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Art Basel Qatar: Artists and galleries on a new cultural moment

by Ivona Mirkovic

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At the beginning of February, from 5th to 7th (with previews on 3rd and 4th), the first edition of Art Basel Qatar unfolded across M7 and the Doha Design District in Msheireb, bringing together 87 galleries presenting 84 solo artist projects. Participants came from 31 countries, including 15 first-time Art Basel exhibitors, marking a measured yet ambitious debut for the brand's fifth global fair.

Artistic Director Wael Shawky, working closely with Art Basel's leadership, replaced the traditional booth model with a curated, open format structured around the theme *Becoming*. The concept examined transformation—of identity, systems, and cultural narratives—positioning the Gulf as a site where history and rapid modernization intersect. In Qatar, the fair signaled more than a market expansion; it underscored the country's long-term investment in culture as infrastructure.

By the close of the week, over 17,000 visitors had attended, with nearly half of private collectors traveling from the MENASA region. Galleries reported sustained engagement from institutions and collectors in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the

UAE, and Europe, translating into sales across a broad range of price points. Representatives from more than 85 museums and foundations were present, reinforcing Doha's growing institutional gravity.

Ivona Mirkovic traveled to Doha for hube to attend the inaugural edition on the ground. Reporting from across multiple venues, she examined the solo presentations and spoke with artists and gallerists about what participation signals at this formative moment. Her account offers a close look at a fair that could play a defining role in reshaping the region's cultural landscape.

'In Folded Space' by Sarah Al Mehairi at the Carbon 12 Gallery

Emirati artist, Sarah Al Mehairi presents *In Folded Space*, a project that plays off her *Off Centered* series as she continues to explore abstraction as a language attuned to flux and expands her investigation into language and structure. Voids and intervals are as significant as form, suggesting that meaning emerges as much from absence as from presence. Through a constellation of wooden frames and gridded forms that lean, rest, and intersect across the booth, these modular units echo architectural fragments yet resist firm closure. Rather, they fold into one another and the surrounding space. Within the theme of Becoming, the work reflects on layered sites of transformation, whether as a person, as a space, or as a region, where histories are continually inscribed and re-inscribed

Ivona Mirkovic: What does it mean to you to be part of the inaugural edition of Art Basel Qatar? How do you hope it will impact your career or visibility as an artist?

Sarah Al Mehairi: I feel absolutely honored to be part of the inaugural edition of Art Basel Qatar. It's a truly special moment to actively participate in a defining chapter of this region's art and cultural history. There's something profoundly impactful about being in a new setting while still feeling so close to home. I hope my participation in Art Basel Qatar expands my visibility beyond the region while also deepening my connection within it. Being part of a platform of this scale at such a defining moment is both a privilege and a responsibility. I'm truly grateful to contribute my voice to this larger, evolving, and collaborative ecosystem.

IM: From your perspective, what does the emergence of Art Basel Qatar signal for the Middle Eastern art scene? Do you think it will reshape how the global art community perceives artists from this region?

SAM: From my perspective, the launch of Art Basel in Qatar, the first of its kind in the region, signals a powerful shift for the art scene, reinforcing that this region is indeed central to the global cultural conversation. It's always been local to global but now it feels like the global has become local, physically present, integrated in dialogue, platforms and relationships. We have an incredible group of artists here, and a platform of this scale gives us the opportunity to be seen, heard, and engaged with in a more direct and expansive way. I believe it has the potential to reshape how the global art community perceives artists from this region. It creates space for our narratives to be understood on our own terms, within our own context, and within our community first. It begins here.

IM: How do you personally define success at an event like Art Basel Qatar? Is it exposure, exchange, inspiration, or something else?

SAM: At an event like Art Basel Qatar, as an exhibiting artist, I define success through conversations. Conversations lead to relationships, and relationships foster support and defining moments. For me, it comes down to meaningful exchange, the kind that continues long after the event itself.

IM: Are there recurring themes or ideas in your work that you feel speak specifically to a cross-cultural dialogue?

SAM: Because I work in abstraction, cross-cultural dialogue happens quite naturally. I use forms, patterns and compositions that feel familiar but I don't define them completely. I give just enough information for someone to

grasp onto something, or to lean in a little further, while still leaving space for interpretation. That space is important to me because that's where the conversation begins.

Ivona Mirkovic: How do you expect the launch of Art Basel Qatar shaping the contemporary art market in the Middle East over the next few years?

Nadine Knotzer (Founding director at Carbon 12 Gallery): We hope it allows artists and galleries to showcase important projects, leading to acquisitions by strong and relevant collections and institutions in the region. Art Basel Qatar and the fair's program also give collectors from abroad the chance to travel to the Middle East and discover new practices. With the idea of an entire Basel fair only showing solo presentations, we can expect well-curated displays that give visitors a clear sense of each exhibiting artist's practice. A fair like Art Basel Qatar definitely puts the art scene on the map.

IM: Are there specific opportunities you hope Art Basel Qatar will create for cross-regional partnerships, collaborations, or cultural exchange?

NK: We are interested in giving our artists different platforms to exhibit. The idea is always that strong collaborations emerge from such presentations. You don't just want to go to an art fair or a new art scene and sell to one or two private collectors; the goal is to ensure that artists' practices are shown and promoted where it matters most.

IM: Have you observed a shift in the openness of regional collectors or the general public toward emerging artistic practices? How might Art Basel Qatar accelerate this trend?

NK: I can only speak for what we see and experience in the UAE. Our art scene has grown and continues to evolve, with the help of galleries, new collectors engaging with the art scene, and artists producing fantastic work in the country. It requires a whole ecosystem, and a growing ecosystem depends on fairs like Art Basel to allow the art scene to thrive.

Photography and words by IVONA MIRKOVIC (unless otherwise stated)