

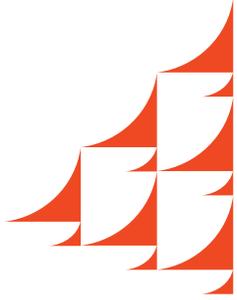
The Arab Gulf States
Institute in Washington
Building bridges of understanding



The AGSIW *Gulf Arts and Culture Series*

The UAE's Emergence as a Hub for Contemporary Art

Hanan Sayed Worrell



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The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), launched in 2015, is an independent, nonprofit institution dedicated to increasing the understanding and appreciation of the social, economic, and political diversity of the Gulf Arab states. Through expert research, analysis, exchanges, and public discussion, the institute seeks to encourage thoughtful debate and inform decision makers shaping U.S. policy regarding this critical geostrategic region.

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The AGSIW *Gulf Arts and Culture* Series

The past five years have witnessed tremendous growth in the creative fields in the Gulf Arab states. This paper is part of AGSIW's *Gulf Arts and Culture* series, covering these advances and evaluating their impact: on social change, and on the global perception and representation of the Gulf Arab states.

About the Author

Hanan Sayed Worrell is a non-resident fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. She is a specialist in the formulation and development of complex international and cultural projects, with an emphasis on strategic, civic, and business objectives. She has over 25 years of international experience in the public and private sectors, including arts and culture, education, environment, energy, and aviation.

Worrell provides cultural, strategic, and development advice to a number of institutions, while also establishing partnerships, relationships, and projects in the Gulf region, building on her earlier experience in management consulting with a leading practice in New York. As a native Arabic speaker and long-term resident of the Gulf, she has contributed professionally to several of the most impactful projects in the region including the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and New York University Abu Dhabi. She is currently the senior representative for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in Abu Dhabi, with responsibilities for the planning and development of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi museum in Saadiyat Cultural District.

Worrell has held senior positions in the Abu Dhabi government where she was responsible for the strategy, development, master planning, design, and construction of the Abu Dhabi International Airport expansion, Presidential Flight, Environment Agency Abu Dhabi, Conservation and Breeding Centers, Nature Reserves, Botanical Gardens, and Wildlife Park. She earned a Bachelor of Science in civil engineering and Master of Science in civil engineering and construction engineering management from Stanford University. She is a member of the International Women's Forum and American Chamber of Commerce Abu Dhabi. She served on the boards of the American Community School of Abu Dhabi and the NYUAD Mentorship Program as well as the selection committee for the NYUAD Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Scholars Program.

Executive Summary

Since the early 1980s, the United Arab Emirates has been a contributor to both the regional and global conversations about contemporary art. Situated at the nexus of East and West and connected to the Middle East, North and East Africa, Iran, South Asia, and Central Asia, it is a commercial, trade, financial, and transport hub. In the past decade, the UAE has emerged as a regional arts center with global reach, shaped by the efforts and achievements of individuals and institutions and influenced by geopolitical events. This paper describes a pivotal period in the life of a country that is making an important investment in art and culture.

The UAE's three main cities – Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah – have developed distinct yet complementary art ecosystems defined by the leadership and character of each emirate. Abu Dhabi, the capital city, is focused on large-scale museum developments, international partnerships, and long-term capacity building. Dubai has leveraged its trade and finance infrastructures to become a regional hub of the art market. And Sharjah deepens the engagement in arts and culture with a content-rich local international art scene. The developments in the arts across each emirate are bound together by a desire to engender unique and enriching experiences for local audiences and to create a contemporary art scene that is culturally rich, intellectually engaged, and connected to the global art world.

This paper highlights some of the cultural luminaries that built the contemporary art scene in the UAE as well as the museums and institutions that have served to regionalize and internationalize it. The decision to build these institutions reflects the UAE's commitment to broadening the country's economy, thereby establishing new opportunities. However, greater investment in higher education and training for arts professionals will be necessary to meet the ambitions of institutions being planned. Enhancing conditions for artists to work and live in the UAE will deepen the cultural landscape and firmly establish the country as a hub for artistic production and exchange.

Introduction

On January 31, 2007, dignitaries and officials gathered at the opulent Emirates Palace hotel in the distinguished company of four Pritzker prize-winning architects for the unveiling of the multibillion dollar master plan for the Saadiyat Cultural District by Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, crown prince of Abu Dhabi. The glittering exhibition showcased scale models of the proposed Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi, maritime museum, and performing arts center, with a series of pavilions along a man-made canal bifurcating the Cultural District from the remainder of the island. The Cultural District is just one component of the 10-square mile island development planned for a population of 125,000 with residential and business districts, golf courses, and luxury hotels along five miles of pristine sandy beach.

Frank Gehry, the late Zaha Hadid, Tadao Ando, a representative from Ateliers Jean Nouvel, and Skidmore Owings & Merrill – the master planners – were present at the Emirates Palace to discuss their design inspirations and concepts, culminating months of work with the Abu Dhabi authorities. The vision to create a contemporary cultural locus was bold, ambitious, and unprecedented in the Arab world. The visitors walked through the exhibition, entwined in the

branches of Hadid's concert halls, lost in the chaotic pile of blocks of Gehry's galleries, showered with the delicate rain of light filtering through Nouvel's dome, and calmed by Ando's reflecting pool.

Was this a cultural Xanadu for the Arab world, as The New York Times headline read the following day? The article stated: "In all, the project, known as the Cultural District of Saadiyat Island, would create an exhibition space intended to turn this once-sleepy desert city along the Persian Gulf into an international arts capital and tourist destination. If



Exhibition for the unveiling of the master plan for the Saadiyat Cultural District, January 31, 2007.

completed according to plan sometime in the next decade, consultants predict, it could be the world's largest single arts-and-culture development project in recent memory."

A decade on, and while the Saadiyat Cultural District continues to progress, what has emerged in the UAE is not a cultural Xanadu, but a contemporary art scene that is culturally rich, intellectually engaged, and connected to the global art world. From its modest beginnings some 40 years ago to the boom of the first decade of the 21st century, through the global economic crisis, and amid the regional geopolitics, the contemporary art scene has proved its resilience.

The Early Years

Since the 1980s, contemporary art in the United Arab Emirates has been engaged in both regional and global conversations through the efforts of individuals and institutions and in the framework of both government-supported and artist-led initiatives. The evolution of the arts in each of the three main cities – Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai – developed organically alongside the nation-building efforts of the nascent UAE, which was established in 1971 as a federation of seven emirates. The place of the arts within each emirate reflected the approach adopted by its leadership at the time.

Sharjah – Capital of Culture

As one of the first ports of trade in the Gulf and the only emirate to span the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman, Sharjah has been at the crossroads of exchange between East and West for centuries. Often referred to as the "cultural capital," it aims to balance commerce and development with culture and tradition. The driving force behind Sharjah's cultural prominence has been the emirate's ruler, Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed al-Qasimi. An author and poet with two PhDs and known for his artistic sensibility, he steered the emirate toward

culture when he ascended the throne in 1972. His belief that culture is essential to the human spirit is shared by members of his family and evident in the many programs, initiatives, and institutions that have flourished in Sharjah.

One such initiative is the Emirates Fine Arts Society, established in 1980 in Sharjah by a group of pioneering Emirati artists, including leading conceptual artists Hassan Sharif, Mohammed Kazem, and Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim. In its early years, the society served as an informal community for local artists who worked across the UAE. It was an important forum for discussion and incubator of ideas among artists, writers, and poets. It provided support for local artists through group and solo exhibitions both locally and internationally, along with workshops and publications. As development boomed, artists from other Arab countries came to live and work in the UAE. Many found their way to the society and were welcomed, bringing a diverse range of voices to the conversation. The society launched its annual exhibition in 1990 coinciding with a traveling exhibition from the Soviet Union. This led to the launch of the Sharjah biennial in 1993 as an international exhibition featuring presentations by individual countries, inspired by a similar enterprise in Cairo.

