



## ARABÉCÉDAIRE

HAMED ABDALLA (1917–1985) WAS A PIONEER OF EGYPTIAN MODERNISM. A SELF-TAUGHT ARTIST FROM A MODEST PEASANT FAMILY OF UPPER EGYPT, HE ROSE TO PROMINENCE EARLY IN HIS CAREER. ABDALLA'S WORK CENTRED ON HIS DEVELOPMENT OF WHAT HE CALLED THE 'CREATIVE WORD', WRITTEN WORDS EXPRESSED IN PAINT, BLENDING ABSTRACTION AND HUMAN FORMS. *ARABÉCÉDAIRE* EXPLORES HIS EXTENSIVE AND PREVIOUSLY UNSEEN ARCHIVES, LOOKING AT HIM BOTH AS AN ARTIST AND AS A RESEARCHER.

THE TITLE OF THE EXHIBITION IS ROOTED IN THE FRENCH WORD ABÉCÉDAIRE MEANING A VISUAL ALPHABET PRIMER. ABDALLA PAINTED SOME WORDS REPEATEDLY IN HIS WORK, EXPERIMENTING WITH DIFFERENT WAYS OF EXPRESSING THE WORD FORMS. THE EXHIBITION LOOKS AT SIX WORDS THROUGH WHICH THE ARTIST DEVELOPED HIS VISUAL LANGUAGE AND POLITICAL IDEAS: LOVERS, NUBIA, REVOLUTION, CAVES, LETTERISM, KLEE.

ABDALLA TRAVELLED WIDELY, AND LIVED BETWEEN CAIRO, COPENHAGEN AND PARIS. THIS EXHIBITION EXPLORES THE ARTIST'S TRANSNATIONAL JOURNEYS, REVEALING HOW HIS WORK POSES A FASCINATING CHALLENGE TO ORIENTALIST REPRESENTATIONS.

THE EXHIBITION'S CURATOR, MORAD MONTAZAMI COMMENTS: 'I CONSIDER HAMED ABDALLA THE EPITOME OF ARAB COSMOPOLITANISM. HE WENT BEYOND THE EAST AND WEST ABSTRACT CATEGORIES, TO SET UP A NEW LANGUAGE OF WHAT HE CALLED 'LETTERIST EXPRESSIONISM' (USING THE WRITTEN WORD AS A MEANS TO EXPERIMENT WITH COLOUR, TEXTURE AND ABSTRACTION). IN ABDALLA'S PAINTINGS AND ARCHIVES WE SEE A WHOLE UNDERGROUND ART HISTORY TAKE ON A LIFE OF ITS OWN.'

WE ARE DELIGHTED TO PRESENT THE FIRST SOLO EXHIBITION IN THE UK OF THIS MULTIFACETED ARTIST.

## HAMED ABDALLA



Hamed Abdalla (1917–1985) a self taught artist, gained public recognition early in his career. He had his first solo exhibition in 1941, before going on to show widely throughout Egypt in the 1940s including a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art Cairo (1949). His first trip to Paris saw him exhibit at the Gallery Bernheim-Jeune (1950), followed by a group show at Palais Du Louvre, and a show at Egyptian Institute, London (1951). From the mid 1950s he was exhibiting throughout Europe, the US and Asia, including a group show at the Metropolitan Museum, New York (1956). He left Egypt for Copenhagen in 1956 but was committed to the pan Arab movement. He exhibited widely in the Middle East and North Africa. Solo shows included National Museum of Damascus (1967), Gallery One, Beirut (1968); collective exhibitions included an exhibition for Palestine, UNESCO, Paris (1982) and 'Contemporary Arab Art', Museum of Modern Art, Tunis (1984).

## TENTH ANNIVERSARY SERIES

'We are delighted to celebrate our tenth anniversary through a special programme of exhibitions that will offer the chance to both look back and look forward. This exhibition is the first of a three part series curated by Morad Montazami entitled *Cosmic Roads: Relocating Modernism* presenting important modernist artists from three countries, Egypt, Iran and Morocco. The programme will also feature a series of group shows of contemporary art from these three countries organised in partnership with regional institutions and curators. These alternating strands of contemporary and modernist exhibitions will aim to create new connections and dialogues between the artists, curators, institutions, audiences and The Mosaic Rooms. We hope you will follow the series with us over this year and next.'

