



ABU DHABI ART THE COMMERCIAL AS CULTURAL

- RAJESH PUNJ

The eleventh edition of Abu Dhabi's Art Fair, branded in black-and-white as 'Abu Dhabi Art' at pivotal points across the port city, intends, for the absence of 'Fair' from its title, to concentrate on the cultural – as was explained at the inaugural press conference - with mention of geographies and agendas that are cerebral rather than sales-driven. 'Art Fair' or otherwise, Abu Dhabi Art, under the stewardship of Dyala Nusseibeh and lead curator Omar Kholeif, both of whom are in their third year, appears intent on replacing one 'c' word for another - the 'commercial' for the 'curatorial' - in order, as Nusseibeh explains, it can better embrace the social and cultural currency of contemporary art, that turns sales into generative seeds, for the country's own creative canon.

Inaugurated in the international art scene in 2007, at a time when the value of art was burgeoning, and gallerists were able and interested in new markets, the two art fairs, Art Dubai and Abu Dhabi Art, were

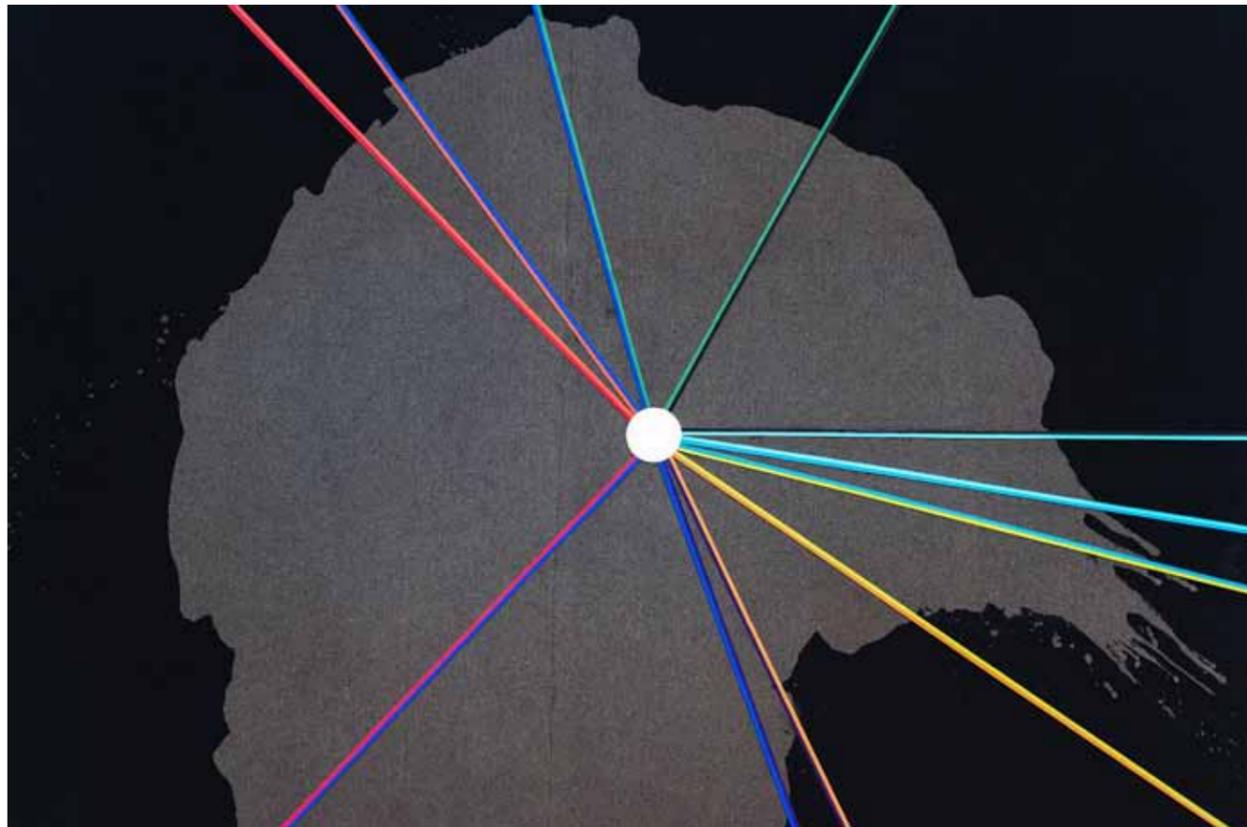
[^] Ranbir Kaleka, *Conference of Birds and Beasts*, 2010, Duratrans print, mounted on light film, 60.96 x 152.4 cms, Image Courtesy: Ranbir Kaleka and Vadehra Art Gallery

