



## There Where You Are Not: Selected Writings of Kamal Boullata and Uninterrupted Fugue: Art by Kamal Boullata

Recent Books

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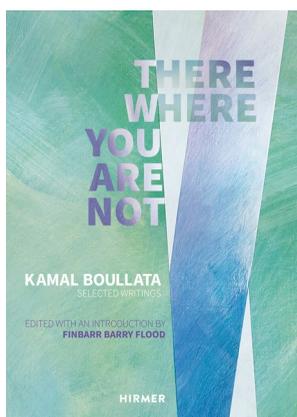
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## RECENT BOOKS

***There Where You Are Not: Selected Writings of Kamal Boullata***, edited by Finbarr Barry Flood. Munich: Hirmer Publishers, 2019. 488 pages. \$39.95 cloth.

***Uninterrupted Fugue: Art by Kamal Boullata***, edited by Burcu Dogramaci. Munich: Hirmer Publishers,\* 2019. 176 pages. \$35.00 paper.

Reviewed by Steve Tamari



These two lavish companion books are a well-deserved tribute to Kamal Boullata (1942–2019), the most acclaimed Palestinian painter of modern times.

*There Where You Are Not: Selected Writings of Kamal Boullata* (henceforth *Selected Writings*) is a posthumously published collection of forty-five of Boullata's essays, arranged in a book that he designed with the aid of his life partner and collaborator, Lily Farhoud. It is a testament to Boullata's prodigious fifty-year career as a writer who was at once art historian, political activist, cultural critic, translator, poet, and indefatigable advocate for fellow Palestinian and Arab artists. *Selected Writings* doubles as a work of art with 224 full-color plates. Editor Finbarr Barry Flood, author of a crisp introduction that distills the essence of the artist's life and work, encapsulates the interplay between pen, brush, word, and shape thus: "The productive tension between language and the visual that is so central to Boullata's vision is at the heart of a series of oppositions that structure his painting and writing" (*Selected Writings*, p. 15).

*Uninterrupted Fugue: Art by Kamal Boullata* (henceforth *Art*) is a collection of ten essays by a distinguished roster of art historians, critics, and curators, including such luminaries as historian Hans Belting, postcolonial theorist Jean Fisher, and literary critic Abdelkebir Khatibi. Edited by art historian Burcu Dogramaci, *Art* examines the evolution of Boullata's painting during the later period of his work. Ninety-eight color illustrations complement expert analyses of themes that intersect the long arc of Boullata's career. In

reference to the musical metaphor of the book's title, Dogramaci writes: "With fugue and counterpoint, the intersected, interdisciplinary work of painting and writing in Boullata's work . . . becomes tangible" (*Art*, p. 15).

The dynamism of a body of work driven by point and counterpoint, and by dialectical oppositions, makes it impossible to divide Boullata's oeuvre into discrete sections and a linear chronology. This review focuses on the dialogical relationships that pattern his life and career and that are taken up in both books under discussion here. These collections—one of Boullata's own written work, the other of critical perspectives on his

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\*Both books are also available through the U.S. distributor University of Chicago Press.

paintings—document the creative power of the tensions that animated Boullata's continuous search for new answers and modes of expression that could address the discord between belonging and exile, autobiography and history, word and geometry, abstraction and color, writing and painting.

The tension between belonging and exile is the most consistent of the motifs that animate Boullata's creative output, with Jerusalem the departure point for all that follows. Boullata was born and raised in the walled city, and he lived there until his mid-twenties. Like many Palestinians, he was trapped outside the country during the 1967 war and banned from returning. In terms of art, politics, and intellectual life, however, he never left. The Orthodox icons that filled the family home launched his career as a painter and were the fount for his revisionist history of modern Palestinian painting.<sup>†</sup> The arabesque and calligraphic decorations that embellish the Dome of the Rock inspired an artistic practice and a lifetime of research that located the Arab and Islamic roots of European abstract art.<sup>‡</sup>

