

Myrna Ayad
From Tangier to Teheran, geometric abstraction continues to inspire

Discover how the region's artists celebrate the beauty of symmetry, pattern, and accuracy, drawing from Islamic art and nature

It was a trip to Cairo in 1943 that forever impacted the work of Saloua Raouda Choucair (1916-2017). In the mosques of the Egyptian capital, the Lebanese artist marveled at the Islamic geometry and architecture, believing, she said in an interview for Nelda LaTeef's book *Women of Lebanon: Interviews with Champions for Peace* (1992), that 'this is real art! It endures!' Choucair, whose 70-plus-year career was the subject of Tate Modern's first retrospective on an Arab artist in 2017, is largely considered the mother of abstraction in Lebanon.



Press photography from the Saloua Raouda Choucair retrospective exhibition, Tate Modern, London, April 17 – November 17, 2013. © Tate.



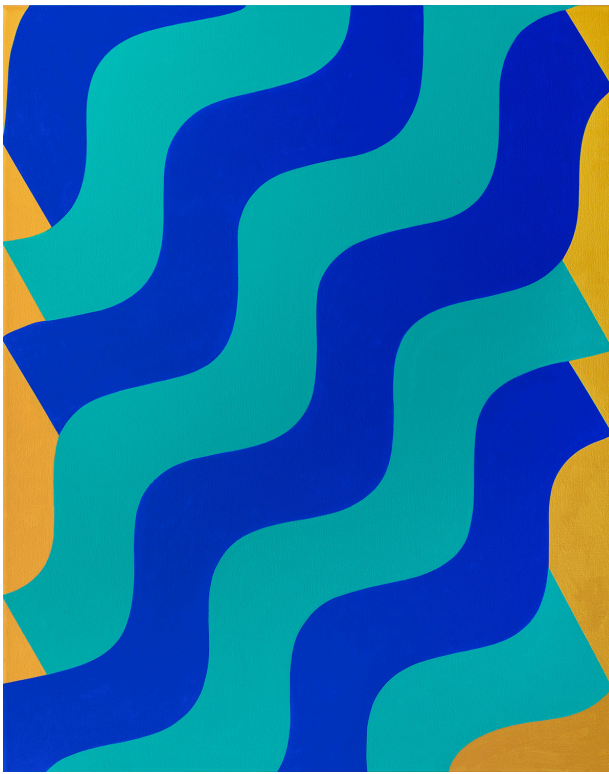
Two-Die
1961-62
Oil paint on canvas
Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation
Morocco

Press photography from the Saloua Raouda Choucair retrospective exhibition, Tate Modern, London, April 17 – November 17, 2013. © Tate.

Where there is discourse on geometric abstraction in Arab, Iranian, and Turkish art, most signs point to Islamic art, which as a construct in art history was coined in the 19th century, but in fact permeated every aspect of life in the Islamic world for over a millennium. Other artists, however, derive inspiration from different sources in their abstract geometric work: Saliba Douaihy (1912-1994), Huguette Caland (1931-2019), and **Etel Adnan** (1925-2021) all abstracted landscapes in their paintings. Morocco's Mohamed Melehi (1936-2020) went back, time and again, to the motif of the wave, both a hint at Arabic calligraphy, but also, a curvilinear feature of his beloved coastal hometown of Asilah. 'Whether we speak of non-figurative art inspired by meditative Sufi experiences, or compositions derived from deconstructing Arabic letterforms (sometimes referred to as *hurufiyya*), geometric abstraction can take many forms, and calls for an expanded set of terms to describe its different manifestations,' says Suheyla Takesh, the curator at the Barjeel Art Foundation.



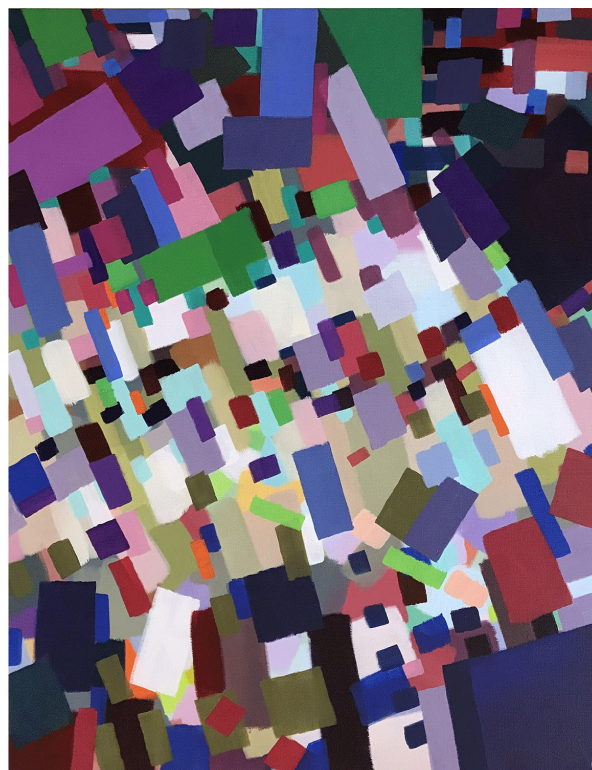
Etel Adnan, Untitled, 2010. Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery.



