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CONTEMPORARY, EMIGRANT, MIDDLE EASTERN ART

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX AUGUST 2012 BY ANDREW JOHN WITHEY

CONTEMPORARY, EMIGRANT, MIDDLE EAST ART

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to any other University for the award of any other degree.

A.J.WITHEY

20/08/2012

THESIS ABSTRACT

CONTEMPORARY, EMIGRANT, MIDDLE EASTERN ART

The thesis focuses on those artists who have emigrated from their Middle East homelands since the middle of the Twentieth Century. The first Chapter proposes that the artists form an identifiable group, through the use of common themes deriving from their heritage. The second chapter debates if Post-Colonial theories of alienation, hybridity and 'third space' are useful concepts and tools for these artists. The last chapter discusses the different approaches to the concept of universalism, which is frequently used in the presentations of the work of these artists.

Chapter One identifies the themes of calligraphy, literature, nostalgia/longing and politics which are common to the group of artists. These themes demonstrate a clear cultural memory, with each artist using one or more of these characteristics.

Chapter Two questions the usefulness and relevance of Post-Colonial concepts of alienation, hybridity and 'third spaces' in the analysis of the artists' work. The individuality and complexity of the artists, their lack of clear alienation from either or both of East and West and the absence of predictability in their output makes it difficult to apply these concepts as analytical tools.

The third chapter shows the way in which contemporary Middle Eastern art has taken over from the earlier, Western based, Orientalism. The resulting work has frequently attracted the label of Universalism but this term has different connotations for Western viewers and curators compared to the Middle Eastern artists and their patrons. The former results in differentiation, the latter claims to transcend boundaries and geographies.

The Conclusion, thereafter, draws together the discussions and attempts to position Middle Eastern art within the current international art scene, rather than as an 'other' which is outside a usually Western mainstream. The Middle East expatriates are seen as part of a growing but incomplete globalism, within which localism can co-exist.

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INTRODUCTION. FROM EMOTION TO ANALYSIS

This thesis has been born of an individual interest and passion and its origins merit some introduction as to why a 68 year old retired English investment banker should have wanted to devote four years to researching the art of contemporary emigrant Middle Eastern artists.

I have had a fairly conventional English background. The son of a Baptist minister, I went to an English public school and then graduated in Social Studies, majoring in economic history, from Sussex University in 1965. In 1967 I joined the Inland Revenue as a tax inspector but in 1969 left to work at a unit trust company in the City of London. After being transferred to a merchant bank I became an investment manager, looking after the largest UK unit trust and subsequently other investment trusts and insurance funds at investment banks and insurance companies. I served on the boards of two major public funds and, having gained experience in private equity, became Chairman of a very large private equity fund before I retired at the end of 2007.

Punctuating this career in finance were two events that were seminal in my development and have helped to lead to this thesis. The first is that, after leaving university in 1965, I spent a year in North Africa with Voluntary Service Overseas teaching at a secondary school at Derna in the east of Libya, then spent three months travelling back to the UK through North Africa. The result was a continuing and abiding interest in the Middle East, its people and its culture. I have always been grateful for the experience of living in Libya. Although it was a different culture, and I was always conscious of this (sometimes wanting to hear rock or jazz rather than Umu Kalthum¹) I never felt unwelcome or threatened in any way. The sound of the call to prayer in the middle of the night, the mosque being just behind my house, was comforting rather than disturbing. When I was in the Middle East I never made any major effort to collect Islamic art or antiques but I still have some Persian miniature prints which I bought from the museum in Cairo. It was the difference that appealed to me. No Westerner would create such bright, decorative images with only the beginnings of perspective, which left the images following a sense of political or social order rather than the rules of perspective I had come to accept.

The second event was that I had always had an interest in art (visiting a few exhibitions, reading a few books and buying the occasional picture) so in 1996, whilst still working in finance and investment, I decided to do a part time MA in the History of Art at Sussex. My final dissertation linked the worlds of art and the Middle East when I wrote on Orientalism and the portraits of the Arabists, looking at the way the Orientalists such as Richard Burton, Charles Doughty, T E Lawrence and St John Philby were portrayed as Easterners and the way in which later Arab leaders portrayed themselves as Westerners.

After graduating with my MA I felt confident enough to want to collect art in a more serious way and a natural course was to collect Orientalist works and I acquired a few by such artists as Girardet, Allott, Andrew Johnstone, Charles McQueen and David Wilkie. Somehow though I did not find them satisfying and challenging and had the feeling that the Orientalists were focussed on the past so there was no real

¹ Umu Kalthum, Egyptian singer and songwriter, 1898-1975

development in the genre (they were now collected by Middle East rather than European collectors, almost a souvenir of a lost past). The exception was Kandinsky, where his North African experience seems to be almost an integral part of his move to abstraction and I have bought five of his woodcuts including 'Orientalische'. Again here there is a sense of difference and change at the boundaries of culture and style which I had sensed in the Persian miniatures. I also felt that Orientalist works had become expensive for what they are (my investment banker's instinct was repelled by prices driven up by oil-rich sheikhs who pushed auction prices for oil paintings over the million dollar mark as oil revenues rose). They were also unsatisfying as the time had passed when the West wanted to paint the East, so could not offer any new insights into the culture. The political and social climate has developed in a way that meant no worthwhile new works were being produced.

I then discovered that the Middle East was able to supply its own vibrant, original and, yes, exotic art. In addition it was able to offer new insights into not only the Middle East but also to the Western and international art world, in a way that was both new and interesting in handling different cultures. I admired the work of the artists. Sergei Schukin, the Russian collector said you should buy art when you experience a psychological urge and not for commercial reasons.² This I had experienced when I bought my first work, a mythical cityscape by Suad Al Attar, which I had seen in passing by a gallery window.

As I collected the Middle Eastern artists I realised that I was just being driven by a picture that was currently available, I found exciting and affordable (or potentially interesting as investment for I could not totally neglect my commercial background). What I was not getting was a broader understanding of the market and the group of artists in which I was interested. In the early 2000s there were only one or two dealers in London and the English literature was limited to initial introductions by Widjan Ali or to Iraqi art by Maysaloun Faraj. The auction houses were only just starting to probe the market. This is being steadily improved with new art museums being established in the Middle East, the development of AMCA (The Association of Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran and Turkey, the title alone evidencing the political and racial complexity of the region), and specific auctions of Middle East Art, even in the region itself. Nonetheless this is not a well researched field and many Art History departments have no expertise in the field. Likewise most major European galleries have little exposure in the area with, for instance, the Tate Gallery only very recently establishing a Middle East acquisitions committee, as I discuss in Chapter 3.

I wanted to know how many more images and artists there were, understand them better, to find out what they are trying to communicate and present and how they fit into, not only their own culture but also that of the world art market. At a time when there has been major interest in the art of emerging markets such as China and India (not seen as part of the Middle East for this thesis) I found it surprising that there was so little interest in Middle Eastern art, or that prices looked more modest for what I considered to be greater quality and interest. Whilst some of the answer may rest in the political conflict

² Sergei Schukin 1854-1936, a Russian businessman who amassed a collection of contemporary European art including works by Picasso, Matisse, Gauguin, Cezanne, Rousseau and Monet.

between Islamic fundamentalism and Western neo-Colonialism the real answer probably lies in the difficulty of accessing the subject, with an unfamiliar or unknown language and religious barriers. There may perhaps even be the fear that a Westerner, unfamiliar with these areas, ought not to venture into areas beyond his understanding for fear of being accused of neo-colonialism by trying to apply Western experience, concepts and attitudes to the product of another culture.

The most accessible part of the market was on my doorstep as the turbulent history of the region has led to major emigration by those able to do so. For this reason there is now, therefore, a large number of artists, collectors and dealers based in London, Paris and New York who I could meet and who could help me to understand the group. This, therefore, has thus been my focus and I have come to believe that they are representative of Middle Eastern artists as a whole and that their emigration can accentuate their regional sensitivities, adding the interesting dimension of the reactions of the exile.

Against this background I wanted to move from an emotional attachment to the work of the artists to an analysis of the emigrant group and see what conclusions and insights I could gain. I have tried to do so in three ways. Initially I examine the field to see if it is reasonable to look on the emigrant Middle Eastern artists as an identifiable group with an intellectual cohesion of its own. Thereafter I review the nature of the group, in relation to its Eastern, Western and international influences to see how it fits into the modern world. Lastly I look at how the group of artists is regarded in the West, by its collectors (noting that the emigrant collectors themselves share many of the attitudes of the artists they collect) and, most important, by its own members.

Given the origins of this thesis which have just been outlined I am very conscious that academic research demands objectivity. Therefore the very thought of the author having pre-conceived ideas which he tries to justify within his own thesis is fraught with conflicts. Even though I am a minor collector, and therefore a legitimate subject, alongside the other collectors of contemporary Middle Eastern art, I am very conscious that any interviewing of artists and, especially collectors, must be treated with extreme caution as questions may not probe sufficiently deeply and responses may be constructed to minimise or maximise the quality or value of the collections. Motives may be obscured, be they commercial, religious, psychological, cultural or political. The creation of an identity or personal image may be manipulated by curators, dealers and even artists without any reasonable cross-checking of responses or fact.

The aim is not to supply a catalogue of artists from a relatively unknown group but to give it identity, coherence and understanding, expanding horizons so viewers and academics are able to move away from simplistic ideas of identity, culture and appreciation. The resulting perception of the group needs to be more appropriate to a changing and sophisticated world which has moved beyond twentieth century ideas of colonialism, hybridity and culture to a more globalised outlook.

This study focuses on artists who have emigrated to the West from the Middle East in the latter part of the twentieth century. The reasons for emigration are varied, and can be complex, involving politics, economics, culture, religion, race, personal safety, personal wealth, family protection, ambition or

desire for education or training. It is the combination of these factors which creates a 'push-me/ pull-you' mixture of rejection and desire. It also produces the distinct identity which these artists possess and which can mark them off as a unique group, despite the fact that the initial impression is that their work and their attitudes differ from the others in the group.

In order to get as unbiased as possible a view of the group of Middle East artists I have included a large number of names quite deliberately. This makes it less likely that the nature of the group is distorted by a few individuals. Without using any statistical methodology, I have tried, inasfar as possible, to use artists from across the region, ranging from Algeria to Pakistan. There has also been an attempt to encompass as many styles as possible, from calligraphy to abstraction and from figurative to performance. Another, I believe crucial, diversification has been the eras of the artists, with some having grown up in the Colonial era, some under neo-Colonialism or independence, giving the opportunity to make comparisons. Some comments are made on the issues of periodisation, although the extent and complexity of this subject due to geographies and individual experience mitigate against any simple analysis.

It is worth noting that the use of a particular artist as an example of a particular point or idea should not confine him or her to just the issue under discussion. An artist may appear in chapter one for their use of calligraphy. It may well be equally possible to use them in chapter two in the debate over alienation and hybridity or in chapter three in the discussion of universalism.

In terms of my research the focus on emigrant artist was helped by my ability to access them easily. Many artists live and work in the UK, mainly in London. They also exhibit there so there are opportunities to meet them and see their work. As a result I have been able to talk to them and the conversations have been helped by the fact that I have been a prospective or actual buyer of their work. This can put the discussions on a more personal basis than if they had been formal interviews between researcher and subject and, it could be argued, that a different or better view can be obtained. Accordingly, as a result I have not gone down the route of formal questionnaires or recordings, partly because I have suspected that for some they could be less willing to be forthcoming. In many cases, particularly when the meetings have been short or spontaneous, I have not taken notes at the time but adopted the practice of writing them up afterwards. Frequently I have found that the most useful comments come at the end of a relaxed meeting, as I am leaving, and the artist proffers some insight which he feels I need to know. This is less likely to happen in a formal process, which he thinks he satisfies by answering all the questions.

For me writing the notes up afterwards tends to concentrate my thoughts on those aspects of the meeting that were particularly useful. What is 'useful' can be information that is not available in public sources such as books or the internet, or a comment which reinforces my views (or perhaps changes my mind on some aspect). Usually the 'useful' material has been something that I could actually put in the thesis, either the main body of the text or in a footnote.

As I noted earlier published material on the artists in English has been limited (although it has steadily improved over the four years during which this thesis has been written). To add to the written material here are specialist magazines such as Canvas and Bidoun and I have been able to find relevant articles in the Times, Sunday Times and even the Financial Times. I have, however, found exhibition catalogues very helpful, not only for the images but for the text which has made me realise that the way in which the images and the artists are presented can influence the viewer and create stereotypes and perpetuate prejudices. The limited academic material in English has therefore been supplemented by catalogues, newspaper and magazine articles and electronic sources which have meant that I had adequate source material available to me for the focus on emigrant artists.

Over the past four years the internet has grown in usefulness as a source of information and one which is less likely, though not immune, to influence views in the way in which images are presented. It is necessary to point out, however, that it may not be possible to access the material easily in the future and I have adopted the practice of noting the dates on which the text or image was viewed.

In any discussion of the Middle East (and contemporary art is no exception) always in the background, and probably the most powerful, influence is the fractious history of the region over the twentieth century, even into the first decade of the twenty first century. Whilst this thesis is not intended to be a detailed, recent history of the Middle East a short description of events in some of the countries gives some flavour of how the politics of the region have had an impact on the individuals within it. The historian Eugene Rogan identifies four different phases in the region in his book *The Arabs-A History*³, namely the Ottoman era, the European colonial era, the era of the Cold War, and the present age of US domination and globalisation⁴ (to which we may soon have to add a fifth phase of the 'Arab Spring'). Significantly, for the creation of modern identity, he contexts this against the broader sweep of Arab history. He cites the journalist and author Samir Kasir (who himself died in a booby trapped Alfa Romeo in 2005) who wrote 'It is not pleasant being an Arab these days. Feelings of persecution for some, self hatred for others; a deep disquiet pervades the Arab world. Yet the Arab world has not always suffered such a malaise'⁵

Kasir contrasts this malaise with the first five centuries after the emergence of Islam, spanning the seventh to the twelfth centuries, which was 'the great era when Islamic empires dominated world affairs. During this time Arabs then had an international presence stretching from Iraq and Arabia to Spain and Sicily. The era of early Islam is the source of pride to all Arabs as a bygone age when the Arabs were the dominant power in the world. It also resonates, in particular, with Islamists who argue that the Arabs were greatest when they adhered most closely to their Moslem faith. Kasim also points to he another great era which began in the nineteenth century when 'The cultural renaissance, the famous

³ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs, A History*, Allen Lane, 2009

⁴ Ibid Page 6

⁵ Ibid Page 3

nahda, illuminated many Arab societies'. The *nahda* shaped a distinctly secular modern culture where 'Egypt founded the world's third oldest film industry, whilst from Cairo to Baghdad and from Beirut to Casablanca painters, poets, musicians, playwrights and novelists shaped a new, living Arab culture'.⁶

Thereafter, there appeared to be a period of decline which has created a sense of disillusion and Kasim asks, 'How did we become so stagnant? How has a living culture become discredited and its members united in a cult of misery and death' and goes on to pose the questions that have troubled Arab intellectuals and Western policymakers alike in the post 9/11 age:

'Many in the West see the greatest threat to their security and way of life coming from the Arab and Islamic world. They don't understand that many in the Arab and Islamic worlds see the greatest threat to their security and way of life coming from the West'⁷

This comment underlines how difficult it is for Westerners to come to terms with contemporary Middle Eastern art. The background leads Kasir to the conclusion that 'The Arab people are haunted by a sense of powerlessness ---powerlessness to suppress the feeling that you are no more than a lowly pawn on the global chessboard even as the game is being played in your backyard.'⁸

The forces that have led to this conclusion go right across the Middle East with frequent wars, revolutions, violence and external invasions. A few examples give some indication of the extent of the turbulence. Iraq has been invaded twice by the West and had its own revolutions (with the assassination of a Prime Minister who was the grandfather of one of the artists we feature later). In its turn the Baathist Iraq regime has persecuted both its Kurdish minority and the marsh Arabs and fought a long war, from 1980 to 1988, against its Shi-ite Islamic neighbour Iran. The latter has moved violently from an absolute monarchy under the Shah to religious rule and an aggressively anti-Colonialist stance. The Lebanon, seen once as a haven of stability with divisions of powers amongst its Sunni, Shi-ite, Druze and Maronite Christian elements, embarked on a series of civil wars which continue to this day.⁹

The state of Israel in the midst of the Middle East has been bitterly resented by its Arab neighbours. In order to preserve its existence, supported by the US, Israel has adopted an aggressive military policy to protect its interests. There have been wars against the Arab states in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973 and ongoing conflicts throughout the period. The failure of the Arab states to confront Israel successfully, in a united manner not only caused political and military resentment in the region but also had a psychological effect of failure on some Middle East artists. With the conflicts around it, Palestine has

⁶ Rogan, Eugene, *The Arabs, A History*. Page 3

⁷ Ibid Page 4

⁸ Ibid Page 5

⁹ Ibid, this paragraph contains multiple references from the book.

never been able to achieve any stability and has its own internal disputes between Hamas and Al Fatah, as well as acting as a focus for global terrorism.¹⁰

The catalogue can continue, with Syria failing in its attempt to form an Arab union with Egypt, which ended with a military coup in 1962, being embroiled with Israel over the Golan Heights and currently in internal conflict over the 'Arab Spring'. Egypt, one of the largest states, saw its monarchy driven out by a military coup in 1952, numerous wars with Israel, conflicts with the UK over the Suez Canal, failed attempts to unite the Arabs under its wing, assassination of Sadat in 1981, internal conflicts with the Moslem Brotherhood and now trying to resolve its internal conflicts after the downfall of President Mubarak. The extent of Egypt's, ultimately doomed, drive to unite the Arabs can be seen in President Nasser's 1962 statement that he 'Had to support the Yemeni revolution (to topple the monarchy) without knowing who was behind it' with a resultant loss of life of Egyptian soldiers¹¹.

Egypt's neighbour, Libya, despite its oil wealth has seen problems after the fall of King Idris in 1969 and Ghaddafi's feuds with the West which have led to US air attacks on the Gulf of Sirte, the Lockerbie disaster and the current civil war between Cyrenaicia and Tripoli which, at the time of writing seems to have led to the emergence of a new, and as yet uncategorisable, nation. Moving further west along the coast of North Africa we see the experience of Algeria, which only achieved its independence from colonial rule after a bitter and brutal struggle with France from 1954 to 1962. In this conflict Eugene Rogan believes 'over one million Algerians and French lost their lives. Algeria's economy was shattered by war and the wilful destruction by the departing settlers'.¹²

The discovery of widespread oil reserves in parts of the Middle East has led to what may be perceived as an apparent stability in wealthy countries like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, so there has been less open conflict or economic stimulus to emigration. The major oil revenues have enabled these countries to give massive direct and indirect benefits to many of their inhabitants so dramatic revolutions have been avoided, unlike in Iraq and Iran, which, although they have oil they do not have the same very high GNPs per capita.¹³ Nevertheless, the apparent stability masks a concern over threats from communism (military aid has been given to Christian militias in Lebanon rather than allow a communist takeover) and the strong *Wahabi* (strict Moslem sect) influence has encouraged an environment where fifteen of the 9/11 hijackers were allegedly from Saudi Arabia.

Violence and revolution are not the only causes of emigration. Unstable governments often lead to repressive regimes and few Middle East counties have robust democratic structures. Almost all are ruled by monarchies, military or religious governments. These tend to repress democratic or secular

¹⁰ Rogan, Eugene, *The Arabs, A History*. This paragraph contains multiple references from the book

¹¹ Ibid, this paragraph contains multiple references from the book

¹² Ibid, this paragraph contains multiple references from the book

¹³ Economist, *The, World in Figures, 2010*, Economist 2009

groupings or racial or religious groups such as Kurds, Marsh Arabs, Christians, Zoroastrians or even Sunni or Shi-ite minorities. Herein is a rich stimulus to emigration towards what is perceived as a more tolerant West. As Rashad Selim says of Iraqi artists of the 1970s in his article, *Diaspora, Departure and Remains*:

‘What is special today is the scope of the betrayal that has befallen the promise of an age with all its promise and potentials and the magnitude of waste and dispersion influencing every aspect and strata of the land and people. The Iraqi diaspora is not a sudden exodus but one that has grown exponentially through the 20th Century as each generation faced some form of radical transition or intense conflict. This has resulted in the accumulation over time of fragments representing every segment of Iraqi society and political or religious persuasion’¹⁴.

From the ‘push-you’ side of emigration via politics, violence, war and revolution there is the ‘pull-you’ elements from Western economics and culture. On the economic side some simple statistics illustrate the possible pull of emigration to the West. Noting that the average GDP per head in the US and UK respectively is \$45.9k and \$35.1k we can context the pressures to emigration in the Middle East. The oil rich Saudi citizens (albeit residents rather than the many temporary immigrant workers) clearly do not have a major ‘economic push’ with a GDP of \$22.9k nor do inhabitants of the United Arab Emirates with a phenomenal average GDP of \$53.2k. Unfortunately these two Middle East states are exceptional and residents of Iran (\$11.9k), Iraq (\$3.8k), Algeria (\$7.7k), Egypt (\$5.5k), Lebanon (\$10.1k) or Yemen (\$2.3k) must certainly see a potential economic benefit in emigration. It is, however, important to provide a broader picture. Averages conceal a wide disparity and many of the Middle East emigrants are amongst the higher income earners, sometimes higher than the averages for the Western states to which they emigrate. This can be because they take with them family wealth and businesses, which they are endeavouring to protect from the regimes of their homeland. These emigrants are far from the purely economic migrants who come from sub-Saharan Africa, where GDP can often be often below \$300 per head. It is worth noting that many of the artists interviewed in the course of this study do come from wealthy families which have managed to protect their fortunes and provide a high level of educational and economic security. This dilutes, even if it does not eliminate, the pain of exile.¹⁵

Within the economic ‘pull-you’ factor is a contradiction which lies at the root of much Middle Eastern animosity to the West. Replacing the direct political and military colonialist regimes there is now the neo-colonialist, globalised world where the capitalist West, with its profit-driven, materialist philosophy, dominates the impoverished rest of the world. Economic dominance has led to cultural assertion and Western advertising, film, tv, music and literature have replaced military patrols and colonial governors. The changes are visibly notable in the architecture of the Middle East, where the city skylines have lost their domes and minarets, replaced by skyscraper offices and tower blocks. The materialist western approach is particularly resented by the Islamic religious movements. At the same time the commercial

¹⁴ Faraj, Maysaloun (Ed), *Strokes of Genius*, Saqi Books, 2001, Page 48

¹⁵ Statistics in this paragraph are all derived from *Pocket World in Figures, 2010* published by The Economist in association with Profile Books in 2009. The figures therefore are the latest available data at the time of publication

approach has been viewed with favour by parts of the Arab business community, with the Western cultural mores and freedoms welcomed by the certain elements of the Arab intellectuals and youth. In the economic sphere the Arab world has been able to use the oil price to fight back against Western dominance but in the cultural world the reaction has tended to more towards social/religious controls (including the use of the veil and the place of women), specific censorship or terrorism. These, in turn have alienated the more liberal parts of Arab society, leading to emigration of many of the cultural elite as well as the political opposition.

The 'pull-you' factor of the West is not confined to a purely economic incentive. There is also a related educational attraction. Education spending as a percentage of GDP in the US and UK is 5.7% and 5.5% respectively but in Egypt it is only 3.8%, with the *Economist 2010* survey not giving a number for Algeria¹⁶. All of the top twenty universities listed by the *Economist* survey all are in the West (albeit the sample will be biased in the way it is compiled) despite the fact some of the earliest educational establishments were in the Middle East¹⁷, such as the Al-Azhar University in Cairo which some have claimed to be the oldest university in the world. Specifically, also, there are many acknowledged art history universities and art schools in the West, which emigrant artists featured in this thesis have attended, places such as Corcoran School of Art, California State, Slade School of Art, Wimbledon School of Art, Byam Shaw, Moscow Institute of Fine Arts, Chelsea School of Art, Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Decoratifs, Ecole du Louvre, Academy Santa Andrea, Ecole de beaux-Arts, Cambridge University, University of California Berkeley, St Martins School of Art, Academia de Belle Arti, Leningrad Vkhutemas Academy of Art and Design, Academy of Fine Arts Ljubljana and School of Oriental and African Studies in London.¹⁸ Again, though, this search for education and artistic training has to be placed in a wider context as many of the artists who emigrated received their initial university and artistic training from Middle East Universities and colleges¹⁹ such as the American University of Beirut, University of Baghdad, College of Architecture in Baghdad, Tehran University, Ecole des Beaux Arts-Algeria, Institute of Fine Arts Baghdad (the alma mater for many Iraqi artists which was founded in 1939), Ecole des Beaux Arts-Morocco, University of Alexandria, University of Damascus, Leonardo School of Art-Cairo, Tehran School of Fine Arts, Azad University, not to mention the many training schools for traditional calligraphy and Islamic studies. The artistic emigrants are therefore often very well educated elites, very far from deprived of educational opportunities.

¹⁶ *Economist, The World in figures, 2010*

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ Porter, Venetia, *Word into Art*, British Museum 2008, *Artists Biographies* (pages 140-147).

¹⁹ See May Muzaffar *In conversation with art Bahrain* on www.artBahrain.org/archives/jul-aug2011/passion_for_art (accessed 13/05/2012) when she remarks 'Nearly all the contributors (to the 54th Venice Biennial Iraqi Pavilion) acquired their first hand art education in Baghdad, they later on developed their know-how in their resident countries but have never forgotten that they come from Iraq, the land of the first civilisation in the world'.

The 'pull-you' attraction of the West goes beyond the economic and educational attractions. For artists, particularly contemporary artists, there is also the opportunity to see Western art (or even their own history, architecture or archaeology) in the many museums and galleries as well as the chance to consort with other artists, collectors (often expatriates in their own right) and teachers. The lack of explicit censorship is also an attraction, notably in relation to Islamic rules on figurative art (although this can be overemphasised)²⁰ and for many the lack of political censorship and control is a welcome attraction, particularly as some are politically as well as artistically active. Many of the artists interviewed have cited the British Museum or National Gallery as a source of artistic inspiration.

What identities emerge from this process of emigration? At one extreme there is the possibility of an alienated exile, dramatically but bleakly portrayed by Edward Said in the following extract:

'Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its' essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history can contain heroic, romantic, glorious and triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of an exile are permanently underlined by the loss of something left behind for ever.'²¹

To see how accurate Said's analysis is in relation to our expatriate Middle Eastern artists let us follow on from the facts of Middle Eastern history that we have related and see what characteristics we would logically expect to see. We need to note that he uses the term 'exile' which implies an enforced

²⁰ See discussion later in this chapter.

²¹ Michael Archer/Guy Brett/Catherine de Zegher (Eds), *Mona Hatoum*, Phaidon 2001, Page 110. This article in contains a number of extracts from Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile*, 1984. In these Said emphasizes the trauma of exile as follows:

'Just beyond the frontier between 'us' and the 'outsiders' is the perilous territory of not-belonging: this is where in primitive times people were banished, and where in the modern era immense aggregates of humanity loiter as refugees and displaced persons.

Because exile, unlike nationalism, is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land and their past---Exiles feel therefore an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by seeing themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people. The crucial thing is of exile free from this triumphant ideology designed to re-assemble an exile's broken history into a whole new world is virtually unbearable, and virtually impossible in today's world.

Exiles look at non-exiles with resentment. They belong in their surroundings, you feel, whereas an exile is always out of place. Much of an exile's life is taken up with compensating for disorientating loss by creating a new world to rule. It's not surprising that so many exiles seem to be novelists, chess players, political activists and intellectuals. Each of these occupations requires a minimal investment in objects and places, a great premium on mobility and skill. The exile's new world, logically enough, is unnatural and its unreality resembles fiction.'

departure rather than 'expatriation' which incorporates at least some willingness, or acceptance, on the part of the departed. There is certainly likely to be both a respect and affinity by the expatriate for a great Arab long term history, as well as an acceptance that more recently there has been an absorbing of the nineteenth century cultural renaissance that Shamir Kasir saw as shaping 'a living Arab culture'.²² There is not a total resentment or perception of failure of the expatriates homeland, albeit there is inevitably a resentment of certain current political and social circumstances (perhaps what Said means when he speaks of 'triumphant ideology' and 'restored people'). Whilst there are elements, sometimes strong, of both economic and political migration due to the circumstances of the Middle East the artist expatriates are not purely in those categories. To a certain extent the expatriate's departure can be driven by economic, educational or cultural ambition and there can be perceived to be some acceptance of the economic, political or artistic freedoms present in the West. The fact that many of the artists (such as Suad Al-Attar, Maysaloun Faraj, Ali Omar Ermes, Shirazeh Houshiary or Dia Al-Azzawi, who we profile in this thesis) have been living abroad for thirty years or more. This could demonstrate that, they have become totally 'Westernised'. This is clearly not the case, as we shall see from the nature of their work. It seems more likely that they have accepted a wider role as 'citizens of the world' or 'universal artists', who have a message for mankind in general, even if it is one expressed in terms of their heritage.

The result of looking at actual examples of artist expatriates is that, although we can recognise some of the traits described by Said, his overall approach seems to be extreme with the use of such words as 'exile', 'unbearable', 'unhealable' and 'resentment'. In practice these emigrants cannot usually be described as economically deprived. They often seem to be people who have come to terms with their predicaments and who bear little or no animosity to their hosts or their heritage. They do though have specific, and in many cases totally justifiable, antagonisms to certain regimes, individuals or (mainly political) groups. The way in which they have come to terms with the dilemma is by expressing their love of their long-term heritage, acknowledging current international artistic and cultural developments, and accepting their personal economic, cultural and political freedoms. This may be evidenced by their ability to criticise their homeland from the security of their adopted nation or, in certain cases to criticise their adopted country's policies from within its freedoms of political or artistic expression. One possible final way in which the artists come to terms with their situation is by accepting that their specific heritage and adopted present allows them to speak as representatives of all peoples, with some broader cultural, political, religious or humanitarian message, to which we can apply the loose term 'universal'. This term is vital for our research and we will continue to explore and try to see how it is used, what is implied by it and whether there is any fundamental reality underlying it.

Writing about a number of artists as a group raises issues as to the extent they should be seen as individuals or as representative members of a group. This is a dilemma of analysis shared with the discussion of any artistic group, be they Western, European, African, male or female, abstract or figurative. The term 'Middle Eastern Artist' does, however, raise quite specific dilemmas, as it can be

²² Rogan, Eugene, *The Arabs, A History*, Allen Lane 2009, Page 3

defined in either nominalist or essentialist ways. In the former case the group would be nothing more than artists who share the same birthplace and who can often be identified by their names as having hailed from the region. In the latter case, however, the result is that before their work is examined their names and descriptions of their geographic origins have created a perception of an 'other group'. The objectivity of the viewer is therefore hard to achieve as the display of an artist's work is rare without being accompanied by his name and a simple cv giving his origins. This can mark the artists off from the, usually, Western mainstream, accentuating a concept of a different culture or an alien 'other'²³. The issues are particularly sensitive where a Westerner is writing about the Middle East. Not only has the Westerner to be conscious of the legacy of the Colonial past but also to the powerful reaction to *Orientalism*²⁴ set in train by Edward Said. Treating Middle Eastern artists as a group can be seen as an acknowledgement of a perceived 'difference' and a denial of individuality which could be seen as the prerogative of the Westerner. The term therefore becomes more than a geographic label and may even be a cultural statement that these artists are different in some way to those coming from the West, a topic which we explore fully in Chapter 2, 'Aliens and Hybrids'.

Rather than accept an 'otherness' as a denial of membership of some kind of cultural mainstream we would like to identify some specific, fundamental or underlying features of the Middle Eastern artist's work that marks it out as different, unique or in some way work that could not, or would not, be produced by artists without the Middle Eastern background. Let us, therefore, for a moment consider the practically impossible approach of looking at the works of the expatriate Middle Eastern artists without the benefit of their names (perhaps with aliases) or knowledge of their geographic and cultural origins. Would we recognise them as a group and be able to detect common themes, styles or subjects in such a way as to be able to identify them? Could we identify their work if it were presented with that of 'non Middle Eastern' artists? If such an identification were not possible we could not claim that the Middle Eastern artists were in any way a meaningful group, or that the knowledge of their geographic and cultural origins had value in understanding and appreciating their work.

If, however, the viewing of a work identifies common styles, themes or subjects that can legitimately be identified with the Middle East then a 'group' label may be acceptable and even useful. If though such a label is perceived as a 'difference' then it is reasonable again to accept the term but inevitably the question arises as to the motivation for exposing the 'difference' and whether there is any implication of inferiority. Morally and politically the identification of 'difference' could be accepted if there is no intention of deriving any unjustified benefit or levelling any insult. Green is different to red but the simple statement that this is so does not, in itself, claim benefit or imply inferiority.

²³ Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, Penguin Books, 1995. In this seminal book Said describes the way in which Western writers wrote of the Middle East in terms that implied it was different, or 'other' and that their 'Orientalist' texts attempted (consciously or unconsciously) to create hegemonic control over the region. This concept of 'otherness' to some extent encouraged Westerners to assume a degree of intellectual or moral superiority and the ability to assume a 'mainstream' heritage which excluded, or marginalised other cultures.

²⁴ Ibid

Like any sample, however, a group of Middle Eastern artists may be biased by its selection. Theoretically it may be possible for a Middle East artist to have a non-Middle Eastern name, to avoid revealing his origins and to paint in a manner which has no identifiable association with the Middle East. Leaving aside the question of whether there would then be any identity left to merit the Middle East label, such an individual would be hard to identify for inclusion as a member of the group we intend to describe. All that can be said is that, although such anomalies cannot, by definition, be denied it would merely confirm that not all artists with geographic and cultural origins in the Middle East always adopt legitimate Middle East styles, subjects or themes. In our survey we have attempted to minimise bias by including as many artists as is practical.

The concept of 'legitimate Middle East associations' is not intended to require precise sameness between all the works, Different individuals may adopt different styles so we do not have to that works will be similar. Equally the extent of the styles may be more or less powerful with some artists, producing work that is much harder to identify as Middle Eastern than others, needing the viewer to go behind first perceptions to deeper underlying themes. It is also clear that the associations of calligraphy and politics are not exclusive to Middle Eastern artists, although the cultural memory of literature, history and architecture appears to us to be particularly powerful with this the artistic group. To some extent the tribal memory was appropriated and distorted by the Western Orientalists. One of the features of the expatriate Middle East artist group is the way in which they have regained their heritage. It is this that lends integrity to their distinct identity without retreating to a repetitious past.

Accepting this background and the practical impossibility of locating and looking at artists without known names we believe it is possible to put forward a set of four formal, social elements which could constitute 'legitimate Middle Eastern associations', or 'identifiers' that create a meaningful artistic group for the expatriate Middle Eastern artists. These identifiers are not just perceived similarities or connections in their work but they can be seen to derive from the political, social, cultural and religious background that we sketched at the start of this chapter (namely the love of the *Koran*, Islam, Arab literature and history, the fractious history of the region, the resulting disempowerment and the universalist message). The four 'identifiers are therefore calligraphy or script, poetry (with its associations with both the Islamic mysticism of Sufism leading to abstraction), history (incorporating nostalgia and longing) and political statement.

Although it can be claimed that these identifiers can be detected in the art of most regions of the world, it is the emphasis and the specificity of each that gives Middle Eastern art its character. Chinese art contains calligraphy but that of the Middle East derives much from one source, the *Koran*, and does not stem from a pictorial tradition. The poetry of the Middle East derives a great deal from its unique Sufi origins. The history of the region and its resulting political landscape clearly belong to no other region.

New Lamps from Old, A Spectrum of Different Similarities

The first identifier is the use of the artistic power of calligraphy from religious sources. Language and its expression in the written word is one visual experience in the same way as are stories, myths and history which are transmuted into visual images. For the Middle Eastern artist the written word is particularly potent as the Koran embodies not just religion but also law, society and morals, the whole of human activity. As an act of religious devotion in a society which has strictures on figurative images²⁵, the script of the Koran, poetry or other traditional stories take on an artistic dimension as well as a practical means of communication. For the expatriate Middle Eastern artist Arabic calligraphy makes a statement of the artists's identity, as it is his own language and owes nothing to the West. This statement of origins can offset the fear that identity has been lost by emigration and answers any accusation that the artists have defected to the West and rejected their cultural heritage. Western art techniques and styles are learned and utilised but the subjects themes and images come from the Middle East. With the *Koran* so integrated into the social and political fabric of the region the act of writing the *Koran*, and its related interpretations, beautifully is a means of artistic expression but is also an act of worship and a means of self identification. Given the all embracing nature implicit in Islam this creates a universalism which goes alongside, but differs from, the Western concept of globalism. The universalism of the Middle Eastern artist contains a spiritual transcendentalism, which goes beyond the interrelationship of different cultures, a topic which we will explore in detail in Chapter 3, 'From Orientalists to Universalists'. For some artists script is dominant in their work, for others it is more marginal but still present as an identifier.

The love of calligraphy goes deep into the Middle Eastern and Islamic heritage. The philosopher Ibn Haytham is quoted as saying:

'Position produces beauty and many things look beautiful because of order and position. Beautiful writing is regarded as such because of order alone. For the beauty of writing is due only to the

²⁵ The extent to which Middle Eastern art is constrained from using figurative images is discussed in *Islamic Arts* by Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair (Phaidon 1997). They say 'It is often said that figures were banned in Islam from the start but this is untrue. The Koran itself has very little to say on the subject. Muslims believe that God is unique and without associates and therefore cannot be represented. He is worshipped directly without intercessors so there is no place for the images of saints. Since the Koran has little in the way of narrative there was little reason to present stories of religious art and in time this absence of opportunity hardened into law.' (Page 30). Bloom and Blair then go on to cite the figures in the decoration at Khirbat al-Mafjar saying that they 'demonstrate that in early Islamic times, as at most other times and places, what one did-or saw; in the privacy of one's home was entirely different to what one did under public scrutiny.' (Page 37)

The strictures on figurative representation arise largely from the *Hadith*, or the traditions and stories relating to the life of the Prophet. Bloom and Blair cite the story of how the Prophet's wife, Aisha, was warned by him for curtains decorated with images of birds and animals as imitation of God's creatures would be reprimanded on Judgement Day. According to Bloom and Blair the tradition went on to say that the Prophet was quite satisfied when Aisha cut up the curtains into cushion covers.

soundness of the shapes of the letters and their composition among themselves, so that when the the composition and order of the letters is not regular and proportionate, the writing will not be beautiful , even though the shapes of individual letters may be correct and sound. Indeed, writing is considered beautiful when of regular composition, even though the letters in it are not quite sound. Similarly many forms of visible objects are felt to be beautiful and appealing only because of the composition and order of their parts among themselves'.²⁶

Ibn Haytham (965-1040) is presumably including Islamic geometric decoration alongside script as objects of beauty and in laying an aesthetic foundation for Middle Eastern art. His comments might not recognise the freer forms of calligraphy practiced by modern artists such as Ali Omar Ermes but the basic principle of the inherent beauty of script which was established in the Middle East and, according to Valerie Gonzalez, 'had a strong impact on European Christian thought and arts, not only in the Middle Ages but also in the post medieval period that is at the beginning of the 'modern' period.'²⁷

The nature of calligraphy for contemporary artists does need to be defined. Gabriel Khan in *Arabic Script*²⁸ points to an important distinction:

'In Istanbul every year the cultural organisation IRCICA organises an international competition of traditional calligraphy and miniature painting: many modern artists use calligraphy in their works in highly sensitive and innovative iconographic adaptations. Painters are also experimenting with the versatility and potential for adaption of Arabic writing'.

It is therefore clear that there needs to be a distinction between the traditional 'art of writing' following the strict teaching of a master and 'writing as art' as practiced by the artist. In reviewing the art of Ali Omar Ermes the lecturer Riad Nourallah states that 'Ermes takes his calligraphy through and beyond the classical Islamic tradition of Qur'anic and religious art.'²⁹ In the same exhibition catalogue the dealer/art consultant Dale Egee quotes Ermes as saying 'I am not a calligrapher, I am an artist' and explains that Ermes was not trained in traditional calligraphy but as a graphic artist.³⁰

Another artist who we describe later for his use of calligraphy is Hassan Massoudy and he also has a clear view of the distinction between traditional calligraphy, as taught by the masters in the various Middle Eastern schools, and its use within art. Venetia Porter describes his artistic journey as follows:

²⁶ Gonzalez, Valerie, *Beauty and Islam*, I.B.Tauris, 2001. Pages 22-3

²⁷ Ibid Page 23

²⁸ Khan, Gabriel Mandel, *Arabic Script*, Abbeville Press, 2001. Page 21

²⁹ Art Advisory Associates, *Ali Omar Ermes in Context*, Art Avisory Associates. Page 9

³⁰ Ibid Page 14

‘Although unable to study at the Academy of Arts in Baghdad, Massoudy began to live off his calligraphy, working in advertising but also learning different script styles from the masters that he encountered. The paramount calligrapher at the time was Hashem al-Khattar who, surrounded by a few students, continued to work in the classical style that had survived from the Ottoman period. But Massoudy was beginning to feel torn between art and calligraphy- Massoudy began to seriously dream about going to Paris to study art. Massoudy left Iraq in 1969 at the age of twenty four. Financing himself by doing commercial calligraphy he was accepted at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts to study figurative art and painting. He now felt his true calling was art. But calligraphy kept re-emerging; Massoudy found that he was incorporating it into his figurative art in the manner of the *hurifiyya* artists, and also began to study the works of the Japanese calligraphers. Finally abandoning figurative art but knowing that the strictures of the tradition of Arab calligraphy were not for him, he set out on a different journey.’³¹

The second identifier and source of inspiration is poetry and literature (pre-Islamic, Islamic, modern and even in some instances, Western or Far Eastern such as Zen). For the Middle East the use of poetry immediately brings in an involvement with Sufism which is often referred to as the mystical form of Islam. Many of the early Arab poets were Sufis and the work of Rumi, Al Attar, Ibn Arabi and others are incorporated, both explicitly and implicitly, into the work of contemporary Middle Eastern artists. We will be referring in detail to the Sufi influences when we discuss the work of such artists as Shirazeh Houshiary, Shakir Hassan Al Said and Rachid Koraichi but as it is deeply integrated into one of our four identifiers a brief description of the movement may be helpful, on what is a complex and perhaps unfamiliar area. The Sufi origins, according to the poet Adonis:³²

‘were linked to what was hidden and transcendental . The movement to Sufism came about because reason, religious orthodoxy and science were unable to answer many of the profound questions posed by man. For man felt that there were problems that continued to disturb him even when all religious, legal and scientific problems had been solved by logical, legal and scientific means. This is what was insoluble (is insoluble) was unknown (is unknown), was not spoken about (is not spoken about)’.

Adonis goes on to say that the same factors led to the emergence of Surrealism in that ‘the goal of the Sufi is to become one with the invisible, that is the absolute and the nature of the absolute , be it God, reason, matter itself, thought or spirit, or the notion of becoming absorbed into it is unimportant, as it is the path that leads to it.’³³ The Sufi path is described by William Chittick by repeating Al-Ghazali³⁴ (‘one of the greatest Sufi teachers’)³⁵, as the living spirit of Islam which ‘gives life to the sciences’ from the

³¹ Massoudy, Hassan, *A Calligraphers Garden*, Saqi Books, 2010

³² Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, Saqi Books, 2005. Page 8

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Al-Ghazzali, Persian writer, mystic and philosopher, 1058-1111

³⁵ Chittick, William, *Sufism*, One World, Oxford, 2008. Page 24

study of the *Koran* and the *Sunnah* or exemplary teachings and practices of the Prophet , with the strengthening of Islam into a sturdy tree by the constant supply of teachings, practices and traditions. Laleh Bakhtar³⁶ confirms this description by noting that Sufism has ‘assimilated concepts through texts which preceded it in time’ and:

‘thus re-enacts the process of creation whereby the Divine came to know itself. The receptacle in which the creation is re-enacted may be an external form, such as an artefact, or it may be the life form of the mystic which is transformed. Here the very soul of the Sufi-to-be reaches to the Divine centre through the mystic Quest’.

It is the use of these texts and artifacts into (often abstract) forms that are integrated into the work of many of the contemporary Middle Eastern artists, creating in the words of Laleh Bakhtar ‘ the concept of unity which annihilates all multiplicity to see ‘unity in multiplicity’ of flower, bird or tree and the concept of the Universal Prototype (most often translated as the Universal Man).’³⁷

The third identifier which we propose as an analytical tool to investigate Middle Eastern art is the regard that is held for the past history, literature and culture of the region. Often this source of inspiration incorporates myth which creates nostalgia or longing (a better word as nostalgia has modern overtones of something which is a little fluffy rather than deep seated and psychologically powerful³⁸) with architectural, archaeological, geometric design and decoration or landscape artefacts being evocative of the material or mythic presence of the past. The architecture of the region is part of the respected and revered past with mosques and palaces with their minarets, domes and arches being instantly recognisable, not only by residents of the region but also (in part due to the popularity of Western Orientalist art and exotically illustrated editions of the *Arabian Nights* stories) by foreigners. The long history of the region, going back before the Islamic era to the Sumerian and Mesopotamian time, has provided many images for artists such as Dia Al-Azzawi (who studied archaeology), Suad Al Attar, Maysloun Faraj, Feyredoun Ave and Rashid Selim. Legends such as the story of Gilgamesh³⁹ and the adventures of Rostam⁴⁰ invoke the heroes of the region. Islamic geometric decoration not only provides identifiable imagery but subtly invokes the region’s contribution to intellectual and scientific development in the fields of mathematics and physics. It is not just a matter of dumping a palm tree or a camel into an image to create a Middle Eastern ‘signature’ to appeal to a Western buyer of the exotic

³⁶ Bakhtiar, Laleh, *Sufi, Expressions of the Mystic Quest*, Thames and Hudson, 1976. Page 7

³⁷ Ibid Page 9

³⁸ It is acknowledged that the Greek root of the word ‘nostalgia’ reflects a lost homeland but the sense of this author is that the present use of the word has moved away from its more specific origins

³⁹ The legend of Gilgamesh is an epic poem which is believed to have come from Mesopotamia and is based on Sumerian legends. The most complete version available today is twelve 7th century clay tablets

⁴⁰ Rostam was a legendary Persian hero. See Davis, Dick, *Abolqasem Ferdowsi, Rostam Tales of Love and War*, Penguin Classic, 2007.

but a real attempt to provide both Eastern and Western viewers with a proper appreciation of the achievements and glories of a past that is as distinguished as any other region.

The more immediate past is the fourth vector of identification or source of inspiration for works of art, depicting violence and politics. Anti-colonialism and anti-Western themes show that the emigration of an artist does not necessarily mean adoption of all the host country's values. Inevitably, recent wars, revolutions and invasions feature largely, since for many of the artists, such as Laila Shawa and Mona Hatoum, the experience of enforced exile is deeply personal. There is also a powerful gender influence as art is one of the ways in which women artists can protest against the discrimination in many Islamic societies. The veil is an obvious symbol of repression, clearly resented and mocked by artists such as Shadi Ghadirian and Parastou Fourouhar (in illustrations such as the hand peeking out from the all enveloping chador or the cheese grater substituting for a face over an all encompassing burkhar).

What is often clear though is that the political protest goes beyond the regionally specific and is not a one-sided protest against colonialism or a particular repressive regime. The tribulations of the Middle East are also used to make a general, or universalist, point about war, peace, cruelty, discrimination, materialism or humanity which can be recognised in any region. This generalist humanity or universalism may arise from the broader values of Islam as a universal religion, or from the individual or social views of the artists themselves, but they are applied equally as criticisms of the East and the West. It is not just the inhumanity of the Middle Eastern regimes but also the cruelty of colonialism and the insensitivities of neo-colonialism that are the targets. It is not just the Western invasions but the inability or unwillingness of the Arabs to work together, or to appreciate the inherent humanity of Islam, which tends to incur the wrath of the expatriate artists.

As a form of categorisation these four identifiers are, perhaps, simplistic, with many artists combining elements of each of the four into one image. Together, however, they create a spectrum from highly religious Islamic calligraphy through to intensely political, violent images passing through religion, poetry, literature, archaeology, myth and tradition. Nonetheless, it may be possible to illustrate the different approaches by looking at works by different artists, with some incorporating all the identifiers and some focusing on only one or two. Whilst each of the identifiers can be related to the very evident Middle Eastern background there are obviously mirror images in other cultures and artistic traditions. Calligraphy is rarer although not unknown in the West but is prominent in places such as China and Japan. Religious mysticism is a major source of artistic inspiration in the Christian West, Asia and Africa. Invoking a glorious past is the essential foundation of many cultures and political art and it can be seen from Claude Lorraine to Diego Rivera. The Middle Eastern blend is, though, distinct and discernible and heightened amongst the expatriate artists, whose experiences and backgrounds have sensitised and sharpened their awareness of the importance of their pasts.

CHAPTER 1. ARTISTS AND OUTPUT

Ahmed Moustafa and Religious Calligraphy

A remarkable exhibition took place in 1998⁴¹. At the Pontifical Gregorian university in the heart of the Vatican the artist Ahmed Moustafa showed his Koranic calligraphy in an exhibition called *Where Two Oceans Meet* which has a detailed catalogue⁴². Not having the traditional formal calligraphic training Moustafa trained himself to use calligraphy as an artist with academic study of the subject. He deeply believes in Islam so his work therefore takes on what he is happy to call a universalist theme, in his own words;

‘to convey the harmony, perfection and order of the Koranic message through images that can be appreciated in the West for their composition, colour, energy and rhythm, without knowing or understanding the text and the title alone conveying the meaning of the letters and words for the non Arabic speaker’.⁴³

Such universalism is also demonstrated in the fact that in 1997 the Western monarch Queen Elizabeth had presented the original of *Where Two Oceans Meet* (Illustration 1-1⁴⁴) by this Middle Eastern artist to the nation of Pakistan to mark the occasion of the country’s fiftieth anniversary. The Koranic text is used to create a visual impact of mathematically precise order in a way that recalls the Arab contribution to science. It also conveys a message of universalism that can be appreciated by non Middle Eastern viewers. In this case, as with much Middle Eastern calligraphy, the text creates the image or a message in the mind of the viewer in the same way as art, where the image tells the story or tries to communicate a message. At this point text can be said to become art.

One work can illustrate the complex imagery and message, *Attributes of Divine Perfection* (Illustration 1-2⁴⁵) the famous Islamic *hadith* or traditional teaching that ‘God has ninety-nine names, one hundred minus one. Whoever enumerates these enters Paradise’⁴⁶. The image itself shows an opened cube made up of separate boxes, each of which has one of the names of God. Visually striking with its blue,

⁴¹ *Where Two Oceans Meet-the Art of Ahmed Moustafa*, Exhibition held at the Vatican 1998. Sponsored by Altajir World of Islam Trust

⁴² Henzell-Thomas, Jeremy, *Where Two Oceans Meet*, Fe-Noon, Ahmed Moustafa, UK Ltd 1998. NB the pages are not numbered.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Illustration 1-1, Ahmed Moustafa, *Where Two Oceans Meet*, 1997. Oil and watercolours on special paper/187x200cm, Property of Queen Elizabeth II

⁴⁵ Illustration 1-2, Ahmed Moustafa, *The Attributes of Divine Perfection*, 1987. Oil and watercolour on handmade paper/130x116cm. Exhibited at Pontifical Universitas Gregoriana , 1998

⁴⁶ Henzell-Thomas, Jeremy, *Where Two Oceans Meet*, Fe-Noon, Ahmed Moustafa, UK Ltd, 1998.

gold and green colours and complex lettering the perfection of the picture comes from Moustafa's eleven year research into the mathematical basis for the work of the ninth century vizier and scribe Ibn Muqla. Moustafa's mathematical analysis, applying scholarship to Islamic tradition, of the cube of cubes showed that if it is constructed with sides of ten units length and the component cubes have sides of one unit then , wherever the cube is levered open, it will display ninety nine cubes. Such order or mathematical perfection is seen to illustrate the harmony of the universe but the viewer does not need to count the cubes, or read the names, to appreciate the concept. The exhibition catalogue ⁴⁷ refers to viewers 'responding to the images on a metaphysical or spiritual level, sensing that the paintings speak to them of the universals which transcend cultural and religious boundaries for as Michelangelo said 'Good painting is nothing but a copy of the perfection of God'

The viewer may experience a degree of visual disorientation from *The Attributes of Divine Perfection* :

'by the simultaneous affirmation and denial of perspective. Such disorientation is intended to intensify the sense of the supernatural paradox that lies at the heart of mystical experience but which can never be grasped by the mind. The step-like pyramid or honeycomb of clustered cubes appears to be both solidly present in the foreground yet receding into the distance at the same time. Here the optical effect perceptually 'imitates the paradox that God is present in His name at the same moment as he is absent, that He is closer to you than your jugular vein yet utterly remote in His limitless glory.'⁴⁸

As the picture was exhibited in a Vatican exhibition the catalogue writer, Jeremy Henzell-Thomas⁴⁹, is at pains to establish a relationship between Arab calligraphy by an artist who is a Moslem and a Catholic Western viewer. Henzell-Thomas writes that 'It is the faculty or organ, otherwise called 'creative imagination', 'imaginal understanding', 'symbolic thought', or 'archetypal awareness' resident in the heart and beyond discursive reason that reflect a basic urge towards mystical experience shared by all humanity'. ⁵⁰

The absence and presence of God is expressed in Islam in the contrast between '*tanzih* or incomparability and *tashbih* or similarity' and Henzell –Thomas claims that Islamic art by 'generally avoiding figurative representations most perfectly expresses the balance between abstraction of *tanzih* and the concrete imagination of *tashbih*, for it displays beautiful and majestic forms yet simultaneously reminds us that their beauty and majesty cannot be ascribed to themselves but to God alone, the fount of all Beauty and Majesty'. ⁵¹

⁴⁷ Henzell-Thomas, Jeremy, *Where Two Oceans Meet*, Fe-Noon, Ahmed Moustafa, UK Ltd, 1998

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Jeremy Henzell-Thomas is a former director of the Book Foundation and has written frequently on 'the universal message of Islam' (see incredulous.blogspot.com, accessed 28/10/2010)

⁵⁰ Henzell-Thomas, Jeremy, *Where Two Oceans Meet*, Fe Noon, Ahmed Moustafa, UK Ltd, 1998.

⁵¹ Ibid

Within Islam the state of servanthood to Allah is regarded as the highest state for man and art is seen as a supra-individual activity, concerned not with the aesthetic appeal of images *per se*, whether abstract or figurative, but with the role of the images in pointing to a higher reality. The question for the Westerner may be 'does the image work as art?' (albeit that much Western religious teaching forbids any attempt for the image to become worshipped in its own right) whereas the question for the Moslem viewer is 'does the image provide a medium for the contemplation of the divine'. Implicit in asking these questions Henzell-Thomas appears to be implying that in the case of *Attributes of Divine perfection* the image works as art for the Westerner but also as a means of contemplation of the divine for the Islamic believer.

In order to confirm the value of *Attributes of Divine Perfection* for both Islamic and Catholic viewers Henzell-Thomas refers to writings by two thinkers⁵², the Sufi poet Ibn Arabi and Albertis Magnus (or 'Doctor Universalis'). Ibn Arabi says there are three types of knowledge, namely intellectualism, emotionalism and the Knowledge of Reality. At the level of interpretation which approaches this third form of knowledge the image connects directly with the intuitive faculty within the heart, echoing and illuminating the spiritual life of the viewer. This approach is set alongside the words of Albertis Magnus who has written:

'A man will dwell in God once he sees that he himself is imperfection and nothingness and knows that his only good is in his creator. Let him abandon himself, his own power and strength, and then, withholding nothing, plunge himself into his creator. All he does is then directed solely to his Lord God, and he seeks and knows nothing outside Him in whom he finds all good and the happiness of perfection'.⁵³

Ibn Arabi is also quoted by William Chittick in his guide to Sufism⁵⁴ in reference to the Divine Names of God saying:

'The whole cosmos is the locus of manifestation for the divine names. In reality there is nothing in existence but His names. There is nothing in existence but God. As for us, though we exist, our existence is through Him. Those who exist through something other than themselves are in effect non-existent'.

Further accentuating the Sufi dimension in relation to Ahmed Moustafa's work Chittick also quotes from Jami⁵⁵ illustrating the names that can be used;

'Neighbour, companion, fellow voyager---All are He

⁵² Henzell-Thomas, Jeremy, *Where Two Oceans Meet*.

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Chittick, William, *Sufism*, One World Oxford, 2008. Page 93

⁵⁵ Ibid, page 92. Abd-Ar Rahman Jami

In beggar's rags, in king's satins---All are He

In the banquet of dispersion, and the closet of gathering

All are He, by God—by God, all are He'

In an interview⁵⁶ with Ahmed Moustafa in October 2008 he said that there was a 'crisis of identity and a need to re-discover belief' and that 'form without substance was a recipe for getting lost' so that there needs to be 'compatibility between form and meaning'. Harmony has to governed by 'precise ratios' and 'abstraction is equal to the inner dimension and addresses the essence of things', This is why his religious calligraphy using the Western techniques of oil and watercolour on paper relate to a Western Catholic audience without any sacrifice of his mathematically based artistic integrity or Islamic beliefs. The apparent abstraction of the work of Moustafa is an attempt to achieve an 'inner dimension' and 'address the essence of things'. At one level this is achieved by the calligraphic technicalities and Sufi symbols such as upright strokes illustrating states of uprightness and four seven-dot squares symbolising the 28 phases of the moon. At another level these are just means to an end, techniques to achieve his aforesaid 'harmony and meaning'.

Ali Omar Hermes and the Calligraphy of Poetry

The use of Arabic calligraphy in Contemporary Middle Eastern art is not confined to Koranic sources with the application of precise mathematical formulae. Ali Omar Hermes, a Libyan who has lived in the UK since 1981 has work that is more expressionistic in style and often makes use of literature and poetry as source material. Again, it is interesting to see an exhibition of the work of a Middle Eastern artist in a Western setting with the 1993 exhibition, held to raise funds for the development of Linacre College Oxford.

The curator, James Allan, in the catalogue⁵⁷ again seeks to establish a relationship between the Arabic calligraphy and the Western viewer. Allan points out that, in mediaeval times, Egyptian craftsmen would produce ivory inlaid furniture for a Coptic *minbar* one day and a Christian pulpit the next. He goes on to highlight the growing antagonism that has come about in later history and calls for the need to build bridges. He sees this as being achieved by the work of Ali Omar Hermes who has 'unashamedly drawn from the Western tradition his technique, the use of acrylic, ink and paper, together with the scale of his compositions, and indeed the concept of painting as opposed to calligraphy or book illustration'⁵⁸. Allan

⁵⁶ Interview of Ahmed Moustafa by the author, 7/10/2008

⁵⁷ Rizvi Sajid/Allan, James (Ed), *Reaching Out, Conversations on Islamic Art with Ali Omar Hermes*, Saffron Books, 1993. Page12. James Allan was Keeper of Eastern Art at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford at the time.

⁵⁸ Ibid, Pages 12-13

then says that of Ermes 'What he portrays comes from his Arab and Muslim background: Arabic letters and early Arabic poetry'⁵⁹.

Such bridge building, though, can only go so far and Ermes is conscious that the attitudes of the viewer and the artist have to be aligned. The dealer, Dale Egee, once asked Ali Omar Ermes⁶⁰ to provide a work based on a certain Sura from the *Koran*. He refused on the basis he did not know where it might be hung or who might walk past, perhaps profaning them.

The perception of the work of Ermes for the Western viewer does not depend on 'the understanding of every letter or reading of each Arabic word in one of his paintings'⁶¹ and it is notable that the early paintings of Ermes were sold as souvenirs to Western oil-workers who were working on the Libyan oil fields⁶². Allan claims that:

'For these letters and words are only seen as two small parts of the total composition. And it is that composition which does the true speaking. It has colour and rhythm, dimension and form, a sense of space, an atmosphere. These attributes are unique to each individual painting. They cannot be described. They can only be felt. As a result we do not have to verbalise our feelings. We can simply enjoy them and the bridge is built.'⁶³

In this extract Allan is trying to describe the way in which the Western viewer can react to a work of art from a different culture. The viewer may well not understand or appreciate specific letters, words or images but it is thought that he can, through some kind of universal understanding, derive the basis message of humanity.

*Tughra*⁶⁴ painted in 1993 exemplifies this kind of work by Ali Omar Ermes (the *tughra* was the ultimate symbol of Ottoman power, an intricate device that served as the Imperial signature and was attached to government documents which circulated across the empire). The large, swirling letter in vivid blue and gold are against a the detail of a quotation from the blind philosopher poet, Abdul Al Alaa al-Maari (973-1057) 'When I utter the implausible I can shout it out loud without fear or favour but when I speak of the truth I have to whisper'⁶⁵. The paint dribbles and spatters create an immediacy and spontaneity that

⁵⁹ Rizvi Sajid/Allan, James, *Reaching Out, Conversations with Ali Omar Ermes*, Saffron Books, 1993. Page 13

⁶⁰ Art Advisory Associates (Ed), *Omar Ali Ermes in Context*. Art Advisory Associates, 2005. See page 14.

⁶¹ Rizvi, Said, Allan, James, *Reaching Out, Conversations with Ali Omar Ermes*. Page 13

⁶² *Canvas Magazine*, July/August 2010, Volume 6/Issue 4. Page 85

⁶³ Rivzi, Said/Allan, James, *Reaching Out, Conversations with Ali Omar Ermes*, Saffron Books, 1993. Page 13

⁶⁴ Illustration 1-3, Ali Omar Ermes/1993, *Tughra*, Acrylic and watercolour mounted on canvas/15x123cm. Exhibited at Linacre College Oxford, 1993

⁶⁵ Rizvi, Said, Allan, James, *Reaching Out, Conversations with Ali Omar Ermes*, Saffron Books, 1993. Page 40

is not present on formal calligraphy, allowing the Western viewer more access to the impact of the picture, rather than the text, the medium rather than the explicit message.

The extent to which the Western viewer can absorb the full extent and impact of the picture without being able to understand Arabic must, however, raise questions for this and all Middle Eastern artists. At one level all that can be appreciated is the abstract quality of the image and its decorative merits. To the extent that there is some understanding of the language, or receipt of a translation through the accompanying legend, this may channel the contemplation of the image in a relevant direction. The level of appreciation must therefore vary according to the knowledge of the viewer.

Ali Omar Hermes is aware of this conundrum. He has commented⁶⁶ that:

‘Visual art does not need translation and to someone without a background in Arabic literature my paintings convey their wholeness as visual art. But to someone versed in Arabic they provide an additional bonus. Most art works at different levels and mine does too. Some may see the Arabic element of paintings as introducing a sense of mystery but it is not a mystery, it’s an invitation for any inquisitive mind to go deeper into aspects of Islamic culture and history’.

Hermes may be optimistic if he believes that the non-Middle Eastern viewer can appreciate the whole, or entirety, of his image. He may, though, have justification in hoping that the central message, or kernel, of his work is somehow conveyed from the combinations of shapes, colours and compositions, particularly when some translation of the underlying words is provided. Once the words are translated or explained the viewer associates the style with the message.

Ali Omar Hermes also explains what he sees as the difference between the contemporary Middle Eastern artist and that of a traditional Moslem artist when he says⁶⁷ ‘For almost three years I didn’t paint at all. Then I found the visually recognised aspect of Islamic/Arabic art is the letter form. Because I was engaged with a lot of literary reading and writing I decided to use this vehicle.’

The use of the letter is not just to repeat or recall what has gone before but, as he has written, ‘the Arabic alphabet presents a unique challenge because the letters have been around for thousands of years, it is the manner in which you choose to employ them in your art that they assume new meanings and new significance’⁶⁸. As to poetry and literature it is:

‘A vehicle for culture and feelings which, by encapsulating our heritage and worldly experience, interprets it for successive generations. The text by itself is a device which triggers a sense of shape, colour, and space and the musicality of images. As to whether it comes before the picture, whether it inspires the picture, it is difficult to say, because the text after all is part of the whole concept.’

⁶⁶ Rizvi, Said, Allan, James, *Reaching Out, Conversations with Ali Omar Hermes*. Pages 20-21

⁶⁷ Ibid Page 20

⁶⁸ Ibid Page 24

The message in *Tughra* that truth has to be whispered has a special resonance for Ali Omar Hermes. He believes that the artist has two choices. He can be part of that:

‘all-pervasive system of injustice and succumb to the myriad corruptions, falsehoods and enticements that come with it or he can decide to stick with his morals and defend his integrity and honesty in the best way possible. Frankly, from the Islamic point of view this is what art is all about. Sometimes the rewards of such creative pursuits are material success and sometimes they are not.’⁶⁹ (in practice Ali Omar Hermes may have achieved the objectives of both creativity and material success as he is recognised as a creative artist and today a work like *Tughra* could realise an auction price of around \$75,000.⁷⁰)

Al-Maarri was very conscious that his meditations are sentiments that, if they had not been surrounded by many expressions of pious faith, would have incurred a charge of heresy. He therefore talked of his work in a way that perhaps reflects the complexity and dynamism of the *Tughra* painting, ‘When I utter the implausible I can shout it out loud without fear or favour but when I speak the truth I have to whisper’⁷¹. Ali Omar Hermes reconciles the interplay between his Arab Muslim heritage and his international role by referencing the wider aspects of Islam, in a way which many other Middle Eastern contemporary artists could recognise with the following statement:

‘As an Arab and a Muslim I feel (and rightly so) that I am a world citizen: after all this is the Islamic approach to society and mankind. Since I started the first steps in my art, I meant it to be enjoyed and understood by all people to break the barriers to communication between people and languages. That’s why I have combined more than one language in my art (as for example in ‘AAAA’ and ‘Silah of 1992 and 1993). Arabic is an ideal visual form and the musical entity in the movement of its letterform ‘as in poetry’ not only in its literary expression but in its silent music expressions, combines the use of space, colour and the power of shifting places in their quiet and noisy effects.’⁷²

Hassan Massoudi and the Universalist Power of the Single Letter

In medieval times it was common for Christian scribes to highly embellish an individual, introductory letter to a new chapter of a book. We see this in the *Lindisfarne Gospels* or the *Book of Kells*. In itself it was an act of religious devotion which often gained significance from an individual letter which introduced a new chapter of the *Bible* or a passage tradition had imbued with particular religious, literary or social significance. It became, however, a work of art in its own right as it went beyond a simple copying of text and conveyed a visual impact or message.

⁶⁹ Ibid Page 16

⁷⁰ Author’s estimate

⁷¹ Rivzi, Said/Allan James, *Reaching Out, Conversations with Ali Omar Hermes*, Saffron Books, 1993. Page 40

⁷² Nourallah, Riad, *Ali Omar Hermes in Context*, Art Advisory Associates, 2003. Page 10

Hassan Massoudi, like Ahmed Moustafa or Ali Omar Ermes, is a calligrapher who has also absorbed the techniques of Western Art. In Illustration 1:4⁷³ a dramatic, sweeping, red *Ayn* is a symbol of the source of the intellect. It does not, however, introduce a Koranic sura or hadith, nor Arabic poetry or literature. Massoudy, who lives and works in France uses the letter to illustrate a clause from Heraclitus. There is Arabic script, in classical Kufic form as well as contemporary script and then in French:

‘Sans l’esperance il est impossible de trouver l’inespere’

A similar work by Massoudi was used to brand the British Museum *Word into Art* exhibition of 2006 which brought the work of contemporary Middle Eastern artists to the notice of a wider British public, so presumably this kind of work was deemed appropriate to the man on the London underground. The image was also seen as sufficiently powerful to be featured in a *Times* review⁷⁴ of the related exhibition of the work of Hassan Massoudi at the October Gallery.

The power of Arabic calligraphy has always been a source of inspiration to Massoudy from his earliest years and Venetia Porter’s introduction to his work, *The Calligraphers Garden*⁷⁵ encapsulates the love and enthusiasm for the medium, with three examples:

‘When we visited [Massoudy’s uncle Ali who was a proficient calligrapher in his own right] we would find him in his library, seated cross-legged on carpets, a notebook on his knees, propped up by pillows. His turban, made of a long black cloth, gave him a majestic and striking look to the eyes of the child that I was at the time. A Persian *qalam* in his hand, he would write silently. I could not yet read them but the calligraphy fascinated me. The fluidity of the shiny black ink on satiny, yellowish paper captivated me’

Engulfed by the crowd we walked through the huge mosque of Ali. My eyes were fixed on the ceramic walls decorated with pale monuments of calligraphy. I discovered a network of white and yellow letters interlaced on a blue and green surface. As I was small the calligraphy already large, in my memory it had reached gigantic proportions.

⁷³ Illustration 1-4, Hassan Massoudi/2003, *Ayn’/’Heraclitus*, Ink on paper with pencil script, 138X77 CM. Property of the author

⁷⁴ *The Times* 17/07/2006. Section 2

⁷⁵ Massoudy, Hassan, *The Calligrapher’s Garden*, Saqi Books 2010, Page 6. Saqi Books, founded in 1984 has, according to its website ‘links with cutting-edge voices in North Africa and the Middle East that have led to a rigorous reassessment of Arab cultural heritage’. Venetia Porter, who contributes the introduction to the book is the Curator of Islamic History at the British Museum and has played a leading role in establishing its leading collection of Contemporary Middle Eastern Art. Hassan Massoudy has also published nineteen books of calligraphy in France

It was at that moment [with a newly appointed school teacher who had studied at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad] that for the first time I knew the pleasure of making the black and liquid ink flow onto the paper, like a ribbon that turns round and round to create calligraphy.'

In the turbulent early 1960's, when the Iraqi monarchy had been overthrown by a republic established by Abd el-Karim Qasim, the work of Massoudy was not a calm, haven of ancient tradition. Massoudy was accused of designing political banners for peace rallies for the Kurdish revolts of that time which led to intermittent prison terms, showing how easy it is for artists of the region to be sucked into dangerous political disputes. Very soon he was led on his calligraphic journey, as we have noted earlier, to draw an interesting distinction, namely the difference between art and calligraphy. Having encountered contemporary artists, such as Jawad Selim, in 1960's Baghdad he chose to emigrate in 1969 and to study at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. It was there that Massoudy combined his Arabic calligraphic heritage with an experience of Japanese calligraphy and the work of Western and Asian writers, both ancient and modern.

Massoudy's work is therefore much broader than one letter introductions to classical Western writers. He also rendered the poetry of the politically-aware Mahmoud Darwish into Kufic script for the illustrations of Rachid Koraichi in his 1997 book *Ummah fi al-Manfa'* (*A Nation in Exile*). It is not uncommon for Massoudi to use Western writers for his work. In addition to Heraclitus he has used the literature of Schiller, Rilke, Borges and even Collette. In his book *Calligraphies des Amour* Massoudi says he believes that modern calligraphers do more than just add 'life to the line'. He himself decides:

'Which word stands out, should be magnified? I count the straight letters and then the curves so as to be able to create a rhythm by composing them. I sketch a few lines, transforming the letters, moving them around, adjust them. At the same time the image of the poet is floating in my mind. Hazy at first certain images reveal themselves, sometimes the first day, sometimes after long months.'⁷⁶

As with Ahmed Moustafa, Massoudi believes that 'proportions are very important and are calculated to a hair's breadth—as calligraphy is an art that puts down the essence of things and not just the visible'. He is, however, more flexible in his approach to calligraphy than Moustafa and does not see the practice as an application of ancient techniques as 'if they are a hurdle you have to set them aside and invent others or take inspiration from the other arts, listen to the rhythm of music or observe the movement in dance.'

In common with many other Middle Eastern artists a note of evangelical universalism creeps in to the description of Massoudy's work, 'This calligraphy reflects my vision of the world, it has become the desire that the world should be thus, with a new harmony and freedom'. The material contradictions are a reflection of the contradictions of life as Massoudy claims that 'the point of balance doesn't exist: the world is a 'harmony of tensions' according to Heraclitus'. It is these tensions that are implicit in the words of Heraclitus that Massoudy tries to reflect in his dramatic presentation of another clause from

⁷⁶ Massoudi, Hassan, *Calligraphies des Amour*.

Heraclitus in a way that includes dramatic visual impact alongside a traditional script, a modern Arabic script and a Western script. Putting the separate scripts into the same image may create artistic tensions in the image but the fact that they are able to be combined together emphasises the universalist message that Massoudy is promulgating.

