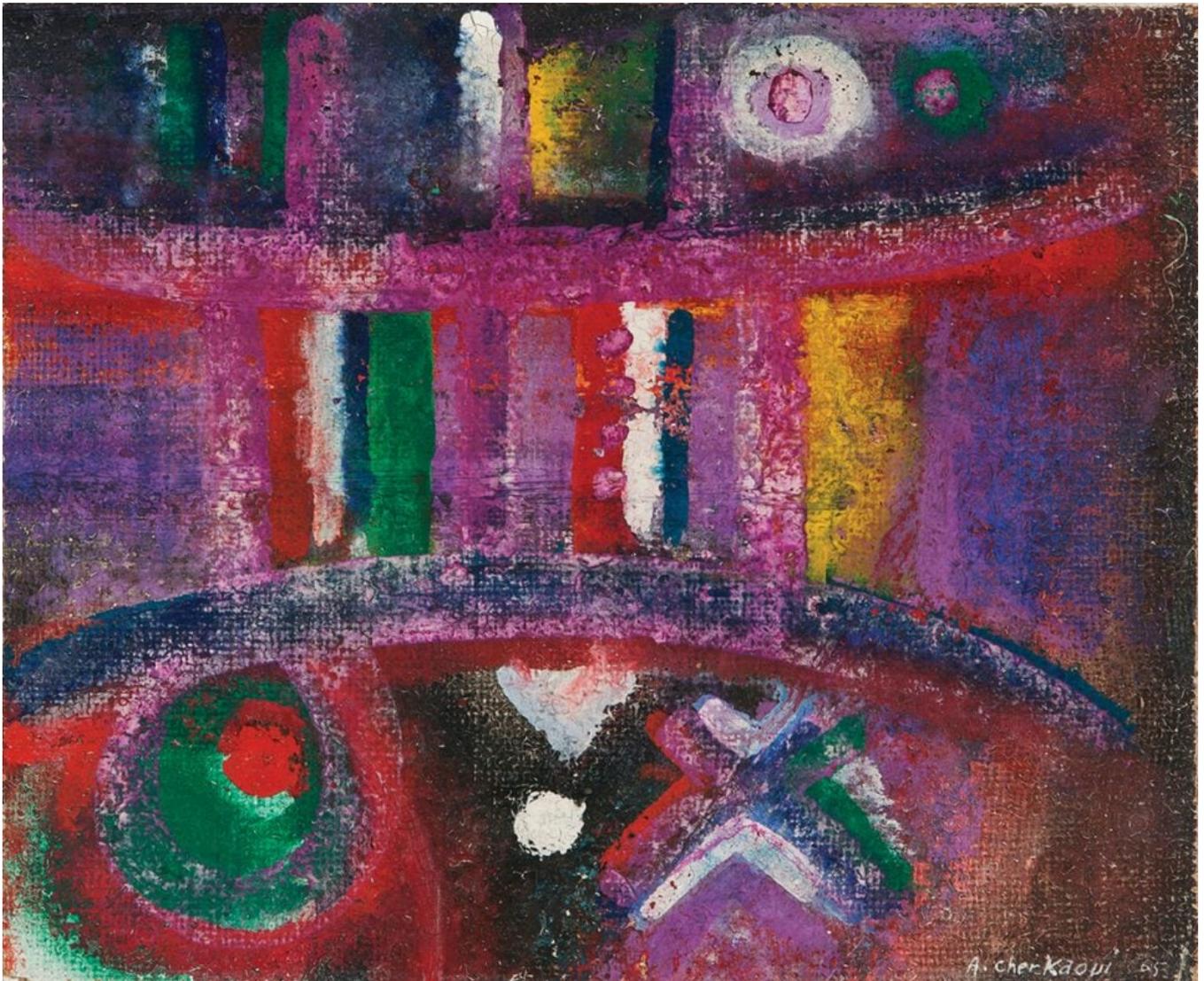


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A Groundbreaking New Survey of Abstract Painting From the Arab World Adds a Vibrant Chapter to Art History

The curators of “Taking Shape: Abstraction From the Arab World, 1950s–1980s” explain the mission behind the show.



Ahmed Cherkaoui, *Les Miroirs Rouges (Red Mirrors)* (1965). Courtesy of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE.