originally intended to entice Emiratis into buying into the art world. Prompted by the country's appetite for everything modern, to introduce the UAE to the art world and vice versa. In the early editions showcasing works from Europe and America in the Middle East, to spearhead its cultural renaissance. Acknowledged or ignored, the contemporary relics of Ellsworth Kelly and Cy Twombly, among them, were always intended to introduce art to the country's audiences, for it to go on to create a market for its own artists.

Unlike Art Dubai, which has in twelve years established itself as a cross-continental convergence of Southeast Asian, African, Latin American and Australian interests, under the umbrella of the Middle East, Abu Dhabi's art affair appears more intimate, and in many ways still maturing. Having already shed several skins, in an attempt to continue to evolve from its commercial endeavour as Art Paris, Abu Dhabi, with its links to Paris and the Louvre, into something more homegrown - as is a measure of how far the country has come culturally. Rationalised by Nusseibeh as an event that '(we have)

a wider mandate' than other art fairs, if we were to compare, for its long-standing relationship with the Department of Culture and Tourism in the UAE, as 'not just a commercial enterprise, but actively contributing to and supporting the local art ecosystem.' Which is key to understanding the landscape of this year's art fair, as it successfully spreads out across the city, as a collaboration between various institutions. All of whom act as an extra repository for the many manifestations of works intended to emphasize their creative calibre. And to talk of 'ecosystems' as cultural energy is to not see everything as entirely static, of artworks as objects, but of art as an experience, in focus on a series of stages. Connecting, as Nusseibeh sees it 'the local with the global.'

Adding that "Globally I think a lot of art fairs have now to think not only about how to attract collectors, but of how to keep them, and one of the ways is having very serious programming and exhibition content. So when collectors visit, they are not just going to see works in a gallery format, they are also able to see artworks that are part of an exhibition." Admitting, "I



think we are probably doing it far more intensely than a lot of fairs, because, as I said, we work closely with the department of culture and tourism, and so whilst a lot of fairs are commercial enterprises, that have to make money for the people running them. We can extend to our cultural interests," which Nusseibeh says, "allows for the opportunity to collaborate with other institutions and partners." "Our exhibitions can last for three months, and that they are not just pop-up events. And the fair's programming is year-round, not a one-off event and we disappear." "The artists we commission are already with a gallery at Abu Dhabi Art, and the exhibitions will be with curators and artists who are connected by the exhibiting galleries. For example, Jérôme's (Sans) section is intended as an exhibition, in collaboration with galleries that are participating are part of the fair, and their works are for sale."

Nusseibeh insisted that their attention to the curatorial, for this and previous fairs, tied to the commercial and that without it being recognised as a makeshift marketplace, nothing of the cultural could exist. So all of the non-for-profit interests of an institution or organisation, to curate and care to inform its audience's of its artworks, are here integral to the business of buying - to introduce context. Which Nusseibeh addresses as being about "acknowledging that it is circular, that gallerists are at the heart of a lot of the programmes, and not independent of it. And as with the Venice Biennale, the galleries are

^ Xu Qu, *The Antarctica*, 2016, Acrylic and Decolouriser on canvas, 250 x 200 cms, Image Courtesy: Almine Rech

often the ones commissioning the artworks in it." Arguing that, "I think it is a false divide to talk of the commercial and the curatorial. We rely on the art dealers who support the artists, as much as the curators who find the works and decide to exhibit them. They are all connected." "It is that idea about how the audience interacts with the fair, of what is our model, and how does it serve the people coming to it?" "Galleries are doing many more art fairs, and art fairs in turn, have a responsibility to put on really good shows for the galleries." And of "Integrating art into public spaces." This in visionary terms edifies the art fair as more than a commercial exercise.

