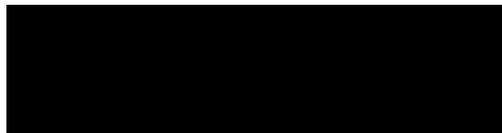


HELEN KHAL

*Gallery One
and Beirut
in the 1960s*



Omar Kholeif

*Fingers rake
the debris
of the past
recognition
of the Self*
— Maud Sulter, “Cadences,”
in *Zabat: Poetics of a Family Tree*, 1986–89

Looking from the Present

Maud Sulter was a Ghanian Scottish author, poet, theatermaker, and curator whose life, archive, and work gradually seemed to dissolve after her passing in 2008. In rediscovering her poem “Cadences,” I found not only a starting point for speaking of Helen Khal as a polymath who fashioned a view of Beirut in the 1960s, but also an affective perspective through which to begin a process of looking back in time, from the present tense. Both women, underexamined in the field of art history were multi-hyphenates with a persistent interest in lyric as it related to an embodied visual language, albeit being from vastly different geographic spheres and cultural backgrounds.

The sensibility of “looking” at history and its images is increasingly affected by social, political, and economic conditions weighted by a sense of perpetual anxiety—a longing to assume a comprehensive collection of the documents associated with a specific aesthetic history. Here I am invoking the spirited charge of the late curator Okwui Enwezor and his 2008 exhibition “*Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*,” at the International Center of Photography, New York—his rendering of Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, a treatise authored in the wake of the birth of electronic communication. In turn, our ontology as historians and spectators is now constructed through what is variously called an “age of anxiety,” the “era of new sincerity,” or a “crisis society.”¹ These are states where mourning for a lost past—in the case of this exercise, reflecting on a Beirut that no longer exists—can be fostered through a lens of lived and situated experience.² This publication seeks, through its various documents, to bring to life the myriad sensibilities that Helen Khal embodied. She was an individual who existed at the front end of the so-called golden period of Lebanese cultural history that emerged in the 1960s and flowed into the 1970s, until the outbreak of war in 1975, but who, for decades, was absent from the sanctioned field of canonical art and/or literary history.³

It has been no easy task attempting to scrutinize and develop a methodology for this context. Vitally, examining the artistic output of this

period through the world of Helen Khal offered an anchor. Khal’s life and art, much like this project, necessitates an act of “female worlding”—an imaginative animation of the social, economic, and juridical strictures that have historically and continually been imposed on women in much of the world. Khal’s pursuits, from art criticism to teaching, curating to painting, were developed through a constellation of networks. An examination of her archives—her art criticism, her love letters to Chafic Abboud, her correspondence with both her chameleonic mentor Aref El Rayyes and her student Farid Haddad—could read like nostalgia, or rather, reveal indices of survival. Here they exist as reconstituted threads to and of a life that has continually been obscured at multiple junctures.

The exhibition “At the still point of the turning world, there is the dance,” curated by Carla Chammas and Rachel Dedman at the Sursock Museum as part of the critical forum Home Works 8 (2019), portrayed the cultural exchange that existed in Beirut during the 1960s. The concept of nostalgia here can be used as a disciplinary tool to interrogate the ways in which a now seemingly analogous material culture literally colors and contours one’s perception. Chammas and Dedman’s practice of curating—of foraging, arranging, categorizing, untangling, presenting, and subsequently documenting—was accompanied by the sensuous pleasures of research into an era that seemed to have disappeared.

What is revealed is something akin to what Susan Sontag articulated as a “symptomatic society.”⁴ It is an ecosphere where the subaltern subject, often female, is relegated to the “world of the sick,” left swimming for dear life, constantly displaced, much like the art histories that I have examined here and elsewhere. Michel Foucault articulated that the structures of power, what we now dub “complexes,” emerge from everywhere. They are not sovereign or self-contained; rather, power is accepted through the forms of knowledge that dominate society, which are thus rendered as truth.⁵ But whose “truth” do we speak to and from?

In my work, through the practice of organizing, ordering, displaying, arranging, and rearranging, indexing, and archiving, I have come to ask myself the following: What does a responsive act of gazing, from within a culturally situated context, look like? And can there be an expression of meaningful dissonance that allows for an emphasis on the individual? Or is our ontology merely a manifestation, a contouring of an arbitrary notion of perceived power, as some poststructuralist thinkers once believed and/or argued?⁶

My schooling focused on how a particular group of thinkers was able to create an organizational methodology that resisted subjugation through the construction of meta-languages. Those anointed as post-structuralist (some formerly structuralist), and later to be postmodern—from the likes of Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and Foucault—encouraged a process of decryption, or perhaps more aptly, of resisting the universal concept of truth. The very notion of ontology—of being in the world and existing within its confines or a predetermined set of frameworks—was a standard that such individuals often rejected. Thus, I begin this brief history by contesting the notion of collective society in favor of focusing on one collective anchored by one individual. Via the prolific sensibility of Helen Khal, the reader is able to consider this specific culture—one that has been elided by the canon.

My approach is partly aided by the current theoretical interval we find ourselves in. The cultural theorists Ariella Aïsha Azoulay and Saidiya Hartman have prompted a decoding of the canonical ordering principles of modern-day institutions. Deploying concepts such as “potential history” and “critical fabulation” to interpret the structuring and epistemic exclusion of unreliable narrators, which, as Azoulay points out, includes but is not limited to encyclopedic museums, national archives, and public libraries as well as government agencies and policy think tanks. These confines—these mausoleums, if you will—are inherited, and in need of reimagining.⁷ Questions of language and indigeneity, the ethics of and how research into histories of fabulation are articulated, unfold throughout this book’s pages through acts of accrual and ordering. It has been my goal through the structuring of this book, and indeed this essay, to operate outside the bounds of what the political theorist Nancy Fraser refers to as “the hegemony of progressive neo-liberalism”⁸ in favor of a situated field where the reader can choose to “fill in the gaps” with the tools of the imagination.⁹

Let’s consider this a reversal of the present-day cause and effect. Not a world where of culture where a small group of funders and institutions shape how art is seen and who is entitled to see it, but rather one where we can remake it from the ground up.¹⁰

