

DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Portraits/autoportraits dans les pratiques artistiques du pourtour méditerranéen

CHANGING BODY AND SOCIETY A SPECULATIVE EXAMINATION OF PORTRAITURE IN CHOUCAIR'S NON-REPRESENTATIONAL CORPUS

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ABSTRACT | What ways do portraits relate people to aesthetic practices and social configurations when representational and individualizing assumptions that ensue from figurative art cannot be assumed? If social being is not given, an art act might be seen to affect primarily an artist's relation to the possibility of subjectivity. The idea that the audience of an artwork includes the artist herself raises questions about her self-understanding and social being. Building on my ethnographic research, I conduct a speculative examination of portraiture in relation to the career of Saloua Raouda Choucair towards founding a local art history. To conduct my review, I borrow tools from contemporary art, anachronistically, to demonstrate that we may learn ways of studying from art itself. Tending to the mundane, minute, intermeshed matters of childhood education, daily life, and encounters with audiences, I speculate that Choucair's abstract sculptures offer "portraits" of becoming, germinations for beings to come.

MOTS-CLÉS | Saloua Raouda Choucair – Portraiture – Contemporary Art – Local Art History – Ethnographic approach.

Introduction¹

So much is at stake in the portrait, and in the self-portrait *a fortiori*, that its absence can pose serious cultural and even political problems. The call for papers inaugurating this dossier quotes André Félibien, official historian and art chronicler to Louis XIV, describing portraiture as the manifestation of divine excellence at a time when French colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Americas multiplied and official contacts with the Ottomans resumed.² In art, the perfect concretization of the sovereign subject's capacity for generating self-knowledge might be the self-portrait. So, what do we see when portraits appear elsewhere, not securely located at the center of this history, or perhaps do not appear at all? How many colonialist texts took pains to observe that "the natives" did not recognize themselves in the mirror, let alone produce self-portraiture?³ "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented," intoned Karl Marx, in an analysis of failed French political action that makes clear the connection between self-representation and sovereignty.⁴ For Euro-Arab relations, Marx's injunction explains the alleged superiority of and Oriental dependence on Western representational systems, as Edward Said deftly extrapolated several decades ago.⁵ Where the ability to produce a portrait indexes self-awareness and rationality, the inability to represent oneself is a white flag waving vigorously. In this context, it makes sense that the editors of this dossier ask, "What about artistic practices in the Arab region and the Mediterranean countries?"⁶

My fear is that such a question can prompt a campaign to fit art practices here, like a garment into a drawer, without considering why this drawer, or set of drawers. If its material is too bulky or stiff to fold neatly, the garment becomes the problem. Worse, the presence of the drawer creates the need to fill it. It proposes the sense of a proper wardrobe without which we might feel we remain undressed no matter how pleasant our vestments. Rather than start with the drawer—the certainty for why portraiture matters—my inclination is to start with the practices that have developed and consider what wardrobes they produced, what ways of seeing and creating the self they espouse. The portrait, for example, might have other ways of relating people to aesthetic practices and social configurations than the

1- The author wishes to acknowledge the contributions of Hannah Feldman and Noah Salomon who read an early draft, as well as the feedback from the organizers and audience of "The Arab Apocalypse: Art, Abstraction, and Activism in the Middle East," Zentrum Paul Klee (Bern), September 27-28, 2018. Passages of this text originally were developed for the inauguration of *Poem in Four Verses*, by Saloua Raouda Choucair, installed at the American University of Beirut on October 18, 2019.

2- BAETJER Katharine, "The Women of the French Royal Academy", in BAETJER Katharine, BAILLO, Joseph (dir.) *Vigée Le Brun*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016. p. 38.

3- LUTZ Catherine, COLLINS Jane, *Reading National Geographic*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 207-9.

4- MARX Karl "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte", in TUCKER Robert (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition, New York, W. W. Norton and Company, 1978, p. 608.

5- SAID Edward, *Orientalism*, New York, Vintage Books, 1979, p. 21.

6- See *Regards. Presentation* (call for papers). Link: <https://www.cfplist.com/CFP/191918> (consulted May 15, 2019). This is also where I read the first source quoted above.

representational and individualizing assumptions that ensue from a figurative start. In this essay, I speculate about portraiture in relation to the career of Saloua Raouda Choucair (1916-2017). During one of my first interviews with Choucair she read to me from an art historical lecture she had given years before: "The Sufi artist immediately understood that there is nothing visible that needs to be pictured mentally."⁷ Choucair adamantly opposed figurative art, of which portraiture usually forms a sub-category; so, her oeuvre might seem unwelcoming terrain for exploring the genre. Building on my ethnographic research from 1996-2004, I undertake this perverse task for two reasons. The first is to confront the over-categorization of Choucair's art which leads to relying on dissatisfyingly polarizing terms, such as "abstraction" vs. "figuration," or "public" vs. "personal."⁸ The second is towards founding a local art history, meaning one grounded in practices undertaken in specific conditions rather than rigged towards meeting expected chronologies or idealized categories. It does not focus on the big names that emerge from conditions of practice but rather on the relations with audiences and experiences that emerge. Precisely because Choucair's art does not fit the conventional categories by which art history in a universalizing mold unfolds and enwraps cultures, her oeuvre provides a sturdy foundation on which to pursue the questions I raise above. Tending to the mundane, minute, intermeshed matters of childhood education, daily life, and encounters with audiences, I speculate that Choucair's abstract sculptures offer "portraits" of becoming, not representations of given beings but germinations for beings to come.

7- Interview by the author with Saloua Raouda Choucair, November 22, 1997, Beirut.

8- These terms arise repeatedly in discussions of Choucair's work. E.g. MUYSATI, Fu'ad, "Fi marsam al-fannana Salwa Rawda: fann al-tajrid wa fann al-taghyir fi al-rasm", in *Al-Hayat*, 1789, March 6, 1952, p. 4; HAKIM Victor, "L'Exposition Salwa Rawda", *Le Revue du Liban*, mars 1962, p. 36 (Saloua Raouda Choucair Archive, Beirut); AL-GHURAYYIB Thérèse, "Sijjad wa rusu wa siramik wa nahat", in *Al-Hayat* March 4, 1952 (Saloua Raouda Choucair Archive, Beirut); KHAL Helen, "Salwa Rawda Choucair, as a child, she was a tom-boy; today, she is one of the foremost sculptors in the Middle East", in *Monday Morning* 1:14, September 24, 1972, p. 30-31 (Saloua Raouda Choucair Archive, Beirut); AL-SAYIGH Samir, "Fi al-Hawa", in *Al-Anwar* 181, November 1974, p. 9; KHATIR Nazih, "Salwa Rwada Shuqayr: Musamima `ala al-manbit wa al-bunya", in *Al-Nahar* 16, July 1986 (Saloua Raouda Choucair Archive, Beirut); SULTAN Faisal, "Al-Ittihad al-`am li al-tashkiliyin al-`arab yukarrim al-ruwwad", in *Al-Safir*, 2289, September 1980, p. 4 (Saloua Raouda Choucair Archive, Beirut).

