

GALLERY

# PAST REMEMBERED, FUTURE FORGED

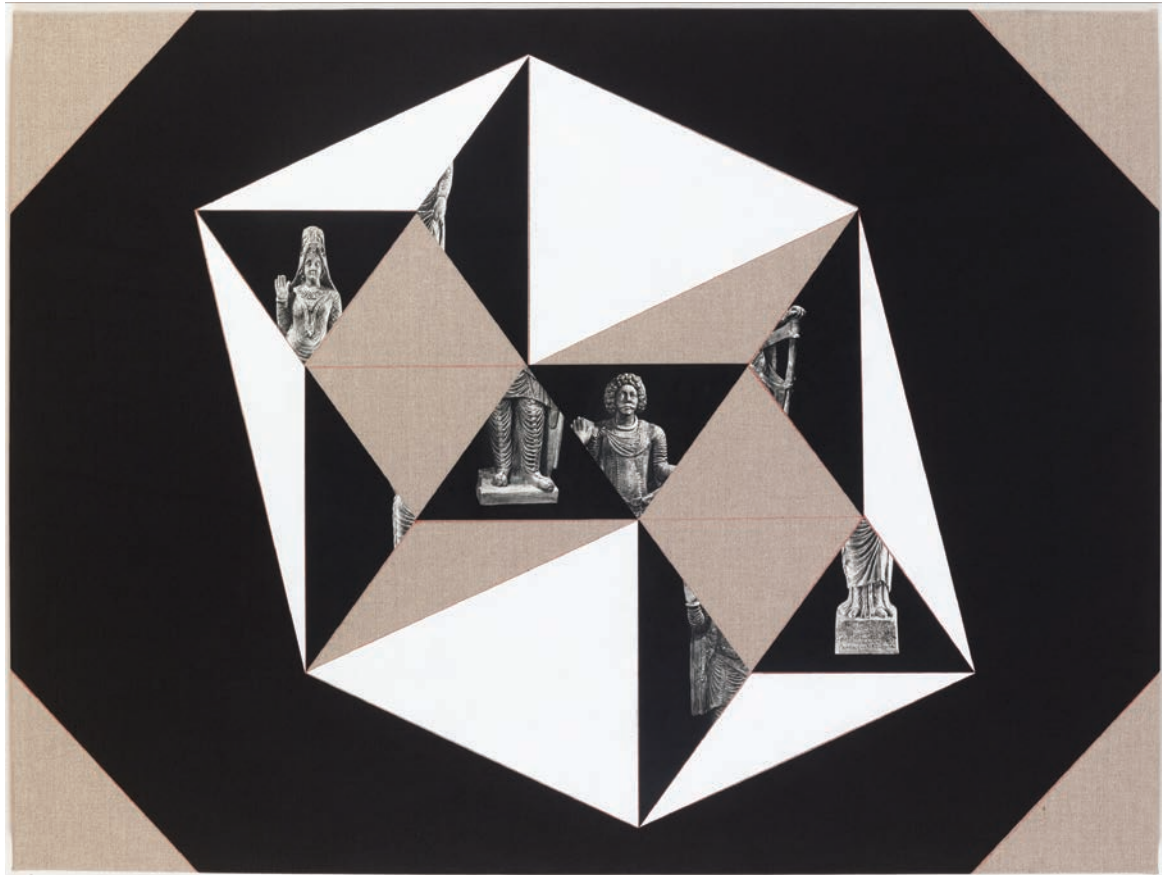
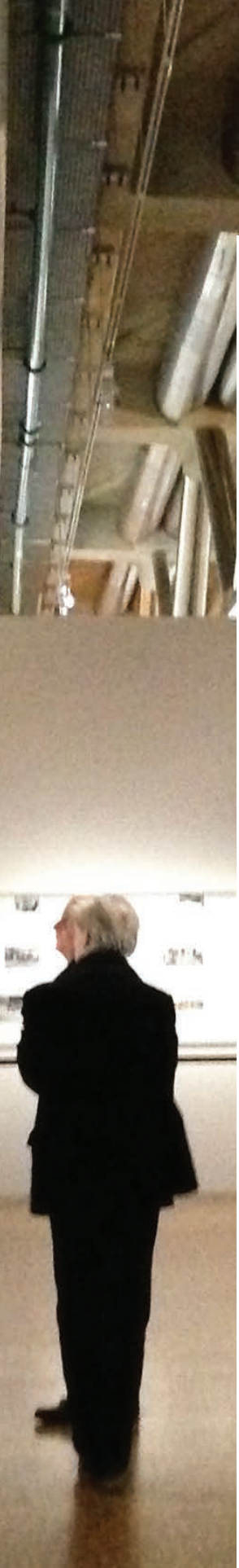
GREEN ART GALLERY



This spread: Installation view of  
Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck's *Israeli Nuclear  
Arsenal*, 2004–13.

**Laura Egerton** finds out what makes Dubai's Green Art Gallery tick and why the oldest gallery in the city continues to find new things to say and do.





