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FIVE REASONS WHY
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Entrepreneur and financier

SHAILESH DASH

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(AND PORTFOLIO GROWTH) TANGIBLE

LEARNING THROUGH ACTION

THE HOW-TO

Converting your
entrepreneurial ideas
into viable business
opportunities

PIVOTING TO SUCCESS

CLASSPASS CEO
FRITZ LANMAN ON
HOW HIS ENTERPRISE
BUILT A WINNING
BUSINESS MODEL



Creative PURSUITS

Insights on what it takes to build (and be a part of) the art gallery scene in the GCC

by TAMARA PUPIC

Anna Szonyi
Director,
AR. Gallery + Studio
argallery.ae

What art gallery business model have you found most viable in the GCC region?

"Our business model is fundamentally different from other galleries not only in the GCC but further afield, and there are several reasons for that. Firstly, we are a design gallery, and not a fine art or art gallery. Secondly, we -who manage it- are not professional gallerists or curators, but designers and artists ourselves. Therefore, it is our playground where we exhibit our own pieces and create installations and collaborations with brands and other designers/artists. We also invite artists to exhibit who we think are in line with our philosophy. Thirdly, we use the gallery space as our studio as well, where we work on the design of our artworks, our projects



and public art commissions that are exhibited elsewhere. For us, this is the only viable business model, as this is what we know. We believe that with this unique approach we have managed to create a new kind of gallery type, which is more open and more accessible to the public and upcoming artists. We have also managed to build a bridge between collectible art and commercial brands as well as to connect with other creative disciplines, such as architecture, jewelry design, graphics design, glass art, etc."

"WE USE THE GALLERY SPACE AS OUR STUDIO AS WELL, WHERE WE WORK ON THE DESIGN OF OUR ARTWORKS, OUR PROJECTS AND PUBLIC ART COMMISSIONS."

From a commercial point of view, what is the biggest mistake you see emerging artists make when approaching you?

"We work with artists whose work is complementary to our specific creative vision, and who are open to work in a different kind of gallery set-up than the regular one. We continuously research artists, and when we find someone who we think has a potential, we reach out to them. We also receive loads of proposals via email from artists who'd like to exhibit. Unfortunately, most of the time, their applications are not professional. We've received applications to exhibit with us; however, they're sent out in one email to all the galleries in the GCC area "cc-ing" all of them. This approach will not be liked by any other gallery, regardless of the talent or the quality of

IMAGE COURTESY AR. GALLERY + STUDIO



the proposed work, due to it being very impersonal. The applications are also, most of the time, sent without a cover letter. For us to evaluate whether we can work with the artist/designer, we need to have a clear, well-organized and personalized application submission, which we can evaluate, record in our database, and get back to them, once there is an exhibition or collaboration opportunity matching their skills or their artistic style. We also have walk-in artists who pass by, have a chat with us, and then follow up with their portfolio via email. This is a better approach; however, we still prefer to receive requests for an appointment before approaching us, as

we are also working on our own creative projects, and have other meetings. We suggest to the artists to make sure that the application and presentation is well worked out before sending it, as the first impression will decide whether she/he will have the opportunity to work with us."

"WE HAVE ALSO MANAGED TO BUILD A BRIDGE BETWEEN COLLECTIBLE ART AND COMMERCIAL BRANDS AS WELL AS TO CONNECT WITH OTHER CREATIVE DISCIPLINES, SUCH AS ARCHITECTURE, JEWELRY DESIGN, GRAPHICS DESIGN, GLASS ART."



THE HOW TO ANNA SZONYI'S TIPS ON RUNNING A COMMERCIAL SUCCESSFUL ART GALLERY

- > It is important to have connections, and know most of the players in the art world before opening a gallery.
- > Prepare for a huge amount of unexpected expenses, which will be added as extra contingency to the financial plan.
- > Try to work with a mix of renowned and upcoming artists to have variety in the display, and provide opportunity for talented artists to exhibit along big names.
- > Don't rely on walk-in guests to buy anything. Focus on bringing clients to the gallery, and do extensive PR and marketing work.
- > Don't change your exhibit too often, neither too rarely. Find a balance.
- > Don't use too much collateral- save the planet.