The strength of this year's fair includes Faig Ahmed's morphed prayer mats exhibited at Sapar Contemporary, that dissolve as you look at them; as the traditional and contemporary mutate into a visual catastrophe. Others in the carpet series have as there design a pixelated pattern colliding head-on with more traditional detail, as another is rewardingly ruined by a shower of black oil almost, that drips down over the decorated rug underneath, destroying it of all its detail. Ahmed's works, for its wit and interventionist wonder, easily explore narratives of social and religious interests. That is as much about the vibrant vandalising of traditions, as it is the liberty to allow for anything to happen.

Then there are the delicate drawings in pen and watercolour at Leehwaik Gallery, by South Korean artist Yeongseok Cha, who renders quite remarkably the outline birds of prey, as these technicoloured symbols of the animal world as visual icons. Manjunath Kamath's Gallery Espace works, that emerges as these ruinous relics from the ancient and modern world combine. And Pourn Jinchi's coloured tile works, at Third Line Gallery, that for their incomprehensible configurations, appear as these unsolved puzzles, of brightly coloured symbols on correctly cut shapes; that is as interesting to the eye as they are intentionally other.

Outside of the maze of makeshift spaces, is an exhibition entitled 'East is East', of Moroccan born-Paris based photographer Mous Lamrabet. With inspired works that reflect off of one another as a fusion of fashion, photography, and cultural fanaticism, and whose appetite for the muddling by manoeuvring of social and cultural ideas appears to be the basis of a visual assault on the Goliath-like grandeur of the United States and Europe. Adopted by western brands as avant-garde, Lamrabet is committed to introducing his audience to an alternative vision of the world grounded in Morocco and the Middle East. Introducing labels, 'Gucci', 'Nike', 'McDonald's', 'Louis Vuitton', to the alienness of his images, his photographs take these conglomerates into new terrorises, as though conquering the world all over again. And it begs the question as to what succeeded within the work if the logos were removed entirely?

Of the international artists invited to exhibit Argentine Leandro Erlich and musician and artist Oliver Beer's works, extend the art fair into a positive appraisal of the arts as they are now. That fair director Dyala Nusseibeh enthuses about, for their turning the city's historical sites into stages for contemporary art. Beer's art involves several animations situated at the Al Ain and Al Qasr sites, hours outside of Abu Dhabi. The works *Film Still* from *Reanimation Paintings*, 2019 based on the films *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, 1926, and *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*, 1982 are Beer's collaborative involvement with a whole host of school-children, who were given the task of drawing in coloured crayon and pastel, over traceable images of longstanding cultural iconography. Including 'Aladdin' and 'Prince Achmed' (as interpreted over several decades by cartoonists and film-makers alike). Also, of the participating children being invited to draw over existing works of art from the Louvre's collection. Strikingly a portrait of George Washington, the first president of America, painted in the 18th century by Gilbert Stuart, is in the hands of Beer's choice children, feverishly reproduced as a swell of unsolicited colours and characteristics, that the artist cleverly sandwiches together, to create an impressive animation of everyone's energies, that appear to erupt over their drawings like unrecognisable graffiti tags.

Played into the enclosed corridors and crevasses of the Al Jahili Fort, Beer's short films give the audience ample opportunity to wander through the heart of this 19th century clay castle. As his series of illuminations fire colours out into the building's ancient atmosphere like crackers fired into the darkness. Animations that the artist explains as being about "the images we make, the stories we tell and the songs we sing, that are in a constant state of flux and exchange; but certain ideas and tropes seem to recur across civilisations, and are constantly borrowed, transformed and subverted. Our cultures are rapidly shifting... The thousands of individuals who have contributed to the *Reanimation Paintings* are each essential to the work. Their efforts become subconsciously perceptible within the whole, absorbed into a flickering communal creative work." And what is rewarding of his works is of this involving interpretation of a new generation of children, who are invited to imprint their own identity over these cartoons, that speaks for the many thousands who saw these animations days and decades before. And by actively allowing his young audience to intervene, where the films have essentially only ever intended to be watched, Beer introduces as essential a child's initial sensations of seeing something new.

