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Anwar Jalal Shemza and Kamrooz Aram. Installation view at Green Art Gallery, Dubai. Photography by Anna Shtraus. All images courtesy of Green Art Gallery and Jhaveri Contemporary

CONVERSATIONS ACROSS TIME

In one of the last exhibitions we saw on Alserkal Avenue pre-lockdown, conversations played out between two galleries and a selection of artists from different generations.

This group show at **Green Art Gallery** in Dubai was presented in collaboration with **Jhaveri Contemporary** in Mumbai and sparked meaningful exchanges on portraiture, hybridity and cultures largely rooted in Western and South Asia.

Words by Katherine Volk & Nadine Khalil

Green Art Gallery, which has been a major player on the regional art scene for over four decades, went from being a primarily Arab Modernist art gallery to a contemporary art space in 2010, the same year that Jhaveri Contemporary was founded. That the two galleries converged in Green Art's recent show in Dubai (ended 14 March) was more than just a coincidence however. Gallery director Yasmin Atassi said she was interested in experimenting with forms of exhibition-making that moved beyond the art fair circuit. The collaboration was a natural one, she explained: "We are both interested in research-based

practices and historical and contemporary artists, as well as the conversation that results in showcasing both together and independently." The resulting visual exchange between Green Art and Jhaveri Contemporary merged different mediums – from photography to painting and sculpture – and melded the past with the present.

Ali Kazim's 2019 *Untitled (Man of Faith series)* featured a shirtless man floating in a turquoise void – the painted plane devoid of context and the mysterious figure shrouded in a naked spirituality. Here, Kazim's background



Lubna Chowdhary. *Certain Times*. 2019. Installation view at Green Art Gallery, Dubai. Photography by Anna Shtraus



Mohan Samant. *Bruhannaddas*. 1977. Watercolour on paper. 41.9 x 58.4 cm. Photography by Anna Shtraus



Ali Kazim. *Untitled (Man of Faith series)*. 2019. Watercolour pigments on paper. 40 x 51.7 cm



Lionel Wendt. *Untitled*. c.1930. Gelatin silver print. 25.2 x 17 cm

as a cinema billboard painter was apparent, despite the smaller scale of his work (which drew upon the art of miniature painting), and his bold illustrative style still evocative of fantastical large-scale hoardings. Placed on either side of Kazim's paintings were Lionel Wendt's photographic portraits (1930-1944) revealing different layers of the working class in colonial Sri Lanka. This pairing of different ways of expressing the male body, and different epochs, lent itself to surprising effect. While Wendt's archival photography had a contemporary feel, Kazim's contemporary painting revealed a formalistic historicism. As Amrita Jhaveri noted, "This demonstrates how contemporary Wendt was and how classic Kazim's works are."

An entire wall of the gallery was dedicated to Lubna Chowdhary's sculptural series *Certain Times* (2019). These ceramics playfully spoke to Kamrooz Aram and Anwar Jalal Shemza's two-dimensional works on the opposite wall in a call-and-response that intermingled dimensionality, Modernism, Islamic art and ornament. Comprising geometric architectural forms, *Certain Times* was presented in the manner of skylines, while the work of Kamrooz Aram – the only artist in the exhibition who is represented by Green Art Gallery – abstracted patterns from geometric motifs and ornamentation, the arabesque and the grid in art. Shemza's paintings, which drew from Arabic calligraphy and Western modernists such as Paul Klee, also combined multiple narrations and cultures in a minimalist manifestation of form and colour.

The work of Mohan Samant on a central wall linked the rest of the space both in terms of layout and content. A leading light in the short-lived Progressive Artists' Group (alongside FN Souza, SH Raza, and MF Husain), his paintings were hybrid works that pushed the boundaries of the medium, referencing sculpture, drawing and architecture in unusual compositions. After many years successfully exhibiting internationally, Samant left India permanently in 1968 and his journeys around the world to historic sites enriched his understanding of the classical arts. His bright figurative watercolour, *Untitled* (c.1980-90s) speaks to both the Modernist impulses of Chowdhary, Shemza and Aram, while addressing the figurative expressionism of Wendt's and Kazim's work. As Jhaveri mentioned, "He is one of the rare Indian modern artists who spent time in Egypt and his work draws upon Egyptian wall paintings and hieroglyphs. His approach to figuration is distinct – but related – to Ali Kazim's interests."

As all these conversations unravelled silently, the mental noise they created was resounding. The intergenerational dialogues between the featured artists transcended space and time, spanning the 1930s to the present day. While it is uncertain if this dialogue will continue at the gallery level in India as originally planned for the autumn, the aesthetic discourse sparked by this first collaborative group show between Green Art and Jhaveri Contemporary has set in place an interesting point of departure.