

# ArtForum

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## Real Surreal

<https://www.artforum.com/diary/id=67224>



"It's somewhere between a craft fair and gun show. Doesn't it feel that way?" an artist observed, watching VIPs gamely shuffling to lackluster beats at the after party for Art Dubai's Tuesday preview. The cash bar left many reminiscing about the heady nights, just a few fairs ago, of free-flowing libations and late, late fetes on the beach. Several attendees were heard to wish the DJ would play some Arabic "or at least Turkish" music. People from the region wanted to actually dance, and as for those parachuting in from further away (their numbers were up), were they not in Dubai precisely to carouse, with those self-consciously orientalized wrist twirls, on a manmade island? Surrounded by ersatz canals and the kind of bling I once heard a collector memorably describe as "pussy and Ferrari art?"

I had just arrived from *The Room: Cooking Liberty*, a gastronomic performance by Beirut-based collective Atfal Ahdath. Inspired by professional spinach-hater Salvador Dalí's 1973 cookbook *Les Dîners de Gala*, the twelve multisensory courses unfolded over three acts ("Glass," "Shell," and "Egg"), bookended by potent arak and cognac-based cocktails. In one, there was nothing to eat, only a giant conch shell daubed with "Dalí's perfume." Walls were draped in red velvet, tables lined with electric candelabras, and the ceiling fluttered with thousands of peacock feathers. Surrealist more than surrealist, it was good fun nonetheless.

Middle Eastern surrealism has been enjoying something of a resurgence in the past two years, with the Sharjah Art Foundation's recent conference and Cairo exhibition "When Art Becomes Liberty: The Egyptian Surrealists (1938–1965)" and Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath's well-received multicity show "Art Et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938–1948)." And why not? It's not like things are getting any less absurd, either regionally or abroad. (One of the vitrines in the display antechamber of the dinner included a taxidermied Chinese pheasant, its bouffant golden coif an unpleasant reminder of Muslim Ban 2.0, which would go on to be struck down later that night.)

Bardaouil and Fellrath's steady hand could also be felt in the halls, which boasted far less decorative art than usual. Risks were few with the notable exception of Iranian galleries like Tehran's Dastan's Basement, who gave their booth over to artist Fereydoun Ave for a curated installation. Perhaps that was to be expected following a few difficult years as the fair struggled to recover from the twin blows of the rouble crashing and Art Basel's purchase of ART HK. They needn't have worried, with galleries in the contemporary sector reporting brisk sales, and even the usually sluggish modern sector doing well, bolstered perhaps by new fair director Myrna Ayad's inaugural three-day modern-art symposium.

A casualty of the fair's new direction is the experimental Marker sector. The curated section focused on a different geography each time and provided visitors with the rare opportunity to engage art from places like Central Asia, West Africa, and the Philippines. The influence of international director Pablo del Val was felt in the number of galleries from 2015 focus region Latin America, which had some of the fair's strongest booths. Particularly exciting were D21 Proyectos de Arte from Santiago and Piero Atchugarry Gallery from Pueblo Garzón, whose striking monochromatic presentation brought together Pablo Atchugarry's marble sculptures and Yuken Teruya's delicately fractal trees in shopping bags. Also notable was Dubai gallery Carbon 12, with delicious ceramics from Monika Grabuschnigg that managed to surprise despite its gilded candy-colored phallic warheads and a suite of drawings from this edition's much buzzed discovery, Amba Sayal-Bennett. No one could believe she's only twenty-six; if there's anything this city loves, it's youth. At another local gallery, Isabelle van den Eynde, a seven-foot suspended rope sculpture, finished by Emirati conceptualist Hassan Sharif's assistants after his death last fall, served as a poignant memorial to the artist beloved as the father of the UAE's contemporary art scene.

"Where is the contemporary in this? Nobody loves themselves in this city," artist Raja'a Khalid remarked at the massive Alserkal Avenue gala dinner the following night. She was feeling the love: Everyone agreed her warehouse commission featuring five personal trainers working out in multihour displays of performative masculinity was the arts district's unequivocal highlight. This year, we were there to celebrate the inauguration of Concrete, OMA's first building in Dubai. All translucent moveable panels and rough-textured walls, the building is stunning in its unexpected humility and currently home to a worthy exhibition of Syrian portraiture organized by Rasha Salti and Mouna Atassi. "It's not networking, it's collaboration!" I overheard among the beautifully dressed guests mingling over canapes and juice. "I don't feel the need to network anymore."

