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UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

ROUND-UP: DUBAI

BY JENNIFER PIEJKO

Although the first month of the year is generally a quiet time of regrouping and planning for the months ahead, Dubai has been a hub of activity and festivity, as a number of galleries inaugurated new spaces on Alserkal Avenue this January.

Founded in 2007, Alserkal—a warehouse block and budding arts district, out of view of the implausible skyscrapers and backlit palm trees for which the city is best known—is located in Dubai's industrial outskirts known as Al Quoz. It was initiated and is supported by founder and developer Abdelmonem bin Eisa Alserkal and his family. Newly expanded, the district now totals 23,000 square meters and contains more than 20 galleries and arts organizations, with common spaces for public programs, screenings, performances and readings. In addition to established galleries Isabelle van den Eynde, Carbon 12, Ayyam and Grey Noise, newcomers to the block include Leila Heller, who opened its second location (with its first space located in New York), and The Third Line, a high-profile Dubai-based gallery formerly located around the corner from Alserkal.

The United Arab Emirate's largest city redrew its landscape almost entirely following the discovery of oil in the late 1960s, transforming from a major exporter of pearls into a world capital of finance and real estate, and manmade wonders such as the Gold Souk, the Burj Khalifa, the Palm, the Dubai Mall and the World—the latter being artificial islands laid out in the formation of their namesake. (Nearby, The Mall of the Emirates houses an indoor ski slope, a terrain suited for snowmen and the live penguins that occasionally wobble over to them.) Stretching from Deira, the city's financial district, to Internet City, Dubai is fabled to be named after the Arabic proverb *Daba Dubai*—"they came with money." It has historically always been a thriving trading hub, though with each round of development it perpetuates its reputation as a place less defined by what passes through it, but more as a hotspot for speculative and online markets. The endless skyscrapers are its trophies.



MONIR SHAHROUDY FARMANFARMANIAN, *Sunrise*, 2015, mirror and reversed glass painting on plaster and wood, 130 × 100 cm. Courtesy the artist and The Third Line, Dubai.



MONIR SHAHROUDY FARMANFARMANIAN, *Untitled*, 1993, felt-tip marker on paper, 35 × 41.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and The Third Line, Dubai.

Despite its longstanding, substantial community of artists and thinkers, Dubai suffers from a dearth of public spaces for arts and culture. The state's limited art and studio education programs and complete lack of museums leave a noticeable void of hubs cultivating and supporting cultural growth. It is curious, then, that in a city that emphasizes its accessibility, especially to the bigger art world, via the tourist industry, significant auction house activity and a major art fair (Art Dubai celebrates its tenth anniversary this month), support for the arts rests entirely on private patronage. "We are curating a community of creative artists, entrepreneurs—an ecosystem that everybody can benefit from . . . we're always welcoming new initiatives," remarked Alserkal over fruit and tea.

So it was that in January The Third Line mounted a series of works by Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfardian. The nonagenarian artist, seeing renewed interest in her practice following her solo exhibition at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum last spring, is showing a number of mirror wall works—what she calls "geometric families"—made in collaboration with traditional artisans in Tehran, a number of whom she originally worked with in the 1970s when she still maintained a studio in Iran. After many years living abroad, when Farmanfardian was finally able to return to her home country in 2004, she picked up where she left off, in terms of her art. The bold, graphic mirror mosaics, a form known as *aineh-kari* in Farsi, include reverse glass painting, and are arranged in accordance with Islamic geometry patterns. The show at The Third Line, "Infinite Geometry," also includes the artist's drawings and silk carpet works from the 1990s, produced in Tabriz and Bijar, and are being exhibited in Dubai for the first time. Additionally, a few precious pieces of jewelry—gold stars and bows studded with bright gems—are tucked away under glass upstairs.

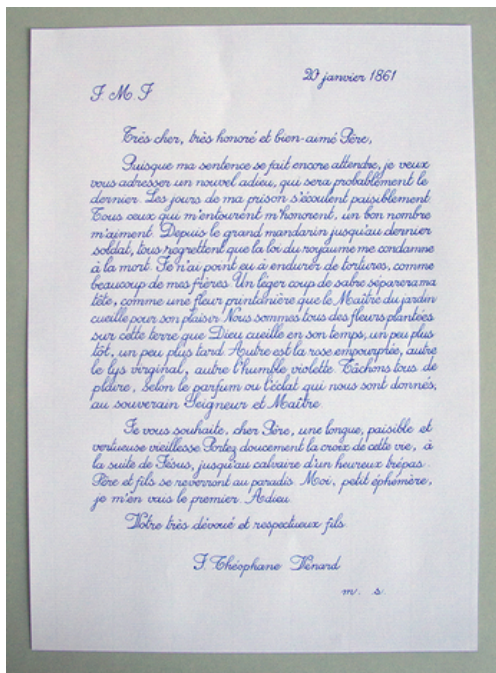


SOHRAB SEPEHRI, *Untitled*, 1960, oil on canvas, 70 × 100 cm. Courtesy Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai.

