

What to expect at Abu Dhabi Art 2017

We round up the various offerings at the latest edition of Abu Dhabi Art – from participating galleries to local artists showcasing their works



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Nothing ups your game like competition. While attention is currently focused on the opening of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, a few miles down the road, at Manarat Al Saadiyat, Abu Dhabi Art is in the process of reinventing itself as a cultural institution in the capital.

Dyala Nusseibeh, the fair's new director, has amply increased the public programming of the four-day event: introducing two curated shows, a new curated section of galleries, three major commissions of artists' work, workshops and discursive events, and a stand focusing on art and technology, which all run alongside the fair's established Durub Al Tawaya performance series and Fabrice Bousteau's commissioning of street art throughout the capital. The Manarat auditorium will also host eighteen talks. The site will be teeming with artworks, spilling beyond the gallery booths all the way to – really – the bathroom stalls.

Abu Dhabi Art is unique, Nusseibeh says, because it's not a commercial enterprise. "Unlike a lot of other art fairs globally, we're a government organisation. The government funds us, so our mandate is much wider.

"It's about being a cultural activator and giving young artists opportunities. It's not just about making money by putting on an art fair once a *year*."

This mandate of supporting a young scene is a shift in focus from the origins of the art fair, which emerged in response to the Saadiyat museums project. When the Louvre Abu Dhabi and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi began collecting, the fair provided a way to both create an art public in the capital, and for major galleries to propose museum acquisitions. As a result, the price point of works sold at Abu Dhabi Art has largely been higher than that at other fairs. While it has been successful in attracting top-tier collectors and interested members of the public – the fair's attendance numbers have grown from 5,000 in 2009, the fair's first year, to 20,000 last year – it has struggled to cater to mid-tier individual collectors and a more specialised art audience.

This is the challenge faced by Nusseibeh, an Abu Dhabi native and former director of Istanbul's Art International fair, and – rather incredibly – the first director appointed by the Department of Culture and Tourism (formerly the TCA), who organise Abu Dhabi Art.

Fifteen new galleries join this year, seven of these in the section "Focus: Beyond Territory"; organised by Omar Kholeif, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago curator, much loved by artists and cultural figures in the GCC. Kholeif, who was born in Egypt and grew up in Saudi Arabia, has worked on a number of shows that have brought art from the Mena region to London, New York and Chicago.

For this exhibition, he invited a global selection of galleries to curate solo shows around the theme of landscape, broadening this concept beyond its Northern European connotations. He has drawn in heavyweights such as Marian Goodman Gallery and Spruth Magers, the latter with their first ever presentation in the Middle East, as well as younger galleries such as Jhaveri Contemporary from Mumbai and Gallerist from Istanbul.

"I see my work as a constant re-examination of history and specifically what we might call a 'global art history.' Kholeif explained by e-mail, "which has so often excluded artists from outside the context of the west. I wanted to make a show that had formal and conceptual resonances, so for example, The Third Line is presenting a solo booth of Hayv Kahraman, an artist who re-imagines the legacies and histories of Orientalist and Oriental painting, which feels aptly positioned with the work of Shahzia Sikander, who re-imagines the form of the Mughal era miniature by inflecting this tradition with contemporary issues and figures."

The idea of using Abu Dhabi Art to create and contest global art histories was suggested by a number of its curators - which might be unusual for those who think of art fairs as simply places to trade art. But fairs have emerged over the past 10 years as cultural producers in their rights, from Frieze Art Fair's boisterous Projects section to Art Basel Statements, the solo presentations by young artists at the Basel fair.

This edition of Abu Dhabi Art is particularly energised by giving a platform to the younger sector of the art world. Munira Al Sayegh, the curator of the talks programme, says she used the events to shed light on the "sub-scenes" in the GCC that often fly under the radar: the collectives such as Loudart and Hunart that have emerged in Saudi Arabia, or the points of connections and departure among Gulf artists. "I want to bring in a crowd that is more regionally based, and create a sense of continuity and a network for residents here," she says. "I work with younger artists and creators, and discussions take place among ourselves, but we need to put those in the forefront."

The fair's final panel, "(Mis)interpretation: Critical Thinking in Arab Contemporary Art Practice"; features four female Gulf artists - Sarah Al Agroobi, Manal Al Dawayan, Ahaad Alamoudi, and Eman Ali - who would meet while studying in London for their master's degrees, debating the role of Arab women or the Gulf's place in global art histories. "I want to take those discussions out of school and into the open," says Al Sayegh. The idea of a regional network will further be explored in Halqat Fann, a programme of closed-door sessions between students and Mena artists that Al Sayegh and Tarek Abeu El Fetouh, the curator of the fair's Du rub Al Tawaya performances, have put together.