The international or globalist dimension in Massoudy's work is again shown in *The Calligraphers Garden*⁷⁷ where he illustrates the work of writers as diverse as the Japanese, Kobayashi Issa⁷⁸, the English, William Blake, the French, Jacques Lacarrière, the Italian, Francis of Assisi as well as Turkish, Spanish, Madagascan and African proverbs. This is in addition to Middle Eastern writers, such as Omar Khayyam, the modern Lebanese poet Ilya Abu Madhi and Sidi Abou Madyan, the 12th century Andalusian Sufi poet.

One work by Massoudy has a very Far Eastern feeling to it where he illustrates a quote by Kobayashi Issa⁷⁹, an eighteenth century Japanese poet:

'A world of pain and sorrow

At the very time the cherry trees are blossoming'⁸⁰

Massoudy's achievement (along with many of the other contemporary Middle Eastern artist/calligraphers) is to marry text and art in a way that transcends the specific local Arabic language and tradition. The use of text is less prevalent in Western art than it is in the Middle East or Asia but an interesting parallel can be drawn with the US artist, Brice Marden. He too was inspired by the work of Tu Fu which he read in translation by Kenneth Rexroth and then produced a portfolio of prints in 1985-6 'Etchings to Rexroth' described by Brenda Richardson in her essay on Marden in *Abstraction, Gesture, Ecriture*.⁸¹

'The imagery of the Rexroth etchings was inspired equally by the fluid eloquence of Asian calligraphy; the dramatic, asymmetrical markings spiralled on exotic seashells (especially the volutes the artist collects); the layered transparencies of medieval stained glass; and the subtle traceries of grasses and branches as observed and drawn by Marden in landscapes from Thailand to the Caribbean, from Pennsylvania to Greece.'

⁷⁷ Massoudi, Hassan, *The Calligraphers Garden*, Saqi Books, 2010

⁷⁸ Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827) Japanese poet and Buddhist Monk

⁷⁹ Illustration 1.5, Hassan Massoudi/2010 *Kobayashi Issa*, Ink on paper/18.5X24cm. Reproduced in Hassan Massoudy *The Calligraphers Garden*/Saqi Books 2000

⁸⁰ Massoudi, Hassan, *The Calligraphers Garden*, Saqi Books, 2010. Page 66

⁸¹ Fischer, Peter (Intro), *Abstraction, Gesture, Ecriture-Paintings from the Daros Collection*, Alesco AG Zurich, 1999. Page 86

The interest of Marden in calligraphy as language was enhanced later when in 1988 he was given a copy of *Red Pine*, a translation by John Blofeld of the Collected Songs of Cold Mountain with the original Chinese characters on the facing page to the translation. Richardson describes the resulting Marden (who does not read Chinese) works as 'internalising the literary and spiritual content of what suddenly for him became words-poetry-inhering in those abstract forms, initially the artist admired calligraphy as abstract art; he wasn't seeing it as script although intellectually he knew that's what it was.'⁸²

It is this intertwining of art, text, abstraction, content, mood and thought that Massoudy achieves in the same way as Marden, albeit he started from a traditional calligraphic heritage whereas Marden began from a Western artistic tradition. Both try to create something that goes beyond the words and what may have been their original local meaning. Richardson cites two descriptions of the process for moving script to art, the first from Charles Baudelaire⁸³ as 'evocative magic' and the second from Marcel Duchamp's biographer Calvin Tomkins⁸⁴ who summarised the artist's position;

'Works of art could not be understood by the intellect [alone]—nor could their effect be conveyed in words. The only valid approach to them was through an emotion that had [in Duchamp's words] 'some analogy with a religious faith or a sexual attraction-an aesthetic echo'.

This echo, however, was heard and appreciated by very few people [and] Duchamp assigned to the person capable of hearing the aesthetic echo an essential role in the creative process.' Richardson adds the perceptive comment that 'the aesthetic echo' is a profoundly spiritual as well as artistic pursuit'.

Both Marden and Massoudy therefore demonstrate that it is possible to present script in an artistic way which transcends the original culture or language. Of course some of the original meaning, context or experience may be lost by the viewer from a different culture but he may, at the same time, add a new dimension or experience. Roland Barthes in his exploration of *The Responsibility of Forms*⁸⁵ refers to the way in which the twenty six letters of the [European] language are:

'Animated by hundreds of artists from every period and are put into a 'metaphoric relation' with something other than the letter (birds, fish, serpents, men, monsters, flowers, plants, instruments) so that a whole catalogue of natural and human products come to double the alphabets brief list: the entire world is incorporated into the letters, the letter becomes an image in the tapestry of the world'.

Barthes goes on to point out the way in which a single letter can represent, or indicate, two different and even contradictory meanings (Z for Hugo is the lightning flash, God, while for Balzac 'Z' is the bad letter) and specifically refers to a book by J Berque and J P Charnay who had commented on the way

⁸² Fischer, Peter, (Ed), *Abstraction, Gesture, Ecriture*. Page 91

⁸³ Ibid Page 102

⁸⁴ Ibid Page 102

⁸⁵ Barthes, Roland, *The Responsibility of Forms*, Hill and Wang, 1985. Page 100

'Arabic knows such contradictory signifiers, such as *ad'dad*'. The result is that 'freed from its linguistic role a letter can say everything'⁸⁶. The ability to comprehend the artistic meaning of the letter is dated by Barthes from Erte saying that:

'Before Erte (but this is virtually a new age, so completely has it been forgotten), the Middle Ages bequeathed to us a thesaurus of experiments, of dreams, of meanings, in the labour of its uncials; and graphic art, if we can shake off our society's empiricist yoke, which reduces language to a simple instrument of communication, should be the major art that transcends the futile opposition of figurative and abstract: for a letter, at one and the same time, *means* and *means nothing*, imitates nothing and yet symbolises, dismisses both the alibi of realism and that of aestheticism.'⁸⁷

Massoudy might also be said to use 'aesthetic echoes', 'evocative magic', 'put into metaphoric relation', 'animate', 'free from linguistic role' and 'transcend futile opposition of figurative and abstract'. Put more simply in his own words, 'I use calligraphy as a means of personal expression, reflecting sensations. To take it further, however, I must seek a deep experience. To do so I went into the desert to create works that were warm and weightless. I work with dancers, for calligraphy that floats away.'⁸⁸

Issam El-Said, Architecture, Geometry and Calligraphy

Issam El-Said had the interesting background of a Cambridge graduate in architecture, designer and grandson of the assassinated Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri El-Said. He therefore combines the traditional Arab tradition of geometric decoration of architecture with ceramic tiles with calligraphy and a personal sense of his Middle Eastern heritage of violent politics.

Much of his artistic output revolves around geometric patterning about which his autobiography⁸⁹ gives an interesting background. As an architect he was commissioned to decorate the interior of a London restaurant 'The Caravanserai', the name recalling the social gathering of travellers before they set forth on their journey. El-Said decided to brighten the whole place by covering the walls and pillars in the same way as had traditionally been used for tents, with mirrors and canvas. On talking to traditional craftsmen in Cairo he discovered that they did not use centimetres or inches and used rulers and string instead of compasses. It was only in the eighth century AD that numbers began to be used for calculating measurements and before that letters were used to calculate in both the Arab and the Western world. Issam El-Said then used the basis of the original Egyptian 'rope-stretchers', or surveyors, to demonstrate that their patterns were based on a circle. The inscribed and circumscribed polygons

⁸⁶ Barthes, Roland, *The Responsibility of Forms*, Page 100

⁸⁷ Ibid Page 100

⁸⁸ Massoudy, Hassan, *The Calligrapher Garden*, Saqi Books 2010. Page 9

⁸⁹ El-Said, Esmat, *Issam El-Said: Artist and Scholar*, Issam El-Said Foundation, 1989

were on key grid lines, formed by the diameter, radius and the diagonals. With these individual designs it was possible to make up larger designs based on the repetition of the component designs. This decorative repetition forms the basis for the embellishment of many Arab buildings.⁹⁰

The unifying role of geometry in Islamic arts is discussed in El-Said's book *Geometric Concepts in Islamic Art*⁹¹. This book elucidates how the shapes of the Arabic letter are derived from the circle and how rhythm and intervals are geometrically measured in music. Poetry and rhythm of poetic utterance fit in the same category and can be dealt with on the same basis.

Looking at his work of *Fallen Star* (1984 and subsequent Lithographs)⁹² we can see why El-Said chose to base it on the 55th Sura of the Koran

'And God---hath created man.

He hath taught him the power of expression.

The sun and the moon are made punctual.

And the sky He hath uplifted.

And He hath set the balance

That ye exceed not the balance

But observe it strictly, nor fall short thereof'

The image in *Fallen Star* is presented in diamond shape, the same manner as some Islamic tiles. The script, clear at the bottom, decreases in size towards the desert horizon, to the point where the letters become the grains of sand, indicating the presence and the absence of God. Script or calligraphy is therefore not always to be read, or even appreciated, for its decorative qualities but to indicate the concepts and ideas, many of which are beyond the immediate understanding of man.

El-Said adopts the same overall, universal approach to his art as many other Middle Eastern artists and his biography recalls the great 'Islamic tradition in sciences and arts has achieved a continuity of the common, human heritage--the adoption and application of a geometrical method as a unifying basis to diverse fields of expression.'⁹³ This reversion to the past achievements of the Middle East and the days when it was seen as the source of global knowledge and wisdom is one of the identifying features of the

⁹⁰ El-Said, Esmat, *Issam Al-Said-Artist and Scholar*. Pages 26-27

⁹¹ El-Said, Issam/Parman, Aysha, *Geometric Concepts in Islamic Art*, World of Islam Festival, 1976

⁹² Illustration 1-6 Issam El Said,, *Fallen Star/Quaranic Verse*, 1980. Lithograph on handmade paper/55x56cm, Property of the author.

⁹³ El-Said, Esmat, '*Issam El-Said: Artist and Scholar*', Issam El-Said Foundation, 1989. Page 31

contemporary Middle Eastern artists. Architecture and decorative design are the most obvious sources for Middle East artists but music, mapping, mathematics and measurement also owe much to the Middle East and underlie a claim by the publishers of a book (one of a series) called *Variantology*⁹⁴ that it will not be 'possible to write the history (and stories) of the arts and the media without taking a long and hard look at the deep time of Arabic-Islamic culture'.

Shirazeh Houshiari, Sufism, Rumi and the Individual

Shirazeh Houshiari uses calligraphy, as well as poetry, geometry and even architecture in her work but the effect is very personal and the impact less direct than the calligraphers described so far. Her work *Round Dance*⁹⁵ uses a poem by the Sufi mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-73) as a basis but the script is not intended to, and cannot, be read. In the words of Houshiari⁹⁶ 'the word loses its meaning and form is born from this'. The accompanying poems by Rumi such as the following do not specifically refer to the image but complement it:

'Walk to the well

Turn as the earth and moon turn

Circling what they love

Whatever circles comes from the centre'

The shapes in the image refer to the rotation of the earth and the planetary system, whilst the black drawing consists of chants and prayers. A catalogue by Ferashteh Daflari of an exhibition by Houshiari in Seoul in 2004 outlines her approach:

'Houshiari is not here concerned with gender or ethnicity but has a sustained Eastern mysticism using, for instance Sufic dervish dancing movements in her performance art. Repetition as with Sufi 'zikr' meditation, or even Western meditation, 'don't divulge the word but dissolve meaning through repetition.'⁹⁷

Movement is important and Houshiari has used a development of Pollock style floor painting on some of her more recent canvases. This enables the artist to have personal, physical involvement in the creation of the work in the same way as Sufi dancers have in their performance. The result is abstract,

⁹⁴ Zielinski, Siegfried/Furlus, Eckhard, *Variantology 4*, Walther Konig, Koln, 2010. Introduction

⁹⁵ Illustration 1-7, Shirazeh Houshiari/1992, *Round Dance*, Etching on paper (proof set)/77x75cm. British Museum

⁹⁶ Porter, Venetia, *Word into Art*, British Museum, 2008. Page 69

⁹⁷ www.shirazehhoushiari.com. Accessed 12/9/2010

although it is easy to detect similarities with traditional Islamic geometric design. It also connects with some Western abstract artists, such as with Kandinsky whose whirling *Comets* uses the same theme of individual elements circling round a core and, at the same time, themselves creating a circling universe. Within Sufism the circling, whirling action of dancing has an important role and William Chittick cites Ruzbihan Baqli, whom he describes as 'one of the more intoxicated of Sufi prose writers' on the subject:

'When the Gnostic turns his hearing to the Unseen of the unseen, the light of sudden witnessing falls into the core of his secret heart and his spirit encounters the beauty of the Real in the clothing of contentment and joyful expansion. His spirit delights in God and it almost flies from the human makeup. It remains imprisoned and bewildered in the jail of the original disposition. As with much of the light of the Real becomes unveiled to it, it inclines towards ascending into the Realm of Sovereignty. With its form it drags its tail into the world. Because of delight in God it is described as dancing, moving, turning and so on. The Gnostic says 'Dancing is the fluctuation of the spirit in the shrine of eternity without beginning, since it sees the existence of the Real in the clothing of beauty.'⁹⁸

Rumi expands poetically on the role of dance as a performance and we can see how the movement of Houshiary in the creation of her art combines religious mysticism and modern performance to create an art work which is at the same time religious, modern, Islamic, universal, art performance and poetry:

'People dance and frolic in the square-

Men dance in their own blood

Freed from their own hands, they clap their hands.

Having leapt from their own imperfections, they dance.

Within them their minstrels beat their tambourines-

Their uproar makes the ocean clap its waves.'⁹⁹

Houshiary adopts the Sufi principles in that, although there is clear form and unity to her work, it is not figuratively explicit, not even in the ability to decipher the underlying text. Her actions in creating the work, and the thought she has put into it, combine to create the work which in itself is art, poetry and dance or visual, oral and movement.

The circle is one of many Sufi symbols, being a perfectly symmetrical shape, acting as a container and including both upward and downward sweeps reflecting movement. Also the circle can be seen to reflect man's position in relation to God and the universe, with God both at the centre and also surrounding man. The circling of the individual dancers and the group of dancers pick up this theme.

⁹⁸ Chittick, William, *Sufism, One World*, Oxford, 2008. Page 112

⁹⁹ Ibid Page 113

Houshiary therefore uses the circular form as an illustration of what is explained by Lahleh Bakhtiar in the following way:

‘The dancing is a reference to the circling of the spirit around the cycle of existing things on account of receiving the effects of the unveiling and revelations; and this is the state of the mystic. The whirling is a reference to the spirit’s standing with God in its Secret, the circling of its look and thought, and its penetrating into the ranks of existing things.’¹⁰⁰

Dance and its role within Sufism is both basic and ancient. Some of the early ninth century Sufi mystics composed little dancing songs to convey the way in which man should relate to God. One such comes from Razi and explains why dancing should not be ignored (or condemned) but seen as a wider part of religious observance:

‘Dancing is not to keep jumping up

Floating in the air without pain like dust

Dancing is to jump out from the two worlds-

To shatter your heart, to leap from your soul’¹⁰¹

Round Dance can be seen as a very Middle Eastern work. It encompasses the calligraphic, literary and Sufi identifiers that we see as signifiers from the Middle Eastern group of expatriate artists. The last identifier, the political, is not manifestly obvious here but can be hinted at in a way that invokes comparison between harmony and turbulence. As we will later analyse, in Chapter 3, there is a global and also transcendental aspect to Islam and Sufism which can demonstrate to the followers of Islam that they have a place in the wider world and the principles of Sufism can be appreciated by Western observers.

Despite the clear Middle Eastern origins and sources in her work Houshiary refuses to inhabit a ghetto, either Western or Islamic but invents a new order alien to both (Houshiary has lived in London since 1974 and was a Turner prize contender in 1993). Perhaps her approach is best described by the story of Rumi himself, who in his search for God, looked at the Cross, the Hindu temple, the uplands of Herat, the lowlands of Kandahar, the mythical mountain of Kafi, and even Mecca. In the end he looked into his own heart, in that place, He was in no other!

At an earlier exhibition in 1993 at the Camden Arts Centre, entitled *Dancing Around my Ghost* the catalogue author, John Hutchison, describes a similar personal desire by Houshiary to ‘transcend cultural boundaries but remain true to her inheritance’ and a yearning for wholeness. There is thought to be ‘a symbolism of geometric patterns and mathematics is therefore a kind of spiritual hermeneutics, by

¹⁰⁰ Bakhtiar, Laleh, *Sufism, Expressions of the Mystic Quest*, Thames and Hudson, 1976. Page 70

¹⁰¹ Chittick, William, *Sufism*, Oneworld Publications, 2008. Page 113

which there can be movement from sensible to essential worlds.¹⁰² The dance movements are thus seen not only to be symmetrical and obey fundamental physical rules but also to be interpretable in a way that can translate physical dance movements in a spiritual way for the viewer. This, then, is one of the roles played by the contemporary Middle Eastern artist in translating the traditions of the region into a visual image that can be accepted and appreciated, if not fully understood, by the viewer.

Rumi himself (along with Omar Khayyam, on whom there is a book¹⁰³ solely focusing on illustrations of his work by Western artists, demonstrating his appeal outside the Middle East) is a vital source for many Middle Eastern contemporary artists. They may have helped to confirm Rumi's literary and artistic popularity in the West, as much as they can be accused of exploiting it. Houshiary is able to relate the ideas of Rumi in a way that illustrates the dual role of script in conveying either meaning or form:

'In words men see the meaning or its form,

They can't see both at once, this is the norm,

Changing its meaning, form he throws away,

No one can look both ways at once, can they?'¹⁰⁴

It is easy to see from this why the work of Rumi appeals to artists as their personal searches and the desire to relate to their audiences are combined. For an artist, such as Houshiary, there can be a desire to transcend self. The fact she has moved across geographic boundaries does not mean she has moved away from her initial cultural boundaries, only that she has been able to see how the cultural heritage can transcend, move beyond or integrate other cultures. For her calligraphy is a means to an end and the fact that it becomes blurred or identifiable and could be seen to be equivalent to the way a Sufi dancer collapses with exhaustion, or religious ecstasy, at the end of dance. This ecstasy is in itself the end or objective of the dance. Houshiary's work may or may not produce a similar personal or religious experience, either for her or her viewers, but the experience, thought and philosophy that have produced it are the same. Houshiary is thus an artist who has been able to move from her geographic heritage to a wider international stage in a way that appears seamless and we will revert to her work and standing in Chapter 3 which considers the wider 'universalist' concept .

Dia Al-Azzawi, Calligraphy, Poetry, Archaeology and Myth

Buildings sometimes remain when men and books are long gone. Archaeology is therefore one of the profoundest ways to explore and relate to a culture. Dia Al-Azzawi, who was born in 1939, gained his

¹⁰² Hutchison, John, *Shirazeh Houshiary, Dancing Around My Ghost* Exhibition Catalogue, Camden Arts Centre, 1993

¹⁰³ Martin, William/Mason, Susan, *The Art of Omar Khayyam*, I B Tauris, 2007

¹⁰⁴ Mojadeddi, Jawid, *Rumi, the Masnavi' (Book 1)*, Oxford World's Classics, 2008. Page 93

first architecture degree in 1962 but moved swiftly to one of his abiding passions, by earning a degree in archaeology in 1964 and stated 'Antiquity was an incentive. Instead of following a European example seek inspiration from tradition'.¹⁰⁵ Following his own dictum Al-Azzawi has produced art works which feature not only archaeology but also Arabic poetry, modern literature and the ancient tradition of making books. This has been produced in a deliberate attempt to break the shackles of European influence and create a distinctive contemporary Arab artistic movement.

One of the most prolific Middle Eastern artists to be based in London, where he moved in the late 1970s, the work of Al-Azzawi is multi faceted, embracing many of the different sources of inspiration, using all the Middle East associations of calligraphy, history, religion, literature and politics that we have identified as defining features of contemporary Middle East art. *Mutanabbi*¹⁰⁶, for instance, shows the influence of the large eyed Sumerian reliefs and the poetry of Abu Tayyin ibn al-Husayn al-Mutanabbi. Elsewhere whole series of works illustrate the Gilgamesh legend and the tales of the Arabian Nights. Vivid colour is a characteristic of the work of Al-Azzawi but even here this is not simply something derived from the Western 'fauve' school but, according to Nada Shabout:

'Represents the more direct and deep sense of personal experience (times, places, feelings and situations) that are not subject to immediate recall but are triggered involuntarily by objects or events associated with experience. Colour contains a psychological aspect, for example the colour black, used in almost every Azzawi painting, to be one of the basic colours in Iraqi culture, in which tragic tradition plays a large role. The tension created by the application of contradictory colours, such as black and red, forms the dynamic of his work and expresses the intensity and violence of Azzawi's emotions.'¹⁰⁷

In common with other Middle Eastern artists Al-Azzawi retains a religious or spiritual dimension in his work stating that 'a painting is a departure in time, in place and in memory: an attainment of the Sufist Stage, Sufism is what is tangible.'¹⁰⁸ His experience goes beyond just his Iraqi past –'Within the cultural situation I could not simply be an Iraqi painter but had to be an Arab one as well.'¹⁰⁹ Al-Azzawi tries to create an Arab model as Nada Shabout comments:

'He is an Arab who searches in his vast homeland for a space where he can be free: as such he is constantly emigrating: emigrating geographically and historically. He also reminds the Western viewer

¹⁰⁵ Shabout, Nada, *Modern Arab Art*, University Press of Florida, 2007. Page 121

¹⁰⁶ Illustration 1-7, Dia Al Azzawi/2007, *Mutanabbi:Nusus Shri'rya Mukhtara*, Set of eight illustrated silkscreen prints from unbound book/59x42.4cm, British Museum

¹⁰⁷ Shabout, Nada, *Modern Arab Art*, University of Florida, 2007. Pages 121-122

¹⁰⁸ Ibid Page123

¹⁰⁹ Ibid Page 125

that modern boundaries in the Middle East often owe more to Western control and influence as they do to the traditions and needs of the local people'.¹¹⁰

For Al-Azzawi as well as all his contemporaries the Arabic letter appeared almost instinctively in his work. Nevertheless his approach differs from the more introspective Sufi philosophy of Shakir Hassan Al Said, a founder of Arab Abstraction and the One Dimension group. 'Sufism was for Al Said a total way of life but for Azzawi it was a dimension of spirituality.'¹¹¹ Ultimately Al-Azzawi 'did not see the letter was not central to [his] painting. [He] always preferred it to be part of the group of elements of which painting is composed-the letter as sign and form. As such its properties will have further energy to reach the world.'¹¹² In *Oriental Scene*¹¹³, for example, the calligraphy is manipulated to evoke Baghdad streets and narrow alleys (the shape also recalls the suitcases needed by exiles to carry their few goods on their emigration, to remind them of their hurried flight from their homeland, a theme employed by Western installation artists such as Christian Boltanski as well as Middle East artists). Azzawi does not wish to be thought of as a calligrapher who uses colour but rather as a painter who employs script in the composition of a painting. Scattered letters do not create a word.

Poetry is not intended by Al-Azzawi to be simply illustrated by the calligraphy but a work such as *Mutanabbi*¹¹⁴ is intended to function as a link between the viewer's present and his history:

'neither words, nor the old times that envelop these poems, but rather the accumulation of letters and the flow of symbols on a single line of imagination is present here. Poetry is not just symbols or merely a language: it is the power of imagination and recollection.'¹¹⁵

This is not just a nostalgic evocation of the long past. Al-Azzawi was very affected by his army experience in the 1970's. The morbid reality of the Palestine was evoked in 'We are not seen but as corpses' and the 1976 Lebanese massacre at Tell al-Za'tar inspires poetry by contemporary writers, such as Mahmoud Darwish. From this background Al-Azzawi demonstrates what was to become a growing influence on contemporary Middle Eastern poetry, namely violence, political anger and anti-Western demonstrations.

¹¹⁰ Pocock, Charles, *Dia Al-Azzawi Retrospective*, Meem Editions, 2009. Page 22

¹¹¹ Shabout, Nada, *Modern Arab Art*, University of Florida, 2007. Page 130

¹¹² Ibid

¹¹³ Illustration 1-8, Dia Al Azzawi/1986, *Oriental Scene*, Mixed media, acrylic and foam boards/51x41cm, British Museum

¹¹⁴ Illustration 1.8

¹¹⁵ Shabout, Nada, *Modern Arab Art*, University of Florida, 2007. Page 131

In a different way to Shirazeh Houshiari, Al-Azzawi has moved to assert himself as an individual, using Middle Eastern themes but in a Western manner. There is a combination of abstraction and figurative work but calligraphy does not dominate, being used as a tool. Personal interests and loves, as for myth, poetry and archaeology, are expressed using a personal colour palette but bitter personal experiences are expressed in political statements. The emigration of the intellect became a physical emigration. The achievement is summed up by the comment of Rashid Selim in *Strokes of Genius* as 'a profoundly Mesopotamian sensibility turned into the contemporary Arab cultural psyche validated by international status and circumstance'.¹¹⁶

One image can be used to illustrate many of the characteristics of Al-Azzawi. Nada Shabout has noted that he believed 'that possessing a literary background for painting would allow the viewer-even a Westerner-to question the work without either accepting or rejecting it completely since it deals with a living entity in both concept and language'. Azzawi has illustrated a contemporary Arabic novel *The Crane* by Halim Barakat, who was born in Syria in 1936 into a Greek Orthodox family and is a Sociology Professor at Georgetown University as well as a novelist. In an interview in 2002 Barakat expounded views on Arab identity, with which Al-Azzawi would feel very comfortable:

'The Arabs have often defined themselves in terms of language and ethnicity, but there is much less emphasis on ethnicity and race than on language. The definition is not purely linguistic, however, as there is a sense that in the Arabic language is the carrier of Arabic culture, and that this sense of shared culture is more important than economics, ethnicity, religion, geography or politics, though these too are important factors in a legal and political sense'.¹¹⁷

In *The Crane-Halim Barakat*¹¹⁸ of 1991 Al-Azzawi combines dramatic colour (red, black, yellow, orange and purple), with ethnic identities, calligraphy and the symbol of the heart alongside the closely intertwined male and female, facial features. As far as the colour is concerned there is no intention of rigidly linking colour too specific emotions or images. Rather, as Nada Shabout points out, it invokes:

'the memoire involuntaire dimension of memory which according to Walter Benjamin represents the more indirect and deep sense of personal experience (times, places, feelings and situations) that is not subject to immediate recall but instead are involuntarily triggered by objects or events associated with that experience. Al-Azzawi believes the colour black, which is present in many of his works , to be one of the basic colours in Iraqi culture, in which the tragic tradition plays a large role.

¹¹⁶ Faraj, Maysaloun (Ed), *Strokes of Genius*, Saqi Books, 2001. Page 54

¹¹⁷ www.teachmideast.org/audio accessed 10/01/2012

¹¹⁸ Illustration 1-10, Dia Al-Azzawi/1991, *Two Lovers from 'The Crane' by Hakim Barakat*. Silkscreen on paper (10/12)/54x38cm. Property of the author.

The tension created by his application of contradictory colours, such as black and red, forms the dynamic of his work and expresses the intensity and violence of his emotions'.¹¹⁹

Al-Azzawi has not been offended by the comment that his use of brilliant colours is merely ornamental by stating that 'As long as I can create unique aesthetic forms, possessing their own terminologies and able to carry me back to a national tradition I belong to, I consider that something of a success. In the end, the aesthetic value of these forms lies in the attempt to create forms that belong to our reality'.¹²⁰

'The Crane' also shows the regional, historic influences on Al-Azzawi with the large, dramatic portrayal of Sumerian dark eyes. Dark eyes are also a racial characteristic of the Arab peoples and Al-Azzawi has agreed with Barakat and recognised the need for him to go beyond his own Iraqi tradition when he states 'that from the beginning my inclination was toward tradition. I therefore chose an Arab undercurrent and explored the folkloric and legendary tradition. Within the cultural situation I found I could not just be an Iraqi painter but had to be an Arab one as well'.¹²¹

This broader, more inclusive, approach by Al-Azzawi could also be seen to go beyond just a movement from Iraq to the Arab world. In an article by a Western writer, Nadine Descendre of Institut de Monde Arabe, tries to set the emigrant Al-Azzawi in a global or universalist (terminology that we seek to define more specifically in Chapter Three) context:

'Conventional history often creates cultural traditions through man-made borders that separate nations. Al-Azzawi boldly questions these divisions, thus marking one of the most important engaging directions of his artistic vision. Through his work, he transcends the nation states of the world and gives them life and colour. Modern in his delineation of this notion, he presents the viewer with a visual rendering of the world that remains current even when it is derived from the past.

It appears that this pendulum sway between the East and West as mentioned above, is not enough for Azzawi as he introduces another element of inspiration, one that is very different from Islamic art, and inspired by Mesopotamian civilisation, namely the art of Sumeria and Assyria. There is no doubt that the richness of Sumerian imagery presents the Arab artist with an irresistible challenge'.¹²²

Descendre notes that Al-Azzawi may have gained part of his Sumerian and Assyrian inspiration, not from his Middle Eastern archaeological experience but from the 'images that he can calmly contemplate in the British Museum, located in his adopted city of London'.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Shabout, Nada, *Modern Arab Art*, University of Florida, 2007. Page 121

¹²⁰ Ibid Page 122

¹²¹ Ibid Page 125

¹²² Pocock, Charles(Ed), *Dia Al-Azzawi, A Retrospective*, Meem Editions, 2009. Pages 36-7

¹²³ Ibid

In *The Crane* Al-Azzawi does use script and this does act as a Middle Eastern identifier but it is in no way dominant, or even essential, artistically. The image is therefore clearly one by Al-Azzawi in terms of theme, colour, script and literary inspirations but also one where an underlying universalism can be detected in a way that is consistent with Azzawi's emigrant status. In doing all this Al-Azzawi is additionally able to convey the political sentiment of Halim Barakat that:

'For many individuals tribal, ethnic, local, class, language etc can be complementary or conflicting. These identities not only compete with a pan-Arab identity, but also with the identities of the individual nation states, and they have contributed to the instability of certain states. This diversity is often used as a rationale for authoritarian regimes that claim a strong hold on power is the only way to maintain unity'.¹²⁴

This complexity can be seen in the way in which *The Crane* figures are intertwined with their close relationship symbolised by the image of the heart. Nonetheless their closeness appears to be threatened by the turbulent and contrary colours and the potential for disturbance indicated by the large dark eyes, potentially reflecting fear as much as love.

Maysaloun Faraj, Myth, History, Women and War

Maysaloun Faraj is not only an expatriate Middle Eastern artist but she is also an art dealer and historian of contemporary Iraqi art. Her book, *Strokes of Genius*¹²⁵, chronicled the recent history of Iraqi art but also was designed to launch a movement to promote the genre, making a clear statement of intent at the opening of the book:

'The fact that belief and cultural systems throughout the world are growing ever closer and often face one another in confrontation also compels us to redefine our orientation and search for new perspectives and horizons. For many people this age marks a new beginning and puts a full stop to the past whilst at the same time symbolising a positive commitment to a better future. Due to recent world events, as a result of which many Iraqis have had to seek alternative existences outside their homeland, an innovative body of artworks by Iraqi artists has emerged and taken shape.'¹²⁶

In addition to the broader concern for the world itself Maysaloun Faraj has more specific concerns for those who have suffered in military or civil conflicts and for Iraqi women. *Bism Allah al-Rahman al-Rahim*¹²⁷ was inspired by a British television picture of a burned Iraqi soldier exiting his tank. The

¹²⁴ www.teacheast.org/audio Accessed 10/01/2012

¹²⁵ Faraj, Maysaloun, *Strokes of Genius*, Saqi Books, 2001.

¹²⁶ Ibid Page 15

¹²⁷ Illustration 1-11, Maysaloun Faraj, *Duaa (Prayer -Bism Allah Rahman)*, 1995. Mixed media on canvas/90x90cm. British Museum

invocation 'Who listens to the soul distressed when it calls on him and who also relieves its suffering' (*Surah 27*) is repeated by Faraj in times of despair, suffering and fear of the unknown. The process of creating the picture shows the origins of the inspiration. There were;

'The usual applications of turquoise (in expression of spirituality and hope). I concealed the entire surface, using for the first time the colour black, leaving only a faint remnant of the original background, a trace of hope. Then, those eyes, those haunted eyes, four eyes and not only his tormented two, perhaps it was my way of sharing his grief for one knows we were not created alone. Lastly, straight from the tubes, the picture was overlaid by the repeated *Surah 27*.'¹²⁸

In a society where there are major constraints on what women can do, it is sometimes through art that women can find a voice. Maysaloun Faraj aims to provide that voice and her latest exhibition *Boats and Burdens, Kites and Shattered Dreams* is intended as a tribute to the 'heroic women of Iraq'. In his contribution to *Strokes of Genius* entitled '*Diaspora, Departur*' Rashad Selim identifies Maysoun Faraj, along with a number of other women artists who 'directly approach identity from the depths of feminine sensibility'. He goes on to say in the case of Faraj that :

'Her creations are diverse in material and thematic content but all seem to extend back to the covenants of her innate sense of belonging. Fertility, bounty and the sensuality of the chthonic (Earth) spirit reaches the light beyond the metaphorical veil through conviction and faith in unity attainable and blessed by peace as a basic right'.¹²⁹

Selim was referring to pieces such as *History in Ruins*¹³⁰ where Faraj says:

'from the land of the two rivers I pick up in my mind's eye the remnants of two pages from an ancient past scripted on clay tablets, where man first recorded his deeds and victories and recreate my own. I 'sew' them together in an act of healing and hope. I stand them tall and proud like an open gate, defiant and dignified like our precious date palms, like our people, like our spirit.'¹³¹

Selim is thus drawing together three essential features of the work of Maysaloun Faraj, her deep seated, physical love for the landscape of her heritage, her femininity in creating what she sees as a healing image and her desire to communicate a message of peace and humanity. *History in Ruins* brings together these themes with the clay tablets recalling history, 'sewing' bringing in a feminine pursuit, the 'gates' evoking the historic walled cities and the comparison with palms celebrating the landscape.

¹²⁸ Faraj, Maysaloun, *Strokes of Genius*, Saqi Books 2001. Pages 94-5

¹²⁹ Ibid Page 59

¹³⁰ Illustration 1-12, Maysaloun Faraj, *History in Ruins*, 2005. Earthstone and oxides with raffia. British Museum

¹³¹ Porter, Venetia, *Word into Art*, British Museum, 2008. Page 95

As we review in the descriptions of political art, later in this chapter, gender is an important political identifier in Middle Eastern art. Faraj is very conscious of this dimension but it is not blatant and is put it in a broader context in the following way: 'As an Iraqi, an Arab and a Moslem woman with an East/West upbringing, it is conflict, war, injustice, human rights, human wrongs and beauty lost that informs much of my work today.'¹³²

She goes on to identify the relationships that are 'at the core', namely with people, nature, history, culture, language and the 'invisible'. Faraj sees 'the breaking down of these relationships as the root cause of 'immense chaos and suffering, loss of innocence and beauty that could have been'.¹³³

Faraj believes that, despite fears that art does not matter, the answer 'deep within' is that 'if there is any hope for humanity it will be on the hands of artists'.¹³⁴ We can see in her work how she hopes this will be helped by her love of her country, its history and culture and the role of women and mothers in holding together their families, their country and their heritage.

Suad Al-Attar, Myth, Memory and Tears without Words

Contemporary Middle Eastern art is not always derived from script or words and is not always Islamic in any way. In some cases the themes are evoked by images but still retain their distinct Middle Eastern character. In *Strokes of Genius* Rashid Selim enumerates a number of the themes:

'Starting with the depiction of eyes, more eyes and what eyes. Sumerian statuettes depicting worshippers hold in their wide open gaze the legacy of man questing into the unknown for significance, beyond his essential aloneness within creation. Ruins and dust, as well as the geometry of human industry, that survives the layered weight of history in the traditions of popular culture. The primal architectonics of palm-tree and grove, domes and arches demonstrate with the passage from cube to sphere an intrinsic proportionate consciousness of space and silence as profoundly integral to sense, rhythm and place.'¹³⁵

Suad Al-Attar's *Mystery at Sunset*¹³⁶ shows her ability to evoke the mystery and dream-like character of a scene that conjures up centuries of myths and legends.

'The Sun is fairer in my Homeland

¹³² Faraj, Maysaloun, *Boats and Burdens, Kites and Shattered Dreams (Exhibition Catalogue)*, Aya Gallery, 2009. Page 58

¹³³ Ibid

¹³⁴ Ibid

¹³⁵ Faraj, Maysaloun, *Strokes of Genius*, Saqi Books, 2001. Page 55

¹³⁶ Illustration 1-13, Suad Al-Attar, *Mystery of Sunset*, 1997. Oil on canvas/62.4x81.6cm. Property of the author.

And the Darkness

Even the Darkness

Is fairer there

For it enfolds Iraq

Alas when shall I sleep again?

Badr Shaker el Sayyub 1924-64¹³⁷

Suad Al-Attar recalled this poem in an interview with the author¹³⁸ describing how she, as a young girl accompanied by her brother, watched and admired the sunsets over the river Tigris and the memory has stayed with her today. She was born in Iraq in 1942 but left after her initial education in Baghdad, studying in California and settling in London in 1976. Despite the passage of time her work clearly shows her strong links with her homeland. There was a seminal event in 1993 when her sister Leila, an artist in her own right, was killed by a 'stray' American missile in the bombardment of Baghdad. In others of her works Suad Al-Attar tries to purge herself of the grief of this event in therapeutic images of contorted faces shedding tears, looking very much like the *Scream* by Munch. In the 2006 Leighton House Exhibition of her work, *Tears of the Ancient City*, there is a work entitled *Silent Scream*¹³⁹. Despite overtones of Munch, there is still a Middle Eastern dimension in the accompanying poem in the catalogue by Rumi:

'My soul cries out for thee, O Basra

With a sigh like the blaze of a conflagration

My soul cries alas for thee, O mine excellences

With a sigh that makes me bite my thumb'¹⁴⁰

The assertion that these images are therapeutic comes from Suad Al-Attar, where she talks obviously of her sadness and grief but shows neither outward, ongoing bitterness nor adopts an anti-American stance. It is here, perhaps, that we have a view of the exile which differs from the bleak perception of Edward Said that we discussed earlier in this chapter. Al-Attar has good reason to be antagonistic to the West but has accepted her residence in the UK for the last thirty six years. It is perhaps worthy of

¹³⁷ Leighton House Museum, *Tears of the Ancient City, New Paintings by Suad Al-Attar, 2006*, Page 11

¹³⁸ Interview with Suad Al-Attar, 30/10/2008. Author's notes.

¹³⁹ Illustration 1-14, Suad Al-Attar, *Silent Scream*, 2006. Oil and mixed media on canvas/180x150cm. Exhibited at Leighton House, 2006

¹⁴⁰ *Tears of the Ancient City*, Exhibition catalogue for Suad Al-Attar, Leighton House 5/5-15/6/2006. Page 13

mention that her work has perhaps more Western collectors than most Middle Eastern artists so when the author attended a recent exhibition¹⁴¹ of her work there was no-one dressed in Middle Eastern clothes. Of course the sadness for what has been lost is still there but there appears to be an acceptance of how things are and a 'moving on' from the death of her sister.

Al-Attar, herself has claimed Corot and David as early Western influences on her work¹⁴² but more immediately obvious are the comparisons with Rothko¹⁴³ and Turner. Indeed Al-Attar exhibited a picture at the Albermarle Gallery in 1999 entitled *Homage to Rothko*. She charmingly admitted, with a smile, that she had subsequently sold the picture to a Middle Eastern collector after she had changed the title to something more Middle Eastern after discussions with the British Museum had failed. Her images include many that are redolent of the Middle East and her interest in Mesopotamian history. They include Paradise-like gardens, full of flowers and birds and winged, mythical horses and beasts, as well as half human, half winged beasts which to the Middle Eastern viewer would recall Assyrian friezes and to the Western viewer would recall the imagined, mythological portraits by G.F.Watts.

*Mystery of Sunset*¹⁴⁴, however, neither contains, nor needs, human or animal figures, nor lush images of flowers, gardens or plants. Here we have a strangely, empty city at sunset-or possibly also at sunrise, it only being the title that determines the time of day. There is also, confusingly, the scratched, crescent moon on the canvas, a familiar marking from Al-Attar which may be more of an identifying symbol of the Middle East than as an indicator of the time of day. We have, however, to face a titular dilemma. The piece was marketed by the Albermarle Gallery in their catalogue¹⁴⁵ under the title of *Mystery of Sunset*. There is, though, a post-It note attached to the canvas which shows, in Al-Attar's handwriting the title as *Blazing Sky*. To add to the confusion even this title is crossed out by Al-Attar and that of *Haunted City* substituted. Given Al-Attar's proclivity for changing titles this series of changes is not surprising and may have been done for perceived marketing reasons, or simply to avoid confusion with other pieces created by Al-Attar on similar themes.

¹⁴¹ Leighton House 29/09/2011

¹⁴² Interview with Suad Al-Attar 30/10/2008. Authors notes

¹⁴³ In an interview with Adolph Gottlieb 13/10/1943 Mark Rothko is quoted as saying 'If our titles recall the known myths of antiquity we have used them again because they are eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas. They are the symbols of man's primitive fears and motivations no matter in which land or what time'. Catalogue for the Tate Gallery exhibition *Mark Rothko*, Tate Publishing, 1999. Page 80. The same catalogue, page 23, has Robert Rosenbaum claiming that 'part of these [Rothko's] paintings' emotional density resides in what is almost a conflict between pleasure and denial, between the immediacy of hues that can glow like a sunrise and their inevitable extinction'.

¹⁴⁴ Image 1.13

¹⁴⁵ *Suad Al-Attar*, Exhibition catalogue, Albemarle Gallery September 1999. Page 17

The viewer, faced with this multiplicity of titles, therefore has a dilemma, or series of dilemmas. At one level he could ignore the titles and simply focus on the image and what is conveyed to him, deeming any title to be purely nominalist, giving no more meaning than 123 or ABC. Alternatively he could accept a more essentialist approach and investigate whether the image conveys some meaning or essence of that implied or inherent in the title. If the second approach is adopted he then has a number of questions arising from whichever title is adopted. *Mystery of Sunset* effectively states there is a mystery about the sunset itself whereas if the title had been *Mystery at Sunset* (the verbal terminology used by the dealer at the time of sale) the questions would revolve around not just what the mystery was but also why it occurred or was painted at the particular point of time when the sun set. *Blazing Sky* would tend to relegate the domes and arches of the city to background of what might, more importantly be something of a landscape piece (as in Turner where the ostensible subject is of minor importance compared with the dominance of the sky). If the title is *Haunted City* the viewer has to decide if the sunset (or sunrise) is of little importance compared to the city and if the term 'haunted' conveys something different to that of 'mystery', such as something supernatural or the assertion that the city is haunted. All this analysis has to be subjected to assumptions that any title is meant to be in English and is not just a translation of the Arabic where different nuances may be present. We can make certain assumptions from what we know of Al-Attar. She is not in the habit of leaving pictures without titles or using mere ABC/123 designations. Nevertheless she has been known to change the titles of her pieces but this may be for practical or commercial purposes. It should not be taken to assert that any additional title is not meant to convey some meaning or give guidance to the viewer as to how he should interpret the piece. The *Mystery of Sunset*, *Mystery at Sunset* and *Haunted City* titles could all be used to interpret the image and not just identify it from another piece. Indeed the additional titles may be useful to give greater insight.

If we take this practical approach it seems to be helpful in developing an interpretation of the picture. It seems that whatever mystery might be involved in one title is not whether it portrays night or day but the eerie (a possible alternative word for haunted) absence of people or activity. Here the imagination is allowed to roam free for, as has been claimed by one collector, it is possible to enter the world of Al-Attar through her pictures, and you will find something better when you come out. There is something multi-layered and ethereal about the city. It seems to float as much as it does to stand, and it is hard or impossible where it stands in relation to the horizon. The domes and arches are archetypically Middle Eastern but there is an implication of depth and mystery from the fact that we have entrances and exits within entrances and exits. Looking at the picture at different times of day, or in different moods, the viewer sees new doors or domes which he did not see last time, or he may not identify next time!

One interpretation is that that we are evoking the magical world of the *Arabian Nights* with the viewer being transported to a strange new (or, more probably, old) place on a magic carpet or winged horse. Another is that Al-Attar is evoking the ancient history of her region, with the people having long departed, leaving just the memory of their existence in an exotic world. This *Arabian Nights* fantasy is as meaningful to Western as Middle Eastern viewers as the tales have become as much part of the folklore of the West, via movies, cartoons, books and pantomime as they are to the Middle Eastern viewer.

Yet another interpretation might relate to the modern problems of Iraq which are ever present in the work of Al-Attar, as with almost all contemporary Middle Eastern artists. Whereas Middle Eastern cities are, or should be, busy, bustling places there comes a few moments within, or after, terrorism or wars, when they go quiet, with the population not daring to go out on the streets. Later city works by Al-Attar show domes and arches obscured by fire from the military activity, so the idea of a 'blazing sky' may be a reflection of the fire below. The percussive effect of bomb blast might lead the buildings to appear to rise (as they are 'blown up'). The fact that the fire below is mirrored in the fiery sky above can, and does, create an image and reality of a blazing sky, the landscape and the skyscape being one and the same.

Taking this modern analogy even further we have the effect of emigration with which Al-Attar and other artists are all too familiar. To them their ancestral cities may now seem to be deserted (so it would not be illogical to set the cities against a desert background, a well known Middle East image) of their friends, family or religious or political comrades. The fact that they are departed or dead may leave their spirits, if not their bodies, to inhabit, or haunt, what seems to be an empty, mysterious city. Past, present, city, sky, blazing, mysterious, haunted, sunset, sunrise, regardless of title this image is all these things and distils the Middle East of Al-Attar into this work.

Mona Hatoum, Laila Shawa, Hannah Mallala and Satta Hashem, Politics, War and Violence

Most regions do have a political side to their artistic works so it is therefore sensible to define any unique aspect of Middle East politics if we are to claim that political art can be an identifier for the work of Middle Eastern artists, particularly for those who are expatriates. Such a unique feature can be found in what we believe is the special tripartite nature of Middle Eastern politics which, whilst it can be found elsewhere, is very pronounced in the Middle East. In almost all parts of the Middle East we can detect three levels of political debate. The first is within the borders of these countries, with the usual dialogues between tribes and monarchs, monarchs and armies, armies and republics, republics and religious power and so on. The second is within the region with borders, many imposed by Colonial powers, as areas of conflict. In particular there is the continued existence and aggression of Israel and the resulting problem of Palestine. Third is the conflict with the West with the consequent invasions and responsive terrorism.

For a region where religion should, or ought, to be a unifying factor there is a similar tripartite split. Within Islam is the split between Sunni and Shi-ite. Then there is the conflict with the Christian West which, in the past, has been reason for Crusades and Jihads. Lastly, and increasingly taking over from the old Islamic/Christian conflict, there is the conflict between the secularity and economic dominance of the West and the religious authority of Islam which, for many is seen to be in conflict with Western values.

One broader issue is that of gender, which for our purposes can be seen as a political as well as a social issue for the region, arising from religious and social mores and traditions. Again, this is not an issue that

is unique to the Middle East but it is one of extreme importance and visibility for the region, with the veil being as much of an identifying symbol of the region as Arabic script, palm trees, mosques or camels. Deprived of status within their own society it is not surprising, probably inevitable, that many Middle Eastern women use their art as a way of giving voice to their gender, as we have already seen with the work of Maysaloun Faraj.

In addition to this complexity of politics there are two other important factors which can lead to an artistic identifier for emigrant artists. The first is that conflicts have gone on for a very long time, seeming to be without solution within lifetimes. This means that the forces that have led to emigration have not gone away, so what might have been thought a temporary expedient has become a lifetime with no end, or redemption, in sight. The second is the contradiction that for some expatriates the regional problems and conflicts have driven them to the West, a place which does not share the religious, moral or political values which they had believed or hoped that their own homeland would endorse. At the same time whilst the emigrant may hold to what he believes are the virtues of his homeland it is more likely in the West, not his homeland, that these values are tolerated. The solution to these dilemmas is that the emigrant can adopt the personae of a Universalist, in a role that transcends East and West and their individual politics. In Chapter three we will attempt to give more definition to this term and identity.

Political art can thus take on many dimensions at the same time and the resulting mixture arises from the interplay of politics in the region, local, regional and international. The flavour can vary between religious and secular, anti-East and anti-West, pessimistic or universalist. What is, however, often clear is that the stance and the way it is presented is a natural result of the complex of forces within the region, in a way that is extremely unlikely to be the case for artists who do not have this unique background and heritage. The emigrants are very quickly aware that the West often does not appreciate the depth of the Middle Eastern anguish over the violence in the region. Within the region it is only too real and has resulted in many of the artists emigrating from the region to the West. Whilst accepting the political stability and personal security of the West, the Middle Eastern expatriate artists cannot forget what they have seen and experienced and this has resulted in the move from their homeland. For many artists the tragedy and the violence of the Iraq wars and the Palestinian conflict with Israel are dominant features of their life and work. Perhaps it is the very ignorance of the West over the importance of what has happened and its part in it that continues to accentuate the way in which the Middle Eastern artists feel they need to present political themes.

The last feature of Middle Eastern political art is again one which is shared with other regions but particularly powerful in this region. It is that the political artist, even if he has emigrated, is vulnerable to personal attack from his political opponents both in physical and mental terms. Such fear accentuates the senses and can lead to coded references in the artistic work.

We can suggest four artists who possibly illustrate the agony of the Middle East experience. For Satta Hashem (who has the versatile background for an Iraqi of being educated in Algeria and in Communist Russia, emigrating to neutral Sweden and then settling in the UK) the way in which he comes to terms

with it is by delving into ancient Iraqi history. The impact of the Gulf War Of 1991 was traumatic. In his own words¹⁴⁶ 'during the 43 days I saw how my lovely cities, including Baghdad, were bombed. I saw the destruction of my memories. During this time I created 43 drawings and a day by day diary. The drawings were a turning point. The 43 day war changed my life forever. It put a stop to life as an adventure and started a life of question marks'. *O Misfortunate Land* was based on the work of another expatriate, the poet Fawzi Karim, which described the tragedy of the Iraq wars:

'From what breach rises the smoke

Like a banner of the dead

Hoisted en route to you, Amura?

Which martyr, save you my friend, has not returned

And been admitted into this abandoned garden

Blind as I am, but our dry throats united us in thirst in exile:

Oh what agony your conquered land gives me'.¹⁴⁷

For Hashem this war, however dramatic and immediate, is part of a continuum going back to ancient Mesopotamia and reflects not just the current war but the whole human condition. The Iraq wars of the 20th century are yet more struggles between life and death, as it was for the ancient Sumerian artists. From the viewpoint of the Western observer, however, the image¹⁴⁸ is more likely to recall Italian Old Master drawings or the thrashing horses in Picasso's *Guernica* picture. These images accrue meaning and this comes from the viewer as much as the artist. Whilst Hashem is referencing the Assyrian reliefs in his image the Western viewer is more likely to relate to Picasso or Italian Old Masters as he is to appreciate the Mesopotamian allusions. Perhaps in adopting this westernised presentation Hashem is trying to educate the Western viewer and get him more used to the extent of the violence and disruption in the Middle East.

Another view of the destruction that has been wreaked on Iraq, this time following the US invasion in 2003, comes from Hanna Malallah (a pupil of Shakir Hassan Al-Said, whose work we discuss later in this chapter). Malallah goes back to the 13th century epic, *Conference of the Birds*¹⁴⁹, written by the mystic Farid Ud-Din Attar. The birds, led by the hoopoe, go on a quest for enlightenment in an allegory of the

¹⁴⁶ Porter, Venetia, *Word into Art*, British Museum 2008. Page 63

¹⁴⁷ Ibid

¹⁴⁸ Illustration 1-15, Satta Hashem, *O Misfortunate Land*. 2001. Ink and white pigment on paper, 28.2x20cm. British Museum

¹⁴⁹ Attar, Farud Ud-Din, *The Conference of the Birds*, Continuum, 2000,

religious journey undertaken by disciples led by a Sufi sheikh. The hoopoe, described by Attar as having 'the crown of truth and the knowledge of both good and evil' is a favourite image of Malallah who uses the dried body of a hoopoe (obtained over the internet) in a canvas pocket of another large work she has produced.

Malallah's version of Al-Attar's quest is produced in the form of a book but her story is bleaker than Al-Attar's which ends with the birds meeting the Simurgh, the mythical 'guardian of heroes and the symbol of God' and 'losing themselves for ever' within him. As Malallah says of her work:

'Incising paper surfaces from which sections are then burnt renders a sequential recital almost impossible/unworkable. By way of shifting the cut and scorched page I have facilitated the possibility of multiple interpretation of a single surface, stored in my memory through repeated readings of the book by Al-Attar. With this I am also able to recall scenes of ravaged manuscripts in Baghdad which took place during the war on Iraq and the subsequent occupation.'¹⁵⁰

After this war Malallah, who was head of the Graphic Art Department at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad, moved to England without being able to take her passport. The irony of moving to the West, which she has shown to have caused the destruction of her Baghdad heritage, is not lost on her and the burnt book allows both her and the viewer:

'to participate in the reconstruction/remaking of the artwork through an interactive process. The act of shifting these surfaces became a metaphor for an apprehensive recital of Al-Attar's narrative, whilst the burnt/slashed pages evoke mystery and confusion, which are essentially the basis of my reading of the *The Conrence of the Birds*.'¹⁵¹

In the view of some Middle East artists the efforts of world politicians, however well intentioned, seem to have made little impact in the realities of the Middle East. Laila Shawa, an artist to whom we shall return in a later chapter, sees no change after the Oslo agreement of 1993 with her image of young boys from the Sheikh Radwan refugee camp carrying sticks and guns in *Children of War, Children of Peace*. The image of the boys is repeated without change¹⁵²:

'Unfortunately there has been no change in these children's lives and the trauma and the dispossession has carried on. The only apparent difference in the streets of Gaza was the change in the colour of the graffiti which became brighter. However the misery, poverty and the trauma of violence

¹⁵⁰ Illustration 1-16, Hannah Malallah, *Mantiq Al-Tayr*. 2007. Handmade book/40x40cm. British Museum

¹⁵¹ Interview with Hanna Malallah, 12/10/2011, author's notes. It may be no coincidence that the burning and destruction portrayed in the studio of Hana Malallah are mirrored down the corridor in the studio of Rashid Selim whose burning of the *Geo-Piano*, discussed in Chapter 2

¹⁵² Illustration 1-17, Leila Shawa, *Children of War, Children of Peace*, 1997. Silkscreen on canvas in two parts/100x23cm. Property of Mrs Mona Al-Khatib/Mr Gazir Shaker. British Museum

remained.’¹⁵³ Even the graffiti in the background are now deliberately illegible, a symbol of the fact that the Israelis would spray on purple paint to eradicate the words. As with Satta Hashem, the tragedy of war may be portrayed by different interpretations of the same image by Western and Middle Eastern viewers. For Shawa the obliteration of the graffiti shows the cruelty and domination that has been inflicted and the use of images of children impacts both Western and Middle Eastern viewers.

As Laila Shawa says ‘I have to criticise the world around me through my paintings-I don’t believe in painting butterflies and flowers and pretty things.’ In a talk at Leighton House in July 2010 Shawa admitted that she derived no redemptive or cathartic satisfaction from her work. As a Palestinian she saw no improvement in conditions or the status of her native land.¹⁵⁴

Mona Hatoum, the Image of the East in the West

Mona Hatoum is a considerable artist whose work cannot, and should not, be confined to her geographic Lebanese and Palestinian origins. On the one hand she has been seen as representative of the culturally deprived group of ‘African, Caribbean and Asian’ (no mention of Arab) emigrant artists practicing in the UK who featured in the controversial Rasheed Araeen exhibition *The Other Story* of 1989 at the Hayward Gallery. Jean Fisher notes of the geographic terms which had obvious racial overtones that ‘Black at the time was a self defining *political* not phenotypical category, alluding to alliances based on shared histories of colonial repression. Thus *The Other Story* was one of several multi-stranded initiatives by Araeen and other artists to construct a cultural and archival counter-memory.’¹⁵⁵

Hatoum herself places ‘blackness’ in a wider context:

‘At the beginning it was important to think about the black struggle as a total political struggle. There are common political forces that discriminate against people in the same way as feminism started off with this totalizing concept of ‘sisterhood’, and we ended up with many feminisms, if you like. The black struggle became more diversified once the basic issues were established. And blackness here is not to do with colour of your skin but a political stance.’¹⁵⁶

Following ‘The Other Story’ there were continued attempts to keep Hatoum within the British art scene of emigrant artists with the curators of ‘The British Art Show’ of 1990 insisting on trying to reproduce an installation called *The Light at the End* which depicts a narrowing cell where the light at the end is barred by red-hot metal. Hatoum could not see the piece as appropriate to all venues:

¹⁵³ Porter, Venetia, *Word into Art*, British Museum, 2008. Page 137

¹⁵⁴ *Art as Protest*, Leighton House Conference, 20/7/2010

¹⁵⁵ Fisher, Jean, *The Other Story and the Past Imperfect*, Tate Papers, Issue 12, 2009

¹⁵⁶ Archer, Michael/Bret, Guy/de Zegher Catherine, *Mona Hatoum*, Phaidon, 2001. Page 14

'For a couple of years after I made *The Light at the End* no one wanted to show anything else. It was made as a site specific piece for the space at the Showroom and I never, ever thought of it going anywhere else. The curators of 'The British Show' insisted that I reproduce it for the tour rather than make a new work. But then it became something else, because putting it in the museum it had to have all the security devices to make it childproof, foolproof, everything.'¹⁵⁷

Rather than see Hatoum as an emigrant artist practising in the UK there is a wider view of her work represented by an introduction to a book published alongside an exhibition in Hamburg Kunsthalle where her work is introduced in relation to humanity rather than geography:

'In her sculpture, video and installation work she repeatedly addresses the vulnerability of the individual in relation to the violence inherent in institutional power structures. Her primary point of reference is the human body, sometimes using her own body—not only in her performances but also in her video works and installations.—Since the early nineties Hatoum has been producing large installations which succeed in arousing in the viewer contradictory feelings of attraction, fear and fascination.'¹⁵⁸

Nonetheless, in the words used by the recent Saatchi exhibition *Unveiled, New Art from the Modern Middle East*¹⁵⁹, it is possible to take the artist out of the Middle East but it is not possible to take the Middle East out of the artist. Many of her images and performances refer to the Middle East and *The Negotiating Table*¹⁶⁰ is one of the most specific and immediate. It is described by Christoph Heinrich in the following way:

'This is a live performance work with three chairs, a hanging light, sound tape, plastic sheet, raw beef kidneys, surgical gauze, and red paint. The room is dark and lit only by a light bulb lowered over a table on which the artist lies motionless. Empty chairs surround the table. Her body is bloodstained, covered with entrails, wrapped in plastic, and her head is firmly covered with surgical gauze. On the soundtrack, news reports about civil war and speeches by Western leaders talking about peace can be heard. For this work Mona Hatoum prepared four gouaches showing three naked men tearing apart the body and gulping down the pieces.'¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Archer, Michael (Ed), *Mona Hatoum*, Phaidon, 2001, Pages 22/3

¹⁵⁸ Hamburger Kunsthhaus, *Mona Hatoum*, Hatje Cantz, 2008. Foreword

¹⁵⁹ *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*. Catalogue for Saatchi Gallery Exhibition. Booth, Clibborn Publications, 2010

¹⁶⁰ Illustration 1-18, Mona Hatoum/1983, *The Negotiating Table*, four gouache sketches for a performance/mixed media on cardboard/29x40cm. Performance staged in Ottawa, 1983

¹⁶¹ *Mona Hatoum*, Catalogue for Hamburger Kunsthhaus Exhibition, Hatje Cantz, 2008. Pages 101-104

In her comment on this work Mona Hatoum refers to the two elements, the brutal reality of the situation in the Middle East and the representation of the events there from a 'Western' point of view:

'It was basically a juxtaposition of two elements, one referring to the physical reality and brutality of the situation, and the other to the way in which it was represented and dealt with in the West. This piece was the most direct reference I had ever made to the war in the Lebanon. I made this work right after the Israeli invasion and the massacres in the camps, which was the most shattering experience of my life.'¹⁶²

Hatoum is therefore dealing with the violence at the kind of three levels that we have seen as a feature of the regions approach to politics. Initially there is the personal suffering, the body on the table probably representing that of the artist (or perhaps her free, expatriate spirit). Secondly there is the brutality of the regional violence and then the separate, detached reaction of the West which sees the violence and the suffering from a journalistic point of view as a news item about something that is happening in 'another country'. The 'peace' that is being discussed on the radio is a figment of the Western imagination and in no way reflects the reality of what is going on day to day in the Middle East.

As with some other Middle Eastern artists this work is bleak and despairing with nothing that is healing, redemptive or cathartic and one of the observers of the performance commented that it had no 'development'. We shall see a similar position with another Hatoum work which we discuss in Chapter 3. In this way they very much reflect the same theme as that of some other artists, such as as Laila Shawa, in seeing no improvement in a world of ongoing conflict. In an annotated catalogue of Hatoum's performance works Christoph Heinrich also detects a feminist dimension by recalling the 'lust murders' of earlier 20th century German artists like Dix, Grosz and Schlicter, 'which also portrayed man's unbridled impulses and fantasies of private violence, giving expression to artists and intellectuals fear of the so called Frauenfrage (question of women's rights)'.¹⁶³

The Non-expatriates, Shakir Hassan Al-Said and Total Abstraction

In this study we are focusing on expatriate Middle Eastern artists but it is legitimate to ask how, if at all, their work differs from that which was being produced at the same time within the Middle East. In Iraq, for instance, it may be possible to dismiss the works commissioned by Saddam Hussein for his own glorification as lacking in importance but it is not possible to dismiss the importance of Shakir Hassan Al-Said. Although educated initially in Iraq, he spent a couple of years in France, where he was deeply influenced by the writings of Paul Ricouer, and the UK. He returned to his homeland in 1966 and remained there until he died in 2004. Deeply hurt by the oppressive atmosphere of the Mahdawi trials

¹⁶² Hamburger Kunsthhaus, *Mona Hatoum*, Hatje Cantz. Page 101

¹⁶³ Ibid Page 101

and the Shawa revolt he suffered depression and self imposed seclusion. He found spiritual salvation in Sufism, particularly in the work of the mystic philosopher, al-Hallaj.

We will return to the influence and importance of Sufism on Shakir Hassan Al-Said in Chapter Three when we analyse more closely the role and nature of universalism on Middle Eastern artists. At this point it is, though, worth looking at Al-Said's use of the four identifiers of Middle Eastern that we have proposed, namely calligraphy, poetry (encompassing Sufism), history and nostalgia (although in the case of Al-Said the words agony or longing may be more appropriate) and political statement.

Al-Said gradually abandoned figurative expressionism and moved towards total abstraction, adopting the Arabic letter as the central subject of his compositions, 'The letter is not just a linguistic symbol. It is only the isthmus to penetrate from the world of existence to the world of thought'¹⁶⁴. Although the letters are to some extent figurative (they are not subject themselves to abstraction) what they represent moves the viewer below the flat ('one dimension') surface of the paint, which is often seen as a wall, as with *Objective Contemplations*¹⁶⁵, with marks like those seen in the works of Tapies (a European painter but whose Spanish origins are also closer to the Arab and Islamic world). The letter therefore is the means of passage for the viewer through an otherwise impermeable medium.

To gain a good introduction to the way in which Al-Said reaches into the internal through an external medium, an early pen and ink sketch *Magic Eye II*¹⁶⁶ provides some insight. A line passes through an eye entering into the head and towards the brain. Sight becomes thought and a single straight ray leads to the complexity of the mind. The line or ray is made up of a series of dots but these are more than splashes of ink. When Vizier Ibn Muqla (886-940) developed the Arabic script he also created a proportional system of letters by inscribing each letter in a circle and giving letters codified proportional dimensions using dot notations (*noqta*). The symmetrical shape of the dots arises naturally from the flat end of the stylus or calamus which is cut from a piece of reed. The dots are therefore the very basis of the Arabic script creating proportion and thus a unity with God's creation and carry the message from the outer world to the inner. Some Arabic letters and *notqa* also surround and move into the eye but there is a dominant entry into the head although the line tapers out inside the head, perhaps after the message has been assimilated into the brain. In his later work Al-Said simply uses a scrawled letter on the surface to indicate the entry point to the world below but this early work is a clear marker to what will develop later where a wall replaces the eye and the paintings become almost totally abstract.

This move to abstraction with 'Objective Contemplations' is consistent with the view of Adonis in *Sufism and Surrealism* and his comments that:

¹⁶⁴ Porter, Venetia, *Word into Art*, British Museum, 2008. Page 76

¹⁶⁵ Illustration 1-19, Shakir Hassan Al-Said, *Objective Contemplations*, 1984. Mixed media on wood/458x460cm, Institut de Monde Arabe, Paris

¹⁶⁶ Illustration 1-20, Shakir Hassan Al-Said, *Magic Eye II*, 1963. Ink on paper/13x18cm. Property of the author

'Abstraction frees art from the functional weight of media or belief. Only art, which has been liberated from this functionalism, is able to realise pure excitement. Functionality or usefulness is linked to the primitive and in the past the primitive was a gauge for assessing art. Now we perceive the external world objectively and are able to distinguish between the useful and the beautiful and are therefore able to enjoy something for itself and detached from its uses. We enjoy the poem or the painting or the sculpture as a work of 'beauty', not as something 'useful.'¹⁶⁷

The link with surrealism is something that may well have been very meaningful to Al-Said after his sojourn in Paris in the late 1950's and it seems appropriate to see a link with the seminal image in *Le Chien Andalou* (with some possible reference to Al Andulus), a film produced by Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali in 1929. A scene shows an eye being lanced, creating a link between the internal and external world.

Al-Said's religious and political sensibility (evidenced by his concern over political developments) is an integral rather than an explicit part of his work and the extent of his move to abstraction is consistent with the fact that he returned to his homeland in 1959 rather than remain in Paris. The battered walls in his images demonstrate the effects of war and violence and the scribbled, often unclear, messages are the visual, but coded, signs of political statement. The graffiti helps to create the totality of the image as well as its message in a way which is well summarised by Cy Twombly in an interview with Nicholas Serota:

'Well graffiti is linear and it's done in pencil and it's like writing on walls. But [in my paintings] it's more lyrical. And, you know, in those beautiful early paintings like *Academy*, it's graffiti but it's something else too. I don't know how people react but they take the simplest way to something, and the totality of the painting, feeling and content are more complicated or more elaborate than say just graffiti. Graffiti is usually a protest, or has a reason for being naughty or aggressive. Ink on walls is graffiti.'¹⁶⁸

The emphasis on abstraction found in Al-Said and others comes also, in part, from a self imposed taboo on the sort of representations that are seen in the work of many of the expatriate artists. The taboo may result, in part from religion and the Islamic strictures on representation but it is also a way for the artist to avoid direct political criticism which would result in reprisals. In the last few years the self imposed taboos are being abandoned in an increasingly globalised world. For many years, though, it was the expatriate artists who carried the burden of using modern figurative images, augmented by calligraphy and Arabic (and sometimes Western) script that contained political and social comment. They did not need or want to go all the way to pure abstraction that was perhaps necessary for Al-Said with his return to Iraq. Even amongst the calligraphy the greater degree of expression permitted and encouraged in the West helped to liberate the artist from the confines of the strict, traditional rules. The emigrant group of

¹⁶⁷ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*. Saqi Books, 2005. Page 174

¹⁶⁸ Serota, Nicholas (Ed), *Cy Twombly, Cycles and Season*, Tate Publishing, 2008. Page 53

artists are allowed to express themselves in whatever way they wish free from the political and religious strictures of their homeland.

Sources of Inspiration, Conclusions

Karl Popper¹⁶⁹ proposed that any scientific statement should be capable of being disproved. Without passing that test the statement can have no predictive value and would therefore be of no use, other than as a personal opinion. In making the statement that there is such a thing as a group of expatriate Middle Eastern artists we have, therefore, to subject the statement to tests in order for the statement to have any use for our purposes.

Before discussing the tests we need to be clearer as to the statement and the first refinement is to make it clear that we intend it to mean that there is such a thing as a group of expatriate Middle Eastern artists, who are more than just geographically sourced from the region. In other words we intend to say that there are certain features of their work which are common to the group and make them identifiable. Further, we intend to say that the features of their work that make them identifiable are intellectually or philosophically consistent with the history and culture of the region. In other words the fact the artist was born in the region and that his name sounds Arab or Middle Eastern would not be sufficient for the artist to qualify as a member of the group.

We are dealing with human beings and not scientific data so we have to admit that there may be a few artists who pass our tests who are not from the Middle East, although the likelihood of this happening is not thought to be high. Equally there may be a few Middle Eastern artists who do not demonstrate any of the features that we propose. Again we can say that this is unlikely unless, perhaps, they are specialists such as portrait painters. Even here there may be hints of the identifying traits. Subject to these limited adjustments and caveats we can move to our contention that expatriate Middle Eastern artists, since the middle of the twentieth century, possess at least one, and probably more, of the four identifying features (Arabic calligraphy, regional poetic or literary inspiration often derived from Sufism, nostalgia or longing for a recent or ancient Middle Eastern history or culture and lastly an approach to politics that evidences the specific experiences and attitudes of the Middle East). If a work of art contains any or some of these identifiers we believe it should be possible to say that it has come from a Middle East artist, without knowing who it was who created the image, his name or geographic heritage.

Again, as we are dealing with people and not precise scientific data, we ought to caveat or context these identifiers. The calligraphy may be Koranic or classic or expressionistic or calligraphic and it may not be decipherable. The literary or poetic inspiration may not be explicitly Sufi and may be ancient or modern. The longing or nostalgia may be for a mythic ancient past, a time of scientific or intellectual eminence or

¹⁶⁹ Popper, Karl, *The Poverty of Historicism*, Routledge Books, 1957

a recent era in which the artist or his family felt comfortable. The political stance should incorporate the complex tripartite relationships of local, regional or global.

We must also be aware that the identifiers are not entirely discrete factors as calligraphy is intertwined with literature, history with politics, religion and spirituality with culture. The mixing is part of the whole nexus of the region and it is the distillation of these elements that confirms the Middle Eastern inspiration. Any claim that we have proved our proposition has to be qualified, albeit not invalidated, by having only analysed the work of certain artists in this chapter, so we cannot claim to have looked at every expatriate artist, and there is always the possibility that there are artists who do not fit with the identifiers. All we can say is that we did not propose the identifiers and then seek artists who fitted in with them. The identifiers were derived from the work of the artists not the other way round. As will be seen from later chapters where we introduce further artists, it is again possible to fit them in with the identifiers applicable to the initial thirteen.

The work of the featured artists is rarely limited to one identifier and, in practice, they often evidence more than one identifier and cannot be neatly fitted into one pigeon hole. This seems natural and reasonable as there is an intertwining of the factors at play which creates the cultural mix of the region. Calligraphy is important but is not the only factor, since it is sometimes only used in a supportive way. Ahmed Moustafa may be the 'purest' of the calligraphers but the stereotypical Sufi influences are clear and the derivation from classic calligraphy show the longing/nostalgia for the glorious historic past when the Arabic script was being developed. Issam El-Said uses calligraphy that is indecipherable but his love of Islamic architecture shows the appeal of the past and his family link to an assassinated Premier reminds us that the politics of the region are never entirely absent. Shirazeh Houshiary links literature, Sufism and calligraphy whilst Maysaloun Faraj uses calligraphy, love of her native Iraq and a subtle political appeal for a better world. Suad Al-Attar rarely uses calligraphy but shows an intense relationship with both recent and ancient past. Laila Shawa is overtly political but beneath it lies the deep love and anguish for her native Palestine. Mona Hatoum does not use calligraphy, there is nothing sentimentally nostalgic about her work but she well demonstrates the complexity of the Middle Eastern and Western political relationships. Her continued use of domestic objects (soap, cheese graters, beds chairs, mats) can be seen as a remembrance of, and longing for, a simple past even though they are transmuted to objects of aggression. Even so though they are contextualised and presented in a way that highlights the horrific way in which they have been subverted to conjure up the brutality of the region. Shakir Hassan Al-Said uses calligraphy as a means of accessing an abstract world to illustrate the intensity of his Sufi beliefs.