Other works in the series include the reanimation of French painter Jean-Auguste Ingres' *Don Pedro of Toledo Kissing Henry IV's Sword*, 1814 in which the faces of the noble figures are reduced by the children to coloured paint bombs that remarkably still manage

to refer in shape and sentiment to the encounter between Ambassador and King. Beer's version, illuminated and hurriedly animated, accompanied by a profound and perfected soundtrack, runs riot for the incredible strength and unsolicited innocence of children, whose ability to understand and reinvent reality is something that Beer recognises. Making these works in-situ, magical.

Leandro Erlich's cloud capture is a work that plays tricks with our perception of reality, and of how we come to experience it. The Heart of Water, 2019 as an installation is a work that beautifully captures, 'museumises', for want of a better word, the earthly and very essential. Capturing a cloud, as Erlich has us believe, is like holding the sea still for several minutes, or inviting the sun to illuminate the planet in its entirety for days at a time. As simple as it is, Erlich's work draws attention to the anatomy of the atmosphere. His remarkable feat is to have convinced us of captured and encased a cloud, by offering a voyeurist vision of the ephemeral. That refers in human terms to the will and want of acquiring everything as one's own, by ostracising it of its original surroundings to claim it as a commodity. A glass-plated metaphor, The Heart of Water holds everything in and outside of the cabinet static for a moment, proving poignant when considering the earth's critical condition.

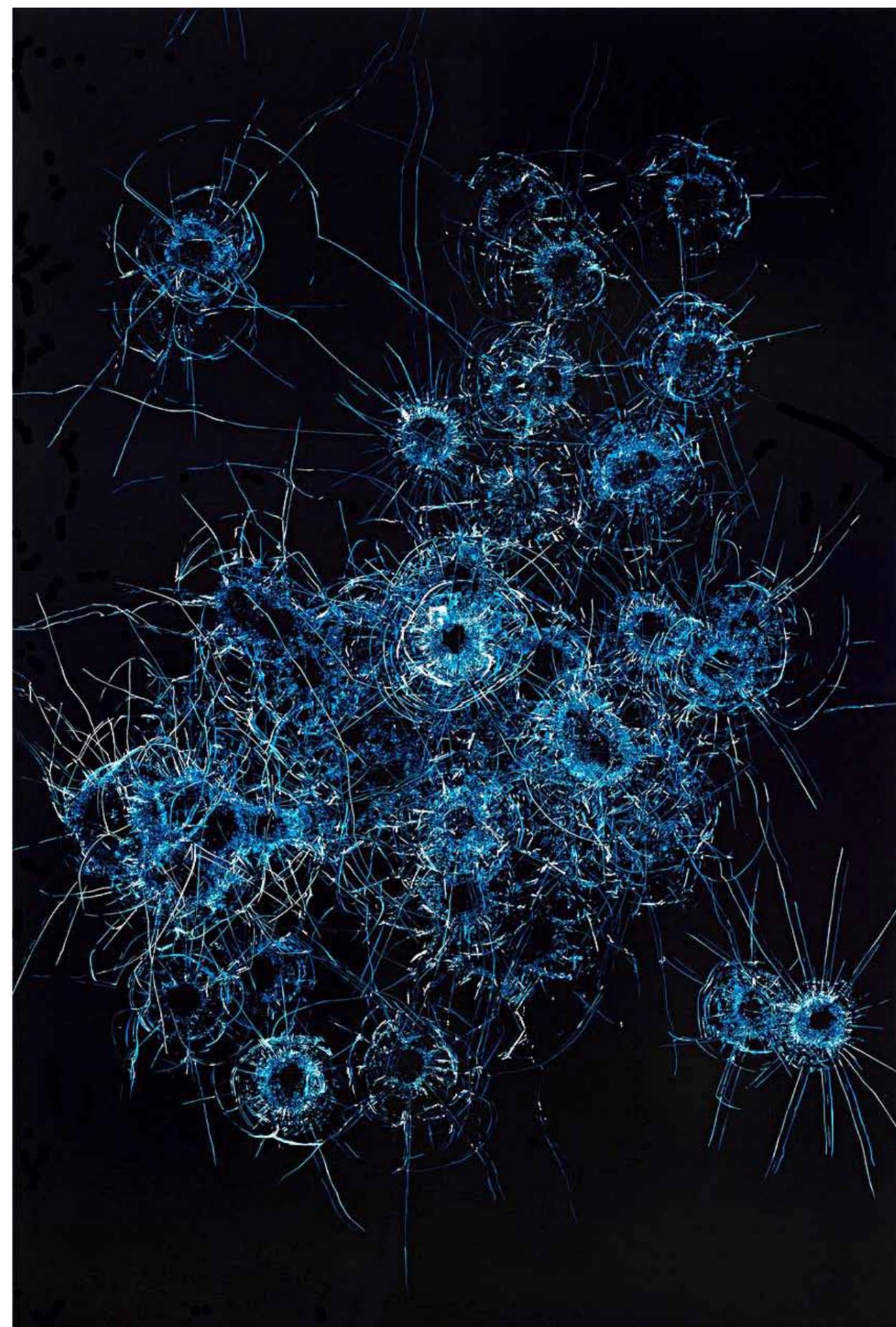
Which Erlich explains as being about an "installation that draws on the deep history of the region while inscribing the precision of modernity within its stone walls. The cloud at its centre is a mystery, both easy to see and impossible to touch. Clouds carry with them the suggestion of the ineffable and immaterial, a reminder of the sacred beyond the particularities of faith and time." For their novelty, Erlich's encased cloud work recalls the photographs of Dutch artist Berndnaut Smilde, who introduces clouds to a room as these remarkable motifs of the natural world entering the interior space that Erlich contains even further in his cabinets of curiosity.

