

# LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Sutton, Kate. "Global Village." *Artforum*. (March 29, 2015).

## ARTFORUM

### Global Village

DUBAI 03.29.15



Left: Global Art Forum director-at-large Shumon Basar with artist Cécile B. Evans. Right: Sultan Souud Al Qassemi with Mathaf's Joanne Lisinski. (All photos: [Kate Sutton](#))

IF THE OLD McLuhan adage holds true, first we shape our tools and then they shape us. At this stage in history, however, we face the very real possibility that our tools might soon evolve beyond us, a moment ominously dubbed "The Singularity." This is the dilemma explored in *The Age of Earthquakes: A Guide to the Extreme Present*, a pocket-size primer on our blossoming obsolescence, coauthored by [Hans Ulrich Obrist](#), [Douglas Coupland](#), and [Shumon Basar](#). Modeled after McLuhan's tenets, the book embeds images by [Rosemarie Trockel](#), [Taryn Simon](#), [Hito Steyerl](#), [Jon Rafman](#), [Amalia Ulman](#), and [Camille Henrot](#) with bon mots, titillating questions, or irksome observations, like, "In *Star Wars* there is no shopping," or "I miss getting emails from Nigerian princes."

The guide served as unofficial muse to this year's Global Art Forum. Now in its ninth year, GAF has come into its own as Art Dubai's brainy twin—the Elizabeth Wakefield to the fair's Jessica. And just as Art Dubai has matured, growing more elegant and steady in its purpose, so too has GAF branched out to find exactly what it does best, supplementing its traditional run at the fair with two-day jaunts to Gulf-area destinations like Doha or, beginning this year, Kuwait, where the forum spent the days preceding Art Dubai's March 18 opening.

While Basar remains GAF's director-at-large, this year's event was programmed by Turi Munthe, founder of the "citizen newswire" Demotix, and Sultan Souud Al-Qassemi, the Dubai-based political commentator and all-around master of making Twitter matter. Under the blithe title "Download Update?," the duo focused on the role of technology in the wake of the Arab Spring. Programs ranged from a series on digitizing archives and the persistence of paper-publishing to a panel outlining "The Arab Technocracy," led by [Roland Daher](#), head of business development for the entrepreneurial incubator Wamda. "It was surreal having a conversation about technology in the region and not discussing a three-hundred-billion-dollar economy next door," Daher confessed during a break. One of his colleagues was less reserved: "If anyone has made a brilliant use of technology, it's Israel... oh, and ISIS! ISIS is, like, the Airbnb of extremists." "The Uber," Daher corrected him. "It's all outsourced, remember?"



Left: Artist Mehreen Murtaza. Right: Artists Payam Sharifi, Nanu Al-Hamad, Khalid Al Gharaballi, and Tiffany Malakooti.

For its home away from Art Dubai, GAF settled in Kuwait's oldest concrete building, the Amricani Cultural Centre. Once an American hospital, the structure is now occupied by Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, the thirty-thousand-piece-strong art collection of the ruling al-Sabah family. The premises are festooned with the institution's logo, a loopy little font, like someone making shadow puppets with their fingers. "Look familiar?" artist Payam Sharifi quizzed, gesturing toward the welcome banner, black with white lettering. "There's only one other organization that publicly uses that font."

Inside, the Amricani was studded with selected treasures from the al-Sabah Collection. We were struck dumb by these "Splendors of the Ancient East," figurines of tigermen, conquered boars, interlocking scorpions, and several heavily dreaded warriors, all reputedly thousands of years old, but astonishingly intact and suspiciously shiny. "It looks like there's been a lot of restoration on these," a reporter mused. "No no, sir," a guard assured us: "Laser cleaning." The last gallery had been temporarily hijacked by "Jaykar: The Cheeky Video Scene of the Gulf," a loop put together by Monira Al Qadiri, whose own video *SOAP* superimposed somber South Asian maids and chauffeurs into Gulf soap operas. The next video—by quirky Saudi spoofers Telfaz11—featured rapping migrant workers throwing down the ultimate boast: "I'm not afraid of my sponsor." "That's actually pretty gangsta," designer Tiffany Malakooti said admiringly.

