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ARTICLE

Barjeel Art Foundation: Cross-National Bridge Building and Decolonisation of the History of Art

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Abstract This article focuses on the Barjeel Art Foundation based in Sharjah, UAE. Using a case study approach the work demonstrates how art, art exhibitions and museum spaces are positioned as influencers in the formation of an inclusive space within the History of Art for scholarship on modern and contemporary art from the Middle East and North Africa. Founded in 2010, the Barjeel is a strong proponent for cross-national bridge building through national and international temporary exhibitions. However, in 2018 the foundation altered their exhibition practice from temporary shows to a long-term display at the Sharjah Art Museum (SAM). I argue that this shift in exhibition practice from temporary/travelling to long-term/stationary is demonstrating the foundation's pendulum swing away from acting as cross-national bridge builder towards being an important supporter for the decolonisation of art history. To be clear, since its founding the Barjeel has always supported the development of Arab modern art through art collecting and temporary exhibition practices; however, since 2018, the foundation's curatorial choices are showing acknowledgment of the clear distinctions between engagement with art collecting or art criticism and the practices used in the discipline of the History of Art. To support this claim, the study argues that the Barjeel's recent long-term show at SAM is posing nuanced *art historical* questions, which engage with yet move far beyond art criticism and political discourse. In addition, through its long-term exhibition at SAM the Barjeel is defining its purpose away from modernism tied to Europe and making valuable contributions to region specific modernism in the History of Art.

INTRODUCTION

Referring to modern and contemporary art from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Sussan Babaie rightly highlights that various countries in the MENA, for example Iraq, Qatar, Iran, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Algeria, Egypt and Morocco (to name but a few countries), hold long established traditions in the production and practices of modern art from which more recent contemporary practices have emerged (Babaie, 2011, p. 133). Since the late twentieth century, postcolonial scholarship has called on art professionals and academics to decolonise the

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History of Art by acknowledging modern and contemporary art from the many countries around the world. Responding to this call, the *art histories* of modern and contemporary art from the MENA (1882-present) are only recently being recorded.[1] This critical analysis aims to provide commentary on art institutions in the Middle East and their role in challenging conventional European understandings of modernism in the History of Art. Using a case study approach which focuses on the Barjeel Art Foundation (Barjeel, the foundation or BAF) based in the UAE, I will demonstrate how art, art exhibitions and museum spaces are positioned as influencers in the formation of an inclusive space within the History of Art for scholarship on modern and contemporary art from the MENA.

Modern and contemporary art from the MENA is considered by the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey (AMCA) as a developing field in the History of Art. AMCA is one of the leading voices in the field. Nada Shabout states that AMCA's aim is to initiate 'the much-deserved recognition of a neglected and misrepresented field, and to open up institutional spaces for discussion, research and study' (2008, p. 16). Shabout's article is appropriately titled 'Art Without History?' and she—along with other prominent figures in the field such as Salwa Mikdadi, Wijdan Ali and Hamid Keshmirshekan—call for scholars to take a global interest in the topic, which requires further empirical data collection and critical study.[2]

A number of institutions in the USA have strong ties with modern and contemporary art from the MENA, for example: the Contemporary Arab and Muslim Cultural Studies Initiative at the University of North Texas, and The History, Theory and Criticism of Architecture and Art program at MIT. In recent years, a few newly established scholarly networks in Europe are giving a sustained focus on modernism and modernity in the MENA, for example: the Institut National de l'Histoire de l'Art in Paris and the Forum Transregionale Studien in Berlin have a unit for Art Histories and Aesthetic Practices that incorporates art from the MENA, as well as the recent inclusion of the subject in the formal History of Art curricula at University College Cork in Ireland. However, even in light of these and other research and teaching activities, it is still reasonable to state that there is a very limited engagement with and/or understanding of modern and contemporary art from the MENA in the practices of the History of Art in Europe. Limited knowledge production in the field from a European perspective is due to the subject's absence from the conventional 'Western' art historical canon (Shabout, 2015a, pp. 64–66).

As highlighted by Holiday Powers, until recently scholarly work has centred on modernism in Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq, however this limited focus has now expanded to include numerous other countries across the MENA. Published in 2018, *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Document*, edited by Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers and Shabout, argues for definitions of 'Arab modernism' spanning from Morocco to the Gulf. In addition to translating key documents into English, the edited volume also acts as a guide for wider modernism in the MENA and, significantly, it proposes a timeline from 1882 to 1987—which is supported by various texts and works of art. However, I am in agreement with Powers when she astutely states that, due to the infancy of the field, when teaching the subject of modernism in the MENA at university level, 'much of the burden falls on individual faculty members, both to make connections between movements so that they are not isolated to

national boundaries and to explicate the importance of different groupings. . .I am not convinced that there is a canon that we all know, teach, or reference, much less agree on (Powers, 2020, pp. 11–12).' For this reason, the editors of *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Document* emphatically claim that the book is not a comprehensive or definitive view of the origins and development of modernism in the Arab world; rather, the events and timeline proposed in the volume act as a foundation for further research and development (Lenssen et al., 2018, p. 21; Powers, 2020, pp. 8, 11). I would add that the 'Arab World' does not incorporate Persian, Berber and various other communities present in the MENA, however, this volume is a valuable source which is supporting advancements the field.

This article is broken into four parts: part one will present an introduction to the decolonisation of the History of Art; part two will give a brief background to the Barjeel; part three will look at the Barjeel's temporary and traveling exhibitions; and part four will explore the foundation's long-term exhibition at the Sharjah Art Museum (SAM) and recently proposed permanent museum space in Sharjah. Part one outlines for the reader just some of the current debates in the History of Art which bring to the fore the developing subject of 'global modernism'—which is an ongoing debate among academics, the museum and gallery world, and many other art professionals. Part two will open by introducing the Barjeel, which will briefly set the foundation into the context of other art institutions in the gulf region. Part three will present a discussion on the Barjeel's efforts to create awareness about Arab modern art through select temporary exhibitions. However, the central focus of this section will be on the BAF's use of soft power and cross-national political bridge building through select temporary exhibitions. Finally, part four will discuss the Barjeel's more recent long-term exhibition at SAM. I will argue that this major shift in exhibition practices from temporary/traveling to long-term/permanent is demonstrating the foundation's pendulum swing away from acting as cross-national bridge builder and towards being an important supporter for the decolonisation of the History of Art. To be clear, since its founding the Barjeel has always supported the establishment and advancements of Arab modern art through art collecting and temporary exhibition practices. However, since 2018 the foundation's curatorial choices are showing acknowledgment of the clear distinction between engagement with art collecting and art criticism and the practices used in the discipline of the History of Art. To support this claim, part four will argue that the Barjeel's recent long-term show at SAM is posing nuanced *art historical* questions, which engage with yet move far beyond art criticism and political discourse.

While many other art institutions based in the MENA are mentioned in this article, a case study on the Barjeel is presented for the purpose of highlighting the foundation's distinctive collecting and exhibition practices in the gulf region and internationally. Importantly, I aim to show how the Barjeel's exhibition practices, which support the promotion of regional heritages and cross-national diplomacy and political bridge building, are now, in addition, supporting key components in the recently proposed timeline of MENA aesthetic modernism in the History of Art.[3] Furthermore, modernism must also be studied through transnational artistic influences, thus ideas and challenges relating to global History of Art will also be discussed.

