

Western museums and galleries are finally taking contemporary Middle Eastern art seriously as curators bring it out of storage and give it its rightful place in the story of art today.

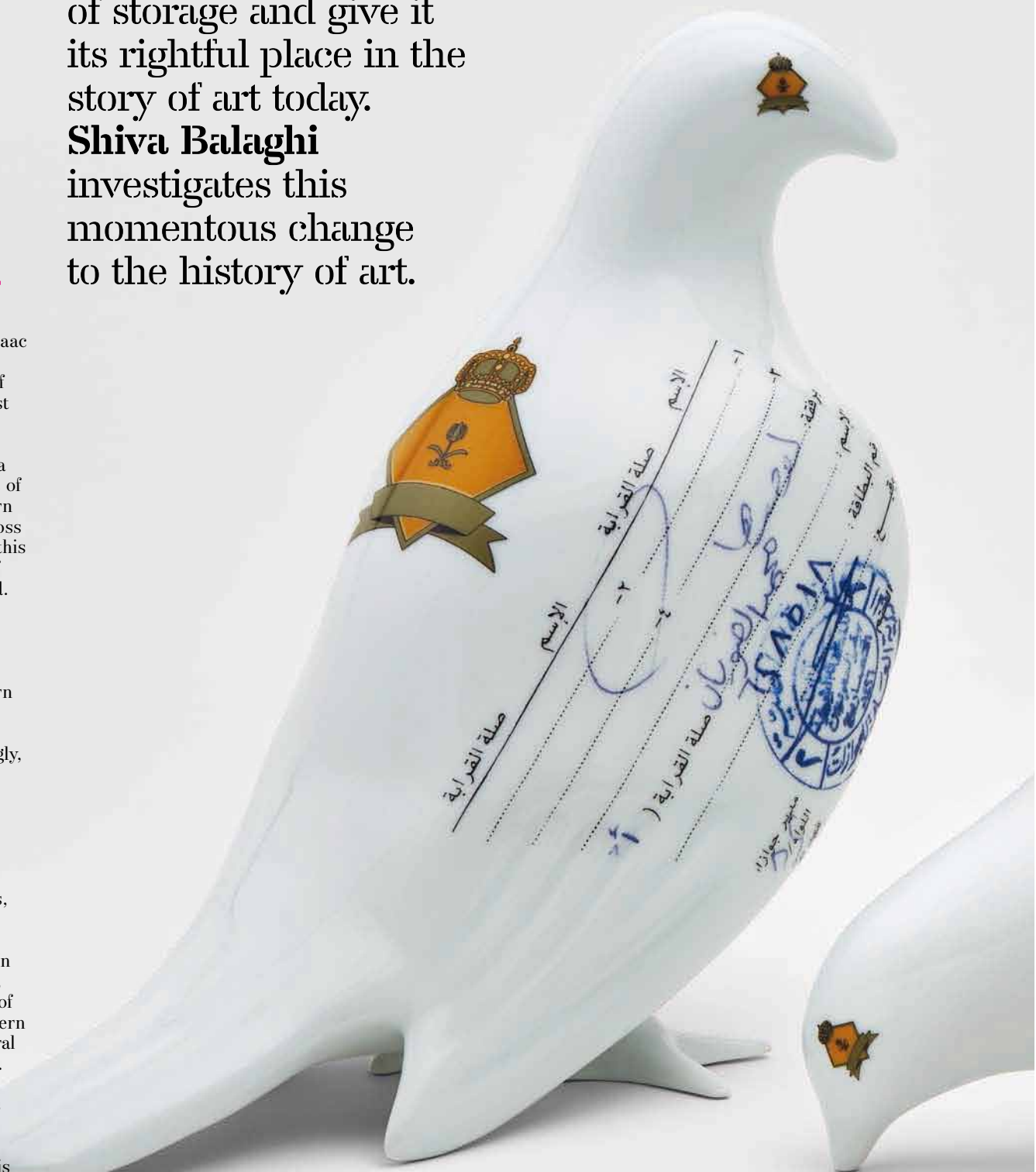
Shiva Balaghi investigates this momentous change to the history of art.