Then there is the work of a select trio of women artists (curated into the programme by the collaborative Tehrani artists Ramin Haerizadeh and Rokni Haerizadeh, with US-born and Dubai based Hasam Rahmanian), whose critical and cultural inventiveness across disciplines draws attention to the elemental interests of a new generation of artists. Specifically, Ayesha Hadbir, whose pigment prints appear as these theatrical sets, that have within them the objects that inhabit our interior lives, repositioned at the ocean's edge. Exposed to the elements, Hadbir's work is her examination of the significance of the natural world over our preoccupation with the material and manmade. Along-side Rawdha Al Ketbi, whose work is an arresting attempt at understanding a landscape for its human presence. Interested in the slow corrosion of materials and matter, willing everything

back to life. Together with Shaikha Al Ketbi, who sees the desert as the sand-duned set for her introducing everyday objects to the remotest of locations. Adding material objects to the unchallenged environment, the artist appears to want to punctuate the landscape with makeshift fossils that facilitate a very different understanding of the inhospitable earth.

Artists whose interests are further addressed in one corner of the curated element of the art fair, by curator and advisor Paolo Colombo, drawing attention to the archaeological and anthropological. To that which underpins the country, its culture and its accumulative interests for the future. As this year's Gateway project, 'Fragments, Yesterday and Today', Colombo introduces a canon of contemporary works, as critical to social history. Including a haunting work by Russian American husband and wife conceptual artists Ilya and Emilia Kabakov The Eminent Direction of Thoughts, 2017 that for its enclosed space and interrogatory light-blub, manages to conjure an atmosphere of incredible isolation, as much as one of religious calling. Beyond the opening is what appears to be an immovable wooden chair, rooted by a spectrum of sentiments and sensations, that has attached to it coloured thread, the yarn rising to the roof of this temporary setting, like thoughts reaching for the sky - with the work drawing attention to the artists' interest in the individual. Again just as with the artists included in the Beyond exhibition, the Kabakovs see the object and its immediate environment as residual evidence of lives lived, and of the pervading presence of humanity beyond there being there.

