

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Contemporary Arab Women's Art: Dialogues of the Present by Fran Lloyd

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between this proud history and the city's recent emergence as the nation's mural capital. Interestingly, the current activity has effected change at America's oldest art museum and art school, the venerable Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, which decades ago phased wall paintings out of its curriculum when the subject went out of fashion. In late 2003, the Academy announced that it would revive its historic mural painting program, in large part inspired by the increasing international recognition of Philadelphia's stature as a center of mural arts.

Judith E. Stein, a Philadelphia-based writer and curator, is the author of the forthcoming *The Best of the Barnes*, on the art in the Barnes Foundation.

Contemporary Arab Women's Art: Dialogues of the Present

edited by Fran Lloyd

Women's Art Library, London, 1999

Reviewed by Linnea S. Dietrich

It is vital that we read this book and incorporate its ideas into our thinking. Most Westerners know little of the people and cultures of the Near and Middle East and Africa, and art can be a particularly effective means of building transnational understanding. *Contemporary Arab Women's Art* is a good place to start. The book is divided into two main parts. The first consists of four thematic essays, each a chapter, and the second, with two chapters, features a portfolio of 30 color plates (there are 80 reproductions in all), a section of artists' statements and commentaries on their work, and another of their biographies and bibliographies, plus a general bibliography.

The issues raised by the eighteen artists documented in the book, who span several generations and come from ten different countries, are provocative: they not only add to feminist theory, they also deal with their aesthetic and personal concerns. As the editor Fran Lloyd, Head of the School of Art and Design History at Kingston University in England, states in the Preface, foremost of these issues is identity, whether of gender, nationality, hybridity in the Arab diaspora, or religion. Another is "the imaging and re-imaging of the female body." (10) A third is the kind of support structures for art and artists in the Arab world. Lloyd also stresses the diversity among the women she discusses.

The book accompanied an exhibition of the same title that served as Phase II of the

Women's Art Library initiative to encourage a transcultural dialogue. It was the first exhibition of Arab women's art to tour Britain. ("Fantasy," the work of 15 British women that toured the United Arab Emirates in 1994, comprised Phase I.)

In the first essay, "Cross-Cultural Dialogues: Identities, Contexts and Meanings," Lloyd acknowledges the binary oppositions in Western thinking that privilege the West, the male, and the mind while continuing to demean the East, the female, and the body. She asks how this dualism can be resolved—or dissolved—especially now in the face of war, terrorism, and globalization. A further complication is the fact that there is no one Arab nation but rather a composite of multiple and disparate regions and religions. The Egyptian writer, physician, and activist Nawal El Saadawi offers this solution to the nomenclature problem: "Some years ago my Arab identity was a fact of politics and culture and of life....Now...if I am asked I should say that my identity is Middle Eastern, not Arab at all. That way I can be postmodern, updated, moving with the time." (28)

Of major concern to the artists are the issues of veiling, unveiling, and revealing. Some deal also with the stereotyping of Arab women, with women as colonial and postcolonial subjects, and with the political and social realities of their present, which include war, displacement, and exile. They deal with memory, both personal and cultural, and thus with their cultural heritage, art, and language, the latter of special importance in the Arab world.

Curator Siimee Keelan's essay, "Ensuring Visibility: Art, History and Patronage," examines the reception of Arab women's art—and all Arab art—in the West. She begins with a challenge to the assumption that, being Chinese, it is abnormal for her to be studying the work of Arab artists. Western viewers have considered non-Western art in general to be a curiosity or quite separate from Western civilization, ignoring centuries of cross-cultural influences thoroughly chronicled by Frederick N. Bohrer in *Orientalism and Visual Culture*, and earlier by Edward Said.¹ Arab art has been and still is seen from an anthropological, archaeological, or purely aesthetic perspective. Keelan comments that although cultural and visual studies since the 1980s have promoted a reassessment of accepted values in the arts, the work of women and non-Western artists is still sidelined. Colonialism and imperialism continue, and Western curricula continue to focus on Western art.

The third essay, "Bodies in Representation: Contemporary Arab Women's Art" by Tina Sherwell, Director of the Archive of Palestinian Art, who lives in Jerusalem, discusses the artists and their work specifically in

terms of the ways women's bodies are represented and the stereotypes Arab women artists encounter. She notes the absence of literature on the art of Arab women and the complexities in defining the term "Arab." Sherwell discusses the outstanding film, photography, and video work of Shirin Neshat (b. 1967), an Iranian American now living in New York. Neshat uses double video projections to confront and dissolve dualisms like female/male, East/West, veiled/unveiled. She deals directly with issues of identity and sexuality, as do several other artists in comparable diaspora positions. Sherwell also discusses the Egyptian-born, New York-based artist Ghada Amer (b. 1963), whose work may look abstract but is actually embroidery on canvas "unveiling" explicitly sexual images and figures.

