

For Immediate Release



AUB brings artist John Carswell's works back to where they were created half a century ago

Beirut, Lebanon- 21/11/2014 - AUB Art Galleries and Collections has opened its major exhibition of this year, entitled *Trans-Oriental Monochrome: John Carswell*, in the presence of the artist himself.

The exhibition runs until February 25, 2015 in two galleries: the AUB Byblos Bank Art Gallery on campus, and the AUB Rose and Shaheen Saleeby Museum (previously AUB Art Gallery) located on Sidani Street, Hamra.

This exhibition familiarizes the public with a series of monochrome works produced by John Carswell: the art historian, artist, teacher, explorer, curator and scholar of Near, Middle, and Far Eastern art and culture.

Carswell graduated in 1951 from the Royal College of Art in London, and instead of setting out to conquer the British art world, ruled at the time by local social realists, he embarked on a steamboat and entered the Middle East through the port of Beirut.

For almost six decades now, John Carswell has been studying this region, following on the heels of his lifelong source of inspiration, the medieval Islamic explorer Ibn Battuta. Instead of tracing the routes of the sacred *hajj*, however, Carswell has been closely observing the pilgrimage of artistic ideas, the circulation of cultural currents within and beyond an area that gave the world its earliest great civilizations.

“Whichever way you look at it John Carswell is a polymath: someone who is truly expert in an extraordinarily wide-ranging array of subjects. His life has also been something that reads like the wanderings of a 19th century adventurer,” said Rico Frances, AUB art galleries director, during the opening of the exhibit.

Carswell's interest in the art, culture and history of the Fertile Crescent has led him to various places and positions: from archaeological excavations in Turkey, Jordan, Syria, and Palestine, to teaching fine arts at the American University of Beirut, to following in the footsteps of the first Western explorers of Central Asia, to becoming the Curator of the Oriental Institute and then Director of the Smart Museum at the University of Chicago, and

later moving back to London to become the Director of the Islamic and South Asian Department of Sotheby's, London.

For Octavian Esanu, AUB art galleries curator, Carswell's work is a rare study of 1950s and 1960s monochrome art that is not discussed within the context of European and American art history.

"The emergence of modernist monochrome art around the same time in some parts of the Middle East has not yet been brought into broader discussion," he explained.

Yet, British artist and scholar John Carswell resided for more than two decades in Beirut (1956-1977). During this time he produced several series of monochrome artworks.

"We at AUB Art Galleries have decided to bring Carswell's work back, and display it in the place where it was made half a century ago: in Beirut at AUB in the 1960s," Esanu added. "We take this opportunity offered to us by John Carswell to pose certain questions: what do these works mean for the place where they were made, and what do they mean for those fields of knowledge and discourses (Orientalism, Postcolonialism) that have traditionally examined cultural interactions between Western Europe or North America and the Middle East?"

Esanu argues that Carswell maintains that the intense and rich color of the Mediterranean sky causes brilliantly emblazoned painting to look slightly vulgar, hence his complete renunciation of color. In this, Carswell's work distinguishes itself not only from that of his modernist post-World War II contemporaries but also from that of generations of artists before him, artists whose engagement with the Orient, both as place and as concept, modified their work formally or chromatically. With this series of monochrome two- and three-dimensional works, Carswell seems to have come to challenge the very core of painterly Orientalism: the rich colorfulness, luminance and chromatic brightness that it is believed to be the result of the European painters' encounter with intense Mediterranean or Near Eastern sunlight. Carswell, then, works against the grain, or against the palettes, of the romantic, realist, naturalist, impressionist and modernist Orientalists and other painters who have worked in or have been influenced by the idea of the Orient over the course of almost two hundred years. Carswell's chromatic reductionism, his monochrome Orientalism or "trans-Oriental monochrome" - which originates in Beirut and then travels during the 1960s and 1970s to various venues in Western Europe and North America - together with his constructivist aesthetics is an important statement in the art, aesthetics and politics of the ongoing dialogue between Western and Eastern art.

Attended by a host of art lovers and members of the AUB community, the opening ceremony also included some remarks by Carswell in addition to Afaf Zurayk, who teaches painting in the department of Fine arts and art history, and who was a student of Carswell's during his time at AUB.

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 700 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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