**G**reen Art is the sort of gallery that gets into Frieze and Art Basel. Institutions and biennials look to it as a benchmark of contemporary art practice. Regularly commissioning curated exhibitions, publishing monographs and truly nurturing those of their artists who are not (yet) the biggest names on the market, these are serious practitioners who are ideas-led and project-focused. Yasmin Atassi, still in her early 30s, is an astute and passionate gallery director; asking precisely the right questions in our troubled climate – how to remain relevant, and how to evolve a programme that tackles the big issues of our times and yet still connects to our past?

The past is a particularly commanding force. Its roots extend back thirty years to the Atassi home city of Homs in Syria, then a very different place from the war-ravaged wasteland of today. It is a personal history for Atassi herself. She remembers pretending to sell books as a child in Ornina, the first creative venture of her late mother Mayla and sister Mouna, and which would become Atassi Gallery. Today Atassi also acts as an independent adviser for the nomadic Atassi Foundation. She is glad that grants for residencies with the Delfina Foundation in London are planned: "It is critical that artists from Syria get exposed to something else."



This spread: Installation view of Hale Tenger at Centre Pompidou, Paris; (Inset) Kamrooz Aram. *Ancient Through Modern Collage 16*. 2015. Acrylic, pencil and paper collage on linen. 76.2 x 101.6 cm.



## BREAKING FRONTIERS

Representing Syrian artists for the sake of supporting those from the home country is not in the DNA of Green Art Gallery. Only one contemporary artist from Syria is on their books – Jaber Al Azmeh (see page 58). The photographer has had four solo shows with the gallery in recent years, which when examined are as eloquent a response to the state of affairs in Syria as you could hope to find. *Traces* in 2011 offered snapshots of an abandoned Damascus. A year later, *Wounds* was a direct response to the revolution: stark images in red and black, fervent depictions of individuals caught up in violence and conflict, from the time when Al Azmeh was forced to migrate to Qatar. In 2014 he tackled the lack of freedom of speech by taking black-and-white photographs of Syrians holding copies of *Al Ba'ath* (the main state-owned newspaper in Syria) upon which they had written personal remarks. His latest

exhibition, *Border-Lines*, brought us to a standstill: bleak aerial perspectives occasionally interrupted with hints of surveillance, workers' buses, tyre tracks, sand dunes. We are undeniably now in the Gulf.

Dubai became home for Atassi after her father had a stopover there in 1989. "He decided it was the future," she explains. Her mother didn't have funds to open a gallery immediately, instead selling artefacts that included limited edition greetings cards designed by artists made on recycle-friendly paper – hence Green Art. In 1995, in partnership with Amna Dabbagh, the gallery opened in Jumeirah, showing the works of Arab Modernists such as Fateh Moudarres in Dubai for the first time. It was more of a *salon d'art* but it worked, losing its footing slightly after 2004 when Mayla was diagnosed with cancer (which she fought for three years). Despite studying computer science and knowing nothing about the art world, Atassi decided to take over the gallery. "I found myself unconsciously reading more about art,"

*“I walked the aisles without knowing anyone,” Yasmin reminisces. “It allowed me to learn art the way I wanted, without any restrictions.”*

Left: Installation view of exhibition by Chaouki Choukini.

Below: The first Green Art Gallery space in Jumeirah.



she tells us. “I knew it needed to either close or stay open but with a new vision, representing what it had been before but also doing something else.” She then embarked on a remarkable independent journey to immerse herself in the world of contemporary art, travelling to Art Basel. “I walked the aisles without knowing anyone,” she reminisces. “It allowed me to learn art the way I wanted, without any restrictions.” Initially she stayed in the Jumeirah villa, steeped as it was in history, but demolition and a new era was calling. By then Alserkal had opened up and she bagged a central warehouse spot, finally opening in January 2011.

### CONNECTING THREADS

Atassi believes in the gallery model and keeps to a busy calendar, with roughly five shows and five art fairs annually. That she has

maintained a connection with the Arab Modernists is part of the gallery’s unique strength. “I always felt I wasn’t cool enough,” she jokes. “Over the years I really feel we have established so much – it’s not about the boundaries that you make, it’s the connections between historical periods, between artist generations, between audiences, that is really what drives me now.” She talks animatedly about both the “crazy” video piece Shadi Habib Allah produced for Frieze and an exhibition planned for early 2017 exploring women artists in mid-20th-century Egypt. “For me there was never a thing like ‘I want to be contemporary, or I want to be modern,’” she explains. “The region is never static, it’s always evolving. But we can’t forget history.”

