

7 Extraordinary Arab Female Modernists, Curated By Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, Founder of Barjeel Art Foundation

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September 28, 2022

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A staunch champion of Arab women artists, Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, founder of Barjeel Art Foundation, curates for Vogue Arabia the modernists who have left an indelible mark on the region and the world.



Leila Nseir at work in her studio

A few months ago, Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi received a WhatsApp message that began with the question: “You’re that guy who likes women artists, right?” The sender was a Cairo-based gallerist with a rare painting by the late Palestinian painter Jumana El Husseini. The stunning piece – a dream-like portrayal of horses encircling a woman with henna on her hands that was sent to the Alexandria Biennale in the late 1960s – is now on display in the Barjeel Art Foundation, which Al-Qassemi founded in Sharjah in 2010. While this acquisition story may sound out of the ordinary, it happens more often than one might expect. “Sometimes, when you gain a reputation for something, things come to you,” says Al-Qassemi, who has used everything from social media to word-of-mouth exchanges to track down the work of the region’s lesser-known modern and contemporary artists. “I’ve become some kind of magnet; people send me all sorts of stuff and it’s so exciting. My WhatsApp is like a stream of artworks.”

It’s Al-Qassemi’s focus on championing female talent in particular that has allowed for him not only to display gender-balanced exhibitions within the walls of the Sharjah Art Museum, where Barjeel’s key acquisitions are on display, but to also advocate for more equal representation throughout the Gulf and beyond (a 2018 study of 820,000 exhibitions across the public and commercial sectors found that only one third featured female artists). Three hundred of the foundation’s 2,050 works are currently on loan internationally, with even more information and imagery accessible through its digital archive and partnership with the Google Arts & Culture online platform. Earlier this year, Al-Qassemi was invited by Her Excellency Hend Al Otaiba, ambassador of the UAE to France, to speak in Paris about modern art in the Arab world at the “Majlon” she co-hosted with His Excellency Salem Al Qassimi, the UAE’s permanent delegate to Unesco. In keeping with his *modus operandi*, Al-Qassemi used the opportunity to share an edit of female modernist artworks that haven’t received the same global recognition as, for example, the work of Lebanon’s Etel Adnan and Saloua Raouda Choucair.

“Yes, there are these incredible artists that we know, but there are many others that we don’t know about,” he explains, attributing this lack of representation to the historic exclusion of women from fine arts schools and scholarship programs dating back to the early 20th century. By shining a light on those who managed to leave their mark on regional modernism despite these disadvantages, Al-Qassemi hopes to shift perceptions of the movement within the Arab world, and maybe even perceptions that Arabs have of themselves. Female creatives have expanded the canon of art through etchings, ceramics, tapestries, and other techniques, while also inviting viewers to experience spaces that men haven’t been able to capture themselves, such as the El Husseini painting of a henna ritual, activist Inji Efflatoun’s depiction of the inside of a women’s jail in Egypt, or feminist artist Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq’s visual retelling of a female-only exorcism ceremony in Sudan.

Ahead, *Vogue Arabia* brings the mission of the Barjeel Art Foundation on paper by taking a look at some of the extraordinary female artists within the collection.

Leila Nseir, Syria



A Leila Nseir painting

Leila Nseir is a prominent painter of her generation who was born in 1941 in Latakia, Syria and studied at Egypt's Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo in the 1960s. She is known for her portrayal of female subjects in her work, which delves more broadly into issues of war, martyrdom, and the experience of the working class across a variety of media and techniques. By centering women in many of these visual narratives, Nseir challenges cultural norms in the art world that have long favored the depiction of men in positions of power and strength. While her paintings have traces of realism, expressionism, surrealism, and abstraction, what Al-Qassem most admires about the artist is that "her style is really her own." He adds, "She was influenced by her teachers but she didn't replicate their work." Al-Qassem also points out that Nseir looked beyond her immediate surroundings, and even her region, to find inspiration for her work, which included depictions of the Vietnam War and of the civil rights movement in the US.

Fatma Arargi, Egypt



Fatma Arargi

Born in Cairo, Egypt in 1931, Fatma Arargi was among a collective of artists whose early subject matter drew from her country's rich heritage to inform a more modern portrayal of the ordinary people she observed around her. After graduating from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1951, Arargi was influenced by the political and social changes that swept the nation as a result of the Egyptian revolution the following year. Over the next decade, she continued to use her art as a way of reacting to her surroundings.



