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Organic explosion: Dubai's 'art district' Alserkal Avenue expansion

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"Artistic oasis" extends its reach with addition of respected international galleries, bold commissions and first residency programme.

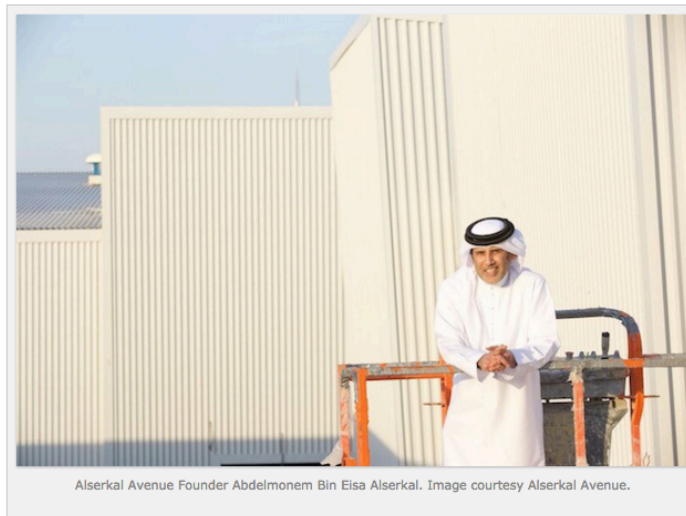
Alserkal Avenue, Dubai's premier contemporary art destination, edges ever closer to its goal of doubling its footprint by expanding to 500,000 square feet.



Mehreen Murtaza, Art Dubai Projects commissions in collaboration with Alserkal Avenue, 2015. Image courtesy Alserkal Avenue.

Alserkal Avenue was founded in Dubai's Al Quoz industrial neighborhood in 2007. One of the seven sheikhdoms that makes up the United Arab Emirates, Dubai is considered the heart of the contemporary art scene in the MENASA region, with Alserkal Avenue as the place to access and experience consistently high quality visual and experiential offerings, as **was noted** on *Artnet News*:

Dubai has quickly claimed its role as arbiter of the Middle Eastern art scene and within this frame, Alserkal Avenue has emerged as a microcosmic cultural hub. The space is made up of Contemporary art galleries and cultural spaces camouflaged within warehouses. Each gallery and cultural milieu takes on a unique identity in its theme, artist representation and aesthetic energy.



Alserkal Avenue Founder Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal. Image courtesy Alserkal Avenue.

The complex, which was once a marble factory, is the brainchild of real estate developer and fine art patron Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal, who was born and raised in Dubai and attended university in the United States. Alserkal's 'founding father' is also an art collector and his love of the arts and culture rubbed off on his son, who envisioned a vibrant cultural community in Dubai akin to London's Shoreditch and New York City's Meatpacking districts. As Alserkal relayed to *Islamic Arts Magazine*, **the complex has a unique role to play in the region:**

Today, Alserkal Avenue is a community unlike any other. It is a community of creative visionaries, rising in union with the patronage and providence of our country's leaders, who put culture at the core of their worldview. It is a community of creative thought leaders and talents who mark not only this new ground, but also the fabric of the city and country beyond, and the entire cultural landscape of the region.



[Click here to watch Alserkal Avenue: Dubai's Arts & Culture District on YouTube](#)

Vilma Jurkute is the Director of Alserkal Avenue. Jurkute came to Dubai with extensive experience in New York, Chicago and London in the international business arena, specialising in the development of creative communities. Jurkute told the UAE's *The National* that Alserkal Avenue **has grown from "organic" beginnings** and is now reaching well beyond the national and regional boundaries:

One of the most interesting things about Alserkal Avenue 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.



Quoz Arts Festival, November 2015. Photo: Lindsay Kirkcaldy. Image courtesy Alserkal Avenue.

Tairone Bastien recently joined the Alserkal Avenue team as the organisation's Programming Director. Bastien previously worked as a Curator for **Performa** in New York (2005-2010) and most recently, as Head of Public Engagement for **TCA Abu Dhabi** (2011-2014). As Bastien told *Islamic Arts Magazine*, the organisation seeks to provide artists with the means to "establish new forums to connect" through its various programmes.

Of particular interest is the organisation's Safina Radio Project, an initiative that participated in the 2015 edition of the **Venice Biennale** and recent **Dhaka Art Summit**. According to the **project's website**, the platform supports a "format for exploring subjects and concepts that relate to the aesthetic, social, cultural and political":

Safina Radio Projects are itinerant online broadcasting platforms, each edition acting as a roving stage for conversation and performance, working alongside contemporary art events.



Alserkal Avenue's A4 Space. Photo: Lindsay Kirkcaldy. Image courtesy Alserkal Avenue.

The expansion of the complex includes a black box theatre, more outlets to eat and drink and increased space for outdoor festivals, films, concerts and panels. In addition, the new complex will use its enlarged environs to support commissioned pieces and has recently established the organisation's first artist residency programme, complete with studio space.

