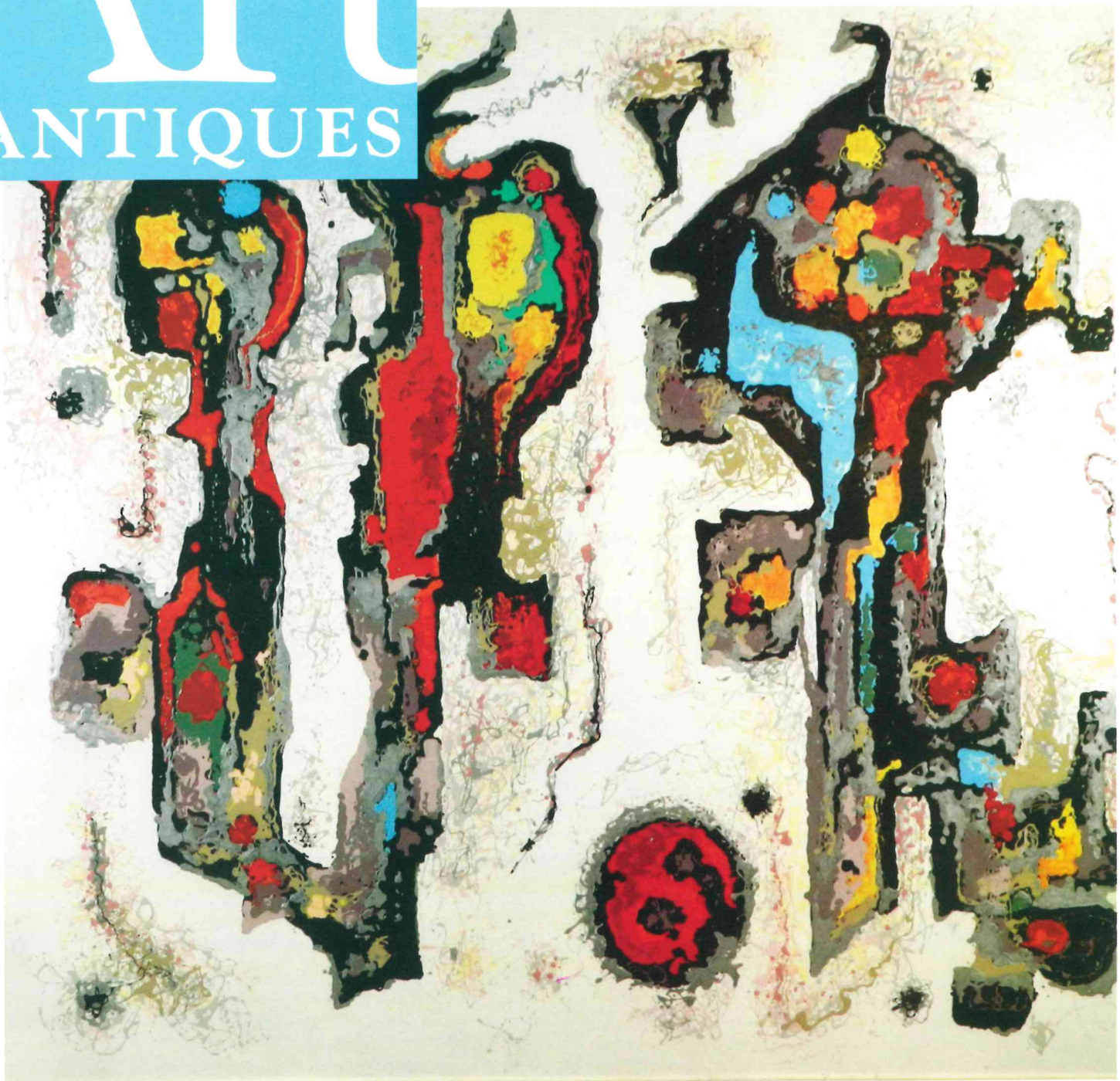
SEPTEMBER 2013

# Art ANTIQUES

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



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## The Transcendental Painting Group

