

Art Dubai 2018: an oasis of cultural expression amid Middle East's increasing political strife

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More than 100 galleries from around the world showed at the luxurious event, illustrating that political tension and wars in the Middle East don't seem to be hampering the art industry





From March 21 to 24, more than 100 galleries from around the world presented at Art Dubai. Photo: AFP

The 12th edition of Art Dubai lived up to its reputation as one of the most culturally diverse emerging art fairs in the world. From March 21 to 24, more than 100 galleries from a staggering 48 countries presented a wide range of modern and contemporary art at the Madinat Jumeirah resort, with more works by artists from the Middle East, Africa and South Asia than you'd see at any other major international art fair.

The venue is a luxurious, sandstone-coloured hotel compound with its own upmarket souk, ornately designed in traditional Arabic style. The five-star surroundings, lavish after-parties, beautiful people attending and, most importantly for the participants, the continued buying and selling of art, all point to a market that is taking the political strife and wars in the Middle East in its stride.

Four Tehran galleries that were at Art Dubai 2017 have not returned. Pablo del Val, the fair's international director, says that has nothing to do with the fact that the United Arab Emirates has joined Saudi Arabia in its increasingly strident warning against Iran as a security threat, and is merely due to different considerations by each gallery.

The five Iranian galleries that were there, however, have some of the strongest booths in the fair.

Majid Fathizadeh's new paintings at Tehran-based Ab-Anbar Gallery's booth are mystical, exquisitely painted Boschian nightmares. In his *Fermentation*, sharp-teethed fish lie on a beach, both monstrous and helpless as they are fed on by humans.



Fermentation by Majid Fathizadeh. Photo: Enid Tsui

Dastan's Basement, the first Iranian gallery to exhibit at this week's

Art Basel Hong Kong

, arranged the works of seven artists on large display panels that could be turned like pages of a book, a reference to traditional Iranian books of illustrations. It was a feast for the eyes.

The illustrative, surreal works by Ali Akbar Sadeghi inspired by *Shahnameh* – the Persian poem about the rise and fall of mighty kings – sat nicely next to

Fereydoun Ave's Rostam series

, which challenges the way such myths have been used to build up male, and national, authority.



Two works by Ali Akbar Sadeghi at the booth of Tehran-based Dastan's Basement. Photo: Enid Tsui

The big elephant in the room during the four-day event was, of course, the absence of the Qataris. This year's Art Dubai is the first edition to be held since the Saudi Arabia-led blockage on the country started last June.

Dealers played down the significance of what they described as a very small market, but Qatar, led by Sheikha Al-Mayassa's Qatar Museums Authority, was among the world's biggest buyers of contemporary art just a few years ago. Now, no Qatari is allowed to set foot in the UAE.

Missing among the many artworks that refer to regional strife – including the poignant paper collages depicting the tearing apart of the Syrian landscape by Tammam Azzam – was any reference to the humanitarian disaster in Yemen as a result of a civil war in which the Saudi-UAE coalition is a major player.



Paper Series (2018) by Tammam Azzam. Photo: Enid Tsui

The absence was as jarring in the regional press (Qataris broadcaster Al Jazeera was outspoken on the issue but it is blocked in the UAE) as it was in the “Saudi House” display at the Sikka art district that celebrated the heritage architecture straddling the Saudi-Yemen border.

On the plus side, artists and curators in the region said Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s promise to restore the ultra-conservative state to “moderate Islam” provided much reason for optimism. Saudi galleries and buyers have always been a major presence in the Dubai art market, but they are now expecting Saudi art to reach a greater international audience.



Art Dubai 2018 was held at the Madinat Jumeirah resort. Photo: Enid Tsui

Jeddah-based female artist Dana Awartani's interpretations of Arabic geometric designs sold well at Athr Gallery's booth at Art Dubai. She took part in the Venice Biennale (2013) and, rare for a Saudi artist, has had quite a bit of exposure in Asia. In 2016, she was in both the Yinchuan Biennale in China and the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in India, and was the solo artist that Athr took to Art Basel Hong Kong.

