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## Art Dubai Finds Its Footing Thanks to a Saudi Art Renaissance and the New Louvre Abu Dhabi

After a sluggish few years, the fair's 12th edition felt reinvigorated with strong sales and heavy foot traffic.



**Arsalan Mohammad** (<https://news.artnet.com/about/arsalan-mohammad-710>), March 23, 2018





A visitor walks past the work of Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul during Art Dubai. Photo by Francois Nel/Getty Images for Art Dubai.

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A young woman in an embroidered burqa giggled and adjusted a virtual reality headset perched uneasily on her head. Her companion, an elegant man in a long dishdasha, smiled but politely refused to join her. She was watching *Reframe Saudi*, a lavish VR film that features contemporary Saudi Arabian artists guiding viewers around their workspaces and their home cities, all while basking in the sunshine of a new era of social reform, liberalization, and embrace of the outside world.  

Both virtual reality and Saudi Arabia dominated the 12th edition of the Art Dubai fair this week, which runs through March 24. Two years ago, the idea that Saudi Arabian entities such as Art Jameel, the Misk Art Foundation, and Culturrunners would be anchoring substantial portions of the 2018 program would itself seem like virtual reality. But the current burst of artistic energy emanating from Saudi Arabia (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/saudi-arabia-art-scene-survey-1231676>), under the aegis of the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has galvanized an Arab art scene that has been in danger of subsiding into self-congratulatory torpor in recent years. The sluggishness of recent underwhelming editions of Art Dubai seems to now be changing for the better.

The fair itself was in good health this year. The event, the second edition under the directorship of Dubai-raised Myrna Ayad, featured 78 galleries from 42 countries. There were much-hyped initiatives, such as “Residents,” a new program dedicated to solo presentations from artist residents in Dubai who created (somewhat unremarkable) work that “merge[d] their distinct artistic practice with their surroundings.”





The scene at Art Dubai, 2018. Photo: Arsalan Mohammad.

## Early Sales Surge

The opening night and VIP preview saw halls packed with the usual blend of Arab, Iranian, and Indian collectors who were briskly slapping down checkbooks, rather than tentatively making reservations.





“The foot flow has been excellent so far, and sales rather satisfactory for the current situation, where everybody was expecting the worst,” said Beirut dealer Saleh Barakat of Agial Gallery. He sold three works by the Lebanese painter Tagreed Darghouth and other work by Lebanese artist Hiba Kalache; two of the buyers were new. “In general, there are a lot of new faces here,” he said.

Marianne Boesky Gallery (<http://www.artnet.com/galleries/marianne-boesky-gallery/>) sold Matthias Bitzer’s *Consoler of the Confounded* (2018) to a collector from the Middle East for \$50,000 and a popular *The Falcon and the Bandit* (2017) by Syrian painter Diana Al-Hadid for \$120,000. Dubai-based Meem Gallery’s solo booth of work by the Palestinian painter Kamal Boullata also attracted a great deal of interest, with three \$30,000 abstract works exchanging hands on preview night to collectors from Germany, South Africa, and Dubai.





Installation view of Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery at Art Dubai, 2018. Photo by Arsalan Mohammad.

London's Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery was effervescing with excitement as a substantial number of pieces sold from her moving solo presentation of works by Iranian-born, UK-based artist Soheila Sokhanvari, who delicately paints with egg tempera and smuggled Iranian crude oil. "We've sold half our booth," she said, noting that the works went to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and important private collections. "We've met a lot of great people, all kinds of nationalities."

**Weak Spots**



Although the overall mood was optimistic, one Dubai-based dealer bemoaned the absence of major international blue-chip galleries and a prominent Lebanese collector, Basel Dalloul, derided the general standard of the booths at the opening night. “The selections of the various galleries were kind of weak both for the contemporary and the Modern,” Dalloul told artnet News. “Some galleries in the contemporary [section] were showing the same tired art in the same booths! That was kind of disappointing.”