Taylor Dafoe (<https://news.artnet.com/about/taylor-dafoe-731>) February 5, 2020

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The middle of the 20th century was a tumultuous time for the 22 countries of the Arab world. It was a period of decolonization and industrialization, of war and mass-migration. It saw the rise of socialism, the global oil boom, and the formation of new nations.

“Because many of these countries were entering the world arena as independent nations and young nation-states, one of their primary objectives was to begin defining themselves as being distinct peoples. A good way to do that is through culture and through art,” says Suheyla Takesh, a co-curator of [“Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s”](https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/exhibition/taking-shape-arab-abstraction-1950s-1980s-barjeel-january-14-april-4-2020/) (<https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/exhibition/taking-shape-arab-abstraction-1950s-1980s-barjeel-january-14-april-4-2020/>) at New York University’s Grey Art Gallery.

As its name suggests, the show charts the rise of non-figurative art produced in—and by artists from—Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and other countries of North Africa, West Asia, and the Arab diaspora. Nearly 90 paintings, sculptures, and other works populate the exhibition’s walls and floor, all of which were taken from the collection of the [Barjeel Art Foundation](https://www.barjeelartfoundation.org/) (<https://www.barjeelartfoundation.org/>), an independent organization dedicated to Arab art located in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).



Installation image of “Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s.” Photo: Nicholas Papananias, Courtesy of the Grey Art Gallery, New York University.

“Many art schools and collectives were being formed during this time as people tried to come up with what it means to be, say, an Iraqi artist or an Egyptian artist,” Takesh adds. “Much of this time period found artists going back to their local histories and heritage to revive innovative ways to create a new, site-specific modernism.”

Takesh, the sole curator at the foundation, teamed up with the Grey’s director, Lynn Gumpert, to realize “Taking Shape.” The ambitious topic hadn’t been tackled in detail before and necessitated a great deal of new scholarship, starting more than two-and-a-half years prior to the opening. (A hefty [catalogue](https://secure.touchnet.com/C21125_ustores/web/product_detail.jsp?PRODUCTID=297&SINGLESTORE=true) (https://secure.touchnet.com/C21125_ustores/web/product_detail.jsp?PRODUCTID=297&SINGLESTORE=true), edited by Gumpert and Takesh was published alongside the exhibition.)

Despite the considerable investment of resources required, Gumpert says, such work is vital now as we rewrite our collective understanding of modernism through a global—not strictly Western—lens.

“We all were trained in Western art history; there was no other art history for us to turn to,” says the Grey director. “That’s finally starting to break down and there are other histories being written. We hope that this show adds to that momentum.”

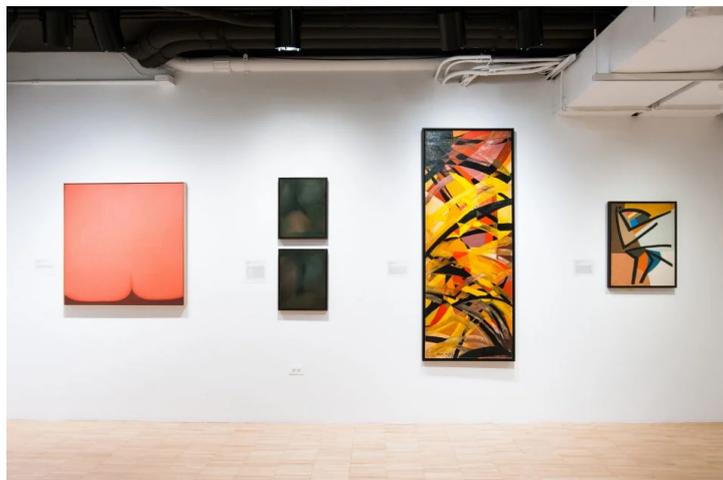


Saliba Douaihy, *Untitled* (c. 1960–1969). Courtesy of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE.

Founded around the personal collection of sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, a member of the Sharjah ruling family known for his globe-spanning efforts promoting Arab art and culture, the Barjeel Art Foundation counts more than 1,000 artworks in its holdings.

“We were lucky that the body of work was so diverse,” says Takesh. “It forced us to look into the differing, more specific histories as well as the artists’ personal histories and their development as individuals.”

