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LEILA HELLER

It's rare to find a Middle Eastern artist in New York of any note who hasn't, at some time, worked with Leila Heller. A Manhattan legend, Leila Heller has been championing art from the East in the West for over 30 years. Arsalan Mohammad heads to her sleekly appointed Manhattan HQ to find out how...



Leila Heller, summer 2012 in front of an artwork by Reza Deekshani (All images courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery except where credited)

LEILA HELLER IS BUSTLING ABOUT THE SUNNY INTERIOR of her gallery space, a street-level entity in the middle of Manhattan's high-end art district, Chelsea. A compact, neat blur of energy, she zooms about the space, simultaneously having a phone conversation in Farsi, smiling and offering hospitality to a visiting artist (the photographer Firooz Zahedi) issuing rapid-fire instructions to her gallery staff and urging me to wait a few minutes for her undivided attention and ensuring I am comfortably situated with a choice of still or sparkling water.

Fiercely ambitious, cheerfully pushy and unashamedly successful, Leila Heller has built up quite a reputation during the thirty years her gallery has been, in one way or another, extant. Her audacious gamble, back in the early 1980s, to establish herself as a major international dealer specialising in Middle Eastern art, in the notoriously-cut throat Manhattan art scene has paid off.

Having attended Brown University to study museum management during the 1970s, her break came following the Iranian Revolution, when she found herself stuck in the US 'without papers' and jobless. Heller found herself a job at the Guggenheim and subsequently, as an in-house curator at an investment bank. Soon afterwards, she founded a small art salon on Madison Avenue and set out her stall, showing works by Modern Iranian artists such as Monir Farmanfarmaian and Charles Zenderoudi. Early years were tricky - Iranian art was nowhere near as stylish as it would eventually become - but Heller's perseverance, determination and glittering social circle, all coalesced into the opulent Chelsea space that sits today by luminaries such as Pace and Marlborough. A regular on the international art fair circuit and constantly moving forward - she has recently begun making inroads into the coming scene in Central Asia - Heller's position as the grande dame of the Stateside Middle Eastern art scene seems assured. (When the Chelsea district was ravaged by the aftereffects of Superstorm Sandy in late October, Leila Heller's gallery was spared the sort of damage that caused neighbours such as David Zwirner, serious problems. In a gesture of solidarity with her community, she Tweeted the next day, offering office space to galleries not so fortunate.) ➔

During my visit to the gallery, Heller sparkles, bubblers, exclaims loudly at frequent intervals and exudes impossible levels of tautly-focused, Manhattanite energy. I am introduced to artists. I am enthusiastically encouraged to interview as many of her charges as possible. (None of her roster should feel their dealer is anything less than diligent, when it comes to securing press). Yet this persistence is precisely why Heller is so successful, possessed of a steely core honed by years of struggling within an indifferent Manhattan art scene. Today, things are different. She might have to keep a hand in the secondary art market to keep things afloat, but her talk is of the future, growth, expansion and rewarding times ahead. I select a sparkling water, fire up the dictaphone and away we go.

Why do you think Middle Eastern art has increased in visibility in the US in recent years?

Me! Because I've worked so hard! I think collecting is mainly museum and foundation orientated here. LACMA, MOCA, The Detroit Institute, the Brooklyn Museum... we've sold Middle Eastern artists to all these institutions. The Met is buying tremendously and again this has been in the last two years, here, in the West, also with what's happening in the Middle East, with the museums. I am having a panel discussion in Los Angeles just about that subject on Saturday. So, it's because of the internet, the auction houses showing the artists they have, the successful auctions that Christie's and Sotheby's do there. It's because of the museum initiatives in Doha, Abu Dhabi, foundations like the Farjam foundation (sic) in Dubai - that's why!

Yes, LACMA has been really busy with Middle Eastern art of late, mainly due to Linda Komaroff...

Yes exactly, Linda is actually moderating the panel I've organised in LA.

How do you feel audiences in the US react to Middle Eastern art - is there an element of education and contextualising you have to do in order to present work here?

There is, but there always has to be education, that's why we do so many panel discussions. That's why we do so many symposiums at the gallery, we take NYU, Columbia, Sotheby's, we take Christie's and do panel discussions on different artists from the Middle East or different movements from the Middle East. Turkish, Iranian, Lebanese, Iraqi - its all because you need to educate. Otherwise they think the Middle East is all terrorists, that's all they think! This is what the press has done and its disgusting! So it's a struggle to open in Chelsea one of the top galleries, same sidewalk as Pace, back to back with Gagosian and next to Marlborough - and survive.

