

*In Vested Interests: From Passion to Patronage, The AbdulMagid Breish Collection of Arab Art*, edited by AbdulMagid Breish, Louisa MacMillan, & Mysa Kafil-Hussain (Skira Editore, 2020)

The art catalogue—not the monograph, exhibition review, or the peer-reviewed article—is the predominant form of discourse when it comes to the art of the Arabic-speaking world. Normally, catalogues cover exhibitions, such as *Arabicity* (2017) or collections, like the recent *Reflections* (2020) volume which details the British Museum’s Middle East and North Africa collection, consisting mostly of paper-based works and the subsequent 2021 debut of the collection in exhibition-form at the British Museum itself. While many private collectors and art funds have made their collections available online, like the Barjeel Foundation Collection or the Dalloul Art Foundation, collecting strategies are often not part of the discourse. The recent *In Vested Interests: From Passion to Patronage, The AbdulMagid Breish Collection of Arab Art* is an exception to this rule, with multiple lengthy essays about collecting by the collector himself, Libyan-British banker AbdulMagid Breish. However, the strength of the collection lies beyond the sheer transparency of the project: a significant portion of the Breish Collection consists of Libyan art. In a field where most major collections of art from the Arabic-speaking world often hold a single work of art by a Libyan artist, if any, the Breish Collection represents major documentation of contemporary Libyan art and a resource for the field of contemporary art history.

*In Vested Interests*, edited beautifully by Louisa MacMillan and Mysa Kafil-Husseini, begins with various introductory notes to the reader, including Breish’s biography, his collecting methods, a short history of Middle Eastern art sales by Nima Sagharachi, and an essay on investing by Breish. It positions the reader to enter the collection itself, which is organized, not by theme like other major catalogues or

even by artist, but rather by how art fits into the Breish Collection as an investment. First comes “Blue-Chip” investments, which are stable and low-risk: in the Breish Collection these are largely by dead masters like Inji Aflatoun (1924-1989) and Seif Wanly (1906-1979). “Large-Cap” follows, representing living masters, “Medium-Cap,” “Small-Cap.” “Secluded Markets,” which is where we find the majority of the Libyan work, represents an effort to elevate Libya’s art and to function as a more local patron of Libyan art. “Diversification,” the final section, is where the reader will find some non-Arab artists, including Lorna Selim (b. 1928) as well as 3-D works and mixed media. In Diversification, Breish included iconic collages of Mohammad Omar Khalil (b. 1936), one of which is titled *Gaddafi* (2011); Khalil is also a friend of Breish, who he met through the artist Dia al-Azzawi (b. 1939). Needless to say, Azzawi is well represented in the Breish Collection, including some works he made specifically for Breish. Several essays conclude the book, some by artists themselves in Breish’s circles, like Azzawi and Khalil, commenting on pieces commissioned by Breish or inspired by conversations with him: Breish thus establishes himself as not only a collector but a patron of the arts.

Of the many reasons the Breish collection is significant, its representation of Libyan art is the most compelling: it is perhaps the strongest documented collection of Libyan art in recent history. Most museum collections and gallerists feature one or two Libyan artists if any; this tends to represent artists living outside of Libya, mostly because of how historically artists have been treated within Libya. They were often prohibited from leaving Libya to exhibit their works abroad during Gaddafi’s reign, and thus have remained largely isolated from the international market. The Breish Collection gathers ten Libyan artists in particular: Mohammad Barudi (1931-2003), Ali Ezouik (b. 1949), Yousef Fatis (b. 1966), Najla Shawkat al-Fitouri (b. 1968), Ali Gana (1936-2006), Bashir Hammouda (b. 1948), Taher el-Maghrebi (1941-2017), Ali al-Muntasser (b. 1967), Ali Mustafa Ramadan (b. 1938), and Salem al-Tamimi (b. 1956). The works are mostly paintings and prints; outside of the Secluded Markets section of *In Vested Interests*, the Breish Collection includes a sculpture in Large Cap investments by Ali Mustafa Ramadan made of brass alloy titled *Dynamic Shape of the Eye* (1987); it is a model of a larger structure outside of Tripoli’s main eye hospital. Breish himself explicitly states that he wanted to support Libyan artists in the light of the Arab Spring in 2011; Libyan artists were documenting events as it happened and, in

turn, should be collected and acknowledged.

