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Unified multiplicities : Arabic letters between modernity, identity, and abstraction

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Chapter V Conclusion: Is Calligraphic Abstraction a Movement Informing a New Arab Identity?

In this research I tried to understand the calligraphic abstraction movement by suggesting an alternative reading of Islamic art. I attempted to trace the continuity or lack of it between Islamic art, specifically calligraphy, and modern art. I also tried to highlight how art and identity are related and how calligraphic abstraction comes as a manifestation of that identity. The most significant contribution is the attempt at creating a system of placing letterist works of art in relationship to each other. The suggestion is a new formula for the understanding and contextualization of modern and contemporary calligraphic abstraction works of art and artists. It is a new way to understand artworks on a spectrum of abstraction so that we can understand them within their context. By comparing artists to their contemporaries who have worked on art and the Arabic letter, it makes it easier to look at the movement critically. More importantly, we were able to draw a structure of what these artists have in common and what the key differences between them are. By finding common grounds and patterns of commonality between their work as well as the major differences, we might be able to answer the questions of whether it is possible to call their combined body of work an influential movement. I hope that this tool will help historians, curators and collectors understand the dynamic of the Arabic letterist abstraction movement. Finally I discussed the work of Samir Sayegh as a case study, highlighting his creative contribution to the overall discourse on the topic.

This leaves us with one final question to answer, is calligraphic abstraction a movement informing a new Arab identity? Some scholars would argue that it is not a unified movement. Hassan states, “Despite several serious efforts, it never solidified into a unified movement or school.”²⁴² But what is really the definition of a movement? The literal meaning of the word is a group of people working together to

²⁴² Hassan, *When Identity Becomes Form*.

advance their shared political, social, or artistic ideas. It is also a group of people with a shared purpose who create change together. The key aims of an art movement are to change culture; it rejects a reality and proposes a new one. An art movement creates an art style with a specific common philosophy, or goal followed by a group of artists who share this philosophy. We have discussed the relevance of calligraphy and its use in artworks and painting in informing a new Arab cultural identity. Calligraphic abstraction artists have included calligraphy in the artwork with that awareness in mind. Of these artists we mention from Iraq: Madiha Omar (1908-2005), Shakir Hassan al Sa'id (1925-2004), Dia al Azzawi (1938-), Rafi' al-Nassiri (1940-2013), Hassan Massoudy (1940-). From Sudan: Osman Wagialla (1925-2007), Ahmed Shirbini (1931-), Ibrahim el Salahi (1930-). From Egypt Hamed Abdallah (1917-1985), Youssif Sida (1922-1994), Omar al Nagdy (1931-), Kamal Sarrag (1960's), Taha Hussien (1928-). From Palestine: Kamal Boullata (1942-) and Fateh Mudarris (1922-1999) From Morocco: Mehdi Qotbi (1951-), Mohammad Malihi (1931-) Farid Belkahia (1934-2014) and Ahmed Sherkawi (1934-1967) From Tunisia: Nja Mahdaoui (1937-) and Naguib Belkhouga (1960's). From Syria Muneer Shaarani (1945-), Naim Ismail (1939-1979), Adham Ismail (1922-1963), and Abdulkader Arnaaout (1936-1992) From Algeria: Rachid Koraichi (1947-), and Mahgoub Benbella (1946-) From Lebanon: Wajih Nahlé (1932 -), Said A. Akil (1926-), Hussain Madi (1938-) and Samir Sayegh (1945-).

Some historians would add or take out a few names. Some of these artists were innovators and some were visitors to the style. But it cannot be denied that from every single Arab country there are artists in the past seven decades who have experimented in one way or another with the Arabic script in their artwork. The One Dimension group in Iraq in essence was "art that was inspired by the letter" as suggested by the artist Jamil Hamoudi, it was about "unveiling the letter as a dimension."²⁴³ Artist Ahmed Shibrain, Kamala Ishag and Ibrahim El-Salahi, founded the Khartoum School in the 1960's. They used Arabic calligraphy in their compositions converting it into abstract shapes. It does not matter that these artists and groups were never connected or that they did not have a shared vision for a

²⁴³ Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity*, 37.

movement. This urge to use calligraphy and return to their cultural roots in search of a new identity, encouraged the calligraphic abstraction movement to spread and flourish all over the Arab world. "Painting with letters" became a dominant mode of expression in the 1960's and 1970's, and calligraphy was transformed from a circumscribed art form – one of great beauty, but with strict formal limitations – into a vital form of modern artistic expression."²⁴⁴

