

Financial Times
February 27, 2015

DRISCOLL | BABCOCK



The Armory rings in the changes: New York's oldest modern and contemporary fair opens next week with a special focus on Middle Eastern art

Catherine Milner



Wafaa Bilal's 'Canto III' (2015), a depiction of Saddam Hussein wearing a hat shaped like the Dome of the Rock

Art fairs are becoming increasingly similar: the same galleries presenting the same works can often be seen in Hong Kong, Switzerland, Miami and elsewhere in the world.

But the Armory, America's oldest modern and contemporary art fair, opening next week in its 17th edition, has decided under its recently arrived director Noah Horowitz to ring the changes. To do so, each year the fair chooses a special regional focus. Last year, curator Phil Tinari directed visitors' attention to contemporary work from China; this year, under Omar Kholeif, an Egyptian who is a curator at London's Whitechapel gallery, the focus is on work from the Middle East, north Africa and the Mediterranean.

At the heart of the fair, with its 199 stands, will be a tightly curated "Focus" section, a group of 15 galleries showing and selling work by artists from Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian territories — but also from Greece, France and New York.

One of the most notable works, from Lawrie Shabibi Gallery of Dubai, is a large golden sculpture by the Iraqi-American artist Wafaa Bilal; it depicts Saddam Hussein wearing a hat shaped like Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock. As gallery director Asmaa Shabibi reveals, the artist plans to shoot the sculpture into space so that it can orbit the Earth for eternity — in line with an ambition held by Saddam himself.

It sets the tone for a fair that Horowitz hopes will "get people talking about issues". "Our concern is to give interesting artists a voice," he says. "Clearly a number of artists from the region, like [London-based Lebanese artist] Mona Hatoum, already have a high market value. But our initiative focuses on the up-and-coming names of whom the vast majority — compared with western artists — are selling at a discount. As time goes on, we are going to see more integration of these Middle Eastern artists into the global art infrastructure."

This process is well under way: art fairs, auctions and biennales across the region have helped to foster a new breed of Middle Eastern contemporary art collector, and prices for some artists — for example, Abdunasser Gharem from Saudi Arabia — have doubled in the past five years. On Claude Lemand's stand are works by Shafic Abboud, the grand old man of Middle Eastern art — some of which have risen tenfold in value, the gallerist says, since the artist died in 2004.

"We are offering Middle East galleries a gateway to the US market, and bringing a slice of that art world to the west"

Conceptual work is showcased too, in such pieces as "Cowboy Code" by Saudi artist Ahmed Mater: a panel composed of red plastic toy gun caps that compare Islamic Hadiths to the mantras of American "cowboys". There is also a new work by Mona Hatoum made of black marbles at Alexander & Bonim gallery. There are some diverse and interesting painters too, such as Marwan Kassab-Bachi from Syria and Iraqi-born Dia Azzawi.

Curators and art dealers in the west are also waking up to an arena of art production they have hitherto given little attention. In London, Tate Modern held its first solo show of work by a contemporary Arab artist only two years ago — but it has started to acquire contemporary Middle Eastern art, as have the Victoria & Albert and the British Museum. In New York last year, the New Museum held its first exhibition devoted to contemporary Middle Eastern art, and next year the Guggenheim is set to follow suit.

As Horowitz puts it: "Middle Eastern art has simply become too important to ignore."

Still, drawing attention to it in a city that contains more Jewish art dealers than anywhere else seems brave. Horowitz insists it is not: "We did not draw any political or religious lines around this fair," he says. Yet only one Israeli gallery is showing at the Armory: Artis, a not-for-profit organisation based in New York devoted to promoting contemporary visual art from Israel. 'Blue Bird' (2013)©Galerie Claude Lemand

"Most of the galleries have been tremendously supportive and see it as a great way to be part of a progressive movement," Horowitz says. "We are offering galleries in the Middle East a

gateway into the American market at the same time as bringing a slice of that art world to the west. A lot of dealers in the west have a deep client base in the Arab region and this enables them to create a touch point with them.”

The issue of visibility is crucial. Stationed outside the fair will be a juggernaut fashioned into a temporary mobile studio, where 15 Middle Eastern artists from the group Edge of Arabia — the leading cultural partner to the fair — will relay to the world their impressions of New York, and in particular its Arab communities, via the internet.

Edge of Arabia director Stephen Stapleton is quick to point out the relevance of this medium to practitioners in the least liberal countries in the region: “One young Saudi artist told me that ‘the internet is our oxygen’,” he says.

There are sound commercial reasons for constructing a vibrant focus for the fair too. Although the Armory attracted 65,000 visitors last year, dwarfing its main rival Frieze New York (which attracted only 40,000), it runs in tandem with no fewer than eight other fairs opening across the city at the same time. Which leaves little room for being complacent.

“There is an ongoing homogenisation of the landscape in Fair Land,” Horowitz says. “But our approach is quality over quantity, and the dedicated symposium and project focus at the Armory all elevates what we do. Many people treat it like going to a museum.”

This year’s two-day symposium is sponsored by Art Jameel from Saudi Arabia, the fair’s education partner, and includes speakers ranging from Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah, to Chen Tamir, curator of the Center for Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv. One of the sessions, moderated by Al Qassemi, a prolific commentator on Arab affairs, will broach one of today’s pertinent topics: “How do politics and conflict affect the art market?”

Such issues matter, but Kholeif insists: “This isn’t going to be a place for boring social documentary.” The artist commissioned to make works specifically for the fair — Lebanese Lawrence Abu Hamdan, who grew up in Amman and Britain and who now lives in London — nonetheless has contemporary debates in his sights. He plans to distribute 5,000 crisp packets throughout the fair — not only for fairgoers to eat but to show how the packets can be used in surveillance technology. “Crisp packets are one of the most high-fidelity ways of recording sounds,” he explains. “It’s a playful way to think about the future where even the most banal everyday objects could take on a new kind of sensitivity.”

Meanwhile Claude Lemand, a veteran Arabist who has sold Middle Eastern art for almost 30 years at his gallery in Paris, echoes his colleagues’ views about the importance of exposure for the work in the Focus section. “I don’t know if the American public will buy the works I am showing or not: it doesn’t matter,” he says. “My aim is not to sell the pieces — most of them already belong to museums and collectors anyway — but to disseminate information about the artists.”

“We are living in a reign of darkness, of bloody darkness,” Lemand says. “But at the same time you have places and individuals who are promoting magnificence, and art is a way to shed light in this bloody darkness.”

Photographs: Lawrie Shabibi Gallery; Meem Gallery; Galerie Claude Lemand