

# WAKE UP BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE: THE ART OF MIDDLE EASTERN WOMEN

BY OMAR KHOLEIF



Etel Adnan, *Mount Tamalpais*, 2013. © Etel Adnan. Courtesy: the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York



Etel Adnan, *Untitled*, undated. © Etel Adnan. Courtesy: the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York

Omar Kholeif explores the artistic research and practices of a heterogeneous landscape of pioneering artists who created a historical and cultural heritage, opening up different interpretations and visions in the history of art. The author proposes a “new contra-colonial discourse,” in which a set of practices must be not only seen, but historicized. Is it too late? Maybe not.





Anna Boghiguan, *Nefretiti*, 2013.  
Courtesy: the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut



Perhaps the art world has woken up. Or it woke up circa 2013 at Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's *DOCUMENTA (13)*, when she presented what was virtually a solo show of Etel Adnan, a Lebanese artist in her eighties who spent her life in Lebanon, France, and California. Known in America's literary underground as one of the great Arab American poets, she has also for decades merged her literary work with visual art, producing immaculate accordion-like books called *leporellos*, where poems are transcribed and illustrated in striking form. This practice also existed in her book works, such as in her landmark text *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989), which tells a poignant history of an Arab world attempting to heal itself from the wounds of conflict.



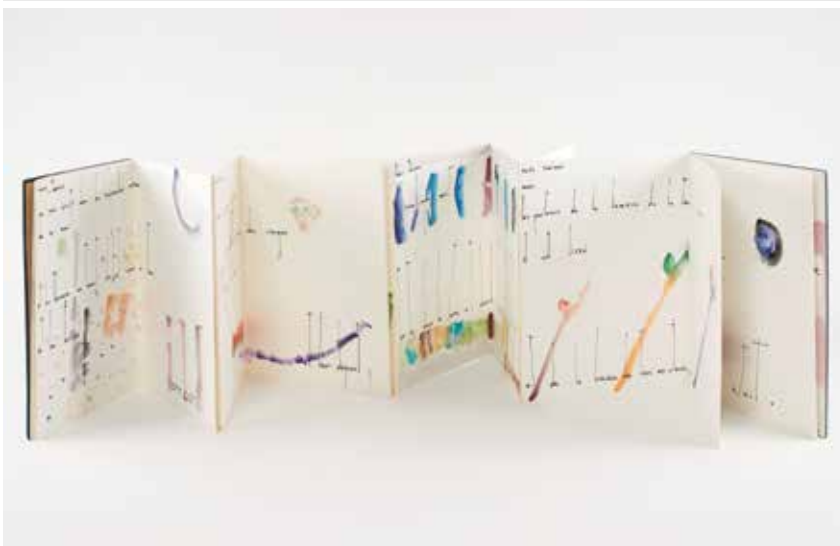
Above, from left - Etel Adnan, *Déjeuner au soleil*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana. Photo: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio; Etel Adnan, *Lumière Blanche*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana. Photo: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio

Adnan is also a great producer of magnificent large-scale tapestries, and is perhaps best known for her small, colorful landscape paintings, which capture the imagination with their childlike innocence. One of her primary subjects was Mount Tamalpais in the Bay Area, where she lived for many years with her partner and publisher, the artist Simone Fattal.

Adnan's presentation led to worldwide recognition, solo exhibitions, and a well-deserved increase in her market value. Her paintings of propositional and real landscapes, along with her evocative poetry, journalism, and novels, such as the landmark *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978)—a preemptive imagining of the results of Lebanese civil wars to come—construct what one can only call the “Arab imaginary,” an awareness of a united universe that emerged after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, where Arab countries were bound by a shared sense not only of ideology, but of “self.”



Left, from top - Etel Adnan, *Vibration 2*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut; Etel Adnan, *Wendell Berry*, 1963. Courtesy: the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut







Anna Boghiguan, *Nefretiti*, 2013.  
Courtesy: the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut





Anna Boghiguan, *In the world. East and West, North and South*, 2017.  
Courtesy: the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

Egyptian Armenian artist Anna Boghiguan, in a very different vein, uses a multiplicity of forms to tell stories of Egypt, where she lives and works. She uses watercolors on paper and collage to create critical renderings of what one could deem an Egyptian imaginary. In *Nefretiti* (2013), we see eyes morph into a mouth, an abyss perhaps, while a quintessential image of the great Egyptian queen is plastered into a corner. Boghiguan plays with the Egyptian imagination—an imagination that in the era of President Gamal Abdel Nasser led to what was deemed the Pan-Arab ideal, a dream of unity among all Arab countries, which was destroyed after the Arab-Israeli War of 1967.



