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PROJECT

Political Art by Middle Eastern Artists in Berlin

During my fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I intend to investigate political art created by Middle Eastern artists who moved to Berlin over the course of the past decade. Following the 2011 uprisings in a number of countries across the Middle Eastern region, as well as ensuing political and economic instability, several contemporary artists from places including Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey have relocated to Berlin, setting up their studios and resuming their creative practices. This includes figures like Fadi Al Hamwi, Tammam Azzam, Khaled Barakeh, Mohamad Said Baalbaki, and others I have yet to discover. Many, such as Ghassan Hammash, Yara Mekawei, and Raed Jazbeh, have also begun to set up organizations, create collectives and cultural hubs, and enrol in educational and fellowship programs in Berlin's institutions. It is my intention to expand my investigation to the city's wider cultural scene and examine its support for migrant practitioners and how the position of regional artists has transformed from individuals working in isolation to the creation of networks, communities, and initiatives, gradually turning Berlin into a centre and a sought-after destination for young Arab and Turkish painters, musicians, filmmakers, actors, and writers. This line of research will also allow me to truly immerse myself in the city's cultural landscape and get to know Berlin from an angle that has so far received little attention from scholarly endeavours.

Recommended Reading

Al Qassemi, Sultan Sooud. "The Politics of Egyptian Fine Art: Giving a Voice to the People." In *Arab Politics Beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism*, edited by Thanassis Cambanis and Michael Wahid Hanna, 240–268. New York: Century Foundation Press, 2017.

–. "Toward Abstraction: The Case of Kuwait in the 1960s." In *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s*, edited by Suheyla Takesh and Lynn Gumpert, 107–115. Munich: Hirmer, 2020.

Al Qassemi, Sultan Sooud, and Todd Reisz, eds. *Building Sharjah*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2021.

A Journey Through Modern Political Art in the Middle East

Throughout major socio-political shifts that the Middle East experienced in the twentieth century, cultural production remained in constant ebb and flow—reflecting current events, as well as exploring possibilities for a collective future. Artistic production accompanied the rise of independence movements, anti-colonial efforts, the emancipation of women, and various aspects of conflict within the region and on the global stage. Whether it was under the Baathist regimes of Syria and Iraq or under Egypt's pan-Arabism championed by Gamal Abdel Nasser, painting, sculpture, posters, and public monuments, as well as music, film, and literature have been employed by various governments as a tool of soft power to propagate policies to the public not only in their respective states, but throughout the region and beyond. Oftentimes, opposing sides would resort to art and culture as a method of disseminating ideas and goals, to rally both the masses and the elites towards a common ideological trajectory. Art as an instrument allowed a common set of symbols and cultural affiliations to be formulated and introduced to communities in which, for decades or even centuries, little unity existed.

As radio and mass media came to the fore in the mid-twentieth century, cultural production intensified in the region, benefitting from easier means of dissemination and a potential to reach wider networks. This development coincided with the formation of numerous nation states throughout Asia and Africa, many claiming their independence from retreating colonial powers. While the semblance of cultural/ethnic cohesion that was foregrounded in many emancipatory movements was perhaps exaggerated to various degrees, it nevertheless aided in the projects of liberation and was reflected in numerous artworks. Common themes at this time included Pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism, solidarity with Palestinians and Algerians, anti-colonialism, and at a later stage, a turn towards depictions of Islam. Artists also began to depict scientific headway made in the twentieth century, ranging from space exploration to discoveries in the field of nuclear physics and the building of the High Aswan Dam. Women's movements, too, were making strides in many Arab states at this time. As women began occupying leadership roles in social, political, and scientific spheres—after centuries of having their potential denied—their contributions to the artistic field were also becoming more recognized and grew in magnitude and scale. Other cultural phenomena that emerged in the mid-century included several schools of thought that transcended national borders, and sometimes even language barriers, manifesting in practices like Hurufiyya (or Lettrism), as well as the development of abstraction based on Islamic geometric motifs.

Oftentimes, the Middle East and its artistic production are associated with conflict, political tensions, and even the breakdown of nation states. Following the outbreak of a brutal war between Iran and Iraq in 1980, for instance, not only were the military machines of both countries mobilised, but so was their cultural production, to muster citizens behind the objectives of their respective regimes. However, does art also offer the possibility to present citizens, both within individual states and throughout the region, with the potential for forming a common identity that would transcend ethnic, linguistic, and religious divisions?

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Al-Qassemi, Sultan Sooud (London, 2022)

Urban modernity in the contemporary Gulf : obsolescence and opportunities

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1754909698>

Al-Qassemi, Sultan Sooud (Basel, 2021)

Building Sharjah

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1738494535>