

Emirati art collector  
Maisa Al-Qassimi (left)  
and gallery director  
Katia de Rham; all  
clothes stylist's own



# CONVERSATIONS ON COLLECTING

*In the run-up to the eighth Abu Dhabi Art Fair this month, five insiders reflect on the evolution of the Middle East's art scene over the past decade, the women who have helped pioneer it, and the special bond between collector and advisor*

Words by ANNA BRADY

## THE CURATOR COLLECTOR AND GALLERIST

MAISA AL-QASSIMI, 37, EMIRATI, COLLECTOR .

KATIA DE RHAM, 33, SWISS-IRANIAN, DIRECTOR AT LEILA HELLER GALLERY

Striking a pose on Leila Heller Gallery's staircase, it's hard to believe this is the first time the collector and curator Maisa Al-Qassimi, and gallery director Katia de Rham, have met.

"We seem to think in the same way," says Katia, as they share thoughts on the bond between collector and gallerist and the women who have pioneered the region's growing art scene. Among the latter are Maisa's cousin, Sheikha Hoor Al-Qasimi, revered for her groundbreaking work at the Sharjah Art Foundation, and Farah Pahlavi, who started the most valuable collection of Western art outside Europe and the US. But also Leila Heller herself, the New York-based gallerist who both Maisa, a long-term client, and Katia, a recent employee, praise for both her artistic vision and pristine style, never a hair out of place.

"When Leila hosts a dinner, she will wear something amazing that is really a reflection of her personality," says Maisa. Such personality, infusing the ethos of the gallery, elevates collecting above mere commercial transaction. Maisa has been a client of the gallery for the past seven years but it started as a friendship; moving in similar circles, they knew each other from social events.

"A lot of the galleries I collect from are owned by my friends. Leila was a friend years before I started buying from her. That's how I like the relationship. It's a Middle Eastern trait, we don't like to be hassled."

"There's a very different way of dealing with Middle Eastern collectors," says Katia, "The culture is humble. They don't like to be put on the spot, you need to build trust." Spending time with the collector to get to know their tastes is crucial: "I'll take them out for lunch, and visit exhibitions to see how they react to other artworks. It's about building that special bond. Often I'll be in an art fair and see a work I think might appeal to a collector and will take a picture and send it to them," Katia explains.

Maisa agrees, "Whenever I'm in New York, I'll pick up the phone to Leila and say I'm coming by the gallery for tea. I'll never say I'm coming to see what artists you have. But I might end up seeing something I like."

Above all, for both women, the real thrill is in supporting emerging artists, watching their careers grow. "I've bought artists years ago who are now in major museums," says Maisa. "I love that feeling of being there from the beginning. I don't just collect to have stuff on my wall, I collect to support the artists."

Maisa's own collection includes the Malian photographer Seydou Keita, the Iranian Hadieh Shafie and Indian artist Zarina Hashmi. She bought her first piece at the age of 15, a watercolour by a student at the Dubai International Art Centre, and works on paper, along with photography, remain a particular passion. Her approach remains organic. "I buy things I love. If I see something I really like, I'll buy it even if I don't know the artist or the gallery. And I won't check the markets or anything before I buy." Katia agrees that, unlike many male collectors, she has "rarely heard a female collector asking if a piece would be a good investment."

Ten years ago, both agree, growing up in the Gulf and aspiring to a career in the art world within the region would hardly have been feasible; there were simply not the galleries to support it, so moving to Europe or America was the inevitable choice for many. Now, however, entities such as Art Dubai and Christie's have been in the region for 10 years, and galleries within Dubai itself have grown from a handful to over 50, complemented by a wave of universities in the UAE offering master's degrees in arts and museum studies, like the NYU and The Sorbonne.

"I remember working on the first Abu Dhabi Art Fair in 2008 where there is also a growing scene, and museums are taking shape like the Louvre and Guggenheim," says Katia, pointing to the growth of museums and art education in Qatar and further afield, adding "awareness in Saudi Arabia is really starting to take off; we're seeing more and more galleries opening in particular in the last three years, there are more contemporary artists emerging."

As Maisa says, "An art ecosystem has built up. It's exciting."