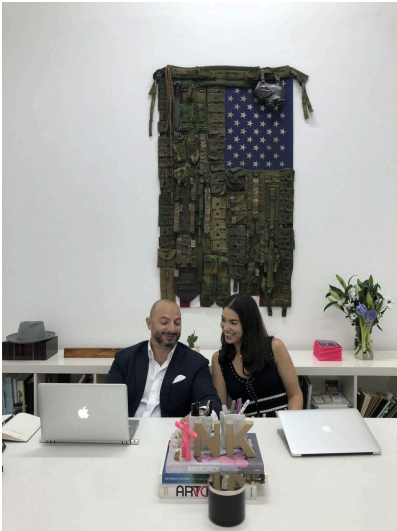


Mar 19, 2019

Dubai Gallery Carbon 12 Celebrates 10 Years In The Art World

By [Ann Binlot](#)

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/abinlot/2019/03/19/dubai-gallery-carbon-12-celebrates-10-years-in-the-art-world/#443fa1131016>



Being in the art business isn't an easy task. Mid-tier galleries have been suffering as blue-chip galleries continue to grow. When husband-and-wife team Kourosh Nouri and Nadine Knotzer founded their Dubai-based gallery [Carbon 12](#) in 2008, there was a dearth of contemporary art in the United Arab Emirates, and the emerging metropolis in the Middle East lacked culture. Nouri and Knotzer moved from Vienna to open one of the first galleries in [Alserkal Avenue](#), which is now the epicenter for art in Dubai, akin to Chelsea in New York, or Mayfair in London. Carbon 12 would become one of the pioneers of Dubai's contemporary art scene, showing artists from the region and internationally, and participating in several art fairs annually, including NADA, the Dallas Art Fair, Chicago Expo, and Sunday Art Fair in London. The gallery would soon cultivate the careers of several artists, including the New York-based Sara Rahbar, whose poignant American flags created with found objects tell the fractured narrative of the United States; Vienna-based Philip Mueller, whose fantasy-filled paintings evoke a sense of decadence mixed with darkness; and Bernhard Buhmann, another Vienna-based artist who creates bold geometric abstract paintings (he also has an exhibition there through May 1). Carbon 12 continues to celebrate their 10th anniversary this week with Dubai Art Week, and their 10th time participating in [Art Dubai](#). I quizzed Nouri and Knotzer about the genesis of Carbon 12, the challenges of the art market, and how they helped cultivate the contemporary art scene in Dubai.

Why did you decide to open a gallery a decade ago?

Kourosh Nouri: It had to be done! There was back then a total absence of an international contemporary art program, very different from what you would see in any international big city, and the desire of getting professionally involved with contemporary art was already in my mind since years. I had the privilege of having discovered contemporary art in Iran, over a decade before the scene and the artists explode and come to an international relevance... so this "eye" I "inherited", back then purely as an art enthusiast and modest collector was ready to be exploited commercially.

You were both living in Vienna at that point. Why did you decide to open it in Dubai?

Nouri: Tabula Rasa is what has brought us to Dubai, and already back then the believe that we will be able to implement what we planned. In retrospect, we did and got what we aimed for! Vienna remains our safe-haven, where we are much closer to our artists, and where we allocate our work during summer.

How did you build your roster of artists?

Nouri: Patiently and carefully, and in a very honest way. We really hand picked all those we believed in, and from a group of brilliant individual with genuine contemporary approaches. The few times we realised the practise lacks a long-term genuine relevance, we immediately pulled the plug, and I believe we would stick to this approach. We are 100 percent dedicated to our represented artists, and they know it! This was always our way of building the roster, and as well the fact that we never based success only on commercial aspects.

Describe your program.

Nouri: To make it simple, it was about being the gallery I didn't have access to when I started collecting back in the mid-'90s! Someone I could trust, offering a wide and complementary group of artists with exciting approaches to the production of contemporary art, each and everyone with a very unique practise. Naturally the roster evolved with time and become what it is today.

One decade is quite an achievement. To what do you owe your success?

Nouri: It is a long time, a huge human investment, and total commitment, but all in all, and when you think about it in terms of the "big picture", it's not that long... look around us, it takes generally over 20 years to really establish a company, sometimes even longer and almost in most industry longevity is a key component of success. We are extremely thankful for being where we are today. We, my partner Nadine and I, work hard, we are not afraid of 1000 percent commitment and we have been putting all our energy, knowledge, and passion into Carbon 12. We try to keep it together by eating as well as we can, sleeping well, and exercise... that's the way we have worked on especially the past four years.

What are some of Carbon 12's biggest highlights in the past decade?

