

TheNational



Watch this space

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The Frey Norris Gallery is showing the largest canvas yet from Kate Eric, the collaborative identity of Kate Tedman and Eric Siemans, Bug War Over Two Blue Mountain. [Courtesy Frey Norris Gallery](#)

At last year's Art Dubai, the fair's director John Martin faced down the economic downturn with the hope that it would knock some of the silliness out of the marketplace. "We've seen a lot of froth in the art market over the past three years," he said. But no longer; the coming era of sobriety would bring order, and new opportunities, too. "Now is a fantastic opportunity to find new artists," Martin reassured the press corps.

As good as his word, the fair did introduce the UAE to a lot of good work. But in light of Martin's remarks, it's interesting to see how the galleries have been retooling for the second post-slump Art Dubai. Novelty is on the back burner. The big trend this year is for booths concentrating on the work of just one artist. This might seem counter-intuitive. Why, in a stiffer market, would exhibitors want to stake everything on a single, solid talent? But from a presentational point of view, it makes good sense.

If froth is dead, nothing signals seriousness like a retrospective show. Viewers get to gauge the artist's commitment to his ideas, be moved by the agonies and ecstasies of invention and generally bask in a sense of vocation. Even quite flippant artists gain pathos, if not dignity, when it becomes clear that they've spent their whole careers glueing marbles onto animal heads or turning out anguished portraits of Pinocchio. The one-man show has the same sort of gravitas as the CD box set, the Library of America hardback edition. No wonder, then, that around a quarter of the 70 visiting galleries are counting on a lone champion.



At Artspace we get Adel El Siwi, a well-known Egyptian painter who goes in for spiky, witty portraits: think Sue Macartney-Snape's Social Stereotypes cartoons fed through the brain of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Rose Issa is ploughing everything into Chant Avedissian's sumptuous pop-culture riffs. Frey Norris is leading with the largest canvas yet from Kate Eric, the collaborative identity of Kate Tedman and Eric Siemans. Like their past, delicately visceral (literally, gut-like) work, Bug War Over Two Blue Mountain is grippingly gruesome. However this year the Indian painter MF Husain, purveyor of mythical scenes of such hectic radiance you might mistake them for spots on your retina, is the most eminent artist getting the grand-old-man treatment.

This is an interesting point in itself, given that India's art market took one of the biggest knocks in the industry. Husain has recently been in the news because he has

renounced his Indian citizenship. In 1996 the then-80-year-old painter fled India after a legal controversy over some risqué paintings of Hindu deities that he had made decades earlier. Fearing prosecution and reprisals at home he lived out the bulk of his exile in London and Dubai. Last week, however, he accepted an offer of Qatari citizenship. Husain has been executing a large commission – a painted history of the Arab people – in Doha, and to the chagrin of liberal Indian commentators, has agreed to stay. The upshot is that India's greatest living, most reliably selling artist has turned his back on his homeland. The show at Grosvenor Vadhera's Dubai booth promises to summarise Husain's seven-decade career. Given the latest twist in that tale, expect interest to be more than usually fierce.

Not everyone is banking on a single star, however. Of the group booths, Germany's Galerie Caprice Horn looks to have a particularly interesting mix of artists.



Men at Work by Abdunnasser Gharem. Courtesy Galerie Caprice Horn Berlin

The Saudi conceptualist (and army major) Abdunnasser Gharem shares a bill with the Egyptian pop-artist Khaled Hafez, the British-Iranian painter Sacha Jafri and Canada's hi-tech artist Daniel Canogar. Dubai's own Carbon 12 is coming out with its usual cast of international talents: a splashy fashion rage from the painter Katherine Bernhardt, spooky theatre interiors from Gil Heitor Cortesao and Sara Rahbar's satirical textile collages among them. Clearly there's still room for the something-for-everyone approach.



