



Art Dubai 2014
By **ARIE AMAYA**

The most important week of the year for the art world in Dubai just passed, with an incredible offer that kept visitors traveling back and forth between Dubai, Sharjah and Abu Dhabi. The art week, however, was crowned with the beginning of Art Dubai, the Gulf's signature art fair and the most established and energetic fair in the Middle East. Art Dubai 2014 was ecstatic and electrifying, together with all its side programs (in particular the Global Art Forum) and the newly inaugurated Dubai Modern section, consolidating itself into a global fair attracting more and more international galleries. Art dealers in particular were happy about the fair and even happier about the results, though admittedly, some said that the sales had been better in the previous edition. The team of Art Dubai, led by fair director Antonia Carver, is always helpful and creative, ready to provide solutions on the spot and that said, impossible to deny the spectacular growth of the fair in the past two editions.

Dubai Modern was the highlight of the fair, bringing 20th century modernist works from South Asia and the Middle East, following a trend seen in other fairs and with the emergence of Frieze Masters: The contemporary has depleted its energy as it has gone too far into certain practices and forgotten its birth as a historical movement dependent on modernism. The selection of the participants was chaired by a committee that carefully studied the applications and curated the section. However, the greatest challenge for the section if it is to have continuity is its location. Dubai Modern was located in a distant ball room which some collectors say that they never found, and at times, especially at night, while the fair was buzzing with activity, this was concentrated along the terrace in front of the contemporary section, and Dubai Modern was relatively empty in comparison. The results it seems were very satisfying for the dealers, but a larger amount of fair energy was a bit missing.

The contemporary section lived up to its reputation as the leading fair in the region, the proof of which is, the number of new galleries participating from elsewhere than the Middle East. On a more historical approach, the quality of regional galleries (mainly from the Gulf and Lebanon) has significantly improved and strong programs are reflected in booths meeting international standards, rather than being placed in local and regional clusters. Many European galleries on the other hand, seem to have underestimated the growth of Art Dubai (and its collecting public), and continue bringing artworks that are somewhat condescending, too common place and slightly Orientalist; in fact it is not necessary to attend Art Dubai to find such works. As a paradigm shift in the structure not only of the fair but of the artistic panorama in the region, different artists from the Gulf (From Bahrain, UAE and Saudi in particular) were showcased at the fair by well established galleries with consolidated programs.

A selection of some of the best artworks present in Art Dubai, in no specific order:

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer at Carroll Fletcher

This young London gallery, at the edges of contemporary art, with an interest in new media and pioneering practices, brought to Art Dubai a new work by Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, one of the leading practitioners in multimedia art. His work, extending across formats and drawing heavily on architecture, performance and theater, was exhibited in a solo show at Borusan Contemporary in Istanbul last year. "Sphere Packing" is a series of 3D-printed pieces that concentrate the entire musical production of a number of composers in a single multi-channel device, creating a sphere of simultaneity through density and examines the question of pure sound rather than music, with a compositional process in mind. In "Wolfgang A. Mozart" (2014) he manages to integrate 565 channels of sound containing the whole of Mozart's artistic production. Works from this series were shown also at ARCO Madrid in February.

Joanna Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige at CRG

The Lebanese duo considered among the most significant artists from the Middle East in this generation, were shown in Dubai by the well established New York gallery, with one of their most arresting pieces. "Lasting Images", a video-installation completed over a decade ago, tells of a very particular story of loss, memory, archive and retrieval. In 2001 they stumbled upon films that once belonged to Joreige's uncle, a person still officially missing from the war like thousands of others. At the time they found a super-8 undeveloped film and hesitated whether to send it to be developed. The latency could be haunting and the message might be even lost. The resulting film came out veiled and barely noticeable, yet the presence was there at the moment of the dissolution. "Lasting Images" opens a vast field (as well as an abyss) in Hadjithomas and Joreige's practice that soon enough becomes an Archimedean point. In this work they question not only the production of images but the limits of memory and trauma.

Nasser Al Yousif at Albareh

Inaugurating the Dubai Modern section, featuring works from the Middle East and South Asia that were produced in the 20th century and that have status of pioneers and classics for artists working today, the well-established Bahraini gallery brought to the fair works from Nasser Al Yousif, one of the Gulf's hidden pearls and most pioneering modernists. Although Al Yousif's body of work is best known among specialists in the region through his expressionist paintings using archetypes and primal subjects, his printmaking work on linoleum has a special place in the canon of Arab art as they were produced once the artist had lost his sight and could no longer paint. These works, although formally very structured, tend towards abstraction and symbolism, being some of the earliest conceptual art in the region. The piece "Two Village Girls" (2000) was highly desired at the fair, having been prior exhibited and awarded several prizes. The piece was not for sale but helped make sense of the selection.

Kamrooz Aram at Green Art

One of the stars of Art Dubai, Aram, an Iranian painter based in the US, was not only present in the booth of this edgy Dubai art gallery, but as one of the winners of the prestigious Abraaj Group art prize, with the solo exhibition "Palimpsest: Unstable Paintings for Anxious Interiors" in the white cube of the gallery and the launch of a book of the same title. His recent painting work, dense but very fragile is well represented by the large canvas work "Tempered Composition with Three Points" (2013). One of his palimpsests, the work functions on several layers of paint, some of which are built architecturally and others, build up conceptually as a series of fragments. Rather than starting from an empty canvas, Aram seems to build upon fullness and cleans his images so that they are never completely present, fleeting elsewhere, titillating, but single snapshots do not move independently. The whole work is a composite unit of time and therefore gains its weight from an acute play with perception.

