You first became known to many in the region, especially younger generations, for your commentary on the 2011 uprisings. Why did you feel compelled to lend your voice to the movements?

During the momentous events of the Arab Spring almost a decade ago,
Leila Nseir (Syria, b.1941)
The Nation, 1978, oil on canvas, 160 x 140 cm.
Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.
Image courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.
I felt compelled to step up and fill a communications gap that existed and arguably still exists between the Arab world and the West. At that time, for instance, speeches by Arab leaders like Husni Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi would only be reported on in broad terms, while many across the world wanted more details about their plans and even thought processes.

Nine years on, can you share reflections on that experience? If you had the benefit of hindsight, how would your commentary have changed at that time?

I was certainly caught in the moment. I was also on the side of the protesters and remain so to this day. Sadly there is an attempt to re-rewrite the events of the Arab Spring and cast them in a negative light, while in reality, the negative aspect was the violence that was meted upon the protesters. In

Moataz Nasr (Egypt, b.1961)
hindsight, I would not have changed my commentary, but perhaps I would have added more cautionary notes about the dangers of not compromising with the members of other camps that I don’t necessarily agree with.

Can you tell us the story behind Barjeel Art Foundation? When and why did you create it? Is there a connection between your focus on art and the 2011 uprisings?

The Barjeel Art Foundation is an initiative that predates the Arab Spring as it was launched with an exhibition in February 2010. There is perhaps a connection between both my activism during the heyday of the Arab Spring and the launch of Barjeel, which is to expand the understanding of the Arab World using alternative methods whether it was art or new technologies.

You have said that “Arab art is our way of telling our story”; what is that story, and why do you think it is important to tell it?

The story of the Arab world is one of great complexity—yes, it includes sad and unfortunate chapters, but it also is full of creativity, hope, and perseverance. I teach a 13-week class on creativity in the Arab world and the Middle East, and my only regret is that I don’t have enough time to explore all the different facets of this creativity as well as all the countries in the region. When the world is better acquainted with our human story, I believe that will contribute to a greater understanding, appreciation, and respect for my region.

Barjeel, in part, fills an important gap in that it serves as a historical repository of art from across the Arab world; why do you think this gap existed?

While the Arab world has had many collectors dating back over a century,
such as Egyptian Mohamed Mahmoud Khalil (1876–1953), much of the works concentrated on either Western or local artists, and very few collectors acquired art from across the region. This started changing in the second half of the 20th century with major collectors such as Qatar’s Sheikh Hassan Al Thani and Saudi Arabia’s Adel Al Mandil along with Lebanese architect Assem Salam and American Louis A. McMillen who collected art in the 1960s from countries as varied as Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Sudan.

Arab art, historically, has not necessarily taken the form of a painting; rather, it is dynamically embedded in surroundings from architecture to furniture to clothing. When selecting an art form, why did you choose to focus specifically on paintings?

Arab art, like other global modernities, developed over many decades and across different genres. Modern Arab painting can be traced back to the mid-19th century in many parts of the Arab world, including Egypt and Lebanon, and is one of the lesser-documented Arab art forms, although one could argue that we still lack enough books on the history of embroidery, tapestry, architecture, furniture design, and other crafts.

What mediums do you use to make art pieces and the stories surrounding them accessible? What do you hope your audiences will take away?

I feel I have unleashed an Arab modern art onslaught upon the world with whatever avenue available to me. For instance, Barjeel’s presence

*Left Hamed Ewais (Egypt, 1919–2011)*

The Guardian of Life, 1967–8, oil on canvas, 132 x 100 cm.
Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.
Image courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.
extends across numerous social media platforms, and I have worked on an online program for AJ Plus that showcased modern Arab art over one- and two-minute “bite-size” episodes. We have made the 1,000-strong Barjeel collection available to museums around the world, including a major exhibition of Arab abstract art that is now touring five US university museums (and coming to the McMullen Museum in Boston in spring 2021. I have also taught art of the Arab world at four US universities (New York University, Yale, Georgetown University, and Boston College) in an academic attempt to introduce Arab and Middle Eastern art into US institutions that have not offered such a class before. It’s been a great journey of discovery for me perhaps more than anyone else.

**How do you see themes tied to social movements expressed in art from across countries and decades? What lessons do these works leave for contemporary societies in the region?**

Modern Arab art very much mirrored modern Arab world history with its social and political causes. In the mid-20th century, labor rights featured heavily in paintings such as Egyptian Gazbia Sirri’s student and about protests painting in Al Mahallah of 1947. The rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser was reflected in art as well with pan-Arabist themes. Other themes include nationalism and Palestinian rights all the way to the Arab Spring. In the past year with uprisings in Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, and Algeria, we once again see themes of human rights, democracy, people power, and martyrdom and reflections of the brighter future that all Arabs and human beings aspire to.

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