Portraiture without Mirrors

“Ghalat (wrong),” in the artist’s hand, appears four times in the margins of Thérèse Ghurayyib’s March 4, 1962 review of Choucair’s 1962 exhibition at the Ministry of Tourism, in Beirut.



Fig. 1 Annotated clipping, from Thérèse Ghurayyib, “Sijad wa rusum wa siramik wa nahat,” Al-Nahar, March 4, 1962. Saloua Raouda Choucair Archives, Beirut

As with many of the clippings I found in her archive, Choucair objected to how the journalist discussed her art. Yet here she objected equally to how Ghurayyib discussed her person. The years did not soften her objection. When I interviewed her in 1999, Choucair paused on this page, commenting vehemently on the “misrepresentations” of her work:

Choucair, “I was off the beaten path. I mean, the pigeons are going that way, and I was off flying on my own, apart... apart...”

Scheid, pointing to the margin, “And this part where you say, ‘I hate to have my art described as feminine [nisa’i] art... .?’”

Choucair, “Yes, why feminine? I challenge all men. Why feminine? Just because I’m a woman?”

Scheid, “Okay, but out of this sentence, they made a headline, and then they wrote, ‘And she has a sole daughter, Hala, who is five, and despite her domestic, family responsibilities, she is devoted to her Art.’ Also, ‘She hates to spend time on elegance, make-up, and fixing her hair.’ I mean, they almost don’t want to allow you to be a woman anymore.”

Choucair, “To this day, I’m not very interested; I don’t go to the coiffure to fix my hair.”

Scheid, “But for the news, this was very interesting, to the degree that they had to write about it. This was news!”

We both laughed. “Okay,” Choucair re-read the passage aloud and then, lifting her gaze, contended in a dead-pan voice, “So what?”

9- Interview by the author with Saloua Raouda Choucair, December 25, 1999, Beirut.

I had been hoping to get Choucair to talk about her work “as a woman,” or from a woman’s social position. After all, in 1999 that was (and still is) a voluminous drawer in the portmanteau international visitors bring to the Middle East, and to Middle Eastern arts, too.¹⁰ I knew my dissertation advisors would ask me about “the woman issue,” so I thought I should have an answer. The temptation for social scientists is to attribute Choucair’s “So what?” to a denial of her social condition and to blame, in turn, a naïve acceptance of art’s unmarked masculinity. To attribute her denial to a lack of self-awareness, in other words. Yet, we social scientists must not forget that Choucair was an artist, meaning she devoted her career to developing plastic and aesthetic forms for calling into question the origins and formation of social norms. Moreover, like many artists, she sought to intervene in them. This “So what?” is not mere misrecognition. It demands gravity.

The solo exhibition (UNESCO palace, Beirut, March 1962) that was under consideration in Ghurayyib’s objectionable review had stunned audiences with its diverse media—much of it domestic by association—and disavowal of figurative modes of representation. The 3-paged, unillustrated, bilingual catalogue, divided works by media, and listed them by numbers, colors, geometric shapes, or media terms. The format debarred the by-then standard preface, artist’s statement, and biography. As Choucair explained to visitors, and as so many of her reviewers repeated, the Persian point carpet listed under the title, “Composition, Two Forms,” for example, was not *l’art pour l’art* but art for the user.¹¹ In this sense, her art spoke openly of an external motivation in a way that fit with the developed gendered notion of aesthetic activity: fine art for men, home décor for women. What seemed strange was not that Choucair was a woman making pretty carpets and ashtrays but that she wanted professional recognition for doing so. Furthermore, her willful invocation of the sensual side of art-making encouraged audiences to interact with it not as a matter of edification but feminine sensibility (that code word for good taste) which was commonly understood to motivate skilled female art-making. Fearing they circumscribed her work to a self-representation by tying it to her socially ascribed womanhood, Choucair retorted emphatically, “So what?” What did tying it back to her womanhood add to understanding her art?

Choucair’s own presentation of her work has supported the tendency amongst her critics to read it as cerebral and ethereal. My previous writing has contributed to this.¹² But something has always nagged at me: She had such a strong

10- MARKS Laura U., “What Is That and between Arab Women and Video? The Case of Beirut”, in *Camera Obscura*, 18:3, 2003, p. 40-69.

11- BEAULIEU Simone Aubrey, «Les quatre royaumes se Saloua Raouda», in *L’Orient*, no. 68, 24 février 1962 (Saloua Raouda Choucair Archive, Beirut); AKRAWI Najla Tannous, “Mrs. Salwa Rawda Shoucair AA ’33, awarded Prize” in *Alumnae Bulletin*, 1969, p. 16-17 (Saloua Raouda Choucair Archive, Beirut).

12- SCHEID Kirsten, “Painters, Picture-makers, and Lebanon: Unsettled Identities in an Uncertain State”, PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 2005.

awareness of herself as an agent in society and of the constraints that society arbitrarily imposed. She went to a school that countered those boundaries by insisting on women’s involvement and on deploying art everywhere. Replete with rugs, pool floors, fountains, gates, ash trays, plates and jewellery, her corpus does in fact fit closely contemporary articulations of a “feminine aesthetic” that was also a claim for female citizenship, or “patriotic motherhood,” as Elizabeth Thompson terms it—a nationalist, political idea of womanhood.¹³ In the 1920s, local pedagogues introduced drawing into elementary school curricula across Beirut to cultivate human resource potential, i.e. young girls and boys.¹⁴ The developing understanding of drawing linked it to allegedly natural feminine capacities and female commitment to social improvement. Arguing for girls’ education, the poet Muhammad Kamil Shu`ayb al-`Amili expressed a common theme that the logic of essential sexual difference required society benefit from the gifts of each sex.¹⁵ An aesthetically “refined” woman could best care for her home, raise her children’s hidden talents, and nourish their good manners, thus helping humanity distinguish itself from the world of beasts (and Ottomans). Sami Sham`a, in the feminist review *Minirva*, explained in a 1927 discussion of “the refinement of young girls,” that girls, who are innately more sensitive than boys, could better engage and transmit art’s lessons in beauty and harmony to the broader population.¹⁶ Forming a “female position” through art, these opinions demanded that curricula for girls give greater attention to aesthetic matters. A handful of nationalist schools—crafted in opposition to *ajnabiyya* (“foreign”) ones—extended arts training beyond the Mandated elementary years into high school.¹⁷ Al-Ahliyya School for Girls, which young Saloua attended, was one of those few.

