Insight | Art Fair

Dubai Connections: Eight Highlights at Art Dubai

By Rebecca Anne Proctor
Dubai
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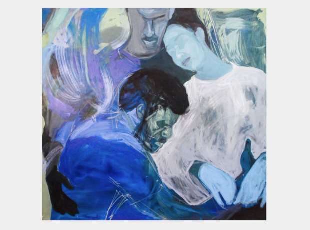
Rebecca Anne Proctor highlights eight artists showing at the 14th Art Dubai, this year taking place in its new location at the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) (29 March–3 April 2021), featuring 50 participating galleries from 31 countries with a focus on artists from the Middle East and the Global South.



Tizta Berhanu, *Rest in the arms of trust* (2020). Oil on canvas. 120 x 120 cm. Courtesy Addis Fine Art.

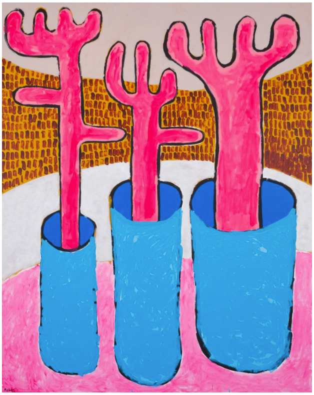
Tizta Berhanu at Addis Fine Art

Ethiopian painter Tizta Berhanu has quickly become known for her expressive paintings awash with lucid colours and gentle brushstrokes through which she explores emotional relationships and human connections.

Berhanu was born in Addis Ababa in 1991, where she has lived and worked her entire life. In 2013, she graduated from the Alle School of Fine Arts and Design at Addis Ababa University, where she trained as a figurative painter under Tadesse Mesfin, one of Ethiopia's most recognisable modernist painters.

Berhanu has received great acclaim after the closing of her sold-out solo exhibition with Addis Fine Art in Addis Ababa earlier this year (*Hēber*, 21 December 2020–27 February 2021).

The gallery will be showing new works that the artist completed during her time in residency at Art Dubai last year, which have not yet been sold due to coronavirus-related complications.



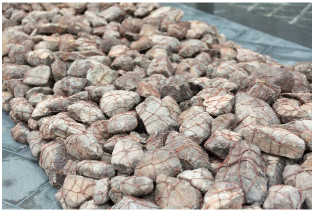
Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, *3 Pink Forks in Vase* (2020). Acrylic on canvas. 250 x 200 cm. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi.

Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim at Lawrie Shabibi

Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim is part of the first generation of contemporary artists from the late 1980s that made up the United Arab Emirates' avantgarde scene.

Like his contemporaries Abdullah Al Saadi, Hussain Sharif, and Mohammed Kazem, Ibrahim's work straddles conceptualism, painting, and sculpture. It is marked by a deep connection with his birthplace of Khorfakkan, a small town near the emirate of Fujairah nestled between the Gulf of Oman and the Hajar Mountains that can be found throughout his practice, in his installations, drawings, and objects.

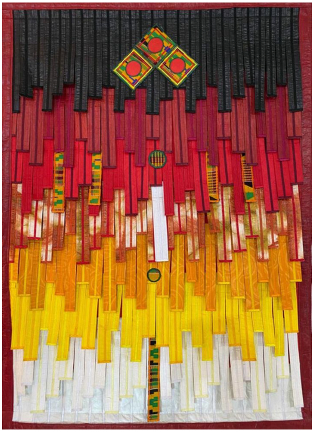
Over the last several years, Ibrahim has garnered increasing international attention for his work and has recently been chosen to represent the U.A.E. pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2022.



Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, *Mountain Rock Wrapped with Copper Wire* (2007). Rock and copper wire. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist, Lawrie Shabibi, and Art Dubai.

For Art Dubai's Sculpture Park, which features large-scale works by eight artists along the water paths surrounding the iconic Gate Building in DIFC, Ibrahim will present his *Mountain Rock Wrapped in Copper Water*. Dating to 2007, the work draws once again upon the natural landscape surrounding his hometown of Khorfakkan and comprises nearly five tonnes of rock collected over the course of several years.

In the piece, each rock is wrapped with copper wire—an action that relays the obsessive act of repetition, evoking both the archaeology of this hometown and his memory of it before it was changed forever by urban development.



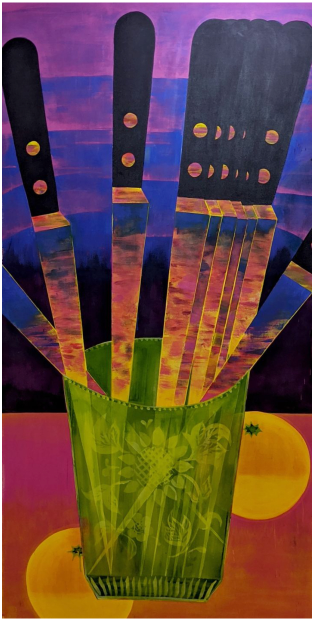
Abdoulaye Konaté, *Kente 1 et motif du Sahel* (2020). Courtesy Gallery 1957.

Abdoulaye Konaté at Gallery 1957

A nod to Art Dubai's ongoing relationship with the African art scene, Accra-based Gallery 1957 is participating in Art Dubai for the second time with new works by Malian artist Abdoulaye Konaté.

Konaté's colourful textile-based works incorporate traditional Ghanaian kente cloth. Delicately sewn and assembled to relay the power of African tradition and history, Konaté's works question the way in which societies and individuals, both in Mali, greater Africa, and beyond, have been affected by factors such as religion, globalisation, environmental disasters, wars, pandemics, and the struggle for power.

The artist's rich use of fabric offers an earthy and grounding way for viewers to connect with his homeland and the themes that he presents.



