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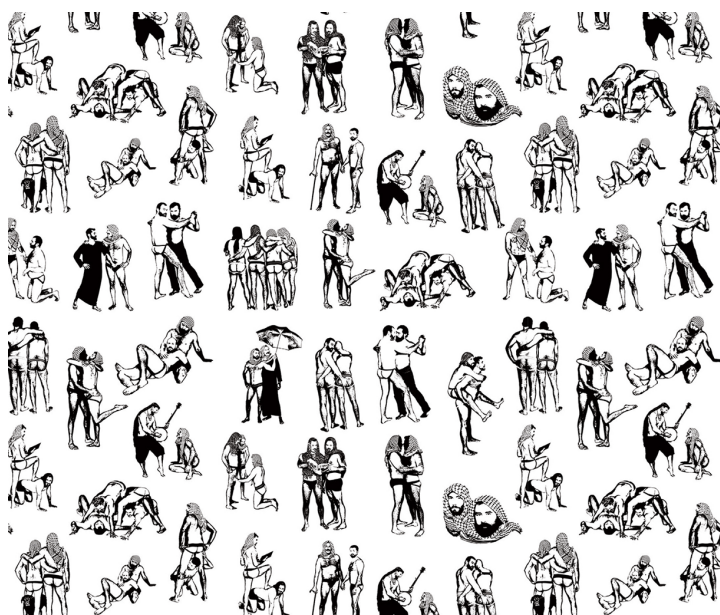


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Reviews



Andrew Gayed, *Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2024. ISBN 9780295752297 (pbk.). 324pp. \$35.00.



QUEER WORLD
MAKING

CONTEMPORARY
MIDDLE EASTERN
DIASPORIC ART

Andrew Gayed

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Andrew Gayed's first book is timely, offering a disciplinary pivot within Middle Eastern and North African sexuality studies in art and visual culture. *Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art* promises to be required reading for global art historical methods, queer theory, and Middle Eastern studies—just some of the fields in which this book intervenes. In sexuality studies, theories of *homonationalism* and *homocolonialism*—where the so-called “West” imposes sexual identity and civil rights politics on colonised societies—have become part of queer theory's canonical core.¹ Gayed's book contributes to the postcolonial and decolonizing aim of such literature. The text also ensures that art history is a part of the conversation within this context by incorporating contemporary artists from the expanded Middle East who no longer live there, thus addressing the diaspora through such discussions.

I say “expanded Middle East” in reference to the book's use of the term “Islamicate.” Coined by Marshall Hodgson around 1974, this term works as a generaliser to refer to diverse societies from regions that are predominantly Muslim, and/or bear Muslim forms of religious authority and political governance.² By this definition, an artist of any denomination living in places as widespread as Casablanca, Cairo, Baghdad, Tehran, or Karachi, would fall under the Islamicate umbrella. Categories can be difficult. The Middle East, as Gayed suggests within the text, does not geographically contain the far western reaches of Africa, such as Algeria and Morocco, yet artists from these places are pulled into a similar context of reception through the Islamic religious governance of their regions. Gayed advances a theory of the Islamicate to include diverse sexual practices—Islamicate sexualities. Avoiding the “global-to-local” route of transculturation present in some global methods of art history, Gayed claims to work within a “local-to-local” mode. In this mode, the locality of the artists within an Islamicate region can be connected to another artist's locale and/or worldview. Gayed finds this approach to be especially useful when the purpose is to connect diasporic artists to pre-colonial histories of sexualities in the places of their homeland. While this local-to-local approach is ideologically decolonizing and de-imperializing, the interconnectedness of geographies from Casablanca to Karachi and its diasporas is largely indebted to Arabian medieval imperial ambitions that centered religious colonialism. What does an artist from Morocco, living in Montréal, share with an artist from Iran, living in Paris? All to say, although Gayed's book certainly participates

1 See Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2007).

2 Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (University of Chicago Press, 1974).

in de-imperializing global art histories, I wonder if a change in vocabulary is necessary to move forward.

