

Review of Faye Q. Oweis, *Encyclopedia of Arab American Artists (Artists of the American Mosaic)*, (Greenwood Press, 2008)

The difficulty of making national or ethnic origin a defining factor for the consideration of art while dodging the notoriously reductive lens of the East/West binary is one all too familiar to any curator, artist, critic, or scholar dealing with art from the Arab world and its diasporas. Of course, this dilemma is one whose reach extends far beyond that region; every exhibition, catalogue essay, dissertation, or in this case—the ever-ambitious project of an encyclopedia—whose organizing principle is art produced by any group perceived as either marginalized, displaced, and/or outside the mainstream canons of Western art, inevitably faces the same unrelenting problem: that is, how to present their work under the umbrella of a shared cultural experience without subscribing to the rather stale discourse of “the Other” and its inevitably grim aesthetic in which diverse artistic practices are consistently contextualized within a struggle for inclusiveness, or worse, a fetishized narrative of victimhood.

In other words—and more specifically—when it comes to Arab American art (a term, in its own right, glaringly problematic in its infinite ambiguity), how do we describe an art as located between home and another country without inadvertently reinforcing dangerously paradigmatic dichotomies based on issues of national identity (East/West), authority (center/periphery), temporality (tradition/modernity), gender (male/female), subjectivity (oppressor/oppressed), and space (local/global)? How do we speak of difference without naming it? And conversely, how do we account for cultural unity without succumbing to totalizing systems of thought associated with the practice of identifying, classifying, and essentializing—processes integral to the formation of a survey such as that of an encyclopedia?

While such questions related to the notion of hybrid identity may feel like desperately exhausted and ubiquitous anxieties firmly instilled into us by the lessons of post-colonialism, Faye Q. Oweis appears to remain blind to such concerns in his *Encyclopedia of Arab American Artists*—a blindness that while paradoxically empowering to some degree, proves itself to be immensely problematic throughout the book’s entries; indeed, there is no doubt that Oweis’ endeavor is admirably bold in light of the aforementioned theoretical stalemates, however, his decision to organize the text with an encyclopedic paradigm of analysis gravely undermines both his accomplishments and those of the artists he discusses.

The latest installment of Greenwood Press’ “Artists of the American Mosaic” series (other encyclopedias in the series are of Jewish American, Asian American, Native American, and African American artists), the *Encyclopedia* immediately smacks of the classically 1990s exercise of “flavor of the month,” inclusionism—a strategy that reverts to the false assumption that to simply attempt to account for, represent, and describe will alleviate repression, misinterpretation, and homogenization. Oweis even goes so far as to state that in his effort to provide “a cross-section” of Arab American artists from varying backgrounds, he has made a concerted attempt to include artists who are openly homosexual in order to “add diversity” to his selection of artists; here, Oweis seems to do

more to legitimize sexual difference (albeit, inadvertently) than to call it into question all together. A more effective tactic, as some of the artists profiled in the encyclopedia itself demonstrate, is to seek not so much this kind of cosmetic inclusiveness, but rather, elicit a discussion that calls for a dislocation of center and shift in discourse.

Each of the 85 entries in Oweis' encyclopedia roughly follows the same basic organizational scheme: an identification of that artist's preferred medium/media; a brief biography; an identification of his or her key thematic content; a description of one or two specific examples from his or her body of work; a list of exhibitions in which he or she has been included; a bibliography of the sources used to write the profile; and the websites and spaces where one can view that artist's works. While the structural redundancy of the encyclopedia is excusable given its conventional association with that format, more troubling is Oweis' repeated deployment of a laundry list of formal, political, and theoretical concerns. Among these, and by far the most recurrent refrain, is that the artist "explores issues related to "identity," "ethnicity," "displacement" and/or "exile,"— broad generalizations that, rarely fully unpacked, very quickly become tiresome. By insufficiently explaining how such heavily loaded issues arise from the works themselves, nuanced explorations of complex socio-political questions are watered down into what reads as a ready-made list of formulaic, symptomatic grievances.