Asmaa Shabibi
Co-founder and Director,
Lawrie Shabibi
lawrieshabibi.com



What art gallery business model have you found most viable in the GCC region?

"I can't speak for the rest of the GCC or other galleries, but what I can say is that our gallery model is to run a tight ship from a costs perspective, and we widen the net by ensuring we have a good number of enthusiastic international clients that generate strong sales. As part of this strategy, my co-founder and director William Lawrie has moved to London in order to focus on that market and Europe. We felt that a presence there was very important at this stage of our business. Furthermore, given the lack of institutional support in the region, the gallery does play the role of an institution despite being as a commercial gallery. Working with us, >>>

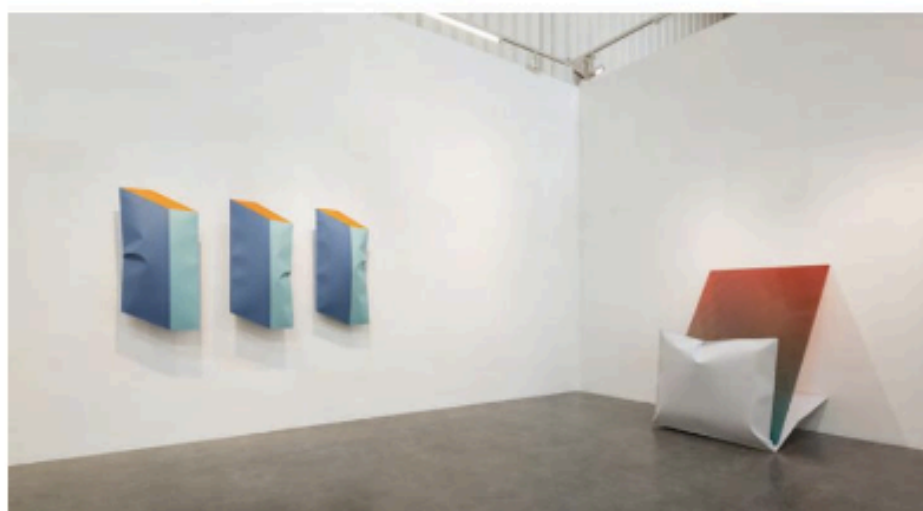
"IT IS IMPORTANT FOR US THAT ARTISTS MAKE WORKS THAT APPEAL TO BOTH PRIVATE COLLECTORS, AND ALSO GENERATE INSTITUTIONAL AND CURATORIAL INTEREST."

an artist will not only have the opportunity to show with us in Dubai, but they will also have the chance to show at international art fairs. We have participated in fairs in New York, Hong Kong, Turin, London, Dallas as well as Dubai and Abu Dhabi. These fairs provide visibility for our artists to collectors, curators, institutions and the press in a way that would not be possible if we were to just show them in Dubai. Our strategy is to take our artists outside the region so that they become international artists."

ONE OF THE THINGS WE PRIDE OURSELVES IN DOING IS WORKING WITH MUSEUMS TO PLACE OUR ARTISTS' WORKS IN THEIR COLLECTIONS."

From a commercial point of view, what is the biggest mistake you see emerging artists make when approaching you?

"Commercially, an artist is of interest to the gallery, if we consider their works to be of museum quality. It is important for us that artists make works that appeal to both private collectors, and also generate institutional and curatorial interest. One of the things we pride ourselves in doing is working with museums to place our artists' works in their collections - this has included the Guggenheim New York, Centre Pompidou, Tate Modern, to name but a few. But we also have to be realistic - the gallery operates on sales, and so we do need to counter this with artists whose works are of interest to private collectors. I believe this is a good strategy. I just attended "Picasso 1932" at Tate Modern, and



Above:
Installation views of
Shaikha Al Mazrou's
solo exhibition
Expansion - Extension
at Lawrie Shabibi

it was interesting to see that the majority of works were on loan from private collectors rather than museums. The private collectors are going to be important in the development of an artist's career, as well as providing them with an income, so that they should develop that relationship as well."