Fatma Arargi's Three
Fishermen oil on wood, 1964

Her 1967- 68 work titled *Martyr*, which was acquired by the Barjeel Art Foundation and depicts a funeral procession, is a somber and emotive piece evoking the national sentiment of despair amidst the disastrous Six-Day War that erupted between Egypt and Israel. "There are so many works that are quite sad... but this is the reality of the region. It's a sad region, there are so many sad things that happened, so many conflicts," Al-Qassemi explains. Arargi's style did shift in the 1970s and 1980s as she sought to explore and depict more abstract ideas. In 1981, she became the head of the painting department at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Alexandria, where she resided until her passing in 2022.

Madiha Umar, Iraq



Iraqi artist and calligrapher Madiha Umar pictured in Egypt in the 1950s

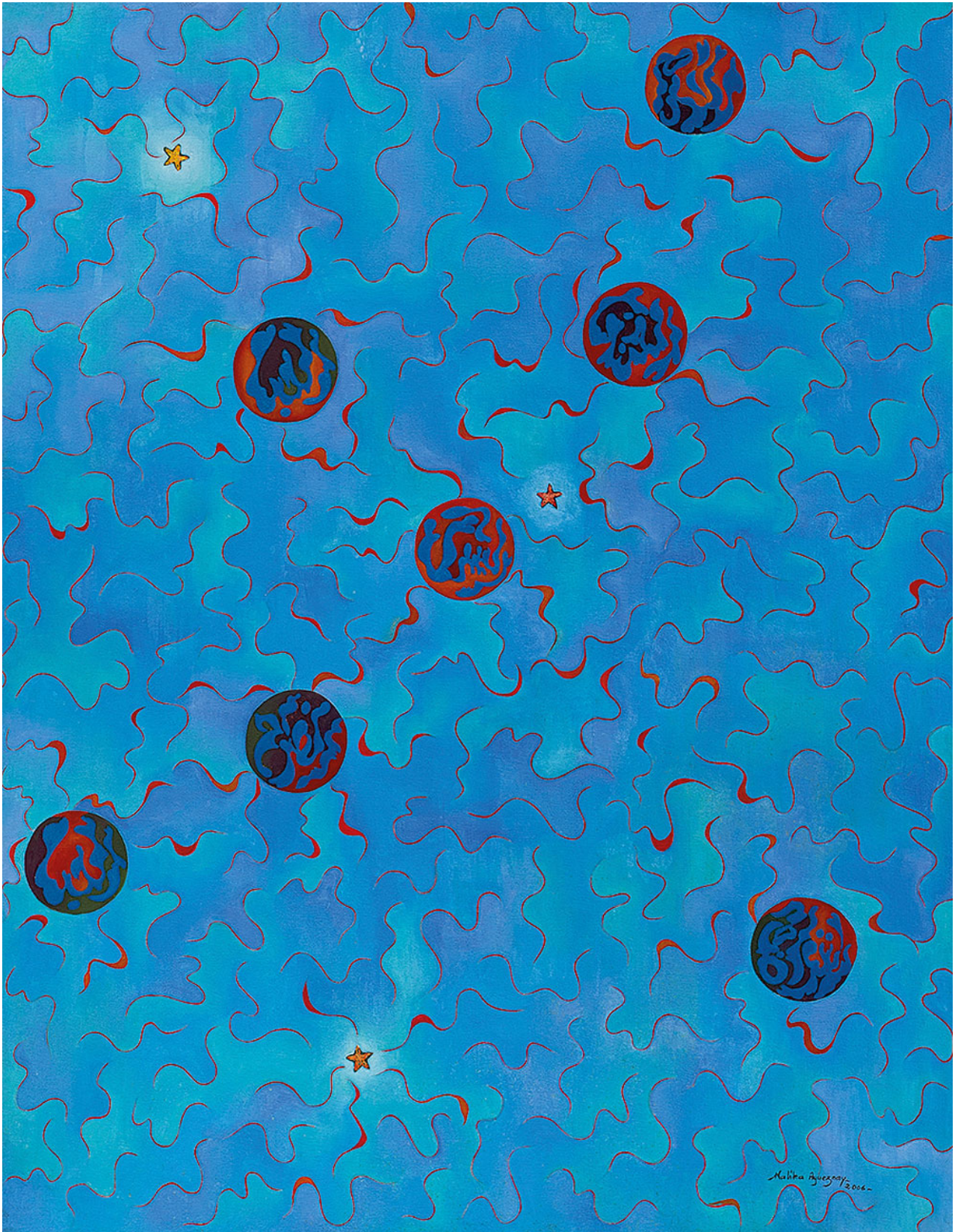
Madiha Umar was born in Aleppo in 1908 but moved to Iraq as a young girl. In 1933, she became the first female student to receive a scholarship from the Iraqi government to study in Europe. Umar became a painter and educator before receiving her masters from the Corcoran School of Art in Washington DC while studying art education at George Washington University and researching Arabic calligraphy. Umar is best known for incorporating decorative lettering into abstract art and is considered a pioneer of the Hurufiyya movement, also referred to as the letterism movement. “This movement tried to liberate the letter from the word [because] in Arabic, when people look at a word, they try to read it but they don’t admire it for the beauty of the calligraphy,” Al-Qassemi says. He considers Umar’s 1961 oil painting *The Eyes of Night* – a dynamic piece that extracts the form of different Arabic letters and puts them in visual conversation with shapes derived from parts of the eye – to be one of the top 10 artworks in the Barjeel Art Foundation’s collection. Umar passed away in Amman in 2005.

