

ArtReview

Letter from Dubai

J.J. Charlesworth reports back from Art Dubai 2014



Navin Rawanchaikul, Postcards from Dubai (Day), 2014, Courtesy of Yavuz Fine Art, Art Dubai 2014,

Art Dubai, now on its eight edition, is a sort of international artworld 'silk road' in the age of cultural globalisation. Galleries from the West – America, the UK and Europe – find themselves alongside galleries from the near and middle east, and then eastwards to India, Pakistan, and Southeast Asia. *ArtReview* likes going, since Dubai is sunny and hot compared to freezing wet London; the nice people at **Art Dubai** pay for the flight; and, as experiences of hyper-capitalist globalisation flux-culture go, its pretty hard to beat: the gulf states are in the midst of a furious period of reinvention, throwing all they've got into repositioning themselves as cultural and trade hubs, exploiting their geographical and economic position as mid-point between the west and east, in a bid to diversify away from the narrow and politically unstable business of exporting oil. It means a lot of building, the kickstarting of a whole cultural infrastructure, not to mention a whole lot of migrant labour.

Art fairs are always about selling art, but a fair such as Art Dubai also reflects the more unstable and evolving nature of an emerging art scene: the fair's role in drawing attention to the Emirate's small but growing circuit of commercial galleries and nonprofits can't be underestimated, and the presence of the fair as focal point for the scene is significant. What's interesting about the fair is the relative absence of art stars, as well as blue chip galleries (Art Dubai would no doubt be happy with a few

more), though 2014 saw the arrival of big New York galleries **Barbara Gladstone** and **Marian Goodman**. Perhaps the biggest international galleries are art-faired out, but it makes for less stereotypical viewing – the biggest object in the fair was, thankfully, not some shiny art-collector bauble (although Elmgreen and Dragset's golden child on a rocking horse, came close) but a ceiling-high venetian blind sculpture (*Dress Vehicle - Yin Yang*, 2012) by Berlin-based Korean, Hague Yang, at Chantal Crousel.

It meant a genuinely broad presentation of artists from an unusually global catchment of small but active galleries, from what one might call the 'new' artworld of east and south. The politics of the gulf states, and the cultural realities of life there kept poking through the well-ordered surface: Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul's *Postcards from Dubai* painting diptych, at Singapore's Yavuz Fine Art, made the obvious but effective gesture of portraying the other side of Dubai life – the low-paid, mostly immigrant workers from the Indian subcontinent who make everyday life function while the expats and Emiratis enjoy a whole other lifestyle and standard of living; elsewhere, Emirati moral sensibilities got the better of certain works, as Australian Juz Kitson's wall of weird and variously vaginal ceramic sculptures *The desired desires the desire of the other* (2011 – 2012) was given a quick edit by those mysterious authorities who seem to pass through the fair discreetly drawing the line on what constitutes the morally and visually unacceptable. Among the acceptable works hung on the wall one could find half a dozen steel screws left accusatorially in the wall of the booth.

ART DUBAI REFLECTS DUBAI'S SUCK-IT-AND-SEE, BOTTOM-UP APPROACH WHOSE EMPHASIS SEEMS TO BE ON GROWING THE CITY AS A PLACE FOR MIDDLE-CLASS URBANITES

What makes Art Dubai more engaging than your average art fair is the evident pressure to create situations that might shape the emerging art world around it, both critically and institutionally. So a major component of the fair is its hosting of the Global Art Forum, which this year presented a three-day public talks programme (having started with two days in Doha the weekend before), and which co-ordinates a networking vehicle for artists and curators, the 'forum fellows' meetings. This is a more substantial undertaking than the usual talks-programme window-dressing that has become routine at art fairs. The GAF's programme this year, under the title 'Meanwhile...History' was an eclectic and often illuminating assembly of presentations and panel discussions on various aspects of the history of the Arab peninsula, from the nineteenth-century pearl farming trade to the history of modernist architecture in Kuwait. Only the parachuted-in panel discussion and ego-fest of Documenta ex- and future curators (**Okwui Enwezor**, Catherine David and Adam Szymczyk, chaired by a distracted **Hans Ulrich Obrist**) seemed disappointingly out of place.

Along with the GAF, Art Dubai also supports Campus Art Dubai, an attempt to create a sort of art-school community and network which might create a bit of continuity in a country where most people have no right to remain permanently, making the artworld small, volatile and transient, and in which, as one young expat artworlder told *ArtReview*, people tend to leave because, after a while, one realises there's 'not much to do in Dubai'.

Writ large, then, is the realisation that an art scene doesn't really evolve substantially without a local community of interested people that goes beyond the merely commercial or institutional. In this, Art Dubai reflects Dubai's suck-it-and-see, bottom-up approach whose emphasis seems to be on growing the city as a place for middle-class urbanites; everywhere one goes one sees hoardings advertising large tracts of luxurious, contemporary villa developments, soon to be built; though as

Dubai struggles with the fallout of the financial crisis, 'soon' is an elusive. (Check out, for a spectacular example of Dubai urban aesthetics, [Falconcity of Wonders](#), a development headed up by Global Art Forum speaker Salem Al Moosa.)

This stands in contrast to the museum- and foundation- building approaches of Qatar and neighbouring Sharjah. It's an off-year for the [Sharjah Biennial](#), but the Sharjah Art Foundation still added to the cultural 'offering' by opening solo shows by Susan Hefuna and Wael Shawky, and an important retrospective of Pakistan-born, London-based artist Rasheed Araeen – an artist who for forty years has challenged the Western biases of art discourse, and has been an irascible critic of establishment cultural prejudices in Britain, is now being feted by a new, multi-polar artworld.

The basic question for such an elite-led society as the Emirates is whether kickstarting cultural infrastructure, whether of the big museum or grassroots commercial sort, can lead to a more complex, spontaneous and independent cultural and artistic scene. There's a genuine sense of enthusiasm for this to happen, yet sooner or later this will come up against the social and cultural realities of life here. Munching on the best curry *ArtReview* has had in a long time, at the Global Art Forum dinner in a downtown Dubai canteen, whose customers were the kind of men depicted in Rawanchaikul's paintings, *ArtReview* turned these questions over with English writer Guy Mannes-Abbot. Mannes-Abbot is involved in the [artist-led campaign Gulf Labor](#), which has been relentlessly pursuing the Guggenheim and the Louvre over how they will contract the migrant labour to build their franchises in neighbouring Abu Dhabi. Nothing will change in a day, Mannes-Abbot admitted, but it's important for western institutions to be called to account, publicly, as they spin their brands across the globe.

Making art, building institutions – who for and at what cost? Perhaps it was just *ArtReview's* musings that meant it kept noticing symbols and suggestions of construction and building in the artworks it came across. Not the over-literal large-scale photographs of building sites it saw so much of last year, but more cryptic suggestions of structures and architectures imagined or recollected. None more so than in the work of Fahd Burki, at the excellent [Grey Noise](#) gallery. It's not that Burki's work is about building or architecture in any obvious sense – rather, Burki's quietly metaphysical sculptures and drawings played out the tension between thought and materiality, ideal and reality. It was pure accident, *ArtReview* was told, that one of Burki's pieces resembled the 900m-high [Burj Khalifa skyscraper](#). A merely uncanny resemblance, sure, but a case of the context rubbing off on the artwork; in Dubai, which world the art chooses to reflect – artworld or wider world? – is a question that's hard to avoid.

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