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

Shehab, B.

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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.