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ART

State of the Art

Is the UAE going to become the next stop for the art connoisseur? **Shiva Kumar Thekkepat** speaks to gallerists and artists on its position on the ever-changing international art scene.

When the Picasso exhibition travelled to Abu Dhabi last year, I didn't think twice before bundling my family into our car and trundling down to the Emirates Palace Hotel on a weekend. Usually we are too tired to attempt anything but the barest minimum of travel during weekends. But this was said to be the biggest in the world, better than even the one at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York. It was a treat that we had never imagined we'd be able to

experience in this lifetime. How could we miss this chance?

If I had any doubt that art had arrived in the UAE, this event certainly dispelled it. But what really drove the fact home was that there were many other families from across the UAE who had made the trip that day to be exposed to the great master. That certainly opened my eyes to what was happening to the art scene in the UAE.

It also raised the question about the UAE's status in the art world. Are

trends in the international art circuit reflected in the UAE?

"Yes, to a certain degree," says Salwa Zeidan, artist and gallery director, Salwa Zeidan Gallery, in Abu Dhabi, and art director of the forthcoming Abu Dhabi International Sculpture Symposium (ADISS). "With the numerous multinational galleries, two major art fairs, biennials, the Guggenheim, the Louvre and many other high standard icons in the global art circuit moving into the UAE, we can safely say that the country is setting a solid platform that contains the most vital components of a credible art scene."

The problem with identifying art trends is that we often miss the forest for the trees, so to speak. There are so many vastly different things happening, and in so many directions. Ask the experts and you'll



Art Sawa Gallery, Dubai
Despite being a nascent art market, the UAE shows an independent stream of thought

KISHORE KUNAR/ANH

get the answer that art trends emerge clearly only upon retrospect, and over time. Though they can see trends being formed at any given time, they also accept the fact that they cannot perceive at once some, if not most, of the important developments in contemporary art.

"The UAE art scene is a recent phenomenon and quite young, so obviously the trends of the international art scene take some time to percolate down here," says Amel Makkawi, founder, Art Sawa Gallery, Dubai. "However, the UAE is known to catch up quite fast. It is a challenge, of course, especially considering the number of new and interesting initiatives and projects."

Despite being a nascent art market, the UAE appears to be showing an independent stream of thought that is reflected in the work of artists based

A sculpture by Hasan Sharif titled "Spoons", in stainless steel and copper, at the Salwa Zeidan Gallery, Abu Dhabi



SUPPLIED PHOTO



Amel Makkawi, founder, Art Sawa Gallery, Dubai

SILVIA BARON/ANH

in the UAE, say experts. "Like all artists around the world, the process begins with outside influence as part of the natural evolution of things," says Zeidan. "However, we are noticing a surprising number of artists who are seriously pursuing their careers in art and, as a result of that, are presenting very original works, thus setting an entirely new benchmark in the region."

"I have no doubt that this type of dedication will place the UAE's national artists on the international art circuit where we already have some remarkable artists already, such as Hassan Sharif, Mohammad Kazem and many others."

"The UAE has a complex mix of different cultures and nationalities, so certainly that will be reflected in the art we produce," says Makkawi. "This in itself will be reflected as a unique stream of thought in art. We are

mainly in the process of developing a regional market."

What art experts attempt is to interpret the current art trends through their knowledge of art history, and their informed view of a particular trend or artist, and the place they will occupy. A collector invests in what he hopes will turn out to be a trend based on the experts' view.

Much of that perceived trend is centred around creating new media work - anything built with new technology. Artists typically work with technology when it becomes cheap and easily available. With the internet and computer technology becoming accessible to anyone with the time and determination to work with it, experts say this is the time to play with it and participate in its development - presenting a real opportunity for artists.

Makkawi agrees. "We are not just about paintings or sculptures," she says. "We look at art in a very broad perspective. Some of our artists came out with some very creative ideas like CDs, posters, poetry, etc. - a lot of computer related stuff. So, the canvas is really huge."

Social media is apparently where things are headed. It involves crowd-sourced art projects that essentially have artists working with the newest technology. People participation is essential in such projects, and it works both ways, with the people supporting and promoting the artist as well. Dubai had a vision of one such project when

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David Mach, the Scottish installation artist and sculptor, held a 'show' at the lobby of the Mall of the Emirates in 2007. In full view of the public, he worked on a huge image of an Arabian stallion leaping into space.

