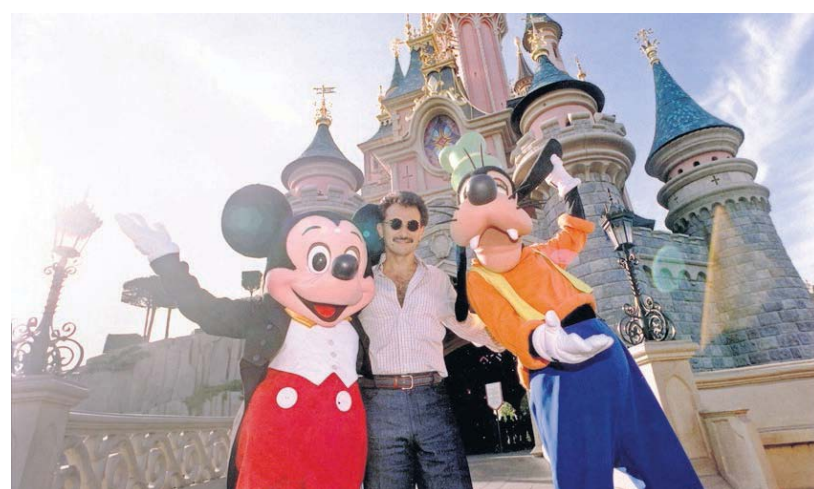


Big sales from the opening of Art Basel last week include a **Frank Stella painting from 1967 that went for US\$2 million (Dh7.35m)** on New York's L&M Arts booth, and a flurry of interest in Larry Gagosian's stock of Warhols and Picassos. The event attracted 300 galleries, including two from Dubai. Continues until June 17

Get your hands on the latest issue of Harper's Bazaar Art Arabia, featuring a **special cover by the artist Shezad Dawood from his first feature film A Piercing Brightness**, as well as a look at next month's Beirut Art Fair



Beyond what meets the eye

Christopher Lord scouts out this week in the local art sphere: behind-the-scenes shots by one of the world's most prolific photojournalists and vivid new works in household paint by the sick man of Tehran

At left, photo by Ammar Abd Rabbo taken in August 2009 in Tripoli, Libya. Top left, Saudi Prince Al Waleed bin Talal in Disneyland, Paris, taken in August 1998. Top center and right, Between the thorns II and Eclipse II (part of diptych) by Farzan Sadjadi.
Courtesy Ammar Abd Rabbo;
Courtesy Farzan Sadjadi / Carbon 12 Gallery

Follow the Leader

The Polish writer Ryszard Kapuscinski used to keep two notebooks during his days as a correspondent covering the coups and chaos in post-independence Africa.

One was his working notebook of quotes, hard facts and contacts. The other was for colour – impressions, glimpses and heightened moments that would make up the meat of his subsequent novels when he got back from the field.

Follow the Leader is an exhibition that's almost like pages from the second notebook of the Syrian photojournalist Ammar Abd Rabbo. As a snapper working for everyone from *Time* to *Le Monde*, and having shot over 60 magazine covers in his career, Abd Rabbo files photo-

graphs that make the news.

But this exhibition is made up of captured moments that were perhaps too ephemeral or nuanced for the dailies.

There's a shot of Queen Elizabeth, for instance, peering around a doorframe looking worried. Abd Rabbo explains that he captured this strange moment when France's premier Jacques Chirac was late for a royal appointment. The queen, it would seem, is not amused.

Another shows the now-deposed Tunisian despot Zine El Abidine Ben Ali having the creases on his suit fussed over by his wife Leila Trebelsi. There's a surreal image of Mickey Mouse and Goofy cuddling the Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal in front of Sleeping Beauty's castle at Euro Disney. Benazir Bhutto ap-

pears somehow beatific, staring off into the corner of a darkened room, the light creating a lustrous haze around her hands, which by coincidence appear clasped in prayer.

These images offer insight into these much-photographed, cover stars. But they do present them at a skewed or slanted moment – a frozen second when the impermeability of their omnipotent, camera-savvy selves slips off. In many, these are smirks, side-glances and subtle twitches that destabilise the indefatigable public pose of these leaders.

There are several shots here of Muammar Qaddafi, which Abd Rabbo explains have a resonance for him since he grew up briefly in Libya.