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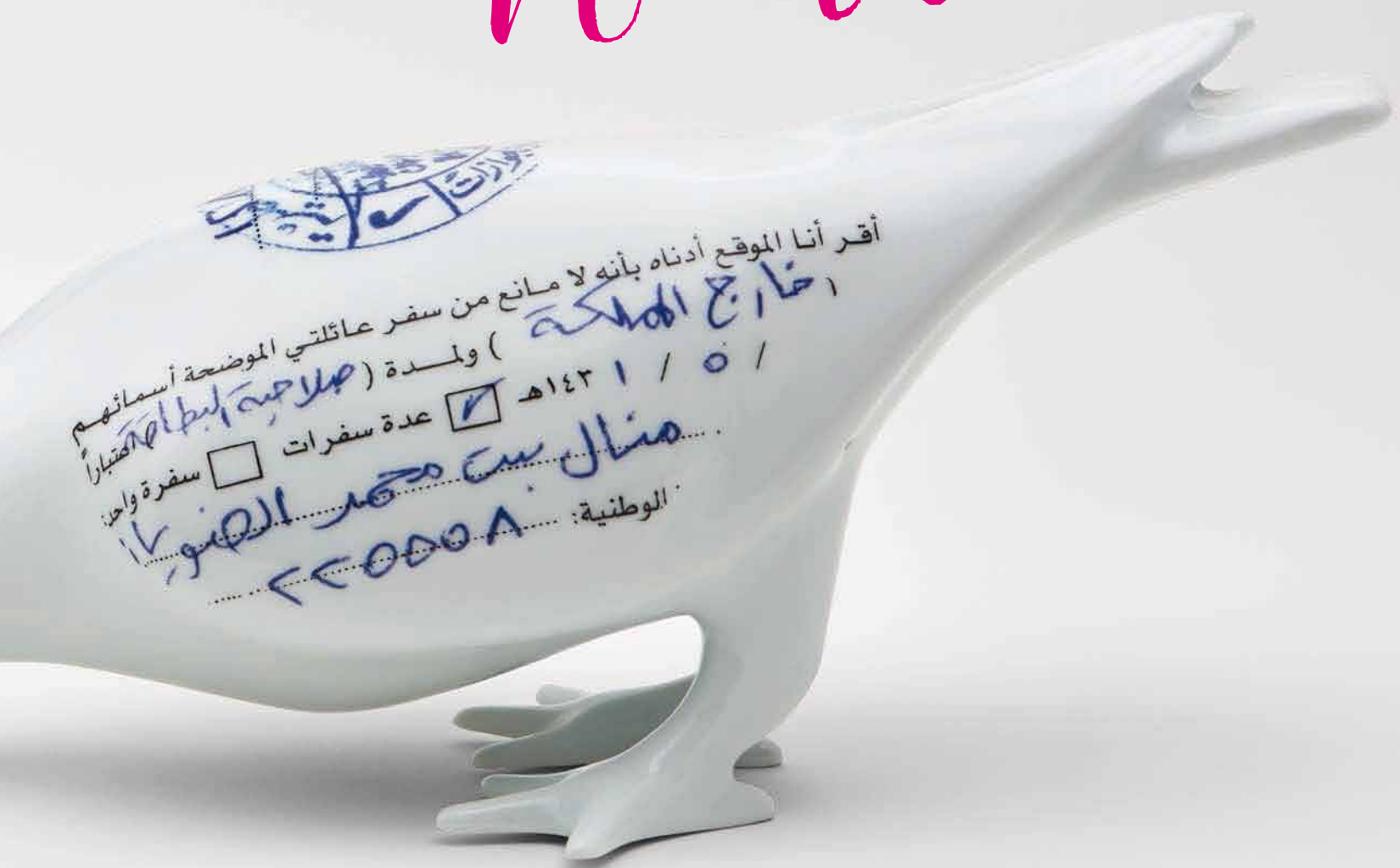
en build too many walls and not enough bridges." These words by the physicist Sir Isaac Newton were the inspiration behind a recent exhibition of Iranian and Arab art at Kunst (Zeug) Haus in Rapperswil near Zurich this summer. The Swiss show was one of a dozen important exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art on view in museums across Europe and North America this year, marking a crumbling of walls all across the art world.

From Porto to Paris, from London to Los Angeles, museums are collecting and exhibiting modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art. Never before has this art been in such focus at an institutional level. Increasingly, the cartography of Western museums is expanding to encompass a more global art history.