Art and Life in Lebanon

Halt your speculating. I would like to propose a form of reimagination—of a different, nonimperial history, a hypothetical history, for Lebanon, and Beirut. What would it look like? In this world, certain “power structures” and state entities have been summoned to pay for reparations—for stolen artifacts, for shelled museum buildings, the dollars in banks that no longer exist. Indeed, amendments to historical record do not simply exist in the “return” or restitution of art objects, but they also exist in the form of their narration. For it is through art’s propulsive storytelling that the phenomenological and sensuous pleasures of objects can be made manifest. Carla Chammas and Rachel Dedman, much like Khal herself, conducted their research through a methodology of affiliation, resonance, and collective nurturing: an inclusive subjectivity led them to the materials that I have sought to order into these pages.¹¹

Examining this material, brought me to home in and focus this text on the role of women artists in Lebanon, as their situated histories have, for too long, been the subject of “potential” disappearance. Since the country gained independence from French colonial rule in 1943, the archive has been filled through oral histories and personal artifacts gleaned from kinship among artists, curators, and academics. An interest in resuscitating Lebanon’s art history has coincided with recent changes in regional political history, from the widespread activism around global political movements from the Egyptian revolution of 2011 to the people’s uprisings in Lebanon in October 2019 and Black Lives Matter since 2020.

One could argue that this has led to a process of historical deconstructivism. Or rather, it has led to what the British once called a form of “individual collectivism.”¹² When, in 1987, the artist Lubaina Himid in one of her early solo exhibitions in the United Kingdom, “New Robes for MaShulan” at Rochdale Art Gallery, the museum director, an employee of the local city council, equated the support of Black women’s work with that of socialist policy. While steadfast Marxists may argue that the “pure” act of representing the so-called Other is not representative of the socialist impulse toward the communal, it nevertheless remains a useful reference to consider how one might address the topic of marginalized art forms and histories in an age where the concept of community can be summoned at the drop of a hat. Let us try to order some principles.

Lebanon is a nation, a community, unlike any other in the so-called Arab (or Arabic-speaking) world, a land of “exceptions.”¹³ For more than a century, and despite innumerable violent conflicts, its capital Beirut has been referred to sentimentally as a site of affinity and fancy. “The Paris of the Middle East,” as it was idly termed while under colonial rule, is a phrase still often used despite ongoing social, political, and economic decay. Most of the city’s residents are fluent in three languages: French, Arabic, and English.

Topographically small compared to its neighbors, Lebanon has an official population of around five million. It sits within a tumultuous area, bordered by Syria to the north and east and Israel and Palestine to the south; to the west, Cyprus is just over 150 miles across the Mediterranean Sea. Like these nations, Lebanon has a deeply entrenched history of political conflict propelled by divisive tensions—sectarianism, uneven wealth distribution, and a long-standing, and continually escalating refugee crisis. That Lebanon has supposedly remained an “escape” amidst this world of constant war is all part of its wondrous act of mythmaking.¹⁴

In Mesopotamian time, Lebanon was signified as part of the mythicized Fertile Crescent, along with Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. Today, it is denoted as part of the Levant as well as the Eastern Mediterranean. The nation is also referred to as home of the Phoenicians, an ancient affiliation referring to a Lebanese nationalism associated with the Maronite Church. A leading figure within this group was the Lebanese industrialist, author, and political figure Charles Corm (1894–1963), who argued that the Lebanese were not Arabs but Phoenicians, originally hailing from Greece, and part of classical western civilization.¹⁵ These Phoenicians could distance themselves from the

violent tribal legacies of the neighboring Arab populations, and profess to be western, or more conveniently, white.¹⁶

This view was not necessarily shared by the Arab League—the consortium composed of twenty-two Arabic-speaking, predominantly Islamic nations.¹⁷ Although the Francophone flair of Lebanon has seemingly remained intact, ushering in a culture of social liberalism that distinguishes it from other Arabic-speaking countries, since its independence, the country has nonetheless also been perceived as “ruinous,” “cursed,” or as the historian Andrew Arsan puts it, “a country in fragments.”¹⁸ Still, despite the nation’s unceasing daily violence—from economic collapse to or the looming specter of interreligious agitprop, Lebanon is still perceived from within and by its neighbors as a nation that will rise from its ashes.

At the turn of the millennium, Beirut became a hub for artistic creativity and social entrepreneurship. Landmark art initiatives such as Ashkal Alwan: The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, and its forum Home Works, grew to international prominence under the directorship of its founder, Christine Tohmé. Along with numerous grassroots initiatives, this scene gave verve and credence to a generation of Lebanese artists including Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Tony Chakar, Lina Saneh, Rabih Mroué, Walid Raad, Lamia Joreige, Jalal Toufic, Paola Yacoub, and Akram Zaatari, to name but a few.¹⁹

Visiting Beirut in 2009 (the year of Helen Khal’s passing), I recall how one could walk to the port of Beirut through the Gemmayzeh neighborhood, past crumbling buildings, where posters of martyrs from the Lebanese civil wars remained plastered on their edifices. Refugees scavenged for food, funneling in and out of sleek cafés and bars. Artist studios sometimes existed in the upper floors. One could continue to the Beirut Art Center or, for a time, the Beirut Exhibition Center, as well as enterprises such as the Sfeir-Semler Gallery and Galerie Tanit.

New architectural projects were sprouting up across the city while Lebanese architects such as Bernard Khoury and Hashim Sarkis were growing in international stature. Still, the city’s central district was criticized for its insensitive corporate aesthetic. Governed and built by Solidere, a real estate company primarily owned by family members of the former Lebanese president Rafic Hariri, the district’s architectural fracture has mirrored that of the nation. Solidere’s urban planners have been criticized for building a kitschy architectural environment that mimics heritage and colonial architecture.

Storefronts filled with high-end boutiques, whose wares are often unattainable by the local city dwellers, sit next to the grandeur of decomposing architecture—from once-bustling theaters to memorials and the oddly placed public sculpture.²⁰ For a time, medical tourism became a boon thanks to the highly educated population who gained their degrees abroad and returned to work in city hospitals, offering leading treatment to regional visitors; investments soared in this neat little tax haven, and real estate prices ballooned.²¹ This historical juncture was thwarted by occasional civil unrest as well as the growth of certain political factions, including Hezbollah. The 2006 war with Israel temporarily broke apart a recently reconstituted nation.