> Zhao Zhao,
Constellations No. 14, 2015, Oil on canvas, 300 x 200 cms,
Image Courtesy: The Artist and Chambers Fine Art Gallery





^ Bharti Kher, *Untitled*, 2019, *Bindis on mirror*, 182.9 cms dia
Image Courtesy: The artist and Nature Morte

> *Sapar Contemporary Coherency*, Faig Ahmed, 2016.
Image Courtesy: Faig Ahmed Studio

Then there are the two continents curated into the fair, India and China, which for the strength of the works, emphasises how the once emerging had become the mainstream, and a while since such country codes mattered. As a barometer of what is current to India, curator and gallerist Ashwin Thadani invited a handful of interested Indian gallerists, to show off their leading artists. Including Bharti Kher at Nature Morte, Ranbir Kaleka at Vadehra Gallery. Whose Birds and Beasts works also adorn the minibuses that are attended to ship the VIPs' from dinner party to drinks. And in spite of all of India's aesthetic assets, it is the inclusion of the Indian gallerists Jhaveri Contemporary, to another curated element of the fair, Focus, Drawing, Tracing, Mapping, that offers more rewarding evidence of a longer-lasting legacy, of what translates across countries, in the form of beautiful portraits of Lahore based artist and academic Ali Kazim. Effortlessly capturing in

