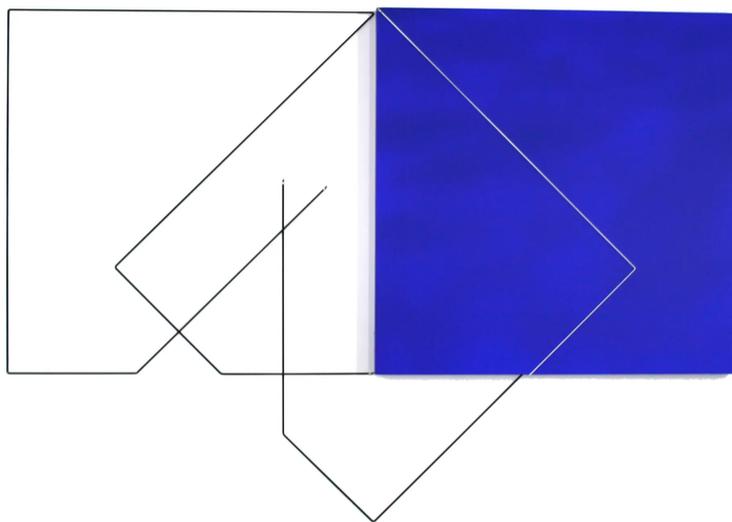


Starting New Conversations About Arab Art

This month, the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar, will open four shows exploring the depth and breadth of the Arab world's contemporary works.

By David Belcher

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“Three Squares,” (2022) by Mehdi Moutashar. “Introspection as Resistance” will show 27 works by Mr. Moutashar, from his early works in the 1960s to more recent ones. Credit...The artist and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery

Tucked away on a side street, far from the flashier museums that have come to represent Qatar in the post-World Cup era, the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha is about to unveil four concurrent exhibitions that can be seen as a testament to the museum's crucial role in the world of contemporary Arab art. It's part of a new vision for the museum, affectionately known among locals as Mathaf (Arabic for “museum”). As Qatar has established a flashy vision of a global arts center — with several enormous museum projects planned over the next decade — Mathaf has positioned itself as a vital player in that scene, all from a nondescript former school building in the shadow of one of the stadiums built for the World Cup. For Zeina Arida, who joined the museum as its new director from the Sursock Museum in Beirut, Lebanon, two years ago, these four exhibitions, all opening Oct. 27 and running until March 5, depict the past, present and future of an often misunderstood — or simply unknown — chapter of art from the Arab world. They reflect the museum's vision, she said. Mathaf, which is overseen by the government agency Qatar Museums and opened in 2010, has a collection of more than 9,000 items in its 59,000 square feet in a former school building redesigned by the French architect Jean-François Bodin.

“The connecting fabric of these four shows is really about Mathaf being very much in the conversation about modern Arab art and how it can prepare for the future,” Ms. Arida said in a recent video interview. “We are changing the experience at Mathaf, and it's going to evolve in the coming years. It's important that we act as a platform that is local but international.” That mix of global and local is on display in the four exhibitions, all running simultaneously and in many ways connected through themes and history.



“Alif,” (2004) by Mr. Moutashar. “Mehdi bridges the gap between the modernism that flourished in mid-20th century Baghdad and global contemporary art,” the show’s curator said. The artist and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery

‘Mehdi Moutashar: Introspection as Resistance’

The Iraqi artist Mehdi Moutashar, 80, is being given his first solo museum show in the Arab world since the 1970s, according to Mathaf. Museum officials say it’s long overdue. “Mehdi is bringing his work back to the region where he comes from,” Amin Alsaden, the Toronto-based curator of this exhibition, said in a recent video interview. “He grew up in Iraq playing in the ruins of Babylon. He was mesmerized by the stunning calligraphy and the geometric patterns. He plays with those patterns.” Mr. Alsaden said that Mr. Moutashar in many ways personifies the history of modern and contemporary art by blending his classical training and fascination with Arab and Muslim history with modern art, which is connected in ways that Western artists and art lovers might not understand. He works in a variety of media: wood, paint, elastic wire and thread, and painted steel. “Introspection as Resistance” will show 27 works by Mr. Moutashar, from his early works in the 1960s to more recent works, such as “Three Folds at 60-degrees and Two Squares,” made of painted wood, painted steel and elastic wire, from 2021. “Arab modernism is a movement that the world knows very little about, and there is a lot more work yet to be done to honor the pioneers,” Mr. Alsaden said. “The instability in Iraq and the region has made it difficult to access archives, artists and where art is shown and where ideas are debated.” The curator also pointed out that Mr. Moutashar could be seen as a pioneer. “There is a Western bias where Europe and America became known for modern art, but it’s only in recent years that major museums are beginning to pay closer attention to modern Arab art,” he added. “We’re catching up more than 50 years later. Mehdi bridges the gap between the modernism that flourished in mid-20th century Baghdad and global contemporary art.”