

Painting The Town

Abu Dhabi is fast becoming the creative capital of the Middle East. We get a first look at **Abu Dhabi Art**, the boutique fair that's at the core of the city's aesthetic revolution

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With the gargantuan addition of both a Guggenheim and a Louvre to its cultural epicentre, Abu Dhabi's artistic credentials are about to be set in stone. But, having made the city's cutting-edge Saadiyat Cultural District its home some five years ago, Abu Dhabi Art has been at the heart of its evolution, quite literally, from the ground up.

Now in its eighth edition, what began as a boutique art fair has grown in tandem with the capital's cultural ambitions to become a pacemaker for contemporary art, and an essential

stop on the philotechnic's world tour. Its scale this time around, and its scope, befit its status as an integral part of a city's creative rebirth.

As Alanood Al Hammadi, senior exhibitor relations coordinator for the Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority, puts it, "Abu Dhabi Art is always evolving because the art market and the art scene are always changing and evolving, so it will continue to evolve with, and complement, the opening of these museums [the aforementioned Guggenheim and Louvre, plus

Zayed National Museum]. It's *the* international boutique art fair, and a great destination to see modern art."

A collection of 40 modern-art dealers from around the world forms one of the four pillars of this year's Abu Dhabi Art, along with Bidaya, devoted to one emerging local gallery; Beyond, a city-wide series of large-scale sculptures and installations; and newcomer Gateway, a trio of exhibitions that will be woven through the main gallery space at Manarat Al Saadiyat, the fair's hub. The latter hinges on a colossal sea of bananas, the brainchild





Previous page: Pablo Picasso's *Buste d'Homme* (1964) will be shown by New York's Acquavella Galleries. **Opposite:** Gu Dexin will recreate his 2007 banana installation

of Chinese master subversive Gu Dexin and undoubtedly one of Abu Dhabi Art's most high-profile attractions. Thousands of the yellow fruits will fill an entire hall for the fair's four-day run, and, explains Al Hammadi, "It's an interactive piece so people will actually be able to eat the bananas. It'll be amazing."

Other highlights include works by Idris Khan, the British artist who's also behind the emirate's recently unveiled UAE Martyrs' Memorial, as part of renowned New York gallery Sean Kelly's offering – a truly international collaborative crossover that's typical of the Abu Dhabi Art mix. Says Al Hammadi, "We bring together galleries from all over the world – from the US, Europe, Asia and Africa – in one boutique art fair."

Crucial to that mix is the fair's roster of top-level curators – among them, Catherine David (of the Pompidou) and Alexandra Munroe (of the Guggenheim) – who, says Al Hammadi, "play a really big role in transforming the concept of Abu Dhabi Art each year. Through them, we're basically working with the different corners of the world. And by having them on board, we're emphasising the importance of the art fair".

At the other end of the spectrum, Bidaya (from the Arabic for 'beginning') will showcase works from Saudi artists Mounirah Mosly and Ibrahim El Dessouki, exhibited by Jeddah's up-and-coming Hafez Gallery. And even closer to home, enthuses Al Hammadi, "We also have a gallery from Dubai joining us for the first time, Cuadro Fine Art, which is great because they're going to bring a selection of amazing Emirati artists like Zeinab Al Hashemi and Ammar al Attar."

Supporting home-grown talent is part of the fair's DNA, as is engaging with the local community as a whole. So as well as a full supporting programme of performances and talks across Abu Dhabi, there are workshops for children and tailored tours of the exhibition proper. "We want people to really interact with and enjoy the exhibition," says Al Hammadi. "This is your chance to see museum-standard modern artists and artworks, and hear commentary from top curators, gallerists and art critics."

The hive of activity within the fair's hub will be mirrored by an external buzz in the shape of "food trucks and beautiful installations and artworks surrounding the whole building", says Al Hammadi. And indeed, it's outside the gallery walls where arguably the most extraordinary elements will unfold. As I write, Italian-born, Brussels-based conceptual artist Anna Rispoli is in town setting up a light show of grand proportions, which will see all the buildings in the area switch their lights on and off in tightly choreographed coordination. And the plethora of installations and sculptures that make up the Beyond portion of proceedings will remain in their urban habitats for a further six

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months, ensuring the reverberations of Abu Dhabi Art are felt long after the lights have gone out.

Each year, this vibrant blend of aesthetic innovation attracts a slew of art collectors and connoisseurs, to whom organisers cater in style: "We have a dedicated VIP programme for collectors and VIP visitors," explains Al Hammadi. "We arrange bespoke tours of Abu Dhabi and stage special dinners and events around the fair to give VIPs a full experience of the city and the emirate."

Abu Dhabi Art isn't just for VIPs, though – far from it. The exhibitions et al are free to enter, and everything on display is for sale, with price tags running the gamut from stuff of dreams to everyday affordable: something that can't be said for every art fair of this calibre. Ultimately, explains Al Hammadi, "Abu Dhabi Art is for everyone, so we make sure we satisfy everyone's taste. I believe this is the most amazing challenge, to have an audience of all ages – whether they are in the art world, or have zero knowledge about the arts – and it's always exciting." *Abu Dhabi Art runs from 16 to 19 November. For more information, visit abudhabiart.ae*