

Contemporary UPRIS

Below: *Arousten* from the series *Four Wives* by Sarah Mohana Al-Abdali, a Saudi artist on Neama's radar and shown at Alāan Artspace



From Riyadh's youngest gallerist to inspiring political expressionism, Bazaar meets the Middle Eastern trailblazers revolutionising the Arab art scene

Words by JULIA MAILE

Whether it's the transformation from a small fishing village to a cosmopolitan metropolis or the growth of a powerful economy, the pace of change in the Gulf is thrilling. What takes the rest of the world centuries to achieve, the UAE often does in mere decades. And the recent boom in the art world is no exception. In less than a ten years, it has grown from humble beginnings to become one of the fastest growing markets of the art world. The focus isn't just on the Gulf but the region as a whole, with artists from countries such as Lebanon, Syria and Iraq helping to put the Middle East's creatives firmly on the international radar.

With the likes of Sheikha al-Mayassa Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani leading the way through her role as chair of Qatar Museums (and world's biggest art buyer), women are key to the burgeoning industry. Artists such as Iraqi-Palestinian Sama Alshaibi and Syrian Sara Shamma are producing thought-provoking works to international acclaim, while the region's three influential annual art fairs are all spearheaded by women; Antonia Carver is fair director of Art Dubai, Rita Aoun-Abdo is executive director of Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority, the body behind Abu Dhabi Art, while Laure d'Hauteville is the founder of the Beirut Art Fair. "When I meet gallery owners and collectors in the USA, they always ask me about Art Dubai

Alāan Artspace in Riyadh was born from Neama's desire to "encourage and nurture the burgeoning arts scene in Saudi"



KARIM RAMZI. COURTESY ALĀAN ARTSPACE

Neama Al-Sudairi, Riyadh's youngest gallerist and founder of Alāan Artspace in Riyadh



ING



because its excellent reputation has created such a buzz," says US-based Sama.

World-class museums, such as Qatar's Museum of Islamic Art and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, also help to cement the Middle East's reputation globally. "The scale of the region's cultural building boom is massive," Neama Al-Sudairi, owner and founder of Saudi's Alāan Artspace tells *Bazaar*. "Countries that once had a few museums are overnight turning into repositories of the latest art trends and styles." As Riyadh's youngest gallerist, Neama is proud to say that women run three out of the four contemporary art galleries in the capital city. "Saudi has always had art and culture, but until recently we haven't had places to exhibit it. When we opened in 2012, for the first time Riyadh had galleries at street level. Even a few years ago, this was unheard of. The unexpected emergence of four galleries, each with different and wonderful personalities, has dramatically changed the art scene."

POLITICS – FRIEND OR FOE?

While the boom in the art scene is undeniably positive, another darker force has also been at play, with the region's political unrest heightening awareness of Middle Eastern art. "Instability attracts the interest of international buyers to the region, as art can help [people] to understand the politics," says Yasmin Atassi, director of Dubai's Green Art Gallery. "The political situation in the region does not affect the sales, however, sometimes it becomes an inspiration for artists."

For Sara, the conflict in her Syrian homeland acted as an incubator for creativity. "It made me more active. ►

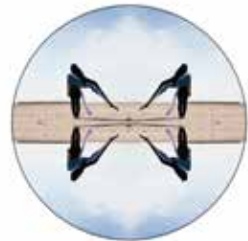


"THERE IS A POSSIBILITY THAT WASN'T ON THE HORIZON A FEW YEARS AGO. I HOPE THE ARAB SPRING WILL HAVE A POSITIVE IMPACT ON ART"

Sama Alshaibi, artist

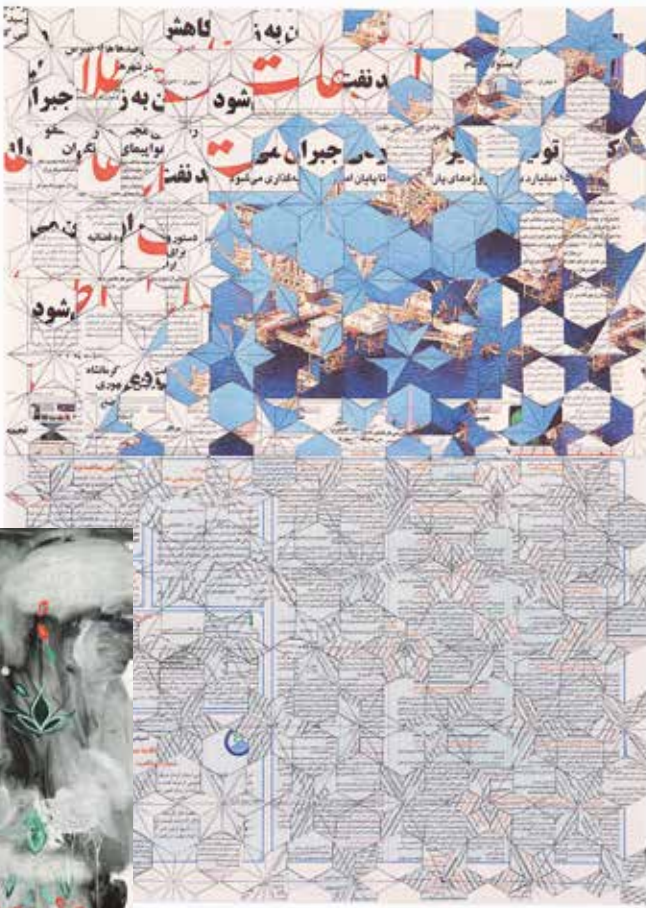


Above: Iraqi-Palestinian artist Sama Alshaibi. Clockwise from top right: Multi-media works from various projects by Sama