# Rising in the East

**MIDDLE EASTERN CONTEMPORARY ART, AS DIVERSE AS THE REGION'S COUNTRIES AND CULTURES, IS TAKING THE WORLD BY STORM.** BY ELIZABETH PANDOLFI

Shiva Ahmadi, *Pipes*, 2013

IT'S NOT ALWAYS easy to pinpoint the moment when a given type of art really hits it big—when people sit up and start taking notice. But for Middle Eastern contemporary art, the consensus among dealers, curators and supporters of the region's work seems to be that that moment was the 2006 Christie's auction in Dubai.

The first major art auction in the region, Christie's Dubai event sold $8.5 million in modern and contemporary Middle Eastern, South Asian and Western art. The success surpassed the auction house's estimates and put contemporary works of the Middle East before the world's major collectors for the first time. Since the Christie's success, other auction houses have followed suit. Bonham's opened a branch in Dubai—its first in the region—in 2008, and Sotheby's opened a Doha location that same year. Sotheby's auction in April of this year brought in $15 million; that same month, the piece *Secret Garden,* by Iranian artist Farhad Moshiri, fetched $987,750 on Christie's auction block.

Today, Middle Eastern contemporary art plays a vital role in the international art market. That's a marked change from just 10 years ago, when most Western art professionals—from curators to gallerists—had little knowledge of or interest in the art of the region. "Traditionally, the way Islamic art used to be taught was that Islamic art somehow stopped existing sometime in the 19th century," says Linda Komaroff, curator of the Los Ange-

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Clockwise from top left: Negar Ahkami, *The Water Is Turbid From Its Source*, 2012; Ayad Alkadhi, *Untitled II (In Vitro series)*, 2013; Hadieh Shafie, *7 Colors - Magenta, Primary Yellow, Ultramarine Blue.*

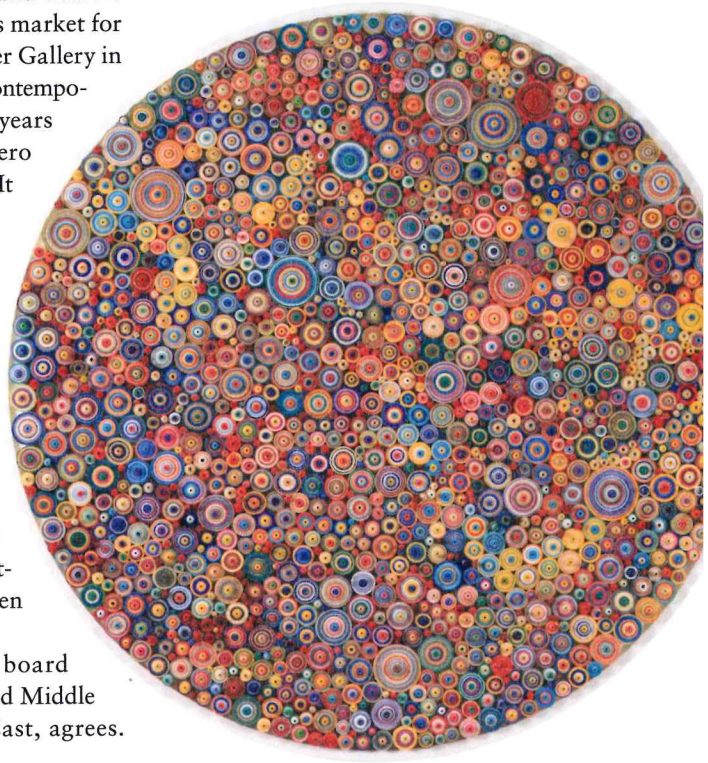
les County Museum of Art's Islamic art collection. "I kind of accepted that in grad school without thinking about it too much, and then my colleague Venetia Porter [of the British Museum] did this really groundbreaking exhibition called 'Word into Art.' It was mostly about contemporary art of the Middle East that was based in calligraphy. I was so engrossed by it. Everything seemed familiar even though I didn't know any of these artists, and it made me realize that Islamic art hadn't really stopped; it had just morphed into something different."