Waqas Khan at Sabrina Amrani

A Pakistani artist, represented by the energetic Madrid-based gallery, has been one of the most revealing discoveries in the MENASA region in recent years. Trained in Pakistan (unlike many of the region's artist, product of British and American schools), he was captivated by the Bardhakhat technique at the basis of the Mughal miniature painting – a method of crafting drawings dot by dot with a thin brush. Traditional wasli paper is used and the effect is one of surfaces so dense that one might think that he is facing the skin of limestone or marble. Wandering between mysticism and obsession, "Line of Force II" (2012) is a subtle drawing based on dots in straight lines that from a distance resembles a dense painted surface. Only a magnifying glass reveals the architectural madness of Khan's drawings. The visual narrative associated with the work opens up only with careful observation; an attention almost as obsessive as the lengthy process involved in creating such fragility.

Ali Cherri at Imane Fares

One of the leading names in the second generation of Lebanese artists from the postwar generation, Cherri's work has investigated political memory from a very personal point of view, across video (including film), installation, objects, performances and archives. This Parisian gallery, with a decidedly Middle Eastern touch, brought Cherri to Dubai with his "Archéologie" series (2014), from the exhibition "On Things That Move", which opened this past January. An expert in the archaeology of disaster, Cherri explores in this series of maps alternative readings of history and geopolitics that are almost apocalyptic and sensual. Using maps from the grand colonial era of Europe, the artist marks a territory of boundless violence and destruction and mirrors the memory thereof as a simultaneous past and future in which the present has disappeared under the weight of history. His archaeology of disaster, while an eminently political trope, is also a poetics and aesthetics of catastrophe and the X-ray of a fragile body politic.

Huguette Caland at Janine Rubeiz

Featured in the Dubai Modern section and one of the highlights there, Caland is a Lebanese master whose name requires no introduction for those familiar with art from Lebanon and the Levant. Born in the 1930s and still active, the artist has traveled a long road, including long periods in Europe and the United States. Her paintings and drawings, concerned with shape as a signifier – and thus in a highly modernist tradition – deals with objects as human fields. Brought to Dubai by one of Beirut's most prominent art dealers, a number of older works gave the audience the opportunity to see Caland in a broader context that adds extended layers of meaning to her recent work and the retrospective exhibition held at Beirut Art Center. Caland's status as a Lebanese master becomes indisputable with this presentation, whose themes are not only present but recurrent in the contemporary.

Secundino Hernandez at Krinzinger

A new large painting by the versatile Spanish artist was a surprise to find at the fair, whose contemporary section has

witnessed a slow but steady return of painting (as have other major fairs), after an update of the format of abstract painting. Brought by Austria's foremost art dealer and one of the strongest European presences in Art Dubai, Hernandez's canvas is not simply a pictorial space but the container of a massive sculpture in which acrylic and alkyd, gouache and oil, blend into a living organism with relief and depth using pure color and texture as both subject and object, creating a sense of perspective entirely based on color. Perhaps the heaviest work in his new series of semi-abstract paintings with sculptural relief, his "Untitled" (2014) is a work whose composition can radically change in the mind of the viewer and is ought to change overtime because of its inner structure that remains there intact, as if the colors were being held together by gravity or centrifugal force.

Lara Favaretto at Franco Noero

An eye-catching piece at the fair, "Lay It On Thick" (2013) is another of Lara Favaretto's now signature confetti cubes held by nothing but the sheer weight of itself. Both ephemeral and consistent, the work plays with the senses of the viewer who cannot easily conceive of it as pure material. The Italian artist, known not only for her confetti sculptures but also for the survey of her work presented in 2012 at MoMA PS1. A work that can be easily destroyed simply by walking too quickly near it or running your fingers through it, each one of these cubes involves hundreds of kilos of confetti, reflecting well her idea of "momentary monuments". Favaretto is also a versatile artist whose work extends across different overlapping formats such as painting, installation, found objects and performance. Experimenting with gravity and the possibility of solids is at the heart of Favaretto's practice whose sculptural installations have also involved concrete and even a caravan suspended in the air.

Jung Lee at Green Art

Visible at the fair only for one day, the stunning work of Jung Lee, a South Korean artist recently shown for the first time in the Middle East at this Dubai gallery, "I Want To Be Your Love" is one of those signature pieces of Lee, trained in photography in the UK but working across sculptural and conceptual edges. Lee is primarily interested in the limits of language and the loss of language drawn on a very careful and passionate reading of Barthes, investigating the ways in which language operates as an image. Text-based light installations are set on abetted landscapes, and then photographed, creating a dystopian world of simultaneous representation and destruction, playing with intense emotions and thinking of the spatial arrangement of the work as a void that needs to be filled with meaning, once language has ceased to accurately describe our experience of loss, as a consequence of the loss itself. The work examines the contemporary not only as a thematic axis but also as a condition.

Andre Butzer at Carbon12

One of two Dubai galleries with a decidedly European twist and take, Carbon12, brought to the fair a large untitled work by Andre Butzer, one of the leading German painters from a younger generation, who is at present on show at the gallery. More symbolic than abstract, Butzer's works unfold as tapestries or threads of history, embedded in a distinct syntax of despair. While at the edges of contemporary art, sharing a visual space similar to that of Jonathan Meese, Butzer inherits the legacy of the great painters from the 20th century, Munch, De Kooning and Mitchell. Sometimes almost resembling color fields and surface painting, the artist creates mental landscapes punctuated with tragic references. Butzer has been shown in major European galleries, and it is always both interesting and surprising that galleries make off-the-beaten path choices and bring to fairs something other than the generic formulas of contemporary art, giving collectors and the audience the opportunity to see quality works from solidly grounded artists.