



**Maliheh Afnan**, *Of Numbers*, 1980, ink on rice paper, 54 × 64cm, courtesy the estate of the artist and Lawrie Shabibi

DUBAI

## A Tribute to Memory

An exhibition of works on paper by **Maliheh Afnan** at **Lawrie Shabibi's** booth at **Art Dubai Modern** cast a light on the artist's rich oeuvre in the wake of her death last January

by Laura Egerton

Art Dubai Modern can be a place to make new discoveries. Lawrie Shabibi participated in its first iteration in 2014 with Nabil Nahas. They found tremendous success, subsequently securing sales to Tate Modern and the British Museum. Their showcase this March of works on paper by Maliheh Afnan, dating from the 1960s to the 1980s, was a breathtaking presentation. Videos of the artist discussing her practice allowed the viewer to enter her world. Afnan's death in January ended half a century of intense artistic production, and yet she has rarely been exhibited in the region from which she originates.

Born in Haifa, Palestine to Persian parents of the Baha'i faith, Afnan moved to Beirut in 1949, and then with her husband to Washington DC, where she first studied art. In the 1960s they lived in Kuwait, before returning to Beirut until 1974. Paris then became home until 1997, when she made her final move to London, where she spent her last two decades. There she has shown with Rose Issa and was selected by Venetia Porter for the seminal *Word Into Art* exhibition at the British Museum, which did travel to Dubai in 2008.

The works in *Tracing Memories* chart her journey from Beirut to Paris, and the effect of the Lebanese Civil War on her practice. Despite always choosing to work on a modest scale on paper, Afnan manipulates surfaces and materials with a tremendous physicality. Several works have as their base corrugated cardboard, which she has ravaged with a blowtorch, in essence creating war-torn landscapes. The way she builds up layer upon layer, enjoying ink bleeds and inconsistencies, is comparable to the way in which a writer sets a scene.

Indentations and shifts in texture have a lasting impact on tonal choices, always rusty and earthlike. Revealing a fascination with archeology, her creations are akin to broken pieces of terracotta or disintegrating papyrus. Writing was an early passion and calligraphy is a major source of inspiration, especially evident in her *écritures* works from the 1980s. The literal meaning of the text is of no consequence to her at all — she sees scripts as the source of line, expression and rhythm, forming true abstraction.

Her eerie figurative works, *personages*, are equally beguiling: not specific portraits but built up through a memory of all the faces she has seen in her life. Afnan's rich oeuvre offers exceptional insight to a life punctuated by war and displacement. **AP**