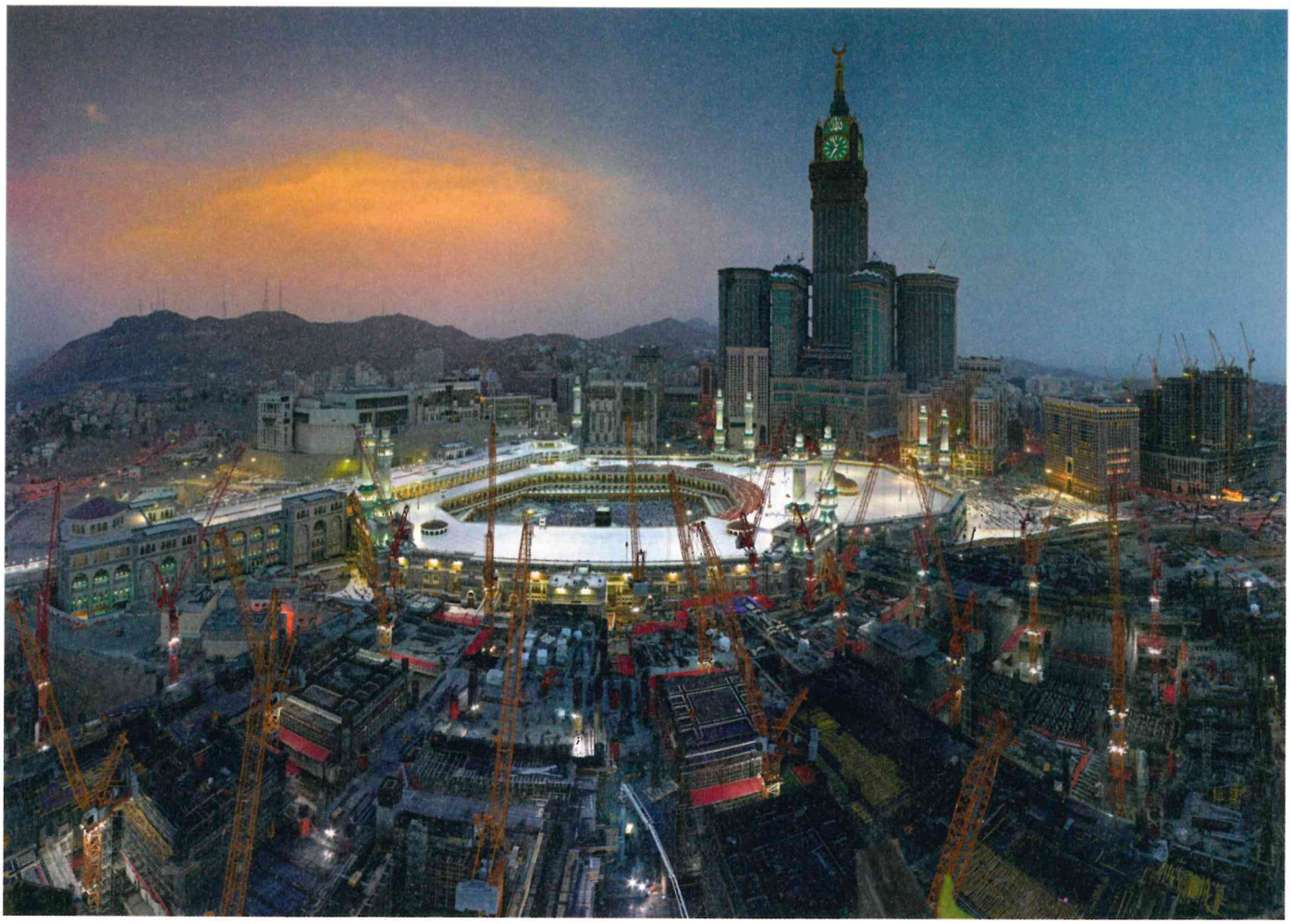
That exhibition, which, coincidentally, also took place in the all-important year of 2006, inspired Komaroff to begin adding contemporary works to LACMA's historic Islamic collection. Although LACMA's director, Michael Govan, bought into the idea with alacrity, the rest of the museum staff turned out to be a harder sell. "Initially, my curatorial colleagues had no interest in what I was doing," Komaroff says. "Some of them felt like it wasn't worthwhile art. It's only over time, when collecting contemporary Middle Eastern art has become more popular—I think maybe about four years ago the cover of *Art in America* announced that contemporary Iranian art had arrived — it was only then that they began thinking 'Oh, this is something we should be involved in.'"

