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No mega-buck deals, but Art Dubai dodges economic doldrums

City's economy may be flagging, but fair's diverse offering and clientele help sales stay afloat—up to a certain price

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Art Dubai 2019 Courtesy of Photo Solutions

Art Dubai (until 23 March) is a gateway fair, one of the very few international art fairs in that vast geographic swathe from Delhi across to Lagos.

While a few international big guns exhibit—Victoria Miro, for example, and (new this year) Sprüth Magers—adding a blue-chip seal of approval in the eyes of some, it is those galleries and artists seldom seen at other fairs that are the real reason for coming here.

This year Art Dubai has gone on the curatorial charm offensive, inviting over 50 museum representatives to the event—the highest number ever, says Pablo de Val, the fair's artistic director—though the fact it is also a Sharjah Biennial year provides extra cultural carrot.

Residents One thing the fair tries to counter is Dubai's reputation as a cultural desert, simply a city of vacuous shopping malls and luxury hotels (although, admittedly, it is held in one of the latter).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a land of contradictions and three of the resident artists say their experience was defined by mixed emotions.

Jerry B Martin (shown by Revolver) from Peru concurs: "It took me while to overcome my preconceptions. My idea of Dubai was more bling bling, shiny and fast.

However, both artists felt compelled to address the issue of migrant labour in the work they produced. "I felt emotionally attached to the struggle of the people who come here and have to bust their asses to make it work—those people who work on the sites all day, where do they go?" Martin says.

For the Brazilian artist Luiz Roque (exhibiting with Mendes Wood), part of the reason for accepting the residency was to escape Jair Bolsonaro's far right Brazil, which is "like living in a bad soap opera—we don't know what he will do or say next."

Roque's video, Zero, is priced at \$8,000 (edition of five plus one artist's proof) and therefore in line with much of the work on offer at Art Dubai—the vast majority is priced between around \$5,000-\$50,000 or \$100,000, with a few pieces edging further into six figures.

As de Val himself says, the litmus test remains the fair's ability to produce sales and, as numerous Dubai-based galleries say—off the record—the city's economy is in the doldrums and business is slow (though run a Google News search here and, naturally, the state-controlled press will tell you all is dandy and that the hotels are always "fully-booked", even when strangely devoid of guests in reality).

Yet at the fair, sales appear to be decent, even if not necessarily to dirham buyers. There is never going to be a flurry of first day sale reports here—as Glenn Scott Wright of Victoria Miro says: "There's a slower pace compared to other fairs like Frieze and Basel."

"I've spoken to some curators who say they were just invited by the fair: they weren't required to do anything in return. It feels convivial," says Anne-Claudie Coric of the Paris-based Galerie Templon.

Kristin Hjellegjerde, based in Berlin and London also had a good opening day, selling works for between around \$2,600 and \$18,000 including seven pieces by the Moroccan artist Yassine Balzioui, along with pieces by the Pakistani artist Maha Ahmed and Soheila Sokhanvari, an Iranian born UK-based artist.

Addis Fine Art, based in the Ethiopian capital and London, sold five of the seven works on view during the opening day, including paintings by the Modern Ethiopian artist Tadesse Mesfin, both priced at \$28,500, to locally-based collectors.

The message last year and it remains a strong presence, although Ghana's Gallery 1957 is (which exhibited for the first time in 2018) is notably absent this year.

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