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Leila's "Lay of the Land"

Leila Heller, New York contemporary art dealer, dishes with Laura Stewart on her "Hot" artists and reveals some of her future projects.

Laura Stewart: How many years have you been participating in Art Dubai?

Leila Heller: We first participated in Art Dubai in 2009 with a solo presentation of video paintings by our artists Shoja Azari and Shahram Karimi. They presented seven video paintings of Burning Oil fields all shown together in a dark room. It was called the highlight of Art Dubai that year! Since then we have gone with group presentations. Last year we had an amazing three-person show of new works by Shiva Ahmadi, Ayad Alkadhi, and Kezban Arca Batibeki which was very well received.

LS: What Changes Have You Seen?

LH: There is no doubt that each year the fair becomes more and more professional. Under Antonia Carver's direction, the fair has reached a new high in terms of the quality of the curatorial staff and the highly dynamic and engaging public programs they have initiated. As a result of this, I believe the fair has succeeded in garnering the attention of pivotal international curators, collectors and press. I eagerly anticipate to see the thrilling evolution of Art Dubai in the years to come.

LS: What artists are you exhibiting this year, and why?

LH: This year we will be presenting one of our most ambitious booths to date. We want to show the depth and variety of our artists, not just in terms of their mediums and style, but also in terms of the diverse themes present in their work. We have carefully selected a group of artists who we know deeply engage with one another on a variety of levels. Ayad Alkadhi has created a new four-panel painting masterpiece specifically for Art Dubai which explores the reverberating traumas of war on the collective memory of the Iraqi nation. Rashid Al Khalifa's works on convex canvases continue to explore the reflective porous layers of shifting color and space. His works converse with husband and wife duo, Kate Eric's paintings of trailing color and movement depicting the constant interplay between light and dark matter through images of slow morphing figures in a cosmic environment. Such contemplation of the self in space is also what one finds in the works of Farideh Lashai, whose intricate video-painting installations will be showing both in our booth and at the public space in Art Dubai Projects. Lashai is one of the most central and groundbreaking female figures in contemporary Middle Eastern art, and we are also honored to be exhibiting her solo show at our

New York Gallery this March. Texan artist Rachel Lee Hovnanian has added a new dimension to her Reflections and Motherboards specifically for Art Dubai; now the her signature narcissus flowers have been coated in 24 karat gold! The new series of Reflections and Motherboards are absolutely breathtaking. Hadieh Shafie, whose elaborate paper scroll paintings have captivated its viewers time and again, will be revealing new works in which she has dipped the scrolls in black and white ink to further add depth to her striking colors. Finally, we will be showing four paintings from Nir Hod's Genius series.

LS: As you were one of the first dealers to specialize in Middle Eastern Contemporary art you are in a unique position to judge what is of value on the market and what is lightweight, or manufactured to take advantage of speculation. Amongst the newer artists to enter to the market, who do you think has staying power?

LH: As a gallery owner, it is essential not to blindly follow auction trends and raise the price of your artists' works simply because he/she has done well in one sale. I work closely with my artists to develop a strategy for>



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their market, and more importantly, to focus on getting their works into significant private and public collections, especially Western museums. This is what will help them gain international recognition and staying power in addition to further shift the attention of the West on art emerging from the Middle East. Hadieh Shafie currently has a waiting list of collectors who want to buy her work and auction houses who want to include her works in every sale! But we are being cautious and not raising her prices too high or too quickly. There is no doubt that she has staying power and we are so thrilled that one of the important museums has just confirmed that they are acquiring her work.

LS: Have you seen a change in the geographic background of your clients? Have they become more international? In short, are some of the best contemporary artists now becoming "international contemporary", rather than pigeon-holed as "Middle Eastern Contemporary"?

LH: We have a very international client base which is becoming more and more diverse each year due to several factors. Last year, we moved the gallery to one of the best streets in Chelsea, and this has helped showcase our artists to a new clientele. Also, by participating in several art fairs such as The Armory Show in New York City, Masterpiece London, and various online platforms, we have been able to gain exposure to collectors from all around the world. I believe that online platforms are beginning to play a central role in the art market, and I intend to keep up with the way in which they evolve!

We also represent a group of international artists; in addition to our Middle Eastern artists, we have others who are American, Korean, Nigerian, and so forth. We would never want to pigeon-hole our Middle Eastern

artists into structured categories and I think it can be dangerous to sometimes use these labels, although they are necessary to some degree. In my opinion, one of the best ways to counteract the tendency to pigeon-hole is by making Middle Eastern contemporary art more accessible to a Western audience through museum shows, academic programming, or online platforms that place Middle Eastern artists in conversation with other prominent contemporary artists. This is undoubtedly the direction in which this emerging market is going.

