

ISSUE # 20

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ART ISSUE

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Gathering at the Emirates Fine Art Society, 1984. Image courtesy of Hassan Sharif.

UNBRIDLED GROWTH: ART IN THE GULF REGION FROM THESSIGER TO TODAY

by Dana Lorch

As the gentleman adventurer Wilfred Thesiger trekked across the Arabian Peninsula from 1945-50 he shot portraits of many of the people he met along the way. For decades afterwards, there was a prevailing Orientalist idea that inhabitants of the Gulf should serve as subjects of art rather than artists themselves. Noor Al Rashid, the self-taught photographer who captured the discovery of oil in film and served as royal photographer to Sheikh Zayed for many years, was perhaps the best-known and best-loved artist through the 60's and 70's.

When the conceptual artist Hassan Sharif founded Emirates Fine Art Society in Sharjah in the 1980's, art from the Gulf beyond traditional Arabic calligraphy was not yet valued as an asset by the general public. Some affluent individuals imported European masterworks, but these were two-dimensional landscape paintings set in gilded frames. Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim recalls the Society's 1986 group exhibition, when authorities condoned off his abstract paintings because they were considered so shocking.

As there were not yet university programs dedicated to arts in the region, the majority of the artists of this earlier generation grew their practices simply through community and instinct, supplemented by the occasional art history book brought back from a trip overseas. An exception is Dr. Najat Maki whose work will be featured in the 2015 UAE Pavilion at the Venice Biennale) who was the first woman in the UAE to receive a scholarship to study art abroad back in 1977.

The late 90's and early 2000's saw the establishment of galleries, which not only introduced visitors to art from the Gulf, but also served as community hubs for discussions, film screenings, and other events that celebrated Arab culture and laid the groundwork for a growing appreciation for regional art and artists. These pioneering gallery directors paved the way for the Middle East's art market that we know today. Among the strongest of these spaces still in operation are Dar Al Furoon (Kuwait), Al Batein Art Gallery (Bahrain), Green Art Gallery (Dubai), and The Third Line (Dubai).

Art is always a reflection of the times and art in the Gulf has expanded as audaciously and rapidly as the region itself in the 21st century. Powerful collectors such as Qatar's H.E. Sheikh Hassan bin Mohammed bin Ali Al Thani (whose private collection formed the basis for Mahafel Sulien Sound Al Qassemi (Sharjah) and Ramini Salsali (Dubai) began to support the establishment of museums and foundations while nurturing patronage relationships with artists.

Christie's opened its doors in the region in 2006 with the first sale of Arab, Islamic, and Iranian art, setting the baseline for pricing and big names in the market. Today Sotheby's and Bonhams also have a presence in the Gulf with local auction houses like Arabian Wings in Saudi Arabia beginning to bring in consistent results as well.

Beginning in 2007, the Alseikhal Family in Dubai repurposed a former marble factory into gallery spaces and incubated fledgling galleries like Aiyam and Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde, which today are respected names known around the world. The area is set to double in size in 2015. Art Dubai debuted the same year as the first major art fair in the entirety of Asia, opening with 40 galleries and 8,000 visitors. Today, the fair enters its 9th edition, with more than 90 galleries and 25,000 anticipated visitors; numbers that are symbolic of its role as a connector for regional and international artists, collectors, and galleries.

Sharjah Art Foundation has become known as a powerhouse for meticulous curatorial practices and a meeting place for artist residencies and collaborations, while in Jeddah, Atr Art, which held its first young artists exhibition in 2011, has served as part gallery, part artist incubator and education space. Sheikhra Al Mayassa bint Hamad Al Thani, who serves as Chair of Qatar Museums Authority has helped to put Doha on the map as a hub for cutting edge contemporary art and helped to introduce the region to public and street art.

The younger generation of artists are grounded in the Gulf culturally, but are also citizens of the world. They have grown up with access to strong university programs, galleries, residency funding, patronage opportunities, and a thriving press. To recognize the rich, multi-faceted climate of art in today's Gulf region, Selections has profiled 8 of the many contemporary artists in practice in the pages to follow ■