Iman Raad, *Outdoor Cordial Table* (2020). Courtesy the artist and Dastan's Basement.

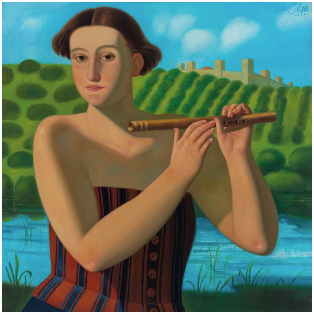
Iman Raad at Dastan's Basement

Iranian New York-based artist Iman Raad is one of several artists being shown by Tehran-based Dastan's Basement, a gallery that has been in operation since 2012 and is known for its experimental programme and championing of Iranian artists internationally.

Raad, who works across a variety of media, incorporates within his works delicate references to Persian and Mughal painting as well as South Asian truck painting with digital glitch imagery.

Brimming with colour and bold shapes, works are both unsettling and seductive due to their repetitive forms, altered perspectives, and ornamentation in the form of birds, flowers, and still lifes.

Raad incorporates these myriad elements onto his canvases, instilling within them a reconciliation of his Iranian culture with visual nods to his current base in the United States. His works thus merge the flatness of Persian miniature painting with the perspective found in Western painting.



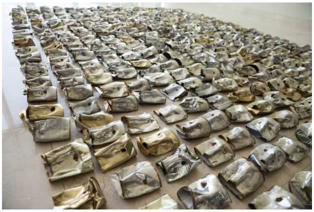
Afifa Aleiby, *Flute* (2012). Oil on canvas. 70 x 70 cm. Courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

Afifa Aleiby at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

The works of Iraqi painter Afifa Aleiby will light up the booth of Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery. Now based in the Netherlands, Aleiby is known for her dramatic abstract figurative paintings that reference both a personal and collective history.

Aleiby has been particularly active in supporting the cultural activities of her homeland, including the Iraqi democratic movement and the struggle against racism, war, terrorism, and dictatorship. Her portraits of women marry references to Renaissance religious paintings to those of social realism.

Aleiby uses the female figure to reflect on the current state of world affairs, politics, beauty, and society. An unsettling yet dreamy silence grips her women—a feeling that draws the viewer into the scene to contemplate perhaps the same very questions as Aleiby's characters.



Hussain Sharif, *Faces #2* (2017). 455 tin cans. Courtesy Salwa Zeidan Gallery.

Hussain Sharif at Salwa Zeidan Gallery

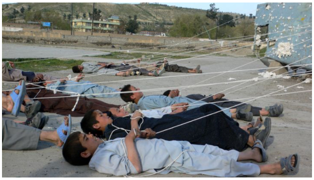
The Emirati artist's experimental work in installation and mixed media is on view at Abu Dhabi-based gallery Salwa Zeidan.

Born in 1961 in Dubai, Sharif is a pivotal member of the Emirati art scene. He founded and is an active member of the Emirates Fine Art Society in Sharjah along with his late brother, Hassan Sharif.

Like other artists from the U.A.E., his work reflects on Emirati identity and the surrounding natural desert landscape. His installation *Faces* (2017), made of 455 tin cans and shown this year at Art Dubai, was originally shown in its first version in the 99th edition of the Cairo Biennale.

While at first glance the work may seem repetitive for its sole material of tin cans, further inspection reveals what resemble human faces, rendered by Sharif with a hammer and other interference—a nod to human physiological diversity and life experience.

Since the beginning of the nineties, Sharif has worked with ready-made and neglected objects, reviving them with new life and giving them another meaning apart from their utilitarian function.



Lida Abdul, *In Transit* (2008) (still). Courtesy Giorgio Persano.

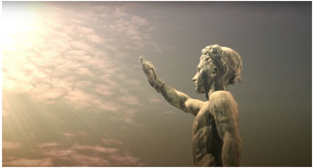
Lida Abdul at Giorgio Persano

As part of Art Dubai's new film programme, a curatorial project featuring single-channel films produced by over 20 regional and international artists, Giorgio Persano is showing *In Transit* (2008), a short film by Afghan artist Lida Abdul.

Set in the outskirts of Kabul, where viewers can immediately witness a landscape decimated by over 20 years of war and constant bombings, children play with the remains of military tanks and planes that look akin to bird carcasses.

This is now a normal sight for war-torn Afghanistan, where disaster, pain, and hardship are an everyday part of life. Yet, Abdul still hopes to find beauty, even in the depths of despair. 'I want to bring out the beauty of how children that tragically face violent scenarios can be more flexible as they create through their innocence an antidote to the tragedy of their condition,' she says.

'Without children playing and running through the streets of Kabul, Afghanistan today would be an even more violent place. I want to bring out their innocence by trying to resuscitate the monsters of the past so that something new can appear within their society.'



Laurent Grasso, *Soleil Double (Double Sun)* (2014) (still). Courtesy Perrotin.

Laurent Grasso at Perrotin

In the 16-minute film *Soleil Double (Double Sun)* (2014), French artist Laurent Grasso shoots the district of EUR (Esposizione Universale di Roma) in Rome, Italy.

Now a residential and business district far removed from the Italian capital's historical sites, the area was originally chosen in the 1930s as the site for the 1942 World's Fair, the opening of which Benito Mussolini marked as the celebration of 20 years of Fascism.

Grasso has revisited the modern area of Rome and added a second sun in post-production, producing the effect of a natural disaster, or perhaps even a divine manifestation in the area.

The effects endow the film with a dreamy, if not eerie experience of this area of the city that doesn't have the romantic charm of ancient Rome's fabled heritage sites. The viewer is led to question reality as Grasso distorts the moving image.—[O]