Well you do...

Yes, and it's because of my work. It's because of my passion. It's not because I am making millions, because I don't. I don't make it. I have to sell a Picasso to underwrite the gallery, to underwrite the Middle Eastern art.

Even though there has been much interest in recent years, Middle Eastern prices are still proportionally significantly lower than say, Chinese...

Yes, exactly. But it still doesn't pay for the cost of having a storefront gallery in Chelsea, in the best block. I sell a De Kooning and that underwrites the gallery here for a whole year.

And thats always been the case?

Yes that's always been the case, in my case. Because I go to eight art fairs a year and the cost of each is around \$100,000 - \$150,000.



"We have made big progress.. now the Western world has come to appreciate Middle Eastern art and artists." (Photo Sam Bardouil)

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Post-opening dinner with Leila Heller, New York City. Note pensive ex-'Interview' chief Bob Colacello bottom right. (Photo Sam Bardouil)

Guo-Qiang's 'Saraab' exhibition, there is that too. We had a Chinese collector buy a major work by Ayad Alkadhi, who is Iraqi, at Art Dubai last year. So, bit by bit...

I'm interested in the breadth of collectors who are taking an interest in Middle Eastern art now, especially those for whom it is a new field. Let's take an example - well, here we have Reza Derakhshani's show up at the moment. What kind of responses does Reza's work get from US collectors?

well, Reza's work - this is a new show is different, but his work is very appealing to many people. People relate to his work, the content is not so 'Eastern' necessarily. This is the closest he's ever come to making a show that relates to the region. But otherwise, his work is beautiful.

Which other artists are especially popular here?

Shoja Azari - Shirin Neshat's husband - very much so, depending on what kind of work. We have a very political video of his that five museums have got. One in the Middle East, one in Switzerland, one in LA, (MOCA) and also one in Columbia, Bogota and one in here in New York. How cool is that? They sold out, mainly to museums. The video shows thirty years of events in the Middle East, portrayed on one white canvas. It's fascinating. It shows from, let's say, the houses being destroyed in Ramallah to the hah's portrait. Episodes come and go, come and go, come and go. It's fascinating. I'll give you a look at it later. So all our clients for those are American and European. Shiva Ahmadi has show with Shirin Neshat at Worcester College of Art, they are all in a show at Rutgers right now. It's a fabulous show. I started it, let's say. Well, it's not my show as such, it's the curators of those places.

You seem to be at the centre of a lot of activity in the States.

Yes. I am. I really am. And I consciously placed myself there. My background is actually very academic. I have a background in museums and museum management, I'm not somebody who just opened a gallery and said, 'Let's make some money!' I don't make money through the ventures I do. I've become a spokesperson. Yesterday I had a huge interview with the The New York Times about why are women at the forefront of all the art events in the Middle East! People like Linda Komaroff at LACMA or the Tate or at the Metropolitan Museum, or the artists, are women - the curators, Sheikhha Mayassa, or the Mathaf one, she just left [Wassan al-Khudairi], the director of the Orientalist Museum - they are all women!

Why do you think that is so?

I think women have tremendous power in the Middle East and women in the West, they don't think so! They think they are in the back, under a veil and it's so not true! The art scene in Middle East - it's mainly women! Isabelle van den Eynde, Sunny Rahbar and Claudia. They are women! They are the two best galleries in Dubai and they are women! I here am a woman! It is an interesting, fabulous phenomenon.

I always assumed that the -

Yasmin Atassi! The third best gallery in Dubai! That is a woman! They are all there and they are all women. The successful ones. Not the ones who just open some door on art. ➔

So, to do that and have shows like this which are curated and have catalogues for every show - you can't do this by selling Middle Eastern art!

But do you see this altering significantly within the next five to ten years?

Yes, prices will increase. As museums open, as new foundations open, all of this will support it. Middle East art will reach the heights of the Chinese market. It will. Usually the way things are in normal life is that collectors support first, then it goes to auction houses and then museums. Here it's the other way round. It goes to museums first.

It's interesting to see how this paradigm is evolving, outside of the usual Western art economy...

Yes, there will be a global change. Already you have in China interest in Middle Eastern art...

