

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Roxane Zand "A Busy Season for the UAE Art Scene" *Sotheby's*. November 2016.



A Busy Season for the UAE Art Scene

A caravan of events set off the fall 2016 art season in the UAE. It all began with the presentation of the Aga Khan Architecture Award at the UNESCO world heritage site of Al Ain. In a glittering and moonlit ceremony at the Al Jahili Fort, and in the presence of His Highness Sheikh Rashid Al Maktoum Ruler of Dubai, His Highness Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed Crown Prince of Dubai, His Highness Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan Culture Minister, His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan, and various other dignitaries, the world's oldest and most prestigious architecture award (\$1m USD) was presented to this cycle's winners from Bangladesh, China, Iran and Lebanon. In his keynote speech, HH the Aga Khan drew attention to "the way in which a thoughtful concern for the built environment can characterise an entire civilization." It was heartening to hear this comment in light of the huge positive impact of one of the winners' social and environmental contribution: the Pol-e Tabiat, a beautifully-designed 'green' bridge over the stark urbanization of Tehran which I experienced for myself earlier this year as a highlight of my visit.



IDRIS KHAN (SECOND FROM LEFT) WITH SOTHEBY'S ARYANA KHAN, KATIA NOUNOU AND ASHKAN BAGHESTANI AT THE YOUNG COLLECTORS EVENT

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On November 13, Sotheby's Institute of Art, at the invitation of the Sheikha Salama Foundation, rolled out a series of educational talks in Abu Dhabi on a range of topics that covered aspects of collecting, the bridge between the modern and contemporary periods, and the business side of the art world. That same evening, Sotheby's Young Collectors Club hosted a well-attended dinner on the rooftop of the Four Seasons Hotel in Dubai, bringing together the young, vibrant art-loving community of Dubai which Katia Nounou, the newly-appointed head of Sotheby's Dubai office, will increasingly be engaging on educational and art-related activities.

Just a day later and back in Abu Dhabi, Sotheby's pioneered a programme aimed at those wanting a deeper understanding of the art industry: 'The Art World – An Inside View' took place at the new Warehouse 421 space to a curious audience that learned about the inside facts of Sotheby's, careers in the for-profit and non-profits worlds, the MENA art market, and even participated in a mock auction which saw dynamic bidding from an enthusiastic crowd. It was exhilarating for the bidders to spend pretend money and equally thrilling for the Sotheby's staff to see record after record smashed effortlessly! A repeat is no doubt on the books.

As with all important fairs, an exclusive event the night before the VIP opening of the Abu Dhabi Art Fair entertained visitors and gave them a glimpse of the new and the fresh. Warehouse 421, hosting a fascinating series of pioneering and innovative curated



exhibitions of Arabic posters and other artworks, was this time the venue for a reception

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where international collectors and curators mixed. An eye-catching photographic exhibition by a Syrian photographer vied with a small but meaningful installation by emerging artist Nasser Al Zayani; video works and paintings completed this show of works by the RSDI artist-in-residency programme. A short walk down the road in this budding art district, Warehouse 411 was the setting for the actual Dinner, arranged by the Abu Dhabi Art Fair Host Committee, chaired personally by Her Highness Sheikha Salama. In previous years this dinner took place at the palace, but fittingly, this year the warehouse spaces were used instead.



ALI BANI SADR, MIGRATION (DETAIL SHOT), 2016 AT THADDEUS ROPAC.

Sotheby's now well-known and much appreciated Collectors' Lunch in honour of the Abu Dhabi Art Fair at the Majlis of Culture Minister Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al

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Nahyan, took place the day after the dinner, on 15 November. With characteristic generosity and openness, His Highness received upwards of 70 VIP guests who were honoured to enjoy regional cuisine and traditions, a special privilege on this annual occasion which is the prelude to the Fair's official VIP opening that same evening. With no more than 37 galleries, this is a 'small but beautiful'/less is more fair concept – boasting names such as Acquavella, Continua, Ropac, Lisson, Hanart, and Sean Kelly. More than one visitor commented on the fair's accessibility, its superb programming thanks to Reem Fadda's Majlis Fann featuring such names as Anna Somers Cocks and Alexandra Munroe of the Guggenheim, and the possibility of catching top-quality speakers at panels that at other locations would entail a crushing crowd. It was exciting to see more local engagement this year, even greater numbers of new buyers and visitors (over 20,000 I am told), and some brisk trade.

Continua sold a superb Mona Hatoum, Ropac sold out its Bani Sadrs and more than one beautiful blood-soaked Imran Qureishi; Lisson sold a Wael Shawky and an Anish Kapoor, while Shirin Gallery sold its Ali Akbar Sadeghi, an artist recently acquired and celebrated by LACMA. Leila Heller Gallery, Hanart, Robin Start, and Third Line amongst others, also experienced robust interest; my personal highlights included works by Sahand Hessamian and Farhad Ahrarnia at Third Line – recent gems by both artists, and a great Nabil Nahas at Heller. Idriss Khan at Sean Kelly of course was a magnet for all fair visitors. His iconic work near the Abu Dhabi Mosque will be unveiled on Nov 30.

Abu Dhabi Art Fair this year was, by unanimous consent, an even better edition than the last. The fair's recently-appointed Director, Dyala Nusseibeh, expressed fresh optimism for next year, and we wait with anticipation to see the evolution. The current new configuration of the spaces - with the main hall that featured an arresting centrepiece installation of thousands of fresh bananas by Beijing's New Wave artist Gu Dexin (raising the question of what constitutes art!) - worked well in its flow and capacity. First-time visitor and collector/curator Kamiar Maleki says, "Not knowing what to expect, I was pleasantly surprised by the quality of the Fair. From the galleries represented to the art, it was a very elegant fair that had a certain energy and vibrancy. The individually-curated rooms and installations brought an innovative approach, and it will make me definitely want to return. I was delighted that the VIP programme was tailored and not rushed, allowing us to access everything on offer."

Part of what makes Abu Dhabi Art Fair so special is the welcome extended by local personalities. Two such occasions were the exceptional privilege for VIPs of visiting the Palace and private collection of His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan bin Khalifa Al Nahyan for brunch, and also travelling to the oasis town of Al Ain to the exquisite home and collection of His Excellency Dr Zaki Nusseibeh, Special Advisor to the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and a great presiding influence on the growth of the local art and culture scene. The Palace collection boasts the best of regional artists' works, nestled lovingly among the decorated interiors that recall the magic of a thousand and one nights. The

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Careful selection of works by both Arab and Iranian artists is testament to His Highness's range and scope of taste.

No visit to the UAE would be complete without a trip to the Sharjah Art Foundation, which this year offered another outstanding series of exhibitions. On the 19th, visitors were invited to arrive at the finely-restored nineteenth-century Bait Al Sharjah which was once the home of the British Commissioner to the Gulf. A show of sculptures by Sudanese sculptor Amir Nouri proved spell-binding – subdued lighting and judicious installation created a magical setting for these outstanding works. Buses then transported us to the heart of Sharjah, the heritage site – where again a number of exceptional shows were open for viewing once His Highness the Ruler of Sharjah and



GU DEXIN'S INSTALLATION OF BANANAS, 2016 AT GALLERIA CONTINUA.

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his daughter the visionary Sheikha Hoor Al Qassimi had passed through. The proceedings culminated in a magical dinner outdoors.

With the art industry suffering an overload of fairs and a calendar that groans from back-to-back events, it is refreshing to experience art events that retain their special flavour and momentum, carrying in their tide a host of other positive growth in the region. It is no exaggeration to say that in the blur of annual art events, the UAE art offerings always stand out and remain memorable.