To persevere, nonetheless, has been the *modus operandi*. An analysis of international exhibitions from 1998 to the present reveals that Lebanese artists have made up the largest representation of “Arab” artists featured within international biennial and museum exhibitions of contemporary global art.²² Beirut’s art scene itself was the subject of two major international surveys, in 1999 by the prominent curator Catherine David as part of her project Contemporary Arab Representations, and in 2006 the curator Suzanne Cotter staged “Out of Beirut” at Modern Art Oxford, working closely with Christine Tohmé on her research.²³

Of all the Arabic-speaking countries, the new millennium saw a procession of art-world luminaries appearing at the doorsteps of artists’ studios, and at the homes of Lebanese collectors, which was coupled with more egalitarian artist-led outdoor happenings. The few museums in Lebanon maintained their haughty elegance. This was not something altogether new for Beirut: this “fertile crescent” has been a continuous site of creative fervor. The “high period,” golden and incandescent, was the scene of the 1960s and 1970s. As Achin Vanaik notes, this was a time when the whole world was undergoing “fervent and revolutionary transformations.”²⁴

During the Second World War, Syria and Lebanon mounted an independence campaign against their French colonizers. In 1943, Lebanon became independent and elected its first president, Bechara El Khoury (father of the artist Huguette Caland), and soon after, in 1948, the tumult of the Arab-Israeli conflict began, consuming the region in military coups and popular uprisings. Nearly one hundred thousand Palestinians fled to Lebanon (a number that has increased to nearly half a million today).²⁵ Egypt’s political turn followed soon after, in 1952, with its own revolution against King Farouk, ending the final vestiges of British colonial rule in the region. Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt’s second president, aspired to unify the Arab nations in a bloc of countries akin to the European Union. Ideals of an “Arab identity,” as well as an “Arab socialism,” were prominent in public debates at the time. Later, Nasser’s dream of “Pan-Arabism” was perceived as not only impractical but a delusion.²⁶ However, the hangover of the movement persists in much public consciousness; despite a great dislike for Nasser within Egypt, he remains towering among certain influential circles.²⁷

Unifying such fractious geography as the “Arab world,” so heterogenous among its populace, embodying myriad racial, ethnic, and political-ideological subsets, is a curious proposition. Religion, historically, has been entrenched within these social ideologies, particularly within Lebanon. The nation’s governance structure post-independence, for example, was delineated along religious lines, guaranteeing that the president belongs to one religion (Maronite Christian) and the prime minister by convention is chosen by the President and is traditionally a Sunni Muslim.²⁸ The context around this decision has continued to spur a sense of alienation as, for one, it is not representative of the demographics of the country’s populace.

In 1967, Abdel Nasser’s dream of Pan-Arabism was thwarted with the historic “Arab defeat,” which left Egypt economically, socially, and politically in tatters.²⁹ Artists responded to and documented this rupture in

geopolitical influence. Hamed Owais of Egypt and Marwan Kassab-Bachi (known as Marwan) of Syria and Germany produced portraits and landscapes that preserved a sense of “Arab unity” by expressively adopting different styles. For Owais, the Mexican muralists were a visual reference point. Exchange took place beyond the sole geographical expanse referred to as the Arab world. A form of aesthetic friendship, moored in political strife, resurfaces. Indeed, kinship is one of the softest forms of power. In the end, this violent historical rupture enabled networks of affiliation to appear.³⁰

Women in the Abstract Field

Despite the pandemonium that was sweeping across the Arab world in the 1960s—i.e., the nations that run from Mauritania to Syria—Beirut was considered a radical exception. Day-to-day life seemed relatively stable on the surface, and pioneering contemporary visual practices, chiefly by women, were being exhibited. At the heart of this growing movement was the American-born artist, critic, and gallery founder, Helen Khal. Khal enabled progressive artistic pursuits by local and regional artists, offering them a platform through the venture she co-founded, Gallery One. Recognized as the first permanent venue for the ongoing exhibition of modern and contemporary art in Lebanon, it was co-founded with Khal’s husband at the time, Yusuf al-Khal, a poet and literary editor. The gallery opened its doors in 1963 in Ras Beirut, a neighborhood near the city’s coastline and not far from the fashionable Phoenicia Hotel and the American University in Beirut.

The scant number of books about “Arab art”, however, have often neglected to mention Gallery One. It was not until Carla Chammas mentioned her research to me, over lunch in New York in 2015, that I became aware of it. Equally surprising is that Khal’s name as an artist could scarcely be found outside of her own writings. Unlike the Lebanese “postwar” group who emerged after the end of the Lebanese civil wars in the 1990s, Khal’s generation of artists had been nurtured by familial networks, while the postwar group was able to access the support of commercial galleries and curators whose interest generated sales. Khal, despite some public perception, did not hail from wealth, nor was she a particularly astute self-promoter, as she was towards the other artists whose work she admired and supported.

The exhibition “At the still point of the turning world, there is the dance” illuminated this story for the public. It revealed how Khal found vigor in stimulating debate about the work of her peers—artists who did not conform to the status quo. The tendency at the time veered toward figurative art in the tradition of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Orientalist painters such as Eugène Delacroix, Jean-Léon Gérôme, David Roberts, and Ludwig Deutsch, who occupied many of the museums and grand halls in Arabic-speaking nations. Those large-scale figurative canvases, filled with scenes of bazaars, ashen landscapes, acts of prayer, and subjugated women, reinforced notions of the Arab world as a site of delayed modernity and suppression.