Could that concern for integrating aesthetics into all life just have dropped out of Choucair’s set of concerns? We can look at the Persian point carpet Choucair called, “Composition, Two Forms,” for example. Some reviewers in 1962 saw it simply as a demonstration of the artist’s handicraft: Look at all the media she has mastered,’ said the maligned Thérèse al-Ghurayyib.¹⁸ Rather, the piece implements the same mathematical method of formal decomposition that Choucair developed in her *Modules* series from the 1950s.

13- THOMPSON Elizabeth, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon*, New York, Columbia Press, 2000.

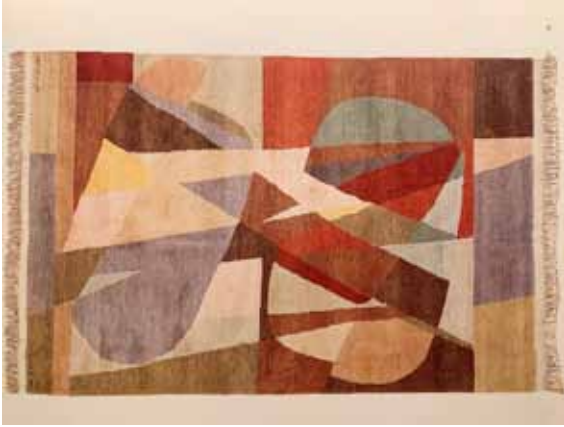
14- See chapter 2 of Scheid, *op cit*.

15- AL-`AMILI Muhammad Kamil Shu`ayb, “Al-Rajl wa al-mar’a ayyuhuma al-afdal?”, in *Al-Fajr* 1, January 1921, p. 11-14.

16- SHAM`A Sami, “Tahtib al-fatayat” in *Minirva*, 5:33, June 1927, p.404-5.

17- On the difference between on “nationalist” and “foreign” educational institutions see SBAITI Nadya, “Lessons in History: Education and the Formation of National Society in Beirut, Lebanon, 1920s-1960s”, PhD dissertation, Georgetown University, 2009.

18- AL-GHURAYYIB Thérèse, *op. cit.*; Choucair contracted out the weaving of the rugs (interview by the author with Saloua Raouda Choucair, December 25, 1999, Beirut).



Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Composition, Two Forms (Ta'lif `ala shaklayn)*, 1961, carpet, Persian point, 178 x 275 cm. Courtesy of Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation.

She randomly divides geometrical shapes—here a rectangle and an oval—then traces the outlines of their slightly separated halves, flips them, divides them randomly again, and repeats the tracing. The resulting series of outlines she then fills in with a palette of colors—here, the complimentary shades of green and red—but just as she incrementally divides the form, she gradually augments the shades. This compositional formula produces a visual ratio, in which segments of the picture echo the lines and tones from other parts of the surface in proportional harmonies. The process of composition relates closely to the idea of the perfect number whose proper divisors add up to the number.¹⁹ Just as 6 is the sum of 3 + 2 + 1 and the multiple of these same digits, so Choucair's compositions involve inner, elementary parts that can be variously combined to arrive at the base whole. Viewers need not be fully aware of the ratio (and rational) structure underlying the work, but they will sense a continual succession of resonances and convergences. Rendering this formula on a rug (or pool floor, or wall mural) allowed Choucair to integrate that thinking with the surfaces of daily life. So, in rejecting the “feminine explanation” for her art, was Choucair not thinking of herself as a woman, or were we coming at womanhood the wrong way?

The temptation when an artist declaims her truth is to stop taking her art into account; it becomes an illustration of her being, seen only for how it leads back to the asserted being. Counterintuitively perhaps, Choucair's woman-rejecting annotations on her press dossier bear a striking correspondence to the many catalogues that assemble Middle Eastern women's art to challenge Orientalist-stereotypes.²⁰ Both declare their being in the negative: “We're not that!” Both

19- BERGGREN J. L., “History of Mathematics in the Islamic World: The Present State of the Art”, in *Middle Eastern Studies Association*, 19, Winter, 1985, p. 9-29.

20- E.g. NASHASHIBI, Salwa Mikdadi (ed.), *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World*, Lafayette, The International Council for Women in the Arts, 1994.; LLOYD, Fran (ed.), *Contemporary Arab Women's Art: Dialogue of the Present*, London, Women's Art Library, 1999; BRODSKY Judith K., OLIN Ferris (eds.), *The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art, and Society*, New Brunswick, The Rutgers University Institute for Women and Art, 2012.

produce new objects (texts, artworks, corpuses) by which the artists become differently visible. Both present themselves to the objects' audiences, intimate and international. Yet, taking the category of women as the starting point seems to undermine actual belief in art. How are women produced socially if not through art forms: make-up and clothing, but also cultural models to orient?²¹ Performance art, body art, and live art, we now call it. Society relies on this constant but mostly unacknowledged, unlabelled art. "Woman" is a product of art, not a pre-existing category by which we measure it.²² As a social scientist, I am struck by the basic unfixity of life and the agency we allocate to art to fix it for us. Given that neither society nor artists are finished entities, I eschew the mirror-model for thinking about "women's art" and "portraiture" in general. Absent the assumption that social being is given, an art act might be seen to affect primarily an artist's relation to the possibility of subjectivity. Perhaps the first audience of an artwork is the artist "herself." Interacting with her art, producing a self for her own recognition, the artist *becomes* through her artwork.

The idea that the audience of an artwork includes, perhaps even prioritizes, the artist herself raises questions about her self-understanding and social being. Choucair worked from a socially ascribed position and knew herself and the world from that spot. I want to invert the premises of her trenchant "So what?" to ask not what gender or social identity does to art but what art does to gender and social belonging. The portrait seems like a good way to grapple with these issues. First, its allegedly universalized status imbues it with socio-political import, as discussed above. Second, it tends to be studied through a model of internal-to-external effect, from a core self to an onlooking world, but it could form other relations between art, self, and society. How does art expand the toolkit of vocabularies and ideas with which an artist may meet the world? For example, how does art convince an artist of her subjectivity? In what ways may art teach artists other possibilities for social interaction? Attention to the dialogic nature of these projects compels us to keep looking, not for representation or expression but for presentation, experience or becoming. Taking, therefore, this anti-representational stance, I conduct a speculative review of Choucair's "not-a-woman's" oeuvre to examine not its content but its method, to look for interactions more than intentions, to flesh out becoming rather than representing. I ask what we learn from it when portraiture is not simply a drawer awaiting its contents.