THE HOW TO ASMAA SHABIBI'S TIPS ON RUNNING A COMMERCIAL SUCCESSFUL ART GALLERY

> **Keep your costs low.** Shipping can be a high cost especially if most artists live outside the GCC. Be creative with how you ship.

> **Keep your program consistent.** This will help build a following and people will get into your program.

> **Focus on international buyers to grow your artist's career.** Artists need to be seen, and one institutional show or curatorial recognition can really make a difference to their careers.

IMAGE COURTESY LAWRIE SHABIBI; SHAIKHA AL MAZROU PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHAIKHA AL MAZROU

Leila Heller
Founder and President,
Leila Heller Gallery
leilahellergallery.com

What art gallery business model have you found most viable in the GCC region?

"The gallery scheme in the GCC is quite active and vibrant, especially in Dubai. The model that we have followed is a mix of Middle Eastern artists and Western artists, which seems to work for us. We have a very active Western program that has an educational component, including the publishing of our catalogues as well as having an active lecture series. Our model works quite well in the region as the collector base is educated and the market is growing, especially with all of the amazing foundations and institutions and the new Louvre Abu Dhabi."



From a commercial point of view, what is the biggest mistake you see emerging artists make when approaching you?

"With the onset of the internet, the global population has become much more aware of artists from emerging markets. It is always about exposure and use of social media and

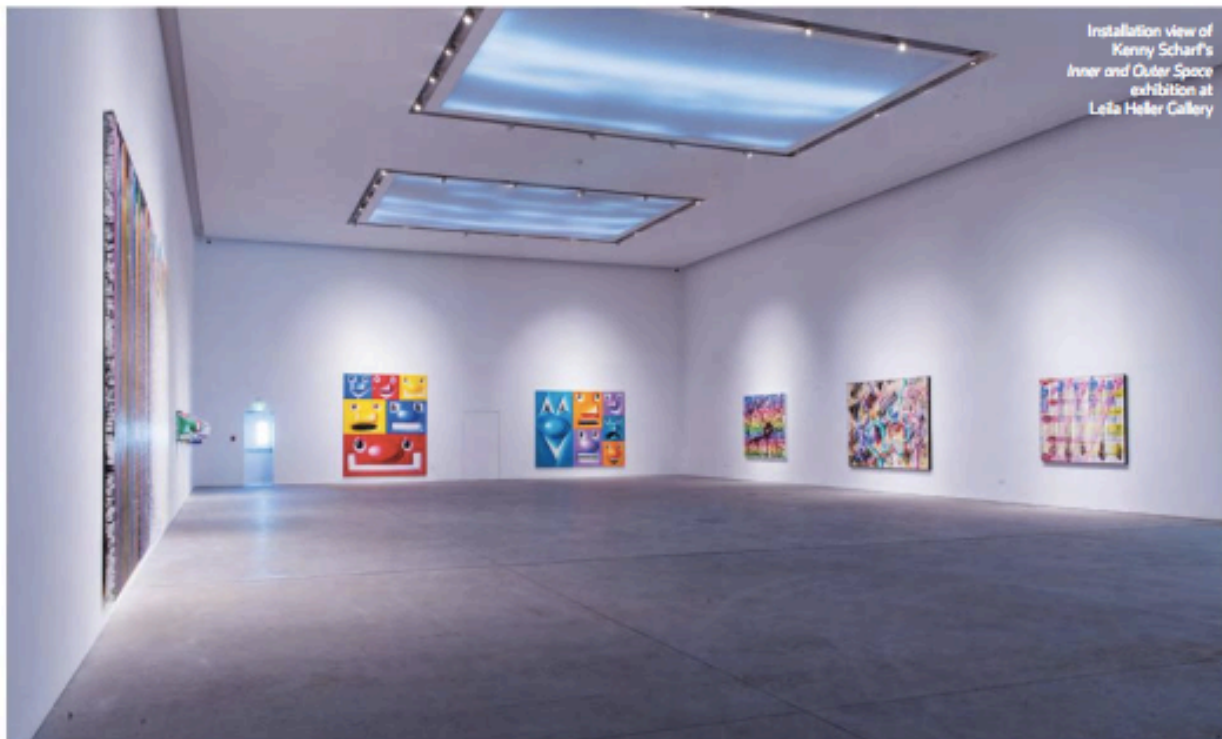
"THE MODEL THAT WE HAVE FOLLOWED IS A MIX OF MIDDLE EASTERN ARTISTS AND WESTERN ARTISTS, WHICH SEEMS TO WORK FOR US."