Left: Mohamed Melehi, *Moucharabieh in Blue*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Lawrie Shabibi. Right: Mohamed Melehi, *Arabian Moucharabieh*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Lawrie Shabibi.

Samia Halaby, for example, reflects on nature in her vibrant compositions, with the indigenous trees of Palestine a critical source of inspiration for the Jerusalem-born, New York-based artist. 'We extract from nature and apply to our lives. We don't make material; we are not creators. The material is out there, we just manipulate it. Abstraction sees principles in nature,' says Halaby. 'Symmetry was the essence of Arab art; numbers and geometry are not devoid of nature, they're the very essence of nature, they're the image of growth and pattern. Then you think about it within the range of Islam and see that it's a celebration of the principles of nature.'

That is precisely how Choucair felt about Islamic art. She delved into Islamic philosophy, studied mathematics and physics (which fascinated her), and also aimed to translate the mechanisms of Arabic poetry into stackable, modular sculptures. For Choucair, it simply made sense, and this understanding is grasped by other artists who share her fascination with Islamic art. 'There is something sublime to it; as though it belongs to a higher order,' says Berlin-based artist [Timo Nasserj](#). 'When I think of these patterns, I see that what we have is a cut-out of the infinite. It doesn't end somewhere, and it can go on forever.' Nasserj's first live encounter with Islamic art and architecture happened in the Iranian city of Isfahan – 'it burnt into my eyes in 1999' – and he was further exposed to it a few years later while visiting the Central Asian nations of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Kyrgyzstan, as well as western China. He was not practicing art then, but the sights he encountered provoked a deep desire to decipher and to analyze what he saw; it became almost scientific. 'It was a puzzle I had to solve. I needed it to make sense and I had to take it apart to understand,' says Nasserj.



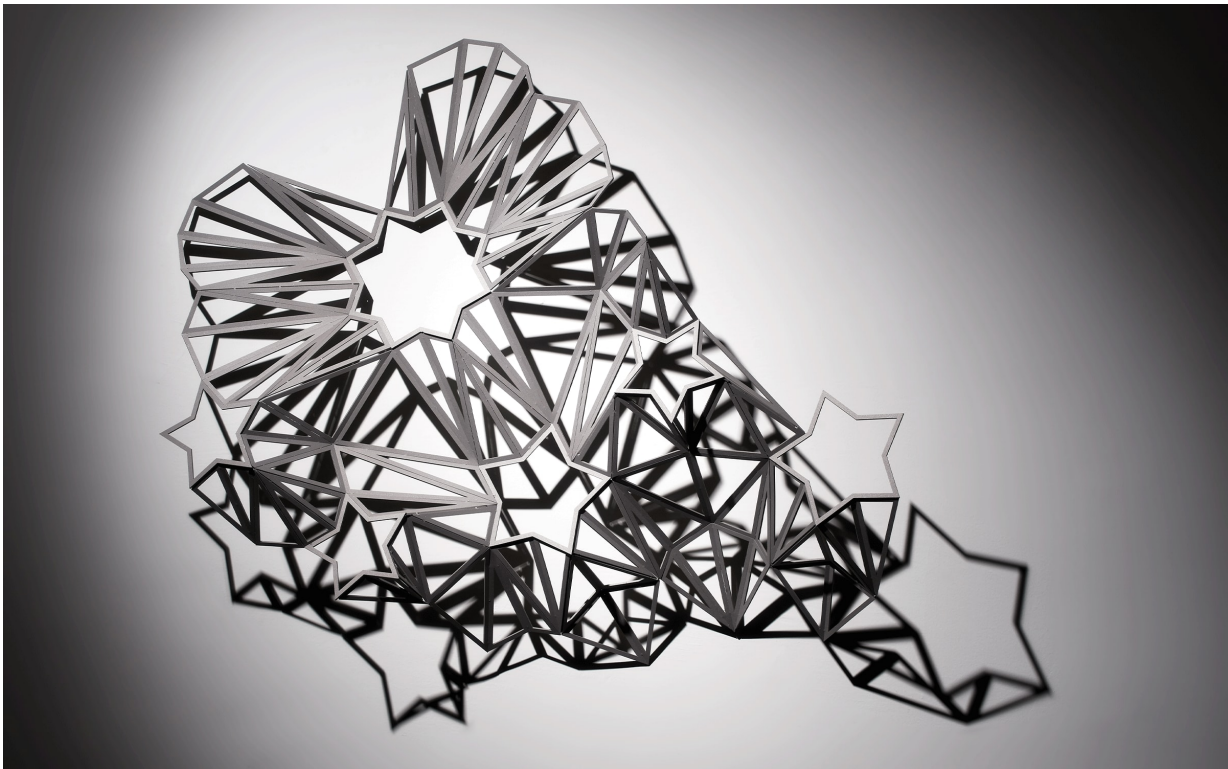
Left: Samia Halaby, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery. Right: Samia Halaby, *Steps Shops Signs* (detail), 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery.



