

# Leading the way for the Dubai art scene: an interview with Kourosh Nouri

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Carbon 12 Gallery in Dubai was the first gallery in the region to establish a global roster of institution-grade artists, putting on six to eight shows a year in addition to publications and talks, aiming to establish Dubai's presence on the international art scene. It was founded in 2008 by Kourosh Nouri and Nadine Knotzer, and is currently located at Alserkal Avenue, a hub of contemporary art in the city's Al Quoz industrial area. AMA spoke to Founding Director Kourosh Nouri about the gallery's origins and attitudes towards contemporary art in the country.

## **Could you tell us about how the gallery started out?**

We opened the gallery in 2008, exactly six years ago, on 28 November. The plan was to become the first international art gallery in the region. We had already come up with a programme which was a mix of contemporary practises which often complimented each other, and which we hoped would be comprehensive. There was a gap in the market, as there was something really fundamentally missing: a gallery with an extensive programme. We were in Dubai Marina initially, which wasn't a great location, and then we moved to Alserkal Avenue. We were one of the first galleries to start our activities in this area.

## **How has the gallery evolved over the course of its history?**

Over time we have become a lot stricter. Curatorially speaking, the shows have become tighter, more challenging, as we see the artists evolve. You just need to look at the artists we started with, the core artists of the gallery like Sara Rahbar and Bernhard

Buhmann – artists who have evolved with us. The better they get, the more exposure they get. They have been getting closer to being institutional greats, for example Sara Rahbar, who was recently the subject of a lecture at the British Museum where they have just acquired two of her works. These kind of things are happening more frequently. As artists develop, the shows become better put together, more cohesive, more challenging. This has been the main evolution of the gallery.

**More generally, how have you seen the art scene in Dubai change?**

Unfortunately the transient nature of a lot of people's visits to Dubai also impacts the art market here, as there are a lot of people coming in and out. Generally, one of the trends is that no artwork remains in the country. Museum-quality artworks which are produced end up being sold completely outside of the region, or if they stay in the region they go to Iran, to Lebanon. This is something which is really a problem; contemporary art is not seen as national heritage and therefore is not valued.

**As a gallery, how do you go about selecting your artists?**

We wanted to have an international but also very comprehensive programme, as I said before. So the choices were very easy; for example in terms of painting we chose a group of painters that complement each other. We didn't want to be curatorially so rigid that we would have the same kind of approach for the whole programme. We also wanted to bring something really new into the art scene, so the visitors didn't get bored. In the same way that our passion for contemporary art gives us a lot of energy, we wanted to enthuse the public and collectors in the same way. So the choice is always very simple; we have a certain number of artists we want to work with, and most of them join the gallery. Today we represent 17 artists, 12 of whom have been with us from the beginning. In essence, we choose our artists according to their visual practice.

**So do you think it's important to encourage artists and artistic production from the United Arab Emirates?**

Encouraging artists' development is a very organic process that needs time; you cannot take shortcuts.

To create or to have great artists starts from the very beginning: it starts from the family environment, then at primary school, at middle school, at high school, then at university, and so on. Contemporary art in particular isn't something that you just invent – it's a very long process. Just take the example of those countries with a rich contemporary art scene. You have Switzerland, Austria, Germany – countries which aren't large in terms of population compared to India or China – where the tradition of contemporary art starts at an early age. There are museums, Kunsthallen, all of which play a key role in allowing them to have a representative number of artists. I don't believe that in three years you can just create artists. If you do, it is going to collapse. You need time, you need infrastructure, and you need the right environment to encourage contemporary art creation.

### **What is your artistic background?**

I started collecting when I was very young, I was 24. I grew up in a family that lived with art, so it wasn't alien to me. I am 43 years old now, and I have around 20 years of experience in contemporary art. Gradually collecting became more and more of a professional activity for me, I was advising and in 2007 we started planning the gallery. So when I speak in terms of expertise, I not only have the years under my belt but knowledge, as I also studied contemporary art.

### **Can you explain the name "Carbon 12" to us?**

It's actually a very organic choice. We didn't want to use our own names because we wanted a name which was catchy, so we chose Carbon 12 as Carbon is an essential element. It is charcoal, the first thing that you can use to draw; there is this sense of the essential, the elemental. Internationally, the name Carbon 12 is being mentioned a lot more and a lot of galleries know who we are. So it was actually a marketing choice that also fitted in with our programme and our approach. It is now a well-known name.

### **How important do you think it is to represent artists from the UAE on an international level, and how do you go about doing that?**

Unfortunately, apart from Hazem Mahdy, who was born in Sharjah, we don't have any UAE-born artists. I think it's crucial that the UAE becomes internationally important in the art world. But again,

it's not something which you can create in a short period of time, as you need all the infrastructure. Everything starts in the family home; at home you need exposure to contemporary art. It will become very difficult to follow this up later if you don't have any museums. For example, a child that travels around the world with their parents, visiting museums, learns to centre things around culture. It's extremely important to the UAE to have international artists, but it needs time and investment as well as the creation of infrastructure.

**What do you hope for the future of Carbon 12?**

I would like to keep on surviving! It's going very positively in terms of our programme, which gets better every year. What I really hope is that the regional art market evolves, so that there is more attention and focus on contemporary art – not only to generate profit for the gallery, but also because contemporary art needs to be seen as a national treasure, in the same way that some neighbouring countries have huge museums with very solid collections. I hope that more focus will be given to collecting contemporary art, not necessarily as an object but as a source of culture and dialogue.

**Would you say there are a lot of Emirati collectors in Dubai, or do they tend to be more international?**

At the moment, the large majority are expats. I believe that in time, as artists and artistic creation become more developed, so will collecting. I believe this dialogue is still open; let's face it, there are top-notch galleries in Dubai. We go to a lot of international art fairs and we have a good international reputation, but still, an equal amount of attention is not given to Dubai. I hope in the future that there will be more involvement and commitment from the Emirates because this is something which can only be built together.

**Finally, can you tell us a bit more about what events you have coming up at the gallery?**

So currently we're having one of the most important shows of 2014 which is Sara Rahbar's show, "Swarming", which is going on until early January. Then comes another key painter, the Portuguese artist Gil Heitor Cortesao. During Art Dubai we are going to show works by Anahita Razmi, a half-German, half-Iranian artist. We are taking part in this fair for the sixth consecutive time.