Dubai’s Isabelle van den Eynde rather crankily refused to answer “stupid” questions about sales, but praised the quality and diversity of visitors to the gallery’s booth. Meanwhile, Wendi Norris of the eponymous San Francisco gallery returned to Dubai after a three-year hiatus, bringing a dramatic, highly Instagrammable cartographic sculpture by Val Britton.

Norris said she was lured back by the network of collectors and friends she had in the region and the opportunity to see the newly opened Louvre Abu Dhabi. In Dubai, there are “international, high-level professionals asking all the right questions and everyday people who have enough income to afford art,” she said. “I’ve been on my feet eight hours talking to people.”





Installation view of Dastans Basement gallery at Art Dubai 2018. Photo by Arsalan Mohammad.

## Sluggish in Modern

Across from the halls of contemporary art, the fair's regular platform for Modern work was in full swing, though it was less enthusiastically received than in previous years. "The Modern section is slower for sure," said Saleh Barakat. "There is interest that has not been converted into real sales so far."

Over-fishing in the relatively small pool of 20th-century Arab and Iranian art in recent years has left slim pickings for buyers at the 2018 fair. Yet the boom among collectors for this "Modern" work is suffering from a lack of historical documentation, a problem exacerbated in recent years by the destruction of historical scholarly archives in museums and libraries across Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

A much-needed corrective came in the form of renowned art historian Nada Shabout, who with New York's Museum of Modern Art published *Modern Art in the Arab World*, a weighty tome on sale in the section. It comes at a time when pressing questions about provenance and authenticity in 20th-century Arab art are at an all time high, with rumors and counter-rumors and unsubstantiated allegations peppering many a late-night conversation at this year's fair.

"The Modern [section] really was weak," said Dalloul, whose vast family collection of Middle Eastern and North African art from the 20th century is soon to open to the public in a private Beirut museum.

The only "saving grace," Dalloul said, was the Misk Institute's group show, curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, titled "THAT FEVERISH LEAP INTO THE FIERCENESS OF LIFE." It was a curious selection of 75 works from across the Arab world, dating between the 1940s and '80s. The show offered a pleasing counterpoint to the tech frenzy apparent at the fair's garish setting, the Madinat Jumeirah, where VR was represented by the superb winner of the \$100,000 Abraaj Group Art Prize, Lawrence Abu Hamdan. His hard-hitting video piece, *Walled Unwalled*, was a timely polemic decrying the idea of walls and separations (it included, at one point, the screams of Oscar Pistorius's murdered fiancée, Reeva Steenkamp).





Overall, the early takeaway from this year's Art Dubai is that it is a fair comfortable in its niche as a regional leader. In years to come, uncertainty in the broader region may transform it in ways we cannot anticipate. And though it may not be a global contender yet, it is all the stronger for that stance.

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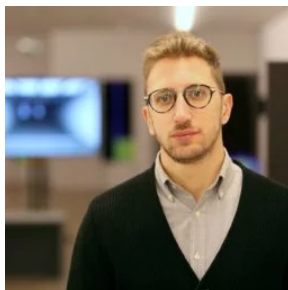
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## Meet 3 Cutting-Edge Artists Pushing the Boundaries at Art Dubai

These artists confront subjects ranging from physical encounters under occupation to fossil fuels.

**Brian Boucher (<https://news.artnet.com/about/brian-boucher-244>)**, March 14, 2017





Rana Samara, *Intimate Space XI* (2015). Courtesy Zawyeh Gallery, Ramallah.

Traditional robes—white for men, black for women—appear alongside business suits and t-shirts at the Art Dubai fair, taking place this weekend at the palatial Madinat Jumeirah hotel, set on its own private beach.

Contrasting with that natural touch, the rest of the surrounding emirate is chockablock with skyscrapers and is crowned by the 2,720-foot-tall Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest skyscraper, built from the ground up with oil money over the last few decades.

