

Abu Dhabi Art enjoys healthy sales at this year's in-person event

► Gallery owners says the majority of potential buyers prefer to view an artwork and interact with its artist in person



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Abu Dhabi Art opens to the public at Manarat Al Saadiyat from November 17. All photos: Vidhyaa Chandramohan for The National

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Abu Dhabi Art is at Manarat Al Saadiyat this year for its first [in-person event](#) since the onset of the pandemic. With the event being held online last year, galleries had to traverse the rockier terrain of attracting clients and making sales solely in the virtual realm. Now back in a physical space, several galleries have expressed immense relief at being able to meet clients face to face and discuss artworks, with the viscerality of canvases and the contours of sculptural works, for instance, far more easily viewed, allowing for relationships between the viewer and the work to be formed quicker.

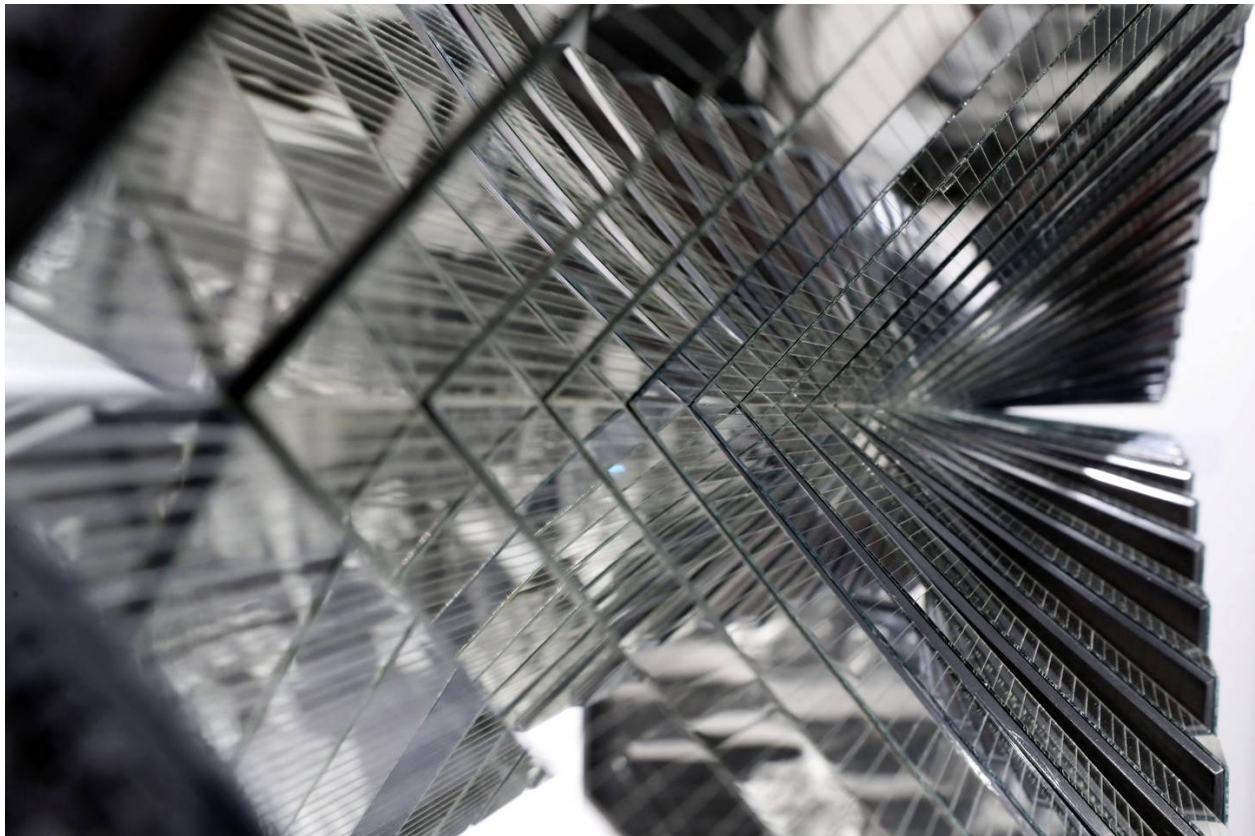
A general trend has emerged at the fair this year, with galleries expressing that their sales have significantly improved, compared with being online. Several galleries, such as Perrotin, say that despite being able to make some

sales online last year, it feels easier now to be able to attract new clients and simply do their job in a more traditional and comfortable way – conversationally, to aid the transactional aims of a fair, which is, in essence, a marketplace.

