

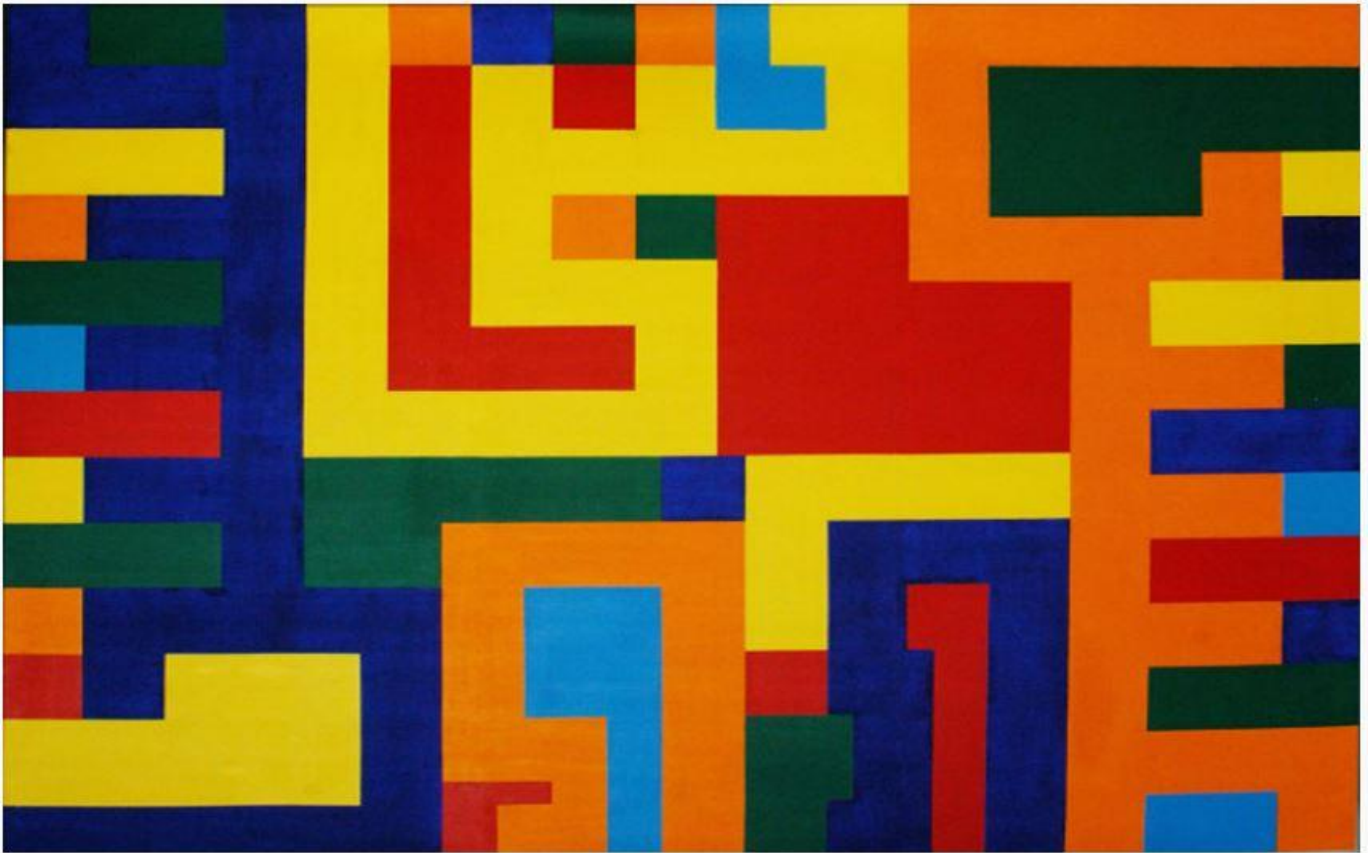


By Naima Rashid

Art Dubai's ninth edition confirms its grasp of the global game it set out to play. Along with well-established international players, including those from the Middle East and South Asia, the galleries participating in this year's Modern and Contemporary section alone covered regions as diverse as Africa, Eastern Europe and Australia. Being a global player today no longer means ticking off all the countries on the world map. It means, more than anything else, the ability to provide a level-playing field to all actors, and this inclusive mindset is what sets the fair apart.