Indeed, a wide variety of approaches to abstraction is represented in “Taking Shape,” inspired by everything from mathematics, geometry, and spiritualism to Arabic calligraphy and Islamic decorative patterns. Often, formal techniques can be traced back to regional heritage.



Installation image of “Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s.” Photo: Nicholas Papananias, Courtesy of the Grey Art Gallery, New York University.

For instance, cuneiform was a big influence for Iraqi artists, while traditional amazigh patterns can be seen throughout art made in North Africa. For other artists represented in the exhibition, the turn to abstraction was a political gesture, intended to contradict the popularity of social realism that came with the rise of communism and socialism.

The deconstruction of the Arabic alphabet is another theme that courses throughout the show, as is the desert landscape and its monochromatic pallet.

There's a temptation to read the developments in these countries against the well-charted evolution of abstraction in Euro-American art, from Wassily Kandinsky to Picabia, Picasso, Pollack, and so on. The comparison may be problematic insofar as it defers to Western art as the dominant narrative. Yet at the same time, Gumpert notes, many artists in the Arab world were very much aware of developments in modern art elsewhere.



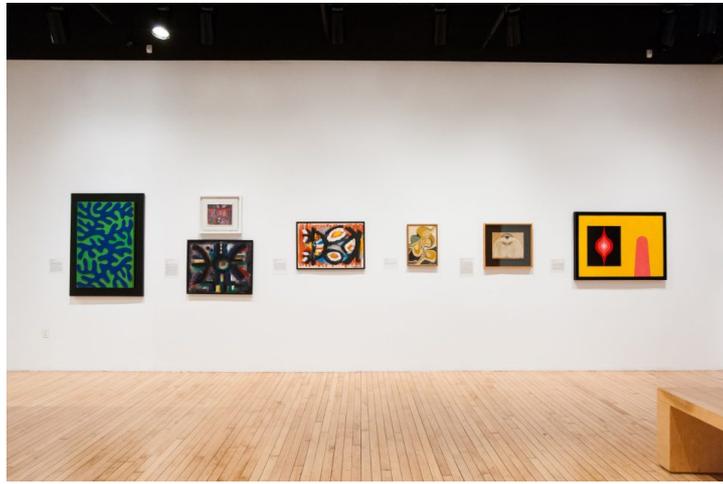
Etel Adnan, *Autumn in Yosemite Valley* (1963–1964). Courtesy of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE.

“One of the things we found was that many of these artists themselves were aware of [the cross-cultural conversation] because they attended Western-style art academies,” she explains. Many artists sought inspiration from both Europe and their own country’s heritage of architecture, textiles, and other applied arts.

“It just so happens that a lot of their sources are already non-representational,” adds Takesh. “So the work that came out is what people trained in Western art history would call abstract, even though some artists have said that abstraction as such wasn’t their goal. The goal was making work that was relevant to their context, which a lot of the time happened to be non-representational.”

Ultimately, “Taking Shape” shows that art history itself is abstract. It’s as hard to define as any painting on the walls of the Grey.

“Art history likes to make categories that are nice movements, one following and reacting to the other,” says Gumpert, “but the art itself is much messier.”



Installation image of "Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s." Photo: Nicholas Papananias, Courtesy of the Grey Art Gallery, New York University.

"Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s (<https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/exhibition/taking-shape-arab-abstraction-1950s-1980s-barjeel-january-14-april-4-2020/>)" is on view through April 4, 2020 at New York University's Grey Art Gallery.



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Why Walter De Maria's 'The Lightning Field' Remains a Striking Work of Land Art

Here are three things you may not know about the iconic and remote installation.



Walter De Maria, *The Lightning Field*, 1977. Long-term installation, western New Mexico. ©Estate of Walter De Maria. Photo: John Cliett, courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York

Katie White (<https://news.artnet.com/about/katie-white-1066>) June 4, 2024

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In the high desert of Northwestern New Mexico, 400 stainless steel poles jut out of the desolate landscape. The poles, each measuring two inches in diameter, are spaced evenly, at intervals of 220 feet, forming an illusory grid running one mile by one kilometer.

