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The Doha skyline



Sheikh Hassan bin Mohammed bin Ali Al Thani, at the opening of Mathaf, the Arab Museum of Modern Art



Wassan Al-Khudhairi, acting director of Mathaf



This 1847 painting by Ali Zara is the oldest work in the Mathaf collection

THE ARAB MODERN by Barbara Pollack

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"I love it here," said **Jeff Koons**. "This is my sixth time in Doha since 2000." Koons denied that he had a project in Qatar, saying rather that he liked taking his kids for buggy rides in the sand dunes. He was standing in a chilly windstorm outside the new Mathaf, Arab Museum of Modern Art, waiting with the rest of the crowd for the Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, and his entourage to finish their tour of the building before everyone else could enter.

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Among the visitors who had flown in for the occasion were 2011 Venice Biennale director Bice Curiger, Tate curator Sheena Wagstaff, New Museum duo Eungie Joo and Richard Flood, Museum of Modern Art international council head Jay Levenson and Tony Bannon, director of the George Eastman House in Rochester. The conundrum of the moment was what modern art means in a city where every building is spanking new but the leaders and most women dress in traditional garb.

"I was wildly curious about a museum that would put everything in context," said Flood, who considered the trip "an educational venture." Of course, part of the fact-finding mission was to see what the Qatar Museum Authority, with its unlimited spending budget, was up to, two years after it had opened the I.M. Pei-designed Museum of Islamic Art on Doha's stunning waterfront.

By comparison, Mathaf is a modest affair, installed in a 59,000-square-foot former school building, a temporary space redesigned by French architect Jean-Francois Bodin in association with Burns and McDonnell. The museum is located off the beaten path on the edge of a neighborhood called Education City, where Virginia Commonwealth University, Weill Cornell Medical College, Texas





Mahmoud Said
Les Chadoufs
 1934
 \$2,434,500
 Christie's Dubai
 Apr. 27, 2010



The vernissage at Mathaf, the Arab Museum of Modern Art



Jeff Koons at the vernissage at Mathaf, the Arab Museum of Modern Art



French architect Jean-Francois Bodin, designer of the Mathaf, with artist Yan Pei Ming, whose portraits of the Emir and his wife hang in the museum lobby



Jay Levenson of the Museum of Modern Art international council with Roger Mandle, head of the Qatar Museum Authority

A&M University, Carnegie Mellon, Georgetown and Northwestern all have outposts.

The draw was not the location or the building, a boxy structure of two floors of rabbit-warren style galleries, but the collection, which was assembled over the past three decades by another Qatari royal, a cousin of the Emir, His Excellency Sheikh Hassan bin Mohammed bin Ali Al Thani, and covers all phases of modern art in the Middle East from the 1840s to the present. H.E. Sheikh Hassan, who studied "Art of the 20th Century" in a course at Qatar University and lived in London with his family, gradually built up a holding of over 6,000 works, specifically designed to fill in the gaps in research on Arab modern art movements.

For ten years, H.E. Sheikh Hassan operated a private museum, as well as offering a residency program as a refuge for artists from the region, especially war-torn Baghdad. In 2004, he offered the entire collection to the Qatar Foundation and in 2009, under the leadership of the Qatar Museums Authority chair, Her Excellency Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, the daughter of the Emir, plans moved forward to create a public institution. "I will become only an observer, just like everybody else," writes Sheik Hassan in the catalogue essay accompanying the opening exhibition, "The museum will go out of my hands into the hands of a new generation, who I hope will remember me with fondness."

Ironically, the lobby of the new Mathaf, which means museum in Arabic, is dominated by two monumental portraits of the Emir and his No.1 wife, commissioned by the Sheikha from Chinese artist **Yan Pei Ming**, who shows with David Zwirner and lives in Dijon, France. The inaugural exhibition, "Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art," featured 240 artworks, mostly paintings, by more than 100 artists, curated by Nada Shabouf, an associate professor at the University of North Texas in Denton, and chief curator and acting director Wassan Al-Khudhain, whose previous experience includes a position at the Brooklyn Museum.

Organized along broad themes -- family, portraiture, landscape, individualism -- the exhibition resisted presenting a canon or highlighting masters. Such forbearance wasn't shared by western visitors, who speculated on budgetary matters (if not esthetic ones), such as how many millions were spent to acquire works by artists like **Mahmoud Said**, whose painting, *Les Chadoufs* (1934), was bought by Sheik Hassan for \$2.4 million at Christie's Dubai in April 2010.

Though you can't help but give it an "A" for effort, "Sajjil" offers a view of Arab Modernism that seems -- at least for the present -- distressingly short on innovation. In fact, as the curators insisted during the tour of the exhibition, 20th-century Arab artists were working to build bridges between European art and their own traditions, rather than rebel against those traditions. What results is a fairly tepid take on modernism, with little of the radicality we see in **Picasso** or **Pollock**. Still, with almost 6,000 works still left to be shown, the museum may be saving more experimental pioneers for later exhibitions, after it has won over the local population as an audience.

While Abu Dhabi is making a name for itself by building dramatic local satellites of the Louvre, the Guggenheim and the British Museum, Qatar's scheme of cultural nation building is much more





The contemporary annex of the Mathaf, on the grounds of the Museum of Islamic Art



I.M. Pei's Museum of Islamic Art in Doha



Sheikh Hassan bin Mohammed bin Ali Al Thani with Nada Shabout and Wassan al-Khudhairi and an installation by Dubai artist Hassan Sharif



Her Excellency Sheikha al Mayassa



homegrown, establishing its own museums rooted in the collections of its own royal family. Mathaf is just one example of an attempt to create a national identity, as if Qatar (which was founded in 1973 and has been run by the current Emir since a coup in 1995) had a long and rich cultural history.

