



LEILA HELLER

WORLD BUILDERS:  
ARTIST AS ARCHITECT

Published on the occasion of the exhibition of:

***World Builders: Artist as Architect***

Curated by Donna Honarpisheh

April 2, 2024 - April 29, 2024

Leila Heller Gallery would like to express deep gratitude to Anees and Semine Fazalbhoj for the introduction to the Estate of Jehangir Vazifdar, and would also like to express deep gratitude to Jody Greenstone and Matt Miller for the introduction to the Estate of Wassef Boutros-Ghali.

**LEILA HELLER.**

22 East 80th St., Ground Level

New York, NY 10075

T.: +1 (212) 249-7695

[www.LeilaHellerGallery.com](http://www.LeilaHellerGallery.com)

Leila Heller, President

Ella Schwartz, Director

Marvin Doctor, Registrar and Preparator

Catalogue Designed by Marvin Doctor and Claudia M. Rodriguez

Front Cover Image: Detail of Wassef Boutros-Ghali, *La Porte Étroite*, 2021

Back Cover Image: Jehangir Vazifdar, *Mother & Child*

WORLD BUILDERS:  
ARTIST AS ARCHITECT

# WORLD BUILDERS: ARTIST AS ARCHITECT

Essay by Donna Honarpisheh

*World Builders: Artist as Architect* is grounded in the vital link between modern architecture and visual art as parallel practices of world building. The concept of world building, which crosses both the conceptual and concrete, includes both the fine arts and the architectural and how they overlap in practices of imagination and materiality. Thinking of *artist as architect* allows us to consider the shared drive to construct the world through structure and design, material and form, as well as dream and fantasy. For artists and architects alike, world building is both a practice and a tool; it is both a way of seeing and actualizing the world. To build a world is to envision and create, while at the same time, defining and de-lineating. For many 20th century modernists, the grid-like templates of architects might function as an ordering technique within the city, but for these artists, the city is also a place of wonder, the unknown, and possibility.

Through the work of artists from a variety of global contexts including Jehangir Vazifdar (1920-2011) in India, Marcos Grigorian (1925-2007) in Iran and Armenia, Wassef Boutros-Ghali (1924-2023) in Egypt and the US, and Tarik Currimbhoy (1954-) in the US and India, the bodies of work on display are formed by the developing 20th century urbanism and modernization and how this affects their approach to image-making and materiality. Indeed, the link to architecture begins from the reality that all but one of the artists included in this exhibition held long and vibrant careers as practicing architects. In this way, architecture functions not simply as metaphor but as a reality of building structures, monuments, and public spaces that reflect 20th century modernization and the contemporary across global metropolitan centers. While architectural form is critical to how these artists approach their practice in painting and sculpture, architecture does not function as a template to represent actual buildings, but a manifestation of form structured by geometry, an attunement to architecture's transformation of spatial experience and how this can be played with through abstract and minimalist approaches.

Taking architecture's fundamental qualities: structure, color, shadow, and light, as a point of departure, these artists approach their art practice as an opportunity to explore the shared qualities of architecture and art as portals that extend beyond the concrete into imaginative possibilities inherent in minimalist approaches. A throughline of this exhibition is the way in which artists who work across painting and sculpture reconfigure form, structure, and material to shape both visual and spatial perception in their experience of everyday life. What is more, while these artists are attuned to the concrete realities of architectural design, whether

in the erection of buildings in urban centers, or in the materials required to build villages, it is their connection to materials and how they structure our perceptual experiences that allow their visual corpus to consistently transform both the concrete space of the city and the realm of the aesthetic.

Many will know Jehangir Vazifdar for his architectural work and for its impact on India's modern urban landscape. Vazifdar was equally talented as an artist, experimenting across mediums and styles in powerful portraiture to mid-century cubism. Vazifdar crafted his own techniques including a "Color Alphabet and Dictionary" in which hues correlated with abstract concepts. Vazifdar chose not to commercialize his art practice and as a result his aesthetic contributions remained omitted from modernist art historical narratives. The works included in this exhibition are reflective of Vazifdar's work across mediums in painting, collage, and drawing, all of which were created between 1960 and 1997, showcasing the artist's major contributions to India's post-independence art scene and in a broader global context of modernist art. Vazifdar's 1966 work "*Untitled*" (pg. 4) is a dynamic play of shapes and colors, which draws the viewer into the work's multiple curves, angles, and paths. These shapes reflect a type of portal that appears in many of his works, drawing you deep beyond the surface of the painting and the confines of the canvas. Across a selection of drawings, Vazifdar uses his overlap technique, in which he took magazine covers and drew over them with a thick felt pen, creating distinct images from negative space. Vazifdar's visual vocabulary moves between abstraction and figuration, calligraphic forms, occult, and dream-like scenes, as well as a deep referential practice from Indian, global, and western art historical lineages. Vazifdar exhibited his work alongside his contemporaries including MF Husain, Francis Newton Souza, Ram Kumar, Anjolie Ela Menon, and Satish Gujral amongst others, indicating his role in a broader network of artists and within a national and international art historical lineage.

