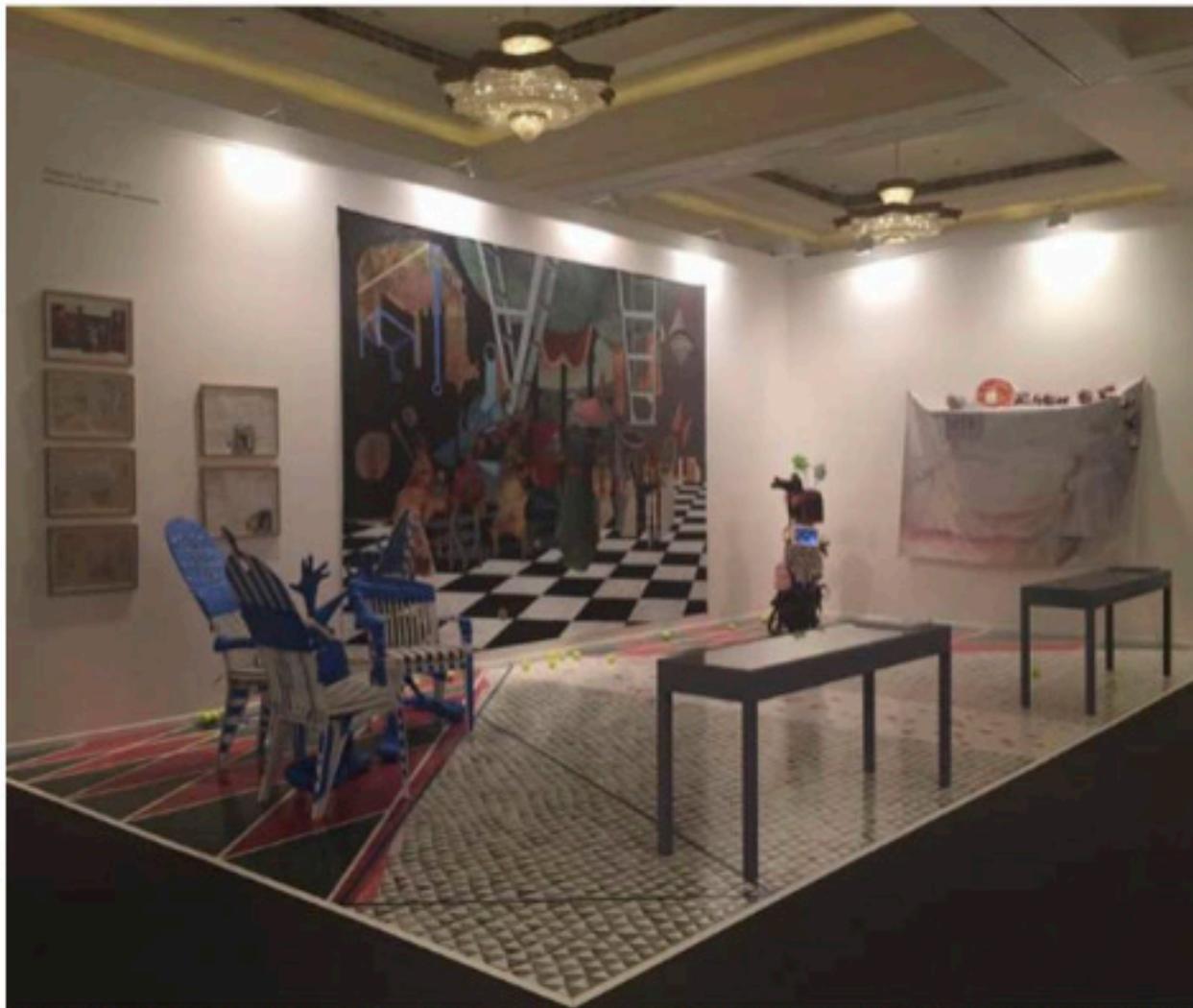


Art Dubai grows wise in a maturing market

Bold installations sell to ideas-driven regional collectors

By Kevin Jones. Web only

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Dubai's Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde showed an exuberant installation by the Iranian trio Rokni and Ramin Haerizadeh, and Hesam Rahmanian

As Art Dubai closed the doors of its ninth edition on 21 March, both collectors and galleries agreed that the fair's learning curve was paying off. Having grown to include 92 Modern and contemporary galleries from 40 countries, this year's fair seemed both thoughtful and confident, with less

glitz and more substance, as galleries responded to a steadily maturing regional market.