"Qaddafi was a photographer's dream because he was always wearing weird outfits and was a playful photo subject. As a result, for a long time Libya was Qaddafi and Qaddafi was Libya unfortunately.

"But look at the way Qaddafi was exhibited right up until the end. He went from being young and attractive to this ridiculous figure. Then take someone like Benazir Bhutto and the path of her life: if you wrote it as a screenplay, it would be like *Dallas* – she was accused of corruption but came from a big political family, two of her brothers were killed. There's something very cinematic about these."

It's that cinematic quality that seems to drive this show. These are almost the unpublished behind-the-scenes shots of the motion picture that is contemporary politics, the ones where the actors look tired, or bored, or when they think no one is watching.

Abd Rabbo tells us he's got quite a lot of flak for exhibiting images of the Syrian president Bashar Al Assad at a time when the regime is shelling civilian homes daily.

"I've received tons of criticism on the internet for this," he says. "But it's part of my history as a photographer, and part of Syria's history, whether we like Bashar or not. I had the same criticism about the image of Ben Ali – people from Tunisia maybe would like to erase the Ben Ali years from their memory. But it's there and you can't take it off."

The image of Al Assad is from 2005, when the Syrian president was in the process of steadily returning the country to international engagement after a 30-year blanket of isolation dropped by his father. It shows him together with the first lady, his wife Asma, in the minus 20°C bitter cold of a Russian winter. Whereas Mrs Al Assad's face is haloed in a ring of lavish fur, the president hasn't prepared for the occasion and his pink hand is outstretched and clenched, presumably to hold back the shivers.

"Sometimes it's very tough for the audience to understand that because I take a photo of someone it doesn't mean I'm in love with this person, or their way of leading a country," says Abd Rabbo. "It's the curse of our job as journalists, because we're always running after a good story – if the story leads you to a terrible person then you still go. If I only shot people that I like, then this would only be an exhibition of my family, a handful of friends and a few rock stars."

● Ayyam Art Gallery, DIFC, Dubai until July 12

Wet Dog

Farzan Sadjadi – the painter of anaemic scenes from the under-

nourished suburbs of Tehran – has turned his sights to another desolation row. This time, Sadjadi headed to the central Iranian village of Mar that, according to Carbon 12, is near-abandoned due to "harsh living conditions and scarcity of water".

Prime territory for an artist whose vision of modern life is something akin to that great Kafkaesque Persian writer of privation, Sadegh Hedayat – warped anxiety, but a little absurd at the same time.

One of the defining things about Sadjadi's works is his use of household paint on canvas. It's what gives his images their stygian gloom and heaviness. Yet, he's improving as a painter, and seems more at ease with being exacting: gone are the unnecessary whips of paint on the canvas or the messy free-form brushstrokes. Instead, *Wet Dog* shows off a clearer, chillier voice.

Of particular note is *Daily Labour*, a sort of anti-pastoral image depicting a farmer and his wife working their bitter earth while the wind blows around them. Bent double, the farmer's wife has puckered her face and tries fruitlessly to give life to a clump of stubborn plants.

A group of goats resting among thorns, a dog stretching itself amid a bleached carcass, and then opposing scenes of a snow-filled landscape being watched over by a full moon that has been eclipsed by a passing cat. There's no doubt that a lot of these images feel like skits and sketches – boxer's jabs at the follies of life on the margins. But across these works, we are left with the sensation of a world and its inhabitants slowly disappearing into a deep blizzard, steadily out of reach.

● Carbon 12, Alserkal Avenue, Dubai; from June 19 to September 10

✉ clord@thenational.ae

1. Ayyam Art Gallery, Gate Village Building 3, Dubai International Finance Centre, (04) 439 2395, www.ayyammgallery.com, difc@ayyammgallery.com, Sunday-Thursday, 10am-8pm, Saturday by appointment

2. Carbon 12, Alserkal Avenue, Al Quoz Dubai, (04) 340 6016, www.carbon12-dubai.com, info@carbon12dubai.com, Saturday-Thursday, 11.30am-7pm



On the cover

Farzan Sadjadi's *Vegan*, household paint on canvas. Photo Courtesy Farzan Sadjadi / Carbon 12 Gallery