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The Mysterious Entrepreneur Who Paid \$62 Million for the World's Largest Painting Plans to Open a Dedicated Museum in Dubai

The sale offers a view into an alternative art world where famous names rub shoulders with reclusive billionaires to raise money for charity.

Rebecca Anne Proctor (<https://news.artnet.com/about/rebecca-anne-proctor-1060>), May 17, 2021



Abdoune following his purchase of the painting. Photo: Sacha Jafri.

Inside a ballroom at the Atlantis Hotel on a manmade archipelago in Dubai, British artist Sacha Jafri made history. On March 24, he sold his work *The Journey of Humanity* for \$62 million (<https://news.artnet.com/market/sacha-jafri-world-record-biggest-painting-sells-62-million-auction-1954163>), making it the second most expensive painting ever sold at auction by a living artist. The price isn't the only grandiose part: at 17,000 square feet, the equivalent of four NBA-regulation basketball courts, the painting has claimed the Guinness World Record for the largest art canvas.

On a normal day in a normal year, such a mind-boggling price would immediately make waves around the world. But the sale came less than two weeks after an NFT by the digital artist Beeple (<https://news.artnet.com/market/christies-nft-beeple-69-million-1951036>) fetched \$69 million at Christie's, and the art world seems only able to process one historic price fetched by one relatively unknown artist at a time.

Now, new details only serve to make the sale—which was sold to benefit children around the world affected by the pandemic—appear more extraordinary.



Sacha Jafri embraces Andre Abdoune after his purchase. Photo: Sacha Jafri

The buyer of the work, French-Algerian businessman Andre Abdoune, plans to build a museum in Dubai to house it. Sources tell Artnet News that the Dubai government is expected to provide land for the institution, although neither Jafri nor the government would confirm by press time.

The sale was a high-wattage affair, with endorsements and promotion by the likes of Deepak Chopra, American actress Eva Longoria, and Iraqi-American makeup artist Huda Kattan. The proceeds have gone to Unicef, Unesco, the Global Gift Foundation, and Dubai Cares.

The event was not without controversy. “It’s all money-laundering,” quipped one art collector in Dubai the morning after the sale.

The auction, held in a swanky ballroom of the five-star Atlantis the Palm Jumeirah resort, was originally to be staged by Sotheby’s, but the auction house pulled out at the eleventh hour. (The Sotheby’s logo, which was printed on all the save the dates, remained in place for the duration of the sale.)



The Journey of Humanity on auction night. Photo: Sacha Jafri

Behind the scenes, accounts differ as to what exactly caused the partnership to fall apart. One source said Sotheby’s was put off by the fact that advance press coverage described it as a “Sotheby’s sale.” Another source said the house was spooked by rumors that buyers had placed bids in advance, which could have made the sale

appear fixed without the proper disclosures. “We were told by Sotheby’s Dubai that ‘London wouldn’t let us go ahead’ and so they pulled out,” the second source said.

Sotheby’s official line is that it was simply a matter of personnel availability. “Where we are able, Sotheby’s often provides charity auctioneers to wield the gavel on behalf of worthwhile causes across the globe,” a spokesperson said. “In this case, the request for an auctioneer came in last minute and we were ultimately unable to go ahead.”

The 44-year-old Jafri, unmissable for his uniform of cowboy boots and paint-splattered blue jeans, has long raised eyebrows. A British painter who attended Eton College and Oxford University, he makes a living from his art but funnels the majority of sales to charitable causes, particularly relating to children’s welfare.

After operating as a lone wolf for most of his career, he recently began working with New York and Dubai-based Leila Heller Gallery. A solo show of work spanning his 18-year career is on view at the Dubai gallery through June. Ten works have sold to date at prices ranging from \$75,000 to \$2 million, according to Heller.



Sacha Jafri’s exhibition at Leila Heller in Dubai. Photo: Sacha Jafri

“I do things my own way,” Jafri told Artnet News. “I work with galleries but I don’t sign gallery contracts. If I sign to the gallery then I have no control over who buys my paintings. I want them to be shared and seen widely.” He counts George Clooney, Barack Obama, Madonna, Richard Branson, and Leonardo DiCaprio among his collectors.

The artist says he’s raised over \$130 million for charity to date, including the sale of *The Journey of Humanity* as well as two works for approximately \$8 million at a Dubai auction last month to support a government initiative to deliver 100 million meals during the month of Ramadan.

Jafri worked on *The Journey of Humanity* for eight months at the Atlantis Hotel during the height of the global lockdown. He had originally planned to sell it in 70 smaller pieces, but multiple collectors stepped forward with offers to purchase the entire piece.

The winning bidder, Abdoune, is not a familiar name among art-collecting circles. He has purchased items here and there from auctions in Paris, but nothing of the scale or price of Jafri’s work.

Jafri and Abdoune had met by chance at an opening at the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris in 2019. The next year, Abdoune was in Dubai shopping for a new villa and his broker advised him to view Jafri’s painting at the Atlantis. “I love art and collect many things but I don’t have any knowledge about art—I just go with my feeling when I buy a work,” Abdoune said.



Artist Sacha Jafri and his Guinness World Record painting *The Journey of Humanity*. Photo by Francois Nel/Getty Images.

The 50-year-old was immediately moved to tears. “I felt I had seen the painting before,” he told Artnet News. “It was like I had met ‘the one.’” Jafri says Abdoune came back each day for five days in a row, four hours each time. He felt devastated by the idea that the work would be broken up into pieces.

The charitable side of the project also moved Abdoune, who hasn’t been able to see his two children since his acrimonious divorce several years ago. The French businessman of Algerian origin grew up in a poor family in Paris that rarely had enough to eat. Abdoune, now lives between Paris and Dubai, made his fortune from stock trading before buying the industrial corporation Altius Gestion International Holding and getting into cryptocurrency trading. He says his assets are now “mostly in bitcoin,” though he paid for Jafri’s work in cash.

Abdoune said he didn’t pre-bid, and went to the Atlantis feeling nervous. The first bid for the entire piece came in at just over \$30 million; Abdoune entered the fray at \$50 million.



Sacha Jafri at work. Photo: Sacha Jafri

The entrepreneur intends for his future museum to be similar to the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, a place to contemplate art and human rights. In addition to housing Jafri's Guinness World Record-breaking masterpiece, the space will host dormitories where children with special needs, refugees, and orphans can take art workshops with Jafri.

"I surrendered and have faith in the universe and believed that whatever this painting deserves, that is what will happen," Jafri said. "Anybody can paint a brushstroke but it is that intention pouring through you that makes a difference."

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