

by ASTRID MANIA

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## Art Dubai

MADINAT JUMEIRAH, Dubai

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The adage that culture follows trade is something like globalization's subtitle. When it comes to art fairs, however, trade follows culture. Art Dubai, now in its seventh year, seems to be a prime example of this reciprocal development. Among its participating seventy-five galleries, the fair is attracting a rising number from outside of the region. They have clearly identified Dubai as a promising marketplace where trade (money) and a growing interest in international contemporary art (culture) coincide.

Still, some play it safe by presenting works that in one way or another are tied to Arabic or Muslim cultures. Three galleries from Berlin, all participating at Art Dubai for the first time, have chosen to take this route: Tanja Wagner has paired up pieces by Šejla Kamerić with new text-based work that takes its greenish color from night vision footage during the Iraq war by Beirut-born Annabel Daou; while Schleicher/Lange combine Berlin-born, half-Iranian Timo Nasser's geometric stainless steel sculptures with Czech artist Křištof Kintera's *Memorial of One Thousand and One Nights II* (2013), a Babylonian tower of pillows serving as a soft monument to storytelling. Campagne Première has devoted their booth to a solo presentation by Algerian-born, Paris-based Fayçal Baghriche, who also took part in last year's Art Dubai Projects. His series "Family Friendly" (2012) reproduces images from international art magazines in which any form of nudity is blackened. It's not the artist's intervention, though, but the magazines "as is"—that is, as they are found in magazine stands in Dubai. The subject isn't generally talked about, but apparently the art fair representatives are careful not to provoke the attention of censorship authorities. Galleries have been advised to cover up what might be considered politically or otherwise offensive, and Baghriche is one of the few to dare to make an overt comment on such loaded, if latent, politics.

Indeed, most US and Western European exhibitors have made sure to include some local flair from the fair's regional scope—with some exceptions: Victoria Miro has devoted her booth to a solo presentation of intensely colored dot paintings by Yayoi Kusama; while both Chantal Crousel (a member of the gallery selection committee) and Yvon Lambert have put up sundries from their programs. Yet New York's Alexander Gray, in his second year in Dubai, places drawings by Hassan Sharif next to witty text pieces by Luis Camnitzer. Sharif (who has a quasi-private museum here) is considered to be the father figure of Dubai's contemporary art scene in that he introduced Western conceptual art to the region and, as the founder of the Emirates Fine Art Society, was vital in setting up an infrastructure for contemporary art. Ursula Krinzinger from Vienna, something like an Art Dubai veteran, brings together artists from the gallery with Saudi Arabian artists Maha Malluh or Ahmed Mater, who were part of the gallery's "Edge of Arabia" project in 2012.

Wim Delvoye takes the fusion of Western and Arabic arts to cynical extremes—not surprisingly. His Berlin dealer Arndt (participating in the fair for the second time) showcases the stunning woodwork interior from an 1815 Aleppo salon (from Delvoye's own eclectic art collection). In Dubai, it became the historic backdrop for the artist's stainless steel sculptures, staged like a cabinet of curiosities, complete with an orientalist attitude. The entire installation, as it is for sale, is celebrated, however, in the accompanying catalog as a reminder of "the sad state of current affairs in Syria." Seen from another point of view, the acquisition of this salon looks more like the sad state of its exploitation.

Palestinian artist Oussama Diab's *New Guernica* (2012) could be considered the counterpiece to Delvoye in that it borrows from Picasso for his representation of the civil war in Syria. Diab shows with the Ayyam Gallery, originally founded in Damascus, with branches in Dubai, London, Beirut, and Jeddah. In Damascus, the gallery is functioning as a sort of "creative haven" for artists who remain in the city, and here in Dubai they've dedicated the entire booth to the subject. No other exhibitor has put such an explicit political agenda on display, though the subject lurks everywhere. Officially, the art fair has even declared that it will be contributing some of its revenue to the UN's World Food Programme to support refugees from Syria.

