

Register now and receive
exhibition updates from
Sprüth Magers Berlin London

Register Now

OCULA

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

March 19, 2014, 10:47 AM ET

Art Dubai Eyes Cultural Growth Amid Dubai's Commercial Upswing

By Asa Fitch



Some of the work on display from the Caucasus and Central Asia at Art Dubai.

Asa Fitch for The Wall Street Journal

Along one edge of the main exhibition space at this year's Art Dubai art fair is a smattering of galleries from Central Asia and the Caucasus – places like Georgia, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan. They're here as part of an annual "Marker" section that covers a theme or region the organizers want to spotlight, but they also represent one way in which the fair is trying to broaden its geographical reach in line with Dubai's expansion as a commercial hub.

As Dubai has grown – its airlines now fly to 239 destinations and its ports handled 13.6 million standard shipping containers last year – people in the business of culture also see it increasingly as a go-to meeting point between Africa, Asia and other parts of the Middle East. While many artists and galleries are wary of local censorship and the treatment of foreign workers on big museum projects in the region, the emirate's geographical centrality, ease of access, relative political stability and cultural ties to other parts of the Muslim world have made it an obvious destination.

"It's safe to say that if this invitation to curate work from this region had come from anywhere else other than Dubai we probably wouldn't have agreed," said Payam Sharifi, who co-founded an art collective that brought the Marker galleries to Dubai. "I think it's very important to situate the context of the Caucasus and Central Asia vis-a-vis the Muslim world and the Middle East."

Successful fairs should take on the character of their host cities, which for Dubai means embracing its cosmopolitanism and bringing in art from parts of the world that aren't necessarily well-represented on the global circuit, said Antonia Carver, Art Dubai's director. Dubai's trading spirit is increasingly entering the cultural sphere, she said, making the city a point of exchange for ideas, not just goods.

"It's also something that's very strategic on our part, because we know this is what makes the fair part attractive for museum directors and collectors and curators," she said. "They see this as the one point in the year they can really connect with art scenes they don't see anywhere else."

Whether Dubai or other Gulf cities can compete on a cultural level with the established hubs of the Middle East is a more controversial question. When the Emirati commentator Sultan Al Qassemi suggested last year that the Gulf was surpassing Cairo, Beirut and other traditional centers, it [provoked a heated debate](#) over whether energy-rich countries spending billions of dollars on new museums and art collections was an adequate substitute for endemic cultural development.

A recent outcry over regional labor practices poses another risk for the Gulf's growth as a center for art. Abu Dhabi is building Louvre and Guggenheim museums as part of a massive cultural playground on an island near its city center, but [artists' groups have protested](#) the projects because of the involvement of thousands of low-wage migrant construction workers who don't have the right to form unions and often have their passports confiscated by their employers, restricting their freedom of movement. Those protests could be especially galling for Abu Dhabi because of the involvement of contemporary Arab artists the museums likely want to court and exhibit.

Mr. Sharifi said the labor issues were a big concern not just for artists but for people in general. Still, he said, there's no better place to meet and exchange ideas right now than Dubai.

"We can't meet anywhere else in the Middle East other than Dubai," he said. "That's sad. That so-called weakness of Dubai – people criticize it for being neutral and aseptic, like Switzerland – actually in this moment it's very urgent and necessary. That's why this fair is so important."

Copyright 2014 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com