Wassef Boutros-Ghali also devoted himself to a career in architecture, designing and building structures throughout his native Egypt and Africa before turning to painting. It was his architectural proclivity towards simple forms and equilibrium that permeated his later years as an artist. When Boutros-Ghali moved to New York in 1971, his practice changed considerably, he began to paint in acrylic and larger canvases and moved from a more representational practice to experimentations in abstract forms. While Boutros-Ghali's art practice might recall the flattened and colorful landscapes of Etel Adnan or Saliba Douiahy, his corpus

is also more aptly placed within the context of modernist schools that were directly influenced by modern architecture including Le Corbusier's Synthetic-Cubism, Patrick Henry Bruce's Purism, or the Precisionist paintings of Manierre Dawson. In "*Troy*" (2002) (pg. 20) the artist references the ancient archeological layers of the city of Troy and renders the idea of the city into an abstract rendering of pure form and color. Boutros-Ghali's architectural precision in painting presents a deliberate interest in the way in which movement, space, and color are transformed by architectural modernity, therefore expressing simultaneous practice in building and painting and how the two are interconnected.

Marcos Grigorian's earthworks explore an architectural lineage that is more closely inspired by the materials and communities of Iranian village life, expanding our thematic focus beyond the building of modern architectural structures as concurrent with global projects of state modernization. While not a practicing architect as the other artists included in this exhibition, Grigorian was integral to expanding Iran's art scene in the mid-twentieth century by starting the commercial gallery Galerie Esthétique in 1954 and the establishment of the Tehran biennial in 1958. Grigorian's diverse aesthetic practice included performative photography as well as figurative and expressionist paintings that were often made with humble materials such as soil, straw, mud, and at times, found objects and perishable food. Using these natural resources, namely, *kahgel* (a mixture of clay used for the adobe-like village dwellings), Grigorian's work can be contextualized as a precursor to land art, predating the American movement by almost a decade. Grigorian's innovative use of village materials, especially as industrialization was transforming Iranian village life, allows us to consider modernist art making as resisting the technology driven, machinic, and urban development plans of the mid-20th century. By placing these humble materials of everyday life at the center of his canvases, Grigorian offers a radical retelling of the history of art and its relationship to buildings and dwelling, bridging the high modernism of abstract art with the minimalism of village life.

Classically trained in the arts, architecture, and industrial design, Tarik Currimbhoy transforms his foundations and ongoing career in architecture to build sculptures that express what he refers to as "stories of structure and gravity." Taking the mathematical precision of forms along with the imaginative possibilities inherent in movement, space, and subjectivity, Currimbhoy's sculptural corpus challenges the opposition between science and art. Currimbhoy's kinetic sculptures are built with stainless

