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Your essential guide to Dubai Art Season

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Plans are taking shape for this year's Dubai Art Season, which grows ever more crowded with each edition. With all the talks, openings, and events that are really just pretexts for parties, it's a doozy to keep track of; so hopefully, this will help. First, however, a structural word on scheduling. Within the UAE, there has long been grumbling – or, given it's the art world, emotive panicking – that local art organisations crowd all their programming into two months of the year: March, during Art Dubai, and November, during Abu Dhabi Art.

Many argue there is now enough of a local audience to support year-round programming, and indeed some venues are avoiding the March madness altogether: NYUAD Art Gallery opened its new show of the sound artist Zimoun on February 26, and the Alserkal Avenue galleries all had strong shows in the formerly quiet periods of January and February, such as Samir Rafi at Green Art and Elisabeth Wild at Carbon 12.

But lest you breathe a sigh of relief, this year's March art season has two more venues to take in: the Jameel Arts Centre, which opened last November, and the Ishara Art Foundation, which is launching during Art Dubai.

Moreover, this year will be a particularly long haul, as the Sharjah Biennial and Art Dubai dates do not coincide with each other. They're separated by almost two weeks, effectively stretching the season out from March 7, when the Biennial launches, to March 23, when Art Dubai closes.

So, steel yourselves: adopt a brace position, polish those high heels, and perfect your air kisses.

Here's our definitive guide to the best of the art world to look forward to this month, day by day:

Thursday, March 7:

Sharjah Biennial officially launches, with three separate curators each approaching the topic of how we digest and form opinions today.

The curators are all quite varied, in terms of stylistic affinities and geographic specialisation – Zoe Butt works in Vietnam; Claire Tancons focuses on African art; and Omar Kholeif is on work from the Arab region – which seems designed to help the show avoid the “echo chamber” of its title.

As is typical for the well-respected exhibition, it launches a number of commissions – look out for new work by a hefty list including Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Mohamed Bourouissa, Meschac Gaba, Aline Baiana, Caline Aoun, Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn, Khadim Ali, and Lisa Reihana. There are historical presentations as well, which the biennial has likewise become known for: check out the Pakistani modernist Anwar Jalal Shemza and more from Lebanese artist Hugette Caland, whose work has been happily appearing here and there over the past few months in the UAE.

The opening events this year take place across three evocative sites: the refurbished heritage buildings that make up the Sharjah Art Foundation; the former Kalba ice cream factory on the east coast of Sharjah, and the legendary airplane graveyard in Umm Al Quwain.

Sharjah's March Meetings, its discursive component to the opening days, will also launch this weekend, with days programmed by each curator.

Thursday highlights include the House of MAKEdbA, a performance by Neo Muyanga that commemorates the South African civil-rights activist Miriam Makeba. Part of curator Zoe Butt's section, the event starts at the Al Hamriyah studios, in the north of Sharjah, on Thursday March 7, at 2pm.

And Jameel Arts Centre, in Dubai, changes its programming with three new artists' rooms, its focused solo presentations of artists' works: work by Hemali Bhuta, from India; Farah Al Qasimi, the Emirati conceptual photographer and artist; and Seher Shah in collaboration with Randhir Singh.

Friday March 8:

Sharjah continues: The Dominican artist Isabel Lewis, who works to activate social spaces with her expanded performances, stages the event *Untitled (juice, inwardness, natures)*, with music by Colin Hacklander and set design by Matthew Lutz-Kinoy (part of Tancons's programming strand), at 2pm. You'll need to board the bus for this, as it's hosted at the off-site space of the Kalba ice cream factory, an iconic building which the Sharjah Art Foundation saved from destruction and uses as intermittent exhibition space.

Saturday March 9:

The Filipino Superwoman Band, a collaboration between artist Eisa Jocson and an all-female band she's assembled from the UAE (part of Tancon's curation), plays at Al Mureijah Square, 8.15 to 9.15pm.

At Alserkal Avenue in Dubai, the Atassi Foundation opens its exhibition of female Syrian artists, which provides a great opportunity to see little-shown work.

Sunday March 10:

You can't leave Sharjah yet. It's not our fault their programming looks so good this year. (You can also check out our Sharjah restaurant recommendations [here](#).) At 10.30am curator Zoe Butt will be in conversation with the Filipino cinema auteur Kidlat Tahimik, whose masterpiece about longing and technology, *Perfumed Nightmare* (1977), will also be screened at the biennial (Thursday March 7 at 10.30am and Sunday March 10 at 9.30pm, both at Mirage City Cinema).

Monday March 11:

The Canadian conceptual artist and writer Douglas Coupland has turned his focus to art and technology in the past 10 years. Kholeif has invited him to Sharjah to perform his *A Manifesto*, a discussion of data and behaviour as well as an attempt to think through new literary forms in its own right. At 4.20pm at the Sharjah Institute for Theatrical Arts – and followed immediately (at 440, though note events often run late) with a talk by the Egyptian writer Yasmine El Rashidi.

Wednesday March 13:

Another denizen of thinking around art and technology, the peripatetic, syncretic brain of Shumon Basar, will be in conversation at 6.30pm at Jameel Arts Centre with Farah Al Qasimi, one of the most intriguing young Emirati artists working today (and whose solo exhibition – keep up! – just opened).

Friday March 15

Another of the UAE's favourite minds, Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, returns from Yale University, where he is teaching a class on modern Arab art. Al Qassemi will discuss overlooked Arab modern masters with Ibrahim Ismail at Jameel Arts Centre. (In Arabic, 6.30pm.)