DECOLONISATION OF THE HISTORY OF ART

'Decolonisation' has multiple meanings and for some it is rooted in the physical taking back of geographical territories from European powers during the twentieth-century age of decolonisation. 'Decolonisation' is also closely associated with the undoing of the violence of colonialism or historical protectorates or occupation of territories more broadly—for example, this can refer to systems of governance, lived spaces and architectural structures, the undoing of colonization of the individual's mind and dehumanization, and the protection of one's language and heritage. As claimed by Elizabeth Giorgis, 'decolonisation is also the possibility to realise the role of human agency and its move to decentre colonial hierarchies'. Decolonisation of the History of Art tends to be a very loosely used term, however in this article I refer to the undoing of the conventional narrative associated to the birth of modern art and modernism in 'Western' practices of art history—an act of undoing which is more closely associated to the decolonisation of the colonial centre and cultural practices as well as the decolonisation of the mind.[4]

Global modernism is a developing subject in the History of Art, and there are still many unanswered questions in scholarly understanding of the subject. In this section I will provide a brief background to the discussion of global modernism thus far. Of course, due to the limitations of this article, this brief background cannot possibly include all stakeholders and voices currently active in the discussion. In the conventional practices of the History of art, Europe is defined as the birthplace of 'modernism' during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, late twentieth-century postcolonial and interventionist projects in art as well as twenty-first-century scholarship in global histories of art have now debunked conventional 'Western' ideas about the origins of modernism. It is true that modernism flourished in Europe via a flow of important late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art 'isms', however art historians and art practitioners can no longer justify this conventional definition of modernism, which was originally fashioned through the lens of colonization and its various power dynamics.

Over the past 30 years the History of Art has experienced pioneering change in that the art canon has opened to recognize modern art produced in various countries, works which were produced by the historically marginalized including women as well as peoples who were subject to colonization or veiled protectorates (Özpınar & Kelly, 2020, p. 2). As highlighted by Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price in their extensive 2020 survey 'Decolonizing Art History', the field of the History of Art can no longer be viewed through the lens of various European traditions. In a contribution to the survey, Basu rightly claims that modernism is a series of interconnected but individual experiences, 'successive movements, in a timeline chronologically linked to industrial modernity, within national frameworks' (Grant & Price, 2020, pp. 8–66. Priyanka Basu at p. 15). Various countries in the MENA have very different histories relating to the formation and timelines of aesthetic modernism —and these accounts have yet to be fully recognized in foundational scholarship in the History of Art, which is still being used in teaching practices in many European and American based universities (Kelly & Özpınar, 2021).

As I have discussed elsewhere, scholars working in the area of transcultural exchange, for example Okwui Enwezor and Salah Hassan who engage with artistic productions in sub-Saharan Africa, raise important questions about the development of scholarship beyond the Eurocentric norms and standards; alternatively these scholars consider local influences in the production of art.[5] However, as justly questioned by Meier, is it possible to develop intellectual work in modern (and contemporary) art in the MENA without investigating instances of the European encounter? (pp. 12–45). Considering the artistic encounter, many European modern artists, for example Henri Matisse (1869–1954) and Ketty Carré (1882–1964), traveled to North Africa during the early twentieth century where they borrowed stylistic and decorative form from Islamic art and, on returning to France, their productions of modernist form evolved to reflect the modern European social and artistic experience. Likewise, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century many artists from the MENA studied for a time in Europe after which some returned to their home countries and created works of art that reflected on and drew from their cultural experiences, heritages, historical art practices, time periods, political and geographical spaces—developing their own artistic and modernist views on their societies. Iwona Blazwizk claims that modern (and contemporary) artistic practices in the MENA were molded 'by forces pulling in directions that can clash and converge: the trajectories of cultural and religious tradition and modernism: artistic. . .innovations and acts of iconoclasm and censorship; colonialism and self determination' (p. 9). In keeping with this idea, Saeb Eigner highlights that 'it is clear that Western colonial domination, which began in the nineteenth century and intensified with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War, was an important factor' in the stylistic direction of art from the MENA (p. 9). It is interesting to note the historical entanglement herein: the industrial revolution in Europe depended on colonial expansion, which in turn was one of the driving forces behind the developments of modern art in Europe. Likewise, the recent developments in modern art from the MENA are closely correlated with twentieth-century architectural and industrial development in MENA countries. For example, the architectural spaces in which MENA art is housed are central to research, curation and exhibition of works of art, which has led to the establishment and advancements in the History of Art.[6] Considering historical political and/or artistic travel experiences as important influencers for the production of a shared visual language between the global north and south, it is fitting to state that there is a lingering tension between the local and global present in all works of art—modern or otherwise.

In 2007, James Elkins asked: is art history global? Elkins' research is concerned with the methodologies used in European and American art history and whether or not they can be applied to art produced beyond Europe and North America (pp. 3–24). As identified by Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, with the continued development of a global History of Art conventional methodological practices in the field—which stem from Europe and America—are being called into question and asked to reflect upon, broaden and reconsider their perspectives (Kaufmann et al., 2016, pp. 1–3). Due to the unearthing of new material, for example modern works of art and primary sources from the Middle East, Africa, China, India, etc., the conventional Euro-American centred approaches to the History of Art are outdated and problematic (p. 1). DaCosta Kaufmann, Dossin, Joyeux-Prunel, Enwezor, Hassan and Elkins, among others, call for art historical

emphasis on local, translocal, transnational and transcultural encounters which tease out conditions of global exchange (Kelly & Özpınar, 2021).

We have now moved into 'post-postmodernist' thinking which comprises a global History of Art based on a shared visual language between different peoples, time periods and nations. Today, many art historians (a few already mentioned herein) are calling for the foundational teachings of the discipline in the global north to embrace this move towards a global History of Art not only for the progressive good of our discipline, but also because—through the principles of soft power—art and its scholarship possess the ability to breakdown walls and build bridges between different peoples and nations. If the foundational teachings of a global History of Art are truly activated in the global north, meaningful cross-national innovation in research, teaching and learning (scholarship) in the field will follow.

Shabout, Mikdadi, Rogers, Roger Benjamin and others discuss the various entanglement and engagement of ideas between MENA and European artists during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries[7]: Ragheb Ayad, 1892–1982 and Inji Efflatoun, 1924–1989 (Egypt), Mohammed Racim, 1896–1975 and Mohammed Issiakhem, 1928–1985 (Algeria), Daoud Corm, 1852–1930 and Saloua Raouda Choucair, 1916–2017 (Lebanon), Shakir Hassan Al Said, 1925–2004 and Layla Al-Attar 1944–1993 (Iraq), Mona Saudi, 1945–2022 (Jordan) and many others practiced within a local/regional and transnational paradigm in which individual artistic influences were shared between the local and regional in the MENA and with Europe, leading to a blurring of different artistic styles and methods across cultures, time periods and geographical borders. Most scholars in the field agree that modernist practices in the MENA began with colonization and advanced rapidly with industrialization during the decolonial era of the mid-late twentieth century (Meier, 2010, pp. 19–20; Takesh & Gumpert, 2020). Some interpretive models consider MENA art as 'parallel' or 'alternative' to European practices, however this model is problematic. Rather MENA modern art is part of the global articulation in art (Shabout, 2009, pp. 1–3); thus, in order to move away from the conventional European traditions towards an acknowledgment of the various timelines of aesthetic modernism, works of art must be read through the lens of local and transnational encounter and exchange.