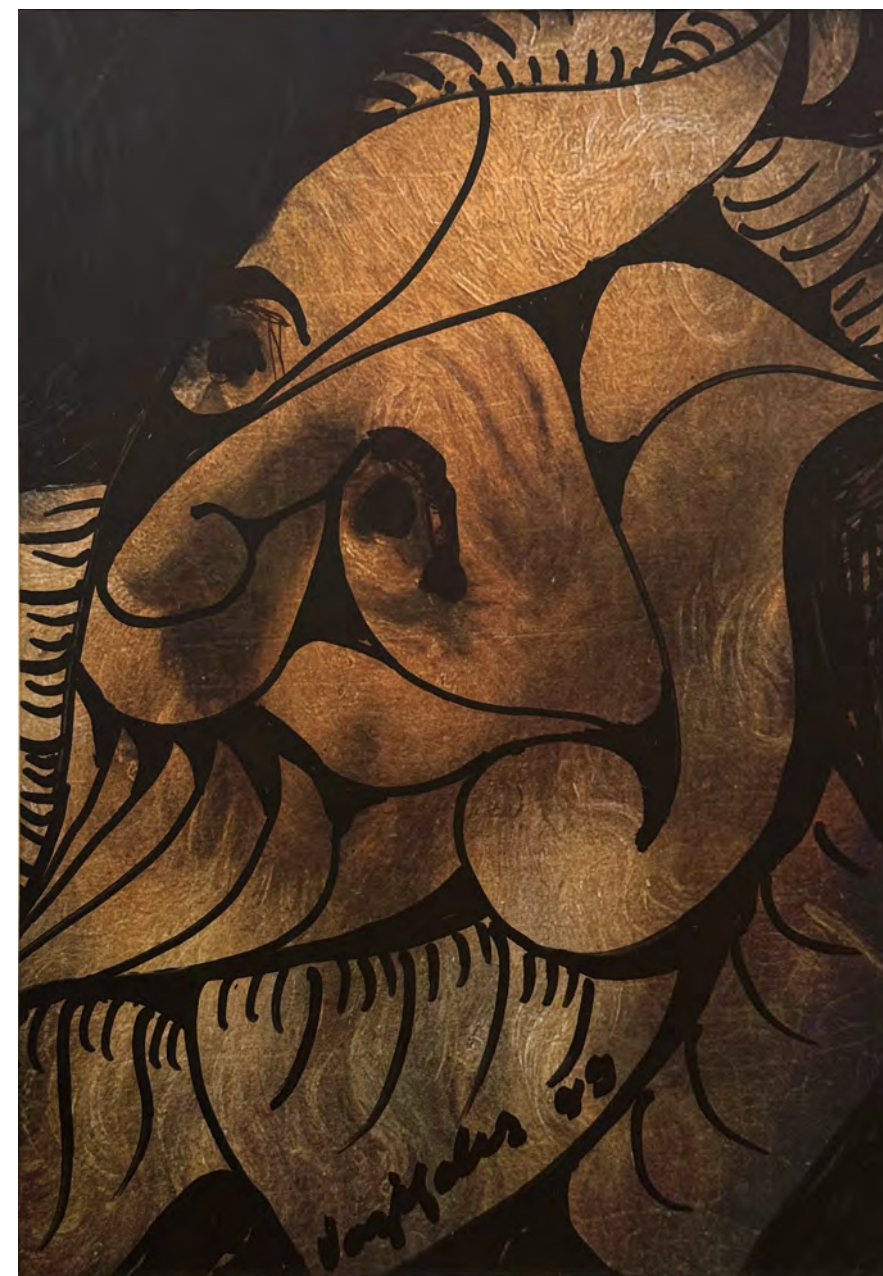
steel and bronze and explore the dynamics of simple forms through movement and stasis. Works like "*Pendulum*" (2018) (pg. 22-23) can exist in rest or in motion, playing with gravity, motion, and compression. As both an architect and sculptor, context and scale are key to how Currimbhoy's work transforms. His sculptures function as illustrations of volume cast in reflective materials becoming not just objects in space, but forms that dynamically reflect and refract. In this way, these works act in the space they are in, transforming via their surroundings in indoor or outdoor spaces. The work "*Eye*" (2022) (pg. 21) is a circular sculpture made of stainless steel, with a concave circle at the center of the work and yet another hole, which punctures the solidity of the sculpture. The work contains multiple layers of vision, appearing itself as an eye that absorbs its surroundings. When exhibited outside, the work reflects both earth and sky with changing reflections depending on the work's movement as well as the viewer's position and perspective.

The range of work produced by these artists reflects the dynamic ways in which architecture both shapes and opens their relationship to space, color, perspective, and place. For these artists and architects, material and formal experimentation are key to the worlds they build, while also being attuned to the immaterial aspects of world building. As each artist included in this exhibition has had a strong presence in shaping the public spaces they inhabit, their art practice bridges inner and outer worlds, while simultaneously expressing the interdependence of the abstract and the concrete. Across these bodies of work, artists experiment with the structural foundations of form as well as the forms of imagining that accompany and continue to shape our worlds.

*Donna Honarpisheh, PhD is Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Miami. She is also a scholar of Global Modernisms and has taught courses at Sarah Lawrence College, Fordham University, and UC-Berkeley. She received her PhD at UC-Berkeley in Comparative Literature and Critical Theory where she wrote a dissertation on post-1953 Iranian modernist art in a global context.*



Jehangir Vazifdar  
*Untitled*, 1966  
 Oil on Canvas  
 126 x 99 cm. / 49.61 x 38.98 in.



Jehangir Vazifdar  
*Untitled*, 1998  
 Felt-tip on Printed Paper  
 29 x 21 cm., 61 x 55 cm. (framed) / 11.42 x 8.27 in., 24 x 21.65 in. (framed)



Jehangir Vazifdar  
*The Writer*, ca. mid-70's  
 Oil on Canvas  
 76 x 61 cm. / 29.92 x 24 in.



Jehangir Vazifdar  
*Mother & Child*  
 Oil on Canvas  
 147 x 117 cm. / 57.87 x 46.06 in.



Jehangir Vazifdar  
*Dancing*  
 Oil on Canvas  
 102 x 84 cm. / 40.16 x 33.07 in.