In addition to a prologue and introduction, there are three chapters in Part One, and four chapters in Part Two in *Queer World Making*. Part One outlines the theories and frameworks that Gayed employs as decolonial methods. The first chapter posits that a horizontal ideology is required for decolonizing methods; Gayed advocates for historians of Arab art to “queer locally,” or consult inter-Arab subjectivities as a horizontal method to avoid the vertical, Western-constructed, “canon” that positions histories of art as stylistic and logical successions. The second chapter then argues that biographies of artists should be avoided as it can often contribute to colonial trauma, in the context of Arab artists. However, the author then proceeds with a biography of artist Wafaa Bilal. Gayed’s excursus against biography is critically important and has long been a discussion in the field, however his inclusion of Bilal’s background suggests value in acknowledging one’s biography, thus underlining the tensions and nuances existing within this argument. The following third chapter pivots from Gayed’s layered argument, and surveys a vast corpus of theories, without art, to explain how one can use the Islamicate as a method in art history.

Part Two turns towards queer diasporic world making. In the introduction, Gayed informs that the first section will establish his theories and methods, and the second will consult artworks. The fourth chapter reflects the focuses of Part One, while introducing analysis of artworks, diving deep into a critical comparison of literature on sexuality and orientalism before introducing an installation by Jemil Hellu titled *Be My Guest* (2016). Art’s role within queer theory is more apparent in the fifth chapter, where Gayed brings Erbin Bagheri’s drawings into conversation, to play with, critique, and provide an argument for horizontal art history’s ability to “re-world” homoerotic colonial photography. “To world” is to become, and the dimensions of one’s world are always in process.³ Queer worlding has continuously created microcosms that, purely by existing, challenge any religious and political oppression of persons of diverse sexualities. If Western visual culture attempted to create a kind of world picture of the homoeroticism in the Middle East and North Africa

3 My understanding of worlding has largely been shaped by the range of theories that have continued to question and advance the two different ideas proposed by Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected edition (New York: Free Press, [1929] 1978); and Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010). Gayed cites Heidegger’s school of thought as influential to his own approach.

through a colonial lens, then queer diasporic artists such as Bagheri “re-world” the colonial archive through their subjective interventions.⁴

The sixth and seventh chapters present Gayed’s strongest arguments within the text, supported by highlighting art as a form to engage with such subjects. Chapter six focuses on diverse forms of “coming out” via the cleverly self-replicating multidisciplinary artist, 2Fik. Working from within contemporary Western art history in a way that calls back to Kent Monkman’s mode of re-appropriation, 2Fik inserts himself into canonical works of art, as both the masculine and feminine subjects, to “queer” and visualise the diverse and dynamic aspects of Arab sexuality in diaspora beyond colonial sexual identity and emancipatory politics. Chapter seven deals with Iranian-French painter Alireza Shojaian’s reworking of Persian visual ideologies into homoerotic and “macho” car art, while simultaneously punctuating homophobic honor killings in Iran. Shojaian faced persecution because of his sexuality in Iran, and so he sought refuge in Paris. Due to the homosexual iconography he used in his practice, the Iranian government threatened to pull their funding for his exhibitions in Paris. Gayed recounts Shojaian’s story, while additionally exploring the ways in which anti-homosexual legislation in colonized countries has been brought in by the West. I would say though that we must address agency in these contexts.

Within *Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art*, Gayed highlights an exceptional range of diasporic artists, with their respective works that demand our attention—asking us, as readers and viewers, to listen, closely, to what the works are translating and conveying. This does, after all, accomplish what Gayed valiantly champions: a political, horizontal art history that is driven by aesthetics, and not pre-determined by colonial trauma. I am thrilled to think about the ways that Gayed and others will continue to explore the worlds that these artists have built, and keep building, in and across their brilliant media.

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4 My thinking here is shaped by Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Duke University Press, 2006).

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