

MUTUAL ART

APRIL 24, 2019

A GUIDE TO MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EASTERN ART WITH ASHKAN BAGHESTANI

by Adam Heardman



Manoucher Yektai, *Untitled*, 1958

With Sotheby's launching their biennial sale of Modern and Contemporary Middle Eastern Art, we spoke to their Director and Head of Sale, Ashkan Baghestani about "one of the most exciting regions in terms of contemporary art practice."

"When you have such an exciting young market," says Ashkan Baghestani, Director and Head of Sale for Arab and Iranian Art at Sotheby's, "you need to educate people and tell them what our art is about."

And it is indeed an exciting young market. Middle Eastern art from the 20th Century and the contemporary period is gaining recognition in Western galleries and auction houses at a pace. A significant barometer of the market's growth was a 2017 auction at Christie's London. The sale of 43 modern and contemporary works from the region outstripped its upper-band estimates for a total realized price of \$6,938,068. A leading performer in that auction was the Iraqi painter, Mahmoud Sabri. His 1960 painting, *Grief*, sold at a 1237% return for \$886,288 against a high estimate of just under \$80,000.

Such sales announced to collectors, auction houses, and consignors that demand was high. Estimates for artists like Sabri have risen at auction. Figures such as Mona Hatoum (from Lebanon/Palestine) and Shirin Neshat (from Iran) have attracted enormous interest from Western Galleries and media outlets. On April 30th this year, Sotheby's London bring 85 works to their 20th Century Art / Middle East auction.

“You cannot see the region as a monolith,” says Baghestani, but goes on to call the Middle East including Arab countries from the Gulf Cooperation Council, “one of the most exciting regions in terms of contemporary art practice.” With the growth of awareness globally, particularly in Europe and North America, comes the responsibility of re-dressing the historical context of these artists and their works.

“Every country has its own artistic movement, practice, evolution,” says Baghestani. “It’s hard to create a proper timeline. But a lot of people are trying to do that and you have a lot of exhibitions that are trying to explore and build those bridges. So it’s a very exciting time, especially in the institutions where you see so many museums in the West are curating or exhibiting solo shows on artists from the region. That’s always very helpful for the market and for the appreciation of the art.”

Baghestani highlights the importance of an artist like Manoucher Yektai, an Iranian-American painter who was pivotal to the New York School of Abstract Expressionists, though not as well remembered as his contemporaries. His appreciation of Islamic calligraphy informed his fluid, gestural abstracts, his communicative actions towards his canvases. A significant work, *Untitled* (1958) comes to the London sale this month, and a panel discussion concerning his life and work takes place before the auction on Sunday April 28th.

Other artists represented whom Baghestani picks out include the LA-based Lebanese multidisciplinary, Huguette Caland, and Asim Abu Shakra (“The most important contemporary Palestinian artist,” says Baghestani, with some emphasis). But the build up to this auction is once again dominated by Mahmoud Sabri. His monumental canvas, *The Death of a Child* (1963), is considered one of the most important pieces of modern Iraqi painting, and leads the sale with an estimate of £350,000-£500,000 (\$451,036-\$644,247).

Asked what makes this painting such a special piece, Baghestani tells me, “There was a generation of Arab artists in the ’60s - Syrian, Palestinian, Iraqi - who travelled through to the Soviet Union, to Moscow and St Petersburg, and worked actively with the artistic community over there for several years. Mahmoud Sabri was the most prominent among them. He travelled to Moscow and studied for four years at the Surikov Institute from 1959 to 1963. Every collector or expert will tell you that these are his four best years.”

Though “it was a period when he was not happy, he was very depressed, he did not understand the culture, the language,” nevertheless Sabri produced his best work during these years. “This painting was produced then and there, during his best time.”

“In terms of scale it’s probably the largest work he’s done. There were a few that came up on the market the past five or six years that are also from this period. They have a much stronger Soviet feel to them where there is a lot of red, they’re ‘revolutionary’, there’s always an idea of martyrdom, there is strong reference to Christian iconography. This work has similar elements but it’s much more of an Iraqi piece. The colors are sombre. There are a lot of blues and blacks and browns. It’s a much more personal work.”

Although displaying Sabri's signature style, fusing Soviet Realist techniques of composition with the figurative logics of the High Renaissance, Baghestani feels this painting is particularly important because of its keen nostalgia for Iraq, Sabri's home country to which he never returned because of disagreements with the Ba'athist group who took power following the revolution. The painting becomes, in this context, a complex political, religious, and human allegory.

"You have on the left of the painting Iraq's past, this young, Christ-like child that is dying in his mother's arms. The faces of the figures are much darker. And then you move to the right and you have these angelic figures that are overlooking the young generation. You have this child's face that is uncovered and lifted to a semi-Biblical status or semi-angelic status. I think he is looking towards the future of his country."

The work of Sabri and other prominent artists from the region is beginning to change attitudes and awareness of Middle Eastern modernism in the West, and their presence in the marketplace is growing, too. "Prices have gone up," says Baghestani. There are many reasons for this, but among them is "an element of rarity, you know. It's very hard for us to source good modern works like this Mahmoud Sabri because of the region's political instability. A lot of works end up being lost or they're hard for us to trace."

But it's still an emerging area of the art market in which significant and very high quality works are available at a relatively low price band. "The price point is still, I feel, very attractive to a young or established collector base. You can find some amazing modern works from the '50s and '60s where the quality, the historical reference, is there and the price point is still very low."

And it's important to consider these works as the valuable, beautiful works of modern art that they are, rather than as contemporary political artefacts from some ravaged zone. Yes, admits Baghestani, it's a relatively unstable region, and some of the art explores these concerns, but when asked to give advice to collectors new to Middle Eastern art, he's adamant that it's not all about politics. "A lot of it is quite ambiguous. It's quite subtle. Other artists are quite aggressive. But you have a majority of artists who decide to explore other means of expression and other sorts of influences. It's time to move away from this stigma around Middle Eastern art as politicized."

Sotheby's will be exhibiting the key pieces from the sale from the 25th of April, ahead of the sale on the 30th. The results of the auction will be a barometer of the continued progression of Middle Eastern art in what Baghestani calls "a very exciting time."