

Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World

The International Council for Women in the Arts (ICWA)
The National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA)

Washington, D.C. -- December 1993
The National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) and the International Council for Women in the Arts (ICWA) are pleased to present the exhibition *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World*, which brings together works by seventy accomplished modern painters and sculptors from fifteen Arab countries. Arabs today are citizens of twenty-one states in the Near East and North Africa. While Arabs share a history, culture and language, the Arab world is vast, with a population of over 250 million people, and exceedingly diverse. It encompasses a wide range of ethnic groups, religious sects and political interests. Consequently, Arab artists today draw from a variety of sources and influences, Islamic art being only one of them. Among the other influences are prehistoric art and arts from the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Byzantium, and Africa.

Recognizing the region's rich history, major art exhibitions in the West have portrayed modern Arab women as keepers of the traditional forms embodied in textiles and embroidery. By contrast, *Forces of Change* highlights the contributions of Arab women to a flourishing, vibrant and modern civilization that exists in the region. These contributions serve as an antidote to the standard portrayal of Arab women as the passive victims of unchanging traditions and as inhabiting harems as Western imagination portrayed them a century ago. For the first time, this ground-breaking

exhibition presents Arab women as eloquent interpreters of the contemporary experience. The art on display amply demonstrates their growing self-awareness rooted in admiration, revulsion and resistance -- signifying a recognition of the complexities of their history and of the wider world they inhabit. Arab women artists are seizing the moment to make an imprint upon the forces of change in their lives. Their art, in celebration of life and in mourning of the destruction which surrounds them, confronts and alters the cultural constructs that stimulate the senses.

At the dawn of the 21st century we have yet to unveil our minds to explore and appreciate the art of the "other" for what it is, and not what we conceive it to be, in spite of the advances in mass communication. The artists in this exhibition empower the audience to appreciate and explore, to break the barriers and open the door to intercultural dialogue. The art is there to be admired, to evoke outrage or amusement, to elicit emotion and response. Most of all, it is here to communicate.

The Exhibition

Forces of Change clearly demonstrates the diversity of the Arab world. The exhibition includes 160 works by 70 artists from fifteen countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza, Saudi Arabia, Syria,

Sudan, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates. It also includes work by artists of Arab origin living in the United States and Europe. It is organized around four principle themes:

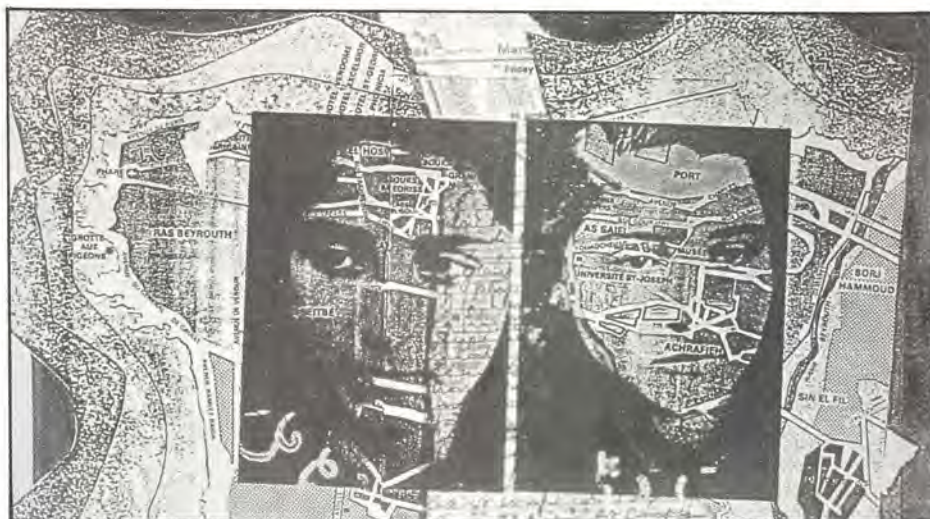
Rhythms of the Past presents artists who explore traditional or regional forms of expression. Their creation often revitalizes these ancient modes and include the use of local materials. Among the artists included here is Mounirah Mosly (Saudi Arabia), whose vividly colored and highly textured art focuses on symbols common to the region extending from the mountains of Asir to the villages of Nubia. The work of Thuraya al-Baqsam (Kuwait) is inspired by early Islamic miniatures and manuscripts. The art of Baya Mahieddine (Algeria) is grounded in the Arab-Berberi-Andalusian culture of her native Algeria. Her imagery refers to mysticism, paganism and Islamic ornamentation. Baya was only sixteen when her talent was recognized in 1947 by André Breton and Pablo Picasso.

