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Art Dubai 2020: the new art hub for the Global South?

By [Alexandra Chaves](#)

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Over the past few years, Art Dubai has undergone big changes in rapid succession – from Antonia Carver’s departure after six years as director in 2016 to Myrna Ayad’s brief run of two years. Then came the collapse of the fair’s decade-long partner Abraaj, as the company faced charges of fraud. This resulted in the end of the annual Abraaj Prize, which gave a sizeable \$100,000 (Dh367,250) to the winning artist every year.

In 2018, Art Dubai made the decision to appoint two directors to run the fair together. Namely, Pablo del Val, who has been artistic director for a number of years, and newcomer Chloe Vaitsou, who has worked for Frieze Fairs in London, joining as international director. The two worked on last year’s Art Dubai as a team, with a vision of bringing a stronger identity to the fair.

Since then, the duo have ramped up the event’s curatorial initiatives and sharpened its focus on the Global South, which encompasses Africa, South and South-East Asia and Latin America. For its 14th year, which will take place from Wednesday, March 25 to Saturday, March 28, they have recruited seven independent curators to manage different sections, including their expanded commission and performance programmes.

“What is becoming apparent in the international fair context is that there is some level of homogeneity in the types of art that you might encounter in the big urban centres, where collectors go to see blue-chip galleries and the big stars of the day. We wanted a different approach, to put the spotlight on art that doesn’t get this global attention on an international stage,” Vaitsou says. “Dubai is home to more than 200 nationalities, and there are specific geographies more activated here, so we make sure that all of these get exposure.” She also notes that Middle Eastern and South Asian diaspora communities in Europe are also part of their target audience.

Del Val agrees. “What is Dubai? Who do you hang out with in Dubai? It’s the Global South,” he says. “It’s the part of the world where Dubai’s cultural and culinary references come from. This is the DNA of the city, so I understand that an African gallery would perform better than a Berlin gallery, or a Pakistani gallery performs better than a French one.”

As a result, the 56 participating galleries for Art Dubai this year hail from these vast geographies. This includes two galleries from the Philippines, Silverlens and 856g, the latter shown at the curated section Bawwaba last year. There are also newcomers Rele Gallery from Lagos and Dar d'Art from Tangier.

UAE galleries such as Ayyam Gallery, Carbon 12, Custot Gallery, Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Leila Heller Gallery, Meem Gallery and The Third Line will also participate. Carbon 12 will present works by artists from their roster, including Amir Khojasteh and Philip Mueller, while The Third Line's booth will be dedicated to Hassan Hajjaj. Meem Gallery will showcase editioned prints by Etel Adnan, Dia-alAzzawi, Kamal Boullata and Marwan.

Curated by Nancy Adajania, the Bawwaba section, which was introduced last year, features solo presentations from galleries in New Delhi, Karachi, Sao Paulo and Ho Chi Minh City. Works by Tanya Goel and Ranbir Kaleka from India will be brought by Nature Morte and Vadehra Art Gallery respectively, while the paintings of Japanese artist Yohei Yama will be presented by Vin Gallery from Vietnam. All the works on view will be new and created specifically for the fair.

This year, Vaitsou has brought in a new institutional partnership with a non-profit organisation from Jordan, the Mohammad and Mahera Abu Ghazaleh Foundation for Arts and Culture. A curatorial jury will award one artist from the Bawwaba section and commission him or her to produce new work that will be shown at the foundation in Amman in 2021.

Art Dubai's Modern section, curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, will be its largest to date, with each of the 19 galleries showcasing works by one leading modernist artist. These include Fahrelnissa Zeid at Dirimart from Istanbul, Aref El Rayess at Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Fouad Kamel from Gallery Misr and Jamil Naqsh at Eye for Art.

While the residents section of last year's Art Dubai focused on Latin America, the 2020 event puts a spotlight on Africa. Kabelo Malatsie from Johannesburg serves as curator for the section, which Del Val promises will break down the traditional structure of a gallery booth. "The curator has developed a floor plan where there are windows, raised walls, low walls, zigzags ... It requires visitors to get immersed in a different level of reality," he says. The residents, Daniela Yohannes (Ethiopia), Longinos Nagila (Kenya), Gideon Appah (Ghana) and Wallen Mapondera (Zimbabwe), have arrived in Dubai this month to begin producing works for the fair.

For its commissions programme, Art Dubai will tackle themes of ecology and environmental sustainability. The issue of climate change is one that the art world has been addressing recently, including at the inaugural Sharjah Architecture Triennial and Jeddah's 21,39 festival. Even the winner of this year's Ithra Art Prize, which will be unveiled at the fair, will raise the question of sustainability in the Gulf.

This year, Del Val brought in Natasa Petresin-Bachelez to develop commissions with four artists, Asuncion Molinos Gordo, Charwei Tsai, Khalil Rabah and Prabhakar Pachpute, whose works will be installed across the venue. Their concerns range from agriculture, soil, mining rights, seeds and archaeology.

Though it is one thing to talk about these issues in theory, it is a whole other endeavour to apply them in practice. An art fair, with all its logistical and production demands, is hardly eco-friendly. "I don't think we could ever become neutral, but there are ways to be a leader in reducing our carbon footprint," says Vaitsou, adding that the fair is taking steps such as consolidating shipments of artwork and imposing a plastic-free rule for this year's event.

Del Val, on the other hand, says he has a more idealistic approach. "This is an entire economical system that is difficult to fight against." He says "being green 24/7" is "absolutely impossible". Instead, he sees artists creating an ethos of environmentalism that changes mindsets and instigates action. "Through these projects, you can cultivate the attention of people to be more reflective about their behaviour. Artists do it with a certain poetry ... It is about changing our behaviour as humans from scratch. It's going to take a long period of time."

The fair's performance programme this year, curated by Marina Fokidis, will build on this theme through the works of seven artists who will look at healing and the human connection to our environments.

Looking towards the local scene, Gulf Now, curated by Munira El Sayegh and transformed from last year's UAE Now, will present commissions by collectives from Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Operating outside of government funding, these artist-run platforms offer experimental approaches to creative production and exhibition-making.

El Sayegh is also involved in the Campus Art Dubai 8.0, which will show works by artists selected from its open call last year. CAD's theme of Animal/Vegetable/Mineral: Symbiotic Life in a Parasitic World ties in with the topic of ecology, looking at the impact of climate change and urbanisation in the Gulf. Floor space for the initiative has increased this year, from 40 to 200 square metres.

Despite these growing networks across alternative regions, Del Val acknowledges that cementing the fair's new positioning will take time. "You don't become the art centre for the Global South in 24 hours. You need to convince people that Dubai is the place to come to." This will have to go hand in hand with Dubai becoming a cultural destination, an endeavour that the government is still working on. Recently, the emirate has launched a long-term visa for artists, a move that Del Val applauds while acknowledging that it was a long time coming.

Both he and Vaitso continually look to the future of the UAE art scene, both in terms of the market and the rest of the ecosystem. Though the number of contemporary art galleries has stagnated over the years, more institutions such as Jameel Arts Centre and Ishara Art Foundation have sprung up. For Art Dubai, which also runs a patrons programme, questions about the fate of the art fair model and the mindset of the next generation of collectors is vital for its sustainability. "We are very obsessed about the future," says Del Val. "Who will be the new galleries in Dubai? In the age of the internet and Instagram, how do you engage with young people who conceive of the possession of an object in a completely different way? And what is the future of the art fair in that context?" Much like the fair, the answers are ever-evolving.