

# KhALEEJ modern

PIONEERS AND COLLECTIVES IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

NYUADARTGALLERY

This publication accompanies the exhibition *Khaleej Modern: Pioneers and Collectives in the Arabian Peninsula*, organized by The NYUAD Art Gallery.

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# INTRODUCTION

I must first acknowledge a debt to His Excellency Zaki Nusseibeh and Munira Al Sayegh, who have each encouraged the gallery, and me, on a path that has led to this exhibition. Both introduced me to Dr. Aisha Stoby long ago. My first occasion to dive into conversation with Aisha arrived in Spring of 2016. I was working on conducting an oral history of the conceptual, experimental art community in the UAE, for the exhibition and book that were to come out in 2017. I invited her to contribute an essay for the book, and so began a collaboration that ultimately became this exhibition.

My work with Aisha has been a deeply invigorating and rewarding challenge, as only something this ambitious can be. In a herculean effort of network-tracing, Aisha tracked down many of the works in this show, and initiated our loan negotiations. Our curatorial team was complete with Tala Nassar, who conducted the rigorous and astute research on the checklist, object histories, tracking, and confirmation of countless sources, in Arabic and English. What is on view here is only a fraction of the many leads we chased to bring this story together.

I learn much from every exhibition we mount at The Art Gallery. A most pressing lesson for this one is how crucial the role of lenders and archive-keepers: those whose mission it is to protect, preserve, and interpret art and culture for future generations. These collectors, estates, artists, governments, and peer institutions play the

single-most crucial role in making it possible for us, in turn, to present a rigorous, well-rounded history and visual narrative of our region. I offer my profound gratitude to all who have supported this exhibition, through their act of lending the artworks that you see here—57 artworks by 38 artists from 21 lenders. These many and precious contributors have made possible this beginning, this proposition for a mapping of the region's modern art, for the purposes of deeper and broader contextual understanding.

And finally, a note about the research: I'm keenly aware that this exhibition is a beginning, not an end, of this mapping—in itself a life's work. Aisha Stoby has courageously gathered a broad swath of narrative for her dissertation project, from which the exhibition texts began. I would like to extend deep gratitude to Aisha and our research and editorial team, all of whom worked tirelessly to develop this first publishing of the narrative, in exhibition form. Alaa Edris, Tala Nassar, and Metha Naser Alsaedi. Thanks also to our colleagues in the academy for their support and invaluable knowledge: Nelida Fuccaro, Salwa Mikdadi, Khaled Abdul Mughni. We look forward to discovering more stories for this mapping, in the time ahead.

**Maya Allison**

*Executive Director, The NYUAD Art Gallery  
Chief Curator, NYU Abu Dhabi*

# CURATOR'S INTRODUCTION

My research leading to *Khaleej Modern* grew out of an interest in the modern art histories of both my own country, Oman, and neighboring countries in the Arabian Peninsula. I have long found myself in a community of frustrated researchers faced with sparsity of scholarship, underrepresentation of the Arab world in modern art histories, and a further marginalization of the Gulf in regional art historical texts. Against this background, I set out to contribute to a more accurate and representative archive as well as scholarship, at first informally, and later on through doctoral studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London.<sup>1</sup>

The works brought together for this exhibition form, for the first time, a proposed mapping of the art movements that flourished during a transformative period of regional modernization starting as early as the 1940s. Ultimately, *Khaleej Modern* begins a conversation on modernism and visual modernity in the Gulf. It points to the volume of artwork and archival material in our diverse and abundant region that is yet to be brought to a more global audience.



On the occasion of Mojib Al Dosari's 1943 exhibition at Al Mubarakiya School in Kuwait, educator Rashid Al-Saif wrote a poem and recited it at the opening. In this poem, Al-Saif refers to the immense pressure of establishing

new status-quo, and the vulnerability of how it must feel to be a "pioneer."

The artists referred to in *Khaleej Modern* as "pioneers" offered me key entry points to these histories. Revered throughout the Gulf, many of these pivotal figures, included in this exhibition, have transcended the role of artist to that of mentor, curator, teacher, gallerist, and founder. As they developed their practices, they also helped establish local creative infrastructures. One of these pioneers, Hassan Sharif, described this process of establishing such infrastructure and spaces for creative practice: "I didn't only make art, but I made my audiences too," he said. "I had to contextualize what I was doing."<sup>2</sup> Many artists across the Gulf worked in this manner, laying the groundwork for the current cultural boom in the Gulf and the well-deserved recognition many of them receive today.

Often, but not always, these pioneers established core groups that served as their anchor. They worked alongside each other and benefitted from constant interaction and exchange of ideas. These small communities of artists developed a distinct style and identity that served dual creative purposes: as a group, they could both create a space for the sharing and exchange of artistic practices, and establish new societal norms around art. Some of these groups were informal clusters, while others were collectives in the traditional sense of having titles and manifestos. Collectivization and artistic production have long been

inter-related, in western communities such as the Futurists and Dadaists, or in politically organized movements such as the Mexican Muralists and the Russian Socialist Realists. Indeed, the tendency toward collectivism and communal artistic production had emerged as a recognized phenomenon throughout periods of modernism across the globe.<sup>3</sup> However, such developments in the context of the Gulf region have their own dynamic and expression.

The title “Khaleej Modern” describes the point of transition, from the rich pre-existing material culture and oral tradition that was prevalent in the region, to an increasingly global concept of modernism in the visual arts. This transition parallels the period of transformation brought about by rapid development and state-building in the context of decolonization. The term “Khaleej” (“Gulf” in Arabic) has been used colloquially to delineate the geographic region comprising Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, to distinguish it from the Persian side of the Gulf, which has been a geography of contestation. “Khaleej” is a vernacular term for the region that is also known as the Gulf States, the Arab Gulf, the Gulf region, or by the name of the organization to which the countries collectively belong, the GCC.<sup>4</sup>

The word “Modern,” however, activates many intersecting discourses around modernity. It has complex meaning, both for global history (as in “modernity”), and for artistic movements (as in “Modernism”). My use of the term

“modern” speaks to both meanings. It is rooted in the work of scholars who have challenged the presumed centers of modernity as originating from the Global North. They have argued for a modernist pluralism that seeks ways to reconfigure the idea of the modern altogether, from a post- (or post-post-) colonial perspective. They have acknowledged the intersectionality as well as plurality of modernisms, and suggest that regional groupings of art histories with a European-centered canon are fundamentally misconceived.

For these scholars working within the field that has come to be known as “transmodernism,”<sup>5</sup> modernization is not simply the relationship between modernity and tradition, but rather, as Geeta Kapur has astutely described its occurrence in India, “a real if incomplete historical process.”<sup>6</sup> That incompleteness allows for the reality of continuity versus the fractures that have been experienced, depending on the ways the idea of progress has been perceived.

The effects of the Gulf’s ongoing and accelerated modernization project have emerged throughout the work of Khaleeji artists. In art historical terms, Modernism has traditionally been defined as a succession of interrelated movements in the visual arts, literature, architecture, and music that developed in Europe and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This definition hinges on European and North American Modernist art canons that have already reached their peak and

whose end ushered in the post-modern or contemporary art movements.

The selection of artworks in *Khaleej Modern* reflects the many intersections that have given rise to what I would identify together as a nuanced hybrid concept of modernism in the Gulf, surveying a period when city-state plans were transforming capitals, catalyzing the infrastructural growth of local art movements.

Following in the footsteps of Geeta Kapur and others whose work helped to decolonize our understanding of Modernism, this exhibition reappropriates the term in reconsidering the recent history of a region that underwent rapid transformation and grappled with changing identities throughout the second half of the twentieth century. This exhibition also acknowledges the multiplicity of influences and philosophical trends present throughout the Arabian Peninsula today. These influences vary from an ideological and stylistic Pan-Arabist ethos, to an acknowledgment of local traditions and a range of influences from the European schools of Modernism.

*Khaleej Modern* represents artists from the GCC countries who practiced during the early twentieth century through to the early twenty-first century leading up to the extraordinary regional cultural boom we experience and benefit from today.<sup>7</sup>



The first section of the exhibition, entitled *Early Pioneers*, initiates a timeline that begins with Mohammed Ahmed Rasim (Saudi Arabia, 1911–1974) and Mojib Al Dosari (Kuwait, 1922–1956). These pioneers each participated in what could be argued to be the first modern art exhibitions in their respective countries. Al Dosari was in high school at the Al Mubarakiya School, where he participated in the school's first exhibition, in 1943, and possibly the first exhibition of its kind in the Gulf states. He then went abroad to study, and upon his return, played a formative role in early art culture in Kuwait. Rasim had also gone abroad, and when he returned, he showed his work at a cafe in Jeddah in the 1950s. This registered as an event that could mark the first public art exhibition in Saudi Arabia. These two artists have not been widely shown, and it is a privilege to bring them together in one space and draw attention to their early practices.

Each country has stories like these, and these are two among a group of other artists distinguished in the first room of the exhibition for their unique and ground-breaking roles in their art ecosystems.