Currently, the contemporary collection sits at around 165 pieces, including calligraphy, photography and video, and is the largest collection of contemporary Middle Eastern art in North America. Komaroff has acquired several significant works, including an entire 33-photograph series by the Iranian artist Shadi Ghadirian inspired by 19th-century portraits. LACMA is also home to the calligraphic art of Qatari artist Ali Hassan and the works of Iranian-American artist Shirin Neshat.

Though American museums are slowly catching on to the importance and value of Middle Eastern contemporary art, led by pioneering institutions like LACMA, there are of course galleries and dealers who have seen the value of this market for years. One of them, Leila Heller Gallery in New York, started exhibiting contemporary works from the region 30 years ago. "There was absolutely zero market for it," Heller recalls. "It was maybe a few local people from different countries, but definitely not much of an audience." Heller attributes some of the drastic increase in interest to a fairly simple cause: the internet. "In those days, unless you traveled to the region, you didn't see anything. With the internet, you see everything. It's not like it's new, or they've become better artists—they've always been good artists."

Mahnaz Anwar Fancy, a board member of the New York-based Middle Eastern arts nonprofit ArteEast, agrees.





Ahmed Mater, *Golden Hour*, Desert of Pharan series, exhibited at the Sharjah Biennial.

"This kind of quote-unquote Islamic art has always had a place in the American art world," she says. "I think the difference is if you look at my father's generation, these were people who traveled in the Middle East. They felt very comfortable going on a trek, going to Syria, going to Egypt, because that's how accessible the world was. I think that what's happened in the last 20 years, and especially the last 10 years since 9/11, is that we in America don't have enough contact with that region, and so I think that yes, we're late to the game for that reason."

Now that the political context of the Middle East is shifting, with so many countries undergoing major upheaval and struggles to achieve democracy, many in the Western world are beginning to see the region in more complex terms. That's allowing for a serious look at the art of individual countries, and not just the historical works that hang in the great European, American, and Middle Eastern museums.

That shift may help explain the huge increase in international attendance at Gulf state art fairs like Art Dubai and the Sharjah Biennial. Both attract dealers and audiences from around the world who are eager to learn about and participate in the booming arts culture of the United Arab Emirates and the region at large. This year's Art Dubai attracted 25,000 visitors and featured 70 galleries from 30 different countries. And this is a fair that's only six years old. "The fair's growth is both a reflection of and a catalyst in the development of Dubai as a cultural center," says Antonia Carver, Art Dubai's fair director. "The visitors have always been a healthy mix of local and international, but we've seen both audiences grow so rapidly—in numbers, but also in terms of

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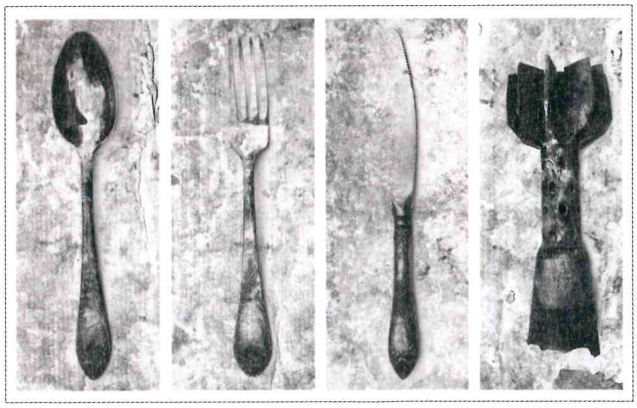
knowledge and depth of interest and engagement."