Rachael Jarvis, Director of The Mosaic Rooms

## COSMIC ROADS: RELOCATING MODERNISM

This curatorial platform aims to present a series of exhibitions and publications highlighting the artistic and intellectual legacies of key modern Arab and Iranian artists, mainly within the postcolonial context of the 1950–1970s. Exploring their contribution towards a wider art history, beyond their primary role as painters and sculptor but as researchers, critics, designers, photographers, political activists and more. The word 'cosmic' acts as a reminder of the word 'cosmopolitan' and refers to the internationalist discourse the project will reveal, showing how artistic journeys can be real as well as imaginary.

Hamed Abdalla is the first exhibition in the series, and will be followed by Bahman Mohasses (28 September–8 December 2018) Mohamed Melehi (12 April–22 June 2019)

Thanks to Chloe Bonnie More, assistant curator, and Pooya Abbasian, video production.

**This exhibition series is supported by**  
Maria Sukkar, Driss and Heli Ben Brahim, Yasser Hashem and a number of generous supporters who wished to remain anonymous.

## PUBLIC PROGRAMME

### CURATOR TOUR **Cosmic Roads** Saturday 14 April, 2pm **FREE**

Curator Morad Montazami leads a tour of the current exhibition, *ARABÉCÉDAIRE* by Egyptian modernist painter Hamed Abdalla. Montazami will offer an insight into Abdalla's work and his extensive archive and into his own research process for the exhibition.

### FILM SCREENING **Zerda and the Songs of Forgetting** Thursday 19 April, 7pm **£6.50**

Olivier Hadouchi presents two evenings of films that try to re-think, re-invent and re-open visions and perceptions of history and modernity. Starting with *Zerda and the Songs of Forgetting* (1982) by Assia Djebar. Screening followed by a Q&A with Olivier Hadouchi.

### PANEL DISCUSSION **Pan-Arabism Revisited** Wednesday 25 April, 7pm **FREE**

What was Pan Arabism and what is its legacy? The panel will explore the movement's popularity in the 1950s and 60s and examine what Pan Arabism means in a contemporary context post The Arab Spring.

### FAMILY FUN **ABC** Saturday 28 April, 2pm **FREE**

The launch of our new monthly series of family sessions. Artist Dia Batal leads drawing, collage and body mapping activities. Sessions last an hour and a half. Children must be accompanied by an adult. Suitable for ages 4–10 years.

### TALK **Signs of Our Times** Wednesday 2 May, 7pm **FREE**

Rose Issa, Venetia Porter and other special guests join this discussion on calligraphy, Hurufiyya and Letterism examining the modernist and contemporary iterations of these art forms in Arab and Iranian art practises.

### TOUR **Interactions** Thursday 10 May, 7pm **FREE**

A new series of walking tours through our current exhibitions. Curator Rose Lejeune will explore the exhibition and engage with the display in conversation with Dr Danah Abdulla, designer and researcher.

### BOOK LAUNCH **Hamed Abdalla: ARABÉCÉDAIRE** Saturday 19 May, 4pm **FREE**

Zamân Books in collaboration with The Mosaic Rooms launch this new book on Hamed Abdalla. Morad Montazami reflects on the artist's incredible archive and his legacy in discussion with the books contributors, curators Kristine Khouri and Clare Davies.

### LECTURE PERFORMANCE **Chicken Scribbles and the Dove that Looks like a Frog** Wednesday 23 May, 7:30pm **FREE**

Artist Samah Hijawi takes a playful look at art and political histories of 1970s Palestine. Her performance weaves an account mixing fact and fiction to question representation and nostalgia and challenges this romanticised era with its failures.

### FAMILY FUN **Dancing the Dabke** Saturday 26 May, 2pm **FREE**

Dancer Jamila Boughelaf leads this workshop where children will learn the basic steps of Palestinian dabke, a joyful and defiant traditional Arab folk dance. Together they will create simple dances to upbeat and refreshing rhythms.

### DISCUSSION **Relocating Modernism** Thursday 31 May, 7pm **FREE**

Morad Montazami and Art Reoriented curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath lead a panel discussion about non-western art histories and modernism in the Arab world. Reflecting on artists and intellectuals who travelled and created work in dialogue with global modernism.

### FRIDAY LATE **Love & Revolution** Friday 1 June, 7pm **FREE**

Enjoy the current exhibition at The Mosaic Rooms after hours at this Friday late opening. With drinks at the bar, music, and a special interactive dance performance by Zosia Jo created in response to works in the exhibition.

