extends his repertoire of iconic symbols, vividly writing with his brush curves, angles and whorls of pigment echoing the historic arabesques of Islamic scrollwork, while also treating motives from the environment as strong upright reliefs hinting at Iraqi folklore.

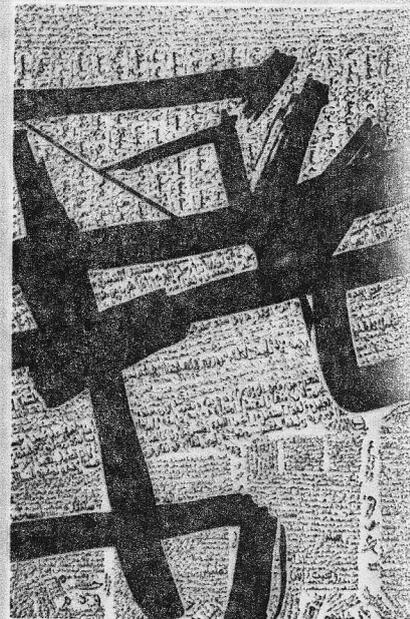
suggests rather than spells out any literal meaning. **Mehdi Qotbi** is a young Moroccan painter of iridescent compositions who has worked in France for some years. He weaves veils of tone in tiny gouache strokes of his brush immediately evocative of Arabic script, but which as he explained to me were as representative of the notation of music in which he is deeply interested. These skeins of detail with their minute intricacies akin to those of woven lace shimmer in bands of movement across the paper. This is his first time in London, and this attractive sampling should assure him of the success he deserves.

**Rachid Koraichi**, an Algerian now living in Tunisia, is already well-known from previous exhibitions, some at the Iraqi Cultural Centre, London. In his virile and dynamic two-dimensional structures are ideographic symbols assuming human outlines with their own dramatic tensions. From his native environment in North Africa he has followed the long pedigree of the visual image that predates even the rich mosaics depicting Roman gods, some of which I discovered in 1942 being used as 'hard standing' for British Army ammunition dumps at Bulla Regia in the fertile plain of the Medjerda near the Tunisian front line.

While it would be rash to assume that all Arab art is imbued with overtly religious tones there is no doubt that the proscription on human figuration acknowledges the effectiveness of painted and carved symbols to imply subliminal power in a positive sense. This sense of ritual comes frequently into play in the use of calli-

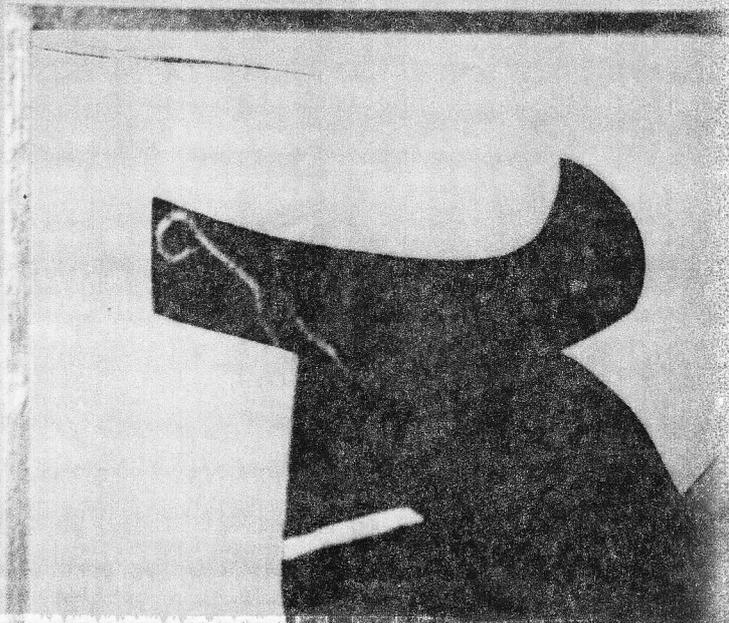
graphic signs and texts emerging in subtle forms, as in the series *Pages* of books by Iraqi artist **Saleh al-Jumali** now lives in California. His works on paper live up to their title here are lines of inscrutable text, seeming partly obliterated, many signs of the erosion of time now preserved even in their incompleteness. Much of the Arab's history lies covered under the sand; the restoration of his ancient history has an unending

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Thus **Dia al-Azzawi**, who has lived and worked in London for several years after leaving his native Baghdad, shows recent works developing from his formidable earlier concepts in solid cut-out structures; bright primary colours recall something of the social ambience and architecture of life in the towns of Iraq. Here he extends his repertoire of iconic symbols, vividly writing with his brush curves, angles and whorls of pigment echoing the historic arabesques of Islamic scrollwork, while also treating motives from the environment as strong upright reliefs hinting at Iraqi folklore.

While much has been written about the recurring presence of calligraphy in Arabic painting, perhaps too much stress on this aspect has obscured the fact that much of it

modern painter of indolent compositions who has worked in Baghdad for 20 years. He weaves veil-like, tiny gouache strokes of his brush, delicately evocative of Arabic script, but which as he explained to me were as representative of the notation of music in which he is deeply interested. These skeins of detail with their minute intricacies akin to those of woven lace shimmer in bands of movement across the paper. This is his first time in London, and this attractive sampling should assure him of the success he deserves.

