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Passion for Art

May



THE LEILA HELLER GALLERY

Ms. Heller's impact
on the MENASA market
& her featured artists at
Art Dubai

LEILA HELLER

by Laura Stewart

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ALTHOUGH THERE were seminars, lectures, symposia and lots of idle chatter, there was perhaps no one better suited at this year's Art Dubai fair to comment

on the evolution and globalization of the MENASA market than the powerhouse dealer, Leila Heller.

Heller, an elegant Iranian born gallerist – now based in New York – was one of, if not the first dealer from the Middle East to bring the work of the region to the attention of the international art world. Heller opened her gallery in Manhattan in 1982 –nearly two decades before the interest in art from the Gulf Region began to peak – and as a result she is considered the doyenne of the Middle Eastern market by many art aficionados.

In a recent article in ArtNews magazine, Daniel Grant discusses Heller, her artists and their impact on the market: "From the Leila Heller Gallery," he writes, "Iranian artist Shoja Azari's videos have doubled in price, from \$12,000/20,000 to \$22,000/40,000, within the past three years. Several other artists she represents—including Iran-born artists Shiva Ahmadi and Reza Derakshani, as well as Turkish artist Kezban Arca Batibeki, who creates acrylic and embroidered images on canvas—have all jumped considerably within the past five years. For instance, Derakshani's work was priced \$5,000/35,000, "when I started working with him" five years ago, and now his work is priced \$25,000/150,000.

Last year, a Christie's sale in Dubai featured an auction record of \$146,500, compared with an estimate of \$80,000/120,000, for his Prelude in Pink, 2010-11, an oil and enamel on canvas." If one were to go to central casting to find a woman to play a sophisticated player on the international art market, one would have difficulty finding an actress that would match Ms. Heller in style, intelligence, art savvy and business acumen.

A Persian beauty of a certain age, Heller is always as well turned out as her exhibitions, and perhaps because of her global perspective – sometimes lacking in other more regionally based dealers – she tends to lend any art occasion a certain gravitas.

It would perhaps not be an overstatement to say that Ms. Heller's acutely curated and well-edited shows of the work of expatriate Iranian artists and artists from other countries in the Gulf region have functioned as a leading contributor to the education of Western audiences to movements in Middle Eastern Modernism and Contemporary art. When I met her in Art Dubai at the VIP preview, she was effortlessly squiring wellheeled collectors through her booth, which this year featured the work of two top-rate young artists: Shiva Ahmadi and Ayad Alkadh.

Shiva Ahmadi

Ahmadi's exquisite works on board bring to mind a panoply of references from the stories depicted in Indian and Persian miniatures magnified on a vast scale, to the heavily symbolic pictures by 16th century Dutch artist, Heironymous Bosch, whose disturbing triptychs populated by writhing figures and vignettes intended to visually communicate Christian imagery of heaven and hell.



Shiva Ahmadi

It is not surprising that Ahmadi's work brings Bosch to mind, as the Teheran-born artist says that much of her work is inspired by the time she spent as a child during the Iranian revolution and then the resulting war with Iraq. She explains, "The dominant memories of my childhood were the daily city bombings and their results: the handicapped children, the sobbing and screaming of the families who lost their loved ones, the black fabrics that appeared all over the city as a sign of national mourning".

Q & A

Laura H. Stewart
artbahrain.org & Leila
Heller of Leila Heller
Gallery, NY.

LS: How did you do at Art Dubai 2012? Did you find that you met many new collectors, or was your business primarily done with collectors with which you have previously done business?

LH: It was impressive how Art Dubai had managed to bring so many different collector groups from so many parts of the world including LA, Aspen, NY, Paris, London, Germany, China, India, Australia and different countries from the Middle East. And of course, we the galleries were the beneficiaries of these efforts. We sold over 90% of our booth and the collectors ranged from the Middle East to India to China to the US. For us it was ironic we came to Dubai to sell to US clients even though we're based in NY. We felt that the Saudi collectors were the most active this year and Saudi Arabia is a burgeoning art scene.

LS: What were your impressions of this year's Fair in general? Did you think that it has gotten a great deal better, or is it incrementally and slowly getting better (with regard to quality of art on offer/diversity etc)?

LH: Under the directorship of Antonia Carver, Art Dubai has exponentially grown much more professional and competes in every way with the best of the art fairs in Europe and the US. The different galleries' productions were very well curated and the fair as a whole had a very high standard and quality. I loved the intimate size of Art Dubai— it is not a small fair but it is not too large where you get lost or exhausted. It has the best combination of galleries from the East and the West and an amazing dialogue between them!

