

Pamela Karimi on *Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran*, edited by Saeb Eigner with a forward by Zaha Hadid (London: Merrell Publishers Ltd, 2010)

Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran is a beautifully illustrated 384-page art book by the London-based author, entrepreneur, cultural advocate, and art expert Saeb Eigner. The volume is divided into eight chapters, an afterword, artists' biographies, a list of suggested additional readings and notes, and an index. It begins with a brief foreword by the Iraqi-born British architect Zaha Hadid, who sets an optimistic tone for the book. Eigner's emotional and familial bonds with Iran and the Arab Middle East could be a major drive behind the book's exclusion of works from Turkey and Israel. But a more amusing account by the author reveals that Iranians and Arabs equally cherish the legendary diva Umm-Kulthum (p. 14). This explanation alone justifies choosing *Umm-Kulthum's Greatest Hits*—a 1997 piece by the Egyptian artist Chant Avedissian—for *Art of the Middle East's* front cover.

Featuring a broad range of artworks from the 1950s to the present, the book is organized around seven themes: scripture, literature, music and performance, politics, conflict and war, history and identity, portraiture and the body, nature and the land. The introductory chapter provides a concise overview of the modern period, describing how, since the late-nineteenth century, a number of conventional categories (calligraphy, the art of the illuminated book, and ancient or pre-Islamic modes of representation) and political events (decolonization, revolutions, civil wars, and nationalistic ambitions) have stimulated the work of most Iranian and Arab artists. The introduction also highlights the role of outside influences, including the spread of Western avant-garde views and the introduction of European-style art institutions. The remaining seven chapters each include a preface to one thematic topic, consisting of a brief look at the significance and historical influences of the topic, as well as discussion of the ways contemporary Middle Eastern artists have reacted to that thematic topic in their works. The preface is followed by a series of images with inclusive captions.

The author does not offer sufficient analytical descriptions of the featured works, and the introduction and prologues to each chapter often do not go beyond supplying primary information and reiterating data from secondary sources. At times, the choice of artists for each category seems arbitrary. These artists are not listed chronologically or based on the specific media they employ; it is not fully clear why certain works are displayed side by side. The book as a whole suffers from some unevenness: It includes so many diverse artists, ranging from well-established professionals to up-and-coming ones. While some emerging artists have managed to create captivating images, they have yet to define a solid framework for their approaches. It is also worth mentioning that contemporary Middle Eastern art could be framed according to deeper psychological sentiments and philosophical concepts. Seen in this light, the chapters of the current book could be developed around theoretical themes.

For instance, the work of studio photographers who depict local and contemporary women as "other" (e.g., Shadi Ghadirian's Qajar-looking women, Shirin Aliabadi's forged chic blondes of her "Miss Hybrid" series, and Yussef Nabil's Egyptian Frida in "My Frida") could all be grouped in one chapter focusing on issues of femininity as masquerade. The book could also benefit from more profound deliberations on the qualitative aspects of the works. Farhad Moshiri's diptych of ceramic bowls ("Silver Bowl on Gold and Gold Bowl on Silver") may be regarded as more than just "a rigorous celebration of the formal beauty and intense colors of the pottery of Iran" (p. 207). The

cracked surface of Moshiri's painting allows for a rather different interpretation. It is one thing to portray traditional pottery as a means to celebrate the past, quite another to represent pottery as an object in decay. It is thus not clear whether the work was meant to celebrate the past or to eradicate it altogether. This ambivalent characteristic is indeed the strength of Moshiri's diptych of ceramic bowls.

Disappointingly, *Art of the Middle East's* appended bibliography consists of a random selection of books. The absence of more critical texts on contemporary Middle Eastern art (such as Jessica Winegar's *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*) confirms that the volume belongs to the category of books with lighter textual content. Such is Paul Sloman's *Contemporary Art in the Middle East* (2009), which nonetheless provides more in-depth analyses and goes beyond Iran and the Arab Middle East to assimilate contemporary art of Israel, Turkey, North Africa, and Afghanistan. Such coffee-table books, no doubt, have put the art of the Middle East on the map. What remains open to discussion, however, is the extent to which the featured artworks can detach themselves from this system of cultural commodification in order to maintain their real values. Most emerging artists from Iran (including those presented in the current book) offer "models of resistance" against insidious forms of socio-political domination. By doing so, they help expand the field of "cultural production" (in Pierre Bourdieu's sense of the term). But this important endeavor may be sustained only if the artistic manifestations of the so-called models of resistance do not appear over and over again on the glossy pages of expensive coffee-table books.

The aforementioned shortcomings, however, should not detract from the book's value. Eigner must be credited, first and foremost, for the vital task of bringing together the work of more than two hundred artists from both within and beyond the region. No other such existing compendium (including *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*; *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*; *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity*; *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World*) covers the extent of the works presented in *Art of the Middle East*. The book ends with a provocative piece by José Parlá, a prominent Cuban-American artist whose lyrical brush strokes are inspired by the repetitive style of Umm-Kulthum's singing (p. 360). Parlá's work can be perceived as a new beginning; perhaps it was meant to encourage the less informed reader to re-evaluate the book's featured artworks in a slightly different way—one that entails a special "rhythm" of thought.

Due to the wealth of its imagery and the clarity of its text, the volume would appeal to general audiences who are curious about contemporary Middle Eastern art and culture. Students in introductory-level courses focusing on contemporary Middle Eastern art and visual culture will find Eigner's book very useful. Consequently, *Art of the Middle East* will be a fine addition to libraries' reference collections worldwide.

Pamela Karimi is Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.