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Curatorial creativity works extra hard to shine next to Louvre Abu Dhabi

We look back at this year's Abu Dhabi Art, from the works and trends to its wider achievements

[Melissa Gronlund](#)

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Abdullah Al-Saadi's 'Scarecrows'. Christopher Pike / The National

During a talk at Abu Dhabi Art last Wednesday, curator Maya Allison spoke warmly of the trust she had in working with Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, whose room-based installation *Lines* she recreated for her show at Abu Dhabi Art, *Gateway:Line*. Allison's exhibition, which will remain on display until the end of January, effuses a feeling of intimacy: a generous connection of geographically disparate works of art by the idea that all the works draw lines. The art is connected by the idea of connection.

The exhibition was a critical standout at the fair, jostling for attention in one of the most packed weeks in Abu Dhabi's history for art-related events. At the fair, untold numbers of selfies and

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Instagram posts were snapped inside the installation *A Trip to Nowhere* by Sheikha Shaikha bint Mohammed bin Khalid Al Nahyan, in which glowing swings swayed like pendulums in a light-striped tunnel. “I wanted to offer a ‘pause’ that is infinitely mysterious and laden with unanswered questions,” Sheikha Shaikha says of her installation, which was positioned outside by the fair’s entrance. She admits that “I did not anticipate that the response would be so infectious”.

Daniel Wetzel’s *Evros Walk Water*, part of the Durub Al Tawaya series, was another highlight. The performance was enacted by its audience, who listened to instructions on headphones at different stations. Its backstory has three layers: *Water Walk* is a 1959 performance by American composer John Cage, in which he carried out a variety of nonsensical actions at mathematical intervals to show how music could be made from ordinary objects: ice cubes being put in a glass; a vase of water being poured over flowers in a bathtub; a lid being struck. The discovery of joy in everyday sounds is also behind Cage’s most famous work, *4’33”*, for which he sat in front of a piano and played nothing for four minutes and 33 seconds, letting the sounds of the outdoors and the people in the auditorium take centre stage instead.

For *Evros Walk Water*, Wetzel, one of the founders of German theatre company Rimini Protokoll, revived Cage’s *Water Walk* in a minors’ refugee house in Athens. He worked with a group of refugees from Iran, Afghanistan, Syria and elsewhere to re-enact *Water Walk* with the materials they had to hand: the bath tub that Cage pours water into, for example, became an inflatable dinghy. At Abu Dhabi Art, the work’s third stage, visitors were instructed to perform the actions themselves.

While they listen to the instructions, they also hear stories from the children: one boy explained how he evaded prison in Afghanistan by letting his food go rancid, and then escaped from the hospital he was sent to. Another told the story of rowing in the dinghy across the River Evros that separates Greece from Turkey.

Enthusiasm and humour oozes through the boys’ retellings, despite what they have been through. At the end of the performance, the audience is asked to make as much noise as they want, however they wish.

On the commercial side, the fair was put in the shade a little by other momentous art happenings in the capital.

“I’m an architecture buff,” says Sean Kelly, whose New York gallery that takes his name was exhibiting at Abu Dhabi Art for the second year. “And Louvre Abu Dhabi is one of the best buildings I’ve seen in the world. But it drew attention from the fair, and the fair suffered as a result.”

The galleries who did well were mostly those with a local collecting base, such as Elmarsa, whose galleries are in Tunisia and Dubai, and the New York- and Dubai-based Leila Heller Gallery. The gallery’s Alexander Heller said they broke US\$1 million (Dh3.7m) in sales. “It was our best Abu Dhabi Art so far.”

The kind of work on show at the fair has changed from previous years. Gone were five-star names such as Ai Wei Wei or Lawrence Weiner and large sculptures or installations oriented towards museum acquisition. Many galleries brought more attractively priced work in hopes of appealing to mid-level collectors. This is the collecting and art-appreciation base still being developed by Abu Dhabi Art, which has the role of being not just of an art fair, but also a means to introduce contemporary work to a new audience. And if the fancy strikes, to entice them to buy it.