

Highlights From Art Basel: 14 Middle Eastern Artists



Photography by Renato Ghiazza

Saba Innab. *Inscribed on Sight*. 2019. Claustra and metal structure. Courtesy of Marfa' Gallery

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From the first-time participation of Beirut's Marfa' Gallery to Saudi artist Abdunasser Gharem's monumental artwork in the Unlimited section, here's a round-up of the Middle Eastern art on show at the 50th edition of Art Basel

Inside Art Basel's Unlimited section, the area for artworks whose size exceed that of the traditional art gallery fair booth, no one could forgo the long lines extending out from Riyadh-based artist Abdunasser Gharem's *The Safe*. At 40-second intervals visitors were guided inside the work's soundproof cell with rubberised walls uncovering a room not unlike a psychiatric ward for violent prisoners.

The expressions of those leaving The Safe told of an uncanny and deeply unsettling experience. Some spectators were even seen crying. Inside are rubber stamps on an autopsy table brimming with hidden messages, some taken from Shakespeare, arranged back-to-front as they would be on a stamp. Visitors can take the stamp and leave a mark on the wall. Inside the cell, tunes from Beethoven play in the background and on the right hand wall is an image of the Saudi Arabian flag, again with messages written in reverse. It's impossible to escape the feelings of oppression and claustrophobia that one experiences in here.



Abdunasser Gharem. The Safe. 2019. Art Basel's Unlimited section. Courtesy of Galerie Nagel Draxler & Galerie Brigitte Schenk

“The way Abdunasser Gharem works with stamps is telling—stamps are symbols for bureaucracy and identity,” says Brigitte Schenk. “The issues he is speaking about in this work are important everywhere but particularly for countries where you have a lot of bars in front of you. And things are finally starting to change in Saudi Arabia!” Staged jointly by Galerie Nagel Draxler and Galerie Brigitte Schenk, it is priced at \$753,000 and has received interest from several institutions.

Elsewhere in the Unlimited section is the work of Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari. Entitled *The End of Love* (2012) and displayed jointly via Thomas Dane Gallery and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, in the piece Zaatari brings together a collection of 48 portraits, including brides and grooms, taken by Hasem el Madani in the 1960s-70s at the Studio Shehrazade in Lebanon. The images signal an important moment of transition in the family lives of those depicted as well as relay the tale of a private image that has now become part of a social archive.



Hassan Sharif. Cardboard and Cloth. 2001. Cardboard, cloth and jute string. Variable dimensions: (as shown: 200 x 180 x 80 cm). Courtesy of the Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

Long-time Art Basel participant since 2007 Andrée Sfeir-Semler could be found in the Gallery section seated amidst a strong showing of works by the late Marwan Kassib Bachi, Anna Boghigian, Akram Zaatari, Mounira Al Solh, Etel Adnan, Marwan Rechmaoui, Walid Raad and Wael Shawky. "The fair has been good so far, we are very happy with the interest in our programme, as well as in the Akram Zaatari presentation at Art Unlimited. Art Basel really draws serious collectors and institutions: we have reservations for museums, and several works were placed in private collections." Sfeir-Semler first participated with a booth in the Statements section and then returned year after year to the Galleries section. She also participated from 1990-2002 with her Hamburg gallery.

The UAE's iconic artist, the late Hassan Sharif (1951 - 2016), was in the spotlight in the Statements section through Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde. The solo presentation featured works by the pioneering artist with a particular focus on his multifaceted practice highlighting his works on canvas and paper, Objects, and Semi-Systems. "The feature sector is devoted to artists of historical importance and Hassan Sharif definitely falls into this category," says founder and director Isabelle van den Eynde. "Hassan is considered to be the father of contemporary art in our region.



*Marwan Rechmaoui. Bougainvillier. 2017. Pastel on paper. 55x75cm.
Courtesy of Sfeir-Semler Gallery*

To my very good surprise people seemed to be aware and familiar with his practice. It's wonderful to speak with collectors who now have a knowledge outside of what is happening in the western region. While we wouldn't consider ourselves to be on the 'periphery,' it seems there is now much more interest in Middle Eastern art." While sales were not disclosed, the gallery noted much interest from institutions and foundations. Prices ranged from \$10,000 to 55,000.

Elsewhere in the Gallery section, works by Baghdad-born California-based Hayv Kahraman could be purchased at New York's Jack Shainman gallery as well as Los Angeles-based Susanne Vielmetter. The latter was selling the works for \$35,000 each. It was impossible to miss the works of Emirati New York-based artist Farah Al Qasimi at Dubai-based The Third Line, also in the Statements sector. The artist has received much international acclaim recently for her use of bold and patterned interiors that combine kitsch with scenes from everyday life. All of her works are shot in the UAE and showcase photographs and wallpaper in vibrant colours, patterns and arrangements, typical of what is found in the UAE. By the second VIP day the gallery had sold several works priced between \$3,000 and \$6,000.



Hassan Sharif. Copper. 2016. Copper tube and copper wire. 155 x 76 x 55 cm. Courtesy of the Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

First-time Art Basel participant Marfa' raised the flag for Beirut in the Features section. The gallery, which opened three and a half years ago, showed *Inscribed on Sight* (2019) by Jordanian-Palestinian Saba Innab. An architectural fragment made in claustra and metal structure, through the work Innab attempts to analyze the fragility of exile, refuge, and the extraterritorial space. The part of the tunnel that she has created relays an archetype of dwelling in the temporary.



Hassan Sharif. The Flying House 32. 2008. Oil on canvas. 150 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

“The work relates back to Palestine which is the point of departure because Saba questions this notion of dwelling in temporariness that is to become permanent – the situation of Palestine today,” says Joumana Joumana Asseily. “It’s this idea of broken architecture that is so delicately holding everything together.”

In the sieged Gaza strip, a tunnel acts as a structure of survival. Yet after it is exposed, it becomes a sign of the colonizer and there is no longer the possibility for movement within it. Beholding the Innab’s work thus becomes a powerful act. Seeing it denies its ability to be unseen so that the act of seeing in turn becomes an act of destroying, for in seeing the fragment and recognizing it as a part of a whole, we accept its destruction.