The second section of the exhibition, *The Landscape*, examines landscape painting and plein-air practice. This section also makes reference to the influence of the Arabic letter through the emergence of Hurufiyya (Letterism),<sup>8</sup> with compositions inspired by the tones and elements of the landscape. This section particularly highlights the work

of two collectives: the group sometimes referred to as the Manama Group (Bahrain), and The Three Friends (Qatar, represented here by Yousef Ahmad). Both groups worked intensively in the genre of landscape painting during the periods in which they were active as groups. Their intention was to document the overwhelming transformations taking place in the landscape and the increasing urbanization around them. The artists in both of these groups went on to help found fine art societies in their countries and were pivotal figures in the growth of the local and regional art ecosystem.

In the section, titled *Self-Representation and Portraiture*, the exhibition traces the distinction between private and public space, as well as the tensions between tradition and modernity that marked the period of the mid-twentieth century onward. Rather than examining the physical landscape, these artists looked at the social landscape, prioritizing private space and the human figure. Also present in this room is evidence of socio-political events that influenced their artistic output, including the 1990 Iraq invasion of Kuwait that triggered the Gulf War and the ongoing sentiments of Pan-Arab solidarity. Alongside other pioneers from the Gulf states, two communities have been highlighted in this section, which are the active modern art centers of Jeddah and Riyadh, both in Saudi Arabia.

While artistic communities in Kuwait were the focus of the entry gallery's *Early Pioneers*, movements in Bahrain

and Qatar are highlighted in *The Landscape* section, and Saudi Arabia's art centers are displayed in the section on *Self-Representation and Portraiture*. The final section of the exhibition, *The Conceptual Turn*, focuses on collectives in the United Arab Emirates and Oman. In the UAE is a community of artists, not officially named, but often referred to as "The Five,"<sup>9</sup> and in Oman is a group of artists that exhibited together as "The Circle." The phrase "conceptual turn" was coined by art historian Salah M. Hassan in the context of his writings on modern Sudanese art movements. It describes a period in the early to mid 1970s, when artists from the Global South moved toward critical theory and experimental practices in dialogue with global art world events. The artists in this section, likewise, have participated in this global conceptual turn.

Made at the turn of this century, the final artworks on view do not match traditional images of the style and period of "modern art." Yet here is where the proposition for the term "modern" in the *Khaleej Modern* resolves most clearly: like their predecessors, these artists evolved in the context of extreme urban growth and development, encouraged by the wealth of the oil-based economy—modernization. These conditions dramatically influenced the development of artistic perspectives in all of these sections and differed in substantial ways from the conditions of European canonical "Modernism." The artists in the *Early Pioneers*, and the artists in *The Conceptual Turn* both have undergone immense pressure in the course of developing new genres

of artmaking, but possibly more so in the course of creating a context in which art is being made, studied, and exhibited. In this last section, these two groups would ultimately normalize their experimental and new media practices, laying groundwork for the cultural boom that was beginning at the turn of the twenty-first century.

One crucial circumstance in which the state of the Khaleeji “modernist” moment differs from that in Europe is related to the embedded power dynamics within a global exchange of influences. That dynamic gave rise to what Partha Mitter refers to as the “Picasso Manqué syndrome,” a hierarchical phenomenon in which Picasso was lauded for his appropriation of African form, while the non-European avant-garde have been deemed “derivative” in their practices that responded in dialogue with art from the West. This is an example of the power dynamics that surround the transmission of ideas, from which Khaleeji artists did not escape. However, I hope this exhibition will make abundantly clear that any perception of Khaleeji modernism as “derivative” of the western modern bears serious reexamination. With an awareness that the multiplicity of traditions that these artists have operated within or have drawn from have enabled them to enter into dialogue with the global modern while contributing to its shaping, too.

Much more scholarship remains to be pursued, in particular research into early exhibition practices that occurred across these areas and a mapping that has become more

complicated by contested dates and sparsity of material. The urgency and timeliness of this research and further studies have been underscored by the loss of several elderly artists during the course of my research for my PhD dissertation. I was grateful to have had exchanges with Saudi Arabian artist Mounirah Mosly, Omani artist Ayoub Al Balushi, and Emirati artist Hassan Sharif. These experiences have intensified the urgency of my research that is compounded when one considers the dedicated efforts required to track down contacts in order to borrow the works in artist estates as well as private and public collections regionally and abroad. Even with this support, there is still further material that we were unable to display. Over the last two years, a dedicated team of colleagues at The NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery and other colleagues in the region have worked tirelessly through personal and official channels to make this exhibition a success.

Against this background, I must iterate that it has been an honor to speak with scholars, as well as the friends and family members of all the artists in this exhibition, and to tell their stories.

In the same vein, I am deeply grateful to all who have invested tremendous contributions and efforts to make *Khaleej Modern* possible, throughout the region and beyond. I am certain that this exhibition will be the first of many more that will explore this important topic. Joined together for the first time, the work on display and the research

it represents serve as a testimony to the abundance of material present within our Gulf countries, the beauty of our nuanced distinctions, and the undeniability of what binds us together. The artists in this exhibition have each made a far-reaching and lasting impact on their communities, lending an essential voice to art in the region that has become integral to the experience of life throughout the Gulf until today.

**Aisha Stoby, PhD**

## Notes

1. I would like to respectfully acknowledge esteemed scholar pioneers Shawkat Al Rubaie, Fakhriya Al-Yahyai, Abdulrahman Alsoliman, Professor Fareed Abdal, and Salwa Mikdadi. I also benefited tremendously from primary works by artists such as Kuwaiti artists Sami Mohammed and Khalifa Qattan, Bahraini artist Abdul Karim Al-Orayyed, Qatari artist Yousef Ahmad, Saudi Arabian artist Safeya Binzagr, Omani artist Hassan Meer, and Emirati artist Hassan Sharif, among others.
2. Anna Seaman, "Images by Hassan Sharif tackles the image overload we are constantly subjected to," *The National*, May 4, 2015, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts/images-by-hassan-sharif-tackles-the-image-overload-we-are-constantly-subjected-to-1.12334>.
3. Studies include Reiko Tomii's research on artist collectives in post-war Japan reacting to community structures, Rachel Weiss's research on artist collectives responding to challenging socio-political and production circumstances in socialist Cuba, and Okwui Enwezor's studies on the Congolese collective Le Groupe Amos employing public interventions responding to the material needs of African communities, among others referenced in *Collectivism after Modernism*, edited by Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette.
4. Abbreviation for the Gulf Cooperation Council, an inter-governmental organization founded in 1981.
5. These scholars include Salah Hassan and Iftikhar Dadi, both based at the Institute for Comparative Modernities at Cornell University (established in 2007 with a view to examine variations and nuances in multiple modern centers), and acknowledges "rehangs" at institutions such as the MoMA in New York, Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, and Tate Modern in London, under the auspices of the newly established Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational ("transnational" being a term acknowledging a multiplicity of art historical meeting points).
6. Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism* (Tulika Books, 2000), 298.
7. I refer to the "boom" as a collective regional period that transpires after 2008 (and therefore the end of the timeline for this exhibition), when new art fairs, bienales, and institutions are established at an unprecedented rate in each of the Gulf States.
8. Also called Al-Madrassa Al-Khattiya Fil-Fann (the "Calligraphic School of Art").
9. For more on the evolution of this term, see Maya Allison, ed., "Introduction," in *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988–2008* (Abu Dhabi: Akkadia Press, 2017), 9.

ARTISTES

The artworks represented in *Khaleej Modern* allow the viewer to trace the art movements that developed during the GCC region's transformative period brought about by rapid development and the building of modern states. When brought together, these works tell stories of the forming of nation-states, of the GCC union, of first exhibitions, of wars, of labor, and of life.

The artists who established themselves as individuals are a few of the many in the Gulf who helped build local creative infrastructures and lay the groundwork for the current cultural boom. Others represent some of the most notable groups and collectives—formal and informal—that contextualized and created spaces for shared artistic practices.

Each of these artists has an extensive artistic practice and a unique experience with the art world. They originate from across the GCC countries, although some were born elsewhere, and others have experiences of nationhood that transcend the borders we recognize today. The following pages include brief biographies of these artists, highlighting critical moments in their personal and professional lives that situate them within the larger context of this historical narrative. The goal of these biographies is not to capture the full extent of these artists' complex lives but to give readers an entry point to the sense of their role in this history.

**Tala Nassar**

*Exhibition Assistant Curator*

**Abdul Karim Al Bosta**

Kingdom of Bahrain, 1940–2011

Abdul Karim Al Bosta was a pioneer of modern art along with a group of peer artists who helped foster the emergence of modern art in what would become Bahrain. His work was part of the first exhibition of the Bahrain Contemporary Art Association in 1971, and he presented work in a range of exhibitions at home and abroad. Al Bosta traveled extensively for his art practice, including to Morocco, Spain, and France. He also spent time in India documenting scenes of life that he found there.