Princess Fahrelnissa Zeid, *My Hell*, 1951. © Istanbul Museum of Modern Art Collection, Istanbul. Şirin Devrim and Prince Raad Donation

Also deconstructing and pushing the formal boundaries of the Arab imagination was Princess Fahrelnissa Zeid, a Turkish Jordanian Iraqi artist whose mammoth abstract paintings evoke Byzantine architectures, alongside her own personal interiority. One of her greatest paintings is a ginormous work more than five meters wide entitled *My Hell* (1951), created after the death of one of her closest relatives in Iraq. This inflection of emotion emerged from Fahrelnissa's troubled mental state, which was articulated recently in Adila Laïdi-Hanieh's epic memoir of the artist, released in 2017. Fahrelnissa's depression led to manic episodes, and her greatest respite was the canvas. I mention her complex state of mind because many of these artists were oppressed by a "state of mind" that withheld them from reaching the heights that their male peers attained, both within the Arab world and internationally, despite having studied at the same schools.





Anna Boghiguian, *In the world. East and West, North and South*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

For example, one of the great pioneers of Arab modernism and abstract art, the Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair, who passed away in 2017 at one hundred years of age, had been working since the 1940s and had not sold a single work until the 1960s. In 2013, again, a monumental year, Jessica Morgan mounted a precise and stunning exhibition of Choucair's work at Tate Modern in London. At the time, almost all of the works were in the care of the artist, specifically her daughter, Hala, who manages her mother's estate. This exhibition, rightfully, turned the dial and opened up both art historical interest and also a market for the work, which had never existed before. Choucair's sculptures and paintings are fantastical; she produced complex geometric abstractions using oil on canvas, such as *Two-One* (1947–51), where the geometric forms seem to be eating one another. *Infinite Structure* (1963–65), made out of tufa stone, presents a propositional architecture for a future Beirut.

One must pose the question: Why was everyone so late to the game? Why did we have to wait until 2013 to hear these names circulate in the Western world? And, just as importantly, why did it take the Western world's validation to create a context for these artists at home? The answers are seemingly straightforward. The postcolonial discourse of the 1990s emerged mostly in the UK, and these writings focused largely on diasporic artists living in Britain or holding a very specific connection to Britain. This did not necessarily extend broadly enough to dig deeply into the context of the Middle East, nor did it seek to unbuckle gender inequalities. This framework needed to be unfolded, and it arguably took a politics of "globalization"—of institutions seeking funding in foreign places—to create contexts through which curators could truly "look" at this work. Of course this argument is not ironclad, and to flesh it out would require a word count beyond what is possible here. What one can argue here is that there is a need for a new discourse that extends beyond the limits of post-colonial theory to what I dub to be a "contra-colonial" theory—one that takes into account the agency of artists who were working globally, and who have produced work that requires a re-evaluation, and which has the potency to inflect and shape our collective future understanding of art history.

To bring to the table a few more names of artists who continue to shift and contort my imagination. Huguette Caland, for example, has since the 1970s been outside the mainstream art world. The daughter of the first Lebanese postindependence president, she studied at around age thirty at the American



Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Two = One*, 1947–1951. Courtesy: Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

