

Upsurge: Waves, Colour and Illusion

## UPSURGE: WAVES, COLOUR AND ILLUSION

MOHAMED MELEHI | MONA SAUDI |

HAMRA ABBAS | MOHAMED AHMED IBRAHIM |

SHAIKHA AL MAZROU | VIVIEN ZHANG

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Bringing together the diverse range of practices of a multi-generational group of artists – Mohamed Melehi (b.1936, Asilah, Morocco), Mona Saudi (b.1945, Amman, Jordan), Hamra Abbas (b.1976, Kuwait), Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim (b. 1962, Khorfakkan, UAE), Shaikha Al Mazrou (b.1988, UAE) and Vivien Zhang, (b.1990, Beijing, China) - *Upsurge* explores notions of perception within abstract art: how form, colour and contrast affect the visual experience to give illusions of depth or dynamism based on our psychological predisposition. Different starting points lead each to converge on *Op art*: the perceptual experience is related to how vision functions.

A term coined in 1964 by Time magazine, *Op art* describes a form of abstract art, specifically non-objective art, that uses optical illusions. Never a movement, more a tendency, works now described as "op art" were produced decades earlier by Victor Vasarely in the 1930s and as early as the 1920s, by Francis Picabia. Other artists and works associated with the term include those as diverse as Josef Albers from the 1950s, and Richard Anuszkiewicz and Bridget Riley from the 1960s.

For Moroccan modernist Mohamed Melehi, his point of departure was the hard-edge abstraction with which he came into contact in New York at the beginning of the 1960s. Melehi's early rectilinear works soon gave way to curves (which he described as "Soft Edge"), later morphing into his now-familiar waves. The motif of the wave is, for Melehi, all about movement and change. It is as much about electromagnetic radiation as it is about water, and when vertical it becomes a flame. In his recent *Moucharabieh* paintings (2020), Melehi strips away his wave motif to its bare essentials – they become all-over diagonal compositions. The present series is based around orange coloured waves, which in each work alternate with waves of a different colour, generating a different figure-ground relationship in each work that puts the two planes (foreground and background) into tense and contradictory juxtapositions.

Waves recur in much of Mona Saudi's work. Working between Beirut and Amman for more than 50 years, Saudi is perhaps the only sculptor from the region to work almost entirely in stone. For Saudi, who chooses stone mostly sourced from Jordan and Lebanon (or as she calls it, *balad ash-shams*) the wave motif is grounded in nature and the history of the region, its undulations reminiscent of both water and desert.

The sinuous form of the waves breathes life into *Woman/River* (1998), carved in an extraordinary green-veined marble from the deserts south of Amman that Saudi calls “Jordanian jade”, and the larger *Rivers of Sadness* (2004) carved in a dramatic black marble.

Also in marble are Hamra Abbas’ *Construction Drawings* (2019), re-creations in black granite and white marble of the complex line drawings that she used to make her tri-coloured Plexiglas light boxes, which exclude their three primary colours and instead focus solely on their outlines. The circular webs of straight lines converge into points of stard just within the scope of the viewers’ peripheral vision. The precise scale of the works is key to providing the illusion – it keeps these points perceivable, but peripheral.

*Upsurge* also presents new paintings by Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim presents, populated by the same figures and hieroglyphs seen in his large-scale murals, alongside sculptures recreating these same characters in the round. Abstract, anthropomorphic, humorous, animated, and a little mischievous, these figures inhabit every surface and every shape. Ibrahim’s practice is inspired by his deep connection to the natural environment of Khor Fakkan, a rambling coastal town on the Gulf of Oman, enclosed on one side by the rocky Hajar Mountains and the other by the sea. Ibrahim’s vibrant palette serves to emphasise the elementary colours found in this natural environment, by expressing them in highly saturated tones.

Colour provides both perspective and depth to the works of Shaikha Al Mazrou. Her brightly coloured geometric metal sculptures play with positive and negative tension and illusions of colour and material. Her *Untitled* (hexagons) (2019) relate closely to Vasarely’s works such as *Hommage to the Hexagon* (1969) set of prints and related sculptures in the Jeddah Sculpture Museum. However, Al Mazrou’s irreverent use of material highlights the apparent contradictions between hard-edged Op-art influenced straight lines and the crumpled forms of the steel sculptures: Al Mazrou makes these durable materials resemble something soft, pliable or ephemeral.

Using analogue painterly techniques and materials, Vivien Zhang recreates the sensations of a digital world – motifs stripped of context, the layered, endlessly repeated, structured yet semi-random aesthetic that crowds our screens and our lives. The paradoxes of this information age, with its collating of motifs that often span multiple contexts and cultures, imbuing them with ambiguous qualities, is manifested in various combinations in her paintings. Freed from their original interpretations, they generate open networks and ‘alternative landscapes’ for an imagined generation of third-culture inhabitants, whilst simultaneously flipping in appearance between flatness and depth.

# LAWRIE SHABIBI

## ABOUT THE GALLERY

Lawrie Shabibi is a contemporary art gallery housed in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue. The gallery supports the long-term development of the careers of young international contemporary artists, with a focus on those from the Middle East and North Africa, and more recently diasporic artists within the UK. From its inception, the gallery has also organized art historical exhibitions, working with an older generation of artists from the Middle East and North Africa region. By holding a regular programme of exhibitions, screenings and talks, publishing catalogues and participating in international art fairs, Lawrie Shabibi has in the space of eight years been a forerunner in the development of the contemporary art scene in Dubai. As of 2020 Lawrie Shabibi has a UK outpost at Cromwell Place in London.

## FOR GALLERY INFORMATION

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