The Barjeel Art Foundation and the History of Modern Arab Art

Melissa Gronlund

The past twenty years have been rough for the humanities. STEAM subjects—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—are on the ascent, offering more certain pathways to remunerative employment and quantifiable success. Across universities, the number of students enrolling in literature, art history, and other mainstays of a humanist education are falling precipitously, as are their departmental budgets. Even those who have dedicated their lives to the value of culture have a hard time arguing for it. Justifications fall somewhere between the devil of coopted consultancy language ('an English degree promises a strong ROI') and the deep blue sea of bromides ('art brings the world together').

Is this the fault of the humanities or the yardstick by which we are measuring them? The current means of measurement is economic: What monetary value does culture add to the economy, and what monetary value does a degree in culture promise later on? But for much of the 20th century, culture was seen as a valuable and effective political tool, not so much in the sense of party politics but in the sense of politics as the allocation of power between the people and that which governs them. This is both the mode and the subject that has been explored by the Barjeel Art Foundation, an idiosyncratic foundation in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) devoted to art of the Arab region and its neighbours. Arguably, this commitment to culture as a politics of

1
Le Gardien de la vie (The Protector of Life)
Hamed Ewais (Owais) (Egyptian, 1919–2011); 1967–68
Oil on canvas; 132 x 100 cm
Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

2
He Told Us How It Happened
Kadhim Hayder (Iraqi, 1932–1985); 1957
Oil canvas; 96 x 65 cm
Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

the people is enabled by the unusual characteristics of the economies in the Arabian Gulf, where state and private capital have been so plentiful that cultural entities do not have to justify their existence on their financial return—and, moreover, where the contemporary cultural field has been in such flux that dynamic entities and individuals, such as Barjeel and the Sharjah Art Foundation, have been tasked with filling the space that elsewhere would be occupied by public museums and universities.

The Barjeel Art Foundation was set up by Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi in his home emirate of Sharjah in 2010 in order to care for and develop his art collection. Al Qassemi was at the time a journalist and writer in the UAE who was well known for his work on architecture and urbanism. He also took on the role of a public translator during the Arab Spring, when he translated tweets from Arabic protestors into English so that the West—and its journalists—could be aware of sentiments and actions on the ground.

These twin ideas of transparency and publication also marked his art foundation from the beginning. Early on—when the foundation had only around five hundred works—Al Qassemi and his team put almost their entire collection online, organised and searchable by artist, title, and date, with a short blurb for some of the artworks. They also began exhibiting at venues with high artistic credibility rather than blockbuster potential, such as the acclaimed 'Imperfect Chronology' exhibition in collaboration with the Whitechapel Gallery in 2016–17; 'No to the Invasion: Breakdowns and Side Effects' at CCS Bard in Annandale-on-Hudson in 2017; and 'The Sea Suspended: Arab Modernism from the Barjeel Collection' at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in 2016. As soon as Barjeel acquired artworks, they showed them, developing a three-tier strategy of local exhibitions at a space in Sharjah, regional exhibitions throughout the Middle East, and international exhibitions.

3
La Montagne, Liban
Etel Adnan (Lebanese, 1925–2021) and Simone Fattal (Syrian, born 1942); 1973
Oil on canvas; 54 x 64 cm
Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

In a region in which publicness as a category is not an unquestioned good, this was a major change. No other museum in the Middle East publishes its database online, and curatorial agendas are often guarded by a phalanx of communications teams, assistant curators, and governmental supervision. Barjeel acted quickly and swiftly, and from the beginning targeted the realm of education as well, funding scholarship in the form of symposia and publications, which it continues to do.

Thus, by 2015—five years after its founding—the Barjeel Art Foundation had become a major standard-bearer for telling the story of modern Arab art. This story was largely unknown in the international world—and in the Arab world itself, an omission due in large part to the lack of public sites in which to see works of Arab modernism. Indeed, for many, Barjeel was *the* story of modern Arab art—a visibility that was in itself dicey, as Barjeel is the personal collection of just one man, untrained in Arab art history, and his team of smart young curators (in the early days, Mandy Merzaban, Suheyla Takesh, and Karim Sultan). Although it drew on the knowledge of experts in the field, Barjeel's collection was not put together in the accountable way of public art museums, via a selection committee and

4
The Red City
Fahrelnissa Zeid (Turkish, 1901–1991); 1957
Oil on canvas; 162 x 132 cm
Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

5, 6
Installation views of 'Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s'
Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 2020
Curated by Suheyla Takesh and Lynn Gumpert
Photographs by Nicholas Papananias, courtesy of Grey Art Museum, NYU

7
The Martyr (The Nation)
Leila Nseir (Syrian, 1941–2023); 1978
Oil on canvas; 160 x 140 cm
Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

board. Instead, it was an ambitious, amorphous exhibition purveyor, dedicated only to the art itself (and to showing it). All of this would have been fine if the collection was just one public collection among many—but it was not. During a period when Mathaf, the Arab museum of modern art in Qatar, receded from public view, when Western institutions had not begun collecting, and when the many modern museums now in Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia had not yet opened their doors (as they still have not), Barjeel assumed an outsize importance.

