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MUSEUM

Painting the Middle East With Too Broad a Brush?

By RICHARD HOLLEDGE



Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art

Adam Henein's 'Al-Safina' ('The Ship'), outside Mathaf, the Arab Museum of Modern Art.

Doha, Qatar

Dubai has gone the commercial route with snazzy galleries, money-spinning auctions and international fairs; Abu Dhabi is importing the franchises of the Louvre and the Guggenheim museums. But when it comes to art, Qatar is trying to formulate a cultural heritage of its own.

Mathaf, the Arab Museum of Modern Art, opened in December with a "commitment to modern and contemporary art from the Arab world." The first exhibition—in a converted school on the dusty outskirts of the state capital, Doha—is called "Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art," and it displays works by more than 100 artists from the 1840s to the present. The show's name comes from the Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish's poem "Sajjil, ana arabiy" ("sajjil" means "the Act of Recording").

It's a brave move, because there is very little home-grown art in Qatar and only two Doha-born artists—Jassim al-Zainy and Yousef Ahmad—on display. This paucity is hardly surprising given that

60 years ago Doha was a sparsely populated town inhabited by pearl fishermen and nomads before becoming a supercharged city of skyscrapers.

Mathaf symbolizes the state's determination to focus some of its wealth on culture, arts and education. The driving force behind the new museum is the Sheikha al-Mayassa al-Thani, the emir's daughter. She encouraged the creation of what its guest exhibition curator, Nada Shabout, describes as a space "to unravel, confront and interrogate the various problematics about what it means to be an Arab artist."

Such efforts were rejected by the Iranian artist Kamrooz Aram two years ago when he argued that attempts to categorize art from the Middle East—with little regard as to whether it is Arab or Iranian, Moroccan or Lebanese—all "exhibit signs of what we might call Neo-Orientalism . . . the need/desire to control a mythology of the East as other."

Last week, the New York-based Mr. Aram, who is showing at the Green Art Gallery as part of the Art Dubai fair this month, returned to his theme: "I think that there are many artists in the Middle East and from the area who are very interesting, who are making important and relevant work, but I don't think they necessarily have anything in common when you look at the content of their work."

"At different times in art there is a Zeitgeist when a different group of people come together or a cultural shift happens," Mr. Aram continued. "You could say the Bauhaus movement was a general historical advance even if there were different types of work within it. I don't think there is a cohesive Middle East art culture that can be labeled in the same way, but I do think that there are people forcing it, and I think the motivation behind that is not so much cultural as economic or financial. To categorize something as Middle East art or Arab art is dubious. It doesn't make sense because it is a very diverse art world."

Ms. Shabout would agree with that. She says: "Most contemporary artists of the Arab world reject the term 'Arab' because they are convinced that they belong to a global world that accepts them as artists per se, a category in which identity is not a factor."

The exhibition is based on 20 years of acquisitions by Sheikh Hassan, another member of the al-Thani family, who has given his collection to the museum. It goes some way to show the development of an Arab sensibility from the days when the artists of the region, such as the Egyptian Georges Sabbagh (1887-1951) and the Lebanese Saliba Douaihy (1915-1994), would travel to Paris to learn about European art. There is a nod to Cubism here, to Impressionism there, and examples of abstract art influenced by the likes of Joan Miró. Much of the work is figurative, with depictions of life in souks and cafés, of scenes of music and dance.

In fact, the works have been installed not chronologically but by theme, under headings such as "Nature," "Family" and "City." Those that appear under "Society" and "Struggle" tend to be the more recent, the most political and striking. In a coda to the exhibition, paintings by artists who fled Iraq and settled in Doha in the past two decades—such as Ala Bashir, Mahmoud Al-Obaidi and Hazar Yahya—are overtly, bitterly political, few more so than Ismail Fattah's trio of men, one holding a bloodied dove.

This militancy is more marked in the exhibitions of contemporary art organized by the museum and staged in a warehouse a few miles from Mathaf, on the seafront alongside the imposing Museum of Islamic Art—another example of Qatar's determination to develop a cultural narrative.

In "Told/Untold/Retold," for example, a 2010 painting by Khalil Rabah portrays a U.S. aircraft carrier shaped like the Gaza Strip that has been transformed into a farm for tomato paste and strawberries—goods Israel won't let Gaza farmers grow. Steve Sabella's installation, "Settlement" (2010), has six Israelis opposite one Palestinian, all seven clad in underwear, facing each other with a neutral stare. Their eyes also meet the gaze of the viewer, making him a discomfited witness.

Unlike Dubai, across the Persian Gulf, Doha has only one serious commercial gallery, the al Markhiya. There, says marketing director Heather Alnuweiri, "We prefer to look at art from a more aesthetic view than the politics of it. The Middle East is so imbued with conflict, whether in Palestine, Sudan, Iraq or Egypt, which people see every day on TV. It's not that we don't want to deal with it at all, but that we are trying to be as diverse as possible."

Ms. Alnuweiri says that one of the central differences between the Dubai art scene and that of Qatar "is that Dubai has all the galleries but no local artists of any repute, yet here we have one gallery and four internationally acclaimed talents—Ali Hassan, Faraj Daham, Salman Al-Malik and Yousef Ahmad, who worked as an adviser for Sheikh Hassan. Arab art is so new it is hard for people to know if this is a worthwhile undertaking or if it is just a flash in the pan."

Maybe the biggest contribution Mathaf will make to answering that question will be seen in 10 or 20 years' time. The museum's acting director, Wassan al-Khudhairi, considers Mathaf to be a catalyst. It is working with community centers, photography societies, schools and youth clubs, and is particularly proud that it has trained six students to work as museum guides.

She says: "We really are hoping that Mathaf will be a pre-eminent platform for dialogue and discussion—and to do that we will have to have some tough conversations, some tough exchanges about what we want this place to be. Because we are not commercial, we can let the community be involved in the shaping of what they are going to see."

Mr. Holledge is a freelance arts writer based in the U.K.

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03/03/2011 15:2

Mathaf, the Arab Museum of Modern Art | Painting the Middle East With Too Broad a Brush? | By Richard Holledge – WSJ.com 03/03/2011 15:26