Jehangir Vazifdar  
*Untitled (Face Series)*, 1997  
 Felt-tip on Paper  
 29 x 21 cm., 61 x 55 cm. (framed) / 11.42 x 8.27 in., 24 x 21.65 in. (framed)



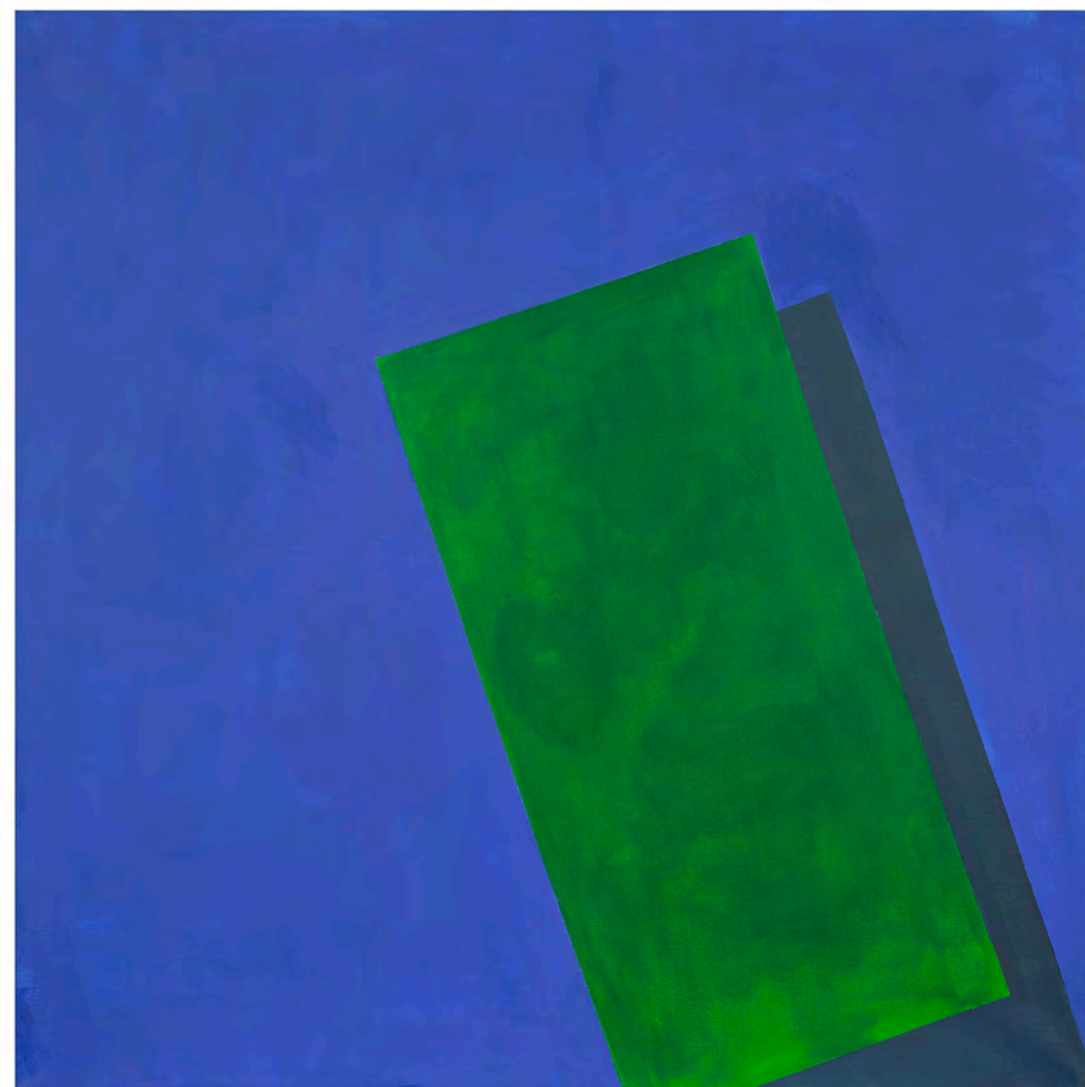
Marcos Grigorian  
*Autunno*, 1984  
 Straw on Mixed Media Compound on Canvas  
 31.75 x 24.13 x 1.91 cm / 12.5 x 9.5 x .75 in



Marcos Grigorian  
*Vartoosh*, 1984  
 Oil on Canvas  
 60.96 x 45.72 x 1.905 cm / 24 x 18 x .75 in



Wassef Boutros-Ghali  
*La Porte Étroite*, 2021  
 Acrylic on Canvas  
 137.16 x 137.16 cm./ 54 x 54 in.