Sharjah received the UNESCO designation “Cultural Capital of the Arab World” in 1998, demonstrating the achievements made by the small emirate.

At the same time, Sharjah’s ruler began opening museums of archeology, science, and calligraphy. In 1997, the Sharjah Institute of Arts was established offering specialized courses in visual arts and art history, and nurturing local talent. The same year, the Sharjah Art Museum opened, displaying artwork from the ruler’s orientalist and Arab art collection.

Sharjah received the UNESCO designation “Cultural Capital of the Arab World” in 1998, demonstrating the achievements made by the small emirate. Arts and culture had been successfully interwoven with the development of the community, and learning and creativity continue to be actively encouraged through a number of institutions and initiatives. Sheikha Hoor al-Qasimi, president and director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, said on the occasion of curating the UAE’s National Pavilion for the 56th Venice Biennale: “This is the history that I grew up with, that influenced me to become an artist and curator, and eventually led to my involvement with the Emirates Fine Arts Society, the Sharjah Arts Institute, and ultimately the Sharjah biennial.”

Abu Dhabi – The Capital

In the UAE’s capital city, Abu Dhabi, amid the complex process of nation building and providing basic infrastructure and services, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan established the Qasr Al Hosn Cultural Foundation in 1981 to foster and nurture cultural consciousness for the new country. A charismatic and visionary leader, Sheikh Zayed believed that a country that loses sight of its culture and heritage risks its present and future. The foundation is located in the “founding block of Abu Dhabi city.” Until its closure for renovation in the mid 2000s, the foundation offered an eclectic program including music, dance, theater, poetry, photography, film, art, exhibitions, and discussions. Artists, writers, musicians, and poets were invited to participate from across the Arab world and beyond, often in collaboration with embassies. As a community center, the foundation offered art, music, and calligraphy workshops for youth

and adults. It was home to the National Library and hosted the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair, established in 1981. The foundation and the Emirates Fine Arts Society collaborated closely, contributing to the art scene, particularly between the early 1980s and mid-1990s. The Qasr Al Hosn Cultural Foundation was the cultural heart of the city.

Sheikh Zayed believed that a country that loses sight of its culture and heritage risks its present and future.

The foundation inspired one of its own, Huda I. Al Khamis-Kanoo, founder of the Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation, to expand cultural offerings in the city. "I had been working at the Cultural Foundation and I could see there was a hunger. With a visionary leadership, dedicating support to arts and culture, I wanted to be a part of this movement. 'Mighty oaks from little acorns' grow and that is precisely the story of ADMAF." In 1997 she established ADMAF, with its roots grounded in nurturing local artists and inspiring creativity with arts education and community programs.

Dubai – Capital of Commerce

Almost 100 miles northeast of the capital, in Dubai, then ruler Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid al-Maktoum, envisaged a city focused on developing industry and trade, with a deepened creek, supersized seaport, free zone, and airport to enhance navigation and connect Dubai to the region. He had an unfaltering belief that a modernized Dubai as a regional hub could be achieved. This entrepreneurial spirit endures through the leadership of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, the current ruler of Dubai, and the emirate today continues to attract people from around the world to visit, work, and live.

In the 1980s and '90s, the contemporary art scene in Dubai consisted of a handful of private galleries and patrons who supported them. The arts developed primarily through private and individual initiatives. Among the early arrivals was Alison Collins, an interior designer who moved to Dubai in 1976. She fell in love with an old wind-tower house in Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood. She rented the house and lived in it with her family until she converted it to Majlis Art Gallery in 1989. The gallery exhibits contemporary art works created by international artists inspired by the region, as well as unique pieces of pottery, glass, and other crafts.

One of the pioneers, Mayla Attasi, brought her passion for Arab modernism when she moved from Syria to Dubai in the early '90s. With her partner, Amna Dabbagh, she opened Green Art Gallery in 1995. The gallery had an intimate salon d'art feel bringing together patrons and art lovers year round. The early exhibitions included artists such as Fateh Moudarres, Dia Azzawi, Paul Guiragossian, and Ismail Fattah, who are today's modern Arab masters. Attasi's daughter, Yasmin, took over the gallery a little more than a decade later and relaunched it to represent contemporary art from the Middle East, North Africa, and Turkey.

Across the Sheikh Zayed Road from the Green Art Gallery, another pioneer, Dariush Zandi, who had relocated from New York, rented a piece of property in Al Quoz, a dusty area of warehouses. He designed The Courtyard, a series of connected loft-like spaces with a verdant central courtyard. Immediately it became home to boutiques specializing in bespoke furniture, antiques, and objects d'art, as well as the Total Arts Gallery owned by Zandi. The gallery exhibited

international and regional artists. It changed the way art was exhibited and experienced in Dubai. The Courtyard was the first arts outpost in industrial Al Quoz neighborhood, which a decade later has become home to a dynamic arts district.

The Pivotal Decade

The start of this century is proving to be a period during which the world is both increasingly interconnected and aware that local context and cultural differences matter as much as commonalities. This openness to multiple viewpoints and tolerance has defined the UAE historically and continues to inform the country's vision for nurturing a contemporary art scene that welcomes diversity of voices and enhances creativity.

Through auctions, art fairs, biennials, galleries, collectors, foundations, and museums, the contemporary art scene across the UAE has made remarkable progress in little more than a decade. The approaches in each of its three main cities have differed: occasionally disjointed and uncoordinated, organic and unplanned, sometimes strategic and long term. But what has emerged are dynamic centers for contemporary art that engender unique and enriching experiences, not only for those who live in the UAE, but also for people around the world. The following presents the art ecology that has developed, highlighting some of the cultural luminaries in the UAE.

Making a Market

The Godolphin Ballroom at the Jumeirah Emirates Towers hotel in Dubai on May 2006 was buzzing with guests nibbling on canapés and sipping champagne. The hall, usually reserved for large weddings, was filled that evening with contemporary art juxtaposed against the gilded walls and plush interiors. It was the first auction in the Arab world of modern and contemporary art. Christie's had opened its office in Dubai in 2005, recognizing a growing interest and collector base in the region. The auction was hailed as the emergence of a regional market for art with sales of Arab Indian, Iranian, and Western art at \$8.5 million, doubling presale estimates. Michael Jeha, the managing director of Christie's Middle East recalled that moment: "Usually when we do auctions we have a good idea what is going to happen and how the auction will perform." And he noted that ahead of the first Dubai auction, there was nothing. "There were hardly any pieces covered." He said when they entered, however, "the room was packed from front



Jussi Pylkkanen at Christie's International Contemporary and Modern Art sale, Dubai, 2007.

to back with several hundred people. I remember the first lot came up and it made several times the estimate and there was a huge sigh of relief from our team. We realized this is going to be ok ... The sale was a huge success.”

A decade later, Christie's Dubai branch has sold over \$200 million of Middle Eastern art, with many world-record prices set for artists at the auctions, consolidating Dubai's position as an international market for art from the region. Jaha explained: “We shouldn't lay claim to being the first. What we helped to do was bring cohesion to what was a dispersed market. Before we started, there were localized markets, say in Egypt or Lebanon or Iran or Dubai. People knew about the art markets in their respective locations but less so about each other's markets. We helped to regionalize the market and then, beyond that, internationalize it. Now we attract institutions and collectors from around the world – in fact, 30 percent of our buyers come from outside the region.”

