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Dubai's Carbon 12 Gallery Founder Kourosh Nouri Prepares for Armory Show

By Rawaa Talass

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More than a decade ago, the Iranian gallerist Kourosh Nouri made a bold move: He packed up his belongings and relocated from Vienna to Dubai to realize a singular dream.

He and his partner Nadine Knotzer founded Carbon 12, one of the first international contemporary-art galleries in Dubai's cultural hub, AlSerkal Avenue.

Kayhan Life caught up with Kouroush to find out about his career and background and activities during the pandemic.

How did your interest in art begin?

It began in a very organic way. My parents gave us a lot of tools, which means books. There was also at least one or two big fat art books at home. From a very early age, I used to take these books and just go through them. Going to exhibitions was also part of our cultural life. When we moved to France, I was a teenager and you had what they call 'les excursions,' going around and seeing local museums.

Then, in the mid-1990s, I grew very unhappy with my professional life. As compensation, I started visiting shows in Iran, because I was traveling between Europe and Tehran. At the time, nobody cared about emerging contemporary art in Iran. When you don't care, there is no market, and when there is no market, everything is unfortunately [very] cheap, which is saddening.

I suddenly realized that there was this incredible, super-cultured youth in Iran. I ended up hanging out with a super gang of artists who took me to see other shows. I started to collect for my own pleasure.

What brought you to Dubai?

I was having some personal problems in 2006 and 2007. I'm also not your average corporate guy, even though I have an MBA. There was this need for me to do something outside the box. I told my partner Nadine, who is a brilliant young woman: "Listen, let's go and open an art gallery in Dubai."

She's Austrian and the Germans have a magnificent expression. When they talk about someone, they say: "With this woman, you will steal horses." She is a trooper.

We arrived here literally with our personal stuff and a couple of artworks. We just drove around the city and looked at the art scene. We went back to Europe and on an epic research trip to figure out what the gallery was going to look like. I remember that one day in Berlin we went through so many studios that my shoes broke down, and those were quality shoes.

We said let's do a gallery with a program about great artists, creating visual conversations through exhibitions, and this was how we started. It was really hard from day one, but we held on very tightly to our guns. We have one artist based in Iran, two from the Iranian diaspora, one Emirati artist and the rest are from completely different regions of the world.

Why did you choose to name the gallery Carbon 12?

In my fantasy world, I'm an environmental activist, so the topic of the carbon footprint and pollution was really close to my heart. The '12' came from the fact that we were joking around, saying: "As an Iranian, let's avoid the radioactive isotope." So we chose the 12 instead of the 14.

You previously mentioned that you represent a number of artists who are from or work in Iran. Tell us more about them and the kind of work they produce.

Sara Rahbar is a human being I deeply respect. She has a very genuine practice that is layered and sophisticated. Sara doesn't hide anything and just comes straight at you with her practice, giving you a direct hit. It's very strong, and very counter every fashionable movement of the art world. She's so genuine that she doesn't even bank on the fact that she's an immigrant child, walking into the US and making it that far.

Her 'Flag' series is about this Iranian girl who escaped Iran in the harshest way and ended up having baggage (or the lack thereof) on a new soil. The new 'soil' is the American flag. The decorative elements and the textiles were her cultural and personal baggage.

An artist still based in Iran, hopefully not forever because he really deserves to see something else, is Amir Khojasteh. We discovered his work by accident. In my opinion, contemporary painting in Iran has been having some issues in the past years. So it's a challenge to find very good contemporary painters. Amir comes from a very modest background and has been working very hard to be where he is. This is only the beginning of his career, and the progression in his practice is so impressive.

We've been in the Covid-19 pandemic for more than a year now. How has this experience been like for you as a gallery? We managed to put together five magnificent exhibitions as if there was no pandemic. I remember that it was really hard, but we did our job. I am very old school and nothing beats a beautiful exhibition. You want to do it online, knock yourself out. But it's not the same thing.

What's next for Carbon 12?

September is going to be a big return of big real art fairs – namely the Armory Show. We have been accepted, and it's going to be our second consecutive year of going there. We are pulling out some heavy artillery for that. Amir's show, "Try to Catch the Moon," will stay on all summer. And we have a fascinating new artist joining the gallery in September.