Like many of his peers in that period, he worked primarily in landscape, conveying local images and themes, and later shifting to a more folkloric atmosphere. In 1993, he founded the Bahrain Potters Association. A dedicated teacher at the center of the arts community, he taught art from 1960 until he passed in 2011.

## **Abdul Karim Al-Orrayed**

Kingdom of Bahrain, b. 1934

Pioneering artist Abdul Karim Al-Orrayed is one of the first to have organized exhibitions and formed art associations in Bahrain. In the 1950s, he and his students, artists Ahmed Qassim Al Sunni and Nasser Al-Yousif, worked together to develop landscape painting, documenting their surroundings in Manama and its suburbs. They are considered to have produced the strongest outputs of their generation. In that period, they painted on location, in a style that was noted for its use of color to evoke the transient quality of natural light. Informally referred to as the “Manama Group” (or “the group from Manama”), they would meet each Friday to search for environments that inspired them and paint landscapes in a style influenced by European landscape artists, but with a focus on Bahraini scenes: rural life, fishermen, traditional houses, and boats. In the decades

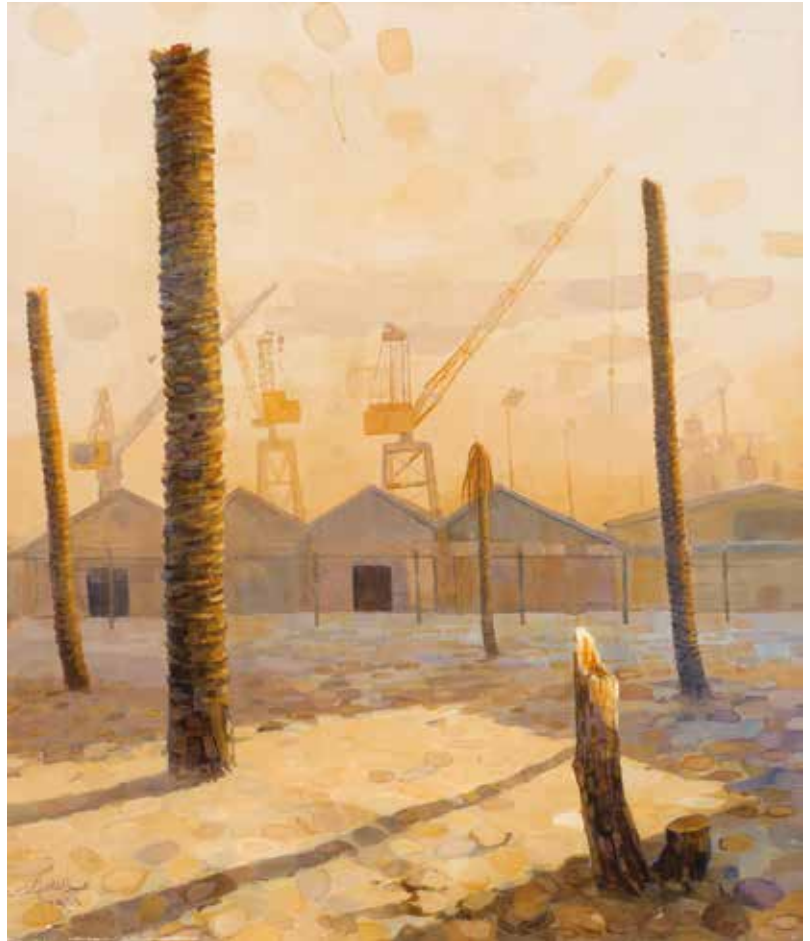
that followed, Al-Orrayed experimented with cubism-inspired techniques, as did a number of artists in the region at that time. As a teacher, Al-Orrayed led courses and workshops at Manama’s Arts Amateurs Association, which he founded in 1956, and where he curated its first art exhibition that same year. In 1960, Al-Orrayed established the first art gallery that sold paintings at Al Manama Souq. He also moved beyond his local environment in Bahrain, and painted landscape scenes from Oman.

## **Abdul Qader Al Rais**

United Arab Emirates, b. 1951

Abdul Qader Al Rais is known for his paintings of local neighborhoods, customs, and landscapes in the United Arab Emirates. After much of his childhood spent in Kuwait, he returned to the UAE, where he earned his bachelor's degree in Sharia law from the UAE University in Al Ain. He developed his artistic practice independently. Al Rais' first solo exhibition was in the Dubai Public Library in 1974. In 1980, he co-founded the Emirates Fine Arts Society.

After his studies, Al Rais lived in Kuwait, where he frequented Al-Marsam Al-Hurr (the "Free Art Atelier"). His interest during this time in the Dutch Masters and French Impressionists influenced a turn toward landscape painting as his primary mode of representation. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, more political themes permeated Al Rais' work, as well as some industrial landscape scenes and the changes in his local environment. Later, he shifted his practice to abstraction and calligraphy, developing the style for which he is best known today.



*A Sad Afternoon*, 1989  
Oil on canvas, 100 x 79 cm  
Image courtesy of the artist

## Abdulhalim Radwi

Saudi Arabia, 1939–2006

Abdulhalim Radwi was among the earliest Saudi artists to study art abroad. He earned degrees at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze (Academy of Fine Arts in Florence) and returned home in 1965 with a particular interest in Western modernism. He mounted a self-curated solo art exhibition, debatably one of the first art exhibitions in Saudi Arabia. His colleague Abdulrahman Alsoliman recalls that his exhibition was poorly received by the Saudi public, and that he was “ridiculed and accused of insanity despite the fact that his works had been critically acclaimed in Italy.” By the late 1960s, a small artistic community had begun to develop around Radwi in Jeddah, with other artists exhibiting their work.

He was part of a group of artists influenced intellectually and stylistically by Arab solidarity in the 1960s. These exhibitions were noteworthy not just because they introduced the public to exhibitions through word of mouth, but also in introducing artists to each other. He went on to help lay the foundations of local art infrastructure in Saudi Arabia. Radwi taught art in Mecca and was the director of Jeddah’s Center for Fine Arts from 1968 to 1974. He then went abroad to study again,

*Palestine, 1962*  
Mixed media on  
canvas, 121 x 76 cm  
Image courtesy  
of Barjeel Art  
Foundation, Sharjah



earning a doctorate from the Royal Arts Academy in Madrid in 1979. He returned to become the city of Jeddah’s director general for arts and culture from 1980 to 1992.

## **Abdullah Al Qassar**

State of Kuwait, 1941–2003

Abdullah Al Qassar helped found Kuwait's modern art movement. He began showing work in the late 1950s. In 1962, with a scholarship from the Kuwait government, he relocated to train at Cairo's School of Fine Arts, spending nearly a decade in Egypt. When he returned to Kuwait in 1971, Al Qassar served as the treasurer of Al-Marsam Al-Hurr (the "Free Art Atelier") until 1982.

Like many Gulf artists who studied in Egypt, Al Qassar portrayed people doing manual labor. He often depicted scenes of Arab culture and heritage, particularly concerning Kuwaiti fishing life in the Gulf. The artist's dynamic use of color and line to create depth and movement made him one of Kuwait's most technically versatile practitioners in this period.



*Luxor Port, 1964*

Oil on panel, 100 x 155 cm

Image courtesy of the artist and  
Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

**Abdullah Al Saadi**

United Arab Emirates, b. 1967

Al Saadi began making art as a teenager in the area around Madha on the UAE's mountainous Eastern coast. By the late 1980s, he had become a part of a community of artists committed to experimentation and conceptual development of their artistic practice. He was among a group known as "The Five," part of a larger community which formed in the late 1980s around the atelier of Hassan Sharif.

Al Saadi's artworks accumulate from his immediate surroundings in daily life and frequently derive from art-making journeys that he takes, camping and often by bicycle. The result ranges from his ongoing diary projects, to collections of objects that carry specific meaning for him and paintings of long scrolling views of the landscape he traverses. In the 1990s—when

there were very few opportunities to exhibit art in the UAE—he began seeing the landscape as its own kind of gallery. He put his artwork back into nature, to document it, and those images were then included in later exhibitions and artist books. In 1994, Al Saadi began a series of impromptu outdoor exhibitions at the Sharm Coffeeshop near his home and continued these through the end of the decade. One such installation included *My Mother's Letters*, a series of objects his mother left at his studio door, to let him know she had visited while he was away.

**Abdullah Al Shaikh**

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 1936–2019

Iraqi-born Saudi artist Abdullah Al Shaikh is one of Saudi Arabia's pioneers in modern art. At the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad, he studied under Iraqi artists Jawad Salim and Fa'eq Hassan, graduating in 1959. Al Shaikh then studied design and printmaking at the South-East Essex Technical College and School of Art in England, graduating in 1965. He was active in Dar Al Funoon Al Sa'udiyah (the "Saudi Arts House"), and from 1984 to 1999, he served as Chairman of the Design Department at the Royal Printing House in Al Jubail, Saudi Arabia.