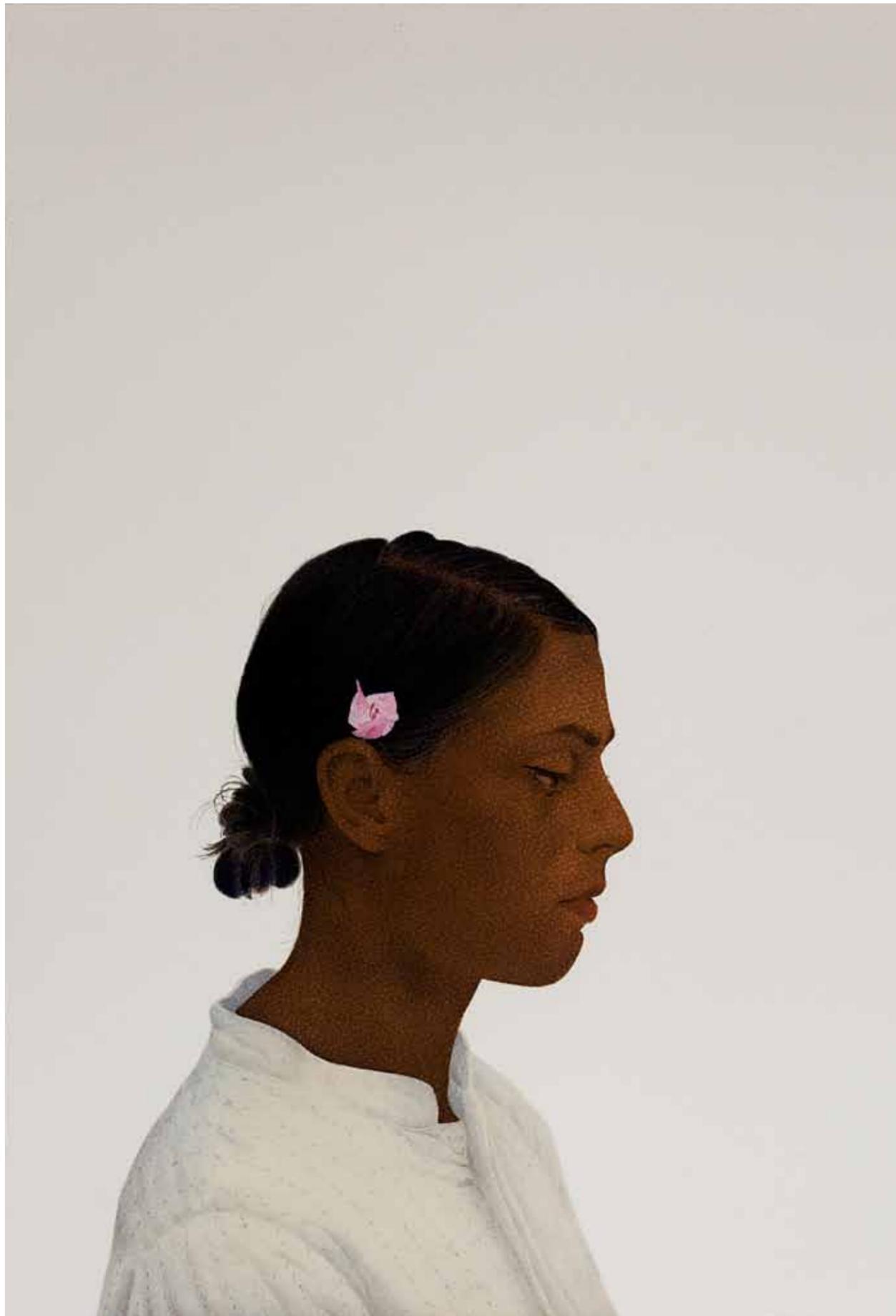


watercolours the faces of individuals, who for their subdued expressions, appear as specimens of our times. The sitter's isolation is our isolation, and the white silence that surrounds them spreads over the canvas like an antidote to the fair's commotion. China, under the stewardship of French curator and Chinese specialist Jérôme Sans, sees art as about the essential. Capturing into the opening space a new order, from a country at the forefront of everything of modern life. Gallerists included are Almine Rech with the geographic works of Xu Qu. The gold-coloured bullet holes of Zhao Zhao at Chambers Fine Art Gallery, the alien-like aluminium sculptures of Liu Wei, courtesy of New York gallerist Lehmann Maupin, and the cultural maps of Qiu Zhijie, Hanart TZ Gallery. Whose ink and paper works mirror the majesty of the early maps of the 16th and 17th century.

Drawn under the same theme, there is an obvious politics to everything of India and China, as the visual becomes the vocal, and generations of emerging and more established artists understand themselves as technologically interlinked. Seeing that one's own

interests are overlapped by another's ambition, the individual becomes the collective, for all the likes in the world. And art, aesthetics, attitude and one's agenda, homogenise into a common calling. Where 'love' and 'liberty', are among the universal watchwords for everyone wanting to explain and express themselves. Thus the expanded world, with India and China included, governed by a greater commonality, is reassuringly evident in so many of the artworks in Abu Dhabi - paintings and sculptures alike. Just as the classification of art by countries, as a basis for the geography of this year's fair, appears less relevant. Which by walking the length of the fair dissolves into a configuration of colours and forms, objects and ideas, which effectively eliminate such categories from one's mind.

Granted countries create their own commentary, championing conceptualism over consumerism, raw materials against the mass-produced. But such events have a duty to propose an alternative vision of the world other than the well worn one on the map, that could well be social media led, or gallery decided



^ Manjunath Kamath, *Unfolding Moon*, 2019, Painted terracotta, 198.12 cms dia, Image Courtesy: The artist and Gallery Espace

< Ali Kazim, *Untitled*, 2019, Watercolor pigments on paper, 51.5 x 40 cms, Image Courtesy: The artist Jhaveri Contemporary

- gallerists having always successfully compressed continents and cultures into their individual booths. Ultimately to curate has to be about an intention to invent, and not of categorising identities and ideas into spaces. As curator Omar Kholeif propositions, "Our focus was we begin in the Middle-East, and move out into a global south conversation. So it is really to do with thinking about our world and the rest of the world, and our perspective as opposed to looking at a purely western gaze. When we still have audiences and collectors looking to western art as an archetypal standard by which to measure what they are looking at when they see works from the Arab World, or India and Pakistan. So I think it is important we create a platform for new conversations to happen." The exchange and overlap of interests and artworks are, as Kholeif would want, where such cultural contaminations happen if art is to function beyond its commercial value. Thus the display in parts merits more imagination.

