

# MAPPED OUT: TO THINK OF MARWAN RECHMAOUI AS A LANDSCAPE PAINTER

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One of the major preoccupations of art historians in the past seven decades has been the break in an artist's work from figurative to abstract painting. As narratives go, the movement from one way of mark making to another is both archetypal and readymade. Like a boxing match or a football game, the drama is obvious, compelling, and always already circumscribed. Rules, traditions, taboos will be broken. An opening, a passage, some vision will be found. A man alone in his studio will struggle to cross an invisible threshold, struggle to create a new language, struggle to capture the wilds of his imagination, and in doing so to make a new world. In one form or another, we read the story of this breakthrough and in our minds we hear the bebop soundtrack. We see the footage of Jackson Pollock striding across a canvas laid flat out on the floor, flicking brushes, dribbling paint from the can. Even as Pollock's great friend and rival Willem de Kooning danced back and forth for years over the line between figuration and abstraction, we assume that the story goes only one way, forever driving forward, marking progress, onward movement, modernity.

Or at least that's one version of the story, applied in subtle variations to Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*, the grid-like compositions of Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky's *Improvisation* paintings, Pollock's drips, and Rothko's blocks of color. Hinging on shifts, breaks, drifts, and pivots, the narrative appears again and again to advance certain theories of modern art, particularly in Europe and United States, where, as the story goes, artists in the aftermath of a war or financial crisis came to find representational painting insufficient for their purposes and set forth on a search for new forms, subjects, and techniques. Almost any artist working in the latter half of the twentieth century would likely have a passing familiarity with this line of thinking. Virtually all artists working since the 1990s could rightly claim it as their common heritage. But in the last ten to fifteen years, a handful of scholars, critics, and curators have made a considerable effort to complicate that narrative, and to show how the recourse to abstraction (as well as the arrival of modernity) happened differently at other times and in other places. Advocates of multiple, parallel, transnational, or otherwise alternative strains of modernism have suggested that the move to abstraction may well mean something very different in South America, South Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. Its sources of inspiration could be layered into other histories and older practices, including the decorative and applied arts, the sites and rituals associated with religion, and other such cultural phenomena.

One such advocate, the Syrian poet Adonis, has argued that the start of modernity in the Arab world dates back to the writings of Sufi mystics in the eighth century.<sup>1</sup> To understand the place and practice of modernism in postcolonial contexts, the art historian Iftikhar Dadi has written

1 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, translated by Catherine Cobham (London: Saqi Books, 1990), p. 88

that it was precisely the instability of the nation-state and the absence of an art historical canon (in Pakistan, specifically, but also wherever elements of a broader South Asian Muslim modernism apply) that allowed artists to experiment with abstraction - as a means of exploring the personal and social consequences of modernity itself, working back through them.<sup>2</sup> Elise Salem, in her book *Constructing Lebanon*, tempers the expansiveness of the postcolonial, transnational argument by noting that modernity tends to reproduce itself only in the structure of the nation-state; it rarely appears in other paradigms.<sup>3</sup> But she notes that the very concept of the nation is itself abstract, and often mistaken for the concreteness of the state, and that nation, nationalism, and national identity are all ideas that remain bafflingly inconclusive in Lebanon, particularly in the decades of the country's civil war and reconstruction, when the state collapsed and was then somehow, half-heartedly, and only to a certain extent, put back together again in the postwar era.

With all these terms up for grabs—modernity, abstraction, the nation, and the state—Lebanon is also a place where the most standard and typical of art historical narratives runs into some confusion, much of it productive in terms of emerging scholarship. Easel painting, like the novel, was imported to the lands of the Levant from elsewhere, namely Europe, in the late Ottoman, early colonial period (the time of the French and British Mandates). Over the course of the twentieth century, painting and the fine arts broadly speaking became firmly established. A handful of artists in Lebanon developed their own, highly individual vocabularies of painterly and sculptural abstraction, the most consistent of whom was Saloua Raouda Choucair, (1916–2017). Her sources of inspiration included modernist architecture, the structure of Arabic poetry, the double helixes of DNA, and Sufi principles such as oneness with the divine. But something curious happens when one surveys the work of several other seemingly abstract painters, near contemporaries of Choucair, such as Saliba Douaihy, born in 1912, and Etel Adnan, born in 1925.