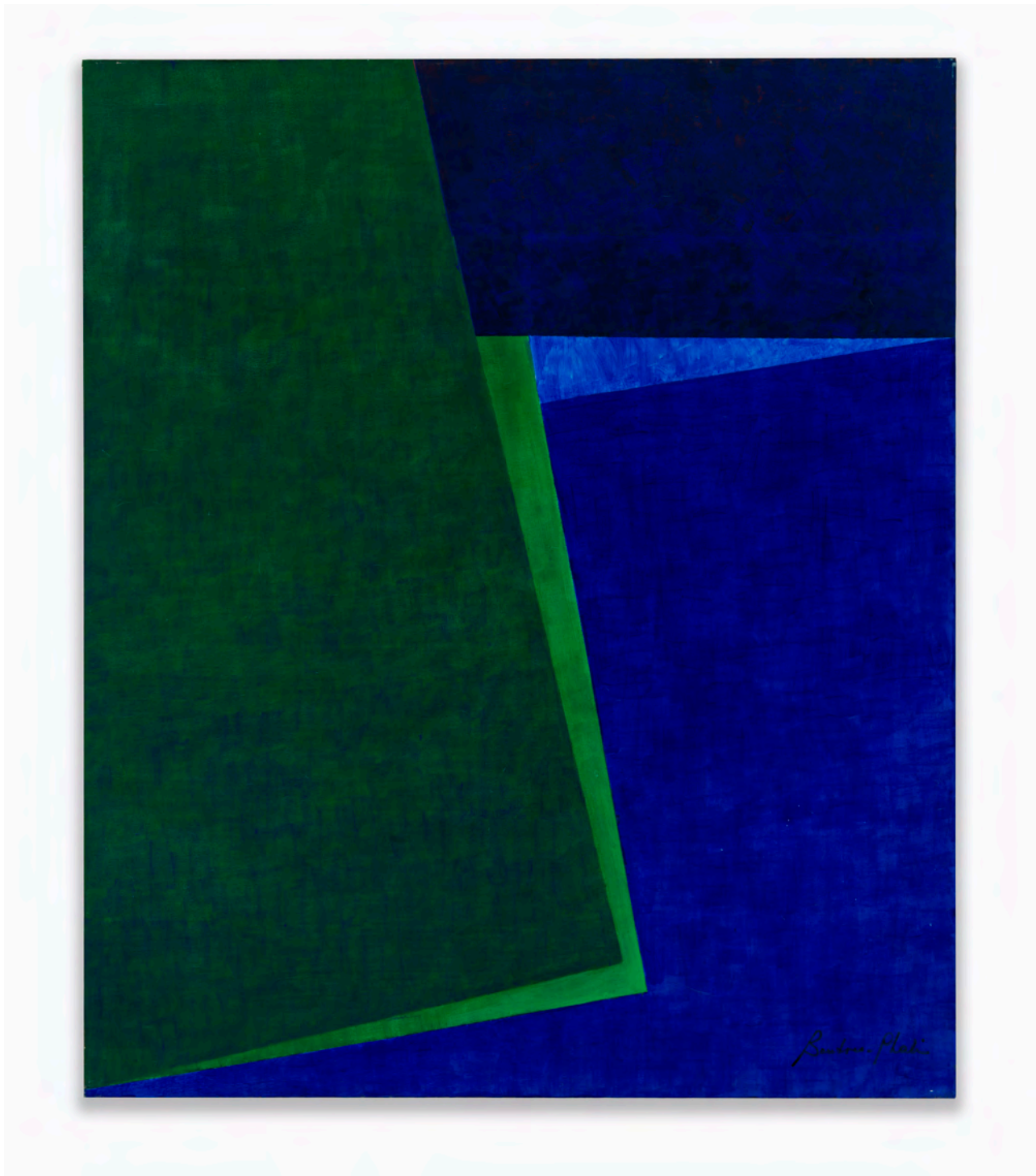
Wassef Boutros-Ghali  
*Lonely Green*, 2021  
 Acrylic on Canvas  
 137.16 x 137.16 cm./ 54 x 54 in.



Wassef Boutros-Ghali  
*Untitled*, 2015  
 Acrylic on Canvas  
 116.84 x 116.84 cm. / 46 x 46 in.