Traditionally, art of the region has been relegated to the Islamic arts departments, while museums' modern art departments remained oriented towards the West. In the 1960s Alfred H. Barr Jr., the influential first director of New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), acquired several works of Middle Eastern art. But they weren't included in the hanging of the museum's permanent collection, which helped shape the canon on modern art. For decades, this art remained in storage. I call it a 'closeted modernism': the art remained marginalized, only passively acknowledged as part of a larger modern art movement.



The Writing on the Wall



Today, Middle Eastern art is regularly integrated into MoMA's curatorial programme. For example, as part of the exhibition 'Scenes for a New Heritage: Contemporary Art from the Collection' (until 10 April 2016), photographs by Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué are on display. The blurred colour photographs are ethereal portraits that question the role images, instantly spread by social media, play as sources of information during political crises.

MoMA's director, Glenn Lowry, trained as an Islamic art historian and, attuned to the art of the region, has helped initiate curatorial and research projects focused on the Middle East. MoMA's Project 101 often includes small but revelatory exhibitions by artists including Akram Zaatari and Slavs and Tatars. This summer MoMA's PS1 showed Wael Shawky's *Cabaret Crusades* (2010–15), an epic video trilogy accompanied by a series of esoteric puppets displayed in vitrines, thereby complicating standard Western narratives of the Crusades.

Currently on display at MoMA (until 31 January) is the first US museum survey

of Walid Raad, a leading Lebanese artist. Though Raad has lived for three decades in the US, his art is more often exhibited in Europe. The opportunity to see an artist's work in a comprehensive manner gives "a sense of how certain gestures, forms and concepts fundamentally shape their practice," says Raad himself.

"Walid Raad is among the most important artists working today," Lowry asserts. "His practice challenges conventional notions of history and the way in which ideas are framed, constructed and disseminated." This retrospective at MoMA, Lowry adds, "reflects a belief that it is time for American audiences to see the full range of his work and our ongoing interest in the region".

The growing integration of Middle Eastern art in MoMA's curatorial programmes is reflected more broadly in American and European museums. How did this shift come about? An important impetus came from the classroom as a few university professors expanded the curriculum to include courses on modern and contemporary art of the Middle East. Books and scholarly articles followed, often spurring related curatorial projects.

In 1997 Catherine David curated Documenta X, presenting a complex visual narrative of the 'age of globalization'. David followed this with a long-term project, *Contemporary Arab Representations*, that included a series of exhibitions from Berlin to Venice. Nada Shabout's groundbreaking book *Modern Arab Art* appeared in 2007, and he has curated a series of exhibitions from Texas to Doha.



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PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHOTO BY MIGUEL VETERANO, CAPITAL D STUDIO
© BARJEEL ART FOUNDATION, COURTESY AGA KHAN MUSEUM.

FOR DECADES, THIS ART REMAINED IN STORAGE. I CALL IT A 'CLOSETED MODERNISM': THE ART REMAINED MARGINALIZED.



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Previous spread: *Suspended Together* – (Standing Dove, Eating Dove) (2012) by Manal al-Dowayan.

Reviewing a 2002 exhibition of Iranian art at NYU's Grey Gallery, art critic Holland Cotter wrote in the *New York Times*: "Until just a few years ago, 'modern art' and 'contemporary art' meant 'Western art', at least in this part of the world." Cotter posited "globe-trotting biennials" and the internet as helping to bring about a change of perspective.

The mapping of the art world has become more complex. Commerce and politics created new networks of global flows that found expression in the arts. The internet provided new platforms for artistic exchange. Galleries, biennials and art fairs became more inclusive, often spotlighting non-Western art. Shoring themselves up against the vicissitudes of the Western art market, auction houses began to invest in emerging art markets such as the Middle East. By 2008 Christie's and Sotheby's were holding regular auctions in Dubai and Doha. In response to turmoil in the region, more artists emigrated, working in studios in Paris, New York and London, where they became better known to curators and art writers. This diaspora also included important collectors who have taken an active role in supporting museums as they extend the geographic scope of their collections.

