



TAKING

NYU STUDENT WRITING PRIZE

SHAPE

**GREY**ARTNYU  
GALLERY

Published in conjunction with the exhibition *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s*, which was organized by the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, and curated by Suheyla Takesh and Lynn Gumpert.

Designed by Clint McLean

Produced by the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE

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Cover: Simone Fattal, “Celestial Forms,” 1973 (detail)

Exhibition on view:

Grey Art Gallery, New York University

January 14–March 13, 2020

McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College

January 25–June 6, 2021

Tampa Museum of Art

September 30, 2021–January 16, 2022

Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University

February 10–June 12, 2022

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University

September 22–December 4, 2022

# TAKING SHAPE

## NYU Student Writing Prize Competition

Focusing on the Grey Art Gallery’s exhibition *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s*, drawn from the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE.

The “Taking Shape” NYU Student Writing prizes were awarded for the best essay or poem written by an NYU undergraduate and graduate student in response to the Grey Art Gallery’s exhibition *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s* (January 14–March 13, 2020).

The show was forced to close early due to Covid-19, and entrants worked from the full suite of images, gallery labels, and other resources available on the Grey’s website. Contest judge was Lucy Oakley, Head of Education and Programs at the Grey.

## UNDERGRADUATES

Congratulations to Azeki Ali, first place winner in the Grey Art Gallery's NYU Undergraduate Writing Prize Competition; Amelia Grace Annen, second place winner; and Niccolò Acram Cappelletto, honorable mention.

# Untitled

by Azeki Ali

Many artists—the “first” within their culture  
Though their culture might’ve been the “first” of many artists  
The deep dark tones exemplify light  
The light is never truly out of sight  
I seek to answer—  
I seek to recall—  
Knowing it all—between the hues created by Younan  
Created by Afaf Zurayk  
Created by more than 5 x 5 x 5  
Cre-ated more than just a 5 by 5  
They put their faith in something first  
They put their art into action for it  
Action for Abstraction ... “from the Arab World”  
Takes Shape.

Azeki Ali is a junior in NYU’s Gallatin School of Individualized Study, concentrating on Political Action through Acting & Dance, with a minor in French. He expects to graduate in May 2022.



## A Ghazal in Yellow

by Amelia Grace Annen

Sunflowers, bumblebees, lemonade ice cream, I've always loved yellow.  
an abstraction for a summer's day dream, I've always loved yellow.

My own secret heaven; too personal to utter whatever it may be that would make you stay  
yellow wasn't your favorite color, so I didn't tell you that I've always loved yellow.

A little nugget of wisdom from you: never believe the movies, never do.  
yellow: the color of my heart (new) when I met you, I've always loved yellow.

A mecca for lovers: looking for a passage to the great beyond, I loved  
some mix of modern and classic, most importantly I always loved yellow.

Blurred lines of you and me, an abstract painting of *Celestial Forms*  
or *The Light from Within the Green* (it just hit me) but I've always loved yellow.

God is repenting for a sin I made, there the final day before I go, then you lie  
out of hope to stop what already came, and you say you always loved yellow.

No more Grace, It's blue now or grey, you aren't here and now I'm stuck in the quotidian  
the color of time passing, I'm not the same, and I forget why I always loved yellow.

Amelia Grace Annen is a senior in NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, majoring in Drama with a minor in Creative Writing. She expects to graduate in May 2021.



Mohammed Khadda (Mostaganem, Algeria, 1930–Algiers, 1991), “Abstraction vert sur fond orange” (Green Abstraction on Orange Background), 1969, Oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 23 5/8 in. Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE From the exhibition *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s*

# Untitled

by NiccolòAcram Cappelletto

As I walk I see the Void,  
I am not empty, and I am not soil  
I try to look beyond my forms  
Aiming towards the sky above my head  
Above the clouds, and above the earth  
Mother and father of this home  
And above me  
Just the stars

I take a step into your colors,  
Please save me from this abyss

As I walk I see the Shape,  
In many hues, the sound of a flower  
I call your name but you are long gone  
Passing through the memories  
Shouting for my name in despair  
I came to stay alone with you  
But at the wrong time, at the wrong space  
And above me  
Just the stars

I take a step into your colors,  
Please be there when I fall

As I walk I see the Dawn,  
Meant to be a new start, again this life  
A desert around and a palm  
A city on the horizon and the museum  
Where I store our letters of love  
Preserved on the island inside of me  
You were the ship, you were the port  
And above me  
Just the stars

NiccolòAcram Cappelletto is a senior at NYU Abu Dhabi, majoring in Art and Art History. He expects to receive his BA in 2021.

## GRADUATES

Congratulations to Lucie Taylor, first place winner in the Grey Art Gallery's NYU Graduate Writing Prize Competition; Ruqaiyah Zarook, second place winner; and David Lamb, honorable mention.

