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# Tripoli Art House: The curators on a mission to bring awareness to the arts and culture scene in Libya

Culture 7 min read

Naima Morelli | 23 May, 2023

Libyan curator Wareda Elmehdawi seeks to shed light on the richness of Libyan art history through her family's work with the historical Tripoli Art House.



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A country that experienced a long dictatorship and civil war is hardly a breeding ground for experimental art practices. The division among different factions is reflected in the art world and makes it harder for Libyan artists to build a community.

"Libyans have the habit of dimming each other's light so that other people don't progress, even though that would cost the development of the entire art scene," says Prague-based Wareda Elmehdawi, curator at the foundational space Art House in Tripoli. "This is a practice that has been happening during a 42-year dictatorship. So obviously, it doesn't just disappear overnight."

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It is true that in the art world dealing with difficulties can sometimes create new ways of coming together to create and present art.

At the same time in Libya, political and economic instability have hindered a linear development of a healthy art scene. The result is that values that should be foundational when speaking about art, get completely twisted.

**"There is very little emphasis on art theory and the conceptualisation of art"**

In Wareda's view, the problem with the Libyan art scene today starts right from school: "On one hand, there is very little emphasis on art theory and the conceptualisation of art," she explains. "On the other, there is little understanding by the artists and the public about original work. Intellectual property and infringement are concepts that are not well understood."

Another issue that the curator highlights are that galleries delegate commissioned artworks based on demand: "We have a big wave of war money and warlords, having hundreds of millions and villas that need to fill with art. So a part of the art market and art production in Libya caters to this necessity, rather than developing independently."



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### The Role of Tripoli's Art House

In this scenario, and in a country where no government is collecting art, the role of collectors is crucial as they are the only ones treasuring art and setting up standards for art.

Wareda's family has been deeply involved in the arts; her twin sister Yasmin is an emerging artist doing abstract expressionist painting, while her father Khalifa Elmehdawi has been collecting modern and contemporary art since the 70s.

"We did that as a passion, but we are also careful of having those artists hold up the market value, as there is often an issue of undervaluation in the Libyan art market."



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Khalifa also practised cultural diplomacy since the 80s, and in 1993 he contributed to founding the Art House in Tripoli, along with a group of local artists, including the seminal Libyan modern artist Ali Mustafa Ramadan.

"Ramadan has been one of the very few artists organising exhibitions with a curatorial view throughout the past four decades," writes Libyan artist Hadia Gana on *Ibraaz*. "Ramadan co-created El Dar El Libya in the late 1990s, a space that mutated into The Art House a few years later."

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The Art House hosted the very first solo exhibition for acclaimed Libyan artist Bashir Hamouda: "This was an iconic exhibition and was also the event that helped publicise peace between the east and the west after the shelling of the US in Libya in that same year," explains Wareda Elmehdawi. "The event symbolised harmony between Western diplomatic visitors and the Libyan people."

According to London-based Libyan curator Najlaa Elageli, the Art House was the first kind of cultural space for artists in Libya: "While there were attempts to develop it into an actual museum of modern art, the Art House ended up becoming a hub for artists to go exhibit have kind of cultural gatherings and discussions."

Najlaa says that the gallery became particularly successful in the late 90s and early 2000s when the sanctions were lifted on foreign ambassadors, and there were a number of cultural exchange taking place: "Some artists hailing from the Art House exhibited their work in Italy, in the Arab world, in China, and ambassadors and diplomats were regulars to the space. The international art community was much impressed by what the artists were offering," she explains.

"This place is still one of the most established galleries in Tripoli, and its impact has spanned over many generations of artists, from the '80s up to today," says artist Faiza Ramadan, Mustafa Ramadan's nephew. "Since my uncle's involvement with the space, I have known the space for more than a decade. It is one of the most old and sustainable art galleries in Tripoli."

Faiza exhibited there twice, as a part of group exhibitions: "It was a wonderful experience; the hall was packed with visitors and the event got huge coverage by the press," she recalls. "I got to know a lot of artists and art enthusiasts."

In the last 20 years, Wareda's father took the lead, and after the revolution, they started screenings, book signings, poetry readings, and art courses.





### The issue with institution-based art production

The mission of the Art House today is to counter what Wareda points out as being another major issue in the development of contemporary art in Libya, namely, the fact that the international community is hyping street art, hobbyist art, art therapy, but totally ignoring Libyan expert artists, the history and importance of their fine art.

"This is very sad as many of the first-generation artists have passed away in the last 5-10 years, and their work had no chance to be treasured or recognised in the near future."

She sees the embassies and the international associations operating in Libya as fore bringers of personal agendas — which are not related to art development — and are using Libya and Libyan artists to advertise themselves: "The embassies and international organisations are funnelling a lot of art funding opportunities to Libya, but it's all controlled," she explains.