21- For cultural models see, for example, Lila Abu-Lughod's study of poetry among the Awlad Ali in ABU-LUGHOD, Lila, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986.

22- I thank Noah Salomon for suggesting this eloquent formulation.

Tools of Study: Visual objections and Corporal Extensions

To conduct my review, I borrow tools from contemporary art, anachronistically, to demonstrate that we may learn ways of studying from art itself. The first tool comes from Sama Alshaibi's *Birth Right* series of digital archival prints on cotton rag from 2004.



Fig. 3 Sama Alshaibi, *Target Practice*, Digital Archival Print on Cotton Rag, 2004
23 x 29.5 inches. Courtesy of Selma Feriani Gallery and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery

This eerie piece alerts us to how the art act conventionally connects subjectivity—self-knowledge in a specific setting—and sovereignty—control over oneself and one's fate. Technically, Alshaibi's photograph is a self-portrait, focusing on her swollen, pregnant belly, but the self it depicts cannot be fully located in her body. If a portrait, it erases the features that customarily index intentionality and awareness—the head, face, and eyes—as well as the hands, arms, even feet, i.e. the entire anatomy of causality, rationality, and mobility. A swaddling cloth has transformed the legs and feet into a pedestal for the belly. It passively converges with an enclosure formed by target markings on the ground. As the artist's belly balloons under a soft, *sfumato* light, her body merges with markings of apparently external discourses. Where is the subject that should generate self-knowledge? How can one claim to represent one's own existence when that is exactly what another has occupied or even ascribed? The self-portrayed Alshaibi neither exercises sovereignty over her body nor secures her subjectivity in it.

Representation clearly cannot get us very far towards understanding this art's relation to subjectivity. Alshaibi's photograph elongates the moment when a child is not yet fully human (let alone nationalized or gendered) and a woman ceases to be fully human, for carrying a provocation to media and security apparatuses. By embarking on motherhood, Alshaibi discovered that she invited into her very being the military occupations of Palestine and Iraq, her twin homelands, as well as the hysteria surrounding "terrorist babies" and the hype about "martyr mothers." Viewers who might target the artist or her unborn child for existing on any "given" social trajectories find themselves visually stumped. The photographs' target markings capture neither the woman's self nor a fetus nestled inside, but in measuring their prey, they deform them beyond recognition. The struggle to determine what their prey is will produce the question of what viewers themselves are. The photograph thus intervenes in the ongoing formulation of identities by rearranging how people array themselves around images, stereotypes, and dreams.

I adopt Alshaibi's apt term "visual objection" to capture ways art objects intervene in scalar relationships of the personal to familial to geo-political by exceeding human intentions and arranging audiences, including the artists, around them anew. Such artworks restore our awareness that people are never just bodies unto themselves but always points in scalar relationships, both shifting from scale to scale (intimate to international) and generating scales (giving substance to forms of family, ethnicity, population, etc.). The photographic object creates new relations, spatially and experientially. With its opportunities for manipulating bodily surfaces, retitling them, and circulating them internationally, digital photography allows Alshaibi to assert that "she" is not caught by a regime of international media and military practices even if she is invisible outside them. Visually objecting to and interfering in their operations, it allows her to live her pregnancy agentially rather than as the mere object of that discourse.

My second tool comes from the recent installation and multimedia work of Ruanne Abourahme and Basel Abbas, *And Yet My Mask Is Powerful* (2014-ongoing). They draw on the poetry of Adrienne Rich. *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), describes the experience of diving to reach a sunken submarine by dressing its readers in a second skin, a scuba mask, that allows them to attain an unreachable destination without losing life. Just as importantly, the conflation of body and scuba mask accomplished in the poem reveals the site of the "wreck" to be one of not destruction but growth and vitality. Destruction is only a point of view, related to dependence on oxygen; a corporally extended being, liberated from such dependencies, can engage vegetation and sea life that would otherwise appear hostile. Thinking in terms of artistic becoming and artists discovering themselves in relation to artwork, I take *And Yet My Mask Is Powerful* to exemplify self-extension. Through this tool, art loosens subjectivity from historically given, politically narrated settings and offers a new set of self-capacities.

In their installation, which includes documents of their working process and an edited video of their deployment of the masks, Abbas and Abourahme materially merge objects and bodies in ways that foreground a subjectivity's expanded capacities and boundaries. To start the project, they downloaded 360° of digitalized documentation about the Neolithic stone masks. Having found these masks on the Israel National Museum's website, which claimed they "all originated in the Land of Israel and are considered among the most ancient human portraits²³," Abbas and Abourahme initiated a decoupling of the masks from the Zionist website and associated allegations by downloading the material and exposing it to a new setting. Next, they 3-D printed replica masks in modern-day latex and distributed them to Palestinian youths undertaking trips to villages abandoned since the 1948 Zionist aggression. Returning to these post-48 sites with "contemporary Neolithic" second skins expanded the youths' margins for relating to them as well as to their given world. They find spaces lush with flora they have never seen before; they inhale a vitality they have never known and exude a new energy.



Fig. 4 Basel Abbas & Ruanne Abourahme, "We Know What It Is for, We Who Have Used It," image compiled from video footage and fieldnotes by the artists, from the project *And Yet My Mask Is Powerful*, 2014-ongoing. Reproduction courtesy of the artists.

Removing the youths from given identities that would predestine their understanding of the space as "lost territory," "stolen property," or "destroyed heritage," the masks extend their wearers' capacities, taking them and the artists into "new" territory, allowing for forbidden arrangements of energies, hopes, and subjectivities outside the (geopolitically) given coordinates. Through the powerful corporal extensions provided by art, not only do Abourahme and Abbas contest Israeli sovereignty over the narrative of Palestinian land, but they also produce for mask-wearers the possibility of composing alternative subjectivities not contained in that narrative. With corporal extensions, art changes body and society.

²³- From the Israel Museum's website, <https://www.imj.org.il/en/exhibitions/face-face> (accessed August 5, 2019).