What has not been demonstrated, as it is beyond the scope of this survey, is if there is a distinction between the work of resident Middle East artists and the work of the emigrants. It seems clear that the work of the emigrants evidences the features of the region and it may be that they are, in no important way, any different from the artists who remained at home. It is though worth speculating that there are two features that may show some distinction between the two groups. The first is that the intensity of the emigrant's experience, which has forced them to move overseas, also intensifies their art and accentuates their love for their region at the same time as magnifying their political resentments. They

also have to wrestle with the fact that they embrace some of the values of their adopted hosts in the West which are rejected in their homeland. The second is a practical one in that the artists who have remained behind are subject to the specific and implicit legal, religious and political censorship. One possibility is that the homeland artists use more coded, abstract presentations, as has been intimated in the discussion of Shakir Hassan Al-Said.

There is one feature of the work of the artists which cannot easily be visually represented but has emerged in a variety of different ways and this is what we might call the 'Universalist' dimension, where the artists adopt a position which transcends their regional issues and the political, social and economic issues with the West. At this stage let us simply say that it contains elements of individualism, humanitarianism, spirituality, internationalism, pacifism and mysticism. It is not definable in a way that is sufficient to be one of our identifiers and it is not necessary to try to do so for the purposes of this initial analysis of the group. It does, though, throw up a powerful theme that we need to follow as the investigation of the group develops. It is useful to be able identify the works produced by a group of artists and the factors that have led to their production. It is more important, however, to identify the characteristics of the artists, what they are trying to produce and if they have succeeded in doing so.

CHAPTER 2. ALIENS AND HYBRIDS

An emigrant is, by definition, someone who has left his geographic homeland for voluntary or involuntary reasons. It may be for political, economic, social, personal or educational reasons but it is a departure nonetheless. The reasons for, and the effects of, this departure, are elements that need investigation, in the context of expatriate Middle Eastern artists. Even here we have an interesting ambiguity in that the term 'expatriate' implies something that may be voluntary and perhaps temporary, whereas there is more of a permanent tone to the word 'emigrant'. As both categories in practice result in geographic movement, at least in the short or medium term, we will use both terms equally for the group as a whole but, as we will see, it may be possible to identify at the individual level into which category a particular artist falls. Equally we will include 'exiles', namely those who have been physically forced to emigrate, within the same group.

Numerous questions arise in relation to the effect of emigration in relation to expatriate artists. Several crowd in. Was the emigration involuntary? Does the emigration imply alienation from the whole or part of the homeland's culture? Has the very act of emigration caused some rejection of the homeland? Does the artist feel an alien in the adopted country? Is there a deliberate or unconscious attempt to adopt or reject the culture of the adopted country? Is there a deliberate or unconscious attempt to hold onto the culture of the homeland whilst away from it?

We have used the terms 'alien' and 'alienation' already but we need to be conscious that the terms themselves are difficult to define. Frank Johnson calls the term 'alienation' an atrocious one¹⁷⁰ and cites another writer, Hardin, who in 1956 used the expression 'panchreston' for an overgeneralised, scientific concept which in attempting to explain all, explains nothing. Johnson goes on to describe the attempted breadth of even just the theological aspects of the concept in the following way:

'Alienation, both as a concept and experience in contemporary religion is a considerably more complex subject than even thirty years ago. Modern theologians see alienation not simply as a cosmic theme but as a set of phenomena with compelling secular implications. Man is seen

¹⁷⁰ See Johnson, Frank, *Alienation*, Seminar Press, 1973 –for a general discussion of the term 'alienation', Introduction Pages 3-25

as not only separated from God but as separated from meaningful experience with other men, institutions, Nature and himself.¹⁷¹

Alienation also has economic (sometimes Marxist)¹⁷², psychological and political dimensions, making the term so broad that it is difficult to answer the questions we have raised in a meaningful way. There is also the question of scale as saying that an artist is alienated in some way implies an extreme position, whereas the terms 'distaste' or 'indifference' may be more appropriate in some cases. We also have to consider that any suggested alienation may be a two way relationship, with actual alienation or rejection coming from the homeland or host country, rather than arising on the part of the expatriate artist himself.

Given the complexities and inexactitudes of the term 'alienation' we can try to identify other tools for a better understanding of the relationship between an expatriate artist and his host and homeland countries, such as the work of the post-colonialist theorist, Homi K Bhabha¹⁷³, and his concept of the hybrid which has been used by other Post-colonialist theorists. In practice, though, it is hard to identify artists who fit his model of what makes up a hybrid, which perhaps renders the term of limited use as a meaningful tool to analyse the Middle East expatriate artists as a group. Sometimes, however, as we hope to illustrate, there are ways in which the concept can be usefully employed in the study of individual artists.

The term 'hybrid' has arisen from post-colonialist studies to encompass the relationship that evolved between the ruler and subject. It also reflects the idea that in a globalised society there will be influences from many cultures and not just a set of pure local cultures. The difficulty here is the same as when Johnston outlined it in 1973 in the context of alienation. The concept has to become more and more complex and is therefore less capable of giving rise to simple conclusions. There may still be a few pure local cultures (the New Guinea tribes have been extensively researched as examples of societies uninfluenced by external cultures) but they are difficult to identify and locate in the current world. At its broadest the idea of globalisation implies that all people are subject to, and often dominated by, influences and pressures from outside their immediate locality. These influences and pressures may be rejected but often they

¹⁷¹ Johnson, Frank, *Alienation*, Pages 3-4

¹⁷² Ibid Page 18. Marx stressed the way in which the worker was alienated from his work and its product by the fact he was doing it for a capitalist rather than himself

¹⁷³ Bhabha, Homi K, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1995. Homi K Bhabha, born 1949, is the Anne P Rothenburg Professor of Humanities at Harvard University and a founder of modern post-colonial theory.

are adopted or absorbed, at least to some degree. The claim that all people are hybrids may be extreme but it is therefore probably a useful starting point.¹⁷⁴

The trouble is that the nature of the hybridity is infinitely varied and that it is very hard to find such a thing as a pure hybrid, a predictable synthesis of two or more specific cultures creating an identifiable, new entity. There are usually multiple layers of pressures, experiences and influences that go to make up the individual and the artist.¹⁷⁵

In the same way it is hard to identify a standard model or process shaping the hybrid, particularly one that can be recreated by similar experiences, from someone who has had a Middle Eastern childhood and then moved to the West to create art. Each individual has a different background and the extent to which they have absorbed or rejected the various influences varies. It is only by looking in detail at the work of each artist that we can differentiate and identify the 'layers' of effect within their work. All that is true is that they will have had some shared experiences and what is not true is that these experiences will have the same results.

Hybridity, as a methodological coinage, was constructed by Homi Bhabha and has been developed by notions of a 'third space'¹⁷⁶. In a recent introduction to the JAMM London exhibition, *Neither Here nor There*, Homi K Bhabha¹⁷⁷ tries to define this area of creation:

'These are artists who live and work in the palimpsestic fold of aesthetic practices—those regions in which the artwork is built out of layers, techniques, emotions, colours, experiences

¹⁷⁴ For discussions of hybridity see Ashcroft, Bill, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge, 1997.

¹⁷⁵ To take a couple of examples, at extremes of the spectrum! The writer is English and has a Bristol born father and a Balham born and bred mother (these may not appear to be entirely distinct cultures to those outside them but their inhabitants will recognize the differences). Experience of working in North Africa, for a London merchant bank, a Canadian insurance company, a global bank and US and European private equity partnerships have created a being who is now not comfortable in the Balham or Bristol cultures.

At the other extreme Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) was born in Paris, to an Orleans journalist father and a Peruvian Creole mother, but brought up in Lima. He worked as a stockbroker, moved to Brittany, had a short time in Arles and then moved on to Panama, Martenique, Tahiti and the Marquesas. Again this mix of experiences created an individual who did not feel comfortable in his original home and was probably, to some extent, rejected by it anyhow. In many ways he appeared to be alienated from his European family but still looked to them for support.

¹⁷⁶ See Areen, Rashid/Cubitt, Sean/Ziaddin, Sardar, *The third Text*, Continuum, 2005

¹⁷⁷ Bhabha, Homi K, *Neither Here nor There-Reflections on Cultural Hybridity and the Third Space*, Catalogue for the JAMM Art exhibition. Bhabha also gave an explanatory lecture at the Royal College of Art sponsored by JAMM Art-November 2010. NB The catalogue was not given page numbers.

whose borders bleed into each other creating hybrid intersections, contingent meanings and un-thought of interpretations. They explore conceptual spaces that overlap while revealing faint borders of figuration that are both present and absent, shadow and substance. These artists explore the third space of representation which is an emergent space, often virtual, that refuses the polarities of experience and creation; the One or The Other, the singular or the hybrid; it is a spatial and temporal concept that pays minute attention to moments of transition, in what is imminent or contingent, to what is both strange and familiar'

Bhabha goes on to warn that:

'The third space can be obscured too easily by grand designs and utopian schemes that thrive on the immensity of scale. It is for this reason that the third space, which may often be small and subtle in scale, can make a big difference. The third space is neither here nor there-it lives on the limits of things and survives, uneasily, on the cutting edge'.¹⁷⁸

Following this theoretical approach JAMM Art called the resulting exhibition *Neither Here nor There* with each of the eleven featured artists providing an introductory text attempting to present their work as somehow part of a 'third Space'. For example Sonia Balassanian¹⁷⁹ asks 'Can one distinguish where one stops and the other starts? Is a mixture of layers of identity possible at a time like ours?' and Sheza Dawood states that 'There is a radically idealistic universalising basis to my work which I think gives me the temerity to rewrite and reconcile superficially different cultural elements and ideologies'.¹⁸⁰ Within these attempts to create 'a third space' it is hard to see that something completely new has been created, rather the artists have simply stated the extent of the multiplicity of the views and experiences and the way in which they relate to the views and experiences of others.

Whilst appreciating the fact that Bhabha (and other theorists) have identified newer and different influences which have been brought to contemporary art from outside the Western world, it seems contradictory that, in a world recognised as at least partly globalised, their practice should be designated as a third or different space. Artists have always responded to external influence, be they from Greece, Rome, Italy, Paris, New York, Japan or China. The subversive practices of the colonial subject may have originally been muted but in a global world, where it can be argued that the West may have passed the peak of its power and

¹⁷⁸ Bhabha, Homi K, *Neither Here nor There*. JAMM, 2010

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. Sonia Balassanian is a media artist and curator. Born in Iran she now lives and works in New York and Armenia.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid

influence, it may be that the new voices are adapting to, rather than perverting, the mainstream. Instead of seeing the emigrant artist as a peripheral operator, perhaps he should be viewed as finding ways of expressing non-Western experiences and influences that are relevant to a globalised society and market place. Whilst these may not have been immediately perceived in the West this may be just an inability to recognise the true nature of a globalised society. The unintended consequence of an initially Western driven globalisation may be a shift, but not a total move, to the East. As Bhabha¹⁸¹ admits his 'third space' can be 'obscured by grand designs and utopian schemes that thrive on immensity of scale' but there is a danger that the main driver of globalism, the grand design itself, might be obscured by too great a concentration on a peripheral and transitory third space.

Whilst the idea of a 'third space' may seem unnecessary in a global world this is not to say that the concept of globalism is a pure one, without any differentiation. Globalism may mean different things to different people and have different impacts. The loss of jobs in Europe or the US may be an increase in jobs in the currently cheaper Far East. What may seem as an opportunity to a businessman seeking to source cheaper product may be seen as a threat to a religious leader in the Middle East. There is, therefore, not a homogenous 'third space' which functions as a simple, discrete and identifiable discourse but a multiplicity of varied environments and cultures.

In Chapter 1 the calligraphic background of some Middle Eastern calligraphic artists, such as Ahmed Moustafa, Hassan Massoudi and Omar Ali Ermes has been outlined. These artists use and adapt the traditional script of the Middle East, not only to reflect an ancient tradition and religious heritage but also to create a dialogue with the Western world, which appreciates the script for its artistic and aesthetic character rather than its religious or textual merits. In the work of Hussein Madi, described later, we see a fairly straightforward integration of Middle East traditions and twentieth century European modernism. On the other hand an artist, such as Hayv Kahrahman, who we analyse later, has had experience in Africa, Europe and the US and appears to incorporate into her art, not only her Middle East traditions but also techniques from the Renaissance, images from Japan and styles from Victorian England as a way of appealing to an international audience. To try and confine these different approaches and complexities into a distinct 'third space' appears to ignore a powerful globalism (what Bhabha might categorise as a 'utopian scheme that thrives on an immensity of scale'). The work of Kahrahman is not a use of subtle mimicry to disguise the artist's insinuation of herself into an alien Western culture. It is a fully fledged confrontation of the modern West to a variety of

¹⁸¹ Bhabha, Homi K, *Neither Here nor There*, JAMM, 2010

global and historic experiences. It comes, historically, as part of a process of cultural integration which is happening alongside fundamental shifts in economic and political relationships.

In a way everything is on the edge of something else and, whilst individuals or countries may perceive their own culture to be the mainstream, the adjacent cultures will perceive them to be on the edge of their culture. To that extent where any 'third space' lies will depend on the space from which you are starting. There might be a dominant school of thought but at any time the dominance may be threatened, diluted, altered or even improved by new approaches. Over time these new approaches adapt the dominant culture to new events or trends without creating an entirely separate or 'third' space. Thus multiple texts serve to integrate cultures, without denying their differences or localisms or creating something completely new. As each artist outlines their own approaches the influences, or layers of effect, can be differentiated without the need for a 'third space'. For some it is the historic Middle Eastern past (both archaeological and literary) that needs to be examined. For others it is the problematic present, both within and outside the Middle East, whilst for others it is religious experience, be it Islamic, Sufi or even Zoroastrianism¹⁸². For some there is a clear gender issue that has to be addressed; for some there may have been a concern that their artistic tradition was seen as merely functional. Others, again, may have a more assertive response, like the proud Middle Eastern tradition and religion. This response may have been seen in the West as a challenge, or a criticism, whilst for the artists themselves it may well be just a statement of what for them was self evident or reality, intended to develop the dialogue, rather than prolong an argument or conflict.

We are, therefore, not looking to 'de-layer' or remove the differences or individuality that can be applied to expatriate Middle Eastern artists but to identify the themes or styles within their work. In this chapter we have again adopted the approach of looking across a spectrum of artists, ranging from those who exhibit more signs of 'alienation' to those who appear to be more integrated and perhaps less 'hybrid' and those for whom the concepts of alienation or hybridity appear irrelevant. We will, also, try to see if we can identify a 'pure hybrid'. Whilst this approach has an element of trying to typecast individuals it serves to show the different extents to which artists respond to the same influences and environment.

¹⁸² Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic religion originating in Persia in the 6th century and is currently estimated to have as many as 200,000 current adherents, mainly in India (where they are called Parsees) and Iran. There are examples of Zoroastrians amongst emigrant Middle Eastern artists, such as Feyredoun Ave. In addition to his 'Rostam' paintings discussed in Chapter 3 Ave has produced a number of studies of the wind evoking the cleansing wind towers of Zoroastrian burial practices.

Amongst the many layers, however, there is one that appears common to all the artists and this is some sort of cultural memory. Often this seems to arise from a knowledge or perception of the distant, pre-Islamic as well as more recent and modern Islamic, past. This can be communicated in images, references or commentary from Islamic, Sumerian, Mesopotamian, Sufi or Zoroastrian history. The psychological, cultural or biological causes of this inherited link are powerful and an important identifier for the emigrant artist. It could be speculated that there is some kind of 'hard wiring' of the artist, in terms of localist and cultural factors such that the inheritance or memory is reproduced in their work.

We have to be aware that cultural or collective memory, rather like alienation, is a slippery concept which is both hard to define and subject to multiple definitions. In her article *Remembrance and Memory* Aleida Assman¹⁸³ lists the types of cultural memory which exist from the psychological to the historical, political and literary as well as those derived from art. She distinguishes between 'embodied' memory which exists within the individual or group and the 'externalised' memory which accesses written, library and archive material. These sources can then be used in two ways that 'relate to one another like a background and foreground'. Assman holds that stored memory 'collects and keeps sources, objects and data, regardless of whether they are needed in the present'. Functional memory 'contains a small selection of what society selects from the past in any particular case and updates it from the contents of its cultural tradition'.¹⁸⁴

Assman goes back to the work of Maurice Halbwachs¹⁸⁵ who, she believes, coined the term 'collective memory' in the 1920s. According to her Halbwachs showed that 'memories are intrinsically social and constitute a group's communicative and emotional glue'.¹⁸⁶ Interestingly, and relevant to our analysis of contemporary, emigrant Middle Eastern artists, Halbwachs 'radical theory was that, strictly, people do not develop an individual memory at all but are always included in memory communities (Halbwachs believed that a person who is completely alone cannot develop a memory at all!)'.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ Assman, Aleid, *Remembrance and Memory*, Goethe Institut, February, 2008. Assman was born 1947, studied English Language, Literature and Egyptology. Professor of English at the University of Constance where she specialises in cultural memory research

¹⁸⁴ Ibid Page 1

¹⁸⁵ Maurice Halbwachs, 1877-1945. Professor of Sociology and Pedagogy at the University of Strasbourg

¹⁸⁶ Assman, Aleida, *Remembrance and Memory*, Goethe Institut, February 2008. Page 2

¹⁸⁷ Ibid Page 2

Assman also identifies another aspect of collective memory which is useful in looking at contemporary, emigrant Middle East artists and that is those traumatic experiences that are so painful that the 'gates of perception close in the face of such force'. What is closed away is not forgotten:

'but conserved at a distance and becomes noticeable after a certain interval of time through a certain set of principles. Therapy aims to transform the trauma into conscious remembrance and to communicate it with the person's identity. While this does not heal it, it does reduce its damaging effect'.

These trauma are passed from one generation to another, forming a 'collective of suffering' which create a new problem when 'political groups base their identity on 'selected trauma'.¹⁸⁸ The artist and film director Jalal Toufic¹⁸⁹ gives an effective illustration of how traumatic events impact on the emigrant. Talking of what he terms 'surpassing disasters' such as Hiroshima, Nagasaki or Middle East wars he claims that it is not just the immediate effect of the traumatic event that has to be taken into account with its loss of people, buildings and archives. Subsequent events have to be considered, such as the '*apres coup*' or the 'subsequent withdrawal of literary, philosophical and thoughtful texts as well as certain films, videos and musical works' notwithstanding that there may be copies of these that continue to be physically available: of paintings and buildings that were not physically destroyed; of spiritual guides; and of the holiness/specialness of certain spaces'.¹⁹⁰

Toufic believes that it is up to the victims of these surpassing disasters to 'resurrect' their destroyed past in order to contest the version of history of the victors, who 'not being part of the community of the surpassing disaster, have the advantage that the works and documents are available to them without having to resurrect them'.¹⁹¹

In a moving passage Toufic gives a vital role to the emigrant Middle Eastern artist:

'We do not go to the West to be indoctrinated by their culture, for the imperialism, hegemony of their culture is nowhere clearer than in the developing countries. Rather we go to the West because it is there that we can be helped in our resistance by all that we do not receive in the developing countries----and there we can meet people who can perceive, read or

¹⁸⁸ Assman, Almeida, *Remembrance and Memory*. Page 2

¹⁸⁹ See Toufic, Jalal, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*, Redcat 2009. Pages not numbered

¹⁹⁰ Ibid

¹⁹¹ Ibid

listen and genuinely use pre-surpassing disaster art, literature, music and thought without having to resurrect them.

If following the devastation of Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan and earlier of Arab Palestine etc, I can have the same relation with one of the most beautiful books of the Middle East and North Africa 'A Thousand and One Nights' as Barth and Pasaolini (*Arabian Nights* 1974) can then I know that I am either a hypo—critical Arab writer or already a Western writer.¹⁹²

Looking at the Middle East artists that we feature in this chapter there is one (Hussein Madi) who might merit the title of 'Western writer' and one (Anwar Jalal Shemza) who might be considered to have some of the necessary characteristics. The others are identifiable as 'hypo-critical Arabs' (on the assumption that Toufic means that there is a low level of criticism of their own culture whilst at the same time more ability to criticise the West) who are reinforcing and resurrecting their traditional cultural identity.

There can be very specific examples of how thematic within the cultural memory of Middle East art can work. In his article 'Iranian Cultural Identity' William Hanaway¹⁹³ cites clear examples. There is the 'dynasty narrative' where 'a new King, often related to the one of the ruling houses, has been brought up in humble circumstances far from his future seat of power, tasting hardship and deprivation. He has been unrecognised until the decisive moment comes when his royal attributes show in his countenance and behaviour. He then vanquishes, often with divine blessing, the corrupt holders of power and institutes a reign of peace and prosperity'.

A second Iranian thematic which Hanaway has proposed is that of the Persian garden which, deriving from nature provides a conceptual framework for organising a space into a controlled and pleasing area which is separated by a border from the disorganised or even hostile world outside. A third topic identified by Hanaway is the way in which, at a time of stress, the close relation to the past is expressed by revising it to serve better the needs of the present. Given the shifts in Persian history between Farsi and Arabic, Islam and Zoroastrianism, Monarchy and democracy, theocracy and Westernism, this ability to redefine itself by reference to the past, although by no means unique to Iran, can be seen as part of a long tradition. The past is therefore adapted to the needs of the present to give validity and support to current views or institutions.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Toufic, Jalal, *The Withdrawal of Tradition, Past a Surpassing Disaster*.

¹⁹³ Hanaway, William L Jnr, *Iranian Cultural Tradition*, Iranian Studies, Vol 26 Nos 1-2--Winter/Spring 1993. Hanaway is Professor of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at the University of Pennsylvania

¹⁹⁴ Ibid

Edward Said, as recalled by Bhabha in his JAMM article, has noted the importance of what he calls 'collective memory' which he identifies as 'a new field of study but is enjoying considerable attention among historians. It is a field of activity in which past events are selected, reconstructed, maintained, modified and endowed with political meaning'¹⁹⁵. In a fuller examination of the way in which lives are changed by the media in the modern world ¹⁹⁶ Nikos Papastergiardes analyses the multiple influences at work in changing or developing personality in a mobile and multinational world:

'What has emerged is a complex amalgam of diverse nodes, within which like-minded agents make tactical alliances. These fragmentary pockets of interaction sporadically produce intense bursts of resistance that rise like flares, then fade into the horizon. These entities do not consolidate within formal structures but have the dynamics of a cluster. Near and distant elements form loose configurations and throw out signs that loop into other systems. Creative juxtapositions, unstable identities, non-linear feedback-these are the features of new clusters.'¹⁹⁷

Papastergiardes therefore stresses a more dynamic and transitory identity, or series of identities, than those alien 'others' or hybrids that have been posited by Bhabha and Said. It could also be speculated that the reference, back to a past where the Middle East was the cradle of civilisation or to times when Islamic scholarship was a dominant force, offset any sense of inferiority to the power of the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This approach might accord well with a colonialist or neo – colonialist approach to emigrant Middle Eastern art, but there are two alternative ways of viewing this which would be consistent with the more globalist approach of Papastergiardes. The first is that we have not been able to detect an immediately perceivable or identifiable sense of inferiority amongst the current generation of Middle Eastern artists, but that they regard themselves, due to their heritage, as at least equal to (or even superior to) the West in certain ways. The second is that the reclaiming of the past is simply an assertion of the long-standing and deeply engrained cultural memory and has nothing to do with any relativistic comparison to the West. It is as an important strand of world history and civilisation that cultural history is evoked and one that comes naturally to the artists themselves. In 'Variantology 4'¹⁹⁸ the editors claim that:

¹⁹⁵ Bhabha, Homi K, *Neither Here Nor There*, JAMM Art, November 2010

¹⁹⁶ Bailey, Olga, *Transnational Lives and the Media*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007

¹⁹⁷ Ibid Pages 56/7

¹⁹⁸ See Zielinski, Siegfried/Furhus, Eckhard, *Variantology 4*, Walther Konig/Koln, 2010. This concept of 'variantology', on which a series of seminars have been held, relates to the interaction between the sciences, arts

‘In a process that was highly complex the Arabs exerted a decisive influence on the Western world in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in virtually all fields of knowledge - astronomy, biology, chemistry, cartography, mathematics, medicine, metaphysics, music, optics and philosophy — and made a fundamental contribution to the development and diversification of the sciences which goes on until today.’

To explain Middle Eastern artistic development by reference to the West, and purely in terms of what has happened in the last couple of centuries, may be to overemphasise the importance of the latter. It therefore seems useful to look at the emigrant Middle East artists in the context of their own long term history and their current circumstances, not just as the creation of something on the periphery of the current Western mainstream, however defined.

Working along these lines is consistent with the thinking of a number of more contemporary theorists who, whilst grateful for the contribution of Bhabha, look on what is actually being created rather than looking back (often with resentment) to a colonial, or immediately post-colonial, world. In *Hybridity and Ambivalence, Places and Flows in Contemporary Art and Culture* Nikos Papastergiadis¹⁹⁹ acknowledges that ‘hybridity has been a much abused term’ and seeks to refine the concept with a more complex formula with three phases. The first stage of hybridity refers to ‘the visible manifestations of difference within identity as a consequence of the incorporation of foreign elements’. The second phase is ‘the process by which cultural differences are either naturalised or neutralised within the body of the host culture’. The third phase ‘has been used as a perspective for representing the new cultural and critical practices that have emerged in diasporic life’. The next stage, Papastergiadis suggests is, ‘the critical task is now to build new cultural and political frameworks that connect the hybridity in a local identity to a transnational discourse on universal social justice.’ The urgent project as seen by Papastergiadis is to rebuild ‘a new kind of universalism’.²⁰⁰

and technologies of the different areas of the Middle East (for example the programmed music of 9th century Baghdad, to 11th century Cairo where ‘the laws of seeing and visual perception were rewritten to the 12th century automaton theatres of the Al Jazira region’.

¹⁹⁹ Papastergiadis, Nikos, *Hybridity and Ambivalence, Places and Flows in Contemporary Art and Culture*, SAGE, 2005. Papastergiadis is Professor at the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne and founder of Spatial Aesthetics. He is also Co-Editor of Third Text, the international journal and has worked on projects with artists such as Jimmie Durham and John Berger

²⁰⁰ Ibid The brief quotations in this paragraph come from pages 40-58

In the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Noel Carroll²⁰¹ moves further in his essay *Art and Globalisation, Then and Now*. He points out that hybridity and globalism is nothing new (the Silk Road is cited) and is patchy (with some regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, lagging behind or different arts such as film or dance more globalised than perhaps painting). Nevertheless Carroll believes:

‘what we are witnessing now differs from the past insofar as what we see emerging is something like a single integrated, cosmopolitan institution of art, organised internationally in such a way that the participants, from wherever they hail, share converging and overlapping traditions and practices at the same time that they exhibit and distribute their art in internationally coordinated venues. And this is something worth considering as substantially unprecedented.’²⁰²

Carroll therefore claims that ‘now seem to be the case that the various national and regional centers of serious or ambitious fine art are beginning to be fashioned into a single world, a unified transnational institution of art’. As evidence he points to the increasing number of biennials but freely admits that ‘Not every art-making activity today belongs to this emerging transnational institution of art. There is still folk-art, mass art and various national traditions’. As Carroll sees it these exceptions do not prevent the ‘transnational institution of art that connects the artistic practices of urban centers around the world both physically and intellectually’. He goes on to assert that the function of this process is ‘not to enfranchise art [but] to consolidate a transnational or global artworld, a culture-scape with its own language games and networks of communication, distribution and reception.’ In this way Carroll appears to have moved away from the separate development of a ‘third-space’ to a more integrated approach which still allows for diversity, difference and localism. If there is an integration or globalism that can accommodate (or encourage) ethnicity and localism then there is no need for a stand-alone culture defined by opposition to a perceived dominant Western philosophy.²⁰³

This latter, more global, approach does seem relevant to the emigrant artists as a group. This chapter looks at artists coming from Pakistan, Iraq, Iran and the Lebanon. They are, typically, a well and broadly educated group, often with degrees from both Western and Middle Eastern institutions. Whilst they may well have been forced, or pressured, to emigrate, they tend not to

²⁰¹ Carroll, Noel, *Art and Globalisation, Then and Now*, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol 68, Winter 2007. Carroll, born 1947, is Professor of Philosophy at CUNY Graduate Center and has PhDs in both Philosophy and Cinema Studies.

²⁰² Ibid Page 131

²⁰³ Ibid The multiple quotations in this paragraph come from Pages 131-143

be uncomfortable or unsuccessful in their adopted Western environments, but sometimes have been able to move back or travel to the Middle East, or at least some parts of it. They usually communicate as easily in English (or French or German) as in Arabic or Farsi. This does not mean that they have become, merely, a hybridised, global or multicultural beings, as it is very clear from their histories and their work that they have retained, in their own ways, aspects of inherited or cultural memory that does give them an identity distinct from other artists. In most cases (although there is an exception with Anwar Jalal Shemza), they exhibit few obvious, significant personal strains in their relationship with their adopted nation or culture.

It is entirely possible that there may be differences and different relationships in the future. If the Middle East stabilises (and at the time of writing there are more than the usual uncertainties) and there is a decline, even on a relative basis, in the power of the West with 'Emerging nations' actually emerging in fact, we could see an even more examples of truly 'global artists'. Any cultural memory may erode as the children of the emigrant artists are exposed to a more international education and lifestyle. It is though, current and future circumstances, as much or more than the recent past, that will create the new artists. Although specific Middle Eastern cultural memory may decline or adapt, it is worth stating that we believe we are able to show that it has been remarkably powerful as a factor conditioning the recent generation of emigrant Middle Eastern artists, despite Western influences. The most useful standpoint is to locate these artists against the long term history of world civilisation as well as more recent globalising developments, not just at the periphery of the last two centuries of the Western colonialist and neo-colonialist era.

Anwar Jalal Shemza

Shemza was born in Simlar in 1928 to a Kashmiri and Punjabi family which owned carpet and military embroidery businesses in Ludhiana. He studied at high school in Lahore and then started reading Philosophy, Persian and Arabic but after a year convinced his father of his vocation as an artist. He then moved to the Mayo school of Art and learned to paint in what has been described by Iftikhar Dadi²⁰⁴ as a 'sort of late Bengal style'. Shemza graduated in 1947 and set up commercial design studio in Simla.

Shemza taught at various schools and colleges in Lahore and during the 1940s and the early 1950s became an active participant in the intellectual and cultural life of the city. He published novels in Urdu, edited the journal *Ehsas* for three years, wrote and performed in a number of

²⁰⁴ Dadi, Iftikhar, *Perspectives 1-Anwar Jalal Shemza Calligraphic Modernism*, Green Cardamom, 2009 Exhibition Catalogue. Page 1. This catalogue tells of Shemza's early experiences when he first arrived in England and his reaction to the comments of Gombrich on the nature of Eastern Art

radio plays and contributed poetry to journals under various pseudonyms. He participated in groups promoting a right-wing Pakistani ideology and the debate between progressivism, equated with 'art for life's sake' and literary modernism, termed 'art for art's sake'. In the words of Dadi 'the move to a painterly modernism needs to be situated accordingly as an affirmation of its metaphoric and allegorical potentialities in offering deeper insights into the self and society than the kind of reductive realism the progressives had increasingly embraced in the late 1930s'²⁰⁵.

Shemza was a founder of the Lahore Art Circle, a group of young artists who aspired towards modernism and abstraction in the mid 1950's. A journal called *Khayai* was intended to address issues faced by modernist thinkers with discussions on the relevance for contemporary culture of T S Eliot, Ezra Pound and Baudelaire and the painterly modernism of Cezanne, Matisse, Klee and Kandinsky as well as historical Moslem thinkers. The writings of Rilke and the art of Klee became major influences on Shemza.²⁰⁶

The bloody separation of India and Pakistan and the killings of many of Shemza's relatives created a traumatic memory that haunted Shemza throughout his life and he decided to study art at the Slade School in England, moving in 1956. This move created an existential crisis in Shemza's life best described in a statement, really a testimony, which he wrote in 1963 describing his three years at the Slade:²⁰⁷

'Before I came to England I was a very happy man, a celebrated artist, who had several one-man exhibitions, who had his work in national collections of his country and among very many private collections. I was indeed represented in dozens of countries.

The dream of this already happy man came true in 1956 when I arrived in London. My whole body became two big astonished eyes. The first evening I went to the National Gallery, where after two hours I had to be reminded that sometimes it closed. I ate a hamburger at Lyons Corner House and hated the smell of it.

²⁰⁵ Dadi, Iftikhar, *Anwar Jalal Shemza, Calligraphy and Modernism*

²⁰⁶ Ibid

²⁰⁷ Ibid. This is a very long quote on pages 76-78 but is included in full, and in the main text, as it not only gives a complete emotional picture of the experience of Shemza but also gives a detailed prototype of what some commentators on Colonial attitudes expected of an expatriate colonial subject, namely experiences of personal and cultural rejection in the country where he expected to be welcomed. To summarise or edit the text could lose its emotional and personal impact and completeness. As we see later the relevance and validity of this prototype can be challenged by the experience of other, maybe later, artists.

Next month I joined the Slade and met young and very English students trying Englishly not to be English. But within a few months' time I had failed my drawing test. And all the paintings I had submitted for the annual Young Contemporaries Exhibition were rejected. These two shocks were too much for me for I could not forget that at home I was an 'established painter'.

Shemza then recounts how he decided to try to re-invent himself:

But one day I locked myself in my room and stood in front of the mirror, and had a heart to heart talk. The result was a decision to start again from the beginning. And to hide the face of that 'celebrated artist', I grew a beard. This worked rather well.

It was a wonderful, depressing time. I read a lot including [Rilke's] 'Letter to a young Poet'. It sounded fascinating in the books that if you go wrong, just start again-but in real life it was a painful process, especially when you didn't know from where to start.

Then came the moment of truth:

One evening when I was attending a Slade weekly lecture on history of art, Prof Gombrich came to the chapter on Islamic Art-an art that was 'functional'-from his book 'The Story of Art'. I remember leaving the room a few minutes before the lecture finished and sitting on a bench outside. As the students came out they seemed so contented and self-satisfied. I went home and looked again at the mirror. This time I couldn't find any familiar face at all, neither the beginner at the Slade nor the 'celebrated artist'. I couldn't talk; I just stared. After all it wasn't a very pleasant sight.

All evening I destroyed paintings, drawings, anything that could be called 'art'. All night I argued with somebody-as I was told next morning by my hostel neighbour. All day restlessness sent me from place to place, until I found myself in the Egyptian section of the British Museum. For the first time in England I felt really at home.

No longer was the answer simply to begin again; the search was for my own identity. Who was I? The simple answer was; a Pakistani. But this wasn't enough. I could see Pakistan in my mind's eye: Lahore, where I came from, my friends, painters, their work-all little Picasso's, Cezanne's, Braque's, Van Gogh's. I could see third rate 'Paris'. The 'celebrated artist' was lost at last, as was also the beginner at the Slade. What's more I had lost my home. I was an exile, homeless, without a name.

Shemza tried to come to terms with his new home:

Although I was a regular student at the Slade, I hated much of my time there, that was the only place that gave me unhappiness, not a source to find happiness. Happiness was in the British

Museum, and at the Victoria and Albert. I started painting again, strange paintings. And at the Slade Andrew Forge was 'father and confessor'. His encouragement meant more to me than anything else that happened to me in England. I worked between fourteen and eighteen hours a day. Further encouragement from George Butcher and W G Archer confirmed only one thing, that my search for myself was leading in the right direction.

*Such searching has its own fascination. One 'enjoys' it even when tired, depressed, annoyed. But that is the nature of the creative process, perhaps even of life itself. Thus far have I come. It's for others to look for themselves in what I have done. Either way, we have all only just begun.'*²⁰⁸

After the Slade Shemza tried moving back to Lahore in 1960 with his English wife and child saying that 'Whatever I had obtained in England it was solely for the sake of students in my country'. Unfortunately he was unable to find a suitable position in Lahore and ended up working for an advertising firm in Karachi. Eventually he felt deeply unhappy with the career choices available to him and decided to settle permanently in England in 1961, moving to the 'relative isolation' of the Midlands where his wife could be near her family. He taught art education in schools and continued to paint and exhibit both in group and one-man shows, both in the UK, Pakistan and internationally. He died in Stafford in 1985.

Following his personal shock at the Slade, Shemza's work developed in a new manner as the following images show.

---Illustration 2-1²⁰⁹ *Couple* comes from the time before Shemza came to England and the Slade under the 'late Bengal'/Mayo School of Art influence. Perhaps for the Western viewer this will look to be typical of the art that has been derived from Indo/Pakistani culture. Conversely to the Eastern viewer it will look to be a Westernised version of traditional Pakistani art, an illustrative approach to modern art. It was this kind of work that Shemza rejected in his 'dark night' following the Gombrich lecture.

---Illustration 2-2²¹⁰ It could be said that *Still Life*, painted in 1958 shows the early 'post trauma' development of Shemza's art. Shemza considered this picture to be a breakthrough into his mature phase. Dadi refers to 'the dramatic move from a volumetric depiction of space and objects in the lower part of the painting, to an abstract, flattened and calligraphic rendering at

²⁰⁸ See note 207

²⁰⁹ Illustration 2-1, Ali Anwar Shemza, *The Couple*. 1947. Gouache on paper/23x34cm. Private Collection/Exhibited at Green Cardamom Gallery, 2009. Artist's estate

²¹⁰ Illustration 2-2, Ali Anwar Shemza, *Still Life*, 1957. Oil on fibreboard/60.5x44cm. Exhibited at Green Cardamom Gallery, 2009. Artist's estate.

the upper middle of the canvas'. Dadi sees the modern calligraphic artists as 'anticipating and [helping] to enact an image of a globalised and universalised Islam that is no longer confined to political movements inside individual nation states but is instead de-territorialised, highly visible and seemingly elsewhere'²¹¹

---Illustration 2-3²¹² *Oasis* contains much of Shemza's new search. He remained an admirer of Klee and had, at one point intended, to write a book on him and travelled to Switzerland to meet Klee's family. He adopted much of Klee's fascination with script but inevitably had developed it from a Middle Eastern rather than a European point of view. Klee's interest in alphabets was commensurate with the requirements of modern art-ideological, aesthetic and trans-cultural. The art goes back to primitive times when markings were scratched on animal bones and cave walls and perhaps had the same magic or psychological properties as the animal paintings. Klee's interest in European characters went with his fascination with Arabic and Egyptian script with which he had come into contact. He saw the latter as useful in abstract art as he could not decipher them but they represented and contained the essential, but perhaps lost memories of peoples and civilisations.

In the rebuilding of Shemza's artistic life he used two European letter forms as essential building blocks in creating, from simple elements: both 'B' and 'D' are closed letters and he uses them to create complex images, in the same way as Arab calligraphers construct figurative images from the letters of their language. In his analysis of Shemza in *Image and identity* Akbar Naqvi²¹³, whose book 'Image and Identity'²¹⁴ presents a long, detailed history and catalogue of the emergence of modern Pakistani art, refers to the figures looking like Shamanistic elders. This demonstrates that Shemza, despite his move from Pakistan, still needed to refer back to his personal traditions. Interestingly to the Westerner the figures recall chess pieces, a subject that Shemza uses in other works. This reference to a game that originated in India in the sixth century, and was adopted by the Arabs who exported it to Europe, shows Shemza using his historic roots to communicate with his Eastern and Western audiences. The building of the image from simple elements mirrors the way in which Shemza re-invented himself without

²¹¹ Dadi, Iftikhar, *Perspectives 1, Ali Anwar Shemza*, Green Cardamom, 2009

²¹² Illustration 2-3 Ali Anwar Shemza, 1963, *Oasis*. 1963. Gouache on Japanese paper, 69x42cm. Estate of artist, Exhibited at Green Cardamom Gallery, 2010

²¹³ Akbar Naqvi has a PhD in English Literature from Liverpool University and writes on art for Pakistani newspapers, The Sun, Dawn and The Muslim and teaches History of Art at Indus Valley School of Art and Karachi School of Art and Architecture.

²¹⁴ Naqvi, Akbar, *Image and Identity*, Oxford 1998. Page 284.

forsaking deeply embedded memory. Naqvi positions Shemza as an artist who, whilst absorbing the influences of the West (particularly Klee), retains his own traditions when he remarks 'but despite a deep affinity with him [i.e. Klee] Shemza's art guided him to the recall of the decorative art of the Moslem world to which he paid homage'.²¹⁵ Whilst Naqvi correctly recognises the intertwining of the Moslem heritage with the work of Klee it is perhaps worth noting the incestuous relationship, whereby the influence of Klee essentially derives from the influence of the Middle East heritage. The source is one and the same but in one case it comes from a direct cultural memory and in the other from a reaching across cultures to an abstract aesthetic where the understanding is visual rather than textual.

---Illustration 2-4²¹⁶ This illustration comes from the *Roots* series that Shemza produced in his later years. Arabic characters, usually indecipherable, form the roots of flowers and occult plants growing from a ground of magic, perhaps showing what Naqvi claims as 'a mystic conundrum which Muslims and Hindu wise men understand'.²¹⁷ In his exhibition catalogue *Shemza, Calligraphic abstraction*²¹⁸ Iftikhar Dadi sees the *Roots* works as 'relay[ing] the anguish of diaspora in a formally restrained language based on calligraphy and ornamental designs inspired by oriental carpets and textiles'. That the images are portable may reflect a perpetual motif of migrancy and the necessity to relocate.

Shemza had good cause to re-examine his own origins, so the use of the roots image seems a natural one for an artist who is searching for his own identity. The twisting of the roots, in what may seem to be an uncoordinated way, conveys the message of an individual who absorbs different influences and develops in his own way. Shemza needed to accept not only his own history and origins but also the influences of the world in which he exists. Under this process the artist may end up by incorporating a height, breadth or structure far larger and more complex than the original seed from which he or the plant may have sprung.

²¹⁵ Naqvi, Akba, *Image and identity*, Page 282

²¹⁶ Illustration 2-4, Ali Anwar Shemza, *Roots*, 1972. Coloured inks on paper. Exhibited at Green Cardamom Gallery, 2009. Artist's estate.

²¹⁷ Naqvi, Akbar, *Image and identity*, Oxford University Press, 1998. Page 283

²¹⁸ Dadi, Iftikhar, *Perspectives 1, Ali Anwar Shemza*, Green Cardamom, 2009.

In a the London exhibition at Green Cardamom in October 2010²¹⁹ of the landscape works of Shemza, the curator Rachel Garside, tried to bring together the various elements of his work to re-position Shemza . She notes²²⁰ that in ‘ the late 1950s and the 1960s, during and after his studies at the Slade, the analysis of Shemza’s work, even by his greatest admirers and advocates, sought out the points of differentiation from English painting, making the work ‘Pakistani painting’. Garside cites an article on Shemza by G.M.Butcher which initially situates the work of Shemza within a milieu; ‘Contrary to the general trend of South Asian painters or in relation to fashionable trends, such as Tachisme or Abstract Expression’. According to Garside Butcher then goes on to use this framework to elevate Shemza to the quintessential marker of a great artist, the ‘loner’, but then goes on to situate Shemza again within the Pakistani paradigm, but under the influence of Klee:

‘Instead he thought to combine a renewed enthusiasm for the pattern and line and colour of his homeland with the inspiration of the one Western painter to have been the most interested in the art of Islam-Paul Klee’. Butcher then goes on to say ‘But there is in all this nevertheless a seed which might be the beginning of a ‘school’ of Pakistani, the emphasis here is on a future Pakistani artist. If his explanations are to ‘speak’ to even a few Pakistanis he will know that he has penetrated that just a little-and marvellously significant—way into the cultural future of his homeland’.

Garside then reflects on the contradictions of Butcher’s approach, which positions Shemza in a Pakistani milieu after having tried to suggest that he is unique.²²¹She claims that she is not attempting to make Shemza an ‘English artist’ any more than a Pakistani one but is highlighting the way in which the prevalent debates of the post-war era preclude ‘adequate readings of the work which would secure its legacy in Britain’. She appreciates the ‘diasporic elements’ of Shemza’s work but argues that a ‘multivalent’ reading is the key for an adequate appraisal of his work.

²¹⁹ Green Cardamom is an art gallery in London (recently re-located to Hong Kong) and the home of an arts organisation funded by the Rangoonwala Foundation and focussing on Pakistani, South and Central Asian and Middle Eastern art.

²²⁰ Garside, Rachel, *Anwar Jalal Shemza-The British Landscape*, Green Cardamom, 2010. This is a short introduction to the work of Shemza for the Green Cardoman exhibition on Shemza of October 2010. Garside also participated in a seminar at the Whitechapel Gallery 30/9/2010.

²²¹ Ibid

The way in which Garside re-positions the work of Shemza builds on recent commentaries where, for example, Timothy Wilcox²²² has commented that Shemza is working ‘with basic forms which were as visually and culturally neutral as possible, the square and the semi-circle, in order to speak simultaneously to distant communities’. Garside proposes the notion of ‘gothic vernacular’ in relation to the work of Shemza with a globalised, universalised Islam and the universalised mathematically neutral forms of Wilcox. She draws comparisons with John Piper as a quintessentially English Painter of the twentieth century. The work of Piper was interested, according to Garside, ‘in the relationship between an instinctive life force and the ‘rational’ or the ‘tension between geometry and what affects the beholder as being organic or vital’, qualities that are found in the cityscape works of Shemza. This is not a restatement of the perceived dichotomy of the ‘East as instinctive’ and ‘West as rational’ debate but to place Shemza alongside Piper in the same cohort of English post-war artists, a group that would perhaps contain Ceri Richards amongst romantic gothic, landscape artists. To see the similarities between Piper and Shemza it is worth looking at a 1976 collotype of *Reading Townscape* from Piper (Illustration 2-5)²²³. In it we can see the domes, arches, towers and chequered squares that are typical of the work of Shemza. There is the same feeling of an approach to a city from an outsider and it is even possible to distinguish a number of ‘B’ and ‘D’ shapes.²²⁴

This approach leads to Garside’s description of the interrelationship between the cultural memory of Shemza and influences of the Western environment in which he came to live and work:

‘The device of horizontality that would be recognised as modern landscape is siphoned through interior moodscapes that are in constant dialogue with line and calligraphic form: this is at its most literal in the Roots series. However, it is the calligraphic form that that delivers a broader understanding of the place than nostalgia: on the one hand we have Iftikhar Dadi’s argument of the heroic, nationalist Modern, and on the other hand the city walls are meshes to be looked through, bars that make the viewer aware that they are outside the place. The reading of Shemza’s work as an interior moodscape is paradoxically held at bay precisely

²²² Timothy Wilcox teaches at the University of Surrey and is a regular contributor to the Cambridge International Summer School. www.ice.cam.ac/components/tutors

²²³ Illustration 2-5, John Piper, *Reading Townscape*, c1976. Collotype/41.9x26.7cm. *John Piper at the Goldmark Gallery Exhibition*, 2009

²²⁴ Garside, Rachel, *Ali Anwar Shemza, The British Landscape*, Green Cardamom, 2010. Quotations come from the author’s detailed notes of the Rachel Garside lecture on Ali Anwar Shemza at the Whitechapel Gallery on 30/9/2009

through a reference to place in the work, which seems to situate the work somewhere. It is the dual readings, the oscillation back and forth, or rather, one through the other, that gives the work possibilities, offering a complexity that cannot easily be pinned down into one reading, making for a sustained interest in the work that goes beyond the expected'.²²⁵

It is thus possible to identify some of the different layers present in the work of Shemza. It would be hard to claim that a standard hybrid was created. Shemza was never comfortable in either East or West and saw himself as rejected by, or uncomfortable within, both cultures. Was he alienated by East and or the West? Given the ongoing calligraphic and Middle Eastern symbols he obviously retained a strong spiritual link to his heritage but the fact that he lived so long in the UK does demonstrate some acceptance of his adopted country. Alienation is therefore too strong a term, a better one may be that he was a disillusioned man who, nonetheless did manage to come to some accommodation between the conflicting forces in his life. Garside's final verdict is somewhat Delphic but nevertheless she observes that; 'If the work of Shemza is to be brought into focus it needs to be readable through a number of registers- registers that do not serve just for now with the globalising interests of commentators in the art world, but a critique that offers many possibilities into a future that we cannot predict'.²²⁶

Aisha Khalid

The experience of Shemza was extreme but the use of a comparator may help to put it in context and shed light on the overall experience of the emigrant Middle Eastern artists. Aisha Khalid was, like Shemza, born in Faisalabad in Pakistan but forty-four years later. She now lives, and works, in Shemza's old home city of Lahore. Although not strictly an emigrant she describes her interesting experience of going to study Fine Art at the Rikssakademie in Amsterdam, arriving in 2001 at the time of the 9/11 attacks in New York and experiencing the Western reaction of fear and anger at that time. Her time in Amsterdam made her conscious of her background, to the extent that she was made aware that in Pakistan she was regarded as 'contemporary' whilst in the Netherlands she appeared 'traditional'.

Aisha Khalid was recently a contender for the 2011 Jameel Prize awarded at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London for 'contemporary art inspired by Islamic tradition'²²⁷. Her work

²²⁵ *ibid*

²²⁶ *Ibid*

²²⁷ The Jameel prize is a biennial award inaugurated by the V and A in 2009 with the support of Abdul Latif Jameel Community initiatives. There were 10 shortlisted contenders for the 2011 prize who each gave presentations on 11/9/2011 (the date is coincidental but evocative)

ranges from commentary on the conflicts between East and West, within the East and to more reflective abstraction influenced by Sufi patterns. One of the two works described in the catalogue for the prize is 'Name, Class, Subject' (Illustration 2-6)²²⁸, which is a lined exercise book similar to those used by school pupils for writing practices. The work, according to the catalogue is seen to 'address the tensions underlying Pakistan's progress as an Islamic state that remains heir to a colonial past'. As the country still has two national languages, English and Urdu, Khalid shows each language starting from a different side of the page (with empty lines inviting us to supply our own text) and where the lines approach one another 'they become increasingly blurred and overlap to show the tension between them'.

This may have been an appropriate piece for the artist to nominate as a contender for a Jameel prize but it does not fully reflect the diversity of Khalid's oeuvre. It would also be wrong to see Aisha Khalid as a disillusioned artist like Shemza. It may, of course, be the more robust nature of the individual but it is as likely to be a generational shift, where young Pakistanis no longer see themselves as wanting or needing to be integrated into the Western world and culture. Aisha Khalid has been able to build a career as an international artist with exhibitions in, amongst other places, New York, London, Hong Kong, India, Sydney, Sharjah, Kabul, Morocco as well as her native Pakistan. As well as her contention for the Jameel prize she has exhibited at the Venice Biennale.

Her work goes beyond a revisitation of Pakistan's colonial past and the conflict with the West. Khalid's second piece in the Jameel prize was '*Kashmir Shawl*' where a 'cashmere cloth is pierced with 300,000 gold pins, which recreate the Paisley pattern 'symbolising the agony of people in occupied Kashmir', showing that there are conflicts within the Middle East as well as with the West. The extent of conflict internationally is stressed by the Venice Biennale piece in which the viewer moves amongst transparent screens marked with bullet holes which are reflected onto the viewer. The works on which Aisha Khalid has been concentrating more recently reflect, as with many other Middle Eastern artists, the Sufi tradition of Islam but placing it within an international and 'universalist' context. At her Jameel prize presentation she referred to the influence of Rumi and the 'oneness of god' and at a similar exhibition in Vienna, *Das Macht des Ornaments-changing role of ornaments in a changing world*, she showed pieces (eg Illustration 2-7)²²⁹ which recall the circling Sufi patterns and also as used by other contemporary Middle Eastern artists such as Shirazeh Houshiary.

²²⁸ Illustration 2-6, Aisha Khalid, *Name, Class, Subject*, 2007. Wallpaper and gold leaf. Jameel Prize catalogue, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

²²⁹ Illustration 2-7, Aisha Khalid, *Kabul*, 2009 (Detail). Gouache on wasli paper/122x198cm. Property of the artist

An initial comparison between Aisha Khalid and Anwar Shemza might make it possible to draw a few tentative conclusions on the nature and identity of contemporary Middle Eastern artists. The first is, as we shall be able to emphasise as we progress, that there is not always a traumatic alienation between the artist and the West, or even between the artist and their Middle Eastern heritage. To see the artist merely in terms of a colonial or post-colonial conflict risks imposing a Western orientation which may not be applicable to an artist who views herself as much as international or universal as local. Whilst it is true that the passage of time and history may have allowed younger artists (those starting to practice after the end of the pure colonial era) a greater cultural freedom, there may be another dimension which it is worth indicating to define the extent of the 'Middle East', namely the extent and nature of the Western influence. Without imposing a simplistic historical conclusion it is reasonable to suspect that certain countries or regions were subject to more specific Westernisation than others. In India, Pakistan and, perhaps, in the French North African colonies, the education and upbringing of certain social groups in the middle and upper social classes were based on an inherent, or imposed, assumption that Western education and culture was something to which the young should aspire. In other parts of the Middle East the extent of colonial control was never able, or willing, to be so rigid or structured. Here, there was never as great a culture shock when it was realised that the West saw its inhabitants as different and hard to integrate within the wider parameters of Western society.

Nuha al-Radi

These thoughts set the scene for analysing the Iraqi artist and writer Nuha al-Radi whose experiences are arguably as traumatic as those of Anwar Shemza and we see them in a direct way in one of her prints (Illustration 2-8)²³⁰. A small edition of three shows a framed, crowded group of mutilated or malformed people entering and breaking out of the frame. They lack arms, the legs are swollen, some have two heads (or are they Siamese twins?). The broken frame, allowing the emergence of an armless figure advancing towards the viewer, is a simple (ethnic?) square of decorative motifs. There is pain and anger in the image but also, perhaps, sympathy and escape by breaking out of the frame. Where does such a tortured image come from?

Al-Radi wrote a diary²³¹ of the war years in Baghdad, 1991-2002, of which Edward Said that 'I have searched for recent books about Iraq which described it as a real country. I found only

²³⁰ Illustration 2-8, Nuha Al-Radi, *Ain Ghazal 1/Exiting Exiles* 1997. Lithograph on paper, 1 of 3/37x37cm. Property of the author

²³¹ Al-Radi, Nuha, *Baghdad Diaries 1991-2002*. Saqi Books 2003. This is a personal account of the author's experiences during the Gulf war and its aftermath.

one'²³². The diary combines all the pain, terrors and fears of war with an indomitable humanity and personality. Introducing the diary al-Radi says 'this is the third day of war and it has taken me that long to realise that the war has actually begun and I am not dreaming it. I have decided to write a diary to keep some kind of record of what is happening to us'. She adds dryly 'after all this kind of thing doesn't happen every day '²³³

The diary helps us to understand not only where the image's malformed bodies come from but also the individual who emerges from the experience. Al-Radi was an established artist, born in Baghdad in 1941 but trained in the UK at the Byam Shaw School of Art in the early 1960's and she later taught at the American University of Beirut. The war did change people. Al Radi says 'Since the war started I have not been able to read a word, not even a thriller. Instead I am writing this diary, not something I normally do. Ma, who usually never stops knitting can't knit. Instead Suha and Amal, who have no talent in that direction, have started to knit.'²³⁴ The image emerges from the text as al-Radi describes a dream where:

'Americans in battle fatigues are jogging down Haifa Street---led by a girl in red who was running very fast. The suddenly the scene switched and I was coming out of the house and everything was dry as dust, just earth and I was alone. I said to myself 'I will build and plant it so that it will be the most beautiful garden.'²³⁵

Al-Radi muses that what bothered her about the dream was the loneliness of it and if she would be the only survivor. Perhaps the figure breaking through the frame was this lonely survivor?

Al-Radi has fears about a nuclear war, believing Bush to be mad and she asks who gives Americans the licence to bomb at will? She can understand Kuwait but not the whole world. Living under this kind of anxiety we can imagine how the double headed monsters image could arise. Without electricity much of the time the pattern of the day changes, with dinner early, 'sometimes it's accompanied by bombing, sometimes not!' Even though she has learned to do a lot of things in the dark none of her family has learned to sleep early. Again it would be reasonable to see her tortured figures emerging into the light from the darkness of wartime. After these horrific thoughts, however, the essential humanity and humour of al-Radi emerges as she immediately goes on to mention that her dog, Salvador, has a new and horrid girlfriend.

²³² Cited on the cover of *Baghdad Diaries*. Said is only one of the many critics, usually Middle Eastern, who have admired the book.

²³³ Ibid Page 19

²³⁴ Ibid Page 17

²³⁵ Ibid Page 17

'He bit Said yesterday. He is not a strokeable dog!'²³⁶ Anger and frustration are never far away- 'No one bet on that Baghdad was going to be bombed. They were supposed to be freeing Kuwait'. It is always followed by humour, 'Maybe they need a map?'²³⁷ Al-Radi also feels alienated from not only the American aggressors but from her Arab lineage:

'What a brave man (Mr Bush), he passes judgement on us while he plays golf far away in Washington. His forces are annihilating us. I find it very difficult to believe that we have been so discarded by everyone, especially the Arabs. I presume that this war will be the end of so-called Arab unity –that was a farce even whilst it lasted. I don't think I want to call myself an Arab any more. As an Iraqi I can choose to be a Sumerian, a Babylonian, or even an Assyrian. If the Lebanese can call themselves Phoenicians, and the Egyptians Pharaonic, why can't we follow suit?'²³⁸

The Sumerian recollection²³⁹ may also arise from nightmares about the war. In a dream al-Radi:

'was holding a little carving, a beautiful white Sumerian head with ruby eyes. Someone, an Iraqi, maybe Fuliya, broke it whilst trying to pierce it –I think he was trying to turn it into a bead. Then Fuliya's father comes into the kitchen and I tell him about my dream. He throws up on the table. I rush out crying, to find a mass of dogs in the orchard, but am too sad to shoo them away'.²⁴⁰

On visiting the war damaged historic sight of the already ruined Hatra²⁴¹ al-Radi agonises over not only her heritage but also the current situation:

'The entire landscape has changed –walls and columns stamped with his [Saddam's] initials, everywhere concrete. They could have left Hatra alone, it was so wonderful. They ruined Babylon but in reality there was nothing left to ruin.'²⁴² Al-Radi then goes on, in her usual way, to contrast the memories of the past with the absurd realities of her present experience: 'Dinner at the Hatra Hotel; nouvelle cuisine—five bits of charcoaled meat, three slices of tomato and three small slices of bread for 4000 dinars. My Toyota Corolla cost that

²³⁶ Al-Radi, Nuha, *Baghdad Diaries*, Page 22

²³⁷ Ibid Page 28

²³⁸ Ibid Page 41

²³⁹ It is worth noting that Iraqi artists frequently have reference to the Sumerian past as we see elsewhere in this study with Suad Al-Attar, Dia Al-Azzawi and Rashad Selim.

²⁴⁰ Ibid Page 49

²⁴¹ Hatra was a Parthian city in Northern Iraq which flourished in the first and second centuries but was destroyed in AD257. Sculptures, reliefs and other objects have been found there.

²⁴² Al-Radi, Nuha, *Baghdad Diaries, 1991-2002*. Saqi Books 2003. Page 65

much in 1981. Moon so bright we couldn't see the stars. Iraqi dogs have proprietary rights to the archaeological sites-each group with its own area-and terrible wars between them. They chased me away.'²⁴³

Elsewhere, in a similar contrast, Al-Radi recounts a meal she prepared using truffles. On being accused of being extravagant compared to the French use of truffles she comments that they were Iraqi truffles and that she was happily selling the contents of her studio to buy more as one only lives once.

The dreams haunt her and credibly supply pictorial images:

'I dreamed last night of a two-headed person cum-donkey, it sort of changed, metamorphosing from one to another; a bad guy stuck to a good guy, making terrible faces. The last thing I was reading last night before I fell asleep was about how in olden times Indian princes would cut up two young birds, join them to grow them into one, teach them how to fly so they could show their alternating profiles—one side blue feathers, the other pink, sounds grotesque'.²⁴⁴

The reality of the war also inspires her art:

'I will call this exhibition 'Embargo Art'. All the sculptures, whole families of people made of stone and car parts-busted exhausts and silencers that I collected when I went to mend my silencer-quite funny. The heads are painted stones and come off easily, a recognition of the reality that is present day Iraq.'²⁴⁵

The work referred to is probably, 'Installation', (Illustration 2-9)²⁴⁶ an assemblage of figures, recalling the curtain call from a group of actors at the end of a play bidding farewell to the audience. In some ways this is a 'found' object with al-Radi using the auto components:

'disregarded and useless because of the war, awaiting a different or better world in which they could be useful again. Given their vulnerability it is always possible that the events may never develop in a way where they could be useful again and they would simply just fall apart and have no value.'²⁴⁷

²⁴³ Al-Radi, Nuha, *Baghdad Diary*. Page 65

²⁴⁴ Ibid Page 106

²⁴⁵ Ibid Page 108

²⁴⁶ Illustration 2-9 Nuha Al-Radi, *Installation*, 1999. Found automotive objects. The image, obtained from www.daratafunum.org on 10/02/2013 is fuzzy and no better version can be obtained as the work may no longer exist. Whereabouts unknown but was property of the artist.

²⁴⁷ Al-Radi, *Baghdad Diaries, 1991-2002*, Saqi Books, 1993. Page 108

Driven out of Iraq eventually Al-Radi analyses what exile means to her:

‘What is exile? My father died in exile in Beirut in 1971 and Ma thought to take him back and bury him in Baghdad, which she did. Does it make a difference? I myself want to be buried wherever I die. I dislike the West temporarily for making us suffer more than we already have, and so will keep myself and my travels limited to the East. Not that the West is dying for my company. It’s a kind of self imposed or inflicted embargo, a little gesture.’²⁴⁸

Not that al-Radi is returning totally to a traditional Muslim culture. In a Beirut supermarket she orders ham despite the guy behind the counter yelling at her that it was ‘Pig’. She didn’t, though, dare to tell him that she was a ‘pig eating Muslim!’²⁴⁹

The image featured therefore clearly comes from al-Radi’s bitter experience of the Iraq War. The inherent anger and resentment of the pain caused are reflected in the image as well as the text of her diary. Double heads come not only from her real fears of corporeal mutilation caused by nuclear war but from the dreams that result. What she sees on the streets also makes its way into her dreams, with the girl running ahead of the soldiers and the destruction of the Sumerian head. In the text the criticism of the West is explicit. In the image the criticism is as much anti-war as much as anti-West. Despite her criticism of the West Al Radi does not adopt a clearly Arab posture, retreating to the deeper and more ancient origins of the Iraqi people and their archaeology. The fact that distorted bodies are still tumbling into the back of the darkened frame of the image show recognition, though, that the past has not been idyllic and the pain goes back far into time.

To see al-Radi as a political artist is legitimate but this is not the whole of her personality. For every political utterance we get a personal, human one.

In this context it is worth recounting the experience of another Middle Eastern artist, Laila Shawa, recounted during at a recent Leighton House seminar²⁵⁰ that she, as a Palestinian, has been and continues to be traumatised by the Israeli occupation of her homeland. Shawa recounts her experience of political art when her poster design for the Palestine Liberation Front was rejected (by Yasser Arafat’s ‘fat’ mistress) for not representing the Star of David as being sufficiently broken. Shawa makes the point that the ‘political has to come from the personal’²⁵¹. It is the personal experience of death, war, torture or physical exile that creates the artistic protest and not the membership of a political group.

²⁴⁸ Al-Radi, Nuha, *Baghdad Diaries*. Page 148

²⁴⁹ Ibid Page 180

²⁵⁰ Leighton House seminar. *Art as Protest*. July 2010. Author’s notes

²⁵¹ Ibid

Personally Nuha al-Radi did not claim solidarity with the modern Middle East, due to its lack of support for Iraq. She did travel to the West, finding sympathetic friends despite their alien political regimes. Neither did she commit to any particular political party. She feels more affinity to her immediate family and country rather than the political region more broadly defined as the Middle East, or to one of its political parties. This is no simple hybrid, creating art in a third, peripheral space. Al-Radi exhibits the common political and archaeological themes of contemporary Middle Eastern artists but the image comes from her direct experience and does not need a hybridised or politicised third space at the margins.

Perhaps Dia Al-Azzawi best summarises the direct importance of the experience of Iraqi history when he described the influence of Jawad Selim²⁵² on the art of his nation.

‘You were nurtured on Iraqi soil, primordial clay kneaded with primeval words. You saw the march of history, the history of men who loved justice, yet put people to the sword, who built proud cities and lofty ziggurats yet burned whole villages to the ground, who wrote on clay yet painted with agate. You called your pictures by her name, like a lover who searches in corners for friendly signs, a square or a rectangle, a suggestion of a palm tree or coffee pot, or the faces of tired women in love’²⁵³

Al-Azzawi was not writing of the work of al-Radi but we can recognise the relevance of some of these comments. The image from al-Radi is in some ways crude and she may not regard it as perfect. There is certainly a rigour and boldness and there has been no need for more refined techniques to carry the message of anger and sorrow. The idea of expressing herself through the ‘drama of a wounded beast’ seems particularly relevant.

Parastou Forouhar

There is an interesting contrast between the image from al-Radi and later work from an Iranian artist called Parastou Forouhar, whose political and activist parents were assassinated in Iran in 1998²⁵⁴. She had been educated in Iran, studying classical Persian art at the University of Teheran. Forouhar, who has lived in Germany since 1991 has produced many images reflecting the horrors of today’s Iran, reflecting the inevitable trauma of her personal loss:

‘My efforts to investigate this crime had a great impact on my personal and artistic sensibilities. Political correctness and democratic coexistence lost their meaning in my daily life. As a result I have tried to distil this conflict of displacement and transfer of meaning, turning it into a source of creativity’. The author, curator and critic, Russell Harris, writing in the Leighton House 2010

²⁵² Jawad Selim 1919-1962. Iraqi painter and sculptor who had a major influence on the next generation such as Dia Al-Azzawi, Rashad Selim, Shakir Hassan Al Said and Maysaloun Faraj.

²⁵³ Shabout, Nada, *Modern Arab Art*. University of Florida, 2007. Pages 143-144.

²⁵⁴ See *Parastou Forouhar, Art Life and Death in Iran*, Ed Rose Issa, 2010. This is an introduction to the work of Fourouhar for the Leighton House and Rose Issa exhibitions of her work in 2010

catalogue sees the process as having been a transformation of someone who could no longer look on herself as being cosmopolitan or 'simply an artist' when he remarks that:

'the domestic execution of her parents put an end to her extra-territorial identity and forever stamped part of her artistic personality as a victim of the Iranian regime. The anger at being vacuumed into a world that she had left is palpable in her later output'.²⁵⁵

A good example of Forouhar's work is one from a series of five digital drawings (Illustration 2-10²⁵⁶) made in 2009 from the *Parade* series. A leading UK dealer in Middle Eastern painting, Rose Issa, remarked that she had 'never seen so many passers-by stop at the gallery window and then move on, shaking their heads'.²⁵⁷ At a distance the image appears to be a pretty pattern in attractive colours but initial impressions are deceptive and on closer inspection the viewer sees that the work is made up of repetitive, never-ending images of violence. The style harks back to the Persian miniatures which she studied as a student, a case of East mimicking the East rather than the West, in contrast with the mimicry of the West on which colonialist theorists such as Bhabha and Spivak²⁵⁸ have focussed.

The formal repetitions do not morph into different images as with the work of M.C. Escher²⁵⁹. There is a scaring inevitability that the violence will go on, reflecting the pessimistic, political views of the artist whose parents were assassinated by the Iranian regime. The political intensity of Forouhar uses the same attractive patterns to seduce the viewer into looking at the image as many pop artists, such as John Wesley²⁶⁰, have done knowing that the reality of the image and its message is very different from the original expectation. They reflect the disillusion of an Iranian who is familiar with the beauty and nobility of the Iranian artistic tradition, from exotic ornament to crafted miniature paintings using gold and other expensive media.

The drive to ornamentation in Forouhar's work shows the way in which it can cover up the brutality of a society in which the views of the individual are seen to count for nothing. Both the guards and their victims are dressed in neutral clothing, the perpetrators losing as much

²⁵⁵ Issa, Rose (Ed), *Parastou Forouhar*, Page 12

²⁵⁶ Illustration 2-10, Parastou Forouhar, *Parade 1:4*, 2008. Digital drawings/digital print on alu dibond/64x64CM. Property of the author

²⁵⁷ Discussion with author, September 2011

²⁵⁸ Morton, Stephen, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, Routledge, 2007

²⁵⁹ M C Escher 1898-1972-A Dutch artist famous for his so-called Impossible images such as *Ascending and Descending*, *Relativity* and *Metamorphosis* where images slowly morph, through repetition, into other images

²⁶⁰ John Wesley was an American Pop artist born in 1928 whose work depicting bodies and cartoon characters embraces some of the qualities of minimalism and surrealism.

individuality as the brutalised subjects. The faces of the guards (torturers, interrogators) are hidden by their lashing whips and the prisoners are masked, hiding the individuals underneath. The only relief can come from the viewer hoping that at some point in the future the violence will see a break, a feeling that Forouhar, with her long, bitter, personal experience of her country, can do nothing to encourage.

The other difference between the whippers and the beaters is their postures. The former are dominant and active whilst the latter are submissive and passive. It is worth noting that the submissive, passive position is also that of prayer, perhaps Forouhar's only concession to any prospect of redemption.

The visually alluring lilac background colour of the image may also contain a complex message about the way a Western viewer thinks of the East. This author recently searched for a lilac oriental rug to match the colours of a newly decorated room. The task did not seem too demanding as there is a tremendous variety of oriental rugs on offer. What became apparent was that the lilac colour was not a usual one for Persian rugs, indeed it was extremely rare, probably because there is no appropriate vegetable dye available. The only two examples found with a lilac background turned out, on enquiry to have been commissioned for a glitzy Hollywood mansion. The colour was therefore used to appeal to the Western viewer and was alien to the Middle East.

This lilac background of the *Parade* image shows off the black used for the tiles or chequers (other Forouhar images in the Parade series use stars, dots and commas), as well as the whips of the jailors and the bonds and blindfolds of the sufferers. Black is an important colour for Forouhar as she has often portrayed the all enveloping black cloak or chador as a contrast to white (as in her representations of swans) or colours such as red (in her Signs series). Black is figured as the colour of suppression, especially of women who are forced to wear the veil which hides their individuality. There is a notable irony in that in this image it is the male (a reasonable presumption from the shapes of the figures in this image) aggressors whose faces are partly hidden by their whips.

The butterfly, which forms the structure that makes up the picture, is usually thought of as both fragile and beautiful. The beauty attracts the viewer but the fragility emphasises the vulnerability to violence. The butterfly would not last long in the face of the whip but the shape of the butterfly is made up from the curves of the whips' lashes. Even in the most extreme of evil an optimist might glimpse something beautiful, whilst the pessimist can see evil in beauty. Forouhar does not explicitly offer the ability to subsume evil in beauty but perhaps leaves scope for the optimist, who has not had to suffer the remorseless, never-ending trials of the Iranian theocracy, monarchy and militarism and who might hope that there could be an improvement and not a never-ending cycle of violence.

A UK viewer might recall the butterfly metaphor in *The Times* editorial on the Rolling Stones drugs trial when the editor, William Rees-Mogg²⁶¹, asked 'Who breaks a butterfly on a wheel?'. In a single phrase he highlighted the futility of using the might of the state to crush an individual. The problem here is that whilst Mick Jagger effectively was acquitted many Iranians continue to be crushed. The never-ending cycle of Forouhar's depiction of violence continues in the Middle East often, according to Forouhar, unappreciated in the West.