"They create categories and make open calls, but the categories are very narrow, so they control the end result of the creative product becomes all about humanitarianism.

"Authenticity, originality, and creative expansion are not valued," Wareda continues. "They just need to match report requirements, and are throwing money at that, rather than encouraging experimentation and tending to the artists."

**"Authenticity, originality, and creative expansion are not valued"**

### A home for the artistic community of Tripoli

Curator Hiba Shalabi started visiting exhibitions in Art House in the 2000s, and increasingly so after 2011, to the point, it became a second home.

She curated a number of exhibitions there, from photography shows to showcasing digital artworks: "The gallery supported all artists in Libya in their emerging phase, and through this space, I got introduced to the Libyan cultural community myself."

Hiba sees the space as one that protects artists, encourages them, and pushes them to do their best in a comfortable family atmosphere. In her experience, she has been seeing development in contemporary Libyan art in recent years, although less significant compared to neighbouring countries.

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With a keen awareness of the necessity of situating Libya within the North African contemporary art scene — both in terms of market and cultural discourse — at the moment the Art House is implementing art training by the artists from the gallery, as well as keeping active with



workshops, courses, and seminars.

"We also had cinema nights where we would show movies throughout the revolution from 2000 to 2014," says Wareda. "We would show a movie every week, opening up to other cultures, whether Japan, France, America, England, or Italy."

With the mission of bringing awareness and liveliness to the arts and culture in Libya, Wareda is starting a new programme that focuses on local modern art.

"We don't want our Libyan modern history to be forgotten or dismissed," she says.

"We would like to bring it back to Libya as soon as possible and to bring awareness about intellectual property, originality, authenticity, and to make it an unconditional relationship with an artist."

***Naima Morelli is an arts and culture writer with a particular interest in contemporary art from the Middle East, North Africa and the Asia-Pacific region. She is also the author *Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione* and *The Singapore Series: a contemporary art reportage*.***

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Campaigners and experts are warning that Africa is facing an unprecedented food crisis, with thousands of people, including children, living in food insecurity, suffering from serious malnutrition and facing threats of starvation.



Deaths from hunger are on the rise in Africa because of droughts worsened by climate change and conflict, UN officials and non-governmental organisations have warned — the latest in a series of statements from campaigners and experts warning that Africa is facing an unprecedented food crisis.

There is a death by starvation every 36 seconds on average in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, the UN's children's organisations UNICEF and NGOs Care and Oxfam told a joint news conference in Paris.

**"There is a death by starvation every 36 seconds on average in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia"**

Close to 20 million people in the Sahel region are living in food insecurity, they added.

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In Burkina Faso, a country destabilised by an extremist rebellion, three times as many children were killed between January and September 2022 as in the same period a year earlier.

The number of minors treated for severe malnutrition rose by half, UNICEF said.

**"Some 430,000 children in Niger suffer from serious malnutrition"**

In Niger, recurring droughts and disastrous floods combined with ongoing conflicts led to a near-40 percent drop in cereal production as harvesting became increasingly difficult, said Louis-Nicolas Jandeaux at Oxfam France.

Some 430,000 children in Niger suffer from serious malnutrition, according to Lucile Grosjean, a spokeswoman for UNICEF.

This year, the number of malnourished pregnant or breastfeeding women is projected to rise to 154,000 from 64,000 in 2022, she added.

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### 'Catastrophic situation'

In the Horn of Africa, five straight rainy seasons producing too little rain killed millions of cattle and destroyed harvests, according to the UN.

**"We forecast that between April and June, more than a third of Somalia's population will be in a state of food crisis, with projections of a famine"**

That put 22 million people at threat of starvation in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia with the latter — a country of 17 million — also in the throes of an extremist insurgency.

"We forecast that between April and June, more than a third of Somalia's population will be in a state of food crisis, with projections of a famine," said Mathilde Casper at Care.

Jandeaux, for Oxfam, argued that the food crisis was the result of an "injustice", accusing wealthy countries of "permanent inaction".

Last year, only about 62 percent of humanitarian financing needs were met, he said.

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In an interview with French daily *Le Monde*, former World Food Programme director David Beasley called on Western governments to step up aid, saying Africa was facing the worst food and humanitarian crisis since World War II.

In a separate statement, the Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) NGO said an unprecedented number of undernourished children had been registered by its teams in Maiduguri, north-eastern Nigeria.

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"Last year was terrible, but this year could be worse if this trend continues," said Htet Aung Kyi, the organisation's medical coordinator, warning of a "catastrophic situation" once food stocks from last year's harvests have been used up.

An international group of climate scientists have also warned that the devastating drought that has struck the Horn of Africa could not have occurred without global warming.

"Human-caused climate change has made agricultural drought in the Horn of Africa about 100 times more likely," said the World Weather Attribution (WWA) group in a new report.

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