

**MIDDLE EAST**

# Creating a Place for Contemporary Art

By VINITA BHARADWAJ MARCH 28, 2012

DUBAI — The Emirati artist Abdul Qader Al-Rais, 60, looked pleased last week as he showed off his latest works in the Hunar Gallery booth on the first public day of Art Dubai, the annual art fair for the region's contemporary art community.

Mild-mannered and soft-spoken, Mr. Rais gestured to his untitled oils: "These are inspired by the Arab Spring," he said, in halting English to a couple from Japan.

One of his works featured a silhouette of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria against a backdrop of red, with the words "Death Over Humiliation" written in Arabic. "It's a painting of Bashar al-Assad killing his people," he said.

The painting sold at the fair for \$30,000 to an Emirati collector.

Other works that sold on the same day included the Moroccan artist Zakaria Ramhani's politically inspired acrylic "Faces of You Other" for \$24,400 and the Egyptian artist Mohammed Taman's "Qaddafi's Bullets" for \$16,000.

For Mr. Rais, who is considered one of the Emirates' pioneering artists, the local and regional art movement has come a long way. He believes it has been accelerated primarily by the cultural momentum gained as a result of high-profile museums and events such as Art Dubai, which featured more than 70 international galleries in its 2012 edition that concluded last week.

"Before 2000, art was limited to the elite families," he said. "Families generally discouraged their children from pursuing art as a career. However, from 2006

onwards, the exposure has increased because of the overall culture movement in the region and the resulting jobs, which has allowed families to be more accepting and understanding of art.”

Art Dubai has become a key one-stop shop for international dealers and collectors. But it is not just about selling art. The fair has been integral to promoting regional discussion and exchange about art. A key figure in promoting such links has been Antonia Carver, the fair director, who has lived in Dubai since 2002.

“There has always been a legacy of culture, but in the last decade there’s been a new phase of international interest in the region, resulting in an organic growth of Dubai’s art calendar,” she said. “It was only a matter of time before the art community opened out to include a larger public audience.”

Positioning itself as a city at the crossroads of East and West, Ms. Carver said it was natural for events in Dubai to embrace work coming out of Asia and Africa.

“Firstly, from a historic standpoint, Dubai as a port city developed relations with South Asia, East Africa and Iran,” she said. “With the exchange of goods, came the exchange of ideas and culture. It’s a connection embedded in history and looking forward it presents an opportunity. For international art professionals who are time-poor, Dubai presents itself as a meeting point to experience all that is outside of Europe and the Americas.”

With art quickly becoming an important factor on the cultural scene, the series of events associated with Art Dubai also provides an opportunity to develop the concepts and vocabulary needed if the practice of art criticism, still not well-developed, is to catch up with the artists themselves.

At the Global Art Forum, held within the framework of Art Dubai, Lara Khaldi’s presentation of an interactive “Arabic Art Glossary” is an excellent example of an effort to encourage a regional conversation about art.

Ms. Khaldi — a Palestinian curator who divides her time between Jerusalem, Amman and Beirut — said the project’s interactive nature allowed

for multiple voices to be heard in the debate and discussions surrounding the rapidly growing art vocabulary.

“Often people are on deadline, whether it’s a journal, publication or event, and the dialogue is limited,” she said. “By creating an interactive platform online for the exclusive purpose of discussing an Arabic art glossary, the stakeholders can continue the debate.”

Because many Arab cultural institutions, such as Doha’s Arab Museum of Modern Art and the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut, have their own translations of art terms, Ms. Khaldi said there was a need to have a broader consensus on meaning.

“For example, during one of the sessions I’ve conducted, the term ‘installation art’ was interpreted in Arabic in two ways. The first ‘tajheez phi fada’a’ is related to a specific site and means ‘installing equipment.’ The second ‘a’amal fani tarkeebi’ is more philosophical and doesn’t take into account the context of space, but literally means ‘work of art that is assembled,’” she said.

“There is no end to these discussions, but by keeping it alive online we expand the discussion to come up with suggestions and hear different opinions,” she added.

But she stays away from the region’s stuffy Arabic language academies, which are dominated by academics.

“We don’t want the glossary to be defined by language alone,” she said. “An art glossary needs to take into account several other factors, such as techniques, influences and contexts. It’s a debate best held between those working in and around the field.”

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