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Alserkal Avenue's Industrial Chic Grows In Dubai

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Dubai is a city of incongruities and complexities. Last week, it played host to its annual Art Week — a boost to the regional market with fairs like Art Dubai and Design Days Dubai, as well as a series of openings and celebrations centered around Alserkal Avenue, a growing gallery district located in the industrial neighborhood of Al Quoz. (The first art space opened there in 2008.) Helmed by its founder and chief funder Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal, the circumscribed cluster of barebones, high-ceilinged metal sheds are home to heavy-hitting locals: Lawrie Shabibi, Carbon 12, and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde all have their spaces here; The Third Line is planning to relocate to the area in the fall, and New York's Leila Heller will open an outpost later in 2015. They'll be joined by various eclectic neighbors, including architecture and graphic design studios; the organic-juice-and-kale-chips proprietor Wild & the Moon; Nostalgia Classic Cars; and MB&F M.A.D. Gallery, a "captivating universe of kinetic art where Horological Machines and Mechanical Art Devices reign supreme," which I suppose is inelegant code for "totally zany clocks that cost as much as small apartments."

During Dubai Art Week, everyone was eager to compare Alserkal Avenue to other touchstones perhaps more familiar to Western journalists. Vilma Jurkute, the initiative's director, told me that she finds an energy in Alerskal (and Dubai in general) akin to New York in the '70s or London in the '90s. Press materials draw connections to the Meatpacking District. A promotional brochure, with plucky earnestness, describes the surrounding Al Quoz neighborhood as "an industrial, dusty, gritty, organic area — a mix of old and new, where car warehouses live next to contemporary art galleries and bakeries border skateparks." In less flowery terms, what Alserkal Avenue physically resembles is a functional, everything-in-one-place complex that makes it easy (if one doesn't mind dodging truck traffic and the blaring sun) to take in a dozen or more gallery exhibitions in one mostly-pedestrian-friendly afternoon. While the district is expanding, Alserkal and Jurkute stress that it's not just about more-and-bigger; a necessary distinction in a region where, with enough money and the right whims, it's probably possible to build the world's-largest-building-shaped-like-a-rotating-banana in less than 12 months. At odds with the rest of Dubai's shiny, mirrored, sinuous architectural follies, the facades here are plain corrugated metal.

Alserkal Avenue's density and convenience, to be fair, should be offset by a bit more landscape architecture. My peers and colleagues couldn't help but lament the total lack of greenery on-site — the Avenue could take a few hints from the High Line, a model for a kinder, gentler industrial-grittiness — but the project is still a work-in-progress. And rather than try to connect the Avenue to its mythical predecessors, it makes sense to admit the district's singularity. It's not Chelsea, or the Lower East Side — neither of those neighborhoods, clearly, are overseen by a patron who will help pay the costs for individual galleries to travel to international art fairs and other "milestones," which is the case with Alserkal Avenue. (One perk for galleries under the Avenue's umbrella seems to be an ability for programming to focus on what's important, rather than just sellable.) And any discussion of the UAE is inevitably going to glance against the ongoing debate over guest-worker labor in the region. A special commission by Gaza-born artist Hazem Harb, on view during Art Week, memorialized the actual construction of the Avenue's expansion through video and sculpture; it was admittedly strange and uncomfortable to stand there and watch footage of half a dozen foreign laborers performing their tasks while singing, since labor conditions in the UAE don't typically generate the most pleasing melodies. At a dinner to fete the project's new growth, all gentlemen (only, mind you) were kindly asked to stand and applaud the beneficence of Alserkal. These are pesky realities that peek out from beneath Dubai's efforts to become an international art destination like any other, a reminder that any "homegrown initiative" is going to bear the baggage of the home it's grown in.