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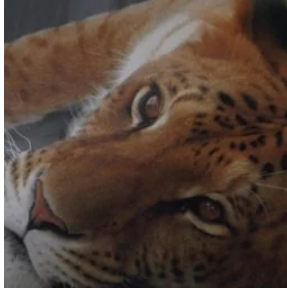
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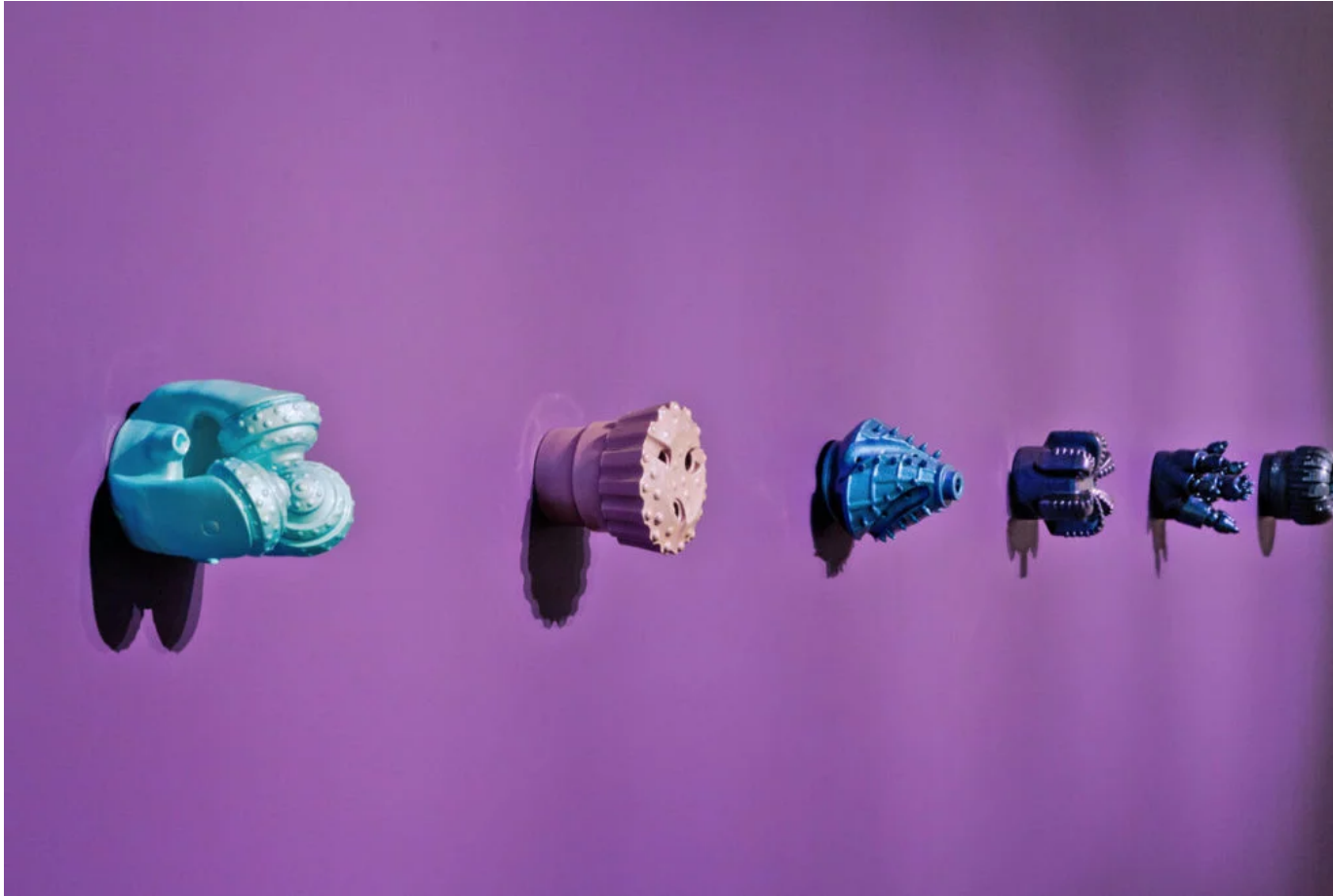
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The fair's 11th edition features 94 galleries hailing from some 43 countries, which, the organizers note, makes this edition—under the leadership of new director Myrna Ayad—the fair's most international to date. The global quality of the fair echoes that of the state itself, where the vast majority of the population is comprised of expatriates.