“Modernization” efforts in the arts across the region were driven by the founding of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo, in 1908, by Prince Yusuf Kamal, an artist himself. Still, the teaching and art produced in the

institute’s early days reflected the styles of the European tutors, leaving many artists in the shadows and accused of being mimetic by critics in the prevailing European world of art.³¹

A different light was shed on artists of the region by Helen Khal’s book *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*. Authored in 1976 after Khal left Lebanon for the United States during the civil wars, the book reaffirmed the point that the visual arts in Lebanon are often perceived in the west as belonging to the tradition of Islamic art.³² With its progressive use of mathematical and scientific processes coupled with innovative materials such as thread and canvas, Islamic art was considered revolutionary at one point. However, it was no longer a sufficient lens through which to interpret the arts in a part of the world that was producing its own context-specific and responsive forms of abstraction and eroticism, one of sensuous splendor.³³

Lebanon did not have a prominent independent art school; the departments of art were mainly part of larger research universities. Accordingly, informal networks brokered by Khal and others became ever more relevant.³⁴ Gallery One was a site of learning, where one could bear witness to artists who imbued modernist references with cultural characteristics of their lived experience to tackle the enveloping colonial imagination of the time.³⁵

Although authored in 1976, Khal’s publication on women artists did not make it to print until 1987, owing to the conflicts in Lebanon that began in 1975. Her divorce meant that she had to forego life with her two sons, thus committing herself fully to her own art practice alongside her commitment to scholarship and writing. From her “diasporic” years in the United States until her death in 2009, Khal was to remain in relative obscurity and isolation. The friendships that generated networks remained, particularly with Huguette Caland. The influential art of the figures involved with Gallery One—including artists found in Chammas and Dedman’s exhibition, such as Etel Adnan, Farid Haddad, and Simone Fattal—was rarely the subject of historical inquiry.

In 2008, with the world teetering on economic collapse, the market for contemporary Middle Eastern art (in market terms, the Arab world plus Turkey and Iran) had begun to boom, particularly in the Gulf States, with specialist auction houses, staging regional sales, ramping up promotion, and opening flagship outposts in the region’s central meeting place, Dubai.³⁶ Studios tastemakers may shudder at the thought that it was the auction marketplace that created the context for what is often referred to now as a “modern Arab art,” which includes several figures featured in the program at Gallery One.³⁷ However, with few commercial galleries representing the artists of the 1960s and 1970s, the secondary art market gave collectors, estates, and families a platform to make their holdings visible.³⁸ By 2015, a revisionist approach to constructing “Arab modernism”—that is, art before the official end of Pan-Arab cultural and political ideology, or pre-1970—had become the preserve of an Arabic-speaking elite.

Today there are numerous private and corporate foundations spearheading this revisionist movement in collections, touring exhibitions, and academic discourse. At the helm is the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah and Dubai, which has of late focused its collecting strategy on women artists of

the Arab world between the 1920s and 1960s. Also significant are the Dalloul Art Foundation and the Saradar Collection in Lebanon, which have both actively pursued and acquired art from this era.³⁹ But the story of what we now see is of course still incomplete. How taste was brokered and value attributed to art objects in Lebanon has been the subject of much debate.

Widespread across the region in the early twentieth century was the attempt to replicate the salon exhibition based on the initial model developed in seventeenth-century France. In 1954, Lebanon's Ministry of Education and Fine Arts began its own open-call juried exhibition, to take place every spring. It was not until 1961, however, when the Sursock Museum took over with its Salon d'Automne, that a discernible shift emerged in the forms of art the local public could encounter.

The Sursock Museum was at the heart of Lebanon's artistic modernization project. The aristocrat and art collector Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock bequeathed his mansion to the state upon his death in 1952 with the purview of furthering engagement with the creative arts. According to interviews with local artists engaged in the scene of the 1960s and 1970s conducted by the researcher Nadia von Maltzahn, the Salon d'Automne helped the museum become a destination for a nascent bourgeoisie. Artists and patrons would travel from neighboring countries to be seen at exhibition openings in Beirut, despite the numerous interruptions of the time.⁴⁰

The salon was not without its bouts of controversy. As the works in Chammas and Dedman's exhibition illustrate, many of the artists were largely preoccupied with abstraction as a mechanism for formal interrogation. Khal wrote in 1978, "Art for art's sake' was now a tolerable idea." Or was it? Certainly, Khal was not critiquing abstraction. Looking closely, the history of the salon reveals tensions between the local governing officials and the invited critics who juried the prize, many of whose members hailed from Europe and the United States. Local newspapers criticized the "abstract rage!" while the ministry attempted to intervene by demanding categorical divisions based on medium, arguing that "every form of art *must* be represented."⁴¹ One might deduce that this was the reason why the figures who orbited Khal, many of whom were women, remained in relative obscurity until late in life, or even until their passing. Although taste was evolving and the status quo challenged, two generations had to pass before the risks taken by these artists would be critically evaluated and exhibited.⁴²

In *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*, Khal reveals that Lebanon held more actively exhibiting contemporary female artists per capita than many of the world's art metropolises. Among the artists she profiled were comrades whose work she supported and who are today considered foundational in global art history. Of these, Etel Adnan, Huguette Caland, Saloua Raouda Choucair, and Simone Fattal are the most familiar; others included Yvette Achkar and Dorothy Salhab-Kazemi.

Several of these women, in various guises, have occupied interstitial identities, or have led unsettled lives. Living at "home" one moment, relegated to the diaspora the next, fleeing violence, oppressive relatives, local politics, cultural attitudes, unaccepting partners—to name but some

of the catalysts for their perpetual movement. Still, it is that very measure of movement, in and out of the country, that created an archipelago such as Gallery One. Working with multiple forms and subjects, these women are bound together by their commitment to abstraction—expanding the possibilities of what art can be produced and appreciated.

The politics of these artists' work, while inflected by the history of abstraction in the western world, is also specific to their own narratives as diasporic women. Adnan's paintings of Mount Tamalpais in California, often fashioned with a palette knife through repetitive, dreamlike gestures of color and form, proffer a soothing space to consider the vivid wounds of conflict—also captured by Adnan in her 1978 semi-autobiographical novel *Sitt Marie Rose*. Elsewhere amid this coterie of artists, Caland's thin lines, which evolved from paper onto caftans, eventually mushroomed into colorful forms against expansive planes. Pregnant with memory, unrelenting in their suggestive sensuality, her paintings speak to the life of a person who eschewed custom or characterization. For to consider a 1970s *Bribes de corps* painting by Caland is a phenomenological act that reveals the transcendental experience of exiting one's body into the realm of the nonbinary.