It remains a fact that due to several factors, many of these artists were not aware of each other's work. It could be due to the lack of communication or lack of an artist network and art institutions within a postcolonial Arab world. Calligraphic abstraction "did not emerge under the influence of one trailblazing leader."²⁴⁵ The artists had no connection to each other, but they had the same reactions and ideas at the same time. This can be compared to the reaction of street artists during the 2011 Egyptian uprising. They went down to the street to comment on similar events in their own voice. Some of them were relaying the same message, but the way they said it was in their own unique style. It is possible that the artists of calligraphic abstraction were reacting to a postcolonial condition in their respective countries and in their respective styles. It makes sense if we consider the timing. Dagher states that, "The region's artistic lethargy of the first half of the twentieth century was shaken in the 1950's when conflict with the West was at its peak. It is not a coincidence that, as these countries moved towards independence, this new spirit of freedom and possibility would be reflected in the art being produced. And it is no accident that calligraphy, a potent symbol of identity against the old colonial masters, should emerge within the new work being created."²⁴⁶

Beginning in the early 1950s, artists in the Arab world took inspiration from their own cultures, even when they were exposed to international concepts and aesthetics. The result was an alternative and original approach to modernism and contemporary art.²⁴⁷ They used the Arabic script as a manifestation of informing a new modernist experiment. By liberating Arabic calligraphy from its association with the sacred and classical texts through their artwork, they helped nurture new ideas

²⁴⁴ Issa, *Signs of Our Times*, 19.

²⁴⁵ Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity*, 27.

²⁴⁶ Issa, *Signs of Our Times*, 19.

²⁴⁷ Issa, *Signs of Our Times*, 19.

for a new generation of artists and individuals concerned with issues of Arab identity and its expression. They did so through artwork, intellectual endeavors and a rigorous process of informing a future generation of thinkers and creative producers on the concerns they have witnessed on topics related to Arab modernity during its formation. Their work is a bridge between the aspirations of unity that were formed in the post-colonial set up of the Arab world, and the future that is yet uninformed of its history due to wars and political and social instability. Calligraphic abstraction continues to inspire a new generation of artists using different mediums in the Arab world and beyond.

Summary

Following the emergence of concepts related to Arab nationalism there was a clear struggle between the progressive thinkers who wanted to secure a secular society and release public life from religion, and the conformists who wanted to maintain their traditional practices. My research starts by defining what is Islamic art since it is the main point of misinterpretation. I propose a new reading of Islamic art, and then compare Islamic art to modern and contemporary art so that the transition of societies from producing Islamic art to ones producing modern and contemporary art can be understood. And finally, in the first chapter I discuss how the different artists who used the Arabic script as a subject in their paintings dealt with issues of identity and modernity.

In the second chapter of the book I propose a critical understanding of letterist abstraction works of art. It has been a very complex and challenging task for the very few critics who have attempted to classify this movement. Since it is based on visualizing language, getting caught up in the literal meaning of the work rather than its level of abstraction has been a very common point of confusion for most critics. I have devised a tool that allows scholars to place a letterist work of art on a spectrum of abstraction in relationship to different elements in the painting. It is a way to understand the artworks and their artists in relationship to each other.

Understanding letterists abstraction artists and the dynamics that dictated their work was essential for understanding the movement and its artistic production.

In the final chapter I have focused my research on the life and work of Samir Sayegh, relying primarily on testimonials by the artist himself and by his contemporaries. My subject is a multifaceted cultural figure who started his career as a poet and a journalist seeking a new modern means of Arab expression, eventually becoming interested in Arabic script as a means of representing, researching, and innovating a new Arab identity. I study his work in relationship to the totality of the movement. I also use the different phases of his work to see where it falls on the spectrum of abstraction in the different phases of his career, thus applying my new tool to the totality of the artistic production of one artist.

The Main Theses and Goals this dissertation attempts to develop is a critical understanding by which Arabic letterist abstraction works of art can be understood.

It places the life and work of letterist abstraction artists in a wider artistic, social and political context, thus helping the reader form an understanding of the movement from a broader perspective. By tracing all the threads for the assessment of letterist abstraction works of art and artists, I hope to encourage the emergence of more such scholarly and critical works, until we have a better critical understanding of the contemporary Arab art scene as a whole.