Really? In Hong Kong this year there seemed to be very little concrete interest in Middle Eastern art

No. Pearl Lam is very interested. I was with her just now in Azerbaijan and she is tremendously interested. If you look at Sheikhha Mayassa's show in Mathaf last year when she had the Cai

You are clearly one of the successful ones as well.
Yes.

Its true, compared to London that -

But then look at Venetia Porter at the British Museum! She is a woman. And at the Tate, Frances Morris, Jessica Morgan and Sheena Wagstaff who has come now to the Met. They are all women!

It s almost now we need to try and get more men involved perhaps..

Yes! [laughs uproariously] Yes!

In the Gulf it s traditional that men tend towards business and women gravitate towards the arts

Yes, well my father was like that. I came here as an economics major and then fell in love with art. And the Empress [Farah Diba] told me, well if you study art, you should study Western art. Don't study Islamic art as we are looking for Western art curators. They had all the Islamic and Middle Eastern curators they needed when the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art opened, but they were struggling to find Western curators. And right now, Mathaf is struggling for curators.

You were going to work at TMOCA - but what happened?

Well, the revolution happened. And I had no passport and was stuck here. A friend of mine had been at Brown University and joined the Guggenheim, so I was lucky to do that too. I couldn't even be paid as I had no papers! So i just stayed and worked and then an investment bank hired me as a curator and sponsored me so I got my papers. I had been at the Guggenheim for two years, working with the curators, doing shows and everything - but I wasn't being paid.

How did you survive?

The living money I had left - all of that disappeared, so I got a job. I was separated from my parents, it was rough!

From that point, when did the idea of setting up your own space come about

Well, when I was at the investment bank I was buying artists, and I then decided OK, Zenderoudi got in touch with me, Nicky Nodjoumi got in touch with me, Monir Farmanfarmaian got in touch with me - that's when I realised these artists have no galleries! So I decided to open a gallery here.

Monir had been in New York for some decades already?

Yes! We had been family friends and so once I opened the gallery she gave a show to me. Nothing sold! Nothing. In those days it was tough. In 1983, 1984, 1985, it was tough. In 1985 I did a show called 'Calligrafiti' with 120 artists, half Middle Eastern and all the international artists sold but none of the middle eastern artists. Now times have changed and we have made a big progress to that end and now the Western world has come to appreciate Middle Eastern art and artists. It was hard though. First I was on Madison and 82nd. Then the next space was 72nd and Madison and my third space was 78th and Madison.

What was New York like at that time during the mid-1980s?

I had so much fun! I was hanging out with Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. I did two shows with Andy where he suggested artist friends of his and they all belonged to 'Interview' magazine and he and I would do a party for a thousand people. I am in those books about the 1980s as having those fun openings. It was party central. Oh my God, we had such



I am in those books about the 1980s as having those fun openings. It was party central. Oh my God, we had such wild parties!



wild parties! Studio 54, Xenon and Area. We were wild in those days. I was young, single... the perfect scenario! Andy thought I was this young, Persian princess, so he kept wanting to do parties with me. Firooz (Zahedi, photographer) I met through Andy Warhol!

So this was an amazing time. Yet, how different was the business of the art market in New York, then compared to now?

Well those days the auction houses didn't play the role they do today. In those days, the only people who would show up at auction were dealers. They would buy and sell in turn to their collectors. Now, auction houses became accessible to collectors and a lot of price levels are made because major collectors buy at auction. So, that has changed since then. I think also it wasn't also just a few top galleries controlling the market. Smaller galleries could survive as well, because it was different. There was no internet. You could bring an artist from Paris and give him exposure here and do very well. Or in the secondary market, you could buy a Masson in Paris and sell it here and make a good profit. These days, everything is on the internet and nothing is hidden, there is no novelty.

So developing your credentials in the secondary market has long been a strategy of yours.

Yes, that's 30 years in the secondary market. That's why I am successful. We have a director of Western Modern Masters and my gallery director and I do the Middle Eastern. We are always in the secondary market for Sepheris, for Zenderoudis, for Guiragossian - all the major artists across the board.



Opening nights at Leila Heller Gallery: 'Andy Warhol thought I was this young, Persian princess, so he kept wanting to do parties with me...'

I can imagine Guiragossian would be consistently popular in the secondary market

Absolutely, absolutely, and in fact, one of the shows I am thinking about would be a multi-generational Guiragossian show.

That's an interesting idea, so there hasn't actually been a comprehensive Guiragossian show thus far in New York.