Even as they work to further integrate this art into their collections, museums take different approaches to nomenclature. In 2003 the Metropolitan Museum of Art closed its Islamic Art Galleries and undertook a long-term renovation. The refurbished galleries were opened in 2011 with a new name – the Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia. Some museums such as London's Tate Modern have created curatorial positions in Middle Eastern art. Other museums collect contemporary art as part of their Islamic departments, a

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proclivity that some scholars and artists wrestle with given the term traditionally used for art of an earlier period doesn't seem well suited to describe the contemporary. Some museums work within a national scope, presenting shows of Arab or Iranian art. Still other museums focus on collecting particular artists, eschewing broader categorizations. Questions of terminology and categorization remain in flux as interest in this region grows.

These developments in the West coincided with a growing

1. *The Fall of a Hair: Blow Ups* (detail) (2012) by Rabih Mroué. 2. Mathaf in Doha, Qatar. 3. The Heydar Aliyev Centre, Baku. 4. A render of the Louvre museum to be built on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi. 5. A still from *Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo* (2012) by Wael Shawky. 6. Marionette from *Cabaret Crusades: The Secrets of Karbalaa* (2012) by Wael Shawky. 7 & 8. Istanbul Museum of Modern Art.
9. *Witness from Baghdad 3* (2008) by Halim Al Karim on display at Kunst (Zeug) Haus, Rapperswil, Switzerland.
10. *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (English version) (2001) by Walid Raad at MoMA, New York.

investment in cultural infrastructure in the region itself. Istanbul Modern, a beautiful glass-and-concrete museum on the shores of the Bosphorus, was inaugurated in 2004. Doha's Mathaf, dedicated to modern Arab art, opened in 2010. In the UAE, major museums including the Louvre and the Guggenheim are building local branches. Further north, Baku established a gleaming Zaha Hadid-designed museum, the Heydar Aliyev Centre, which features an international curatorial programme.

Iwona Blazwick, director of London's Whitechapel Gallery, thinks that Western curatorial interest is fuelled in part by local cultural dynamics: "Within the region important cultural festivals, ranging from the legendary Shiraz/Persepolis festival in the 1970s to today's influential contemporary projects such as the Sharjah Biennial, or journals such as *Bidoun*, raise awareness of local practitioners and debates."

Blazwick herself has taken a keen interest in Middle Eastern art, travelling to Beirut, Cairo, Tehran and Dubai. There are no less than three exhibitions of Iranian and Arab art on Whitechapel's schedule for 2015 to 2016. Curator Omar Kholeif has organized the UK's first solo exhibition of Palestinian artist Emily Jacir (until 3 January). The show includes *Material for a film* (2004–), a large-scale, immersive installation that won the Golden Lion at the 2007 Venice Biennale. Whitechapel is also mounting a collections display, featuring works by Arab artists from the Sharjah-based Barjeel Art Foundation (until 6 December).

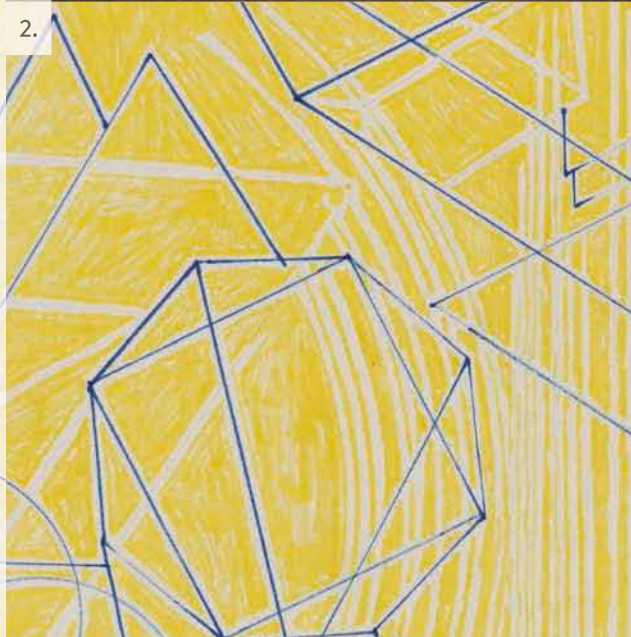
Whitechapel is particularly attentive to archival displays. It has just shown a brilliant assemblage of posters, photographs and documents relating to the Shiraz Festival of Arts, an annual celebration of performance art held in Iran from 1967 to 1977. Its curator, Vali Mahlouji, specializes in deeply researched exhibitions that fill gaps in the history of non-Western art. The recent flurry of Middle Eastern art shows in Western museums, according to Mahlouji, "reflects the new world of cross-pollination, dialogue and interchange".

