

Gronlund, Melissa. "Alserkal Avenue expansion means a bigger canvas for the community." *The National*. (November 14, 2015).

## TheNational



The expansion area of Alserkal Avenue in Al Quoz, Dubai. The creative hub has doubled in size, welcoming new galleries and offering more opportunities for the growth of arts and culture in the region. Courtesy Alserkal Avenue

## Alserkal Avenue expansion means a bigger canvas for the community

Melissa Gronlund

**November 14, 2015** Updated: November 15, 2015 11:59 AM

"It's also where the things that build Dubai are stored and made," — that's how Tairone Bastien, the programming director of Alserkal Avenue, describes the art and cultural space that sits in Al Quoz, the industrial area. Alserkal Avenue has become the region's pre-eminent hub for creative activity. This week, the organisation will open a 250,000-square-foot expansion, doubling its size and welcoming new galleries into the mix. In the coming months, it will also open dedicated exhibition spaces for temporary programming, a black box theatre called The Junction, an outdoor performance venue, the region's first art cinema, as well as design stores and high-concept restaurants. It's an impressive feat for an area that is less than 10 years old. "One of the most interesting things about Alserkal Avenue," says Vilma Jurkute, the director of the organisation, "is how it has grown organically. It started out as a curated group of art and design galleries, and then we began receiving applications from international galleries. Now for the first time, we are opening up international gallery spaces. It is such an accomplishment for the region."

## Forward thinking

In 2007, the area was simply a group of warehouses on land owned by Abdelmonem bin Eisa Alserkal, the organisation's Dubai-based patron. As art galleries began moving in, Abdelmonem started supporting what Jurkute calls a "home-grown programme" to give a platform to local and regionally based talent. Two years ago, the Alserkal Avenue arts organisation was officially launched, with a curatorial staff who develop exhibitions, talks programmes and film and video screenings.

The expansion will provide further space for this public programming. The outdoor space is the venue for the arts organisation's current Movies Under the Stars series, and in the future it will be used for performances and concerts, too.

The new public gallery spaces will house curated shows and commissions, allowing for more ambitious and regular curating strands. Behind the courtyard, the Junction, a black box theatre will be open to the community for programming, and a separate, already established arts organisation, The Jamjar, will also be moving into one of the new warehouse spaces.

According to Jurkute, this week marks the first phase of the expansion, led by the opening of the art galleries. "We mark November week with arts spaces and then continue with the gradual openings of all spaces into March 2016."

## Art explosion

The commercial galleries that are opening this week broaden the area's already noted international flavour. El Marsa, a Tunisian gallery, will have an outpost focusing on art of North Africa; while 1x1 Gallery will show Indian art.

The prestigious Leila Heller Gallery, based in New York, opens this week with a mammoth 11,000-square-metre space, thus making it the largest commercial gallery space in the GCC. They will open with a show by Ghada Amer and Wim Delvoye, two well-established international contemporary artists.

So, is Alserkal Avenue the new Shoreditch? Its founder seems to think so. Shoreditch, in London, is one of a number of former industrial areas that have been transformed by artists and galleries into creative hubs, where galleries sit alongside graphic design studios, internet start-ups and young fashion brands. They are the amazing success stories of the creative economies (for people who want artisanal coffee, at least) and the drivers of the booming and interconnected contemporary art world.

Theatre lovers will also rejoice with the opening of the black box theatre space, The Junction, with a pop-up performance of Noel Coward's *The Vortex* on Wednesday.

## Coming soon

Because not all the deadlines for the expansion have been met, the retail stores and The Jamjar will be opening in the second phase of the expansion. The Third Line will be moving from its current location into Alserkal Avenue in mid-December, opening with a show by Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, one of Iran's foremost contemporary artists.



The Jean-Paul Najar Foundation also plans to open in the district, showing the late French collector's holdings: predominantly European and American work from the 1960s to the 1990s.

Alserkal Avenue will also get its first residency programme, with a studio attached, giving artists the chance to live and work within the centralised hub. Such activities are the most important facet of the site.

They offer a space for the kind of work that the market does not traditionally support – young or untested work, or that which is performance or film-based, which tends to be less sellable. For a nascent arts scene like Dubai's, it is crucial that a space for discourse develops alongside the commercial scene in order to encourage younger artists to work in the region and broaden the possibilities of what they might accomplish. Art needs a place to play around and experiment in – and that is exactly what Alserkal Avenue will increasingly provide.

### **What's on at Alserkal Avenue**

Gallery launches and talks

Sunday November 15

VIP guests are invited to check out three new galleries – Leila Heller Gallery in the extension, and 1x1 Gallery and El Marsa Gallery at the older part of the site – opening their shows alongside current Alserkal galleries, with a programme of talks and events scheduled to coincide with Abu Dhabi Art. These events are not open to the public.

Catch a public talk by artist Daniel Rich during the launch of his new show at Carbon 12, in which he and Gil Heitor Cortesão are exhibiting paintings of architectural elements.

- *4pm, at the A4 space*

South African artists, the brothers Husan and Husain Essop, will be in conversation with Tairone Bastien, to launch their show at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde. The public session will include a video that demonstrates the artists' confrontation between East and West, and religion and pop culture.

- *5pm, Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde*

Galleries Night

Monday 16 November

Lawrie Shabibi debuts an exhibition of Egyptology-inspired work by Farhad Ahrarnia, while Leila Heller Gallery shows work by the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye and the New York-based Egyptian artist Ghada Amer, who makes intricate and beautiful embroidered paintings that investigate gender, identity and postcolonialism. Amer and Delvoye will head a panel with Marine Antle, moderated by Shiva Balaghi. From 6pm–7pm in the Yard.

Ayyam Gallery opens a show by Iraqi artist Sama Alshaibi, who will be in conversation with Maymanah Farhat and Wael Hattar at 5pm in the Yard. Later at 6pm, eL Seed – whose calligraphy boutique is planned for the

extension – will be in conversation with Myrna Ayad.

## **The Junction**

### **November 18, 19, and 20**

Pop-up performances in warehouse H72 at Alserkal Avenue on Noel Coward's *The Vortex*.

## **The rest**

### **November 21**

#### **West Side Story**

The musical is part of the *Movie Under the Stars* series and presented in collaboration with Cinema Akil.

November 24

Lantian Xie

The multi-media artist will present a performative lecture about waiting and belonging in Dubai, staged on Sunset Beach.

December 16, 17, 18

*Black Girl* (1966)

By Ousmane Sembene, the Senegalese director known as the "father of African film" for his films and novels from the 1960s onwards, and for the connections he set up with filmmakers in France and elsewhere.