



Rana-Begum, No. 695, 2017, Abraaj Group Art Prize winner. Photo courtesy Photo-Solutions-8

## Art Week Madness in Dubai and Beyond Galleries, fairs, commissions and more electrify the local scene

by Janet Bellotto

In 2007 Art Dubai was launched in United Arab Emirates (UAE) and ten years later the art community has exploded with dozens of galleries, exhibitions, events, venues and more. Each year the number of events expands, as does the fair's repertoire from performance to design. It was time to revisit this UAE development, as well as celebrating the beginning of my second decade in Dubai.

For most of the year, there had been a slow building up to the climax that epitomizes the March art season. The commercial galleries have their set exhibitions, where in October and November Art Abu Dhabi and the Downtown Design fair briefly explode into the districts. Every two years, Art Dubai and the Sharjah Biennial coincide. However, just a short plane ride to Qatar we now have the New York Times Conference

*Art of Tomorrow* – with a high profile agenda, along with other events in the region. The art of March Madness is exhilarating and exhausting.

Abu Dhabi, the capital of the UAE, has been slower in the development of venue possibilities, but is still hosting must-see shows. Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi, welcomed the NYUAD Arts Center and Art Gallery. Everyone is in anticipation of the Louvre Abu Dhabi designed by architect Jean Nouvel, that will finally open its doors to the public this coming November. However, Manarat Al Saadiyat has been hosting the fair and other exhibitions throughout the year. Warehouse 421 is a new venue sponsored by the Sheikhha Salama Foundation. The Abu Dhabi Festival runs for the month of March and schedules a variety of exhibitions and performances with artists from across the world, with its timely 2017

theme *Culture & Tolerance*. With major performances hosted at Emirates Palace – a six-star hotel with an ornate gold-leaf interior, but also at other venues including the NYUAD Art Center. Ten artists were commissioned for the Abu Dhabi Festival Exhibition, *The Art of Nature*, which celebrated 20 years of the Abu Dhabi Environment Agency, and took place at Umm Al Emarat park. Venues inviting community participation are growing.

With each edition of Art Dubai – the largest fair in the region – new gallery venues emerge and festival style events are launched. In the last year alone, Dubai has seen the opening of the Opera House and the Etihad Museum, with several heritage museums expected to open in the Shindaga area soon. Myrna Ayad took over the 2016 edition of Art Dubai from Antonia Carver, whose directorship brought a strong focus to the Arab region and the under-represented in its Marker exhibition. Now with over 94 galleries attending from 43 countries, Art Dubai reported 2017 as its most international edition,



Yuken Tryua's paper bag constellations and paper forest series, installation view. Photo: Janet Bellotto

and this was made clear while walking through the two main galleries.

A strong representation of Iranian galleries and some from South America, presented a new direction. Dastan's Basement was one of the more eclectic booths with its *Clues, References, and Favorite Things* curated by Fereydown Ave. In Tehran, the gallery has two locations while still curating exhibitions across the city. From Uruguay, Piero Atchugarry Gallery of Pueblo Garzón presented Yuken Teruya, whose paper sculptures made from commercial paper bags one might get at an Apple store or even McDonald's.

In comparison to a decade ago where we saw more painting or sculptures with crude oil, we now see works from ceramic donuts (Jae Yong Kim, GALLERY YEH) to digital video works as that found at PACE Art + Technology. Art Dubai's educational program keeps on growing with a symposium on modern art, complementing Art Dubai Modern, and the fair's strong commission program which this year featured performances curated by Yasmine Raggad. The \$100,000 Abraaj Group Art Prize

unveiled the winner Rana Begum with her colorful geometric glass installation.

Returning regional galleries included Athr from Saudi Arabi, Dubai galleries like Carbon 12, Third Line, Grey Noise, Lawrie Shabibi, 1x1 and many others. The international galleries tended to be more diverse than ones seen at Art Dubai's first edition. However, I found the poetics befitting institutional collections in works like *Water in Dripping no.8* at Sundaram Tagore Gallery by Zheng Lu or Burçak Bingöl's *Temporary Permeable* (2016). Its wall installation references Istanbul's lost craft and garden culture through appearing and disappearing ceramic vessels and floral wallpaper. It was part of Zilberman Gallery's second year at the fair. Emirati artist Hassan Sharif, the father of Dubai conceptual art passed away in 2016, but an homage was presented that could be experienced through a dance performance based on his archived instructions and diagrams. Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde (IVDE) honored him by hanging one of his rope sculptures. The Flying House presented a group exhibition.