The artist is, on her own admission a political and feminist artist and one justifiably influenced by her own experiences. She loses no opportunity, or device, to get across her camouflaged message condemning the Iranian government, leading the viewer to face up to a harsh reality. The viewer can, and often does, walk away or he can accept the reality. He then has to decide if he can see some hope of redemption despite the fact that the artist gives him no immediate evidence for doing so, leaving the viewer to create his own dialogue with the image. This is not a crucifixion image where the Western viewer knows there can be redemption and an afterlife. It acts as conscience to the viewer and a challenge to him that he ought not to ignore the brutality. If the initial view of the image was pleasing should this change when we know the underlying truth? Does the viewer feel guilty if he ignores the picture because it is telling him he ought to know and also telling him that he was seduced by its initial prettiness? Some images are designed and intended to do so and in this Forouhar is successful. The success is not just getting across a critical political message to the viewer but also in telling him something about himself and his ability to be deceived. Rose Issa's passers-by may be able to forget the plight of Iran and their gullibility but they may also be forced to confront the message behind the image.

Forouhar has, very understandably, been alienated from the current reality of her modern homeland but not its traditions. She still retains the historic images of the region but uses them mediated through modern technology in order to criticise the present day regime, whereas al-Radi uses the print making techniques she learned at Byan Shaw to criticise the American aggressors in Iraq. Unlike al-Radi with her statement that she would limit her travels to the East Forouhar has remained in Germany although she does travel regularly to Iran. Interestingly she retains her Iranian passport, despite the problems it creates in travelling within the West, as she does not want to give the Iranian authorities the excuse to prevent her going to Iran on the basis that she has German passport.

We might conclude that it is not just the geographic origins that create the complex characters that emigrants from the Middle East adopt. It is also their personal experiences and the traumatic personal backgrounds of both Al Radi and Forouhar are probably more important in relation to their attitudes to East and West, rather than just their geographic origins. Emigration can not only encourage the absorbing of the culture of the adopted culture but can also with

²⁶¹ William Rees-Mogg was editor of *The Times* from 1967 to 1981. The editorial quoted was published on 1/7/1967

some people intensify the links with their homeland. Forouhar sums up well the importance of the personal experience and the effect of the adopted country when she says:

‘When I arrived in Germany I was Parastou Forouhar. Somehow over the years I have become ‘Iranian’. This enforced ethnic identification took a new turn with the assassination of my parents in their home in Tehran. My efforts to investigate this crime had a great impact on my personal and artistic sensibilities. Political correctness and democratic coexistence lost their meaning in my daily life. As a result, I have tried to distil this conflict of displacement and transfer of meaning, turning it into a source of creativity.’²⁶²

Whilst Forouhar is manifestly correct in her claim that she is a political artist she is able to do so without compromising her classical Persian background saying:

‘I am Persian. I can tell you beautiful stories about my homeland, which may not be true. I have wonderful memories of my country, but I do not know if I have manipulated them. At some point, a time whose precise date I cannot remember, I started re-building the idea of my homeland into a fortress of illusions. Ever since then it has grown in my mind invisibly and beautifully. I search for my homeland by writing words of my mother tongue in soft, rhythmical, inviting lines, remembering the openness and ambivalence of the beautiful Persian patterns that the old masters of the centuries have left us.’²⁶³

This ‘invisible, soft, rhythmical beauty’ does not stop her political criticism being devastating and the allusions to the historical past are sharpened by the use of modern technology with digital drawings not only on paper but also on materials such as fabrics, suede and aluminium as well as more traditional materials like paper and vellum. The fact that Forouhar’s work recalls traditional Persian miniatures was criticised by her teachers who encouraged an (outdated) Euro-style naturalism, according to Laura Marks in her book *Enfoldment and Infinity*. Marks does though move on to draw the vital distinction that the work of Forouhar ‘far from being the manifestation of divine order, crystallise from histories of violence’.²⁶⁴ Forouhar is thus seen to be using the beliefs and traditions of her heritage to construct a modern point of view, in the same way as some of the calligraphic artists use their traditional script to create a figurative image.

Forouhar herself puts it this way

‘all surfaces are covered with the vibrations of patterns. They represent the harmony of the world, of God’s all embracing power and beauty---But this untouchable harmony can only be appreciated from a distance, as it conceals the potential for brutality. All that does not

²⁶² Issa, Rose, *Parastou Forouhar, Art, Life and Death in Iran*, Saqi Books, 2010. Introduction

²⁶³ Ibid Page 18

²⁶⁴ Marks, Laura, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, MIT Press, 2010. Page 167

submit to this strict canon of ornamental order cannot be represented and is therefore non-existent, it is expelled into the periphery of the unworthy and is condemned to extinction'.²⁶⁵

The heritage is not, therefore, seen through rose tinted glasses as the repeated patterns have a malign side according to Forouhar, 'Life in the world of the old Persian miniatures is unbearable. People are allocated a place, given their body posture, their specific colour, so that their presence amplifies the ornamental order. With great effort I have escaped this role and I refuse to be dragged back into a similar condition, into the suffocating world of pre-set patterns'.²⁶⁶ The artist in her therefore does not see pattern or decoration as the ultimate objective of her art, imposing a pre-conceived order on society or the individual. Rather she sees pattern or decoration as a means to make a political protest or individual statement.

Unlike some artists who wish to emphasise their artistic credentials Forouhar is in no doubt that she has a political role to play in relation to her homeland saying:

'Waiting seems to be the condition that affects the entire Iranian society -the one group waiting for freedom, the revolution, and the intervention of the West or reforms staged by the totalitarian regime ruling the country. On the other hand there is the other group waiting for religious salvation due to the return of the *Mahdi*²⁶⁷, the 'imam of the times'. The waiting seems to be characteristic of the art world as well. It is shown in humble longing, in depression and lethargy. But it can also be seen as a time during which, thrown back to one's own self, people analyse the present state, come to terms with their own history and its consequences and start to identify potentials. 'Possibly the goal of this is the waiting itself, the willingness to stay, to persevere, in order to be present when the opportunity arises to rebuild the city''.²⁶⁸

Despite the intensity of Forouhar's Middle Eastern collective memory the fact that she has lived in Germany for nineteen years is recognised as an influence by commentators on her work. The dealer, Rose Issa, has remarked in her catalogue for a Leighton House exhibition in 2010 has remarked that 'the colour, humour and playfulness in her wonderfully powerful work have that rare combination of serious German pedagogical training with a deep understanding of her Iranian culture and background'.²⁶⁹ In the same catalogue²⁷⁰ is an essay by Lutz Becker, a

²⁶⁵ Issa, Rose, *Parastou Forouhar, Art, Life and Death in Iran*, Saqi Books, 2010. Page 17

²⁶⁶ Ibid Page 17

²⁶⁷ In Sunni and in Shia eschatology the Mahdi (Guided One) is the Redeemer who will stay on earth for a time.

²⁶⁸ www.parastou-forouhar.de/english/texts/rays-of-light-from-the-planet-iran.html Accessed 25/07/12. The quote in the last sentence comes from Susan Wintch (*Tribsand –Discharging quicksand*), DVD Magazine on Contemporary Art, Volume 01, February 2007.

²⁶⁹ Ibid Page 7

²⁷⁰ Ibid Pages 16-19

German artist, curator and film-maker living in London, who similarly recognises the importance of the German dimension in the work of Forouhar:

‘Her response to the horrors of our times gives her work purpose and energy, living in Germany has made her aware of the burden of memory prevalent in that society for crimes committed during the Nazi period. Seeing historical and psychological parallels with the Iranian trauma, she invests her art with a sense of personal responsibility that clearly implies a collective dimension’.²⁷¹

In relation to the German influence on Forouhar, Russell Harris sees a complex struggle between the two forces by asking the question:

‘We ought also to ask whether Forouhar wanted to be an ‘Iranian artist’: whether her vision was once free to roam and use her new country, Germany, as a source of her inspiration. Is Iranian culture too strong- the years of studying Hafez, Saadi and Rumi; the attractiveness, beauty and inescapability of Iran’s written and visual language- for the artist to set it all aside and then live with the paradox of always being seen as an Iranian expatriate or, as the artist herself says, simply as ‘Parastou Forouhar?’²⁷²

In Forouhar we have a complex individual who is far from a simple hybrid and encompasses multiple layers in her personality. She is Iranian but has experienced an important German influence. She is intensely political as well as artistic. She has embraced certain traditions from her cultural patrimony but is modern in her use not only of materials and techniques but in the message they portray. Russell Harris also notes the femininity that ‘oozes from the fabric – coverings of the setting of chairs’ in the Leighton House exhibition and we also see this in her photographs of the black chadors, from which an emerging finger and thumb are the only sign of the individual from whom identity is removed.

One further image may help to deepen our exploration of this complex individual artist. Russell Harris recounts his introduction to the work of Forouhar with his sight of the *Swanrider* (Illustration 2-11²⁷³). His eulogy states:

‘This amazingly graceful photograph, so full of charm, wit and multidimensional irony, is simply stunning-as an image, statement, wish and window into the artist’s empathies. The placid figure of the Swanrider paradoxically screams from the printed surface, and in a succinct restrained way echoes slogans of shared humanity and common dreams.’²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ Issa, Rose, *Parastou Forouhar*, Saqi Books 2010. Page 16

²⁷² Ibid Page 12

²⁷³ Illustration 2-11 Parastou Forouhar/2004-2010, *The Swanrider*. One of a series of photographs/digital print on alu dibond/80x80cm. Exhibited at Leighton House, 2010

²⁷⁴ Issa, Rose, (Ed), *Parastou Forouhar*, Page 12

Russell Harris then goes on to context this image against the broader background of Iranian and Western photography:

‘She labels the depiction of what Dr Martin Barnes²⁷⁵ so elegantly and euphemistically describes in the preface to the book, *Iranian Photography Now*, individuals grappling with the state of a country where tradition and modernity face each other’. This elegantly gliding image embodies the ‘urgent quality’ that the Iranian art historian Parisa Damandan finds lacking in Western photography’.²⁷⁶

In relation to Forouhar, and many other Middle Eastern artists, it can be useful to know of their hybrid backgrounds from their Eastern and Western experiences as it allows the viewer to understand something of the images they produce. Hybridity, therefore, as a concept may have value but the complexity of individuals and their experiences is such that terming an artist as a ‘hybrid’ often tells us little and instead we need to unpick the all the layers of their experience and how the artist has reacted to them. When we do so we discover the complexities and any idea of a simple East/West hybrid may be overlaid by specific geography, personal experience, education, political affiliations, religious beliefs or even commercial demands. The term ‘hybrid’ appears, at least in the general context of contemporary artists of the Middle East, to have drawbacks in that there is little or no precise, predictive value in terms of the techniques, themes, styles or appearance of their work. It is the multiple layers of experience, training and memory that create the artist and not just the interaction of two particular cultures. Forouhar has claimed that she ‘is more involved in politics than art. To make art you need time to reflect and the events at the moment are so urgent that the main thing for me is to follow them and take them in’.²⁷⁷ Quite rightly Russell Harris sees this as dissimulation and sums up Foroufar as ‘having opened an easily accessible path to understanding of the emotional, personal and political helter skelter around the issues of identity, gender and volcanic anger’.²⁷⁸

Hussein Madi

We have seen examples of how the layers of determining factors for Middle Eastern artists create complex individuals and complex works, which do not seem to belong to easily definable hybrids. There may be little general predictive value in using the concept of hybridity in the analysis of contemporary Middle East. This is due to the complexity of the individuals concerned but it may, nevertheless, be possible to come up with at least one example of a ‘basic hybrid’, where both the individual and his art seem to combine the basic perceived attributes of both the East and the West. Given the origins, training and residence of Hussein Madi there is some predictability in the images that he produced. Before we look at the works

²⁷⁵ Martin Barnes is Senior Curator of Photography at the Victoria and Albert Museum

²⁷⁶ Issa, Rose *Parastou Forouhar*, Saqi Books, 2010. Page 10

²⁷⁷ Ibid Page 13

²⁷⁸ Ibid Page 13

themselves we can look at the history of the artist and try to forecast what kind of work might emerge from that background. This cannot be totally scientific as it involves subjective judgement but, nonetheless, it can provide a test as to whether the concept of a hybrid can have any potential predictive value.

Hussein Madi²⁷⁹ was born in 1938 at Mount Hermon (Chebaa) in the Lebanon. At elementary school in the 1940s his favourite book was *Larousse*, the copiously illustrated dictionary popular with students at the time. He studied painting from 1958 to 1962 at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts in Beirut, financing himself by producing caricatures for the *Beirut Press*. He broadened his Middle East experience in 1963, spending nine months in Baghdad as a graphic designer and illustrator. He then went to Rome where he spent the next twenty two years, acquiring Italian citizenship in 1983, although from 1972 to 1987 he spent two months of the year teaching at the National University of the Lebanon. It was only at the end of this period that he moved back to Lebanon full time.

The Rome experience started with studies at Accademia di Belle Arti and he later studied fresco at Academia San Giacomo. From the start of his Italian stay Madi, however, was able to sell his work and has had regular exhibitions, both in Italy and the Middle East as well as Paris and Sao Paulo.

The fusion of the Italian and Middle East backgrounds can be summed up in two statements from him. When Madi first arrived in Italy he asked himself what he was doing there and if it was too much for him. He soon found that he absorbed the Italian culture and way of life:

‘The Italian people have a talent for living. I didn’t only study there. I learned to appreciate classical music, theatre and opera. I learned to live elegantly, even without money; how to choose the clothes I wore, how to care for and take pride in my body, how to walk and behave according to the principles of etiquette, how to converse and interact with people, how to cook a simple meal which would taste like manna from heaven’.²⁸⁰

Madi did not have ‘the extended family that he had in Lebanon’ and so was able to support himself (‘had I stayed in Lebanon I would have married and had a dozen children!’).²⁸¹ As these comments make very clear there is no way in which Madi ever felt alienated in his new Italian environment. Inasmuch as it is ever possible he has always seemed to be integrated, without totally losing touch with his origins.

At the same time as Madi was integrating into Italy an event ‘of lasting significance established the definite and permanent direction of Madi’s art’. He tells how, shortly after he arrived in

²⁷⁹ For a general introduction to the life and work of Hussein Madi see Madi, Hussein, *The Art of Madi*, Saqi Books, 2005.

²⁸⁰ Ibid Page 10

²⁸¹ Ibid Page 19

Italy an Italian artist who visited him 'Noted the prevalence of Impressionism in his style told [him] to look to his own heritage, dig into the roots of his Mesopotamian past that made him what he was and forget about adopting European influences'. According to Helen Khal²⁸², his biographer this led to 'an extended exploration of Islamic art, which allowed him to comprehend the graphic manifestations of its spiritual content and, in turn, to express them in his art'

Madi has a love for Italy that stresses a cultural integration, which goes beyond just the historic, artistic heritage:

'Italy opened my eyes to elegance in life as well as to art. It is a feast even to the eyes of the poor; it is all around them in the ancient monuments, in the architecture and the museums and in the likes of Michaelangelo and da Vinci. All around is visible evidence of the Renaissance that began in Italy---it made me think of all the people throughout the centuries who had lived their lives for art and who had made of Italy a cultural jewel. And the marvellous thing is that they did not make it just for themselves or just for the Italians, they made it for the whole world. It made me realise that true artists don't work just for themselves or their family or for their community, but for the whole of mankind.'²⁸³

Drawing on this background what would we expect the art of such a person to look like? Given the timing of his emergence onto the art scene the dominant European influences could still be the giants of the day, Picasso and Matisse. Given the need to sell work it would be natural to demonstrate some affinity with the most popular artists of the time in order to appeal to the market (too Middle Eastern might be perceived to be 'ethnic' rather than 'artistic' to the European buyer). True that much of the work of Picasso and Matisse may have been formed and executed in a slightly earlier era, but Madi appears to experience some kind of 'time-slip' in catching up with developments in Western art.

From the Middle Eastern background we might expect some elements of calligraphy, geometrical shapes, repeated patterns, arabesque curves. These can be used to create a wholeness, an attempt at perfection that in some way reflects the Islamic belief in the fact that Allah is the source of knowledge and inspiration. Madi himself believes that his art reflects the integrative principles of Islam through its geometry where:

'the basic form is the circle, an image of the infinite whole, which can be divided and repeatedly sub-divided into perfectly harmonious proportions. In Islam this division of the circle symbolises *Tawhid* (Divine Unity)²⁸⁴ as the source and culmination of all diversity. My aim is to produce a contemporary figurative art based on the unifying principles of Islamic abstract

²⁸² Madi, Hussein, *The Art of Madi*, Saqi Books. Page 10

²⁸³ Ibid Page 19

²⁸⁴ Ibid Page 17. The circle is a well known in Sufi imagery as a means of enclosing.

composition in order to arrive at a perfect inter relationship between the parts and the whole, and thus achieve the universality of order rooted in Islamic belief’.

In many ways this is what we see in Madi. Take a single page from *The Art of Madi* from Saqi Books showing four drawings (Illustration 2-12²⁸⁵). The first may owe something to a Picasso’s renderings of a bull, the second may combine an Assyrian wall panel with Picasso’s *Guernica*²⁸⁶, while the third hints at calligraphy in creating a figurative animal image and the last may pass unremarked in a catalogue of Matisse sketches of women. In the first three, though, the viewer can glimpse the Middle Eastern references and, even in the Matisse-like sketch, there is a completeness and structure of curves that we may not see in Matisse himself.

In the Tate Modern exhibition *Matisse /Picasso* of 2002 the interplay between Picasso and Matisse was analysed. From the catalogue of the exhibition two images are displayed on facing pages. The first is *Still Life after Jan Davidz de Heem’s ‘La Desserte* (Illustration 2-13)²⁸⁷, painted by Matisse in 1915. The second is *Mandolin and Guitar* (Illustration 2-14)²⁸⁸, painted nine years later by Picasso. Both images feature musical instruments, together with other objects on tables, against a domestic background. The images are basically figurative but slightly distorted to deliver a more rounded view than a purely two dimensional image would give. The overall effect is of a slightly bucolic, domestic tranquillity, set against an airy exterior.

Seventy and even eighty years later, in 2003 Hussein Madi has produced an acrylic still life (Illustration 2-15)²⁸⁹ which is also redolent of just such a similar, domestic, musical tranquillity. The image is perhaps less cluttered than those of Picasso and Matisse and the objects portrayed more figuratively with the hookah, particularly, presented with a traditional perspective. Instead of being set against the windows used by Picasso and Matisse, the background appears to be a wall, covered by a *kelim* or carpet with a repetition of geometric patterns usually seen in Eastern carpets. This repeated design from the East is set above a similarly repeated, but less formal, design of floral cushions, perhaps drawing the viewer to the idea that the setting could be Western as easily as Eastern. The image of the hookah, rather than the ewer in the Matisse, is distinctly Eastern but the mandolin is a feature of both cultures. The mandolin of Madi lacks strings showing an emphasis on the curves and shape of the object

²⁸⁵ Illustration 2-12, Hussein Madi, *Four Drawings*, c1965-75 Ink and pencil on paper/various sizes. Reproduced by the artist in ‘Hussein Madi’, Saqi Books, 2005

²⁸⁶ Picasso’s image of the German bombing of a Spanish town in 1937

²⁸⁷ Illustration 2-13, Henri Matisse, *Still Life after Jan Davidz de Heems ‘La Desserte’*, 1915. Oil on canvas/180.9x220.8cm. Museum of Modern Art,, New York

²⁸⁸ Illustration 2-14, Pablo Picasso, *Mandolin and Guitar*, 1924. Oil on canvas with sand/140.6x200.4cm. Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, New York

²⁸⁹ Illustration 2-15, Hussein Madi, *Still Life with Mandolin*, 2003. Acrylic/90x60cm. Reproduced by the artist in ‘Hussein Madi’, Saqi Books 2010

rather than Picasso's emphasis on the function of the instrument's straight line strings rather than the shape. The veneered designs on Madi's mandolin could as easily be derived from calligraphy as from floral images. Although the right hand end of the sofa is cut off the overall effect is more complete and permanent than that of Matisse and Picasso, where the impression is much more ephemeral, with the possibility that any one of the objects could be moved or removed at any moment.

To produce such an image so long after the originals, which may have been the source of inspiration, may seem to be a very long delay. We must, though, bear in mind that the process of communicating European art developments to an artist born in the Lebanon hills in 1938 was happening at a time when communication between cultures was much slower. In his youth Madi did not have had easy access to Western art books. As we have seen²⁹⁰ his first real exposure to Western art would have come in the 1940's via the copy of *Larousse* that he used. Even at college in Beirut the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA) was in its infancy when Madi attended it in 1958. The painting programme offered the student 'no more than an atelier outfitted with easels, stools and plaster busts. Instruction was not structured, and often the teacher was not even there'. Madi and fellow students 'practically had to teach themselves and each other'.²⁹¹ It, therefore, does not seem totally unreasonable for it to have taken over a generation to communicate the developments in early twentieth century France to someone from completely outside the European culture. It is worth noting that at the time that Madi was embarking on his Italian stay Picasso and Matisse would still have been the role models for some young European artists.

One of the ways in which the Islamic tradition has been reworked and incorporated in the work of Madi is in his sculptures, which exemplify the harmony and oneness of the creation from a single source, as one would expect from someone who believes that God is the 'source and culmination of all diversity'. Madi has chosen to form his sculptural image out of a single piece of metal, which is not welded at any point but bent and folded into the desired shape. He starts from a line drawing which is mapped onto cardboard and then folded into shape, with the result passed onto galvanised tin and tested for authenticity by projecting the shadow onto a white wall, turning the piece through all angles. The tin model is then passed to a blacksmith, who produces the sculpture in its final form under Madi's supervision in wrought iron, at the required size. The final creation thus passes the test of the compelling need to 'combine all in one', except that he begins with the one and through it reveals the 'all' as a way of illustrating the essential Islamic unity of God and man.

Madi is prolific artist and has produced a wide range of work on paper, acrylic and oils as well as ceramics and sculpture and it would be wrong to confine the range of his output to just a few of his images. Nonetheless he lacks an easy categorisation within those we have earlier proposed of calligrapher, literary, longing or political. Without in any way belittling his achievement, it

²⁹⁰Madi, Hussein, *The Art of Madi*, Saqi Books, 2005

²⁹¹ Ibid Page 9

could be claimed that his output is in some ways predictable from his Eastern and Western background, stemming from the influences of both, without the multiplicity of complex and contradictory layers that we have identified in other emigrant Middle East artists. Had an artist been given a specific commission to paint a work that might have been produced by an emigrant from the Middle East, who had been matured in the West at a certain time and who wanted to produce a synthesis of both cultures that might appeal to buyers in both markets, this may well have resulted. In the sense that he is predictable in portraying a fusion of East and West, without too obvious intervening layers, so the term 'hybrid' may have predictive value in his case. What is perhaps notable is that we have come across few other clear cut examples of a 'simple East West hybrid'.

What is the result of this 'hybridisation process'? In a recent review of a new biography of Durer by Norbet Wolf²⁹² the critic Jackie Wullschlager²⁹³ notes that Wolf does not really challenge the 'long-held biographical assumption that Durer's innovative integration of classicism into northern art made him the greatest German artist, while psychologically he paid a profound price for Italy's assault on his aesthetic sensibility'. Without wanting to create a definitive psychological profile of Madi, his assertive masculinity is foregrounded in a few of the comments in his interview with Helen Khal to show some of the stresses of his cultural odyssey. He relates that he was married to a Lebanese girl but 'I discovered that I was not at all traditional in what I expected of marriage so we separated'. He goes on to say that 'I might love this woman today but tomorrow I might love another woman' and that 'To love a woman in herself is not important to me. I love woman in the absolute sense (*bil mutlaq*)'. Madi says that if he does not respect a woman he can still paint her but if he is in a relationship he wants to be involved in deciding 'what she wears and he will buy her stockings and underwear and everything that she wears'. He admits that there is a kind of dictatorship in this attitude but 'I live according to my own beliefs'.²⁹⁴

Interestingly, although there are many portraits of woman in the work of Madi the occasional male figure that appears in the tableau is always Madi himself and he admits that no other 'male is permitted to enter his harem',²⁹⁵ a patriarchal attitude that contrasts with his claim not to be 'traditional'!

He admits that he does not regret ever having a child as he believes 'every person has his destiny in life fated and sealed by God'. Madi believes that 'God gave me the talent to be an

²⁹² See Wolf, Norbert, *Albrecht Durer*, Prestel 2010

²⁹³ See *Sunday Times* 5/12/2010

²⁹⁴ Madi, Hussein, *The Art of Madi*, Saqi Books 2005. Page 20-21

²⁹⁵ Ibid Page 12

artist ---and that this talent cannot allow for another responsibility in life, the responsibility of children. The two are not compatible with one another'.²⁹⁶

It is only in his later years that Madi has regained his belief in God and he relates his religious journey as follows:

'I always believed in God and I always wanted my relationship with God to be good. But for years while living the ups and downs of an artist's life I was too busy to think about God. Since my return to the Lebanon, however, my attachment to God has become more prominent, more pro-active. I don't know why that is but it is so. Drinking alcohol is forbidden in Islam, so I no longer drink alcohol. And two years ago I began praying five times a day, as prescribed in Islam. I am now much more at peace with myself'.²⁹⁷

The impression here is of a man, who late in life, is emphasising a return to his spiritual and cultural roots, having experienced the delights, rewards and stresses of having lived and worked in a different culture. Whilst no regret is made specifically there seems to be an awareness of some kind of loss, which is nevertheless compensated by having permitted devotion to his artistic talent. As Madi has now ceased being an emigrant he is now, perhaps, less of a hybrid personally and maybe in artistic terms than he has been for most of his life.

Soody Sharifi

Madi is probably one of the few artists to whom some kind of 'hybrid' label seems to have immediate relevance or value. A possible further example, who could provide a more complex comparison, is Soody Sharifi, who like Aisha Khalid was a recent contender for the Victoria and Albert Jameel prize. At a distance or at first glance the images of Sharifi, who was born in Iran in 1955, appear to be very like the miniature manuscript illustrations of court life and myth²⁹⁸ which were produced in Iran in the period of 1300-1600. It is only on closer inspection that the viewer sees that she has inserted her own photographic images of contemporary life into the old manuscript. Sharifi's *Frolicking Women in the Pool* (Illustration -16)²⁹⁹ was inspired by the several trips she made to the seaside and we see that she has contrasted the fully clothed traditional women with women bathing naked in *Fashion Week* which she sees as 'exploring the meeting point between the discrete nature of Islamic attire and fashions driven by consumer culture'³⁰⁰.

²⁹⁶ Ibid Page 21

²⁹⁷ Ibid Page 17

²⁹⁸ See Canby, Sheila *Persian Painting*, British Museum 1993.

²⁹⁹ Illustration 2-16, Soody Sharifi, *Frolicking Women in the Pool* 2006. Digital collage. Reproduced in Jameel Prize catalogue, 2010/Courtesy of LTMH Gallery, New York

³⁰⁰ *Jameel Prize Catalogue*, Victoria and Albert Museum 2011

Soody Sharifi, who is a photographer, now lives in Texas and sees her images as very much along the lines of a 'Texas versus Teheran' debate. As, however, with many of the Middle Eastern artists it is dangerous to see her work in a simplistic manner as just contrasting between East and West. There is a clear feminist assertion of, or objection to, the way in which men have sought to cover and establish control over women and this is not thought to be solely a prerogative of the Middle Eastern man. This is shown in her *Maxiature* image of women taking over the male game of billiards in a Persian court (Illustration 2-17)³⁰¹ There is also a strong element of contrast between the public and private images that people have for themselves (they are rare but there are some examples of nude women being depicted in the traditional Persian miniatures³⁰²). Sharifi is fascinated by the way that everyday life contradicts public life and notes that in both Texas and Teheran the rooftops of buildings (before they all became skyscrapers) provided sanctuary and contrast from the heat and the public life on the streets below them (Illustration 2-18)³⁰³. In her words 'the modern facts and the historic fiction create a new fiction and what is not shown is more powerful than what is shown.'³⁰⁴

This theme of rooftop versus street was further developed at the 2011 *London Frieze Fair*³⁰⁵. An Iranian performance artist called Anahita Razmi³⁰⁶ has followed a performance piece by an American artist, Trisha Brown³⁰⁷, who forty years ago in New York had twelve dancers performing on the rooftops of the SoHo area. The Razmi piece, subject to the usual objections and interference by the Iranian authorities, is intended in Razmi's words as a 'political piece [where] the actual movements themselves are not political, they are just movements on the roof, but since the protests of 2009, the rooftops have become politicised spaces. They have always been domestic spaces.'³⁰⁸

Sharifi also believes that she is highlighting the effects of 'advertising driven consumerism', which is 'what many people claim to want with their private lives with the restrictions of family

³⁰¹ Illustration 2-17, Soody Sharifi, *Fashion Week* 2010. Digital Collage. Reproduced in Jameel Prize catalogue 2011/ Courtesy of LTMH Gallery, New York

³⁰² See Canby, Sheila *Persian Painting*, British Museum, 1993

³⁰³ Illustration 2-18, Soody Sharifi, *Rooftop* 2010. Photograph from *Moslem Youth* series, 2/20. Accessed from soody-sharifi.com 2/4/12

³⁰⁴ Catalogue for the *Jameel Prize 2010*. Victoria and Albert Museum, 2011

³⁰⁵ From a *Sunday Times* article by Robert Shrimsley on 9/10/2011

³⁰⁶ Anahita Razmi has an Iranian father and a German mother. She is based in Germany and has studied at Akademie fur Bildende Kunst in Stuttgart, Pratt Institute in New York and Bauhaus Universitat of Weimar

³⁰⁷ Trisha Brown, born 1936—US Postmodernist dancer, choreographer and performance artist

³⁰⁸ See *Sunday Times* article by Robert Shrimsley, 9/10/2011

life contrasting with public display in modern society in the same way as the traditional Persian court life went on behind walls.³⁰⁹ This new 'fiction' can be seen as one aspect of the new 'Arab Spring' whereby the new demands for democracy and (sexual) equality march alongside demands for traditional Islamic and Middle Eastern values. Unlike Madi the work of Soody Sharifi is not directed at creating images that fit neatly into the Western cultural mainstream, or appeal directly to the Western viewer, with the possible exception of feminists. The works are intended to challenge both the Western and Middle Eastern male and integrate women into modern life and culture in a way that has not been possible in both West and East. Sharifi is not a hybrid, mimicking Western ways with the specific intent of integrating into Western society through the back-door. She is injecting a feminine and Eastern voice into an international society by applying her modern feminist viewpoint into a traditional world. She is therefore, (at least to the author) an altogether more complex artist than Madi. This, again, may be a product of time and history as we have seen with the contrast between Anwar Shemza and Aisha Khalid. Sharifi is the product of a post-colonial world where she is to some extent emancipated from, or can rise above, both traditional and modern values to try to create her own 'fiction' or reality. To that extent she is neither American nor Iranian.

Farhad Ahrania

We can encounter this international, trans-cultural positioning with another artist with a striking piece of work which clearly combines two cultures but also creates an image which is neither in the mainstream of Western nor Middle Eastern traditions. Farhad Ahrania's³¹⁰ career combines the similar sounding but very diverse locations of Sheffield and Shiraz. The latter gives Ahrania his Middle Eastern roots and the former, not only his experience of the West but also access to a local Western craft and technique. Sheffield is famed for its ability to use steel for knives and cutlery but also for crafting the more expensive, precious metal of silver. Sheffield was one of the original assay offices for the UK silver industry and until 1742 pure silver items were made in Britain. Thereafter a process was invented for fusing silver to copper and the Old Sheffield Plate industry started to develop and silver objects were crafted by hand from sheets of fused plate.

Ahrania has described his approach to making his art in a quotation from *Zendighi*, a catalogue by Rose Issa for a 2011 exhibition of Iranian art in Beirut. Issa describes the embroidery works of Ahrania which show how 'we are all stitched up' with threads connecting film stars to ancient Iranian monuments. In the films the Western actors like James Dean (Illustration 2-19)³¹¹, Greta Garbo and Montgomery Clift speak in Farsi, which has been dubbed into the film

³⁰⁹ Presentation by Soody Sharifi at *Jameel Prize Seminar* on 11/9/2011. Author's notes

³¹⁰ See Issa, Rose, *Zendighi*, Beyond Art Productions 2011. Page 18

³¹¹ Illustration 2-19, Farhad Ahrania, *Beautiful is the Silence of the Ruins*, 2011. Embroidery and needles on canvas/80x144cm. Reproduced in *Zendighi*, (Ed Rose Issa), Beyond Art Publications 2011

making them 'an integral part of Iranian or Lebanese history, belonging to us all.' The expatriate nature of Ahrania is described by him as follows in global terms:

'For me living in Iran has never guaranteed a state of detachment or indifference to events unfolding in the rest of the world. Various contradictory narratives, sounds and images seep into my imagination and consciousness. They become entangled with my perception, history and everyday reality. Naturally I can't help but weave my own set of meanings from what I see around me. I piece together tainted realisations and understandings, imbued with a sense of conspiracy, anxiety and unease, however false or twisted it may be.'³¹²

In order to bring together the local and the global Ahrania recognises the need to create some kind of new dialogue or, in his word, 'emancipation':

'The myriad diversity of Iranian perspectives on regional and global events has always bemused and intrigued me. I suppose the greatest challenge that faces my generation is how to reconcile our contemporaneity and modernity with a search for individual and collective truths. If and when we bother to reclaim everything that tends to seduce and manipulate our views, perhaps then a degree of emancipation will be achieved.'³¹³

Taking the influences on his work Ahrania works through to the underlying themes as 'I navigate my thoughts through the surface of the image I find myself deconstructing and re-assembling its subliminal undertones and intentions'. This search has led Ahrania to an image that is a combination of East and West, but one that differs from those produced before in either of those cultures-'Recently I have been carving metallic household utensils, forming my version of certain collective histories on to their surface. This is my attempt to dig out and save the lost spirit of all that might still be hovering beneath.'

'*The Dig, Composition No 3* (Illustration 2-20)³¹⁴ is part of a series which shows Middle Eastern archaeological and historical images on an Eastern shaped shovel, created as a piece of Old Sheffield Plate, thus linking Sheffield and Shiraz. This example shows the ruins of the pre-Islamic civilisation of Persepolis and others in the series feature the Assyrian monarch Khouros³¹⁵, known in the West as Cyrus the Great, and an Egyptian Pharaoh. It is this spade, the most basic of archaeological tools, that allows Ahrania the artist to recover his heritage. Instead of using a paintbrush to recreate an image of the past he is using Western technology to create the tool

³¹² Issa, Rose, *Zendighi*, Beyond Art Productions, 2011. Page 18

³¹³ Ibid Page 18

³¹⁴ Illustration 2-20, Farhad Ahrania, *The Dig, Composition No 1*, 2010. Silver plated copper/42x27x3cm. Illustrated in *Zendighi* (Ed Rose Issa), Beyond Art Publications 2011. A similar piece featuring the image of Cyrus the Great is owned by the author (No 3).

³¹⁵ Cyrus the Great (or Khouros or Kuris) was a sixth century Achaemenid Emperor who is credited with uniting the Medes and the Persians

that that is used to dig up the past for the modern viewer to see. The spade is therefore both the tool and the image.

The word 'emancipation' is important to the discussion we are undertaking on alienation and hybridity. It creates a broader approach which rises above a debate over just two cultures, lifting the dialogue to a different level. Ahrania is not concerned with promoting either the East or the West but of using their traditions to create something different which can be used by both. This is not intended as a 'third way' or just an alternative to the two different cultures but as guiding to a world where traditions are respected in a way where there is an evolution to something more global or universal.

Neda Dana-Haeri

Dana-Haeri³¹⁶ came to England after her father died when she was sixteen and has lived here for thirty years without going back to Iran, her birthplace. In common with many expatriates her family has had international connections, her father was partly educated in France, and she completed her education in England with a degree in psychology. Her art education includes continued life drawing and printmaking courses. In terms of influences she now has few Iranian or Islamic belongings in her home (unlike some expatriate Middle Eastern artists whose homes look like cultural museums).³¹⁷

In a recent interview³¹⁸ she has said that she does want to go back to see Iran after all this time. This is not because she feels guilty about not having been back but because 'it seems right to do so'. Dana-Haeri's work is, she claims, not 'marketing led', a reference to the then current debate in the *Art Newspaper* (August 2009) about 'Orientalist flourishes'³¹⁹ or artists that use decorative calligraphy, political images or the more obvious Middle Eastern symbols (veils, mosques, arches, deserts) to appeal to Western Orientalist buyers. Despite the continued life drawing classes Dana-Haeri's work is often abstract and rarely allows any figurative images.

³¹⁶ The general information and quotes from the artist come from meetings with the author during the course of 2009 and 2010

³¹⁷ Dana-Haeri does admit to some Eastern possessions, 'I do have a Persian rug, doesn't everybody?' but she has pictures by an English artist friend and a Picasso print of a bull, and has recently travelled to Barcelona for the Picasso/Velazquez Exhibition.'

³¹⁸ Interview with Neda Dana -aeri 5/11/2010

³¹⁹ See article by Ann Summers Cocks in the *Art Newspaper* September 2010 where she notes a tendency for current Middle Eastern artists to add 'Orientalist flourishes' to add to the commercial appeal of their work.

Her inspiration comes from the Sufi tradition and her work is deeply rooted in its spirit. Whilst still deeply committed to Sufism, she also talks naturally of Zen, Dao and the 'ying and the yang', as she sees these movements as compatible with the true nature of Sufism, without there being any direct connection. In this she accords with William Chittick in his introduction to Sufism where he states:

'Rather than trying to domesticate Sufism by giving it a more familiar label, we should recognise at the outset that there is something in the Sufi tradition that abhors domestication and definition. It may be helpful to suggest that that Sufism has family resemblance with other traditions-such as Kabbalah, Christian mysticism, Yoga, Vedanta or Zen-but making this connection does not help us to get closer to Sufism itself'.³²⁰

This broader approach, combined with an essential personal base, is not an uncommon one with expatriate artists who, on leaving their homeland, retain much of its influences. They then, rather than adopt all the tradition and culture of their host nation, pursue a more internationalist or global approach to their work and philosophy. For them it is important to retain their local religious link and faith, as well as identifying similarities with other faiths. It is often the interplay of the homeland, host and universal influences that inspire creativity in their work. In an attempt to get better understanding for Middle Eastern art Dana-Haeri has curated exhibitions, notably in the Samuel Osborne Gallery in the East-End as a way of linking with the newer British (YBA) artists of Hoxton.

Dana-Haeri does not prepare drawings or sketches for her work and there is no 'painted out image' under the surface. This gives an immediacy and impact to her work that is Zen-like in its impact as the picture below illustrates:

'From White to Red' (Illustration 2-21³²¹) shows simply the way in which the white shows up the black and the black shows up the white. There is no red although this is part of the 'crimson' series. It is the overall spirit or 'essence of the image that is important and the title comes after the image is created according to the impact it has on the artist.

For the Sufi their path is to lead them to union with God, but at the same time God is still within the man. This is the ying and yang image, where the white dot is within the black shape and the black dot is within the white shape, a common Sufi image that also appears in other philosophies such as Zen Buddhism. God's attributes of mercy and wrath are combined within

³²⁰ See William Chittick *Sufism* Oneworld Publications 2000. Page 2

³²¹ Illustration 2-21, Neda Dana-Haeri, *White on Red/Davazdah Kargaa*, 2009. Acrylic on canvas/120x90cm. Exhibited at Sistani Gallery 2009

him in the same way as the image balances the white and the black. As a religious philosophy Sufism has been developed by its teachers and writers and the image by Dana-Haeri *Khanjar-e Aagaah* (*Assassin*) (Illustration 2-22³²²) shows how a created image links back to a specific Sufic tradition. Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi (1155-1191) was a writer and teacher who was executed by al-Malik al-Zahir (son of Saladin). Suhrawardi was a mystic who drew on Zoroastrian and Platonic ideas. He developed the complex idea of pure immaterial light that unfolds from the 'light of lights' in a descending order of ever diminishing intensity and through complex interaction gives rise to a 'horizontal' array of lights, similar to Plato's forms, that governs the species of mundane reality.

The image created by Dana-Haeri is large, quite simple, and basically abstract with dark grey bars against a lighter grey background. The bars are superimposed on a large red featherlike shape which is floating behind (or perhaps in front of them if the viewer is behind) and apparently bleeding into them as it escapes, or is trapped by them. The only other colour comes from some small flecks of green throughout the picture. How is it that this work, which has no calligraphy or figurative images of domes, arches, palms or veils, is nonetheless deeply imbued with the culture, history and literature of the Middle East and Iran but also has references to the politics and problems of today? What is it that makes this image different from a visually similar Western image such as the five bar *Little Spanish Prison* (Illustration 2-23)³²³ with its 'vertical stripes, yellow and white, with its lone horizontal red slash, a bar vivifying the whole' by Robert Motherwell³²⁴ which evokes both prison and freedom?

Dana-Haeri provided a personal note for the Janet Rady/Sistani exhibition that says her art is 'inspired by Persian Sufism, particularly the works of Attar, Mavlawi (Rumi) and Hafiz'.³²⁵ The picture we are discussing comes from a series *Aghi-e Sorkh* or *Crimson Mind* which is influenced by Suhrawardi's 'philosophy of illumination where light and colour are a continuum of the manifestation of physical and metaphysical bodies. Here vision and awareness transcend their linear limitations to reach an abstract world subtly imbued with dissolving and emanating colour.'

³²² Illustration 2-22, Neda Dana-Haeri. *Assasin/Khanjar-e-Aaghee*, 2009. Oil on canvas/120x90cm. Property of the author.

³²³ Illustration 2-23, Robert Motherwell, *Little Spanish Prison*, 1941-44, oil on canvas/60x43.5cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

³²⁴ Robert Motherwell 1915-1991. US abstract expressionist artist.

³²⁵ Introduction by Janet Rady who curated the exhibition of work by Dana Haeri and Feyredoun Ave at the Sistani Galley in November 2010

At one level these words help by confirming what we can see in the work. It is basically abstract and the colours do appear to emanate from, or dissolve into, the canvas. The feather, through the bleeding (an emotive word as it describes blood and not just the physical dissolving of one colour into another) can be said to 'transcend' the 'linear limitations' of the bars (another emotive word as it evokes prisons and not just vertical lines of colour).

We need to know what is meant by 'inspired by Hafiz' or 'influenced by Suhrawardi' or what is seen by the eyes of the artist and not just what is immediately apparent to the viewer. We want to know what lies behind the words 'Persian Sufism' and the names of Hafiz, Attar and Rumi. To distil the essentials of Persian Sufism J.T.P Brujin claims that 'Islamic mysticism or Sufism has found its finest expression in the classical poetry of Persia' and the 'most creative period was up to the end of the fifteenth century'. Brujinn believes that he is able to show a relationship between Sufism and literature and that he is able to illustrate this through 'four main genres of the tradition: the epigram, the homiletic poem, love poetry and symbolic narrative'. He then goes on to review the 'mystical epigrams, poems of abstinence, poetry of love and the teachers and storytellers'.³²⁶ Hafiz, Attar and Rumi are the best known practitioners of this art.

The viewer of the Dana-Haeri image is told that it is closely linked to Persian mysticism as related by the three leading Persian Sufi poets. Presumably Dana-Haeri believes, or hopes, that she is in some way revealing, or explaining, something of her own interest or understanding of Persian mysticism to the viewer, not in words but in an image. She must, therefore, believe that it is possible to do so and maybe that Persian mysticism can better be communicated by images rather than text. The viewer may then be left with the sense that the image in some way can represent the Persian mystic tradition. Faced, perhaps, with similar images in the future he may be reminded, not just with the line or the colour, of the Persian mystic tradition. The viewer may already have an image of Persian mysticism in his mind from what he has seen before and this Dana-Haeri image may amend, enhance, change or otherwise influence his received understanding. The previous received image may be calligraphic, a photograph or film of whirling dervishes, a geometric pattern or a television clip of an anti-Western riot. If this is the case the viewer will be encouraged by the Dana-Haeri image to think in a different way about Persian mysticism. Arabic (or Farsi) calligraphy, tourist pictures or decorated mosques may create perceptions of something that is remote, different or challenging to the Western viewer but the Dana-Haeri image may lead to a view of Persian mysticism that is more subjective.

³²⁶ See Brujin de, J T P, *Persian Sufi Poetry*, Curzon 1997. The short quotes in this paragraph are all from the Introduction.

Of course the viewer is probably influenced by knowing that the artist is Dana-Haeri who is an Iranian expatriate and who is inspired by Persian mysticism and the Sufi poets (in the same way as the viewer of a Motherwell picture may know of his interest in the Spanish Civil War and interpret his images in the light of that received knowledge). Mary Ann Caws does so in her biography of Robert Motherwell³²⁷ when she reflects on Motherwell's other geographic interest in France, but then concludes 'The Oriental ways of thought, including a consciousness of Zen Philosophy and Oriental calligraphy, were essential for much of his vision and technique. He was more universalist than simply Francophile.'³²⁸). It could be, however, that the viewer of the Dana-Haeri image does not know of her background and is left with just a feeling, sensation or experience after seeing the image, which he cannot immediately relate to Persian mysticism. Nevertheless this subjective act, sensation or memory may, for some, be the equivalent or a form of Sufi experience, albeit unrecognised, if Dana-Haeri has been successful. If, however, the viewer is not left with some kind of Sufi experience, even if unrecognised, then either Dana-Haeri has failed as a communicator or, somewhat unlikely in the light of what we know of the individual, then the artist herself lacks a deeper understanding of Persian mysticism.

The reference to Suhrawardi intensifies the link that Dana-Haeri has with her Persian culture and heritage. The link is not just confined to the Sufi poets but encompasses a complex and controversial Persian philosopher. Again to give a brief summary of a profound subject we can draw on an essay *Suhrawardi on Knowledge and the Experience of Light* by Hossein Zia³²⁹. In this essay we learn that Suhrawardi was a thirteenth century Persian philosopher who developed the idea that:

'All existent entities are depicted as light and may be abstract, or non-corporeal or bodily. Such entities differ in terms of their luminosity, intensity or other attributes that may be perceived by the senses or apprehended intellectually based on the rules of inference, including the deductive and the intuitive.'³³⁰

The importance of Suhrawardi, however, goes beyond his theories and teaching to the personal and political repercussions of his philosophy. We also know that the way in which he died (or was murdered, executed or assassinated depending on different accounts) was the result of

³²⁷ Caws, Mary-Ann, *Robert Motherwell, With Pen and Brush*, Reaktion Books 2003

³²⁸ Ibid Page 35

³²⁹ Kapstein, Matthew T (Ed), *The Presence of Light*, University of Chicago, 2004. Zia Hossein, Page 31

³³⁰ Ibid Page 26

actions, which may have been reluctant, by the son of Saladin³³¹, al-Malik al-Zahir. The reason for Suhrawardi's demise may not be entirely clear now but it has been speculated that it may have had something to do with his requirement that a 'Natural Ruler of the universe' is one who 'knows philosophy and perseveres in thanking and sanctifying the Light of Lights'. This individual has been 'given aid from the Highest Heaven-and his dreams and inspirations will reach their uppermost, perfect pinnacle', a doctrine that military or hereditary rulers can find hard to accept.

What of this can we see or intuit from Dana-Haeri's image? Although we have noted the image is not totally abstract. A reasonable guess is that the dark grey bars are prison bars, and that the oozing red represents the blood of the assassination. The concept of light may be conveyed by the contrast between the light and dark greys and the idea of the spirit of the philosopher transcending the iron bars of a prison can come from the free-floating, although battered, wing or feather enabling the idea of the importance of light living on in the late works of the Sufi poets, admired by Dana-Haeri. One speculation could be that the feather recalls the Al-Attar tale *The Conference of the Birds*³³² which recounts the search by the birds, led by the hoopoe, for their spiritual leader, the Simurgh.

There is also perhaps another dimension of the Suhrawardi philosophy of Light in the work of Dana-Haeri that moves beyond just an attempt to convey a past cultural tradition. Another writer, Matthew T Kapstein, has speculated on the possibility that the use of light in Islamic, Christian and Buddhist traditions creates a common, or universal, religious experience. Even though he has some serious doubts as to the possibility of such a conclusion he does create some space for something akin to a universal experience in the following extract:

'Despite the pronouncedly constructivist-contextualisation orientation of these assertions [that the interpretation of religious experiences can be related in terms of local experience and tradition] some concessions to perennialism nevertheless may be in order. Careful phenomenological characterisation, psychometric classification and the like may be reasonably compared across cultural and historical boundaries, Moreover we may aspire to identify experiential capacities of human agents that approach universality, although the capacities in question may seldom be actualised universally, or in precisely similar ways. One

³³¹ Saladin is the Westernised version of the name of the Kurdish born Salah Ad-Din Yusuf Ibn Ayyub, 1137-1193, who led the defence against the Christian Crusaders.

³³² See Attar, Farid Ud-Din *The Conference of the Birds*, Continuum 2000

such capacity may well be the ability to evaluate our experiences and their contents religiously, just as we have the capacity for their aesthetic evaluation'.³³³

Dana-Haeri has spoken in an interview³³⁴ of her view that there are connections between Sufism, Zen and Dao and that there are no 'contradictions on God'. In some of her work the colours are left to run, so creating a more spontaneous, Zen-like, image, unlike the more structured and organised traditional Islamic images. She would not object to being given some sort of universalist label, although the sources of her inspiration are often specific to the Middle East, despite her long residence in the UK for most of her life. Local and universal worlds sit easily with her, as they do with many of the expatriate Middle Eastern artists. The image, *Khanjar-e Aaghaahee*, that she has created, with its contrasts of light and colour, the literary and religious evocations and the possibility of both figurative and abstract interpretations can, and does, provide an image that can be the source of contemplation for both the West and Far East, as well as the Middle East.

Equally, she accepts that her work cannot just be seen as the representation or communication of a historic past. Any work by an Iranian artist which could be interpreted as showing prison bars or bloody, political or religious executions will always have modern political overtones. It may be a long time since the death of Suhrawardi but his spirit lives on and there are hints in *Khanjar-e Aaghaahee* of rebellion and dissent from the current regime. Green has become the colour of the young Iranian protest movement, particularly after the doubts about the validity of the 2010 elections when protesters wore green headbands and scarves and waved green flags. It would be hard not to see the green flecks throughout the *Assassin* work of Dana-Haeri as having some current and reverberant dimensions, coming from an image representing the light of knowledge and the attempts, and failure, to stifle ideas that may be revolutionary in political terms.

Khanjar-e Aaghaahee is a complex picture. It is not a political image as such but it does have a political message. It is not merely a celebration of Iranian history, Sufism or Persian history, although it does attempt to convey something of their ethos. It is not a religious painting even though there is something of a universalist approach to religious experience. The level at which it most succeeds is as a reflective piece which encourages the viewer to absorb the light and the dark, the lightness of the feather and the shocking presence of the blood. It is these that remain in the mind as much as a precise poetic text, religious experience or political statement. The

³³³ Kapstein, Matthew T. *The Presence of Light*, University of Chicago, 2004. Pages 265-287, outlines tentative conclusions on the specific and universal roles of light in religious and aesthetic experience.

³³⁴ Interview with the author, November 2009

viewer is left to find his own way to the connection and conviction of the links with Sufism and Suhrawardi's concepts of light and being, which are the initial inspiration of the artist.

The image, therefore implicitly contains references to the violence of what was perceived to be an assassination and the theories of Suhrawardi about light and dark. There is no direct figurative link in the image but an overall essence or spirit, from which the artist can bring back a cultural memory as the image can also invoke the religious idea of the self being annihilated in the Divine through total union.

In writing about the poetry of Hafiz of Shiraz Peter Avery has discussed Suhrawardi, to whose teachings Hafiz was attracted:

'It is thus that Suhrawardi answers the question often asked about whether or not in Sufism the self is to be completely annihilated in the Divine. Suhrawardi's contention is that ultimately the Divine is always implicit with the self and once the latter is released from entrapment with mundane matters it then becomes part of the realm of the Divine Light. It is interesting to note the age old Iranian pre-occupation with light, in the ancient Iranian faith the seat of goodness in opposition to Darkness, the abode of Evil. Those who are acquainted with Iranians will have noticed how on entering a darkened room, at perhaps twilight, they will immediately ask for the lights to be put on: the Iranian desire for light is still endemic' ³³⁵

The emphasis on light is embedded very deeply in the Iranian/Persian heritage. The ancient *Bundahishn* text tells how the mythical King, Gayomart, was created. Not only was he 'four medium reeds in height as in breadth' but he was 'round and shining as the sun'. According to the *Bundahishn* his sperm was:

'fashioned from the light and brightness of the sky' so he could pass on his seed to his children. When he died his sperm was 'in two parts, purified by the rays of the sun and entrusted for safe keeping to the deity Neryosang and in one part fell on the earth and was received by Spandarmad, his creator and mother. His seed slowly grew a rhubarb plant, the stem of which developed into the first human couple'. ³³⁶

³³⁵ See Avery, Peter *The Collected Works of Hafiz of Shiraz*, Archetype, 2007. Page 11

³³⁶ *Bundahishn* is the encyclopaedic collection of writings on Zoroastrian cosmology, dating from the 8th and 9th centuries. See www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/84625/bundahishn accessed 30/11/2009

In this way it is easy to see why Dana-Haeri believes that artists do have a highly developed 'cultural memory' and cites the example of Farhad Moshiri³³⁷ who paints monumental jars. For Iranians they may recall childhood associations with food and drink; Dana-Haeri can recall such jars in the cellar of her grandmother. The Moshiri jars also have archaeological associations which take Iranians further back into their dimly, or unremembered, pasts. Dana-Haeri has a painting exhibited at the Levantine Cultural Center in September 2010 entitled *Cultural Memory* (Illustration 2-24³³⁸). Though abstract it is possible to sense the sun or light breaking through and the blue evoking a sense of the sky, images that could well come from her Iranian heritage. There is a sense of something which is not fully perceived or represented but which is there, within the memory, psyche or past of the artist. What may have existed, or been important in the past, is still there even though it is not fully described or represented.

A recent small private exhibition in December 2010 was held in London to mark the celebration of the one thousand year anniversary of the Persian epic *Shahnameh: the Persian Book of Kings* by Abolqasem Ferdowsi which relates the pre-Islamic myths concerning the great hero Rostam. Four artists, all Iranian expatriates, produced works based on the saga, all in totally different styles. Afsooon created screen prints of complex figurative collages of the 'more optimistic' episodes, Farnaz produced sound installations based on abstract images and Yassi Golshani a fascinating set of boxes containing newspaper cuttings or papier mache models beneath calligraphic text on glass lids. Although for all the artists there is clearly a strong cultural memory based on the saga, the approach is in no way a hybridised standard, each artist having her own very distinctive style and approach.

Neda Dana-Haeri has used her usual abstract approach to illustrate one of the episodes from the saga. Her image *Zal and the Simurgh* (not illustrated here as it was shown in a private exhibition) comes from the start of the Ferdowsi poem which describes the birth of Zal, the father of Rostam. At his birth Zal was left by his father, Sam, to die exposed on a mountainside because of his white hair and mottled skin but the baby was found by the fabulous magical bird, the Simurgh, which rescued him and brought him up. As Dick Davies has written:

'The implication is that there is something demonic about Zal's appearance, and indeed there is only one other character in the *Shahnameh* who is described as having white hair and a mottled skin, the White Demon of Mazanderan who Rostam later kills in single combat, and who almost kills him. Once one has registered the similarity of the descriptions of the demon's

³³⁷ Farhad Moshiri, born 1936 in Shiraz, lives and works in Teheran and is well known for his monumental pictures of Middle Eastern storage jars.

³³⁸ Illustration 2-24, Neda Dana-Haeri *Cultural Memory 2010*, Oil on canvas/ 100 x 140cm. Courtesy of the Artist.

appearance and that of Rostam's father, it is hard not to see this struggle as an Oedipal reversal of a common motif of the Shahnamah, the death of the sons through the actions of their fathers'.³³⁹

The Simurgh returns Zal to his father but remains as a protector. Rostam is able to call on its magical powers at the times of extreme peril. This continuing relationship forms the basis of Dana-Haeri's image. The background is turquoise representing the exoticism and magic of the Simurgh. A white crescent symbolising Zal³⁴⁰ is upheld, supported and uplifted by another darker crescent representing the Simurgh. The different coloured crescents facing different directions shows that they are different species but together they form a satisfying form, almost a unified whole. That they do not form a full circle, and there is a small rip, tear or zip in the picture which shows that there are stresses and strains to be experienced. This is not an image of an Islamic deity but a powerful pagan past, etched deep in the mind of the artist.

It is hard to see this representation, and those of the others in the exhibition, as those of Middle Eastern hybrids scratching in some 'third space' to create an image that communicates in a sotto voce, 'subaltern way' with the West. The techniques historically first employed in the West, collage, sound installation, abstraction and found objects have been appropriated and put to use to evoke the deep seated cultural memory so that it can be communicated both to Middle Eastern, Western and other viewers. Although the heritage may not be common with that of a Western viewer the 'gaze' is direct and in no ways sideways or implied. There is no sense of inferiority about the quality and depth of the tradition. A similar approach could be used by Western artists illustrating the stories of Hercules. Most societies have some kind of creation myth but the use of it in the present day, employing techniques different to the original does not limit their work to an ethnic or indigenous category. Similarly the use of these techniques and approaches should not lead the viewer to regard the works as 'hybrid' as the cultural memory which is the source of their inspiration is in no way adulterated; quite the reverse, for it is the celebration something which is unique and pure. There is no attempt, for example, to use the story of Rostam to evoke those of mythical Western heroes or draw any message of multi-culturalism.

Rostam himself, like many other mythical national heroes is seen as fighting against the evil powers of magic employed against the nation that he is committed to protect, even though he is able to call on the magical support of the Simurgh. The demons against which he fights are

³³⁹ Davis, Dick (Translator) *Abolqasem Ferdowsi, Rostam-Tales of Love and War*, Penguin Classics, 2009. Pages XII-XIII

³⁴⁰ Zal was the father of Rostam and famous for his white hair.

seen as uncivilised and Zabiholla Safa³⁴¹ has suggested that the demonic enemies represent the indigenous peoples whom the Iranians conquered. Safa goes on to suggest that the Iranian religion was opposed to magic and the *Shahnameh* rarely ascribes magic powers to Iranians, with exception of Zal and Rostam, who use their connection with the Simurgh in the interests of their Iranian homeland. Dick Davies³⁴² notes the irony that throughout the classical period the West saw Iran as the home of magic, despite the Zoroastrian condemnation of it. In his view magic and the ability to predict the future seems to be something whose origins and expertise are always placed elsewhere and notes that the word 'magic' comes from Magi, the word for a Zoroastrian priest- 'as the Greeks and Romans looked to Persia for its (magic) origin so the Persians looked to India'.

The story of Rostam, so deeply preserved by modern Iranians, is therefore analogous to those of many nations, including those in the West, who wish to show how they have been able to establish themselves despite the evil magic of their enemies. Modern representations of this story could be said to be simply part of a worldwide tradition of mankind asserting itself against 'the other', no different in the East as to in the West'. In Dana-Haeri's image of *Zal and the Simurgh* we see simply another evocation, albeit expressed in abstract terms familiar to Western viewer (and now also familiar to the Middle Eastern viewer), of how to combat the evil powers of the demonic enemies of the nation and the state through an alliance with a friendly, if somewhat supernatural, power. The Greek heroes with their supporters amongst the gods would recognise the nature of that alliance.

Hayv Kahrahman

While the art of Hussein Madi might have some degree of predictability, that of Hayv Kahraman has beaten its own complex path through the world. For some expatriate artists, like her, their journey has taken them a long way from their original roots and they have absorbed a wide variety of experiences and other cultures. Their work therefore only contains elements of their Middle East origins alongside other influences. Hayv Kahraman³⁴³ was born in Baghdad in 1981 but her family fled to Sweden some ten years later by way of Ethiopia, Yemen and Germany. The Swedish stay lasted ten years with much time in a refugee camp at the start. At 22 Kahraman went to study graphic art and web design in Florence where she met her American husband, moving in 2007 to his hometown of Phoenix, Arizona.

³⁴¹ Cited in *Abolqasem Ferdowsi-Rostam, Tales of Love and War*, Dick Davis, Penguin Classic 2007. Page XXIII

³⁴² Ibid Page XXIII/Note 1

³⁴³ For a summary of the career and work of Hayv Kahraman see *Canvas Magazine* Volume 5/Edition 6- November/December 2009

Despite such diverse experience Kahraman believes Iraq is never far from her mind and is still embedded in her work, even though it might not be totally apparent from her product. 'As an adult I feel this guilt so being categorised as a Middle Eastern artist makes me feel as though I'm trying to make it right. I feel like I was robbed of fully experiencing Iraqi culture'.³⁴⁴ There are misgivings about living in the US but she was surprised to discover on visiting Iraq that she could not relate to current Iraqi culture or people. At that moment it became clear to her that she was an outsider no matter where she went, saying 'When I went to Iraq I feel like a tourist. In Sweden I am a tourist and here [in the USA] I am definitely a tourist'.³⁴⁵

The result of this alien displacement has imbued Kahraman's work with a wide geographic appeal in the Western world (within the last year she has had exhibitions in Germany, New York, San Francisco, Toronto and was part of the Saatchi *Unveiled*' exhibition³⁴⁶ in London). She claims that 'The merging of cultures in my art is a search for identity. I never had a home. Well I had one but it got destroyed'.³⁴⁷ She has devised a signature of a red circle above a red square that depicts words in Arab calligraphy that translate as the 'inner travels of Hayv', thus illustrating her comment that 'My work is an outlet. I don't possess one language perfectly so I have all these works floating in my head, [all] in different languages'.³⁴⁸

Some of Kahraman's paintings go down the well-trodden path of examining women in society but it is not confined to the specific circumstances of women in the Middle East. She was shocked, for example, by American women who had no aspirations beyond 'getting married, having kids and a house, owning a car and having a dog.' This inspired her *Marionettes* series where women are manipulated by strings held by an invisible puppet master – or mistress (Illustration 2-25)³⁴⁹. What is most interesting about her approach is that she is as critical of the way in which the suburban wives of Phoenix are manipulated and controlled, just as she was of the way in which women in the Middle East are subjugated. For her it is not just a matter of whether or not to veil, it is the extent to which women's lives and appearance are controlled.

³⁴⁴ *Canvas Magazine*. Volume 5/Edition 6, Nov/Dec, 2009.

³⁴⁵ Ibid

³⁴⁶ See *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*, Saatchi Gallery, Booth Clibborn Editions 2009

³⁴⁷ *Canvas Magazine*, Volume 5/Edition 6, Nov/Dec, 2009

³⁴⁸ Ibid

³⁴⁹ Illustration 2-25, Hayv Kahraman *Combing* 2008, Oil on linen/172x104CM. Reproduced in *Canvas Magazine* 11-12/2009, Courtesy of the artist

Like some Middle Eastern artists Kahraman freely admits to being political but in her case it is channelled into a wider feminist cause admitting:

‘Political issues-specifically gender-based are heavily present in my work. I feel a necessity or even a sense of duty to be involved in these issues. Having fled Iraq during the war I’m constantly faced with the fact that I am not in my country of origin and while I live a safe and pleasant life in the West my fellow countryman and woman suffer from unspeakable wars and injustices. As a result I’ve inherited an appetite for rebellion that exclusively takes form in my work’.³⁵⁰

Kahrahman’s feminist stance shows the way in which it is expected that ‘malleable flesh can be altered’ and that ‘because beautiful is seen as good there is a striving for perfection’ and results in ‘excessive grooming, shaving and getting rid of hair’,³⁵¹ sharing a pre-occupation with female hair with artists such as Frieda Kahlo and Mona Hatoum. The feminist strand has been given new life by the variety of influences that have been absorbed and acknowledged. From the Middle East there is admiration, to the point of veneration, of Shirin Neshat³⁵² and in an interview with Ana Finel Honigman for *Artslant*³⁵³ in 2010 Kahraman calls Neshat ‘Her hero’, the but this is only one contemporary influence. She acknowledges, in addition, the impact of Western feminist artists such as Kara Walker and Amy Cutler and literary influences such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler. Accounting for her surrealist orientation and floating figures she is prepared to state that:

‘I grew up as a surrealist believing in the power of the subconscious and dreams. The outer world didn’t matter or at least that is what I believed. As my work has matured I still utilise ‘automatic drawing’ in the process of creating a painting. It’s a technique considered to be a gateway to the subconscious mind by none other than Andre Breton. It entails a drawing process that has no predetermined thought or reflection’.³⁵⁴

The way in which this is applied in the figurative work of Kahraman is to ‘translate the brutality to a more tolerable image and this is where the myth and symbolism come in’. The Frey Norris

³⁵⁰ *Canvas Magazine*, Volume 5/Edition 6, Nov/Dec, 2009

³⁵¹ Presentation at *Jameel Prize Seminar*, Victoria and Albert Museum 11/9/2011

³⁵² Shirin Neshat was born in Iran in 1957. She is resident in New York and is widely known for her work in film and photography.

³⁵³ *Artslant* 2010

³⁵⁴ *Ibid*

introduction³⁵⁵ to its exhibition of Kahraman in 2010 identifies its *Denounced Ideal* installation where the central figure sits in an allegorical Platonic cave gesturing upwards towards escape from the golden threads that bind her. The pattern repeated in the strings echoes the Fibonacci³⁵⁶ sequence that appears biologically in the heads of grown sunflowers.

From the UK and late 19th century graphic design comes the inspiration of Aubrey Beardsley's³⁵⁷ flat and macabre compositions. From Japan come the hairstyles of the women, while textile patterns are derived from Persian miniatures. The construction of the paintings owes much to the Italian Renaissance, with the use of rabbit skin glue to prepare the canvas. The female face and pointed chin remind some of da Vinci's Madonnas and Ghirlandaio's ladies in waiting. Putting all these influences together prompts Kahrahman to remind us that 'Our world is so cosmopolitan, everything is merged and I think people recognise that unity in my work'.³⁵⁸

Like other artists Kahrahman has been a contender for the 2011 Jameel prize and in her presentation she admitted that she 'felt no need for background with many of her figures as she prepared for them to float without the need for context'. In this way she is able to 'abstract the figures from everyday life'.

Elsewhere the influence of Art Nouveau has been notable. As with Parastou Forouhar the work initially appears decorative and she also uses repetitive images recalling the geometric tradition of Middle Eastern decoration, although on subsequent viewing the brutality and criticism within the work become clear. The 'femininity' which can be read into the decorative appearance is used to draw in the viewers but, once they are involved, the artist hopes that they understand the internationalised political message that is the self declared mission of Kahrahman. In order to keep the artist and viewer involved and 'part of the story' Kahrahman insists on creating her patterns by hand so the viewer is not put off by mechanistic presentation.

Elements of Middle Eastern culture cannot easily be taken out of the artist but have to be seen alongside other concerns such as feminism, manipulation and corporeal identity and

³⁵⁵ Frey Norris Gallery *Kahraman*, 2010

³⁵⁶ Fibonacci is the name given to Leonardo of Pisa, who in 1202 proposed a mathematical sequence of numbers that can be applied to many natural and human events, such as the biology of plants and animals.

³⁵⁷ Aubrey Beardsley, 1872-1898, English artist well known for his black and white drawings emphasising the grotesque, decadent and erotic

³⁵⁸ *Canvas Magazine*, Volume 5/Edition 4, Nov/Dec 2009

placement. The use of female dancers in *Meylevi Sema* (Illustration 2-26)³⁵⁹ would not be usual in a traditional Sufi 'whirling dervish' image. The bird's feet recall the ancient Persian story of the *Conference of the Birds* in the epic poem by Al-Attar³⁶⁰. In the *Sacrifice* (Illustration 2-27)³⁶¹ series of paintings used in the Saatchi Gallery exhibition the role of the lamb in the Middle East is combined with two figures who would look at home in the Middle Ages courts of either Renaissance Italy or Japan. Kahraman has brought together the topics of gender, abuse of power and revolution in the following manner:

'I chose to portray a story of determined women taking conscious action on their current and future destructive social paradigms; 'inequality and injustice'. The paintings present an analogy of the sacrifices that women make for the sin of being the weaker sex. This is disproportionate to the sacrifices that men make for their sin of power abuse. The lamb is regarded as a pure and innocent animal that in this series draws a parallel with the female sex. The white lamb is an ironic visualisation of the significant sacrifice (in orthodox Jewish code) for human sin. The carefully calculated slit of the throat of the animal is a metaphor of finally conquering misogyny by solid female assertiveness. A source for these paintings is the controversial narrative of Judith beheading Holofernes³⁶², this is the biblical story where Judith contradicts one of the precious stereotypes of our culture, whilst actively empowering the feminine. The violence in my paintings is not to be interpreted as the way in which women should act but rather as a voice of the upcoming revolution'.³⁶³

Kahrahman is very conscious of her position as an emigrant and has talked of her 'figures being cut off with scissors'³⁶⁴ and many of her works recall the homeland from which she departed many years ago. Floating in space her figures, are often 'disassembled with the broken

³⁵⁹ Illustration 2-26, Hayv Kahraman *Meylevi Sema 1*, 2007. Sumi ink, acrylic and watercolour on paper/58.5x109.5cm. Reproduced in *Canvas Magazine* 11-12/2009, courtesy of the artist.

³⁶⁰ Al Attar 1142-1220, Sufi poet, author of *The Conference of the Birds*.

³⁶¹ Illustration 2-27, Hayv Kahraman *Sacrifice/Flaying the Lamb*, 2007. Oil on linen/173x106.5cm. Reproduced, courtesy of the artist in the catalogue for 'Unveiled-Art from the Middle East' at the Saatchi Gallery/Booth Clibborn Publications, 2009.

³⁶² Frequently illustrated story from the *Apocrypha*, which was seen as showing freedom from tyranny. Artists include Botticelli, Caravaggio, Tintoretto, Cranach

³⁶³ Catalogue for Frey Norris exhibition *Hayv Kahraman* 2010

³⁶⁴ *Jameel Prize Presentation*, Victoria and Albert Museum, 11/9/2011. Author's notes

fragments occurring when the link with the local is broken'.³⁶⁵ In common with other artists there is an element of longing and the cultural memory of distant Middle Eastern history, as with her work depicting a Syrian lion hunt of around 1650 BC where 'the sympathy is with the lions rather than the monarch who is hunting them'. Other images show a deck of cards being scattered with each card being separated from the pack but the usual mirror image on the cards is slightly altered to show the emigrant status, with the top different to the bottom. There is also a 'semiotic relation with maps' which are seen both as 'objects of power' and as 'creating designs' as viewed 'in the Mercator projection'. A recent series shows torsoes (Illustration 2-28)³⁶⁶ with no limbs as 'vessels' made from 'wilting boxing gloves and old shoe lasts that have been burned and charred'.

Whilst Kahraman clearly retains a cultural memory of her Middle East heritage this is far from the only influence in her work. The complexity of Kahraman's life and experience has led to an art that it would be very difficult to predict and can more easily be located in a broad internationalism rather than a specific Middle Eastern context. In some of her images there is little no specific Middle East reference and her politicised femininity needs to be seen in an international setting and not just that of the Middle East. To the extent that categories can be applied she is definitely an expatriate, but as much from everywhere as from the Middle East. Even though the 'Middle East' label can, and is, applied to her work, there must be a feeling that this is done, in part, because of the prior knowledge of her background, and that any such tag is not fully adequate to encompass the multiplicity of experiences and influences in her background. Given the variety of her images and their political and social aggressiveness it would be very hard to categorise Kahrahman as a simple hybrid trying to insinuate herself into Western society; rather she is a complex individual who is as concerned with creating her own world by challenging both East and West.

Rashad Selim

If any emigrant artist might have been expected to move away from their Iraqi origins it could be Rashad Selim. Born in Sudan to a German mother and an Iraqi diplomat father, he studied at Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad and St Martins School of Art. Widely travelled he has worked in various countries as a teacher, designer photographer and Adviser to the UN and other NGOs.

