

UAE's women art collectors to discuss what's ahead for Middle East art

A virtual panel brings together directors from Sharjah Museums Authority, Abu Dhabi Art, Alserkal Avenue and NYUAD



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In the past decade, the Middle East's art scene has evolved to include more museums, events and institutions. It is this growth, as well as what comes next, that a new series of talks by The Art Circle wants to examine.

Founded in 2018 by Barbara Farahnick-Mathonet, who also serves as director, The Art Circle is a non-profit organisation and network of women art collectors in the UAE. The members-only club stages activities throughout the art season, from studio visits to private tours of exhibitions and art collections.

Tac is bringing together four female directors from the UAE's major art organisations for its new series, titled "The New Dynamic of the Middle East Art Scene". Taking part will be Manal Ataya, director-general of Sharjah Museums Authority, Vilma Jurkute, executive director of Alserkal Avenue, Dyala Nusseibeh, director of Abu Dhabi Art, and Maya Allison, chief curator of New York University Abu Dhabi and founding executive director of NYUAD Art Gallery.

Ms Allison is also the curator of the National Pavilion UAE at the Venice Biennale in 2022.



Maya Allison, executive director of NYUAD Art Gallery and chief curator of NYUAD

The talk series will first cover the UAE, with future events dedicated to Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Held in partnership with Menart Fair in Paris, the UAE-focused premiere takes place online on Tuesday, at 8pm UAE time.

During the talk, the directors will discuss their roles and how their institutions and organisations have helped shape the UAE's arts and culture landscape. In the case of Ms Ataya, for example, the Sharjah Museums Authority currently runs 16 museums, which focus on various areas, including modern and contemporary Arab art, Islamic art and history, UAE heritage and maritime history, science, children's learning and archaeology.

“It is not unique to the UAE that there is great attention and investment globally in cultural districts and projects,” Ms Ataya tells *The National*, highlighting the mushrooming of several cultural players in the country.

“However, in the UAE, our arts ecosystem is growing much more rapidly in comparison with others, reaching a level of maturity now with a layering effect, which is needed for sustainable growth.

“In Sharjah, we see a great example of, over decades of work, establishing small and large institutions with government support and consistency with public programmes for all audiences to enjoy cultural life,” she says.

Sharjah’s recent major exhibitions include a [retrospective on Algerian artist Baya Mahieddine](#), an important figure in modern Arab art.

Ms Jurkute, who has been part of the Alserkal organisation since 2012, oversaw the launch of major architectural project Concrete, an Office for Metropolitan Architecture-designed cultural space.

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Manal Ataya, director-general of Sharjah Museums Authority

Over the years, Alserkal Avenue, an arts neighbourhood with contemporary art galleries and spaces in Al Quoz, has transformed into a cultural destination. But it has also become an arts institution, with the creation of the Alserkal Arts Foundation in 2019, which includes artist residencies and commissions programmes.

Bringing an academic and curatorial perspective, Ms Allison has made crucial contributions to UAE art history, particularly in the publication of the book *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1998-2008*, which she edited. In it, she brings together essays and research material that chronicle the development of contemporary art in the UAE, focusing on pioneering artists such as Hassan Sharif, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Mohammed Kazem, Vivek Vilasini, Ebtisam Abdulaziz and more.

Currently, Ms Allison is curating the UAE's pavilion for the Venice Biennale – a solo presentation by Ibrahim, with whom she has worked closely over the years.

Ms Nusseibeh's insights will encompass her time as the director of Abu Dhabi Art, which she has run since 2016. Under Ms Nusseibeh, the fair expanded to more than simply a market event, but also a platform for cultural programming in the UAE.

These changes included "Beyond: Emerging Artists", which focuses on commissioning young practitioners in the UAE to showcase their work during the fair, plus "Beyond: Artists Commissions", which invites international and regional artists to install ambitious projects that respond to the history and landscape of heritage sites in Al Ain.

Under Ms Nusseibeh's guidance, Abu Dhabi Art has also staged year-round exhibitions in the UAE and abroad, including a new show set to open at London's Cromwell Place in June, featuring Emirati artists Hind Mezaina, Afra Al Dhaheri and Afra Al Suwaidi. The works were originally presented at Manarat Al Saadiyat as part of Abu Dhabi Art 2020.