It is hard to know how much of this singularity informed the decision-making at Barjeel. Al Qassemi and his team were certainly aware of it, but the most immediate critics highlighted layers of misunderstanding between the Gulf and the rest of the world. A caustic review in the *New York Times* of the show at CCS Bard's Hessel Museum of Art, for example, categorised Al Qassemi as a rich sheikh showing his wares around the world. I remember their more urgent problem was the review being greeted angrily, as yet one more example of how Western press outlets—in many ways, and regrettably, the only press outlets that matter—consistently failed to go beyond their clichés of the Gulf and to think through the reality of a nascent field. Barjeel also sustained criticism after its 'Abstraction' show in 2020 for ignoring the important experiments in Syria, such as those conducted by Fateh Moudarres, Mahmoud Hammad, Nassir Choura, and Mahmoud Daadouch. The reason was simple: the war in Syria had kept the Barjeel team from access to research and artworks in the country. They have since tried to reengage with work there, but the furore over the omission demonstrates the level of responsibility that Barjeel bore in giving a comprehensive narrative of modern Arab art to the public.

The Barjeel Art Foundation was understood in the UAE art world to be the only venue actually doing things. Much of the Barjeel's singularity was driven by the fact that they were the first: Al Qassemi did not have a PhD or bachelor's degree in Arab art because when he went to university, those were not offered. No regulations existed around museums' acquisition or deaccessioning policies. Although Barjeel has not always aligned itself with the Emirati state—to the point of getting in trouble with it at times, with planned UAE exhibitions cancelled at the last minute, and private admonishments—Barjeel is in many ways a microcosm of the country: young, lean, and learning on its feet.

Barjeel's openness and exhibition-friendliness was also in sync with the ideals of the 20th century artwork it collected. In the West, the ideal of art being non-purposive tends to move it in the direction

8
Awaiting the Return
Maysoun Jazairi (Syrian, 1945–2015); 1970
Oil on burlap; 72 x 172.5 cm
Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

9
Untitled (Zaar)
Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq (Sudanese, born 1939); 1973
Oil on canvas; 134 x 134 cm
Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

of being nominally apolitical. Museums and art academia in the United States and Western Europe want art to be political—but also to stop short of being simple propaganda. It needs to be informed by politics but not used by politics. But Barjeel showed a different story. As the colonial and then postcolonial nations of the Arab world navigated new parameters for art, the ability of art to reflect and unite a population around a cause became incredibly important, and modern Arab art intersected with many of the key political causes of the 20th century Middle East.

The collection celebrates this engaged politics. In Egypt, Inji Efflatoun was jailed for her communist activism from 1959 to 1963, an incarceration she uncannily foresaw in her 1957 painting of a woman holding her hands up in surrender, while a figure beside her holds their head in their hands (*The Prisoners*, 1957). Hamed Owais's portrait of a rural Egyptian fighter protecting his community with his firearm (*The Protector of Life*, 1967–68; fig. 1) speaks to the importance of the *fellahin* in safeguarding Egypt's citizens after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. In Sudan, Ibrahim El-Salahi was jailed in 1975 for alleged involvement in an anti-government coup; he responded with *The Prison Notebook* (1976; not in the Barjeel collection but reissued by the Sharjah Art Foundation), which addresses wrongful imprisonment. In Iraq, Kadhim Hayder used the story of the martyred Prophet Ali Hussein to provide a metaphor for the persecution of artists and cultural figures, particularly those with affinities to the Communist Party, under the new Ba'athist regime in his cycle of works *The Epic of the Martyr* (1963). In Palestine, until his death, Abdul Hay Mosallam Zarara made reliefs showing typical scenes of Palestinian life, keeping alive these practices as a counterweight against right-wing Israeli elimination of Palestinian culture. These political works are accompanied by

10
Quartier Populaire
Zeinab Abdel Hamid (Egyptian, 1919–2002); 1956
Oil on canvas; 116 x 81 cm
Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

a diversity of non-engaged work, but Barjeel shows that they are not adjunct or second-rate. They *are* the art history. By exhibiting them, Barjeel also exhibits the history of the political grassroots commitment of a region that struggled with huge losses for self-rule during the 20th century.

