

'Looking Back, Looking Forward.' *Canvas – Abu Dhabi Art Edition.* (November 13, 2018).

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## LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

We speak to the gallerist and collectors who were present at Abu Dhabi Art from the beginning

In a place of hyper-development like the UAE, a decade can witness seismic shifts that transform entire industries and communities. Since Abu Dhabi Art's inception in 2009 (after its rebrand from artparis-Abu Dhabi), arts and culture have flourished here, thanks in part to political stability, as well as infrastructural support from new institutions, both private and public, a growing interest in culture, and more importantly, artists and galleries that keep the scene alive and active. That same year witnessed great steps forward for the arts: the UAE became the first country in the GCC to have a permanent pavilion at the Venice Biennale; Sharjah Art Foundation was launched; art studio Tashkeel turned a year old. In 2010, the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation was set up. Five years later, arts hub Alserkal Avenue created its own programming arm and doubled its size, bringing international names into its fold. Last year, the inauguration of the much-awaited Louvre Abu Dhabi dominated headlines, casting light on this coastal city in the Gulf. It is in this context that ADA has evolved over the past decade. From its beginnings at the Emirates Palace to its permanent home at Manarat Al Saadiyat, ADA has expanded and brought in big names such as Jeff Koons, Anish Kapoor, Damien Hirst and Jean Nouvel, among others. On average, the fair welcomes 20,000 visitors every year, with about 45-50 galleries participating in each edition.

## THE GALLERISTS

Of those who have been around from the start, including Cologne-based Brigitte Schenk and Hong Kong-based Hanart TZ, are a handful of Dubai-based

# LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

galleries such as Elmarsa and The Third Line. Even Leila Heller, whose eponymous gallery in Dubai only opened in 2015 (she also runs an NYC gallery) has been present at every edition since 2009, showcasing a mix of Middle Eastern and Western artists. "Abu Dhabi Art is truly unique," said Heller. "It's a very intimate and personal experience, like returning to your family every year." Lilia Ben Salah, co-founder of Elmarsa Gallery, which focuses on Tunisian art, shares this sentiment. "It's one of the only art fairs where you really feel supported, in the sense that it has always tried to renew itself and adapt to the market to attract collectors and visitors," she asserted. Both galleries have met commercial success at the fair over the years. Elmarsa Gallery does well with established Arab artists such as Nja Mahdaoui, who Ben Salah noted is one of highest priced in their roster. For Leila Heller Gallery, 2017 was a good year following the sales of Jacob Hashimoto's bamboo- and-paper kite collages. "Last year, we basically sold out our booth," said Heller. "Having participated for ten years, we've developed a strong client base in Abu Dhabi and connect with new clients every year." Another ADA-seasoned gallerist is Sunny Rahbar from The Third Line, Dubai. Their first booth brought in names such as Monir Farmanfarmaian, Farhad Moshiri, Hayv Kahraman, Poursan Jinchu, and Tarek Al-Ghoussein. Often taking part in art fairs worldwide, including Art Basel and Frieze, the gallery maintains its participation in its UAE home base. "We represent artists from the MENASA region, so it is vital that our local and regional audiences and collectors connect with the work," Rahbar said.



Clockwise from left: Leila Heller, Khaled Samawi, H.E. Hoda Alkhamis-Kanoo, Sunny Rahbar, Lilia Ben Salah.