The growth of Dubai as a market place for contemporary art has as much to do with the city's cosmopolitan nature and business-friendly economy as the passionate individuals who nurtured the arts and are well-tuned to the geopolitics of the region. Dubai is a global crossroads city powered by its world-class airport, airline, ports, and free zones. In the 1990s Saudis and Iranians came to shop in Dubai and enjoy weekends away from their restrictive environments. Entrepreneurial Russians

arrived after the collapse of the Soviet Union to re-export home appliances and anything they could sell back home. Western expatriates continued to arrive in increasing numbers lured by the tax-free environment and business opportunities. Multinationals

The growth of Dubai as a market place for contemporary art has as much to do with the city's cosmopolitan nature and business-friendly economy as the passionate individuals who nurtured the arts and are well-tuned to the geopolitics of the region

set up regional offices in Dubai's special economic zones of banking, media, and technology, governed by business-friendly legal codes. Arab expatriates vied to relocate to Dubai for the promise of a better future. South Asians arrived in large numbers both as blue-collar workers in construction and business professionals. Following the events of 9/11, Dubai was positioned for an economic and social transformation. Waves of investments rolled into Dubai after 9/11 due to the anti-money laundering provisions of the United States' Patriot Act, which made investing closer to home more appealing, and the meteoric increase in the price of oil.

In 2002, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid enacted one of Dubai's most transformative reforms, which would have a lasting impact on shaping the city and propelling its arts and culture scene. He issued a land reform decree that allowed foreigners to own real estate in Dubai. A real estate market was born seemingly overnight with an unprecedented construction boom generating impressive economic growth that was halted only by the 2008 global economic crisis. Wealthy expatriates from the Middle East, South Asia, North Africa, and former Soviet Union invested in property in Dubai. Many second generation Arabs, Iranians, and South Asians, who had grown up in Dubai, returned home to participate in the development. Between 2002 and 2008, the city's population doubled and its urban footprint quadrupled.

As the residents became property owners, their relationship with the city began to change. The arts offered the space for people to engage in complex social and political dialogue and explore their journeys in a rapidly developing city, of which they had become invested stakeholders. This dialogue extended to notions of identity and culture. The effects of the “War on Terror” and the revival of the “clash of civilizations” theory – that post-Cold War conflict would not be ideological or economic but cultural – was felt particularly by the younger generation, many recently returning from the West in the aftermath of 9/11. The immutable characteristics such as history, language, tradition, and religion became the new fault lines. This stimulated a kind of activist approach to explaining and understanding the region more broadly through its artistic and cultural production.

Sunny Rahbar, co-founder of one of the leading contemporary art galleries in Dubai, The Third Line, recalled the pivotal events of 9/11. Of Iranian origin, Rahbar grew up in Dubai and moved to the United States, where she completed her degree in design management at the Parsons School of Design in New York in 2000. Rahbar shared: “I was in New York City working for an art gallery when the 9/11 attacks happened. I remember the day the Village Voice published their issue with an image of the burning towers and the headline: ‘The Bastards, Terrorists Bring War to our Shores.’ Everyone was afraid. My Arab friends were scared, shaving their beards and wearing the American flag. I thought, ‘This is pure hatred and has to change. What do they know about Muslims and Arabs?’ I knew that art was a way to change minds. I decided to go back home to Dubai and then realized it was the perfect place, with so many people passing through from all over the world.” Rahbar began with pop-up art exhibitions in hotels and luxury apartments under construction. She exhibited artists she had met in London and New York like Youssef Nabil and Hassan Hajjaj, and with a handful of school friends and new arrivals to the city, a contemporary culture scene began to take roots.

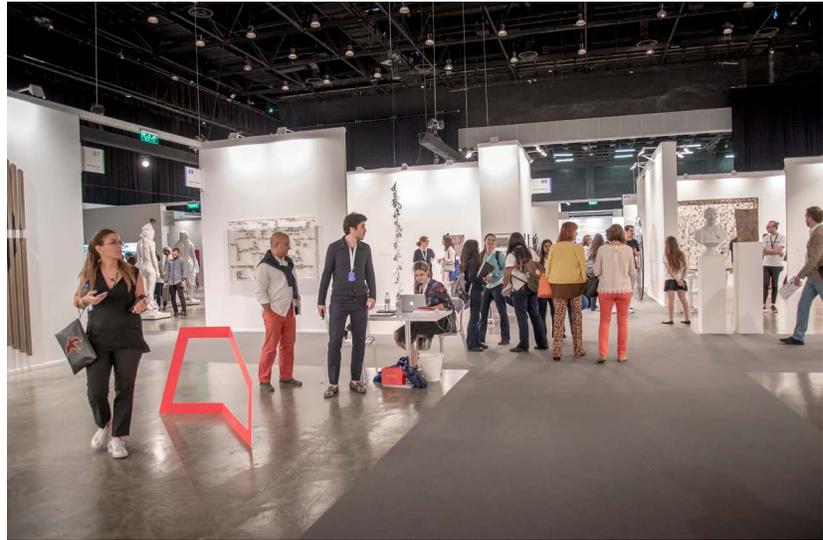
The event that firmly established Dubai as the marketplace for art from the region and a cultural meeting point was Art Dubai.

On the other side of the world in Singapore, Claudia Cellini, an American art consultant, became interested in the Middle East following the events of 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq. “I had attended a lecture by the neoconservative Eliot Cohen at the American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore in early 2003 about the inevitable war of Iraq. I was pretty appalled by the title and the premise that the U.S. invading Iraq was inevitable. I was working in the arts and wanted to see the reaction of artists in the Middle East. I planned to go to Egypt, Beirut, and Iran. On a stopover in Dubai I had a few meetings with consultants and the local authorities, and I was blown away by the vision of what was being planned. The confluence of money, openness, and entrepreneurial spirit made Dubai a unique place.”

In 2005, Rahbar and Cellini sought the support of Omar Ghobash, now ambassador of the UAE to Russia, who had a deep interest in the arts, to open a gallery. They established The Third Line gallery, which is one of the first truly contemporary art galleries in the growing metropolis of Dubai. The gallery gives a platform to artists living in the Middle East and the diaspora. In the early years, its diverse programming and educational endeavors helped to cultivate a group of local and expatriate collectors who were inquisitive and eager to learn. One such collector is Mishaal Al Gergawi, the founder and managing director of The Delma Institute, an

interdisciplinary research institute. He shared his encounter with The Third Line gallery: "I had just returned from studying in France, where I had read philosophy ... I didn't really care about the arts initially." He continued, "I wanted to have the conversations that were only happening around the arts, which would go into broader philosophical questions. But then after seeing art enough times, and spending time with the artists, I started to collect." Gergawi gravitated toward the arts attending openings, speaking at events, writing, and then working with Dubai Culture and eventually establishing The Delma Institute.

Another arrival to Dubai in 2001 was Antonia Carver, now director of Art Jameel. Carver began to freelance as a journalist for a number of art publications and was part of the launch team for the Dubai International Film Festival among other projects. She then joined Bidoun, another important contributor to



Art Dubai 2017 courtesy of Photo Solutions.