“We took a massive hit when we were just online,” says Leila Heller, founder and director of Dubai’s Leila Heller Gallery. “We were mainly able to close deals with old clients who had already worked with us, and on artworks by older artists that they already knew.”

Taking up two booths at the fair, Heller is palpably overjoyed about returning to the physical space. “We are occupying so much space this year and it’s incredible. It feels even more special because Abu Dhabi Art is my favourite fair. I feel loved here. It feels like I am part of a family, and the atmosphere is less corporate than at other fairs. The sales we are making now, compared to last year online, are five to 10 times more,” she says.

One of Leila Heller Gallery’s two booths is occupied solely by the works of Iranian sculptor Aref Montazeri. His art is conceptual, as it is rooted around mirrors. The eye-catching booth seems lit with flashes of silver, contorted and cut into various detailed forms in which viewers can confront the many mirrors, and thus their reflections, in myriad powerful perspectives.



Mirror 5 by Aref Montazeri. Photo: Chris Whiteoak / The National

Heller says the mirror works are doing wonderfully at the fair, again reinforcing the importance of displaying pieces such as these in person. “How can you show mirror works and express their full capacity for impact online? Not one of them sold then; it’s just not the same. Now that we’re in person, there is so much attention directed towards these works because people can see them in their full glory.”

Heller has flown in six of the artists she is displaying to discuss their works in person, including Montazeri. The artists’ presence with their work is another factor, she says, that has been important when trying to make sales. The pieces become easier to understand and deeper relationships are built if the artist who created them can directly talk about them in the moment. It also lays the foundation for buyers to connect not only with specific, individual pieces, but also with an artist’s oeuvre or a larger body of work, which they can start to follow and return to buy more of.

Other UAE galleries expressed similar sentiments to Heller in terms of online versus physical sales. Lilia Ben Salah, director of Elmarsa Gallery, which specialises in art from the Middle East and the Maghreb, says that while online they received “no feedback”, sales have been exponentially better in person. She says “Abu Dhabi is still an emerging

market”, with its own particular way of navigating art fairs that favours engaging with artworks in person and being able to see nuances and details up close.

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Osama Al Fahel, operations director at Custot Gallery Dubai, emphasises the importance of “feeling the work” in person, also expressing that the gallery’s sales have been better this year. When online, he says, the gallery found it more challenging to close deals and the sales process was slower. Prospective clients, unable to see the actual artwork, would spend more time wanting to verify the artwork’s legitimacy or trying to send somebody to view the artwork amid stringent Covid-19 restrictions. It was also generally more difficult for the gallery to attract new clients when online.

Afriart Gallery from Kampala, meanwhile – in the fair’s main hall as part of the Kind of Blue section, curated by Simon Njami – has an unusual take on the changes between sales made online and in person. The gallery is presenting works by two Ugandan artists – a series of digital paintings by Charlene Komuntale and arresting sculptural works by Richard Atugonza, the latter’s enormous centrepiece sculpture, *At Heart but Far (Layla)*, 2021, is a standout at the fair, inspired by the tragic Persian love story of Layla and Majnun.



A work by Charlene Komuntale at Abu Dhabi Art. Photo: Abu Dhabi Art

Afriart’s exhibitions and press co-ordinator Lara Buchmann says that while Atugonza’s sculptures did very well last year online, it is now the digital paintings, which are sold in sets of three, that are selling fast.

It seems an unconventional outcome; you’d expect sculptures to sell faster in person, as their full visual impact – details, textures, contours – translate better in real life, while digital paintings are easier to connect with online. Nevertheless, the gallery says that, in general, both artists are still selling well and had done so online, too.

The ideal situation, however, for all galleries would be for them to become more adept at making sales in both formats, says Malini Gulrajani of Dubai’s 1x1 Gallery. Gulrajani says that while the gallery had navigated the virtual realm with some success, even managing to sell an installation, sales were still far better this year. “With technology’s general progression and everything going online, especially with Covid, it’s good for galleries to learn to be adaptable.”

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