The dynamism behind Alserkal Avenue was evident from the beginning, with regional heavyweights **Ayyam Gallery**, **Carbon 12** and **Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde** leading the way. In November 2011, **Ramin Salsali** opened the doors to the first private museum in Dubai. Salsali spoke with *Art Radar* and told us the story behind his decision to open the **Salsali Private Museum** in Al Quoz:

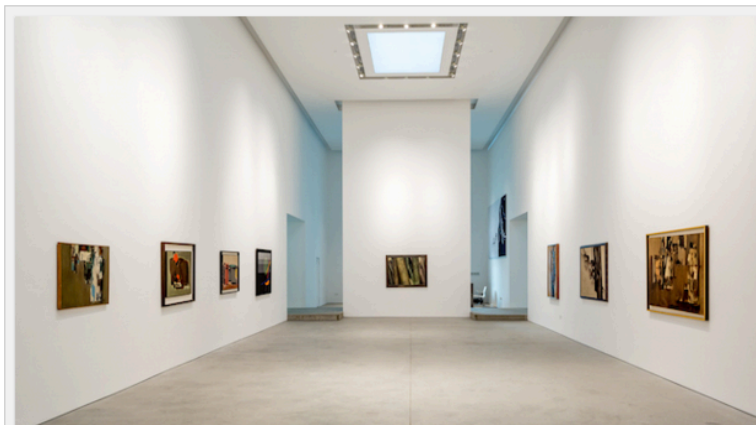
I had the choice between Berlin and Dubai and I decided upon Dubai. Dubai is not just a city – it's an amazing university and leader in the Middle East with technological advancement, tolerance and dynamism. In 2011, I selected Alserkal Avenue based upon its artisan flavour and authentic location. Today, I would do it again. Alserkal is the epic center of creativity for the entire Middle East.



Salsali Private Museum, "German Cool" installation view. Image courtesy Salsali Private Museum.

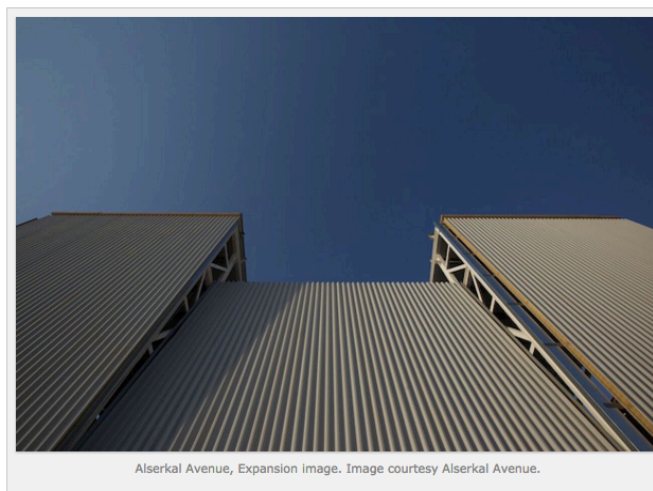
All told, Alserkal Avenue's tenants read like a veritable who's-who of contemporary art, and include:

- **1x1 Gallery**
- **Custot Gallery** (opening 14 March 2016)
- **Elmarsa Gallery**
- **eL Seed Studios**
- **Green Art Gallery**
- **Grey Noise**
- **Jamjar**
- **Jean Paul Najar Foundation**
- **La Galerie Nationale**
- **Lawrie Shabibi**
- **Leila Heller Gallery**
- **Showcase Gallery**
- **The Third Line**



Sohrab Sepehri, installation view, Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai. Photo: Mustafa Aboobacker. Image courtesy Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai.

One of Alserkal Avenue's newest tenants, the Leila Heller Gallery, is not a newcomer to the contemporary art scene. In fact, Heller is well-known for being amongst the first in New York to highlight Iranian artists after establishing her gallery in 1982. The Leila Heller Gallery Dubai represents the biggest gallery in the complex, with an impressive 14,000-square-foot layout. As founder Leila Heller told **Myrna Ayad in a recent article** for *Artnet News*, the gallery will continue to shine a light on the best and brightest artists from the region and has hinted at unveiling an Emirati exhibition in the near future.



Alserkal Avenue, Expansion image. Image courtesy Alserkal Avenue.

This support of "homegrown talent" is important to Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal and is one that will continue beyond the physical expansion of the complex. As Alserkal told *Flash Art International's* Kevin Jones in a **2015 interview**, the organisation is continuing to evolve as organically as it began – this time beyond the confines of its neighborhood:

We have always housed homegrown talent. Now we are extending the platform for them to participate more deeply in the international art world. In this respect, we are acting more like an arts organization. We have done well in supporting the commercial side; now we want to contribute to supporting actual arts creation through our commissions, and to supporting artists internationally through our galleries.

Content is extremely important for us, but the programming is new. In the first year it will be about forming our own voice. We want to be part of the art history in this part of the world. Ten years from today, we want people to refer back to commissions we did. We want to be part of that timeline. But we are just starting.

Lisa Pollman

<http://artradarjournal.com/2016/02/17/organic-explosion-dubais-art-district-alserkal-avenue-expansion/>