

CREATIVE *forces*

When New York gallerist Leila Heller began toying with the idea of opening a space overseas, Dubai felt like the most obvious location. "I've been coming to Dubai and Abu Dhabi for the past 10 years", explains the acclaimed doyenne of art, who has been in business for over three decades. "Over time I have built up a network of locally-based clients who kept asking me 'When are you opening up out here?' So doing so felt like a natural step."

Conversations with Al Serkal Avenue began six years ago and Leila Heller Gallery Dubai threw open its doors last November. In between, it was decided that the UAE chapter of Leila's hugely popular gallery in Chelsea, New York would become the largest in the Middle East, occupying a space that was almost 15,000 square feet large. The project was ambitious, but Leila and her eldest son Alexander, who is also gallery director, had very clear ideas on how they would achieve their vision.

"We knew that we wanted to create something different to what was already on offer in the region", states Alexander. "The artists that we represent are an international mix and when you bring artists from New York, Los Angeles or London to a place that they have never exhibited in before, and possibly never actually visited, you need to ensure that what you are offering them is a space in which they will feel comfortable". Cue creating a hub that was of international standards and that had the familiar feel of a Leila Heller Gallery, but which also responded to the needs of the local market. "I wanted to create a space in which artists could think big and dream big,

knowing that collectors in this part of the world often like big", explains Alexander.

To achieve his vision, Alexander enlisted the help of New York architects Charlap Hyman & Herrero. The fledgling firm had previously worked on Tina Kim Gallery and Christian Berst Gallery in the US, but an overseas project, particularly one of this scale, was new to them. "When we began working on the Leila Heller space neither Andre nor I had ever been to Dubai", admits founder Adam Charlap Hyman. "Initially it was challenging to grasp the enormous scale of the site and the potential luxury of space that it afforded."

Charlap Hyman & Herrero's involvement in the project began entirely by chance. While at a friend's birthday party, Alexander struck up a conversation with a young man who was carrying rolls of renderings under his arm. The next morning, he called the architect in question, Adam Charlap Hyman, and ►

*It took three architects,
a mother and son duo and
one established patron to
create the Middle East's
largest gallery – but, as
Polly Sweet finds out,
the result is a work of art*



Making a 15,000 square foot space feel less imposing was a challenge for the design team. Despite the proportions, the gallery feels warm and inviting.

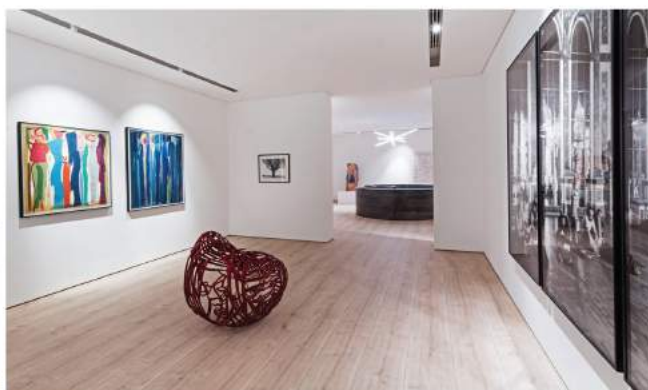


Leila Heller and her son
Alexander at their gallery in
Al Sorkal Avenue.



The suspended spiral staircase that leads to the offices upstairs is a stunning feature and is the only black element in an otherwise white space.

Below and right: Omar Ghafour of Light Space Design was responsible for much of the upstairs. Bottom right: the gallery's entrance



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architect, Light
Space Design*

asked him if he could come by his office for some advice perhaps. The meeting proved pivotal. “He turned up with all these books”, recalls Alexander. “And also these shopping bags full of materials!”, interjects Leila, “Full of mesh and wire and so many different kinds of marble that we had to help him out of the cab. And he was already so invested in the project saying ‘I can see the staircase like this, I can see the floor like that’. We knew within an hour of meeting him that this was our guy”.

With an architect found, Alexander’s next priority was to speak to his mother’s coterie of artists and ask them what they liked about a space, what inspired them and perhaps most importantly what they didn’t like. He also spent his weekends scouring New York’s art houses and museums and taking note of the tiniest details – from the colour of the flooring to the lighting in the bathroom – with the aim of bringing all of his favourite elements together in the new gallery.

One of his favourite aspects of the space today is the step that leads up into each hall. “Galleries can feel intimidating – the scale of them, the value of the art on the walls. A lot of collectors talk about how intimidating they can feel and these are people that will happily spend Dhs 3 million on a piece of art. Here in the Middle East we knew we would be speaking to a new generation of collectors and so it was important to create a warm and inviting atmosphere”. Hence the step, which welcomes visitors into the space while also acting as a

clear demarcation between the gallery’s different exhibitions.

Even with Leila’s expertise, Alexander’s vision and Charlap Hyman & Herrero’s involvement, managing a project that was over 6,000 miles away posed a problem and a seasoned man-on-the-ground was found in architect Omar Ghafour of Light Space Design. London-trained but living in Dubai for the past 14 years, Omar and his firm have worked across a variety of commercial and residential projects, from a Dhs 100 million penthouse in Dubai Marina to a container selling mattresses on Kite Beach.

“Our last project was a 43,000 square-foot penthouse so there was nothing daunting about the Leila Heller Gallery”, he claims. “That said, to make a large white box look interesting is definitely a challenge”. Shadow grooves, skylights and lighting details were all deployed to subtly soften the space and give it a sense of personality – without, of course, detracting from the artwork. Enormous lighting panels create an illusion of sunlight streaming down and make the 32-feet high ceilings feel less imposing while a shadow groove of precisely 2cm runs all the way along the floor of the gallery to make the entire gallery look as if it is floating. “That is the key to making everything feel welcoming – a sense of lightness which counterbalances the weight of the size of the space”, explains Omar. Instead of the standard 10cm thickness, each of the walls is almost a metre wide, which allows them to feel perfectly in proportion with the rest of the features and avoids visitors feeling Liliputian.

Despite the different time zones, continents and climates and the limited time frame in which it had to produce the space, Leila Heller Gallery Dubai’s triumvirate of creative forces has managed to bring a little slice of New York to the heart of Al Serkal. As for what comes next for the gallery, there is perhaps less harmony; says Leila – “Alexander already said to me the other day – ‘So. What’s next?’ I’m like, ‘Are you kidding me?’” ■