With new peer-reviewed research on art from the MENA coming to the fore, understandings of modernism in art history as a global phenomenon is beginning to emerge. Research and development is also focusing on new methodologies for the practices of the History of Art. For example, in 2016, the 4th AMCA conference was held at NYU-Abu Dhabi and the Barjeel gallery in Sharjah. Over 3 days, 22 papers responded to the topic 'Abstraction Unframed' exploring the disciplinary inheritance of Abstraction beyond the traditional European centre, one which is located in Eastern mysticism and vitalist philosophy (Author Unknown, 2016). Such art historical readings are expanding our understandings of modernism in art beyond the European and American centres. This discourse engages with Elkins' 2007 enquiry into art history as a global entity. As mentioned, Elkins asks 'what is the shape. . .of art history across the world? Is it becoming global—that is, does it have a recognizable form wherever it is practiced?' (p. 3). He puts forward five reasons why art history might encompass different practise, which vary from one place to another; and then five more reasons why art

history can be considered as a unified global enterprise. A key argument in why art history is not a global enterprise is that 'what counts as "art history" in many countries is [actually] newspaper art criticism' (p. 5). And herein lies premise for my argument that, since the hanging of the Barjeel's long-term exhibition at SAM, the foundation is demonstrating deeper knowledge about the distinction between art criticism and practices used in the History of Art. Those attuned to the practices of art history and art criticism will know that these are two very distinct enterprises, method and approach being central to their differentiation.

Prior to the recent work of Shabout and Mikdadi *et al.*, art history did not exist as a discipline in the Middle East: it was not practiced and it was not taught in Middle Eastern universities. Since 2010, the subject is now taught at, for example, NYU Abu Dhabi, Zayed University Abu Dhabi and VCU Qatar. In the absence of 'non-Western' methodologies in art history, even though source materials vary from country to country, the art historical interpretive methodologies used in these university programmes are 'Western' in origin, for example, identity theory; iconography; iconology and semiotics. Building from this, rightly, DaCosta Kaufmann, Dossin and Joyeux-Prunel claim that the traditional 'Western' methods in art history seem 'increasingly unsatisfactory, as notions of cultural mixing, decentering, and interchange have become prevalent.' (pp. 1–3, Özpınar & Kelly, 2020, p. 2). As noted, scholars are calling for an emphasis on transcultural and transnational encounters in order to tease out conditions of global exchange which could lead to the development of new methods in the History of Art. With this in mind, I am in agreement with Elkins when he states that 'I do think that it is important to share the methods of art history' and, with time and future collaborative research into art historical methodologies, 'a worldwide set of practices identifiable as art history poses a fascinating challenge.' (Elkins, 2007, p. 22).

BARJEEL: A BRIEF BACKGROUND

During the late twentieth-century, numerous new art institutions have been established in different Middle Eastern countries. Collecting, recording, preserving and exhibiting modern and contemporary art from the MENA forms a cornerstone of these institutions—which aim to showcase Arab, Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, Berber, etc. cultural heritages both regionally in the gulf and internationally (Exell & Rico, 2014, pp. 1–18). In line with governmental strategies (for example: UAE's Vision 2021 and Qatar's National Vision 2030), Gulf States are preparing themselves to become global centres of excellence in art and education. New museums, galleries and centres of excellence are positioned as communicators of information about art collections, regional gulf cultures, identities and heritages to audiences both at home and abroad[8] —for example, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (established in 1977); Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts (established in 1980); the Sharjah Biennial (established in 1993 and was under the direction of Sharjah Department of Culture and Information until 2015); Ashkal Alwan in Beirut (founded in 1993); The Third Line Gallery in Dubai (opened 2005); The Sharjah Museums Authority (established 2006); Museum of Islamic Art, Doha (opened 2008); Sharjah Art Foundation (founded 2009, which assumed directorship of Sharjah Biennial in 2015); Manarat Al Saadiyat in Abu Dhabi (opened 2010); Mathaf: Arab Museum of

Modern art in Doha (opened 2010); Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah (established and opened 2010), and Louvre Abu Dhabi (opened 2017) to name but only a few art institutions. Of course, these institutions and many others differ greatly in their governance and exhibition practices: some are governmental organizations while others are for profit, some are private while others are corporate foundations, which leads the art history community to question who is driving these projects and for what purpose—some, perhaps, are more politically or economically motivated.[9]

However, considering the exhibition practices alone, one common thread is shared between these institutions: many artists, curators and scholars are working together across institutional, local, national and international divides in order to speak in an art historical unity and establish the various origins and timelines of aesthetic modernism in the MENA. Over the past 25 years museums, galleries, artists, curators, collectors and academics have played a central role in creating an awareness around modern and contemporary art from the MENA, for example, a few important exhibitions include: 'Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World' (National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C., 1994, curated by Salwa Mikdadi); 'Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art' (Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, 2010–2011, curated by Nada Shabout, Wassan al-Khudhairi and Deena Chalabi); and 'Imperfect Chronology' (Whitechapel Gallery, London, series of four exhibitions of art from the Barjeel collection, 2015–2017, curated by Omar Kholeif). Various individuals and institutions, such as those already mentioned as well as others, rightly aim to further record and contextualize the histories of modern and contemporary art from the MENA, progressively rewriting the History of Art on their own terms and through the filter of their local and regional experiences, histories, cultures and heritages. Due to its rather distinctive formation and development—namely its approach to exhibition practices locally, regionally and internationally—the Barjeel is positioned as one institution making vast contributions to the History of Art. *A 'Barjeel' is an air-cooling tower, a structure that was once a common feature in the Middle East. Its name translates as 'wind catcher'* (Blazwick, 2015, 9).

Since 2010, Barjeel has acted as one of the key art institutions which engage in the sharing of knowledge about modern and contemporary Arab art. The foundation was founded by Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi—who is an art collector and a prominent commentator on social and political affairs in Arab states. Throughout the Arab Spring Al Qassemi's Twitter feed was highlighted as an important news source. 'It was [Al]Qassemi's rapid translation of Arab language news into English that won him a global audience during the uprisings that convulsed the Middle East and North Africa' (Adams, 2011). Al Qassemi claims that many individuals and institutions approach the regions of the MENA via a political lens only. He states that it 'is essential to consider the cultural dynamics that influence political and social spheres across the [MENA] region[s], such as the formation of national identities and championing of pan-Arab causes' (Fulham, 2021). In addition, moving his attention to gender issues, in 2019 Al Qassemi made comment on 'male chauvinism' in art where he emphatically claimed that early/mid twentieth-century MENA women artists required more visibility in the museum and gallery sector (Gronlund, 2019). The Barjeel originally arose out of Al Qassemi's appreciation for art and its effectiveness as a tool for socio-political commentary, however the foundation was also realized through the unyielding dedication and art expertise of the wider Barjeel team:

Mandy Merzaban (founding curator, 2009–2018); Karim Sultan (curator, 2016–2018); Suheyla Takesh (curator); Sarah Adamson (registrar), and Marah Shaaban (administrative coordinator). [Corrections made on 28th December 2022, after first online publication: the text 'Mandy Merzaban (founding curator 2010–2018); Karim Sultan (curator 2010–2018)' has been changed to 'Mandy Merzaban (founding curator, 2009–2018); Karim Sultan (curator, 2016–2018)'] It is apt to state that the Barjeel is very much defined by the individual that founded it; therefore, in the sections that follow, this article will explore the Barjeel through just two points highlighted in Al Qassemi's sociopolitical commentary: the formation of national identities and the influences of pan-Arabism as well as MENA women artists' visibility in the museum and gallery sector.