The next morning we loaded up into buses for a tour of the Arab Fund corporate headquarters. "It's not a museum, but it's by far one of the most beautiful buildings in the Gulf. Plus, the collection is fantastic!" Al-Qassemi raved, prepping us for the hand-tiled fountains, spiraling staircases, and the soaring, nine-story atrium, stocked with everything from contemporary paintings to ancient bureaus and intricately fashioned marriage beds from all corners of the Arab world. The mix of art and corporate culture made for the perfect prelude to our next stop, the historic Sultan Gallery, where the collective GCC had just unleashed their latest, *A Wonderful World Under Construction*. Set up to resemble an executive-level press conference, the exhibition staged the fictional launch of an app that would bring government-sponsored branding to its citizens as a kind of public service.



Left: Global Art Forum's Turi Munthe with Wamda's Roland Daher. Right: GCC's Barrak Alzaid with DIS's Marco Roso and David Toro.



"The Gulf loves its superlatives, but Sultan really was the first Arab art gallery," explained writer Kristine Khouri, who has spent several months helping to scan the gallery's tremendous archives. "Everything that's going on now in Doha or Sharjah has shared roots in Kuwait." Founded in 1969 by brother and sister Ghazi and Najat Sultan, the gallery provided a critical hub in a regional network that stretched from Kuwait to Casablanca. Having shown artists like Dia Azzawi, Saleh Al-Jumaie, and Etel Adnan, Sultan Gallery was forced to close with the 1990 invasion, only to be reopened in a new location by the Sultans' younger sister Farida in 2006. "Farida Sultan's really the reason any of us are here now," Khouri told me. Scanning the GAF crowd for a possible patroness, I found myself unceremoniously poked by a waggish-looking woman with a wave of russet-colored hair. "Pose! I'm taking photos for *Playgirl Magazine*," she winked. Khouri shot me a smile: Farida.

That night, we would be guests of another art-world lioness, when Sheikha Paula Al-Sabah flung open the many doors of royal residence Dar Noor for an elaborate buffet dinner. Every bit as jaw-dropping as the architecture was the Sheikha's collection, with its concentration on the 1960s and '70s, as spelled out in de Koonings, Rauschenbergs, Motherwells, Warhols, and a feisty Frank Stella. Apparently the collection had been decimated twice now—once in Beirut, once during the war—but both times the Sheikha has resolved to build it back up. I was drawn by a framed map of Kuwait, its coastline riddled with spiky red clouds, like cartoon sound-effect bubbles minus their KAPOW!s. "Joana and Khalil?" I wagered. Khouri laughed: "This is actually not an artwork; it's a map left behind by the US army when they used this floor of the house as their command center during the invasion." So, not Joana and Khalil?



Left: Dealer Priya Jhaveri. Right: MoMA associate curator Ana Janevski, Garage Museum director Kate Fowle, curator Luiza Teixeira de Freitas, and MoMA chief curator of media and performance Stuart Comer.

The next morning, all available units reported to Dubai, where the city was already rippling under the fair's effect. And while the Sharjah Biennial may have consciously uncoupled with the fair (pushing its opening to Armory Week, and the March Meetings to the same week in May as Frieze New York, a not-so-subtle message to the transatlantic art world), there was more than enough distraction for a Monday evening, with Dubai Design Days, the Abraaz Art Prize, and a spate of openings in the Alserkal Avenue gallery district. Currently home to Ayyam, Lawrie Shabibi, Grey Noise, Green Art Gallery, and Carbon 12 (to name but a few), Alserkal has extended its holdings, taking on at least two more blocks of warehouses, soon to be occupied by the Third Line and a Leila Heller outpost, among others. For the fair week, the Third Line had set up a temporary pop-up program, screening an eight-channel video installation by Rami Farook in its new digs, while its present location featured Ala Ebtekar's celestial cyanotype paintings, alongside a thoughtful installation by Abbas Akhavan upstairs. ("Don't bother, it's lit by natural light," a frustrated colleague huffed as she made her way down the shadowed steps.)