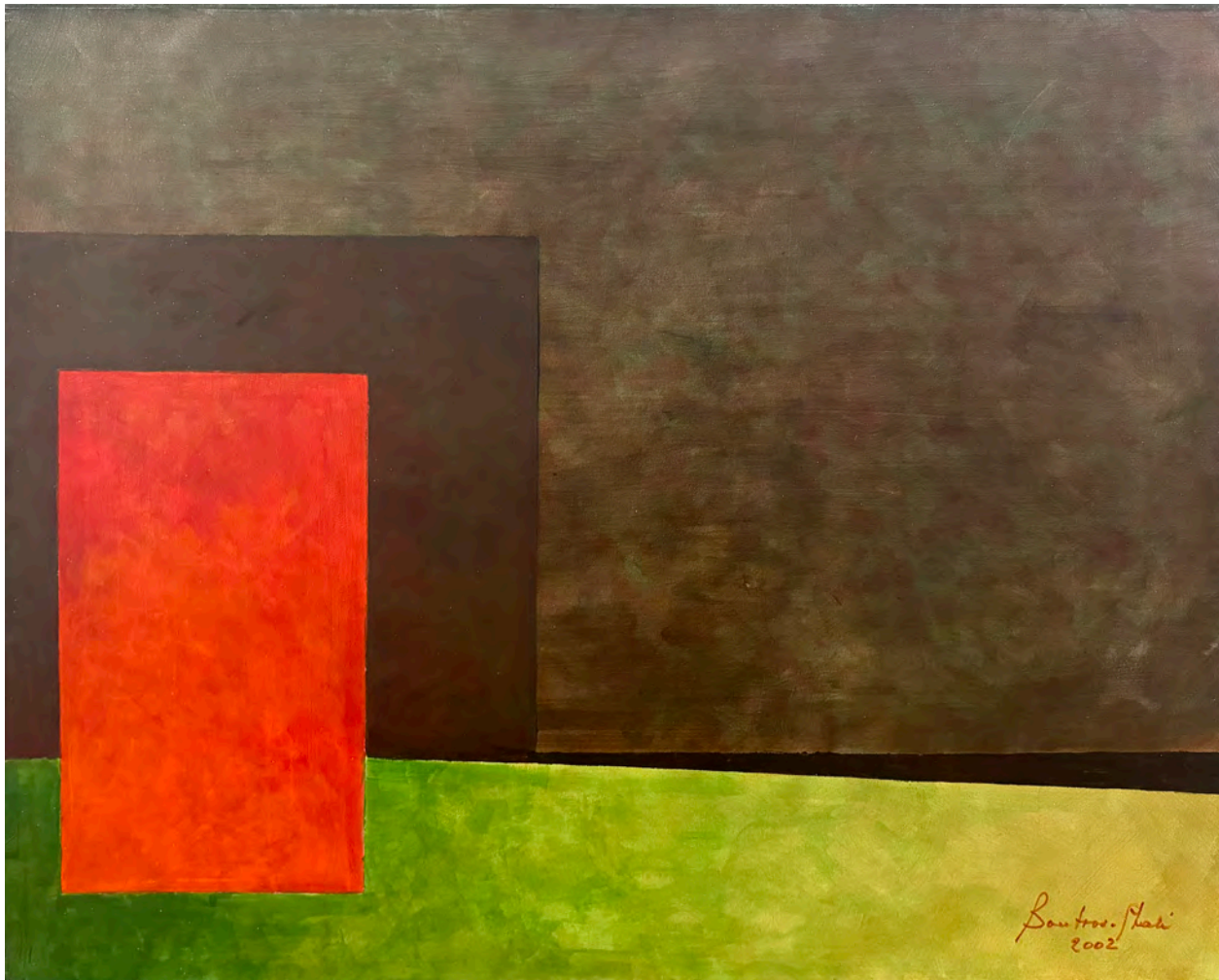
Wassef Boutros-Ghali  
*Untitled*, 2020  
 Acrylic on Canvas  
 116.84 x 116.84 cm. / 46 x 46 in.



Wassef Boutros-Ghali  
*Untitled*, 2021  
 Acrylic on Canvas  
 137.16 x 137.16 cm./ 54 x 54 in.



Wassef Boutros-Ghali  
*Untitled*, 2020  
 Acrylic on Canvas  
 116.84 x 116.84 cm. / 46 x 46 in.



Wassef Boutros-Ghali  
*The Night Hunter*, 2002  
 Acrylic on Canvas  
 96.52 x 116.84 cm. / 38 x 46 in.



Wassef Boutros-Ghali  
*Untitled*, 2008  
 Acrylic on Canvas  
 96.52 x 116.84 cm. / 38 x 46 in.



Wassef Boutros-Ghali  
*Troy*, 2002  
 Acrylic on Canvas  
 116.84 x 96.52 cm. / 46 x 38 in.



Tarik Currimbhoy  
*Eye (Small)*, 2022  
 Stainless Steel  
 30.48 x 30.48 x 5.08 cm. / 12 x 12 x 2 in.



Tarik Currimbhoy  
*Eye (Big)*, 2022  
 Stainless Steel  
 60.96 x 60.96 x 10.16 cm. / 24 x 24 x 4 in.



Tarik Currimbhoy  
*Pendulum*, 2022  
 Stainless Steel  
 50.8 x 30.48 x 3.81 cm. / 20 x 12 x 1.5 in.



Tarik Currimbhoy  
*Pendulum*, 2022  
 Polished Bronze  
 45.72 x 27.94 cm. / 18 x 11 in.

## JEHANGIR VAZIFDAR

Born in Bombay in 1920, Jehangir Vazifdar was a man of many refined talents. He made his living as a very successful architect, contractor, and builder, but was also very active in post-independent India’s art scene. Although remembered primarily as an architect and building contractor, he was a true innovator in the arts. He devised languages of colour, while correlating hues with various abstract concepts and emotions. These have been recorded in his unpublished ‘Color Alphabet and Dictionary.’ He dedicated his artistic career to producing works that could not be copied or otherwise forged.