Malika Agueznay, Morocco



Malika Agueznay

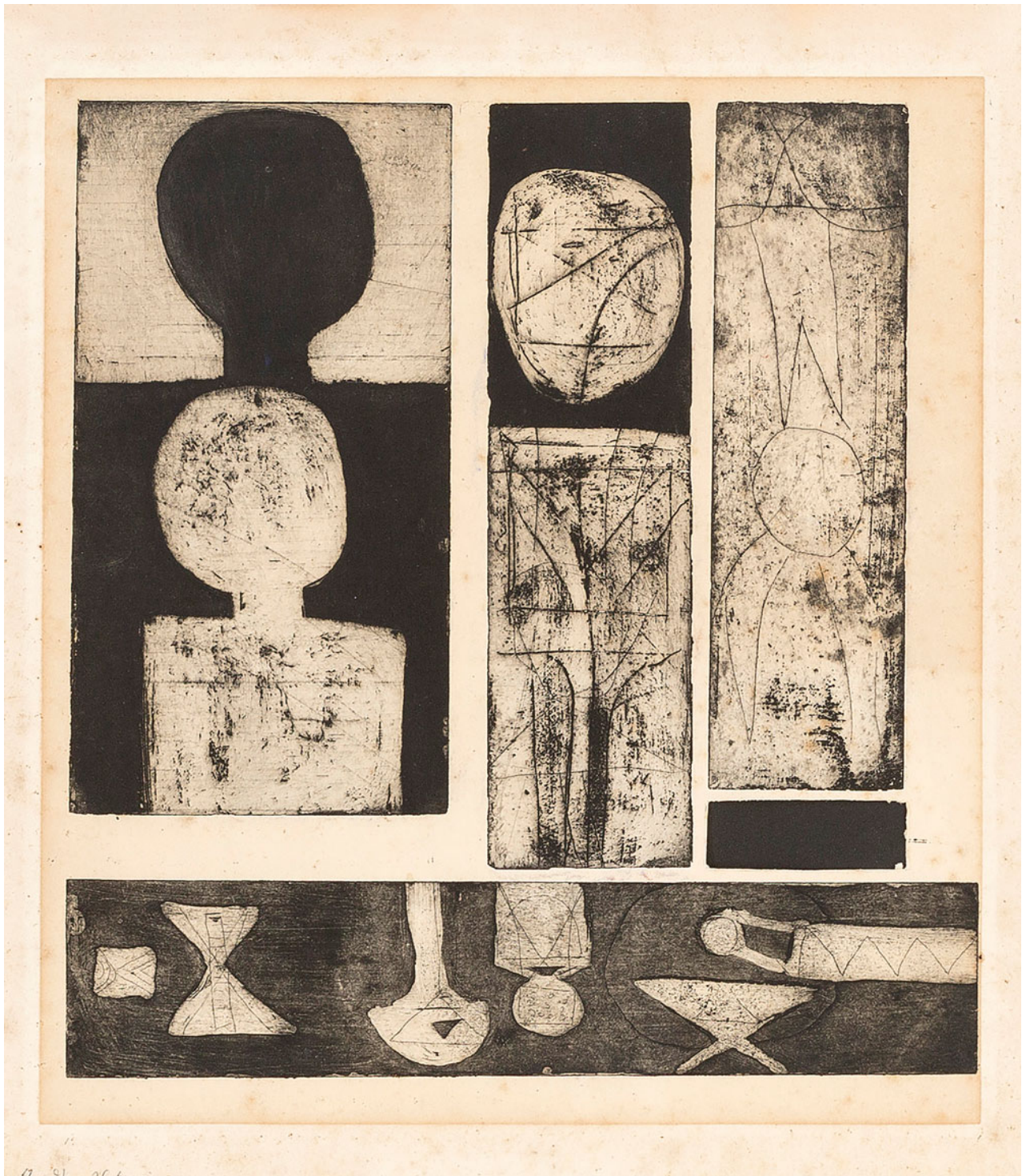
A key figure in bringing forward Morocco's modernism movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Malika Agueznay is a celebrated contemporary artist and researcher who employs a variety of media including acrylic paint, wood, metal, engraving, and printmaking. She was born in Marrakech in 1938 and graduated from the School of Fine Arts in Casablanca in 1970. There, she studied under faculty members who spearheaded the transformative modern art movement named for the institution, which questioned painting techniques and encouraged the study of lines, geometry, and pure color.