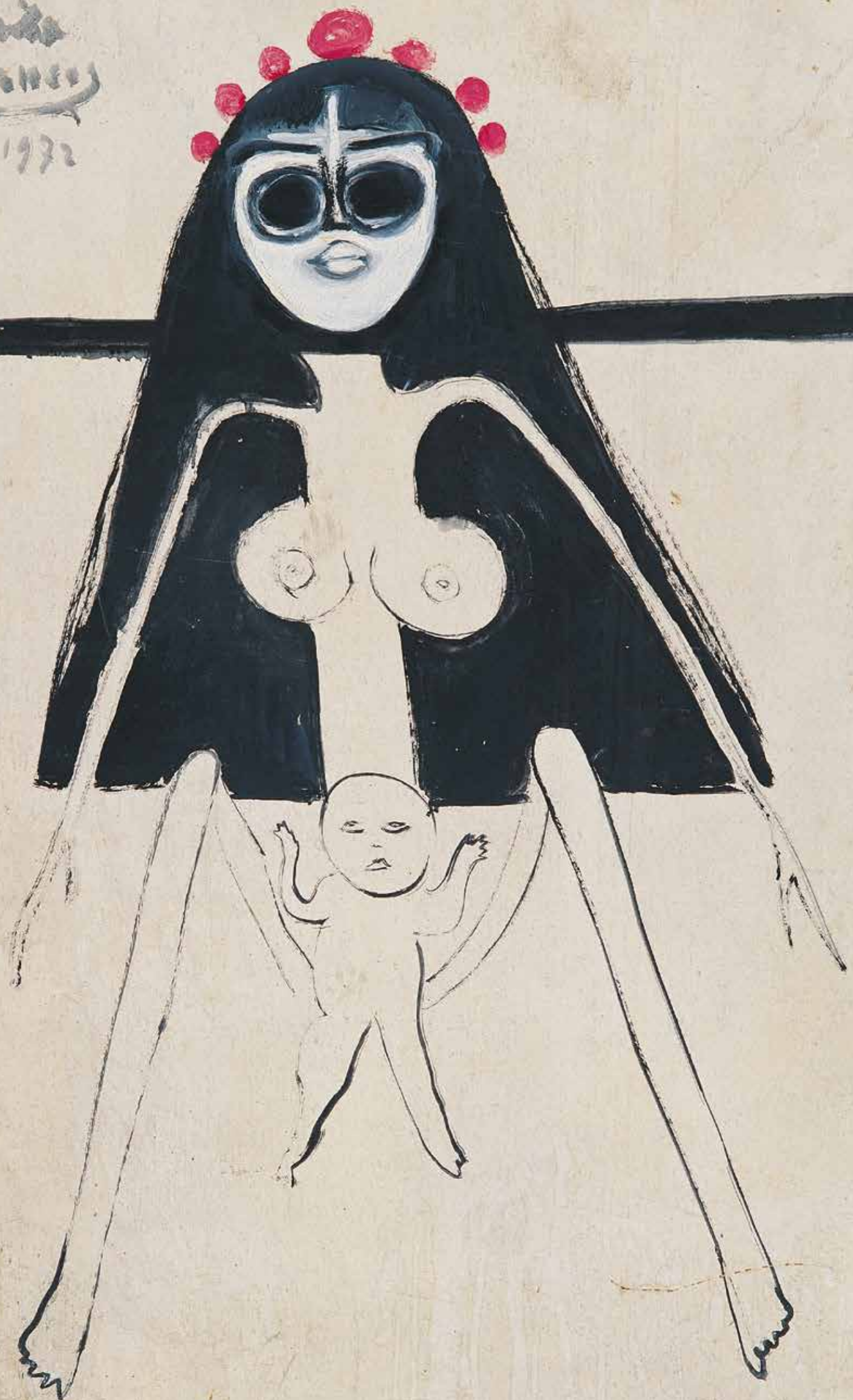


Above - Huguette Caland, *Self Portrait*, 1973.  
From the series *Bribes de corps*. Courtesy: the artist

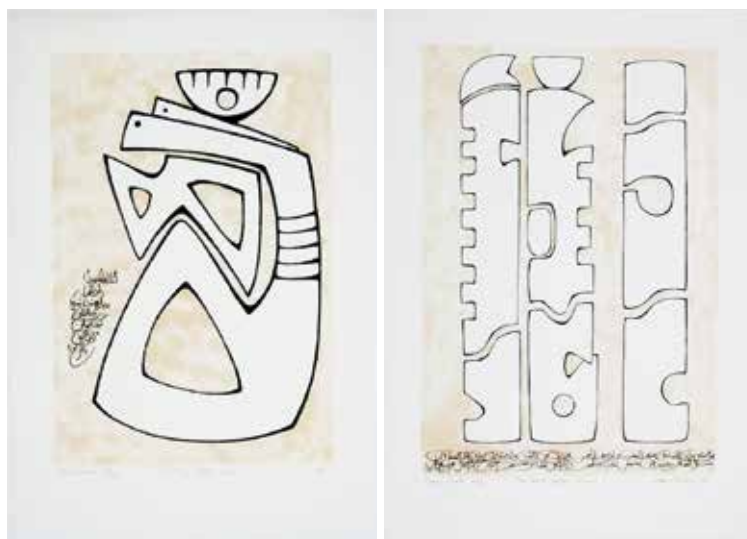
Opposite - Semiha Berksoy, *"Birth" My Mother*, 1972.  
Courtesy: Galerist, Istanbul



La madre  
Barnes  
29.5.1972







From left - Mona Saudi, *The Petra Tablets 10 - Adonis Collection*, 1997. © Mona Saudi. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai;  
Mona Saudi, *The Petra Tablets 6 - Adonis Collection*, 1997.  
© Mona Saudi. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai



Mona Saudi, *Homage to Brancusi (The Lovers)*, 1968.  
© Mona Saudi. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai



Monir Farmanfarmaian, *Octagon*, 2010. Courtesy: the artist and The Third Line, Dubai



University of Beirut, and focused on creating the perfect “line,” as Kaelen Wilson-Goldie mentions in a recent monograph. This line morphed and emerged into sumptuous erotic drawings, specifically in Caland’s *Bribes de Corps* series, where limbs and bodies appear in unusual positions—in sexual freedom, liberation, hiding. An artist’s imagination unfurled.