Zineb Sedira (b. 1962), an Algerian French artist, likens the worn veil to a mental veil, the veiling of the mind. Iraqi-born Jananne Al-Ani (1966), now living in London—she attended the Royal College of Art—deals with the gaze outward and at women in various stages of veiling in her photography. Naming and the identity constructions that go with it are of course a choice for individual women as is the choice of costume, veiling, unveiling, living in a private space (like a harem) or in a more public one.²

One factor that threatens the visibility of art in most Arab countries is the absence, or infancy, of support systems. Western art is promoted in the West by capitalism and the museum and gallery systems. Salwa Mikdadi Nashashibi, the organizer (and catalogue editor) of the groundbreaking 1994 *Forces of Change: Women Artists of the Arab World* exhibition at the National Museum for Women in the Arts in Washington D.C., addresses this issue in the fourth essay "Elements of Empowerment: Support Systems in Art Practice." She explores opportunities and difficulties for women artists in each specific country. Interesting to note, she says, is that while Western art has been resisted in Syria, it is welcomed in Lebanon. Art audiences in these Arab countries do not regularly visit art exhibitions or perhaps attend only on opening nights. Art journals are published infrequently. Arts education is neglected, though there exists a rich tradition in what Westerners call craft. Nashashibi concludes with a useful Appendix listing art sites, exhibitions of Arab women's art, and universities and art colleges in each country.

The first chapter in Part II, "Diverse Bodies of Experience: 18 Contemporary Arab Artists," includes the 30 color plates, statements by each of the artists (who are listed alphabetically), and viewer responses to the work. Many of the artists now

live and work in England. Firyal Al-Adhamy (b. 1950), an Iraqi, was educated at Baghdad University and now lives in Bahrain and the U.K. She uses ancient Sumerian motifs and materials in her acrylic and gold paintings and sees her work as “part of a continuing tradition where detail and decoration is uppermost in the everyday experience of Arab culture.” (148)

Malika Aguezny, a Moroccan born in the 1940s, trained in Casablanca, where she still lives. Her paintings and etchings include elements of calligraphy in which the “feminine body is subtly embodied in the visual forms.” (153) A Kuwaiti, Thuraya Al-Baqsamī (b. 1952) studied in Cairo and Moscow and paints women in a “waiting position,” hemmed in by the confused signs that symbolize Arab culture and “the worries...of getting older.” (161)

Rima Farah (b. 1955), from Jordan, was educated at the Cambridge School of Art, and now lives in London. A printmaker, she uses calligraphy as “the connecting tissue throughout the history of Islamic art.” (164) For example, her beautiful carborundum etching *Red and White Letter* (1997; Pl. 23) boldly and simply spells out the word “la,” or “no.”

Born in 1955 in the U.S. of Iraqi parents, Maysaloun Faraj journeyed to Baghdad to study and has lived in London since 1982. She mourns the wars and the children dying, and her ceramic pieces convey “a serene and spiritual emotion charged with ‘hope’ in a longing for a more peaceful and harmonious existence” (167). Her stoneware *Sisters of Black and Gold* (1988) seems an attempt to unite two cultures.

Although Batool Al-Fekaiki was born in Iraq (1942), she too now lives in London. Her paintings, both the figurative and abstract, speak of “desire and loss, with distance and nearness and with memories and hopes. It is such because I believe that it is a human right to express yourself without the slightest fear.” (170)

Lebanese-born Saadeh George (1950) and Mai Ghossoub (1952) both live in London. Trained as a physician, George pays homage to all those who experience the painful state of being an “other.” (173) Her remarkable gauze and mixed-media constructions like *Today I Shed My Skin: Dismembered and Remembered* (1988) are cast from her body and sutured together, suggesting both wounds and healing. Ghossoub, who studied in France, uses the female figure in her linear metal sculpture. *Diva* (1998) is a tribute to the great Egyptian singer, Um Kulthum. Her plaster installations like *Displaces* (1998), done with her Lebanese colleague Souheil Sleiman, recall

Rachel Whiteread and are “an evocation of the experience of ‘unbelonging’” that “both contain and challenge assumptions about what signifies home or belonging and resist any fixing of identity by gender, race, or sexuality.” (180-81)

Wafaa El Houdaybi (b. 1966) combines traditional Moroccan materials (leather, thread, and paint) with surreal and abstract mark-making. Stretched leather is the support for her evocations of her native Moroccan places and cities. “They become a visible extension of one’s body, feelings, and desires.” (185)

Sudanese-born (1939), Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq studied in Khartoum and London and now lives in Oman. She paints the figures and heads of women, as in *Images in Crystal Cubes* (1984), to show women framed by transparent boundaries. In 1978 she co-founded The Crystalists to oppose a “masculine prioritized empirical world view and towards a re-designation of knowledge as insight.” (189)

Although born in Iraq (1945), Leila Kubba Kawash now lives in London and Washington. Her often cube-shaped sculptures combine mythologies from Islamic, ancient Sumerian, and other cultures “to find a place where the past and present overlap, where countries shed their boundaries and distances.” (192) Now also calling London home, Tunisian-born Sabiha Khemir (1959) has a Ph.D. in Islamic Art and Archaeology from London University. Her intricate pen-and-ink drawings often illustrate texts from Islamic history or literature, for example *Island of Animals* (1994). Her first novel, *Waiting in the Future for the Past to Come* (1993), was published in London.

