

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Mirza, Quddus. 'Art in the age of Dubai.' *The News on Sunday*. (April 1, 2018).



Art in the age of Dubai

Quddus Mirza April 1, 2018



Rasheed Araeen, *Chandni Raat*, 2018, Wood and paint, 73 x 86 x 5 in.

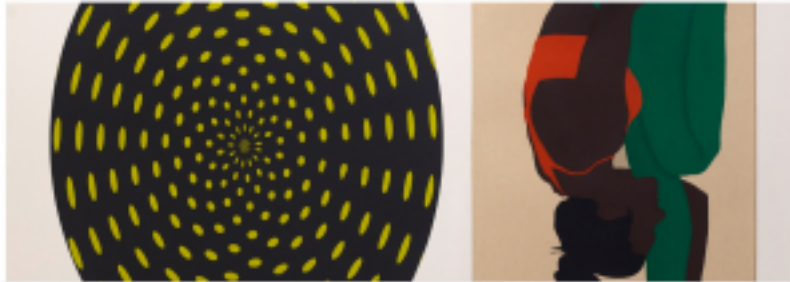
Dubai can also be called the art capital of South Asia, if not of Asia or the world. Artists who cannot travel to their neighbouring country can meet on neutral ground in Dubai. Art Dubai has been happening for the past 11 years, and this year, too, the 12th edition was held from March 21-24. It included 105 galleries from 48 countries, some participating for the first time like Kazakhstan and Ethiopia.

Like previous years, Art Dubai 2018 presented big names from the art world, including many artists from the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. It also offered some surprises in terms of works which had never been shown previously.

These were not limited to the two halls of 'Contemporary' but under the title 'Modern' too. One came across an early canvas of Zahoorul Akhlaq at the Grosvenor Gallery booth in which he had painted a stylised bull in thick brush strokes, an imagery completely different from his known work. The painting (discovered at someone's place in Cambridge) certifies Akhlaq's link with his mentor and teacher, Shakir Ali, who frequently drew the bull.

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Artists are not only inspired by their tutors but also their contemporaries. This was observed a lot at 'Modern'. Abstraction, stylisation of figure, folk forms and traditional practices were a few features spotted in works from India, Pakistan, Iran, Tunisia, Bahrain, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Palestine. This section reaffirmed the concept of parallel modernities being practised in different parts of the globe, without much contact.



Muhammad Zeeshan, ...And a girl, 2017, Pastel on sandpaper

The connection among artists was highlighted in an exhibition 'That Feverish Leap into Fierceness of Life: A look at five artist groups in five Arab cities across five decades'. Works of artists based in Cairo, Baghdad, Casablanca, Khartoum, and Riyadh (especially from 1960s and '70s) reminded one of their contemporaries in other parts of the world, for example the painters of Lahore Art Circle active during the same period. The exhibition, curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, suggested a desire among artists to formulate a language that is distinct for its local connection and yet is understood across continents due to its content. The presence of 'naïve' art conveyed the artists' aim of identifying with the purity and primitiveness of expression of eastern art. Perhaps a response to mainstream Western art which envisages the 'East' as the holder of heritage, thus an 'explorer' of past, and 'proud' of its primitiveness.

The world has moved since. Today, due to the split of economic centres and information resources, there is no centre of art any more. The contemporary section of Art Dubai illustrated this aspect. This year two Pakistani galleries had booths, and represented single artists (Muzzamil Ruheel at Canvas Gallery, and Muhammad Zeeshan at Sanat Gallery). Some other artists from Pakistan were also seen at different galleries. The art of Rashid Rana at Leila Heller Gallery indicated a new dimension in the artist's oeuvre. Focusing on the history of image-making, Rana unpacked the works of the 'orientalist' genre to challenge the constructs about 'other' cultures. In fact, when we see others we see through our eyes — an apparatus fixed within our bodies. So all views are singular views. Rana tilted this scheme of things — by providing multiples of single image/idea.

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Rashid Rana takes The Carpet Merchant, c. 1887, (Minneapolis Institute of Art) by Jean-Léon Gerome.

This conceptual exercise took another turn in the work of Zeeshan which is a comment on the business of art in an art fair. The works are a series of a few images which were identical and thus named or described as first, second and third 'original copies'. They were priced not following the norm of valuing the first copy higher than the second, and second more than the third copy.

Another Pakistani artist questioned the value of an art work, not because of its commercialisation but by reducing its sacredness. 'Please Do Not Step: Loss of a Magnificent Story' 2017, the text-based marble piece of Hamra Abbas (at Lawrie Shabibi) was placed on the exhibition floor with visitors walking on it.

Abdullah M. I. Syed invoked the link between art and money by using dollar bills as the material to produce his geometric forms. Syed has been utilising currency notes in his works on paper, installation and performance for quite a few years; his current works at the Aicon Gallery were part of the same sensibility/style.

Continuation of this style was visible in Waqas Khan's painting at the Galerie Krinzinger. The gallery showcased a few other famous artists like Marina Abramovic, Sudarshan Shetty and Maha Malluh. Shetty referred to tradition: to multiple traditions and their modern-day utility or relevance.

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Anish Kapoor who approached tradition to liberate it from a fixed culture/location was displayed at Galleria Continua along with Ai Weiwei, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Ahmed Mater, Daniel Buren and others. Kapoor's large disk in deep blue enthralled the viewers due to its illusion of infinite space. Both the circular form and pigment was reminiscent of a popular Indian pictorial practice, but stripping it from an easily identifiable address, the work contained a sensory experience that is open to all. An entangled wooden handcuff by Ai Weiwei suggested the distance between openness and captivity, difference between freedom and restrictions; a condition one has to face living in countries with political turmoil and state repression.



Lida Abdul

Time, Love and the Workings of Anti-Love II #1 2013-2017

I remember a friend who when invited to an Ethiopian restaurant inquired if a thing such as 'Ethiopian restaurant' exists. A similar sort of ignorance is witnessed towards art from Afghanistan. Most people are oblivious of Afghan artists who are producing works about violence, identity, and Neo-Imperialism. At Giorgio Persano, Afghan artist Lida Abdul communicated through her work — consisting of 80 framed photos of people from her country, initially “belonging to an Afghan passport photographer” — capturing how American war “affects the expression of men, women and children over a span of twenty years”.

Anyone aware of the brief history of our times, especially after 9/11, would second this view that America is the neighbour of every country. On the other hand, one may describe Dubai as the neighbour of all nations, where all of us (in the words of Peruvian poet Augusto Lunel) “...are against all laws, starting with the law of gravity.”