



## THE WEIGHT OF THE WORD

In Part II of our language-themed issue, we move beyond decipherable meaning and into the realm of deconstructed text. Starting with a compact history of asemic writing in art, from the ancients in the East to the abstractionists in the West, we deep dive into the regional variation of Lettrism known as *Hurufiyya*. We learn that Cy Twombly's scribbles can be seen in Arabic script, and letters can morph into human bodies. Words are layered, repeated, written backwards, or broken down with the artists we feature, all of whom obscure language as a form of abstract art.

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# Forming Words and Word-Forms

*ARABÉCÉDAIRE*, a play on the French word 'Abécédaire' (a visual alphabet primer), was the title of a recent solo show at The Mosaic Rooms in London on Hamed Abdalla (1917–1985), the influential and self-taught Egyptian modernist, which ran until 23 June. Curated by **Morad Montazami**, the exhibition showcased the artist's gestural and anthropomorphic word-forms that introduced an idiosyncratic visual vocabulary to the art world. Here, Montazami argues that Abdalla's practice was rooted not only in his own culture but in a broader sense of cosmopolitanism.

Hamed Abdalla: *ARABÉCÉDAIRE* was the first chapter of the project *Cosmic Roads: Relocating Modernism*. As a curatorial platform, it aims to highlight the artistic and intellectual legacies of key modern Arab and Iranian artists by exploring their contribution towards a wider art history. With the exhibition space as a speculative tool to map out and re-enact these trajectories, the intention was for a timely reassessment of Abdalla as a creative figure who has been marginalized for too long.

Hamed Abdalla travelled widely, living between Cairo, Copenhagen and Paris, and assembled an outstanding archive, an encyclopedia of visual culture in the Arab world. My aim with this exhibition was to show how, by travelling, he gathered a 'cosmos' of vernacular and experimental knowledge and was rooted in different cities, continents, utopias and political struggles, exploring multiple artistic identities and sites of displacements. Initially trained in calligraphy in Egypt, he later settled in Copenhagen, where he went through a period of radical experimentation, influenced by the CoBrA artists and their concepts of primitivism and expressionist artistic forms, while remaining linked to the conflicts in Egypt and the Arab world. *Defeat* (1963), for example, is a key work that depicts the failures of the 1950s and 1960s with the Suez Crisis and Gamal Abdul Nasser's descent in a scorched painting of abstract calligraphy taking the form of beaten down silhouettes.

It's not just that Abdalla's work has been transformative for a whole generation of Arab artists. It also moves beyond the categories of 'East' and 'West' into a new visual and political

language that he referred to as 'Lettrist Expressionism', reinterpreted here as a 'Talismanic Modernism'. His attraction to the concept of the *talisman* is related to the notion of a *posteriori* knowledge (as opposed to preconceived knowledge) and also to the analogy between the shape of the painting and the structure of a cartouche, in which a name (divine or secular) is inscribed. He evoked this concept – at once numerological, ritual and chromatic – in all his work from the 1950s onwards. With the symbol of the talisman, he pursued Lettrist hieroglyphics, an adventure that was at once esoteric and erudite, speculative and narrative, like a sequence of numbers that we are asked to first *recognise* and *interpret*, rather than read or contemplate.

The six talismans around which the exhibition was sequenced – Lovers, Nubia, Revolution, Caves, Klee and Lettrism – can be seen as six ways in which Abdalla found forms of expression as a restless Arab militant of the sacred word in art. These divisions express his multiple lives and resist a linear or biographical trajectory. Engaged in the Palestinian struggle, he created a series of 'creative word' paintings of stirring concepts (Revolution, Uprising, Martyrs, Slavery) that mixed revolutionary ideals with erotic representations, blending abstraction with human forms and merging word with image. These were first exhibited at the National Museum of Modern Art, Damascus in 1967, and then in Beirut at Gallery One and at the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, in 1968 and 1978, respectively. They not only resonated with the conflicts around him, but are also metaphors for the existentialist question: "How does one *become Arab*?"

Hamed Abdalla. *Revolution (Thowra)*. 1968. Mixed media on canvas. Image courtesy of The Hamed Abdalla Family Estate



Hamed Abdalla. *Torn (Al-Tamazuq)*. 1973. Acrylic on paper and canvas. Image courtesy of the Hamed Abdalla Family Estate



Exhibition view of Hamed Abdalla's works at *ARABÉCÉDAIRE* at The Mosaic Rooms, 2018. Image courtesy of The Mosaic Rooms. Photography by Andy Stagg

