BOOK REVIEW: *Under the Skin: Feminist Art and Art Histories from the Middle East and North Africa Today*

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*Under the Skin: Feminist Art and Art Histories from the Middle East and North Africa Today* brings together a collection of essays focusing on art practices informed by feminisms and decolonisation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) from the 1950s to the present. The book is edited by Ceren Özpınar, Senior Lecturer in Art History and Design at the University of Brighton, and Mary Kelly, Lecturer in Contemporary Art History, Theory and Gallery Studies at University College Cork, and presents the work of panels convened at the annual conference of the College Art Association in New York and the Association for Art History in Loughborough in 2017.

With its overarching survey of such a wide range of artists and their work, from Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey and their diasporas, this timely and much anticipated volume constitutes a well documented overview of current debates and scholarship on feminist art histories. The collected essays stress the double exclusion of women artists from these geographies: on the one hand, there are the feminist discourses and practices in Arab/Muslim-majority countries, often overlooked by western scholarship if not entirely misunderstood, and on the other, the modern and contemporary artistic practices that are either excluded from the canon or absorbed by the global art platforms which tend to ignore local complexities and homogenise the margins.

Rather than trying to define a feminist art in the region and its diasporas, the collected essays stress the distinctiveness of women’s emancipation in localities that involve specific experiences in relation to gender, religion, tradition and modernity. Hence, a common thread is the constant navigation between the artists’ lived experiences of the postcolonial reality and collective memories of the colonial past. From this perspective, the individual trajectories of the artists introduced by the essays are taken as a starting point to analyse narratives of circulation, migration, emancipation and resistance that nuance hegemonic national or global discourses about race, gender, class and ethnicity.
In the forward, Griselda Pollock, one of the pioneers of feminist art theory and among the first to stress the necessity of including criteria of gender and race in art histories,¹ underlines that ‘art inflected by feminism does not create a feminist art any more than a women’s art’, and that, rather, it ‘creates a space for the singularity of each artist within a plurality’ (p viii). And, indeed, *Under the Skin* shows that while the work of women artists from the MENA region is informed by western feminist movements, and in particular by African-American activists of the 1970s, many of the artists discussed here do not declare themselves as explicitly feminist, although they express the lived experience of gender issues in their specific cultural contexts.

This reinterrogation of the essentialising categories of culture is echoed in the title, *Under the Skin*, which, as mentioned in the editors’ introduction, intends to show ‘what is beneath the surface, under the skin, body, colour and provenance, and not the cultural fixities or partial views detached from the realities of communities, cultures and practices from the area’ (p 4). This epidermal reference also resonates with Frantz Fanon’s description in his *Black Skin, White Masks* of the corporeal scheme and the fatality of difference as ‘being through others’.² Fanon’s discussion about the gaze on one’s body as the primary and inescapable condition of the construction of self and identity is echoed in the work of artists presented in this book as they address the orientalist tropes in representations of the colonised/Arab/Oriental/Muslim/female subject. These tropes are equally disputed by the agency of the artists themselves in interweaving the threads of arts, politics and identities/sexualities, challenging the assumption of women in the region as being politically disengaged and absent from the public arena.

From a methodological point of view, *Under the Skin* provides new critical viewpoints on visual cultures informed by feminisms in the MENA region that will be useful for researchers working in this yet understudied field who often face the issue of the absence of or not easily accessible sources. Against this backdrop, many of the contributions to this collection underline the relevance of working on primary documents through archival research and biographical data, an indispensable aspect for filling the voids of hitherto fragmented historiographies.

The fact that the volume brings together not only scholars attached to English-speaking institutions in the US, but also in other countries in Europe and the MENA area, broadens the often monocultural academic approaches of recent scholarship in the field to reflect a diversity of viewpoints and methodologies in pursuing art history in a global perspective. A consequence, however, of this academic richness is the heterogeneous body of texts in *Under the Skin* that span very diverse historical and geographic contexts with their cultural and socio-political specificities.

Organised in three thematic sections, the book is introduced by Ceren Özpmar and Mary Kelly, who set its theoretical foundation within the framework of current debates and scholarship on global feminisms, art and exhibition histories in the region. The first part, ‘Agency and Resistance to National and Global Discourses’, introduces stories of art from the MENA region that disrupt


mainstream narratives of western globalising discourses and stereotypes. Referring to Linda Nochlin’s seminal text *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists*, Nadine Atallah opposes the American feminist art historian’s question by asking ‘Have There Really Been No Great Women Artists?’ Through the individual examples of two of the most recognised Egyptian women artists since the 1950s, Gazbiyya Sirry and Inji Efflatoun, Atallah explores women’s art production and the role of the Egyptian Feminist Union in Nasser’s Egypt while re-evaluating their position in negotiating issues of authenticity beyond the nationalist canon in the context of decolonisation.