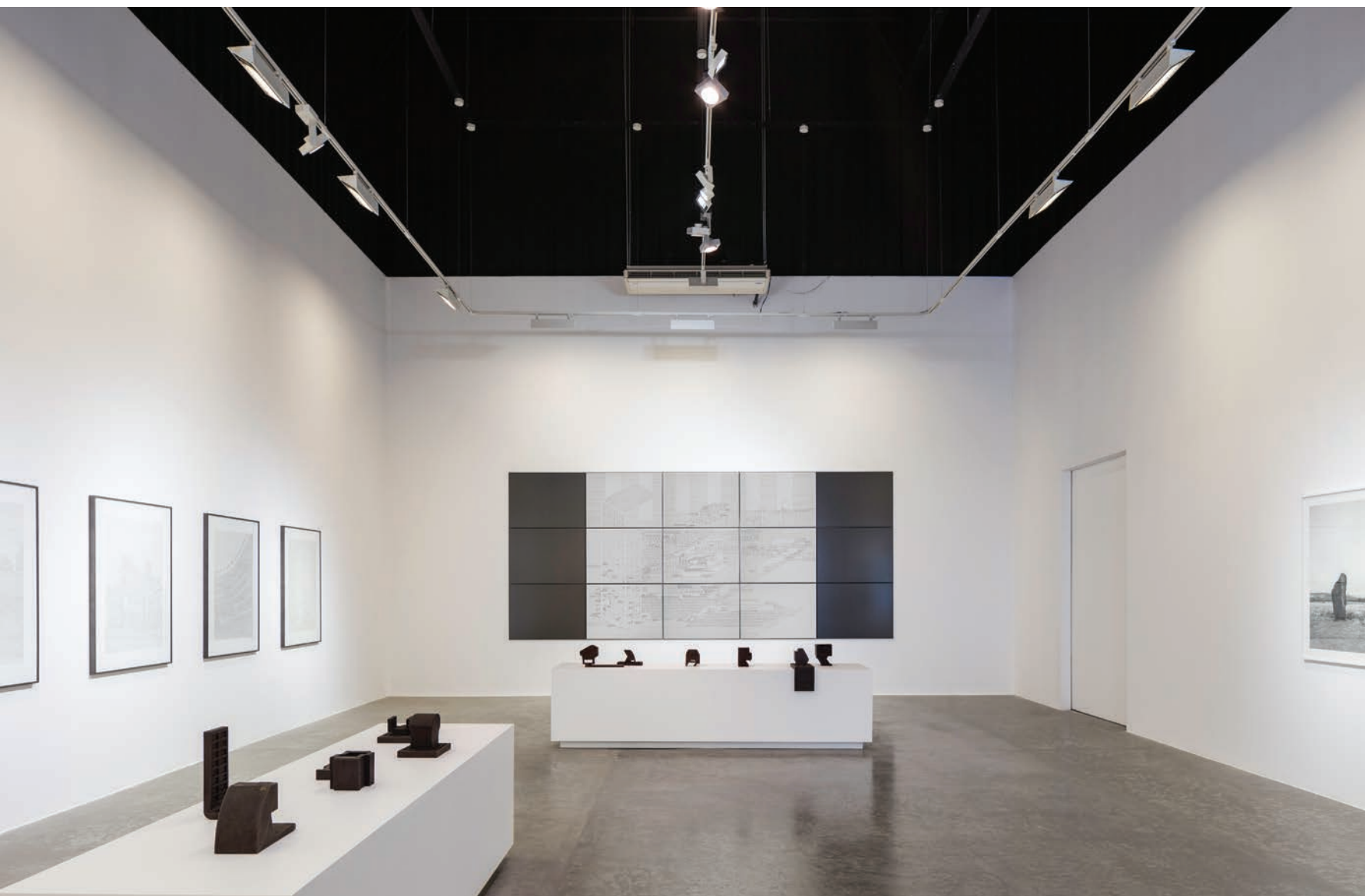
She has a natural instinct for finding artists, approaching them after seeing their work in a museum or biennial show. One team



Facing page: Seher Shah.  
*Untitled (Cantilever cut)*.  
 2015. Cast Iron, 21.5 x 10  
 x 15.8 cm. Edition of two.

This page: Installation  
 view of Seher Shah works.

*Images courtesy Green Art  
 Gallery, Dubai.*



member is dedicated solely to outreach. The artists she picks are slow burners. "Five years down the line, our artists are going places," Yasmin says proudly. "We don't deal in brands, we help build their careers." Not limited to cutting-edge work, her exhibition last autumn by 70-year-old Chaouki Choukini was a revelation. Atassi was struck by the simple beauty of his organic forms. "I felt he was an artist who has developed his own language," she explains. "I love that about his generation – there was never a why or a what, just a guy who loves sculpting wood." Her younger artists are inspired by such work, with Sehar Shah wanting to travel to Dubai from New York just to see the exhibition.

Kamrooz Aram caught Atassi's eye early on and as they prepare for his first solo show in Europe, their relationship continues to be a special one. "It is incredibly rare to find a gallerist that is as well rounded as Yasmin," Aram tells us. "Her intensity, integrity, her deep engagement with artworks and her passionate appeal for her artists, not to mention her exceptionally ethical manner of going about her business with great kindness and elegance. After just one or two conversations I knew that this is someone I need to work with in some capacity, whether it is in Dubai or anywhere else in the world." 

For more information visit [www.gagallery.com](http://www.gagallery.com)