Throughout Al Shaikh's life, he explored themes of individual agency for Arabs in an increasingly globalized world. In his early works, primarily portraits, he did this through references to local folklore and heritage. His later paintings evolved to focus on abstraction derived from the Arabic letter and local architectural traditions.



*Worshippers Leaving the Mosque*, 1981  
Oil on canvas, 89 x 115 cm  
Image courtesy of the artist and  
Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

## **Abdulrahman Alsoliman**

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, b. 1954

Artist, writer, and art historian Abdulrahman Alsoliman lives and works in Dammam, Saudi Arabia. Throughout the 1970s, he was an active participant in local artistic movements. Along with Abdulhalim Radwi, Alsoliman became a central figure at Dar Al Funaan Al Sa'udiyyah (the "Saudi Arts House"), the first independent art space in the country, founded in 1979 by Mohammed Al Saleem. Alsoliman became known for his emotive portraiture and deep attachment to Saudi Arabian heritage. Much of his work expressed themes of local memory, nostalgia, and conceptual understandings of home.

Alsoliman's 2000 book, *The Journey of the Saudi Fine Arts Movement*, is a pivotal document examining the history of Saudi art based on his own research and experience. He continues to paint, research, and write, contributing articles to *Al Yaum Newspaper*, where he previously served as Fine Arts Editor.

## **Ahmed Qassim Al Sunni**

Kingdom of Bahrain, active mid-twentieth century

Ahmed Qassim Al Sunni was the first to receive an art scholarship from the Bahraini government, traveling to London to study in 1952. He was an early and influential art teacher. He practiced alongside artists Nasser Al-Yousif and Abdul Karim Al-Orrayed, and they formed a group that met regularly to focus on landscape painting. Informally referred to as the “Manama Group” (or “the group from Manama”), this group painted in a style influenced by European landscape artists but with a focus on Bahraini scenes.

Upon his return from his studies, he began exhibiting locally, showing his first exhibition in 1956. In addition to his art practice, Al Sunni was also a renowned teacher of art education. He taught Al-Yousif as well as other key figures in the Bahraini art world and was one of the first art teachers to develop a school curriculum for art in the 1950s, which became the basis for the art syllabus in local schools. The work on view is the oldest artwork in the Bahrain National Museum’s collection, dating back to 1960.

**Ali Mohamed Al Mahmeed**

Kingdom of Bahrain, b. 1945

A painter, sculptor, gallerist, and teacher, Ali Mohamed Al Mahmeed laid much of the groundwork for the emergence of contemporary art in Bahrain. He is a founding member of The Bahrain Arts Society and was the commissioner of the Bahrain International Symposium for Sculpture. From 1964 to 1982, he taught art education and in 2009 founded Hend Gallery.

The elegant and elongated lines of Al Mahmeed's minimalist practice can be seen in publicly commissioned sculptures and monuments across Bahrain. Throughout his career, Al Mahmeed's fascination with the Arabic letter has influenced his work. He was active in the Hurufiyya movement, which incorporated aspects of traditional Arabic calligraphy in the framework of modern art. In his current practice, he continues to investigate and reinterpret language as an art form.

## **Anwar Sonya**

Sultanate of Oman, b. 1948

Anwar Sonya was among the first generation of artists to frequent the Al Ahli Club, a youth sports club that opened in 1970, which became a space for self-taught artists like Sonya to gather and show work in the first art exhibitions to take place in Oman. In 1980, Sonya studied at the Byam Shaw School of Art (later part of Central Saint Martins) in London, where he was a friend and colleague of pioneer Emirati artist Hassan Sharif. When he returned to Oman, he taught art at Muscat's Youth Studio. There, he profoundly influenced the next generation of Omani artists, including Hassan Meer and Maryam Al Zadjali, who would become directors of important local institutions.

In Sonya's efforts to capture the beauty and heritage of a rapidly modernizing Oman, he created strikingly detailed landscapes and expressive portraits. In his later practice, he became versed in a range of media and experimented with video in *The Circle Group*. Throughout his practice, he continued painting on the subject of Oman and its landscape.



*Fatma*, 2005  
Video, fabric, dimensions variable  
Image courtesy of the artist  
and Stal Gallery & Studio



*Silsilat Al Ramad*, 1985  
Artists' book, 29.7 x 21 cm  
Image courtesy of Reem Albudoor

**The Aqwas Collective (Hassan Sharif, Nujoom Alghanem, Khalid Albudoor, Yousef Khalil)**  
United Arab Emirates

In 1984, Hassan Sharif mounted his *One Day Exhibition* at his Mreijeh Atelier in Sharjah. This was seen by Khalid Albudoor, Nujoom Alghanem, and Yousef Khalil, who began visiting together regularly. The four formed a collective and called it the Aqwas (“arches”) Collective, after the arch-shaped works Sharif was creating in the studio courtyard. In a 2016 interview, Albudoor recounted, “We started announcing ourselves as a group, and we issued a manifesto and published a journal to introduce ourselves as artists who aim to present a different type of art and a different type of poetry.” Alghanem recalls they named the journal Ramad (“Ashes”) “for some reason, I do not really know why... it came by coincidence.”

They distributed photocopies of the journal, each with a piece of chewing gum, to newspapers and the artist groups they knew. It caused such a stir that they decided the second journal would be an exhibition in 1985 near Sharjah’s central market. After one day, the exhibition closed prematurely. Members of the group continue to practice and collaborate today.

## **Budoor Al Riyami**

Sultanate of Oman, b. 1977

Through a mix of technology, installation, calligraphy, and photography, Budoor Al Riyami questions conventional notions of history and the world in which we live. In the 2000s, she was part of The Circle Group of socially conscious artists in Oman who were engaged with their evolving national identity and concerned with their rapidly changing environment.

Her work was included in several Circle Group exhibitions, including *The Circle 3* (2005), which focused on new forms of contemporary art being practiced in Oman and the Gulf, and *The Circle 4: The City and the Street* (2007), which explored the relationship between art and public space, including references to the street sweepers in Al Riyami's *Brooms of Wisdom*. Al Riyami also founded the Al Rozana Arts Collective, which engaged in contemporary issues through art, with a group of fellow artists in Oman.



*Brooms of Wisdom*, 2007  
Photographs, acrylic cases,  
brooms, dimensions variable  
Image courtesy of the artist



## Ebtisam Abdulaziz

United Arab Emirates, b. 1975

Originally educated as a mathematician, Abdulaziz harbored a love for art, and after graduating from college, studied painting under Mohammed Kazem at Hassan Sharif's Dubai atelier, a space associated with "The Five." Soon, Abdulaziz had a profound breakthrough that connected her mathematical practice to her artistic one. She taught alongside her mentors and became the atelier's manager, a role that Kazem before her had taken on from Hassan Sharif. She began exhibiting with "The Five," and was included in the founding of The Flying House, an artist-run space for showing work from the UAE's artistic vanguard. She went on to have work in the UAE Pavilion of the 2009 Venice Biennale.



*Autobiography* [03–07], 2007  
Video, 5:50 min. 4 photographs from  
a series of 40, 54.5 x 45 cm each  
Image courtesy of the artist and ADMAF

Abdulaziz develops conceptual, performance-based, and experimental work, as seen in one of her best-known works, *Autobiography*, in which she wears a bodysuit imprinted with her ATM transaction records, as she goes about life in Sharjah. She also continued to develop her painting practice, integrated with her performance and mathematical concepts. Today, she lives and works in Washington, D.C.

## Hassan Meer

Sultanate of Oman, b. 1972

Hassan Meer worked to introduce new media art into Muscat's art ecosystem and to create a community of creative practitioners that had a profound effect on contemporary art in Oman. In addition to his art practice, he is a curator and mentor. In 2013, he founded Stal Gallery & Studio, the first artist-run gallery, workshop, and artist residency space in Oman, where he still serves as director. Meer's early practice focused on figurative painting that was heavily influenced by his predecessors at Muscat's Youth Studio, where he was a student of founding member Anwar Sonya. Much of Meer's work, particularly his paintings, contemplates the spiritual domain of ancient magic and rituals and the ways in which they persist in modern society. The interest in national identity that he developed while studying under Sonya continued into his studies abroad, taking different forms in his painting practice and his experimentation with video and installation.

Meer received his BFA in 1998 and MFA in 2000 from The Savannah College of Art and Design (US). When he returned to Muscat, he began to show work in a range of experiments at the Cultural Club and Fine Arts Society. These events were

precursors to *The Circle*, a 2001 exhibition that Meer organized in Muscat with Sonya and artist Saleem Sakhi. The community of creatives that formed around the three artists and around subsequent *Circle* exhibitions had a lasting impact on the development of contemporary art in Oman.

*Under the Water*, 2004  
Video, sound, pool,  
dimensions variable  
Image courtesy of  
the artist



## **Hassan Sharif**

United Arab Emirates, 1951–2016

Hassan Sharif is best known for his approach to sculptural installations made from found materials, waste, and detritus from daily life. He's also recognized for his very early performance work, documented in the early 1980s, both in the UAE and at his college.