Kholeif sees his involvement as being about offering the fair's audiences their own culture, as primary and not as a replacement for a western canon. Citing how he has "Been working on Abu Dhabi Art for three years, three 'focus' editions, which began with the region, wanting to tackle that and let's pull out the icons, and then considering form or practice, and using that to think more expansively about what are

our artists making now - and if I were to summarise what I have done beyond 'focus', is to try and traverse these boundaries between the idea that we only make one particular kind of art here, calligraphic art. That there is a real contemporaneity and desire to engage with broader discourses of what is happening not only in art but across global topics. Artists are using a variety of materials and mediums to do that, and for me, it is a very exciting time to showcase here in the UAE." And that, "As a curator, I think it is important for galleries that people here acquire works of this country, whether they are important collectors, philanthropists or museums, very much because we need to keep this archive and preserve it -it cannot just be left in storage, it has to be seen. Ultimately I want these artists to be known, and to be recognised."

Insisting that, "everything has to change because art is the portal to the future, and to how we see the world. Which begs the question, do we need to be importing a culture, when we have one on our doorstep, or do we need to finesse those relationships more, and have them intertwined and much more incongruous?" Culture has, he says, to be "magnificently interwoven, as opposed to this is that and this is that." Thus the intention to compartmentalise art by country and continent inevitably creates an attractive sub-plot to the overall experience, but when art and technology have dealt so effectively with classification, then it might merit our following suit.

That interplay between common ideas and cultural specificity is positively present at Warehouse 421, where there is an initial exhibition of the works of Syrian architect and artist Talin Hazbar, who has drawn attention to the elegance and architectural excellency of the 'bah-rah' or water feature, in public spaces, palaces and private homes across the Middle East and Asia. And of how such social structures have come to influence human behaviour, as the places of intimacy and idle gossip. That is here built as these independent entities, that stand within the gallery setting as vessels invigorated by a steady stream of running water, and for their sound invigorate one's imagination of the impressive force of nature, as calming as it can be calamitous.

Hazbar explains the work as an opportunity "to explore Syria's social, historical and cultural identity" not as she says, "from the writings of the time, but the object that was commonplace in the Syrian home." Seeing a country's culture as decided as much the energy and industry, of its utilitarian and architectural objects. Which as water-works invite us to comprehend the historical significance of the fountain as a feature of gardens that would extend out beyond the home, as an idyllic contrast to the harshest of environments. As was evident with the Persians in the Middle East, the Mughals in South Asia, and the pharaohs in Egypt. That Hazbar sees as an aesthetic appraisal of how the ordering or

ornamentation of the elements was as much to do with religious-like respect for the natural world, as it was an attempt to cease control of it.

In an adjoining space, divided up into a maze of emerging artists' works, there is a rewarding exhibition of the Salama bint Hamdan Emerging Artists Fellowship or SEAF. Artists enlisted to the country's community programme, whose inventiveness is admirable. Notable are Latifa Saeed's steel, glass and waterworks that appear like creative catastrophes, with glass melted over and into rusted steel rods. These for their material dynamism and arresting damage are very promising. Then Shamsa Al Dhaheri's 'animalesque' wrapped chandelier that sees her sculpture as a removed, remote object. That for the material and manner of its camouflaging is visually very interesting. As though in the act of wrapping it entirely, Al Dhaheri sees luxury as easily removed from reality, as much as it is the city's identity. Works that rightly address a whole host of experiences and ideas, social and cultural - that suggests there is much more to come from their agents as artists.

The routine of an art fair, of commercial galleries compacted as open closets of one's commodities, is here as well, but beyond that - with its concentration on curating with 'New Horizons India and China Today', the 'Drawings, Mapping and Tracing' inspired works, Mous Lamrabat's solo exhibition, 'Gateway, Yesterday and Today', and associated exhibitions at the Al Ain and Al Qasr sites, together with what is on offer at Warehouse 421, and the Cultural Foundation - Abu Dhabi Art appears destined to metamorphose from art fair into an affair of social and cultural standing. That for its devotion to its cultural landscape and location, against its commercial obligations, and dedication to its interests in the UAE, should wish away everything being under one roof, for a more expanded survey of events that has the involvement of everyone for generations to come.

> Abu Dhabi Art Fair display view