Art's opacity, its ability to speak in two registers at the same time, make it an ideal means for representing not only the political struggles of the Arab region but also the complexities of public expression. Take, for example, the boxed-in figure of *He Told Us How It Happened*, painted by Hayder in 1957 (fig. 2). There is something totemic about him, something close to the epitome of a man more than a man himself. Despite his defined, almost rectangular muscular physique, he is hemmed in by the page, an exemplar of the constraining effects of poverty and a system that favours that rich. But nothing of the latter, or of Hayder's own communist sympathies, is literally present. Here, the terrific influence of the Arab Spring, which launched Al Qassemi's public visibility, remains impossible to ignore: its promise of political openness and social freedoms, so cruelly quashed across the region. I would venture to say that the first phase of Barjeel's existence is the legacy of the Arab Spring: a world in which politics became urgent and sayable. In the West, the Arab Spring ignited popular solidarity because it fit a familiar, dated dynamic of the righteous people and the terrible oppressor—a kind of last gasp of a political understanding that connected the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Velvet Revolution and other Eastern European revolts, and the events of 1989—and indeed post-colonialism, though these stories had not been yet integrated into an understanding of Cold War struggles. These are the stories told by Barjeel, Mathaf, and other entities such as AMCA (the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art from the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey) that support scholarship of 20th century Arab art. They document the Arab political response to the 20th century in order to fill out a chapter of cultural history—even as the book they are contributing to risks being eclipsed by a new, econometric generation.

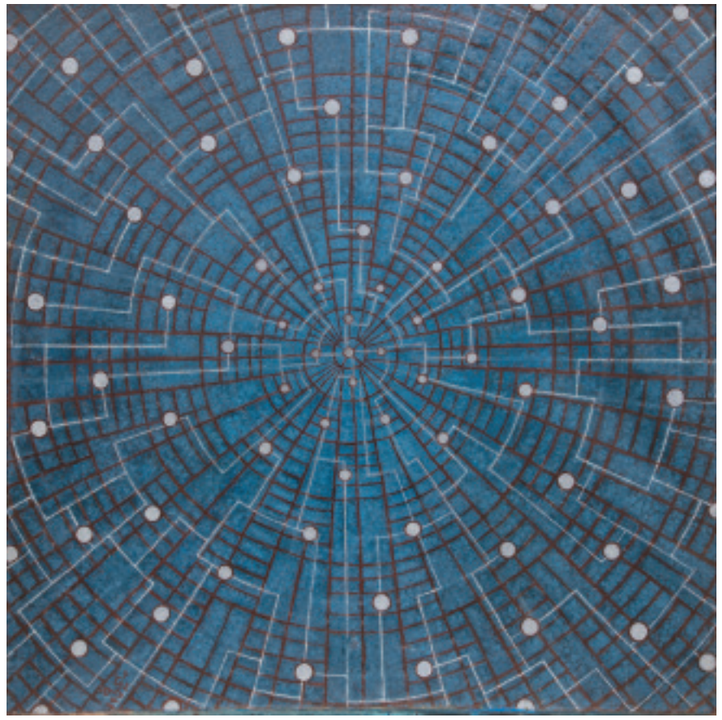
In 2019, the foundation shifted, just a few years after Barjeel hit what might be considered the apotheosis of its drive towards publicness. In 2018, it paired with the Sharjah Art Museum, the longstanding art museum in the emirate of Sharjah, to put its collection on long-term display. Short of building its own facility, this was the best way for the foundation to give the public an extended chance to view the story that their art tells. The opening exhibition, 'A Century in Flux: Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation', curated by the eminent art historian Salwa Mikdadi with the Foundation's then-curators Mandy Merzaban and Karim Sultan, brought together many of the collection's most important works, such as El-Salahi's *The Last Sound* (1964), Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal's *La Montagne, Liban* (1973; fig. 3), Dia Al-Azzawi's *A Wolf Howls: Memories of a Poet* (1968), and Fahrelnissa Zeid's expansive *The Red City* (1957; fig. 4). The move reflected Sharjah's global importance in the art world circuit, buoyed by the highly important Sharjah Biennial and the Sharjah

Art Foundation (run by Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi), as well as Al Qassemi's hometown loyalties to Sharjah, an emirate that has traded the flash of Dubai for intellectual seriousness. Barjeel cut down on its staff, stopped its program of touring exhibitions, and took what Al Qassemi called at the time a 'warrior's break'.

But less than two years after 'A Century in Flux' went up, Al Qassemi was once again coordinating a major touring exhibition, this time about the development of abstraction in Arab modernism. The show, 'Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s', debuted at New York University's Grey Art Gallery (now the Grey Art Museum) in downtown Manhattan in 2020 (figs 5, 6) and travelled to four other museums and university galleries, accompanied by a documentary including interviews with many of the artists and a catalogue with commissioned scholarly essays. More important, Al Qassemi announced a new direction in his collecting: He shifted, in effect, to an activist position. Not content with the lack of women artists in his collection—or artists from other minorities, such as those of the Jewish faith or ethnicities such as the Kurds in Iraq or Amazighs in North Africa—he announced his desire for 50/50 representation of men and women in his collection and shows and set about researching women artists from across the Arab world.