What he used was not paint or clay but thousands of picture postcards of the Jumeirah Emirates Towers and Shaikh Zayed Road illuminated at night, layered across each other intricately – precision engineered to form the larger image. The kind of audience participation it generated was unprecedented, with observers frequently interrupting Mach in his work with questions and requests for autographs. Mach considered the feedback invaluable, and it also spawned an idea to work on back in his native Edinburgh.

"Sometimes we artists get some unique opportunities, it is incredible," says Wasel Safwan, Emirati artist who pioneered a new school of art called UAEism. "Recently for example, the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority gave us, a bunch of artists, some classic cars to paint them in our styles. It was a unique idea, and for us a way of instantly connecting with our audience when the cars were displayed on the roads. The feedback we received was incredible and motivated us into venturing into new areas."

That the UAE is quick to adapt to international trends is accepted. But is it initiating any trends in art that is making waves on more than a local level?

"All that will happen in due course," says Zeidan. "For now, it is important to acknowledge that the UAE art scene is fully supported by the government."

"Let's face it, the attention the UAE government is giving to the national art scene is extremely rare and is sure to nurture the artistic evolution of local talent – a process I find very healthy in the long run. With Sharjah holding biennials, Dubai and Abu Dhabi organising world-class art fairs, a major movement is taking place and resonating on a regional, even global scale. At this rate and through such a high level of exposure, Emirati artists are bound to eventually become a major force to be reckoned with on the global art scene."

Art salons are where art is headed internationally. The earlier model of clusters of collectors and art dealers who had a stranglehold on the circuit

WASEL SAFWAN ON UAEISM

"UAEism started forming in my mind after I completed my architecture studies in UAE in 2003. I started practising architecture, and also art. This is what gave birth to this new style, which I called UAEism. It is almost a non-figurative style, painted on large scales. It created a stir in the media, and that perhaps led authorities in Abu Dhabi and Dubai to support me to exhibit and get involved in public art activities.

My first solo exhibition in Dubai featuring works in the UAEism style was held in 2007, sponsored by the Dubai Culture Council. Then the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH) displayed a huge painting of mine titled "Hams Al Muajei" at the first edition of Art Paris 2007. It is now in the art collection of



Wasel Safwan
with his painting
Hams Al Muajei

MANAR SAFWAN

the Tourism Development and Investment Company (TDIC).

In 2009 I was invited to produce four art pieces in Ostrava, in the Czech Republic. They were titled "UAEism Al Ain – Ostrava 1, 2, 3, 4". This was with the support of H.H. Jan Světlík, one of the richest men in the Czech Republic, who visited my studio in Al Ain.

Another crowning moment was when I was commissioned to make some paintings to adorn the 84th floor of the

Burj Khalifa, all in the UAEism style. Last October, I translated the UAEism style onto a Ferrari F1 racer and a 1959 Chevy Impala! That was a first for me, and my first brush with social media.

I've painted scenes from some cities in the same style in Malaysia and Singapore. UAEism is growing, and it could work in the form of even three-dimensional objects such as a sculpture I did in 2006 for the Madinat Jumeirah. With it, I too am growing all the time. I am thrilled!"

is slowly giving way to a new breed of young professionals who are not so influenced by the standards set by their predecessors, says Makkawi. Art collecting is hot among young professionals, and it doesn't matter where you are located any longer. This democratisation of art collecting is what is expected to fire up the local art scenes. The collectors will in turn support and promote the arts they invest in. This means social functions and a fusion of music, entertainment and gallery space into a multi-purpose environment that harks back to the salon days of the 18th century

"It's all about making a connection," explains Makkawi. "Our events employ all media – like paintings, sculpture, video, photography and movies. We think of art as a tool that bridges gulfs between people and even cultures. That is why we organise events around our exhibitions where the artist explains his or her vision to the audience. Our aim is to simply demystify art for everybody. We like to be direct; we don't use very convoluted words or expressions (to describe our

art). We like people to be first touched by the art and then if necessary we try to explain it."

Art Sawa holds workshops for children as well as adults on painting techniques, among other subjects. "Music appreciation classes and voice improvement classes are all a part of our repertoire," says Makkawi.

But contrary to what people in the field think, Makkawi doesn't feel this is leaning towards the commercial. "Considering art as business is not a pioneering idea itself; reducing art only to that is what might lead to a mistake," she says. "This concept already exists on a global level and there is nothing wrong with it. It becomes a business when art is already embedded deeply in the culture, in everyday life. Any other productive sector today is about business, and this is accepted without question. When it comes to art it is more complicated as it is also about innovation, challenge, communication, entertainment, brainstorming, creativity and much more. A purely non-material art world will not lead anywhere either."