This striking installation forms *The Lightning Field*—Walter De Maria’s iconic land artwork from 1977—and a masterpiece of Minimalist art. A remote destination visited by only the most devoted art lovers, *The Lightning Field* has become mythic in its allure—an American temple on a hill set amid the natural world.

The Dia Art Foundation commissioned the work from De Maria at the height of his fame. The artist was a leading proponent of Minimalism, an artistic movement focused on material exaction that emerged in the 1960s and ‘70s. “What you see is what you see,” Frank Stella famously quipped (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/frank-stella-dead-87-2481352>), of the movement. During these years, land art concurrently emerged as a compelling language for artists aiming to work outside the commodified gallery system and traditional mediums.

A number of Minimalist artists engaged these large-scale interventions in their environments. Upon its creation, *The Lightning Field* joined the ranks of Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969), Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), and Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (1976). Ambitious in scale and intent, these creations emphasized the role of time and space.



Nancy Holt, *Sun Tunnels* (1973-76) Great Basin Desert, Utah. Photograph: Nancy Holt. Collection Dia Art Foundation with support from Holt/Smithson Foundation © Holt/Smithson Foundation and Dia Art Foundation / Licensed by Artists Rights Society, New York

The Lightning Field is a work we know almost everything about. De Maria, along with a team from Dia, scoured California and much of Southwest for the ideal venue for the installation, ultimately choosing a location in New Mexico some 11½ miles east of the Continental Divide and at an elevation of 7,200 feet.

De Maria conceived the work in excruciatingly and intentionally precise detail, and its genesis and life have been assiduously detailed by the Dia Art Foundation. In fact, it is that very exacting precision that imbues the work with its transcendent spirit.

For instance, the poles, which are aligned in rows of 25, are so carefully installed that only a single pole is visible when viewed from straight on. The pointed tips of the poles, similarly, each reach the same height. De Maria imagined the work as a plane that could “support an imaginary sheet of glass.” But the poles themselves vary in height, averaging 20 feet, 7 and a half inches in height, though they range in height from 15 feet to 26 feet 9 inches. The terrain, which appears flat from a distance, is in truth quite craggy and uneven. Together, the work consists of almost 38,000 pounds of stainless steel.

Despite the glut of minute details known about the work and its cult-like fame, an air of mystery still shrouds *The Lightning Field*. As summer winds its way around the corner, and brings with it peak electrical storm season, we took a closer look at this icon of American art. Here are three facts that may help you see *The Lightning Field* in a new way.

1. The Earth Is Part of the Work



Walter De Maria, *The Lightning Field* (1977). Long-term installation, western New Mexico. © Estate of Walter De Maria. Photo: John Cliett, Image courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York

Treks to *The Lightning Field* are often described as pilgrimages—and for good reason. The installation is, according to De Maria’s wishes, meant to be experienced in isolation. Only six people are allowed to visit the work at a time and reservations are extremely limited.

In his lifetime De Maria kept the work’s precise location secret. Even now, the location remains obtuse. Visitors arrive at the Dia Foundation building in the small 4-block town of Quemado in the early afternoon, pile into an SUV, and are driven 45 minutes to a cabin, where they will spend the night. The cabin predates *The Lightning Field*, which it stands adjacent to. The cabin is an assiduously restored homestead from the turn of the century, and a reminder of the people who toiled in unforgiving landscapes in exchange for a parcel of land.

“The land is not the setting for the work but a part of the work,” De Maria explained in his conception of *The Lightning Field*. The land develops the work in several ways—in its remoteness and its elevation, the work becomes akin to a pilgrimage site. In a [two-part essay about *The Lightning Field*](https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2021/07/12/essay-light-lightning-wonder-reactions-walter-de-marias-lightning-field/) (<https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2021/07/12/essay-light-lightning-wonder-reactions-walter-de-marias-lightning-field/>), written for Gagosian Quarterly, art historian and curator John Elderfield draws a comparison to the nearby pilgrimage destination of San Estevan Del Rey Mission Church at Acoma Pueblo, New Mexico, a National Historic Landmark. He writes, “Christianity in the late-antique world, has explained that the cult of the saints required that their remains be placed outside the walls of the city, a practice eventually leading to the creation of relic-rich shrines that became the object of pilgrimages, often to far-off places.” He notes how Peter Brown, a scholar of Christian antiquity, in this book the *Cult of Saints*, references “the ‘therapy of distance’ created by a long pilgrimage carefully maintained tension between distance and proximity. This, he said, “ensured *praesentia*, the physical presence of the holy.” But, rather than offering a place of respite at the end of the journey, De Maria plunges visitors into dialogue with elements. Walking the grounds, one realizes how uneven the land is, and how treacherously muddy it is to navigate if it has recently rained—that the elusive desire for lightning to strike is more often than not supplanted by the realities of the body engaging an arduous landscape.