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graphs by Iraqi artist Saleh al-Jumayli now lives in California. His worked media on paper live up to their name here are lines of inscrutable text, seeming partly obliterated, many signs of the erosion of time now preserved even in their incompleteness. Much of the Arab's history lies covered under the sand; the restoration of his ancient history has an unfailing

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conversion irrevocably to European or American trends in painting styles. Nor is there a chauvinistic insistence on proclaiming their origins as exclusively Arabic or Muslim even though such motives are inevitably present in the works. Their demands for independence as creators requires no special consideration as artists of specific race or religion. While naturally proud of both they ask, as one said to me, to be considered only on their own merits as painters in the international context where they live and work.

None the less when all is said and done, their own identities are inescapably based on heredity and geography, which elements are projected in unique fashion by Kamal Boullata, a Palestinian now living in Washington. While his screenprints bear quotations from the Quran, they take abstract form within profound architectonic geometry. *Glory be to the Creator* sets the key in a deep atmospheric blue ground as something surrounding an area of worship defined in acutely angled perspective lines.

Another Iraqi, Rafa al-Nasiri, studied abroad and ultimately returned to Baghdad where he is now Head of the Graphics Department at the Institute of Fine Arts. He too has shown at the Iraqi Cultural Centre and in previous Graffiti shows. In his mixed media paintings his brush traces calligraphic gestures in broken colour against grounds of changing horizontal hues conveying the evanescent background of a desert sunset like a mirage.

The overall impression to be felt from this assembly of both mature and young artists is that each painting or print has its

own character differentiated from its neighbour, though there persists this tendency already remarked of Arabic letter shapes. This distinction apart, the effect is apparent of overlaid complexities and depths of allusions under the versatile treatment by artists who are relentlessly committed to all the potential resources of their materials and who stand on their own merits as exponents of international contemporary art.

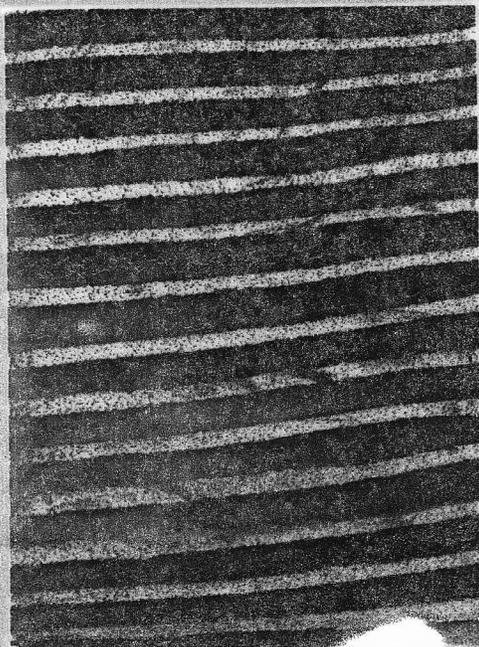
Another Iraqi is Shafiq Alnawab, born in Baghdad and living in Switzerland, who paints veiled echoes of personal poetry in oils and mixed media covering his surfaces in animated textures of scored and cross-

hatched brushstrokes.

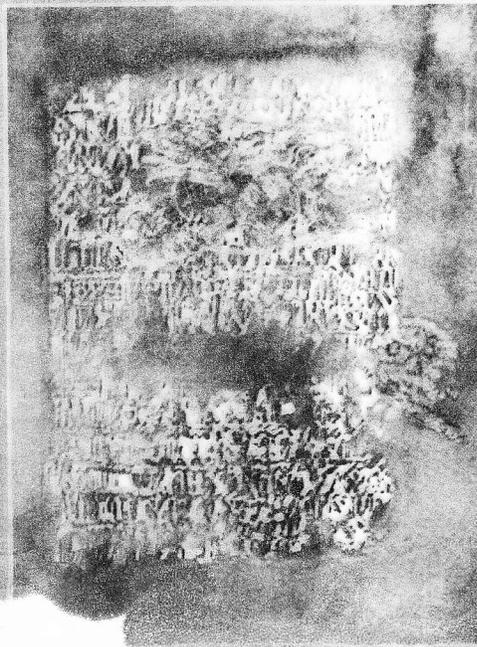
One exception to the non-figurative majority is Walid Abu Shakra, whose etchings have an openness in their landscapes of trees and gardens that though broadly traditional in approach elaborate their spaced depths across the width of each plate. With important new works by popular artists seen in previous Graffiti shows plus the advent of such exciting painters as Mehdi Qotbi seen for the first time in London, Contemporary Arab Art 1985 at the Blackman Harvey Gallery is notable for its special impact in competing with the other exhibitions in the international arena, of the London art world.



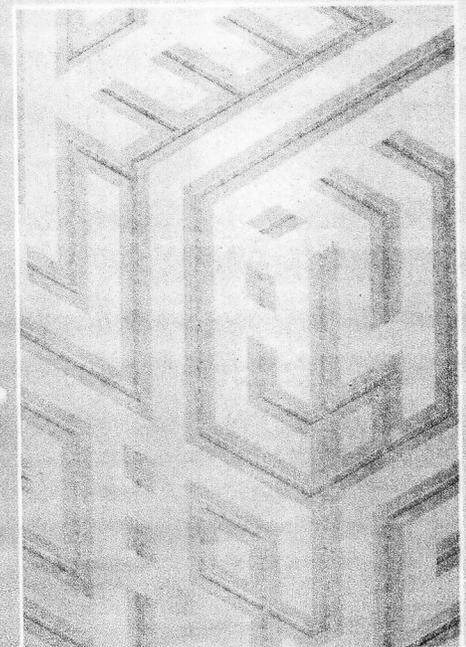
Rafa al-Nasiri



Mehdi Qotbi



SALEH AL-JUMAILI



Kamal Boullata