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Mideast art boom

Dubai's energy is driving a new contemporary scene in the region



Top, Jean Marc Nahas working in his studio in Beirut; below, Kais Salman (pictured on cover) 'Untitled' 2009.



Contemporary Middle East

Dubai's energy is driving the region's art boom

BY BROOKE ANDERSON AND DON DUNCAN

AMID THE ABANDONED real-estate projects, bailout plans and downsized dreams of Dubai, an art market is flourishing. Dubai has become the driver for an explosion in Middle Eastern contemporary art, with more than 60 art galleries, regional offices for international auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's, and several modern-art museums opening, including a satellite of the Louvre in 2012 and the Guggenheim in 2014. Now, through Dubai's new institutional prowess this energy is reinvigorating and transforming older, established art scenes across the region. Beirut, a longstanding cultural hub, saw at least five prominent new galleries open last year, while Damascus is emerging as one of the fastest-developing art markets in the Middle East. Both Lebanon and Syria are enjoying periods of stability with steady economic growth and record tourism numbers—a favorable local climate for the changes afoot in Dubai.

"Since May 2006, we've sold more than \$170 million (€134 million) worth of art, which has exceeded our expectations," says Mike Jeha, director of Christie's Dubai, which opened in 2005 and commenced auctions in 2006. Compared to Dubai's signature sectors—real estate and banking—its burgeoning art market appears to be weathering the recession. Mr. Jeha says this is because, unlike abstract and often complex financial products, art "is very tangible. It's a physical asset with inherent value. Most people buy art for aesthetic purposes and not for investment. People are buying what they want, to hang it on their walls and live with it."

"Dubai still has a lot of expansive wall space to fill with art and connoisseurs with deep pockets to pay for it," says Khaled Samawi, owner of Ayyam, a Damascus-based contemporary-art gallery, which opened in 2006 and has since expanded to Beirut and Dubai.

In April 2008, an 180-centimeter-tall bronze sculpture called "The Wall (Oh, Persepolis)" by Iranian artist Parviz Tanavoli was sold for a record-breaking €2.2 million at Christie's. "It was the most memorable moment," says Mr. Jeha. "There was a real sense that the Middle Eastern art market had come of age."

With total sales at around €12 million, the latest auction at Christie's Dubai last month showed that the buzz continues. The top-selling work, an oil painting depicting a rural Egyptian scene with a geometrical desert backdrop, called "Les Chadoufs," by the late Egyptian artist Mahmoud Said, sold for nearly €2 million, more than 10 times the expected price.

Meanwhile, at the latest edition in March of Art Dubai, the premier art fair in the region, 18,000 people attended to look at and buy the work of some 72 galleries spanning more than 30 countries. "One thing that stands out in Dubai is its energy," Mr. Jeha says. "It's electric and it's still new."

And the effect can be felt across the Middle East. The studio of 33-year-old Syrian painter Kais Salman, located in an upscale neighborhood on the hills overlooking Damascus, offers a glimpse of where Syrian art is headed. His technique—a monochromatic, abstract expressionism—is a bold break from the art of his Soviet-influenced forebears, products of a Syria that was much more isolated than it is today. But the art techniques aren't the only things changing. Mr. Salman and his generation have seen their art appreciate up to sixfold in the past four years. Mr. Salman's canvases now sell for as much as €17,500, offering him an income and working situation unprecedented for most Syrian artists. Mr. Salman's ascent as one of Syria's most-watched artists is in parallel to the fortunes of Ayyam Gallery, which represents him. Through Ayyam and by extension, the auction houses in Dubai, he is reaching clients he once only dreamed of.

"The money I am making gives me more comfort, time and space in which to really concentrate and work as an artist," he says on break in his studio, where three half-finished portraits of women lie against the bare wall behind him. "Money has helped me become more professional."

Once largely government-supported, the Syrian arts scene is effectively privatizing, with a clutch of new private galleries like Ayyam bringing it into the larger nexus of Middle East art and normalizing its price tags. "I would say prices have appreciated 300%-400% from ridiculously low levels," says Mr. Samawi, whose gallery now represents 20 artists, up from five in 2006 when it started. "I think today Syrian art is still 50% undervalued."

The meteoric appreciation of contemporary Syrian art is just one of many indicators of the country's wide economic reforms—moving from a closed socialist economy to a free-market one—initiated by President Bashar al-Assad since he took office in 2001. It is this transition, some say, that leaves Syria particularly exposed to the untrammeled effects of a globalized free market right now, not least in the arts.

"What's happening to Syria is not necessarily a good thing," says Samia Halaby, a New York-based Palestinian artist and former art professor at Yale University's School of Art. As an artist, she is represented by Ayyam Gallery and has benefited from the bump in Syrian art. While she thinks it is generally a good development, she sees some danger in the rapid changes happening in Syria. "Syria is being forced open and in this process, it could be raped."



Above, Mustafa Ali, a Syrian sculptor, in his studio in Damascus; at right, Parviz Tanavoli's bronze sculpture 'The Wall (Oh, Persepolis),' was sold in April 2008 by Christie's for a record-breaking €2.2 million at a Dubai art sale.