Dinner was charmingly served family-style, and with a blessed rapidity that was roundly appreciated during this week of languorous dinners and lunches. Seated opposite me was John Martin, Art Dubai's boyishly affable founder, and talk turned to inflated attendance figures and why the zoned arts cluster model shared by Alserkal Avenue and Gillman Barracks is doing so well in Dubai but floundering in Singapore. I wondered how things were going back in the VIP lounge, where I had just left an intriguing conversation on "Lebanese Lite." A curator explained it as the Arabic equivalent of Transatlantic English, but the term lent itself well to the "Sharjah Beirutennial," as a local artist dubbed it. We had just watched the unveiling of the \$100,000 Abraaj Group Art Prize winner Rana Begum's installation on a floating island across from the VIP lounge. The geometric arrangement of colored Plexiglas morphed rewardingly depending on your position and the quality of light. Smaller maquette versions were available at The Third Line's booth, in a move that felt a little gift shop.

Curator and critic Murtaza Vali found himself seated next to MinRASY Projects director Rana Sadik, who enthusiastically showed him a paparazzi shot she had taken of his "Vetements for Balenciaga" long kurta and sweatpants combo at the Sharjah Biennial. "I'm on trend!" he later crowed, repeating it softly to himself, with no small modicum of wonder. Maybe it was his kurta, and maybe it was the desi mood that seemed to have spread among galleries, which included shows from Lala Rukh, Rashid Rana, Vikram Divecha, and Sudarshan Shetty. The UAE's art scene has historically privileged Arab and Iranian art, but with inaugural editions of the Lahore and Karachi biennials and the Kathmandu Triennale soon joining the Kochi Biennial and Dhaka Art Summit, things are beginning to shift. "Dhaka is my favorite place to go skinny dipping," Delfina Foundation's Aaron Cezar would exclaim the next day, in between practicing his lines for Iván Argote and Pauline Bastard's Born to Collect gameshow performance, which pitted collectors against each other and seemed, from what I was able to catch, enormously fun.

Highlights at Alserkal included the lovely, hushed intimacy of Lala Rukh's watery vistas at Grey Noise and Sara Rahbar's stygian bronze sculptures of contorted limbs at Carbon 12, while at Lawrie Shabibi Mounir Fatmi crossed more than just the color line in a video work that included the artist blacking himself up with shoe polish. Palms included. I wondered whether the artist had ever met a black person before. Frederick Douglass and Moten would pop up again at a lunch for the Artissima fair the next day. "This idea that we're going to create a mass movement out of nothing, or that a show is going to be a paradigm shift?" mused a young curator. "It's not realistic. Douglass's fugitive narrative is proof that the commodity speaks but we don't need more theory, we need new ways of thinking. Theory will just trap us in terms again."

Over in the theory tent (Hans Ulrich Obrist was conspicuous in his absence), I caught a fantastic Global Art Forum panel from Dubai Airports CEO Paul Griffiths, who teased out synergies between conducting an airport and playing a concert organ. Especially memorable were the clips of his disembodied, sock-clad feet, pedaling as if he was not subject to gravity.

Always a reliable visual tl;dr, the GAF cushions this year were emblazoned with the €, and ¥ symbols in a nod to Rem Koolhaas's YES regime. They were updated with the ₹ or Indian rupee and the Saudi Riyal because, as GAF commissioner Shumon Basar explained, "Times have changed and you need a sequel."

And yes, times had certainly changed, but as I took a boat ride back to the fair—the canals are functional! Who knew?—one afternoon, I had trouble articulating why. At lunch, a senior curator remarked that the fair's nonprofit and educational programs seemed to have dissipated and "it feels like it doesn't have a personality anymore. With [former Art Dubai director Antonia Carver], you really felt her presence; Myrna hasn't really made friends."

And yes, despite the same people being here—all those friends we made along the way—there's something that feels impersonal about this edition. For a long time, Art Dubai's nonprofit programming anchored the city's art scene, which made for an exciting few weeks in March and little else (at least on a more critical, discursive level). Now, it feels as if it's passed that baton to Alserkal Avenue to focus on becoming a successful commercial fair again. As if it decided to finally put on its game face, look directly into the camera and say, "I'm not here to make friends; I'm here to win." I think that's great.