Germinating Portraits in the Art of Saloua Raouda Choucair

I return now to consider portraiture in the career of Saloua Raouda Choucair, with “corporeal extension” and “visual objection” as my guiding terms. I had asked what yet unexplored relationships of people to aesthetic practices and social configurations might be part of portraiture, if we surrender certain figuration- or representation-based expectations. I had suggested that binaries of personal/public, like abstract/figurative, would be unhelpful, and that audience experiences should be considered. Both artistic maneuvers that I cull from Alshaibi, Abbas and Abourahme’s oeuvres intervene in the ongoing formulation of apparently predestined identities and arrangements of people to allow more agential lives in specific contexts while exceeding individual intentions. They create new spatial and experiential relations between artists, audiences, and societies. They may help us answer Choucair’s stubborn “So what?” without tying her back to a pre-given, fixed identity. Moreover, they may help us think about self-portraiture in a non-figurative idiom and the stakes of “artistic practice” in this Arab-Mediterranean region, for they relate us differently to given socio-political narratives, by emphasizing the dialogic over the expressive.

At first blush, it would seem impossible that Choucair’s art visually objected to given social arrangements or merged her body with objects in ways that would extend her corporal capacities. How could it do any of that when it is so rigorously “non-figurative” that even the term “abstraction” seems misleading? Abstraction (*tajrid*) is the term Choucair sometimes used. Yet, it is not a helpful word here, in part because it starts with figuration and whittles down from there, and in part because it locates production firmly in a chronology of Western canonical art while ignoring other histories of practice, not least Islamic mathematics, philosophy, and pre-Islamic poetry which Choucair plumbed to understand Mandate citizens’ civic capacities and duties.²⁴ However, Laura Metzler, a researcher exploring Choucair’s later oeuvre and, specifically, a series of sculptures inspired by inquiries into DNA, has asserted:

Through these works we start to see Choucair’s equations and lines from her earlier periods as the same elements that comprise the foundations of the study of genetics, intensifying and morphing through the understanding of their role in complex biological systems. They are no longer just creating form but *producing the human body and, potentially, Being.*²⁵

24- Jack Aswad writes eloquently on Choucair’s relationship to “abstraction” in Paris. ASWAD Jack, “Mu`adalat hassiyya (Sensory Equations)” in *Saloua Raouda Choucair: Her Life and Art*, Beirut, self-printed, 2002, p. 17-34 (Arabic section).

25- METZLER Laura, “(and so on...): Genetics, Quantum Mechanics, and Transcendence in the late work of Saloua Raouda Choucair”, MA thesis, American University of Beirut, 2014, pp. 33-34. Emphasis added.

This possibility that her artwork was not a shape for an idea or identity but a creation of existence, encouraged me to review my exploration of Choucair's earlier work, which does include "figurative" self-portraiture.²⁶ I flag the term "figurative" with scare quotes because I want to alert the reader to the other ways the material may operate.



Fig. 5 Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Self Portrait*, c.1945-7, oil on masonite, 43.5 x 42 cm. Courtesy of Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

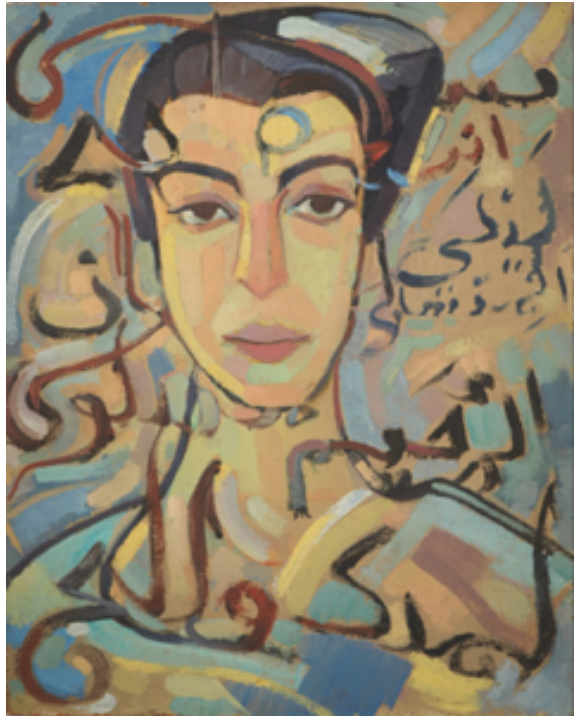
Take *Self-Portrait*, dating between 1943-1947.²⁷ It brings touches of a Cubist-Fauvist palette to Choucair's face, conflating her physical features with a locally innovative turban and a cosmopolitan mien. The brushstrokes render Choucair, then a desk librarian at AUB, both a local and a non-local. They disrupt the

26- During my visits to Choucair's studio, I encountered at least six self-portraits dating between 1938 and 1951.

27- An Arabic signature on the back reads "Saloua Raouda 1943." I am dubious because in 1943 Choucair studied with Omar Onsi and produced more conventional, "impressionist" portraits and still-lives akin to his work. However, a skeptic of teleological time and chronological models, Choucair is known to have both undertaken multiple styles simultaneously. Moreover, while she often left work undated she occasionally backdated work that related to concerns she had earlier considered.

common notion of a “lady-artist,” who drew upon her allegedly natural, gender-engendered aestheticism to infuse her home and community with harmony, proportion, and a longing for progress.²⁸ Here the slabs of color create jarring imbalances in her facial halves and merge her body confusingly with the fluctuating background. Or, take an untitled work on masonite from the same period.²⁹

Fig. 6 Saloua Raouda Choucair, untitled, between 1938-1947, oil on masonite, 40 x 50 cm, Reproduction courtesy of Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation.



On this board, the surface of Choucair’s neck and head shares in the tan background tones while their maroon contours cavort with calligraphic lines that swirl torrentially around her impassive mien. Arabic script starts to issue the *fatihah’s* blessing, but some of the words disappear behind, or perhaps into, Choucair’s head. Meanwhile, her first name merges with the hallowed script. Both self-portraits actively draw on audience participation: the first, to imbue the strange brushwork with associations of distance and cosmopolitanism; the second, yet more forcefully, to utter the missing words that put Choucair in yet another context. Thurayya Malhas, a modernist poet from Jordan studying at AUB who met Choucair during this period, recalls innumerable conversations with the artist about the nature of Arabic language. She asserts that Choucair was

28- See SCHEID *op. cit.*, chapter 2 for an exploration of this concept.

29- Hala Choucair (personal communication August 25, 2019) reports that her mother told her the work dated to 1938. Again, I am dubious, for the reasons stated in the Footnote 25.

fascinated by the unfinalized character of the written language, which generally includes only the consonantal portion of its articulation.³⁰ Further, the language's structure, which Malhas described to Choucair as "purified of details" and eternally open to expansion, enacted abstraction *par excellence*.³¹ The masonite board engages Arabophone viewers in an articulatory art act which incorporates Choucair into the language and enunciates it from their own mouths.