He played a leading role in the vanguard of the UAE, as an artist and educator. He encouraged experimentation and challenged conformist views of art. He co-founded the Emirates Fine Arts Society in 1980 and, after studying art at the Byam Shaw School of Art in London (UK), returned and began a series of experiments with exhibition making, including the notorious *One Day Exhibition* in 1984. He then co-founded the short-lived Aqwas Collective with Nujoom Alghanem, Khalid Albudoor, and Yousef Khalil. He and several artist friends became known as "The Five," after an exhibition in Europe by a similar name. This tightly knit artistic group included Hussain Sharif (his brother), Mohammed Kazem, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, and Abdullah Al Saadi. An intensive creative community formed around them, and in 2007, Sharif co-founded, with

his brother Abdul-Raheem Sharif, The Flying House, a Dubai institution promoting contemporary Emirati artists. This marked the beginning of mainstream visibility for artists and work that had been largely inaccessible to the public, curators, and other artists. Sharif's impact on how art is understood, made, and appreciated continues to shape generations of artists and thinkers today.



*Bakh Bakh*, 1985/2015  
Acrylic and fabric on canvas, 90 x 90 x 12 cm  
Image courtesy of © The Estate of Hassan Sharif



## **Hussain Qassim Al Sunni**

Kingdom of Bahrain, 1936–2001

Although little is on record about this artist, his pioneering reputation is reflected in his contributions to the local art scene, as recounted by artist peers from the Bahrain modern art movement. In primary school, he developed his artistic practice with the support of his brother Ahmed, who taught there. His brother had received the first government scholarship to study abroad, in London. Hussain also studied abroad, at the Baghdad Academy of Fine Arts in Iraq. Following his return, he co-founded the Bahrain Contemporary Art Association with Rashid Al Oraifi and Abdul Karim Al-Orrayed in 1970.

Al Sunni experimented with various styles and techniques. He was equally inspired by British landscape painters and classical music from Europe and Russia. He took inspiration from the landscape, the ocean, and folkloric imagery, as well as popular culture, sometimes abstracting his forms and incorporating Arabic calligraphy. According to Al Sunni's peers, he worked solely with pure color as the primary compositional element.



*Building of Ships, 1966*  
Oil on canvas board, 30 x 40 cm  
Image courtesy of the artist and  
Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

## **Ibrahim Ismail**

State of Kuwait, b. 1945

Ismail graduated from Kuwait's Teachers Institute in 1968, after which he attended the Higher Institute of Theatre Arts. He was a member of the Kuwait Arts Association and represented Kuwait at the first Biennale of Arab Art in Baghdad in 1974.

As a painter, Ismail's absorption in Arab modernist art extended beyond style to narrative. He is perhaps best known for his experimental approaches to subjects related to society and tradition. His compositional techniques and subjects were often associated with Pan-Arab nationalism. Ismail's paintings depict a nation in flux, emphasizing themes of Kuwaiti heritage and both collective and intimate social structures. With a particular interest in Kuwait's modern history, his work also addresses political events and includes patriotic renderings of state emblems.





FACING PAGE

*Untitled, 1965*

Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 cm

Image courtesy of the artist and  
Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

ABOVE

*Independence and  
the Constitution, 1961*

Oil on canvas, 60 x 50 cm

Image courtesy of the artist and  
Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

## **Issa Saqer Al Khalaf**

State of Kuwait, 1940–2000

Issa Saqer Al Khalaf was a prolific artist, working in Kuwait throughout the 1960s, with a practice of oil and watercolor painting and a particular passion for sculpture. Al Khalaf studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo, graduating in 1966. The following year, he became a founding member of the Kuwait Arts Association. He was also a member of the Free Creativity Association and the GCC Art Friends Group, as well as a full-time artist at Al-Marsam Al-Hurr (the “Free Art Atelier”).

Al Khalaf was interested in nature and natural materials. Using bronze, porcelain, wood, and gypsum, he portrayed his subjects in natural environments with an emphasis on national identity and heritage represented through dress and other features.





**FACING PAGE**

*Woman*, 1983

Bronze, 60 x 30 x 20 cm

Image courtesy of Adel Al Khalaf  
and Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

**ABOVE**

*Gharr Hera*, 1970

Oil on canvas, 49 x 60 cm

Image courtesy of The Khalifa  
and Lidia Qattan Art Museum and  
Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

**Khalifa Qattan**

State of Kuwait, 1934–2003

Following his first solo exhibition in Kuwait in 1953, Khalifa Qattan studied abroad at the UK's Leicester College of Art and Technology in 1958. After graduating, he returned to Kuwait and became a foundational figure in Kuwait's visual art community, establishing the Kuwait Arts Association in 1967 and Kuwait's Arab Art Biennial (now known as the Al-Kharafi Biennial for Arab Contemporary Art) in 1969. He helped establish the Kuwait National Council for Culture, Arts, and Literature in 1973 and the National Exhibition Hall in 1974.

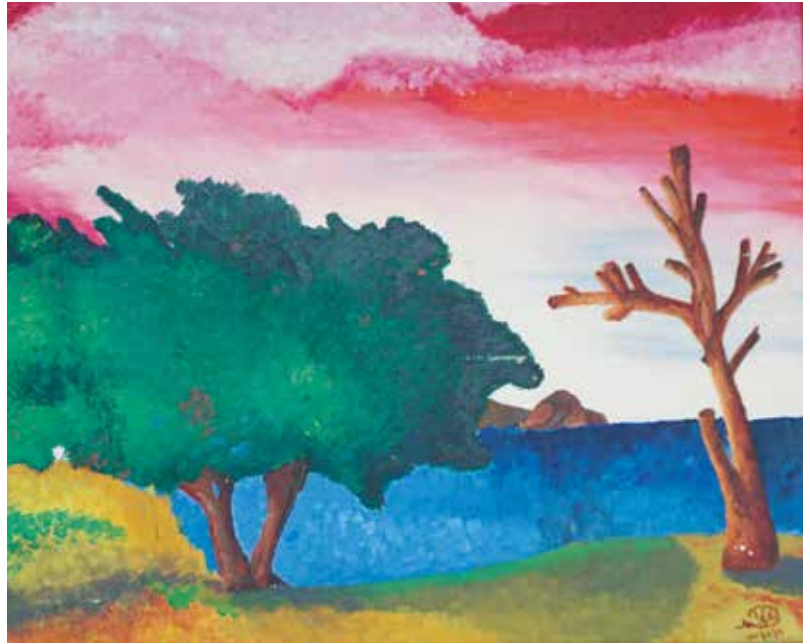
Following his return from England, Qattan developed a style and aesthetic theory called "Circlism." Based on philosophy, science, and spirituality, Circlism uses color, symbolism, and curving lines to depict symbolic meaning related to life, evolution, and quantum physics. In Circlism's philosophy, everything begins at a single point, to which it circles back in a constant transformation of energy into matter and vice-versa, a perpetual and universal force. Qattan's later work explores religion, the roles of women, and the shifting social environments he witnessed in his last decades of life.

## Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim

United Arab Emirates, b. 1962

Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim is part of the UAE's first generation of contemporary artists that emerged in the 1980s. He joined the Emirates Fine Arts Society in the latter 1980s, founded the Khor Fakkan Art Center in 1996, and later was part of The Flying House, which promoted Emirati conceptual art, from 2007 in Dubai. He was among a vanguard group that came to be known as "The Five," which included Hassan Sharif, Hussain Sharif, Abdullah Al Saadi, and Mohammed Kazem.

Ibrahim's early landscape paintings foreshadow the jaunty biomorphic abstractions and bright color saturation that characterize his later work. By the early 1990s, he had moved off the canvas or page and directly into the landscape, conducting sweeping interventions across entire valleys in the rocky mountains near his home. As his studio practice has developed, it has remained informed by the landscape, directly and indirectly describing his surroundings and daily activities in his own visual language. He and his peers were careful to document and archive their work, and in many cases for Ibrahim, that documentation is all that remains of the work made in this period.



*Landscape, 1987*  
Oil on canvas, 40 x 50 cm  
Image courtesy of the artist  
and Lawrie Shabibi



*Untitled, n.d.*  
Pen on paper, 17.1 x 20 cm  
Image courtesy of the son  
of Mohammed Ahmed Rasim

### **Mohammed Ahmed Rasim**

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 1911–1974

Mohammed Ahmed Rasim is reputed to have mounted the first art exhibition in Saudi Arabia in the 1950s in Jeddah. At a popular café that served sheesha and tea, he showed a painting of a car and a puppy. While he may have been the first “modern” visual artist in Saudi Arabia, little is known about Rasim’s practice or legacy. Scholar Eiman Elgibreen suggests that later generations might have been unaware of the artist or this exhibition, as Rasim would have worked in isolation, given the lack of art schools, institutions, or enthusiasts at the time—a circumstance he shared with his early peers.