Gone were the awkward pieces that second-guessed the collector or ignored the more “worldly” nature of society in the wider region. A few booths looked more suited to Design Days, Art Dubai’s design-focused sister fair, but most galleries seemed to be addressing a sophisticated collector, interested in ideas.

The increased number of solo booths and bold installations, generally considered commercially risky, was another sign of a confident fair and the maturing market. The Paris- and Brussels-based Galerie Daniel Templon presented a solo booth of works by the Indian artist Jitish Kallat, a nod to his role as curator of the second Kochi-Muziris Biennale. Similarly, Dubai’s Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde showed an exuberant installation by the Iranian trio Rokni and Ramin Haerizadeh, and Hesam Rahmanian, the star of which was a large-scale painting, *Madame Tussauds II*, 2015. This work sold to a Saudi-based collector on the opening night for around \$100,000. At the time of posting, London’s Carroll/Fletcher was close to finalising the sale of the Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s room-filling, interactive installation *Pulse Index*, 2010, for \$250,000, one of only two, large-scale pieces presented by the gallery.

Some notable absentees this year were Marian Goodman and Gladstone Gallery, probably casualties of what the fair director Antonia Carver calls “the crush of the March diary”, the rescheduling of Art Basel Hong Kong from May to March, and a denser worldwide fair schedule.

Strong first-timers at Art Dubai included Cairo’s recently opened Gypsum Gallery, which sold a challenging work by Mahmoud Khaled, *Do you have work tomorrow?*, 2013, consisting of 32 screenshots of a social network “dating” conversation. Tehran’s three-year-old Dastan’s Basement sold almost all its exhibited works to collectors in the UAE, Russia, Iran and the US.

“The first day was good for sales and curator inquiries,” says Nadine Knotzer, the director of Dubai’s Carbon 12. “Then pretty much nothing until the last day. Oddly, our gallery was busier than our booth at the fair.”

The second edition of the Modern section, with work from the 1940s to 80s, not only had more visitors and brisk sales, according to organisers, but also managed to tug at the region's heartstrings. "People here get emotional about this work," says Carver. "They never see it, and yet they remember having grown up with it."

The fair's non-commercial components such as its Global Art Forum series of talks and debates consolidated Art Dubai's positioning as the thinking man's art fair.

The Fair with a Brain throughout the Year

Once the bustle of its mid-March commercial activity dies down, Art Dubai goes back to being what it is most of the year: a laboratory. In its relatively short existence, the fair has carved out a place for itself in the local ecosystem as an experimental space of educational initiatives. Initially conceived as a single platform to build opportunities for artists, Art Dubai's programming has diversified for the general public, young and old.

Campus Art Dubai (CAD): Now in its third season, this alternative "school" for artists, writers and curators provides seminars, workshops, critique sessions and one-on-one mentorships. Courses are led by visiting academics, critics and artists.

Art Salon: The newest of the initiatives, the Salon is like CAD, but for collectors. Monthly talks led by visiting curators or art world experts are complemented by trips and visits.

Sheikha Manal Little Artist Programme: Running primarily during Art Dubai, the programme aims to bring the galleries alive for schoolchildren and teens through artist-led workshops and tours.

Internships: Three-month internships provide first-hand working experience to budding art world professionals.

Forum Fellows: Targeting already active professional writers, the "Fellows," hinged to the fair's Global Art Forum, is an intensive series of workshops under the guidance of a visiting educator.