Huguette Caland, *Made in L.A.* installation view at Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2016.  
Courtesy: the artist and Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

Caland left Beirut for Paris before settling in Venice, California, where she became a doyenne of the Los Angeles art world. In Aram Moshayedi’s essay in the catalogue for the biennial exhibition *Made in L.A.*, where he and Hamza Walker dedicated an entire room to Caland’s work, it was mentioned that she was for many a kind of Gertrude Stein of the L.A. art world. Despite this supposed proposal, few, if any, in the Los Angeles or international art scene have talked about Caland until quite recently. Caland’s persistent explorations into

erotica and abstraction made her a pioneer in the field globally, but she has yet to have a major retrospective or solo show outside of a single exhibition in Lebanon at the Beirut Exhibition Center in 2013.

Maliheh Afnan, a Palestinian artist who lived in London and passed away in 2016 at age eighty, was also largely left out of both the Arab and British discourses around abstract art, despite her boundless output. Afnan produced charred cardboard pieces, which one could possibly call paintings, and works on paper with tiny script, which look like dark portals into a literary fantasy. She also made abstract black paintings and collages, all of which were rarely seen outside of the gallery of one of her biggest supporters, Rose Issa, a London-based dealer, curator, and art advisor. Afnan is now with the Dubai-based gallery Lawrie Shabibi.

Also working now with Lawrie Shabibi is the Jordanian artist Mona Saudi. Her meticulous sculptures, such as *Homage to Brancusi* (1968), a work in Carrara marble representing two perfectly interlocking bodies in an embrace, suggests an awareness, homage, and conversation with global modernism. Her *Petra Tablets* series (various dates), an art book unfolded into multiple drawings, inspired by and dedicated to the Syrian poet Adonis, are morphing nonfigurative contortions that evoke modernism’s tension between the abstract and the bodily.



Maliheh Afnan, *Omen*, 1978.  
Courtesy: the artist and Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai



Maliheh Afnan, *Lost City*, 1987.  
Courtesy: the artist and Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai



The geometric glass pieces by Iranian abstract artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian create a cinema of sorts with the body as their subject. Farmanfarmaian for a period lived in New York on Fifth Avenue, and was (and continues to be) friends with Frank Stella and other great abstract American artists of the time. Merging Islamic architectural motifs with nonconcrete modernist forms, Farmanfarmaian is still working in Iran, in her nineties, and is the first woman in Iran to have an entire museum dedicated to her work. Other female Iranian artists still remain out of view, such as Behjat Sadr, who passed away in 2009. Her thick, abstract paintings merge architectures, creating a phenomenological sensation between the canvas and the body.



Above - Nil Yalter, *Le Chevalier d'Eon* (stills), 1978. Courtesy: Galerist, Istanbul  
Opposite - Gülsün Karamustafa, *Prison Paintings 17*, 1972.  
Courtesy: the artist and BüroSarigedik, Istanbul. Photo: Artist's Archive

In Turkey, many artists have still gone relatively unnoticed. For example, Semiha Berksoy, an outsider artist, who happened to also be the country's first opera singer, produced works on canvas, board, and other substrates depicting the female body, often in sexualized form—exercising nudes, one could call them. Likewise, Nil Yalter, who at eighty is still in Turkey and actively working, was a pioneer of feminist art. In 1976 she produced a work entitled *Le Chevalier d'Eon*, a two-channel video of a man transitioning to female. In one moment the figure in the film shaves his chest, his breasts resting on a television screen. For a woman Middle Eastern artist to be making such work at this time speaks against the dominant oppressive narratives circulating in the popular media. Other Turkish artists warranting further

investigation include Gülsün Karamustafa, a seventy-one-year-old feminist artist. Much of her work has tackled gender issues. Another is Füsün Onur, whose multi-form, material abstractions with chains and rope and installation pieces evoke the absence of the body.

Certainly, there are many more figures that I have not mentioned here who merit further study. We require curators to take on the corrective task of examining their works and bringing them into the global discourse. That these female artists have been held back from audiences is no surprise. They emerged from countries that were largely colonized by the West, and later fell into the hands of dictators who created regimes where the circulation of art was not a priority, and where women were often marginalized. What shall we do? Write a PhD or curate a solo exhibition on every artist? Curate a group exhibition of these women's work? Collect their work in Western museums? The answer is yes to all of this. But what is required is a deeper form of intergenerational scholarly work that transcends the limits of boxing these artists into a hermetic seal of a

specific culture, and seeks to create a new contra-colonial discourse that takes into account the broader strata of artists whose work should be not only seen, but historicized.