While the group of Libyan artists represented is small, their work generally straddles the line between abstraction and the portrayal of everyday life: human figures and the city represented in geometric blocks of color, along with more classical examples of portraiture. The overall effect is that, by emphasizing how and why Libyan artists have been under-represented, Breish himself is demonstrating how greater inclusivity should be a critical element of the arts market going forward. Neither Breish or his editors are ever anything but respectful of Libyan art: their comments encourage the reader to think about the market and the historical events that shape how art travels, versus any misplaced statements about the quality of Libyan art itself. On a similar note, *In Vested Interests* makes an argument for Libya as an art center of the Arabic-speaking world, if it were paid more attention. The centers of art production in the region have shifted with political and cultural winds, but usually Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, and Sudan, and depending on the decade, the Gulf and Palestine, are well-represented. Again, if we were to take *Arabicity*, a 2017 exhibition, as our example, in comparison to the Breish collection, it does not feature a single Libyan artist. While catalogues of private collections are often neglected and receive far less publicity than art exhibitions or museum collections, there is still hope that between Breish, especially given how extensive his artist-curator-academic-gallerist network is, and between recent Libyan artist initiatives both in Libya and abroad in the last five years alone, Libyan art will begin to receive more detailed documentation on all fronts.

Breish is not simply advocating for the reform of the art market through inclusivity in itself but also greater transparency in acquisitions: his own transparency should be taken as a model for ethical collecting by private collectors and by museum curators. In that way, the book stands as an indirect critique of how curators have assembled catalogues and presented collections to the general public. Curators are often focused on themes versus documenting why and how they are acquiring works: with the art of the Arabic-speaking world in particular, themes of gender, religion and politics reign supreme, almost quasi-orientalist. Breish, in comparison, explains how he understands his art, using the language of investment, then goes on to give practical advice to the would-be collector or curator, especially regarding provenance and storage. Again, Breish very clearly articulates why he believes Libyan art is important: the market was isolated and contem-

porary artists have also stood as witnesses for Libya's recent past. It is important that this call for greater transparency is coming from a Libyan collector, when major collections have been from Bilad al-Sham and the Khaleej, like the Barjeel Foundation and the Dalloul collections. Inclusivity breeds inclusivity: a Libyan collector recognizes that the holes in the market are due to poor documentation and advocates not only for better documentation, but attention to vaster markets. *In Vested Interests* is revolutionary because it could only have been assembled by a Libyan collector and his team of talented editors.

As the Breish Collection's other strengths are acknowledged by Breish and his editors themselves, there are unstated themes running through the art collection that are equally important: religion and Islam, in particular. Breish does mention an interest in Sufism and his conversations with Ibrahim el-Salahi on the Qur'an are documented in the book. These conversations led to al-Salahi's painting, *The Resurrection* (2008-9), which graces the cover of the book. The Breish Collection however should be praised for its unconventional framing around the subject of religion. Again, art catalogues tend to be quasi-orientalist in their approach to framing religion; collections will either use *ḥurūfiyya*, Arabic-script letterism, as a representation of religion, citing image prohibition in Islam. They might also emphasize rebellion against religion as a category on its own. Instead, the work is organized by where it fits into Breish's rubric of low risk versus high risk investments, in addition to the sections detailing his patronage of different artists. Breish goes beyond by selecting pieces that look at religion in everyday life or that play with mixed media, like ceramics.

*In Vested Interests* is not simply an art catalogue but a response to the curation and collection of contemporary art. Breish pushes back against how art from the Arabic-speaking world has been presented, acquired and discussed, arguing for the need for collectors to support their own communities and be transparent about what work they collect and why. In its own way, it is a subtle critique of the museum and the gallery. It will be remembered for being a major document in Libyan 20th and 21st century art.