Formally located in the Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah, the Barjeel is a UAE based initiative which holds an important collection of approximately 1200 works by 400 modern and contemporary artists from the Arab world.[10] The BAF's guiding principle is to highlight the 'vibrant indigenous visual arts tradition' in the Arab World (Al Qassemi, 2013). In addition to collecting Arab art, curating and hosting exhibitions and loaning works of art to regional and international museums and galleries, the BAF is actively engaged in the sharing of knowledge about Arab artists through various channels such as educational forums, publication, and an open access online repository. The foundation's noteworthy mission is to galvanize 'an open-ended enquiry that responds to and conveys the nuances inherent to Arab histories' (Merzaban, 2017a, 2017b). This philosophy of an open-ended enquiry, which has links with the political, is also in keeping with current discourse in the area of global History of Art. That is, art historians are maneuvering through the oscillating and heterogeneous interpretations of art which organically materialize during interdisciplinary and transnational practices.

Enabling the Barjeel's steady will to challenge 'borders' (artistic, social, cultural, political, etc.), since 2010 works of art from the collection have been curated into numerous temporary exhibitions at Maraya. In addition, works have traveled across geographical borders where they act as the *tour de force* behind a number of important international exhibitions. For example, Barjeel's temporary exhibitions ran at the Katzen Art Center, American University Museum, Washington, D.C.; Hessel Museum, Bard College, New York; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; Jordan National Gallery, Amman, Jordan; Institut Du Monde Arabe, Paris; Bibliotheca Alexandrina; Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art; Whitechapel Gallery, London; and Grey Art Gallery, New York University. In recent years, however, progressively bringing the movement of the Barjeel's collection to a slower pace, the foundation is currently engaged in a major collaboration with the Sharjah Museums Authority which includes the long-term public exhibition of select works from the collection at SAM. The first exhibition of the Barjeel collection at SAM was entitled 'A Century in Flux: Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation Chapter I' (12 May 2018–22 October 2020), curated by Salwa Mikdadi with former Barjeel curators Mandy Merzaban and Karim Sultan. The second exhibition at SAM was entitled 'A Century in Flux: Highlights from The Barjeel Art Foundation: Chapter II' (3 November 2019–28 February 2021). Curated by Suheyla Takesh, chapter two centred on gender politics in the History of Art through the display of an equal number of works by both male and female artists from the Arab world. The current Barjeel exhibition at SAM, which opened on 5 March 2021, is entitled 'Memory Sews Together Events that hadn't Previously Met'. Also curated by Takesh, the

third show questions the ways in which 'artists in the Arab world have responded to socio-political events and the human condition across the twentieth century (Takesh, 2021).' In 2019, the foundation announced its plans for the development of a permanent space for the collection in Sharjah: Barjeel Museum for Modern Arab Art.

At this juncture, one needs to question what makes the Barjeel different from other art institutions based in MENA countries? Firstly, given that the Barjeel's collecting practices are underpinned by historical and political events in the MENA and, secondly, since 2010, the Barjeel has demonstrated a very distinctive exhibition practice which I will discuss in the following sections. As this article progresses, it will explore how the foundation's initial focus on political histories and bridge building between the Arab world and various nations through select temporary exhibitions is now—through its long-term exhibition and proposed permanent space—, metamorphosing into a new research source which supports recent peer-reviewed timelines of Arab modernism.

Barjeel's Cross-National Bridge Building Through Temporary Exhibitions

Outlining why he was inspired to establish and nurture the BAF, making reference to various art movements in the Arab world, Al Qassemi claims that:

> *Certainly, art is borderless and there are intertwining narratives and ethnic groups [located in the Arab world] at play. However, in addition to the obvious matter of a shared visual language, there is also common cause, at the forefront of which is the Palestinian cause [specifically the Naksa of 1967] that permeates across all cultural and artistic expressions in the Arab world. . .It is my hope that through [the activities of the Barjeel]. . .a common thread may be defined that binds the artistic narrative of the Arab world together to celebrate not only its unifying artistic tradition, but also, equally, its varying practices dissonances and contradictions. (Al Qassemi in Kholeif & Stobbs, 2015, p. 15)*

Through these words one can identify the metanarrative which drives the Barjeel: a visually informed socio-political intervention in the Arab world which is concerned with historical and political human experiences as expressed through art; an intervention which utilizes soft power in order to bind various Arab peoples and shared ideas together through their individualisms and a collective voice—perhaps inspired by twentieth-century Pan-Arabism. This metanarrative organically stems from Al Qassemi's legacy as an Arab world political commentator, which is further amplified by his recent teaching practices at Yale University, New York University, Georgetown University and elsewhere through a course entitled 'Politics of Modern Middle Eastern Art'.

When looking solely at Arab modern art practice within the political realms of the Arab world, certainly, Al Qassemi's views are shrewd and timely; however, can the idea of art as a borderless entity be applied to the wider discourse in the History of Art? When read through global histories of art the ideology which underpins modern art can be understood as a shared global visual language. However, art is not borderless—even across Arab states. Cultures, identities, heritages, belief systems, language

dialects, etc., all differ across Arab states—and these important individualisms are major driving forces in artistic practices in various countries and for our art historical interpretations. Even the timelines of modernism differ across Arab states (as well as across the world). By stating that MENA 'art is borderless' the political influence is overshadowing the nuances involved in the practices of the History of Art. Furthermore, when moving the idea of MENA 'art as borderless' beyond the Arab world to the global north one must also consider the conventional practices of the History of Art which are still prevalent in Europe and America: regrettably, the reality is that in the 'Western' art historical environment MENA art is not 'borderless'. As discussed in part one of this article, the conventional 'Western' understandings of modern art—from ideas about the origin and timelines of modernism, to the cultural, socio-political and religious variances depicted as well as language difference and issues of translation—all create numerous 'borders' in the making of meaning. While Al Qassemi's view of art as a 'borderless' entity is somewhat problematic, the central political discourse and attempts to bridge-build between the Arab world and other nations through BAF temporary and traveling exhibitions is noteworthy. In keeping with all museums and galleries across the globe, the Barjeel also utilizes soft power in select traveling temporary exhibitions. On analyzing certain exhibitions, it is clear that the foundation has approached turbulent political histories in an attempt to open new dialogue between a collective Arab voice (perhaps influenced by pan-Arabism) and other nations —for example with Iran and the USA.