The daughter of the first Lebanese president, Caland did not practice art publicly until after her father's death. In the 1960s, she expanded upon her paintings of abstract voluminous forms during her studies at the American University in Beirut. In 1970, Caland decided to move to Paris. Unmoored from the shackles of a semipublic political life, here she was free to assume an avatar—to be an artist, a fashion designer; a lover of one, of few, or of many.

Saloua Raouda Choucair studied the biological sciences at the American University in Beirut. Nonetheless, sculptural art became her singular form of expression from the 1960s onward. She sold her first work in 1962, when she was forty-six. Global renown, however, would only find her as she neared 100. Her elaborate sculptures, along with her systematic gouaches and paintings, evoke the mathematical principles found in Islamic architecture while also considering the contours of the biological form—dissolving to become suggestive of bodies, shadows, specters. Her sculptures manifest from granular details that she has examined from and around cityscapes. Fragments of a city become animate—living systems, which she argued could "ascend to infinity."

Simone Fattal, Adnan's life partner, often put her art to the side to take on the role of publisher and book designer, among others. Her amorphous sculptures evoke mythological figures, such as the Sumerian character of Gilgamesh. Such beings are made animate in rousing clay as well as in abstract gestural paintings—fields of color produced by the artist in bouts of ardent feeling.

Yvette Achkar was influenced by Abstract Expressionism. She is particularly noted for her layered use of color, as well as the cracks and folds in her paintings. Like Caland's work, her paintings seem as if they are unbuckling. Seta Manoukian and Juliana Seraphim (adjacent to these other artists but not featured in Chammas and Dedman's exhibition) began as lyrical

figurative painters, before moving their anthropomorphic characters into vaulted backdrops.

Dorothy Salhab-Kazemi is the most unusual of the group from the 1960s covered here since she was principally a potter. However, the raw sculptural nature of her forms does not exclude her from this context. Since childhood, Salhab-Kazemi was obsessed by clay and mystified by how it was employed in Roumieh, a village in northeast Lebanon, where she would return to work in her late life. A presentation of the potter Bernard Leach's work in Lebanon inspired her to study the craft in Denmark; she later taught it in Glasgow before returning home. Her sinewy, tessellating constructions appear as if gesticulating, and often evoke eroticism. The embodied touch of making was, as she would pronounce, an act of love.

The act of loving and being loved is at the heart of the exhibition as well as Helen Khal's life project. For instance, Khal's correspondence with numerous artists was displayed in the exhibition vitrines at the Sursock Museum, revealing both friendship and companionship as defining features in constituting a shared sense of knowledge, form, and aesthetic. The schematics that emerged in their own private universe embody rhythm and music as well as ebullient colors in shapes and patterns that create a hermeneutic loop: art that is open for endless interpretation. These women present a rich field of study in global art.

Decoding here becomes a necessary act. Societal mythologies, as Roland Barthes once articulated, have the potential to make perverse ideological scaffolding into worldviews. By giving the reader, and the artists themselves, an understanding of the power of myth, one hopes that collectively we shall be able to free subjects from the burden of representation to allow for different constructions of intent to take on new life and readings.⁴³

The exhibition by Chammas and Dedman was one of the most anticipated programs of Home Works 8, which was set to open on October 17, 2019. I planned to travel to Beirut a few days later to avoid the opening crowds. As I headed for London's Heathrow Airport, I was informed by artists participating in Home Works that it might be best if I turned back. Another fire had erupted in Lebanon, this time in the belly of its youth; the collapse of governance and economy ensued. I did not have the opportunity to see the exhibition at the time. Instead, a bounty of images was shared with me, captured by different people. The coverage, in the end, was composed of thousands of digital photographs and videos. "The end of images is behind us," Rancière once wrote.⁴⁴ I once believed that nothing will ever disappear again. But the case of Lebanon is a lesson that there is always an exception. Helen Khal, much like the artists who orbited her, lived and worked in unsettled conditions. But as history reveals, where things are continuously unsettled, there is also a will to remain.⁴⁵

1 W. J. T. Mitchell, "Art in the Age of Anxiety: For Omar Kholeif," in *Art in the Age of Anxiety*, ed. Omar Kholeif (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 11–19; Jonathan D. Fitzgerald, "Sincerity, Not Irony, Is Our Age's Ethos," *Atlantic*, November 20, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/11/sincerity-not-irony-is-our-ages-ethos/265466/> and Nancy Fraser, *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born* (London: Verso, 2020), 3–7.

2 George Yancy, "Judith Butler: Mourning is a Political Act amid the Pandemic and Its Disparities," *Truthout*, April 30, 2020, <https://truthout.org/articles/judith-butler-mourning-is-a-political-act-amid-the-pandemic-and-its-disparities/>.

3 Presentness, the act of existing between the past and future, is not to be confused with "presenteism," a behavioral pattern propelled by late capitalism to encourage the appearance that one is constantly "working"—the latter demonstrated in with the expansion of online meetings since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and what is now colloquially referred to as "Zoom fatigue." For more on this subject, see Aaron Benanav, *Automation and the Future of Work* (London: Verso, 2020).

4 Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (London: Penguin, 2013), 1–5.

5 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* (London, Penguin, 1998), 63.

6 See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (Oxford: Routledge Classics, 2003).

7 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 58–63, 286–95.

8 Fraser, *The Old Is Dying*, 3–7.

9 Saidiya V. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008). Pgs.: 1–14.

10 Ben Eastham, "What Is the Art World?," *ArtReview*, December 2020.

11 Carla Chammas, conversation with the author, East Hampton, New York, summer 2018.

12 Maud Sulter and Lubaina Himid, *New Robes for MaShulan* (1987), 1–3.

13 This point is most often expressed in colloquial conversation as opposed to formal debates. In his many articles and books on Lebanon, the late British

journalist Robert Fisk makes some inferences to this effect as well.