This cross-pollination is traced in a current major exhibition, 'The World Goes Pop' at Tate Modern (until 24 January). Pop art emerged within and against the ebullient post-war consumerism of the West. But it resonated globally, finding local expression in the Middle East as well, such as in the bright assembled sculptures of Parviz Tanavoli, featured in the show. "Parviz has a fantastic Pop sensibility that comes from mixing together what he encountered in the American art scene with everyday objects and vibrant colours he discovers in Tehran's bazaars," explains Maryam Eisler, who serves on Tate's Middle East and North Africa Acquisitions Committee.

Elsewhere in London, the British Museum has been steadily incorporating Middle Eastern art into its permanent collection over the past decade, focusing primarily on works on paper. This autumn, curator Venetia Porter organized a show of modern Arab art in which she highlighted some real gems including books by Lebanese modernist pioneer Shafiq Abboud and the innovative Iraqi artist Sadik Kwaish Alfraji.



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With the vicissitudes of conflict in the region, London has become home to many Middle Eastern artists. Mona Hatoum was on vacation in the city when the Lebanese Civil War broke out. She stayed in Britain, studied at the Slade School of Fine Art and was shortlisted for the Turner Prize. In 1994 she had a small exhibition of her work at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Some two decades later, in the summer of 2015, the Pompidou mounted a major retrospective featuring 110 of her works.

Hatoum, in a breathtaking intervention, created a large-scale map of the world by placing glass marbles on the concrete floors of the museum. Massive windows with views of the Paris cityscape form a backdrop to the chimeric work that shifts ever so slightly as viewers walk past. The work is a masterpiece of contemporary art and encapsulates Hatoum's piercing ability to convey the contradictions and fragilities that globalization entails. She does so with a sense of irony and an insistence on extending our aesthetic sensibilities. In 2016 Hatoum's retrospective travels to Tate Modern (4 May – 21 August) and eventually on to Helsinki's Kiasma.

In Porto, Moroccan artist Yto Barrada undertook a different kind of intervention. Suzanne Cotter, director of the Serralves Museum, invited Barrada to inaugurate a programme in which artists present their work in the museum's art deco

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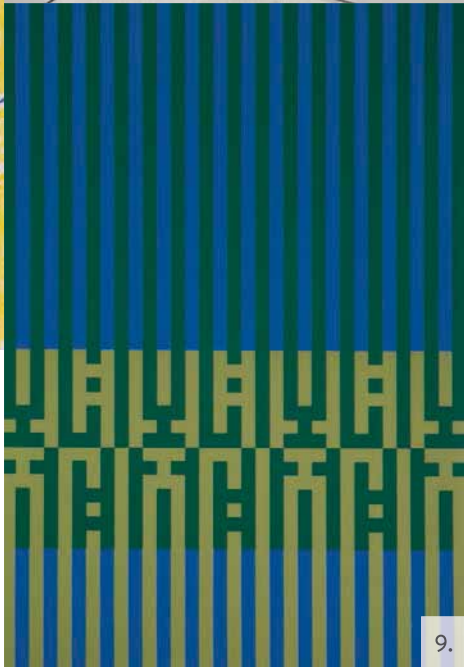
1. *Map* (2015) by Mona Hatoum at the Centre Pompidou, Paris. 2. *Study for the Yale Chemistry Building mural* by Nabil Nahas on display at the British Museum, London. 3. Parviz Tanavoli in front of his sculpture *The Wall (Oh Persepolis)* (1975). 4. Mona Hatoum. 5. *The Poet and the Beloved of the King* (1964–66) by Parviz Tanavoli on display at Tate Modern, London. Works by Middle Eastern artists shown at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, with (6) a poster for Festival of Arts at Shiraz/Persepolis in 1973; (8) *Material for a film* (2004) by Emily Jacir; (9) *‘La Ana Illa Ana’ (There Is No ‘I’ But ‘I’)* (1983) by Kamal Boullata; and (10) a photograph of a performance of *Mantra* by Karlheinz Stockhausen at Stockhausen Panorama, Saray-e Moshir, in 1972. 7. Installation shot of Yto Barrada’s exhibition ‘Salon Marocain’, at the Fundação De Serralves, Porto, Portugal. 11. Installation shot of *Cyprus* (2015) by Rayyane Tabet at the Sharjah Biennial, 2015.



