

The National

May 18, 2020

'Without galleries, there are no artists': Dubai's art spaces fear for their future

By Melissa Gronlund

<https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/without-galleries-there-are-no-artists-dubai-s-art-spaces-fear-for-their-future-1.1020703>

"If galleries don't sell, artists don't make enough money to work, to feed their families, to live," Yasmin Atassi, director of Green Art Gallery in Dubai, tells The National. "Without galleries, there are no artists."

Concerns are rising over the fate of art galleries in Dubai amid the coronavirus pandemic. The Covid-19 outbreak came at a particularly bad time for these small businesses, many of which are based in Alserkal Avenue.

Gallery season in the UAE is heavily weighted towards March, when Art Dubai and its associated events bring in major collectors, curators and museum directors. The cyclical nature of the Gulf's art scene will not give them any ready respite; though the quarantine situation is easing, they still face the traditionally slow periods of Ramadan and the summer months.

Dubai's art galleries represent the entire region

Galleries worldwide are nervous about their businesses in a post-Covid-19 economy. However, if you look at the UAE, Dubai's galleries play a bigger role in the local and regional art scenes that is often overlooked. Because of Dubai's status as a commercial hub for the region, its galleries are key representatives for artists of the Global South and other cities in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia region.

"International curators discover a lot of Arab and South Asian artists through our galleries," says Asmaa Al Shabibi of Lawrie Shabibi. This visibility is important to getting Menasa region's artists into biennials. "We network to get these curators to come visit – we have to, because we do not have a fully fledged art scene."

Commercial galleries are also some of the only places to see contemporary art year-round in Dubai. They regularly host school visits, with children crouching on the floor and drawing the images they see around them. And the shows of historical artists at some places, such as Green Art and Meem, means that galleries offer a chance to see important works of Arab Modernism that are still not regularly on view on the museum circuit.

Indeed much of Dubai's art history has been accomplished through its galleries, which predate non-profit exhibition sites such as the Jameel Arts Centre and Alserkal Avenue Foundation's pop-up spaces.

Yasmin Atassi took over Green Art from her mother, Mayla Atassi, who had set up galleries focused on Arab modern painting in Homs and Damascus in Syria before moving to Dubai in 1995. "No one was buying then," Atassi says, "But my mother always found a way to make things work."

Mayla started off selling prints and paintings to the hotels that were being built then, such as the Shangri-La, and eventually helped shape some of the major UAE collections.

The contemporary art galleries in Alserkal Avenue now play a larger role in setting up artists' practices, supporting them through sales and production funds – acting as agents as much as dealers. Ultimately, they offer a stepping stone towards becoming established, placing artworks in museums and building a dedicated set of collectors that gives artists a reliable income stream. "It's small galleries who take on the risk of younger artists," says Al Shabibi.

But creatives can now apply for grants to help them

Support is beginning to emerge. The federal government conducted an Emirates-wide survey asking the creative sector about challenges in the Covid-19 environment, resulting in the recently launched [National Creative Relief Programme](#). The initiative provides funds to artists, freelancers, and SMEs in the arts sector, offering grants from Dh15,000 to 50,000.

Alserkal Avenue has given a three-month reprieve in rent to its nearly 80 businesses and non-profit organisations, including the 12 galleries it hosts. Galleries are hoping this will be enough.

“There is an impression that we are just doing this as a hobby, or that we have major financial backers,” says Atassi. “We are not – we are small to medium businesses. And it is an expensive business, with very slim margins.”

A larger problem is liquidity: galleries globally tend to have low levels of cash on hand, and this is particularly so before an event such as Art Week in March, for which businesses were forecasting major sales. Galleries are already considering – and in some cases, implementing – cost-saving measures such as downsizing to smaller spaces, consolidating or sharing warehouses and laying off staff.

The dip in liquidity is also a point of difference from the last crisis that many of the galleries weathered: the financial crash of 2008. Those that were around then, such as The Third Line and Carbon 12, say this is far worse.

“In 2008, it was like someone suddenly pulled the plug – the phone stopped ringing. But people were still going out. There were still opportunities to engage and to show work. Now, people are not even socialising,” says Sunny Rahbar, who co-founded The Third Line in 2005. “And it’s coming off from harder times. 2019 was a difficult year. In 2020, we were already worried before the virus.”

There are also fears around the ability for galleries to bounce back once social-distancing measures begin to ease, considering travel worldwide will remain down. Since most of the buyers are abroad, eased local restrictions will not necessarily translate into a rise in sales – unlike in New York or Paris, where there is a strong community of clients. Dubai galleries will still be forced to sell online.

To combat this, they are swapping their usual stratagems of competition and guardedness for collaboration and transparency. Regular calls via the Zoom app have facilitated information-sharing. Openness also helps the bottom line. As art fairs are shut globally, galleries will lose sales and networking opportunities – crucial to the still growing Arab art market. Six of Alserkal Avenue’s galleries are this week taking part in a roving virtual event founded by the digital agency, Treat. The event features artists from galleries in different international cities, exposing them to new client lists and networks, particularly in Europe.

But many say more needs to be done, whether small measures, such as waiving trade license renewal fees, or the temporary suspension of Dewa bills, or larger one-off reforms, such as moving Abu Dhabi Art to earlier in the season. The galleries hope that local buyers realise how important it is to support them at this time.

“It has taken us 13 years to build this,” says Kouros Nouri of Carbon 12. “It could all be taken away in an instant.”