

## At Art Dubai, Political Undertones

By MYRNA AYAD MARCH 24, 2016

DUBAI — An abandoned oil barrel in the Qatari desert. A line of empty buses that had been used to transport passenger loads of migrants.

These images of the modern Middle East, captured by the Syrian photographer Jaber al-Azmeh, were a subtle yet poignant reminder of the world outside Art Dubai, the annual fair that just concluded its 10th edition.

The work “has political and social undertones, and it also poetically and critically analyzes what’s going on around the world and specifically in the region,” said Yasmin Atassi, director of Green Art Gallery in Dubai, which represents Mr. Azmeh and showed his work at the fair.

Ms. Atassi’s gallery was among 94 participants from 40 countries at Art Dubai. The fair drew in more than 27,000 visitors to this year’s edition, which took place March 15 to 19.

In addition to collectors from around the world, some 90 museums sent representatives, including the Guggenheim, the British Museum, the Tate, the Pompidou Center and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

“There were many discoveries, and it was clear that most galleries brought some of their best work,” Glenn Lowry, director of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, said in an email.

Art Dubai “is as vital as ever and continues to provide a unique opportunity to see some of the best art in the region,” he said.

Art Dubai also featured, in addition to the exhibits, the Global Art Forum, a program of talks that included panelists such as the Serpentine Gallery’s Hans Ulrich Obrist, the Italian curator Germano Celant and the artist Francesco Vezzoli.

Art fairs routinely feature works that reflect the social and economic tenor of the

times. Mr. Azmeh's starkly modern images — allegories for the recent drop in oil prices and the wrenching migrant crisis — attracted interest, Ms. Atassi said, even if the grittier issues “did not come up in conversations with collectors or curators.”

In fact, Antonia Carver, director of Art Dubai, said that this year's turnout was a pleasant surprise.

“Some collectors from Lagos were saying, “These are tough times for us in Nigeria, but we're still here,”” she said.

And the turmoil in the region was, for some participants, an incentive rather than a deterrent to attending.

Mona Atassi, a former art dealer who moved to Dubai from Damascus in 2012, set up the Atassi Art Foundation last year to preserve and support modern and contemporary Syrian art. This was the foundation's first year at Art Dubai.

“I'm not just introducing Syrian art — I'm introducing Syria in its natural state,” said Mrs. Atassi, who is an aunt of Yasmin Atassi. “I don't want to protest or align — this patrimony is all I want to do.”

A diversity of Syrian art was scattered throughout the fair, which was divided into a Contemporary hall, which featured the majority of galleries, and a Modern section.

“It's Keith Haring meets Bedouin art,” Khaled Samawi, the founder of Ayyam Gallery, said of the paintings of the late Syrian artist Moustafa Fathi, whose estate is represented by the gallery. “It's as contemporary as folkloric art can be.”

Ayyam, which operates in Dubai, Beirut and Damascus, helped 25 of its artists flee Syria at the onset of tensions and seek refuge in Europe and the Middle East.

“Our whole history is being destroyed,” Mr. Samawi said. “I feel it is my responsibility to preserve the art and culture of today.”

Art Dubai's Modern section was introduced in 2014 and has become a regular stop for museum curators looking to deepen and broaden their regional holdings, Ms. Carver said.

“International museums have tended to come through the Contemporary, and now they're looking back at the 20th century and thinking, ‘Hang on, this was a global decade — the world was always moving and artists were moving more than anyone else,’” she said.

Among the modern Middle Eastern artists on view this year were the Iranian-born

Maliheh Afnan, a graduate of the Corcoran School of Art, whose work was inspired by script and ancient relics, and Pakistan's celebrated calligrapher and painter Syed Sadequain.

Though it is in Modern where six-figure artworks hang, the Contemporary exhibits a variety of midrange works — a financial positioning that Art Dubai has maintained over the last decade.

“We don't advertise ourselves as a fair for the million-dollar collector,” Ms. Carver said.

Still, six-figure sums were paid for sculptures by the Spanish artist Jaume Plensa (300,000 euros, or \$337,000) at New York's Galerie Lelong, and by the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama (between \$400,000 and 600,000) at London's Victoria Miro gallery.

The Contemporary section featured the German-Iranian artist Timo Nasseri's sculpture “Unknown Letter 2.” The work was inspired by the 10th-century calligrapher Ibn Muqla, who created four additional letters that he believed the Arabic language was missing. Attacked by clerics for blasphemy, he died after his right, working arm was amputated and his tongue cut off.

To create the piece, Mr. Nasseri used the planetarium software Stellarium to study the constellations over Baghdad in the year 935, believing, as scholars did then, that the answers lay in the stars.

He located two of Ibn Muqla's letters and rendered one of them in walnut. It sold to a collector for \$50,000 at Beirut and Hamburg's Sfeir-Semler Gallery, which has been coming to Art Dubai since the fair's inception.

“I'm committed to this part of the world, and this is why I keep coming back,” said Andrée Sfeir-Semler, the gallery's director, who also sits on the fair's selection committee.

Another Art Dubai regular, Agial Art Gallery, from Beirut, presented sculptures by emerging Arab artists such as Abdelrahman Katanani, a resident of Beirut's Sabra refugee camp. A piece of his, made from barbed wire, found a buyer at the fair.

“I think Art Dubai is the most accomplished platform where a gallery coming from Beirut, which is a little marginalized today, can meet the people it needs to meet on a global level,” said Saleh Barakat, the founder of Agial Art Gallery. “Coming here, I see everybody.”

A version of this special report appears in print on March 25, 2016, in The International New York Times.



An untitled photograph by the Syrian photographer Jaber Al-Azmeh, one of the many Syrian artists whose works were shown at the Art Dubai fair. Jaber Al-Azmeh/Courtesy Green Art Gallery