# Daughters

by Lucie Taylor

Forty days in your Achrafieh apartment. Quarante jours. Quarantine.

The flag waves *bleu blanc rouge*.

Squinting through the glaring golden light,  
see your daughter crouching in the corner.

Look again:  
she is shapes, lines, figures.  
Her edges tremble, vibrate.

A half-century away,  
an analogous flag bleeds translated colors  
above the sirens' scream.

176 days:  
this quarantine rolls on.

Bread's beginnings bubble up,  
viscous,  
full of yawning  
holes, nearly spilling from the jar.

Edges tremble.  
The oven hisses, roars.  
A loaf glows golden,  
takes shape,  
is born.

Lucie Taylor is an MA student in Near Eastern Studies at NYU and the Assistant Editor at the Library of Arabic Literature, which is published by NYU Press in partnership with the NYU Abu Dhabi Institute. She expects to receive her degree in 2022.



Shafic Abboud (Bifkaya, Lebanon, 1926–Paris, 2004), “Cela fait quarante jours” (It’s Been Forty Days) (Portrait of Christine Abboud), 1964. Oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 36 5/8 in. Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE From the exhibition *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s*



## Abstraction as a State of Preoccupation

by Ruqaiyah Zarook

When art historian Nada Shabout was looking for a university graduate program to pursue her research interest in modern Arab art, she was told that there was no such thing. That was over two decades ago, and yet to this day, we can still see and hear the murmurs of a similar kind of arrogance, that the Western art canon should take up more, if not all, of the space in our museums, and our art galleries, and our minds. But that center cannot hold anymore. This season of mass protests and our current reassessment of state institutions nods to that great era of decolonization in the mid-20th century, the famous revolutionary period that shook the world over fifty years ago. We see that same world trembling again now, and the Grey Art Gallery's exhibition *Taking Shape: Abstract Art from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s* is one of those stark reminders that this era was widespread.

Ibrahim El-Salahi (Born Omdurman, Sudan, 1930), "The Last Sound," 1964  
Oil on canvas, 47 7/8 x 17 7/8 in.  
Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE  
From the exhibition *Taking Shape: Abstract Art from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s*

In the past, and certainly still, representations of what we know as the Middle East have been sub-par, one dimensional, flat, written by interlopers with little understanding of historical or political gradation. Knowledge of philosophical, artistic, and literary movements, anything of the cultural variety, was absent from the study of the Middle East; these were historiographical deserts that remained uninspected and unexamined. But when I see *Calligraphic Compositions* (1960–69) by Ahmad Shibrain, or Ibrahim El-Salahi's *The Last Sound* (1964), or Asma Fayoumi's oil painting, *Ritha' Madina* (1968), I see the emergence of distinct post-colonial identities that show just how dry and neglected these knowledge deserts are, at least for us. These works of art don't mince their (intangible) words when interweaving the politics, art, and social change that affected the lives of artists who created them. In fact, they're so intertwined that the politics is in the paint itself, and in every horizontal, vertical, and diagonal stroke that's been stabbed and glided over and over again.