Dubai's art scene. Bidoun was a publishing, educational, and curatorial platform set up in 2004 in Dubai and New York by Rahbar and Lisa Farjam. They wanted to create other forms of images and ideas about that region that could thwart the toxic notions of terrorism and barbarism portrayed in the West. Bidoun showed the region as a place of cultural cross-fertilization, creating a uniquely hybrid form of contemporary culture and artistic expression. Carver recalled: "There was a sort of collective coming together in Dubai at that



Art Dubai Modern Preview 2017 courtesy of Photo Solutions.

time with Bidoun and others – lots of happenings such as literary clubs, film screenings, pop-up exhibitions, and itinerant events that brought together design, art, fashion, publishing, and more. The events attracted a real 'UAE mix' of Arab, Iranian, South Asian, and European long-term residents, as well as Emiratis. The art scene developed ground up and that's why Dubai has the audience it has now. The galleries emerging at the time had to sell art but they had to do a lot of other events to attract and engage people – as we all did."

The event that firmly established Dubai as the marketplace for art from the region and a cultural meeting point was Art Dubai. The art fair was launched as Gulf Art Fair in 2006 by a London gallery owner and Dubai-based entrepreneur, and was largely a platform for Western and Indian art galleries with The Third Line the only UAE-based gallery. With the global economic crisis and art sales plummeting in 2009, accompanied by the rise in galleries locally and regionally, the fair shifted its focus to more regional art. Carver became the director of Art Dubai in 2010 and took to expanding the geographic breadth of the fair, eventually by 2016 creating the world's most global of fairs, with a strong emphasis on education and artistic programs year round. She aimed to give Art Dubai a unique selling point by making it relevant to the region and the countries linked to it socioeconomically and culturally, from the Arab world, North and East Africa, Iran, Pakistan, India, Central Asia, and the Far East.

Alongside the fair, the Global Art Forum was launched in 2007, bringing a much-needed platform for talks and debates. In 2011, Carver invited Shumon Basar, a writer and cultural critic based in London, to join in commissioning the Global Art Forum and to reshape it into an ideas festival with a thematic approach to understand the “world around us and our role in it.” The forum is recognized as a hub for ideas fueling the development of contemporary art in the region and extending the conversations across disciplines and geographies. Speakers have included artists, curators, musicians, filmmakers, museum directors, architects, authors, collectors, businessmen, academics, and government officials. Art Dubai’s full embrace of the diversity of its location makes it interesting to international art patrons and provides a window to the art of



Art Dubai Modern Preview 2017 courtesy of Photo Solutions.

the region. The fair also contributes to the professionalization of the local art infrastructure through curatorial coaching, exhibition making, and engagement with seasoned collectors and international galleries.

Myrna Ayad, Art Dubai’s director since 2016, a long-term resident of Dubai, is an activist when it comes to art from the region. She said passionately: “In the mid-2000s, Middle Eastern art began to generate a great deal of interest from within the region and abroad largely due to an aspect that people seldom talk about: the emotional level. At some point, people living in the UAE, which is a multicultural place, as well as those in the diaspora in Europe and the U.S., had an incredible sense of longing to connect with their cultures. The ‘War on Terror’ attacked not only our religion but our culture, heritage, and identity. It sparked in all of us a sense to want to regroup culturally and come together to celebrate our art.” In 2007, Ayad joined Canvas magazine, one of the first publications focused on art and culture from the Middle East and Arab world, where she worked for eight years.

Maliha Tabari, another long-term resident of Dubai, returned home to Dubai in 2001 after completing her degree in fine arts and art history at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, California. She surveyed the art scene and found only a few galleries exhibiting mainly in villas. "I decided to open a gallery in a space in the Fairmont Hotel on Sheikh Zayed Road, which had high ceilings and was column free to offer a different experience of art ... Artspace opened in 2003 with 'Vis a Vis,' an exhibition of contemporary Iranian artists Shadi Ghadrian and Kourosh Adim, co-curated with Isabelle van Indyde (who established her own gallery in 2006). We were nervous who would actually come and were pleasantly surprised when 400 people showed up. There was clearly a hunger for contemporary art." Tabari continued to experiment with her program exhibiting artists from Iran, Jordan, and Afghanistan and later relocating to the Dubai International Financial Center, which now houses a number of art galleries as well as leading financial institutions.

A 15-minute drive from Dubai International Financial Center, in the dusty industrial area of Al Quoz, a few more galleries began to set up in former warehouses seeking affordable rent and large spaces. One of the first to locate in what is now the well-known arts hub of Dubai, Alserkal Avenue, was Ayyam Gallery. Hisham and Khaled Samawi, two cousins and art collectors of Syrian origin, founded the gallery in Damascus in 2006. In 2008, they opened in a converted warehouse in Al Quoz, bringing contemporary Syrian art to a broader audience. Their neighbors were auto repair shops and furniture show rooms. On a warm evening in May, at the opening of the inaugural show, the circuit breakers tripped and the cooling system could only supply half what was needed even with the temporary power generators. "This did not detract our visitors from enjoying the show. The energy in the room was palpable. There wasn't a gallery space on our scale at the time" recalled Hisham Samawi. Ayyam Gallery was a catalyst that encouraged other galleries to move to Alserkal Avenue, including Isabelle van Indyde, Carbon 12, and Lawrie Shabibi.



Farah Al Qasimi "It's Not Easy Being Seen." Photo credit – Celia Petersen, image courtesy of Alserkal Avenue.

A decade later, Alserkal Avenue has become the very heart of art and culture in Dubai, responding to the city's socioeconomic shifts and the community's growing desire to shape contemporary art and culture. Alserkal's notable growth drove the need for expansion. The expanded Alserkal Avenue gave it the opportunity to build on the strength of the leading regional galleries that were part of its initial phase to welcome a number of new galleries and concepts. International galleries like Leila Heller Gallery and Waddington Custot joined the contemporary art gallery roster; nonprofit

institutions like Jean-Paul Najar Foundation expanded private museum offerings; independent cinema joined the avenue in the form of Cinema Akil; and a community black box theater took its place among other creative enterprises.

For Alserkal Avenue's founder, Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal, the vision was always to give back to the community and create a global platform for art in and from the region. "We wanted to create an ecosystem for the contemporary art scene to thrive. That the majority of our community members are homegrown is a sign of the creative drive in our society. We wanted to support these risk takers," he said.

Alserkal is now a neighborhood, a curated art community, and an arts organization with a philanthropic mission that supports artists and arts professionals. Its programming activities are bold, experimental, and ephemeral, supporting artist commissions, film screenings, performances, workshops, and talks – all free to the public. Given its location in Dubai's industrial district, it is one of the few places



Rem Koolhaas, public lecture at Alserkal Avenue. Image courtesy of Alserkal Avenue.

where the manufacturing and blue-collar community crosses paths with collectors and art lovers. Vilma Jurkute, director of Alserkal said: "The past decade of contributing to the art ecosystem has been a journey of milestones, from the moment we welcomed our very first galleries to their participation in international art fairs, and the inauguration of Concrete, a multidisciplinary space designed by the Office of Metropolitan Architecture to host international museum-grade exhibitions. None of it would have been possible without the collaboration of various art organizations across Dubai, Sharjah, and Abu Dhabi."

Over the past decade, the Dubai-based galleries evolved to represent a pluralistic roster of local, regional, and international artists. The galleries have ably positioned their artists increasingly on the global scene and in important museum and private collections. Collectors based in the UAE and from the region have grown, with some becoming patrons, supporting artistic production in different ways. Sheikha Latifa al-Maktoum's initiative, Tashkeel, provides invaluable resources for artists and designers to create and exhibit their work.