Many of the artists whose work is shown at Sharjah and Art Dubai are now being seen in museum and gallery solo exhibitions outside the Middle East, as well. The Lebanese painter and sculptor Saloua Raouda Choucair has a solo show at London's Tate Modern this year, while Mohammed Kazem of the UAE was the first Emirati artist to represent his country with a solo show at this year's Venice Biennale.

Art fairs like these are just one sign of the government and institutional support that local arts communities in the Gulf states are receiving. Cities like Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha



From top: Hojat Amani, *Angel*; Khaled Akhil, *Untitled (from the Unmentioned series)*.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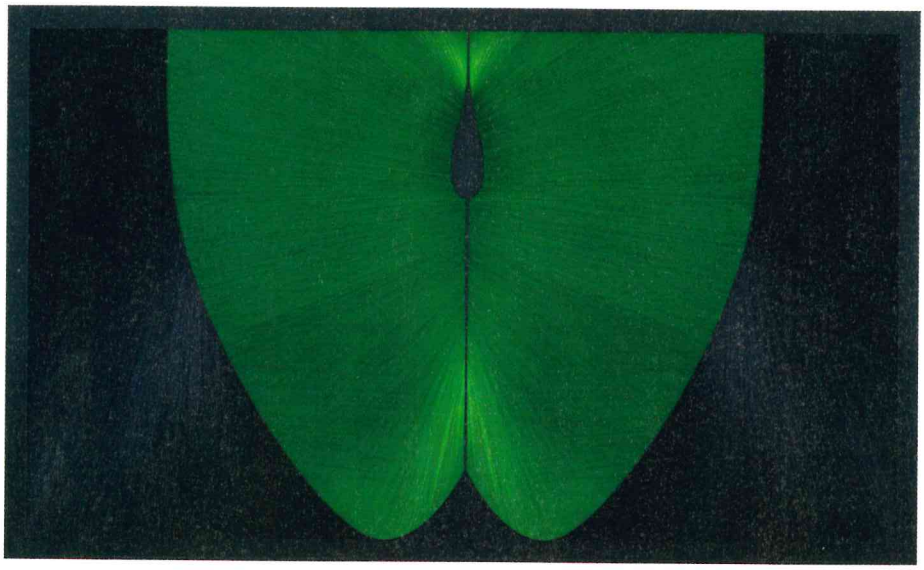
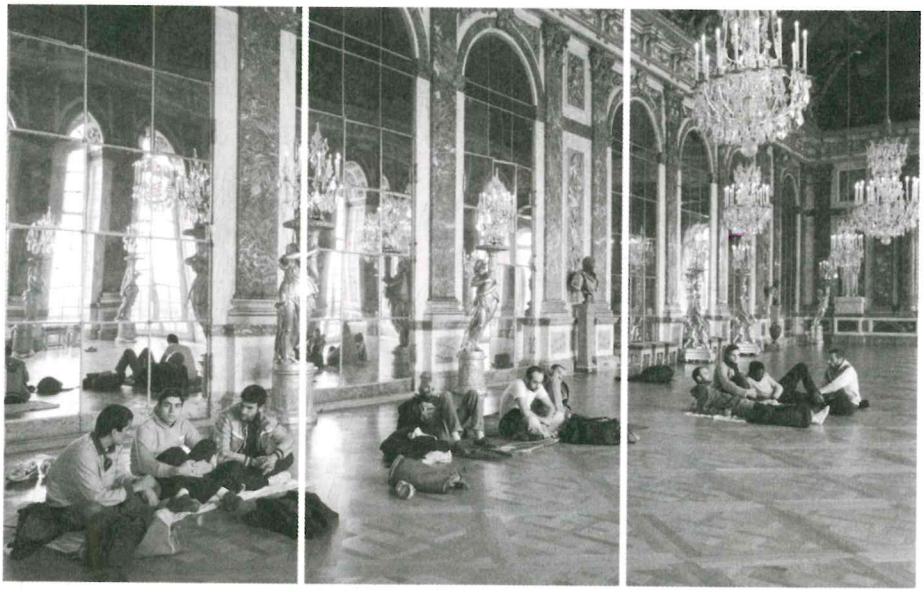