The exhibitors from Dubai, a cross-section from the city's over forty galleries and art centers, navigate the complex context much more discreetly, touching upon socially and culturally sensitive issues nevertheless. The Third Line, for instance, features sculpture and painting by Iraqi-born feminist Hayv Kahraman. Her *Quasi-Corporeal* (2012) is formally evocative of intricate geometry, yet its seemingly ornamental patterns owe their shapes to the organic—to images of the

1 Šejla Kamerić, *30 Years After*, 2006.2 Křištof Kintera, *Memorial of One Thousand and One Nights II*, 2013.3 Gabriel Orozco, *Roiseau 6*, 2012.4 Hassan Sharif, *Wave-like and Straight Horizontal No. 1–3*, 2007.

artist's body itself. Green Art Gallery showcases a varied program (Turkish artist Hale Tenger, New York-based Iranian artist Kamrooz Aram, and New York-based Palestinian artist Shadi Habib Allah) and in particular, Venezuelan artist Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck stood out with his C-prints *Chronoscope, 1951, 11pm (Stelae)* (2009–2011), the photographic version of the artist's video on a US-American 1950s TV series in which politicians and diplomats discuss economic and political events. The gallery Carbon 12 Dubai, however, is decidedly looking towards Western Europe, working with artists like André Butzer, Bernhard Buhmann, or Olaf Breuning.

Though Art Dubai might be a somewhat careful art fair—and certainly every fair has its share of “decorative” painting—a great number of its participants display works that lean towards social or political commentary—some more, some less subtle. Athr Gallery from Jeddah devotes one of their two booths to Saudi-Arabian born Sami Al Turki and his ongoing photographic series “Barzakh” (2012–). In these images of strangely hovering architectural structures against a vast expanse of cloudy skies, Al Turki makes a wry comment on the difficulties of finding a “home” in Saudi Arabia. Apparently, most land owners don't develop their property into building sites anymore, but treat land as a commodity in itself, thus pushing prices and excluding a younger generation from living out the domestic dream. The ethereal starry-night skies of Indonesia are on view at Jakarta's D Gallerie, featuring Kinez Riza's photographic series “Etherworld” (2012), which is, at second glance, a monument to the tribal people and their endangered rain forest.

The third year of the curated section “Marker” highlights West Africa as its region of choice, with five non-commercial art spaces brought together under the thematic umbrella “Cities in Transition.” Charles Okeke's series “Canal People” (2009), still-life-like photographs of a canal's pollution by consumer goods, or Ndidi Dike's *Lagos Market* (2010), an image of a market scene of “pre-pollution” goods made in China, can be seen at the booth of the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos.

But “Marker” isn't the only curated section in the fair. Art Dubai has propped itself up with a number of curatorial schemes, like Art Dubai Projects (with commissioned works by nominated artists) and the natural distractions of “Sculpture on the Beach,” curated by Chus Martinez, which is not to forget, of course, the Global Art Forum, a six-day, cross-disciplinary conference. Indoors, sadly.

Art Dubai is definitely a mostly regional art fair that caters both to regional and international collectors—and, in fact, strong regional, idiosyncratic fairs might be a viable alternative to the dilutions of seeing the same thing everywhere. Coinciding with the Sharjah Biennial, the fair is not only an information platform but also a seismograph for the state of art, politics, and discourse in the region alike. Keeping both local audiences and growing international audiences happy will require quite a balancing act for Art Dubai. It will also require that foreign visitors to learn to read between the lines.

Astrid Mania is a critic based in Berlin.

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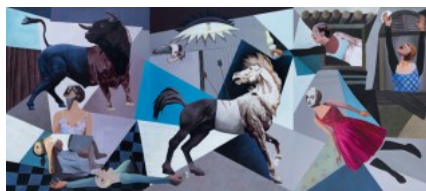
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5 Wim Delvoye, *Salon d'Aleppo*, 2013, installation at Art Dubai 2013.



6 Oussama Diab, *New Guernica*, 2012.



7 Hayv Kahraman, *Quasi-Corporeal*, 2012.



8 Nazif Topcuoglu, *Magic Carpets*, 2010.



9 Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck (in collaboration with Media Farzin), *Chronoscope, 1951, 11pm*, 2011.