3 insiders reveal the hottest contemporary art venues in the Gulf

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As the contemporary art scene in Dubai and the wider Middle East gains international attention, three experts reveal their top spaces in the Gulf.

A number of trailblazing foundations, galleries and museums opening in Dubai and the rest of the Middle East in recent years, so Art Radar asked Joobin Bekhrad, Aaron Cezar and Ramin Salsali to tell us about their favourite contemporary art spaces in the Gulf Region.


To learn more about the Gulf Region’s burgeoning art scene, Art Radar spoke with Joobin Bekhrad from Toronto’s REORIENT online magazine, Aaron Cezar, Director of the Delfina Foundation in London, and Ramin Salsali, founder of Dubai’s Salsali Private Museum. Below are their top picks for contemporary art in Dubai and throughout the Gulf.
Joobin Bekhrad, Founder and Editor of REORIENT online magazine

- **Albareh - Manama, Bahrain**
  Based in Manama (Bahrain), Albareh represents a good number of Arab artists from around the Middle East and North Africa, many of whom are well known and established throughout the region. As well, it’s a wonderful starting point for those interested in learning about and discovering contemporary Bahraini artists, particularly as there aren’t a great deal on the international radar at the moment.

- **Carbon 12 - Dubai, UAE**
  Located in the gallery district of Al Quoz, Carbon 12 features works by Arab, Iranian artists and international artists. The artists they feature all have some sort of ‘edge’ to them and fit in well with the gallery’s alternative ethos.

- **Etemad Gallery - Dubai, UAE and Tehran, Iran**
  Founded in Tehran, Etemad Gallery represents some of today’s best contemporary Iranian artists and holds solo and group exhibitions on a routine basis. Over the years, it has earned itself quite a reputation as a first-rate art space, not only in its native Tehran but in Dubai as well.
Green Art Gallery, Dubai. Image courtesy the gallery.

- **Green Art Gallery - Dubai, UAE**
  Green Art Gallery is one of the spaces in Dubai holding the most interesting exhibitions, I think. Like Carbon 12, they do not focus exclusively on Middle Eastern artists, and also have an edgy, alternative outlook. It’s evident that quite a bit of thought goes into the curation of their exhibitions, which are always quite intellectually stimulating.

- **Khak Gallery – Dubai, UAE and Tehran, Iran**
  Like Etemad Gallery, Khak was founded in Tehran, although it has recently opened up a Dubai branch. They represent a good number of artists, both emerging and established, who work in a variety of mediums.

- **The Third Line - Dubai, UAE**
  To say the Third Line’s artist roster is impressive would be an understatement. The gallery features some of the Middle East’s finest artists, from both the Arab world and Iran, and also features a bookstore with even more ‘goodies’.

Aaron Cezar, Director of the Delfina Foundation. Photograph by Tim Bowditch.

**Aaron Cezar, Director of the Delfina Foundation**

- **Al Riwaq Art Space - Manama, Bahrain**
  Al Riwaq stands out as one the few long-standing independent art spaces in Bahrain that has been nurturing the contemporary art scene through international residencies, workshops and exhibitions.

- **Athr Gallery - Jeddah, Saudi Arabia**
  This Jeddah-based gallery is distinctive not only in terms of its programme
but also the family of individuals involved in its operation who have been strong advocates for Saudi art.

• Grey Noise - Dubai, UAE
This commercial gallery has immediately become a trendsetter in Dubai with an ambitious and well-crafted programme that continually pushes the possibility of what a commercial gallery should be in a place where there are too few spaces to see pioneering work.

![Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Qatar. Image courtesy the museum.](image)

• Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art – Doha, Qatar
Since its opening, Mathaf has staged several blockbuster exhibitions in the Gulf. Mona Hatoum and Etel Adnan are just two examples of the heavyweights in this year’s programme. Now under the helm of Abdellah Karroum, its forthcoming programmes are much anticipated.

• Sharjah Art Foundation - Sharjah, UAE
Sharjah has become the counterpoint to Dubai’s bustling commercial scene. Through a massive regeneration programme that has now paved the way for year-round exhibitions, Sharjah Art Foundation has sparked an unending momentum that doesn’t now only peak with its renowned biennial.

• Tashkeel - Dubai, UAE
With the overabundance of commercial galleries in Dubai, Tashkeel is markedly different: it’s a space with first-class facilities for artistic production and experimentation. As a result, their exhibitions and projects tend to feature artists ‘to watch’ as the next generation of those emerging from the UAE.
Ramin Salsali, founder of the Salsali Private Museum. Image courtesy the museum.

**Ramin Salsali, Founder of the Salsali Private Museum, Dubai**

- **Barjeel Art Foundation – Sharjah, UAE**
  An organisation based in Sharjah created to exhibit, protect and manage the personal art collection of Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi. Through exhibitions, the foundation provides a location to explore and discuss Arab heritage.

- **JAMM ART - Dubai, UAE**
  The first international support centre for contemporary art in Kuwait and the Middle East.


- **Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art - Doha, Qatar**
  This inspiring space was conceived to be used as a venue for dialogue and scholarship about modern and contemporary art in Qatar, in the region, and
in the world.

- **Q Contemporary** - **Beirut, Lebanon**
  Q Contemporary Beirut is committed to providing the most original, edgy contemporary art and design.

- **Salsali Private Museum** - **Dubai, UAE**
  The first private museum for contemporary art in the Gulf Region, and the first collector support centre where emerging, established and visiting collectors can meet, discuss and exchange their ideas.

![Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA). Image courtesy of Hojat Amani.](image)

- **Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA)** – **Tehran, Iran**
  The first public museum in the region to showcase contemporary art, established in 1977.

  Lisa Pollman