Rasim studied in Turkey between 1935 and 1939. He then became an accomplished graphic artist and portraitist, producing drawings and caricatures that were often commissioned by local magazines and newspapers. Later, his practice developed into a distinct flamboyant style marked by sharp, precise strokes.

## Mohammed Al Saleem

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 1939–1997

A pioneering artist and supporter of Saudi Arabia's modern art scene, Mohammed Al Saleem was among the first Saudi artists to pursue a formal art education abroad. According to his daughter, he became interested in calligraphy as a result of his Egyptian teachers, with whom he traveled to Egypt. He then returned to his hometown of Marat, but soon relocated to Riyadh, where he held one of the first solo exhibitions in the city, in 1967. When the Ministry of Information began awarding scholarships to study art abroad, he went in 1970 to the Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze (Academy of Fine Arts in Florence). Upon his return from Italy, he established an art supplies store and began mentoring young artists. In 1979, he established Dar Al Funoon Al Sa'udiyah (the "Saudi Arts House"), working alongside other pioneering artists, such as Abdulrahman Alsoliman and Abdulhalim Radwi.

Al Saleem is known for his broad brushstrokes and warm tones, which convey the power of the sun's panoramic impact on the landscape. In an art style that he developed and dubbed "Horizonism," Al Saleem combined abstract and figurative techniques to replace desert elements on the horizon with forms that suggest Arabic calligraphy.



ABOVE

*Abstract Figure, 1997*

Oil on canvas, 60 x 80 cm

Image courtesy of Najla Al Saleem  
and Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

FACING PAGE

*Legs and Arms, 1995*

Photocopies mounted on aluminum,  
acrylic, 240 x 60 x 40 cm

Image courtesy of the artist  
and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

## **Mohammed Kazem**

United Arab Emirates, b. 1969

Mohammed Kazem began painting in the mid-1980s and often painted scenes taken from the environment around him, such as the atelier where he taught. By the mid-1990s, he had moved into very conceptual experiments, sometimes using photography, performance, and installation. His multi-disciplinary practice centers on documenting his physical relationship to his environment. He has used his own body as material, interrogating its relationship to the world around him. He also collects locations themselves, most often as GPS data points, and sometimes as photographs of physical, but ephemeral, markers of location, such as detritus in the landscape. Also a musician, he transfers the physicality of musical gesture in his compositions made entirely from scratches on paper. He continues to paint today, alongside his varied media practices.

He is one of the group unofficially known as “The Five” (with Abdullah Al Saadi, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Hassan Sharif, and Hussain Sharif). After beginning as a student of Hassan Sharif in the mid-1980s, Kazem began teaching art alongside Sharif at his Dubai atelier in the 1990s, and among his students was Ebtisam Abdulaziz,



who soon joined this community. He later went on to curate exhibitions for The Flying House, founded in 2007, to make visible the work of Emirati artists working in experimental and conceptual modes.

## **Mojib Al Dosari**

Kuwait, 1922–1956

Mojib Al Dosari is among the earliest recognized visual artists in the region. He attended the pioneering Al Mubarakiya School in Kuwait, which offered one of the first art classes in the Gulf. While studying there, he participated in the school's first public art exhibition in 1943. Some records indicate that Kuwait began awarding art scholarships to study abroad in 1936, and in 1945 Al Dosari was among the third cohort to study in Egypt. There he promoted art education in the pages of *Al Bi'tha*, a magazine published by Kuwaiti students who had studied abroad. He then went to London in 1950, returning to Kuwait in 1952. He returned to Al Mubarakiya School as a teacher and advocate for the visual arts.

Through his practice as an artist, Al Dosari expressed a deep, meditative appreciation for nature in all its manifestations. He was interested, as well, in the ways that creative expression took place in the daily lives of Kuwaiti people, such as the choices in dress that represent national identity and the thoughtful curation of items in homes and private spaces.



*The Direction*, 2007  
Acrylic on burlap, 500 x 400 cm  
Image courtesy of the artist  
and Stal Gallery & Studio

## **Moosa Omar**

Sultanate of Oman, b. 1971

Moosa Omar works in mixed media and has developed a dynamic conceptual practice rooted in tradition, folklore, and elements of daily life in Oman. He has created his own visual language employing a combination of colors, motifs, symbols, and textures. As an artist, he describes himself as self-taught but benefiting from exchanges with artists at home and abroad. Previously a member of the Oman Fine Arts Society, the Oman Youth Studio, and the Cultural Club, Omar has also led and participated in numerous workshops.

He is a member of The Circle Group of artists and exhibited in *The Circle 4* (2007), the final *Circle* exhibition. There, he showed an installation of textured, painted mats that incorporate his signature use of symbols in textile. With hieroglyph-like markings, he creates works that have the air of relics, coupling a quasi-religious narrative with the most basic of materials.

## **Mounirah Mosly**

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 1943–2019

Mounirah Mosly was a painter, graphic designer, art teacher, and writer. Among the first artists from Saudi Arabia to study art abroad, she graduated from the College of Fine Arts in Cairo, Egypt, in 1967. After her studies, she returned to Jeddah, where she worked as an art teacher for three years. That first year back, Mosly held what is credited as the first public art exhibition in Saudi Arabia (Jeddah, 1968), a two-person show with Safeya Binzagr. At that point, Mosly was known for using poignant, direct techniques, developed while in Egypt. She meticulously and caringly depicted her surroundings and elements of an environment in constant flux, development, and modernization. Mosly's remarkable career is also noted for her innovation, as she incorporated a range of materials and techniques in her diverse practice.

She went on to complete a master's degree in Graphic Design in the United States. Returning in 1979, she was hired by Saudi Aramco in Dhahran, where she worked for 22 years. She briefly established an art gallery in Aramco, one of the first of its kind in the country. Mosly would go on to exhibit extensively, both regionally and globally, in solo



and group exhibitions. She was a member of several artist groups, including the GCC Art Friends Group, Saudi Arabia's Dammam Art and Culture Society, and the International Council for Women In The Arts, in California. After her retirement, she moved to Bahrain in 2003, joined The Bahrain Arts Society, and devoted herself entirely to her practice as an artist.



**FACING PAGE**

*The Land of Solidities*, 1970

Oil on wood, 110 x 80 cm

Image courtesy of the Mosly family  
and Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

**ABOVE**

*Untitled (Family)*, 1965

Oil on canvas, 50 x 70 cm

Image courtesy of the artist and  
Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

**Munira Al Kazi**

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia  
and State of Kuwait, b. 1939

Born in India, Munira Al Kazi is a Saudi-Kuwaiti painter and printmaker. She began practicing in Kuwait in the 1950s. After graduating from the Central School of Art and Design (now Central Saint Martins) in London in 1961, she continued to work in London and held numerous exhibitions of her paintings and etchings. Her work was included in the inaugural exhibition of The Sultan Gallery in Kuwait in 1969, after which she moved to Ibiza, Spain.

Al Kazi's work centers around family and the role of the mother. In early works, she evoked themes of motherhood and family using household objects. As her practice developed, she created strikingly visceral and abstract paintings of women and families, often including nude figures. Her work is stylistically unusual for artists in the Arabian Peninsula. She may also have been in dialogue with artists working in India at that time, whose work shared a number of composition and technical characteristics.

## **Najat Makki**

United Arab Emirates, b. 1956

Najat Makki was the first Emirati woman to receive a PhD in art. In 1977, she went to the College of Fine Arts in Cairo, Egypt, where she received a BA and MFA in relief sculpture and metal, and, two decades later, a PhD in philosophy of art. Makki originally trained in sculpture, but in the 1980s she turned her focus towards painting. Her painted images retain a sculptural quality, often with multiple interacting layers of visual texture.

Makki has worked in a variety of styles throughout her practice, including realism and abstract expressionism. Her work draws inspiration from the desert and sea that characterize her surroundings and often includes abstracted references to the female figure. Local folklore in the United Arab Emirates and symbols of Emirati culture and heritage play an important role in her early work. As her practice developed, she experimented with large flat fields of solid color in abstract paintings. These debuted in her first solo exhibition, in 1987 at Al Wasl Club in Dubai.



*Composition, 1996*

Mixed media on wood, 120 x 120 cm

Image courtesy of the artist and  
Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah



*Our Green Land, 1977*  
Oil on canvas, 70 x 100 cm  
Image courtesy of  
Mahmood Nasser Al-Yousif

## **Nasser Al-Yousif**

Kingdom of Bahrain, 1940–2006

Nasser Al-Yousif was a foundational figure in the development of modern art in Bahrain. He took painting classes with Abdul Karim Al-Orrayed, and together with Ahmed Qassim Al-Sunni, they began meeting as a group in the 1950s to paint landscapes. Sometimes referred to as the “Manama Group” (or “the group from Manama”), they helped develop and link modern Bahraini art to traditional forms of representation in the country.