Left: Timo Nasserri, *I am a sky where spirits live #3*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery. Right: Timo Nasserri. Photograph by Lina Zangers. Courtesy of the artist and Lawrie Shabibi.

Some of Nasserri's dizzyingly beautiful sculptural work such as *Parsec* and *Muqarna* works feel like scooped out sections of a mosque's dome or bits of its mihrab (a niche in the wall of a mosque indicating the direction of Mecca). To create these large-scale works entails drawings that take up 5 months of experimentation, 'and sometimes despair,' all in the name of reaching a perfect state of symmetry. 'Everything I do has to be symmetrical,' explains Nasserri. 'It's a brain thing, it's an order, it helps me understand.'

Fellow Iranian artist Sahand Hesamiyan, shares Nasserri's craving for symmetry. 'It's how my mind is organized,' says the Tehran and London-based artist. 'Symmetry calms me, the accuracy in it is pacifying.' This symmetry that both artists speak of is one that mimics nature, employs geometric principles, and is found all around the Islamic world, from architecture and patterns in rugs and crafts, to tilework and gardens, which Nasserri is now exploring.



Sahand Hesamiyan, *Majaz 1*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and The Third Line.



Sahand Hesamiyan, *Forough*, 2016. Installation view in Nara, Japan. Courtesy of the artist and The Third Line.

During a 2015 trip to Samarkand in Uzbekistan, Hesamiyan visited the stunning 15th century Bibi-Khanym Mosque, built to commemorate its namesake, the favorite wife of Timur, ruler of the Timurid dynasty. The monumental scale of the mosque's entrance and dome triggered in Hesamiyan a want to explore large-scale works. One of these, named *Forough* (meaning sun in Farsi), was based on the lotus flower, which, across several Eastern cultures symbolizes purity and fertility. The work measures almost 3 meters in height and, in addition to its application of Islamic geometric principles, carries a metaphoric meaning. It is this very method of expressing abstractly and geometrically that drives Hesamiyan and other artists. 'In contemporary art, geometry can be used for a myriad of reasons, ranging from experiments in deconstructing space, to presenting physical reality in a schematized, abstracted manner, to emotive painting or sculpting that relies on the sensations that different geometric shapes may elicit,' says Takesh.

Emirati artist Ebtisam Abdulaziz relies on geometric abstraction to 'convey implicit concepts' in her practice. Based in Washington, D.C., her background in engineering and mathematics fuels her work and adds a layer of decipherment. Like Nasser and Hesamiyan, she views geometric abstraction as both a method to solve problems and a manner through which she can express herself. 'Some of my paintings represent a daily diary,' she explains. 'They may look like optical illusions that can expand and contract infinitely, maybe even appear firm and sharp, but they carry a lot of accumulated feelings.'



Where does that leave the genre within the realm of contemporary art today? Nasserri feels that geometric abstraction is in a very difficult position because it is a duel between man and machine. 'With geometric works, there is something that is a little too perfect in them because we live in a world with machines and people can misconstrue them as machine-made, like it's not human enough,' he says. Others, like Abdulaziz, feel that it is part and parcel of one's identity and geometric abstractions cannot be separated from this. Hesamiyan feels that the universe can be explained geometrically. Choucair agreed with all of the above, and spent her life – outside of the 'in' milieu – experimenting and solving, like a scientist, across various media. That is precisely what geometric abstraction can do: offer infinite potential and solutions executed in stunning aesthetic compositions.

The estate of **Etel Adnan** is represented by **Sfeir-Semler Gallery** (Beirut, Hamburg), **Galerie Lelong & Co.** (Paris, New York), and **Galleria Continua** (San Gimignano, Beijing, Dubai, Havana, Boissy-le-Château, Paris, Rome, São Paulo).

The estate of Mohamed Melehi is represented by **Lawrie Shabibi** (Dubai).

Samia Halaby is represented by **Sfeir-Semler Gallery** (Beirut, Hamburg).

Timo Nasserri is represented by **Sabrina Amrani** (Madrid), **Lawrie Shabibi** (Dubai), and **Sfeir-Semler Gallery** (Beirut, Hamburg).

Sahand Hesamiyan is represented by **The Third Line** (Dubai).

Myrna Ayad is a Dubai-based editor, writer, cultural strategist, and art advisor, as well as the former director of Art Dubai (2016–18). In addition to her articles appearing in *The New York Times*, *Vogue Arabia*, and *The National*, she is the author of *Sheikh Zayed: An Eternal Legacy* and *Dubai Wonder* (both Assouline, 2021) and editor of *Contemporary Kingdom: The Saudi Art Scene Now* (Canvas Central, 2014), among other books.

Caption for top image: Samia Halaby, *Between Time and Light AKA Big Mama* (detail), 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery. A dark filter was applied for readability.

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