He remained a practicing architect and builder of great reputation, founding his own architects’ firm in the late ‘40s and early ‘50s. He then set up the Vazifdar College of Building Industries, a pioneering effort in the field of construction-related education.

In parallel, Jehangir Vazifdar continued to lead a fertile, inventive life as an artist. Jehangir Vazifdar held several exhibitions in Mumbai, the first one being at the Taj Art Gallery about 50 years ago. He had several group shows with the now famous artists like Bhupen Khakkar, Vivasvan and Barwe and was also part of the exhibition called Indian Modernism held at the New York University Museum put together by the Abby Grey Art Gallery.

### SELECTED SOLO & GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2023	Jehangir Vazifdar: A 60-Year Retrospective, Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai, UAE
2015	Abby Grey and Indian Modernism, Selections from the NYU Art Collection, Grey Art Gallery, New York, NY
2004	Jehangir Art Gallery, Kala Ghoda, Mumbai, India
2002	Leela Kempinski, Near Airport, Studio Windsor Colaba, Mumbai, India
1987	Taj Art Gallery, Taj Mahal Hotel, Mumbai, India
1981	Taj Art Gallery, Taj Mahal Hotel, Mumbai, India
1966	Taj Art Gallery, Taj Mahal Hotel, Mumbai, India

## WASSEF BOUTROS-GHALI

Born in Cairo to a family of statesmen and politicians, Wassif Boutros-Ghali was drawn to the arts at an early age. As early as 12 years old he demonstrated great natural skill as a draftsman. He joined the studio of Jaro Hilbert, a classically trained painter and inspirational teacher. Boutros-Ghali set aside the political legacy of his family and devoted himself to a career in architecture, and then turned to painting.

Boutros-Ghali served as a technical consultant for the environment and urbanism with the United Nations and executed buildings in Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Sudan, in addition to growing his commitment to his artwork. Though oil on canvas was initially the artist’s preferred medium, political revolution and a necessary relocation in 1963 interrupted the evolution of his work as well as his choice of materials. Without the luxury of space and with a limited access to painting supplies, Boutros-Ghali produced a series of china ink drawings. The limitations of this new medium provided the artist a tremendous refuge. His experiments veered from abstract to surrealist to constructivist.

A move to New York in 1971 also served as a kind of awakening. The vivacity of the city, the art world buzz of abstract expressionism and the power of minimalist painting and design re-energized his art making practice. Canvases became larger in scale. Acrylics replaced oils as the medium of choice. Figurative improvisations gave way to overtly abstract forms. In the spirit of Rothko and Reinhardt, his canvases sought equilibrium by way of surfaces drenched in singular color. Thus, his nuanced geometric forms became alive inside the field. A return to Cairo in 1985 finally allowed Boutros-Ghali the freedom to pursue his practice without interruption. Increasingly the artist seeks to harness vibrant color to articulate motion/energy within the box of the canvas.

Wassef Boutros-Ghali passed away on March 15, 2023 at 98 years old in Cairo. He painted up until his death. Boutros-Ghali’s work is included in the collections of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE and the Boca Raton Museum of Art, Boca Raton, FL, USA.

### SELECTED SOLO & GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2023	Wassef Boutros-Ghali: Echoes of Creativity, Albertz Benda, Los Angeles, CA
2023	Wassif Boutros-Ghali Arts Club London, curated by Wedel Art, London, UK
2021-2022	Wassef Boutros-Ghali I Levante, Christine König Galerie, Vienna, AT
2022	Exhibition N° 120 (maybe), Galerie Balice Hertling, Paris, FR
2021	Frieze Masters with Rhona Hoffman Gallery and Albertz Benda, London, UK
2021	Wassef Boutros-Ghali, Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, IL
2021	The Armory Show, Rhona Hoffman Gallery, New York, NY
2020	Wassef Boutros-Ghali: A Retrospective, Albertz Benda, New York, NY
2020	The Armory Show, Rhona Hoffman Gallery, New York, NY
2019	Art Basel Miami Beach, Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Miami Beach, FL

## TARIK CURRIMBHOY

Tarik Currimbhoy was born in Mumbai, India in 1954 and currently lives and works in New York City. Currimbhoy came to New York to attend the Pratt Institute to be a painter but he found that sculpture appealed to him more. He studied and received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Pratt with a major in Industrial Design. He then attended Cornell and received a degree in Architecture. He later went on to teach at both of his alma maters (Drawing at Cornell and Design at Pratt). Classically trained in the arts, industrial design, and architecture, Currimbhoy is a trifacta of artistic prowess.

In both architecture and sculpture, Currimbhoy searches for tranquility, simplicity and tactility, expressed in purity of both form and material. Inspired by ancient architecture of building blocks resting on each other in tension and compression, Tarik’s sculptures began as “stories of structure and gravity,” held together under compression in stone. These became the genesis for studies in metal, which could express these concepts in dynamic fashion and sensual form.