14 The national census in Lebanon is a matter of regular dispute and debate. Because of the nearly five hundred thousand Palestinian refugees in residence, and more recently the Syrian refugee crisis, alongside the presence of Iraqi refugees, some studies suggest Lebanon's population may be closer to seven million. See Tala Ramadan, "New Report Reveals Substantial Demographic Changes in Lebanon," *An-Nahar*, July 29, 2019, <https://www.annahar.com/english/article/1002964-new-report-reveals-substantial-demographic-changes-in-lebanon>.

15 Franck Salameh, Charles Corm: *An Intellectual Biography of a Twentieth-Century Lebanese "Young Phoenician"* (New York: Lexington Books, 2015); Asher Kaufman, "Phoenicianism: The Formation of an Identity in Lebanon in 1920," *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 1 (January 2001), 173–94.

16 Franck Salameh (2020) "'Young Phoenicians' and the Quest for a Lebanese Language: Between Lebanonism, Phoenicianism, and Arabism," in *Arabic and Its Alternatives: Religious Minorities and Their Languages in the Emerging Nation States of the Middle East, 1920–1950*, ed. Heleen Murte-van den Berg, Karène Sanchez Summerer, and Tijmen Baarda (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

17 Robert Rabil, "From Beirut to Algiers: The Arab League's Role in the Lebanon Crisis," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 21, 2005, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/from-beirut-to-algiers-the-arab-leagues-role-in-the-lebanon-crisis>.

18 Andrew Arsan, *Lebanon: A Country in Fragments* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2018).

19 For a fuller look at the Beirut art scene, one could consider consulting the 1999 edition of Tamás, the journal published by the Antoni Tàpies Foundation under Catherine David's direction. Suzanne Cotter's 2006 exhibition catalogue *Out of Beirut* (developed in partnership with Christine Tohmé) on Beirut's art scene published by Modern Art Oxford is out of print. Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, a local correspondent for Artforum and frieze, has authored numerous articles over the last two decades about Beirut and Lebanon's contemporary art ecology.

20 Oliver Wainwright, "Is Beirut's Glitzy Downtown Redevelopment All That It Seems?," *Guardian*, January 22, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/jan/22/beirut-lebanon-glitzy-downtown-redevelopment-gucci-prada>.

21 Tatiana Koffman, "Lebanon's Currency Crisis Paves the Way to a New Future," *Forbes*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tatianakoffman/2020/07/09/lebanons-currency-crisis-paves-the-way-to-a-new-future/>.

22 Emma Crichton-Miller, "Lebanon's Art Scene," *Financial Times*, October 8, 2010.

23 Suzanne Cotter, *Out of Beirut* (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2006).

24 Achin Vanaik, introduction to *The Debate on "Postcolonial Theory and The Specter of Capital,"* ed. Vivek Chibber and Rosie Warren (London: Verso, 2016), 9–13.

25 United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East, "Where We Work," accessed December 1, 2020, <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon>.

26 M. Sharnoff, "Nasser's Inter-Arab Rivalries: 1958–1967," *Middle East Observer* 4, no. 2 (2011).

27 Peter Johnson, "Egypt under Nasser," *MERIP Reports*, no. 10 (1972): 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3011223>.

28 Imad Harb, "Lebanon's Confessionalism: Problems and Prospects," *United States Institute of Peace*, March 30, 2006, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2006/03/lebanons-confessionalism-problems-and-prospects>.

29 Amira Nowaira, "Egypt 1967—A Very Personal Defeat," *Guardian*, May 27, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/may/27/egypt-1967-very-personal-defeat>.

30 The art of the Arab world is often discussed in isolation from its neighbors. Exchange with other geographical poles has been commonplace, owing partly to the affinities created by the Non-Aligned Movement. For instance, the Indian artist Mohan Samant spent extended periods in Egypt studying artifacts and urban scenes, which reportedly influenced his painting practice; in North Africa, the geographic proximity to Europe led to the formation of isolated but effervescing artist communities in cities such as Tangier. In the major art cities in the Gulf States, such as Dubai and

Sharjah, South Asian communities outnumber the naturalized population, and form the dominant audience for art.

31 Silvia Naef, "Writing the History of Modern Art in the Arab World: Documents, Theories and Realities," in "Global Art History": *Transkulturelle Verortungen von Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft*, ed. Julia Allerstorfer and Monika Leisch-Kiesl (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2018), 109–26.

32 Helen Khal, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon* (Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1987), 23–27.

33 Despite the prevalence of Islamic art in encyclopedic museums, the influential art historian E. H. Gombrich, like many others of his generation, have said time and again that Islamic art is "purely functional." In his book *The Preference for the Primitive* (2001), Gombrich further elaborates on his prejudices, chastising everyone from Picasso to Dubuffet for "pillorying good taste" with their "rudimentary" drawings and paintings. The contradictions here and in his best-selling *The Story of Art* (1950) reveal a figure with an unclear position. To put it simply, his belief is clearly that the West is the best. This type of hermetic position has prevented entry into the canon for artists such as the ones discussed in this essay.

34 Nadia von Maltzahn, introduction to *The Art Salon in the Arab Region: Politics of Taste Making*, ed. Nadia von Maltzahn and Monique Bellan (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2018), 18–23.

35 Carla Chammas, conversation with the author, East Hampton, New York, summer 2018.

36 Margaret Studer, "New Eyes on the Mideast's Contemporary Art," *Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2008.

37 In the Arab world, as in many other countries, the terms "modern" and "contemporary" are used interchangeably; since 2008 (in Arabic speaking countries), modern has most often referred to artists who began producing work in or around the mid-twentieth century.

38 At the time of writing, an inverse market effect is arguably in action. The market is increasingly flooded with artworks by artists from the 1960s and 1970s whose work was notoriously scarce, and in turn price points become maladjusted, leaving significant works to disappear within private hands as opposed to in civic institutions either locally or internationally.

39 It is important to note that many collections of art of this era already existed, a prime example being the nonprofit organization Darat Al Funun in Amman, Jordan.

40 Nadia von Maltzahn, "Guiding the Artist and the Public? The Salon d'Automne at Beirut's Sursock Museum," in Maltzahn and Bellan, *The Art Salon in the Arab Region*, 253–81.