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“THE THEMES THESE MIDDLE EASTERN ARTISTS PORTRAY, SUCH AS DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION, RESONATE WITH PEOPLE ALL OVER THE WORLD.”



villa. Barrada created a Salon Marocain adorned with her own colour photographs and crafted fossils made in the Atlas Mountains for a growing tourist market. The salon, which closed in September, was an artistic reflection on colonialism, modernism and dispossession. This follows on from a hugely popular Serralves exhibition of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian’s art in the autumn of 2014. Curated by Cotter, ‘Infinite Possibility’ juxtaposed Farmanfarmaian’s

iconic mosaic mirrored sculptures with her line drawings. The exhibition travelled to New York’s Guggenheim Museum in the spring of 2015, making Farmanfarmaian, at the age of 92, the first Iranian artist and one of the few female artists to have had a solo exhibition at the Guggenheim. It was an auspicious moment, with three concurrent monographic exhibitions of Iranian art in US museums. Parviz Tanavoli, considered the father of modern Iranian sculpture, received his first US museum show in nearly four decades. The 2015 edition of the regular February-to-June exhibition at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College featured 180 works spanning six decades of the artist’s career. A ‘Heech Garden’ formed the centrepiece, with over a dozen of Tanavoli’s sculptures in the form of the Persian word ‘heech’ or ‘nothingness’.

1. *Offered Eyes (Women of Allah)* (1993) by Shirin Neshat, included in the exhibition ‘Shirin Neshat: Facing History’ at the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington DC.
2. Monir Farmanfarmaian at the Guggenheim, New York.
3. Shirin Neshat.
4. The Aga Khan Museum in Toronto.
5. *Volleyball* (2013) by Khaled Jarrar.
6. *Handala* (2011) by Dia al-Azzawi.
7. The Iranian painter Farideh Lashai.
8. *Untitled #8* (2011) from the series ‘Lost in Wonderland’ by Amir Mousavi.
9. *Tehran 2006* (2006) by Mitra Tabrizian.

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At the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum last year, 'Shirin Neshat: Facing History' featured photographs, video installations, and studio materials. "I am so proud, as a woman artist, to be taking up so much space at the Hirshhorn," Neshat told viewers at the opening. In doing so, she became the first Middle Eastern artist – and one of only a few women – to have had a solo exhibition at the museum. "Shirin is one of the most important voices of that generation of image makers," says Melissa Ho, who co-curated the exhibition with Melissa Chiu. The show came on the heels of another major exhibition of Neshat's work, 'The Home of My Eyes', held at Baku's Yarat Contemporary Art Space earlier this year. Chiu, who recently took over as director of the Hirshhorn, says the exhibition was "just the beginning of building a programme and collection that tells a global art history".

This global turn is also reflected at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), where since 2006 curator Linda Komaroff has been extending the Islamic collection into the contemporary period. Komaroff has organized two sequential exhibitions highlighting these acquisitions. The first, 'Islamic Art Now' is on view until 3 January. *Between the Motion/And the Act/Falls the Shadow* (2012) is a two-channel video projection by Iranian artist

Farideh Lashai. Clips carefully selected from dozens of Iranian films made before the revolution reflect a common thread in popular cinema, where innocence is swept up in the nightlife of southern Tehran's seamy cabarets. LACMA's next exhibition of contemporary Islamic art opens in January 2016 and will feature Faig Ahmed, a leading artist from Azerbaijan.

Recently, I spoke to Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi in Toronto, where he attended an opening at the Aga Khan Museum. 'Home Ground' (until 3 January) is an exhibition of works from al-Qassemi's collection housed at the Barjeel Art Foundation, which has played a key role in raising awareness of contemporary Middle Eastern art. "The themes these Middle Eastern artists portray, such as displacement and migration, resonate with people all over the world," he says of the growing interest in art of the region being shown by Western museums.

The current wave of museum exhibitions dedicated to Middle Eastern art is a measure of how much the boundaries of the art world have expanded in recent decades. A communal effort by artists, scholars, curators, gallerists and patrons has sustained this move towards a more global art history. No longer 'closeted', Middle Eastern art is now firmly in the spotlight and looks set to remain that way. ❧



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