Alserkal Avenue, the local and international galleries, Art Dubai, the auction houses, the collectors, the artists, and the many passionate individuals in the arts have all helped to cement Dubai's position as an international hub and marketplace for art from the region. Dubai is doing with contemporary art what it has done over decades in other areas – acting as a meeting point and trading place for East and West. Shumna Basar, writer and cultural critic, summed it up: "What makes the art scene in Dubai unique is what makes Dubai unique. It's

where it is positioned between the Arab world, West Asia, Central Asia. All these places feel close. What it has been able to do is position the incredible richness of the cultural, intellectual, artistic heritage of the UAE in a much broader global context.”

Creating a Community

The name Al Sharjah in Arabic refers to sunrise and light, and the emirate has won a reputation as a beacon of knowledge and imaginative expression in a conservative and traditional society. Home to 17 museums, 10 universities and institutes, and a long-established international book fair, it is the reorientation of the Sharjah Biennial in 2003 and the Sharjah Art Foundation's yearlong programs that make Sharjah a culturally vibrant place.

Sheikha Hoor al-Qasimi, the youngest daughter of the ruler of Sharjah, and an artist herself, returned home in 2002 after graduating from the Slade School of Fine Art in London and took the helm at the biennial. The biennial until then was held in the Sharjah Expo Center with a national pavilion style format and artists selected by governments showing mainly painting, drawing, and sculpture. Having recently visited "Documenta 11," the contemporary art exhibition held every five years in Kassel, Germany, Sheikha Hoor was inspired to reshape the biennial by bringing in outside curators, incorporating new media, and integrating art projects throughout the city, thus making it more connected and relevant.

For the sixth edition of the Sharjah biennial in 2003, the first under the direction of Sheikha Hoor, she abolished the national pavilion model and invited Peter Lewis, her former professor, to co-curate the event, which included 117 artists from 25 countries. The biennial opened on April 8, 2003, a day before U.S. troops occupied Baghdad, amid a cancellation of events in the Gulf. Visitors and artists present had a sense of urgency against a widely unpopular war – a sense that art and culture may counterbalance war and ignorance. Spring 2003 launched a new era of contemporary art in the Gulf.



Rayyane Tabet, "Steel Rings," Sharjah biennial 2015.

The Sharjah biennial attracts many talented curators and artists from the region and internationally. Each manifestation brings an added dimension that allows for experimentation and deeper engagement with the city and gently presses the porous boundary of art and politics. The ninth Sharjah biennial, in 2009, directed a significant portion of the budget toward commissioning new works, largely through an open submission process. The following biennial in 2011 expanded into the city and heritage areas and began to engage a wider public.

The 10th Sharjah biennial, "Plot for a Biennial," coincided with the events of the Arab Spring in 2011. The key words referenced were "treason, necessity, insurrection, affiliation, corruption, devotions, disclosure, translation." It was the largest biennial to date with over a hundred artists from 36 countries with significant commissioned works, film, and music programs across the city. On the same day as the opening, the Gulf Cooperation Council sent troops into Bahrain in response to protests. Suddenly the well-respected biennial assumed exponentially more meaning. A direct political action took place that morning as the ruler made his inaugural tour of the biennial. A group of artists handed out pieces of paper bearing the names of Bahrainis killed in the protests. They were taken for questioning and released a few hours later. Another controversy developed around artwork placed in a public courtyard behind a mosque, with writings considered blasphemous. Public outrage led to the removal of the artwork and the biennial's artistic director.

While the biennial had never shied away from showing difficult work, the public reaction was a wake-up call. The team reflected on the foundation's program and its relevance to the local community. Reem Shadid, deputy director of Sharjah Art Foundation said: "That year we recognized there was a gap between the biennial and the community. The biennial seemed more focused on the 'art world' with little real connection to the people of Sharjah. Afterwards, Sheikha Hoor renewed the commitment to working more closely with the community, which was in fact one of the original motivations for establishing the Sharjah Art Foundation in 2009." From 2011 onward, the foundation developed year-round programs of exhibitions, education, community outreach initiatives, and university collaborations that had a real impact on the local perception and participation in the next biennial.



Susan Hefuna, *Beit Al Serkal*, Sharjah 2015.

The critically-acclaimed 11th Sharjah biennial in 2013, curated by Yuko Hasegawa from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, was referred to by some as "the most diplomatic of biennials." The curator took inspiration from the courtyard in Islamic architecture – a place that she treated as a metaphor for the intersections between public and private life. This was a very public biennale with artworks in courtyards, alleyways, rooftops, a cinema, a playground, a boat, a museum, and an old bank building.

This year, the 13th Sharjah biennial, curated by Christine Tohme, director of Ashkal Alwan in Beirut, Lebanon, extended the biennial to a yearlong program that encompassed projects in four cities outside Sharjah – Dakar, Ramallah, Istanbul, and Beirut – and included an online research platform. At a time when borders are closing and movement increasingly is restricted

in some places, this biennial's vision to transcend these frontiers and recognize the indigenous forms of knowledge production is commendable. An added site to the 2017 biennial is the sleek Al Hamriyah Studios about a 45-minute drive east from the Sharjah heritage area. The studios will host yearlong workshops in painting, sculpture, calligraphy, ceramics, and photography with an emphasis on community life. They will also serve the neighboring emirates of Ajman, Ras al-Khaimah, and Umm al-Quwain, which do not have the same access to contemporary art as the other emirates.

The Sharjah Art Foundation has created a heaven for open artistic practices in the region while respecting the traditional values of the home city. It has become known as a laboratory of sorts, attracting artists and curators from around the world to participate. The robust programs reflect the foundation's mission to explore art histories and work with both prominent and lesser-known artists, from the UAE, the region, and around the world. ArtReview magazine has ranked Sheikha Hoor as the 40th most influential person in art globally in its "Power 100," an annual list that ranks the leading figures in contemporary art.

Barjeel Foundation

Another member of the ruling family in Sharjah who shares a passion for the arts is Sultan Suood Al Qassemi, a columnist and prolific commentator on Arab affairs. He rose to prominence in 2011 during the Arab Spring tweeting the events unfolding on the streets. He became a major news source and Time magazine listed his feed as one of the "140 Best Twitter Feeds in 2011."

As a communicator and media personality, Qassemi is passionate about Arab art as a powerful medium that can be shared with the rest of the world to tell stories of a region mostly known for its headline news of war, extremism, and strife. "The events of 9/11 sparked me to write and become more in the public eye, joining the Young Arab Leaders. I also started collecting Arab art, particularly works that were politically meaningful. It's important to share artworks that are provocative and emotional responses to difficult issues. We are taking the narrative away from extremists," Qassemi explained.

Qassemi established Barjeel Art Foundation in 2010. It now encompasses over 1,200 works by Arab artists from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Sea from 1900 to the present. The



Sultan Suood Al Qassemi at the Global Art Forum "Trading Places," Art Dubai 2017.

foundation aims to develop the art scene in the Arab region and show how it is both nuanced and in a constant state of transformation, reflecting the many themes that shape the cross-cultural story of Arab identities. One of its main ethos is to share the collection publicly online and through publications and in-house exhibitions, as well as to communicate its

depth worldwide. Barjeel Art Foundation was the second regional institution after Mathaf in Doha, Qatar to partner with Google Cultural Institute, where over 800 images of Arab art are available to view.

Since its inception, the Barjeel Art Foundation, housed in Maraya Art Center in Sharjah, has held over a dozen in-house exhibitions. The Maraya Art Center is a nonprofit creative space offering the community multimedia facilities, a video archive, an art library, and regular programming of exhibitions, workshops, and events. In the past five years, with the increased turmoil in the region and rise in extremist rhetoric, Barjeel has partnered with institutions in the United States, Europe, North Africa, and South East Asia to exhibit works from the collection, counter negative stereotypes, and share the Arab world's artistic beauty and heritage with the rest of the world.