41 Maltzahn, 81.

42 It was not until 2012, with Etel Adnan, that the work of these artists began to be critically examined by the international art world. Known primarily for her poetry, Adnan was a featured artist at the quinquennial Kassel exhibition DOCUMENTA (13), under the artistic direction of Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, which opened up an aesthetic appreciation for her work in global circuits. Then in her late eighties, she was more visible than ever. The following year, the curator Jessica Morgan presented the first major museum survey of the work of Saloua Raouda Choucair, at Tate Modern in London. Huguette Caland's success was to follow. After her retrospective at the Beirut Exhibition Center, also in 2013, Caland's work and affiliations were appraised in art journals. Caland moved from Venice, California, where she had lived since 1987, back to Beirut. Suffering from a neurological disorder, she could no longer work, but under the stewardship of curators and authors such as Aram Moshayedi, Negar Azimi, and Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, she received greater critical attention from 2016.

43 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies: The Complete Edition* (New York: Macmillan, USA, 2013).

44 Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (London: Verso, 2019), 3–5.



Helen Khal, *Untitled*, 1980s
Oil on paper mounted on board,
44 × 57 cm
Courtesy of Sharjah Art
Foundation Collection

October 23, 1965

Dear Chafic:

When did I write you last? I can't remember, and I can't remember even if I wrote or not. This week Mounir said he received a letter from you, and that you are very irritated with your painting now. I am sorry to hear this, but I can't believe it is a serious situation with you--only a bad time that will pass. I think that when you devote all your time to painting, you will naturally feel more deeply the unproductive times, or the times of bad work--you begin to measure the value of all of your life in the value of your painting, and so you begin to become ~~me~~ seriously disturbed when it is not going right. I think one must sometimes give equal importance to other things in one's life, set aside the painting for a while and try to find the value of yourself outside the painting. Does this sound absurd? But then, I never believed in a total dedication to any one thing. There are many mosaic pieces in my life of equal value.

You were beginning a whole bright new world in your Bikfaya paintings. Do you remember them? I wish you could have been here last month--I went to Bikfaya to see the Kite Festival--dozens of colored paper birds up in that clear sky, like the patches of color that you want to suspend in the space of your canvas, and the sun living through it all.

The time of my own life now is not good. A stupid, mad man and the stupid outdated law in an indifferent, inhuman country have taken my children away from my care--and I have been these past several weeks like a mother cat sniffing around for her lost young. This may sound too dramatic to you, but it is an emotional truth--I have been experiencing a kind of death. Though logically, and practically, the children are still in my life; they are well and I see them once or twice a week. They are in Broumana in boarding school there, and they are not unhappy. But I have lost one link of my life, and I suffer from ~~the~~ indignation at the indecency of it all--that it should be necessary for me to fight to retain my rights as a mother; this has been so unacceptable to me that finally I have refused to fight, I have become a "conscientious objector". How very stupid this world can be; how very stupid sometimes the human mind.

We had a nice party for Wassek last week at my house. It was his birthday and we tried to make a surprise, but it was not easy to surprise him. It was a gay and crazy party and I don't think we talked about painting at all.

I must go home from the office now, so I will stop and mail this quickly before I forget it or lose it--because I think I started a few letters to you in this past month, but none were finished and I don't know where those small pieces of conversation are anymore.

How is Farid? Give ~~me~~ him my affection and best wishes. And write me sometime soon.

Yours,

Helene

over



Page 131:
Letter to Chafic Abboud
Courtesy of Helen Khal Archives
MACAM, Lebanon

Page 132:
Portrait of Huguette Caland
Courtesy of Helen Khal
Archives, MACAM, Lebanon

Below:
Helen Khal (center) with her
sons, at her exhibition open-
ing, Contact Gallery, Beirut,
1972. Courtesy of Helen Khal
Archives, MACAM, Aalita

Opposite:
Courtesy of Helen Khal
Archives, MACAM, Lebanon



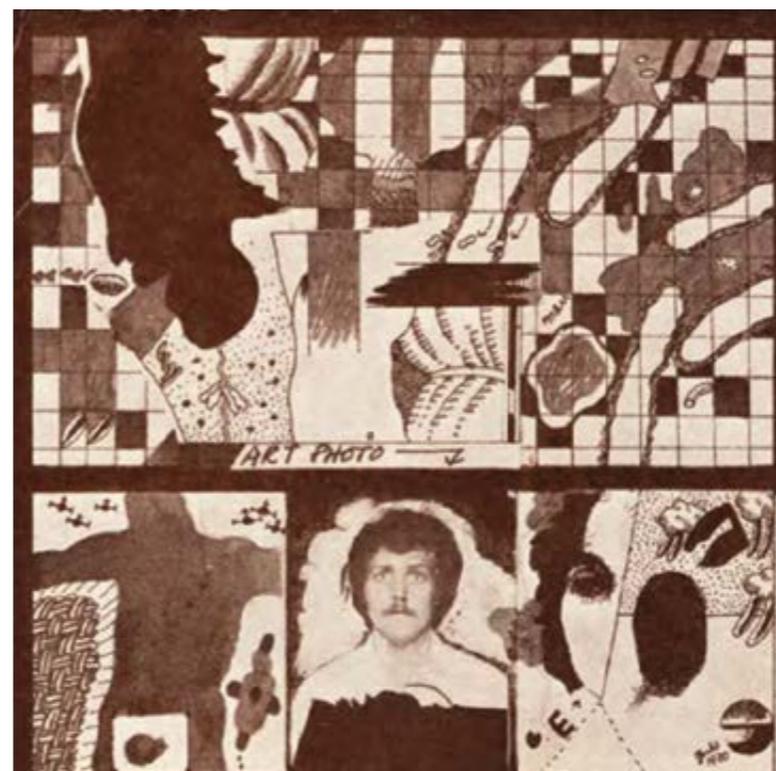
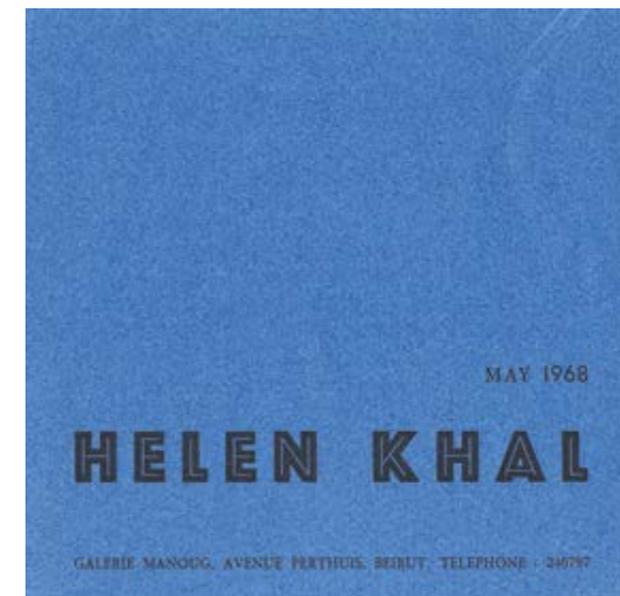
en vente
collection spéciale
à la
gallery one