That said, it's a surprising place, and many assumptions are quickly upended. Spending time in Dubai, with its almost psychotically futuristic skyline and destination malls, can feel like a fever dream that jumbles devout religious tradition with hyper-capitalism. I interviewed Alserkal in his office, a hip space decorated with a bright-red vintage SMEG refrigerator and a preponderance of Tintin memorabilia. Wearing traditional Emirati dishdash, he was joined by his director, Jurkute, a petite Lithuanian who comes to Dubai via New York, Chicago, and Europe and whose judgment, on many matters, he deferred to. Earlier that week, during a reception at Lawrie Shabibi gallery for the excellent

Berlin-based artist Nadia Kaabe-Linke, the actor T.J. Miller (of HBO's "Silicon Valley") wandered in, spending over an hour with the works on view, which are mostly to do with the architectural and bodily remnants of political and personal violence. Patron, artist, and gallerist Rami Farook was omnipresent throughout the week, showing a video series at a pop-up hosted by Third Line — an irreverent work equally concerned with ping-pong and Muslim prayer — and handing out stickers of himself bearing a pineapple (which has no special resonance in Arab culture, mind you — they just make him happy). A4, Alserkal Avenue's excellent cafe-slash-bookshop, has a donation-supported library whose shelves symbolize Dubai's uneasy mix of old and new influences. There were Anselm Kiefer and James Turrell monographs next to a copy of Eckhart Tolle's "The Power of Now." Issue 3 of Emirati Diaries, its cover graced by Khalifa Bin Hendi ("As a young leader, my message to the youth is my own story") was close to "I, Partridge: We Need To Talk About Alan," the satirical, Steve Coogan-penned autobiography.

But beyond these bursts of surreality, what about the art? The current series of exhibitions at Alserkal Avenue is serious, worthwhile, and in many cases, decidedly non-commercial. Hazem Harb (of the aforementioned singing-workers installation) has a solo show of photocollages and sculptures at Salsali Private Museum. Hometown icon Hassan Sharif presents a bevy of new works at Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde — sculptures in twisted metal; assemblages made of rope or deconstructed magazines; a series of snarky cartoons from the 1970s that jab at Emirati cultural foibles and obsession with overdevelopment. Grey Noise is showing a series of delicately beautiful sculptures and drawings by Hossein Valamanesh from the '80s incorporating wood, mud, and oil lamps. And at Carbon 12, German-Iranian artist Anahita Razmi had one of my favorites of the week — an exhibition that cheekily jumbled art-historical references with identity-politics, from a sculpture of detoured readymade backpacks (their labels advertising MiddleEastPak) to a series of framed bootleg T-shirts the artist sourced in Iranian markets, their nonsensical sampling of English language and logos creating perverse poetry.

Alserkal Avenue is planning a series of initiatives beyond individual gallery programming, helmed by programming director Tairone Bastien. Those include artistic commissions as well as ambitions beyond Dubai, like an online-radio station that the Avenue will launch during the Venice Biennale. But it still remains to be seen how fully Alserkal Avenue can integrate itself into the fabric of Dubai's everyday cultural life. On Friday, the roving Thinkers & Doers conference came to the A4 space, hosting a roundtable conversation with various luminaries, among them Dana Farouki and Salvatore Laspada, director of the Salama Bint Jamdan Al Nahyan Foundation. As Laspada clarified, the UAE doesn't have a lack of money to jumpstart initiatives, but audiences are a different matter. (If you build it, will they really come? I've had the same curiosity regarding the slickly-produced and often excellent Sharjah Biennial.) Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation, noted that art education in UAE schools was eliminated in 1978, and only reinstated late in 2014. And despite Dubai being a center for the regional art market, it's unclear how many people are actually making their work here: of Carbon 12's fifteen represented artists, only Hazem Mahdy is based full time in Dubai. Alserkal Avenue does have plans to institute a live-work residency within the district as part of its expansion, a way of increasing outreach and providing material support.

I asked Rami Farook for his thoughts, and he was optimistic, though he did note the absence of a regional, professional-level art school. But, he said, "I see a growing number of artists living in Dubai. They're a mix of locals, as well as expats who grew up here and those who moved here in the past 10 years. Some artists have studios, others work from places like Tashkeel, and the majority work from home to save on costs and be able to work any time." He cited a number of artists who currently call Dubai home, from Ghada Da to Mohammed Kazem, Hesam Rahmadian, and Jessica Mein.

"If there was no demand, if the art scene wasn't growing, we would never have pursued" the new round of expansions, Jurkute said. "Dubai is a young city. It's developing its own stamp within the international art world. And because we're an organization that welcomes change, you never know what will happen."