A new art foundation set up by Prince Mohammed, who was on a diplomatic mission to the US the same time as Art Dubai, also flexed its soft-power muscles at the fair.

His Misk Foundation is a partner of Art Dubai Modern, a section of the fair focusing on earlier 20th-century Middle Eastern and Indian art that, this year, featured a non-selling exhibition called "That Feverish Leap into the Fierceness of Life". It showed 75 artworks mapping the development of modernist art in the Arab world from the 1940s to 1980s.

Hong Kong art dealer and fashion icon Pearl Lam talks style, taste and luxury fashion

The partnership also celebrated the publication of a major book on the subject by the Museum of Modern Art that is seen by Middle Eastern curators and historians as an acknowledgement of their efforts to re-examine the monolithic art history laid down by Western colonial powers.

At the same time Art Dubai was being held, other art organisations in the UAE held exhibitions that also showed how a conservative society can provide the space for artists to make strong, socio-political statements if they so wish (as long as they are not directly challenging the local sheikhs).

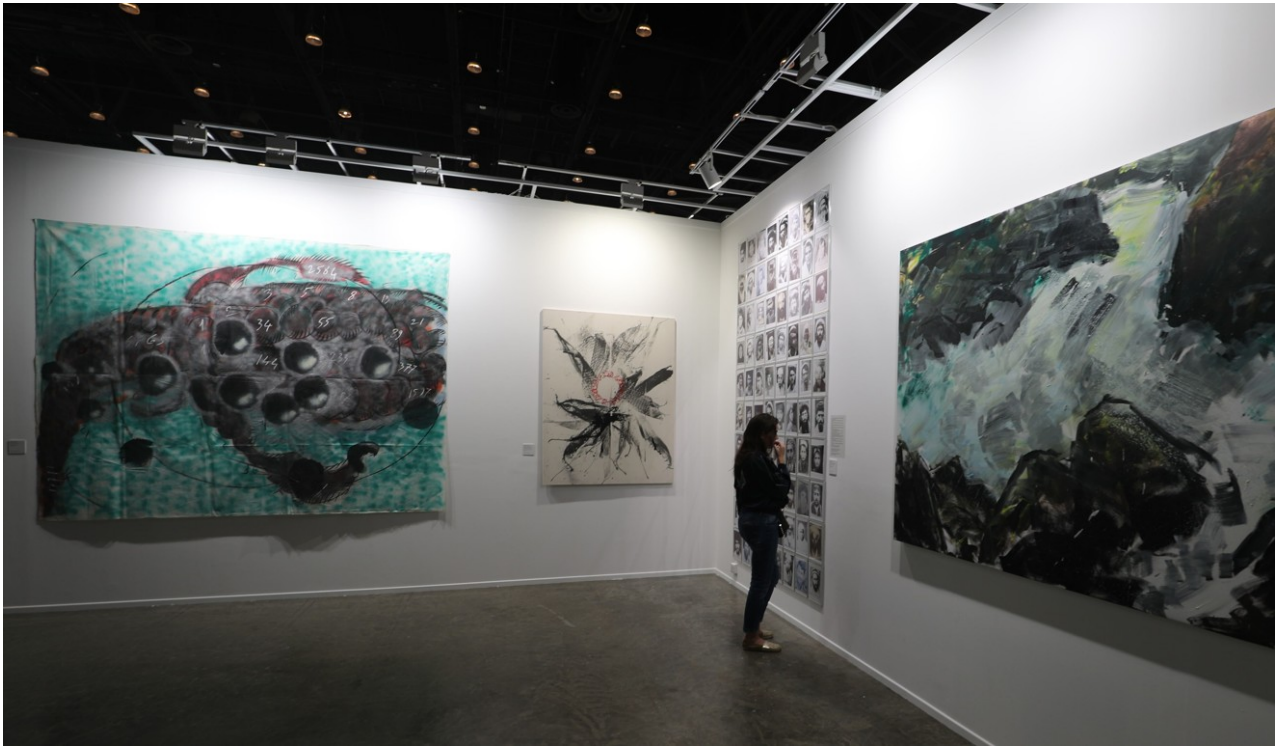


An exhibition on Algerian political cartoons curated by Zineb Sedira at the Sharjah Art Foundation.
Photo: Enid Tsui