As mentioned previously, the activist role women embraced during the 1920s-50s decolonizing period extended the notion of art justified by its pedagogical practicality to a notion of art nurturing the nation. Jean Said Makdisi has written eloquently of the condition of Beirut's well-off women of the period. Having been trained extensively in marital and domestic skills, these women came to see marriage and housekeeping as ends in themselves. "Cleanliness, order, hygiene, mothercare, and perhaps above all good financial management, all this spoke to [mother's] modernity, of something of which she was inordinately proud, of something that marked her out and made her shine, like a college education."³² More tellingly, they found that their spaces and discourses for applying their special feminine roles were circumscribed from the rest of society in a way that they had not previously been. The heirs to a feminist movement that had claimed a social status for women based on their being the mothers of the future members of society, these women found themselves positioned to engineer families professionally but unable to shake the demands of that role when it impeded their attaining other social positions. The higher standards they adopted for being "modern" members of society meant that they faced greater demands on their energies and increased risk of failure if they attempted to combine too many roles.

This was a disintegrating modernism, for women generally, but especially for women operating at the juncture of two civilizational indices: femininity and fine art.³³ For a woman artist, the result was a double-bind of being both a *fannan* in the sense of a "socially free agent"³⁴ and a *lawha* onto which the spectacle

30- MALHAS Thurayya `Abd al-Fattah, *Al-Nahata al-tajridiyya Saloua Raouda Choucair fi masaratiha al-shakhsiyya wa al-fanniyya namuthajan bi imtiyaz*, Amman, `Imad al-Din for Distribution, 2011, p. 47.

31- *Ibid.*, p. 10-12.

32- MAKDISI Jean Said, *Teta, Mother, and Me: An Arab Woman's Memoir*, London, Saqi Books, 2005, p. 321.

33- C.f., HATEM Mervat, "Modernization, the State, and the Family in Middle East Women's Studies, in *Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East*, MERIWETHER Margaret, TUCKER Judith E. (eds.), Boulder, Westview Press, 1999, p. 63-87.

34- SALOMON Nanette, "The Art Historical Canon: Sins Omission," in *(En)Gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe*, HARTMAN Joan, MESSER-DAVIDOW Ellen (eds.), Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1991, p. 222-236.

of modernity was projected.³⁵ This type of woman represented and consumed an already extant culture instead of producing it, to borrow a distinction from Anne Bermingham's study of nineteenth-century British women's involvement in art.³⁶ The lady-artist's presentation of art always pursues another goal, outside of the realm of culture: social jockeying (she beautifies herself to impress others); family comfort (she makes "gifts to the house"); or national improvement (she brings culture to the forefront of public interaction). The lady-artist starts with her position as woman and acts as if she only adds art to it. The art act for Chouair arrives at being through a different route, extending her flesh through a mask-like palette to other climes and objecting to the limitations imposed on her present. She inverts Abbas and Abourahme's project of finding life in a previously inaccessible place, finding in those unusual but resonant brushstrokes and plastic conjunctions a reason to reconfigure life accessible around her. An editorial she penned contemporaneously in the feminist periodical, *Sawt al-Mar'a*, gives a sense of the challenge she issued with such self-rendering. Chouair authored it in response to a difficult interaction with an audience of modern art:

Those who today advocate returning to the classical method in art seek to deviate from the world's problems and trends. They distance themselves from reality to pretend they inhabit hermitages that will take them and their lives back to the dusty centuries that launched this art. Yet their work is not a revolution against modern art only, but rather a revolution against the entirety of modern life. Art and life are inseparable. The direction in visual art we also find in modern music, modern literature, poetry, philosophy, and life. We may either try to redirect the whole caravan, deviate from it, or *walk with it*.³⁷

Chouair issued this withering critique of "classicists" in response to the audience reaction to an exhibition held at the nationalist Arab Cultural Club (ACC) displaying the collection of French architect Henri Seyrig and featuring Picasso and Tanguy.³⁸ The ACC sought to cultivate universal and local cultural values that would guide the formation of a new social order and reconfigure class, gender, and sectarian

35- Salomon offers this term to summarize canonical notions of the artist in art history that invoke a pedigree as established by Giorgio Vasari. Salomon argues that such an agent is necessarily "gendered, classed, and raced, more specifically he is a white upper-class male. Only such an individual is empowered by his social position successfully to stake a claim to the personal freedom and creative calling that Vasari's construct requires" (SALOMON op. cit., p. 223). While I hesitate to assume that "socially free agent" has the same meaning for non-Western ways of using the concept, the "artist-hero" was a relevant category in all art histories produced for Lebanon I have read. E.g. KAMIL Salih, *Al-Fann al-Lubnani*, Beirut, Ministry of Education and Fine Art, 1956; LAHOUD Edouard, *Contemporary Art in Lebanon*, Philippe Michaux (trans.), Beirut, Librarie Orientale, 1974; and KHAL Helen, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*, Beirut The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1987.

36- BERMINGHAM Anne, *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000.

37- CHOUCAIR, Saloua Raouda, "Al-Madrasa al-haditha fi al-taswir", in *Sawt al-Mar'a* 6:4, June 1948, p. 10-11. Emphasis added.

38- AL-NADI AL-THAQAFI AL-ARABI, *Al-Nadi al-thaqafi al-arabi khilal 35 `amman: 1944-1979*, p. 13-14. I gratefully acknowledge Zeina Maasiri's generosity drawing my attention to this document.

relations that had been violently transmuted by the fall of Ottoman feudalism and the failure of French imperialism. Choucair contributed by organizing an art history and criticism lecture series at the ACC in 1947–48. In this forum, art practices allowed Choucair to extend both her physical being from Lebanon to “contemporary culture” writ large, and to invite her audience into this new map of being to “walk with it.” I contend that at this moment, a self-portrait by Choucair was neither a representation of her social identity nor an expression of her desire but a refashioning of her very being, including her social relationships.

Within months of painting the mask of *Self-Portrait*, Choucair moved to Paris, enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and attended Fernand Léger's atelier. Despite an initial attraction to Léger's so-called “realist abstraction,” she seems to have been uncomfortable with the practical relations it afforded him over his subjects.

