

Alserkal Avenue's "Galleries Nights" by Kevin Jones

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Flux. It's a word commonly used to describe Dubai's construction-crazed urban environment, its teeming waves of here-today-gone-tomorrow expats and its relentlessly renewed quest for the bolder, brighter and bigger. Perhaps more than any other, Dubai is a city built by "flux."

The city's cultural nerve center, Alserkal Avenue, a neighborhood of galleries smack at the heart of a heaving industrial zone, is having a flux moment of its own. A booming expansion that will endow the hub with 40 additional spaces, practically doubling its existing size, is careening towards completion. Promise of a cascade of summertime "soft" openings peppered the conversations of the many gallery-hoppers who turned out for the first of this year's Galleries Nights—the bi-monthly evening of vernissages at Alserkal Avenue. Under a night sky punctuated by gently swaying cranes and grid-like building skeletons, flux was almost everywhere to be seen, cavorting in all its finery.

A surprising painting sub-theme underpinned this spate of shows—from Gil Heitor Cortesão's oils-on-plexiglass segmented by aluminum profiles to the bitumen paintings of London-based Nathaniel Rackowe to the deeply structured, highly "geometricized" worlds of Benjamin Senior's canvases. Familiar artists showed surprising new work—Zsolt Bodoni's explosion into color, Jessica Mein's cloth-based interpretation of reality-meets-representation—while newcomers to the Dubai scene provided fresh perspectives.

"Radiant Trajectory," Nathaniel Rackowe's debut solo show at Lawrie Shabibi gallery, showcases the artist's ongoing work with light, with one Dubai-specific series being a memorable standout.

The flux-master. These graphic paintings, made with bitumen on textured cardboard, are outtakes from Nathaniel Rackowe's photographic field trips into the rich heartland of Dubai's ever-changing urban fabric.

Afloat in the glow. The backs of the welded steel frames are painted with yellow or red, casting its color onto the wall behind.

Where's that? Covering a range of industrial zones, historical areas and retail palaces, the stark bitumen paintings play with positive and negative space without ever falling into the easy spot-the-landmark trap.

De-sanctifying Flavin. Light is perhaps Rackowe's medium, more than the mass-produced construction materials he uses to sheath it. Tubes, clamps and colored wires open up the Flavin mainstay of neon to new interrogations and dialogues.

Light box. The cornerstone of the show is Black Shed Expanded (2014), a cubic structure made of bitumen-clad wooden slats, which is literally pulled apart at the edges. The violent yellow light within the structure floods out into the gallery, framing the petrol-black slats against its invasive glow.



Carbon 12 invited Lisbon-based artist Gil Heitor Cortesão for his third solo show at the gallery, entitled "Out of Season." Known for his nearly people-less paintings of photo-inspired modernist interiors, Cortesão makes a radical break from his previous works. In this series, people frolic and lounge, stare and swim in a snapshot world, with aluminum profile frames slicing in to wedge some tension into the scenes.

Back to front. Cortesão paints on Plexiglas, but not on the surface that is facing the viewer. He layers oils onto the back of the plane, so that what appears from the front as the final stroke (the smear, the drip) was in fact the first one applied.

Slice of life. Time-worn photos from Cortesão's personal collection were the basis for these paintings. The works are ultimately quadriptychs, each quarter framed with aluminum profiles—recalling perhaps Cortesão's previous architectural bent—extending the figures slightly, shaking up the very idea of perspective.

Green Art Gallery saw the return of one of its veteran painters, Hungarian artist Zolt Bodoni, for his second solo show in Dubai, entitled "The Shining Path." A deftly handled shift away from his characteristic somber grays into a more colorful realm in no way diminishes the darkly intense nature of his very painterly oeuvre.

Twist and shout. The progressive body-centric ideals of Hungarian dancer Rudolf Laban, widely known in the dance world as having invented the choreographic notation system Labanotation in the 1920s, inspired Bodoni's writhing, poised, swaying figures, freeze-framed in an Expressionist, shadow world.

Flux in movement. Found source imagery from the early 20th century looks uncannily contemporary, layered as it is with Bodoni's visceral smears and scrapes. Figure and ground seem unfixed and, like the dancers themselves, caught in some kind of portentous flux.

One of the more notable surprises of the evening was a first-ever painting show at the coolly minimalist, high-concept gallery Grey Noise. "Enclosure," the title that British artist Benjamin Senior chose for his first solo show in the Middle East, is a stately yet uneasy tour through a realm of undeniable compositional mastery used to somewhat unsettling ends.

Jumping through hoops. The kitschy, colorful hula-hoop is a compositional excuse for Senior to play with geometry—the flourishes of the looping gate at once frame and obstruct the seemingly wholesome action unfolding behind them.

Tricky technique. The "Rings" series (2014), which forms the first half of the show, all depict tightly contained spaces, a density compounded by the gate frame in the foreground and a repetition of geometric imagery behind it. Yet the production process is even more painstaking, with the works mostly executed in intractable egg tempura—a mainstay of early Renaissance painting—which dries instantly, requiring a do-or-die mastery.

Breathing space. The second half of "Enclosure" opens up into a room of landscape paintings populated by hikers and calisthenics-minded girls. A Balthus-esque tension inhabits the figures, whose lunges and kicks point to compositional rifts and manipulations.

Gallerist Isabelle van den Eynde celebrates 10 years of Dubai-based exhibitions by inviting her partners in artistic crime to submit new works of drawing. "Nice Drawings," the resulting show, has no particular thematic focus besides the drawing format, and, like many of the gallery's recent shows, is a rousing, space-filling feast for the senses.

Ramin, Rokni and Hesam. The Haerizadeh brothers and their co-conspirator Hesam Rahmanian are showing new works loosely connected to the exhibition's prerequisite of presenting a "drawing."

The mentor. Farshid Maleki—the man who taught the Haerizadehs how to draw.

Art and life. Brazil-born Dubai-based artist Jessica Mein plays with reality and representation in her black-and white, painstakingly frayed hemp work, straddled by photographic depictions of the same.

Twin spirits. Twin sisters Niyaz and Neza, newcomers to the Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde roster, present works with overlapping sound and video elements.