Three artworks by artists of Middle Eastern origin offer the best examples of the fair's most innovative, challenging work.





Monira Al Qadiri, *Spectrum 1* (2016). Courtesy Athr, Jeddah.

**Monira Al Qadiri, Athr Gallery, Jeddah**

What will 21st-century mankind's dependence on oil, and the infrastructure that supports the oil industry, look like to archaeologists thousands of years from now? This is one of the questions that underlies Monira Al Qadiri's 3-D-printed sculpture *Spectrum 1* (2016), which takes the shape of six drill bits used to extract oil from the earth.





Monira Al Qadiri, *Spectrum 1*, detail (2016). Courtesy Athr, Jeddah.

A Kuwaiti native, Al Qadiri, who's also a member of the curatorial-darling collective [GCC](https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/power-of-gcc-exhibition-positive-thinking-692693) (<https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/power-of-gcc-exhibition-positive-thinking-692693>), draws a connection between that country's historical pearl trade and the fossil fuel industry that supplanted it; both oil and the pearl bear a shimmering finish, one that she emulates in her sculptures, some of which look like menacing, horned animals. The similarities between the substances don't stop at



the visual, according to Maryam Bilal, the gallery's curator and artist liaison; just as the pearl trade has been supplanted as Kuwait's main source of income, so will the oil industry one day come to an end.

The sculptures, which come in an edition of three, will set you back \$18,000.





A visitor checks out Meriem Bennani's *Ghariba/Stranger* (2017), an Art Dubai commission.

### Meriem Bennani, Art Dubai Commission

Sited outdoors under the blazing sun, the Moroccan-born, New York-based Meriem Bennani's work takes the form of cartoonish, brightly hued lounge chairs, benches, and hair-salon thrones that harbor videos in which the artist's female relatives play themselves in modes that toggle between documentary, reality TV, and homemade footage. One relative sings about frustrated love at a family gathering; one talks about her dog, who, she says, gets more attention than she does.



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(<https://news.artnet.com/market/sothebys-dubai-makes-890801>)

By **Caroline Elbaor** (<https://news.artnet.com/about/caroline-elbaor-464>), Mar 14, 2017





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It's not always clear to Bennani, she admitted, what is a performance by her subjects and what is a moment of unvarnished, genuine identity—just as, one surmises, it might not be clear to the performers themselves.

“I'm from a generation that wants it all,” the artist said, meaning a great job but also the opportunity to read books, do yoga, and go out at night. Similarly, she wants to create works in every genre, that deliver the viewer everything, every time. The full installation will cost something like \$45,000, individual works in the region of \$15,000.



Rana Samara, *Intimate Space IX* (2015). Courtesy Zawyeh Gallery.



**Rana Samara, Zawyeh Gallery, Ramallah**

Rana Samara insinuates into public view a subject that her conservative Palestinian society might wish to keep under wraps, Zawyeh Gallery advisor Sulieman Mleahat told me—namely sex, which is hinted at in gorgeous paintings of domestic spaces that evoke Bonnard and Matisse.

But the paintings' backstory is hardly one you might associate with those affluent Western masters, as is revealed in a passage from the artist's statement describing the inspiration she found while walking in the Al-Amari refugee camp in Ramallah: "I began wondering about the sex life of couples living in such condensed spaces that afford them almost no privacy." Sprinkled across the colorful interiors are clues like a few Viagra pills, a bottle of lubricant, and a piece of discarded lingerie.

A set of handkerchiefs are embroidered with various imagery that refers to a tradition in which a bride's virginity is confirmed by a bloody handkerchief from the wedding night. One shows a vagina in red thread; another has a piece of Jordanian currency pinned to it in a blunt indication that women are "bought" in marriage, as Mleahat characterized it.

The paintings go for up to \$25,000, the handkerchief work for the same price.

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