Agueznay's constellation painting

Agueznay's style is reminiscent of her Moroccan identity and environment, featuring a distinctive palette that matches the bold and warm colors of her childhood neighborhood as well as shapes borrowed from arabesque motifs, flowers, and seaweed. This vision is evident in Agueznay's 1968 mixed-media piece *Blue Algae*, which was acquired by the Barjeel Art Foundation and is currently on loan in the US. "It's part of a series of works in which she's inspired both by Arabic calligraphy and the Mediterranean and the Atlantic that she grew up by, and bringing together all of these different influences and the Casablanca School into a style of her art that is her own," Al-Qassemi explains. Agueznay currently lives and works in Casablanca.

Munira Al-Kazi, Kuwait



A Munira Al-Kazi piece from 1962

Munira Al-Kazi's abstract paintings and prints have been integral to the representation of female artists from the Arab Gulf states on a global scale, having been collected by some of the most renowned institutions in the world including the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and MoMA in New York. She was born in Pune, India, in 1939 and is of Saudi-Kuwaiti descent. After studying at the Central School of Art and Design in London, the oil painter evolved her style by incorporating printmaking techniques and honing the use of geometric motifs that characterizes her recognizable aesthetic. After graduating in 1961, Al-Kazi held exhibitions of her paintings and etchings in Europe and the Middle East and, in 1969, had her work displayed at the inaugural exhibition of Sultan Gallery in Kuwait. Put simply, "she's a boss," Al-Qassemi says, highlighting the fact that Al-Kazi was the first

Kuwaiti woman to have an exhibition in Kuwait. Since moving her art studio to Ibiza, Al-Kazi has continued to develop and innovate her practice, most recently by embracing digital media.

Safia Farhat, Tunisia



UNFT, a photo showing Safia Farhat during a meeting of Unft (Union national des femmes Tunisiennes or The National Union of Tunisian Women) in 1960

Safia Farhat's Arab roots had a profound impact on her relationship with visual art and politics as she grew up between France and Tunisia. She was born in Tunis in 1924 and became the only woman to take part in the École de Tunis movement in 1949, which saw artists reclaiming their practice and cultural heritage from colonial influence. Farhat established a colorful and abstract style that celebrates her North African and Arab identity through the depiction of local animals, plants, attire, and customs.



The Safia Farhat Museum

In 1956, she founded Tunisia's first magazine addressed specifically to women and was later appointed the republican era's first director of the Tunis Institute of Fine Arts, a role that allowed her to use art as a form of education. "She encouraged artists to look beyond painting and sculpture and into crafts," Al-Qassemi says. Farhat led by example, experimenting with ceramics, stained glass, and decorative tapestries before passing away in her home city of Tunis in 2004.

Safeya Binzagr, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia



Safeya Binzagr

Saudi Arabian artist Safeya Binzagr was born in Jeddah in 1940 and educated at the Saint Martins School of Art in London, where she received a degree in drawing and graphics. She incorporates an array of colors in her work across diverse media including oil, watercolor, drawing, etchings, and pastels. A revered risktaker, Binzagr pioneered her country's fine art movement after holding the first-ever female art exhibit at a girls' school in 1968. Binzagr also became the first Saudi artist to have exhibits in Paris, Geneva, and London, showcasing work that illustrated the richness of life and society in her country.



Al Zabun (1969) oil on board

Her well-researched pieces challenged Western perceptions of the Arab experience by offering a distinctive lens into the more intimate moments and customs among Saudi women. “She went and painted the henna ceremony that women would do before marriage, and there’s no way a man can enter that room and sit while women are preparing before the bridal ceremony,” Al-Qassemi says of her tremendous impact. “Women [like Binzagr] put a spotlight on events that men don’t have access to.”

Originally published in the September 2022 issue of Vogue Arabia