

# Celebrating an Era

Darat al Funun has recently turned 30 years old. **Kevin Jones** profiles the eminent Amman institution and looks back with its founder, Suha Shoman, on what made it so successful in showcasing and supporting contemporary art practices from the Arab world and cultivating a solid art scene.



Ismail Fattah. *Man and Mask*. 1980

As open calls go, this one was rousing. “Truth is black. Write over it with a mirage’s light.” For its 30th anniversary, Darat al Funun, the Amman-based, self-proclaimed “home” for the arts of the Arab world, challenged artists to address the state of global implosion that has dogged us for a millennium. Wars, sociocultural upheaval, identity crises, environmental disaster, globalisation gone amok – the all-to-familiar scene was easily set, particularly in our strife-ridden region. The text, punctuated

by stirring verses from Mahmoud Darwish’s *To a Young Poet*, beckoned artists to reflect, re-imagine and respond, but not just as artists. Read between the lines of the open call text and you penetrate the very heart of Darat al Funun’s faith in artistic production. Artists are summoned as “engaged witnesses” to these tumultuous times. And art, sidestepping commodification and the muck of capitalism, harbours the potential to “operate change,” in the words of artist Suha Shoman, Founder



Emily Jacir. *Ex libris*. 2014/2015. Installation view, retrospective exhibition



Yasmeen Sabri. *Untitled*. 2017–2018

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– Suha Shoman

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. *Waiting for the barbarians*. 2013. Video installation. 4 min, 30 sec



and Chair of the self-funded institution.

From its sloping hilltop campus on Jabal al-Weibdeh, Darat al Funun itself has wrought change in ways that remain sadly unseen and unsung. It has opened institutional eyes to artists who would have slipped through the curatorial cracks. It has deepened scholarship on Arab art through its fellowship. It has helped catapult young regional artists to international renown. And it has nurtured a creative class on its own doorstep: of the 100 proposals received for the open call, the majority were from Jordanian artists. Yet, on the cusp of its fourth decade of consistently high-calibre programming and knowledge production, Darat al Funun itself seems to be stepping back to reflect and

reassess, to take stock of its legacy and fathom continuity.

Flashback, for an instant, to 1988. As now, a region in turmoil: civil war in Lebanon, problems in Syria, wars on the horizon in Iraq. Whatever cultural initiatives had existed – Baghdad’s First Arab Biennale, the Arab Arts Association in Syria – were dead or dying. “Absolutely no one thought of doing anything for Arab artists,” recalled Shoman during our interview in April. “They were totally separated. My purpose was to try to create a meeting place and a space for them.” Grassroots, underground, galvanizing – the spirit of Darat al Funun grew out of an impulse Shoman describes in terms of “duty.” “I was able to understand

Himat Ali. *Spiritual Enlightenment*. 2017



the needs of the artists,” she explained. “They were asking for a specialised art library, workshops, spaces to work and show.” Early exhibitions included a father-son show by Shoman’s friend Emmanuel Guiragossian and the elder painter Paul Guiragossian; works by seven Palestinian artists from the first Intifada; and the first exhibition of contemporary Iraqi artists in Jordan. “It was like an artist-led initiative,” she said. “An attempt to bring everyone together, but also to do something for the wider movement around Arab art.”

Twin conceptual strands run throughout the history of Darat al Funun’s programming. First, a consistent blending of theory and practice, exhibitions and education.

Hassan Khan. *A Glass Object Photographed as a Way of Collecting the World around it*. 2013



Darat al Funun’s contribution to knowledge production is as deep as its investment in shows. In the early years, Iraqi artist Shakir Hassan Al Said hosted feisty, opinionated talks on art, sparking debate and kindling new beliefs among audiences. “The idea,” Shoman clarified, “was to bring together all the people who could write about art to get them to discuss the issues. It was important to have knowledge.” From 1999 to 2003 Lebanese artist Marwan (Kassab-Bachi) donated his time to run the Darat al Funun Summer Academy, during which time 60 artists from the Arab world benefited from his mentorship. More recently, in 2011, the Darat al Funun Dissertation Fellowship for modern and contemporary Arab art



Marwan Rechmaoui. *The League*. 2001

was established to encourage specific research, providing financial support to PhD candidates. Every show includes a component of talks, screenings or even concerts, each consistent with the Darat al Funun lineage of challenging audiences. As part of the first iteration of the “Truth is Black” show (13 February – 17 May) for example, artist/musician Hassan Khan teamed up with musicians Uriel Barthélémi and André Vida for a boundary-pushing electronic/acoustic hybrid show fusing a gamut of references, from punk rock to blues.

A second strand is the opportunity for young and established artists to show side-by-side. Even before it moved into its magical Jabal al-Weibdeh site in 1992,

Darat al Funun ran shows in the space used by the Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, one of the first cultural foundations of the Arab world, of which her husband was Deputy Chairman. There it hosted a 1988 show of Jordanian artists, both established and emerging. Perhaps this gesture harks back to Shoman’s own artistic training under the wing of the remarkable Fahrelnissa Zeid, who exhibited her own art alongside her students’ works. In any case, the emerging/established blend has become a bit of a Darat al Funun programming leitmotif, reaching a memorable crescendo in the institution’s 25th anniversary show, *HIWAR: Conversations in Amman* (9 November 2013 – 30 April 2014).



Mona Hatoum. *Hanging Garden*. 2008. All images are courtesy of Darat al Funun

Curated by Adriano Pedrosa, *HIWAR* comprised a mix of residencies, talks and an exhibition promoting exchanges between artists from the so-called Global South, whose works were shown with the likes of Abdul Hay Mosallam, Amal Kenawy, Mona Hatoum and Rachid Koraïchi – all drawn from the Khalid Shoman Collection, a private collection named after Shoman’s late husband.

Running through the veins of everything Darat al Funun does – from collecting to programming – is a fundamental belief in the artist. Acquiring an early work by then-unknown Lebanese artist Rayyane Tabet, creating an “experimentation” space – The Lab – in 2011, helping a

young architecture-trained Jordanian – Firas Shehadeh – make the leap into artist-hood. Darat al Funun has been a bellwether of change in the lives and situations of artists in a region where they are in equal parts marginalised and fetishized. Yes, it has been a hub, a meeting place, even an oasis for creatives. But these words seem somewhat passive, failing to capture the catalyst-like role Darat al Funun continues to play. If I could launch an open call of my own, it would incite the regional and international art world to seize this moment of institutional reflection at the 30-year mark: bear witness to Darat al Funun’s contribution, engage with its programming, and partner in its future. 🗨️