

Who are the regional artists exhibiting at Art Basel this year?

Works by regional artists are on show at the Swiss fair. We analyse the pieces, which take death, consumerism and wry absurdity as themes, and aim to shock as well as inspire awe

Oliver Basciano
June 11, 2019

Farah Al Qasimi took her camera to Dragon Mart in Dubai on a day in 2017 to take a series of pictures. The result is a set of sensuous photographs that capture the kitsch glamour of the mall, the largest retail complex for Chinese goods outside China.

In one photograph, hot-pink artificial flowers appear against wallpaper depicting a landscape of palm trees. Three lengths of real bamboo have been left carelessly propped up against the wall, however, breaking any illusion of exotic idyll. Another captures a bank of LED screens just as one displays the word “Pay” and its neighbour, “Me”.

While Al Qasimi’s images are never cruel, there is a wry sense of absurdity to her work. Art Basel might pride itself on being culturally a cut above Dragon Mart, but with work by more than 4,000 artists on show at the fair, brought to Switzerland by 290 galleries, including some in Dubai, it is also a vast meeting place in which local aesthetics and global trends intermingle.



'Copper No 32' by the late Hassan Sharif. Courtesy of the Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde



'Rose 1 tomato' (2018) by Farah Al Qasimi. Courtesy of the artist/ The Third Line

Now in its 15th year, a small but notable coterie of artists from the Gulf will be exhibiting their works over six days. Dubai gallery The Third Line is hosting a solo presentation of Al Qasimi. For her new works, the artist, who resides in New York and Dubai, focuses her lens on Emirati domestic scenes. In a series of lush images, she juxtaposes the aspirational nature of interior design photography with prosaic reality. In an image titled *After Dinner*, the luxuriousness of an ornate, soft, pink velvet sofa, adorned with plump purple cushions, is undercut with the presence of a plastic water bottle and someone resting their socked feet on the seat.

The art is not confined just to Basel's exhibition centres. It spills out into the streets and into the shops of the city. For example, to complement the sculpture Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde will be showing at its booth, the Dubai gallery will showcase a large work by the late Emirati artist Hassan Sharif in one of Basel's bookshops as part of the fair's "Parcours" art trail. Like it did for Al Qasimi, the notion of trade in the UAE also inspired Sharif.



'After Dinner' (2018) by Farah Al Qasimi. Courtesy Farah Al Qasimi and The Third Line

Much of his work, produced over a five-decade career, was made through the assemblage of everyday materials he bought from market stalls and shops in the UAE. His *Objects* series, started in 1982, features everyday, mass-produced items, from trainers and handbags to combs, towels and electrical supplies, woven together. *Copper No 32*, made a year before the artist's death in 2015, is the culmination of this process, featuring an almost human form made out of an intricate tangle of copper wire. It will be installed in Erasmushaus, an antiquarian bookshop in Basel's centre.

How places tell stories interests Saudi Arabian artist Abdunnasser Gharem, too. His piece *The Safe* promises to be one of the most controversial artworks on show at the fair. Taking its cue from the 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, in the Saudi Arabian embassy consulate in Istanbul, Gharem has installed a white padded cell within "Unlimited", a section of Art Basel reserved for large-scale installations or major video presentations, which visitors will be ushered into by a guard.

Undoubtedly of questionable taste, the work is typical of the Saudi Arabian artist (and former lieutenant colonel in the Saudi army), well known for pushing boundaries. Previous works include a large-scale dome-shaped sculpture, one half of which replicated the design of the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah, and the other half an Iranian helmet inscribed with verses from the Quran, as well as paintings, made with ink stamps that allude to the 9/11 attacks in New York (a particularly fraught subject for the artist, who found out two of the attackers were former classmates.)



'Attempts at building a wall', 2018, by Nazgol Ansarinia. Photo by Sebastiano Pellion

Death, albeit of buildings, also haunts Nazgol Ansarinia's work. Her long-running project, *Demolishing Buildings, Buying Waste*, takes its title from a phrase commonly sprayed on the side of low-rise homes in Tehran, offering free demolition services. The resulting rubble is traded and multistorey developments are built in the opened up space. Ansarinia's sculptures, to be shown by Dubai's Green Art Gallery at Liste, Art Basel's sister fair for younger galleries, are the result of a complex series of actions by the Iranian artist.

In 2017, having first recorded its architectural plan, Ansarinia filmed the demolition of one Tehrani building. She then put the measurements into 3D modelling software and simulated the destruction. The rubble replicated by the programme she then had rendered into physical concrete elements, which the artist has used to make the objects on show in Basel. This convoluted process, Ansarinia says, mirrors the constant series of demolition and rebuilding at play in the modern city.

Art Basel opens today and runs until June 16

Updated: June 12, 2019 08:49 AM