Najat Maki was born in 1956 in Dubai, U.A.E., and lives there and in Cairo, where in 1997 she received a master’s degree in art from the College of Fine Art. Her expressive figurative paintings deal with themes of life, death, and resurrection. She uses oils and acrylics often mixed with natural dyes and herbs like saffron and henna. Also from the U.A.E. is her much younger colleague, Azza al-Qasimi, born in 1974. Qasimi’s watercolors and etchings with collage such as *No Strings Attached—Guitar III* (1998) at first glance look like colorful cubist Picassos; however, she has layered images from her culture with those of early Western Modernism to address her social concerns. “My society is patriarchal and women are treated as second class citizens,” she explains. “Female circumcision is common, denying women’s sexuality. Arranged marriages are the norm where women are forced into marriage with total strangers. Meanwhile love is a taboo subject in my culture. My work raises these issues but it is al-

so intended to offer encouragement to women to be non-complacent and to articulate their desires.” (209)

Algerian-born (1948) artist Houria Niati’s painting *No To Torture* (1982), after Delacroix’s 1834 *Women of Algiers*, is part of her *No To Torture* series (1982-93). Delacroix’s inspiration for the painting was apparently his trip to Morocco and Algeria in 1832, as part of a French diplomatic mission that began the French occupation of Algeria. Niati’s painting of four seated women, their faces obliterated, is boldly expressionistic. Niata studied and now lives in London.

Laila al-Shawa (b. 1940), a Palestinian from Gaza, received most of her art training in Italy. Her large silk screens on canvas, *Children of Peace* and *Children of War* (1992-95) from her *Wall of Gaza* installations, are comments on tragedy and violence, and also relate to her own experience with breast cancer. She states: “The land and the body are linked and both bear the scars of different forms of invasion.” (219) The screenprints differ only slightly. Both depict boys holding what might be a gun, a hobby horse, or an artificial leg, each with one shoe on, the other foot bare. In *Children of Peace*, the boys look to their right; in *Children of War*, they confront the viewer. Otherwise, they differ little. The point is that our children are vulnerable.

Contemporary Arab Women’s Art: Dialogues of the Present indeed opens a dialogue and brings these artists and issues to us in a most compelling way. Each artist has a strong sense of identity, as a human being, as a woman, and as an artist. However in flux, geography and age, even religion and gender, are not the only factors contributing to a whole and integrated life. A spirit for health, healing, safety, and harmony unites these artists, and their work enables us to understand and relate on a transnational level. Art provides a way of communication that connects us all.

NOTES

1. Frederick N. Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture* (New York: Cambridge University, 2003) and Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

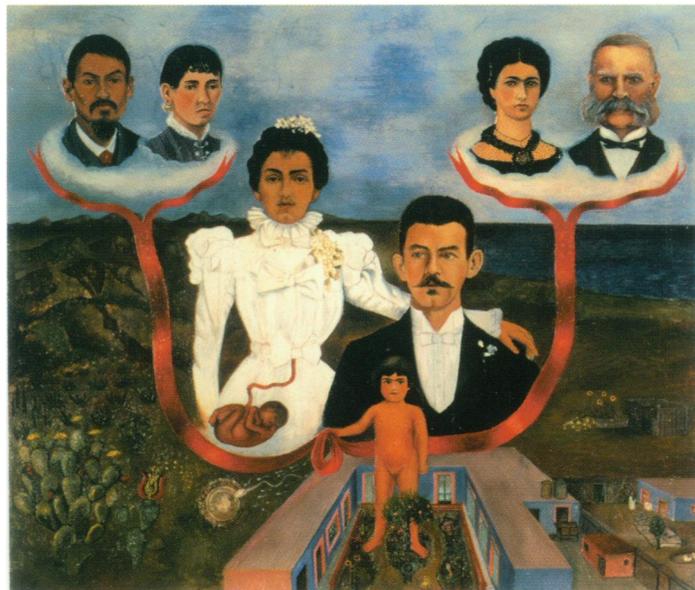
2. See Fatema Mernissi, *Scheherazade Goes West* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001), for more information on East/West attitudes. See also Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus Books, 1994).

Linnea S. Dietrich, Professor of Art History at Miami University, Ohio, teaches a class on Contemporary Arab and Persian Women Artists. Her global survey of art book (with Robert Bersson) is forthcoming.

LAURENCIN / KAHLO / FARAH / CHANDER



Pl. 21. Marie Laurencin, *La Songeuse* (c. 1911), oil on canvas, 35½" x 28½". Musée Picasso, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY; Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.



Pl. 22. Frida Kahlo, *My Grandparents, My Parents and I* (1932), oil and tempera on metal panel, 12⅞" x 13⅝". Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Courtesy the Jewish Museum, New York.



Pl. 23. Rima Farah, *Red and White Letter* (1997), carborundum etching, 21½" x 21½".



Pl. 24. Kanchan Chander, *Torso* (1996), bamboo, paper, jute, cow dung, acrylic, 5'h x 3'w x 2'6" d. Ashish Arand Collection, Delhi.