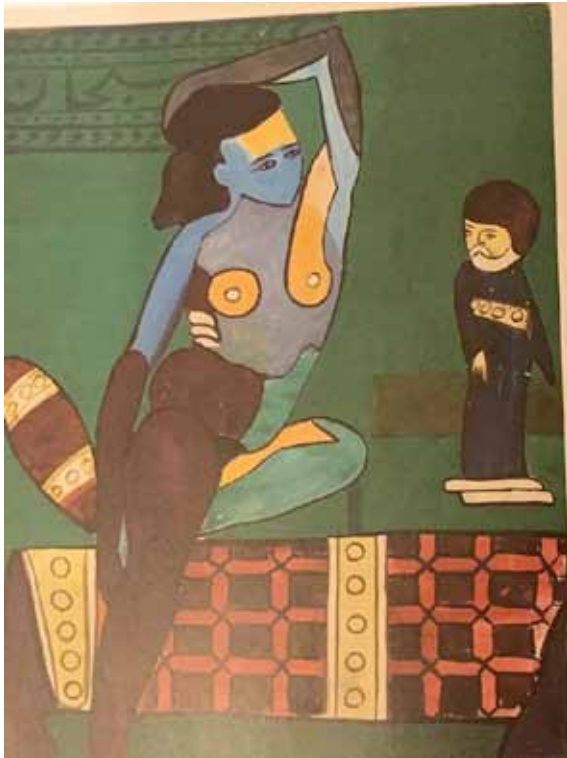


Fig. 7 Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Subhan*, 1949, Gouache on paper, 31.5 x 24.5 cm. Courtesy of Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation.

The next self-portrait dates to this period of separation when Choucair seems to be looking through art at whom she can become. *Subhan*, a small gouache from circa 1949, introduces viewers to a woman who takes the role of being visually desirable for her spectator. The female has adopted a classic model pose that opens her bare chest to full scrutiny. Thick black lines divide her body into anatomical segments: shin, thigh, abdomen, forearm, upper arm, breasts,

ribs, etc. Various unnatural hues fill the segments. Beside her, a bearded male figure, much smaller, clothed in a *jallabiyya* and turban, tops a thin pedestal. As he looks at the female he points one index finger to the ground. Inscribed in the background is the Arabic word “*subhan*,” referring to the phrase “*subhan al-khaliq* (may the Creator be glorified),” which the pious utter to express awe. On Beirut’s streets marriage-aged men may murmur this when a woman they find attractive passes. The creator, here, however, is clearly the painter who has bestowed such a strange look on the scene. And the created spectacle is hardly a naturalizing rendition of female delectation. The flattening, fragmenting style, denaturalizes the relationship between the act of female modeling and the creation of art. Choucair emphasizes instead the degree to which the human artist deformed the model as a woman.

When I saw *Subhan* on her studio wall, Choucair said that the female figure represented her in her Parisian apartment and the male, a figurine of Ibn Rushd which she had brought from Beirut.³⁹ Rendered in a style developed at Léger’s atelier, the image fragments and denaturalizes the sitter. While she has conventionally desirable features, from comely face to provocative pubic hair, she is hardly restored to wholeness by the art act, let alone idealized. Rather, under the Arab philosopher’s rationalist gaze she breaks into schematic bits. In her discussion of art-making, Choucair told me that “*subhan allah*” is what we are provoked to say when we realize that Nature is entirely God’s creation, that it is one unified expression of his being.⁴⁰ The inclusion of “*subhan*” in the background could point to the way looking at the female body, when conducted according to a rationalist Arabic mode associated with mathematics and philosophy, reveals the deep connections, the patterns of creation, which lead one to be aware of God’s presence and glory. Yet that is not the role Choucair found for herself in Léger’s studio where woman served as medium for the artist’s display of his mastery. Caught between the need to be art and the need to create art, the female subject splits.

Perhaps this visual objection to the female artist-spectacle released Choucair from the quest of trying to resolve society’s irreconcilable demands on the artist in a female position. It is not clear the piece was ever displayed. It may have existed as an exercise in becoming, or what I think of as an art act for the artist-as-audience. *Subhan* certainly marks a breaking point for Choucair, who around the time of its making, left Léger’s atelier and helped to found L’Atelier de l’art abstrait. From there she moved into explorations of formal relations: proportions and equations whose implementation in daily items she displayed at the 1962 exhibition.

39- Saloua Raouda Choucair, interview, October 14, 1999.

40- Saloua Raouda Choucair, interview, November 22, 1997.



Fig. 8 Installation shot from Saloua Raouda Choucair exhibition at the UNESCO Palace, March 1962. Reproduced from HAKIM Victor, "L'Exposition Salwa Rawda," *Revue du Liban*, no. vol. mars 1962, p.36. Saloua Raouda Choucair Archives, Beirut, Lebanon.

Choucair had by this point discovered plastic means for enacting mathematically and linguistically grounded formulae whose range of application and execution was limitless. These formulae are like seeds that grow when put into a soil. Transitively, they can pass on their codes to other beings, too. I have come to wonder if they are not dematerialized, corporal extensions of an artist who was reconfiguring her relations to her society and the international art world. They offer her a new way of interacting. Most simply, she rearranged her social relations by making every surface a space for her philosophical explorations of humanity's place in the cosmos.

I do not see these formulae-cum-sculptures, -rugs, or -ashtrays as metaphors for her thought, but as instantiations of consciousness grappling, through sculptural household objects, with the possibility of art activating everyday life. What they demand from audiences is not tying them back to some source but being willing to follow their growth and movement. Because they have no literal or figurative referents, they puzzle audiences. As you walk around the sculptures embodying these formulae, such as *Secret of a Cube*; you find components pointing outwards, to the possibility of meaning and impact, not backwards to a known thing.



Fig. 9 Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Secrets of a Cube* (*Sirr al-maka'ab*), 1960-62, wood, 84 x 60x 60 cm. Courtesy of Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

The “cube” of the title does not tell its secrets. You must keep moving with it, physically and mentally. You must walk with its method of relating to the world. Such artwork highlights our responsibility as viewers (and walkers) for the meaning we produce. Some audience members joined Choucair’s walk; others just saw a thing made by a woman.

Unsurprisingly, within weeks of her 1962 exhibition of household art, Choucair would fill her press dossier with new verbal objections, including the many instances of “*ghalat*” I found that December day decades later. Yet she also would employ her art to create visual objections. The mundane media she had used exposed her to being registered as a “woman artist”; she stopped using them henceforth. This shift reinforces for me an interest in the dialogic relationship art acts establish with audiences. In subsequent years, Choucair would come to speak of sculpture as a living art. She sought scales of interaction that were at once public (monumental installations) and private (intimate maquettes drawing audiences into one-on-one interaction). The method of producing sets of formulae that could be injected, as it were, into an infinite array of media and sizes refuses an inherent separation between these categories. Subsequently, Choucair developed methods of production that not only drew on mathematical and linguistic structural principles, but also on genetics, a then-newly emerging science. In her *Duals* series from the 1970s-80s, Metzler found unique patterns of bonding pairs (performing the DNA-RNA reading process). These three-dimensional pairs usually manifest in soft, warm material, such as burnished wood, but also in extremely dense metals that snuggle heftily into one’s palm. They create closed systems that temporarily open (as if to allow copying and growth) but, through their very surfaces, demonstrate a longing, or energy, to draw each other back together.⁴¹



Fig. 10 Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Dual (Muthanawi)*, c. 1970s, wood, 21.3 x 21 x 12.5 cm. Image courtesy of Laura Metzler, from METZLER Laura, “(and so on...): Genetics, Quantum Mechanics, and Transcendence in the late work of Saloua Raouda Choucair” MA thesis, AUB, 2014.

