


impressive collection of historical material on a topic that should be of great interest to scholars of Middle East studies and American studies. Nevertheless, considering this book more broadly, the author's historiographic approach does not seem a good fit for the material—which requires a more nuanced treatment of some of the most pressing issues that it raises, such as the gender and racial implications of Cairo Street and its related representations. In this regard, as a work of interpretation and critical reflection it is a somewhat uneven offering that will likely not prove either as impactful or as enduring as the scholarship that initiated this important field of historical study.

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Beautiful Agitation: Modern Painting and Politics in Syria

Aneka Lenssen (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020). Pp. 283. \$65.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780520343245

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In recent decades, the historiography of modern art has expanded significantly beyond the Euro-American canon. Aneka Lenssen has been an important contributor to this field of study, not least because of her landmark publication *Modern Art in the Arab World*, coedited with Sarah Rogers and Nada Shabout, which disclosed a well-curated archive of historical documents on Arab modern art to an English-reading audience. In some ways, *Beautiful Agitation: Modern Painting and Politics in Syria* is a continuation of this work, as this study too resists the hegemony of a “MoMA-style” definition of modern art as formalist abstraction, while it also resists contextualist readings that presuppose that art from “elsewhere” tells us something *about* that place. But the book also shows that the decolonization of art history has now entered a new phase. *Beautiful Agitation* discusses artists and their works in terms of their own philosophies of art, drawing on a wide array of historical documents, some of which are located in private collections. In doing so, it leaves the explicit rejection of hegemonic art historical canons behind after a short mention in the introduction and conclusion, and fully commits to studying modern art and art philosophy in Greater Syria in its own right.

The introduction opens with an anecdote of Sidqi Ismail, a young writer, sitting at a terrace in Damascus in 1947 and writing a letter to a friend in which he celebrates the liberating potential of painting. Ismail characterizes “painting as a stage for irruptive forces (*al-inṭilāq*) rather than as a planar object or window onto space” (p. 2). It is this vitalist view of art as a manifestation of “reservoirs of life forces” (p. 5) that Lenssen explores as a commitment shared by a variety of artists in Syria between 1900 and 1965, even if they formulated this vision in different ways. The title, *Beautiful Agitation*, refers to art's capacity to stir those hidden reservoirs and make life burst forth from the canvas animating the viewer.

Beautiful Agitation is an ambitious book, because it tackles this art philosophical frame in three ways. First, it analyzes distinct works of art experimenting with color washes, impasto pigment, melting patterns, unending lines, bleed effects, and other techniques and styles. These analyses are discussed in contradistinction to other art practices circulating at the time, such as the more mechanistic art of the late Ottoman military academy, the ethnographic gaze of colonial-style painting, or international trends such as cubism, futurism, or social realism. The book is richly illustrated with full color reproductions and



Lenssen's thoughtful close readings of the paintings are a sheer delight to read. The book includes comprehensive studies of the painting careers of Kahlil Gibran, Adham Ismail, and Fateh al-Moudarres and offers fresh analyses of their work, thus complementing work in the field of modern Arab art history by scholars such as Nada Shabout, Sarah Rogers, Ifikhar Dadi, Kirsten Scheid, Sylvia Naef, Wendy Shaw, and others.

Second, Lenssen traces ideas on reservoirs of life forcers in relation to Syria's political transformations in the same period. The "painting and politics" in the subtitle means that Lenssen carefully contextualizes the art under study. With notable exceptions such as Ismail's depictions of low-paid labor or refugees, the link between politics and painting has little to do with the content of the image. Rather, Lenssen is interested in the ways in which art practices and discourses circulated within a politically charged public sphere and an institutionally fragile art world. The notion of art as agitation—unsettling conventions and stirring reservoirs of life forces—was read as revolutionary potential in the context of colonial occupation. At other moments, it was formulated as a necessary antidote to the spiritual aridity of technocratic modernity or it functioned as the expression of anxiety (*al-qalaq*) in the first postindependence decades. Lenssen thus convincingly shows how the critical valences of vitalist thought and the role of the arts changed over time responding to changing political contexts.

Finally, Lenssen provides an intellectual history of the concept of reservoirs of life forces and art's capacity to stir them. The book gives an important role to Henri Bergson's thought, brought home by Syrian artists and intellectuals studying in Paris, but also refers to Third Worldist thought, Anglo-Saxon and German Romanticism, surrealism and psychoanalysis, as well as Arab philosophies such as Ibn Sina's, Ibn al-ʿArabi's, and Sufi ideas of *zāhir* (surface appearance) and *bāṭin* (interiority). My hope is that the book, in addition to its obvious value to art history, will also find its way to the field of intellectual or conceptual history, where Lenssen's insights into a vitalist idiom current in Syria's cultural circles in the first half of the twentieth century could open up new avenues for the study of intellectual exchange in and beyond the modern Middle East along the lines of Omnia El Shakry's *The Arab Freud* and Yoav di-Capua's work on the Arab reception of Sartre.

