

# LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

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### The rise of Dubai's Alserkal Avenue

Gareth Harris

The emirate's contemporary arts hub serves as home to established galleries and experimental pop-ups



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'Football' (2006) by Hassan Hajjaj, at The Third Line

Finding Alserkal Avenue in the Al Quoz industrial district of Dubai used to be a difficult task. Not so now: the three "lanes" of former warehouses, once home to a marble factory owned by the Alserkal family, are today an energetic commercial and artistic hub.

Established in 2007 by Abdelmonem bin Eisa Alserkal, it was expanded last year with a mix of site-specific commissions, pop-up projects and collaborations driven primarily by curatorial, rather than market, concerns. The purpose is to "help develop a deeper appreciation for art in and from the MENA region", says Alserkal.

"Even as Alserkal is growing, it's becoming more embedded into the region's cultural landscape. Proof? These days, most Dubai cabs know how to get you to Alserkal Avenue," says Shiva Balaghi, a visiting scholar at Brown University, Rhode Island, who curated the inaugural exhibition at Leila Heller Gallery Dubai last year, which was dedicated to Egyptian artist Ghada Amer.

New York-based Heller launched a 14,000 sq ft space in the Avenue last November, the largest commercial venue in the UAE. Her current show is the first solo exhibition in the Gulf of US-Iranian artist Y Z Kami (to April 25).

Among other established international dealers who have set up shop in Alserkal is the blue-chip London gallery, Waddington Custot. "The collector base is different to other emerging contemporary art markets," says Stéphane Custot. "There is no huge surge, instead it is growing steadily . . . [with] a clearly art-savvy audience." Custot Gallery Dubai's opening exhibition, *The World Meets Here* (March 14-May 7), will feature works by such artists as Robert Indiana and Marc Quinn.

Established local galleries have also moved in. Decade-old Dubai dealer, The Third Line, which represents 27 Middle Eastern contemporary artists, relocated to the Avenue last year. Their next show is of Hassan Hajjaj's photographs of women-only sports facilities in the Arab world (March 14-April 16).

How did it get to this point? In 2008, there was one gallery (Ayyam); today there are 15, along with a black-box theatre, independent cinema and outdoor performance venue. William Lawrie of Lawrie Shabibi gallery says, "Early in 2011, Alserkal Avenue, which at that time already had three galleries — Ayyam, Carbon 12 and Isabelle van den Eynde — suddenly got three more: Green Art, Grey Noise and us. It was a happy accident: the Alserkal galleries soon became among the most active in the region. This was noticed by the landlord, who quickly re-strategised to expand Alserkal Avenue to what you see today." The group show *But Still Tomorrow Builds Into My Face* opens at Lawrie Shabibi this week.

During Art Week (March 14-19) the programming, overseen by director Tairone Bastien, will include five commissioned pieces dotted around the avenue that "highlight the incoherence of the neighbourhood, and challenge notions of permanence and place". The works sound enticing, especially Mohammed Kazem's site-specific installation "My Neighbours" (2006), a series of photographs showing life unravelling outside the artist's window in Al Quoz, and "Warehouse Project" by the Beirut-born artist Vikram Divecha.

" It's a very Dubai response to the development of arts infrastructure — through private-sector patronage "

A wealth of pop-up projects, including a new monograph dedicated to Iranian artist Farhad Moshiri, will also keep collectors, curators and critics busy.

There is also an important art historical show. Mirrored works dating from 1976 to 2015 by the Italian Arte Povera artist Michelangelo Pistoletto go on display in a joint exhibition organised by Leila Heller Gallery and Galleria Continua of San Gimignano at the Avenue's central space The Yard. This section will be transformed by Rem Koolhaas's company OMA into a permanent project space later this year.

And for a bit of fun "RCA Secret Dubai", the local edition of the Royal College of Art's sale of anonymous postcard artworks by famous names, will be held at Art Dubai and Alserkal Avenue.



©Lindsay Kirkcaldy

Alserkal Avenue at night

Despite all these tempting commercial opportunities, Alserkal sees a gradual move away from the market-oriented dynamic. "There is an increased interest in the organic art scene and curated community [of non-profits and artists] within the UAE," Alserkal says.

It goes wider than the visual arts, too, into film, theatre, music and design. Mishaal Al Gergawi and his wife Butheina founded Cinema Akil in 2014; they plan to open a permanent space at Alserkal Avenue. "It represents a very Dubai response to the development of arts infrastructure, ie through private-sector patronage and entrepreneurship," he says.

Alserkal Avenue's scope will be expanded still further next week, when the Jean-Paul Najar Foundation opens on March 14 in a striking new 375 sq metre space designed by Mario Jossa of Marcel Breuer & Associates. This 600-strong collection of post-1960s European and US abstract art was amassed by Najar, who was half-Egyptian, half-Colombian and spent most of his life in Paris. Jean-Paul's daughter Deborah Najar has lived in the Emirate for 12 years, and is convinced that Dubai is the right home for the holdings. "There is an understanding of abstraction here," she explains. "But we need to converse with a new generation of collectors and build a wider base."

There may be other challenges ahead. The post-2008 economic downturn hit Dubai's real estate and financial sectors hard — but Alserkal points out that "we have grown continually since 2009". He also says that he has governmental backing, since "new pioneering ideas are in need of legislative support".

Some of the work here has market value while other art is more experimental, says the Avenue's director Vilma Jurkute: "What is important for the overall art ecosystem is that there are platforms for both." The real test will be whether this momentum can be sustained across the region.