Nicolas Moufarrege: Recognize My Sign
November 10, 2018–February 17, 2019
BEIRUT

In 1973, Nicolas Moufarrege mounted his first art exhibition at Triad Condas gallery in Beirut, Lebanon. The exhibit included a number of modestly-sized portrait-tapestries; a representative work is included in this exhibition. Moufarrege did not follow pre-made plans when embroidering, as one would with a standard embroidery kit. His approach, which he called “experimental weaving,” is improvisational: as images developed, he elaborated on them stitch by stitch. A similar energy enlivens a nearby drawing in marker on paper. For his tapestries, Moufarrege inventively used a combination of silk, cotton, and wool threads in varying colors to create vibrant textures, movement, and tonal shifts. In a 1973 interview with Moufarrege in the magazine *Le Beyrouthin* on the occasion of his inaugural show, the noted Lebanese artist Etel Adnan remarked that “this is how traditional craftsmanship becomes a personal art full of promise.”

Unless otherwise noted, all works appear courtesy Nabil Moufarrej and Gulnar “Nouna” Mufarrij, Shreveport, Louisiana.

**No. 7, 1975**
Thread on needlepoint canvas

**Une Ile [An Island], 1975**
Thread on needlepoint canvas
**Embroidered patch**, n.d.
Thread and bead on denim

**Artist’s scrapbook**, n.d.
Various materials

**Untitled drawing**, n.d.
Marker on paper

**Title unknown**, n.d.
Thread on needlepoint canvas
Le sang du phénix [The Blood of the Phoenix] (1975)—a work Nicolas Moufarrege made in Paris, France—speaks to his experience of the Lebanese Civil War, which began in 1975 and ended in 1990. With the impending war on the horizon, many individuals left Lebanon for other sites, and Moufarrege migrated to Paris. This was a natural choice for the artist, as France was a former colonial power in Lebanon, and the French language is widely spoken throughout the country. The painting’s symbols are unmistakable: the image in the painting’s top right corner—a stylized cedar tree surrounded by red and white stripes—is a reference to the Lebanese flag. The clenched, upraised fist in the lower left corner of the painting is a symbol long-associated with political defiance, strength, and resistance. Unblinking eyes, seemingly shrouded in fog, may bring to mind the watchful eyes of concerned individuals for the homeland, family, and friends they left behind.

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Nikki, 1976
Thread and pigment on needlepoint canvas
Courtesy Nabil Moufarrej and Gulnar “Nouna” Mufarrij, Shreveport, Louisiana
PARIS
Nicolas Moufarrege’s artistic career is punctuated by a series of transnational relocations, from Beirut, Lebanon to Paris, France to New York, New York. Each move seems to have stimulated notable developments in his artistic practice. In 1975, with the Lebanese Civil War approaching, Moufarrege left for Paris. His move to France seems to have fueled his artistic ambitions as he made larger works and began to combine areas of paint with embroidery. He also began referring to his works as “paintings” at this time. Wrapping embroidery canvas over the wooden frames known as stretcher bars allowed Moufarrege to expand the scale of his work. Rather than covering every inch of these canvases with dense stitches, as he did in earlier tapestries, Moufarrege contrasts sections of embroidery against painted brushstrokes and highlights. The painting First Step into the Pyramid (1979) is an excellent example of Moufarrege’s newfound way of working. He uses transparent washes of paint to create light and shadow on the figure, while the pyramid and its watery reflection are rendered in dense accumulations of stitches.

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Languages, 1980
Thread and pigment on needlepoint canvas

Title unknown, n.d.
Thread and pigment on needlepoint canvas
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**The Fifth Day**, 1980
Thread and pigment on needlepoint canvas
Collection George Waterman III

**Laocoön Quest**, 1980
Cotton, silk, wool, and pigment on needlepoint canvas

**The Importance of Being Evergreen**, 1979–80
Thread and pigment on needlepoint canvas

**First Step into the Pyramid**, 1979
Thread and pigment on needlepoint canvas
**Title unknown**, 1983
Thread and pigment on needlepoint canvas
Collection Tim Cone, Washington, DC

**Title unknown**, 1985
Thread, pre-printed needlepoint canvas, fabric, and needlepoint canvas (two parts)
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**The First Time Ever I Saw the Volcano**, 1979
Thread and pigment on needlepoint canvas

**Drawing on needlepoint canvas**, n.d.
Pigment on needlepoint canvas

**Postcard and photocopies with artist’s sketch**, n.d.
Ink on postcard and photocopies
Title unknown, 1985
Thread, pre-printed needlepoint canvas, fabric, and needlepoint canvas (two parts).
Courtesy Nabil Moufarrej and Gulnar “Nouna” Mufarrij, Shreveport, Louisiana

Music, 1985
Thread, pre-printed needlepoint canvas, fabric, and needlepoint canvas (two parts)
Collection Tim Cone, Washington, DC
NEW YORK
Nicolas Moufarrege’s varied interests, skills, and experiences come together in paintings with sharply intelligent and humorous cultural commentary. During his time in New York City from 1980–5, his artistic practice expanded to include writing art reviews and organizing exhibitions. Moufarrege was a lauded and regularly published critic, and the exhibitions he curated were festive, much anticipated shows in which everyone wanted to participate. The work he began making in New York drew on his worldly experiences and demonstrated his interest in appropriation. His surprising juxtapositions of imagery—combining comic books, Pop art, and mass-produced needlepoint kits with historic and more contemporary painting quotations—show how his vision and wit were sharpening. For a 1982 show in his studio, Moufarrege plastered the walls with thousands of newspaper headlines and magazine clippings and hung his paintings on top of this riotous collage of words and images. With this installation strategy, Moufarrege put his artwork in a literal and figurative dialogue with events taking place in the world. Moufarrege’s works combine history and the present, painting and embroidery, and popular and fine art. He doesn’t ask us to choose one or the other; he offers us both.