Knotzer: The fact that we managed to survive financially without compromising on the program (we planned from the beginning), by staying as well financially independent, and by having a very correct pricing strategy for the represented artists' works. We opened at one of the worse times, in November 2018, few months after one of the biggest economic meltdowns in the past decades! From the curatorial aspect, we had many highs—seeing our artists grow, their works being part of permanent collections like the British Museum and Centre Pompidou. Being part of major biennials, and other institutional highlights. What we are also very proud of are our younger collectors, people who started collecting with the gallery and are constantly learning and supporting our artists.

How essential is participating in art fairs for your business?

Nouri: It is essential, especially if the gallery is not located in a typical 'art circuit' cities like New York, London, Paris, or more recently Hong Kong. It becomes then an exercise by itself to make "shows" for a fair. The ability to not misrepresent artists' works in spaces significantly smaller and more sterile than the usual gallery spaces—it is a true discipline! Having said that, it's also important there are fairs bringing a much larger audience to the artists we promote. We aren't an anti-art fair-gallery, we just need to select them carefully, there is so much bullshit out there, and we have learned not to follow only the big names but build a collector community for our artists in places that might not be on top of your usual art fair list.

Knotzer: We have participated at Dallas Art Fair four years ago for the first time and are proud to say that we made that effort and major investment of taking part in a fair so far away from us, that is not on everyone's radar. We can now say that we have a good following of invested collectors based in Texas. Carbon12 is also the only NADA Member from the region, an organization well known for its Miami fair. NADA is an extremely important indicative for a gallery like ours and its community was able to build a strong fair... the way the organization is run, is very exemplary a thank god nothing to do with 90 percent of art fairs out there.

What are the biggest challenges of running a gallery in 2019?

Nouri: Keeping it together, and protecting ourselves from the bullshit out there! These are serious challenges. We want to be a new breed of gallerists, with healthy ethics, bodies and minds, taking truly care of their artists professionally to allow them to develop and continue producing art. By being ethically sound, eating well, sleeping well, and doing sports, as a gallerist you put yourself in the right state of mind to do your profession... and a huge part of this profession is to represent your artists, making sales for them so they continue to stay professional artists living from the art they sell! It's not about us, but we are the vehicles of this promotion professionally and personally. It's marvellous, motivating, and super honourable...

It is rough out there, competing with some 'gallerists' who have totally abandoned the 'exhibition-making', and by association liberated themselves from a huge portion of the work, their spaces turned either into soulless and sad white cubes with no one working there and all that to favor travelling around the world for self-promotion and click-building. And picture this, some art fairs accept galleries without spaces... this is where I draw a line and call the bullshit! It's insane some days! And no one cares about who closes and reopens, who doesn't pay the artists, and who's not even capable of running a basic business... so much is purely in the appearances. So the pressure is very high, surviving commercially in this environment is a daily challenge.

Knotzer: Artists producing quality works for shows and fairs are also totally challenged and under pressure... so many fairs and shows, and a good gallery should not push artists to produce an unhealthy amount of works just because there is 5 new art fairs.... - again long term planning is the key for everyone.

What are some topics that need to be addressed in the art market?

Nouri: There is a serious long list. I mentioned some in the previous question. The other most critical one is the patronage of emerging to mid-career artists. It's very simple and straightforward: if we want to have a thriving number of artists in the future, who would be reaching the golden periods of their careers, artists need to be able to survive now! Not tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, today as now! Otherwise they will be forced to abandon art and seek a salary paying profession!

Buying blue chip art is great, or secondary acquisitions might sound fun, but both will jeopardise the future of the art directly or indirectly. Think about the amount of great and relevant artworks of very high quality than can be in a collection for an amount like \$500,000. This is really nothing when you compare to buying fake "masterpieces" emerging from nowhere sold for hundred of millions of dollars... it's simply insane how far we are going in the extreme of ridicule. Imagine what you would do with half-a-billion dollars then! To resume today you need to support the artists of tomorrow if you want to see more than the same 30 to 50 galleries promoting less than (the same) 500 living artists.

What's next for you?

Nouri: The show will go on!

Knotzer: The March show will be with a household name from our core, Bernhard Buhmann, together with a milestone 10th participation at Art Dubai. At the same time, our (back then) youngest 'recruit' Philip Mueller is having a large solo show at Salsali Private Museum in Dubai. There will be a big monograph published by end of 2019/early 2020. Some of our younger artist are entering signing with a second gallery. Two of our artists are getting their first institutional solo shows in 2019. It's an exciting decade to look forward. I hope in 2029 you will interview us again, and we have something interesting to tell you.