Zineb Sedira's major retrospective at the Sharjah Art Foundation in the nearby city of Sharjah included satirical political cartoons that were tolerated in Algeria from the 1990s to early 2000s. Next to them were records of the many hundreds of journalists killed in Algeria since. A defence of the free press in a country without one is not something one expects to see here, which is a credit to patrons including Hoor Al Qasimi, president and director of the Foundation, who is herself a curator and artist.

The Dubai-based Art Jameel foundation, which announced during the art fair that it will open a permanent space in November, also showed cutting-edge contemporary art at its nearby location in partnership with London's Delfina Foundation.

In this sense, the UAE model may have relevance to China, another socially conservative, dictatorial country that is using art to promote its soft power.



A visitor looks at artwork on display during the 12th edition of Art Dubai. Photo: AFP

Although there is a growing number of Chinese visiting and living in the UAE (Dubai's massive Dragon Mart trading complex claims to be the biggest market for Chinese products outside China), cultural dialogue between the two remains limited. It wasn't helped by the fact that a show like "But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise: Contemporary Art of the Middle East and North Africa" was cancelled by censors just before its opening in Shanghai in 2017.

Alia Al-Senussi, a member of Libya's royal house that was deposed and exiled in 1969 and a founding patron of Art Dubai, said it was inevitable that more exchanges would take place between Asia and the Middle East, helping to strengthen cultural ties.

"Maybe it's because we see bastions of stability falling apart around us, [or] maybe it's for other parts of the world to say, OK, we are going to [use art to] show the way forward for the next generation," she said during her trip to Hong Kong for Art Basel.

A new "Residents" section at Art Dubai exhibited a number of Asian artists' works complete during their Dubai residencies, including Mumbai-based Poonam Jain's contemplation of memories of street life and labourers, and Osaka artist Yasuaki Onishi's glue, ink and wire construction.



Mumbai artist Poonam Jain in front of her residency project at Art Dubai 2018. Photo: Enid Tsui

The focus on modern art inside and outside Art Dubai is one way of expanding an art market still recovering from a sharp fall in demand prompted by low oil and gas prices two years ago. Malini Gulrajani, owner of 1X1 Art Gallery in Alserkal Avenue, says she has had to open a new section to sell modern Indian art as demand for contemporary art has slowed.

At the fair, Ota Fine Arts – one of very few galleries present from East and Southeast Asia – and London-based Kristen Hjellegjerde reported satisfactory sales. The former was seeing continued appetite for Yayoi Kusama and emerging Japanese artist Masanori Handa, while Hjellegjerde had sold at least eight panels priced above £10,000 (US\$14,000) by Iranian artist Soheila Sokhanvari. However, Roupon Salfayan of Kalfayan Galleries in Athens, and Glenn Scott Wright at Victoria Miro said sales as of the second day of the fair were slower than in previous editions despite plenty of footfall. Both were present at Art Basel Hong Kong.

Unexplained scrapping of Guggenheim show in Shanghai illustrates need to tread carefully in China

The Hong Kong fair is a larger, more upmarket event that focuses more on Asia and the West than Art Dubai. It is a rival from del Val's point of view; however, it's mostly to do with timing. The three-day gap between the two fairs this year makes it a particularly brutal experience for galleries exhibiting in both cities. He was in Hong Kong for the first time to suss out the competition, and to refine his arguments when convincing galleries to choose Dubai instead, he says.

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Enid joined the Post as senior culture writer in 2015 after a long career as a business and politics journalist at the Financial Times, the Nikkei Asian Review, RTHK Radio 3, and the Economist Group in Hong Kong and in London. She returned as the Post's art editor in 2020 after taking a year off to pursue a Master's degree in art history.