The fair also introduces two exhibitions. In *Beyond: Emerging Artists*, Cristiana de Marchi and Mohammed

Kazem, artists and co-curators of the influential Flying House exhibition space in Dubai in the late 2000s, used their invitation to support three younger artists - not just by giving them international exposure, but by mentoring them. "We wanted to work with a limited number of artists in order to follow-up on the process, instead of only the outcome," says de Marchi. Thanks to generous funding from the fair, they were able to bring their artists - Shaikha Al-Mazrou, Alaa Edris and Jumairy - to the major art exhibitions of Documenta in Kassel and the Venice Biennale this past summer, to put them into critical dialogue with cultural producers in the UAE who regularly fed back on their work, and to respond to the specialised needs and requests for their projects.

Edris, for example, made the video *The Great Puzzle* (2017), in which she performs a line about self-awareness from *Alice in Wonderland* in seven ways. De Marchi and Kazem arranged for her to take vocal lessons in London, so she could stretch her voice into different interpretations. Where the work has ended up is no reflection on its merit: you'll find it in the toilet stalls, where it activates once you close the door. "Alaa wanted an intimate dimension:" says de Marchi about the video's location, allowing that installing art in toilets is harder than it sounds. The organisers had to fabricate special screens from China, which then proved to be so heavy that the doors had to be replaced. The project will be shown in male and female stalls alike - but not in all of them. "We wanted to give people options;" says de Marchi cutely.

Nusseibeh also commissioned new works by young artists, giving them time and resources to develop major projects, two of which will be sited in Al Ain. "We were thinking about our cultural heritage, and these sites that we consider important for different reasons:" says Nusseibeh, about the works by Manal Al Dawayan and Nasser Al Salem.

Al Salem has devised a machine within the courtyard of the former military site of Al Jahili Fort that spells out "yuheb" - Arabic for "to love" - in the sand, and then erases it, to show the inextricability of love and conflict. Al Dawayan investigated the palm trees of the Al Ain oasis, a Unesco site that has existed for 3,000 years. Palm trees use their roots in order to communicate with one another, and even to pass along nourishment if one tree is healthy and another sick. Her installation maps these roots and exposes their invisible network to the eyes of oasis visitors.

On Saadiyat, the Cairo-based artist Magdi Mostafa created a sound-and-light installation that translates the city's energy into thousands of hand-embroidered LED lights, powered by electric connections that have been hand-soldered - a mix of the craft and manual labour in the service of a display of cold technology.

The amplification of the fair's public programming owes as much to Nusseibeh's ambition as to the maturity of the art scene. Kazem, for example, plays a triple role as curator, mentor, and artist himself, with his work shown throughout the fair in Manarat's public areas, alongside a number of other prominent artists from the UAE, such as Vikram Divecha, Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian, Abdullah al Saadi, Hassan Sharif and Tarek Al-Ghoussein, who all now have international careers. "You'll get a sense of the artists who live here:" Nusseibeh says. The NYUAD Art Gallery director Maya Allison, who curated a show on the emerging canon of Emirati artists last year, returns to some of these in her exhibition for the fair, *Gateway: Line*. Here the work of Kazem, Ebtisam Abdulaziz, and Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim will investigate, alongside international artists such as Saloua Rounda Choucair and Tatsuo Miyajima, a basic artistic question: the compositional tool of the line, as something that connects and divides. In doing so, Allison notably uses a formal principle rather than social history to contextualise the work on show. "These artists are already in dialogue with the international art world;" urges Allison, referring to the Emirati artists she features. "It's time to start doing shows that are matter-of-fact about their impact on other artists beyond on the UAE:"

Nusseibeh's next challenge will be stretching out this intense flurry of activity past Abu Dhabi Art's few days in November, and towards making Abu Dhabi Art a year-round presence. This is already in play: Kazem and de Marchi's *Beyond: Emerging Artists* and Allison's *Gateway: Line* exhibitions will stay up through the end of January, as will the new commissions by Al Dawayan, Al Salem, and Mostafa.

Last year, the fair held a popular Galleries Week at Warehouse 421 in the Mina area, where six mid-tier galleries exhibited (and reportedly did well) - an experience they will repeat Galleries Week this February. Nusseibeh also says they are toying with the possibility of having a gallery space in Abu Dhabi that would feature a rotating selection of international galleries, allowing them to make contacts in the region, and to further build the audience, and collecting base, in the capital.

"There's an enormous can-do, open-hearted attitude of people here:" she says, perhaps also speaking for her November rivals down the road. "You can just make things happen:"