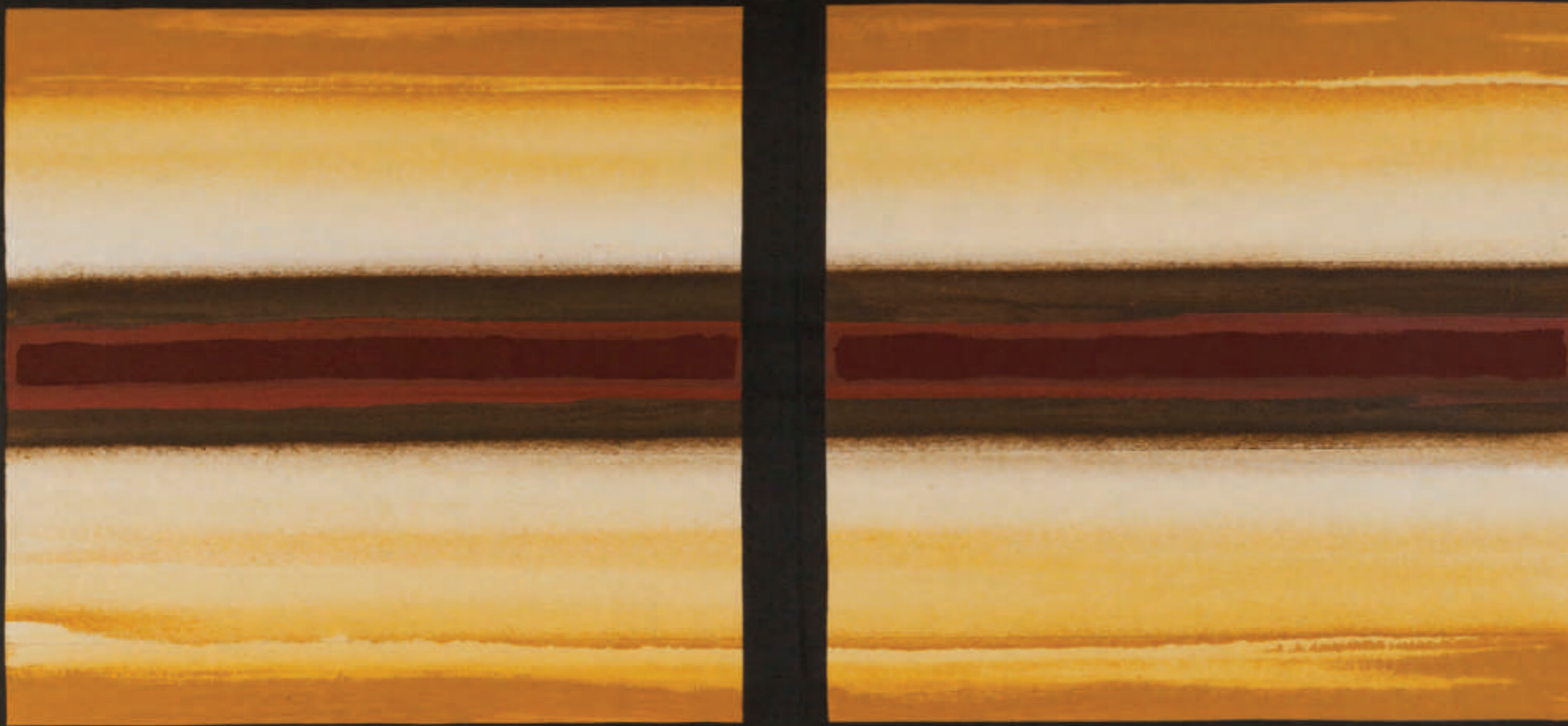
Shibrain's primeval map of Khartoum. El-Salahi's cerebral passage of the soul drawing on themes of death, grief, and transcendence. Fayoumi's architectural lines resembling a jungle summoning the poetry of Damascus's cityscape. The soft and hard lines, the dragging and dripping of paint across canvas, the curves and squiggles, the muted and vibrant hues. All of these showcase the vitality, fertility, and vigour of art as consumed by us, just as important and intelligent and moving and interesting as any abstract art canon located over the imaginary hemispheric line of the Global North.

Art *can* be illustrative of the common humanity within us all; but perhaps this is too easy to say. Art also showcases our differences, our divides, the largely varied geopolitical

and social backgrounds we come from, and perhaps we can't always relate to each other, but really, who cares? Often, the notion of relating to each other through art comes through that process of comparing; comparing art to Picasso, or Braque, or Dali. Must we always try to cross these hemispheric lines from East to West and say, "Look! They draw and paint, just like us!"? But these artworks stand on their own feet, and wouldn't it be amazing if we could consume art and taste it for what it is, as it exists in the moment of consumption?

So, what does it mean to respond to a work of art? And what does abstraction even mean? Why are these works of art abstracted, and to whom are they abstract? To define abstractions, one might say, is to make a piece of art devoid of representational quality, or something that exists only as an idea. I prefer the definition: "a state of preoccupation" to define abstraction. Perhaps these are abstractions from the Arab world in some sense, but mostly in the sense that they showcase the natural preoccupations of a miscellaneous group of individuals, lost and tired and inspired; they represent the convulsions and eviction of feelings onto a surface, dealing with that blurred line between the personal and intimate, and the political. What was it that Toni Morrison once said? Oh, that's right: "All good art is political!" And I'm certainly not interested in art that tries to stand unanchored in this trembling world, either.

Ruqaiyah Zarook is a student in NYU's MA program XE: Experimental Humanities and Social Engagement. She expects to receive her degree in May 2022.



# I dream of diaspora

by David Lamb

In fatal climbs my thoughts return to you—  
Vision of the home that once we knew  
A flight of fancy, another test of faith.  
Chased by hope and silent desert wraiths,  
To foreign lands whose languages we lack  
In which we sleep and dream of coming back

We have witnessed death itself bolt down  
From out of heaven, and scorch the very ground,  
Babel's tower toppled, and Eden shut  
Our tongues confused, ancestral lines are cut

Let these fateful lines describe our plight  
A Khatt that burns the canvas of the night,  
Inscribe my pain in sweeping, soaring hand  
Etched on tiles, remembered by the sand

David Lamb is a student in NYU's MA program XE: Experimental Humanities and Social Engagement. He expects to receive his degree in 2022.

Rafa Nasiri (Tikrit, Iraq, 1940–Amman, 2013), "Variations of the Horizon No. 5," 1979.  
Acrylic on canvas, 51 1/8 x 42 7/8 in.  
Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE  
From the exhibition *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s*