Curated by Karim Sultan, in 2016 the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMCA) in Iran hosted the exhibition 'The Sea Suspended' where 40 Arab paintings from the Barjeel were exhibited alongside 40 Iranian works of modern art from the TMCA collection. Hailed as an historically important event, the show marked the first major exhibition of Arab modern art in Iran. The aim of the exhibition was to highlight 'the multiple approaches to artmaking in modern conditions by artists from diverse [MENA] backgrounds' (Sultan, 2016), while also considering a 'regional cultural bond that has thrived despite the simmering tensions between Iran and its Arab neighbours' (Dehghan, 2016). One year later, shifting the trajectory of the Barjeel to the USA, in 2017 Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven hosted the exhibition 'Modern Art from the Middle East' which was curated by Frauke Josenhans, Kishwar Rizvi, Mandy Merzaban and Najwa Mayer and, like the show at TMCA, comprised various objects from the BAF. The aim of the exhibition in New Haven was to 'mark the 175th anniversary of the field of Arabic studies at Yale' while also highlighting 'the art movements that blossomed in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria in the second half of the 20th century and testify to the emergence of a unique aesthetic in these countries' (Josenhans *et al.*, 2017).

Using the exhibitions in Tehran and New Haven as a point for discussion, it is interesting to consider how the physical movement of art facilitates and creates a rationale for the Barjeel's philosophy of 'an open-ended enquiry that responds to. . .the nuances inherent to Arab histories.' As works crossed geographical borders from Sharjah/UAE to Tehran/Iran and New Haven/USA, select meaning attributed to objects and exhibitions exist as a shared universal truth. As stated by Mollanorouzi, '[a]rt is important in that it allows experiences to be shared, even across the boundaries of language or culture (2016)'. This idea of a shared experience is central to the Barjeel's cross-national bridge building efforts. The shared universal truth that emerged through the temporary shows in

Tehran and New Haven is the wide global learning about the various rich traditions and practices of modern art that developed in the Arab world during the twentieth century. For example, both exhibitions displayed works by the Iraqi artist Shakir Hassan Al Said (1925–2004), whose abstract paintings fuse various traditions from the MENA and Europe (Figure 1).

Al Said, a central figure in Iraqi modernism, was one of the co-founders of the Baghdad Modern Art Group in 1951 and founder of the One Dimension Group in 1971. Al Said's *al-Bua'd al-Wahid* (One Dimension) manifesto centred on art as an act of sacred contemplation which represents the space between the visible world and the spiritual realm of God. The artist blended elements of Islamic Sufism with phenomenology, existentialism, deconstruction, structuralism and semiotics in order to aid the viewer's transcendence to the one dimension' (Shabout, 2007, pp. 109–121; Naji, 2019). Simultaneously, however, it is equally apt to state that other select meanings attributed to objects exhibited in Tehran and New Haven can exist only in the set geographical spaces of Iran or America and—if the exhibitions/objects are moved beyond these countries—select meanings collapse. Analyzing modern and contemporary art from the MENA from a 'Western' perspective brings with it challenges of cultural diversity, language differences and very different sources in art history. Shabout states that 'Western' scholarship about art from the MENA 'is often disengaged from the historical development of the art it describes' (Shabout, 2009, p. 2). Thus, in order to avoid this pitfall, it is mandatory for non-expert scholars and students to cross geographical borders and visit various countries in the MENA in order to (A) gain training in art from the MENA and study the art historical sources located in various research departments; (B) experience the cultures and obtain a more grounded view of these countries beyond the problematic filters of social media; and (C) build meaningful minor and/or major flagship collaborations with colleagues working in the field in the MENA and beyond.

Further to this, building towards an understanding of why select meanings collapse as objects cross geographical borders, analyzing MENA art from a 'Western' perspective requires profound postcolonial consciousness and awareness of one's subject position. James Clifford states that cross-cultural dialogues are made up of 'multivocal exchanges occurring in politically charged situations' and that the 'subjectivities produced in these often unequal exchanges' can be 'constructed domains of truth, serious fictions' (Clifford, 1988, p. 10). Once this pitfall is recognized and embraced by researchers, inventive possibilities for collaboration and new scholarship emerge. After all, as widely established in peer-reviewed scholarship, many artists from the MENA studied for a time in Europe after which some returned to their home countries and created works of art which reflected their modernist views on their societies. Considering the shared modern visual language that exists between the global north and south, in order to truly scrutinize the lingering tension and 'borders' of local and global which are present in works of art, surely collaboration between colleagues based in both the global north and south is a valuable entity. For example, in order to understand why select meanings collapse when the Barjeel's cross-national bridge building exhibitions moved from Tehran to New Haven, attention must be given to the role of constructivism in the viewer's phenomenological encounter with art and exhibitions. Presenting his views on constructivism in museum and gallery spaces George Hein states that:

Figure 1. Shakir Hassan Al Said (1925–2004), *Victorious*, 1983, mixed-media on wooden panel, 122 x 101 cm. Barjeel Art Foundation. Image courtesy of the Barjeel Art Foundation with permission from the artist's estate. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

> *[We] need to consider the personal connections [museum and gallery] visitors may make with modes of presentation and ways to think about exhibits. In stressing the need to recognize visitors' meaning making as the primary way in which visitors interact with exhibitions and the requirement that they be able to connect with the content of the galleries. . .we have to fashion a "better fit" between the contents of the museum [gallery or exhibition] and the ways in which visitors make meanings (Hein, 1998, p. 163).*

When considering phenomenology as a gateway to making meaning in art, it is imperative to apply a constructivist approach where meaning is facilitated through the viewer's encounter with the work of art: lived history, culture, social order, religion, geographical space, political experiences and beliefs, etc. all play a role in the viewer's understandings of works of art and/or exhibitions. Furthermore, the environment (museum/gallery and geographical space) in which the viewer experiences the work of art will influence understanding (Hein, 2005, p. 359). In addition to focusing on just one individual's (viewer's) encounter with art objects, researchers of constructivism also build datasets which explore the commonalities of meaning that can derive from the shared lived experiences of select human groups. As stated by Hein, constructivism 'challenges the notion of absolute truth and requires acknowledging that different people (or different cultural groups) view the world in ways not necessarily compatible with our own.' (p. 359). *The Protector of Life*, 1967/8 by the Egyptian artist Hamed Ewais (1919–2011) formed part of the Barjeel shows in Tehran and New Haven and the painting can be used to demonstrate the role of constructivism in the making of meaning (see image and caption at Barjeel Art Collection online).

Ewais, who co-founded the Group of Modern Art in Egypt in 1947, is regarded as one of the pioneers of modernism and Social Realism in Egypt. Painted during the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, the work depicts an upper Egyptian soldier with a weapon suspended over his shoulder; in the lower half of the painting a group of people are portrayed engaging in various daily activities. Kholeif has identified this painting as marking the collapse of the Pan-Arab ideal: through the work Ewais is calling for a renewal of the ideology after its dissolution post-1967 (p. 20). It is interesting that this painting was included in both the Tehran and New Haven shows: I recall again Al Qassemi's legacy as an Arab world political commentator, the Barjeel's cross-national bridge building efforts and the underlining metanarrative of the foundation as a visually informed socio-political intervention in the Arab world, its use of soft power in order to bind various Arab peoples and shared ideas together through their individualisms and a collective voice. *The Protector of Life* is a visual representation of this ideal, being displayed to audiences in Iran and the USA.