Image and the Word offers contemporary interpretations of Arabic script and artworks in which language is a primary visual element. Etel Adnan (Lebanon) is an excellent example of an artist who uses poetry handwritten in Arabic, instead of calligraphy, to produce painted works that demonstrate her individualism. Wijdan Ali (Jordan) and Madiha Umar (Iraq) also free the Arabic letter from classical Arabic calligraphy, creating abstract shapes that give the word a new artistic identity.

Present Reflection includes works that demonstrate how artists in the Arab world have integrated the language of modern art into their own visual cultures. Gazbia Sirry's (Egypt) spontaneous, original use of color, for example, is drawn from the blue and greens of the Red Sea. Suad al-Attar (Iraq) creates a visual excitement using the Mesopotamian symbols of medieval Baghdad, and Layla Muraywid (Syria) combines handmade paper with natural dyes, fabric and earth to produce mystical images of icons that evoke a sense of both the ancient and the ecological.

Forces of Change presents art that deals with the geopolitical and social problems of daily life in the Middle East, from issues of armed confrontation and human rights violations to concern for the environment. Among the artists represented are Rabia Sukkarieh (Lebanon), who exposes the complexities of personal consciousness in a multi-dimensional, open-ended narrative installation, *Sheherezade 101*. Houria Niati's (Algeria) paintings of women question the exotic stereotype created by Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* and perpetuated by modern Western art. Liliane Karnouk (Egypt) expresses her rage at the environmental violence of the Gulf War through mixed media pieces incorporating bark and papyrus, canvas, paint and photographs. Leila al-Shawa (Palestine) records current events by reproducing graffiti from the walls of Gaza in large-scale photosilkscreen prints.

After its debut at NMWA, where it will be the Seventh Annual Gala Exhibition, *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World* will travel to venues in Boston, Atlanta and Miami.



The Image of the Word. By Bacho, Gianne Makki. Lebanon. 1985

Education Programs

They included a symposium "Forces of Change: Arab Women Reshape Their Reality," On Saturday, February 12, 1994 with distinguished speakers from the Middle East and North Africa. Leading figures in literature, art, medicine, environment, government, and public policy assessed the leadership role women have played in these areas.

A teacher workshop, **Women of the Arab World: Curriculum Strategies and Resources**, was also scheduled in February. The all-day program, offered strategies and resources for teaching about the Arab world and the roles that women in it.

February to April - Film Series
Several feature and documentary films by Arab women will be presented including: *Permissible Dreams* (1983) by Egyptian film maker Atteyat El Abnoudi; *Wild Flowers: Women of South Lebanon* (1986) by Palestinian film maker Mai Masri; and *The Razor's Edge* (1985) by Lebanese film maker Jocelyn Saab.

On Saturday, April 16, 1994, **Exploring the Arab World: A Family**

Day will offer demonstrations of weaving and calligraphy, film and other events for the entire family. For additional information, or to make reservations for programs, please contact the education department at (202) 783-7370.

Exhibition Catalogue

The Forces of Change exhibition catalogue will serve as a valuable resource for those seeking current information about contemporary art by women in the Arab world. This sumptuously illustrated, 148-page volume includes essays by distinguished experts, including Laura Nader, Todd B. Potterfield and Wijdan Ali. It introduces the reader to the development of art in the Arab world and the vital role women have played, and continue to play, in the cultural life of the area.

About ICWA: The International Council for Women in the Arts (ICWA) was established to encourage, initiate and implement projects that help promote the art of women from the Middle East, Africa and Asia. The organization, which was founded in 1990, develops and maintains information on women artists as a



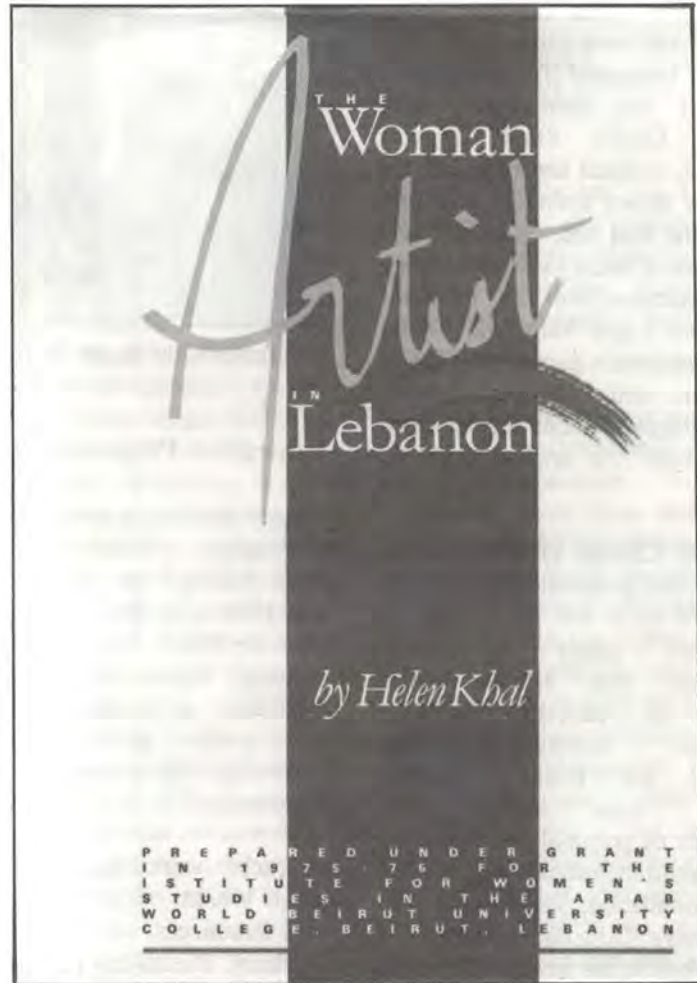
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resource for art institutions and universities in the United States. Working as a liaison between artists and institutions, ICWA seeks to open new channels for educational and cultural exchange between American audiences and the Arab world.

About the Museum: The National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) is a private, non-profit museum established in 1981 to recognize the outstanding achievements of women in the visual and performing arts. Through exhibitions, educational programs and publications, NMWA enhances awareness of women's artistic endeavors. The museum's permanent collection consists of over 1,500 pieces by approximately 500 women artists from 28 countries. The works date from the Renaissance to the present and encompass a broad range of styles, media and perspectives. The National Museum of Women in the Arts is committed to celebrating the contributions of women the world over. This exhibition is the latest in an ongoing program of yearly international exhibitions which have highlighted the art of Greece, Great Britain, Japan, Korea, Belgium and Brazil since 1987 •

For more information about Forces of change: Artists of the Arab World, contact ICWA, Arab Women Artists Exhibit, P.O.Box 226, Lafayette, CA. 94549, USA or call (510) 256-0808, Fax (510) 944-9479.

Women Artists in Lebanon



Women Artists in Lebanon opens with an introduction of 20 pages analyzing the status of the Lebanese woman as woman and artist, followed by interviews with a selected group of 12 pioneers in the plastic arts which include painting, sculpture and ceramics. The book contains ten pages of biographical data on the artists. Sponsored by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), Khal's book is a well studied treatise that describes in some depth the work of 12 Arab women artists residing in Lebanon.

More importantly, through the study of these articles, Khal draws some interesting conclusions about the role of the female artists in the development of modern art in the Arab world and of the society in which that art developed •

Women Artists in Lebanon can be order from the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, Beirut University College, P.O.Box 13-5053, Beirut, Lebanon. Fax: (01) 867 098. Or BUC, 475 Riverside Drive, Rm. 1847, New York, NY 10115. Fax: (212) 870-2762.