

arab news

ART & CULTURE

Art Dubai paints picture of diverse culture

SAFFIYA ANSARI | **Published** — Thursday 16 March 2017



Diversity is a buzzword on the cultural scene this year. Take the fact that “Moonlight” nabbed top prize at the recent Oscars, or that the ongoing Art Dubai show boasts 93 galleries from a record-breaking 43 countries.

The region’s largest art show found its home in Dubai 11 years ago, but is growing under the fresh leadership of Myrna Ayad.

The fair director tells Arab News that, after less than a year in the job, she is learning something new every day.

“One thing that has surprised me most has been how you really need 360 days of the year, if not more, to deliver a five-day event,” she said.

With more than 500 artists representing 66 nationalities, the fair has something for everyone — and, given it runs until Saturday evening, it is not too late to catch it.

Algeria, Peru and Uruguay are represented for the first time at the annual fair, with the Algiers-based Al Marhoon Gallery showcasing the work of three North African artists, including Algerian Sadek Rahim.

Rahim uses marble, concrete, shoe polish and rosewater to embellish and imprint on traditional Levantine rugs in artistic carpet work that drew onlookers.

There is also a stellar presence of UAE-based galleries, indicating the dynamic growth of the local arts scene.

Dubai-based The Third Line gallery is showing off the work of award-winning artist Rana Begum.

Born in Bangladesh in 1977, Begum now lives and works in London producing tightly-controlled compositions of squares and triangles in strong, sometimes neon, colors.

“She continuously investigates materials and shapes, which allows her to produce a visual experience,” gallery representative Josephine Mees told Arab News.

“The sculptural objects are given life and are activated by interactions with light.”

Flying the flag for Saudi Arabia is the Jeddah-based Athr Gallery, the only Saudi gallery to take part in the Contemporary section of Art Dubai, the bigger of the two main areas.

The gallery was founded with the intention of promoting cultural dialogue between Saudi Arabia and the rest of the world and is showcasing the work of 12 artists including Kuwaiti Monira Al-Qadiri, whose otherworldly work drew interest.

“She was influenced by her education and upbringing in Japan, which is why you can see a sci-fi, anime influence in her work,” a gallery representative told Arab News.

Al-Qadiri’s work covers an entire wall of the gallery booth, which has been painted purple and is punctured by a line of protruding, alien-like objects.

“These are 3-D printings of drill bits. The artist comes from Kuwait which is obviously an oil-dependent country; before that it was a pearl dependent country so she painted the drill bits in iridescent shades which have the same color scope as pearls, and is really asking the question, when people look back 300 years from now what will they think these are?”

Three masters

Despite the dizzying array of international art on show, pushing diversity is not the only thing on Ayad’s agenda — the fair director also emphasizes the importance of remembering pioneering artists in the Middle East.

“Art Dubai pays tribute to three masters this year: our film program airs the movies of Abbas Kiarostami, the deceased Iranian film maker; and we’ve got a tribute to Saloua Raouda Choucair, the Lebanese modernist who passed away recently; and we’ve got a tribute to Hassan Sharif, the Emirati conceptual artist.”

The Dubai-based Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde pays homage to Sharif — who died in September 2016 and has shown work in New York’s prestigious Guggenheim Museum — by showcasing a seminal work which was completed by the artist specially for Art Dubai before his death.

Titled “Cotton Rope,” the impressive piece forces viewers to look up toward the ceiling from where a thick bunch of twisted steel-enforced cotton ropes hang, tumbling down to the floor.

New performances

Besides his own haunting work, Sharif will also be remembered through the medium of dance in a specially commissioned series which, for the first time in Art Dubai’s history, will exclusively feature performance-based art.

“We’ve got a lot of new things which we are initiating this year, among them for the first time we are committing our commissions to performance only so as you are walking through our halls, your art-fair experience will be enhanced by the punctuation of a performance,” Ayad told Arab News.

A select group of international artists were asked to create unique site-specific acts, including Lana Fahmi whose dance piece titled “What Modernity?” focuses on the shift from traditional to modern dancing in the Arab world.

“Dancers combine all forms of art — they act, they sing, they paint with their bodies and they sculpt,” Fahmi told Arab News, adding that she is “amazed by the body’s abilities and powers... the shapes, sounds and stories you can tell.”

From dancing to dinner, visitors can also expect a surreal food-based experience at Art Dubai this year.

Beirut-based art collective Atfal Ahdath wowed audiences with “The Room: Cooking Liberty,” a visual and gastronomic installation which takes cues from pioneering Spanish artist Salvador Dali’s cookbook “Les Dinners de Gala.”

Guests enter an atmospheric windowless room, with rich crimson velvet curtains and dark ferns hanging from a low ceiling. A self-playing piano sets the scene while candlelight glints of the elaborate place settings. The dining room is a sumptuous feast for the eyes, but one that sits on the knife-edge between glamor and the macabre.

Art Dubai 2017 is a cacophony of sights and sounds, from hushed and sober ropes hanging silently from a ceiling to in-your-face slaps of paint on a canvas, there is truly something for everyone.