

Observer

20 November 2025

Abu Dhabi Art 2025 Stakes Out Its Vision Ahead of Frieze's Takeover

By [Elisa Carollo](#)

<https://observer.com/2025/11/abu-dhabi-art-2025-highlights-frieze-transition/>



The fair's 17th edition—its final chapter before Frieze—balances its regionally anchored identity with growing global ambitions that could get amplified when the megafair takes the reins.

The 17th edition of Abu Dhabi Art delivers exactly what one might expect from a fair intent on defining the U.A.E.'s place in the global art ecosystem. Running through November 23, this edition of the fair is the last before Frieze takes over in 2026, crystallizing Abu Dhabi Art's cultural positioning as a more international fair—a bridge between the West and the East of the art world. That said, all signs point to it remaining firmly rooted in the region's rapidly developing artistic landscape while operating as a key platform spotlighting local talent, from the fast-growing contemporary scene to the foundations of Arabian modernism. The question now is whether that vision will hold once Frieze steps in and how the takeover will affect the fair's identity.

Although sales are moving at a slower pace than other international fairs (to the point that a proper sale report is almost impossible at the end of the preview days), a broad sense of enthusiasm and excitement was palpable during the highly attended VIP preview on Tuesday (Nov. 18)—the true key moment of the fair, following a pre-preview exclusively for women the day before. By late afternoon, the aisles filled rapidly, becoming packed by evening with both local visitors and a wave of internationals: residents, business travelers and those who had flown in specifically for the fair, with French and Italian chatter particularly dominant.

The fair itself is notably international, with 142 galleries from 34 countries presenting this year at Manarat Al Saadiyat, the multidisciplinary arts center anchoring the expanding cultural district of Saadiyat Island. Two countries in particular, Nigeria and Turkey, receive special attention in this edition, with dedicated sections offering an in-depth look at their rich yet often-overlooked art scenes.

[...]

An international platform for the MENA art scene

Abu Dhabi Art remains firmly anchored in a *genius loci*, dedicating substantial space to artists and galleries in the region as it establishes itself as the premier international platform to amplify the vibrancy of its ever-growing artistic production and community.

Among the local power players, Carbon 12 is presenting a new group of playful wood-carved works by Mexican artist Edgar Orlaineta, following his introduction to local collectors with an almost sold-out solo exhibition last year, alongside a large André Butzer piece and works by Sarah Almehairi. By the end of the VIP days, the gallery already reported to Observer multiple successful placements, with Sarah Almehairi's works selling out the first day of the fair — the artist also has a work at the inaugural NOMAD Abu Dhabi and is currently producing work for her solo presentation at Art Basel Qatar. Works from Edgar Orlaineta's Mountain series were also placed in a significant Abu Dhabi collection. At its gallery in Dubai, Carbon 12 just opened its 100th exhibition featuring Gil Heitor Cortesao's sixth solo show.

[...]