The nature of Boullata's attachment to Jerusalem grew in exile. It is the ultimate "there" from which he is "not," per the title of his selected essays. Boullata repeatedly returns to Edward Said's characterization of the exile as having a "plurality of vision [which] gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions . . . both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together *contrapuntally*" (*Selected Writings*, p. 349). For Boullata, "entering exile magnified the divisions and the discontinuities of [his] favorite years into a different set of refractions and fragmentations" (*Selected Writings*, p. 28). In an essay on Boullata's *Angelus* cycle of nine paintings, which are reproduced in *Art* to illustrate the text (as was done with most contributions in the volume), Dogramaci explains how abstracting Jerusalem compensates for the artist's growing distance from it while, at the same, recreating it (*Art*, pp. 84–97). "This distancing from a real world, which can also exist only in memory, creates its own abstract space in painting. Boullata's paintings reveal, among many other references, his memory of what he left behind. But in the act of painting, this thing lying back in the past is always formulated as something emerging anew" (*Art*, p. 93). Elizabeth Key Fowden's essay in the volume, "Jerusalem and the Work of Discontinuity," traces the continuous discontinuities of Boullata's lifetime of "revisiting" Jerusalem through a host of changing aesthetic modalities and a bevy of historic architectural signifiers, including the fourth-century Basilica of the Resurrection, which houses the Tomb of Christ; the Mosque of Omar, where the caliph is said to have prayed at a distance from the Tomb when he conquered the city in 637; and the fifth-century Kathisma Church and the Dome of the Rock, completed in 692, both of which share reverence for Mary, mother of Jesus (*Art*, pp. 108–33).

Boullata's fascination with the Jerusalem school of iconography exemplifies the interplay of another set of contrapuntal notes: the autobiographical and the historical. As an apprentice to one of the last Palestinian master iconographers, Khalil Halabi, Boullata became acquainted with the convergence of image and word, and with the symbolic function of geometric patterns, setting the stage for a later realization that "the iconographer does not paint an icon. He writes it" (*Selected Writings*, p. 38). His formal training as an artist began in Rome and, as a result of forced exile, continued in the United States, France, and Germany. Caught between being an outsider in his place of birth and an outsider in his places of residence, Boullata turned to the history of art to discover the affinities

<sup>†</sup>Kamal Boullata, "Innovation in Palestinian Art," in *There Where You Are Not*, pp. 205–16.

<sup>‡</sup>Kamal Boullata, "On the Geometry of Language and the Grammar of 'Raqqsh,'" in *There Where You Are Not*, pp. 352–65.

between these two strains in his life as a Palestinian Christian Arab and as a citizen of the West. This scholarly journey led to locating the Islamic roots of European modernism.<sup>5</sup> His essay “Journey through Transparency” is a tour de force reckoning with the early-twentieth-century impact of Islamic art on pioneer European abstract expressionists, the influence of medieval Muslim mathematicians on arabesque, and the legacy of Byzantine architecture as reflected in Muslim monuments. This research, in turn, took shape in the composition of one of Boullata’s later geometric works, the *Bilqis* sequence of 2013 (*Selected Writings*, pp. 282–98).

The relationship between geometry and words in his painting begins with Boullata’s view that Arab culture is essentially oral and inclined to discount visual expression. Boullata is identified with the Hurufiyya school (derived from the Arabic word for letters—*huruf*—and involving stylized renderings of the Arabic script), and in a 1986 outline of the history of modern Arab art, titled “Contemporary Arab Art: Between Importation and Arabization,” he suggests it was a stage in which Arab artists had found a distinctly modern and Arab visual language (*Selected Writings*, pp. 328–44). Although he abandoned Arabic letters, per se, calligraphy and Arabic texts remained sources of inspiration. Boullata addresses these two elements in “Calligraphy and Abstraction” and “Language and the Visual,” two of the nine sections that make up *Selected Writings*. Words and their meanings inspired Boullata’s research and painting. He drew upon sacred texts to affirm the multiconfessionalism he grew up with and the words of dissident mystics and poets—medieval and modern—to affirm resistance to orthodoxies and structures of power. The impact of these findings on others was scholarly but not purely academic. Boullata’s discovery of the elements of a distinctly modern and Arab aesthetic had a palpable effect on his contemporaries. In his essay “Lyrical Abstractions,” Egyptian curator Omar Kholeif describes how, as a young Arab art critic on the cusp of his career, reading Boullata’s findings was tantamount to a cultural awakening, allowing him to embrace Indigeneity and modernism without contradiction (*Art*, pp. 78–83).

Aside from the inspiration he found in words, Boullata focused on the geometry of the square, which he called “the root of my new language” in 1992 (*Selected Writings*, p. 33). It wasn’t long before his abstract painting turned from a fascination with the letters of the Hurufiyya school to the square. In Khatibi’s essay, “An Artist of Proportion and Measurement,” an account of the transition in Boullata’s work between two series—*Symmetries* (1991) and *Surrat al-Ard* (1997)—the author notes the move away from the “linear stability of color, letters, and numbers” in favor of “an invisible alphabet” in which the precision of relationships “vibrates in place of rhythm” (*Art*, pp. 20–23).