Artists of Syria's older generation, such as watercolorist Etab Hreib, 54, once counted on the sprawling socialist state for most of their income. Now Ms. Hreib's pastoral watercolors are fast falling out of fashion. As the patronage of Syrian art transfers from the public to the private sector, she is selling less and less art each year and her prices haven't budged. Like many other artists of her generation, she stands by, dismayed at the turn Syrian art—and its new generation—is taking.

"Now the arts have become like a market," she says in her damp, cluttered studio in Damascus, surrounded by piles of unsold canvases. "The galleries which are responsible for these artists don't care if the artist is good or bad. They don't care about art as a whole. All they care about is if it sells or not."

Some older generation Syrian artists, like sculptor Mustafa Ali, 54, have managed to make the transition. "We are working in the right way now in Syria," Mr. Ali says on a recent break from sculpting his latest stonework, a monumental piece cut from limestone, commissioned by the government for use in a public park. During recent years, Mr. Ali has successfully grown his portfolio of private clients and says the value of his work has increased from \$5,000 for a midsize piece three years ago to \$20,000 today. "The country is advancing and its art is becoming greater. Syrian art is entering its golden age."

Khaled Samawi of Ayyam Gallery is unapologetic for the revolution in the local arts market that his and other small galleries have triggered. Syrian art, much like Syria, he says, is integrating into the larger, global market and those who aren't happy with that will be left behind. "What's happening now is the creation of contemporary Syrian art and it's very different from what the older generation is doing," he says. Much of Ayyam's art now makes a stop at the company's new Beirut gallery, opened in late 2009, where it is selling to Lebanese and international collectors, who have beaten a path to Beirut's more mature art market for years.

That city's art scene is experiencing a different kind of buzz, where a rapid proliferation of galleries is creating a new platform for young artists. Increased interest from Western museums and collectors is also giving confidence to artists in a country that is typically associated with conflict. Lebanese artist Chaouki Chamoun's acrylic-on-canvas "Toppled City" sold for €114,306 in 2007, and it is typical of a traditional Lebanese art mainstay—powerful commentary on the underlying instability of world events.

"We're a country coming out of war, and the local art scene is very rich. In a way it's virgin territory," says Lea Sednaoui, 24, a recent graduate of St. Martin's College in London and founder of the Running Horse, a spacious gallery in the industrial Maddawar district of Beirut. "People need to have

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trends and Middle East art is en vogue," she added. "I think the fact that there's a boom will change things."

Indeed, things are already changing. Many of Beirut's newer galleries are performing a public-service role in the arts, filling a void left by a government still grappling with post-war reconstruction and political reconciliation.

"Before, there was a lack of institutions and support. The government didn't have a real budget for the arts. This has created a free and organic way for art to evolve outside of institutions," says Lamia Joreige, co-founder of the Beirut Art Center, which opened early last year. Unlike many of the city's older galleries, it operates as a nonprofit organization, educating the public about contemporary art, while simultaneously giving new artists a platform for their work.

Gallery owners in Beirut say phone calls and visits from curators in Europe and the U.S. are becoming more and more frequent, something they weren't experiencing just five years ago. This newfound verve has, in turn, given artists the confidence to experiment with other media that until recently weren't considered marketable.

Photographer Nadim Asfar, 34, used to make ends meet taking pictures at weddings and doing work for advertising firms, exhibiting his photographic art work only occasionally. "At my first exhibit in 2004, people resisted," he recalls. "Galleries didn't really have experience with photography. In 2008, we had an exhibit, and we sold all of the pieces, and in several editions."

Today, Mr. Asfar exhibits at Espace Kettaneh Kunigk, a contemporary-art gallery that opened in Beirut last year.

Whereas Beirut's art scene has enabled once-marginal artists like Mr. Asfar to firmly enter the commercial fine-art arena, many of Beirut's more established artists, like Jean Marc Nahas, 46, are skeptical of the huge local shifts, driven by momentum emanating from Dubai. "There are a lot of ignorant dealers making uninformed decisions," says Mr. Nahas, whose cartoon-like black-and-white sketches break from the conceptual-art-driven trends of the new Beirut art scene. "There's a lot of good work that isn't exhibited."

Still, there's no doubt that, today, the region's art scenes are rapidly falling under Dubai's increasingly powerful orbit, bolstered by that city's growing portfolio of international art institutions.

"There are some serious long-term indicators now. The market is more sophisticated," says Saleh Barakat, founder of Agial, which was established in 1990 and is one of Beirut's longest-running contemporary-art galleries with the reputation for discovering and promoting new art talent in the region. "There's a real renaissance now, and Dubai is a good platform for that."

► See a video about the contemporary-art scene in Syria, at WSJ.com/Lifestyle



Alexis Namdar



Clockwise from top right: Samia Halaby's 'Bright Wild Weeds' (2008) at the Ayyam Gallery in Beirut; photographer Nadim Asfar in his studio; Mr. Asfar's 'Les Constellations-Jour 15' (2009) and 'Untitled' (2005), a view on Beirut's suburbs.



Nadim Asfar (2)



Philip Cheung for The Wall Street Journal