Considering the artist's style, Ewais encountered Italian social realist painting during a visit to the Venice Biennale of 1952. The artist—who was a 'proponent of [Gamal Abdel] Nasser's Pan Arab movement'—also drew influence from Mexican muralism and is regarded as one of Egypt's leading social realist painters of the twentieth century (Rogers & Merzaban, 2018)[11]. Pushing beyond the descriptive towards a deeper analysis of the painting, the weapon portrayed acts as a device which separates the viewer from the figures, and it signifies that the peoples are protected and the soldier is capable of defense. The soldier's body displays a binary expression of protection: he shields the group of people with one arm while he confidently grasps his weapon with the other. In turn, this binary

expression of protection creates opposing readings of the soldier: he is both caring and threatening. Considering Hein's constructivist approach to cultural groups and the exhibition of the painting in Tehran and New Haven, the Iranian and American understandings of this painting will differ and it is here where bridge building efforts and the making of meaning potentially collapse when the work is moved across geographical borders. When viewed in 2016 in Tehran through the experience of select Iranian peoples who live in the post-trauma of a twentieth-century protectorate and revolution, this work could speak to, for example, individual Arab and Iranian experiences of the protection or forceful taking back of self-agency, nation and/or space. Conversely, however, when the painting is viewed in New Haven in 2017—perhaps through America's weighty socio-political alliances with Israel *or* the post-traumatic experience of late twentieth- and twenty-first century turmoil with the Arab world, a rational reading of this painting demands the American viewer to hold an informed and balanced knowledge of history and Orientalist theory as well as a deep postcolonial consciousness. Herein lies just one rationale for the Barjeel's wise philosophy of 'an open-ended enquiry that responds to. . .the nuances inherent in Arab histories': that is, understandings of the foundation's objects will vary as they cross geographical borders, because viewers' relationships with the Arab world and their constructivist 'voyages' to the making of meaning in art differ greatly. Using art to open progressive dialogue between the Arab world and other nations, through their established philosophy the BAF have accounted for the various opposing views which can materialize as objects cross 'borders' and, importantly, wide discourse is welcomed into the 'wind catcher'. In the next section I will discuss how the Barjeel's long-term/permanent exhibition at SAM is demonstrating the foundation's pendulum swing away from acting as cross-national bridge builder and towards being an important supporter for the decolonisation of the History of Art.

Barjeel's Long-Term Exhibition at Sharjah Art Museum: Departing from the Conventions of European Modernism

The Barjeel's recent metamorphoses into a long-term show is posing nuanced *art historical* questions about Arab modernism which engage with yet move beyond the political. This section will explore how 'A Century in Flux: Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation', Chapters I and II at SAM are helping to advance a region specific discourse in the History of Art. As I will discuss in this section, through its long-term show the BAF is defining its purpose away from modernism tied to Europe and making valuable contributions to region specific modernism and global modernism. In addition, while curatorial choices are in keeping with the proposedtimeline for 'Arab modernism' put forward by Lenssen, Rogers and Shabout in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Document*, they move the discussion forward via a deeper awareness of gender—specifically the inclusion of women's art practices.

In 2018, creating a new chapter for the Barjeel, the foundation closed its temporary exhibition space at the Maraya Art Centre and entered into a long-term agreement with the Sharjah Museums Authority. A portion of the Barjeel collection moved to SAM where it is currently on display until 2023 (Figure 2). As noted, 'A Century in Flux: Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation, Chapter

I' was curated by Mikdadi, Merzaban and Sultan.[12] In addition to the physical movement from Maraya to SAM, the collection's display practices also transitioned in design from a thematic temporary exhibitions programme to a long-term display. This movement in design challenged curators with the task of maintaining the philosophy of the Barjeel within the limitations of one singular museum space. The exhibition extends across nine galleries at SAM: curators make it clear that the show is not intended as a survey nor does it include a specific theme. Avoiding the pitfalls of presenting a mere chronology of Arab art, which would mirror conventional practices of European modernism, the curatorial team wisely centred on key artworks designated as 'signposts' which best define the various practices in Arab art between 1885 and 1985. The show includes works from pioneering art movements across the Arab world, including the *Art et Liberté Group* (Cairo-based Surrealist collective), Baghdad's *Ar-ruwwād* (The Pioneers), Casablanca Group and Damascus Group of Ten among other artists.

As stated by Mikdadi,

> *[The exhibition] reflects the collector Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi's interest in the ways that Arab artists have responded to historical events and to their corresponding impact on human life over the course of a tumultuous century. . .In contrast with focused temporary shows, this long-term installation offers the chance for repeated visits and for comparative study of the styles, techniques, and themes of artworks that have shaped art practices in Arab countries for more than a century (2018).*

Historical political events were deep rooted in the show, for example, in gallery two *The Hero*, 1963 by Mahmoud Sabri (b. Baghdad, 1927–2012) was hung in close proximity to *Portrait of a Nubia Family*, 1962 by Gazbia Sirry (b. Cairo, 1925–2021). Both artists engaged with pressing socio-political issues in their home countries: Sabri portrayed the execution of Husain Ahmad al-Radi, the secretary of the Iraqi Communist Party, after the 1963 *Ba'ath-led coup d'état*; while Sirry was concerned with the mass forced migration of Nubian peoples from the region around Aswan during the Egyptian governmental building of the High Aswan Dam in the 1960s. While the socio-political subjects, cultures and geographical locations differ greatly, both paintings employ the various aesthetics of social realism in order to make commentary on socio-political events. What is key here, as well as in the wider exhibition, is that curators are prompting art historians to create more nuanced research links for Arab modernism beyond the constraints of national boundaries. This recalls Power's warning that when teaching and researching the subject of Arab modernism much of the burden falls on individual researchers or faculty 'to make connections between movements so that they are not isolated to national boundaries and to explicate the importance of different groupings.' Again, Powers states: 'I am not convinced that there is a canon [of Arab modernism] that we all know, teach, or reference, much less agree on (Powers, 2020, pp. 11–12).' It is evident that the curatorial design of 'A Century in Flux' is prompting scholars to address this issue.