The most extensive display of the collection and of Arab art in Britain, "Imperfect Chronology: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary," curated by Omar Kholeif, Manilow Senior Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, was held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. It ran chronologically in a four-part series from September 2015 to January 2017. It explored issues of a modern Arab aesthetic, migration, media representation, urban life, and the aftermath of war, among other topics. Antonia Carver remarked: "It's the first time I've been in London and heard so many people talking about an Arab art exhibition in London that they were repeatedly visiting ... It's had such an impact on people's perceptions of modern Arab art."

Another landmark exhibition of the Barjeel collection is "The Sea Suspended," curated by Karim Sultan, at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. Held in November 2016, it was the first time a show of Arab art from the modern period was presented in Iran. As the tensions between the Gulf Arab states and Iran escalate, the art collection could travel and "speak" to Iranians.

The rich and diverse initiatives, by the different Sharjah-based institutions described above as well as the 16 museums, government departments, and the art, architecture, and design colleges, have formed a community of artists, curators, educators, collectors, writers, and professionals committed to the intellectual development of the art scene in the UAE, the region, and beyond.

Establishing Institutions

At the "Art Museums Here and Now" conference organized by New York University Abu Dhabi Institute in April 2010, a distinguished group of museum directors, curators, scholars, and historians convened in Abu Dhabi, with Mariet Westermann, then provost of New York University Abu Dhabi and Philippe de Montebello, director emeritus of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to discuss the role of art museums in the 21st century. Abu Dhabi had embarked on the Saadiyat Island project including the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi, and Zayed National Museum, as part of the leadership's vision to develop Abu Dhabi into a global capital city.

De Montebello expressed admiration and empathy during the conference at what was being planned in Abu Dhabi. He drew the parallel between the creation of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1870 and the creation of the museums in Abu Dhabi. "In 1870 in New York there essentially was no art, no collectors, no patrons and no money. [The Met] was a museum that was created like parthenogenesis, out of nothing, out of aspirations and ambition." Historically the establishment of museums has been motivated by a sense of aggrandizement and glorification of the state, a desire of a certain legitimacy that is brought about by having culture of a high order as well as interest in foreign visitors. Abu Dhabi's ambition for building its brand echoed those of Florence, Berlin, Dresden, London, and Paris in the 17th and 18th centuries. De Montebello acknowledged that "art as a commodity tends to go where the wealth is, which is not an incompatible marriage." Great collections have moved since the Middle Ages, from the south to north, then eastward. As the centers of wealth have shifted in the past century so have the large-scale ambitions of art museums and collections.

The conference participants considered several important issues, including whether Western museums' initiatives are completely altruistic or magnanimous; if the museums are an unnatural top down imposition of art onto the public, and what creative, social, and educational roles museums serve. These issues continue to be part of the discourse today, a decade after the announcement of the grand museum projects with big Western brands. What has been accomplished in the past decade in Abu Dhabi, in establishing cultural institutions, training Emirati professionals, and developing the arts ecosystem is significant. The path has not always been linear; unanticipated roadblocks have emerged, short-term priorities shifted, and gaps remain unresolved. However, the government's vision and commitment to invest in cultural capital remains steadfast, the ripple effect of which is apparent across the UAE.

In the mid 2000s, Abu Dhabi's new leadership set out to develop Abu Dhabi's vision for sustained development, by creating a knowledge-based economy that would project the emirate on the world stage.

In the mid 2000s, Abu Dhabi's new leadership set out to develop Abu Dhabi's vision for sustained development, by creating a knowledge-based economy that would project the emirate on the world stage. Culture is at the heart of the emirate's strategy. In the aftermath of 9/11 and in an increasingly turbulent region, culture is recognized as a unifying force, which fosters creativity and individual development, reinforces social cohesion and empowerment, and builds bridges of understanding with the rest of the world.

The Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority is mandated with developing and preserving the emirate's arts, culture, and heritage initiatives. Zaki Nusseibeh, UAE Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs and board member of Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority, has been involved in the major cultural initiatives of Abu Dhabi in the domains of art, music, publishing, film, archeology, heritage preservation, and historic restoration, and has been a witness to the meteoric development of the country over the past half century. He said, "We live in a region of the world where the forces of ignorance and darkness have been able to hijack our own religion and culture ... to disseminate in their vengeful wake destruction and tragic human suffering. Regaining our own civilization and reclaiming the true values of our religion and culture therefore have become the most pressing responsibility of our generation. The huge

intellectual endeavor required to deal with this existential task can only be accomplished by carrying through the great reforms in education and knowledge that the UAE has already engaged in its wide-reaching cultural and education strategies.”

Louvre Abu Dhabi

Louvre Abu Dhabi, a significant cultural endeavor, will open its doors later this year. The museum tells a universal story of openness and dialogue among cultures through its collection, temporary exhibitions, and education programs. The chronological narrative is told in chapters, from the birth of civilization through the medieval days, the birth of Islam, the classical period, and the Enlightenment, and concluding with modern and contemporary art. The museum charts the history of human creativity, emphasizing exchange and shared human experiences.

There will be exhibits on display from the museum’s collection of 600 art works, with a further 300 works being lent by 13 French museums.

The ambition, scale, and complexity of the vision required care and diligence to implement. Manuel Rabaté, the director of Louvre Abu Dhabi said: “There is a necessary period for developing such an ambitious project, one that has been remarkably achieved in the past decade.” Rabaté explained the pillars of this endeavor. Some are physical – such as the four monumental concrete posts supporting the 7,000-ton dome of the building. Others are metaphorical, such as the foundations of the new institution including: developing a scientific and cultural narrative rooted in the collection along with the loans and exhibitions that will be showcased in the museum; designing and constructing an iconic building by Pritzker prize-winning architect Ateliers Jean Nouvel; assembling a cohesive team; and cultivating audiences. “These points all require a



Louvre Abu Dhabi under construction courtesy of TDIC.



"Birth of a Museum" - VIP Opening, Sheikh Hazza bin Zayed al-Nahyan with French Minister of Culture and Communication Aurélie Filippetti, April 2014.

thorough process, which cannot be rushed and is now reflected in the many accomplishments to date by our capable team of Emirati and international museum professionals who have joined Louvre Abu Dhabi.”

Louvre Abu Dhabi is an autonomous museum, under the Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority, with its own permanent collection. The museum works closely with Agence France – Muséums, which has coordinated partnerships between Louvre Abu Dhabi and 17 French cultural institutions.

Guggenheim Abu Dhabi

At the tip of Saadiyat Island Cultural District, near Louvre Abu Dhabi, clusters of concrete piles and a perimeter seawall protrude from a desolate site. With the preparatory site works completed in 2011, the construction of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi museum, designed by Pritzker prize-winning architect Frank Gehry, has yet to begin. The museum will offer a transcultural perspective on modern and contemporary art and culture that transcends time and geography. It will focus on shared and exchanged cultural values and identities as well as lines of influence and common sources of inspiration.