Landscape as it relates to territory and identity was the focus of the vast majority of Al-Yousif’s body of work. In his practice, he regarded his environment in rapidly changing Bahrain as a space that was in flux. In boldly colored paintings and stark black-and-white linoleum prints, Al-Yousif depicted the folkloric traditions and daily life of his homeland. His compositions animated Bahrain’s landscapes, villages, cities, ceremonies, cafes, and fishing boats. When he began to lose his eyesight in 1994, he continued creating these prints, recalling the landscapes of his youth by touch. By 1995 he was completely blind. Using his fingers as a guide, Al-Yousif continued to work, cutting shapes from paper, transferring them to linoleum, and carving with a special tool.

## **Rashid Abdul Rahman Al Balushi**

Sultanate of Oman, b. 1965

Rashid Abdul Rahman Al Balushi works in a wide variety of media. He is a member of the Omani Society for Fine Arts and was a student of the pioneering Omani artist Anwar Sonya. In addition to Sonya's mentorship at the Youth Studio in Muscat, many of the artists who frequented the art center played an important role in Al Balushi's artistic career.

Influenced by Omani heritage and culture, his work includes portraits of local people and architecture, sometimes with cubism- or surrealism-inspired approaches. Many of his works explore the relationship between the individual and the modernization transforming the region.

## **Rashid Al Oraifi**

Kingdom of Bahrain, 1942–2017

Rashid Al Oraifi's contributions as an artist, writer, and institutional founder helped lay the groundwork for the early Bahraini art scene. He co-founded the Bahrain Contemporary Art Association in 1970, serving as its first president. In 1975, he opened the Banoosh Gallery, the nation's first. Al Oraifi published *Art of Bahrain* in 1970 and *Architecture of Bahrain* in 1978, both focusing on Bahraini folklore and history. In 1994, he founded the Rashid Al Oraifi Museum as a home for his paintings, sculptures, and photography. The museum also houses a collection of seals, ceramic frescoes, and sculptures from the ancient civilization of Dilmun (present-day Bahrain).

Al Oraifi saw the Bahraini people as an extension of Dilmun's historical legacy, and Dilmun art and architecture influenced his early work. Following his first exhibition in 1963, Al Oraifi also developed a practice of detailed landscape painting, later incorporating the broad strokes of color that would come to characterize his work.

## Safeya Binzagr

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, b. 1940

Safeya Binzagr pioneered painting and exhibition-making in her country. She showed her work in the first public art exhibition of its kind in Saudi Arabia in 1968, a show with Mounirah Mosly, at the Dar Al-Tarbiyah Al Hadithah School in Jeddah. In 1970, her first solo exhibition was at the Dar Al Hanan School in Jeddah. This was the first solo exhibition by a woman in the country. Thirty years later, Binzagr opened her own museum, a first for any artist in Saudi Arabia, named Darat Safeya Binzagr. It is home to her paintings and a growing collection of costumes and jewelry from Saudi Arabia, making it an important cultural institution in Jeddah and a meeting place for artists, intellectuals, and students.

Binzagr developed as an artist in a series of different environments. Her family encouraged her interest in art, enrolling her in private art lessons after moving to Cairo when she was a child. Later, she studied art at Saint Martin's School of Art (now Central Saint Martins) in London, graduating in 1965. Upon returning to Saudi Arabia amidst the rapid societal shifts that were taking place, she dedicated her



practice to documenting rituals and traditions in her painting, drawing, and etching. Binzagr's work allows us access into highly private spaces and intimate rituals of the home.



**FACING PAGE**

*Al Zaboun*, 1969

Acrylic and print on canvas, 80 x 60 cm

Open edition, no. 30

Image courtesy of the artist

**ABOVE**

*Bronze Sculpture of a Woman*, 1966, cast in 2016

Bronze, 83.5 x 18 x 18 cm. Ed. 1/6

Image courtesy of the artist and Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

**Sami Mohammed**

State of Kuwait, b. 1943

Sami Mohammed is best-known for his sculpture work with bronze. After completing his degree at the College of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1970, Mohammed joined the Johnson Institute for Artists at Princeton, where he first worked with bronze casting. After his return to Kuwait in 1967, he co-founded the Kuwait Arts Association.

Mohammed is known internationally for his monumental human-scale sculptures, which often portray the poignancy of human suffering, with subjects that suggest a particular concern for human freedoms. With a practice rooted in portraiture, he is now celebrated as one of the first artists in the region to use bronze to study the human form.

## Thuraya Al-Baqsamī

State of Kuwait, b. 1952

An artist and writer, Thuraya Al-Baqsamī began exhibiting her work in Kuwait in the 1960s, before studying fine art in Cairo. In the mid-1970s, she moved to Moscow with her husband. There, she earned a master's degree in illustration at the Surikov Art Institute. In that period, Al-Baqsamī immersed herself in a new range of artistic influences. When she returned to Kuwait in the early 1980s, a regional wave of conservatism had affected Kuwait's urban, social, and cultural landscape, extending to the arts. Al-Baqsamī recalls that, as a result, figurative painting had all but disappeared by the time she returned, and she was part of a group who went against this wave. She also exhibited regionally and abroad as part of the GCC Art Friends Group.

Al-Baqsamī's work came to center on painting the lives and role of people, in particular women, in Kuwaiti society. The 1990–1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait also had a profound impact on Al-Baqsamī's work.



*The Parting*, 1991

Etching, 45 x 40 cm. Ed. 3/3

Image courtesy of the artist and  
Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

## Yousef Ahmad

State of Qatar, b. 1955

Yousef Ahmad was among the first generation of Qatari artists to study abroad, completing a bachelor of arts in fine arts and education at Helwan University in Cairo. When he returned to Doha in 1976, he became an active member of the fledgling art community. He co-founded The Three Friends group, along with Mohammed Ali Abdulla and Hassan Al Mulla, which held its first exhibition in 1977. The Three Friends particularly focused on landscape painting and heritage preservation in Doha. He later completed a master's degree in fine arts at Mills College in California in 1982. In addition to his artistic practice, Ahmad documented the development of modern art in Qatar through writing, research, and curation. From 1983–2004, he taught at Qatar University. There, a meeting with His Excellency Sheikh Hassan bin Mohamed bin Ali Al Thani led to his travels throughout the Middle East to collect works that would eventually become part of the Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art (which opened in 2010). In 1986, he published *Contemporary Fine Arts in Qatar*, which documents pioneering artists, organizations, and institutions at the time. Ahmad was also a founding member of the GCC Art Friends Group in 1985.



*Under the Microscope*, 1998  
Mixed media on fiberboard, 40 x 50 cm  
Image courtesy of the artist

Ahmad's practice merges calligraphy, traditional motifs, and architectural forms in landscape scenes using paper he produces himself from palm leaves. His interest in typography led him to become active in the Hurufiyya movement (sometimes called *al-madrassa al-khattiya fil-fann*, the "calligraphic school of art"). He continues to discover, experiment with, and reinterpret forms of the Arabic letter today, in a range of media.

## Checklist of the Exhibition

**Abdul Karim Al Bosta**  
(Bahrain, 1940–2011)

*Memories of Pearl*  
*Fishing Days*, 1975  
Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 124 cm  
Loan courtesy of  
Bahrain National Museum

**Abdul Karim Al-Orrayed**  
(Bahrain, b. 1934)

*Abstraction*, 1979  
Acrylic on wood, 63 x 108 cm  
Loan courtesy of  
Bahrain National Museum

*Homes and Businesses*, 1980  
Oil on board, 158 x 106 cm  
Loan courtesy of  
Bahrain National Museum

**Abdul Qader Al Rais**  
(United Arab Emirates, b. 1951)

*A Sad Afternoon*, 1989  
Oil on canvas, 100 x 79 cm  
Loan courtesy of the artist

**Abdulhalim Radwi**  
(Saudi Arabia, 1939–2006)

*Palestine*, 1962  
Mixed media on canvas,  
121 x 76 cm  
Loan courtesy of Barjeel  
Art Foundation, Sharjah

**Abdullah Al Qassar**  
(Kuwait, 1941–2003)

*Luxor Port*, 1964  
Oil on canvas, 100 x 155 cm  
Loan courtesy of Barjeel  
Art Foundation, Sharjah

**Abdullah Al Saadi**  
(United Arab Emirates, b. 1967)

*My Mother's Letters*, 1998–2013  
Mixed media, dimensions variable  
Loan courtesy of the artist

**Abdullah Al Shaikh**  
(Saudi Arabia, 1936–2019)

*Untitled*, 1986  
Mixed media on fiberboard,  
76 x 71.5 cm  
Loan courtesy of  
a private collection

**Abdulrahman Alsoliman**  
(Saudi Arabia, b. 1954)

*Alienation*, 1973  
Gouache on paper, 30.6 x 19.5 cm  
Loan courtesy of the artist

*Worshippers Leaving  
the Mosque*, 1981  
Oil on canvas, 89 x 115 cm  
Loan courtesy of Barjeel  
Art Foundation, Sharjah