The move was controversial and again shows the outsize importance of the Barjeel Art Foundation. Mikdadi, the curator of Barjeel's first show, took issue with Al Qassemi for rewriting history: for, she argued, elevating women artists to a role that they did not historically play. Others fretted—as did Al Qassemi and Takesh, at times—about the quality of work. Women had not been given the same access to education, international exchange, and exhibition that their male counterparts had, and it follows that their work suffered. But Al Qassemi remained convinced of the potential to use his art as an activist.

The first public display of this shift in collecting came with the November 2019 hang, which Al Qassemi and Takesh put together for the Sharjah Art Museum. The change was palpable, not so



11
Space Exploration/Universe
Menhat Helmy (Egyptian, 1925–2004); 1973
Oil on canvas; 123 x 123 cm
Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

12
Untitled 1, 2, 3
Joyce Mansour (Egyptian French, 1928–1986); *c.* 1965–69
Metal and polystyrene elements; each 14 cm diam.
Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

much of form but of subject. The areas of life that are familiar to many women but largely absent from public or historical view were suddenly publicly commemorated: the long waits at medical centres, where women try to keep multiple children entertained; the midnight intimacy between a mother and child; and pictures of care, whether with children or tending to fish, cats, flowers, birds. As a woman (and mother), it was thrilling. But as an art critic, it was disquieting, a little anodyne. Is this still the ideal? The woman as tender-to? Especially in the Middle East, where the status and position of women is a fraught subject, the uniform messaging of women as helpmeets seemed to undo feminism's project of diversifying the roles and possibilities for women. In telling a story about the Middle East, were these images accurate, in the way that the political images that came before them were? Or is the sheer fact of female representation itself political?

Interestingly, the answer came swiftly, as further research by Barjeel into women artists revealed another significant category of representation: that of female political engagement. Paintings such as the Syrian Leila Nseir's *The Martyr* (*The Nation*) (1978; fig. 7) and Maysoun Jazairi's *Awaiting the Return* (1970; fig. 8), for instance, focus on women's contributions to violent political struggle. The Sudanese Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq's *Zaar* (1973; fig. 9) reveals involvement in mystic spiritual practices, while the Egyptian Zeinab Abdel Hamid's *Quartier Populaire* (1956; fig. 10) reflects on the urban modernisation of Alexandria. Other subjects likewise emerged that broadened the representation of women beyond this initial profile, such as the engagement of women with ideas of outer space and the cosmos, including Menhat Helmy's *Space Exploration/Universe* (1973; fig. 11). The ways that women's artwork complicates accepted binaries between fine art and craft is also beginning to emerge in the Middle East. Barjeel recently acquired three small, ungainly assemblages made of nails, pushpins, and other miniature metallic items, which sit somewhere between satellites and creatures, made by the Egyptian-Jewish artist Joyce Mansour (fig. 12). Women's access to craft techniques means that the media in which women chose to work far surpasses the narrow band of oil painting that dominated Barjeel's previous exhibitions.

Al Qassemi, Takesh, and other researchers into the history of Arab art are currently doing the hard work of sifting through archives, exhibition lists, graduation lists, biennial loans, and correspondence to uncover the work of women and other regional artists whose work is underknown and unexhibited. Barjeel occupies a landscape in which writing about and representation of modern and contemporary Arab art has drastically increased. More is available

to be seen, and more inclusive judgements can be formed. Arab art museums are planned in Al-Ula and Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, and the Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi is finally set to open. The Mathaf in Doha has a new, accomplished director who plans to revitalise the museum and reintroduce it to the international circuit. Rectifying Arab art's invisibility is a stated aim of all these new institutions, with the goal of celebrating Arab art's history and telling a story of identity to its people—in addition to boosting the tourism sector and building new fields for jobs. The reasons, that is to say, are both cultural and economics-driven—even though, curiously, economic diversification tends to lead Western headlines. Why doesn't the vast new investment into the field of art across the Arabian Gulf, in foundations, museums, and universities, budge the perception of the humanities being on the decline?

The incorporation of narratives from the Arab world—as well as from South America, Australasia, and Indigenous peoples—into the art historical canon shows one thing above all: the overriding narrowness of US and Western European perceptions. Political art in the 20th century looked different than many thought it did; the predominant conception of the present might also be wrong. It is a fact that Western museums and universities are cutting budgets for culture. But that sad reality is tempered by the opening up of other geographies where art's public role is growing. Let's not give up on culture, or politics as a premise of allocating power to the people, quite so fast.

Melissa Gronlund is a writer, editor, and presenter on art and cultural heritage.

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Installation view of 'Kawkaba: Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation'
Christie's, London, 20 July–23 August 2023
Curated by Dr Ridha Moumni
Photo by Amir Hazim