Most of the artists in "Sajjill" come from other countries in the region, especially Egypt and Lebanon, which were exposed to European art movements and boasted vibrant art circles during the colonial era. But, in struggling to define Arab modern art, the curators left out artists from Iran and Turkey, though there was at least one artist from Israel, Sliman Mansour, who is Palestinian.

Presumably, when Mathaf moves into a permanent location -- site and architect to be announced -- contemporary art will be included. For now, two concurrent shows were unveiled in a new 20,000-square-foot contemporary art annex on the grounds of the Museum of Islamic Art on the Corniche by the seashore. "Interventions: A Dialogue between the Modern and the Contemporary" features five senior contemporary artists, still little known in the west: Dia Assawi, Farid Belkahlia, Ahmed Nawar, Ibrahim el-Sahafi and Hassan Sharif.

Far more ambitious is "Told / Untold / Retold," curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, co-founders of a New York-based curatorial company named Art Reoriented. It presented new works by 23 artists, including Lebanese artists Marwan Sahmarani and Lara Baladi, Palestinian artists Steve Sabella and Khalil Rabah, Iraqi artists Sadik Kwais Alfraji and Ahmed Alsoudani and Algerian artist Kader Attia, among others. Whatever the uncertain nature of Arab modernism, when it comes to the contemporary, the artists are ready to take part.

Back in 2009, as part of a performance at Paula Cooper Gallery, the New York-based Lebanese artist Walid Raad commented on the situation in the Middle East vis-à-vis contemporary art. "There are two caricatures of the situation," he explained. "One says this is purely cynical, that these guys are just using culture as a cloak to diversify their economy away from hydrocarbon to tourism. The second says, no, this is sign of Arab renaissance with young leaders, tired of the old ways, trying to democratize taste through culture and then they will democratize other aspects of the society."

Raad, one of 23 artists commissioned to make new works for "Told / Untold / Retold," was on hand to witness Sheik Hassan and Her Excellency Sheikha Al Mayassa being led through the exhibition, a significant step towards conveying that the royal family is now fully behind contemporary art. Though no one would discuss the budget for the exhibition, a few of the artists admitted funding at levels of well over \$100,000, including Yusef Nabil, who produced a film, *You Never Left* (2010), and Ghada Amer, whose sculpture is a rather fantastic ceramic globe made out of 100 words for love in Arabic. The work is produced in an edition of two, plus one A.P. and goes on view at Cheim & Read in New York next month.

With rumors circulating that the massive new contemporary annex was in fact built to accommodate Takashi Murakami's planned 2012 show in Qatar, "Told / Untold / Retold" was exceptionally well-installed with each room built

Ghada Amer with her work in
"Told / Untold / Retold"



Museum signage



Arab tschotskes

to the artist's needs. According to Bardaouil, who had worked on the project for a year, no restrictions were placed on him by the Qatar Museum Authority or the Sheik.

In an effort to connect these contemporary artworks with more ancient traditions, Bardaouil and Till focused on the idea of storytelling, and as the case with many biennial and international exhibitions, video projections stole the show.

Hassan Khan, an artist from Cairo, won praise from many of the international visitors for *Jewel* (2010), a single-channel video showing two Arab men, one dressed like a typical cabbie and the other more professionally, dancing to a techno-Arab soundtrack composed by the artist.

Another notable work by Adel Abidin, an Iraqi artist who lives in Helsinki and shows with Galerie Anne de Villepoix in Paris, managed to make Saddam Hussein into a heartthrob. Three films unspool in a circular room, with European chanteuses singing the words of propagandistic Saddam-era pop tunes -- "By Allah, we owe our lives to your moustache" -- in a Lili Marlene style.

Security was thorough at Mathaf, where bags went through metal detectors, but minimal at the contemporary art annex. That was lucky for one artist, **Wafaa Bilal**, who has had a tough time getting through airport checkpoints ever since he surgically attached a camera to the back of his head. Born in Iraq but living in New York, Bilal has spent the year posting minute-by-minute snapshots to his website of what might be called his rearview. In Doha this project is presented as "The 3rd I," a mirrored room filled with monitors playing his footage.

The artist himself was much more interesting as a work of body art, hopping around the opening and after-hours parties with his lens jutting into everyone's faces. But Bilal's inclusion certainly showed how far the QMA was prepared to go to take part in the edgier, experimental contemporary art world.

Did the sheik like the work? "He loved it," Bardaouil said. Meanwhile, the Sheika seemed most taken with *Untitled (Life's Identity)*, a ceiling-to-floor column of flowing blood-red liquid by artist **Kader Attia**, who is best known for his haunting sculptures of empty chadors, seated as if in prayer, recently seen at the Saatchi Collection.

Local art movers and shakers were on hand, of course, to celebrate the establishment of Mathaf, the first museum in the region to highlight talents from throughout the Middle East in such depth: Sultan Sooud of the Sharzah-based Barjeel Art Foundation Al Qassami and Dubai collector Farbod Dowlatshahi joined dealers from the region, which include Third Line Gallery in Dubai, Galerie Sfeir Semler in Beirut, Athr Gallery in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and Townhouse Gallery in Cairo.

But even while Sheik Hassan gave speeches about an institution which will teach a younger generation to value Arab accomplishments, the market makers were no doubt flocking to the event with profit in mind. The night of Mathaf opening, Sotheby's held a preview for a sale titled "Hurouf: The Art of the Word." Featuring 140 works of modern calligraphic paintings much like those seen at the museum, the auction was held on Dec. 16, 2010, and brought in \$5.6 million.