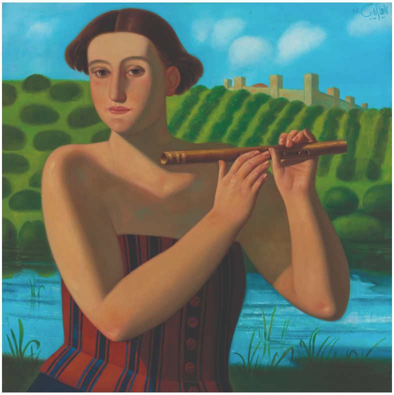
Art Market

Art Dubai Notches Early Sales as International Fairs Resume

Rawaa Talass Mar 31, 2021 6:09pm



Afifa Aleiby, *Flute*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

The show must go on, as the saying goes, and that is exactly how the Middle East's leading art fair, Art Dubai, is bouncing back. After what has been a challenging year for the global art community, the fair's new in-person edition opened to VIPs on Monday (and opens to the public tomorrow). It was around this time last year that the fair's organizers pulled the plug on the event, making it one of the first major art fairs to do so due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

"It's been complicated, there's no two ways around it," said Art Dubai's executive director Benedetta Ghione, reflecting on the process of rethinking the fair's format in recent weeks against the backdrop of the United Arab Emirates gradually returning to some kind of normalcy as a result of having vaccinated almost half of the country's population. "Because we are in Dubai, where the city did reopen quite early on in the pandemic, put in place a best-in-class testing protocol, has been able to operate flights, and started the vaccination rollout aggressively and very early, we really felt all along we were going to be able to hold a physical event."

Acting responsibly in order to enjoy art in person was the way to go, according to the fair's artistic director, Pablo del Val. "Culture should never be canceled," he said. "You can prove this and go ahead with events and be extremely thoughtful and careful. After all this time of being reclusive into our screen, being able to face a work of art in a really raw way is going to be fantastic."

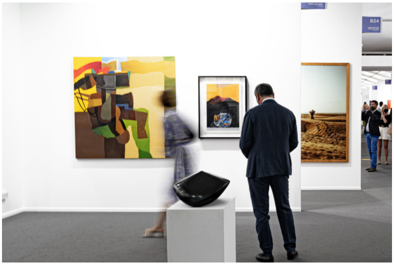
Art Dubai is usually held at the Madinat Jumeirah Hotel, but the 14th edition is taking place at the Dubai International Financial Center (DIFC) business hub. A purpose-built structure divided into three sections was erected at the foot of DIFC's iconic Gate Building to host a smaller grouping of 50 contemporary and modern art galleries from 31 countries. Visitors can also experience an outdoor sculpture park featuring works by 10 artists including Pablo Reinoso, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, and Dia Azzawi, as well as a wide-ranging video program of 10 screening stations.

Her Highness Sheikha Lafita bint Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, chairperson of Dubai Culture and Arts Authority, visits Art Dubai. Courtesy of Art Dubai.

Inside, major changes informed by Dubai government guidelines have been implemented to secure a COVID-safe experience for all fairgoers. The spacious venue is dotted with sanitizer dispensing units and equipped with a ventilation system. Participants can receive PCR tests, should it be necessary. Aside from the mandatory mask wearing, floor stickers remind visitors to maintain social distancing: "Enjoy the art, two meters apart." Due to capacity restrictions, the fair's organizers are expecting between 15,000 and 20,000 visitors through the end of its run on April 3rd. The fair also launched a digital app that allows visitors to book time slots in advance and navigate an expansive artwork catalogue.

Art Dubai also implemented a revised payment model whereby galleries make no up-front payments. Instead, booths will be paid off depending on sales, with the fair receiving 50 percent of sales, up to the cost of the booth. As for dealers who weren't able to fly in due to travel restrictions, Art Dubai set up a remote booth system. Gallerists could ship their artworks to be monitored by an assigned representative at the venue. A barcode on the booth wall can be scanned, allowing an interested visitor to "e-meet" the gallerist through texting or scheduling a Zoom call.

The fair may be smaller in scale, but it didn't compromise on quality. Some participants suggested there may be a silver lining to the necessarily scaled-down format this year. "I don't mind that it's smaller; I think it's actually going to be more enjoyable, more intimate, more one-on-one, and less hectic," said gallerist Sunny Rahbar, who co-founded Dubai's The Third Line. "The massive part is that they were able to put it together in this pandemic."



Installation view of Meem Gallery's booth at Art Dubai. Courtesy of Art Dubai and Chrissified.

Showcasing figurative and geometric works by Hayv Kahraman, Laleh Khorramian, and the late Iranian modernist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, among others, The Third Line is one of a dozen Emirati-based galleries taking part this year. "For me, it is definitely [important] to support not just Art Dubai but also Dubai and to let people know that we're still here, we're still doing what we're doing," Rahbar said. "Yes, things have changed and they're going to change probably even more, but we're still standing."

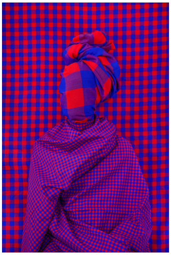
Another prominent Dubai space, Ayyam Gallery, has a focused presentation of evocative works by one of Syria's most important living artists, Safwan Dahoul, who moved to the U.A.E. after the political uprising that occurred in his home country a decade ago. In its booth, Beirut-based Agial and Saleh Barakat Gallery is championing Lebanese artists who have been impacted by the country's worsening economic crisis, with a bold selection of paintings and sculptures that delve into the sociopolitical turbulence of the Middle East.

