

canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

YEAR IN REVIEW
2015

WHAT MADE MIDDLE EASTERN ART HEADLINES

IN THE NEWS



2015

EXPANDING HORIZONS AT DUBAI'S ALSERKAL AVENUE

Creative hub Alserkal Avenue, located in Dubai's Al-Quoz district, may have had its origins as a series of factories, but since 2007 it has rapidly evolved into a vibrant community that holds packed gallery nights, a Quoz Arts Festival with performances, music and food, a market, and now, an increasing roster of galleries, photography studios, design agencies and food outlets that inhabit its large warehouse spaces. New additions in 2015 include Elmarsa gallery (Tunis), the Jean-Paul Najjar Foundation (Paris), Leila Heller Gallery (New York), 1 x 1 Art Gallery (Dubai), Custot Gallery (London) and The Third Line (Dubai). The latter moved one street over to join the compound, as well as Ayyam Gallery, which opened a third Dubai space next to its existing Alserkal one to allow more extensive programming of its activities from exhibitions and auctions to artist residencies.

Already home to several galleries, such as the Salsali Private Museum, Carbon 12 and Green Art Gallery, Lawrie Shabibi, Mojo Gallery, Showcase, Grey Noise and more, Alserkal Avenue is the initiative of Emirati patron Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal (who is often seen perusing the galleries and their events). It recently underwent a serious expansion of 76,200 square metres, opening formally on 16 November 2015. "This year has been a special one for me. It's served as a coming of age for Alserkal Avenue. We started the year with a sense

of purpose – to bring our grand vision of Alserkal Avenue to life together with our arts community. And it's been rewarding," says Alserkal. "We've taken promising regional artists out into the world, providing them with a platform to inspire dialogue amongst new audiences. We've also had so many firsts – our first art commissions early this year; the first season of Alserkal Avenue Programming was launched in October; the first international Contemporary art galleries opened in the region in November... We only hope to grow our efforts in 2016 to bring more of our region's rich artistic tapestry to Dubai and the world."

While the new expansion has a sleeker, more updated warehouse-conversion look, the rows of grey spaces have the same essence as Alserkal's original area: these are galleries you have to walk inside to see the art, instead of idly wander by. The experience is further personalised by the fact that each space comes as an empty shell and so each gallery has been given the opportunity to customise it to their needs. "[The last year] has been about bricks and mortar, cement dust and blueprints, and a lot of time spent in hard hats. It's been about long flights and long days introducing Alserkal Avenue to an international arts community with our talented team. But mostly, it's been about laying the foundations for a creative community that is curious, supportive, engaged and continually evolving," says Vilma Jurkute, director of Alserkal Avenue. "The launch of the Alserkal Avenue Programme and the opening of the expansion are cornerstones of our vision to bolster and encourage appreciation of art and all creative pursuits within our community in Dubai and beyond, with more galleries, creative concepts joining Alserkal Avenue in 2016."

WHY MOVE NOW INSTEAD OF YEARS AGO?

We weren't ready, for various reasons. It so happened that we decided, regardless of what happens, that we would open in November 2015, and then it was serendipitous timing as we heard about the other galleries also opening in November and Alserkal gained all this buzz... it was a big dive! We wouldn't have been ready for it even six months ago. I like the energy here – you see Abdelmonem here often, he's interested, you feel that he is really involved, which is good, and the Alserkal team has the energy, they get the idea: how to make something important in Dubai that reaches an international audience.

IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WHAT OR HOW YOU WILL EXHIBIT WORKS HERE IN THIS SPACE VERSUS IN TUNIS?

For the grand opening we decided to have a big name artist, Rachid Koraïchi. It was an opportunity. He produced the works for this space – we like to give carte blanche to the artists when it comes to the gallery space, and in this case, he made work that was 90 per cent dependent on the space. The gallery inspires them! We have very high ceilings here, unlike in Tunis. It is still a big space there, but this space here gives another dimension to the works. The mezzanine adds space but keeps it open overall, and we can use it as temporary or as a more permanent exhibition space, or even make it into something more intimate, depending on the artists. People come in and say this space is different – it is open, it has light, which is interesting when you have exhibitions with monumental works [like Koraïchi] because you don't end up feeling the size. I am waiting to see what the other artists come up with!

LEILA HELLER GALLERY

Canvas speaks with Leila Heller, founder and president of her eponymous gallery, which opened in New York in 1982 and has now opened a new space in Alserkal Avenue with dual exhibitions of work by Ghada Amer and Wim Delvoye. Known for an active exhibition schedule with a range of emerging and midcareer artists from predominantly the Middle East and Asia, the gallery's prerogative has always been to link East and West.

WHAT BRINGS YOU TO DUBAI'S ALSERKAL AVENUE?

I have been traveling to the region for the last decade to attend both Abu Dhabi Art and Art Dubai, and have developed a great client base in the region. Dubai has become a major arts hub, connecting Asia, Southeast Asia and Europe and the rest of the West. Also, many major museums, institutions, and foundations





are being established here in the near future as well, which will add to the city's importance as an arts centre. We are located in Alserkal Avenue, as there are so many great established galleries, and more to open. I love the dynamic artistic atmosphere, with so many galleries, artist studios and design studios.

YOUR ALSERKAL GALLERY SPACE IS SIZEABLE – CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THE DECISION TO CREATE DISTINCT EXHIBITION HALLS AS WELL AS THE SUBTLE DESIGN DETAILS THROUGHOUT SUCH AS FAUX SKYLIGHTS?

Our main objective when creating the concept behind the space in Dubai was to maintain purity and exude monumentality in scale and effect. Bringing artists from around the world means that we needed to create both an inspiring, yet simple exhibition space consistent with what an artist might be accustomed to exhibiting in New York, London, Paris or any other major arts centre in the world. Elements like our over 10 metre high ceilings allow us to put on monumental and ambitious exhibitions. For the design of our space we used conceptual architects Charlap, Hyman and Herreo, and the project was seen through by Omar Ghafour, of Light Space Design in Dubai.

HOW DO YOU FEEL YOUR PROGRAMME WILL RESONATE WITH THE UAE ART SCENE? ARE YOU COMING WITH A PARTICULAR VISION OR ARE YOU OPEN TO ORGANIC GROWTH HERE?

Our vision is to bring an international programme of artists from around the world to Dubai. We believe the UAE art scene exists on a regional and international level and will continue to grow towards the latter. We are in Dubai to show artists from the region whom we represent and promote, artists from around the world whom we will be representing in the Middle East and expose Dubai to works of Modern and Contemporary Masters that we showcase in our programme in New York.

CUSTOT GALLERY DUBAI

French Stéphane Custot brings his vision from the London incarnation of Waddington Custot to Dubai, offering what he states as, "a complete freedom of expression" to his artists in his 700 square metre space. Opening his doors with an inaugural exhibition *The World Meets Here* in January 2016, Custot speaks with *Canvas* about falling for Dubai.

WHY DUBAI AND WHY ALSERKAL?

Situated halfway between East and West, Dubai stands as an ideal location for art trading and exhibition. The city already plays host to the respected art fair Art Dubai, which has become an important hub for the international art community. The gradual establishment of major museums such as the Louvre in Abu Dhabi

