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Dubai: a safe place for unsafe ideas?



By Peter Aspden

Dubai may become an unlikely locus of artistic freedom in the region



From 'The State of Disappearance' (2012) by Manal al-Dowayan

There's an unusually irreverent air among the visitors to this year's Art Dubai, the emirate's ever-growing fair of contemporary art. Some wear badges bearing cheerfully ironic slogans: "It's not me, it's my Middle East nervous anxiety," says one. "Hands off my freezone," says another.

They are making a point: Dubai is a place associated with spectacular bouts of financial speculation, bold building projects and a still-booming tourist sector. But it is not known for its free-flowing exchange of ideas.

The fair, now in its seventh year, is aiming to change that. What started as an event solidly grounded on market principles – bringing wealthy patrons with bare walls together with decoratively pleasing artworks – is turning into something more substantial. Critics from the west were initially sceptical about the fair's status. How could art be freely displayed and exchanged in a non-democratic society with such rigorous censorship policies?

And yet, little by little, the city's art scene has nudged its way into respectability and international prominence. Its previously defensive attitude has turned into something feistier. "Typical occidental ignorance," says Shumon Basar, commissioner of this year's global art forum, when I ask him whether western scepticism is still justified. "A classic symptom of the west's waning superiority."

Basar is a Cambridge-educated writer and curator who divides his time between London and Istanbul. He embodies what he sees as an eastward shift of intellectual activity. "The economic shift has taken place already," he says. "Now what the west is clinging on to is this exclusive ownership of the idea of the Enlightenment. I am not saying there are no limits here. But there are limits everywhere. What people forget to mention is what is happening under the radar, which is incredible."

Inside the fair, some of the art at least is doing its best to live up to its role as social commentator. There may be no nudity or pornography around (Basar condemns the "absurd focus" on these as totems for freedom of expression), but Dubai has become an important focus for artists from the wider region whose work is making trenchant points not always appreciated in its host country.

The Saudi-based Athr Gallery is showing the work of Ahmed Mater, supersized aerial photographs of the fast-developing area around Mecca and a critique, Mater says, of overzealous planning. The pictures, all cranes and busyness, give little sense of the place's spiritual significance. The artist points to the Grand Mosque in the centre of the picture. "This is the only thing I respect," he says. "Not all this," waving at the cranes. Ideally, Mater wants to show the photographs in Mecca itself. But to show them in Dubai is "testing the waters. I want to hear what thinkers, what intellectuals, think [about the issues]."

The gallery's founder, Hamza Serafi, is more equivocal about the themes raised by Mater's photographs. "Artists always have strong statements to make," he says. "Some people see this as a disturbing image. But these changes are also allowing an extra 1m people to come [to Mecca]." Serafi says the art he likes to display is that which opens up issues for discussion.

"It is not criticism, it is dialogue," he says. "With art, you learn how to have such a dialogue, how to respect other opinions, how to appreciate beauty. It is a form of healing. Seventy-five per cent of our population is under the age of 30. Our youth is dynamic, it is eager to learn, and we have to give them other things to feed on." Showing at a fair such as Dubai "draws attention to the art from a wider perspective".

Like its counterparts in other parts of the world, Art Dubai has spawned satellite events marketed under an "Art Week" umbrella. Over in the industrial zone of Al Quoz, a number of galleries are clustered around Alserkal Avenue, where a \$13.8m expansion is shortly to create a cultural hub for the city.

At Ayyam Gallery, one of the region's best-known, painter Shurooq Amin is exhibiting her new series "Popcornographic",

which aims to expose the hypocrisy of attitudes towards women in her native Kuwait. One work, “The Last Straw”, based on Leonardo’s “Last Supper”, shows Arab men pondering sexualised images of women on their table. In “A Man of No Importance”, a sunglasses-wearing queen plays imperiously with a paper cut-out of men in traditional Arab dress.

Amin’s last show in Kuwait, dealing with similar themes, was shut down after three hours by the authorities for being “pornographic” and “anti-Islamic”. “What I can’t show in Kuwait, I can show in Dubai,” she says. “This has become a centre for freedom of expression. Kuwait used to be so liberal in the 1970s, but it is regressing. Dubai is progressing. And it is important for these works to be seen in the Gulf because they are relevant to the whole region. People are willing to listen here.”



Shurooq Amin's 'A Man of No Importance' (2012)

At the Dubai International Finance Centre, another group of galleries enlivens an otherwise soulless corporate space. And at the Cuadro Gallery, Saudi artist Manal al-Dowayan also addresses the status of women in her own country. The centrepiece of “The State of Disappearance” is a large display panel of newspaper cuttings that use identical stock photographs of women dressed in black to illustrate any article that refers to women.

At Artspace, which recently opened a branch in London, a group of seven Saudi artists raises the temperature still further. Shaweesh, a pseudonymous street artist from Riyadh, places the *Star Wars* character Yoda next to the former King Faisal, who is signing an important state document. In Eyad Maghazil’s installation “Lock and Key”, viewers peep through a keyhole to see “hidden” scenes from Saudi life: a man beating a women, two women in an intimate scene.

What is happening in Dubai, both inside the fair and in gallery spaces around the city, has wider significance than merely to entertain the newly curious about the ways of contemporary art. The very process of airing previously taboo themes is fast assuming equal importance to the art itself. Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi, founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation and an acute and widely followed cultural commentator, says that Art Dubai manages to be both more global, and more intimate, than its international counterparts. “The only debate on politics we have here is under the umbrella of art,” he says. “And I hope that will continue.”

To emphasise the regional significance of the fair, a launch was organised on its opening evening for the Palestinian Museum, to be built in the hills of Birzeit, that will act as a research centre and cultural space for Palestinian heritage. Its poignant slogan could also act as a mission statement for Art Dubai, or indeed any thriving cultural institution that wants to interrogate the political world in which it finds itself: “a safe place for unsafe ideas”.

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