³⁶⁵ *Jameel Prize Presentations*, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2011

³⁶⁶ Illustration 2-28, Hayv Kahraman *Torsoes* 2010. Gypsum, wilted leather, burlap/36x22x14cm. From *Fragmented States*. www.hayvkahraman.com (accessed 2/4/2012)

He was part of the international crew on the Ra reed boat expedition in 1977³⁶⁷. He now lives in Kent but has described his life in the following way:

‘I have been in a near constant state of travel and adjustment to new surroundings of well rooted realities and find in the small raft of my creativity with its accumulation and impressions both the passport and the gift to cross the void with. Nurtured by two cultures, Eastern and Western I find a transient third of travel and the fruits of experience of the journey.’³⁶⁸

Nevertheless he started with and has maintained strong emotional links to the Middle East. He has a sense of the history of his native Iraq so he feels:

‘Our present Iraq situation is the direct result of the prodigal of two forces at odds and similar as the proverbial father and son. One is the massive alliance bristling with collective technical genius spawned in the (we like to think) Mesopotamian cradle (following templates of behaviour not much changed since). The other is a self proclaimed genius (another age-old archetype) manipulating the talents, material and destiny of a young country in an ancient land’³⁶⁹

Starting from his Iraqi heritage Selim embarks on his artistic journey which takes him to other lands and cultures. This odyssey comes together in the *Ayn and Om Tonalities* from his *Marsh Eye* series (Illustration 2/-29)³⁷⁰. Presented in a broader context, these studies of the Arabic letter *ayn* are deliberately juxtaposed with the Sanskrit *om* and the Greek *epsilon* which he believes it resembles. The work was conceived at the time of the destruction of the Iraqi marshlands during the 1970s and 1980s and Selim uses the letter *ayn*, which also means eye in Arabic, to draw attention to the disaster. At the same time he took the Arabic letter on a journey ‘through the alphabets of the world and found a commonality of shape and sound despite topography and language. The design harks back to the Mesopotamian origins with long strips recalling the cylinder seals.’ In this way Selim attempts to apply his analysis of Iraqi artists to his own oeuvre.

³⁶⁷ Rashad Selim accompanied the explorer, Thor Heyerdahl, on his 1977/8 Ra raft expedition from the Tigris to Djibouti.

³⁶⁸ Faraj, Maysaloun (Ed), *Strokes of Genius*, Saqi Books, 2001. Page 142

³⁶⁹ Ibid Page 47

³⁷⁰ Illustration 2-29, Rashad Selim/1998 *Ayn and On Tonalities* (from *Marsh Eye* series), from five monotype offset prints/85x30.5cm each. British Museum

We therefore have the calligrapher, historian, traveller and politically aware artist combining his interests. In his essay in *Strokes of Genius* he muses:

‘With licence we can set down a generalised menu of ‘classical’ iconography of identity in contemporary Iraqi art, starting with the depiction of eyes, more eyes and what eyes. Sumerian statuettes depicting worshippers hold in their wide open gaze the legacy of man questing into the unknown for significance beyond his essential aloneness within creation. Ruins and dust, as well as the geometry of human industry, that survives the layered weight of history in the traditions of popular culture. The primal architectonics of palm tree and graves, domes and arches demonstrate with passage from cube to sphere an intense, proportionate consciousness of space and silence, as profoundly integral to sense rhythm and place. Calligraphy, signs and symbols, the extreme polarities of light and dark, drought and flood, the ecological browns and greys of Mesopotamia, flashed by the iridescent colours of textiles.’³⁷¹

Whilst he has his own vision, Selim is sensitive to the way in which the similar experiences of different artists can lead to different portrayals, there being no standard emigrant artist. Contrasting two artists he has written;

‘Whereas Hamad al-Attar has been overwhelmed by the necessity of expressing tangibly the accumulated terror, Rafa al Nasiri finds an engaged detachment alluding in synthetic deposits to the seeds of continuity and the encryption of past events. Hamid al-Attar howls agony from the gates of hell, Rafa confines solitude within his canvas. Both visions spring from the same deep historical sensitivity. Hamid al Attar, in self imposed isolation cheats the demon of defeat and apathy by a consistent outpouring of great emotional integrity, a lament as ancient as it is contemporary. Rafa al Nasiri, internationally acclaimed founder of the Iraqi graphic movement and teacher to many artist of the eighties generation, moves freely, transcending our limitations towards new horizons.’³⁷²

Selim is thus very aware of the impacts, often contradictory, that emigration can have on an artist. At one point he talks of the way in which both expatriate and homeland artists share ‘states of exile, one internally isolated the other dispersed in a bewildering range of circumstances’. He then goes on to talk of the potential emancipatory effect ‘for an exile the alchemy of place and new lands can be enchanting, transforming the sometime leaden burden

³⁷¹ Faraj, Maysaloun, *Strokes of Genius*, Saqi Books, 2001. Page 55

³⁷² Ibid Page 49 for references to the artists mentioned by Rashad Selim in this quotation.

of experience into light, inspiration and release, acting as a catalyst purifying the elements of art'.³⁷³

Today there is talk of globalisation as if it was a new phenomenon. The explorer and ethnographer, Thor Heyerdahl³⁷⁴ has, however, demonstrated that the interplay of cultures across the world is nothing new. His Kon-Tiki expedition in 1947 was a dramatic visual demonstration that it was possible for South American peoples to migrate across the Pacific on balsa rafts as far as Polynesia and Melanesia thousands of years ago. In a follow up expedition he demonstrated that reed boats could make the journey from North Africa to the Caribbean. He deliberately chose a crew for its diversity in race, nationality and religion to demonstrate that it was possible to work in harmony. Although not a seaman, like most of the others, Selim joined the crew. One notable contribution on his part was the design of the sail which symbolised the westward search for the sun.

In the book 'The Ra Expedition' Heyerdahl recalls one quiet evening as the sun was setting with the various crew members going about their individual pursuits, reading, diary writing or fishing. A Moslem was conducting his evening prayers amid this international group, very much an integral part of the team but retaining his own religious heritage. As a member of a Ra crew Selim was, at one and the same time, a local and a universal, a Moslem and a universal man.³⁷⁵

This international harmony against a background of the Iraqi culture is shown again in Selim's new work *Geopiano* (Illustration 3-30)³⁷⁶. This project grew from Selim's association between a piano abandoned near his London studio, which had had its 'action and keys ripped out', with the continued destruction of his native Iraq following the 2003 invasion. In a previous guise the project had seen a defunct piano burned at an English country house in Somerset, the conflagration recalling those in Baghdad.³⁷⁷ This *Geopiano* was tuned by master tuner Reuben Katz, with Selim's guidance, to span cross-cultural scales moving from left to right, well tempered (western/international), Kali Raga (Indian), Maqqam Rast (Arabic), and Petatonic (Far Eastern/International). The *Geopiano* project has now been merged with an atlas (presented as if it were an art book) in a collaged mosaic of landscapes from around the globe, mountain

³⁷³ Faraj, Maysaloun, *Strokes of Genius*, Page 57

³⁷⁴ Thor Heyerdahl 1914-2002. Norwegian explorer and ethnographer

³⁷⁵ Heyerdahl, Thor *The Ra Expeditions*, Penguin, 1972. See photo of 'Abdullah Praying', Illustration 61

³⁷⁶ Illustration 3-30, Rashad Selim, *Geopiano*. Photograph of performance, 2009. A Geopiano was exhibited at an exhibition of the work of Rashid Selim at Janet Rady Fine Art in October 2010

³⁷⁷ See www.repiano.com (accessed 22/2/2012) The burning took place in December 2009.

ranges above, with rivers and bodies of water descending down the piano, transitioning to deserts and a sound pit below. Such a work is typical of Selim's search for innovative techniques and materials that can give him inspiration and he is quoted as saying:

'I discover geology in the shards of an old gourd, a lost civilisation in the architecture of egg cartons, lyrics in the rigid grid of a wire mesh, the language of water in the warping of a plastic container. In a recent series I transformed the diskettes encased inside computer floppy disks into aerodynamic objects that dance to the play of elementary physics',³⁷⁸.

Selim, like many other Middle Eastern artists, has clearly been horrified by political and military aspects of his homeland but he still retains a deep and abiding love for its culture and tradition. Living in the West, for most of the time, he can still be moved by the cultural memory with which his fellow Middle Eastern artists can imbue their work. He describes an experience of some objects that he rediscovered after a period of time:

'Recently I saw again, after the storage of yet another change of address, three ceramic bowls Maysaloun Faraj had exchanged for a sculpture of mine. My spirit soared with the sustenance of the mythic blues the bowls offered singing with all the sophistication of history yet fresh with that simplicity of design and imagery inexplicably moving and so difficult to put into mere words',³⁷⁹.

He also recalls the way in which the grid pattern has become an integral part of the work of certain Middle Eastern artists:

'One recurring compositional construct symbolic in itself is the grid or squared-off plane dear to many artists from this generation including myself. It is especially developed in the work of these for artists and is attributable to Shakir Hassan's³⁸⁰ talismanic and numerically influenced works. Why the grid should be so popular and apt an expressive vehicle to these artists is worth a thought. There is a talismanic element with its mystery, a psychological angle in its compartmentalisation and also a basic urban abstract order, the quadrants of our geography with a hint of possible game and play. What strikes me most and particularly in the deconstruction of its simplistic patterns takes me to the spirit of Enkido, the wild man from out

³⁷⁸ Faraj. Maysaloun (Ed), *Strokes of Genius*, Saqi Books 2001. Page 142

³⁷⁹ Ibid Page 60

³⁸⁰ See discussion of Shakir Hassan al-Said in Chapter 1

of nature in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*³⁸¹ who tore down the traps and walls of civilisation that he encountered on the way to Uruk. There appears to be a material tension at play here between the geometric certainty and physical oblivion in a departure from Shakir Hassan's 'one dimensional' framework, a departure towards an aesthetics and art that explores a profoundly physical consciousness'³⁸².

A recent conference at the University of Exeter, *Displacing Future Memory*³⁸³, explored negotiations about identity, homeland and attachment to place in the context of contemporary politics in conflict regions. Along with the academic contributors it is not surprising that due to his migratory travel and artistic experience Rashad Selim, together with a number of other artists and musicians, participated. The 'final and most crucial' advance made by the project was in relation to the bond between memory, place and identity. No authentic or original bond was found but 'the physicality of a place is only one of its characteristics, which can be weakened or strengthened depending on the socio-cultural context in which it exists'. Place is also deemed to be 'performative and relational and in that sense does not exist without memory'. It is thought possible that there can be de-placement (individuals and communities moving from one place to another, or having place removed from them). This could be the result of 'a complete transformation of the physical place where they live where, as a result of the a disjuncture between the memory-place and the transformation of the material fabric that embodies that memory which forces an over-writing of place, as for example Baghdad after the destruction during the Iraq war'.³⁸⁴

Selim has been part of the emigrant movement from the Middle East but, in common with other artists that we have analysed, retains a powerful sense of cultural memory, Nonetheless he also shows his ability to integrate with the international community both in a small group and in the world at large. He does not try to merge or synthesise different cultures but to position them side by side in amicable and co-operative relationships. He has not shed his heritage and merged into the Western world, he is still clearly a Middle Eastern artist, but he can also be seen as truly international in his outlook. He sees his concerns for Iraq against a

³⁸¹ Gilgamesh was the King of Uruk in the ancient Mesopotamian saga with the most complete version on clay tablets dating back to the 7th century BC

³⁸² Faraj, Maysaloun *Strokes of Genius*, Saqi Books 2001. Page 55

³⁸³ Exeter University 2009

³⁸⁴ Summary by the Curator of *Displacing Future Memory* of the conclusions drawn from the project at Exeter University, 2009

broader world view without forsaking his own culture, sometimes wearing a baseball cap at the same time as an Arab headdress.

SUMMARY

We have looked at a representative number of artists in this chapter on hybridity and alienation and can come to some tentative conclusions as to the use of these terms as tools for the review of expatriate Middle Eastern artists (with even more tentative possible implications for any group of contemporary artists).

We would suggest that the use of terms, such as aliens or hybrids, often seems to lack usefulness for analysing expatriate Middle Eastern artists. Of course the very act of emigration often incorporates some kind of rejection of part of, or by, the home culture but this is usually a specific element of the difficult current (and also for the last fifty years) political, economic and social scene. Underneath this specific rejection remains a powerful love and tribal memory for the past and the long term literary, family and religious culture indicating that the artists are not actually aggressively alienated from their homeland.

Whilst Middle Eastern traditions and cultures have fundamentally been retained by the emigrants there does not usually seem to be permanent animosity to the culture of the adopted country, albeit there are specific complaints such as al-Radi's very understandable resentment at the US invasion of Iraq. Shemza is the only artist who appeared to be damaged by his emigration and this may be more due to a belief that he was already part of that culture, rather than adopting it. The contrast with Aisha Khalid may serve to indicate that perhaps there may be two factors that apply to Shemza, and probably also Madi to some degree. One is that that there may be a change in the way the West impacts on artists between the colonial and post-colonial eras. The other is the extent to which colonial control and official and implicit Westernisation which has been exercised in the artists homeland, created expectations that are dashed on direct impact with the West.

In most cases the emigrant artists sits not uncomfortably within their own culture alongside, but not totally integrated with, the adopted culture, even in the cases of artists like Dana Haeri, Hayv Kahraman, Hussein Madi or Neda Dana Haeri, who have spent most of their lives away from their ostensible homelands. The fact that they are geographically separated does not mean there is an outright rejection or antagonism and is not really sufficient to justify the term alien, which implies a different species (and often a large degree of aggression). It is possible that the retention by the artists of their Middle Eastern culture could mean that they are operating at the borders of mainstream Western culture and in some kind of third space. This interpretation would arise from the post-colonial theories of hybridity, mimicry and 'otherness', where the Middle Eastern artist was emerging from the hegemony of the Western culture.

The alternative, and more likely and productive, approach is to accept that we are in an increasingly, but not totally, global world and it is the Middle Eastern artists who are more able and willing to accept this. Whilst retaining their historic heritage they are able to adopt Western artistic techniques and practices and incorporate them. In addition they have a wider, global approach, as evidenced by Shemza's acceptance of the economic imperative for working in England, al-Radi's travels to UK and US despite her specific agonies over the Iraq war, the Far Eastern Zen influences on Dana-Haeri and Kahraman's Japanese looking marionettes (albeit created in mid-America) and Selim's international roaming. To view these as global artists, of whatever persuasion, seems to be as logical, and more meaningful, than to see them as working on the edges of Western culture. The influence of the economic and cultural consequences of globalism may now be beginning to be more influential than the increasingly historic nineteenth and twentieth century colonial eras, although it must be recognised that such an all-pervading epoch has and will continue to provide the language for the current debate. This is why it is difficult for some to see the work of emigrant Middle Eastern artists in any way other than in relation to the colonial past and Western traditions. Given the nature of the work, the multiple influences and an international outlook on the part of the artists it may be better to look at them from the point of view of a future globalised world rather than the previous colonial past. This means that the 'space' in which they operate is that of an international market rather than a narrow, transitory 'third' space outside 'mainstream' cultures. From the increasingly world view of the sophisticated Middle East emigrants it may seem that it is the Western world that is at the periphery of the international art market, in the same way as we are seeing the 'hollowing out' of the US and European economies in the face of competition from the East.

Does a recognisable hybrid emerge from this positioning? In nature hybrids may not be able to reproduce but they are predictable as well as identifiable. It is hard to demonstrate this from the work of the Middle East expatriates, as their work is highly diverse and there are too many determining layers within the make-up of the artist to detect a simple hybrid of East and West. The other layers may be traumatic, personal experiences such as the assassination of Forouhar's parents; or else a broader international outlook, such as the Japanese influence on Kahrahman or the travellers' globalism of Selim. Even where there are the same experiences the resulting individual and the works they produce are demonstrably different (there are assassinations in the backgrounds of both Parastou Forouhar and Issam El-Said, as reviewed in Chapter 1). Except in the case of Hussein Madi the hybrid does not seem to be useful as a predictive label in terms of the work produced and the simplicities of a merger between Middle East and West often appears to be overlaid by complex, individual experiences and reactions. The work of Soody Sharifi and Farhad Ahrmania does betray the combination of their Middle East and Western experiences and training but, unlike Mahdi, the intention appears to be the

creation of some kind of international or universalist space rather, than the motive of trying to integrate within the existing Western society as there is no attempt to copy or emulate existing Western precedents

Instead of trying to fit the emigrant Middle Eastern artists into a now conventional Western post-colonial model, by regarding them as hybrids, a better genetic analogy may be that of evolution, the acceptance and adaption to changing world conditions, a more uncomfortable comparison for the Westerner unused to having their culture regarded as merely a localism, however dominant it may be at the present time. This is not to say that there will be a domination by the breed of 'international' artists as evolution always allows for failures of some of its experiments. It is simply to say that there may be a more productive model that can be applied to cultural interchanges than that of the hybrid which is, by definition, sterile. Such a model allows for retention of local experience and experience to be allied with the impact of other cultures, with the ability to criticise both. At the same time this model moves towards (without any final attainment) of some form of globalism, internationalism or universalism for individuals whose characters contain multiple identities made up of different political, social, religious, economic, gender and psychological influences and experiences. The aspiration of the expatriate Middle East artist is neither acceptance nor integration into the West or, necessarily, a re-entry into the current Middle East, but a move towards a world, society and artistic nexus that seems a likely, but not completely inevitable, development over time.

CHAPTER 3. FROM WESTERN ORIENTALISTS TO MIDDLE EAST UNIVERSALISTS

In order to get a rounded view of emigrant, contemporary Middle Eastern artists the group can be approached in three different ways. Their ancestry can be sought, however inappropriately, amongst the Orientalist painters of the West. The way in which the West has received and presented them can be examined and, by far the most important, the way they regard themselves and their place in the artistic spectrum can be analysed. In addition the motives of the collectors and patrons, who can give us a corroborative insight into the group, can be used to compare to the artists themselves.

The Decline of Orientalism

Western artistic associations with the East are far from a modern phenomena³⁸⁵ but the discussions of the idea of Orientalism tend to focus on the last two or three centuries, when the growing economic and political ascendancy of the West allowed it to analyse and describe the Middle East in strictly Western terms. It is, though, important to realise that major European artists formed a view of the East long before, often influenced by its religious ancestry with Christianity. The religious link, however, could operate alongside a personal one and an artist as eminent as Rembrandt demonstrates this in practice. His '*Presentation in the Temple*'³⁸⁶ of 1640 illustrates the dedication of the infant Jesus by Simeon the High Priest in the synagogue and shows a familiarity with the building and its inhabitants.³⁸⁷ Rembrandt's view did not come solely from the Bible. As a resident of Amsterdam he knew the Jewish community well. In the book, *Rembrandt's Jews*³⁸⁸ Steven Nadler has described the complex relationship that Rembrandt had with his Jewish neighbours. Nadler rejects the simplistic view that Rembrandt's portrayals of Jews are intended to express an unprecedented empathy between artist and subject and a remarkable emotional tenderness. Equally, Nadler is uncomfortable with the idea the Rembrandt's interests arose 'out of a conversionist persuasion that he shared with a circle of patrons and friends, that is, out of a desire to see the Jews repent the errors of their ways, convert to

³⁸⁵ Examples are numerous but apart from Rembrandt both Gentile Bellini (1429-1507) and Veronese ('The Old Oriental' in the Doges Palace) are worthy of mention.

³⁸⁶ Illustration 1-3, Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Presentation in the Temple* 1640. Etching on paper/ 29x21.5cm/5th state. Property of the author

³⁸⁷ Even if the inclusion of the dog owes more to Western ideas of fidelity than Jewish customs. Nadler comments that it was not unusual for Dutch painters to include dogs in churches and that to show one in a synagogue may be a sign of inclusiveness.

³⁸⁸ Nadler, Steven, *Rembrandt's Jews*, University of Chicago, 2003. Page 47

Christianity and thereby hasten the return of Christ the Redeemer³⁸⁹ as might be symbolised by the light shed by the descending dove³⁹⁰ in *The Presentation in the Temple* Nadler believes that the truth lies somewhere between the extremes, that the tendency to simplify relationships with other communities must be avoided, and that it is possible to construct a sober and realistic picture of Rembrandt and his artistic relationship with his Jewish neighbours. Nadler tries to clarify the complex relationship in the following passage:

‘Our interest in this print---is undoubtedly enriched by knowing that Rembrandt certainly did, quite often see such a gathering of Jewish elders. He only needed to walk out of his front door and stroll down the block. It was a scene that could regularly be found in only a few major cities of Europe. Rembrandt did paint, etch and draw Jews and Jewish settings. There is nothing legendary about this. The faces in some, and maybe many, of his portraits and history and genre works are Jewish; several of the tableau that he captures on canvas and paper derive from what he saw in his neighbourhood.’³⁹¹

Such a balanced, localised and intimate view of a familiar relationship between a Westerner and the East in 17th century Netherlands subjects serves as a good example for understanding emigrant, contemporary Middle Eastern artists. Neither groups are simple stereotypes but are made up of many complex layers of cultural and historical influences, which may have different results and effects on different individuals.

A seminal event which would have a long term effect on Western Orientalism was the discovery of the *Rosetta Stone* in 1799.³⁹² Its’ translation was an intellectual triumph but it yielded a fairly ordinary story. When translated the hieroglyphics, which had previously appeared to the West to be exotic representations of Eastern mysteries, turned out to be a text like any other known writing. Its messages, detailing such matters as the taxation of priests and the protection of canal workers, were no deeper and its stories were no more profound than those of any other text. Orientalism, therefore, should have lost one of its appeals as a portrayal of the exotic and magic of the East. This did not, for some time, deter Western artists who continued to portray Arabic script as an exotic decoration, often in a way that

³⁸⁹ Nadler, Steven, *Rembrandt’s Jews*, Page 47

³⁹⁰ Without wanting to belittle Rembrandt’s artistic genius the descending bird does more resemble a clunky pigeon rather than an elegant dove—perhaps Rembrandt was influenced by the actual birds that can and do get into large churches and buildings. Author.

³⁹¹ Ibid Page 57. Nadler adds to this, referring to artists such as Jan Lievens, Govaert Flinck and Jacob van Ruisdael that ‘wonderfully few of his contemporaries found this remarkable. Nor should they have, since there was nothing remarkable about it. Rembrandt was not the only artist taking advantage of the opportunities offered in and around Vlooienburg’.

³⁹² Egyptian engraved stone, 196BC, giving details in Egyptian hieroglyphics and Greek giving details from the council of priests of the cult of the 13 year old Ptolemy V—British Museum. It was translated in the early part of the 19th century by Thomas Young and Jean Francois Champollion.

showed that there was no understanding of the words themselves or even the form of the letters³⁹³. What was deemed important was the belief that, somewhere, under the letters was an occult cultural signifier more than the lines on the surface, something that was perceived to lie beneath the curtain covering the *Kaaba* or sacred altar for the *Hajj* or Mecca pilgrimage³⁹⁴. The script needed to be deciphered against the expectations of the Western artist rather than the actualities of the Middle East.

There is a long artistic tradition of using letters, signs and symbols from other cultures as can be seen in Renaissance painting. In more recent times Paul Klee had often used Middle Eastern images in his work and one of his late works attempts to put the mystery and meaning back into symbols. In 1937 his *Legend of the Nile*³⁹⁵ shows a spectrum of signs which Westerners would perceive as being Eastern but he evokes the perception of some meaning behind the symbols familiar to his audience, rather than the realities of the script. We see not only a fish, boats, a palm and the sun but familiar letters like an 'x' or the Greek 'pi'. The circle may be a sun and we have the blue of the sky and sea. Klee was absorbing the much publicised North African influences on his work. Whilst the images are not specifically 'Oriental' there is an identifiable influence in that direction with the geographic origins of the image being apparent to the viewer. Klee is also integrating the influence of the North African light in his use of colour, as a way of representing the natural world that he saw. In his discussion of the Tunisian experience of Klee, the writer Marcel Franciscono³⁹⁶ tries to sum up the combination of colour, abstraction, realism and symbolism that was involved:

'The rhapsodic exclamations in Klee's Tunisian diary are testimony that he responded to the North African landscape as intensely as he had to the only less slightly exotic landscape of central Italy years before: and at least once in Hammamet he tried to be as faithful to his experience as he knew how: 'I painted here in watercolours, strongly transposing and completely true to nature'.

Franciscono sees the liberating effect of the Middle East on Klee, contrasting its softening contribution of colour and light compared to the harsher and more rigid Western structures of his images:

'As it had always been, colour remained after Tunisia a vehicle of lyrical expression for Klee, associated in his mind with the beauty of the natural world. In almost all of his pictures it tends to work against the acidic wit and grotesquerie of his graphic invention, introducing atmospheric effects, and sometimes landscape elements, even into his abstractions.'

³⁹³ For example the 'Arabic script' in many paintings by artists such as Jean Louis Gerome 1824-1904 cannot be understood or interpreted.

³⁹⁴ Pilgrims to Mecca are expected to walk seven times clockwise around the Kaaba as part of their religious duties on the annual Hajj

³⁹⁵ Illustration 3-3, Paul Klee, *Legend of the Nile*, 1937. Watercolour/ 69x61cm. Kunstmuseum Bern

³⁹⁶ Franciscono, Marcel, *Paul Klee*, University of Chicago, 2001. Page 200

Franciscono goes on to accord a context for the Tunisian images in Klee's work when describing the 1914 ink and watercolour works:

'Its' drawing is not completely abstract, though it is as non-representational as anything that Klee (or Kandinsky, for that matter) had made until then. The hieroglyphic forms suggest fragments of figures and buildings, but it is the atmospheric colour that chiefly links it to the world of representation. The patch of blue at the upper left, the portion of arch washed in at the upper right and above all in the large purple 'sun' near the centre all give a distinct effect of landscape to the work, with clear earth-sky orientation'³⁹⁷. Franciscono therefore shows that for Klee, as with many other Orientalists, their experience leads to more dramatic, or exotic, representation in which the perceived images are indicative rather than specifically symbolic.

With the emergence of Middle Eastern artists, painting in a Western manner, who understood their own language and the ideas and beliefs they represented, there has inevitably been a decline in Western artists trying to portray the Middle East. There are still the tourist souvenirs³⁹⁸ which recall the exploratory and Colonial traditions of the English middle classes. The Middle East seems to have reclaimed much of its territory and culture through its own artists, the recent establishment of major galleries in the Middle East, such as those in Qatar, Abu Dhabi and Dubai³⁹⁹, evidencing the trend by the physical build-up of contemporary art collections in the region itself. Whilst this move can be seen as driven by oil money it serves as a reminder that the art market needs cash as well as artistic merit to develop.

The Orientalist tradition dies hard and there are, inevitably, certain exceptions to show it lingers on. Andrew Johnstone is an ex-UK diplomat who worked for many years in the Middle East. His *Damascus Garden*⁴⁰⁰ shows the traditional Orientalist theme of the decline from a great past but uses real script taken from newspapers to do so. Tristan Ra, a French artist has painted a very traditional Orientalist picture with the Western painter looking down from the cool Matissean balcony onto the fevered and fetid North African enclosed city in *Fez, Citie Fievreux*⁴⁰¹. Charles McQueen retains some of the traditions of the Scottish colourists⁴⁰² as can be seen in his depictions of '*Thunder over Sousse*' and *Heat*,

³⁹⁷ Franciscono, Marcel, *Paul Klee*, Page 200

³⁹⁸ John Betjamin, *A Subaltern's Love Song*, 1941 which talks of 'Pictures of Egypt, bright on the walls'.

³⁹⁹ See for example the article on the new Mathaf Museum in Qatar contained in *Canvas Magazine* Volume 7, edition 1, page 84

⁴⁰⁰ Illustration 3-3, Andrew Johnstone, *Damascus Garden*, 1997. Oil on board/ 55x41cm. Property of the author

⁴⁰¹ Illustration 3-4, Tristan Ra, *Fez –Citie Fievreux*, 1996. Oil on canvas/ 79x79cm. Property of the author

⁴⁰² The Oxford Companion to Art, Oxford University, 1970. Page 105, interestingly, not only gives the normal biographical details of the Scottish Colourist movement, led by artists like Peploe, Ferguson and Hunter, but adds the speculative commentary that 'The question as to whether the future belongs to the nationals or the

Monastir⁴⁰³. Despite these exceptions it seems reasonable to assume that the day of the Western Orientalist artist is steadily passing. There is less, or no, need for the Western interpreter when the region itself can and does produce its own commentators, who have a personal as well as intellectual understanding. Somehow the Orientalist's work now rings false when there are others with a more intimate and personal involvement with their subject. Political correctness can also act as a limiting discipline as few Westerners would now want to be accused of any attempt at hegemonic control over the Middle East, even if they believe they have no intention of doing so. Something, though, that is worth mentioning is, as we will see when we look at the patrons, is that the present demand and market for traditional Western Orientalist works has now moved to the Middle East, probably as a way of re-appropriating its heritage. Contemporary works by Middle East artists are therefore sometimes physically sited alongside the historic works created in the West.

The passing of the Western Orientalist artist has led to a new scenario with new Middle Eastern artists taking over the role of presenting their culture, often for the benefit of the Middle Eastern viewer himself but also being interpreted by Westerners in the West. The scene for this is set by Rana Kabbani in her assertive study *Imperial Fictions-Europe's myths of Orient*⁴⁰⁴. Her conclusion is straightforward:

'It is unfortunate that the bulk of European travel narrative about the East was so strongly coloured by bias and supposition. The narrative did, no doubt lead to an expansion in the knowledge of the world but it was a tainted knowledge that served the colonial vision. Some of that taint is still with us despite the passing of the colonial era in its more obvious forms. It is mandatory that we ultimately arrive at a less prejudiced sort of narrative in our descriptions of other people, other races and other religions⁴⁰⁵. And one of the ways in which we do this is to continually question the testimony that we have inherited, be it from the soldier, the scholar or the traveller. In questioning those notions that are supposed to prove how different we are as peoples, perhaps we may, with sympathy and effort, arrive at an understanding of how similar we are as peoples in an increasingly complicated world.'

This epitaph throws up the challenge of arriving at an 'understanding of how similar we are as people' and even if it is necessary to accept that we are 'similar'. Before we write off the Orientalist movement entirely it is worth noting that a distinction is now being made between 'Orientalism' and 'Islamophilia'. In a review of the exhibition *The Genius of the Orient: Modern Europe and the Art of Islam* Julia Michalska, writing in *The Art Newspaper* of April 2011⁴⁰⁶, defines 'Orientalism' as 'derived from Western

cosmopolitans is by no means a Scottish one: there is, however, much talent amongst the artists working in both idioms.'

⁴⁰³ Illustrations 3- 5 and 3-6 Charles McQueen, *Thunder over Sousse/Heat at Monastir*, both 1999 and oil on board/ 46x46cm. Properties of the author.

⁴⁰⁴ Kabbani, Rana, *Imperial Fictions-Europes Myths of the Orient*, Pandora/Harper Collins, 1994. Page 139

⁴⁰⁵ A similar solution is proposed by Julia Kristeva and discussed at the end of this chapter.

⁴⁰⁶ *The Art Newspaper* April 2011

(mis)perceptions of the Orient and used Islamic ornament to serve mainly as backdrops' whilst 'Islamophilia' was 'a determined effort to understand the formal structures of Islamic aesthetic traditions, particularly by European architects and designers'. The curator of the exhibition, Remi Labrusse, claims that 'for these artists Islamic arts were not only an object of knowledge but a model for visual dialogue. It changed their taste and their aesthetics'⁴⁰⁷. Both Klee and Matisse are promoted as being in this latter group. Nonetheless, even if a more constructive interpretation is now given to Western artists researching the Middle East, the advent of Middle East artists portraying their own heritage and culture is probably much more important than any attempt to give a retrospective creative role to some of the Western artists. These artists themselves may, perhaps, have moved in a more universalist direction through the incorporation of Islamic aesthetics.

A new slant on Orientalism and the attempt to build on the universalist idea of 'understanding of how similar we are as people' comes from the journalist Anna Summers Cocks in her deliberately provocative article in the April 2011⁴⁰⁸ edition of *The Art Newspaper*. She describes the initial reactions of a young Qatari to an exhibition of Dutch paintings from the Rijksmuseum in the Qatar Museum of Islamic Art. Looking at Rembrandt's *Man in Oriental Costume*⁴⁰⁹ the anonymous viewer admits that she had not heard of Rembrandt before the exhibition ('his name is difficult to say') and comments of the portrait that 'perhaps he is a king or something and maybe he took the shape of his turban from the Turkish people'). Asked where she thinks he comes from the Qatari says that he is a Westerner⁴¹⁰. Cocks sees such insights as fascinating and make her experience the works for the first time 'possibly in their humanity as they were first seen'⁴¹¹. From these comments Cocks tries to demonstrate an emerging international consensus where 'in the great experiment that the Gulf is undertaking to avoid the 'clash of civilisations' by introducing the culture of the West to the region, we should record these first encounters because their innocence will be lost only too quickly and we can learn a great deal from them'⁴¹². In other words we are moving from a time when the West portrayed the East to an era when the East is also portraying the West.

To predict such a development as an apparent inevitability may well be another demonstration of the Westerner trying to build another grand theory, but one which encompasses Eastern as well as Western views. It progresses from the initial reactions of the West to contemporary Middle Eastern art, which we describe below, but is still in many ways reliant on seeing the development of art from a Western

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid

⁴⁰⁹ Rembrandt van Rijn, *Man in Oriental Costume* 1632. Oil on canvas, 152.7x111.2cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

⁴¹⁰ *The Art Newspaper*, April 2011

⁴¹¹ Ibid

⁴¹² Ibid

perspective, putting the emphasis on possible integration and consensus rather than stressing the independence and separate traditions of those who represent their own, non-western cultures. The danger of this approach has long been appreciated by writers such as Rasheed Araeen who warned in 1978 that:

‘The development of a true international platform/movement, from/to which all cultures could make their unique contributions, is not only possible but desirable in the long run. But if this is to serve the true interests of all peoples rather than become another instrument of selfish Western interests it must be based on the clear rejection of western culture as the mainstream.’⁴¹³

Hence there has been the movement to a ‘third text’ which again looks for an integration or universalism but one which is not dominated by a Western hegemony. The difficulty here is again that the emphasis is on integration rather than separatism, and there is a risk of imposing a new mainstream before it is clearly developed and demonstrable. To take an example from another aspect of internationalism, the belief in a growing trend to globalism in economic affairs. Whilst there are clear examples as the way the international economy has become more globalised and international it is important to realise that there is still a long way to go before this is totally achieved. Pankaj Ghemawat of the IESE Business School in Spain gives a number of examples. He shows that only 2% of students are at universities outside their own country and only 3% of people live outside their country of birth. Only 7% of rice is traded across borders and only 7% of directors of Standard and Poors companies are foreigners with, only a few years ago, less than 1% of American companies having any foreign operations. Exports are only equivalent to 20% of global GDP. More trade benefits come from a common language, trading block, common currency or colonial past than broader global trends. Foreign direct investment is only 9% of all fixed investment, less than 20% of venture capital is deployed outside the fund’s own country, less than 20% of all shares are owned by foreign investors and less than 20% of internet traffic crosses national boundaries. At the detailed micro-level McDonalds serves vegetarian burgers in India and spicy ones in Mexico.⁴¹⁴

Such comparative statistics are not so easy to come by for the art market as they are for the economy. Nevertheless it is all too easy to point to evidence of integration between Eastern and Western art in the emigration and training of artists, the internationalisation of exhibitions and the growing international network of commentary and research as well as the adoption of techniques of easel painting, prints, photography and video. Such examples do not, however interesting, demonstrate that the integration is total, or anywhere near so. In analysing contemporary Middle Eastern art it is therefore important to see this parallel with the global economy which underpins aspects of the production of this emigrant group of Middle Eastern artists. Whilst it is always possible to see global, universal or international influences or trends it can be wrong to assume that they are completely dominant, or that we are near to a new international consensus, grand theory or ‘third text’. It is probably, at least, premature to seek

⁴¹³ Fisher, Jean (Ed), *Global Visions; Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, Kala Press, 1994. Page 11

⁴¹⁴ *Economist* 22/4/2011. Page 83

a new international or universalist order. The images and artists must be seen for what and who they are, rather than parts of a hypothesised greater whole. We should therefore move from a Western Orientalism and the Western reaction to Middle East art to the attitudes of the artists themselves and their patrons, without imposing or seeking an immediate world view of some kind of grand order. If such an order does exist it may well be preliminary and embryonic or, it may be so complex and differentiated that the use as an analytic tool is limited, of little immediate use. It may even be possibly, dangerous as it can obscure a differentiated reality behind a simplistic assumption. The move from Colonialism to neo-Colonialism to any true internationalism will probably be long drawn-out and full of diversions and set-backs, if indeed it is ever realised.

Western Reactions to Contemporary Middle Eastern Art

As script has been so fundamental to the development of both Islamic art and contemporary Middle Eastern art the reaction of the West to its use in contemporary works of art is instructive. Two writers show the reaction of Western viewers to Arabic script and calligraphy. The poet, Anthony Thwaite, who taught at the University of Benghazi in the mid 1960s, describes Arabic script in the following dramatic way:

‘-----you see the stern

Edge of the language, Kufic, like a scimitar

Curved in a lash, a flash of consonants

Such as swung out of Medina that day

On the long flog west, across ruins and flaccid colonials,

A swirl of black flags, white crescents, a language of swords.’⁴¹⁵

The writer Sabiha Al Khemir in her novel, *The Blue Manuscript*, gives another reaction to calligraphy in the following lyrical passage:

‘Arabic, in its sublime form, speaking even to those who do not understand it, opening fine perception beyond language. The experience of silence, in its wholeness. To speak without the need for grammar. When the line is mute, its voice is deeper than the letters and those whose life cannot be expressed by literature can relate to it. The silence of this manuscript is the silence of the whole world. Silence like that imposed by an immense landscape that lifts our being into a state of grace, purifying it. . . and to which human beings of any race, creed or religion can relate. Ineffable. A sacredness for all, a sacredness for all.’⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁵ Thwaite, Anthony, *Collected Poems*, Eintharmom Press, 2007. *Arabic Script*. Page 76

⁴¹⁶ Al Khemir, Sabiha, *The Blue Manuscript*, Verso, 2008. Page 190

Without necessarily understanding the Arabic words or their connotations this passage attempts to describe the way in which the Western viewer, if not reader, senses the drama, emotion, belief, commitment and spiritual attachment that the Arabs have towards their language⁴¹⁷. The way in which the message is communicated to the viewer can be encompassed in the way in which Per Aage Brandt believes cognitive science can help to explain human creativity. In his essay *Form and Meaning in Art* he has outlined the process whereby an artist's image relates to the viewer:

'So, while one input (presentation) orients our attention 'downward' towards form, the other (reference) lets it wander 'upward' towards 'feeling', so that we obtain an attentional split-comparable to what happens in a real erotic experience, which is as highly 'sensual' as it is highly 'spiritual'. The blend then overcomes or 'resolves' this split by offering a unified artful thing, the personlike, vivid, animated object, the work of art, a symbolic version of a beloved being: the opus, *res intense*.'⁴¹⁸

Middle Eastern Artists and the Western Viewer

In 1993 Leighton House in London was the venue for an exhibition of the works of Maliheh Afnan which was introduced by an article from Keith Patrick, who was President of the British Section of the International Association of Art Writers. The full text of the article follows as it can be seen, from the experience of the author⁴¹⁹, as a typical example of a Western introduction to contemporary Middle Eastern art⁴²⁰, initially and immediately establishing the fact that the artist has a different geographic origin to that of the viewer:

'Although the work of Maliheh Afnan has been widely exhibited abroad, it perhaps needs some introduction to British audiences. Born in Palestine to Persian parents, educated in Beirut and Washington DC, the artist lived in Paris for more than 20 years before moving to London.

The commentary then goes on to establish the Western experience and credentials of the artist:

Exhibitions of her work have tended to follow her travels and she has exhibited extensively in America, the Middle East and Europe. In 1991 Afnan was included in an exhibition of work from the British

⁴¹⁷ A personal example. Shortly after purchasing an example of Hassan Massoudi calligraphy the author's grandson was put on life support for three days with meningitis. My daughter, unable to leave her son's bed to buy a birthday card, embroidered the calligraphic image from a postcard reproduction. She neither reads nor speaks Arabic but that image is now firmly etched on the minds of grandfather, daughter and grandson! See Illustration 1-4

⁴¹⁸ See Turner, Mark (Ed), *The Artful Mind*, Oxford University 2006. Page 182

⁴¹⁹ In this thesis we mention similar presentations for the exhibitions of Reza Derakshani and Shirazeh Houshiary, amongst others.

⁴²⁰ *Maliheh Afnan*, Leighton House Catalogue, 1993

Museums 20th century collection and enjoyed her first solo show in London at Leighton House Museum in 1993.

Then comes a claim as to the 'universal' nature of the artist's work:

Afnan's early years in the Middle East, and her training in the West, have left a lasting impression and her art has come to reflect that feeling for the universal. It often appears as a relic of an older civilisation or as an archaeological excavation into the collective psyche. This is not nostalgia but an affirmation that our collective identity reaches back to a common past.

Despite the claim to universality there is still a reference to tradition and local craft:

Her years in the Middle East have also left Afnan with a profound respect for the craft of painting. The delicacy of Persian miniatures and manuscripts, which the artist remembers from childhood is mirrored in her love for intimate scale and for the refined beauty of muted colour. Afnan invariably works on paper, carefully rubbing pigment, crayon or pastel into the porous surface. Her works are tactile in the most literal sense, having evolved from this Braille-like sensitivity of touch.

While Afnan's work often alludes to landscape or to human forms, calligraphy plays an important role. The artist makes no distinction between one subject and another, or between abstraction and figuration; indeed, the final forms only evolve out of the working process. But images that suggest the written word frequently reappear. The artist associates these with ancient texts stripped of meaning by age, but still bearing the impression of human contact.

After noting the influence of local tradition there is still an attempt to fit the artist within some kind of Western 'mainstream':

However to assess Afnan's work in terms of Middle East influences alone, is only part of the story. Having studied in America, and lived in Paris, Afnan is well aware of a Western tradition and she has looked towards artists such as Pollock, Rothko, Dubuffet and Klee. It is significant that Mark Tobey, an artist that she both knew and admired, was instrumental in arranging her first European exhibition of her work in 1971.

We then have a quite common tactic of trying to place the artist in some kind of 'transcendental' or 'universal space', either above or apart from the local traditions or the influence of Western culture:

Above all, the work of Maliheh Afnan shows us that art both absorbs and transcends cultural references. While rooted in the individual perspective of the artist, Afnan's art goes beyond immediate cultural traditions to create a universal language of great subtlety and creativity.'

Any summary of an artist inevitably demands simplification and will be drafted in terms to which the target audience can relate. This means that the artists are defined in a way that puts them within accepted traditions of the audience rather than that of the artist himself. There is therefore a tendency to typecast or pigeon-hole artists into conventionally accepted Western mores. The text of this

introduction therefore merits some analysis to see how the reader's view of the artist is carefully channelled into seeing Afnan in terms of a certain model, in this case that of non-Westerner who had the benefit of Western training and became a 'universal' or 'transcendent' artist.

Interestingly Patrick believes Afnan needs an introduction to British viewers in 1993, even though he later tells us that her first European exhibition was as long ago as 1971. Nonetheless is quite usual to introduce an artist by their birthplace, place of training or education and subsequent place of residence. This is a convenient way of guiding the viewer to an understanding of the artist by referencing other artists or schools. It, however, creates a set of culturally difficult frameworks around notions of universalism which may lead to possible pitfalls. There is the danger that the viewer sees the artist as a representative of a certain style or approach, rather than as an individual who may not fit within conventional models. In the case of Afnan, the geographic typecasting continues throughout the article. Whilst part of the origins may be Western (education/subsequent residence) these will be standard to the Western audience and a focus on the differences of birthplace and early upbringing is inevitable.

The second paragraph tells us that this first London solo exhibition is at Leighton House but that she has also been shown as part of the British Museum 20th century collection⁴²¹. These venues immediately create an image in the mind of the reader and viewer. Leighton House⁴²² is the archetypal Orientalist location in London and not only in terms of its decoration. The Arab Hall is a prime example of the West appropriating the East, not just in the style but there is physical appropriation in the fact that some of the tiles used were brought back by the explorer, soldier and writer Richard Burton⁴²³ from his travels. There is also its pedigree as the home of Lord Leighton (1830-96), a well known painter of Orientalist pictures as well as being the President of the Royal Academy. The British Museum is well known as the established home of an international collection, including many famous pieces from non-Western countries. Being told that Afnan has been shown in these places sends a message to the reader of Patrick's article that she has not had a conventional European upbringing and maybe she is to be looked on as a different 'other' to a Western viewer. She is therefore sited in assorted geographically diverse venues, rather than places like the National Gallery, Tate or Royal Academy which are seen primarily as artistic locales rather than geographic, ethnographic museums.

In the third paragraph the theme is developed and Afnan is presented as a universalist, presumably someone who, regardless of their provenance, has absorbed and integrated Western and global traditions to the point where they can be accepted by the British viewer as relevant to them, not just as

⁴²¹ Venetia Porter (Ed), *Word into Art*, British Museum, 2003. Page 9, Plate 66

⁴²² Leighton House, Kensington London. Built 1866-79 as the residence and studio of Lord Leighton, President of the Royal Academy. The building has a replica of an exotic 'Arab Hall', complete with fountain and is now owned by Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. The museum retains its Middle East connection with regular art exhibitions of contemporary Middle East art and its annual Nour Festival

⁴²³ Richard Burton, Soldier, writer, explorer, diplomat 1821-1890. Translator of *1001 Arabian Nights*

an ethnic artist portraying a different culture in a traditional way. There is an attempt to create a shared set of values by referring to 'an affirmation of *our* (author's emphasis) collective identity which reaches back to a common past'. In other words Afnan's portraying of 'an older civilisation or as an archaeological excavation into the collective psyche' should include the psyche of both Middle Eastern artist and British viewer, implying some kind of shared heritage for all mankind. Afnan herself has a more personal slant on this common heritage and has said:

'I have always loved ruins, archaeological sites. In our part of the world we have had the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans and many others. I find aspects of my work look quite archaic, almost archaeological. This is not intentional but comes from my love of these places.'⁴²⁴

For Afnan it is her desire to communicate a personal vision and not an attempt to create a common bond, as a 'love' of these places does not necessarily mean a historic personal link with them. For a British audience there may be a common, but distant, Biblical or classical Roman heritage or an adopted link with Greece, following the Grand Tour tradition. Such an attempt at creating a mutual heritage would seem to be somewhat contrived, or at so high a plane as to have very doubtful or limited application.

Patrick continues to highlight the geographic source of inspiration in his fourth paragraph which describes Afnan's respect for the craft of painting deriving from her 'years in the Middle East'. Paragraph six then reverts to her Middle Eastern influences but sees these as only 'part of the story'. It is presumably her 'having studied in America', and 'lived in Paris' that completes the story as she is 'aware of a Western tradition and she has looked towards such artists as Pollock, Rothko, Dubuffet and Klee'. Whilst Afnan has enthusiastically admitted to having such awareness, it is interesting that the artist she profiles in the book on her work by John Berger and Rose Issa⁴²⁵ is Mark Tobey⁴²⁶. He is remembered by her for his understanding of calligraphy and, his experience of Chinese and Japanese script as well as his personal help and kindness to her when she was establishing her career. In terms, however, of creating a link between Afnan and the Western viewer the names of Pollock and Klee are more likely to create recognition with the Western mainstream, which is presumably why Patrick mentions them.

At the end of Patrick's introduction Afnan's work is described as 'while rooted in the individual perspective of the artist [her] art goes beyond immediate cultural traditions to create a universal language of great subtlety and sensitivity'. Again the work is defined in terms of geographic traditions and it implies that the intermediation of the Western artists has been necessary to create this 'universal language'. It would be hard to imagine such wording being used to describe Pollock becoming a

⁴²⁴ Issa, Rose (Ed), *Maliheh Afnan-Traces, Faces and Places*, Saqi Books, 2010. Page 17

⁴²⁵ Ibid

⁴²⁶ Mark Tobey 1890-1976 (converted to the Persian religion of Bahaism in 1918)

‘universal artist’ because of his ‘primitivising’⁴²⁷ use of Native Indian signs or Rothko merely because of his Russian origins or the inspiration he received from surrealism in the 1940’s. Even Klee’s clear influence from the Middle East does not usually earn him the ‘universalist artist’ label.

Another, more recent, way of presenting contemporary Middle Eastern art in a way that is intended to appeal or relate to the Western viewer has been the *Recessionist* exhibitions at a country house in Somerset in 2009⁴²⁸. There Middle East artists such as Maysaloun Faraj and Rashad Selim are presented alongside local UK artists who have not been recognised by the UK (London based) mainstream.

The presentation of modern Middle Eastern art as a global development is a regular theme of commentators and writers. It is at this moment where Middle Eastern art intersects with the West that it becomes of interest to the curators of exhibitions (probably because it is here where potential demand and interest will arise from Western viewers) and this intersection is used to introduce and present the work to the Western viewer. It is at the point where the art has moved beyond the ethnic and traditional to a more globalised or universal approach that it is deemed worthy of the interest of the Western viewer, or perhaps capable of his understanding. The contact with the West almost seems to be deemed to have an emancipatory effect along the lines of Edward Said’s view that:

‘While it perhaps seems peculiar to speak of the pleasures of exile there are some positive things to be said for its condition. Seeing ‘the entire world as a foreign land’ makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home: exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that to borrow a phrase from music is *contrapuntal*’⁴²⁹

Widjan Ali is a member of the Jordanian Royal family and an artist in her own right. As an academic she has done much to introduce contemporary Middle Eastern art to the West and was one of the first

⁴²⁷ There are many definitions of ‘primitivism’ (See William Rubin (Ed), ‘Primitivism in 20th Century Art’, Museum of Modern Art 1984). Rubin traces the use of the term from Western artists deriving inspiration from historical periods in European culture to subsequently include non-Western art ranging from the Peruvian to the Javanese. Later the term became more narrowly focussed on Western artists deriving stimulus from African tribal art as a form of art-historical spirit. For the purposes of our current discussion on universalism, as used to describe contemporary Middle Eastern artists most of the definitions do not seem to have meaningful relevance. Whilst it is true that the Middle Eastern contemporary artists certainly do derive inspiration from their cultural past and some view that it contains an eternal truth this has to be seen alongside their adoption of modern Western techniques, their lack of focus on other historical cultures and no perceivable interest in African tribal art. The concept of universalism as it emerges in this study is very different to the later definitions of primitivism as practiced by Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse and Derain.

⁴²⁸ The Somerset Recessionists had a permanent location at Pylle Emporium Gallery, Shepton Mallet

⁴²⁹ Archer, Michael (Ed) *Mona Hatoum*, Phaidon, 2001. Page 113

writers on the subject. Her work *Modern Islamic Art, Development and Continuity*⁴³⁰ was published in 1997 and resulted from her doctoral thesis at the School of African and Asian Studies. Introducing the book Geoffrey King of University of London stresses the 'lack of references' for the study which helps to explain why much of Ali's work is effectively the much needed establishment of a database of Middle Eastern artists and she also focuses on their origins and training. King notes Ali's research into the traditional Islamic sources for the inspiration of modern Middle Eastern artists but goes on to comment:

'Yet it would be equally wrong to focus on the art of Islam as relating solely to the past. Within the internationalisation and globalisation of art during the twentieth century, there remain clear differences that go beyond mere dialects within modernism and postmodernism. The regeneration of art in the Islamic world takes on its own unique characteristics, and it is this issue that runs as a core through Ali's discussion'.⁴³¹

This comment highlights the complex and sensitive issue of how to present fairly an artist's work as both universal and local.

Ali herself defines the goal of her book as twofold. 'To trace the development of Western aesthetics and modern painting in the Islamic world and to establish the continuity of Islamic art of the twentieth century through the contemporary Calligraphic School of art'.⁴³² Another artist, Maysaloun Faraj, adopts a similar approach in her book *Strokes of Genius* of 2001⁴³³ which catalogues the development of modern Iraqi art. She again refers to a globalising inflexion point:

'The fact that belief and cultural systems throughout the world are growing ever closer and often face each other in confrontation also propels us to redefine our orientation and search for new perspectives and horizons. For many people this age marks a new beginning and puts a full stop on the past whilst at the same time symbolising a positive commitment to a better future'.⁴³⁴

For Faraj one of the drivers to this 'new perspective' is 'informed by the complexities of the artists' lives, be it outside Iraq, in the distressed position of being an 'other' or indeed within Iraq where day to day survival has become for many an enormous struggle and an unprecedented burden'.⁴³⁵ Faraj's conclusion is a hope that her;

⁴³⁰ Ali, Widjan *Modern Islamic Art-Development and Continuity*, University of Florida,1997

⁴³¹ Ibid Introduction

⁴³² Ibid Introduction

⁴³³ Faraj, Maysaloun, *Strokes of Genius*, Saqi Books, 2001

⁴³⁴ Ibid Page 15

⁴³⁵ Ibid Page 15

‘attempt to initiate further awareness and stimulate dialogue about the contribution of Iraqi artists to the global art scene’ will lead, ‘in the new millennium, in an age where inter-cultural and inter-religious tolerance are becoming ever more important’, to a ‘challenge to deep rooted stereotypes that have until now hindered the harmonious co-existence of people living in the ‘West’ and other parts of the world’⁴³⁶.

This mission to improve the world or establish shared objectives often underlies the presentation of much modern art from the Middle East. It is, however, based on local experience, themes, history and literature as much as any internationalist fervour.

Faraj is an interesting example of an expatriate artist with deep roots in her Iraqi past and an illustration of the complexities inherent in any idea of an international or universalist artist. Born in California in 1955 she finished her education in Iraq from 1968 until 1978. She left in 1982 and has lived in London ever since. Her deep love of the Iraq comes from a relatively short residence there where she says⁴³⁷ she learned of the beauty of the southern part of the country and ‘first fell in love’. Her work refers to Iraq’s history and the suffering that there has been over recent years, particularly amongst women. Her current life-style illustrates the multi-layered complexity of the Middle East expatriate artist. From her apartment overlooking the Thames in London (with the University boat race in the background) she has explained her affinity to a country where she has spent only a small part of her life and the symbolism of the mystic Koranic letters⁴³⁸ that inspired her bronze sculptures in her living room. She makes no attempt to develop a more international style or themes in her artwork, which is usually has purchased by Iraqi or Middle Eastern collectors. Any broader international appeal comes from an ability to universalise the local themes and symbols, albeit using sculptural and ceramic techniques learned in England.

In 1998 a Barbican exhibition⁴³⁹ put *Iranian Contemporary Art* into the same context of the emerging development of hybrid cultures. In his introduction to the catalogue Daryush Shayegan⁴⁴⁰, an Iranian novelist and comparative philosopher who was professor of Sanskrit and Indian Religions at Tehran University, notes that it is no longer possible to identify a dominant school as it was at the beginning of

⁴³⁶ Faraj, Maysaloun, *Strokes of Genius*, Page 17

⁴³⁷ Interview with the artist 26/3/2011. Interestingly she said that one reason why she has not relocated back to Iraq is that her son believes he could not settle there, illustrating the way in which there can be a generational absorbing into the host culture amongst the emigrant community.

⁴³⁸ The mystic letters are the initial letters of certain Suras in the Koran. They have acquired a mystic significance for many Moslems and their decorative presentation can be compared to the ornate initial letters seen in manuscript Christian books such as the Lindisfarne gospels

⁴³⁹ Issa, Rose (Ed), *Iranian Contemporary Art*, Catalogue for Barbican, Curve Gallery, Exhibition, 13/4-3/6/2001

⁴⁴⁰ Daryush Shayegan 1935. Writer on Persian mysticism and poetry and Founding Member of the Iranian Center for Studies of Civilisations

the century with the birth of Cubism and the modernist avant-garde. He sees the emergence of a new range of sensibilities:

‘As the product of other milieus, nurtured by other visions and drawing on a memory rooted in other traditions, these creatures are actualised in modern language- -they go beyond the day to day pre-occupations of so called ‘indigenous’ cultures and reveal a new existential dimension which, because it flourishes at the cutting edge of intersecting worlds, bears witness to a specific human activity’.⁴⁴¹

Shayegan concentrates on what he believes is an area of hybridisation ‘unprecedented in the history of humanity’ and refers to a world culture becoming a sort of ‘rag bag’ in which the ‘vestiges of things, even the most apparently obsolete, are being revived. This has given rise to plural or ‘border’ identities and also to ‘border crossers’ who live in the interstices of this world of ‘in-between spaces’ as Homi Bhabha⁴⁴² calls them’. Shayegan therefore concludes by placing the Iranian artists as:

‘Ultimately migrants and nomads who live tirelessly in ‘border areas’, sliding effortlessly from one culture to another, amplifying *ad infinitum* the registers of their representation of the world. They manage to carve out a perilous path through the maze of fractured worlds, a maze which constitutes, whether we like it or not, the multi-cultural consciousness of our time’.⁴⁴³

It could be said that the Western art world of galleries, dealers and auction houses has tried to come to terms with this changing and developing market. A Sotheby’s catalogue of 2001 tacked a few contemporary Middle Eastern works on at the end of its *Arts of the Islamic World*, adding in much smaller letters underneath ‘including 20th century Middle Eastern painting’. By 2007 there is a separate catalogue for *Modern and Contemporary Arab and Iranian Art*.⁴⁴⁴ A London dealer, Waterhouse and Dodd, has begun to try to build up its Middle East business with its *Routes* exhibitions in 2008 and 2009. The introductory essay for their 2009 catalogue by Marisa Maria Katz⁴⁴⁵ refers to:

‘Strained relations between Iran and the West very often mean that artists act as de facto diplomats-enabling a unique exchange that has not only punctured today’s art market but also political

⁴⁴¹ Issa, Rose (Ed) *Iranian Contemporary Art*, Catalogue for the Barbican, Curve Exhibition of 13/4-3/6/2001. Page 11

⁴⁴² The work of Homi Bhabha is discussed in Chapter 2.

⁴⁴³ Issa, Rose (Ed) *Iranian Contemporary Art*.

⁴⁴⁴ *Sotheby’s Catalogues*, 2001 and 2007.

⁴⁴⁵ *Routes II*, Catalogue for Waterhouse and Dodds Exhibition, 7-23/10/2009

polemics. The hybridisation of these two facets for example is exquisitely articulated in Shirin Neshat's film *Tooba*⁴⁴⁶, made in reaction to the events of September 11th 2001.'

Katz points to Edward Said's question 'But if true exile is a condition of terminal loss why has it been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture' and feels that it applies to many of the artists in the *Routes* exhibition. She quotes one of the artists, Lalla Essaydi⁴⁴⁷, as commenting, 'In my art I wish to present myself through multiple lenses-as artist, as Moroccan, as Saudi, as traditionalist, as Liberal, as Muslim. In short I invite the viewer to resist stereotypes'⁴⁴⁸. Thus we see some of the Middle Eastern artists themselves shying away or resenting the 'universalist' label, preferring to accentuate their skills and experiences.

The call to resist stereotypes is appealing but can give rise to a contradiction created by the way in which Middle East artists have been presented in the West. In order to present them in a way to which a Western viewer can relate they are limned to a Western discourse, with the recent interactions with the West (by way of art movements, artists, politics, economics, education). This default, narrative strategy of presentation helps to create universal or global artists who use their geographic cultural memories but embrace many Western values or methods. In certain cases this leads to a reconfiguration of the Orientalist's pursuit of Western values being used to question the traditions of the Middle East, whereas in other cases the Western values and Middle East traditions are used to question and criticise actions and realities of the West. This newly posited global artist is, however, capable of becoming a stereotype in their own right. It is often presented as such by curators and dealers who focus on the artists' origins and traditional influences, as well as their Western education and influences, in order to explain the artist to a Western public and also to a potential Middle East market. This latter market is becoming increasingly important with the growth of art collecting in the region, particularly on the part of the new mega-museums in Abu Dhabi, Qatar and Dubai. The Middle East collectors themselves, as we shall see in a later section, have some of the same, globalised, qualities. In other words the global artist created to appeal and relate to the Western audience is also being used now to appeal and relate to a Middle East audience. As Katz says in her *Routes* essay:

'Much of the recent popularity of Middle Eastern artists is a direct result of the burgeoning cultural development infrastructure in their native region. Large stretches of the barren sands of the UAE are quickly becoming the homes for some of the world's biggest museums, including the Louvre and the Guggenheim. In Qatar the Museum of Islamic Art has already promulgated a kind of Bilbao effect attracting thousands of visitors who might never have gone to the Gulf city. And yet it is

⁴⁴⁶ *Tooba*, film, 2002, directed by Shirin Neshat and inspired by Shahmoush Parsipour's novel *Women without Men*

⁴⁴⁷ Lalla Essaydi has produced images where the figures and surfaces are all covered with the same fabric and in one exhibition she has 'drained the images of all colour, removed all male figures and draped the women and surfaces with white fabric'.

⁴⁴⁸ *Routes II*, Catalogue for Waterhouse and Dodd Exhibitio, 7-23/10/2009

important to note that this kind of 'Golden Age' we are witnessing which is the direct result of globalisation, is not fleeting. The growth of platforms the world over which includes the construction of dozens of independent galleries in Middle East capitals like Dubai means Middle East artists will hold fast to their status as immovable fixtures of the global art scene. What we have witnessed thus far is only the beginning.⁴⁴⁹

The process of globalisation in cultural goods is underway but is far from complete and the international art world is now seeing the prospect of continued Middle East demand, supporting the prices of works created originally to appeal to its international clients. An economic stimulus from high oil prices is now added to the appeal of the universalised, global artist; a powerful market combination.

A last example may help to stress the existence and persistence of the presentation of the Middle Eastern expatriate as a universal artist. Reza Derakshani⁴⁵⁰ is an established Iranian artist for whom a recent exhibition was held at the Samuel Osborne Gallery in March 2010. He is introduced in the catalogue's text as being born and receiving his early education in Iran before he went to the Pasadena School of Art in California. After graduation he returned for a short time to teach at the University of Tehran to teach art and graphics but following the Islamic Revolution in 1983 moved to New York for twenty years. In nine short paragraphs, this introductory essay by Dr Christa Paula⁴⁵¹ follows a familiar pattern in presenting Middle Eastern artists to the Western public. It begins with a reference to Derakshani's being 'prized by collectors, both at home and abroad, for his vibrant, emotionally expressive canvases'. It goes on to refer, in the second paragraph, to Derakshani moving 'geographically with the same ease as he travels across media and disciplines', (he is also a musician).

The third paragraph of Paula's essay talks of Derakshani's creations by referencing allusions to 'universal spiritual truths embedded in the metaphysical poetry of Attar, Hafiz and Rumi⁴⁵²'. It is interesting that Paula immediately feels the need to add that 'Rumi is the best selling poet in the US today'. Two paragraphs on we again see the use of the universal concept when Paula talks of 'treating surfaces like the performative construction site for transforming creative energy into matter, thereby connecting to the universal, the essentially creative'.⁴⁵³ The seventh paragraph provides the usual citational litany of Western artists as comparators and inspiration for the work of Derakshani, saying that he came to 'maturation at the time when neo- Expressionist painters such as Susan Rothenburg and Julian Schnabel in the United States, Sandra Chia and Francesco Clemente in Italy, and Anselm Kiefer and George

⁴⁴⁹ *Routes II*, Waterhouse and Dodd, 2009. Foreword

⁴⁵⁰ Reza Derakshani 1952- Painter poet and musician

⁴⁵¹ *Reza Derakshani: Catalogue for Osborne Samuel exhibition 11-31/3/2010*—Pages 4-5, *Essentially Creative*.

⁴⁵² Attar, Hafez and Rumi are all Sufi poets

⁴⁵³ *Reza Derakshani: Catalogue for Osborne Samuel Exhibition 11-31/3/2010*, Page 5

Baselitz in Germany were boldly challenging decades of pristine Minimalism, conceptual premises and Op and Pop-Art'.⁴⁵⁴

In paragraph eight Paula acknowledges Derakshahi's ideas as 'being deeply entrenched in Iran's rich Sufi heritage' but immediately moves on to add 'the spiritual component of art has notoriously been avoided for decades by writers, particularly in the West'. The way in which Paula bridges the gap between the ignored spiritual approach of the West and the Sufi origins of Derakshani's work is to add, in the same sentence 'surely it is at the intersection of the personal particular and the universal where meaning is found and conveyed'.⁴⁵⁵

All these examples demonstrate that there has been a development in the way that the West regards the East. It is no longer simply the knowledgeable Westerner presenting and interpreting the Eastern 'other'. At the same time we are not yet at the point, in many cases, where the presentation of the East by the 'Easterner' is totally accepted as being part of the artistic mainstream or the European tradition. Much of the text implies there has simply been a catching-up process. To mark the distinction the term 'universal' (or sometimes, international, global, cosmopolitan or even 'transcendent') is used in a way that would be unexpected, rare, or considered unnecessary for most Western artists.

Non Universalist Presentations

It is of course possible, if not usual, for a Westerner to present a Middle Eastern artist without the regional label. Shirazeh Houshiary has not only been a Tate Prize contender but she has also designed the so-called 'wonky window' for the church of St Martin in the Fields⁴⁵⁶. As an established artist, who has lived and practiced in the UK since 1975, her exhibition of 2008 in the Lisson Gallery was written up by Mel Gooding in a series of short essays entitled *A Suite for Shirazeh Houshiary*⁴⁵⁷. Nowhere in the book are the origins of Houshiary mentioned, nor the terms 'universal' or 'global' used. Instead there is reference to the works of Jacopo Pontormo in the church of San Felicità in Florence which are 'well known by Shirazeh Houshiary, and important to her as an artist'. There is also reference to Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* and other Fra Angelico paintings in the convent of San Marco in Florence being 'known well to Houshiary and important to her 'as art speaking to art'. The work of Houshiary is given context by its portrayal of:

'light, air and space' an 'animation (unveiling the invisible)' with the works of Brancusi, Francesco de Zurbarán, Antonello da Messina, Malevich, Mondrian, Klee and Klein. The air light and

⁴⁵⁴ Reza Derakshahi, Samuel Osborne, 2010

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid

⁴⁵⁶ Illustration 3/7, Shirazeh Houshiary, *Altar (wonky) Window*, 2007. Etched mouth blown clear glass and shot peened stainless steel frame/15x6M. St Martins in the Fields/London

⁴⁵⁷ Gooding, Mel, *A Suite for Shirazeh Houshiary*, Lisson Gallery 2008

space are brought into being by the 'prolonged, repetitive, contemplative writing of a word (the sign of a breath) into a perfect surface that bears no trace of its supporting material'.

Writers referenced in the essays by Gooding include Henri Focillon, W.B. Yeats and Wittgenstein. The essays end with the endorsement that 'what is revealed is concealed, and, in Houshiary's own paradoxical formulation, what is unveiled is what was invisible.'⁴⁵⁸ Houshiary herself develops this concept of invisibility in a *Financial Times* article:

'I have always been fascinated by the invisible. Our breath is invisible and that's what keeps us alive. We are not our bodies alone: life is something more elusive and intangible, and to penetrate that we need to go further than what we can see. Our perception is very limited.'⁴⁵⁹

Obviously the paean of praise from Gooding is part of the promotion for the Lisson Gallery exhibition but it demonstrates that it is possible to present a Middle Eastern artist, stripped of any references to origins or to a 'universalist' or 'global' label'. The links with European religious art may create a sense of comfort for the UK viewer and, to some degree, this would explain the use of Houshiary for a work commissioned by St Martin in the Fields. Nonetheless, the reader has not been programmed by the recitation of origins to expect anything other than works of art in their own right. Houshiary's style and status may aid this presentation but the focus on the work, rather than the artist, can be contrasted with the many preceding presentations which start with the origins of the artist, rather than the work itself. Houshiary, therefore, finds it necessary to define her position saying that she finds that the word spiritual 'has been abused too much-I am not a religious artist, my concerns are human.'⁴⁶⁰ Her window in St Martin's in the Fields⁴⁶¹ is seen as:

'The greatest challenge to the artist-to confront the public. You have to give something to every kind of person from drunks to the homeless, from somebody praying to somebody attending a concert. You're touching humanity at its depth.'⁴⁶²

The window that resulted has clear glass, so that it can work for the viewer on the outside as well as the inside. Its form recalls the cross but it is distorted, hinting at pain and conflict. The Christian symbol also has a denser ellipse of white glass that Houshiary says 'doesn't go to sleep at night' and recalls the central point of her Sufi style Rumi painting⁴⁶³.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid

⁴⁵⁹ *Financial Times* 12/10/2011. Interview with Griselda Murray Brown

⁴⁶⁰ Gooding, Mel, *A Suite for Shirazeh Houshiary*, Lisson Gallery 2008

⁴⁶¹ Illustration 3-7, *Altar Window*, St Martin in the Fields, 2007

⁴⁶² *Financial Times* article 12/10/2011. Interview with Griselda Murray Brown

⁴⁶³ See Chapter 1, Illustration 1-7

Houshiary's status as an artist has moved beyond that of a 'Middle Eastern artist' to a national and international figure. We can subjectively claim that this is due to her ability but two practical examples perhaps demonstrate her position and standing. Her comments on the St Martins window are matched by those who commissioned the piece as the press release from St Martins reveals:

'The design also had to challenge preconceptions and stimulate debate, as well as encouraging reflection and contemplation. Houshiary and Horne's monochromatic composition celebrates light and is an abstract design with strong spiritual, religious and architectural resonances. The 'warp and weft' design of the shot peened stainless steel framework or 'comes' evokes the agony of the Cross, whilst the central ellipse creates an icon of contemplation. It can be seen as the light at the centre of existence, the glory of God and the light with which He illuminates our lives; or it can be seen as universal, transcending cultures.'⁴⁶⁴

These words do not come from Shirazeh Houshiary the Middle East artist (although they could easily have done so) but from the very English ex-Chairman of the Stock Exchange, the Chief Executive of the Royal Society of Arts, the Vicar, churchwardens and members of the congregation who advised the Parochial Church Council.⁴⁶⁵

At an earlier time it is notable that Houshiary declined to appear in the Rasheed Araeen *The Other Story* back in 1989 along with a few other artists, including Anish Kapoor. Jean Fisher speculates there were artistic and perhaps practical reasons for this saying 'The perception that an 'ethnicity marker' would, on the one hand, lead to limited readings of the work and, on the other, prejudice an artist's success in a commercial market unreceptive to non-white artists was nonetheless a widespread anxiety.'⁴⁶⁶

Interestingly the same Lisson Gallery Houshiary exhibition was shown in New York at Galerie Lehmann Maupin in 2010. Their catalogue⁴⁶⁷ does mention Houshiary's origins but confines it to a brief 'Was born in Iran and moved to UK in 1975'. Again no mention is made of the influences of Middle Eastern poets such as Rumi or Al Hallaj which are referred to in an article on Iranian exiled artists by Rose Issa in *L'Iran Devoile Par Ses Artistes*⁴⁶⁸, an article intended for an international market of Middle East art enthusiasts. In turn Issa makes no mention of any influence on Houshiary from the Western religious artists demonstrating that the presentation of artists can depend more on the audience than on the artist themselves.

⁴⁶⁴ St Martins-in-the Fields, Press Release 25/4/2008

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶⁶ Fisher, Jean, *The Other Story and Past Imperfect*, Tate Papers Issue 12, 2009. Note 6

⁴⁶⁷ www.shirazehhoushiary.com Accessed 13/4/2010

⁴⁶⁸ *ArtPress Magazine, L'Iran Desvoile par ses Artistes*, Mai-Juillet 2010

This highlights the dilemma of presenting Middle Eastern artists to a Western audience and disregarding their origins. When the viewer/reader is not told of the artist's origins a dimension can be lost. The image in Houshiary's pictures is often made up of text so small that it cannot be read, so the viewer may have no steer as to how to interpret the image. Given the origins of the artist the words themselves may be Eastern as much as Western. In the same way that Gooding says that the work of Fra Angelico, Zubaran or Pontormo 'is well known to Houshiary', so is the work of Rumi and Al Hallaj. Elsewhere in a *Financial Times* article on Houshiary she talks of 'a book of *Buddhist cave paintings at Dunhuang on the Silk Route*'. To interpret the artist solely in Western terms is as misleading as to interpret them from an entirely Eastern point of view, or in the words of Houshiary 'Am I Iranian? Am I English? They want to understand you so they can put a boundary around you. But I am a citizen of the earth.'⁴⁶⁹

Exclusions can be as notable as the way in which inclusions are presented. A very recent mention of the work of Houshiary highlights that it is not just the actual presentation of Middle East artists that creates the idea that they are not within the mainstream of European or British art. Waldemar Januszczak's review of the Royal Academy's survey of '20th century British Sculpture' notes the absence of any work by Anish Kapoor, Richard Deacon or Alison Wilding and 'Shirazeh Houshiary isn't there. It's like putting on an impressionist exhibition without Monet, Renoir or Pissarro. Silly!'⁴⁷⁰ Here we have a different approach to the identity of Houshiary as an excluded member of her adopted culture.

