



Works by Michel Basbous on the booth of Agial Art Gallery from Beirut

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ART DUBAI

Bharti Lalwani sent us a report from amongst the booths at this year's fair, stoked by the new Modern section and Art Dubai's signature global scope

Art Dubai returned for its eighth edition in March and upheld its benchmark of quality international offerings. Some 85 galleries and 500 exhibiting artists were drawn to the UAE from cities as diverse as Lagos, Kolkata and Jakarta, and a third coming from the wider Middle East. 'This is my 71st art fair in 22 years,' said Paul Greenaway of GAGPROJECTS (Adelaide/Berlin), a returning gallery to Art Dubai, 'and the majority of conversations at this fair are about the art and the artists. People are not rushing towards brand names and that's refreshing.'

This edition's *MARKER* section looked to the Caucasus and Central Asia and was curated by artist collective Slavs and Tatars. Since 2011, *MARKER* has dedicated its five-booth space to pushing forward new centres of art production, previously galleries from Indonesia and West Africa. This much appreciated element of the fair continued to spark discoveries for collectors, institutions and potential collaborators.

Additionally, this year Art Dubai's was supplemented by a new Modern category, presenting 11 galleries showcasing 20th Century works by artists from the Middle East and South Asia. Prior to the fair's opening, Art Dubai director Antonia Carver emphasised the growing interest over the last 10 years in Modern artists of the region and that, from Karachi to Tehran, substantial research went into finding works that have not been exhibited in Dubai or elsewhere before.



(Above) 'Femme à la Robe Rose' by Algerian artist Baya, 1945. Courtesy of Elmarsa



Sara Rahbar's 'Flag #45, Exceptionalism', 2010-2013. Courtesy of the artist and Carbon 12

Modern's museum-quality show was a hotbed of discovery for work outside the Eurocentric artworld of the 1950s, '60s and '70s. As Laura Harding Stewart of Bahrain's Albareh Art Gallery explained, 'Pioneering Arab modernism – through abstraction, pointalism, woodcut or painting – ties in with personal emotion and integrity. These artists did not feel jaded, nor did they have a commercial outlook.' Elmarsa (Tunis) showed gouache-on-paper works by Algerian artist Baya (1931-1998). 'People forget that Algeria was in political turmoil [when Baya was working],' said dealer Moncef Msakni. 'Even though she had some presence in Tunisia, nothing was really done for her internationally. But now I envision a great future for her art.' Though commenting on the lack of audience footfall, Msakni received interest from American and Palestinian collectors.

Jhaveri Contemporary (Mumbai) chose to exhibit the loosely geometric works of Lahore artist Anwar Jalal Shemza, while architectural sculptures by Michel Basbous featured at Agial Art Gallery (Beirut). Lawrie Shabibi presented assorted works on paper by Nabil Nahas, and Grosvenor Gallery (London) focused on Pakistani-born British artist Rasheed Araeen (b. 1935) whose survey show *Rasheed Araeen: Before and After Minimalism* was running simultaneously at the Sharjah Art Foundation.

But the jewel in Modern was at Shirin Gallery, which worked with the Ardeshir Mohassess Trust to bring a curated selection of Mohassess' (1938-2008) politically charged cartoons. Titled *I Am Only A Reporter*, this collection of satirical drawings and collages conveyed Mohassess's critical interpretation of Iran's socio-political upheavals in the 20th Century whilst remaining visually astute.



Sales got off to a brisk start in the Contemporary section and many galleries noted first-time buyers. Experimenter from Kolkata presented a comprehensive showcase of work by Hajra Waheed. Her works sold to two institutions in Asia and to four private collectors. Kourosh Nouri of Carbon 12 (Dubai) displayed a never-before-seen 'Flag' by Sara Rahbar. 'There are only 50 flags in the series made between 2006 and 2010,' Nouri explained. 'This flag was made in parallel with her latest *War* series and is therefore more military-orientated.' Returning to exhibit at Art Dubai for the fifth consecutive year, Nouri considered his participation as an extension of the gallery sphere. 'It is our goal to maintain a continuity, to see our artists create new works and surprise our collectors.'

Ota Fine Arts, the only gallery from Japan participating in Art Dubai, brought a mix of international artists at a carefully priced range. 'We did Abu Dhabi Art for the first time in 2012 after which I visited Art Dubai in 2013 to gauge the difference,' said director Yoshiko Kogi. "Dubai has a rich variety of visitors. The fair itself is wonderfully organised and we're happy with its size." Kogi mentioned offhand that they want to participate next year but, with Art Basel Hong Kong moving its dates to March in 2015, that could prove difficult. During the press conference, Carver stated that she was aware of this shift in Art Basel Hong Kong's schedule and that Art Dubai would make an announcement soon.

What prevails at Art Dubai, however, is an exponential bridge-building process happening year on year. Art Dubai would not be what it is without the goings-on in Sharjah, and vice versa. Broadening these now-intrinsic links, coupled with the nascent Sikka Art Fair, has strengthened a pan-Emirates discourse, which is as much about giving depth to the scene of the region's as it is about selling work from it.



(Above) Yeesoookyung, 'Translated Vase'. Image courtesy of Ota Fine Arts. (Above-right) Hajra Waheed's 'Coordinates II (1-8)', 2014. Courtesy of Experimenter

(Below) Ardeshir Mohassess's 'Untitled' from 1979. On view at Shirin Gallery