LS: Being one of the earliest dealers from the region to work in the global art world, what are your current thoughts regarding the discussion surrounding the "hot" MENASA market. Do you think that the attention shone on the region with the events of Arab Spring are doing the MENASA market any favors. Or, are you worried that the market could expand too fast with speculation and without a broad or deep enough international base of support from collectors, dealers, academics etc.

LH: In any emerging market there is the danger of the wrong people collecting the work for and selling it to drive up the market and make a quick profit. I think that the financial crisis in 2008 weeded out those collectors who got involved in this market for speculation. I think that the market is quite stable now and through the educational initiatives of a number of institutions and foundations in the region as well as galleries such as ours who have an educational component to their exhibitions in the West, the market is growing gradually in a healthy



Hieronymus Bosch

As Bosch became perhaps a chronicler of morality in 16th Century Europe, Ahmadi functions in the same way as both an observer of and moral commentator on the instability and uncertainty of modern warfare, economic privation and strife, and perhaps as an arbiter of morals as well.

The universal appeal of Ahmadi's work -- which is equally thought-provoking and beautiful to look at -- is reflected in the collections in which she is represented from the Detroit Institute of Arts in Detroit, Michigan to the His Highness Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Institute of Arts

Ayad Alkhadi

The other featured artist at the Leila Heller stand was Ayad Alkhadi an Iraqi artist, born in 1971. Alkhadi's work focuses on cultural and political topics of Iraq and the Middle East.



Ayad Alkhadi

Ayad's work is mainly biographical and often incorporates his painted image. His work explores the intersection of Near Eastern and Western culture, politics and religion.

Born and raised in Baghdad, Iraq, Alkhadi left the country after the first Gulf War. He subsequently earned his MFA from New York University and he currently resides and works in New York City.

Again, the work of this powerful and aggressive artist, is both personal and political. Yet it is not obviously didactic and in many ways leaves questions asked, yet the answers open-ended.

fashion.

LS: Who from your stable and in general do you think are five of the artists from the region --- either those who are already established -- and those who are just starting out -- will be the long-term winners with regard to international recognition based on talent and sustainability?

LH: It is difficult to single out only 5 artists as there are both in the diaspora and region amazing talent that have emerged and who are being actively collected by museums, foundations, and collectors both in the region and world wide. We feel that our artists Farideh Lashai, Shoja Azari, Reza Derakshani, Khosrow Hassanzadeh, Roya Akhavan and the younger group Ayad Alkhadi, Kezban Arca Batibeki, Negar Ahkami, and Shiva Ahmadi have made major breakthroughs in being collected by major institutions in both the West and in the region.

LS: And, finally: Do you think that the exposure for these artists around the world will enable them to stay true to their aesthetic journeys, or do you think that there is a danger that some may be seduced by the material rewards of becoming a "star" on the global market and lose their way artistically? I ask this question in the context of, for example, Cuba, which I realize is a completely different and idiosyncratic case, but a case in which many artists who were laboring at their art in a very "purist" way, either by choice of medium or thematically, and which has shown that some have benefited from exposure on the wider art world radar screen -- while others have lost their way.

LH: In any emerging market, the quick rise and fame of an artist can be detrimental to their longterm career unless its sustained and supported by their gallery in a very calculated manner. To that end, we very carefully manage the sale of our artists' works and have contracts signed by our collectors guaranteeing they will not in turn turnaround and consign it to an auction house for a period of 3-5 years. We also do not sell more than 2-3 works to any one client. We also try to not sell the works of an artist to any given set of collectors from one country. We also reserve some of the best works of the artist for foundations and institutions even though our commission might be less than selling it to a collector. We are weary of artists whose only market is dictated by the auction houses; yet, in the Middle East, the auction houses have played a great roll in exposing to the West the works of many artists from the region and for that they should be credited.

According to critic, Linda Komaroff, Ayad demonstrates his skillful rendering of the human form, often self-portraits, juxtaposing strong draftsmanship, in the western sense, with his mastery of Arabic calligraphy, which makes for both dramatic fusion and visual tension. For example, the series "Ghareeb," from 2006-2008, captures with striking selfimages the artist's emotional responses to the torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghareeb.

Again, largely monochromatic except for the strategic intrusion of red, Ayad here follows an Islamic calligraphic tradition transforming words into images such as chains, swords and rifles, which he causes to both plausibly and disjunctively interact with the figures.

Ayad has exhibited at the Queens Museum of Art, the Austrian Cultural forum, and New York University's Bronfman's Centre in New York City; the Station Museum of Contemporary Art in Houston, Texas; the European Parliament in Brussels; Art Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, and ArtSpace, Dubai.

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38th Annual Fine Arts Exhibition

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