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Abu Dhabi Art 2014: a restored masterpiece

Anna Seaman

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'Abu Dhabi Art is a very special place,' says Dr Shiva Balaghi, an art historian at Brown University and a curatorial consultant for Leila Heller Gallery. "You can count on a local audience that is culturally literate and with whom one can have a genuinely elevated conversation. It is a very sophisticated audience."

Balaghi is in Abu Dhabi for the first time as a curator for the New York gallery, but Heller, who was one of the first gallerists to specialise in Middle Eastern art in the United States, has been exhibiting at the fair since its inception six years ago.

The fact that she continues to return is testament to the fair, but the evolution of the event itself has not been all smooth sailing. Last year's sudden thunderstorm, which left the 22 gallery booths in the UAE Pavilion having to rapidly relocate into the main Manarat building, was a chaotic time and, some say, it might be the reason that Larry Gagosian, arguably the world's most powerful gallerist, has not returned. Nevertheless, Gagosian or not, the general consensus from the 50 galleries that are collectively showing 600 works by 400 artists in booths set up in Manarat Al Saadiyat this year is that it has reached maturity.

Tuesday's opening vernissage evening saw a healthy amount of interest from regional and local collectors. In Heller's booth, which Balaghi expertly curated to include formal experimentation pieces from a collection of artists, two works by Steven Naifeh sold for US\$20,000 (Dh73,462) and \$30,000 to buyers in Abu Dhabi and Doha.

As the doors opened to the public on Wednesday, there was also a steady stream of visitors, photographing and posting images of Yayoi Kusama's *Narcissus Garden*, several mirrored spheres lying and rolling around on the floor in front of a stitched embroidered canvas by the Egyptian-American artist Ghada Amer.

Balaghi notes that both these artists were a considered choice, given that their art also appears in *Seeing Through Light*, the inaugural show from the permanent collection of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi that opened the day before the fair and is housed in the Manarat's Gallery 1 until January.

The forthcoming Saadiyat Island museums have also shaped the booths of many other galleries. Some, such as Kamel Mennour from Paris, brought works that could only be placed within the vast cavities of an institution – animal sculptures by Huang Yong Ping and Lee Ufan, and Francois Morellet's *Pier and Ocean*. Kashya Hildebrand, a gallerist from London, exhibited a series of five giant tapestries by the Egyptian artist Ahmed Moustafa, which she says will only be placed within a regional institution.

"When you think of the role of a museum to educate its audience, this series does a wonderful job of covering many centuries of Islamic culture," she says. "There has been some very serious interest and it is not just in the UAE – there is Qatar, Kuwait and now Saudi is starting."

Hildebrand has been exhibiting at both Art Dubai and Abu Dhabi Art for the past eight years, and she says it has been an "incredible" experience. "The growth, development and sophistication of collectors, the intellectual curiosity, questions and exchanges have been extraordinary," she says of this year's event, while stressing that both fairs have very distinct identities.

From Dubai, a strong representation of galleries are participating. Ayyam has brought show-stopping pieces from Samia Halaby and Safwan Dahoul among others, and The Third Line, whose sculptor Sahand Hesamiyan proved popular with collectors, has also juxtaposed the work of Hassan Hajjaj, a Moroccan photographer, with Monir Farmanfarmanian – an interesting curatorial choice.

XVA, a gallery that opened in Dubai in 2003, is at the fair for the first time. Mona Hauser, the founder and owner, has never participated in either of the UAE's art fairs before now, but says that because Abu Dhabi Art has developed, it's the right time. "We have done several international fairs and this is equal in terms of calibre," she says. "I am really amazed at how enthusiastic people are; there is a lot of curiosity and appreciation and the Emiratis are collecting."

According to Kim DongHyun, the director of Lee Hwaik Gallery from South Korea, Abu Dhabi Art is one of the best places in the world to sell art. He has brought the gallery to the capital for the past three years and now has a regular stable of collectors and friends of the gallery who buy from the same artists.

"There are many benefits here over other fairs in the world; we always have a good experience," he says. "I will definitely be coming back."