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THE WORLD'S GREATEST ART FAIR

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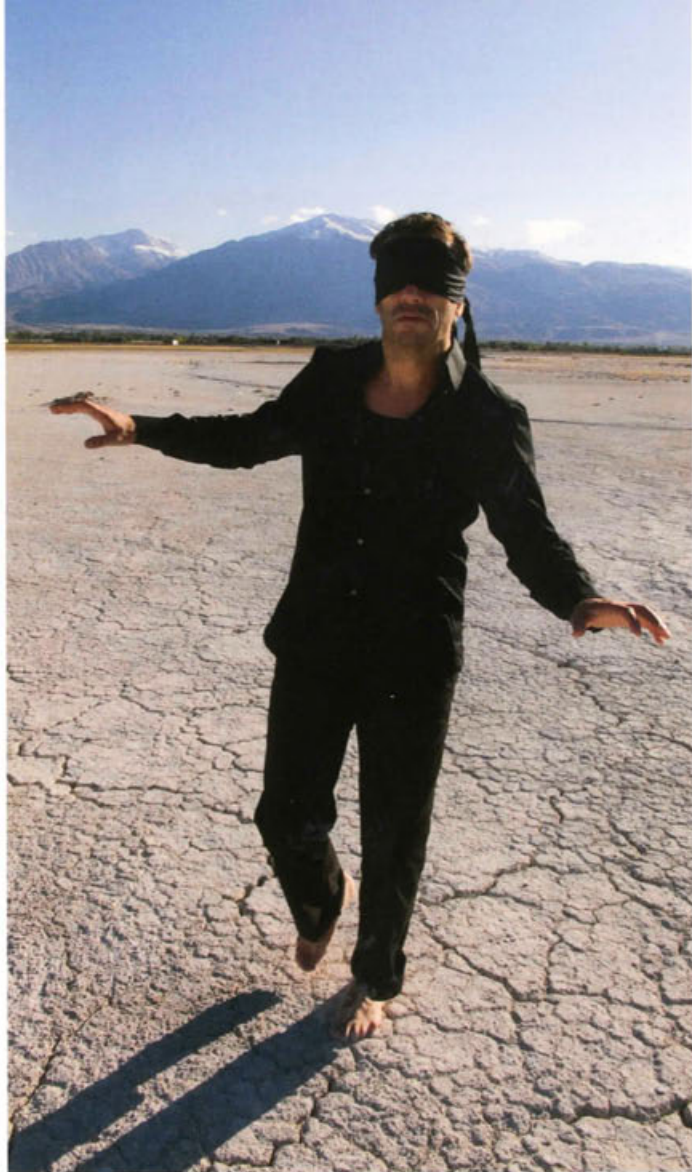
ART DUBAI

AND THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST ART MARKET

A year ago the Art Dubai fair was cresting a wave of demand for contemporary art from the Middle East, north Africa and India. How will it cope in very different circumstances, asks **Lucian Harris?**

Coming as it does in the throes of an economic depression that has made the future of the art market impossible to predict by even the most experienced economic analyst, Art Dubai, which runs from 19 to 21 March at Dubai's Madinat Jumeirah resort, finds itself under considerable scrutiny. It is being treated as a marker that may give some indication of the impact the crisis is having on modern and contemporary Middle Eastern, Iranian and south Asian art. At the time of last year's fair all these emerging markets were experiencing such boom conditions that artists couldn't make enough work to supply demand. However, the fair has not had the most stable history and with almost two-thirds of last year's exhibitors not returning it is all the more difficult to make predictions.

Now in its third year, Art Dubai, like many international art fairs, has aspirations to be more than simply a marketplace. In the current climate a wide range of events is additionally important in attracting visitors and building the fair's credibility. 'The Abraaj Capital Art Prize is our most important new innovation', says the fair's director, John Martin. The new prize – which at \$1m is one of the world's most generous – is divided between three collaborations between artists and curators from the Middle East, north Africa and south Asia. The winners, Cristiana Perrella & Kutlug Ataman (Fig. 1); Carol Solomon & Zoulikha Bouabdellah; and Leyla Fakhr & Nazgol Anzarinia (Fig. 4), will all unveil their winning works during the fair.



The fair has a central role to play in the promotion of the cultural initiatives and aspirations of Dubai, which, like its wealthier neighbours Abu Dhabi and Qatar, has ambitious plans to transform the region into an essential destination for cultural tourism. A new surge of interest in modern and contemporary art from the Middle East, Iran and India saw galleries and auction houses reassess the Gulf market, testing its potential with varying degrees of success. The real extent and nature of local taste and interest in culture continues to be a question underpinning the future prospects of many of the ambitious enterprises now under way – education is often said to be the key here.