The three strands—art history, political history, and intellectual history—are well integrated into an organic whole, with chapters centering on individual artists or groups of artist-intellectuals in an approximately chronological order. The first chapter, "Arab Romantics: Kahlil Gibran and the Awakening Storm," focuses on Kahlil Gibran (1883–1931)—immediately demonstrating the flexible interpretation of Syria's national boundaries used in this book. Largely leaving aside his writing, the chapter analyzes Gibran's drawings and paintings as a career-long commitment to make "his art ... act in communion with life" (p. 73), using color washes to "reveal form" rather than to take the "reflective forms of a thing to display colors on a plane" (p. 67). Lenssen draws a historical context of late Ottoman state and intellectual reform at the dawn of the twentieth century. Gibran rejects the rationality of current ideas on modernity and modernization, as manifested in the mechanistic approach of Ottoman academy-style painting, but also in the spiritual aridity of cubism. In contrast, Gibran's conception of a rippling and transformative world was more in tune with the spiritual view of other contemporaries: the Bengal school of art, as well as the ideas of Ameen al-Rihani who gave an agitational speech propagating a revolution of the spirit following the Young Turk Revolution.

The second chapter, "Colonial Syria: Finding Life within Culture," discusses ideas on the status of images with a focus on three Syrian intellectuals who traveled between Damascus and Paris in the 1920s and 1930s: al-Arsuzi, Dagestani, and Saliba. The chapter draws a context in which the colonial administration heavily invested in the institutionalization of arts education and the preservation and research of heritage objects. While academic painting of the time reflects the colonial ethnographic gaze, Lenssen focuses on critical essays that dismiss such painting as "mere artistry" (p. 96) and that question the truth claim of naturalized vision. Drawing on Bergson, these critics propagate art that produces "a deep tremor within

us” (p. 102). Lenssen thus demonstrates that ideas of a vitalist spirit animating 1930s Syrian nationalism had more complex genealogies and more diverse political colors than German Romanticism. She also shows that Syrian artists often had a more ambiguous relation to cultural heritage and folklore than postcolonial art historiography, for example about the Baghdad school, has so far described.

Chapter 3, “Popular Politics: Adham Ismail and the Aesthetics of Revival,” traces “the potential critical valences of the reservoir concept” (p. 111) in the work and ideas of Adham Ismail (1922–63). Starting with his personal experience of displacement, Lenssen explains how Ismail’s commitment to a reservoir of shared intuitions was articulated in Arab nationalist terms during the anti-colonial and early independent years of the 1940s and 1950s. His works seek to draw on the Arab spirit or energy, imagined as an enduring substrate of inspiration that is nevertheless characterized by movement and spontaneity. With this approach he clearly distinguished himself from social realist contemporaries. The chapter consistently refers back to people and concepts introduced in the three preceding chapters, which gives depth to the historical and intellectual contextualization of Ismail’s artistic practice. It also includes an insightful exposé on the term Arabesque, how it was used locally and internationally at the time, and how it could be applied to Ismail’s work.

The fourth and final chapter, “National Excavation: Fateh al-Mouardres and the Unholy Image,” focuses on the career of Fateh al-Mouardres in Aleppo, Rome, and Beirut (1922–99). The chapter traces his experiences from a rural childhood to an avant-garde circle of surrealists in Aleppo and from his precarious existence in Rome in the late 1950s to his contributions to modernist journals in 1960s Beirut. “Al-Mouardres was interested in ‘Syria’ as a reservoir of not only energies and ‘genius’—as the Arab nation was for Adham [Ismail]—but also sins, profane impulses, squandered sacrifice” (p. 176). More than Ismail, al-Mouardres was confronted with the demands to express loyalty to the postcolonial state, as well as with its repressive apparatus. His paintings give evidence of a precarious balance between conflicting demands and convictions. While featuring patriotic themes such as innocent childhood, motherhood, and countryside, they also include occult symbols, stains, and the layering of paint and matter—scraping off and refilling wax or paint and often sand—pointing to the brutal dynamics of sacrifice inherent to the beloved theme of regeneration. Refusing triumphalist claims, his art emanated from “the unstable reservoir of the earth, an entity containing multidirectional histories of life, death and often silent complicity” (p. 209).

Al-Mouardres is the only artist discussed in the book that witnessed the Lebanese civil wars, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the Oslo Accords. The conclusion of the book briefly considers one of his later works: a face, “a pile of flesh with sensory openings,” that seems muted, “unable to realize itself,” but that nevertheless summons up a space of appearance that forces the viewer to take position (p. 212). It is Lenssen’s rich history of reservoir thinking that makes this reading possible. It demonstrates how the presumption of an absence of creative life in modern Syria has preempted informed readings of both modern and contemporary art. *Beautiful Agitation* is exemplary for the restorative work that needs to be done and will be incredibly helpful for artists, art historians, art critics, and students working in the field of modern and contemporary art from the Levant as well as other post-colonial and post-socialist regions.

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