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**Al Said, Shakir Hassan (1925-2004)**

1005 words

Al Said was a prolific and influential artist. He was a founding member of the *Baghdad Group for Modern Art* (Jama’at Baghdad lil-fann al-hadith) in 1951, together with Jewad Selim and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra; and later, in 1971, of the *One Dimension Group* (al-Bu’d al-wahid). He wrote art manifestos for both groups in addition to his contemplative manifesto (al-bayan al-ta’ammuli), published in the cultural supplement of the Iraqi daily *al-Jumhuriyya* in 1966. The manifesto he wrote for the Baghdad Group for Modern Art was the first art manifesto of its kind in Iraq. It was read out at the group’s inaugural exhibition at the Museum of Ancient Costumes in Baghdad – an event that is considered by some the true birth of Iraqi modern art. The manifesto gives voice to the group’s commitment to both heritage and modernity. Its emphasis on the local character drew inspiration from Islamic art, namely al-Wasiti’s thirteenth century miniature paintings, but also from popular culture, like carpet production, and from the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia. This meant distancing itself from the previous course of modern art in the Arab world — which was perceived of as following European models — and setting out to ground modern art more firmly in a local context. It marked a re-orientation in art that coincided with radical political change and the growth of Arab nationalism.

Born in al-Samawa, Iraq, in 1925, Shakir Hassan Al Said studied social sciences at Baghdad’s Higher Institute of Teachers, obtaining his BA in 1948. He worked as a teacher before he studied painting at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad. After his graduation in 1954, he received state scholarships to pursue his studies abroad. He spent the years from 1955 to 1959 in Paris at the Académie Julien, École des Arts Décoratifs, and the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. On his return to Baghdad, he taught art history at the Institute of Fine Arts. From 1980 to 1983, he headed the Department of Aesthetic Studies at the Ministry of Culture and Information. He later worked as counselor of the Abd al-Hamid Shoman Foundation in Amman, but stayed in Baghdad until his death in 2004.

Al Said’s early paintings show an affinity with European avant-garde art movements such as Expressionism and Cubism, especially Paul Klee, but also draw on Arabic-Islamic heritage and popular culture. Mixing figurative and abstract elements, the paintings are divided into grid-like patterns with different fields of bright color. His artistic practices changed when he turned his attention to Sufism in the 1960s. In this context, he produced many untitled wall paintings dominated by earth tones, in which the Arabic letter figures prominently as a formal element in the composition of an abstract painting. Calligraphy is of vital importance in the Sufi tradition, and the letter “waw,” which recurs in Al Said’s paintings, has aroused particular attention. However, Al Said’s paintings are closer to the art of writing than to calligraphy. Linked to popular and spontaneous expressions, they make use of Arabic writing in the form of mural inscriptions, graffiti, signs scribbled on a city wall. As such, his paintings can be compared to those of the Catalan artist Antoni Tàpies, to whom Al Said refers explicitly in his writings. Tàpies’ paintings focus on Catalan cultural and political autonomy, while the Arabic letters in Al Said’s wall paintings are linked to his time and place, modern Iraq, and carry an overall Arab connotation.

With the One Dimension Group Al Said developed his theoretical approach to art further. The group derived its name from the definition of the line (al-khatt), as rendered prominent by the author of the famous *Mafatih al-‘ulum* (Keys to the Sciences) al-Khwarazmi (d. 997): “The line is a figure with one dimension, length only.” (al-fann al-tashkili, 83-86) The group was interested in the Arabic letter as a formal element in modern art, as stated by Al Said in the group’s manifesto. The group held exhibitions in the early 1970s but then lost its influence as the tendency to incorporate Arabic letters into art, sometimes referred to as *al-hurufiyya al-‘arabiyya* (Arabic letterism), became widely spread. Al Said’s interest in the line was not limited to writing, the Arabic letter; rather, it was closely linked to his vision of an aesthetics of the trace, the wear and tear of life and marks left by time, as the cracks and fissures in his carefully textured wall paintings demonstrate. It is this emphasis on the trace that artists of a younger generation, who came to the fore in the late 1980s and 1990s, have carried further in form and content to respond to the destruction caused by war and occupation in Iraq that has shaped their life realities from the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) and the Gulf war of 1990/91 to the Iraq war of 2003 and its aftermath of sectarian violence and strife.

Al Said published several books on modern art in Iraq and numerous articles in Arabic journals and newspapers. He is recognized today as one of the fathers of modern art in Iraq. His influence as an artist, a teacher, and a forerunner of art historical and theoretical writing in the Arab world has been great but remains much understudied.

Al Said had his first solo exhibition in 1954 at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad. His later solo exhibitions include: Sultan Gallery, Kuwait, 1978; Iraqi Cultural Centre, London, 1979; Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman, 1992; Athar Gallery, Baghdad, 2001. He was awarded a number of art prices and participated in international biennales, such as the Venice Biennale in 1976. His group exhibitions include the National Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad, 1971; the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, 1988; the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman, 1997. His work is held in numerous private and public collections, among them the Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad, Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman, and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha.

**Images:**

- Title unknown, oil on canvas, date unknown.

<http://artiraq.org/maia/items/show/320>

- Untitled, acrylic on wood, 120x120cm, 1978.

<http://www.daratalfunun.org/main/resourc/exhibit/shaker/shaker.html>

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