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Abu Dhabi Art 2024 is bigger than ever—but conflict in Lebanon and Gaza looms large

Meanwhile rumours of Art Basel parent company MCH investing into the fair were being widely discussed

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Visitors to Abu Dhabi Art 2024 with Fatima Al Ali's *Once Upon a Pirate Coast* (2024) | Image: courtesy of Abu Dhabi Art

Abu Dhabi Art (ADA) opened with a buzz, with a strong selection of work and a tide of good feeling. The fair was bigger than in previous years, with more galleries, a larger audience, and a modern section that sought out artists whose work has rarely been shown. There was a sense that Abu Dhabi's sustained investment in art—with the cones of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and the latticework of the Zayed National Museum rising in the distance—and the



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influx of high net-worth newcomers to the city had moved this year's edition up a notch.

Two subjects of discussion dominated the fair and coincided uneasily with each other: firstly the rumours of Abu Dhabi's investment into MCH, which would mean the Art Basel group taking over and redeveloping the government-run event, and secondly Israel's attacks on Lebanon and Palestine, where a number of the galleries and artists had travelled from.

"It is very, very bad," says Saleh Barakat, who runs his eponymous gallery in Beirut. "You have a million people who are sleeping on the streets or who are in precarious accommodation in schools. It is everywhere around you."

Barakat was limited in scale for many of the works on his booth, because only small planes are taking off from Lebanon.

A carpet commission based on the Palestinian flag—designed by the Emirati artist Najat Makki and produced by the Afghan/UAE Fatima bint Mohammed Initiative—greeted visitors as they walked through the door. The non-commercial exhibition *Otra Orilla (Another Shore)* explores the relations between the Arab world and South America, delving into the impact of diaspora Arab populations on art-making practices there.

The fair's director Dyala Nusseibeh said that the fair's goal going forward was to deepen the knowledge around Middle Eastern art histories. "We're looking at Modern art histories of the region, from the region, with research coming out from here," Nusseibeh says. "That's really important to us as a fair. There's so much to do, there's so much to write, there's so many histories that are not researched enough—we're just at the tip of the iceberg in terms of what needs to happen."

This has been a key driver for the UAE for some years now, and while ADA has always sold modern work, it felt remarkable that this was the first time they'd hosted a dedicated section. Arab Modernism's urbane canvases feel on-brand for the UAE capital, which is positioning itself as the upmarket relation to flashier Dubai. And the Modern section ended up being the success story of the fair, giving it heft and gravitas that some of its contemporary presentations have lacked. Curated by the cultural strategist Myrna Ayad, *Something Bold, Something Old* tasked galleries with bringing artists working between the 1960s to 1980s, many of whom are new to the current art circuit.

George Al Ama, of Gallery One in Ramallah, sought out two older Palestinian artists who have been unexhibited since the 1970s: Emily Azar Fanous and



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Nabila Hilmi. He had recently rediscovered the work of Fanous, who had stopped painting when she got married, during a chance encounter with her son-in-law. But getting the work from his house in Bethlehem to the gallery in Ramallah, usually a 20-minute drive, was a “nightmare” in the current circumstances. “It is hard enough for people to move, but to move a fragile object right now is crazy,” he said. “I spent the entire day hoping the paintings would arrive safely.” Al Ama sold multiple works by each artist on the opening night, in the \$6,000 to \$15,000 range.

Lilia Ben Salah, from France, paired seven paintings from the 1970s and 80s by Inji Efflatoun with performance-related, photocopy-based works by the Palestinian artist Amal Abdenour, whose feminist practice has been left out of many art histories. The two were imprisoned at the same time for their political activities, both in the Citadel in Cairo, but their work has never been shown together. Ben Salah sold all of the Efflatouns in the upper tens of thousands to private individuals and institutions.

Ubuntu Gallery, from Cairo, brought some beautiful canvases and drawings by the Egyptian Ibad Shaker (on sale for \$8,000 for works on paper to \$30,000 for paintings), who has been better known for his illustrations and film animation. Selma Feriani, from London and Tunisia, has work from Casablanca School members Farid Belkahia and Mohamed Melehi, as well as the refined Jellal ben Abdallah, who comes from a miniaturist tradition.

Contemporary dealers reported mixed results, with numerous works on reserve but fewer confirmed sales. The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi team, which is edging closer to its full opening, were circulating at the fair and underlined that acquisitions were ongoing and will continue after the museum opens next year. Lawrie Shabibi gave a solo stand to their new(ish) artist Mandy El-Sayegh and Carbon 12, also from Dubai, paired the Abu Dhabi artist Sarah Almeheiri alongside the Austrian painter Bernhard Buhmann in a surprise aesthetic symmetry. The gallery sold out all the Almeheiri works and some of the Buhmann, in the range of \$3500 to \$30,000.

Will there be an Art Basel Abu Dhabi?

As usual in the close-knit Middle Eastern art world, rumours were on overdrive—this time around the all-but-certain takeover of Abu Dhabi Art by Art Basel. Though the *Art Newspaper* was unable to confirm the \$20m figure that has been floated in the press—a sum one source with knowledge of the UAE leadership called “peanuts” for Abu Dhabi—MCH staffers were in attendance and everyone was expecting the news to drop at any moment. If the



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deal goes ahead, it is also possible that there is a date change on the horizon, as MCH might move Abu Dhabi to the start of the year to free up its packed autumn calendar. The March slot is, of course, taken by the larger and more established Art Dubai, which will also be announcing a new director shortly, sources confirm.

MCH, which sorely needs the cash, and the UAE have attempted partnerships before. The UAE capital was to be included in the Art Basel Cities initiative, which was abandoned after its first foray in Buenos Aires in 2018. A year later a second city-based proposal, Art Basel Inside, which would have charged guests \$15,000 for an Abu Dhabi experience, [proved equally ill-fated](#).

The Department of Culture and Tourism (DCT), which runs the fair, would not officially comment. But Nusseibeh said the the presence of the rumour was significant in itself. “Everyone is thinking about the potential growth of the market in the region,” she says. “Even with the auction houses, they're broadening their markets. They're bringing in designer items and luxury goods and so on, because they're thinking about how to reach new buyers. And one way to think about that is, where are those new buyers? People are thinking about the Middle East with that lens: what kind of growth potential is there, and when should we step in and get involved?”