The British Museum

A very important presentation of contemporary Middle Eastern Art comes from the British Museum. Seeing its mandate as broader than mere collections of historical material and artefacts, the Museum has been amassing for the last twenty five years what is probably the most important collection of modern Middle Eastern art.⁴⁷¹ The underlying mandate comes from the 1753 establishment of the Museum by Parliament, which had the overarching purpose to enable citizens to think about the world in which they live. Given the traditions of the Museum, the 2006 'Word into Art' exhibition focused on those works showing the transition of the written word into expressive or abstract free-flowing art form. It identified the fact that modern calligraphy also embraces graffiti, and the wall-words of street politics alongside verses from Holy Scripture and quotations from the great poets and philosophers. Hence, the title of the 2006 London exhibition *Word into Art*, which was transferred to Dubai in 2008.⁴⁷²

⁴⁶⁹ *Financial Times* article 12/10/2011. Interview with Griselda Murray Brown

⁴⁷⁰ Waldemar Januszczak, *Sunday Times* 27/3/2011

⁴⁷¹ The British Museum also has fine collections of Mexican and US prints

⁴⁷² Porter, Venetia (Ed) *Word into Art*, catalogue for British Museum Exhibition held in Dubai, 2008. The original exhibition was held in London and a slightly extended version transferred to Dubai

The London exhibition contained a majority of artists based outside the Middle East. The balance slightly shifted for the Dubai exhibition where of the 91 artists featured (four have died at the time of writing) 14 are based in London, 15 in Paris, 10 in the US and 13 others are based outside the Middle East, emphasising the extent of the diaspora. Of the others still based in the Middle East virtually all of them have had some training or education in the West and frequently exhibit there. The exhibition was based on works on paper (allowing the British Museum to avoid institutional political conflicts with the canvas based National Gallery) and covered the whole of the Middle East, including one Israeli who is based in New York and one Chinese artist, who is an expert in Arab calligraphy.

During the early stages of this collection a decision was taken to collect works that ‘somehow spoke of the region’⁴⁷³ and showed continuity with ‘Islamic’ art. Thus works which contained modern examples and interpretations of Arabic calligraphy were initially preferred over more global, generic forms of contemporary art (for example there are no works by Mona Hatoum in the exhibition). This is fully justified by the traditions of the Museum and the exhibition curator, Venetia Porter claims calligraphy ‘captures a powerful thread in the art of the region as a whole, encompassing beautiful calligraphy with its ancient roots and the random graffiti of other artists, known as the *‘Hurifayyeh’*’.⁴⁷⁴ The resulting exhibition therefore has as much regard to the founding purpose of enabling the British Museum’s viewers to ‘think about the world in which they live’ as it is to show works of art in their own right. This is in no way to criticise the exhibition or its presentation but to clarify its objectives. The standard, range and quality of the works and the scholarship in an otherwise neglected area are, in themselves, an answer to any charge of a Western attempt to diminish the works to the category of purely ethnic art or portray the works as attempts by a non-Western ‘other’ to catch up with the art of a modern globalised world. Nonetheless it is difficult to avoid the result that the collection is seen as much as a portrayal of a different culture as an artistic movement in its own right.

An exhibition culled from a large collection creates its own strains and needs some focus and direction (otherwise it becomes an eclectic mishmash) and this approach inevitably, but quite legitimately led to a focus on the calligraphic pieces which ‘evoke’ the region. To some extent therefore the emphasis is on the local and there is no attempt to portray modern Middle Eastern art as ‘universalist’ in the way that we have seen with many of the previously cited exhibitions and their presentations. Whilst it could be argued that the overall mandate of the British Museum is universalist in its aim to inform the viewer of the world within which they live this is achieved by presenting the local in order to educate. The objective, however, is perhaps not just to inform but to engage the sympathies of the viewer for regions and cultures other than his own, which must be a universalist aim, albeit a laudable one. Indeed in the preface Neil Macgregor, Director of the British Museum, states that the objects of the founding collection for the Museum included amulets and seals ‘delicately inscribed with Qur’anic and other

⁴⁷³ Porter, Venetia, *Word into Art*. Page 14

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid Page 15

religious verses, narratives of Jewish history as well as pious souvenirs of Christian Jerusalem. He goes on to add-

‘Enlightenment Europe was fascinated by the Levant, studying its antiquities and admiring and envying its prodigious commercial success. But above all the politicians and philosophers of eighteenth century Europe wondered at the exemplary religious tolerance of the Middle East under the Sultan. Nowhere in Europe could Christian, Moslem and Jew live together in harmony as they could in Constantinople, Cairo or Baghdad and the political thinkers of German, Britain and France could see that this was the model for the future.’⁴⁷⁵

The role of achieving a universalist objective of ‘harmony’ may now be reversed, with the Middle East looking on the West as the place where Jew, Moslem and Christian can live together, rather than the West learning from the East as it did in the eighteenth century. The Dubai sponsor of the exhibition, Dr Anwar Gargash, deploys in his preface, the only use of the word universal’ in the 160 page catalogue:

‘The art world is moving forward at a rather interesting pace and the direction is perhaps more universal than ever. Our region, sadly, is not an active participant in this development. However, recent trend, including greater openness and deeper awareness, coupled with a new-found sense of self-confidence, appear to be bringing about positive change.’⁴⁷⁶

The initial location of the exhibition in the British Museum inevitably creates a feeling in the visitor of viewing regional or local work. The fact, however, that the exhibition travelled very successfully to Dubai is a demonstration that this is not just the Western viewer looking at ‘the other’ but also the Eastern viewer reclaiming his heritage. The British Museum catalogue of the collection contains the standard geographic origins of all the artists but, in a catalogue of this size, it has the effect of as much emphasising the diversity within the region as of demonstrating the ‘local’ regional origins of the artists. The extent of the artists’ training and education as well as the wide reach of their exhibition throughout the world, including both East and West, tells the viewer that this not just art packaged for the overseas market but one that appeals in its homeland as well. Nevertheless the nature of the appeal may differ in different locations.

The theme and focus of *Word into Art* is on the way in which Arabic and other Middle East scripts have moved from traditional presentation and techniques to more contemporary international/Western techniques such as lithography, photography, and formal tactics such as abstraction or the submergence of text into expressive art.⁴⁷⁷ This process is presented, to some extent, against a

⁴⁷⁵ Porter, Venetia (Ed), *Word into Art*. Preface

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷⁷ There are examples of traditional calligraphy by Ghani Alani, ‘structured calligraphy’ from Ahmed Moustafa, ‘abstract expressionist’ calligraphy by Mohammed Melehi, ‘pictorial’ calligraphy by Jilla Peacock and ‘dramatic action’ calligraphy by Ali Omar Hermes

background that will give reference points to the viewer familiar with Western painters and movements. Saeb Eigner, an adviser to the collection in his forward⁴⁷⁸ states that two of the artists, Paul Guiragossian and Shafiq Abboud, 'would have felt at home painting with Matisse or Picasso.' Venetia Porter refers to materials, techniques and formats 'specifically associated with Western art traditions and were introduced into the region only from the mid nineteenth century'. She notes that-

'Words, of course appear in Western visual art and distinct parallels may be made with Western manifestations. A number of the early generation of Arab artists who studied in Paris would certainly have been exposed to these art forms.'⁴⁷⁹

Whilst the catalogue highlights the incorporation of Western influences into modern Middle Eastern art it does not ignore the way in which it can work the other way round with a reaction by the Middle East artist against the West. Two examples are given by Porter. The first is the way in which after the 1967 Arab/Israeli war (a traumatic event in the Middle East that put psychological pressures on Shakir Hassan Al-Said and other artists) the critic Buland al-Hadairi wrote of Arab artists 'vying with each other in trying to blaze a trail which would give concrete expression to the longing for Arab unity and end by giving the Arab an art of his own.' Porter believes that Arab artists, many of whom had trained in the West, began to seek inspiration from aspects of their own indigenous culture.'

The second example given by Porter was the response to the 'increasingly ferocious criticism of the abstract tendency among Western trained artists'. There was a call for 'a visual language that would speak specifically to Iranians'. The result was the 'Saqqakhaneh' movement of the 1960s which sought to integrate popular symbols of Shi'a culture but also found new ways of using calligraphy and script by artists such as Parviz Tanavoli⁴⁸⁰ (Illustration 3-8⁴⁸¹) and Charles-Hossein Zenderouni⁴⁸² (Illustration 3-9⁴⁸³).

⁴⁷⁸ Porter, Venetia (Ed) *Word into Art*, British Museum, 2008. Foreword

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid Pages 15-16. Specific reference is made to George Braque, Piet Mondrian, Max Ernst, Juan Miro, Antoni Tapies, Bruce Nauman and Paul Klee

⁴⁸⁰ One of Tanavoli's main themes is the sculptural evocation in materials from bronze to fibreglass of the Farsi word 'heech' in many postures which he uses to portray abstraction or 'nothingness'. See Illustration 3/8

⁴⁸¹ Illustration 3-8, Parviz Tanavoli, *Heech*, 1972. Bronze (Unique)/56x30.5x20.5cm. Grey Art Gallery, New York University

⁴⁸² Charles Zenderouni specialises in what the Western viewer would see as decorative or expressive calligraphy. See Illustration 3-9

⁴⁸³ Illustration 3-9, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi *Untitled' (Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all beings*, 1991. Silkscreen on paper (14/20), from an edition with colour variations/66x50.50cm. British Museum

Roles change over time. For many years the British Museum could be seen, with some justification, as being at the very core of colonialism and Orientalism. In the context of its more recent collection of contemporary Middle Eastern art this is no longer the case, with growing emphasis on local rather than expatriate artists and new developments such as video and photography. The British Museum collection and its presentation has been an important element in the growing understanding and knowledge, within both East and West, of Middle Eastern contemporary art. No explicit claim is made but, in the same way as the Museum may see its retention of the Elgin Marbles as an essential act of preservation of heritage, the Middle East contemporary collection has provided a subsequent base for the recent interest in the Middle East itself and the growing collections based in the newly built galleries of Dubai and Qatar. The British Museum exhibition (though not its collection as a whole) was focussed on the use of text but does not give the sort of distorted view of which Rana Kabbani has complained⁴⁸⁴. It is presented without recourse to simplistic claims that the artists are 'universal'. There is an acceptance that the artists involved are complex individuals who are fusing their origins with Western experience and trends. The 'local' is not therefore presented as a crude statement that it is a 'different other', with implications of Orientalism or neo-colonialism for Eastern viewers. Nonetheless the sheer fact that geographic origin is probably the only shared factor among a very diverse group of artists shows how difficult it is to eliminate an element of 'difference'.

In the case of an institution such as the British Museum it should not, however, be forgotten that there is something of an underlying mission or agenda to inform and presumably gain sympathy for the 'universalist' aim of a society where different religions and cultures can co-exist. Operating, as it must, within a Western tradition, it may, in some contexts, may be regarded as neo-colonial. In other contexts it may be regarded as a justifiable aim, consistent with that of the Museum's founders. The viewer needs to be aware that this is not entirely a collection presented for the sake just of the works themselves, however much they can be appreciated within a sympathetic environment.

Tate Modern and the Saatchi Gallery—Recent Developments

The art world is a dynamic market and during the time that this thesis has been prepared there has been some movement in the way Middle East contemporary art has been collected and presented in the UK. This has evidenced some acceptance of the international standing of Middle East art and a movement away from treating the Middle East group as 'others' or 'universalists' who are somehow outside the artistic mainstream. We have mentioned the Tate Modern and Saatchi Gallery initiatives elsewhere but it is worth discussing the different approaches and their impact.

The Saatchi Gallery exhibition *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* took place in 2009 and followed a successful exhibition of contemporary Chinese art. The main exhibition catalogue shows recognition of the growing importance of Middle East art with Lisa Farjam writing;

⁴⁸⁴ See discussion on Kabbani earlier in this Chapter

‘As the art centres of the West slowly began to take notice of these developments [i.e. the production of camera, cinema, painting and sculpture art in the Middle East] Britain’s former colonies, the Arab populations of Paris and contemporary art from sub-Saharan Africa all became the subject of sweeping exhibitions and hefty volumes in museums around the world’⁴⁸⁵

Farjam goes on to claim that ‘And this is just the beginning. From Los Angeles to Berlin to Beirut and beyond, artists from the Middle East are shattering tidy preconceptions and making us all rethink, as part of a world that has been subject to one too many clichés’. Her conclusion is that ‘the works presented here in all their diversity, mark one step in moving beyond the magic of the fetish’.⁴⁸⁶

The Saatchi approach to the Middle East seems similar to the approach to the Chinese art market, a reasonable approach if there is an inherent assumption of a globalising trend. The risks are that Middle East art, although stated to be part of a worldwide trend, is still presented on its own and not alongside works from other cultures. In the seeming attempt, however, to identify works that can be equated to those from elsewhere the specific features of the region can be ignored, giving less than a comprehensive view of Middle East contemporary art.

If we go back to the four identifiers of calligraphy, literature, history and politics that we posited in Chapter 1 we can use these as a template to review the Saatchi exhibition. There is very little in *Unveiled* that can be claimed to be calligraphic, often limited to minor marks on just a few of the exhibits. There are references to literature and to history but again these are minor in the context of the exhibition. On the other hand the political and social issues (notably gender) do loom large.

It is wrong to believe that a single exhibition can, or ought, to give a fully comprehensive view of a subject as broad or complex as contemporary Middle Eastern art. *Unveiled* may, though, leave the Western viewer with a highly politicised and socially sensitive art scene concept of Middle East art. Whilst these topics are certainly important the viewer needs to beware of seeing them as the totality of the region’s output. Perhaps it shows how difficult it can be to move away from ‘the magic of the fetish’ with a one-off exhibition, targeted maybe to capture the mood of the moment.

A much broader and comprehensive approach is adopted by Tate Modern but the motive for the initiative is similar. Sir Nicholas Serota has commented on recent Middle East acquisitions that he is;

‘Delighted to acquire these seminal works [which] powerfully reflect the diversity of artistic practice in the regions from which they originate. Artists from the Middle East and North Africa are addressing the urgent questions of tradition, identity, memory and imagination in ways that compel (Author’s emphasis) Tate to acquire work from the region.’⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁵ Farjam, Lisa, *Unveiled; New Art from the Middle East*, Booth Clibborn Publications, 2009. Preface.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid

⁴⁸⁷ Amirsaghedi, Hossein, *Art and Patronage in the Middle East*, Thames and Hudson, 2010. Page 152

The resulting initiative is multi-faceted and significant. There are professional/educational exchanges with not-for-profit organisations in the Middle East. A curatorial adviser based in the Middle East has been appointed and, in 2009, a 25 member acquisition committee (Middle East, North Africa Acquisitions Committee or MENAAC) was appointed. MENAAC has members who are collectors, curators and gallerists. Also in place are appointments for Head of Collections, International Art and a Daskopoulis Curator of International Art, both of whom are involved and committed to the development of the Middle East collection.⁴⁸⁸

The results of this strategy are already becoming evident. Whilst Tate Modern previously owned some works from artists such as Mona Hatoum and Hari Rasheed it has now extended its collection with works from Kader Attia, Mahmoud Bakshi Moakhar, Hala Elkoussy, Lamia Joreige and Marwan Rechmaoui. Amongst the collection are paintings, installations, sculptures and video art as the Tate's strategy is to 'offer exciting opportunities often overlooked by private collectors'.⁴⁸⁹

There are two issues arising from this welcome, major and comprehensive approach to integrate Middle East art into the international market. One is that such an institutional approach will drive up prices and compete with other UK institutions in the same market, such as the British Museum. As a result of this risk there is co-ordination between the acquisition committees of the two organisations and Frances Morris. Head of Collections, International Art at the Tate has claimed that 'Before we commit we double check to verify that we are not chasing the same work'.⁴⁹⁰

The other issue is how the thrust to build the regional base may conflict or integrate with the artistic integrity of the overall collection. Frances Morris claims, of course, that the Tate aims to collect the 'best art' and over time the test of the initiative will be to see how this is achieved without constraining the regional focus. An early example of what may develop is, though, available. In 2012 a Tate acquisition of a monumental work by Dia Al-Azzawi was sited in the *Facing History* exhibition at Tate Modern. Situated alongside other works, for instance images of the Vietnam war by US artists *Sabra and Shatila*⁴⁹¹ portrays the UN condemned 'act of genocide' at the Palestinian camps in Beirut during 1982. Reminiscent of Picasso's 'Guernica' it may be but Al-Azzawi manages to convey the chaos, confusion and brutality of the incident which the French writer, Jean Genet, described in the following way:

⁴⁸⁸ Amersadeghi, Hossein, *Art and Patronage in the Middle East*, Thames and Hudson. Page 152

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid. Interestingly the Tate notes that it believes one of its roles is 'caring for artworks. We keep it, look after it, it's the place that safeguards it-it therefore safeguards history', a comment which could either be criticised as a colonial style paternalism or an important contribution to protecting a culture so it can be re-accessed by its members.

⁴⁹⁰ *The Art Newspaper*, Issue 208, December 2009. Whilst understandable such co-ordination would raise questions in the commercial world.

⁴⁹¹ Al-Azzawi, Dia, *Sabra and Shatila-1982-3*. Mixed media on paper, mounted on canvas. 300x750cm. Created over a long period of time up to 2011..

'A photograph doesn't show the flies, nor the thick white smell of death. Neither does it show you how you must jump over the bodies as you walk along from one corpse to the next. A barbaric party had taken place there'.⁴⁹²

Al-Azzawi used Genet's text as a starting point and in the opinion of this author, as well as the Tate's curators not only managed to convey more than a photograph could do and create a work that could stand alongside portrayals of war in other cultures. In this case the Tate has therefore been able to show the universal alongside the local and achieve the objective of showcasing art that is good as well as helping to understand the Middle East. One instance is far from conclusive but, in a way that may not be the case with the Saatchi exhibition, it seems to mark a move away from the portrayals of Middle Eastern art as 'other' or different of which have been described elsewhere in this thesis. It is obviously too soon to know if the Tate will be able to reconcile the conflict that could exist between the the desire to promote one particular geographic area and the artistic excellence of the overall collection.

The Concept of Universalism to the Middle Eastern Artist

So far we have committed the Western fault of viewing the rest of the world in terms of its own vocabulary and tradition. We have already noted that there is some reaction by the Middle East artists themselves to the 'universalism' tag so it can legitimately be asked if the Middle Eastern artists themselves believe that they are in any way 'universal artists'? A poem by Rumi, often the source of inspiration, clearly creates the possibility in a way that is very close to the expatriate artists:

'Not Christian or Jew or Muslim or Hindu,
Buddhist, sufi or zen. Not any religion
Or cultural system. I am not from the East
Or the West, not out of the ocean or up
From the ground, not natural or ethereal, not
Composed of elements at all. I do not exist,
Am not an entity in this world or the next,
Did not descend from Adam and Eve or any
Origin story. My place is time less, a trace
Of the traceless. Neither body or soul.

⁴⁹² *Canvas Magazine*, November/December 2012, Volume 8, Issue 6. Page 197

I belong to the beloved, have seen the two

Worlds as one and that one call to know,

First, last, outer, inner, only that

Breath breathing human being'⁴⁹³

Sufism has been, and is, an important source of inspiration both for Middle East literature and art and its interpretation of universalism pervades the work of many artists such as Al-Said, Dia Azzawi, Koraichi and Shirazeh Houshiary. The way in which Sufism encapsulates all mankind can be summed up, albeit very simplistically, in a sentence from Laleh Bakhtiar ⁴⁹⁴ 'The Sufi, through creative expression, remembers and invokes the Divine order as it resides in a hidden state within all forms'.⁴⁹⁵ Thus the divine order can be applied to everything and to everyone, therefore allowing the Middle East artist to create within his work something that can be applied to all mankind. Bakhtiar then goes on to show the wide scope of Sufism in the way it has absorbed other influences which support the concept of the Unity of Being. Examples of this are the *Enneads* of Plotinus which was the 'first complete metaphysical text to reach Islam from the Greeks' leading Plotinus to be known to Moslems as the 'Shaykh'. The writings of Pythagoreans such as Niomachus, Empedocles and Hermes Trismegistis, the founder of hermeticism, were also absorbed, with the latter writer appearing in the Koran as the Prophet Idris ⁴⁹⁶.

According to Bakhtiar Sufism was also able to absorb the influences of Zoroastrianism, the religion of ancient Iran, with its twin concepts of 'There is law in nature, there is conflict in nature' and the ideas of Suhrawardi and his 'angelogy of lights'⁴⁹⁷.

Bakhtiar sums up the doctrine and method of Sufism as based on two concepts. The first is that there is no God but God and Mohammed is his prophet. The second concept 'expresses the concept of the Universal Prototype (most often translated as The Universal Man)'. The Prophet is the Universal Prototype 'who unites the inward eternal aspect of reality with the outward, phenomenal aspect. The Prophet comprehends all individualities and unites all opposites in the infinite and universal nature of self'.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹³ Barks, Coleman (Translator), *The Essential Rumi*. Penguin 1991. Page 32

⁴⁹⁴ Bakhtiar, Laleh, *Sufi, Expressions of the Mystic Quest*. Thames and Hudson, 1976.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid Page 6

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid. Suhrawardi's angelogy draws an intricate web of lights and symbols, many of which are drawn from the Zoroastrian tradition.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid Page 9

With Sufis seeking to achieve the Universal Prototype this philosophy gives its followers a concept of universalism, somewhat different to the more humanitarian, egalitarian and less essentially spiritual concept which lies behind the way in which the term is used in the West. In particular the Sufi approach to universalism differs from the way in which the term has been used by Western presenters of contemporary Middle Eastern art, who we have discussed earlier.

Some Middle East artists therefore have a concept of universalism which many would accept as something that would allow their viewers, both Western and non-Western, to achieve a common approach and accept similar goals, even if they stop short of a syncretic fusion of different views or an integrated or 'theosophic' philosophy⁴⁹⁹. For the Western viewer the acceptance could be akin to the way in which Sufism became incorporated into the New Age movements and the Beatnik culture. In her book *Beshara and Ibn Arabi* Suha Taji Farouk⁵⁰⁰ outlines the way in which Sufism can move, for the Westerner, from an irrelevant archaic Eastern philosophy to something that can be seen as relevant:

'The New Age has been acknowledged as an important indicator of contemporary cultural change. Most striking is its resort to a universal reservoir of resources for understanding and celebrating what it means to be human, implicitly divesting the modern West of its claim to universal cultural validity and breaking the monopoly of divisive cultural and religious paradigms.'⁵⁰¹

Then there is a claim to almost have discovered Sufism and been able to place it in the universalist's pantheon of beliefs:

'As Sufism takes its place in the global repository of spiritual wisdom the Sufi niche to the global New Age (through movements, practices, literature, tourism, the arts etc) whilst perhaps outwardly insignificant, thus represents a potentially important contribution to the gradual erosion of Western perceptions of Islam as 'other', and the detailed ignorance that accompanies such perceptions'.⁵⁰²

Taji Farouk then goes on to outline how this New Age in the West can be perceived as a reaction against modernity, materialism and lack of individuality whereas in the East the New Age (with its Sufi influence) is 'tapped as a resource in exploring culturally resonant paths to modernity'. Hence, again, we have in Sufism something that can have a wide or universal appeal, even if it leads to different reactions. In this way universalism should therefore be seen, not primarily as another term for internationalism or globalism, although it can be thought to encompass these features. It contains a wider element of

⁴⁹⁹ Theosophy is seen as an investigation of direct knowledge of the mysteries of being and nature, with particular concern on the nature of divinity. See Faivre, Antoine, *Theosophy, Study in Western Esotericism*, Albany NY 2000

⁵⁰⁰ Taji-Farouk, Suha, *Beshara and Ibn Arabi*, Anqa Publishing, 2007. Beshara is a spiritual, New Age, New Religious Movement that originated in the UK in the 1970s. The main inspiration was the Andalusian mystic Muhyi al Din Ibn Arabi (d.1240) brought to the UK by Bulent Rauf (d.1978)

⁵⁰¹ Taji-Farouk, Suha, *Beshara and Ibn Arabi*, Anqa Publishing, 2009. Page 236

⁵⁰² Ibid. Page 236

spiritualism and religion (beyond the Sufi connections that are the relevant focus for this study of contemporary Middle Eastern Art) than internationalism and globalism, which are terms often applied in more specific political or economic fields. It is worth noting however that, whilst some of the artists we are looking at may see this spirituality or in opposition to Western materialism, capitalism or militarism, critics such as Slavoj Zizek who approaches the issue from a different angle:

‘the target on which we should focus, therefore, is the very ideology which is proposed as a potential solution [to the problems of the Western world] Western Buddhism, this pop-cultural phenomenon preaching inner difference and indifference towards the frantic pace of market competition, is arguably the most efficient way for us fully to participate in capitalist dynamics whilst retaining the appearance of mental sanity-in short, the paradigmatic ideology of late capitalism’.⁵⁰³

Shakir Hassan AL-Said⁵⁰⁴ would not agree with Zizek as to the role of spirituality or universalism as lackeys of capitalist materialism, although he would probably accept that there have been examples of the way in which they have been perverted to that end. Al-Said is not only a major artist in his own right but he is one of the few Middle Eastern artists who have tried to put their ideas and beliefs into words as well as onto canvas. His *Contemplative Manifesto* was published in 1966⁵⁰⁵ and claims that:

‘art produced through a human being’s unrestricted freedom becomes an abstract description of existence, a positive force that unifies humanity with the universe. This description is only possible by ascending from the self to the *universal* and descending from the human to the microscopic’.

Al-Said’s theory, according to Nada Shabout in her *Modern Arab Art*⁵⁰⁶, ‘drew on a unique synthesis between Islamic Sufism and Western existentialist philosophy’, drawing on the work of Sartre, Martin Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur. Al Said advances the hypothesis:

‘that artistic expression is achieved by five interrelated and occasionally overlapping stages that are modelled on the five purification stages undergone by Sufis to reduce the self to its primordial condition of nonbeing, in order to achieve union with God. These include; transcendence, the motto, denunciation, vision and the glow.’⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰³ Zizek, Slavoj, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass 2003. Page 26

⁵⁰⁴ Shakir Hassaan Al Said 1925-2004. Al Said is an iconic figure amongst contemporary Middle Eastern artists as is evidenced by the fact that artists such as Maysaloun Faraj and Widjan Ali cherish their holdings of his works.

⁵⁰⁵ The article was originally published in the Iraqi newspaper *Al Jamhuriyah* (No 880)

⁵⁰⁶ Shabout, Nada, *Modern Arab Art*, Saqi Books, 2007. Page 103

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid Page 108

The purpose of human existence for Al-Said –as a person well versed in two civilisations or ‘two forms of one civilisation’: Eastern and Western; a backward one and a developed one –is continually to free oneself from decaying values and to replace them with newly discovered ones’

The final stage, ‘the glow’, of Al-Said’s stages can be interpreted as:

‘To be able to say everything with nothing, to speak without language, to paint without an intermediary, to abandon my [individual and personal] humanity in my [abstract and eternal] humanity. According to his artistic style the accomplishment of ‘the glow’ is to summarise everything (colour, perspective, form) in one value. In the history of Western Art, what approached ‘the glow’ was ‘the impression’ since the appearance of an impression is expression beyond space and time; it is achieved through colour. True glow is what transforms a patch of colour into a world.’⁵⁰⁸

Al-Said’s spiritual approach encompasses a universality and is shared, in different ways, by other Middle Eastern artists. Sufism for Al-Said was:

‘A total way of life, whereas for Al-Azzawi⁵⁰⁹ it was a dimension of spirituality’. Al-Azzawi therefore saw the letter, the component of calligraphy, as not the central material of his painting [but] to be part of the group of elements of which the painting is composed-the letter as a sign and a form. As such its properties will have further energy to reach the world’.⁵¹⁰

Al-Said’s objective was the same but to reach the world the ‘letter is not just a linguistic symbol, it is the only isthmus to penetrate from the world of existence to the world of thought’.⁵¹¹ Hence, the viewer sees the use of damaged walls where the script is on the surface but is the entry and link to the ideas underneath. Other artists acknowledge the claims for an acceptance of a universalist objective for contemporary Middle Eastern art. In the catalogue for the Vatican exhibition⁵¹² of the work of Ahmed Moustafa the usual claim for universalism is made by Jeremy Henzell-Thomas when he says ‘the wider significance of this exhibition lies in the fact that it implicitly invites us to rediscover the common stream of mystical experience which underlies the diversity of all religious traditions’.⁵¹³ In this case the claim is effectively endorsed by the artist himself in his introduction when he thanks his (Middle Eastern)

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid Page 108

⁵⁰⁹ Dia Al-Azzawi. Born Iraq 1939. Moved to UK in the 1970s

⁵¹⁰ Shabout, Nada, *Modern Arab Art*, Saqi Books, 2007. Page 130

⁵¹¹ Porter, Venetia, *Word into Art*, British Museum, 2008. Page 76

⁵¹² Henzell Thomas, Jeremy, *Where Two Oceans Meet-the Art of Ahmed Moustafa*. Altijar World of Islam Trust, 1998.

⁵¹³ Ibid

collectors who have lent pictures to the exhibition as 'in doing so they have been motivated by their belief that this exhibition can be of service in promoting harmony between nations and cultures'.⁵¹⁴

Some Middle Eastern artists consciously set out to reform Western prejudices to the Middle East. Rachid Koraichi, an Algerian artist based in Paris, is a committed Sufi. He believes that the Middle Eastern crescent can sometimes be used as a symbol for a container for three dots, representing the three founding religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism.⁵¹⁵ Koraichi has a work entitled *St Augustine*⁵¹⁶ (similar to other works entitled *Rumi* and *Ibn al-Arabi*), placing the Christian saint in the same category as mystic poets. Koraichi sees no contradiction in this as he points out that St Augustine⁵¹⁷ was born in Souk-Ahras in Algeria. Sufism, Koraichi strongly believes, is non-violent and respects all individuals and religions even if this is only part of its overall philosophy with the important and fundamental extra of its spirituality. Middle Eastern art must be seen in the context of its varied history, which he likens to sedimentation. According to this model of accrued deposits Islam was built on Jewish and Christian origins, as well as Greek and Roman. The text in the *St Augustine* picture is therefore in Latin, French, Greek and Arabic and tells of St Augustine's birth and death. The decorative symbols show plants from the region but we also have the crescent moon. The figures are another example of basically indecipherable script but hint at the whirling dervishes⁵¹⁸ of Sufism and also the ghostly Djinn of Arabic literature (which become the Genii in the Westernised pantomimes of *Ali Baba*) which are sometimes portrayed by Middle Eastern artists as the columns of sand and dust whipped up by the desert winds. The use of numbers is a common Middle Eastern device, often shown in a grid or series of triangles, portraying features of the Sufi sect⁵¹⁹. Such symbols are a fundamental feature of the Sufi philosophy as Laleh Bakhtiar shows in her commentary on their role:

'Universal (or natural) symbols are symbols as they appear in the nature of things. They are primordial to mankind and in this sense they are trans-cultural. Particular symbols, or even particular interpretations of universal symbols, differ according to the various traditions. They are sensible or intelligible forms consecrated by God through revelation to become vehicles of Divine Grace. They possess, in a sense, the theophanic light which confers a dimension of transcendence on a particular tradition in which they are revealed'.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁴ Ibid

⁵¹⁵ Author's notes from a talk by Rachid Koraichi at the October Gallery on 12/8/2010.

⁵¹⁶ Illustration 3-10, Rachid Koraichi, *St Augustine*, 2008. Lithograph AP 3of 5/36X27cm. Property of the author.

⁵¹⁷ St Augustine 354-430. Also known as Augustine of Hippo

⁵¹⁸ A dervish is someone who follows the Sufi path and the whirling dance is intended to reach religious ecstasy

⁵¹⁹ In Sufism symbols are important as through seeing them one continues to remember and invoke. The number three is important as it symbolises the triangle which is the first figure to contain space

⁵²⁰ Bakhtiar, Laleh, *Sufi, Expressions of the Mystical Quest*. Thames and Hudson, 1976. Page 27

The use of St Augustine is appropriate as the saint had espoused the idea of a pilgrimage from Babylon, where Jews were held captive and dreamed of returning to Jerusalem, contrasting the city of oppression with a city of freedom. The adventure he advocated could not do without two focuses: estrangement and reunion, want and desire, never one without the other. He spoke of singing 'not with my flesh but with my heart. The citizens of Babylon hear the voice of the flesh, he who founded Jerusalem hears the song of our heart'.⁵²¹

Tearing oneself away from the flesh to the heart can be seen as a true transubstantiation or pilgrimage where the alienation of foreigner/pilgrim ceases within the universality of the love for the other. In the words of St Augustine 'there is nothing closer to man than another man' and this makes it difficult to see the foreigner as the 'other' of Orientalist tradition.⁵²²

For Koraichi, Sufism is an all embracing religion with the Moslem crescent symbolising openness and the three balls which it encloses symbolise the three religions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism. There is a respect for all religions and the 'pre-eminence of the human spirit'⁵²³. Here is an artist who would willingly accept, and even strive for, the 'universalist label' but only on his own terms. One way in which Koraichi is very consciously trying to include the West in the Sufi embrace is through his Christo-like⁵²⁴ 'wrapping projects'. One such was in Paris where he covered the Comedie Francaise with banners showing the protecting 'hand of Fatima'⁵²⁵, the sun for illumination, a fish for fertility, a crescent for the covering moon and a camel with three pyramids for the mystic links between the three religions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The impact of his wrapping is intended to expand the horizons of the viewer and in the words of Laleh Bakhtiar in *Sufi-Expressions of the Mystic Quest*:

'It is through symbols that one is awakened. It is through symbols that one is transformed; it is through symbols that one expresses. Symbols are realities contained within the nature of things. The entire journey to God is a journey in symbols in which one is constantly aware of the higher reality within things.'⁵²⁶

Symbols are, of course, a feature of much art from renaissance religion to the surrealists such as De Chirico. Within contemporary Middle Eastern art they have a particular intensity from their direct links

⁵²¹ St Augustine, *Confessions of a Sinner*, Penguin Books/Great Ideas, 1961

⁵²² Ibid

⁵²³ Talk by Rachid Koraichi-October Gallery 12/6/2010. Author's notes

⁵²⁴ Christo –artist born Christo Vladimir Javacheff in Bulgaria 1935 specialises in 'wrapping' locations from the Reichstag to Central Park in New York.

⁵²⁵ This refers to the amulet shaped like an open palm which is the symbol of protection in Islam (Fatima was Mohammed's daughter, Mary was the mother of Jesus and Miriam was the sister of Moses.)

⁵²⁶ Bakhtiar, Laleh, *Sufi, Expressions of the Divine Quest*. Thames and Hudson, 1976. Page 25

with religion, history, calligraphy and nature. They have been appropriated by artists such as Klee but for the artists of the region the symbols are intended to evoke their philosophy or universality, not just the exoticism of the foreign or the hinting at an unexplained, or unexplainable, hidden mystery.

The Value of the Universalist Label

The predictive value of any theory is reckoned to be a good scientific test of a concept so, despite the fact that some artists themselves accept a universalist label, it must be asked if their use of the term is the same as that of the commentators who present them to the Western audience. Their use of the term is often that of a generalised humanist, or international vision which appeals to all mankind. Commentators who have presented the term to the Western audience use it to position the work as part of a developing world art, where Middle Eastern culture is combined with modern Western culture to create an art that has an appeal across cultures. At one level the term 'universalist' can almost be seen to be a way of saying that the art is not ethnic or traditional and, as such merits the attention of an audience beyond the culture in which it was created. The act of becoming an expatriate is therefore almost seen as the artist himself acknowledging that he has moved beyond his own tradition and accepted that he is a 'universal' rather than a regional artist.

If we accept that some kind of new stereotype has been created we have to answer two questions. The first is if this is a meaningful categorisation for what is in many ways a very disparate group ranging from calligraphers to abstract artists and from figurative painters of traditional subjects to political propagandists? The concept risks denying Middle East artists the possibility of being individuals as they are relegated to being seen only as a member of a defined group and may be the 21st Century version of the Spivak's⁵²⁷ subaltern who is not expected to speak in his own right. Leading on from this is the second question as to whether this is a category confined to Middle East or non-Western artists? The terms universal, global and hybrid are often used about Middle East artists but it can be doubted if the terms are used so often of Western artists, many of whom have experienced other cultures and adopted values other than their native inheritance.

⁵²⁷ Gayatri Spivak. Post-colonialist writer who posed the famous question, *Can the Subaltern speak?* For Spivak's seminal essay see *Post Colonial Studies Reader*, Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 1995, page 24. It is worth noting that in her review of the way in which literature has been taught Spivak sees the role of women as even more subservient than the male colonial subject. See Stephen Morton's *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* Routledge, 2007, page 55 where he writes 'Since official historical discourse tends to privilege men as the main actors of revolutionary politics in India Spivak suggested that literature can provide a different space to articulate subaltern womens' insurgency and resistance into the social text of post -colonial India'. The existence of many of the women artists from the Middle East shows how they are able to achieve a voice through their art after being deprived by their homeland cultures.

We are faced with the fact that many terms such as ‘universal’, ‘global’, ‘international’, ‘transcendental’, ‘enlightenment’ or ‘multi-cultural’ are not only undefined⁵²⁸ but have limited predictive value for the viewer as to the nature of what he is about to see. At one level they do convey a message in qualifying the geographic label ‘Middle Eastern’. What the viewer is about to see is not traditional or ethnic Middle East art. Having created a stereotypical concept of Middle Eastern art, through use of the geographic adjective, the description is immediately qualified or nuanced and the viewer is then encouraged to expect something different. The words ‘contemporary’ and ‘modern’ have a similar qualifying effect, but perhaps not the same emancipative impact.

The use of the ‘Middle East’ descriptive tag is sometimes self evident and unnecessary as the nature of the work itself immediately references the region through the use of calligraphy or images such as minarets, domes, desert or even palms or camels (albeit that the mere name of the artist also creates the same expectation in the mind of the Western viewer without even seeing the image). If we look at some of the images, all by expatriate artists, from Maliheh Afnan, from *Routes*, the Barbican Iranian Exhibition; from *‘Strokes of Genius’*; from Widjan Ali’s *Modern Islamic Art* or the Samuel Osborne *‘Reza Derakshani* exhibition, what would a Western viewer would be expecting to see from such exhibitions?

*Palimpsest*⁵²⁹ is a typical Afnan work, with basically illegible script evocative of past traditions and histories. The subdued colours indicate age and for the Western viewer they indicate a past for other civilisations, with the Middle Eastern viewer glimpsing a slightly more familiar but also distant past. Only in the very widest sense would the Western viewer be able to perceive a globalism or universalism that is relevant. Nevertheless he would detect the Middle Eastern connection from even a limited knowledge of Arabic script. Equally from the *Routes* catalogue, the elaborate calligraphy of Nja Mahdaoui of *‘Caligramm’*⁵³⁰ the viewer is left in no doubt of the work’s Middle Eastern connections even if he has no knowledge whatsoever of Arabic script and what the words mean. The image can be seen as an exotic evocation of the Middle East and the traditional skills of the calligrapher, albeit that the Westernised title of *Caligramm* hints at a more modern and global world.

A Western viewer, familiar with Middle Eastern literature, myths and tales might recognise the title of Derakshani’s *Shirin and Khosrow*⁵³¹ or, if versed in Persian history or miniatures, might recognise the

⁵²⁸ The terms may also have developed specific meanings or associations such as that for ‘enlightenment’ as a European intellectual movement of the 17th and 18th centuries with philosophers such as Locke and Descartes or ‘transcendental’ associated with Ralph Waldo Emerson and David Thoreau.

⁵²⁹ Illustration 3/11, Maliheh Afnan, *Palimpsest* 1998. Mixed media on paper/42x54cm. Reproduced in ‘Maliheh Afnan’/(Ed Rose Issa), Saqi Books, 2010

⁵³⁰ Illustration 3/12, Nja Mahdouia, *Caligramm on Parchment 2*, 2007. Indian ink, colour and gold acrylic on parchment/90x70cm. From ‘Routes’ catalogue for Waterhouse and Dodd exhibition 7-23/10/2009

⁵³¹ Illustration 3/13, Reza Derakshani, *Shirin and Kosrow*, 2007. Oil on canvas /150x180cm. Exhibited and in catalogue for Osborne Samuel Exhibition, 11-31/3/2010. Shirin and Kosrow were two unrequited lovers from the Persian Epic ‘Shahnameh’ by Ferdowsi

clothing of the figures blurred into the red/gold glow of the picture. The work, however, does not have either the more obvious Middle Eastern symbols or the calligraphy that would make it identifiable to the non-specialist Western viewer. Neither is there the more obvious message or allusion to a modern integrated world. In this sense it is akin to the faded symbols of Afnan. Perhaps the best way of justifying a 'universalist' label would be from the striking red/gold glow, which Al-Said might recognise from his search for abstraction.

A different Middle Eastern tradition of architectural geometry evokes the Middle East in the *Image of the Heart*⁵³² from Shirazeh Houshiary's work in the Barbican's *Iranian Contemporary Art* catalogue in a work which we might imagine is very unlikely to have been created by a non-Middle Eastern artist. A different image, but one still very apparent again from its calligraphy, is that of conflict and war and is created by the 'The War is over'⁵³³ (1992) from Salam Khedher pictured in *Strokes of Genius*. The artist here is very clear about the origins of the work commenting 'since we exist in a conditional culture we cannot escape viewing art in set frames of time and circumstance'. In the case of Dia Azzawi's work *What Al-Nifari said to Abdullah*⁵³⁴ again displays Middle East origins through the use of calligraphy (and for Dia Azzawi the use of colour which he regards as very significant).

In all the above instances, the Middle East origins seem clear without the need by the presenter to inform the viewer of the Middle Eastern origins of the artist. Telling the viewer of the origins of the artist simply focuses him more on the general geographic background and away from the individual merits of the work and the artist, further pigeon-holing him in a general group, where often the only connection is the geographic provenance rather than the type or style of the artist's output. In relation to this Mona Hatoum has commented after a personal interview 'It is refreshing to be interviewed without once being asked to explain my work in relation to where I come from. Most people who interview me seem to have this journalistic attitude that wants to explain or validate my work specifically in relation to my background'⁵³⁵. Another artist, Emily Jacir, answered 'No comment' in an interview when she was asked to confirm her birthplace. In practice her origins have been variously traced to the West Bank, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the United States. Her 'No comment' is perhaps a way of saying 'Look at the work and not at me!'⁵³⁶

⁵³² Illustration 3-14, Shirazeh Houshiary, *The Image of the Heart*, 1991, Lead and copper/ 13x98cm diameter. Exhibited and in catalogue for 'Iranian Contemporary Art' at the Barbican, 2001. Courtesy of the Lisson Gallery

⁵³³ Illustration 3-15, Salam Khedher, *The War is Over* 1992. Silkscreen print/ 72x57cm. British Museum

⁵³⁴ Illustration 3-16, Dia Al Azzawi, *What Al-Nifari said to Abdullah*, 1983. Mixed media on paper/110x75cm. Jordan National Gallery

⁵³⁵ Archer, Michael/ Brett, Guy/de Zegher, Catherine *Mona Hatoum*, Phaidon, 2001. Page 30

⁵³⁶ Interview with Emily Jacir, 26/7/2010

The information that an artist comes from the Middle East may, however, contribute to the viewers understanding for a group of work where the Middle East origins are not immediately visually apparent. Afnan's *Pour La Vie*⁵³⁷ does not obviously contain her usual nuanced calligraphy and the French title may give the wrong guidance. Knowing her Middle East origins, with its traditions of vases and jars as the essential crucibles of commodities that sustain life, can lead to a better understanding of the work. In the 'Routes' catalogue we see an image by Shadi Ghadirian of a woman's handbag containing the usual personal effects, supplemented by bullets⁵³⁸ (probably not a usual item?). It is the information that Ghadirian comes from the Middle East that allows the viewer to context the work as part of the Middle East violence rather than a New York gangster's moll, a Second World War Resistance fighter or even a fashion magazine advertising handbags. Whilst the information on geographic origins may help the viewer to appreciate the image in one way it has the contradictory effect that he is thereafter focussed on the 'local' influences and perhaps loses the 'universal' context as a comment on violence and femininity. The viewer is thus deprived of the other interpretations such as the clash between the decorative and the functional, the hard male invasion of a soft feminine space, the subjugation of the individual to the dominance of a violent society, or even reflections on consumerism.

The work of Sohrab Sepehri⁵³⁹, represented in the Barbican catalogue gives no indication of his Middle East origins. Being told of his Iranian origins is important but we also need to know that he is a Kurd from Kashan. This mix and his Japanese links help us to make the essential connection with the way that his Middle East spiritual upbringing has led him to make the connection with the Zen of Japan. In *'Strokes of Genius'* there is a bronze sculpture⁵⁴⁰ by Sharesh Amin which does not give any immediate indication of a Middle East connection. The fact that Amin is an exile from Iraq allows us to understand *'Symbiosis'*, where different spheres are capable of being held in balance despite their physical separation. Widjan Ali includes a work by Shakir Hassan Al Said, *Wall Strip No 4*⁵⁴¹ which does not carry the clearly visual Arabic calligraphy that is evident in some of his other works. The information that Al Said comes from Iraq does, however, help us to understand the importance of the daubings on war-torn walls which may therefore carry internal messages about the surrounding conflicts and tragedies.

⁵³⁷ Illustration 3-17, Maliheh Afnan, *Pour La Vie*, 1996. Mixed media on paper/18.5x16cm. Reproduced in Maliheh Afnan, (Ed Rose Issa), Saqi Books, 2010.

⁵³⁸ Illustration 3-18, Shadi Ghadirian, *Handbag*, 2008. Nil Nil Series #1/C-type print, edition of 10/76x76cm.. Exhibited and in catalogue for *Routes* exhibition at Waterhouse and Dodd, 23/10/2009

⁵³⁹ Illustration 3-19, Sohrab Sepehri, *Rocks*, 1972. Oil on canvas, 200x200cm. Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.

⁵⁴⁰ Illustration 3-20, Sharesh Amin, *Symbiosis*, 1997. Bronze Sculpture 59x36x5cm. Collection of the artist

⁵⁴¹ Illustration 3-21, Shakir Hassan Al Said, *Wall Strip No 4*, 1992. Mixed media on wood, 122x122cm. National Gallery of Fine Arts Amman.

The interpretive value of the information that the artist was born or brought up in the Middle East will vary according to the individual artist. With the handbag of Ghadarian the viewer is quickly able to bring a context to the work, seeing something of the artist's intentions. With Sepehri, however, the geographic origins of the artist can only give a small part of the background, perhaps acting as a starting point to understand a complex individual artist⁵⁴². With Shakir Hassan Al-Said the geographic origins are an essential part of the artist's make-up and inherent in everything he does without being immediately visually apparent to the Western viewer. As much as Mona Hatoum might wish commentators to ignore her Lebanese birthplace and Palestinian parentage, a work such as that of *Present Tense*⁵⁴³ of a field of soap bars made from pure olive oil by Palestinians in Nablus, which map the scattering of Palestinians pushed out by the Oslo Agreement, shows it would be as wrong to ignore geographic origins as it would be to focus entirely on them. In this image there is a clear criticism of the treatment of Palestine but this can be universalised to the way in which many other countries are treated by the international community.

The presentation of expatriate Middle Eastern art in the West thus needs to be reviewed in terms of its impact on the viewer. The global/universalist/transcendent/multi-cultural hybrid labels may lead to the danger of a stereotype which has little or no predictive merit as to what the viewer is about to see and may tell nothing about the work. In many ways the label creates a group which denies individuality and just establishes a new and modern 'other' to the Western counterparts. The use of the statement of origins can, however, add value where the origins of the artist are not immediately apparent despite the fact that it may focus the viewer too much on the origins and too little on the individual or the works themselves. The extent to which the information on origins is of use can depend on the complexity and individuality of the artist and may not be the dominant motivation.

The Local and the Universal

The dilemma of the local versus the universal is a problem for both the Middle East artist and those who present and collect the art. The Middle East may well not be the only region to have this problem of identification of the artist and not the art, although it is perhaps an extreme example. It is beyond the immediate scope of this study but many of the issues faced in the context of the contemporary Middle Eastern art may be present with the art of other 'emerging' markets such as China or Africa.

⁵⁴² Sohrab Sepehri was born in Kashan in 1928 and died of cancer in 1980. His work focussed on natural objects like trees, rocks and stones. With his move to Japan and the nature of his work it is possible to speculate that this artist evidences the universalist approach, through the connection between the spirituality of the Middle East and Japanese Zen as he was the translator of Japanese haikus.

⁵⁴³ Illustration 3-21, Mona Hatoum, *Present Tense*, 1996. Blocks of Nablus soap (a traditional Palestinian product made of potash and olive oil), glass beads/4.4x299x241cm. Installed in Jerusalem and Hamburger Kunsthalle. The image represents the map of Palestine as envisaged in the Oslo Agreement of 1993, causing controversy even in Germany as the graphic simplification implied a continuous autonomous region which did not exist (the use of soap as a criticism of the Jewish state may also have touched raw nerves in Germany). There is a clear play on the word tense as denoting the current moment and the tension in the region.

At root there is perhaps a deeper problem. On the one hand there is the aspiration to be part of the globalised world with all its economic benefits and humane, civilised culture. On the other hand there is a desire not to reject, but to confirm, local origins and beliefs. Its symptoms can be seen in the West, for example Belgium, Scotland and Spain. This creates a cultural conflict for both viewer and artist but for the expatriate it is even more potent as the act of emigration is in itself a form of rejection which can be expiated by a demonstrated allegiance to traditional values, or a criticism of the iniquities of the homeland which have forced exile.

An excellent example of this can be found in the work of Feyerdoun Ave, an Iranian artist who now lives in Paris. His *Rostam in Winter*⁵⁴⁴ shows the traditional Persian hero, Rostam, in the form of a modern wrestler against the background of vultures and hyenas. Painted after the recent 2010 riots following the Iranian elections it reflects both local origins and a criticism of the modern state. The global appeal has been emphasised by both the English script on the image itself and a video from Ave at a recent exhibition of his work which shows the modern wrestler against a background of Maria Callas singing from the torture scene in *Tosca*⁵⁴⁵. Specifically though the work contains the ominous presence of the hyenas and vultures, indicating the dangerous Iranian political climate. The uncertain and unnatural character of the times may be the reason why the shadows cast are contradictory with the light coming from both sides, overhead and behind. The drizzling sky may also contribute to the feeling of political and physical malaise but may also hint at the artist's Zoroastrian beliefs where water is seen as purifying. The affinity with the elements can be seen in another Feyredoun Ave exhibition⁵⁴⁶, where he showed a number of cloud and nature studies.

The politicisation of the art of many expatriates is a result of their attempt to preserve their local traditions whilst overseas. The violence and autocracy that appear to be endemic to the Middle East are contrasted with the perceived values of peace, harmony, spirituality and freedom to be gathered around the imaginary of 'universalist' ideology. As a 'universalist' the expatriate is able to use traditional values to criticise the political and economic colonialists or the local autocrats who caused their emigration. Shirin Neshat, who is an expatriate Iranian artist, has said in a recent interview 'The insiders who are living it, meaning that their expression is more direct and closer to the truth. Our work as artists living abroad is more nostalgic, distant and informed by the experience of our exile. Our work tends to be more metaphoric or allegorical'⁵⁴⁷.

The 'hybrid' label has been used but its value is limited in the context of the idea of 'universalism for the expatriate Middle Eastern artist. The fusion is not between Iraq and the UK or Iran and France but an

⁵⁴⁴ Illustration 3-23, Feyredoun Ave, *Rostam in Winter*, 2010. Coloured print on paper/74x56cm. Property of the author

⁵⁴⁵ Interview with Janet Rady July 2010. Author's notes

⁵⁴⁶ Rossi and Rossi, *Feyredoun Ave, The Sacred Elements: Wind*, Exhibition, 21/9-7/10/2010

⁵⁴⁷ *ArtPress Magazine, Iran Desvoile par ses Artiste*, Mai-Juillet 2010

adoption by someone with a regional background (and who does not have something of a 'regional background?') of certain values of the 'universalist'. Inasmuch as the latter is an 'identity' it is not one that can be fused but is a pure form for all mankind. It can, though, be a form of rejection of regional values leaving the expatriate uneasy at the criticism of his inherited values. The 'universalist' status does, however, allow the expatriate artist legitimately to criticise both local autocracy and Western neo-colonialism with a degree of consistency by applying the same values to both spheres.

To present expatriate Middle Eastern art as either totally local or totally 'universalist' would be wrong as it would leave out an important dimension. Is there therefore a way to do so which recognises the two dimensions and does not force an artificial Western (or Eastern) interpretation? If so it has to be something that is sufficiently robust to encompass the wider experience of all relations between different groups of foreigners. To address this we have the approach offered by Julia Kristeva in her book *Strangers to Ourselves*⁵⁴⁸.

Kristeva asks the question 'Can the foreigner who was the enemy in primitive societies, disappear from modern societies?'⁵⁴⁹ She notes there may have been a few, fleeting moments when this has been achieved, at least to some extent, in the past (for example Greece and the Barbarians, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment as well as early Christianity with St Paul and St Augustine). She goes on to make the question more specific to our modern experience by saying:

'As a still more utopic matter the question is before us again today as we confront an economic and political integration on the scale of the planet: shall we be intimately and subjectively able to live with the others, to live *as others*, without ostracism but also without levelling?'⁵⁵⁰

Kristeva's answer is seen to be that there is a solution within ourselves. This will come when 'the contemporary individual's subversion, beginning with the moment when the citizen-individual ceases to consider himself as unitary or glorious but discovers his incoherences and abysse, in short his strangeness'.⁵⁵¹ If we recognise the 'strangeness' or 'foreigner' within ourselves we can promote the togetherness with those foreigners that we recognise in ourselves. Kristeva does, however, recognise that this is not a solution that can be imposed in any dominant manner and we will return to her resolution of the dilemma at the end of this chapter.

There are some signs that this approach is used with some of the presentations that we have seen but it is more usually seen from the artists rather than the curators, who tend to feature the 'difference' and then make claims as to the 'universality' of their artists. The Kristeva solution demands a level of

⁵⁴⁸ Kristeva, Julia, *Strangers to Ourselves*, Columbia University, 1991.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid Page 1

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid Page 2

⁵⁵¹ Ibid Page 2

tolerance which, in the light of history, is hard to expect. Whilst the concept of universal man may be the only solution whereby the rights or even the existence of the 'local' can be protected, as Kant has claimed, it will be subject to continued stresses, strains, and moments of breakdown. Thus an exhibition of Middle Eastern art at the Brunei Gallery of the School of African and Asian Studies was cancelled in 2005 after terrorist attacks in London⁵⁵² and a level of censorship persists in the Middle East itself which would not be tolerated in the West. For example a recent exhibition, curated by Janet Rady in Berlin, which featured a level of nudity was effectively closed down by political and diplomatic pressure from Iran⁵⁵³. The curator of the Sharjah Biennial, Jack Persekian, was dismissed in 2011 for the detail of one minor piece in his exhibition⁵⁵⁴. Tell Fellrath, the organiser of *Iran Inside Out* (an exhibition of Iranian art at the Chelsea Gallery in New York) refers in the catalogue⁵⁵⁵ to 'many recent exhibitions that reduce Middle Eastern artists to a mere stereotype defined by their cultural heritage' and then comments on the 'even worse reinforcing of the stereotype' by presenting the artists only amongst their own kind and choosing works with clear cultural references and choosing expected titles.⁵⁵⁶ The universal label is thus negated in many instances as the way in which the artists are presented is a denial of the essential feature of universalism which is a denial of difference.

The Universal

In many instances, the problematic term 'universal' (or its international, global, transcendent etc equivalents) has been used, both by curator/presenters and sometimes by the artists themselves. As the term is not defined let us attempt a description of what appears to lie behind the use of the term, rather than a definition. Given the loose use of the term by a number of writers it would be wrong to attempt a precise definition but rather we can extrapolate or elide the elements of universalism from the text, the place of the exhibition and even from the art works themselves. The four elements of the description are not exclusive and are not all present on all occasions, often being intertwined with one another. Western curators will give more emphasis to some aspects and the Middle East artists will give more emphasis to others.

⁵⁵² Interview with Brunei Gallery January 2007. Author's notes

⁵⁵³ Interview with Janet Rady February 2009, Author's notes

⁵⁵⁴ FlashArtonline.com 7/4/2011, accessed 15/12/2011

⁵⁵⁵ Fellrath, Tell (Ed), *Iran Inside Out-Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists*, Chelsea Art Museum, 2009. Foreword.

⁵⁵⁶ The practice of curators, galleries and auction houses of presenting art in the way that will have most appeal to its target market is commercially natural. In a *Financial Times* article of 26/11/11 Isabelle de la Bruyere, Middle East director of Christies admits 'At first 80% of Middle Eastern art was bought by Middle Eastern buyers. Now it is 60% and [I admit] that in choosing works they take account of cultural tastes. Of course you have to be careful of imagery.'

1 The first element of 'universalism' appears to be that the work of the artists has an appeal, acceptance or recognition by all who see it regardless of the origin, race religion, culture or politics.

2 A second view of 'universalism' is that there is some degree of shared values, perhaps as broadly defined as 'freedom', 'peace' or 'tolerance'.

3 'Universalism's' third feature is a perception of some dimension of spirituality which rises above the essentials of any individual religion.

4 The fourth and last element of universalism as applied generally to the work of contemporary Middle Eastern artists is perhaps a contradiction in the use of the term. The mere fact that the noun 'universal' is applied to a group of artists may conceal that they are not regarded as truly and totally universal or accepted but that they retain some remaining kind of 'otherness' or cultural identity. Perhaps an analogy can be made with the term 'world music'. This is music which can be enjoyed and experienced by all cultures but still retains a local identity and is not part of the classical, mainstream (or even Western) tradition.

The first element in the use of the term 'universalism' can be seen as a continuance of the Kantian idea that there is some kind of common value for the understanding of beauty when he claimed that 'the beautiful is what, without a concept, is liked *universally*'⁵⁵⁷ and that there is 'a common moral knowledge' in order to make such judgements.⁵⁵⁸

In his essay on *Postmodern art and the Concrete Self*⁵⁵⁹ Arthur C Danto refers to the 1950's and 1960's as having a philosophy of art, and especially the visual arts that was:

'Essentialist, universal and historically complacent. The endeavour was to identify a genre of painting that was pure and hence expressed the deepest and most final truths of art. It would be abstract: the pleasure it might afford would be almost intellectual; and in its Platonic Absoluteness stood outside history. It made no concessions to the special conditions of the viewers: their experience must at last be alike, exactly as Kant insisted the ascription of beauty must entail. It made no difference whether the viewer was male, female, white or black, Jew or Gentile, American or European.'⁵⁶⁰

Contemporary Middle Eastern art may not fulfil all these conditions fully (it is, for instance, not always abstract and some may not be what Kant would have considered acceptable as beautiful by all) but it can be claimed that it goes a long way if the viewer is able to stand outside the specific geographic origins and detail of the works. For Kant this would be possible, and right to do, as the experience of

⁵⁵⁷ Salim, Kemal, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory*, MacMillan Press, 1997. Page 33

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid Page 23

⁵⁵⁹ Danto, Arthur C, *Philosophising Art*, University of California, 2001

⁵⁶⁰ As an aside it is interesting that Danto does not refer to Arab, Asian or African

beauty has mingled with it no component of what he calls interest as the pleasure elicited by objects perceived as beautiful is 'merely contemplative and does not bring about an interest in the object. Every interest spoils the judgement of taste and takes from its impartiality'.⁵⁶¹ Herein is the potential contradiction between the viewer and the artist. The latter starts with his local cultural memory and creates an image but the viewer, it is suggested, can or should ignore the specifics of the region and just perceives its implicit and universally recognised quality of beauty or even of humanity.

It is interesting that Salim Kemal is able to identify a similarity between the approach of Kant in his assertion that aesthetic response has to do with pleasure or the feeling of life and 'the theories of poetics produced by Arabic philosophy, both before and after Islam'.⁵⁶² Kemal goes further and lays claim to a concept of universalism when he states that the aesthetic response has to do with pleasure or the feeling of life which 'tallies with our own conception of the aesthetic response in that whatever else may be involved in appreciating a poem, novel or other object, certainly pleasure is also present, and comes from appreciating their various features.' Kemal quotes Kant in saying that 'nothing is postulated in a judgement of taste except such a *universal voice* about a liking unmediated by concepts. Hence all that is postulated is the possibility of a judgement that is aesthetic and yet can be considered valid for everyone'.⁵⁶³

Kant's approach has always been subject to concerns by those who advocate multiculturalism. In *Multiculturalism and the Problem of Particularism*⁵⁶⁴ Joshua Parens of Tel Aviv University believes that when Kant referred to culture he meant 'the human capacity to will universal moral laws'. This can be seen as a denial of 'difference' which is 'implicit in Kantian as well as other enlightenment forms of universalism' and leads to a search for a 'corrective for both extreme contemporary particularism and extreme Kantian universalism'. He cites the presentation of Plato by a medieval Arab philosopher, Al Arabi, which 'denies moral universalism but acknowledges the possibility of some form of universalism, at least in the realms of knowledge'.⁵⁶⁵

In the same way as 'universalism' implies a shared concept of beauty the use of the term by commentators on Contemporary Middle Eastern art also seems to imply a shared list of values such as 'peace' or 'tolerance'. It is no coincidence that UNESCO has commissioned work from artists such as Suad al Attar, Maliheh Afnan and Ahmed Moustafa as these principles are enshrined in the Charter of

⁵⁶¹ Salim, Kemal, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory*. MacMillan Press, 1997. Page 34

⁵⁶² Ibid Page 34

⁵⁶³ Ibid

⁵⁶⁴ Parens, Joshua, *Multiculturalism and the Problem of Particularism*, American political Science Review, Vol 88 (3/1994). Pages 169-181

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid

the United Nations⁵⁶⁶. The shared values concept also fits with the political agenda of many of the Middle Eastern artists whose very act of expatriation demonstrates their personal search for an environment of peace and tolerance. The regional political experience of the Middle East, whilst very close to the artists themselves, can be 'universalised' by the viewer or commentator who would see the political works of art as espousing principles of peace and tolerance generally, rather than as specific to the region.

The third element of the implied description of 'universality' is the existence of some kind of spirituality which is imbued in the works of art. This is not specifically related to Islam although, as we have seen, the extra intensity arising from the Sufi sect, where spirituality lies at the very core, is often the source for much of the inspiration. The Vatican has picked up on this dimension with its exhibition for Ahmed Moustafa and, in addition, St Martin in the Fields used Shirazeh Houshiary for its *wobbly window*⁵⁶⁷ and, as we have noted the 'Sufi-wrapped' portrayal of *St Augustine* by Rachid Koraichi. Middle Eastern art is therefore used to promote or illustrate a secular and undefined spirituality in the same way as *'The Rothko Room'* in the Tate Modern Gallery, the *Zen Gardens* in Holland Park or Monet's *Lillies*⁵⁶⁸.

The fourth element of 'perceived universalism' shows that perhaps the Western viewer and commentator has not moved totally away from the Orientalist idea of the 'other'. Maybe the Middle East is now not necessarily regarded as a totally alien, antagonistic world but nonetheless there is still a very strong sense that it is still different, particularly post 9/11. The very use of an adjective to define an artist or a group of artists is a statement of difference and the acceptance of some shared values with other cultures does not mean everything is shared. The fact that exhibitions are held of Middle Eastern art in the British Museum, the Brunei Gallery at SOAS⁵⁶⁹ or Leighton House marks the group out as not totally part of the Westerners concept of mainstream art. The October Gallery⁵⁷⁰ which hosts a number of exhibitions for Rachid Koraichi, Hassan Massoudi, Widjan, Laila Shawa other Middle East artists has the stated objective of promoting a 'Transvanguard', perhaps yet another term for a modern 'universalism'.

The objectives of those who implicitly espouse the universalist cause are laudable and, by their very nature, difficult both to criticise and to put into practice. They highlight perhaps the inherent contradiction of what they are trying to achieve in presenting Contemporary Middle Eastern as a way of bringing together cultures. By marking the work out in terms of its geographic origins, labelling as

⁵⁶⁶ UN Charter 1945

⁵⁶⁷ Illustration 3-7

⁵⁶⁸ Claude Monet, *Water Lilies* (1912-26). Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art New York

⁵⁶⁹ Brunei Gallery is part of the School of African and Asian Studies and holds regular exhibitions of Art from the two continents

⁵⁷⁰ October Gallery in Bloomsbury shows 'cutting edge art from Africa, Asia and Australia'.

‘universalist art’ rather than just ‘art’, presenting it in with a group of similar geographic origins or in venues associated with geographic or ethnic traditions an element of ‘difference’ or ‘otherness’ is preserved. Perhaps this is why there are relatively few private Western collectors of Middle Eastern art with buyers usually being the Western institutions with some kind of political or internationalist agenda (as we have noted it is only in the last couple of years that the Tate in London has founded a Middle East committee to source product so it can claim international status). Similarly Charles Saatchi has only recently produced a Middle East show⁵⁷¹, albeit with images which reflect a generalised, globalised view of international contemporary art, with similarities to the Chinese and Indian exhibitions at the gallery.

The Universalist Middle East Patrons

Having seen the different approaches to the universalist concept by the Western viewer and the Middle Eastern artist it is worthwhile to look at the rationale which buyers and patrons of contemporary Middle East art put forward for their involvement in the movement. Whilst there is some institutional involvement this is often in the form of foundations or charities established by wealthy individuals or by members of ruling families. These private buyers usually come from the Middle East, often being either emigrants in their own right or alternatively well travelled, internationalist or Western educated. One London dealer in contemporary Middle Eastern art admitted in an interview with the author that they had almost no Western buyers⁵⁷² but is obviously able to sustain their business from Middle Eastern buyers passing through London. It is worth mentioning that, as with the art market everywhere, there is a large degree of social and fashionable kudos derived by very wealthy individuals, which is encouraged by galleries, museums and government bodies. Any of the quarterly glossy magazines, *Canvas*⁵⁷³, covers the contemporary Middle East market well, but the reader of the typical 150-170 page magazine has to go past the first 50, or more, pages of adverts by Dior, Harry Winston, Bulgari, Chanel, Van Cleef and Arpels, the private banks of HSBC, UBS, Pictet and Akbank as well as gallery and exhibition adverts along with nine pages of political, entertainment cultural and socialite celebrities attending openings and private views before reaching articles on the artists themselves. Again in a typical issue there may be four or five articles on artists but there will usually be a couple of articles profiling individual collectors in an adulatory way as well as coverage of festivals and museum collections.

As we have already noted it is hard to come by hard statistics on the nature of the art market and particularly details of individual collections. Thames and Hudson has, however, published in 2011 a book entitled *Art and Patronage: the Middle East*⁵⁷⁴. The editors are Hussein Amirsadeghi, a writer, publisher and filmmaker who has published on contemporary art in Britain, Russia and Pakistan, and Maryam

⁵⁷¹ Saatchi Gallery, *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*, Booth Clibborn Publications, 2009

⁵⁷² Personal interview 4/3/2011

⁵⁷³ *Canvas*, Quarterly magazine covering *Art and Culture in the Middle East and Arab World*. Mixed Media Publishing Dubai

⁵⁷⁴ Amirsadeghi, Hussein/ Eisler, Maryam (Ed), *Art and Patronage in the Middle East*. Thames and Hudson 2010

Homayoun Eisler, a collector herself, who is co-Chair of the Tate Gallery Middle East Acquisitions Committee. Whilst a well known gallerist⁵⁷⁵, who has specialised in Middle East art for many years, has commented that 'it is a coffee table book, to flatter a few celebrities and I could find many other more important collectors' the book probably does give a reasonable, if not comprehensive view, of the market for contemporary art in the Middle East. It is important here to stress that the collectors do not always solely focus on contemporary Middle Eastern art. The collections can also contain traditional Islamic art as well as modern Western and non-Middle Eastern art. This reflects the fact that one of the motives of some collectors is for Middle Eastern art to be seen alongside works from the international art world.

There are 102 collector profiles⁵⁷⁶ in the book covering private collections, foundation collections sponsored by individuals, charities, business and public institutions as well as a few major galleries. Of the 102 some 81 are either in the Middle East or in collections of Middle Easterners living elsewhere in the world. Of the remainder there is a clutch of UK institutions: British Museum (described elsewhere), Saatchi Gallery, V&A, Serpentine, Tate (a relative newcomer to this market), Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge and Parasol Foundation⁵⁷⁷. From the US there is the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation and from France the Institut de Monde Arabe⁵⁷⁸. Non-Middle Eastern private collectors are hard to find and even then have strong Middle East connections as with Lord and Lady Palumbo (she was born in the Lebanon and her father was murdered by extremists when she was sixteen), Lady Cochrane Sursock who has lived in Lebanon since she was one and Maryam and Gunther Sachs (Maryam is an Iranian novelist)⁵⁷⁹. Even the London based Pia Getty who has no geographic Middle East connection was drawn into the Middle East nexus when she encountered Lebanese fleeing from the war and Iranians fleeing from the revolution when she was at school in Switzerland. She is now making a three part film series about contemporary art in the region.⁵⁸⁰

For some of the collectors the inspiration comes directly from their Middle Eastern heritage and a desire to promote their own culture. Abdelatif Al-Hamad of the Arab Organisation Headquarters sees the historical connection with the arts commenting 'If you look at the old cities of Islam they are great artistic pieces, be it Taj Mahal or Alhambra, we neglected it for a while but now I think we should be coming back because this is really part of our culture and tradition'.⁵⁸¹ Hamida A. Alireza of the Barakat

⁵⁷⁵ Personal interview, May 2011

⁵⁷⁶ Amirsadeghi, Hussein/Eisler, Maryam (Ed) *Art and Patronage in the Middle East*, Thames and Hudson 2010

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid Page 66

⁵⁸¹ Ibid Page 26

trust says that 'Crucial for the region is that its patrons look towards their culture. We have to embrace our own culture and stand proud.'⁵⁸² At a time when there is fear and resentment of the Islamic world there is an attempt to use art to enhance understanding of the region with Sultan Sooud Al-Qassebi of the Barjeel Art Foundation stating that 'creating art offers viewers a way of drawing more informed conclusions when it comes to Arab identities, cultures, politics and economics'.⁵⁸³ This desire to promote the Middle East is common amongst collectors, perhaps because the family fortune or political base creates a demand for the collectors, institutions or backers to promote and enhance the status quo. The collectors' desire to promote their heritage is not confined to contemporary art, as is evidenced by Shafik Gabr of Cairo who has an enviable collection of Orientalist pictures by Western artists such as Rudolf Ernst and Jean-Leon Gerome. For him the Middle Eastern integrity of the image is important to his project of trying to confine himself to 'Orientalists who truly depicted what they saw, not what they imagined'. For Gabr there is no need for the added exoticism of some Orientalist painters who may not even have travelled to the region⁵⁸⁴.

Not all the collectors have the same missionary zeal to promote their culture. A more individual approach comes from Yto Barrada who sees the artists for themselves and not for their contribution to the acceptance and understanding of the Middle East. Her contribution is more confrontational:

'It is barking up the wrong tree to suggest that the job of the artist from the Arab world is about spreading the culture of the home society. More often good artists call into question the cultures they live in. The artists I know turn into cultural activists when they operate in a society where there is no scope for art and culture. It's a natural reflex, just like someone who is a gardener would plant something in the empty space behind their house'⁵⁸⁵.