**Ahmed Qassim Al Sunni**  
(Bahrain, active  
mid-twentieth century)

*Old Architecture of Manama*, 1960  
Oil and jute on wood, 69 x 84 cm  
Loan courtesy of  
Bahrain National Museum

**Ali Mohamed Al Mahmeed**

(Bahrain, b. 1945)

*The Name of God*, 1983  
Teak wood, 103 x 6 x 34 cm  
Loan courtesy of  
Bahrain National Museum

**Anwar Sonya**

(Oman, b. 1948)

*Fatma*, 2005  
Video, fabric, dimensions variable  
Loan courtesy of the artist  
and Stal Gallery & Studio

**The Aqwas Group**

(Hassan Sharif, Nujoom Alghanem,  
Khalid Albudoor, Yousef Khalil)  
United Arab Emirates

*Silsilat Al Ramad*, 1985  
Artists' book, 29.7 x 21 cm  
Loan courtesy of Reem Albudoor

**Budoor Al Riyami**

(Oman, b. 1977)

*Brooms of Wisdom*, 2007  
Photographs, acrylic cases,  
brooms, dimensions variable  
Loan courtesy of the artist

**Ebtisam Abdulaziz**

(United Arab Emirates, b. 1975)

*Autobiography [03–07]*, 2007  
Video, 5:50 min. 4 photographs  
from a series of 40,  
54.5 x 45 cm each  
Loan courtesy of  
ADMAF Art Collection

**Hassan Meer**

(Oman, b. 1972)

*Under the Water*, 2004  
Video, sound, pool,  
dimensions variable  
Loan courtesy of the artist

**Hassan Sharif**

(United Arab Emirates,  
1951–2016)

*Bakh Bakh*, 1985/2015  
Acrylic and fabric on canvas,  
90 x 90 x 12 cm  
Loan courtesy of  
Family Servais Collection

*Jute, Cloth and Rope*, 1985  
Coir, cotton rope, jute,  
110 x 110 x 50 cm  
Loan courtesy of  
Sharjah Art Foundation Collection

*One Day Exhibition*, 1984  
Photographs and pencil on  
mounting board, 59.5 x 42 cm  
Loan courtesy of  
Sharjah Art Foundation Collection

*Walking No. 2*, 1983  
Photographs and pencil on  
mounting board, 73.5 x 56.1 cm  
Loan courtesy of Gallery  
Isabelle van den Eynde

**Hussain Qassim Al Sunni**

(Bahrain, 1936–2001)

*Al-Ardah*, 1977  
Acrylic on canvas,  
83 x 103 cm  
Loan courtesy of  
Bahrain National Museum

*Foreign Invasion*, 1981  
Oil on wood, 94 x 81 cm  
Loan courtesy of  
Bahrain National Museum

**Ibrahim Ismail**

(Kuwait, b. 1945)

*Building of Ships*, 1966  
Oil on canvas board, 30 x 40 cm  
Loan courtesy of Barjeel  
Art Foundation, Sharjah

*Independence and the  
Constitution*, 1961  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 50 cm  
Loan courtesy of Barjeel  
Art Foundation, Sharjah

*Untitled*, 1965  
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 cm  
Loan courtesy of Barjeel  
Art Foundation, Sharjah

**Issa Saqer Al Khalaf**  
(Kuwait, 1940–2000)

*Woman*, 1983  
Bronze, 60 x 30 x 20 cm  
Loan courtesy of Barjeel  
Art Foundation, Sharjah

**Khalifa Qattan**  
(Kuwait, 1934–2003)

*Gharr Hera*, 1970  
Oil on canvas, 49 x 60 cm  
Loan courtesy of Barjeel  
Art Foundation, Sharjah

**Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim**  
(United Arab Emirates, b. 1962)

*Landscape*, 1987  
Oil on canvas, 40 x 50 cm  
Loan courtesy of the artist  
and Lawrie Shabibi

*Play in the Clay + Just Lines*, 1997  
Handmade catalog, 21.5 x 16.5 cm  
Loan courtesy of the artist  
and Lawrie Shabibi

**Mohammed Ahmed Rasim**  
(Saudi Arabia, 1911–1974)

*Untitled*, 1967  
Watercolor and pen on paper,  
10 x 27.2 cm  
Loan courtesy of the son of  
Mohammed Ahmed Rasim

*Untitled*, n.d.  
Watercolor and pen on paper,  
33.2 x 24 cm  
Loan courtesy of the son of  
Mohammed Ahmed Rasim

*Untitled*, n.d.  
Pen on paper, 17.1 x 20 cm  
Loan courtesy of the son of  
Mohammed Ahmed Rasim

**Mohammed Al Saleem**  
(Saudi Arabia, 1939–1997)

*Abstract Figure*, 1997  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 80 cm  
Loan courtesy of Barjeel  
Art Foundation, Sharjah

**Mohammed Kazem**  
(United Arab Emirates, b. 1969)

*Faces to Face*, 1997  
Inkjet color print on Hahnemühle  
paper, 70 x 50 cm  
Loan courtesy of the artist and  
Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

*Legs and Arms*, 1995  
Photocopies mounted on  
aluminum, acrylic,  
240 x 60 x 40 cm  
Loan courtesy of the artist and  
Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

*Studio*, 1987  
Oil on canvas, 127 x 152 cm  
Loan courtesy of the artist and  
Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

**Mojib Al Dosari**  
(Kuwait, 1922–1956)

*A Portrait of Tawfiq Ahmed  
Al-Jarrah*, 1948  
Oil on canvas, 80 x 60 cm  
Loan courtesy of Tawfiq  
Ahmed Al-Jarrah

**Moosa Omar**

(Oman, b. 1971)

*The Direction*, 2007

Acrylic on burlap, 500 x 400 cm

Loan courtesy of the artist  
and Stal Gallery & Studio

**Mounirah Mosly**

(Saudi Arabia, 1943–2019)

*Fire Pottery Kilns*, 1967

Oil on wood, 70 x 126 cm

2/2 of the Pottery Series

Loan courtesy of the Mosly family

*The Land of Solidities*, 1970

Oil on wood, 110 x 80 cm

Loan courtesy of Barjeel  
Art Foundation, Sharjah

*The Sadness*, 1970

Mixed media on wood, 50 x 70 cm

Loan courtesy of the Mosly family

**Munira Al Kazi**

(Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, b. 1939)

*Mother and Child*, c. 1960

Oil on canvas, 86 x 55 cm

Loan courtesy of Salwa S. AlQadi

*Untitled (Family)*, 1965

Oil on canvas, 50 x 70 cm

Loan courtesy of Barjeel  
Art Foundation, Sharjah

**Najat Makki**

(United Arab Emirates, b. 1956)

*Composition*, 1996

Mixed media on wood,

120 x 120 cm

Loan courtesy of Barjeel  
Art Foundation, Sharjah

*Portrait*, 1982

Welded metal, 40 x 20 x 20 cm

Loan courtesy of  
Sharjah Art Foundation Collection

*Takween (Formation)*, 1984

Welded metal, 49 x 39 x 10 cm

Loan courtesy of  
Sharjah Art Foundation Collection

**Nasser Al-Yousif**

(Bahrain, 1940–2006)

*Our Green Land*, 1977

Oil on canvas, 70 x 100 cm

Loan courtesy of Mahmood  
Nasser Al-Yousif

*Waiting*, 1979

Mixed media on board,

92 x 80 cm

Loan courtesy of  
Bahrain National Museum

**Rashid Abdul Rahman Al Balushi**

(Oman, b. 1965)

*The Darkness of Love*, 1989

Oil on canvas, 90 x 110 cm

Loan courtesy of Hassan Meer

**Rashid Al Oraifi**

(Bahrain, 1942–2017)

*Road*, 1964

Mixed media on canvas,

55 x 49 cm

Loan courtesy of

Bahrain National Museum

**Safeya Binzagr**

(Saudi Arabia, b. 1940)

*Al Zaboun*, 1969

Acrylic and print on canvas,

80 x 60 cm. Open edition, no. 30

Loan courtesy of  
a private collection

**Sami Mohammed**

(Kuwait, b. 1943)

*Bronze Sculpture of a Woman*,

1966, cast in 2016

Bronze, 83.5 x 18 x 18 cm. Ed. 1/6

Loan courtesy of Barjeel  
Art Foundation, Sharjah

**Thuraya Al-Baqsam**

(Kuwait, b. 1952)

*No to the Invasion*, 1990

Linocut, 40 x 30 cm. Ed. 5/6

Loan courtesy of Barjeel  
Art Foundation, Sharjah

*The Parting*, 1991

Etching, 45 x 40 cm. Ed. 3/3

Loan courtesy of Barjeel  
Art Foundation, Sharjah

*Return from the Village*, 1983

Tempera and colored pencil

on paper, 50 x 40 cm

Loan courtesy of Barjeel  
Art Foundation, Sharjah

**Yousef Ahmad**

(Qatar, b. 1955)

*Under the Microscope*, 1998

Mixed media on fiberboard,

40 x 50 cm

Loan courtesy of the artist