The collection, which spans the 1960s to present, is comprised of art from around the world, with a dedicated focus on West Asia, North Africa, and South Asia. The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi provides a platform to share stories and preserve and explore narratives that are being lost from this region, while also considering chapters in art history that have unfolded in other parts of the world. Artworks by leading Emirati conceptual artists, including more than 60 by Hassan Sharif spanning his career and encompassing all of his major series as well as defining bodies by Ebtisam Abdul-Aziz, Mohammed Kazem, and Abdullah Al Saadi, have been acquired. In addition to celebrating the distinctive contributions of local and regional artists and reflecting the history of the UAE, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will serve as a vital crossroads for international exchange and presenting multiple perspectives that engender the appreciation of art and creativity across nationality and cultural background.



The 2017 opening of "The Creative Act" at the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.

Two exhibitions featuring works from the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi collection have been presented in Abu Dhabi: "Seeing Through Light" (November 2014–March 2015) and "The Creative Act: Performance, Process, Presence" (March–July 2017). These exhibitions exemplify the artistic vision of the future museum and its commitment to highlighting individual achievements while bringing attention to common approaches and themes among

contemporary artists. Richard Armstrong, director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Foundation remarked: "Abu Dhabi is on the brink of becoming one of the world's great destinations for museums. Keepers of past evidence, and harbingers of the new, museums can reassert the continuity of creation as well as the importance of change. Through their collections and exhibitions but also through their educational programs and outreach initiatives, the museums being built on Saadiyat Island, among them the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, promise to offer fresh perspectives on tradition and art history as well as innovation and the art of our time."

Zayed National Museum

The Zayed National Museum, designed by the Pritzker prize-winning architect Lord Norman Foster, as wings of a soaring falcon, takes pride of place at the apex of Saadiyat Cultural District. The museum will tell the story of the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, the unification of the UAE, the history of the region, and the region's cultural connections. It will serve as a guardian of national identity and center for transmission of knowledge and learning. Zaki Nusseibeh remarked: "The centrality of museum planning to the process of nation building is not a recent phenomenon in Abu Dhabi. It was recognized by the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan when in 1969, he lay the foundations of Al Ain National Museum to house Abu Dhabi's rich archeological discoveries that tell the story of communities that thrived in areas such as Um An Nar and Hili some five thousand years ago and traded in copper with civilizations of Sumer and the Indus Valley. "

In the past few years, the Zayed National Museum, in collaboration with the British Museum, presented three exhibitions: "Splendors of Mesopotamia" (October 2011–January 2012), "Treasures of the World Cultures" (April–July 2012), and "A History of the World in 100 Objects" (April–August 2014). All were enthusiastically received by locals, residents, and tourists.

The Art Gallery, New York University Abu Dhabi

Across the 10-lane highway from the Cultural District on Saadiyat Island is New York University Abu Dhabi's new campus, designed by Uruguayan architect Rafael Viñoly. It is home to the Arts Center, offering multidisciplinary performances and the Art Gallery, presenting curated art exhibitions. The founding director and chief curator of the Art Gallery, Maya Alison, said, "We present exhibitions with a special emphasis on subjects of both regional concern and international significance and we support scholarly and experimental installations. We view our role as primarily one of encouraging a public dialogue about ideas."

The inaugural exhibition, "On Site" (November 2014–January 2015) took Saadiyat Island as the starting point to consider how physical space is experienced and interpreted. It included works about landscape and the built environment by six artists including Emirati artists Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, known for his large-scale land art, and Ebtisam Abdul-Aziz, a mathematician by education who works in different media including performance. The following exhibitions explored the relationship with technology and Islamic cultural history through the witty contemporary work of Slavs and Tartars. The latest exhibition "But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008" examines the work of a tightknit Emirati conceptual art community over a 20-year period. This group of six artists – Hassan Sharif, Mohammed

Ahmed Ibrahim, Abdullah Al Saadi, Mohammed Kazem, Hussain Sharif, and Ebtisam Abdul-Aziz – played a pivotal role in shaping the social fabric and artistic practices in the UAE. Another key member of the community, Nujoom Alghanem, is a filmmaker, poet, and performance artist who built the foundation of the community and the title of the exhibition is derived from one of her poems.

Allison described the “multicentered and interconnected UAE art scene in that period, with key groupings in Sharjah and Khor Fakkan. Many of [the artists] identified with a ‘new culture’ of radical, formal, and conceptual experimentation in both art and writing ... They are not a movement because they didn’t have a manifesto and they are not strictly avant-garde; they are just friends who are taking refuge in each other and who are trying to be true to their art.”

Allison shared the significant changes in the art economy that she has experienced since she arrived in 2010 and the challenges that still exist. “The main observations when I came here were: professionalization of the artists, community engagement, and visas for artists to work full time. The quality of curatorial engagement with the artists has increased significantly, as artists became exposed to leading international curators invited to curate the Sharjah biennial, the Guggenheim curators, and the Emirati curators like Maisa Al Qassimi and Muneera Al Sayegh working on 'Emirati Expressions' exhibitions. The artists are much more conversant with curatorial practices now and circulating in a broader international setting. The community engagement is gradually growing in Abu Dhabi and thriving at Alserkal Avenue. As for the visas, I understand that is being addressed.” The institutions planned for Saadiyat Island will complete an important part of the arts ecosystem, not the least of which is supporting the development of curatorial and profession arts practices.



"But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008," the Art Gallery at NYU Abu Dhabi 2017.

Salama Bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation

Mina Zayed, Abu Dhabi’s first international port, is transforming. With the main industrial port relocated north to expanded facilities at Taweela, the former warehouses and dhow yards of Mina Zayed are getting a taste of the city’s own creative cool. In November 2015, Warehouse 421, clad in a mesh of CorTen steel, designed by the Danish studio Bjarke Ingels Group, welcomed 10,000 visitors at its opening three-day festival. With two photographic exhibitions, “Lest We Forget: Emirati Family Photographs 1950-1999” and “Mina Zayed: Through the Lens of Jack Burlot,” and a pedestrian plaza showcasing local and regional design products, art

galleries, street dances, performances by Grammy Award-winning Saharan band Tinariwen and Arab-Swedish crossover folk musicians Tarabband, and food trucks, there was something for everyone to enjoy.

Warehouse 421, a community-focused cultural space, is one of the initiatives by the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation to support the development of the arts and culture in the emirates. The foundation was launched in 2010 by Sheikha Salama bin Hamdan al-Nahyan, wife of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, to channel the long-standing tradition of giving by her family along strategic lines that support the development of the emirates. It focuses on three main pillars: arts, culture, and heritage; education; and health.

One of the most impactful programs launched in 2013, in partnership with the Rhode Island School of Design, is the Salama bint Hamdan Emerging Artist Fellowship. The annual fellowship is a selective, year-long program of study to support promising UAE nationals and long-term resident artists. Through the fellowship, the foundation aims to establish a community of emerging artists who will contribute to the arts and education ecosystem of the UAE. Khulood Al Atiyat, manager of arts, culture and heritage at the foundation, shared the genesis of this program: “We did a survey of the

arts ecosystem to understand what is needed focusing on the next generation. We looked back at the early years of the Emirates Fine Arts Society in Sharjah and

The UAE is the first Gulf country to have a permanent pavilion at the International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, the Olympics of contemporary art.

the support it provided for artists in terms of a community and education opportunities abroad. Speaking to the emerging artists today, they identified the need for studio spaces in the city, community and peer-to-peer discussions, and critical engagement with their work. We then designed a program to address these needs and partnered with the Rhode Island School of Design to develop the curriculum, which includes academic courses, technical workshops, studio and exhibition practicum, and a cross-cultural trip to the U.S.”