With so many new artists to

discover or welcome back, Iraqi artist Sadik Kwaish Alfraji's *Seasons of Lost Baghdad* reflects on loss and nostalgia. This follows his concurrent multimedia installation *Once Upon a Time: Hadiqat Al Umma* at Maraya Art Center, Sharjah, a semi-circular projection of 14,000 nostalgic drawings from memory of Baghdad's garden.

On the other end of the city, Sikka Art Fair is the annual festival representing more local and regional artists over a ten day period. It is one of Dubai's historical areas where exhibits and installations are held in old houses and wind towers representing emerging to established artists. Aside from a music performance program experienced underneath the stars, this year's exhibition roster tended to the sporadic and did not necessarily reflect the strongest of the art scene.

Within a tent at d3 – Dubai Design District, Design Days Dubai presented design trends and developments from the region, with wide international representation. It is the region's largest design fair for collectable design items.

Nearby, there are still worthwhile galleries at DIFC, but the paramount location is Alserkal Avenue – Dubai's main arts district, established in 2007 and located in the industrial area. It's where you find the hub of the creative community in gallery-interior warehouses. In 2015, 500,000 square feet were added to make new homes for art and culture spaces. In 2016 the venue Concrete was inaugurated, designed by Rem Koolhaas' OMA. Designed as a multi-purpose art space which can be divided up to four different spaces, it opened with the exhibition from the Atassi Foundation *Syria: Into the Light*.

The Leila Heller gallery pulled out all the stops. The works of Bill Viola in his exhibition *The Vast: Mirrors of the Mind*, and curated by Brooke Lynn McGowan, mesmerized visitors. It was a fantastic opportunity to see such pioneering work, particularly the *Water Portraits* (2013). Indeed, there was a sense that we've come to an edge, the liminality of our existence. Another international heavyweight is the Jean-

Paul Najar Foundation which launched *Artist Run New York: The Seventies*.

Commissioned work presented solo exhibitions by Emirati artists such as Ammar Al Attar who explored one of Dubai's disappearing cinema. There is clear diversity when hopping from

one gallery to the next. Grey Noise's *sagar* by Lala Rukh, who recently passed away, included contemplative photographs of the sea. Employing waves of water, Green Art Gallery's Hera Büyüktasciyan examined the fluid history of a marble factory that

had once been at this location. Joshua Watt's mixed-media interactive works in *Emergent Momenta* at FN Design examined the nature of time and perception. Time, labour and value were found at IVDE with Vikram Divecha – who is one of the artists in the UAE pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale. Nearby The Mine gallery featured Fari Bradley's solo *Stitches to Save 9*. Known as a sound and radio artist, she explores a series of sayings such as *Electric Dreams Can't Last* or *No Shadows in Paradise*. Melodically composed with a feminine perspective, its language and appearance is fleeting, pitting questions and proverbs against the anxieties of our daily rhythms, not unlike the impact on us of advertising signage – captivating for today, gone tomorrow.

When Dubai's March Madness is over, you may just feel that your senses have absorbed too much. The upside, as the slow-down coincides with the heat, makes for either a perfect time to stay in or to get away. For many galleries the next stop on the calendar would be Hong Kong and then to preparations for the three head honcho art exhibits making waves this summer in Europe – Venice Biennale, Sculpture Projects Münster and Documenta.



Fari Bradley, *Electric Dreams Can't Last*, 2017, acrylic lightbox, vinyl image, electric cabling, (60 x 90cm)  
Photo: Janet Bellotto



Rem Koolhaas' *OMA*, Concrete, 2016, multi-purpose art space.  
Photo: Janet Bellotto



Lawrie Shabibi, Mounir Fatmi, *Inside the Fire Circle*, 2017, installation view Photo: Janet Bellotto