From top: Gulay Semercioglu, *Green Apple*, 2011; Khosrow Hassanzadeh, *Haft Khan, Study on Paper 5*, 2012; Reza Aramesh, *Action 121: Palestinians wait at the Rafah border point to cross into Egypt from the Gaza Strip, Tuesday, 8:00 a.m. 15 September 2009*, 2013.

have been making major investments in their artistic and cultural sectors, with strong success. Joobin Bekhrad is the co-founder of the Toronto gallery artclvb, which focuses exclusively on contemporary art from the Middle East and the Middle Eastern diaspora. "Last year Tehran saw its first contemporary art auction, which was a major success, and we're constantly hearing about new initiatives throughout the Persian Gulf region," he says.

Fancy says that the last five years have been monumental for the region's arts infrastructure — Middle Eastern artists today have many more opportunities to display and sell their work than before, although in certain countries, like Syria, Palestine and Israel, internal conflict still presents significant obstacles to artistic freedom and participation in the global art conversation. While there was a period when artistic production in the region had slowed due to a lack of patronage and support, she says, "Now a whole new segment of society is participating in artistic practice. And it's artistic practice writ large, whether it's socially informed practice, graffiti, street art, or documentary film, whether it's citizen journalism—this is all a part of a really exciting explosion of the artistic voice that the entire region is grabbing onto."



And that, perhaps, is what's really attracting the attention of the art world. The Middle East has always held a certain allure for those outside the region, especially Westerners. Now that various circumstances have conspired to make the art of the region not only more accessible, but also more fearless, it seems many collectors are finding real excitement in exploring what these contemporary artists have to offer.

LEILA HELLER GALLERY

Clockwise from top left: Farideh Lashai, *Gone Down the Rabbit Hole*, 2010; Shoja Azari, *Hedjileh 2*, still from *The King of Black*, 2013; Faig Ahmed, *Flood of Yellow Light*, 2007.

"When people here ask me about the art of Iran and the Arab world, they're often very surprised by some of the works I show them, and the comments I make," says Behkhad. "Many times they have no idea that such types of art exist in those parts of the world, and are often curious to learn more."

Those "types" could be the overtly political works of the Iraqi American Ayad Alkhadi, the stark photography of Newsha Tavakolian, or the angel-inspired works of the Iranian artist Hojat Amani. Just like art produced in any other region or country, Middle Eastern contemporary works are as varied as the artists who produce them. "Art Dubai invites collectors from various horizons including America and whatever the knowledge they have prior to the visit, they are always surprised by the immensely large, diverse scope of the works from the region and the free vision of the artists," says Carver. "Collectors from non-Arab regions that we encounter usually have a very open mindset—they tend to appreciate and discover the work not only for its political impact, but also for its new creative aesthetic and its intrinsic quality. Artists from this region have as much right to be artists, first and foremost, and deal with the fundamental [political] shifts in the region in their own way, or not at all."

Sheikha Hoor, president of the Sharjah Biennial and the Sharjah Art Foundation, also emphasizes this point. "Contemporary art offers the possibility of a different perspective—a way to understand, perhaps appreciate what has been a relatively unknown and misunderstood part of the world."

So while high auction prices and prestigious exhibitions are all a part—and a good part—of the recent explosion of interest in Middle Eastern art, there's a vital social aspect that must not be overlooked. As we in the West become more familiar with the art that's being produced in the many different countries of the Middle East, we'll become more familiar with the cultures and the people who are creating it, which in turn will allow for an even more open exchange among the artists, gallerists, and curators in the West and those in the region. It looks like this boom isn't going away.

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