Over the four years, the program has graduated 57 fellows and is in the process of admitting the fifth cohort. Atiyat added, “The program has exceeded our expectations by any measure. We did not expect this kind of impact so soon. The transformation happens literally in front of our eyes during the year. The U.S. trip is a turning point for most of the fellows. After attending the graduate student critiques and experimenting in the textile, glass, wood, and metal workshops at RISD then visiting artist studios in Brooklyn and museums in Manhattan, the fellows come with a deeper appreciation for what it means to be an artist dedicated to your practice.” Several of the fellows have received scholarships from the foundation to pursue a Masters of Fine Arts in the United States or United Kingdom and others are teaching and practicing artists in the UAE and abroad. Gradually, a new community of emerging artists, aware of their locale and connected globally is taking shape in the capital city.

The UAE is the first Gulf country to have a permanent pavilion at the International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, the Olympics of contemporary art. Since the first participation in 2009, the invited curators have presented single and group artist exhibitions. This year’s exhibition “Rock, Paper, Scissors: Positions in Play,” curated by Hammad Nasar, examines the artistic practices in the UAE through the lens of playfulness. The exhibition includes for the first time

UAE-national and resident artists, embracing the multicultural demographics of the country. Artists Nujoom Alghanem, Sara Al Haddad, Vikram Divecha, Lantian Xie, and Mohamed Yousif present several works, some of which are refabrication of “lost” works, existing works, or new commissions. The accompanying publication, with essays commissioned by artists and curators, is also considered a “site” of the exhibition. Nassar remarked: “This is only possible because of the collective and cumulative dialogue that previous



National Pavilion United Arab Emirates, La Biennale di Venezia 2017.

and current exhibitions – in Venice and the UAE – have already built up.” Leading up to the opening of the exhibition, several cultural institutions across the UAE were invited to act as interlocutors in exploring the themes of the exhibition. This moment of collaboration signaled a maturity of the art ecosystem and a growing confidence in the respective institution’s programs and vision.

The foundation also supports an internship program for National Pavilion UAE at Venice Biennale, offering emerging arts and architecture professionals a month in Venice to staff the pavilion. The interns participate in an education program in Venice while acting as docents and custodians of the National Pavilion UAE.

The programs spearheaded by the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation have significantly contributed to the art ecosystem. Maya Alison remarked that the emerging artist fellowship program “is yielding some of our most important artists of the next generation. There is nothing comparable to it in terms of quality and rigor and importance for the professionalization of artists.”

Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation

In 2016 ADMAF celebrated 20 years of arts and culture engagement in the UAE and internationally. To mark that milestone, ADMAF commissioned 20 artworks by emerging and established Emirati artists that were displayed alongside 30 works by Emirati artists in the exhibition, “Portrait of a Nation,” with the artists reflecting on the UAE as a homeland. From large-scale sculptures to paintings, drawings, photographs, collages, videos, and installations, the exhibition captures the ever-changing face of the visual arts in the UAE. Huda I. Al Khamis-Kanoo, ADMAF’s founder remarked: “The UAE has seen exponential growth in the population, innovation, and development of the creative and cultural industries. In that time, we have seen a wealth of artistic and cultural initiatives taking root, the result of an ever-deepening dialogue regarding the role of arts in society.”

ADMAF has forged longstanding ties with many Emirati artists, supporting them with mentorship, residency, and teaching opportunities as well as commissions and exhibitions. ADMAF endeavors to connect the local communities with counterparts through international cultural partnerships, arts education programs, and community art events. "In today's ever-complex world, it is more important than ever to seize what the artistic expression can offer; the opportunity to stand back and explore the many similarities and differences that shape us as individuals, communities, nations, and regions," said Khamis-Kanoo.

UAE Unlimited

UAE Unlimited is one of the newest initiatives to the capital scene. A platform founded by Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan bin Khalifa al-Nahyan, a prominent patron of the arts, it aims to support emerging talent and contribute to the overall cultural production in the UAE.

Its third exhibition, "Bayn: The In-Between" (February–June 2017) curated by Muneera Al Sayegh, was held at Warehouse 421, in collaboration with the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation, the Art Gallery at NYUAD, and Maraya Art Center in Sharjah, highlighting the collective nature of the creative community in the UAE today. The exhibition includes emerging UAE-based artists working in different media: Asma Al Ahmed, Hatem Hatem, Maytha Al Shamsi, Saif Mhaisen, Sara Al Haddad, and Talal Al Ansari. Sayegh reflected: "My role with UAE Unlimited as a curator helped me advance professionally and creatively. Having a platform to engage with a group of emerging creatives is essential to the overall art ecosystem in the UAE." It is noncommercial initiatives such as these that are beginning to fill the gap between the large museums on Saadiyat Island and the emerging artists and creatives seeking support at a critical juncture in their development.



"Bayn: The In-Between," Asma Al Ahmed, Geo Displacement 2017.

The institutions that have been established in the capital in the past decade are important to the health of a contemporary art scene. They represent a pivotal period in the life of a country that is making an important investment in art and culture.

Conclusion

A decade on from the announcement of the Saadiyat Cultural District in Abu Dhabi, the UAE has become an important hub for the arts, attracting international collectors, curators, museum directors, scholars, journalists, critics, and artists and elevating the position of the UAE globally.

The development of the art scenes in its three main cities – Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah – reflects the character of each emirate and its leadership. Abu Dhabi, the capital has embarked on capital-intensive initiatives such as the museums of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, and Zayed National Museum. Dubai's focus on the commercial art market, with auctions, galleries, and Art Dubai builds on its position as an entrepot for finance and trade. Sharjah's critically acclaimed biennial, exhibitions, artists' grants, residencies, education programs, and publications under the Sharjah Art Foundation focus on content production, a hallmark of the emirate.

While the art scene in each emirate developed somewhat independently during the past decades, a growing dependency and interdependency is becoming evident across the art ecosystem, as it enters the age of the institutions, with the opening of Louvre Abu Dhabi. The number of private and family foundations that have been established indicates a deeper commitment to the arts by patrons, such as the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation investing in arts, culture, and education; Alserkal Avenue with its expanded philanthropic initiatives; Sharjah Art Foundation with its continuing support of artistic production; and the Jameel Arts Centre due to open in Dubai in 2018 with an open-access arts library and archive.

The decision to build these institutions reflects the UAE's commitment to broadening the country's economy, thereby establishing new opportunities. In order to support and sustain these developments, a qualified and trained workforce is needed. While Emiritisation is a stated priority of the government across all sectors, the investment in higher education and training for arts professionals is not commensurate with the ambition of the institutions being planned. Knowledge creation in the arts requires a rigorous education in fields such as art history, art practices, museum studies, and conservation, among others. Currently there are limited programs in the UAE that provide the required specializations, creating a misalignment between the higher education programs offered and the growing needs of the art ecosystem. Similarly, scholarships by the government for high-achieving Emiratis to study abroad are focused on science, technology, engineering, and medicine. In a country where such initiatives are mandated top down there is a need for further integration of education and training in the arts and culture fields.

The artists are key players in the development of a contemporary art scene. It is important that more artists are encouraged to make the UAE their home with government support such as streamlined work and residency visas and affordable studios. Similarly, incentives to encourage arts patronage by individuals and corporations would provide broader access to funds for artistic production, research and learning, and arts education.

The UAE offers a rare confluence of resources, vision, and a young population – attributes that have and will contribute to its growth as a cultural force. The contemporary art scene in the UAE is equally conscious of its responsibility to local audiences and its ability to connect with a much larger, global community. Perhaps what's most significant, the past decade of growth has produced an informed, enthusiastic, diverse, and discursive public, engaging with society through contemporary art and culture.