Outside yet another pop-up at Cinema Akil, Mehreen Murtaza's *Deep Earth Object*, 2015, turned one of Alserkal's newly acquired courtyards into a crash site, where a hulking, otherworldly orb had seemingly collided with the cobblestones. "Actually, none of this was paved last week, which might have been why they were even willing to let me do this," the artist chuckled. The piece was one of the offsite commissions for Art Dubai Projects, curated this year by Lara Khaldi. In a space next door was another: Maria Thereza Alves's *Wake: The Flight of Birds and People*, 2015, an elaborate time line tracking the botanical history of the UAE. Seeds, it seems, fear no borders.

Not so labor activists. The next morning, I left bright and early for New York University Abu Dhabi to catch Slavs and Tatars' "Mirrors for Princes," an exhibition packing power puns around the physical and spiritual grooming of one's heart and tongue (as it seems the safest way to critique royalty is through metaphor). The walls of the first gallery are carpeted in Pepto-Bismol pink. ("It's actually made to match the color of Avril

Lavigne's hair," curator Maya Allison clarified. "That's the photo they sent us.") Viewers are then swallowed into a series of black-lit galleries before emerging in a tea parlor—reading room, which has become quite popular with the faculty. That day, all talk swirled around NYU professor Andrew Ross—part of the Gulf Labor Working Group—who had been denied entry to the UAE the night before. While the university has a policy guaranteeing unhindered access for its students and professors, Ross was technically on his spring break, which he planned to spend researching independently. "It's funny," one professor mused. "The university really tried to bring up the conversation by setting these labor standards, and while, yes, of course, they should have done more to uphold them, they also became the scapegoats for a truly widespread issue."



Left: Curators Bana Kattan and Maya Allison. Right: Artist Hadieh Shafie, dealer Suzy Sikorski, artist Noor Ali Chagani, curator Shiva Balaghi, dealer Leila Heller, and artist Kambiz Sharif.

There was certainly a lot to mull over on the long ride back to Madinat Jumeirah ("an authentic recreation of ancient Arabia") for the opening of Art Dubai. With last year's introduction of Art Dubai Modern—relegated, along with GAF, to the tonier settings of the neighboring Mina A'Salam—the fair continues to grow, mingling international operators like Chantal Crousel, kurimanzutto, Galerie Krinzinger, Sfeir Semler, and Victoria Miro with potent presentations from Mor Charpentier, Canvas Gallery, and Jhaveri Contemporary, whose suite of Alexander Gorlizki miniatures brought a lump to my throat. While its geographic positioning draws in galleries from Lagos's Art Twenty One to Moscow's Pechersky Gallery to Tokyo's OTA Fine Arts, it's still heavy on regional players. Local staple Isabelle van den Eynde split her sizable booth in two, showcasing the quietly kooky Mohammed Kazem on one side, with *Madame Tussaud*, a boisterous total installation from Hesam Rahmanian and the brothers Haerizadeh—Ramin and Rokni—on the other, while over at Leila Heller—where art historian Shiva Balaghi had curated a four-artist show—I heard the dealer purr to one of her artists, "Getting into a museum! How's that for a birthday present?"

In the second hall, Honor Fraser had decked out her booth in KAWS paintings of Snoopy characters. "Everyone here seems to know Charles Schultz," Fraser grinned. I personally found Linus—x's over his eyes, backpack slung low—a dead ringer for many a weary fairgoer, especially as art-world extremists (Princess Alia Al Senussi, collector Alain Servais, and Annette Schönholzer among them) began to arrive straight from Art Basel Hong Kong. They were greeted in the foyer by a roaming, compliment-dispensing robot. "You have to make eye contact with it first," I overheard someone explain to a flustered guest, cornered by the machine. As if on cue, the robot piped up: "What a great color on you!" Perhaps those fears of the coming Singularity are a little premature.

— Kate Sutton