

The National,
November 19, 2015

TheNational

Seven things not to miss at Abu Dhabi Art

November 19, 2015, DANA LORCH



Halim Al Karim stands next to his custom-built Large Format camera. Courtesy of Halim Al Karim and The Robischon Gallery

Abu Dhabi Art features a diverse line-up of 40 of the art world's foremost galleries from the Middle East, Asia, North America and Europe, along with a multifaceted public programme of interactive performances, film screenings, children's activities, museum panel talks and artist book signings.

Whether you're a sophisticated collector or an 8-year-old budding artist, you can rub shoulders with artists, dealers and curators from all over the world at the fair, which is known for being particularly accessible to the general public. Read on for our list of essential highlights.

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Contemporary/modern art from the Middle East

This year's fair is on point in bringing together established dealers with formidable programmes focusing on art from the Middle East. It's possible to gallery hop from Tunis to Beirut, Ramallah and Jeddah, as well as Dubai and Abu Dhabi, without ever having to board a jet. Be sure to visit The Third Line (Dubai) booth to spend some time with the Iranian artist Pouran Jinchi's series The Blind Owl, which obsessively examines the cult-classic book of the same title by Sadegh Hedayat.

Perinne Valli's Morning Sun performance

The Swiss-French dancer and choreographer Perrine Valli uses movement to recreate and interpret seminal works by the late realist painter Edward Hopper, who's revered for his vignettes of mid-century Americana. The performance, which is entitled Morning Sun and will take place twice over the weekend, is part of Bliss, a programme of engaging performance art and film screenings grounded in the capital's culture, curated by Fabrice Bousteau.

Sumayyah Al Suwaidi's Back to Nature collection

Even if you don't have a collector's budget at your fingertips, it's possible to take home a memory of your favourite work at Abu Dhabi Art by stopping at Artyfact, the fair's official shop.

Design enthusiasts should look out for the Abu-Dhabi based artist and curator Sumayyah Al Suwaidi's Back to Nature collection, which includes limited-edition kaftans, clutches, watches and other items based on the artist's original works on exhibition in the Emirati Expressions section of the fair.

Al Suwaidi explains: "The collection is inspired by how we are so into our technology that we forget there is another world out there beyond the city and its buildings."

Halim Al Karim's 'Beyond' installation

The Cologne, Germany-based Galerie Brigitte Schenk presents the Iraqi artist Halim Al Karim's life-size format handmade bellows camera to the public, along with a haunting "ambrotype" portrait entitled Survivor Goddess. Al Karim (pictured below) used the camera to revive the 19th-century wet-collodion technique in his darkroom, which became his refuge after several years spent in hiding from Saddam Hussein. The work is part of the Beyond section, which presents large-scale installations in public spaces inside the fair and around the city.

Creative activities for children of all ages

A range of dedicated arts education programmes for children are on offer during Abu Dhabi Art. "Engaging children in the arts at a young age ensures they develop lifelong

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skills and tackle challenges with creativity and imagination,” says Ranya Nasser, the head of education programmes and initiatives at Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority, which organises Abu Dhabi Art.

ArtZone is a highly active studio space where children up to the age of 12 can create their own masterpieces inspired by art-world greats. With art teachers on hand, parents can feel safe leaving their children in the complimentary drop-in spaces.

“Parents who struggle with untethering their children from technology and Minecraft will love [ArtZone],” says Nasser. Children can showcase their own creative building skills using hundreds of foam blocks in the area, which is located in the garden.

Children ages 8 and over are welcome to enter the galleries; families with children younger than 8 should register for one of the family tours, which are offered daily from 9am to 1pm.

A discussion on Emirati Art at Zayed National Museum

Are you curious about the development of Zayed National Museum and how the institution’s growing collection will share the UAE story through multiple mediums? Then pre-register for a special panel running today from 5pm to 6pm, moderated by Salama Al Shamsi, the project manager of Zayed National Museum, TCA. It’s entitled Multaqa Zayed National Museum: The Evolving Nature of Museum Collections. Expect lively discussion on how local artists are incorporating the country’s heritage, environment and urban landscape into their art. Panelists will include the artists Nada Al Mulla, Salwa Al Khudairi and Ammar Al Attar, plus Tarek Al Ghousein, professor of visual art at New York University Abu Dhabi, and the British Museum curator Venetia Porter.

South Asian art from the Aicon Gallery

The New York and London-based Aicon Gallery will present works by some of the biggest names in Indian and Pakistani art. The gallery’s co-director Harry Hutchison explains: “We have a few works by the modern artist M F Husain, known as the “Picasso of India” and the most famous painter to emerge from India in the 20th century. One of Husain’s works in the booth is a large vibrant piece from 2006 called Women from Yemen, which he painted while living in the Middle East. Other than Husain, all of the other artists could be classed as contemporary, the two highlights being Crossing Boundaries by Anila Quayyam Agha and Aura by Abdullah Syed, both sculptural pieces that are worth a moment of anyone’s time.”

Abu Dhabi Art runs until tomorrow at Manarat Al Saadiyat, with additional installations around the city.

Correction: The article has been amended to reflect that The Robischon Gallery in Denver, Colorado was actually the first to present Halim Al Karim’s large scale collodion images as well as the artist’s camera in a solo exhibition in 2013.