CATHERINE MARINO. COURTESY AYAM GALLERY

Right: Iranian artist Nazgol Ansarinia, whose works are shown at Green Art Gallery (including *Reflections/ Refractions*) is currently exhibiting her works at Whitechapel Gallery in London



Left: Iranian artist Kamrooz Aram, whose works are also shown at Green Art Gallery, has had a piece from his *Palimpsest* series (left) picked up by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York



I remember one night there was an attack outside our house. We carried the children from their beds and placed them in a safer place, away from the windows. It was terrible. My studio was about 10 minutes from my house, but because of the war it used to take two hours to get there. So I made a small studio in my house and I stayed awake at night making this painting... The one of the two children.”

When the political situation deteriorated even further in 2012, Sara moved from Damascus to Lebanon with her two young children, while her husband remained in Syria for business. Her most recent exhibition held in November at Art Sawa in Dubai’s DIFC, entitled *Diaspora*, consisted of 12 paintings; half created in Damascus in the last few months before she left, the other half on arrival in Lebanon. Does she recognise a shift in creativity following her experiences? “I can sense it,” she says. “I can see more anger, because this is me. More isolation, more irony, and more sarcasm about what’s happening about all these lies. I don’t like lies; I don’t know how to lie. It affects me a lot but it’s given me a new kind of creativity. Syria is part of me, it’s my country, my lovely city Damascus. I hope to go back there and exhibit some day.”

For many, the influence of politics on art is inevitable. “Most artists reflect their experiences, and unfortunately for artists from our region, our personal experiences are often interwoven with a thorny political dimension that’s difficult to separate from our work,” says Sama. Being forced to make choices others do not even have to consider makes artists from the region particularly strong. “There is no freedom of speech in any of our nations. Our counterparts in the US, Europe or Canada, for example, may never have had to face dilemmas such as being jailed, bringing shame to families, or being ostracised for making work that reflects real experiences or positions. For us, our creative practice has real consequences for our families,

“AFTER THE WAR A LOT OF NEW ARTISTS EMERGED, ESPECIALLY POLITICALLY-SPEAKING. IT’S A NEW WAVE AND IT’S GOOD TO SEE THE DIVERSITY”

Sara Shamma, artist

galleries, and even our own survival.”

Although the works have become more conceptual and subversive, Sama believes they nevertheless inspire audiences to be more courageous in their own lives. “Historically, artists have always been trailblazers when challenging the status quo. In this region, where art is revered and cherished, it can also act as a catalyst towards breaking social taboos, resisting the government and religious establishments, and ultimately, encouraging positive change.”

ARABARTONAGLOBALRADAR

Another person impacted by the region’s conflict is Hisham Samawi. In 2008, he founded Ayyam Gallery in Damascus, before shifting the gallery to Dubai in 2011 in the wake of the Arab Spring, using his influence to move 15 artists and their families from the war-torn country to safety in the UAE. “What is most significant about the art scene now is that it has reached a level of maturity where it is being recognised by international collectors and institutions with no real prior connection to the region,” he says. “Every year we see more and more people from all over the world

COURTESY OF GREEN ART GALLERY



AUSRA OSPA/AGUITE COURTESY OF ART SAWA

coming to see what is happening here. Through our collective efforts we have done something special enough to get on the global art radar.”

It’s an opinion shared by Michael Jeha, managing director of Christie’s Middle East. “We have just had the best sale season since 2010 and arguably, in terms of the quality of the works offered, our best sale ever. Since we held our first international auction in the region [in 2006], we have seen a change in collectors’ appreciation for art from other countries. Initially collectors mainly bought art from their own country, but now there is more regional cross-buying.” While he’s reluctant to cause speculation, he believes Huguette Caland, Samia Halaby, Monir Farmanfarmaian and Lalla Essaydi are worth keeping an eye on. “They are four important female artists with an impressive bodies of work that are making the world take note.”

It’s not just the international community that’s interested; the local art scene is also flourishing. “Education outreach programmes have made a big difference in Riyadh – a big city of four million with lots of empty space still on the walls of our homes,” says Neama. “Before now, buyers

purchased works in Europe or the US. [The programmes are] helping locals grow more confident in their own taste, their own aesthetic.” As a professor, educator and artist, Sama also feels a deep responsibility to help grow the academic creative industry. “It is my most important professional goal that I have worked towards,” she says. “The challenge and my hope is that this is not the momentary buzz of a new scene being ‘discovered’ by the West and then discarded, but is rather the seed of a sustained interest and inquiry into the histories and contemporary practices of artists from the MENA region.”

With the last decade having wielded such phenomenal growth, what does the future hold? “Five years from now will be a very exciting time,” says Hisham. “The museums in Abu Dhabi, Alserkal Avenue extension, Dubai Design District (d3), the Opera House and Dubai Museum will all be completed.” Saudi-based Neama shares his optimism. “The arts scene in Riyadh will be unrecognisable in five years,” she adds. “We believe this is just the beginning.” With a start this strong, there’s no denying the future looks bright for the thriving Middle Eastern art scene. ■



Above left: Syrian artist Sara Shamma in Art Sawa gallery in Dubai’s DIFC, standing by *Panic Attack*, the artwork she started painting of her daughter the night of bomb attacks in Damascus and finished on safer soil in Lebanon Above: *Untitled* by Sara Shamma