Book of Flight by Khaled Hafez. Courtesy Galerie Caprice Horn Berlin

One group show is guaranteed to upstage the solo performances, though it will be a surprise if it adds up to more than the sum of its parts. Three artists from across the Menasa region (Middle East, North Africa and South Asia) have received Dh750,000 apiece from the Abraaj Capital Art Prize (ACAP), the largest art award on the planet. For the last six months they have been trying to produce a trio of ambitious new artworks. Kader Attia, Hala Elkoussy and Marwan Sahmarani (from Algeria, Egypt and Lebanon respectively) are the artists in question and Art Dubai will see the unveiling of their creations. The size of the prize alone means that the new work will be subject to close, and perhaps rather envious, scrutiny, and that puts the artists in a tricky position. They know they'll be facing the crowd of their lives.

Last year when the prize had its debut, the completed works were interesting and thoughtful, but not spectacular in the way that the grand outdoor presentation seemed to demand. Zoulikha Bouabdellah's pagoda, in which a mirrored floor reflected a stylised representation of the night sky, might have been enchanting in a dimly lit gallery. Alas, the effect got lost in the glare of the

Jumeirah spring. Nazgol Ansarinia's rug design showed a quiet wit, but quiet wit and a horde of journalists looking for a headline make uneasy companions. Nothing much seemed to happen in Kutlug Ataman's film. Altogether the reception was polite rather than rapturous or (even better for a new prize on the make) outraged.

Unusually in the art world, the ACAP is awarded on the strength, essentially, of the artist's pitch. Selectors have a vague idea of what they're going to get and artists can trim to the wind. Will the award committee have opted for more theatrical proposals this year? Will the artists sacrifice depth for impact? They should. It would be good for the prize and good for them, too: there's a time for principled reticence and a time to turn heads. This is the latter. Of the three winners, Kader Attia seems the most likely to pull off a PR coup. Elkoussy works with photography and Sahmarani is a painter, so it isn't even clear how they plan to get through their giant bursaries. Attia, a sculptor with a spooky sense of humour and talent for monumental effects (he is best known for the Saatchi-anointed Ghost, a room full of faceless and kneeling robed figures made out of tin foil) could well have something appropriately startling up his sleeve. Watch this space. Everyone else will be.

The curatorial wing of Bidoun magazine is staging an exhibition of its own, titled A New Formalism, which brings together four artworks by four artists (or artistic entities, I should say: one of them is the collective U5). The others are Hazem el Mestikawy, Iman Issa and Mahmoud Khaled, all of whom are intriguing enough alone. Bidoun is also commissioning material especially for the fair: the Emirati conceptualist Ebtisam Abdul-Aziz and the Lebanese interactive artist Vartan Avakian will both be showing off new works courtesy of Bidoun. Bidoun is also presenting Farhad Moshiri's ice sculptures and recreating a 1970s kinetic sculpture by Alice Aycock, among other projects.

The most intriguing of these is that it is enlisting artists to act as tour guides to the fair. Daniel Bokhkov, Sophia Al Maria and Khalil Rabah will be the purported experts exploring "the pure subjectivity of interpretation", presumably by busking the most tendentious readings they can think of on the spur of the moment. Whether the tours end up functioning as off-beat criticism or open-ended theatrical improvisation, they sound like an enjoyable game, and they're open to all the fair's visitors daily.

As it did last year, Art Dubai will become a staging post on the rolling discussion series called the Global Art Forum. This time around the talks, which will have started in Doha, cover several topics that perhaps you always wanted to know about and never dared ask. Titles include "Palestine Syndrome", "Corporate Collecting: Why and How", and "Is There A Crisis In Arts Writing?" and among the panelists are Hans Ulrich Obrist, the director of International Projects at the Serpentine, Omar Ghobash, the UAE's ambassador to Russia, and the terrific Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui. Judging by last year's discussions, the tone will not be too polite to be interesting, so roll up your sleeves and wade in.

Finally, it wouldn't do to finish without noting one of the most interesting events to take place in Art Dubai's wide penumbra. If the Madinat Jumeirah just seems too exhaustingly blue-chip, shoot across town for the Bastakiya Art Fair, a fertile fringe to the main attraction, boasting shows from XVA, Maijlis, Teshkeel and various independent curators, plus performances, talks and readings. It's a rougher scene, and perhaps slightly more experimental. Still, if everyone at Art Dubai is selling prestige, where else are you going to find a bargain?

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