Moving on chronologically, contemporary practices in Syria are examined by Charlotte Bank, who addresses women’s roles in creating social art spaces and shows how new media, and in particular video installations by young Syrian artists in the 2000s, critically addressed gendered norms. Focusing on the work of Jennifer Abessira, an artist of French-Algerian origin who emigrated to Israel, Tal Dekel illustrates the complex transnational experience of immigrants from France with Maghrebi origins working in the field of the arts in Israel. This as yet under-researched field sheds light on the negotiation of identity and citizenship in feminist Mizrahi art. A similar negotiation of global culture and Islamic values is analysed by Lina Kattan in the context of Saudi Arabia in her look at attitudes towards figuration and representation of the veil and women’s bodies in Saudi contemporary art.

The second part, ‘Translating Ethnicity and Subjectivity into Art’, reconsiders artworks dealing with subjectivity as a lived experience of self. They show how, in the words of Linda Alcoff in her book *Visible Identities*, ‘social categories of identity – in this case, race/ethnicity and sex/gender – are related to the self, the lived experience of subjecthood, and what we can perceive and know’. The essays in this section examine the agency of women in engaging strategies of resistance to subordination in patriarchal colonised spaces through performative processes of the lived experience. For instance, Somayeh Noori Shirazi shows how the Iranian artist Katayoun Karami depicts her personal and contemporary perception of veiling by deconstructing the western orientalist gaze of the viewer in global contemporary art platforms. Focusing on the lived diasporic experience of Arab women, Isabelle de le Court investigates the work of Etel Adnan and Saloua Raouda Choucair, two leading figures of Lebanese modernism, and their engagement with non-figurative art as a claim to status, recognition and visibility as professional artists. The subjectivity of family ties, generational transmission and collective memory is further explored by Holiday Powers in her focus on the work of the Franco-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira. Powers shows how Sedira’s private and intimate histories intersect with collective memory and manifest forms of resistance against the power structures of the colonial past still present in Algeria today. Akila Kizzi also looks at individual trajectories as part of a collective past in Algeria and offers a comparison of two artists, the singer Taos Amrouche and the painter Baya Mahieddine, to show how both artists created opportunities for women in the art scene of a colonised Algeria.

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The third section, ‘Methods and Strategies for Seeing Politics and Practices Differently’, is dedicated to methodology and intends to offer scholars a new tool to encourage research in the field of contemporary feminist art in MENA countries. This part brings to the fore the importance of archival feminist practices and the inclusion of alternative methods and sources, such as oral testimonials, to compensate for the critical void of official historiographies. Jessica Gerschultz, reflecting on her own research on modernist tapestry in Tunisia that is based extensively on primary sources, offers a feminist reading and method for navigating in institutional archives in the west and questions the absence in the historiographies of Maghrebi craftswomen. Moving on to Palestine, Rachel Nelson explores Palestinian contemporary art and the intertextual dissonances of conflict, displacement and dispossession through Emily Jacir’s work. Methods for interrogating curatorial approaches are introduced by Ceren Özpınar, who looks at museum strategies in Turkey and the ways new art institutions fashion art narratives and discursive models that construct difference. Finally, Mary Kelly presents an artist’s interview with the New York-based, Syrian artist, Diana al-Hadid, who investigates multiple identities in her artistic practice, as ‘a voice of the diaspora’.

*Under the Skin* represents an important step in the scholarship of cultural production in the MENA region as it poses several questions about the social and political role played by women artists in patriarchal and formerly colonised contexts, as well as the different and often contradictory narratives on art and feminism when they are conveyed on a local or a global level. The solid framing by the editors of a variety of well-researched essays about renowned or emerging contemporary artists, written by both accomplished and younger scholars, provide the reader with a panoramic view of current research and art production, as well as with methodological tools and
theoretical frameworks for further investigation. The fact that many of the scholars and artists mentioned in the volume come from MENA cultural backgrounds or are attached to institutions in the region – and therefore speak for themselves – also brings different perspectives to the field. However, the reader may regret at times that despite this diversity, many of the theoretical references remain rooted in western academia. This is, of course, a difficulty that any scholar dealing with art histories on the margins is confronted with and which cannot be solved through such a collection as this one. In that sense, Under the Skin indicates the necessity for transnational and intersectional readings of art history, but also the need for further investigation in the historiographies of art and feminism in the region. For instance, analysing the different debates about gender that emanate from the Arab, Iranian and Turkish worlds, as well as the specific meanings and manifestations of feminism in these various geographic regions, could strengthen the decentring of traditional art historical narratives initiated in this volume. This raises the more general question of translation and points to a next step stemming from this important work that could perhaps include a discussion on terms and terminology. Indeed, notions such as, for instance, gender, modernism, or even craft, could be precisely discussed within regional contexts and with regard to linguistic particularisms.

Under the Skin constitutes a major contribution to the scholarship in the field of cultural production in the MENA region and attests to the need for further attention to be given to the feminist visual culture produced in the region. It provides solid frameworks and methods for further investigation, in which the appreciation of regional specificities in terms of knowledge and scholarly debates, as well as historical facts, prove to be crucial for the transcultural and inclusive repositioning of the discipline of art history.


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