publication of catalogues that can be distributed to museum libraries and university libraries to expand the market and exposure of the artist to a wider audience. However, it is always much more complicated, because the artist has to fit in the gallery programming and have a synergy with the other artists that are shown in the gallery. Of course, not all artists are commercially viable, but can add to the cache of the gallery by bringing institutional interest and exposure to the gallery. All artists are unique in their own ways

THE HOW TO
LEILA HELLER'S TIPS ON
RUNNING A COMMERCIAL
SUCCESSFUL ART GALLERY

"The GCC audience is very burgeoning and quite actively interested in being exposed to very sophisticated artworks. They are quite knowledgeable, but indeed it would make sense to bring artworks that they can relate to. It is important to know your audience and anticipate their wishes and cater to them and bring them something exciting each time."

and have things that work for them and things that they need to work on, so it depends on the situation and the gallery. It is not necessarily a universal answer, which applies to any artist and any gallery." >>>



Installation view of
Kenny Scharf's
Inner and Outer Space
exhibition at
Leila Heller Gallery

IMAGE COURTESY: LEILA HELLER GALLERY AND KENNY SCHARF

Kourosh Nouri
Founding Director,
Carbon 12 Gallery
 carbon12dubai.com

What art gallery business model have you found most viable in the GCC region?

"The scene has grown unbelievably in the past 10 years. I don't believe there are regional models, but that there are individual models. What's amazing about the UAE/Dubai top six galleries is that each has its own style/program, and the way they approach the market. From our side, at Carbon 12, celebrating our decade of presence in the region and our 65th exhibition in November 2018 shows that our model has always been a program without any compromise, and based exclusively on the work of our represented artists. For those who follow what we do, the achievements of

our artists and their track record in the past years have been significant. The focus was always the quality of the work, the consistency and artistic development, and international relevance. From there, it's hard to say what's viable and more sustainable. We are privileged to exhibit what we find excellent, without pre-marketing calculations, and we have so far survived."

From a commercial point of view, what is the biggest mistake you see emerging artists make when approaching you?

"Simply put, an artist's consistency and artistic development into a relevant body of work is what makes her/him attractive not only to the gallery, but also to collectors, institutions, and critics. One big mistake I have often seen in the past decade is that many artists

approach galleries without really measuring the whole context. If you are a 21-year-old artist with 11 artworks in your "portfolio," it would be too early to contact an established gallery. Instead keep on working, visit the galleries, be aware of what's going on in the art world (and not only in the region), and let people know you are an inspiring artist. Knowledge of what's going on in the contemporary art scene is a vital task for any artist. It still shocks me to read emails of "artists" living in Dubai contacting you for an exhibition, and this person wasn't once in your gallery seeing any exhibitions! Being an artist is a total professional commitment. It will take years, and the same way the works have to be produced professionally, the same way the artist needs to have an impeccable professional profile."

"IT'S HARD TO SAY WHAT'S VIABLE AND MORE SUSTAINABLE. WE ARE PRIVILEGED TO EXHIBIT WHAT WE FIND EXCELLENT, WITHOUT PRE-MARKETING CALCULATIONS, AND WE HAVE SO FAR SURVIVED."

THE HOW TO
KOUROSH NOURI'S TIPS ON
RUNNING A COMMERCIAL
SUCCESSFUL ART GALLERY

"Be genuine, stick to your guns, and keep in mind that the art industry is a serious industry, and without professionalism, there is no place for hobby players. The rest is knowledge and expertise, hard work, and flair."



Kourosh Nouri, Founding Director,
 Carbon 12 Gallery

IMAGE COURTESY CARBON 12 GALLERY