



artbahrain.org

April 2012



"As it really points to the fact that the market and curatorial seriousness of Art Dubai is becoming far more serious than it was when the fair began six years ago."

Interview with
ALEXANDER
GRAY OF
ALEXANDER
GRAY GALLERY,
NEW YORK AT
ART DUBAI



EXHIBITION OF WORK BY LUIS CAMNITZER AND HASSAN SHARIF WINS "JOHN JONES PRIZE FOR WORKS ON PAPER" (2012)

By Laura Stewart

Alexander Gray, the head of Alexander Gray Gallery based in New York's trendy Chelsea art district, was in a happy and expansive mood when I sat down to talk to him at Art Dubai. Part of the amiable dealer's buoyant mood, was due to the fact that the installation at his booth -- consisting of work by Hassan Sharif and Luis Camnitzer -- had just been awarded the "John Jones Prize for Works of Paper".

The jury of the John Jones Art on Paper Award said, "We have chosen for the inaugural prize the pairing drawn between Hassan Sharif and Luis Camnitzer by Alexander Gray Associates. Both artists have had consequent drawing practices for many decades. Bringing their work together made us think anew about each artist's work and created an unexpected encounter. As Diaghilev and Cocteau said: 'Etonnez-moi.'"

The Award was conceived by master framers John Jones Ltd. and Art Dubai to recognize the potential for excellence and innovation for works made on paper. Sharif and Camnitzer will be given the opportunity to present a dedicated exhibition in Dubai between March 2012-2013, and in addition to the artists receiving a cash prize, the winning works will be acquired by the John Jones Contemporary Art Collection in London.

"I am truly excited that we were given this honor," Mr. Gray enthused, "As it really points to the fact that the market and curatorial seriousness of Art Dubai is becoming far more serious than it was when the fair began six years ago. These two artists, both in their 70s," Gray continues, "represent work that is based on esoteric concepts of the artist's process and are not easy or decorative works. Therefore, I find it wonderful that the committee chose us for the John Jones prize as it shows that they are interested in the artists as well as the art, and are willing to bestow accolades on work that is in no way easy or superficial. In the case of talented artists like these," Gray says, "The artist can act as many things -- as cartographers, or fortune-tellers".

"I met Hassan Sharif on a quick trip to Abu Dhabi last year," Gray says. "I was meeting with someone from the Guggenheim there and he suggested I do a studio visit to meet Hassan. I went to his studio and in my own nerdy way, I was immediately taken with his process-based work and his sense of humor, and thought immediately that he would show brilliantly with Camnitzer. I had no hesitation that I wanted to work with him".

The two artists at Alexander Gray are, by comparison to many of the artists on view at Art Dubai, and indeed to younger artists in the contemporary art world in general, are both mature in age and in the work that they are doing. In a succinct statement that highlights the similarity and appeal of the two artists, Gray says. "They both have a true visual economy, and both of their work is tied up with the idea of the 'Diaspora' -- in the cases of both Latin America and the Middle East".

Hassan Sharif, Gray explains, "Is from Dubai, and has chosen to live and work there for the last 40 years. He was born in 1951," Gray continues. "and is really considered one of the pioneers of conceptual art and experimental practices in the Middle East. Since the 1970s, Sharif has maintained a practice as a 'cultural producer' and facilitator, moving between roles as artist, educator, critic, activist and mentor to many contemporary artists in the UAE".

Sharif, who is the founder of the Emirates Fine Art Society and the creator of The Flying House, a Dubai institution for promoting contemporary Emirati artists, has toiled in relative obscurity for many years, and has been happily doing experimental work including experimental "conceptual and performance art" in the desert, Gray tells me. In the past two years, however, Sharif's work, which can be described as much about process as about the end product, has been recognized on the international stage. He was the first Emirati to have his work exhibited at the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, and was the debut artist to represent the U.A.E. at its first national pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2009. In 2011, he was the subject of a retrospective exhibition "Hassan Sharif Experiments & Objects: 1979-2011" presented by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage/Platform for Visual Arts.

Sharif's work on view at Abu Dhabi included drawings, very much based on the exploration of the limits of communication through text and images including pieces like a grid, in which the artist timed the marks that he was able to put on paper. "His approach," explained Gray, "is always tied to the actual process and he never strays from the core practice of having no mediation between the visceral experience of actually holding the pen and putting the marks or drawings on paper. He is not interested in just the "concept". He is interested in how the concept can be translated in the context of time and medium to the actual application and the "making" of a work of art.

Luis Camnitzer, the German-born, Uruguayan conceptual artist and academic who shares the prize with Sharif for the Alexander Gray show, is also in the twilight of his career -- he was born in 1937 -- and is equally cerebral and conceptually oriented. Camnitzer, who has been recognized on the international stage at among other institutions The Kitchen and The Museo del Barrio in New York, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the 2000 Whitney Museum Biennial in New York and at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

"Camnitzer," Gray explains. "Is truly one of the greatest practitioners of concept-based art. His humorous and often biting work in drawing, printmaking and sculpture is truly inspired and is an inspiration to many young conceptual artists".

In the installation at Art Dubai, for example, Gray shows Camnitzer's "Learning Assignment" pieces, which include a basketball hanging next to a plaque which reads: "A sphere is shaped by its limits. With a radius of infinite length will remain a sphere. Comment on this" and a sculptural piece consisting of a pile of poetry books, well-thumbed and annotated in the margins, on a pedestal with a plaque that reads: "This is a poetic statement. Identify the elements that construct the poem".

When asked where he thinks the market for ME.NA.SA artists is headed, Gray responds. "There are currently many forces at work. There are of course all the polemics at play with respect to the Arab Spring, yet we are also seeing Western dealers who are currently using this part of the world as an ATM machine, which cannot be healthy and sustainable and so we will have to see if the market continues to broaden and deepen on its own merits. I think we will have a better idea after Basel in Switzerland as many more artists from the Gulf region are being exhibited than ever before, and the reception will act as a litmus test for the international collecting community".

Finally, however, Gray finishes on a positive note. "The reaction to this booth, and to Sharif and Camnitzer does make me feel that there is a real turn to seriousness and I am thrilled for both of them. We are in discussions right now with the Art Dubai organizers about doing something very special with these two artists next year, and I am honored to be involved with getting them the recognition they surely deserve after these many years of toiling at their vocation with little regard for recognition or commercial success".