Oweis states his intentions in the introduction as seeking to "provide a window into the lives of Arab Americans in general and the lives and contributions of Arab American visual artists in particular, with an aim of educating the readers about issues and challenges facing people of Arab heritage," (xiii). However, the format and function of the encyclopedia, with its traditional role to summarize, survey, and fix threatens to undermine the boundary-obscuring, anti-narrative strategies adopted by many of the artists discussed in its pages; from the open book structure of Dalia Elsayed's evocative "emotional maps" of her daily routines, to Walid Raad's stealth critique of our impulse to gravitate towards the tangible, linear, and authoritative, to Yasser Aggour's bold interrogation of social taboos, to Amina Mansour's dual-pronged critique of social constructions (wealth, gender) and fantasies (identity and nostalgia) alive in both Egypt and the American South, to the revolutionary spirit of Samia Halaby's abstractions, many of the artists included in the volume brilliantly transgress the most repressive ideological demarcation lines.

Perhaps just as many of the artists overviewed, however, adopt artistic strategies that often manage to reinforce the very same stereotypes they seek to disrupt. Take for example, Andrea Ali's work created following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, in which the artist sculpted ten veiled women fashioned as bowling pins. As they wait to be run over by a bowling ball covered with stars and stripes, Ali's sculptures deliver not a poignant examination of violence and oppression, but a contrived perpetuation of the "us verses them" narrative. Indeed, throughout the encyclopedia, Oweis identifies reactionary works like these as a "turning point" in an artist's oeuvre (see Sumayyah Samaha's entry)—a pattern that when so frequently applied, does little to dismantle the myth of conflict and strife as a generator of artistic activity when it comes to Arab artists and/or artists of Arab descent. Thus, it is not just a given work on its own that is the sole

contributor to these kinds of clichés, but rather how Oweis contextualizes it in terms of its importance within that artist's greater oeuvre, and where he locates its meaning. For instance, instead of exploring the ways in which Hala Faisal's depiction of the female nude in various positions of repose, erotic pleasure, and vulnerability functions to subvert the traditional notion of the power relationship prescribed by the male gaze, the use of nudity in Faisal's work is identified as a means to expose the sadness and suffering of her subjects, particularly the women of Iraq, thereby reinforcing stereotypes surrounding the oppressed Arab woman. Often equally misleading are Oweis' formal analyses; abstract and calligraphic works in particular, are paradigmatically explained as a fusion between Arab artistic traditions and a Western modernist vocabulary—a recurring claim that again, when redundantly deployed, risks insulating that the multidimensional nature of Arab American abstract art can be attributed to the mere fact that Arab American artists have been exposed to a visual culture outside of that belonging to their native country.

While the use of plain, straightforward, and easily digestible language, as opposed to lofty art historical jargon, is more than acceptable for the purposes of a preliminary source such as an encyclopedia, describing paintings as “full of excitement and happiness,” or “colorful with vivid tones and shades” or simply “expressionistic”—full stop—fails to do justice to the finely-tuned inventiveness of these artists' formal contributions—a problem exacerbated by the dearth of images provided by the book. In place of the black and white photographs of the artists that accompany the majority of the profiles, certainly the reader would be far better served by an additional image of the artists' work (many profiles have none), if not more in-depth written content.

That said, gathering together artists of such disparate artistic practices, mediums, generations, political attitudes, religious backgrounds, relationships to their country of origin, institutional and commercial success and I would argue, quality, does provide a realistic cross-section of and practical introduction to the broad range of contributions Arab Americans bring to the visual arts. Even more importantly, it does successfully help dispel assumptions about what Arab or Arab American art should look like—a task whose continued importance should not be underestimated. Essentially, Oweis' most unfortunate downfall then seems to be that he appears to have confused breadth with depth, inclusion with redemption, and diversity with multidimensionality. As such, *The Encyclopedia of Arab American Artists* demonstrates the need to come up with far fresher, more rigorously critical, theoretically engaged, tightly-curated, and yet loosely-structured modes of analysis in order to better accommodate the many overlapping and intersecting strata that comprise such exceedingly complex artistic practices and their related discourses.

Ranya Husami recently obtained an M.A. in Modern Art and Curating at Columbia University. Her Master's thesis, "The Dog Ate My Framework": The Origin-ality of the Post-War Lebanese Avant-Garde and Other Post-Modernist Myths," examines the formation of narratives and origin stories that have crystallized around conceptual art practices in Post-War Lebanon.