However, there is still much work to be done. Artists should be understood on their own terms and be judged for the quality of their art, not for their national identities.

LS: This has been an interesting couple of years, to say the least in the Arab world geopolitically? Do you think that artists who are from the MENASA region feel pressure to be political activists? Comment through their art on Arab Spring and the playing out of the burgeoning democracies in the region?

LH: The geo-political situation in the Middle East and North Africa is clearly a source of great inspiration to artists throughout the region and beyond! There is always going to be a correlation between art and activism. Before mass media and online media platforms, art played a fundamental role in the propagation of political ideas and messages, and I strongly believe that it still does. I don't feel that artists from the region are pressured to create political art, however there may be financial or press incentives if such pressures do in fact play a role on the production of new art. The question then is whether political art is in high demand and if so, how to distinguish political art purely created for commercial or press purposes. There is no single answer to this question, and it is too early in the

history of these movements to confidently answer. This is simply something to be aware of. It is easy to brand art as political, perhaps what I find more compelling, is art that has a deeper political and societal message beyond the obvious. I am talking about artists who challenge the mainstream and who depict deep rooted realities that may not be so readily open for criticism. For me that is political art.

LS: Tell me some of the exciting things that have happened and will be happening in the coming year at the Leila Heller Gallery?....

LH: Not only will we be participating in Art Dubai this month, but we will also be participating in The Armory Show in New York City and TH Masterpiece Fair in London in June.

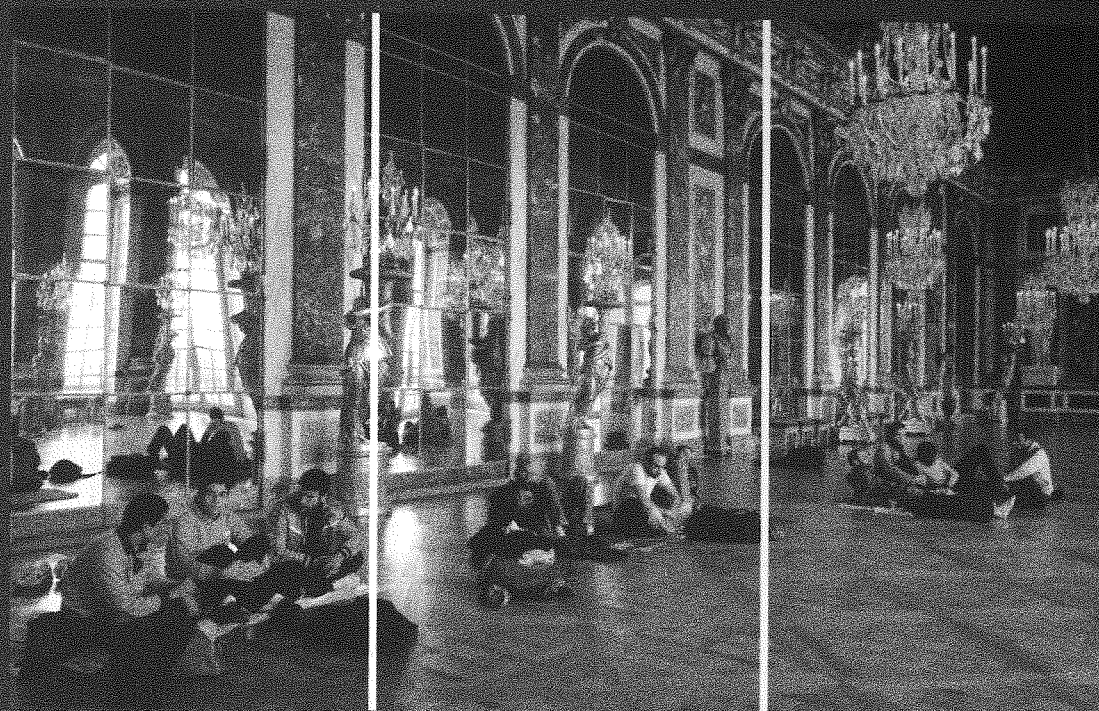
On view at the gallery is a spectacular exhibition of paintings, works on paper, and new video work by Shiva Ahmadi. In addition, we are collaborating this March with MECA at Mana Contemporary in Jersey City on a group show of contemporary Arab and Iranian entitled "The Space Between." In April, we will hold the first solo exhibition in NY of the artist Farideh Lashai. The show will include an extended version of her 'Rabbit in Wonderland' series of animated videos projected on painted canvas.