New York gallerist Leila Heller, whose program already includes a majority of Middle Eastern artists, expanded into the largest and grandest space on Alserkal, and in the entire UAE. The gallery debuted a pair of exhibitions on the same evening, both solo shows of Middle Eastern artists, but ones that could not be more different from each other. One showcases London-based Iraqi-British architect and designer Zaha Hadid. A constellation of objects ranging in scale, from futuristic tables several meters long to metallic platform wedge shoes to fine jewelry, are all recognizable by their advancing swoops and seemingly weightless dynamic forms—whether molded from chartreuse fiberglass, black gold, icy acrylic or intricately carved marble. The other exhibition, separated from Hadid’s work by the gallery’s sweeping, dark spiral staircase, is an exhibition of quiet paintings by Iranian artist and poet Sohrab Sepehri, author of *Hasht Ketab* (“Eight Books”). Comprising a line of subtle canvases that urges intimate inspections, Sepehri’s nebulous, overcast landscape abstractions are focused on details of tree trunks that the artist painted in the 1960s. They reflect his background in Taoist and Zen Buddhist practices, as well as Japanese minimalism, through a soft palette of muddied olives, rich browns and inky charcoals punctuated by milky creams, orange crimsons and subdued teals.



Installation view of **SOHRAB SEPEHRI**'s solo exhibition at Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai, 2016. Courtesy Leila Heller Gallery.



DANH VO, 2.2.1861, 2009, ink on paper, hand written by Phung Vo, 29.7 x 21 cm. Courtesy Green Art Gallery, Dubai.

At 1x1 Art Gallery, Bangalore artist Pushpamala N. is showing “Avega: The Passion & The Return of Vasco da Gama” (1/11–2/29). The ongoing project recreates Portuguese painter Jose Veloso Salgado’s late 19th-century historical montage painting, with Pushpamala casting herself as the 15th-century explorer as he discovers the Indian continent. The layers of misrepresentation—Orientalist, historical and gender-based—overlap to create a stunning set of images that depict a fictional tableau presented as archival document. Supporting images are hung on rich red walls.

At Green Gallery, the group exhibition “1497” features Hera Büyüktaşçıyan, Gitanjali Dang, Shilpa Gupta, Raja’a Khalid, Jacob Lawrence, Matheus Rocha Pitta, UBIK, Deepak Unnikrishnan and Danh Vo. Curated by Lantian Xie, it presents a range of works composed of tactile evidence, from Shilpa Gupta’s images drawn with stitches on paper to Danh Vo’s letters handwritten by his father, Phung Vo. Down the block, Lawrie Shabibi Gallery has mounted its second solo exhibition of Larissa Sansour, “In the Future They Ate From The Finest Porcelain” (1/18–3/10). It debuts Sansour’s latest haunting film by the same name, accompanied by an installation and three large-scale photographs. Other highlights around the Avenue include “But even if I cannot see the sun” at Grey Noise, a group show with Michael John Whelan, Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, Sail Into Night, Lala Rukh and Marco Godinho. Led by a poetic statement by Godinho, it features Boutros’s ghostlike spray-painted works, visually echoed in Rukh’s graphite-on-carbon-paper monochromatic pieces.

Another round of inaugural shows from Custot Gallery and the newly established Jean-Paul Najjar Foundation opens in March, in tandem with Art Dubai. Further down the road, the Avenue will offer residencies for artists from the region in 2017 as part of its nonprofit art program. The rapidly growing island of cultural spaces here is encouraging, and overdue, especially for a city seemingly wealthy in every other conceivable area of new growth.



MARCO GODINHO, *Every Day a Revolution*, 2012, wine bottles and red carnation flowers, dimensions variable. Courtesy Grey Noise, Dubai.

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ArtAsiaPacific

GPO Box 10084

Hong Kong

info@aapmag.com