No. Actually I am meeting Manuela [Guiragossian] in LA soon to discuss this. Anyway, I am also interested in a Turkish artist, who is older and I'm interested in the secondary market for all these shows and eventually doing retrospectives! We also did a major show of Marcus Gregorian and the Met just bought two from us.

So, returning to this point of auction houses in the Middle East over the past few years. This is quite a contentious topic and I'm interested to hear your take on the situation as it stands at the moment...

Yes, I think there are a lot of reactions. They have been doing an amazing job in the Middle East, doing specialised sales, getting the word out to collectors and creating new collectors. But the danger is that artists in Iran or other countries see the success of some artists at auction and are now creating work for auction houses. That is really not good. That can burn an artist's career in two seconds. They are gauging what sells at auction to define what kind of artist they are - and that is very wrong.

There are rumours that Christie's Director for the Middle East, Isabelle de la Bruyere has quit?

Isabelle hasn't quit! No, no. She was promoted in a major way. She's still with Christie's, promoted, now the Middle East is becoming so important they need someone to sit in London and oversee the Middle East who has some understanding of it, because they didn't have this before! She is - phenomenal, she's done a lot for the arts in the region. And, you know, Christie's is actually expanding in the region. I just came back from a trip with the President's niece, the President's daughter and the First Lady of Azerbaijan and Christie's did this trip for curators, collectors and artists, in Azerbaijan. That hasn't happened before.

Central Asia seems to be popping up increasingly on the international art radar...

There's a lot of activity there! I have been to Baku twice this year. I think there is a lot of money there, like when the Middle East started, with all the oil money. I saw the most beautiful Zaha Hadid exhibition hall that's just gone up in Baku. It's gorgeous! Gorgeous! It's beautiful and I am a big fan of Zaha Hadid and I think that's the best of hers that I have seen. It's beautiful and it's going to open soon and the arts initiatives that they are having in Baku, with the foundation of Yarat, their non-profit foundation for the arts, what they are doing with Azerbaijani artists is

fantastic! I hear there is a lot of activity in Kazakhstan too and in Uzbekistan. I am personally half-Uzbeki - my father was born in Samarkand - so I would love to go and explore and see what else they are doing there.

What qualities do you especially find in artists from that region that excite you?

It's fabulous, I especially think the quality is amazing, the way they tie it to the heritage of their area, using a lot of rugs in their work, it's fascinating. Yes, and they are very edgy! Their videos are SOOO edgy! Very cutting-edge and daring! They have freedom there, they don't have to worry about censorship. It's controlled, but it's just like Turkey. You can see nudity, all of that, no problem.

What are your plans for the immediate future? Expanding?

We're always expanding somewhere or other! We've just opened our new installation room where you saw Reza's work, we'll be doing - well, to be having a gallery in Chelsea, the costs are prohibitive. It's like over \$200,000 a month, all included. So I love showing emerging artists and I didn't want to stop that. So our new installation room will be devoted to showing the work of young or emerging artists. For example, this young Azeri artist will be featured in November, December, his name is Faig Ahmed. We will be working with him closely. I still want to work with young artists, even though the price levels are so low - so that's what's happening in the installation room. We are also looking at another space hopefully just for installations in Chelsea and I hope we'll find one. I hope we can find a place where we can give it to an artist to create something amazing!

That will only add to your financial burden though?

It could, but let's see! Hopefully our secondary market business will support it!

Would you ever consider moving to the Middle East, having an outpost out there perhaps?

You know, if we do, it will be done very differently. It won't be done to represent a Middle Eastern artist we already represent. It would be done in a different way, to take to the Middle East what they don't have. So if we ever do such a thing, that's how we would plan it.

Do you think the market in Dubai or Abu Dhabi or Doha would make economic sense for you?

I think Dubai already does. They have great galleries and every day a new one is opening.

But do you think the market there is growing or stagnating?

I think the market for art is global. You don't need to actually sell in Dubai.

Well, yes you are increasingly seeing a global perspective from galleries such as Isabelle van den Eynde, The Third Line, Green Art and so on...

Yes, it's amazing and all three are galleries I have tremendous respect for, I work with them and they are all dear friends as well. I think that they are gaining tremendous respect globally and most of their sales are done at art fairs and through international clients they get to know there as well. But I think Dubai is already a hub for financial business and by its nature, also become a hub for art. So I think there should be no problem. The real estate has started moving again, a lot of people have moved to Dubai. There's a sunny future there! **HBA**

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