In Sharjah, the Sharjah Architecture Triennial will host an event looking at environment and ecology in sustainable architecture design and urban planning. In conversation will be Dalal Alsayer, Samiah Henni, and Marina Tabassum, and curated by Adrian Lahoud, who will curate the first triennial later this year. The March event is at the Triennial's new headquarters of the Al-Qasimiyah School in Sharjah.

Saturday March 16

Sikka opens! One of the original fairs in the UAE, Sikka (which means alleyway in Arabic), has gone through a number of iterations, and has landed at a raucous, slightly disorganised, beloved event that caters as much to a dedicated art audience as to the wider residents of Dubai. Held, as always, among the warren of Al Bastikiya, and most active in the evenings.

Monday March 18

Quick question. Are you still alive? If you pinch yourself, does your skin stay in some small indented mountain formation, still frozen from the March Meetings' famously enthusiastic air conditioning? When you open your mouth, do you come out with phrases like "I always thought the performative nature of third cinema overly determined portrayals of what are essentially fluid racial identities, but actually when you take into account the ice cream I just ate, I think coffee is the best?" Don't worry, you can relax now. Get out your lipstick or your most flamboyant scarf (men, I am talking to you): it's Alserkal Avenue galleries night!

Another trawl, sure, but this is all sweetness and light.

The post-Minimalist New York artist Richard Nonas opens his first show ever in Middle East, at the Jean-Paul Najar Foundation. 1x1 has a group exhibition looking at traditions of Indian story-telling, and Custot Gallery has a group exhibition of some rather big-name international artists. Ayyam opens work by the Iraqi artist Sadik Alfraji; El Marsa looks at the late Algerian artist Baya Mahieddine, better known as Baya, with her colourful works in gouache. **Bernhard Buhmann is channelling Pac-Man in his technology-themed show at Carbon 12;** Kamrooz Aram, another familiar face in the Avenue, shows his beautiful Persian-miniature inspired paintings at Green Art.

The work of some of the famous Emirati five make an appearance: Hassan Sharif at Galerie Isabelle van den Eynde and Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, newly signed to the gallery, at Lawrie Shabibi.

Is there more? Heck yes, there's more. How about two approaches to steely feminine resolve: Rana Begum at the Third Line and Stephanie Saade at Grey Noise. And Hussain AlMoosawi at Gulf Photo Plus, Shamma Al Amri at the Zayed University space, Heitham Adjina at Showcase and Johan Creten at Leila Heller. The Egyptian artist Moataz Nasr does a pop-up exploration of the ancient "sun boat", in one of the Yard spaces, which also host projects by Mohamed Monaiseer and Michelle Poonawalla, with the latter looking into the always intertwined subjects of technology and violence. Oh, and if that's not enough for you, there's a book fair too: Fully Booked has one of the Yard pop-up spaces, as does *Selections* magazine again.

Now for some big guns:

The Salsali Private Museum is closing, and are showing works by Philip Mueller among others in their last show. The artist will be painting a mural on the wall of the gallery as a ground layer for his narrative paintings in a bittersweet development for this Alserkal Avenue stalwart.

The Bangladesh-based Samdani Art Foundation and its well-regarded curator, Diana Campbell Betancourt, are curating the March group show at Concrete: Fabric(ated) Fractures, which looks at 15 South Asian artists particularly through their use of textiles and, thematically, their interest in borders.

And finally, the Ishara Art Foundation launches, with a focus on South Asia and the ex-Tate curator Nada Raza as artistic director. Raza puts the work of Shilpa Gupta into dialogue with that of Zarina Hashmi, over a topic germane to so many in this city: where (and what) is home?

Wednesday March 20

I'm so sorry to break this to you, but Art Dubai has opened! And it looks great! You probably didn't have a day off – I saw you in that VIP lounge – but get your geek hat back on because the art fair's discursive strand is up and running, with Global Art Forum, a new section called Bawwaba and a fascinating, starry symposium on global art cities.

Global Art Forum's theme this year is education, programmed by Shumon Basar with the writer Victoria Camblin and the curator Fawz Kabra. Tirdad Zolghadr gives the keynote lecture on the proliferation of MFAs, BFAS, and PhD programs in the art world in Global Art Forum's regular site at Art Dubai, 7pm.

Thursday March 21

Back over in Alserkal Avenue, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, who will have an open studio in Alserkal Avenue from March 18 to March 23, performs his Earwitness Inventory, one of his lecture-performances investigating how sound can be used in forensic analysis, at 6pm.

Friday March 22

An all-day line-up at Art Dubai of extraordinary speakers:

Nada Shabout, one of the foremost scholars on Arab modernism, will talk about the art scene in Baghdad in the mid-twentieth century, particularly on how the optimism of the 1940s faded to the political unrest following the 1958 revolution. (1235pm at Art Dubai.)

Former Documenta artistic director Catherine David, who curated one of the first solo shows of Hassan Sharif in the Emirates, will speak about Beirut, and Elvira Dyangani Ose, the charismatic head of the Showroom in London, will talk about Dakar, the experiences of blackness, and key moments in Senegalese art history such as the First World Festival of Black Arts and the second Dakar Biennial.

Iftikhar Dadi finishes the day on another important art centre: Lahore, focusing on its 1950s period of modernist experimentation.

And *khalas*, that's a wrap, for both you, your sanity, the blisters on your feet, your ability to synthesise new information, and, probably, your bank balance.

If I was feeling cruel, I'd tell you that the Jameel Arts Centre is planning a symposium on March 30th around its inaugural "Crude" exhibition, but perhaps just put that out of your mind for the moment. Take a week in Zanzibar, and then come back rejuvenated. Remember, the art season is now longer than just March Madness ... and that's a good thing.