Douaihy received a fairly traditional artist's education. He drew and drew as a child and apprenticed with an older painter, Habib Serour, for several years. In the 1930s, he was sent to Paris and Rome to study fine art on a government scholarship. He returned to Lebanon and painted the countryside and its people in styles bearing the influence of everything from impressionism and cubism. And then his approach to painting began to flatten out and coalesce into what appears to be a Middle Eastern strain of hard-edge geometric abstraction. *Abstract*, an oil on canvas from 1971, for example, is all irregular angles, thin strips of orange alongside a sliver of yellow, a field of green, and stripes of red. What Douaihy was painting, however, was not exactly a mental or spiritual or newly secular state but rather, quite simply, a landscape-specifically, the deep crevice running through Wadi Qannoubine, in the northern Qadisha Valley, where he was from. According to the art historian Edouard Lahoud, Douaihy was bewitched by the sun and wanted to crack its secret, capture its magic.

Adnan, likewise, spent a year in the 1980s making drawings, paintings, and watercolors of a mountain in California, over and over, every day, creating paradoxical representations of an actual place with an accumulated language of abstract angles, squiggles, and jagged triangles. Compared to Douaihy, Adnan came to painting from a different tack. She studied philosophy, worked as a journalist, made tapestries, and wrote poems, novels, essays, and plays. She has written vividly of her painting as the daily, mark-making practice of a writer clearing her mind

2 Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), p. 98

3 Elise Salem, *Constructing Lebanon: A Century of Literary Narratives* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), p. 2



**Saliba Douaihy, Abstract, 1971, oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm**

and exercising her hand. She writes in the book *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*: “It seems to me that I write what I see, paint what I am.” She has described that mountain, in Marin County, California, as a beast and also as her best friend. From her early, patchwork paintings in the 1960s through to her accordion-folded artists’ books and the works she has been making in her eighties and nineties, Adnan renders the places she has loved, which she can only imagine now, her mountain and the sea off of Beirut, in lines, shapes, planes of color. Like Douaihy, she is mesmerized by the sun, which appears again and again in her paintings, like the view out of a car’s window on a road trip up or down the coast, warm, cold, cruel, a red, yellow, orange orb plunked into a field of blue or pink or green. Cityscapes emerge, like Mondrian and so many besides, in grids bespeaking buildings and streets, music and movement.

All of this is to say that the allure of abstraction in Lebanon is strange and sometimes misleading, in that the artists who have used it in the last hundred years have often done so to create what would otherwise be considered among the most conventional and conservative of genres: the



*Construction site, Beirut, 2012*

landscape painting. Abstract painters in Lebanon are very often painting landscapes of Lebanon. This also holds true throughout the Levant, particularly in Syria and Palestine. It is not only the case that visual artists in this region have had forms of abstract language at their disposal for centuries, in the geometric patterns that came to be part of the history of Islamic art, in the spatial dimensions of old Christian iconography. They have also drawn on the language of abstraction to do different things, to explore different territories, to effect different changes and achieve different results. In this version of the story, abstraction doesn't always demand a break. It is an available practice, one among many that may be tried on, discarded, returned to, creating a movement that is circular or cyclical rather than one way. The breaks, as it were, are most often elsewhere, in other structures. The art historian Reem Fadda, who coined the term Levantine abstraction (in the writings she produced internally for the Guggenheim in her years working as a curator on the museum's Abu Dhabi Project), has suggested that artists in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine have come to paint various landscapes in an abstract way because those landscapes have been vulnerable, unstable, threatened, falling apart, because they have been lost, because they are gone. The Mount Tamalpais of Adnan's imagination exists there, but nowhere else, and so it has come to mean so much more.