Most of the essays that make up *Art* trace Boullata’s use of abstraction during the second half of his career as he devoted more attention to light and color. Mel Gooding reads the 2015 series *And Then There Was Light*, in which Boullata’s telling of the Genesis story concentrates on the indispensability of light in an abstract and geometric form, “as a sign for every conceivable complexity of creation” (*Art*, p. 54). Boullata’s preoccupation with light and color leads to an interest in transparency, the subject of the *Balqis* series and the *Addolcendo* (from the Italian for “softening” and varying degrees of transparency) series of 2015. In a study of the latter, Dorothea Schöne describes in her essay, “*Addolcendo* and the Poetics of Composition,” the time-consuming pochoir stencil technique once used in printing but adapted by Boullata for painting (*Art*, pp. 66–77).

<sup>5</sup>See Kamal Boullata, “Classical Arab Art and Modern European Painting: A Study in Affinities,” in *There Where You Are Not*, pp. 300–313.

The twists and turns and the back and forth in Boullata's individual trajectory as an artist were conditioned by the collective Palestinian experience of expulsion and foreign occupation. *Selected Writings* documents Boullata's political journey, and his writings on art and politics provide a compelling retrospective. During the 1970s, Boullata partook of the revolutionary spirit of the times, writing, for example, "Towards a Revolutionary Art," a history of modern Arab art through the prism of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Selected Writings*, pp. 152–69). One may have thought that the militant spirit of this phase had disappeared by the time he cocurated an exhibit of Palestinian and Israeli artists in 1988. Instead, his critique of Israeli art was grounded in a critique of Zionist conquest in which, he argued, the artist is unable to divorce themselves from the penchant to control the land and its people (*Selected Writings*, pp. 176–92).

"Alif. Nun. Sin. Alif. Nun.: A Sex-Pol Manifesto," a 1974 piece included in a section of *Selected Writings* titled "Feminism and Gender," was doubly revolutionary in its time as a critique of Arab patriarchy. In his introduction to the volume, Flood notes that Boullata's indictment of the "erasure of the female in [Arab] patriarchy is compar[able] to the erasures inflicted on the land through colonization" (*Selected Writings*, p. 21). Boullata ran up against patriarchal attitudes toward children when he was commissioned to establish and design a children's literature series in Beirut in the early 1970s. His 2015 account of the ordeal, "Children's Joy and Dying in the Homeland," tells of the inability of PLO apparatchiks to accept that children and their experiences might be involved in such an endeavor. He later struck back with the 1990 publication of *Faithful Witnesses: Palestinian Children Recreate Their World*, a collection of Palestinian children's paintings.

Boullata's militancy may have softened, but throughout his career he did a yeoman's work as an institution builder, cultural mediator, illustrator, and translator. He was a consummate promoter of the work of fellow Arab and Palestinian artists and poets. The section in *Selected Writings* titled "Contemporaries" includes profiles of Syrian German painter Marwan Kassab-Bachi, Palestinian painter from Gaza 'Asim Abu Shaqra, Palestinian Lebanese painter Paul Guiragossian, and abstract photographer Steve Sabella, as well as painters Vladimir Tamari and Hani Zurob (who is the subject of a separate monograph by Boullata). "The World, the Self and the Body: Pioneering Women in Palestinian Art" celebrates the achievements of painters Zulfa al-Sa'di, Sophie Halaby, Juliana Seraphim, and performance artist and sculptor Mona Hatoum. In his essays "Rashid Hussein: The Fire and the Mirror" and "Mahmoud Darwish: Dimensions of a Wound," (*Selected Writings*, pp. 84–87, 88–90), and in a host of published translations and collaborations with the Syrian poet Adonis ("A Book of Mirrors" and "The Granada Portfolio," *Selected Writings*, pp. 384–87, 388–91), Boullata's interest in the word found expression in poetry, including his own. The final section of *Selected Writings* is titled "Poetry: The Last Frontier," and it includes four of Boullata's poems.

Together, the two books illustrate the dynamic exchange between Boullata's painting and writing. Fisher puts it this way: "Like two instruments or voices in a 'call and response' musical score, each practice—painting and writing—inspires the other to undertake a creative shift in register" (*Art*, p. 137). These beautifully executed books expertly and artfully track the long arc of the painter as he continuously makes sense anew of the dynamics at play in both his life and his work—belonging and exile, the autobiographical and the historical, the word and geometry, abstraction and color, and writing and painting.

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