Responding to the 2020 'Decolonizing Art History' survey by Grant and Price, Kajri Jain states that 'the call [to decolonise art history] is to attend to practices of land, space, and images in a rigorously materialist and political mode not easily recuperated to metaphorics, while maintaining a

Figure 2. Exhibition: 'A Century in Flux: Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation, Chapter I', Sharjah art Museum, 12 May 2018–22 October 2020. Image courtesy of Barjeel art Foundation, photography by capital D studio. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

commitment to aesthetics as the very ground of politics (Kajri Jain at p. 28).' This idea is in keeping with the Barjeel's interest in the many ways that Arab artists have responded to historical events. Mikdadi highlights that Al Qassemi's socio-political interests in art were indeed given curatorial attention, however a key concern during the design was the creation of an exhibition which would encourage further *art historical* questions beyond the political. For example, exhibited in gallery one at SAM was *Untitled* (*Two Figures*), 1951 by the Iraqi artist Jewad Selim (1919–1961). Selim was awarded government scholarships to study sculpture in Paris, Rome and London between 1938 and 1949. Returning to Iraq in 1949 he became a prominent figure in the formation of the Baghdad Modern Art Group founded in 1951. According to Shabout, 'Selim described his own style—lines, forms, and softly muted colours—as having its roots in the art of his ancestors going back to 2000 BCE' (2012, p. 72). Selim embraced the artistic concept *istilham al-turath* which 'advocates mediation between the past and the present; a negotiation of heritage and of tradition, toward an evolvement of new contemporary aesthetics' (Shabout, 2015a, p. 71; 2007, pp. 28–29). The artist drew influence from iconography and symbolism located in Sumerian and Assyrian sculpture, form located in the thirteenth-century school of Yehya Al-Wasiti as well as form and color located in European modernism. As declared in the group's manifesto, which was written by Shakir Hassan Al Said Al-Said:

> *We will build that which was destroyed in the realm of pictorial art in Iraq since the thirteenth century school of Yehya al-Wasiti and we will connect the chain that was broken when Baghdad fell to the hand of the Mongols. A new trend in painting will solve the (artistic) identity problem in our contemporary awakening by following the footsteps of the thirteenth century (Iraqi) painters. The new generation of artists finds the beginning of a guiding light in the early legacy of their forefathers.*[13] *Excerpt, Manifesto of the Baghdad Modern Art Group (1951)*

Al-Wasiti's thirteenth-century works, for example, are concerned with reduced form, flattened composition with limited play between light and shadow and lack of perspectival depth, and there is

an emphasis on line, space and blocks of color. The Baghdad School attempted to 'connect the chain that was broken' between the ancient past and the then present in Iraqi art—which points to aesthetic influences that pre-date European modernist practices. As stated by Alexandra Dika Seggerman, Arab modern artists studied European art practices, however there "was not a simple 'copying' but an active, calculated choice made for varying purposes" (2014, p. 30). Although artistic processes vary from country to country, this tradition of engaging with ancient artistic legacies and heritages *and* European art practices flows through much modern art created in the MENA. Similarly, I recall again the practices of modern artists from Europe, such as Matisse and Carré, whose travels to Morocco and Algeria during the early twentieth century led them to borrow stylistic and decorative form from Islamic art, and, on returning to France, their productions of modernist form evolved to reflect the modern European social and artistic experience. As discussed earlier, decolonisation of the History of Art refers to the undoing of the conventional narrative associated to the birth of modern art and modernism in 'Western' practices of art history—an act of undoing which is associated to the decolonisation of the colonial centre and cultural practices as well as the decolonisation of the mind. Subsequently, this complicated process of undoing is beginning to highlight a transcultural artistic space in global modernist aesthetics. Therefore, established scholarship on global modernism rightly suggests the need to push beyond the 'frames' set by European art history in order to re-evaluate the timelines of modern art.[14]

These important *art historical* questions concerning transcultural aesthetics and influence were present in 'A Century in Flux Chapter I'. For example, gallery one included several paintings by various pioneers of Iraqi modernism. As previously stated, the curatorial team centred on key artworks designated as 'signposts' which best define the various practices in Arab modern art. Acting as 'signposts' in the display of Iraqi modernism was *Untitled (Two Figures)*, 1951 and *Woman Selling Material*, 1953 by Selim and *Al Deek Al Faseeh (The Articulate Cockerel)*, 1954 by Al Said—all of which make comment on *istilham al-turath*. The initial focus on *istilham* in this section of the exhibition induced a transference of meaning to other objects in the room: that is, the transference of a transcultural modernist aesthetic.

To be clear, the Iraqi modern artists in the exhibition were very different stylistically and their subject matter varied. For example, three paintings by Dia Al-Azzawi (1939-) also appeared in this section of the exhibition: *Al-Jawf Masks (Aqni'at Al-Jawf)*, 1966; *A Wolf Howls: Memories of A Poet*, 1968; and *Sumeriayat*, 1968. These paintings are an example of Al-Azzawi's developed artistic style and political subject matter in Iraq c. 1960s, however the artist was still attempting 'to connect the chain that was broken' between the ancient past and the contemporary in Iraq. Al-Azzawi was a central figure in the founding of the politically driven New Vision group in 1969. As Al-Azzawi proclaimed in the New Vision manifesto:

> *The artist lives the unity of all periods in history, even while he lives in his time, and as a part of his own society. As much as he feels he must change the past though contemporary vision, he also feels that the past orients the present, that between the past and the present there is a unity and coexistence. . .[T]he significance*

of the past is seen and renewed in light of the present. . .We laud the generation of [Iraqi] pioneers for their historic role. . ..[15] *Excerpt, Manifesto, Towards the New Vision (1969)*

At this time Al-Azzawi drew artistic influence from poetry, ancient and contemporary Iraqi and Arab histories and folklore, Islamic calligraphy and he also studied the works of European painters. The New Vision artists 'were also affected by the fever of pan-Arabism and the desire for Arab unity that gave their understanding of *istilham al-turath* a new transnational bend. Thus, Iraqi artists of the 1960s constituted an important link between the pioneers and the generations that followed (Shabout, undated, Siti)'. Applying this art historical theoretical framework to 'A Century in Flux Chapter I', the Barjeel's shift in exhibition design and display prompted the viewer to contemplate aesthetic influences in Iraqi art that pre-date European modernist practices, which raises new transcultural and/or transnational questions concerning Arab *and* global modernism.

This art historical questioning located in 'A Century in Flux, Chapter I' was very timely given that Lenssen, Rogers and Shabout published their state-of-the-art enquiry into the subject in March 2018, just 2 months before the Barjeel show at SAM opened to the public. As mentioned, *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Document* proposes a timeline from 1882 to 1987 for modernism in the Arab world; however, while the primary texts appear in chronological order to date, their anthological presentation is for the purpose of galvanizing and aiding new art historical questions about Arab modernism beyond national borders. It can be argued that the Barjeel long-term collaboration with SAM acts as a valuable 'visual source' for researcher which, when paired with Lenssen's, Rogers' and Shabout's volume, will greatly aid the advancement of the field. As Mikdadi points out in the curatorial statement, the long-term nature of the exhibition offers the chance for more sustained research, which will eventually lead to a 'greater understanding of the region's history of artistic production. (Mikdadi, 2018)'.

As demonstrated so far in this article, while valuable connections can be made between *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Document* and 'A Century in Flux', there are also clear distinction between the two. Firstly, the show's design also poses questions about the how established artists within pioneering art academies in, for example, Morocco, Egypt and Iraq, provided mentorship for the second and third generation of artists in the Arab world—for this reason, 'a limited selection of artworks from the contemporary collection [are on display and they] resonate with the earlier artworks, drawing attention to commonalities and differences that mark this century (Mikdadi, 2018).' Secondly, the curators were also concerned with showing artists who studied abroad in Europe for a period of time; again, herein lies the curators' art historical awareness of the current call for art historical emphases on local, translocal, transnational and transcultural encounters which tease out conditions of global exchange (Kelly & Özpınar, 2021).