⁴¹ For a brilliant discussion, see METZLER, *op cit.*, p.39.

The sculptures do not represent but implement the practice of generation in a new medium, allowing people sensually and consciously, but *asexually*, to engage with their capacity for generation. I recently participated in a class visit to a private collection containing a wooden dual. The tour guide hushed as she came upon the pedestal upholding the unassuming piece. She encouraged the students to draw close. As she lay her palms on the gently curved wooden slabs she pronounced the artist's name. A collective gasp sucked in the air. She gently massaged the pieces and again called the students to move closer in order to sense them more fully. "I love the smell," she avowed and reminded the onlookers that the work demands to be touched. The polished exterior contrasted with a grooved interior worked by an adze. I was riveted by her leaning into the shapes and sliding them over each other, over and over. The affect of the repeated pairing and unpairing extended from the curator's resting fingers up her arms through her neck, as she seemed to breathe taller. Only two students held out their hands; the rest remained behind the antiquated art historical barrier.

I have come to think of the art act as Choucair's means for spawning bodies that allow new subjectivities, bodies unmoored from gender, national, or ethnic identities and bodies that must account for their stance on energy, proximity, and wholeness. In other words, I think these surrogate bodies, non-figurative and purely objective, do something to gender and social belonging that our current categories of representational, abstract, personal, and public do not yet have a vocabulary to explain. And what of Choucair? No longer a spectacle to be seen, as in her early self-portraits, she has become a force of creation. Her "self" has relocated in the process; ever expanding through interactions in new settings, like DNA, it is now irreducible to either the lady-artist or the artist-hero, or any kind of fetishized individual. She has effected a transition from a woman-artist (a given, social and academic drawer) to a creator, along the way loosening all the associations based on social oppositions and conventional art historical binaries. The commode that could contain her work will not be able to encompass the audience engagement, affect, and life that she pursued through art.

Coda

I opened this essay by asking how speculation on portraiture in relation to Choucair's oeuvre might impact our use of art history's conventional chest of drawers. Ensclosed in those drawers are not only terms and genre but also roles, neatly sorted out. Akram Zaatari has already noted the way local contexts in the Arab-Mediterranean region have required a blurring of roles to produce art.⁴² Choucair's art acts take us further. It is insufficient to appreciate Choucair's intentions to grasp her art. This relationship of admiration would ignore the

42- ZAAATARI Akram "Terms Falling: Migrating among Artist, Curator, and Entrepreneur", in *Bidoun* 6, 2006, p. 16.

creative formulae the artist has set into play. They are not a matter of her intention at all. In breaking barriers between the individual, the artwork, and the audience, Choucair's "portraiture" challenges people concerned with art of the Arab-Mediterranean region, whether connoisseurs, critics, or curators, to reconsider their roles. To walk with, live with, and let this art live requires offering it new interpretations and material settings into which to insert it. I have suggested that the duals, gouaches, and maquettes the artist formed are non-representational self-portraits of non-individual entities in the process of becoming. If so, they call for non-representation-seeking, non-individual-fetishizing sponsors willing to support their growth. They require people willing to shed the wardrobes of staid, conventional art relations and not look at artworks' surfaces but rather live their method, by embodying it in new enlargements and public installations. Changing body and society. Anything less is a retreat into a tired, unaccommodating, commode.

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ABSTRACT | De quelle manière les portraits établissent-ils un lien entre les personnes, les pratiques esthétiques et les configurations sociales, lorsque les hypothèses de représentation et d'individualisation découlant de l'art figuratif ne peuvent être assumées ? Si l'appartenance sociale n'est pas réalisée, on peut considérer qu'un acte artistique affecte principalement le rapport de l'artiste à sa subjectivité. L'idée que le public d'une œuvre d'art comprend l'artiste elle-même soulève des questions sur sa compréhension de soi et de son être social. Partant de mes recherches ethnographiques, j'ai conduit un examen spéculatif du portrait en rapport avec la carrière de Saloua Raouda Choucair pour établir les bases d'une histoire de l'art locale. Pour bien mener mon entreprise, j'ai emprunté des outils à l'art contemporain, de manière anachronique, pour démontrer que nous pouvons acquérir des méthodes didactiques à partir de l'art même. S'occupant de sujets banals, minutieux et intimement liés, de l'éducation des enfants, de la vie quotidienne et des rencontres avec des publics divers, j'ai proposé que les sculptures abstraites de Choucair soient des « portraits » d'avenir, pour les futures générations.

KEYWORDS | Saloua Raouda Choucair – Portrait – Art contemporain – Pratiques esthétiques – Approche ethnographique.

ملخص | ما هي الطرق التي تربط صور الأشخاص بالممارسات الجمالية والتكوينات الاجتماعية، عندما تكون الفرضيات التمثيلية المنبثقة عن الفن التشكيلي غير مستوعبة؟ إذا كانت الهوية الاجتماعية غير موجودة، يمكن الاعتقاد أن العمل الفني يميل أكثر إلى الذاتية. الفكرة أن الجمهور يفهم الفنان بذاته. تطرح على هذا الأخير أسئلة حول معرفته لنفسه ولكيانه الاجتماعي. انطلاقاً من أبحاثي الميدانية، أجريت تقويمًا جدليًا عن الصورة الشخصية من خلال مسيرة سلوى روضة شقير من أجل التأسيس لتاريخ فن محلي. لتحقيق غايتي، استعرت أدوات من الفن المعاصر عشوائيًا لأثبت أننا قد نتعلم طرقًا للدراسة من خلاله. فانشغالي بالمواضيع البسيطة الدقيقة المتعلقة بتربية الأطفال، وبالحيات اليومية وباللقاءات مع جماهير مختلفة، جعلتني أعتقد أن منحوتات شقير التجريدية قد تكون نموذجًا لسير ذاتية للمستقبل وللأجيال القادمة..

كلمات مفتاحية | صورة شخصية – انتماء اجتماعي – ممارسات جمالية – فن تشكيلي – سلوى روضة شقير

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