The same desire to challenge existing Middle East society comes in a more violent way from the Lebanese Maria and Malek Sukkar whose collection ranges from Arab and European emerging artists to established artists such as Sarah Lucas, Jenny Saville, Mona Hatoum and Tracy Emin. There is the desire to confront brutality and change society in the hope of something better emerging. The collection is therefore an uncomfortable one with which to live, as Maria admits:

'To be honest, if you look at the collection, you can definitely see a lot of angst and a lot of pain---you can almost cry when you look at the face of a battered woman, or the lady with leukemia, or the dead

⁵⁸² Amirsadeghi, Hussein (Ed), *Art and Patronage in the Middle East*. Page 38

⁵⁸³ Ibid Page 49

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid Page 210

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid Page 42

horse. At the same time there is a lot of *origine du monde*, the woman, the birth, things that remind us of where we come from and where we are going.⁵⁸⁶

Also challenging is a, perhaps surprising, contribution from Mai Yamani and Zain Masud, the daughter and grand-daughter of Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani, who was the powerful Minister of Petroleum Affairs during the oil crisis of the mid 1970s when OPEC raised the price of oil dramatically, helping to precipitate a world economic crisis but who was also a major patron of the arts. His daughter quotes an Arab proverb 'I and my brother against my cousin, and I and my cousin against the outsider' showing how the Arab nations are as likely to fight against each other as against the rest of the world. She challenges some of the attempts at nation building in a way that may be very prescient in the light of the political developments in 2011:

'The more some of these more conservative rulers perceive it [knowledge] as power-and they are worried about the ideas of social justice, or about this new artistic expression of the new generation-their initial reaction will be to repress even more'⁵⁸⁷

Yamani thinks that the imposed monolithic state building in the name of development by some rulers of the region could be self defeating and cites the Asir tribes in the northern part of the Yemen as an example:

'In the process the women got back into black veils-and the men wore the national headdress. The whole cultural expression was forced to change –the houses have changed. These beautiful, beautiful expressions of culture you see there-the art of the make-up, the way the women expressed themselves in the henna on their bodies, their jewellery, their headdress was so distinctive and it gradually became merged with a more austere, monolithic form.'⁵⁸⁸

These thoughts reflect an important divide in the motives of the collectors. For some the purchase and display of contemporary art is a way of embracing modernity and moving away from a more traditional society. For others the acquisition of contemporary Middle Eastern art is a way of emphasising the Middle East culture and the way that it is possible to portray its own culture without the need for the West. For the former it is the universal or global which is pre-eminent and for the latter the local is more important. For some the two objectives are not seen as contradictory but as a desired synthesis.

With many of the patrons there is a genuine desire to promote a better world beyond just the Middle East. Amel B. Makkawi of Art Sawa starts with the individual and then looks towards a better world saying 'Art comes from the soul and is key to documenting the story of the individual artists' real life experiences. It is a reflection of our society. Art Sawa's mission is therefore to give artists from the

⁵⁸⁶ Amirsadeghi, Hussein (Ed), *Art and Patronage in the Middle East*. Page 288

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid Page 314

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid Page 314

region so that they may participate in the global cross cultural dialogue which our world so badly needs.⁵⁸⁹ Likewise Raymond Audi of Bank Audi claims that 'apart from a desire for aesthetic pleasure or a taste for picturesque objects I would cite a commitment to enhance our society's understanding of humanity.'⁵⁹⁰ The same desire for the region to participate in the world at large comes from William Wells one of the pioneers of Middle East art with his Town House Gallery in Cairo. His original objective was that he could offer his artists the chance to participate in the global debate 'that had been denied to them by the cronyism that dominated Egyptian representation at home and abroad'.⁵⁹¹

Thus, as ever, there is a multiplicity of motives for the collectors and patrons. At the individual level there may well be social, political or economic benefit and status which cannot be ignored. Beyond this though there is a desire to benefit and gain better understanding for the region and, in some cases, the hope that there will be a benefit to the rest of the world from what the Middle East can offer. What is apparent is that this desire to address the rest of the world is driven from within the Middle Eastern community. This community, in the same way as the artists themselves, is strongly influenced by expatriates either living in the West or elsewhere in the Middle East and away from their original homeland. Analysing origins of such a group is not a precise art but of the 102 patrons described in the book probably at least two thirds can be described as expatriates of some kind or another. To their motives can also be added the need to recreate, remember and perpetuate their heritage.

In describing the general motives of patrons and their collections as a group who acquire a portfolio of works of art it is easy to forget their relationships with individual works as if the intention was to treat the images as just components of a group and not on their individual merits. For this reason it is appropriate to conclude this section with the views of one patron, Hussein Ali Abbass Harba on a landscape painting by Suad Al Attar 'Just enter this wood and you will find something better when you have been through it'. As Harba says 'paintings offer relief and sanctuary'.⁵⁹²

An interesting but perhaps not unusual source of collecting and patronage comes from some of the artists themselves. A recent *Canvas* article⁵⁹³ cited Feyredoun Ave, Rokni and Ramin Haerizadeh, Nahil Nahas, Adel Siwi and Fadi Yazigi as artists who are also collectors but their motives are not totally dissimilar from the non-artist patrons we have already reviewed. As artists there is a feeling voiced by Feyredoun Ave that they 'want to be inspired when they see something original', Nabil Nahas saying 'it is important not to be a 'fashion victim' and Adel Siwi declaring that he started collecting 'to help young

⁵⁸⁹ Amirsadeghi, Hussein (Ed), *Art and Patronage in the Middle East*. Page 30

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid Page 36

⁵⁹¹ Ibid Page 156

⁵⁹² Ibid Page 218

⁵⁹³ *Canvas Magazine*, November/December, 2010, Volume 7/Issue 6. Pages 75-95

artists and that buying from them was a gesture of solidarity'.⁵⁹⁴ All of the artist collectors though are clear that they have some kind of quasi universalist affinity with the Middle East in the same way as the non-artist collectors. This comes through in comments such as 'I am giving works to the Zoroastrian Cultural Centre on Paris and try to put together cohesive exhibitions that can travel' (Ave): 'The Middle Eastern art market is new and it makes me angry to know that most collectors are looking for an investment rather than art' (Rokni): 'I feel like my interest in artists from the Middle East has been engraved in my subconscious, as it is part of my heritage' (Nahas): 'there is a flag in one of my figure's hands and the work highlights the genuine spirit of Egypt in the Revolution' (Siwi) and 'I'm glad to see the Middle East art scene pick up; as artists we had never been supported in this manner' (Yazigi).⁵⁹⁵

Whilst there is a focus on the Middle East among the artist collectors their interests are international as well as local. Each of them has some non Middle East works ranging through Twombly, Rauschenberg, Warhol, Christo, Joan Mitchell, Serra, Hockney, Eliasson, Katz, Klein, Fontana, Picasso, Auerbach and Kokoscha.⁵⁹⁶ The blending of the local and international in the choice of the collectors allows them to make a statement about themselves as international in their outlook, without needing to forsake their heritage. The directors of the October Gallery (from which some of the patrons would have sourced their Middle Eastern art) refer to their clients as International Nationalists or 'INs' who:

'Are affluent buyers, often from emerging boom economies and who, while loving to shop for prestigious international brands such as BMWs and Louis Vuitton, also like to demonstrate nationalist pride by buying their own country's or region's contemporary art. If much of their ostentatious consumption reflects their internationalism, their taste in art is a telltale sign of where their cultural and national allegiances truly lie'.⁵⁹⁷

Conclusions on Universalism

We have seen how the art of the Middle East has moved from Western Orientalists to contemporary Middle Eastern works. The latter have frequently been portrayed in the West as universal artists, a term that lacks exact definition and can be seen simply to mark the fact that they are not seen as part of the Western mainstream. Amongst the artist themselves there can, however, be an acceptance of a universalist identity that extrapolates from a local humanity to a wider humanitarianism. This common humanity is sometimes subsumed in a much wider spirituality with Sufi and Islamic philosophy being an integral part of the works created by the artists. The appeal of the works therefore tends to be more readily recognised by Middle Easterners, particularly expatriate collectors who seem to share a sense of internationalism or universalism alongside the spirituality and the satisfaction of regaining and

⁵⁹⁴ *Canvas Magazine*, Nov/Dec 2010. Volume 7/Issue 6. Pages 75-95

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid

⁵⁹⁷ *Canvas Magazine*, July/August, 2010. Volume 6/Issue 4. Page 71

emphasising their cultural heritage. It is recognised that the appeal of the local can be as important as the universal and the appeal to modernity has to be seen alongside the desire for tradition.

To ignore entirely geographic or cultural origins fails to recognise the vital source of inspiration derived from the 'local' or the 'particular'. What is an overall dilemma for modern man will always be reflected in the particular. Given history, cultural background and experience it would be wrong to expect anything different in the way in which Contemporary Middle Eastern art is perceived. Growing awareness will help. Even so any progress to eliminate the contradiction will be determined by both the universal effects of globalism in the economic and political sense and the offsetting desire to preserve the particular experience of the 'local other'.

For some the process of globalisation means that there needs to be an acceptance of a truly unbiased 'universalist' agenda. If this objective is accepted its progress is bound to be slow and prone to setbacks. As we have seen from the comparison with economic globalism we know that localism, which is the source of inspiration for much contemporary Middle East art, is a very long way from giving way to a total globalism or universalism. Reflecting the nature of the remaining 'difference' there are two suggested ways to achieve the objective. From within the West, perhaps Julia Kristeva has the best solution in her gradualist approach to embracing otherness:

'Let is not seek to solidify, to turn the otherness of the foreigner into a thing. Let us merely touch it, brush by it, without giving it a permanent structure. Simply sketching out its perpetual motion through some of its variegated aspects spread before our eyes today, through some of its former, changing representations scattered through history. Let us lighten that otherness by constantly coming back to it-but more swiftly. Let us escape its hatred, its burden, fleeing them not through levelling and forgetting but through the *harmonious* repetition of the differences that it implies and spreads'.⁵⁹⁸

From within the East the Indian thinker J L Mehta accepted the challenge of 'belonging irretrievably and inescapably to this 'one world' and [the presence of Western science and technology]---and there is no other way open to us in the East but to go along with this Europeanisation and to go *through it*. Only through this voyage into the foreign and the strange can we win back our self-hood; here as elsewhere, the way to do what is closest to us is the longest way back'⁵⁹⁹.

Even if the objective is shared the means to its achievement are different. For Kristeva it is a modification and moderation of what are probably Western attitudes; for Mehta it is the absorbing of alien culture. Both imply that the process of internationalisation, globalism and universalism has a degree of inevitability. Whilst this may be a valid conclusion, it is by no means certain as the volatile

⁵⁹⁸ Kristeva, Julia, *Strangers to Ourselves*, Columbia University, 1991. Page 3

⁵⁹⁹ Halbfass, Wilhelm, *India and the West, the Problem of Understanding*, Scholars Press 1985. Page 442. Mehta's conclusion is valid in this context but the reader should beware of applying the experience of India, where the colonial experience was more direct, organised and hegemonic to experience in the Middle East where the experience is more diverse and often less direct and more subjective.

history of the Middle East, plus the variety of influences at work on its artists, makes us believe that the process may not only be long, very long, but the process of integration of the local will continue to be complex. At any moment in time the long-term trend may not be an appropriate measure whereby to analyse and judge an individual and multi-layered artist.

This conclusion is endorsed by David Lowenthal who claims that 'The past remains integral to us all, individually and collectively. We must concede to the ancients their place, as I have argued. But their place is not simply back there, in a separate and foreign country: it is assimilated in ourselves and resurrected in an ever-changing present'.⁶⁰⁰

⁶⁰⁰ Lowenthal, David, *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge 2009. Page 410

CONCLUSION

We have tried to establish if there is an identifiable grouping of contemporary Middle East expatriate artists, whether they are aliens or hybrids within the discourse of post-colonial theory and if the 'universalist' label is relevant or meaningful. Underlying these questions is an attempt to see how these artists fit within the art of the modern world. From our investigations we can come to three types of conclusions. First, there are those we can consider to be fairly, if not completely robust. Second, there are those conclusions that are more tentative but based on reasonable evidence and argument. Third, there are those conclusions that are more of the nature of speculations, or suggestions for further research, debate and argument.

It does seem reasonable to say that it is possible to talk of contemporary Middle Eastern expatriate artists as an identifiable group. This is not to assert that there is no diversity, far from it. There are, though, four central themes that give the group identity. These are the use of calligraphy arising from the deeply ensconced Islamic and religious tradition of the region, the literary and historic tradition as exemplified by the Sufi poets, the cultural memory giving rise to longing and nostalgia and the intense political feelings generated by the turbulent history of the region. Elements of one or more of these themes are evident in all the artists we have investigated, with each artist giving different emphasis according to their age, personal experience and individual character.

At this stage it is right to make certain disclaimers as far as the methodology is concerned. This thesis does not, and cannot, make the claim that the work of every expatriate Middle Eastern artist has been investigated, and there has been an emphasis on those who have lived and worked in the UK. As it is not practical, or maybe even possible, to identify every artist who has left the Middle East there is no claim that the survey sample is statistically significant. All that can be said is that artists who might completely change the view of the group have not been specifically excluded and there is a wide range and number of artists. To add further artists would not now change the nature of the conclusions as their work is very likely to fit somewhere within the spectrum covered by a diverse group.

The UK based approach is acknowledged but it is felt that, again, this does not create distorted view of the group, with London being a recognised artistic nexus. The surveys included artists who have returned to the Middle East and those who live in the US, France, Germany and Scandinavia. Many of the artists themselves are international in approach and mingle, without obvious strains, their Middle East heritage with their adopted place of residence and a global outlook and clientele.

The focus of this research has been on the expatriates and, due to the economic, political, religious and military tribulations of the Middle East, there are a large number of them. It is recognised that there are those Middle Eastern artists who have not emigrated and have stayed in the region. No strong claims are made that the expatriates are perfect representatives of the regional artists as a whole. It is, though, suspected and speculated from our contacts and researches that there are few, if any, major differences in work, inspiration and outlook between the expatriate and domestic practitioners.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to establish the extent to which the Middle Eastern expatriates can serve as a model as to how other geographic groups (Asian, African, South American) have or will develop their art, maintain their heritage and integrate within the international art scene. Again it is possible to speculate that a similar approach of establishing group, identity, questioning the concepts of alienation and hybridity and defining the nature of internationalism might yield similar results and conclusions. Inevitably the Middle East has its own powerful characteristics but other regions may have their own claims in this regard.

It is believed that the thesis demonstrates that there has been a tendency for Western curators to present the work of Middle Eastern artists in a way that is different to that used for Western artists. This is not just a matter of the venues chosen, which are often not mainstream but identifiable with different geographies. There is a common recourse to the use of the term 'universal' which, although ostensibly indicative of an overall community of artists and viewers, in practice marks off the Middle Eastern artist as different or 'other'. The viewer is therefore encouraged to regard the works as more part of a foreign, local tradition than that of his own.

This emphasis on otherness is consistent with the use of the terms 'alien' or 'hybrid' which are part of the terminology of post-Colonial theorists such as Edward Said and Homi K Bhabha. These terms do not seem particularly appropriate for the expatriate Middle East artists. They generally retain a cultural memory of their heritage, even though their emigration has often been caused by specific conflicts, governments or policies. In most cases they are able to adapt to life in their adopted countries of residence, with which they can share certain principles, such as the freedom of expression. Again, in most cases they are highly educated, often outside as well as within the Middle East. For some emigration has been a means of preserving family wealth or careers. These artists are not therefore economic refugees as such who express an aggressive antipathy to their adopted homes. They may well wish to return to the Middle East. This longing is expressed in their work but many are long-term expatriates and return becomes less likely over time, especially when families have been brought up outside the Middle East. Given this background it is hard to see many of the expatriate artists as seriously alienated from either the Middle East or the West. For some there is an 'agony of exile' as with Mona Hatoum and Leila Shawa but this tends to result from a resentment of particular political regime in the Middle East, not a total rejection of the heritage of the region or of the culture of the adopted country.

The expatriate Middle Eastern artists are not seen as simple cultural hybrids, using mimicry of the West to express and ingratiate themselves into their adopted countries. Usually their works of art are not close copies of Western models with just a few added Eastern flourishes, as would be expected from a simple hybrid which would produce predictable mixtures of both cultures. The artists tend to be highly educated individuals with their own political, social and religious views, as well as highly developed, sophisticated artistic tastes. Whilst not unknown, there are few examples of works of art by Middle East artists which are created specifically to appeal to Western desires for the Orientalist exoticism of the East. In the main the works appeal to Middle East patrons who wish to present themselves as sophisticated international collectors and who also have a desire to demonstrate their local cultural

heritage. Conversely, the Western collectors of the works may perhaps want to demonstrate their broader internationalist credentials.

Hybridity implies a merging of two identifiable elements and with predictability in the result of the merger. The East and West elements are admittedly present in the expatriate Middle East artists and their work. There are, however, many other elements or characteristics fused into the artists and their oeuvre. These can be as varied as with any other artists, ranging from gender to politics, from abstraction to figuration, from the dramatic to the understated and from complex to simple. To be useful as a concept hybridity needs to give predictability to the result of the East/West merger and this appears to be lacking with the expatriate artists, who exhibit as much diversity as any other group of artists.

Having previously noted that the term 'universalist' has been adopted by Western curators and commentators as a way of denoting 'otherness' it is believed that there is an alternative use of the term by the expatriate artists themselves. The artists would not reject the use of the label, seeing themselves as part of a wider political, religious, social or spiritual humanity which exists comfortably alongside their local geographic and cultural heritage. Within this meld it is often possible to detect a powerful Sufi spirituality, sometimes using Sufi poets as inspiration and sometimes using Sufi symbols as ways of illustrating the relation between man and God, the relations between communities. This influence goes beyond a simple humanitarianism as it is seen to be derived from God and not just from man. In this view the artist can transcend his local origins without, in any way, negating or rejecting them.

Given this group identity, retained cultural heritage, lack of evidenced hybrid or alienated character and acceptance of a 'universalist' label, how then does the expatriate group of Middle Eastern artists fit within the modern art world? To some extent the group has acted as a 'black swan'⁶⁰¹, an unpredicted event in an art market that had been expected to be increasingly globalised. The expatriate artists have firstly made it necessary to accept that some degree of localism may continue to exist in the art world for perhaps longer than expected (as with the economic world where the process of globalism may be slower, or subject to more setbacks). Secondly, that we may need to accept that localism may be able to co-exist alongside universalism. Thirdly, that the nature of universalism may contain spiritual qualities alongside a more general humanitarianism which permits artistic, political, religious, social and gender freedoms.

⁶⁰¹ See the theories of Nassim Nicholas Taleb in *The Black Swan*, Random House, 2007. Taleb focuses on the effect on the financial markets of unpredicted or unpredictable events, such as those of 11/9. Essentially, he argues that established theories rely on known past events and extrapolate from these to predict the future. When an unexpected event comes along, such as the discovery of black swans when previously all known (to the established Western world at least!) swans had been white, theories and predictions have to incorporate the new facts or we have to accept the difficulty, or even the impossibility, of making predictions.

On the one hand it is relatively easy to identify the fact that the expatriate artists have been heavily influenced by Western styles and techniques, a fact which is unsurprising given the Western training received by many of the expatriates. On the other hand the artists have retained their cultural memory and loyalty to their heritage, appropriating Western experience as much to criticise their own region as that of their adopted homeland. The reverse impact, namely that of the Middle East on the Western art world is much harder to define and may be too soon to predict the outcome. It seems clear that the tradition of Western Orientalism is fading and may be being replaced by the blend of universalism and localism exemplified by the expatriate Middle Eastern artists. Over time we may see the four themes of the Middle East expatriates emerging elsewhere in the world art market. We may see this in an integration of script and image, more emphasis (or return) to spiritual values, wider awareness of the literary and artistic traditions of other cultures or a politicisation that goes beyond today's Western canon.

As with most instances of exchange across cultures, the influences are multiple and complex. They may be predictable or unexpected, direct or remote, temporary or permanent, subtle or assertive. A recent conference⁶⁰² presented a number of such influences. These ranged from the contribution made by Italian Renaissance architects to Russian buildings of the sixteenth century to the unexpected collection of Chinoiserie figures in a Danish castle or the evidence of a Greek Bacchic drinking culture in works of Indian art. There was the example of a nineteenth century German artist, Emil Pretorius, collecting Persian book art⁶⁰³, a source of inspiration for his own work, even though he did not speak Farsi and never visited the region. In addition there were the appropriations of Rembrandt by two opposing schools of Russian art in the 1890s, the appropriation of traditional Indian art by early twentieth century British believers in a need for a more spiritual and less materialist world and the dialogue and exchange of gifts between the seemingly unrelated province of Mantua and the Ottoman Empire of the 1490's.

Such examples led to the main conference speakers describing an emerging art world that we can recognise as familiar to our view of emigrant Middle Eastern art. Sarah Victoria Turner stated the complexity of the relationships between cultures by stating:

'Tracing such a relationship [cultural exchanges in the visual arts] is a delicate task. It is one that requires us to breach the traditional, somewhat rigid boundaries of national frameworks which have conventionally structured the discipline of art history, whilst being mindful of the specific cultural and historical circumstances in which artistic identities, subjectivities and exchanges were shaped.'⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰² *Beyond Borders*, A Conference held at Magdalene College, Cambridge 10-11/5/2012

⁶⁰³ Pretorius is quoted as making the perspicacious comment that 'One could say that the love towards art remains platonic until one engages in it as a buyer'

⁶⁰⁴ *Beyond Borders-the Impact of Cultural Exchanges in Art History*. Magdalene College Cambridge Conference Abstract, 2012.

At the same conference Partha Mitter proposed a potential world view along the following lines;

‘Defining the flow of global culture not as a linear process but as a multiple criss-crossing of ideas that flow in different directions, including exchanges between western and non-Western cultures in which a genuine reciprocity is evident.’⁶⁰⁵

We therefore move to the more speculative of our conclusions. The impact of the expatriate Middle Eastern artists may be part of a movement whereby the art world of the West needs to address the ‘otherness’ in itself. This requires a move to a wider and broader universalism which incorporates localisms from throughout the world and different cultures as part of a developing and changing mainstream that cannot be confined to one region. To go back to the example quoted in the Introduction, the Russian collector, Sergei Schukin, bought works by a French painter, Matisse, due to a psychological urge and despite the fact the artist came from a different culture at the time. In the twenty-first century the psychological urges of the collectors may increasingly be able to overcome the dilemma of disregarding origins but accepting localisms. The work of the Middle Eastern artists can therefore be recognised for their inherent artistic qualities, rather than their appeal as something different or ‘other’.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid

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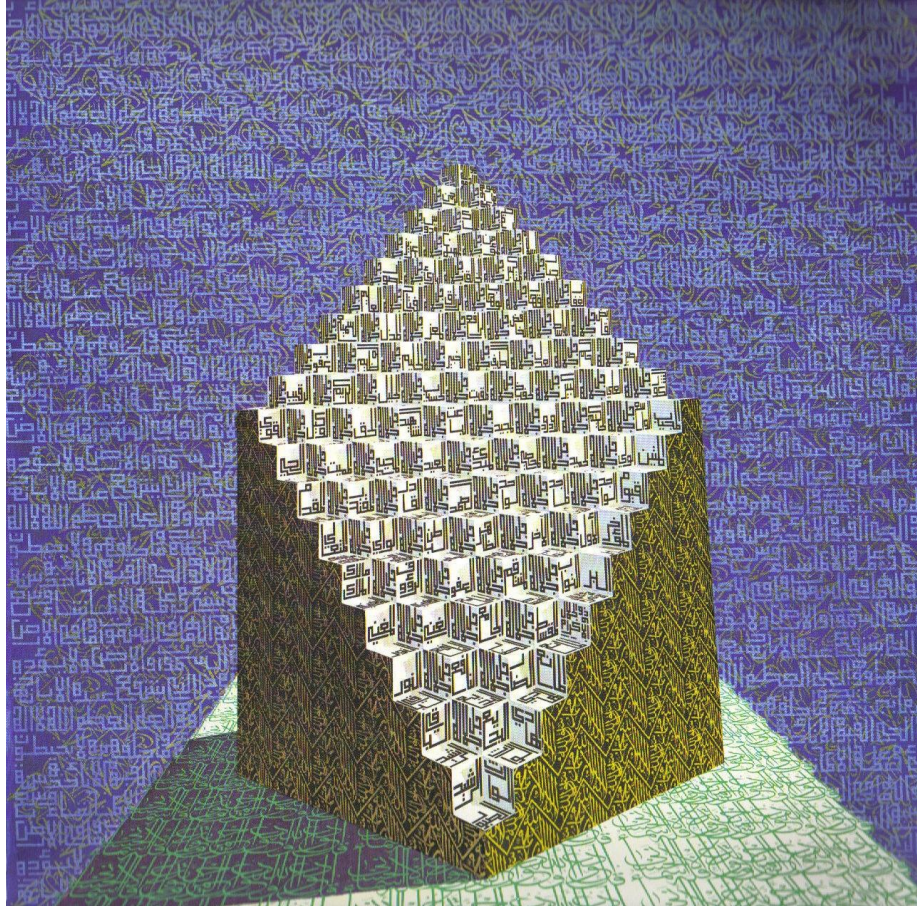


ILLUSTRATION 1-2 AHMED MOUSTAFA/1997 'WHERE TWO OCEANS MEET', OIL AND WATERCOLOUR ON HANDMADE PAPER/ 130 x 116 CM. PONTIFICA UNIVERSITAS GREGORIANA 1998



ILLUSTRATION 1-3 ALI OMAR ERMES/1997 'TUGHRA' (ROYAL SEAL), ACRYLIC AND INK ON PAPER, MOUNTED ON CANVAS/ 150 x 125 CM. EXHIBITED AT LINACRE COLLEGE, OXFORD, 1968



ILLUSTRATION 1-4 HASSAN MASSOUDI/ 2003 'AYN (HERACLITUS)', 138X77 CM. INK ON PAPER WITH SOME PENCIL SCRIPT. PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR. PLEASE SEE NOTE 417 CONCERNING THE ADDED IMAGE IN TOP RIGHT HAND CORNER



ILLUSTRATION 1-5 HASSAN MASSOUDY 'KOBAYASHI ISSA', INK ON PAPER/ 18 x 24 CM. REPRODUCED IN 'A CALLIGRAPHERS GARDEN', HASSAN MASSOUDY, SAQI BOOKS 2010

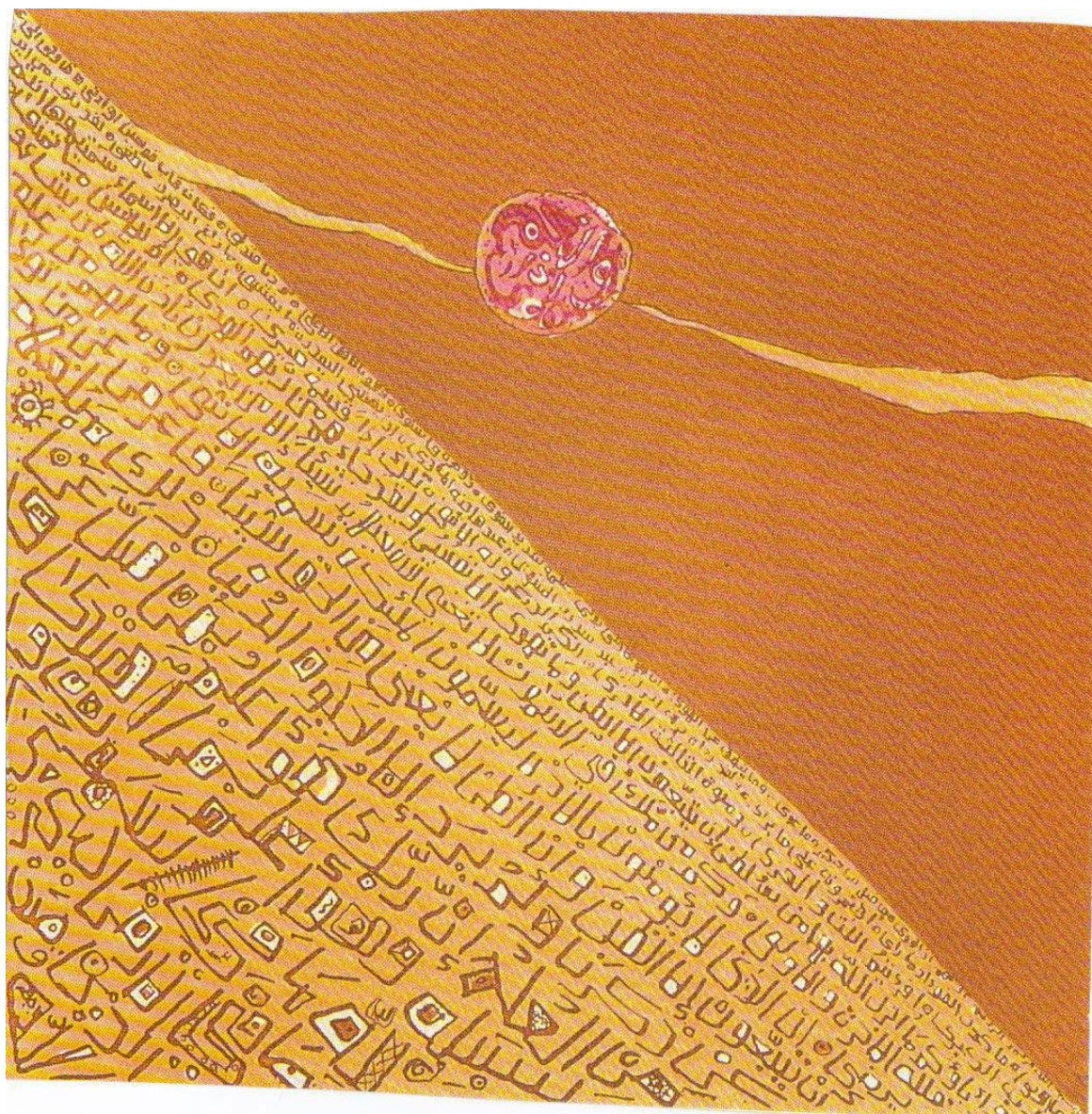


ILLUSTRATION 1-6 ISSAM AL SAID/ 1980 'FALLEN STAR/ QUARANIC VERSE', LITHOGRAPH ON HAND MADE PAPER/ 55 x 56 CM. PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR

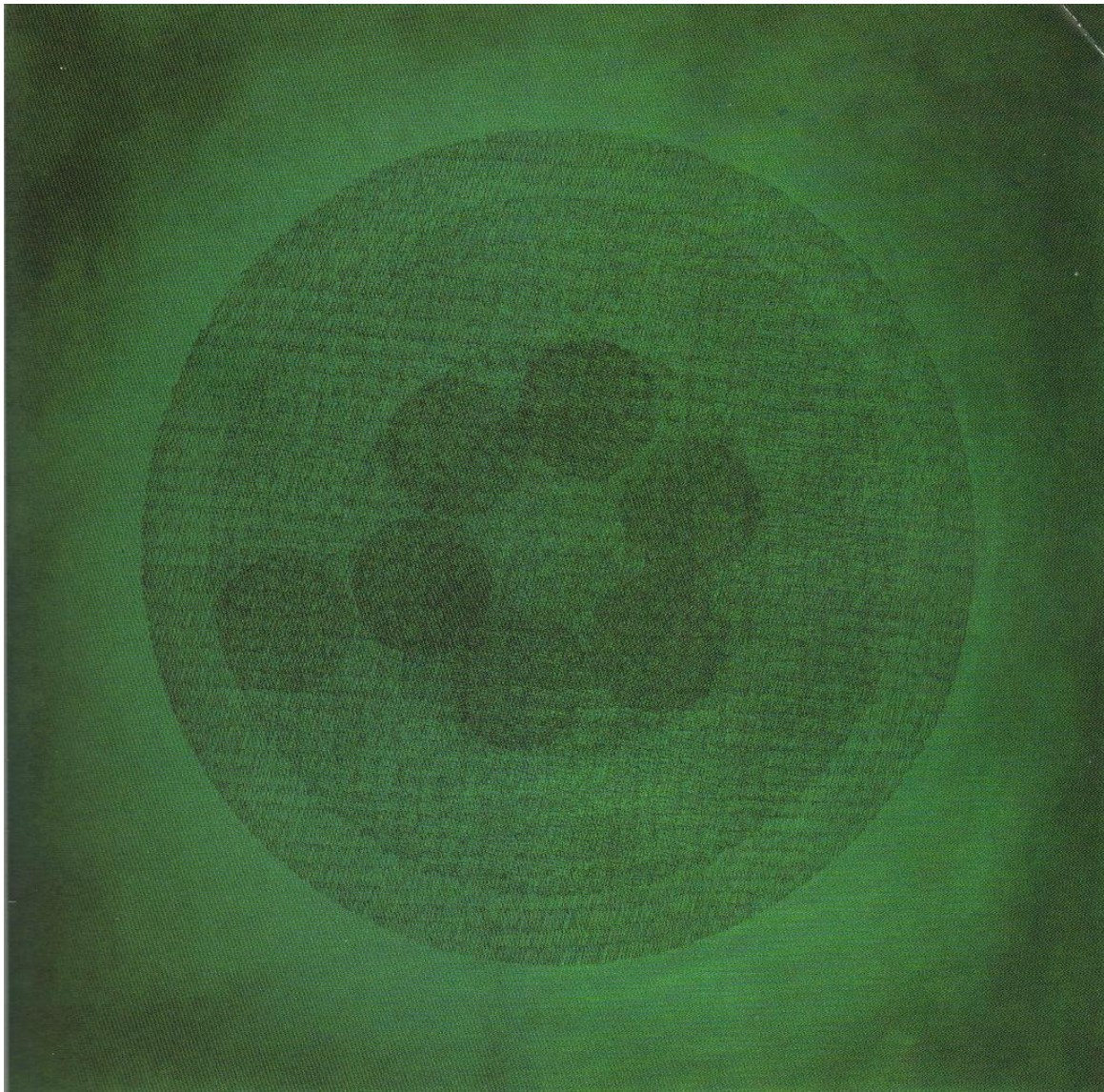


ILLUSTRATION 1-7 SHIRAZEH HOUSHIARY/ 1992 'ROUND DANCE', ETCHING ON PAPER (PROOF SET)/ 77
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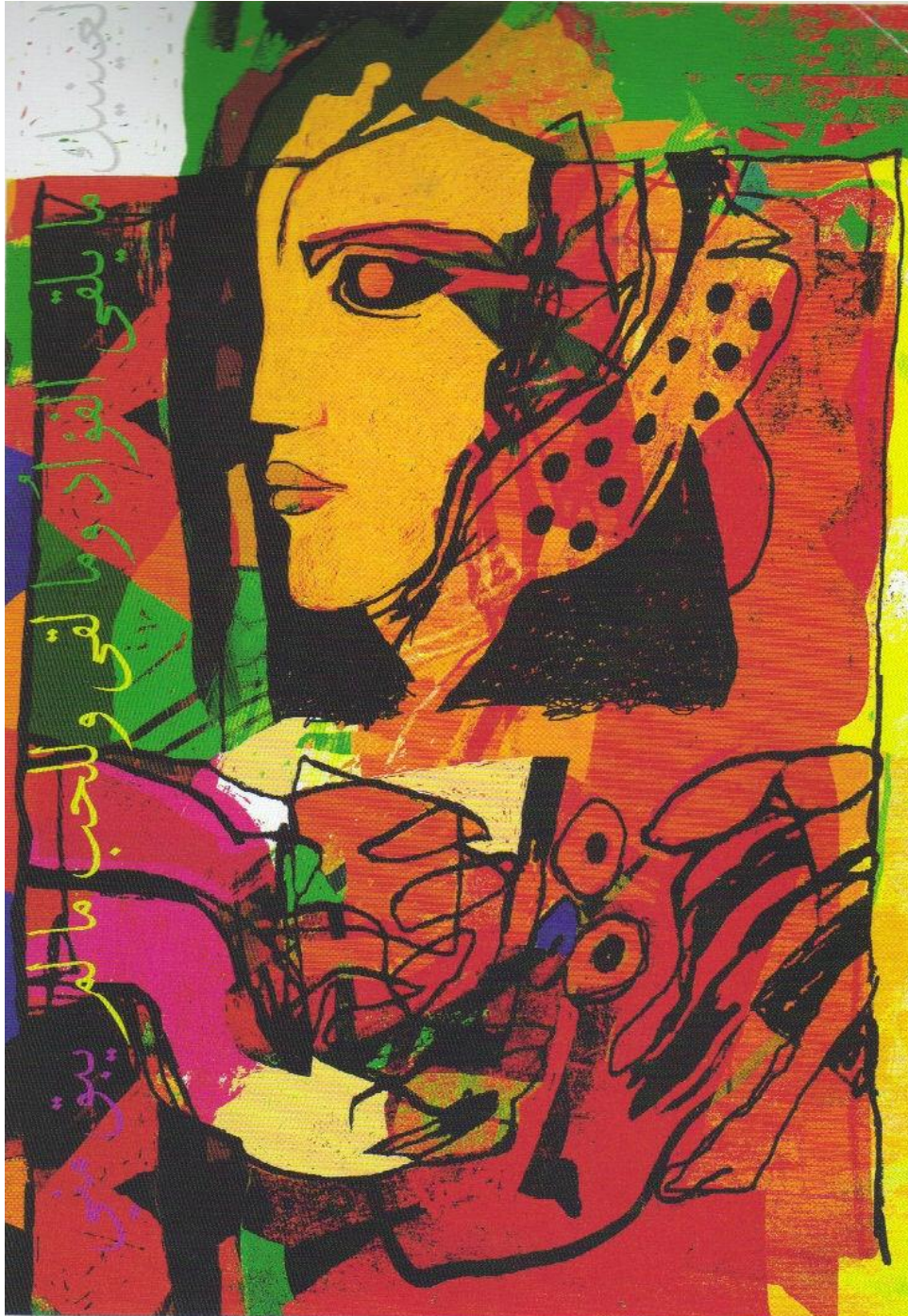


ILLUSTRATION 1-8 DIA AL AZZAWI/ 2007 'MUTANABBI: NUSUS SHRI'RYA MUKHTARA', SET OF ILLUSTRATED SILKSCREEN PRINTS FROM UNBOUND BOOK/ 59 x 42.5 CM. BRITISH MUSEUM



ILLUSTRATION 1-9 DIA AL AZZAWI/ 1986 'ORIENTAL SCENE', MIXED MEDIA, ACRYLIC AND FOAM BOARD/ 51 x 41 CM. BRITISH MUSEUM



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ILLUSTRATION 1-11 MAYSALOUN FARAJ/ 1989 'DUA (PRAYER)/ BISM ALLAH AL RAHMAN', MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS/ 90 x 90 CM. ALI ABDULLAH YUSUF AMAN CORPORATION, MARYLAND



ILLUSTRATION 1-12 MAYSALOUN FARAJ/2005 'HISTORY IN RUINS', EARTHSTONE AND OXIDES WITH RAFFIA/ 30 x 60 CM (APPROX). BRITISH MUSEUM/BROOKE SEWELL MEMORIAL FUND



ILLUSTRATION 1-13 SUAD AL ATTAR/1997 'MYSTERY OF SUNSET', OIL ON CANVAS/ 62.4 x 81.6 CM. PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR



**ILLUSTRATION 1-14 SUAD AL ATTAR/ 1997 'SILENT SCREAM', OIL AND MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS/ 180 x 150 CM.
EXHIBITED AT LEIGHTON HOUSE, 2006**



ILLUSTRATION 1-15 SATTEM HASHEM/ 2001 'O, UNFORTUNATE LAND' , INK AND WHITE PIGMENT ON PAPER/
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ILLUSTRATION 1-17 LAILA SHAWA/ 1995 'CHILDREN OF WAR CHILDREN OF PEACE', SILKSCREEN ON CANVAS IN TWO PARTS/ 100 x 230 CM. MRS MONA AL-KHATIB/ MR GAZIR SHAKER AND THE BROOKE SEWELL PERMANENT FUND/ BRITISH MUSEUM

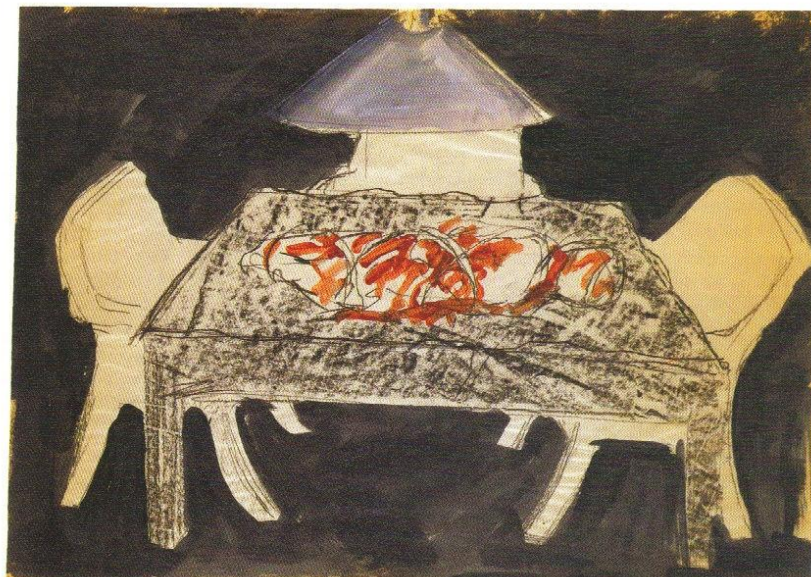


ILLUSTRATION 1-18 MONA HATOUM/ 1983 'THE NEGOTIATING TABLE', FOUR GOUACHE SKETCHES FOR A PERFORMANCE/ MIXED MEDIA ON CARDBOARD/ 29 x 40 CM. PERFORMANCE FIRST STAGED IN OTTAWA, 1983. SKETCHES REPRODUCED BY COURTESY OF MONA HATOUM IN 'MONA HATOUM', HAMBURGER KUNSTHALLE, HATJE KATZ



ILLUSTRATION 1-19 SHAKIR HASSAN AL SAID/ 1984 'CONTEMPLATION' , MIXED MEDIA/180 X 182 CM. INSTITUT DE MONDE ARABE, PARIS

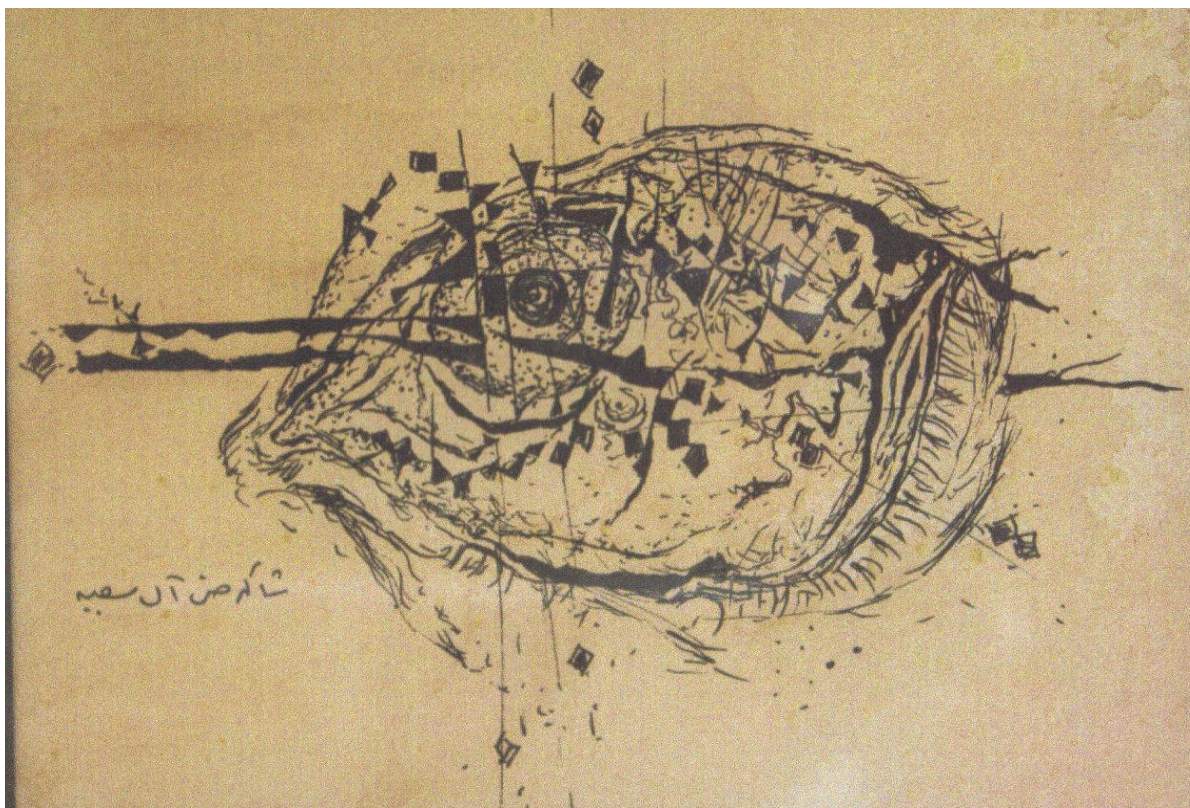


ILLUSTRATION 1-20 SHAKIR HASSAN AL SAID/ 1963 'MAGIC EYE II', INK ON PAPER/ 13 X 18 CM. PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR

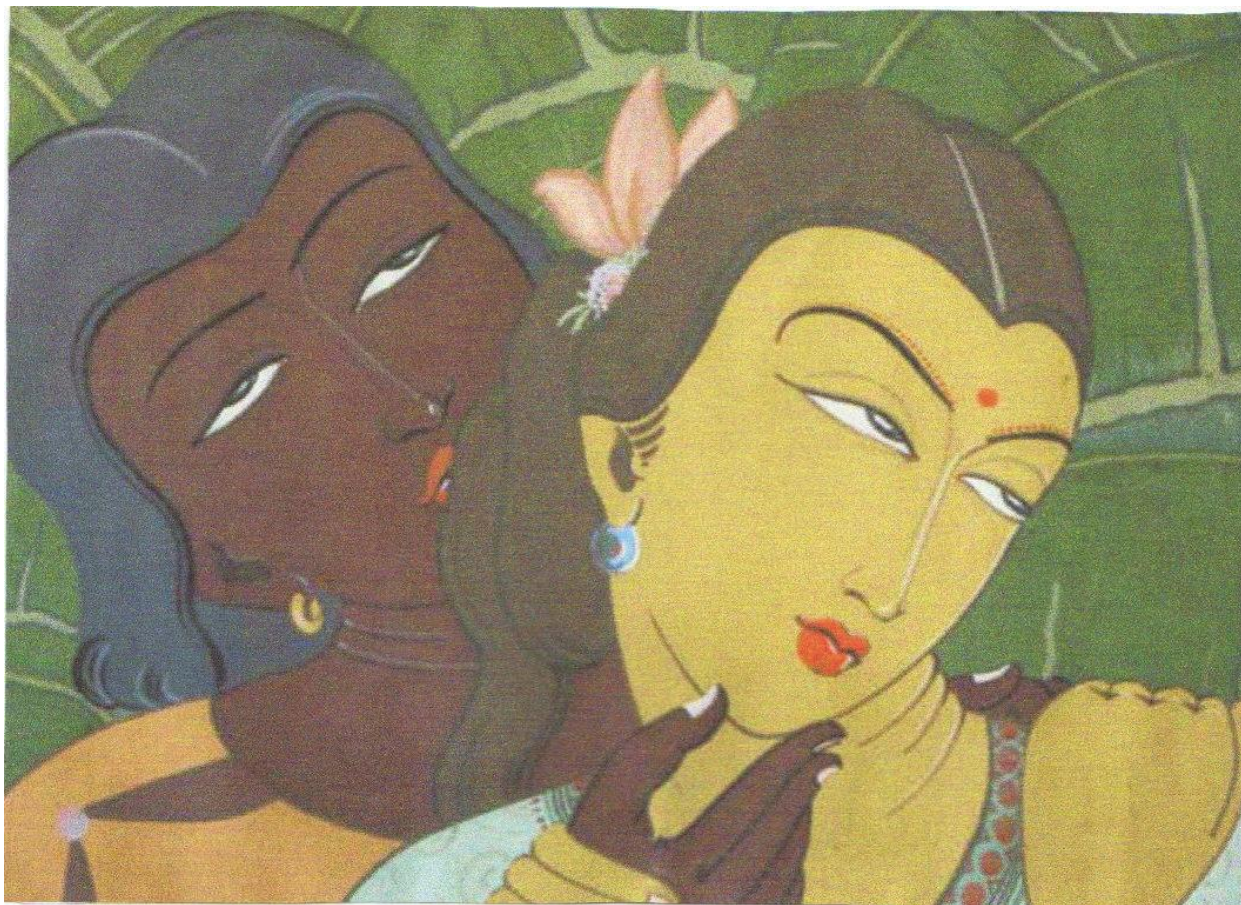


ILLUSTRATION 2-1 ALI ANWAR SHEMZA/ 1947 'THE COUPLE', GOUACHE ON PAPER/ 23 x 24 CM. PRIVATE COLLECTION, REPRODUCED IN GREEN CARDAMOM CATALOGUE, 2009

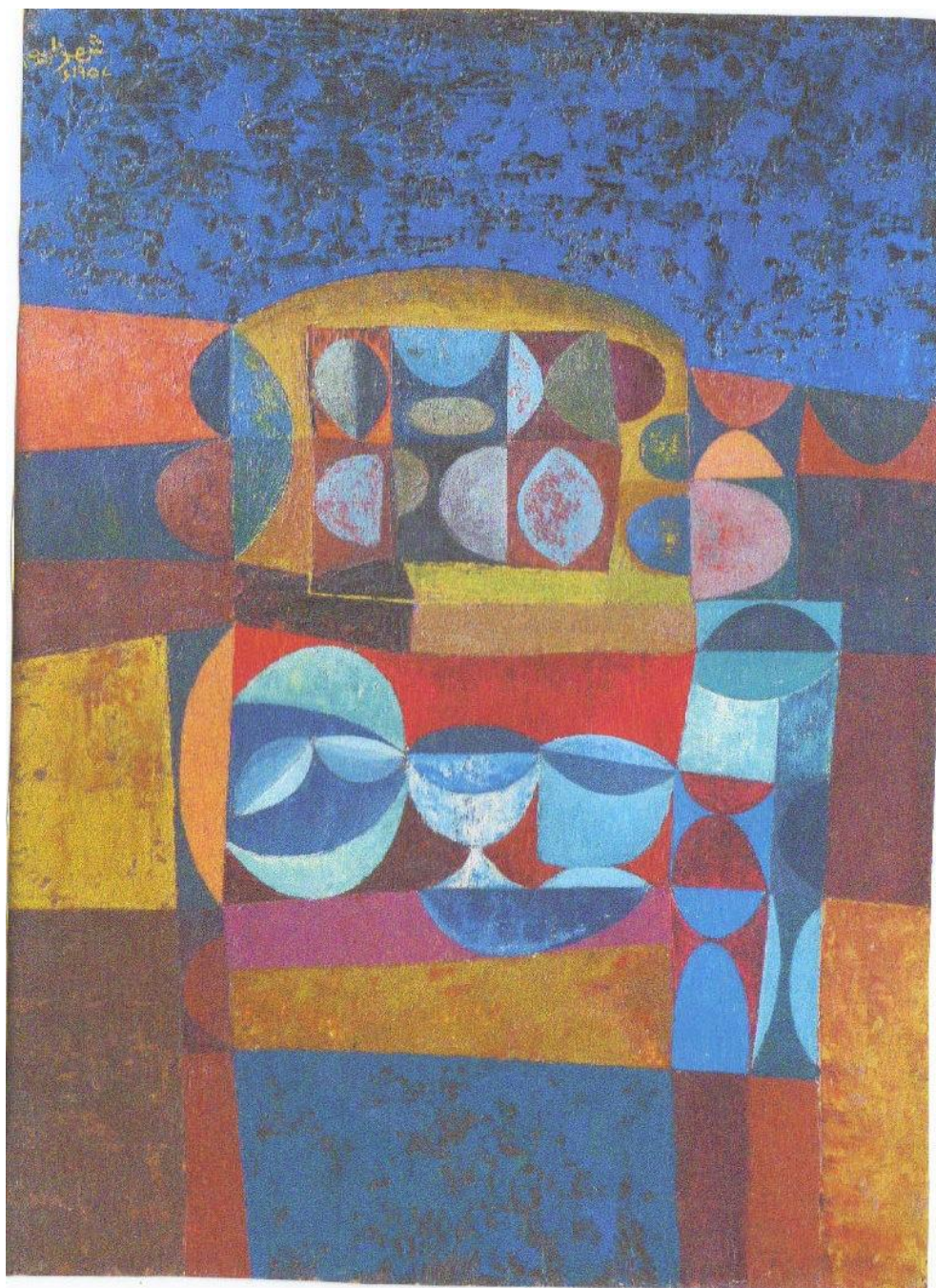


ILLUSTRATION 2-2 ALI ANWAR SHEMZE/ 1957 'STILL LIFE', OIL ON FIBREBOARD/ 60 x 44 CM. REPRODUCED IN GREEN CARDAMOM CATALOGUE, 2009



ILLUSTRATION 2-3 ALI ANWAR SHEMZA/ 1963 'UNTITLED', MIXED MEDIA. EXHIBITED IN GREEN CARDAMOM CATALOGUE, 2009

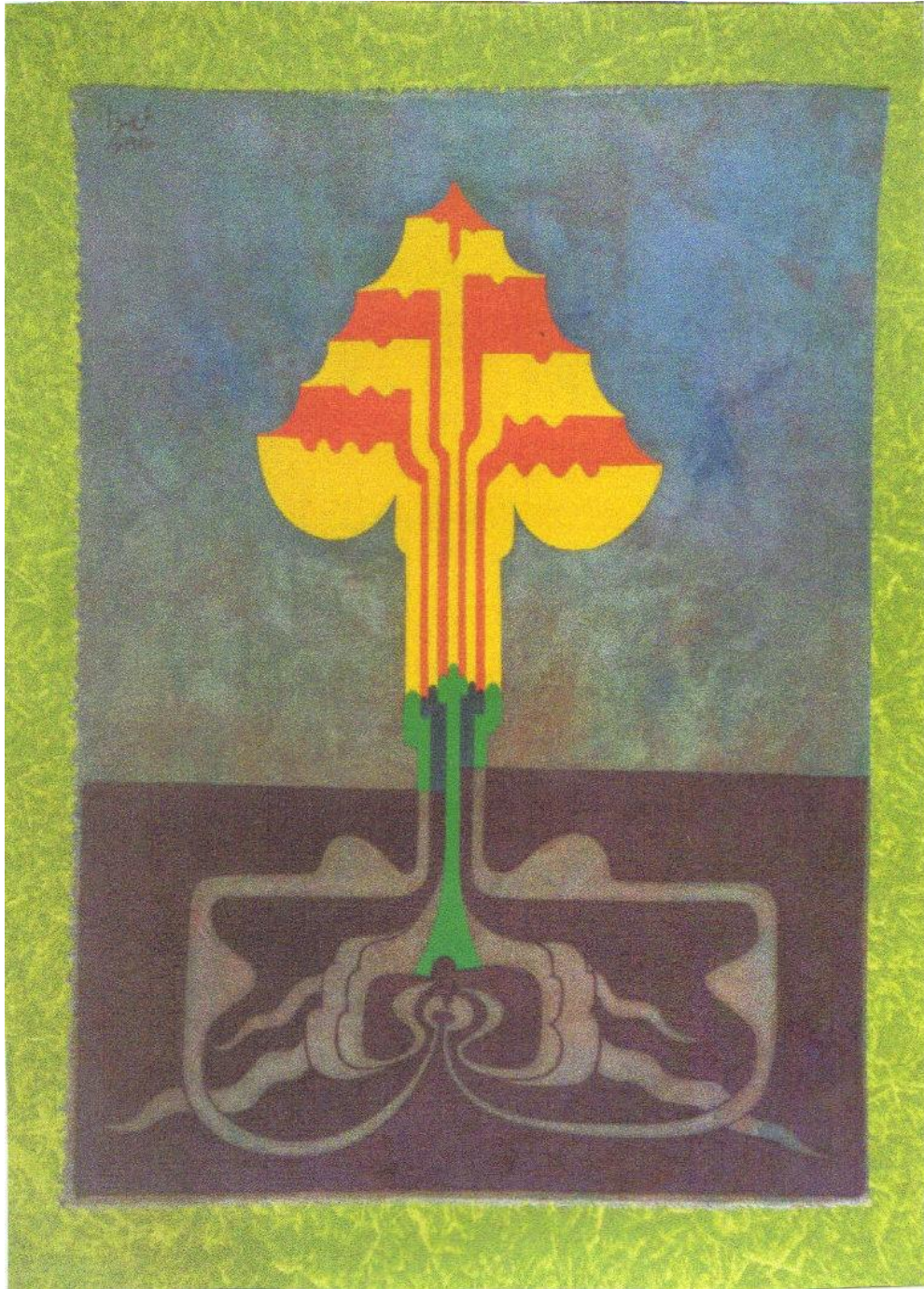


ILLUSTRATION 2-4 ALI ANWAR SHEMZA/ 1977 'ROOTS', COLOURED INKS ON PAPER. EXHIBITED IN GREEN CARDAMOM CATALOGUE, 2009

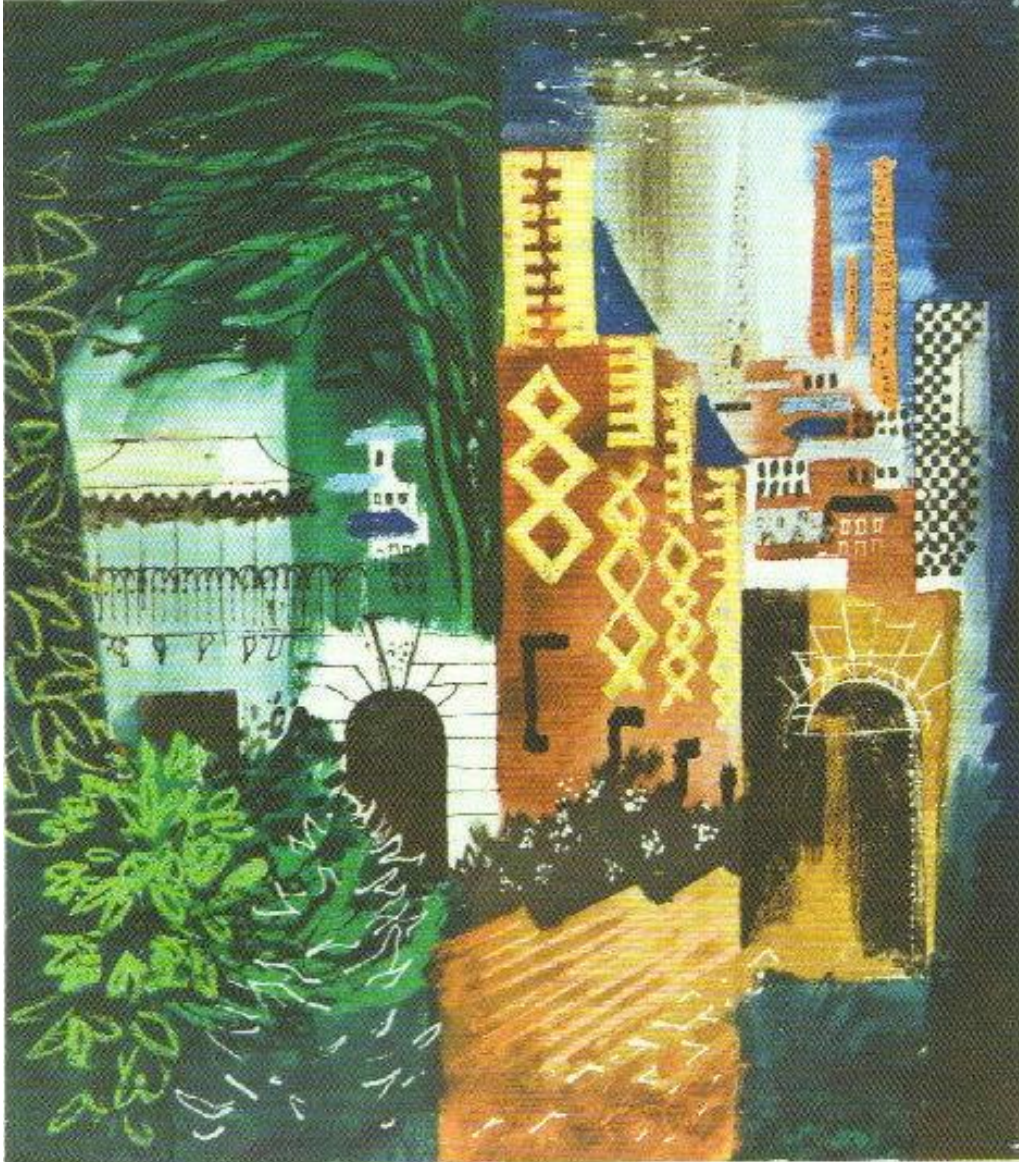


ILLUSTRATION 2-5 JOHN PIPER/ C1976 'READING TOWNSCAPE', COLLOTYPE/ 41.9 x 36.7 CM. REPRODUCED IN CATALOGUE FOR 'JOHN PIPER AT THE GOLDMARK GALLERY', 2008

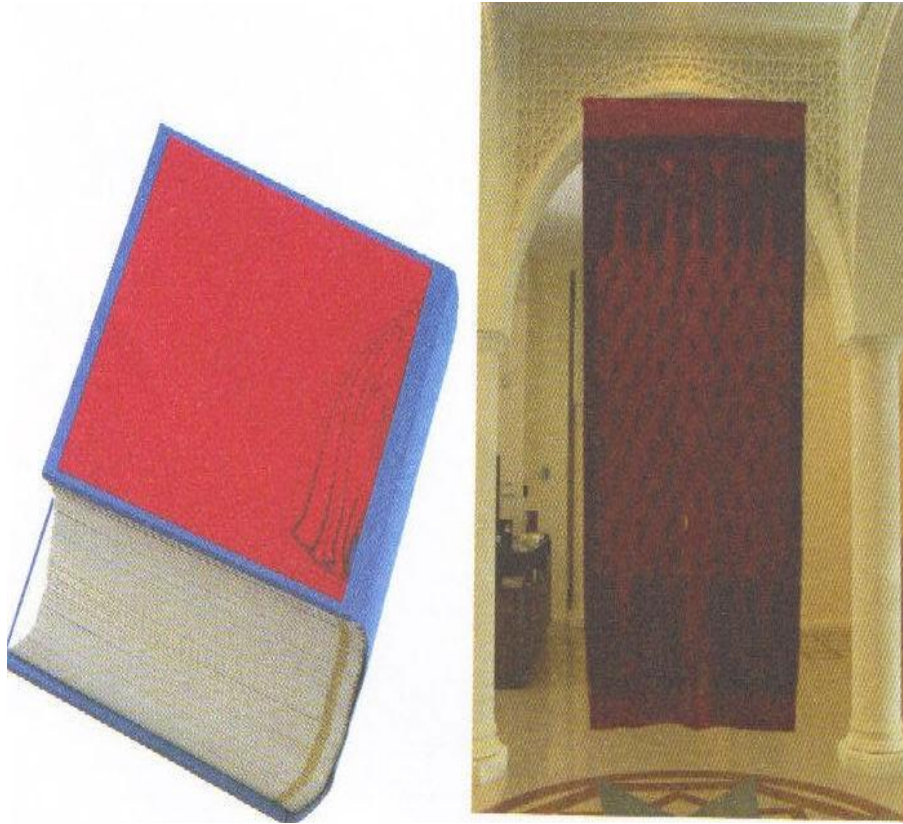


ILLUSTRATION 2-6 AISHA KHALID/ 2009 'NAME, CLASS, SUBJECT', WALLPAPER AND GOLD LEAF . REPRODUCED IN JAMEEL PRIZE BROCHURE/CATALOGUE, VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, 2011. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, CORVI-MORA GALLERY AND RAKING LEAVES.