### WORKSHOP **Egyptian Rhythm Drumming Workshop** Wednesday 6 June, 7pm **£10**

An uplifting and fun introductory workshop in Nubian/Egyptian frame drumming with percussionist and specialist in Arabic drumming, Tim Garside. Suitable for all ages.

### OPEN WEEKEND **Open Garden Squares** Saturday 9–Sunday 10 June, 11am–6pm **FREE**

The Mosaic Rooms opens all weekend for this London wide event. Visitors can relax in the gallery's urban garden and view the exhibition by Hamed Abdalla. *What the Fattoush?* will be serving delicious vegan Palestinian food in the garden on Sunday.

### FILM SCREENING **The Hundred Faces of One Day & A Feeling greater than Love** Thursday 14 June, 7pm **£6.50**

This film double bill opens with Christian Ghazi's *The Hundred Faces of One Day* (1972) an avant-garde film of Palestinian resistance fighters. It is followed by 2017 documentary *A Feeling Greater Than Love* which uncovers the history of factory protests in 1970s Lebanon. Curated by Olivier Hadouchi.

### PERFORMANCE **Mounir Fatmi: The Missing Show** Thursday 21 June, 7:30pm **FREE**

Artist Mounir Fatmi stages a performance about his decision not to attend a 2017 exhibition of his work in the U.S in light of the travel restrictions, and the experience of encountering his own exhibition through social media and the gaze of strangers. Performed by Hillary Keegin.

### FAMILY FUN **Singing Arabic songs together** Saturday 23 June, 2–3.30pm **FREE**

A children's introduction to Arabic song led by musician and broadcaster Reem Kilani. Reem's friendly bi-lingual approach means Arabic and non-Arabic speakers can have fun and sing together.

## THE MOSAIC ROOMS

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### CAFÉ

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for Lovers

N

for Nubia

R

for Revolution

C

for Caves

L

for Letterism

K

for Klee



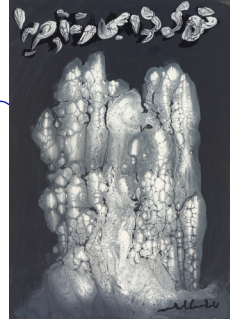
Lovers with Writings, 1983, scratched photographic negative



The House and Streetlight, 1955, ink drawing



Revolution, 1968, mixed media on canvas



Caves series, 'Were you to be in stone or metal'  
(Kuran sura 17, Al Isra, verse 50), 1975, acrylic on paper



Al-Harb (war), 1963, mixed media on crumbled silk paper on hardboard



Soil Consciousness, 1956, mixed media on paper

Abdalla made numerous paintings of *Lovers* and of the word desire (Hob) throughout his life. These were created against the backdrop of two great loves. He met the Egyptian artist, Tahia Halim in 1942 and they married in 1945. During their time together, Egypt experienced the violent ruptures of the Nasserian revolution in 1952, and the Suez Canal crisis in 1956. Through Abdalla's exhibition in Paris and a joint exhibition in London, in 1951, the couple symbolised the dreams of emancipation carried by the Egyptian revolution.

Abdalla met Kirsten Blach, the Danish mother of his children in 1956, when she was working as a nurse in Paris. They led a cosmopolitan life as part of the neo-avant-garde groups of the time from African, American and Arab worlds. These groups had relocated to European cities such as Copenhagen or Paris and created new connections, for example the Afro-American Harlem Renaissance artists with CoBra artists. Hamed and Kirsten lived in the Danish capital for ten years and then in the French capital where the couple finally settled in 1966.

Lovers also represented metaphorically, two letters becoming one – as in Abdalla's prints showing two figures taking sexual positions (reminiscent of the *Kama-Sutra*) and in the micro-space of this photographic negative (pictured) where Abdalla scratched the outlines of two lovers on woven into each other in delicate strands of text.

Egypt, and particularly the villages and landscapes of the Nubian region (Southern Egypt towards Sudan) are the inspirational source of Abdalla's aesthetics. Travelling in the area as a young man, Abdalla depicted it through the *fellah* or peasant figure, the Nubian popular houses and by drawing on the visual vernacular of the mural tradition. These Nubian influences represented a feeling of belonging, and became a fusion of fantasy and reality in later years for the exiled artist.

When the galleries, cultural centres and biennials (the First Alexandria Biennial took place in July 1955) were burgeoning in Egypt, Abdalla was charting a new path exhibiting abroad. Yet in Sicily he encountered an unexpected mirror reflecting back to this point of origin. When exhibiting his work in the Baroque city of Palermo, Abdalla (re)discovered his own Nubian figures, seeing resemblance in the details of the Palatine Chapel's ceiling and the Arab-Norman style, displayed in archive material here. For Abdalla this was a striking experience in his quest for transcultural and trans-Arab signs, signs that reached across cultures.

