

## Art Dubai earns its stripes

Access to new collectors and a solid programme of commissions, talks and events have turned this fair into a fully fledged, paid-up member of the international circuit

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The Saudi gallery Athr said that demand was high at Art Dubai for Ahmed Mater's supersized photographs of the cranes and construction work threatening to overwhelm Islam's holiest site, Mecca. All three editions of the large-scale images *Artificial Light* and *Golden Hour* (above), both 2012, had sold with the final edition of each work priced at \$49,000

The most striking aspect of Art Dubai (20-23 March) is that the Middle Eastern event has become a fully fledged, paid-up member of the international art fair circuit in only six years, notably in the shadow of the global financial crisis which hit the emirate hard. A strong VIP programme, solid public art commissions, educational workshops and an excellent talks programme featuring more than 40 contributors (the Global Art Forum) make the fair a credible hybrid of cultural and commercial concerns.

An impressive array of visitors—from the Tate Modern director Chris Dercon, to the musician Michael Stipe and Catherine Grenier, the associate director of the Centre Pompidou in Paris—duly turned up last week at the lavish Madinat Jumeirah fair venue to pore over works, mainly in the low- to mid-price range, available with 75 galleries.

Art Dubai, now in its seventh edition is, however, often described as a regional fair catering to collectors from the MENASA zone (Middle East, North Africa and South Asia). But under the dynamic director Antonia Carver (formerly a correspondent for *The Art Newspaper*), the client base appears to have broadened. On the geographic spread of galleries, Carver said: “We are roughly one-third from the Middle East, one-third from Europe and one-third from the rest of the world; that’s been the balance for the past two years.”

Significantly, many sales were made to European and American collectors, some of whom had been ferried in on trips organised by 75 museum groups including the Tate in London, the Macro and Maxxi contemporary art museums in Rome and the US-based Centre Pompidou Foundation. By the second day of the fair, Atassi gallery of Damascus had sold two works by the Syrian artist Fadi Yaziji to European collectors (the mixed-media piece *Untitled*, 2012, \$15,000; and a 2013 sculpture, *Cutlery*, \$3,000).

An American collector bought Mohammed Kazem’s light piece, *Directions*, 2006, around \$40,000, from Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai. Lorenzo Fiaschi of Galleria Continua, which has branches in San Gimignano, Beijing and Le Moulin in Boissy-le-Châtel in northern France, said that he had sold most works to “old clients”, including a mirrored diptych by Michelangelo Pistoletto for €350,000.

A bedrock of regional collectors nonetheless still power the fair: the Katara Art Centre in Doha purchased *Deer 1, Kayan Mentarang*, 2012, by the Indonesian artist Kinez Riza for \$5,000 from the Jakarta-based D Gallery while a pair of sculptures by the Emirati artist Hassan Sharif, available with Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, were bought by a Saudi collector (Sharif’s 2012 *Weave 2* sculpture also featured in the off-shoot “Sculpture on the Beach”, an underwhelming exhibition of large-scale works dotted around the nearby Mina A’Salam beach. The works were selected by Chus Martinez, the chief curator at New York’s El Museo del Barrio).

Inviting the Lagos-based curator Bisi Silva to select West Africa-based galleries and institutions for the fair’s curated Marker section was also a canny move on the part of the fair’s organisers, who have turned to an exciting and important emerging market. Nigeria’s most important collectors of modern and contemporary African art—Prince Yemisi Shyllon, Sammy Olagbaju and Sandra Mbanefo Obiako—all attended Art Dubai. By the second day of the fair, the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos, a non-profit space run by Silva, reported “steady” sales (possible shorthand for “slow”) for works at low price points; a vivid C-print by Ndidi Dike, *Lagos Market*, 2010, priced at \$6,000 (edition of three), was unsold.

This influx of African connoisseurs shifts the collecting axis ever so slightly, throwing the spotlight on developing markets in the Southern hemisphere. However, a number of dealers, including Conor Macklin of Grosvenor Vadehra (London/New Delhi), commented on the absence of Indian collectors at the fair (there were three Indian galleries represented this year, including Exhibit 320 of New Delhi).

“Over seven years, we’ve also seen South Asian artists begin to show more with international galleries, often through meetings at Art Dubai (which is the same for Middle Eastern and North African artists too), so actually we have around the same number of artists from India,” Carver said. Works here are, meanwhile, generally more conservative and weighted towards artists from the Menasa.

Macklin stressed that he had seen numerous collectors from Pakistan. “We actually come here for the Pakistani collectors,” he said. By day two, he had sold 13 works by a selection of artists “engaging with miniatures”, including the Indian artist Princess Pea. A trio of Pakistani collectors, as well as some Iranians, had bought works from the gallery, where prices ranged from \$2,000 to \$50,000.

A Saudi collector bought an edition of a photograph from Ahmed Mater’s 2012 series “Desert of Pharan/Adam”, which caused a stir by depicting the rampant redevelopment around Mecca. The Saudi gallery Athr said that demand was high for Mater’s supersized photographs of the cranes and construction work threatening to overwhelm Islam’s holiest site. All three editions of the large-scale images (Artificial Light and Golden Hour, both 2012) had sold with the final edition of each work priced at \$49,000.

The same series is on show in the critically well-received Sharjah Biennial (until 13 May) with several artists at the fair benefitting from the “biennial effect”. Works by Pascale Marthine Tayou are on display at both events, with Galleria Continua noting heightened interest in the Cameroon-born artist whose piece Chalks and Pins O, 2011, priced at €75,000, was snapped up by the Belgian collector Guy Ullens.

Crucially, the Dubai-based dealer Isabelle van den Eynde pointed out that almost half of all sales made were to new collectors. Tapping into new client bases was indeed a priority for most European and US galleries (“otherwise why come all this way?” said an American dealer who preferred to remain anonymous).

The San Francisco dealer Wendi Norris underlined this trend, saying that only new collectors had purchased pieces from her stand, including a Singaporean buyer who acquired Kelly Barrie’s Slow Dance (Enta Omry), 2012, for \$18,000.

“We try and discover new markets every year. We’ve participated twice in Art HK [in Hong Kong] but it didn’t work out for us. I believe Art HK will improve under Art Basel’s management [the first edition launches in May],” said Ozkan Canguven of Istanbul’s Rampa gallery. “But there is more potential here.”



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