Lastly, another significant art historical contribution was made by a 'A Century in Flux' chapter II, which highlighted women artists' vast contributions to Arab modernism. While wider peer-reviewed texts in the area of Arab modernism pay a great deal of attention to women's art and writing, it must be noted that out to the 127 primary source texts which were translated into English and

published in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Document* only 10 were solely authored by women. The volume is a significant contribution to the development of Arab modernism; however, given its limited focus on women's art writing, it runs the risk of repeating the sins of conventional European art history—in which women's art and writing were all but removed from the discipline until the 1980s. Women's art writing and works of art must be placed on an equal par and presented in equal quantity to that of their male counterparts; otherwise, as the practices of European and American histories of art have demonstrated, women will be marginalized and potentially eliminated from the field.

In the first chapter of 'A Century in Flux' out of the 135 works of art on display only 27 were by women artists, this makes up 20% of the show. Given the vast number of women artists in the field of Arab modernism, this number of female artists represented in chapter one was surprising. Such percentages are following the similar path as 'Western' museum traditions, for example, prior to the opening of MOMA's new galleries in October 2019, only approximately 5% of the work on display were by women. Today, only 28% of the works of art on display at MoMA are by women (Dobrzynski, 2019). Much more work needs to be done to ensure a gender balance in the display of modern art.

Responding to this issue, between 3 November 2019 and 28 February 2021, the Barjeel ran chapter two of 'A Century in Flux' at SAM, curated by Takesh. The exhibition extended again across nine galleries at SAM, but, this time, exhibiting 126 works of art with equal contributions by female and male artists. Chapter two aimed to 'confront the question of gender disparity in the art world and its influence on the writing and teaching of art history.' Takesh continues by stating that, in museums globally, 'work created by female artists constitutes a disproportionately low percentage of all art on display, mirroring broader systemic challenges and obstacles faced by women and minorities in acquiring institutional recognition for their labor (Takesh, 2019).' This second exhibition opened a fascinating art historical debate about women's contributions to Arab modernism. Gronlund reveals that the 'decision to hang the works as 50/50 men and women has not been a straightforward one, and it has divided opinion even among those who worked on the show.' Mikdadi assisted on the hanging of chapter two and stated that 'While the exhibition is beautifully mounted, it does not reflect the reality [of historical women's lives], which is more complex than equal representation'. Mikdadi claims that presenting an equal number of women artists actually 'glosses over the details of how they were held back (Gronlund, 2020)'. What I would add here is that, while I see Mikdadi's concerns about glossing over the realities of history, in order for women's histories *and* histories of art to be written, scholars first require access to the works of art and sources for the purpose of research and development. Certainly, the Barjeel's chapter two has provided this access to the works of art, where women's art—and subsequently their histories—are placed beside those of their male counterparts for the purpose of encouraging new comparative studies. Women's experiences were and are different: not lesser or greater than experiences of other genders, just different. While it is important to set women into the context of wider gender experiences, a show of this magnitude requires an accompanying peer-reviewed research catalogue, which gives the viewer the required art historical and historical contexts in order to *problematise* the works on display. Unfortunately, no catalogue or peer-reviewed research studies accompanied the display of 'A Century in Flux chapter II'. Such an

exhibition must be accompanied by a co-authored and interdisciplinary peer-reviewed research catalogue produced from a gendered perspective, which would make a record of the historical contexts of the paintings as well as the lived experiences of the women artists who created them.

The Barjeel's former thematic temporary exhibitions programme played an important role in creating global awareness about Arab modern art. In addition, through select temporary exhibitions, by making reference to various political events across the Arab world, the foundation has acted as a cross-national bridge builder between the Arab world and various other nations. Now that the collection's local and international 'tour' is coming to a slower pace, the Barjeel has metamorphosised again but this time into a long-term research hub at SAM—a fixed display of the collection which provides access for scholars and will enable sustained study and quiet contemplation for the recording of new innovative ideas in the History of Art. The Barjeel is a part of the move to decolonise the History of Art, because the foundation strives to create an expanded vision of modernism. The temporary and long-term programmes and wide educational initiatives of the BAF allow the 'wind catcher' to generate experimental quantitative and qualitative data[16]: this data is currently lying in wait and ready for deep contextual analysis, which would enrich discussions about the correlation between twentieth-century industrial and economic developments in the MENA and its impact on modern art. As this article has shown, the Barjeel is positioned as an influencer for new scholarship on modern and contemporary art from the MENA. One can only surmise that the next logical initiative to come from the BAF would be to facilitate competitive art history research fellowships at SAM to accompany its long-term exhibition, which would guarantee that the momentum and knowledge already gathered inside the 'wind catcher' would transform into a vast flow of peer-reviewed art historical scholarship. **END**

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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NOTES

1. For select further reading on modern art from different MENA countries see: Shabout (2007), Ali (1997), Lenssen et al. (2018), Esanu (2017), Kane (2013), Meier (2010) and Özpınar and Kelly (2020).
2. Ibid. See also: Lenssen et al. (2018), Keshmirshekan (2015), Eigner (2010) and Amirsadeghi et al. (2009).
3. Modern political history and nationalism in the MENA is significant to modernist movements in the region and the Barjeel's socio-political approach is in keeping with this premise. However, following the lead of Dabashi, I wish to highlight that it would be a mistake to consider the political as the only key driving force behind modern and contemporary art practices from the MENA. For a critique on the misreading of contemporary art from the MENA and over reliance on the political over formal art historical analyses see: Dabashi (2019).
4. For a wider discussion on decolonisation of the History of Art and global modernism and see Giorgis et al. (2021).
5. For a more in depth discussion on this subject see Kelly (2019), Özpınar and Kelly (2020). See also Enwezor (2001) and Hassan (1999).
6. While it is important to acknowledge this point, the subject to too large to cover in detail in this article. For a more comprehensive discussion on this topic see Wakefield (2020).
7. See Bardaouil (2016), Rogers (2010), Shabout (2007), Benjamin (2003, 221–248) and Mikdadi et al. (1994).
8. See Van Cauteren (2017), Exell (2016), Jodidio (2008), Katodrytis and Mitchell (2015, 27), Mejcher-Atassi and Schwartz (2012) and Simonet and Vincent (2015).
9. For further reading on the differences between these institutions, including space, collecting and exhibition practices, see Wakefield (2020), Exell and Rico (2014), Exell (2016) and Merzaban (2020).
10. The BAF collects modern and contemporary art from Arab cultures only: the collection does not include, for example, Turkish, Iranian or Berber art objects. See Merzaban et al. (2010).
11. For wider reading on Egyptian Modernism and politics see Kane, 2013.
12. Readers can engage in an interactive view of a 'A Century in Flux: Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation Chapter 1' at https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=6isPFS6m8LD and Chapter 2 at https://my.

matterport.com/show/?m=GPA9ip5JJPA. All galleries and paintings mentioned in this article can be viewed in SAM through these interactive experiences.

13. Text and translation provided in Shabout (2015b).
14. For a wider discussion on 'global modernisms' see Giorgis et al. (2021).
15. See the full New Vision manifesto in Al-Azzawi et al. (2017).
16. Examples of data include responses from members of the public on social media, critical writings and other publications (catalogues and peer-reviewed), related symposia and other academic and public forums as well as data gleaned by the participating galleries in relation to footfall, online interaction and registers.

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