This sketch (pictured) of a village scene was used on the front of an exhibition booklet in Denmark in 1959.

Abdalla's work is resonant with the political struggles that took place in his lifetime. He participated actively in what was then referred to as the Third World (the non-aligned countries who were not allied to NATO countries or the Soviet Union). His art sought a "third space", a space that would give a new voice to the hopeless and the oppressed, far beyond Egypt, connecting the post-colonial nations seeking independence and freedom.

Abdalla was engaged in the Palestinian struggle which was also the cause informing all pan-Arab artistic networks of that time. He created a series of paintings of resonant and stirring words, mixing revolutionary ideals with erotic representations, exhibited at the National Museum of Modern Art, Damascus (1967), and at Gallery One, Beirut (1968) – he also had one painting in the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, Beirut (1978). These words, Revolution, Uprising, Martyrs, Slavery, Hope, are resonant with the political struggles of the time, but are also metaphors for the question 'how does one become Arab?'

The word Revolution (Thowra) in this image (pictured) is bold and dynamic, implying the energy of revolutionary spirit it fills the canvas. This iteration was painted in 1968 a year of protest and civil disobedience internationally, most famously in France.

Abdalla's abiding interest in prehistoric caves and "subterranean worlds" attests to his abiding feeling for natural history. For him, the cave represented a source of complex physical phenomena, and spontaneous beauty, which provoked his own pictorial experiments in attempting to capture them. His representations of caves involved multiple materials, substances and textures, shifted from crumpled paper to torn and cracked surfaces. Abdalla's identification with those dark places in southern France, and the rocks of Nubia during his youth, were of places of visual experimentation. The cave was also significant as a symbol, a place of temporary refuge for the person in exile.

Abdalla connected caves with the sacred in a series of paintings incorporating text from the Quran. In this image (pictured) the natural forms of the rock bloom and dissolve into darkness on the canvas beneath the text above.

As a young man Abdalla trained as a calligrapher before becoming a visual artist. The use of the word in his art was a more radical and wide-ranging concern. He explored the roots and functions of writing in all its forms: esoteric, militant or even children's writing.

Abdalla theorised about the eroticism of the letter. In his paintings sexual positions and the written form of the word become interchangeable and emancipated. He went beyond the discussions of his day, around the aesthetics of the Hurufiyyah, a movement based around the re-appropriation of the Arabic letter in modernist art. He also maintained a dialogue with European Letterist groups (Letterism was a French avant-garde art movement which began in the 1940s with an initial focus on the use of letters and symbols, dealing with phonetic poetry). Abdalla's personal conception of 'Arab Letterism' was deeply experimental, neither intended to be decorative, nor commercial. His own research culminated in his invention of the 'creative word', where he merged word and image, the figurative and the abstract, the secular and the sacred.

This painting *War (Al Harb)* from 1963, depicts the word 'war', as a bull or a God of war (associated by Abdalla with capitalism, imperialism and Zionism). Here it is shown abandoned, in an immense space of ashes and ruin, a reminder of the Palestinian Nakba of 1948 and the Suez crisis of 1956 in which Israel followed by the UK and France invaded Egypt.

Abdalla's archives reveal his visual dialogue with western artists, documenting his research and classification of western ways of looking at 'oriental' arts. He was interested less in listing the signs of that exoticism, which he found in the work of western artists, than by an inter-subjective process. He explored Japanese art through the art of Van Gogh and re-approached Egyptian art through the work of Kandinsky.

Paul Klee played the leading role in this imaginary dialogue. Abdalla re-Egyptianised Klee, pointing to the Egyptian elements appropriated by the Bauhaus artist, turning them into trans-cultural images. Taking Klee's image *Drummer* (1940), he subjected it to other indigenous American and African cultural influences.

The work *Soil Consciousness* (pictured) from 1956 remains one of Abdalla's masterpieces as a site for visual debate between European modernism and contested local and folk aesthetics. Through these kinds of works he re-appropriated the codes of primitivism in order to reclaim them for a grassroots and non-elitist form of modernism.

All artworks and documents in the exhibition courtesy  
Hamed Abdalla Family Estate and Hamed Abdalla Archives.

HAMED ABDALLA  
13/04/18–23/06/18

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ÉCÉD  
AIRE

the  
mosaic  
rooms

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