Returning galleries at the fair have had the time to hone their game and build on the lessons drawn in the course of their earlier participation. Among these, sales were steady at New York's Aicon Gallery, a regular at the fair since 2008. This year, the gallery showed four Pakistani artists. The works had a decorative touch to them and were very likely to appeal to the sensibilities of the Middle East. The uncontested press darling was a work by Aneela Qayyum Agha called 'Sublime Light' – a large, suspended stainless steel square with latticed walls and a light shining from within, reflecting outwards in the form of intricate geometric shadows. It was a limited edition of five, of which three were sold to Middle Eastern collectors starting at US\$ 65,000 a piece. "They have big houses here. This is the perfect decoration piece," the gallery's representative tells me.

Mumbai dealers Tara Lal and Mortimer Chatterjee had moved from last year's relatively easy sell of Rashid Rana's solo to a riskier choice – charcoal and ink drawings and video by Indian performance artist Nikhil Chopra, some of it dating to 2008, were on display for the first time. The works included both outdoor and studio drawings of physical spaces within which the artist's performances were enacted, and were being sold not as concurrent counterpoints to the performances, but as prologues and epilogues to these, hence the title Rehearsal Acts. The works, spread across time points between 2008 and 2014, and geographically across Goa, Kashmir, Kochi, and Singapore, started at US\$ 7,500 for the smallest drawings. The gallery participates in two to three art fairs a year, and is slated to participate in the Video Art Fair in Barcelona this May. "We've learnt that the thing which sinks galleries quickly is art fairs, it's a very hard cost to bear. We're very selective about the fairs we do. And for the ones that we do, we see it as a long-term investment. Fairs are calling cards, portals for making connections and establishing contacts, there is no immediate return on investment."



Launched last year, the Modern section was balanced between Arab and South Asian modern masters. This year, it was more Arab-centric. Karachi's ArtChowk was the lone and proud post showing a solo by a South Asian master, this year the artist Shahid Sajjad who passed away in July 2014, and whose son Sibte Sajjad was present at the booth. Towards the end of the fair, Camilla Chowdry confirmed two sales of untitled works at US\$ 12,000 each to Pakistani collectors based in the UAE, one piece on reserve for a museum, and dialogues initiated with some European museums. The collector base of expatriate Pakistanis, who have the taste and the money to invest in art, is strategically a very important group to watch. The booth's star piece, a human-sized sculptural work, received a "ridiculous amount of inquiries," but ironically, was not for sale. It was being held for a museum the artist's family plans to build to house some of his works.

Among those who showed interest in the piece were Rajeeb and Nadia Samdani, Dhaka-based collectors who are always on the hunt for South Asian masters for the research-based leg of their collection housed in the office space of Samdani Foundation, which is entirely South Asia-based. They noticed the difference in the Modern hall

from last year, when the names of artists showing included Zahoor ul Akhlaque, Rasheed Araeen, Anwar Jalal Shemza and M.F. Hussain. “Last year, it was a special treat because we saw some great South Asian masters under one roof, something you rarely see at an art fair.” This year, a lot of those galleries had switched to the Contemporary section, including London’s Grosvenor and Mumbai’s Jhaveri Contemporary. The Samdanis were not complaining though, since South Asian art was abundantly present in the Contemporary section, and they continued to discover new names. “Even at a regional level, we are always making discoveries, and simply running into artists we simply didn’t know existed, but whose work we see and engage with at once.” They had selected certain pieces and placed them on reserve. “Our top South Asian picks at this year’s fair would have to be the Pakistani artists Lala Rukh, Waqas Khan, Seher Shah, the human-sized sculpture by Shahid Sajjad, Indian artist Dilip Chobisa, and the graphite on paper works by Bangladeshi artist Ayesha Sultana.”

The Samdanis remain fair loyalists. “We never miss Art Dubai and Frieze London,” a major reason being the fair’s increasingly inclusive character and its commitment to take new geographical regions in its fold. For them, as for most visitors, the attraction isn’t just Art Dubai; it’s the whole satellite programme created around the fair, both spatially and chronologically. This year, there was the Sharjah Biennale, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi’s pre-opening exhibition and the galleries night at DIFC, to name just a few of the mind-boggling plethora of events perennially on offer in the city. Art Dubai can hardly be seen as an event in isolation. It is part of a fast-growing network, which continues to generate newer, bigger and more demanding markets, opportunities and audiences.