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The Weather Last Tuesday, 1983
Thread, pigment, glitter, beads, and adhesive on needlepoint canvas
**The Truth About John the Baptist**, 1983
Thread, pigment, glitter, and brooches on needlepoint canvas

**Mission Impossible**, 1983
Thread, pigment, glitter, and brooches on needlepoint canvas

**Somewhere Else to Go**, 1983
Thread, pigment, glitter, beads, adhesive, and brooches on needlepoint canvas

**Narcissix of One and Nick’s of the Other**, 1983
Thread, pigment, glitter, beads, minerals, and adhesive on needlepoint canvas

**Title unknown**, n.d.
Thread, pigment, glitter, beads, adhesive, and brooches on needlepoint canvas
APPROPRIATION

Like many artists working in New York in the early 1980s, Nicolas Moufarrege experimented with appropriation, adopting content from other artworks in ways that questioned notions of originality, authorship, and authenticity. Moufarrege’s appropriations spoke to his interest in other artists such as Katsushika Hokusai, Yves Klein, Edvard Munch, Pablo Picasso, and especially Roy Lichtenstein. Interestingly, Pop artists like Lichtenstein often drew their inspiration and subject matter from previously published sources; the comic book heroine sinking into the waves that appears in Lichtenstein’s painting Drowning Girl (1963)—seen in the book on display here—is one example. Lichtenstein took the image from the cover of a pulp romance novel. Seen in this context, Moufarrege’s quotation of Lichtenstein’s image is a copy of a copy. Moufarrege’s wit and humor is evident in his combination of Drowning Girl with an image of a stylized wave adapted from the woodblock print The Great Wave Off Kanegawa, created by Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai in 1829. By combining modern and historical references, as well as Eastern and Western ones, Moufarrege establishes this painting’s urgent emotional content. Another series of paintings on view here borrow the long horizontal format of comic strips. These striking paintings unite comic book figures like Spiderman, The Thing, and Silver Surfer with depictions of The Statue of Liberty and characters drawn from Picasso’s anti-war painting Guernica (1937). These appropriations by Moufarrege question the distinctions between fine art and everyday visual culture.

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Title unknown, 1984
Thread and pigment on needlepoint canvas
Edward Brad Munch, 1984  
Thread and pigment on needlepoint canvas  
Collection Bradley and Holly Cole, Wichita, Kansas

Title unknown, 1984  
Thread and pigment on needlepoint canvas

Title unknown, 1985  
Thread and pigment on needlepoint canvas  
Collection Pavel Zoubok Gallery, New York, New York

Title unknown, 1984–85  
Thread and pigment on needlepoint canvas
Title unknown, n.d.
Thread on needlepoint canvas

Title unknown, 1985
Thread on needlepoint canvas

Title unknown, 1985
Thread on needlepoint canvas

Title unknown, 1985
Thread on needlepoint canvas

Book owned by the artist
Diane Waldman, Roy Lichtenstein, 1971
Offset on paper
**Artist's photocopy**, n.d.
Photocopy, thread, and adhesive

**Book owned by the artist**
Offset on paper

**Artist's photcopies**, n.d.
Photocopies

**Postcard**, n.d.
QUEER IDENTITY

Some of Moufarrege’s works address his desires as a gay man. The painting in the middle of this wall is based on a photograph taken by Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden (1856-1931). Moufarrege tucked a reproduction of von Gloeden’s image behind documentation of his painting in one of his portfolios, making his inspiration apparent. Another untitled and undated painting in this section includes a reproduction of Roy Lichtenstein’s oil on canvas painting Look Mickey (1961). Moufarrege’s appropriation juxtaposes Lichtenstein’s work with an image of a male torso that is likely drawn from neoclassical sculpture. The painting’s combination of images and text—“Look Mickey I’ve hooked a big one!!”—hints at the possibility of an erotic encounter. The same torso appears in a second painting with an image of the Empire State Building in place of a head. While this combination of images is unmistakably phallic, it is also very likely an homage to Andy Warhol’s film Empire (1964), an 8-hour long static shot of the building as night falls. Like Moufarrege, von Gloeden and Warhol were gay. In New York, Moufarrege lived as an out gay man and celebrated his identity in his work. Even more, with critics like Élisabeth Lebovici noting that embroidery is primarily identified with Western, heterosexist norms of femininity, Moufarrege’s surprising use of embroidery takes on a sharper focus.

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Title unknown, n.d.
Thread, pigment, and glitter on needlepoint canvas
**Title unknown**, n.d.
Thread and pigment on needlepoint canvas

**Title unknown**, n.d.
Thread and pigment on needlepoint canvas

**Artist’s portfolio**, n.d.
Various materials

**Film still from Andy Warhol’s Empire (1964)**, n.d.