Although there is undoubtedly a competitive side to the cultural ambitions of the various rulers of the Gulf states, all face the same task of building from scratch. It is fortuitous for Art Dubai that – far more than last year – a diverse and potentially interesting array of contemporary art exhibitions is on show, including most notably the Sharjah Biennial (until 16 May; Fig. 2) and 'Emirati Expressions: Art from the heart of the Emirates' at the Palace Hotel Abu Dhabi (until 16 April). Also very much in the spotlight since its opening last December is the new Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar (see APOLLO, February).

1 *Strange Space* by Kutlug Ataman (b. 1961), 2008. Video still.
© Kutlug Ataman and the Abraaj Capital Art Prize

Art Dubai's main satellite fair, the Creek Art Fair, now rechristened the Al Bastakia Art Fair (15-22 March), has developed a reputation for showing some of the more interesting and cutting-edge local artists. This year the fair will offer a curated selection of work by Middle Eastern artists chosen from Saatchi Online, the first time that Charles Saatchi has sold works from his website artists at a non-European fair.

Indeed, this year the main fair appears far more focused on Middle Eastern and Iranian art in comparison with its first two years, which were dominated by Indian and Pakistani art, then at the peak of their boom – so much so that many galleries had pre-sold most of their stock and were simply there to revel in the market frenzy. 'The Gulf is at the confluence of Europe and Asia, and with no major fairs in India, Art Dubai was a great opportunity to network to make deals, meet potential clients', says Farah Siddiqui, who has recently opened FSCA gallery in Mumbai.

'The way it is shaping up this year there are galleries coming from Europe, America and Asia, many showing work not exclusive to one country', says Mr Martin. 'We even have galleries from Moscow.' However, the choice of galleries for the main fair has caused a certain amount of controversy, as the organisers have been criticised both for excluding local galleries and for leaning too far towards cutting-edge, politically conscious art that is most likely to impress first-time visitors from the west. It is feared that this emphasis is at the expense of the more conservative contemporary calligraphy and sculpture that has traditionally been most in demand with Arab collectors – and continues to make the highest prices at auction. 'It wouldn't be very interesting having a fair full of Dubai galleries', says Mr Martin in defence – but the omissions include some of the Middle East's leading blue-chip names, such as Dar al Funoon in Kuwait, Meem Gallery from Dubai and Al Barah in Bahrain.

Malini Gulrajani of Dubai-based 1x1 Gallery is one of the leading Gulf-based dealers of Indian contemporary art. She has never exhibited at



the fair, but in the past has held shows at her two spaces, which have proved highly popular. The current situation has made her opt for a conservative approach. 'I will just be showing a series of photographic video works by Chittrovanu Mazumdar', she says. 'I think that the fair will be well attended and may be critically acclaimed but I do fear for its commercial success. However, it is actually a buyer's market and there are definitely bargains to found for anyone prepared to take risks.'

There is a lot less business for Indian art in Dubai now and I think that the Middle Eastern work is selling much better, since there is a much wider range of collectors', she says.

'There are now too many people who are realising that they have bought works which have gone down in value by up to 50%.'

Galleries from the subcontinent, such as Nature Morte, Gallery Espace, Chatterjee and Lal, and GallerySke have deemed Dubai an unnecessary risk and only Chemould, Aicon (Fig. 3), Guild, Project 88, Bodhi, Sakshi and Grovesnor Vadhera remain committed. However, even at this stage things could change if the ARCO contemporary art fair in Madrid in February is a major disaster. 'It's more of a challenge for us, like it is for everyone else', says Prajit Dutta, director of Aicon. 'We didn't do Miami but I heard that a number of Indian galleries pulled out. These two fairs will be the real test for the Indian art market I feel.'

Lucian Harris is a journalist and historian of Indian and Islamic art.

For further information on Art Dubai visit www.artdubai.ae

2 *You Will be Killed by* Amal Kenawy (b. 1974), 2006. Video installation for Sharjah Biennial 8. Photo: Alfredo Rubio

3 *Gandhi* by Debanjan Roy (b. 1975), 2007. Painted aluminium cast, ht 167.6 cm. Aicon Gallery at Art Dubai

4 *Rhyme and Reason* by Nazgol Azarinia (b. 1979), 2008. Colour carpet of wool, silk and cotton, 255 x 355 cm. © Nazgol Azarinia and the Abraaj Capital Art Prize