peintures, dessins, gravures, lithographies, aquarelles,
gouaches, sculptures et céramiques de
peintres et sculpteurs libanais et des pays arabes.

Azzaoui, Fattah, Juma'i, Ghani, Ka'bi, Shibrine, Zaki,
Boullata, Moudarres, Akhrass, Basbous, Radi, Najm,
Scamanga, Guiragossian, S. Raouda, Hadidian, Zghaib,
Osseyran, Abdallah, Awad, Ammoun, Arabi, Siba'i
Naba'a, Zayat, Ismail, Arna'out, Alwani, Nasiri, Nakhlé,
Dabbagh, Samargi, Jouni, Rayes, Guv, Haidar, Toukan,
Abi - Rached, Barrage, Haddad, Ghorayeb, Ghorayeb -
Kerbage, Sharif, Saghir, Yeramian.

Ouverture le Mardi 29 Juin 1971 à 19 heures.

171, Rue du Patriarcat, Zokak al-Blat, Tél. 242044
Horaire d'été de la Gallery : 9h. a. m. - 2h. p. m.



ART
(AN ESSAY)

- 1 THE WAY IN WHICH SOMETHING IS SEEN
- 2 PERIOD DURING WHICH ANYTHING LASTS
- 3 A THING WHICH IS SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT FROM ANOTHER OF THE SAME KIND
- 4 OF OR CARRIED ON BY THE COMMON PEOPLE OR ALL THE PEOPLE
- 5 THE BELIEF THAT THERE IS SOMETHING BASICALLY INEXPRESSIVE ABOUT WORDS

AFTERWORD

Helen Khal: Energy, Painting, and Worldbuilding

Omar Kholeif

A bulbous form effloresces. At first this seemingly opaque painting appears to be constituted of no more than the conceivable colors of black and grey. I peer closely and dusted around the center of its voluminous central form, there appear to be speckles of yellow and gold that are almost indiscernible to the eye. This modestly sized, *Untitled* painting by Helen Khal from the early 2000s (page 175) brims with life. Its constitution reflecting the energy of its maker, who was actively making art, in myriad a configuration, up until the end of her life.

That Helen Khal's output eschewed definition is its binding and distinctive quality. Khal's self-organized lecture tours on Arab women artists, her criticism, her curated exhibitions, her friendships with artists, and not least, her painting—seemingly fashioned from a womb of longing, all coalesce to constitute what was arguably the defining quality of her work—pure energy.

In the lead-up to this book's publication, I spent hundreds of hours looking at Khal's paintings to identify their idiosyncrasies. As she expressed in her own words, experiments with color were crucial to her ocular sensibility (page 12). At times, looking at a painting such as the one on page 138, I am uncertain just how “quietly” an intervention of another color arrives at the fold of another.

Light—within this expanse is a crucial protagonist for the artist. As Farid Haddad reminded us, much of Khal's work was produced on paper and mounted onto Masonite,¹ thereby leaving the spectator with a sense of the fragile seeping of color, like delicate rays of light, slipping between the porousness of paper. The result, nevertheless, is seemingly floating, with the embodied presence of an oil on canvas.

Friendship—to invoke French philosopher Geoffroy de Lagasnerie's treatise arguing that “friendship is a radical act”²—was pivotal in the formation of Helen's artistic practice. These relationships governed an intertextual set of visual forms—alphabets that recur and repeat—of suns and moons; of motifs that resemble the Uto-Aztecan language of the Hopi people, or the sensuous suggestion of layers of ebullient red pastel on paper (page 18). Collectively, these features form part of a painting practice not of citation or appropriation, but of contextualization—of situated worldbuilding. As we have sought to evince, Khal's life involved making space for her peers, but also of embracing the pleasures that she gleaned from living within the constellation of overlapping relations and forms that they generated.

The creation of propulsive energy within this sphere is thus the defining sensibility. If I look at Helen Khal's *Untitled* oil on paper from the

Helen Khal, *Untitled*
ca. 2000s
Oil on canvas mounted on
cardboard, 25 × 35 cm
Courtesy of Sharjah Art
Foundation Collection



1990s (page 36), one can almost sense the artist's hand fervently chasing the various pigments of blue as they crescendo into a shroud that soon begins to resemble a portal, a vortex, an experience of potential transcendence. The sustained mental activity required in these acts of making—the vitality of watching color move across paper, moving, drying, being reordered, before completion, is demonstrative of the persistent sense of contingency that marked much of Helen Khal's life. Despite any notional romance, hers was not an “easy life”—despite the prospects held within its narration.

But that is not to say that Helen Khal's legacy should be subsumed in melancholy or indeed left to the shroud. Khal's world is ours to disentangle now, and if there is any justice, her world shall spark yet another active beginning.

¹ Farid Haddad, telephone conversation with Carla Chammas, March 3, 2023.

² Geoffroy de Lagasnerie 3: *Une aspiration au dehors*, Paris: Flammarion, 2023, 8.

Huguette Caland *Helen I* (left),
Helen II both 2009
Mixed media on canvas
Courtesy of the Estate of Huguette
Caland, Dr. and Mrs. Ghassan Khatib,
c/o Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Lebanon

