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Art analysis in the Gulf: Making sense of it all - June 2009

By Janet Bellotto



We are constantly plugged in to some part of the world through media and virtual systems. Information transpires through a multitude of formats, and within art practice in the Middle East, and particularly the Gulf, it can be a main tool for debate, but not the only one.

Understanding contemporary art today in the region, and how to interpret it requires a toolkit, but is it really different then anywhere else? As media criticism is still developing its platform here, garnering another approach to analysis is critical to the development of how the community views art, how art may then transpire within international circles, and what constitutes art “from” the region.

Longitudes and Latitudes of History

In order to begin to make any kind of selection of analytical tools – and I’m really only scratching the surface - we have to understand what has been occurring in the Middle East in terms of art and art movements and what actually makes up the Arab artworld. Wijdan Ali describes it well in his essay “Modern Art from the Arab World,” first published for the catalogue text accompanying the exhibition *Between Legend and Reality: Modern Art from the Arab World*.¹

Artists in the region have created their own identity, using artforms introduced from the West, but invested with their own social and political concerns. Comparison to the global context brings relevance to the ideas being developed locally – seeing similarities and differences. It was not surprising then to hear from a visitor to the exhibition “Halwasa” at the Dubai International Financial Centre comment, “You mean these works were actually created by Emirati artists?”

Makingrelevance – Connecting the dots

One basic tool is relevance. In a focused learning environment, students learn from a global perspective about art, which involves a basic knowledge of its history, following into theories and research tools and then its practical applications. Although most universities in the Gulf teach within a Western style curriculum, professors continue to develop strategies that discuss regional relevance.

Overall, it provides a vocabulary to begin interpreting what is viewed and its significance. This “tool” will aid to

further develop and understand how criticism and analysis should be occurring. This is complimented by the access and sharing of information on the global stage of the Internet, which is a primary tool in itself. Picture-sharing turns into discussions from techniques used to a young artist's intention.

Think Global, Act Local

As education involves looking at Western vs. Eastern practices, we cannot ignore the fact that the East has made a great impact on Western artists. However, living and growing within a cosmopolitan city in the Gulf, like Dubai, creates a fusion that must be considered – keeping strong to culture and traditions while influenced by change.

Thus understanding the local context brings an important layer in understanding the work. On a historical level, looking at the implications of social and political issues are more crucial.

If we look at the works of Abdulla Al Muharraqi and Hassan Sharif – two artists out of many worthy to discuss, they develop their works based on social/political issues with local relevance. Their visual tools may differ, but they both are criticizing and making conviction to issues in their surrounding environment.

This is no different than an artist from another region in the world, except their choice of color, a gesture or a symbol may have some other relevance such as traced to Islamic art or a regional craft.

We are at a point of time where we still define borders to differentiate monetary accolades, to define cultural and religious differences. In the art world, we try to be big enough to say our language is international, or at least the tools we use are universal. But it is the background that truly makes an artwork linked between a local perspective and a global context.

Ultimately, some last tools I would recommend to begin with to analyze art in the Gulf: time, patience and curiosity.

1 universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2003/modern_art_from_the_arab_world

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