The fair's offerings reflect the unique diversity of artistic energies coming to Dubai from literally from all over the world. In this sense, Art Dubai mirrors the city's multicultural society. "We are very unique and different to [other fairs] precisely because we are looking through the majority of the world population," said del Val.

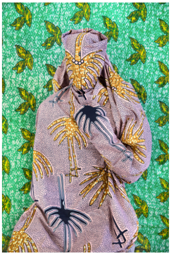
Rakeb Sile, whose London- and Addis Ababa–based gallery Addis Fine Art became the first Ethiopian gallery to participate in Art Dubai back in 2018, also highlighted the fair's diverse offering as its greatest strength. "Every other fair that we do is very white," she said. "It's Western galleries with Western artists, and there is more consciousness now about Black artists, African artists, artists of color, women. There's a lot of talk about that kind of stuff, but the hegemony is still there. So we tend to be very much the minority in terms of diversity when we're in other fairs. Art Dubai is the most exciting for me because it allows me to discover things that I wouldn't necessarily discover."

Because the travel corridor between Addis Ababa and Dubai is open, Sile's business partner and co-founder of the gallery, Mesai Haileleul, was able to attend the fair in person. "It was a pleasant surprise simply because people were happy not only to see us, but also happy to see these amazing works," he said on the fair's busy opening day. "The commitment made by Pablo and his team to take Art Dubai from where it was and install it here at DIFC is tough. They've pulled it off, obviously."

Early inquiries have translated into sales of two figurative paintings by the Ethiopian artist Tizta Berhanu from Addis Fine Art's booth, for prices ranging from £4,000 to £6,000 ($5,500–$8,250).



Alia Ali
Beat, 2019
Galerie Peter Sillem
€8,000



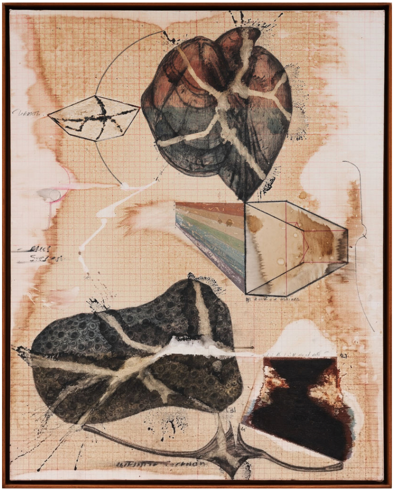
Alia Ali
Avian Blush, 2021
Galerie Peter Sillem
€6,500

Art Dubai's participants are also showcasing works by big-name, blue-chip artists such as Yayoi Kusama, Anish Kapoor, Takashi Murakami, and Kehinde Wiley. One of the most talked-about works at the fair is a visually arresting painting by Wiley portraying a Black woman in a floral field of purples and greens, and being shown by Paris's Galerie Templon. The fair also serves as a lively platform to support rising and mid-career artists associated with the region. One of the standout presentations, in Galerie-Peter-Sillem's booth, features Yemeni-Bosnian-American artist Alia Ali's richly vibrant photographs of individuals wrapped in patterned fabrics. And the Iraqi painter Afifa Aleiby is making her debut at Art Dubai, her dreamlike compositions of women attracting visitors to Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery's booth.

Considering the economic impact of the pandemic, one of the open questions heading into the fair was whether collectors would not only show up, but also make purchases. "I always felt that the art fair is really at the top of the pyramid in the hierarchy of the channels in the market," said Hala Khayat, Art Dubai's regional director. "The effect of it goes beyond Dubai.

I'm talking to dealers and they're so happy that it's happening because they can sell art in Damascus or Beirut. They know that it's there, it's continuing—it gives confidence in the market throughout the region."

While some collectors may be hesitant to visit and spend at fairs just yet, judging by Art Dubai's opening day footfall, there seems to be a hunger to explore and discover again. "This thing has been quite a shock for everybody, even for collectors," said Haileleul. "It's a new world now, but I think eventually they'll come around and be very supportive because at the end of the day, the arts are always what really inspire and engage folks."



Jitish Kallat
Palindrome Anagram Painting 16, 2020
Templon
$20,000 - 30,000

But even among collectors who have remained active through the pandemic, in many cases its economic toll has impacted their collecting habits. "There is a financial crisis, so people will ask a lot and compare," said Lebanese dealer Saleh Barakat. "Previously, a collector would buy 10 artworks, but now it's one or two. So the collector needs to go around, think about it, and try to negotiate a good price. I think we'll see results within the next few days and not right away."

In the first two days of Art Dubai, more than 30 participating galleries reported sales. Ayyam Gallery sold one of Dahoul's paintings in the range of $100,000 to $150,000. Galerie Templon sold two paintings by the Indian artist Jitish Kallat to a collector from the region. A major cultural institution in the Gulf purchased an elaborate, architecture-inspired work by the young Egyptian artist Amani Mousa from Saudi-based Mono Gallery, a first-time exhibitor at the fair. Dubai's Custot Gallery sold one work by French artist Fabienne Verdier for $150,000, and two works by English artist Ian Davenport for $120,000 and $150,000.

Beyond the standout presentations and swift sales, the presence of Art Dubai this year as an in-person fair, given all that has happened, offers a message of unity not just among dealers, collectors, organizers, and artists, but even among the affected cultural workers such as shippers, carpenters, and handlers who helped bring the event to life despite countless challenges. "It is very much about: Let's try and see how we can do this in a different way," said Ghione. "It's definitely an act of solidarity, and I think it's also an act of resistance." ●

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