Currimbhoy is an architect by profession with offices in New York and Mumbai. His design work has been published internationally and his sculptures may be found across the world in public spaces as well as corporate and private collections. Currimbhoy has created and co-designed some monumental sculptures and buildings – including the headquarters for McKinsey & Co. in Gurgaon, India; The Ellipse at the Omi Sculpture Park in upstate New York; The Raincatcher, an observatory installed in a private estate in New York; a 30,000 square foot Italian Renaissance style Mansion in Jaipur, India; and the Aura Skyscraper in New York.

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2022	“Tarik Currimbhoy: Reflections,” Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens, West Palm Beach, FL
2022	“Tarik Currimbhoy: Sculptures in Motion,” Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
2021	“Tarik Currimbhoy: New Sculptures,” Leila Heller Gallery Dubai, Dubai, UAE
2018	“Tarik Currimbhoy: Sway,” Long-Sharp Gallery Project Space, New York, NY
2018	“Erasing Borders,” Queens Museum, New York, NY

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2021	“Eye of the Connoisseur,” Christie’s London, London, United Kingdom
2020	Crafting Geometry: Abstract Art from South and West Asia, Sotheby’s New York, New York, NY
2020	New York Impact, Long-Sharp Gallery Project Space, New York, NY
2019	Palm Beach Modern + Contemporary, Palm Beach, FL
2019	Art in Buildings, Ghent, NY
2018	Seattle Art Fair, Long-Sharp Gallery, Seattle, WA
2018	“Erasing Borders,” Queens Museum, New York, NY
2015	Erasing Borders, Flushing Town Hall, Williamsburg Art and Historical Center, Brooklyn, NY & Hammond Museum, North Salem, NY
1980-1982	Sails, Johnson Art Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY

## MARCOS GRIGORIAN

Artist, teacher, gallerist, collector, actor, curator: these are some of the attributes that may be attached to the name of Marcos Grigorian (1925-2007). In his activities as an artist we find the same multifaceted diversity: from figurative expressionist paintings to sculptural abstractions made with straw, mud, and earth to works incorporating found objects and even perishable food. Grigorian, of Armenian descent, had a nomadic trajectory took him from his birthplace, in Kropotkin, Russia, to Tabriz at the age of five, then to Tehran, Rome, Minneapolis, New York, and his final resting place in Yerevan, Armenia. Grigorian was also a trendsetter whose career began in the 1950s and spanned several countries. By establishing the First Tehran Biennial he was especially instrumental in opening up channels of communication for Iranian artists.

Grigorian’s early works, including the Auschwitz murals, presented in an expressive visual language of anxiety and despair, were potent images that forever remind the viewer of the cruelty of war and inevitability of death and decay. Grigorian, as held by a critic, conceived of two alternative directions from the blackness he perceived: death and earth. Years ahead of his time, his experimentation with earth, straw, and paint predated later pieces by modern American, European, and Japanese artists.

Grigorian’s art is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Tate Modern, the British Museum, the Grey Gallery of NYU, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, the National Gallery, the Near East Museum in Armenia, and the Nelson Rockefeller Collection.

### EXHIBITIONS

2016	“Marcos Grigorian: Crossroads,” Cafesjian Center for the Arts, Yerevan, Armenia
2012	“Marcos Grigorian” Earthworks,” Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
2006	Layered Lives: Iranian Armenian Identity through Contemporary Art exhibition, Brunei Gallery, London
2002	Between Word and Image: Modern Iranian Visual Culture Exhibition, Grey Art Gallery, NYU, New York, NY
2000	Continental Shift Exhibition Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Germany
1999	Stream of Fire Exhibition, The Pharos Trust, Nicosia, Cyprus
1981-1985	Solo Exhibitions, Gorky Gallery, New York, NY
1977	Solo Exhibition, Saman Gallery, Tehran, Iran
1975	Solo Exhibition, Litho Gallery, Tehran, Iran
1971	Solo Exhibition, Iran-America Society, Tehran, Iran
1966	Recent Acquisitions: Painting and Sculpture, MoMA, New York, NY
1956	Solo Exhibition, Gallery Esthétique, Tehran, Iran
1954	Solo Exhibition, Iran-America Society, Tehran, Iran
1953	Solo Exhibition, Raymond Duncan Gallery, Paris, France
1953	Solo Exhibition, Galleria Il Pincio, Rome, Italy
1953	Annual Exhibition, Fine Arts Academy, Milan, Italy
1953	Group Exhibition, Palazzo Delle Esposizioni, Rome, Italy
1952	International Art Exhibition organized by National Tourist Center (ENIT)
1951	Solo Exhibition, Fiorani Gallery, Rome, Italy