

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

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Empress Farah Pahlavi, Leila Heller and Maryam Ekhtiar, associate curator of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Q&A with Leila Heller

For over three decades, Leila Heller Gallery (LA7) has been championing international, Middle Eastern, Central Asian, Southeast Asian and Turkish artists from its home in New York. Now, the gallery has expanded to open its first international space in Dubai, in Alserkal Avenue. From the groundbreaking *Calligraffiti* exhibition of 1984 (juxtaposing American graffiti artists with major Iranian calligraphers such as Charles Hossein Zenderoudi and which saw guests mingling with the likes of Andy Warhol) through to major museum exhibitions and projects, Leila Heller shares with *Canvas Daily* the gallery's journey and enduring relationship with the UAE.

WHY DID YOU FEEL THE TIME WAS RIGHT TO EXPAND YOUR PRESENCE TO A BRANCH OVERSEAS?

I have been working on a Dubai project for almost five years and I am so happy to see it finally come to fruition. I have been travelling to the UAE for the last decade and have built some great relationships here. It really has been a dream of mine to have a gallery here ever since my visit to the first edition of Abu Dhabi Art.

WHY THE UAE?

Abu Dhabi and Dubai have become major international hubs, connecting the region, Central Asia, Southeast Asia and Australia with Europe and the USA. The burgeoning gallery scene in Dubai, alongside the presence of major organisations like Christie's, Art Dubai and Abu Dhabi Art, have encouraged many Western museum directors, curators, art press and collectors to travel to the region. The increasing number of museums opening here is only further strengthening the UAE's position as a major arts centre.

HOW WILL YOUR UAE GALLERY'S PROGRAMME DIFFER FROM THAT OF THE NEW YORK SPACE?

In New York, our gallery represents an

international roster of artists, with a special focus on artists from the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Turkey. Our programme in Dubai will concentrate not only on exhibiting world-renowned Middle Eastern artists, but also Western artists. The gallery in Dubai will also have a strong curatorial and educational component, headed by Dr Shiva Balaghi, who will also remain a Visiting Scholar at Brown University.

WHAT ARE THE DUBAI GALLERY'S INAUGURAL EXHIBITIONS?

I am extremely excited that we are sharing – for the first time ever – Ghada Amer's newest body of work, comprising ceramic sculptures. I am also delighted to be showing Wim Delvoe's new works, which he has produced in Isfahan, Iran, in collaboration with local master silversmiths.

WHAT'S CHANGED FROM WHEN YOU STARTED RAISING AWARENESS OF REGIONAL ART?

When I began my gallery in 1982, I presented shows of Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Messoud Arabshahi, YZ Kami, Monir Farmanfarmaian and Nicky Nojumi. Very few people were interested in these artists then, and I am continually amazed at how far from true that is now. The interest in these artists and their work has continually increased, and even led to major solo museums exhibitions worldwide.

WHAT ELSE CAN VISITORS TO THE NEW GALLERY EXPECT?

We have planned very exciting shows for the next few months, including solo exhibitions by Keith Sonnier, YZ Kami, Zaha Hadid Studio, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Afruz Amighi and Ross Bleckner. ■

Leila Heller Gallery Dubai's inaugural shows, *Wim Delvoe* and *Ghada Amer: Earth.Love.Fire*, run 16 November–4 January. For more information visit www.leilahellergallery.com