ILLUSTRATION 2-7 AISHA KHALID/ 2011 'KABUL, 2009 (DETAIL)', GOUACHE ON WASLI PAPER/ 122 x 198 CM.
PROPERTY OF THE ARTIST



ILLUSTRATION 2-8 NUHA AL RADI/ 1997 'AIN GAZAL I (EXHITING EXILES)' , LITHOGRAPH ON PAPER (1/3)/ 37 x 37 CM. PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR



ILLUSTRATION 2-9 NUHA AL RADI/ 1998 'INSTALLATION', FOUND AUTOMOTIVE PARTS . PROPERTY OF THE ARTIST

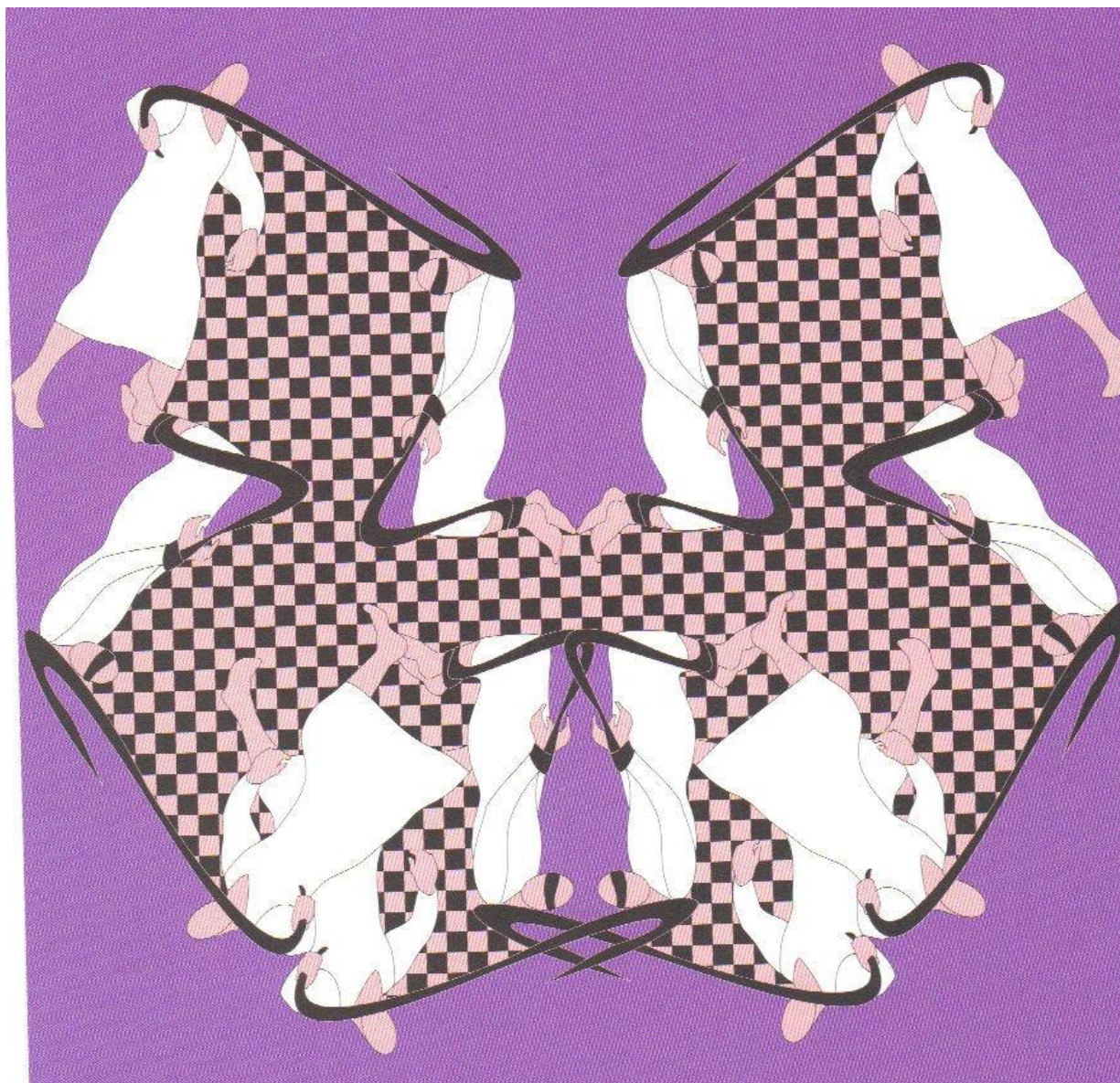


ILLUSTRATION 2-10 PARASTOU FOROUHAR/ 2008 'PARADE SERIES', ONE OF FOUR DIGITAL DRAWINGS/ DIGITAL PRINT ON ALU DIBOND/ 64 x 64 CM. PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR



ILLUSTRATION 2-11 PARASTOU FOROUHAR/ 2004-10 'SWANRIDER', SERIES OF PHOTOGRAPHS, DIGITAL PRINT ON ALU DIBOND/ 80 x 80 CM. EXHIBITED AT LEIGHTON HOUSE, 2010

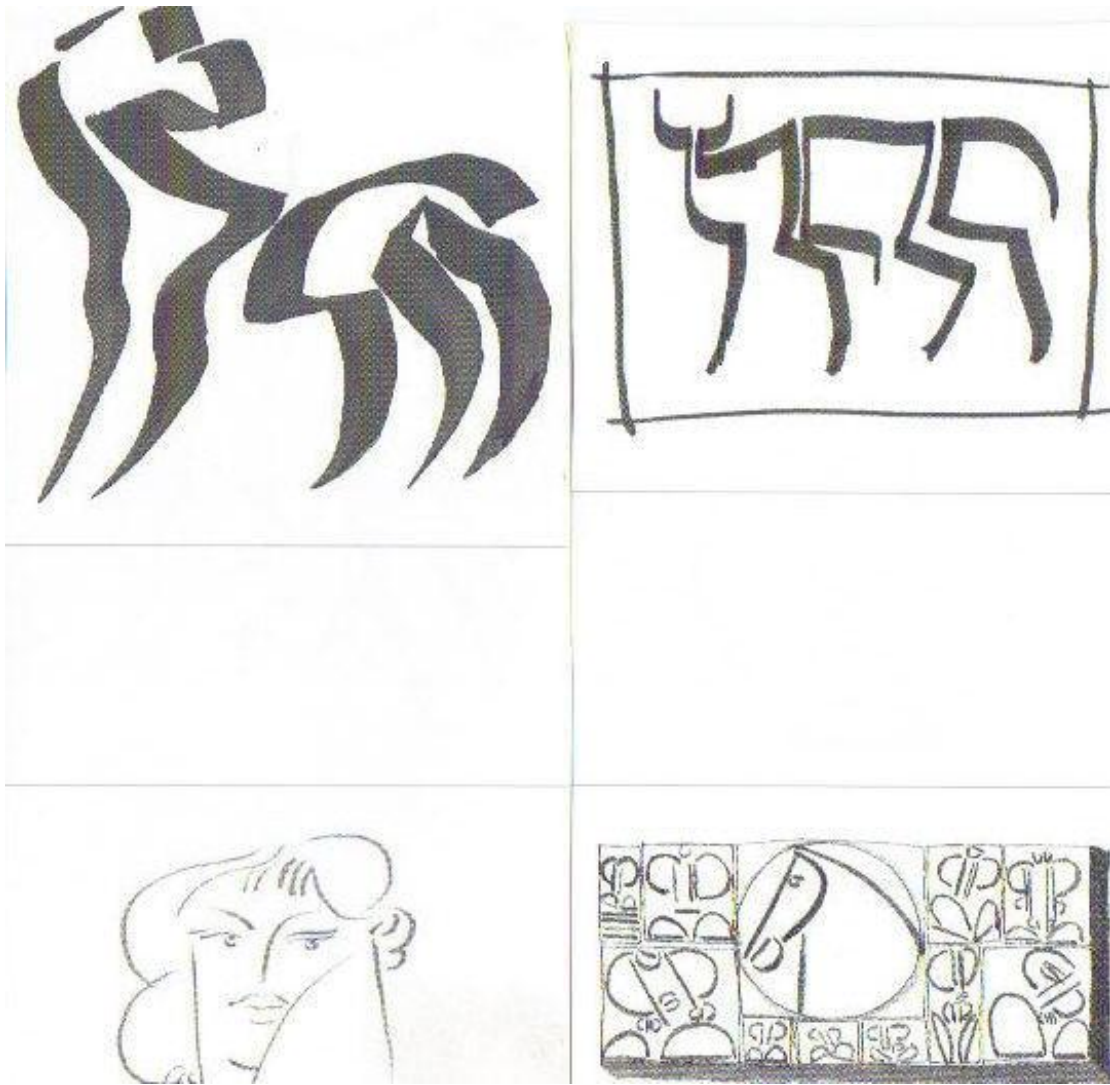


ILLUSTRATION 2-12 HUSSEIN MADI/ C 1965-75 'FOUR DRAWINGS', INK AND PENCIL ON PAPER/ VARIOUS SIZES.
 REPRODUCED, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, IN 'HUSSEIN MADI', SAQI BOOKS, 2005

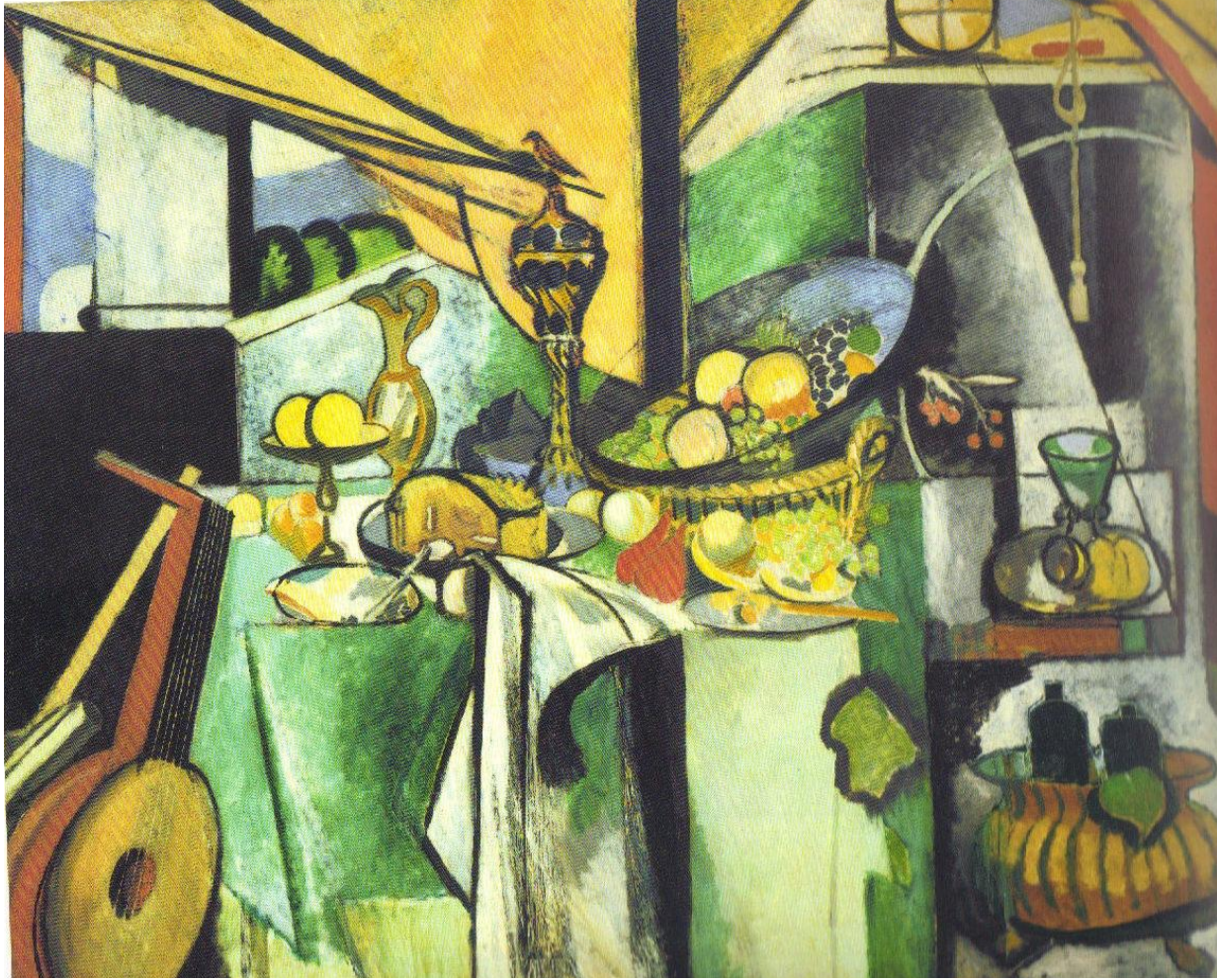


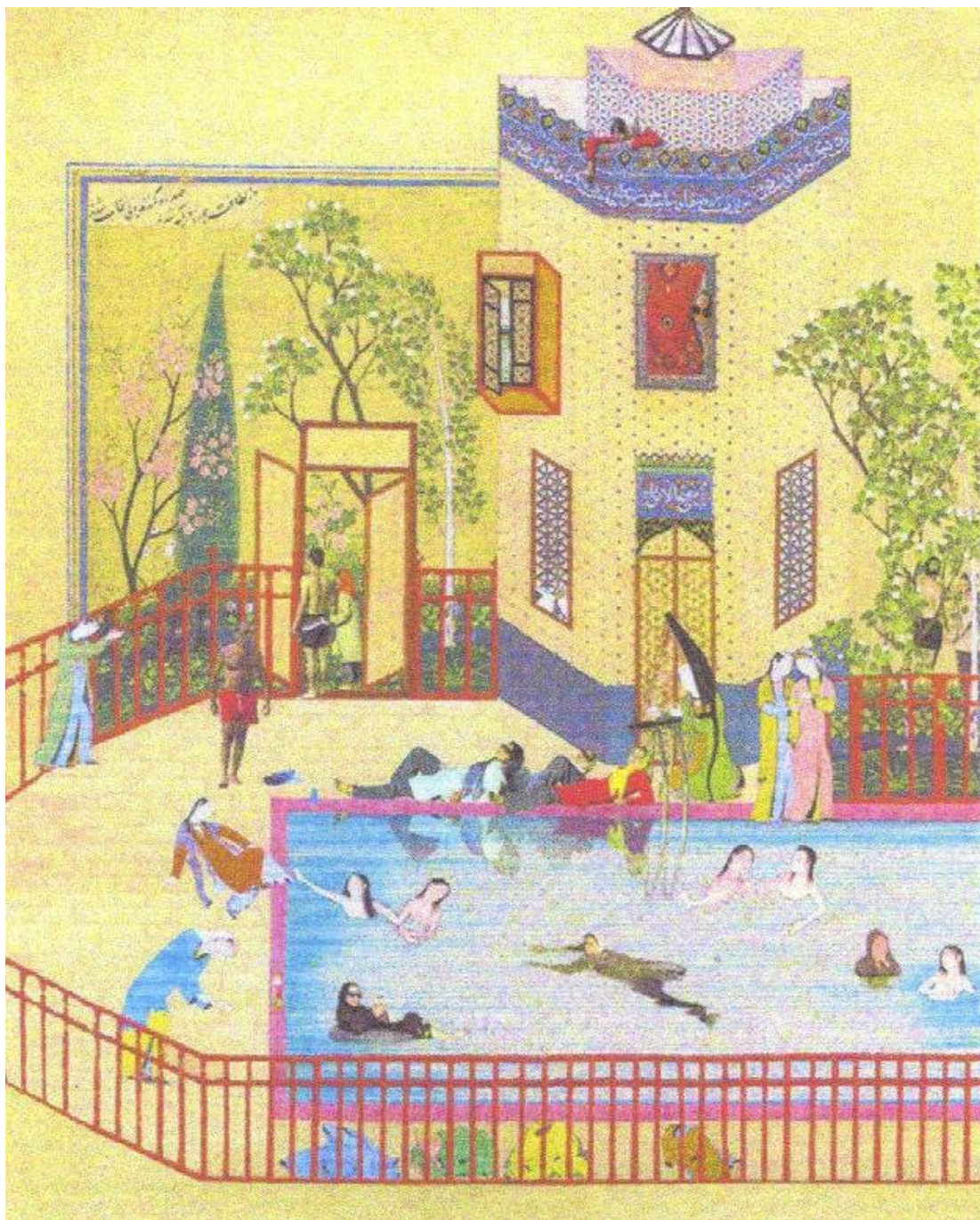
ILLUSTRATION 2-13 HENRI MATISSE/ 1915 'STILL LIFE AFTER JAN DAVIDZ DE HEEMS 'LA DESSERTÉ', OIL ON CANVAS/ 180 x 220 CM. MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK



ILLUSTRATION 2-14 PABLO PICASSO/ 1924 'MANDOLIN AND GUITAR', OIL ON CANVAS WITH SAND/ 140 X 200 CM. SOLOMON R GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM , NEW YORK



ILLUSTRATION 2-15 HUSSEIN MADI/ 2000 'STILL LIFE WITH MANDOLIN', ACRYLIC/ 90 x 60 CM. REPRODUCED IN 'HUSSEIN MADI', SAQI BOOKS, 2005



**ILLUSTRATION 2-16 SOODY SHARIFI/ 2007 'FROLICKING WOMEN IN THE POOL', DIGITAL COLLAGE.
REPRODUCED IN JAMEEL PRIZE CATALOGUE, VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM , 2011 (COURTESY OF LTMH
GALLERY, NEW YORK)**

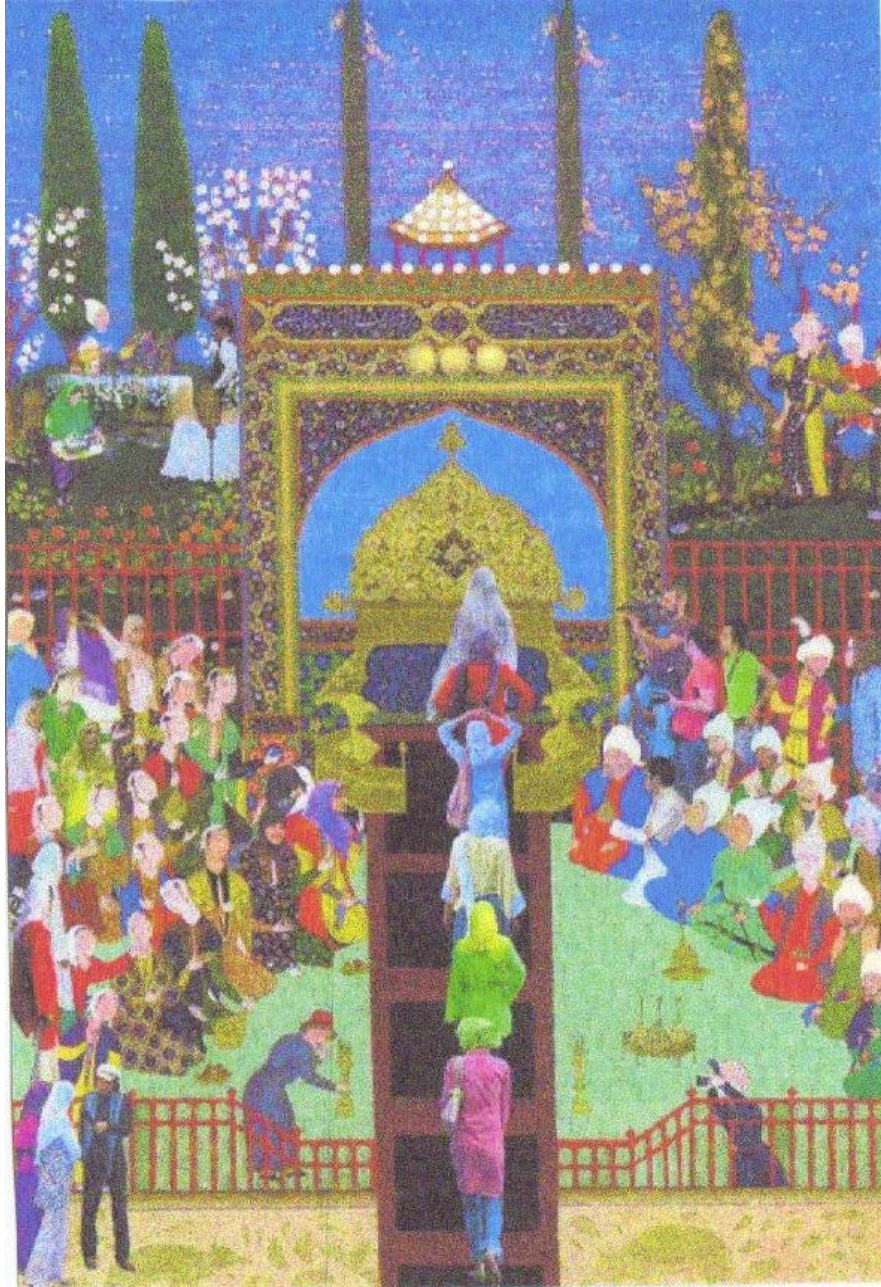


ILLUSTRATION 2-17 SOODY SHARIFI, 2007 'FASHION WEEK, 2010', DIGITAL COLLAGE. REPRODUCED IN JAMEEL PRIZE CATALOGUE, 2011. COURTESY OF LTMH GALLERY, NEW YORK



ILLUSTRATION 2-18 SOODY SHARIFI/ 2010 'ROOFTOP', PHOTOGRAPH FROM 'MOSLEM YOUTH' SERIES .
ACCESSED FROM soody-sharifi.com 2/4/12

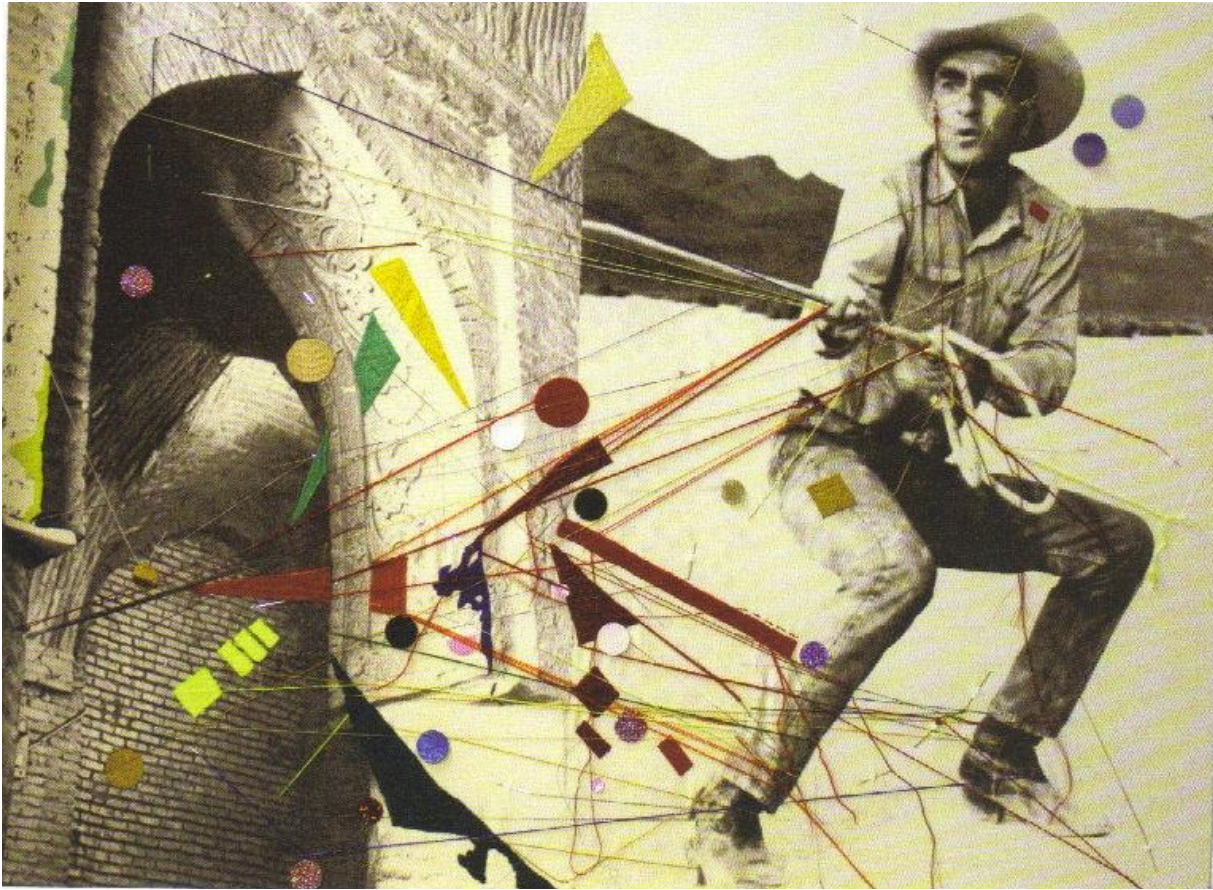
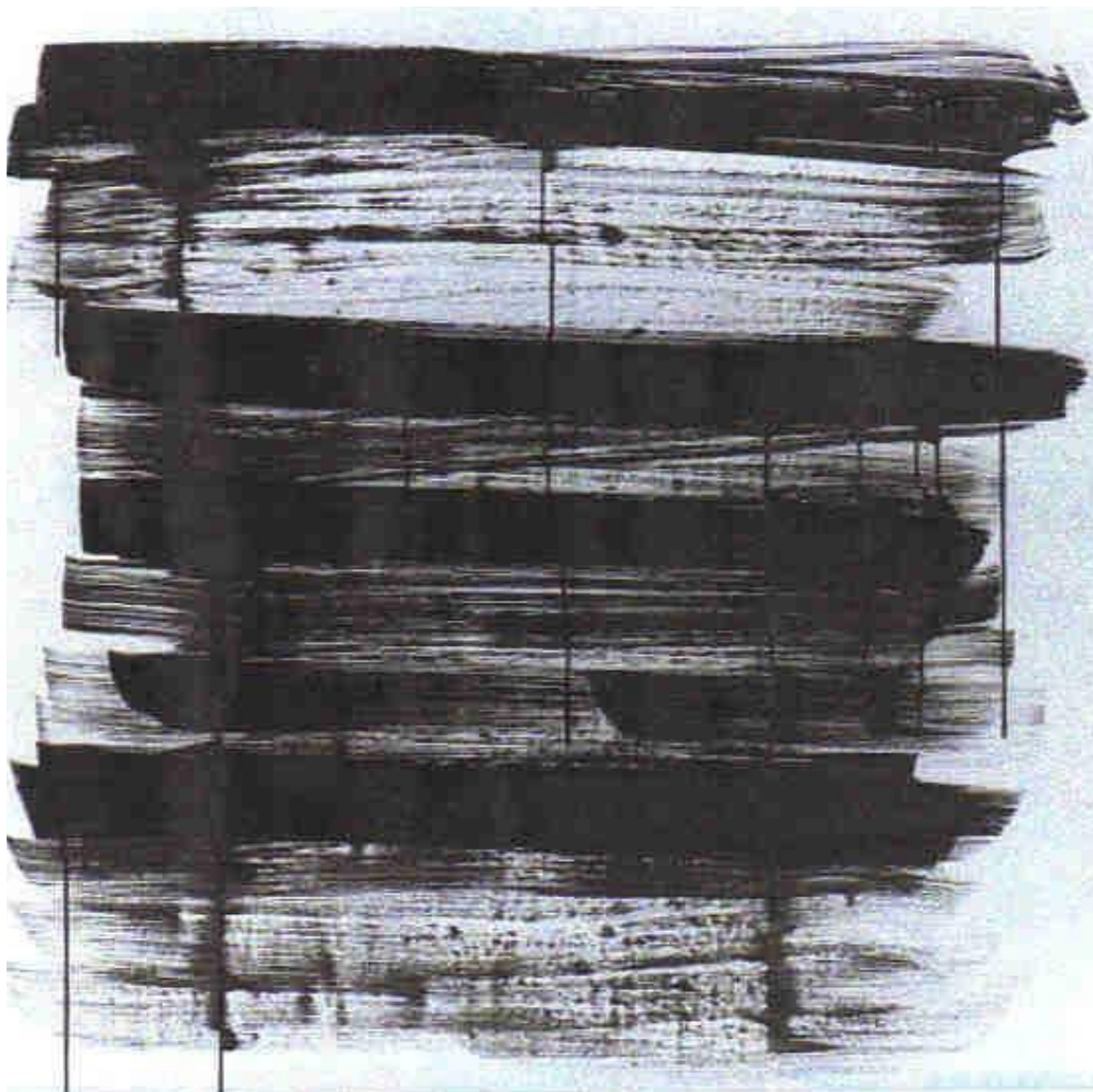


ILLUSTRATION 2-19 FARHAD AHRANIA/ 2011 'BEAUTIFUL IS THE SILENCE OF THE RUINS', EMBROIDERY AND NEEDLES ON CANVAS/ 80 x 144 CM. REPRODUCED IN 'ZENDIGHI', ED ROSE ISSA, BEYOND ART PUBLICATIONS. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, 2011



ILLUSTRATION 2-20 FARHAD AHRANIA/ 2011 'THE DIG, COMPOSITION NO 1', SILVERPLATED COPPER/ 42 x 27 x 3 CM. ROSE ISSA COLLECTIONS. (AUTHOR OWNS NO 3/HEAD OF KHOUROS).



**ILLUSTRATION 2-21 NEDA DANA HAERI/2009 'WHITE ON RED/DAVAZDAH KARGAAH (TWELVE WORKSHOPS),
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS/ 42 x 47 CM. EXHIBITED SISTANI GALLERY, 2009**



ILLUSTRATION 2-22 NEDA DANA HAERI, 2009 'ASSASSIN/ KHANJAR-E AAGHEE', OIL ON CANVAS/ 120 x 90 CM.
PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR



**ILLUSTRATION 2-23 ROBERT MOTHERWELL/ 1941-1944 'LITTLE SPANISH PRISON', OIL ON CANVAS/ 69 x 43.5 CM.
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NY/NY. GIFT OF RENATE PONSOLD MOTHERWELL**



ILLUSTRATION 2-24 NEDA DANA HAERI/ 2010 'CULTURAL MEMORY', OIL ON CANVAS/ 100 X 140 CM. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



ILLUSTRATION 2-25 HAYV KAHRAMAN/ 2008 'COMBING', OIL ON LINEN/ 172.7 X 104.7 CM. REPRODUCED IN CANVAS MAGAZINE/ VOLUME 5- ISSUE 6-NOV/DEC 2009



ILLUSTRATION 2-26 HAYV KAHRAMAN/ 2007 'MEYLEVI SEMA', SUMI INK, ACRYLIC AND WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER/ 58.5 x 109.5 CM. REPRODUCED IN CANVAS MAGAZINE, VOLUME 5-ISSUE 6—NOV/DEC 2009



ILLUSTRATION 2-27 HAYV KAHRAMAN/ 2008 'FLAYING THE LAMB', OIL ON LINEN/ 173 x 106 CM. REPRODUCED IN 'UNVEILED ART FROM THE MIDDLE EAST', BOOTH-CLIBBORN PUBLICATIONS, 2009



ILLUSTRATION 2-28 HAYV KAHRAMAN/ 2011 'TORSOES', GYPSUM, WILTED LEATHER, BURLAP/ 36 x 22 x 14 CM. FROM 'FRAGMENTED STATES', hayvkahraman.com, ACCESSED 2/4/2012

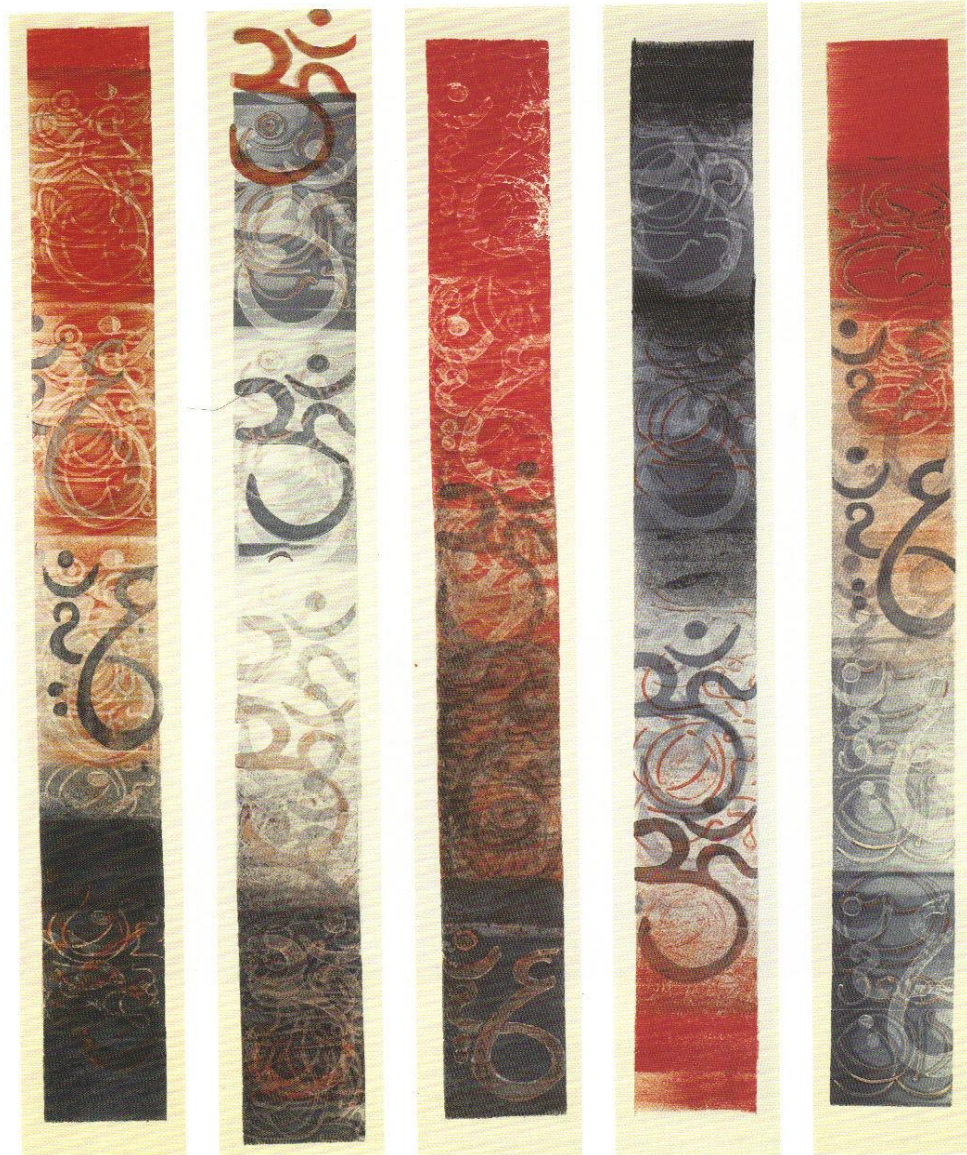


ILLUSTRATION 2-29 RASHAD SELIM/1998 'AYN AND ON TONALITIES (FROM MARSH EYE SERIES)', FROM FIVE MONOTYPE OFFSET PRINTS/ 85 x 30.5 CM EACH.BRITISH MUSEUM/ BROOKE SEWELL PERMANENT COLLECTION



ILLUSTRATION 2-30 RASHAD SELIM/2009 'GEO PIANO', PHOTOGRAPH OF PERFORMANCE/ JANET RADY FINE
ART/ 15 X 12 CM. PERFORMANCE OF BURNING GEO PIANO/ SOMERSET, UK, 2009



ILLUSTRATION 3-1 REMBRANDT VAN RIJN/ 1631 'PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE', ETCHING ON PAPER (FIFTH STATE)/28.5 x 21 CM. PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR

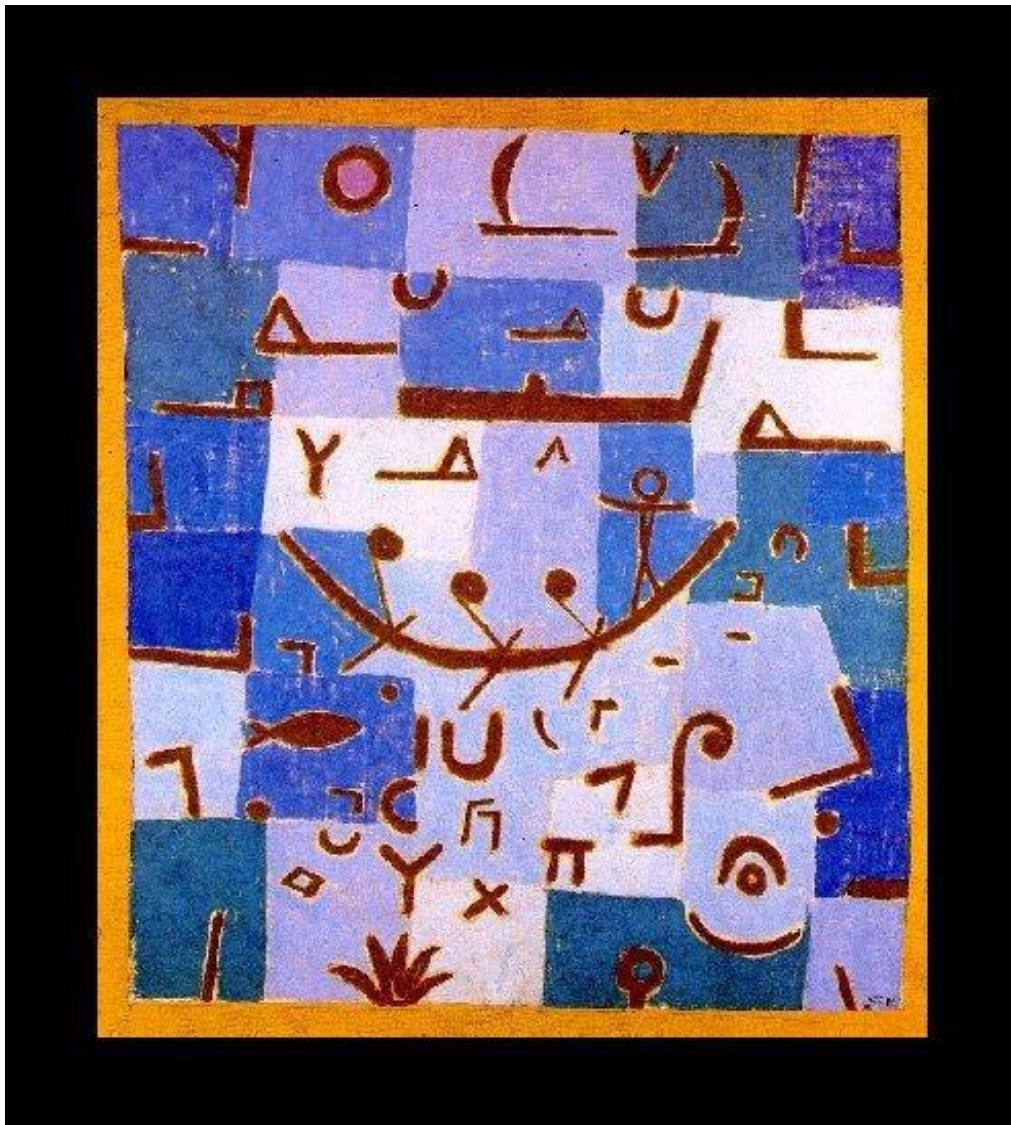


ILLUSTRATION 3-2 PAUL KLEE/ 1937 'LEGEND OF THE NILE', WATERCOLOUR/ 69 x 61 CM. KUNSTMUSEUM, BERN



**ILLUSTRATION 3-3 ANDREW JOHNSTONE/ 1997 'DAMASCUS GARDEN', PENCIL AND MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS/
55 x 41 CM. PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR**

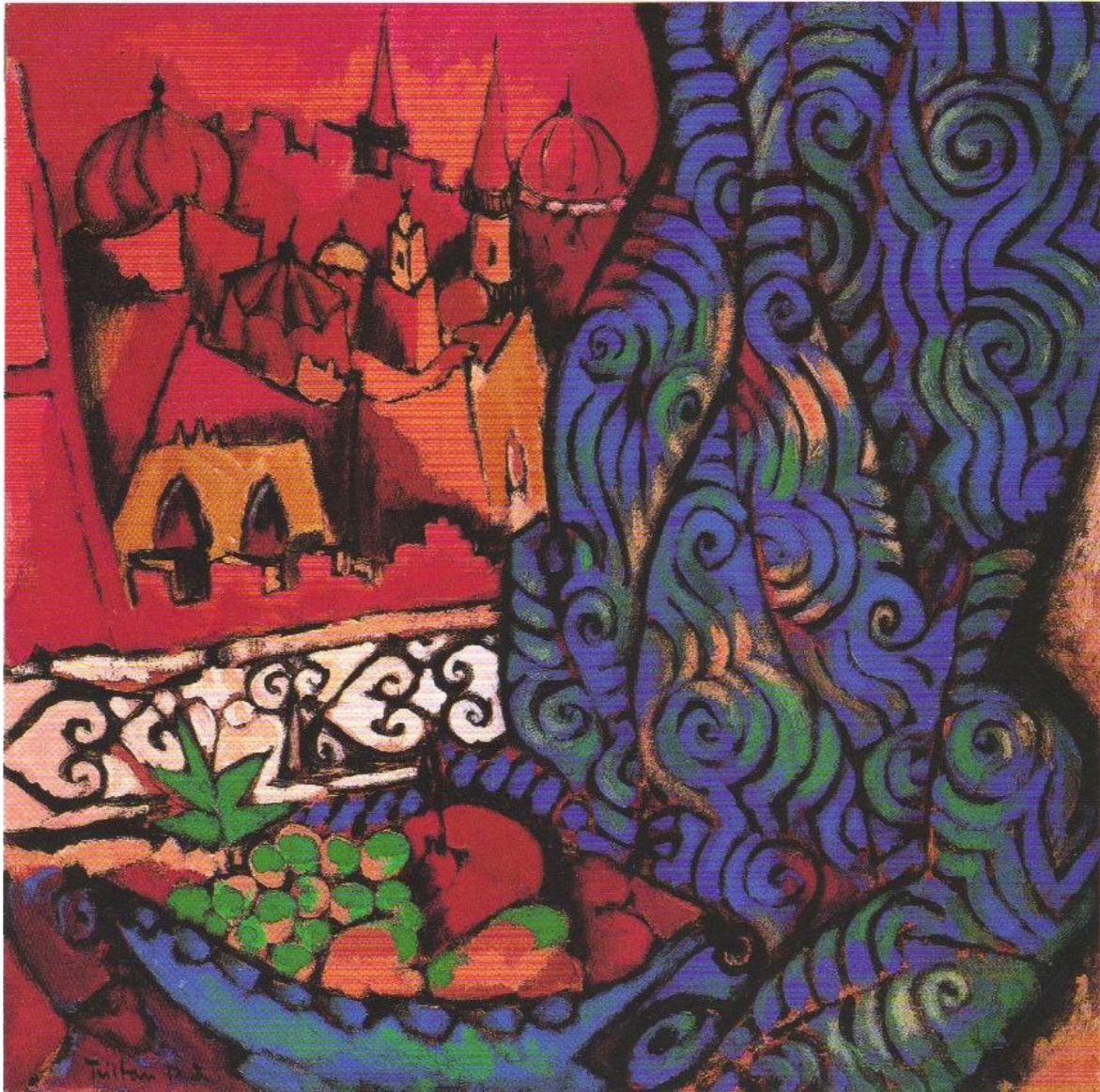


ILLUSTRATION 3-4 TRISTAN RA/ 1996 'FEZ, CITIE FIEVREUX', OIL ON CANVAS/ 78 x 78 CM. PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR



**ILLUSTRATION 3-5 CHARLES MCQUEEN/ 1999 'THUNDER OVER SOUSSE', OIL ON CANVAS/ 47 x 47 CM.
PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR**

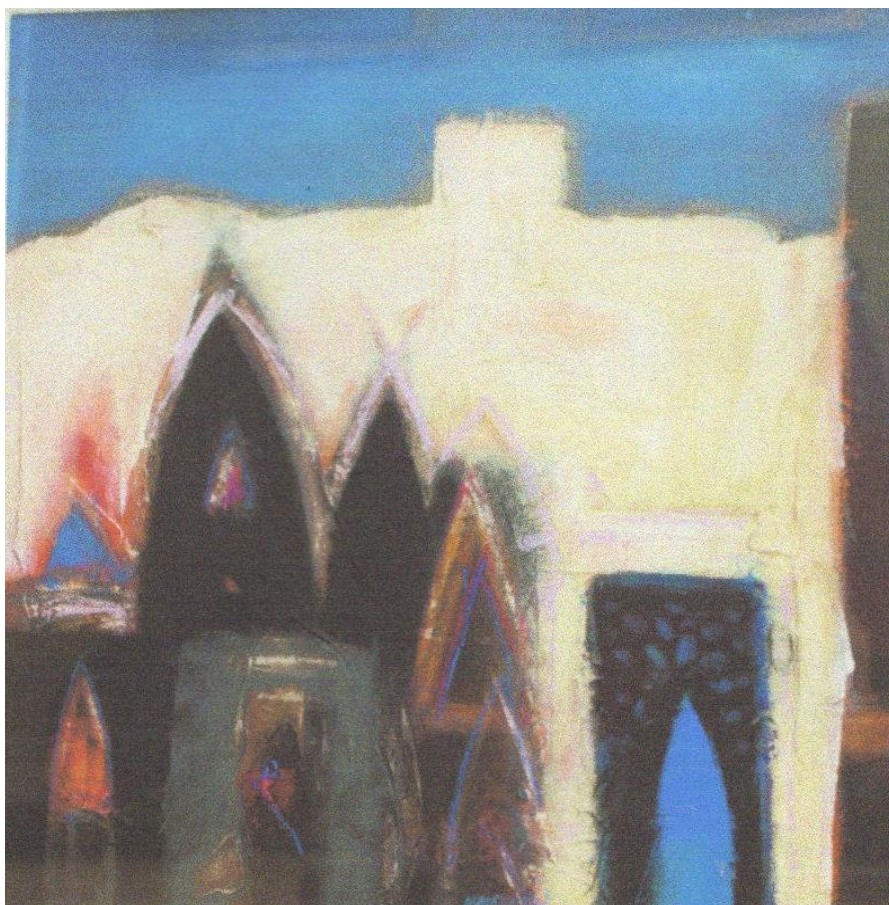


ILLUSTRATION 3-6 CHARLES MCQUEEN/ 1999 'HEAT AT MONASTIR', OIL ON CANVAS/ 47 x 47 CM. PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR

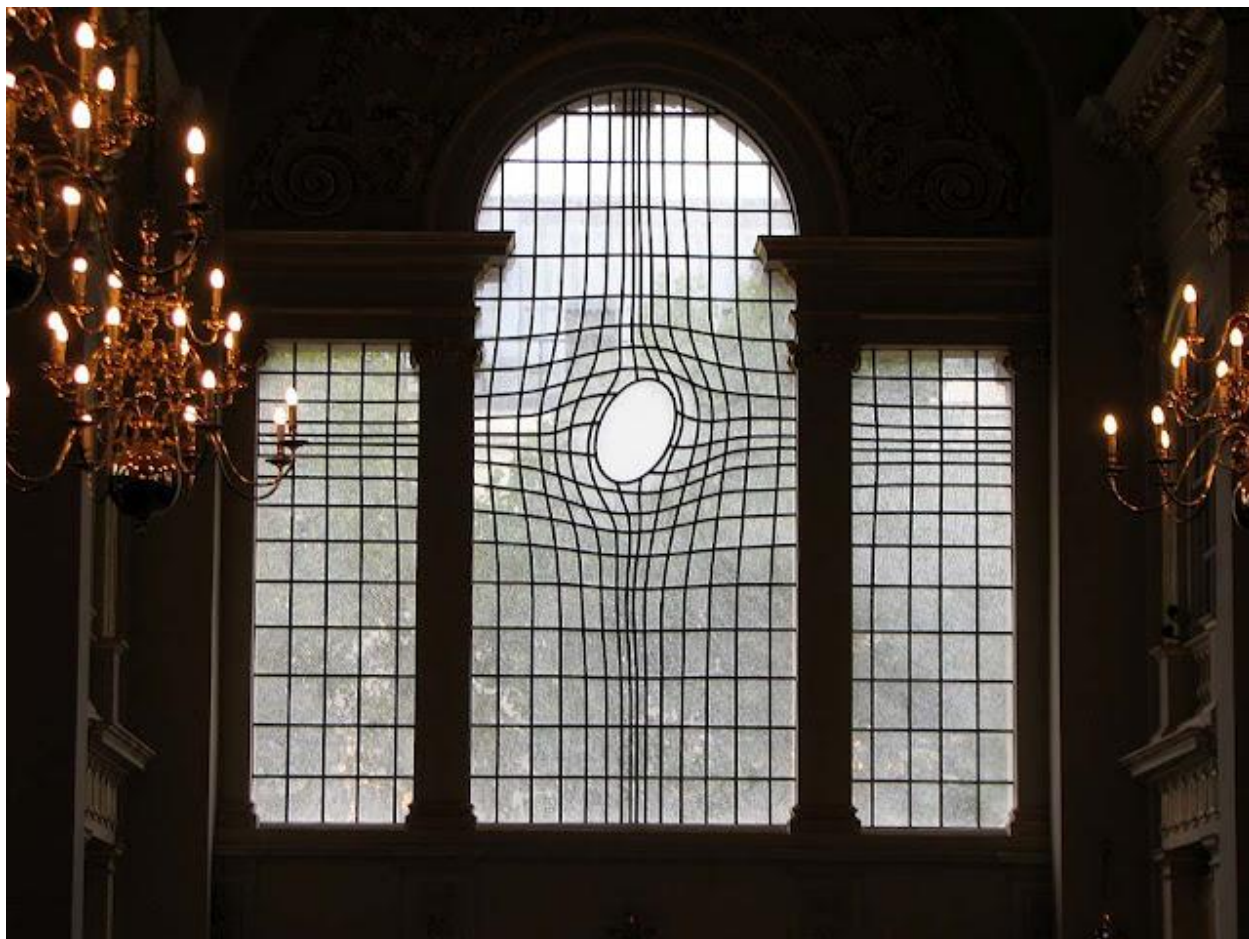


ILLUSTRATION 3-7 SHIRAZEH HOUSHIARY/ 2008 'ALTAR WINDOW/ WONKY WINDOW', ETCHED MOUTH BLOWN GLASS WITH SHOT PEENED STAINLESS STEEL FRAME/ 15 x 6 METRES. COMMISSIONED AND INSTALLED AT ST MARTIN IN THE FIELDS, LONDON



ILLUSTRATION 3-8 PARVIZ TANAVOLI/ 1972 'HEECH' BRONZE (UNIQUE)/ 56 x 30.5 x 20.5 CM. GREY ART GALLERY, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY



ILLUSTRATION 3-9 CHARLES ZENDEROU DI/ 1991 'UNTITLED (PRAISE BELONGS TO THE LORD GOD OF ALL BEING)', SILKSCREEN ON PAPER (14/20) FROM AN EDITION WITH COLOUR VARIATIONS/ 66 x 50.5 CM. BRITISH MUSEUM

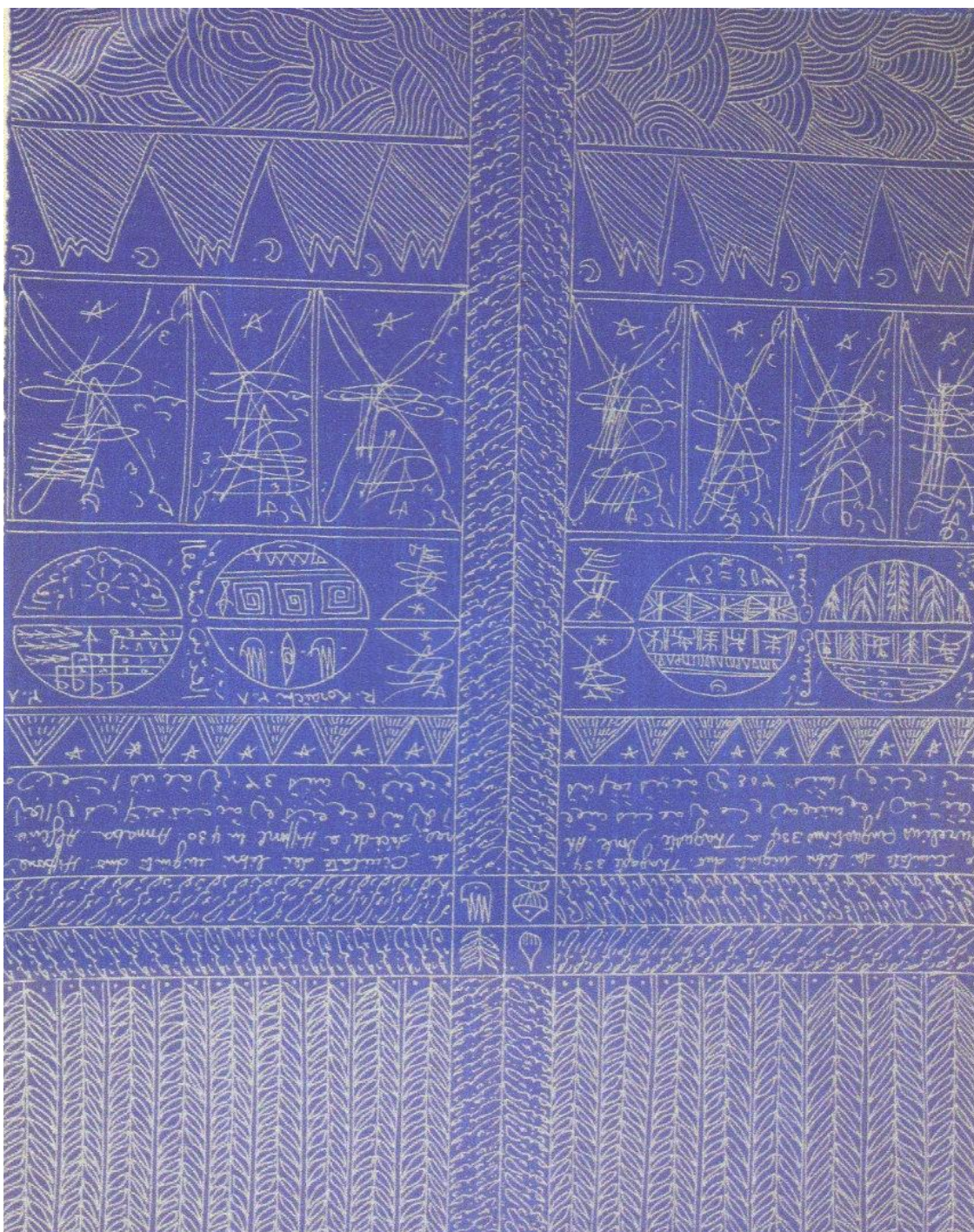


ILLUSTRATION 3-10 RACHID KORAICHI/ 2004 'ST AUGUSTINE', LITHOGRAPH ON PAPER (3/5)/ 38 x 28 CM.
PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR

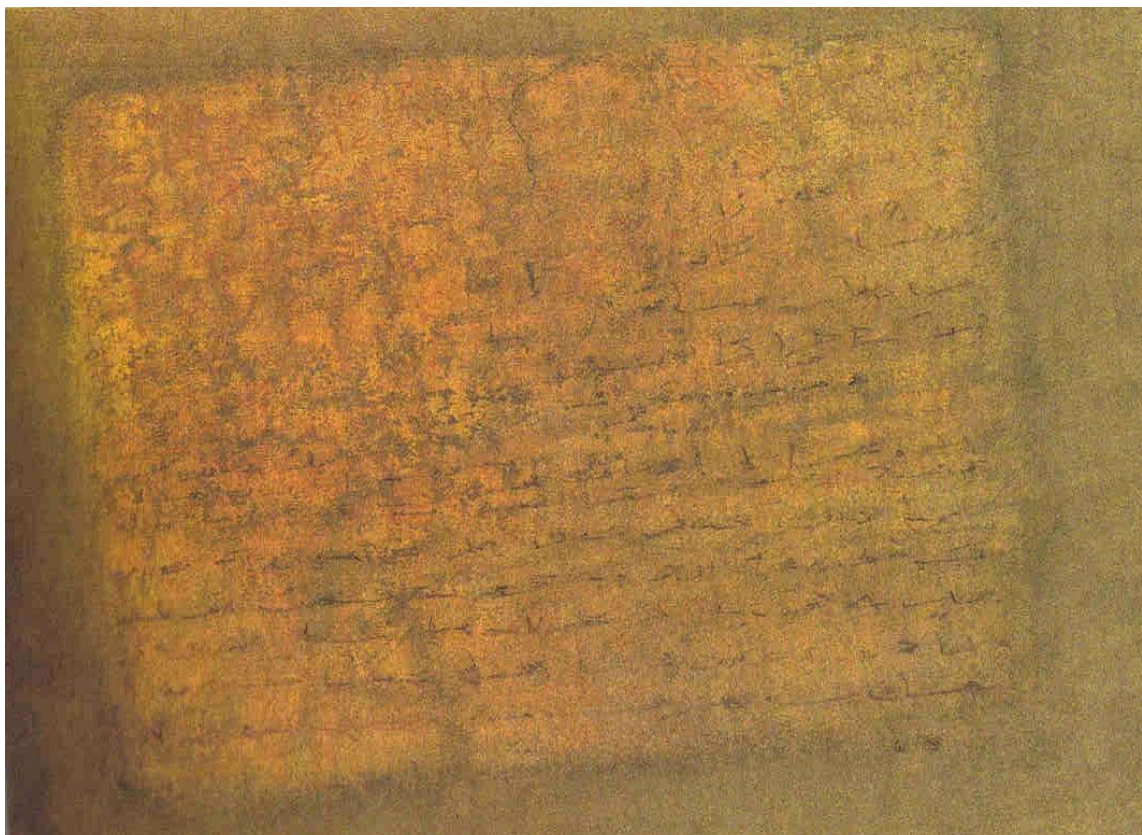


ILLUSTRATION 3-11 MALIHEH AFNAN/ 1998 'PALIMPSET', MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER/ 42 x 54 CM. REPRODUCED IN 'MALIHEH AFNAN', ED ROSE ISSA, SAQI BOOKS, 2010



ILLUSTRATION 3-12 NJA MAHDOUI, 2008 'CALIGRAMM (DETAIL)', INDIAN INK, COLOUR AND GOLD LEAF/ 90 x 70 CM. ROUTES II EXHIBITION, WATERHOUSE AND DODD, 2009



**ILLUSTRATION 3-13 REZA DERAQSHAH/ 2009 'SHIRIN AND KHOSROW', OIL ON CANVAS/ 150 x 180 CM.
EXHIBITED AT OSBORNE SAMUEL, 11-31/3/2010**

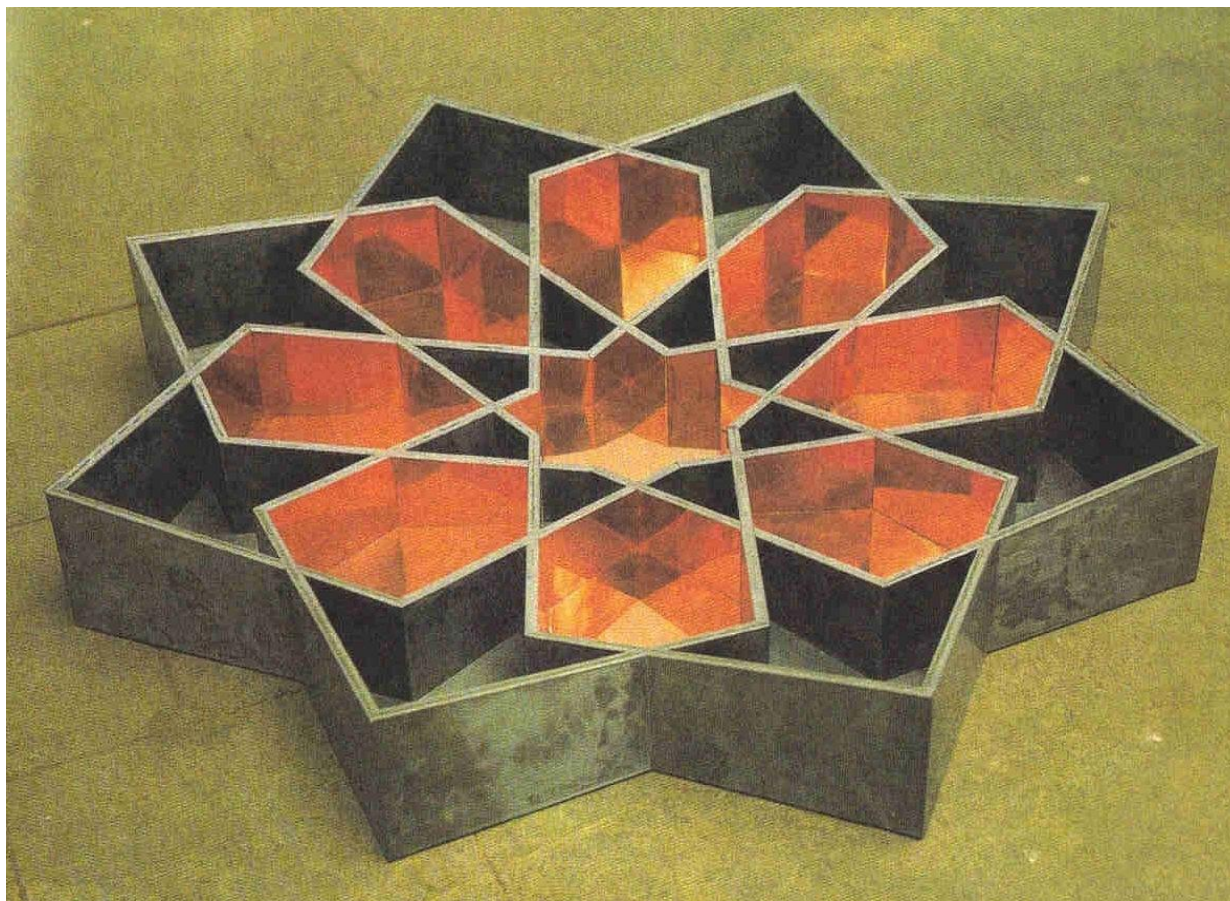


ILLUSTRATION 3-14 SHIRAZEH HOUSHIARY/ 1991 'IMAGE OF THE HEART', LEAD AND COPPER/ 13 x 98.5 (DIAMETER) CM. REPRODUCED IN 'IRANIAN CONTEMPORARY ART' BARBICAN GALLERY/ COURTESY OF THE LISSON GALLERY

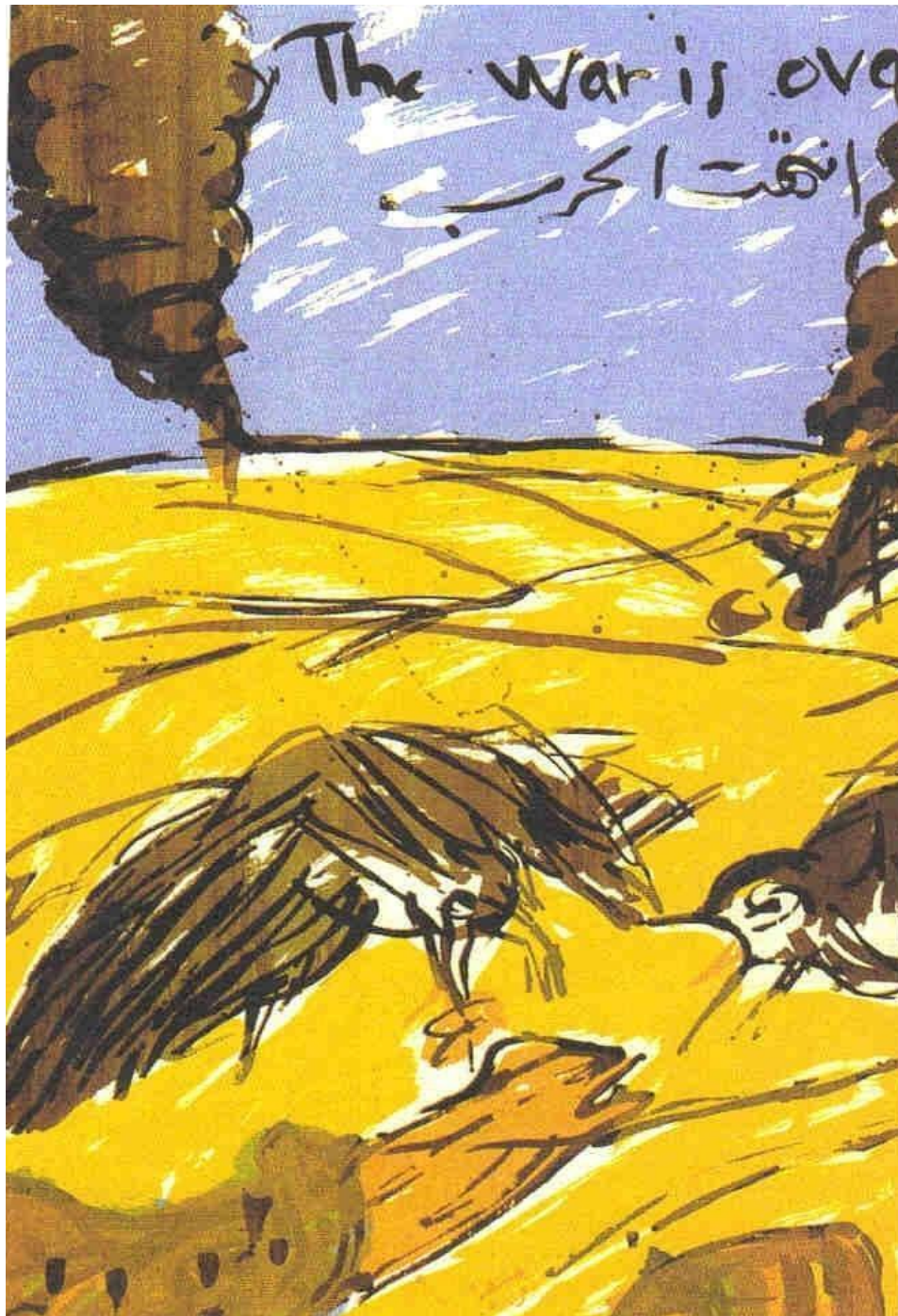
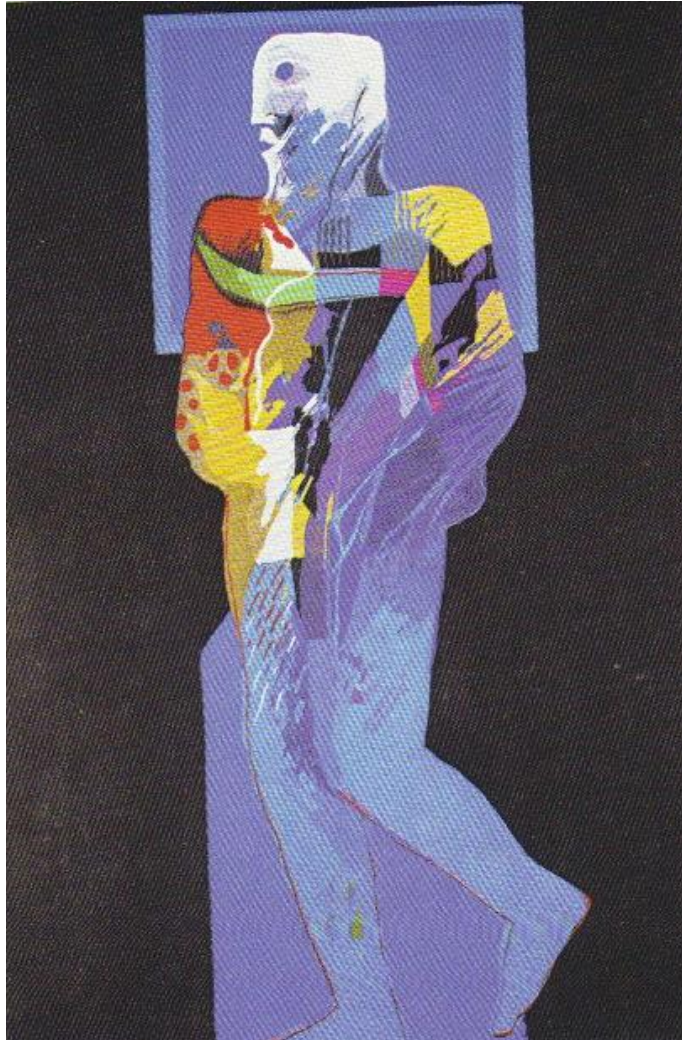


ILLUSTRATION 3-15 SALAM KHEDHER/ 1992 'THE WAR IS OVER', SILKSCREEN ON PAPER/ 72 x 57 CM. BRITISH MUSEUM/ BROOKE SEWELL PERMANENT FUND



**ILLUSTRATION 3-16 DIA AL AZZAWI/ 1983 'WHAT AL NIFARI SAID TO ABDULLAH, no 3', GOUACHE ON PAPER/
112 x 67 CM. JORDAN NATIONAL GALLERY OF FINE ARTS**



**ILLUSTRATION 3-17 MALIHEH AFNAN/ 1991 'POUR LA VIE', MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER/ 18.5 x 16 CM.
REPRODUCED IN 'MALIHEH AFNAN', EDITED ROSE ISSA, SAQI BOOKS 2010**



**ILLUSTRATION 3-18 SHADI GHADIRIAN/ 2008 'HANDBAG', 'C' TYPE PRINT (EDITION OF 10)/ 76 X 76 CM.
REPRODUCED IN WATERHOUSE AND DODD CATALOGUE FOR 'ROUTES II' EXHIBITION, 7-23/10/2009**



ILLUSTRATION 3-19 SOHRAB SEPEHIRI/ 1972 'ROCKS', OIL ON CANVAS/ 100 x 200 CM. TEHRAN MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

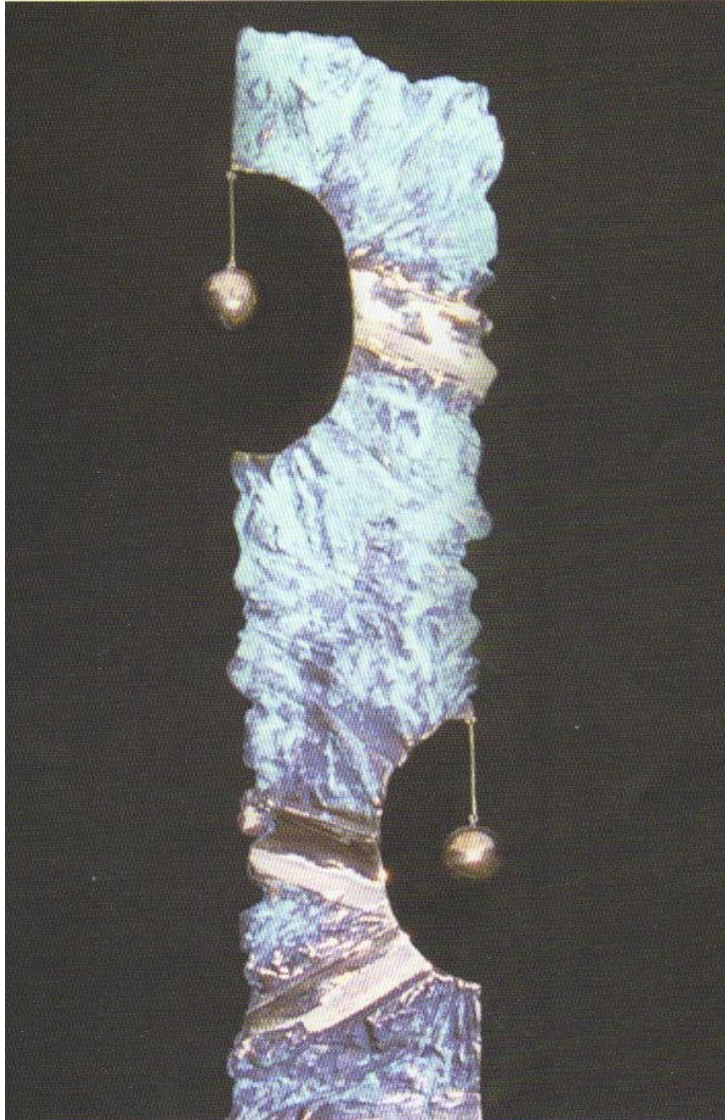


ILLUSTRATION 3-20 SHARESH AMIN/ 1997 'SYMBIOSIS', BRONZE SCULPTURE/ 59 x 36 x 3 CM. COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



**ILLUSTRATION 3-21 MONA HATOUM/ 1996 'PRESENT TENSE', SOAP, GLASS BEADS/ 4.5 x 299 x 241 CM.
INSTALLATION AT ANADIEL GALLERY, JERUSALEM/ COURTESY OF THE ARTIST/ JAY JOPLING/ WHITE CUBE
GALLERY**

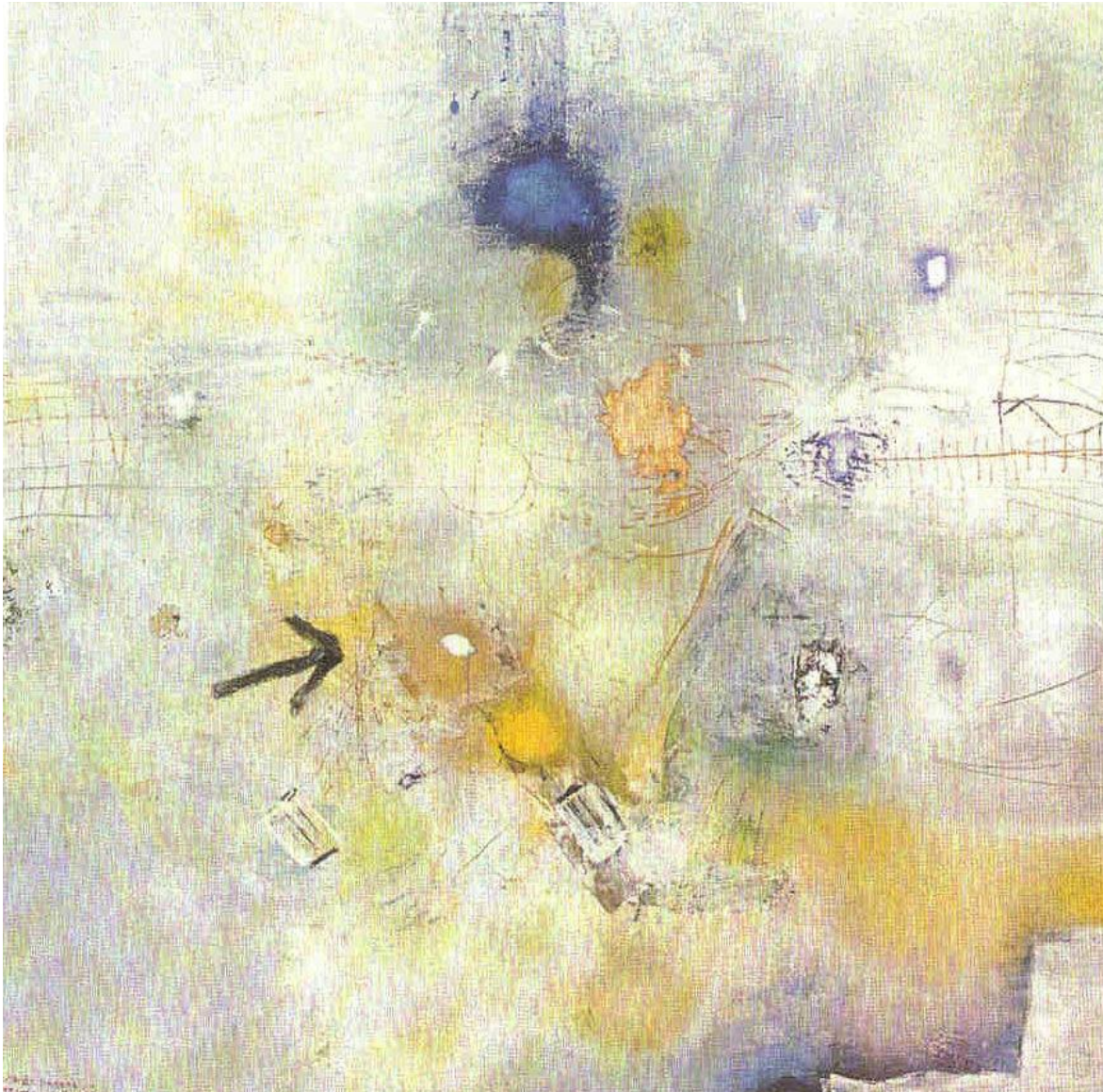


ILLUSTRATION 3-22 SHAKIR HASSAN AL SAID/ 1992 'WALL STRIP NO 4', MIXED MEDIA ON WOOD/ 122 x 122 CM. JORDAN NATIONAL GALLERY OF ARTS

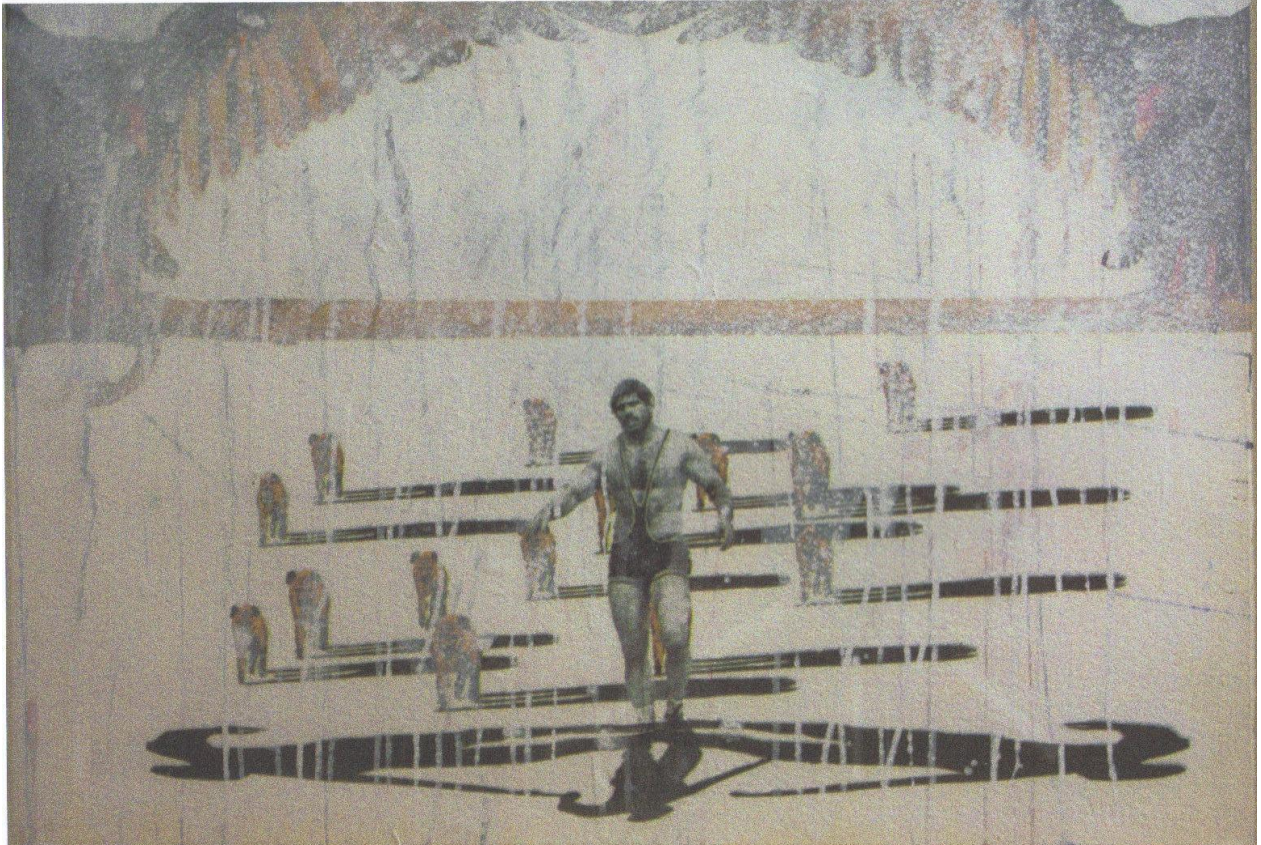


ILLUSTRATION 3-23 FEYREDOUN AVE/ 2010 'ROSTAM IN WINTER', INK AND WATERCOLOUR ON PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE/ 75 x 57 CM. PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR