

Fair Report: Gulf Art Fair

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DUBAI, United Arab Emirates—Last weekend, the **Dubai International Financial Centre** sponsored the much-anticipated **Gulf Art Fair**, the first international contemporary art fair held in the Middle East. It opened with a gala party on March 7 at the Madinat Jumeirah resort, showing off a small but well-presented cadre of some 38 international dealers.

The DIFC has grand and publicly stated ambitions to make the Gulf Art Fair one of the top five contemporary international art fairs within three years and establish Dubai as the most important center for art commerce in Asia.

That, of course, remains to be seen, but first impressions from both exhibitors and a decidedly international cast of wealthy attendees painted a most upbeat picture.

And kudos also were extended to London-based organizer **John Martin** for pulling off a clever alternative to the clogged U.K. and European fair circuit.

It was obvious from the first go-round that exhibitors were a bit unsure about what to bring, judging from the wide and somewhat predictable range of offerings, with more **Andy Warhol** dollar-sign works in evidence than just about anything else.

Milan's **Galleria Tega** had almost every stripe of modern and contemporary art, from late **Giorgio de Chirico** and **Lucio Fontana** to a brilliant **Christo** work on paper from 1980, *The Mastaba of Abu Dhabi*, a proposal for stacking 390,500 barrels of oil in a pyramid shape and then painting it a bright orange color.

“It’s so difficult to understand what they love,” said one perplexed exhibitor who preferred anonymity, though he chuckled over his diverse offerings, including a \$90,000 Warhol dollar-sign work on paper, framed by the dealer’s wife in red glitter patina.

“It’s a good start,” chimed London’s **Ben Brown**, who almost instantly sold a medium-size **Tony Bevan** painting, for around £20,000, to an Italian couple dressed in beach attire. “They had never heard of the artist and just fell in love with the picture,” he said. Since he knew nothing about the beach-ready buyers, Brown asked for a reference and a dealer colleague was able to vouch for the walk-in buyers.

Brown also sold a large-scale **Candida Hofer** photograph from her “Munich Opera” series to a Korean collector for an undisclosed price and quickly replaced it with another Hofer.

The stand-sharing duo of New Delhi’s **Nature Morte** and New York’s **Bose Pacia** rang up a number of early sales, including a stunning group of 12 prints, titled *Jihad Pop*, by emerging artist **Seher Shah**, who was born in Pakistan, trained as an architect at the Rhode Island School of Design and now lives in New York City. It was priced at \$9,000.

They also sold a quartet of watercolor and gouache abstract works, titled *Snooze*, by **Manisha Parekh**, for \$18,000.

As ArtInfo and other news outlets reported last week, exhibitors were careful in selecting the works they brought to Dubai—and obviously, no nudes were in evidence here.

“You had to send pictures to the organizers of everything you were going to bring in order to pass the censors,” said Nature Morte’s **Peter Nagy**. “They didn’t say anything about what we couldn’t bring, but we thought of things more Islamic. We went more for modestly scaled things and abstract things. We don’t know how adventurous or sophisticated the taste is,” summed up Nagy, “but we’re dancing as fast as we can.”

While many of the artworks on display were priced in the \$10,000-to-\$200,000 range, there was a smattering of million-dollar offerings, including a major **Keith Haring** tarp painting, *Untitled (January 1983)*, at New York’s **Max Lang Gallery** for \$1.5 million and a late **Jean-Michel Basquiat** canvas from 1987, *Untitled (Mask)*, for \$1.2 million.

Lang managed to sell a trio of sculptures, including a **Bernar Venet** steel abstraction from 2003, for \$38,000, an editioned, 1980s **Tom Wesselmann** steel-cut still-life, for \$35,000, and a lifetime cast of Haring’s *Curling Dog*, for roughly \$150,000. The Venet sold to a young Dubai couple in the early throes of building a contemporary collection.

One of the biggest surprises, though, was literally parked at **Meg Maggio’s Pekin Fine Arts**, a Beijing gallery specializing in contemporary Chinese painting. It was **Charles Saatchi’s** very own and decidedly unique Mini-Cooper, painted in signature colored dots by **Damien Hirst** and priced at around \$2 million, according to gallery friend **Irene Hochman**.

“We just brought it over to see what the interest is,” said Hochman, known as an active buying scout for Saatchi.

Apart from the Mini-Cooper, Pekin's booth was devoted to a solo display of strong abstract works by Chinese artist **Aniwar**.

But in terms of newborn art, one of the most dynamic works viewed was at London's **Albion Gallery**, showing brand-new video work by the French Algerian artist **Kader Attia**. The startling black-and-white images represented a wall of pristinely stacked sugar cubes drenched in oil—not the olive or peanut type, but just good old crude.

The gallery was waiting for Attia to arrive so they could price the fresh-out-of-the-crate work.