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Not Cancelled: Dubai galleries host digital art event to keep business going

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In a bid to keep business going amid the coronavirus pandemic, a group of galleries in Dubai have come together for a week-long digital event akin to a virtual art fair, showcasing artworks for sale along with a scheduled programme of online artist talks and tours.

Named Not Cancelled Dubai, it runs from Tuesday, May 19 to Tuesday, May 26, and features participating galleries Carbon 12, Green Art Gallery, Grey Noise, Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Lawrie Shabibi and The Third Line.

The event is the regional version of the Not Cancelled initiative, which was created by design firm Treat Agency in Vienna as a response to the closures caused by the coronavirus pandemic. It has since had editions for Berlin, Chicago and the Netherlands.

While art galleries in Dubai continue to [face concerns about their future](#), they have been increasing their digital initiatives and collaborations to ensure that the art scene remains intact, despite the economic toll of the pandemic.

"Covid-19 has brought so many galleries together, not just in Dubai but all over the world. I think it is natural that during a crisis we come together with like-minded colleagues to support each other," says Asmaa Al Shabibi, co-founder of Lawrie Shabibi, which is presenting the works of Shahpour Pouyan and Ishmael Randall Weeks for Not Cancelled Dubai. "We are facing the same set of challenges and disruption to our businesses. Being able to air those concerns has helped us all immensely – we are sharing resources, ideas and even staff."

Speaking of her gallery's participation, founder Isabelle van den Eynde says: "This is a turning point in our way of working. For most of the six participating galleries, it is our first virtual fair ... While nothing replaces the physical experience, the content that we will provide expands what you may probably get when you visit an exhibition at our galleries."

Her eponymous gallery is showcasing works by Indian artist Vikram Divecha and Turkish duo :mentalKLINIK in addition to in-depth videos about the artists' previous works.

It is not the first time that Dubai galleries have joined forces with others to boost their presence online. Last month, 10 galleries from the UAE and India [launched digital platform In Touch](#), which has a similar format and objective to Not Cancelled.

Grey Noise, one of the participants of In Touch, is also part of Not Cancelled, showcasing works by Lebanese artists Charbel-Joseph H Boutros and Stephanie Saade. The Third Line, meanwhile, is presenting photographs by Tarek Al Ghoussein and digital prints by Sara Naim, while Green Art Gallery features Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck's kaleidoscopic paper collages, as well as an excerpt of his video work *Chronoscope 1952 or 1953, 11pm (I)*.

Carbon 12 has included works by Iranian artist Amir Khojasteh and Austrian artist Monika Grabuschnigg. The former will release a playlist of music for the event, while the latter will appear in an online talk on Saturday, May 23.

Although Dubai has loosened a few of its lockdown measures and galleries are now able to open by appointment only, there is still a difficult road ahead. For one, the timing of the closures in March struck just before Art Week and Art Dubai, which would have brought in collectors and networking opportunities. Globally, numerous art fairs have been cancelled too.

With the slow summer months approaching, sales will increasingly have to be made in the virtual realm, which means digital events may be the way forward for art galleries in the months to come.

"The online world has become our only outreach to the general public. Our business is driven by these kind of real-life events like openings and art fairs, so it is only natural that we try and recreate these online," Al Shabibi says.

And what of her prediction for the future of online platforms? "I think over time we will see these kind of initiatives become more sophisticated. These are still early days."