Following this, we will be having an amazing group show curated by Amir Shariat featuring Rachel Lee Hovnanian as well as Raphael Danke, Sheree Hovsepian, & Raha Raissnia alongside modern masters including Fontana, Warhol, Enriro Castellani, Agostino Bonalumi, and Dadamaino. Later in the Fall we will be solo shows by our artists Negar Ahkami, Shoja Azari and Ike Ude. And finally, in the summer, we will have a Pop Art group show titled Summer Camp curated by Bob Colacello.

Reza Aramesh, *Action 121*, 2013,
6.8 x 106.3 in, 195 x 270 cm
Edition of 3 + 1 AP

Leila Heller Gallery

at The Armory Show, New York
March 7 – 10, 2013
Booth 734, Pier 94



On 7th March at The Armory Show in New York, Leila Heller Gallery will debut new work by Ayad Alkadhi, Reza Aramesh, Rachel Lee Hovnanian, Leila Pazooki, Hadieh Shafie and will feature a recent video work by Farideh Lashai.

New York City-based painter Ayad Alkadhi will reveal two monumental paintings from his new body of work in which he explores the process of societal reconstruction through the radical political, social, and economic shifts occurring after revolutions, invasions, or wars. Layering depictions of machinery, limbs, and skeletons, Alkadhi references not only the fragmented struggles of his homeland Iraq, but also of the burgeoning young democracies and governments that have come to power since the Arab Spring in 2011. His subtle use of frigidly fluid imagery blends both the harsh realities of countless failures linked to national reconstructions in addition to the lingering glimmers of hope that continue to fuel visions of a more just future.

London-based sculptor and photographer Reza Aramesh will be exhibiting a photograph from his *Action* series and a new sculpture at The Armory Show for the first time. Aramesh's photographs and sculptures are highly choreographed combining emotive and haunting figures seemingly disconnected and alienated from their surroundings. They combine depictions from violent journalistic war photos and Renaissance and Baroque master paintings which are re-staged using amateur models. He carefully mixes and reconfigures scenes from various sources which are then rendered into a hand-carved sculpture or a hand-printed gelatin photographic

triptych. Aramesh's oeuvre is the unraveling of a universal collective memory of horror and misery rendered into disconcerting yet undeniable works of art.

Texas-born, New York based interdisciplinary artist, Rachel Lee Hovnanian, will continue to explore the blurring of reality and the narcissistic side of digital life in her presentation at The Armory Show. On view will be three new works from her *Mirror Motherboard* series, industrial sheets of steel covered in thousands of hand sculpted metal narcissus flowers. Also on view will be the third version of Hovnanian's *Dinner for Two* installation, entitled *Dinner for Two: Wedding Cake*, a work that highlights the replacement of real-life interactions with technological means of communication and digital social media. Hovnanian's long, elegant dining table alludes to a traditional idealized family dinner; however, at either end of the table, the apparent husband and wife are absent figures replaced by LCD panels affixed to their chairs while the recognizable tunes of "angry birds" and "words with friends" chime from both sides of the table.

Leila Heller Gallery will pay an homage to contemporary Iranian artist Farideh Lashai (1944 – February 24, 2013) with a new version of her video-painting, *Le Temps Perdu*. The subject matter is Edouard Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, a painting that sparked massive controversy after its completion in 1863 due to its depiction of a naked woman casually lunching with two French male figures. However, in Lashai's video, the painting slowly morphs into an image of three identically placed figures, with the exception that they are Iranian and that the woman who was once naked is now clothed. Just as Manet's work caused scandal in moving away

from classical Renaissance based art to a Modernist artist sensibility, Lashai's piece marks a decisive distancing from an imposing European artistic standard, and instead presents a Contemporary Iranian aesthetic.

Berlin-based artist Leila Pazooki will be featuring a new Neon work part of a larger series in which she explores the religious concept of animism present in various traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. As animism seeks to blur the borders between the worlds of material inanimate objects and spiritual energy, so too does Pazooki by superimposing two physical neon works comprising of the words "spiritual" and "prostitution." Pazooki demands her viewers to ponder the significance of a physically produced objects and the idea of their spiritual essence. In addition to this is the added dimension of the dialogue Pazooki creates regarding the actual definitions related to these seemingly disassociated words. She puts forth the multiple layers of meaning present in her work and challenges her viewers to contemplate her piece within a conceptual framework.

Brooklyn and Maryland based artist Hadieh Shafie will debut five new works including three works from the new series of work, *Ghalb* (heart). Shafie's intricate paper scroll pieces represent a re-interpretation of the tradition of calligraphic script and design repetition present in Iranian and Islamic art and design. Her newest series is influenced by the Turkmen "Asyk", an abstract heart-shaped pendant worn by married Turkmen women as a bidding of good health and fertility. For the Armory, Shafie transforms this traditional tribal symbol into captivating and multidimensional works bursting with color.