2. Light, and the Potential for Lightning, Engages the Romantic Sublime



Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, (c. 1817). Permanent loan from the Stiftung Hamburger Kunstsammlungen © SHK / Hamburger Kunsthalle / bpk. Photo: Elke Walford.

The Lightning Field is a work that keeps visitors in a state of suspended expectation and in keen awareness of their environment. One way the work manages this is with the unpromised, but suggested, potential for lightning. In fact, De Maria chose this high desert location because of the frequency of lightning which increases in the months of July and August. He also, of course, included “lightning” in the work’s name. Dia Art Foundation, however, emphasizes that the work can be experienced completely, and as De Maria intended, without seeing lightning—which remains a rare occurrence.

This tension, between the imagined possibility and experienced and perceived reality, draws viewers into sustained heightened sensitivity. In many ways, the work draws parallels to the experiences of the sublime, as described in the 18th and 19th centuries by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. The sublime, in these instances, described the powerful emotional experience—even fleetingly—of comprehending the vastness and magnitude of nature. The sublime is to be awe-struck, rather than overwhelmed. Romanticism emerged as a literary and artistic movement at the turn of the 19th century as artists tried to capture and evoke the sublimity of the natural world. Caspar David Friedrich, William Blake, Frederic Edwin Church, and Albert Bierstadt were among the movement’s key artists; often their works feature lone figures ensconced in massive landscapes in moments of contemplation.



Albert Bierstadt, *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* (1863).
Photo: courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Lightning Field works in much the same way—but in person and by design rather than happenstance. The six daily visitors can quite quickly lose sight of one another, leading to the effect of a solitary experience and a heightened state of contemplation. Photography of the work is also prohibited, encouraging visitors to look at the work itself.

For artists of the Romantic era, light was a visual device to indicate an individual's perceptual awakening. De Maria uses light—real light—similarly. In the height of summer, this stretch of New Mexico sees 14 and a half hours of daylight. The light is so intense that when visitors first arrive at the work much of it is bleached out of vision. “During the mid-portion of the day, seventy to ninety percent of the poles become virtually invisible due to the high angle of the sun.” De Maria wrote. As the sun charts its journey through the sky, one perceives the vastness of the work, and the power of the sun more sublimely and completely.

“*The Lightning Field* is obscure, both in the sense of being difficult to perceive at once—especially at midday—and in being remote and troublesome to reach. Its central image is power—the sometimes lethal power of lightning,” wrote art historian John Beardsley (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/776583>), in an essay on Land Art, “The privations of solitude and silence are integral to the experience of the work; it is vast, both in its own dimensions and in the setting it employs. And everywhere is the implication of infinity.” The sense of infinity is born of the work's format—a potentially limitless expandable field—and, “if not in the horizontal spread of the earth, then in the extraterrestrial dominions to which the work emphatically points.”

3. It Has Ancient Allegories



The Parthenon in the Acropolis of Athens. Photo by Nicolas Economou/NurPhoto via Getty Images.

With its columnar vertical rods, *The Lightning Field* has been likened by historians and writers to an ancient colonnaded temple, a contemporary Acropolis on a hill. In his essays, Elderfield draws a comparison to the Ionic Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, the largest known of these ancient temples, “longer than a football field and in one reconstructive plan comprising one hundred columns, of which only a portion of a single column remains.” The classical scholar Faya Causey, Elderfield notes, draws the prototype for *The Lightning Field* even further into history, to the “templum” of ancient Etruscan culture—open rectangular spaces without roofs that were “cut out”—as the name signifies—from the environment, and “oriented to the points of the compass, as is *The Lightning Field*”. In these spaces, priests would have awaited signs from the celestial realms, “notably lightning” Elderfield adds, “for the bolts were understood as communications from the gods.”



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