What does it mean for abstraction to be equal to representation, instead of its opposite? What does it do for the history of modernism and for abstract art's place in that narrative if both are much older and more fluid than we thought? Why would one place over another inspire depictions in a notably non-figurative, non-objective language? And moving a few years ahead of Adnan's yearlong encounter with her mountain, what would it mean to consider a much younger, more contemporary artist such as Marwan Rechmaoui to be a landscape painter, too, albeit of a different kind? Is it possible to be abstract and figurative, both? Is it plausible to be a painter and a sculptor and a concrete formalist concerned with materials and textures

and volumes and an immaterial conceptualist all at once? Can an artist in Beirut today invest in an old idea about painting “the view” with radical politics and long, winding loyalties to communism, socialism, and the more revolutionary positions of the old (or new) left? Can the notion of landscape painting be stretched, molded, and remade for a twenty-first-century practice that is critically engaged in what we know, and how we know, a truly messed up city like Beirut, which is, as Rechmaoui often says, charming, while also being crass, cynical, chaotic, violent, corrupt, and above all lawless and for the most part ungovernable? What is produced by the provocation of looking at Rechmaoui’s work this way? What is produced by the work itself, and by seeing the city – not only Beirut but the postcolonial, neoliberal, networked, globalized wreck of unplanned urbanism existing equally in the first and third worlds, also archetypal and readymade and always already circumscribed – through three decades of Rechmaoui’s projects?

Rechmaoui is one of the most emblematic figures of Beirut’s postwar art scene. He belongs to a tight-knit community of artists who came together in the 1990s, and worked as a kind of informal collective, jointly addressing a slate of common problems and concerns. Many of those issues were swirling around the reconstruction of the city center. Rechmaoui was among the five original founders of Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, which began producing works and projects in 1993. The group with whom he is most often associated includes friends and fellow artists such as Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, Rabih Mroué, Lina (Saneh) Majdalani, Jalal Toufic, Walid Sadek, Lamia Joreige, Tony Chakar, Ghassan Salhab, and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, who work as a pair. To varying degrees, all of them are intensely focused on Beirut, its history, and the experiences of its inhabitants through and after Lebanon’s fifteen-year-long civil war.

Rechmaoui shares with his peers an abiding interest in identifying the many phenomena that were produced by the civil war and postwar reconstruction periods. Taken together, their works show a remarkably consistent commitment to defining what those phenomena are and how they function, making them legible or visible and exploring their effects on daily life. To the extent that an artist is also a public figure, Rechmaoui is quieter than his colleagues and distinctly unprolific. He can (and often does) spend a decade on a single project. He has made paintings, watercolors, sculptures, photographs, multidisciplinary installations, catalogue interventions, and at least one video, but virtually no element of his practice is performative. He does not do lecture-performances. The standard artist’s talk is not a part of his toolkit. Only on rare occasions (such as the interviews conducted for this book) does he speak about his work at length or for an audience. But to the extent that an artist is also a thinker and a theorist, Rechmaoui is essential for Beirut.

He has articulated some of the major questions of a generation of artists through his work and his work alone. He has painted with the materials of the city’s reconstruction. He has made elaborately detailed, small-scale models of two of Beirut’s most iconic buildings, whose backstories speak to the failures of modernism, the economy, postwar reconciliation, and civility itself. He has mapped the city in multiple ways, geographically and historically, delving into the physical developments and psychological dimensions of its many conflicts and divisions. He has accumulated years of reading and research to do this and in the end he has shown exactly none of it, preferring to place before the public only the distilled forms of the final works – a rubber slip mat in the shapes of the city or the Arab League, a concrete tower or apartment block, a roomful of flags and shields. From those forms, a landscape emerges, familiar but reconfigured, driven in ways that are hard to see and difficult, even painful, to understand.