

Highlights of Alserkal Avenue's new art season

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[Anna Seaman](#) Sep 19, 2016



A piece by British artist Gordon Cheung, who uses newspaper cuttings as the base and paints over them.
Antonie Robertson / The National

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Before the sun set on Sunday, the thoroughfares of Alserkal Avenue – Dubai's art hub – were already starting to fill up with people, and the familiar buzz of anticipation hung in the air.

It was the official start of the art season, with the majority of the 19

galleries coordinating to throw their doors open to the public and whirring into life after another long, hot summer.

The event began in the late afternoon, with an artist talk inside pop-up space Nadi Al Quoz. It lies at the heart of the avenue and is home to presentations, cultural gatherings and even the occasional yoga class.

On Sunday, however, it was the spot for British artist Gordon Cheung and locally based curator Murtaza Vali to have a public conversation about Cheung's art, which is filling the largest room in Leila Heller Gallery.

The conversation moved from information technology to dystopian paranoia, and included a dash of geopolitical dialogue centred around the South China Sea, in what was a fascinating insight into Cheung's work.

After walking through the galleries at Alserkal Avenue, here is our pick of the top exhibitions to check out.

Gordon Cheung

Cheung's paintings, on display at Leila Heller Gallery, demand attention. Psychedelic colours of paint are daubed on so thick that it becomes a three-dimensional swirl on the canvas. Up close, the layers of material become apparent.

The artist uses cuttings from the *Financial Times* to form the basis of his pieces. These are pasted underneath the paint so that from afar they resemble a kind of *The Matrix*-style stream of information running through the veins of the work. The images on top range from cowboys on horses to still-life flowers and the mountains of the Sinai Peninsula.

With several complex threads to the concept behind the work, Cheung, who is making his regional debut, is worth researching before you visit.

Judy Rifka

At A4 gallery, audiences are treated to an insight into one of the seminal artists of New York's counterculture from the 1980s. Judy Rifka's work, which stretches across several media, is centred on movement, lines and form.

On Sunday, she was in conversation with Gregor Stemmrich, professor of art and art history at New York University Abu Dhabi, about her distinguished career. At the Jean Paul Najjar Foundation, a non-profit museum inside Alserkal Avenue, is art work dating back to 1976.

What is particularly interesting about this exhibition is that before the opening, Rifka spent two weeks in Dubai completing a residency, during which time she worked with local artists to produce commissioned work as well as a video and a dance performance.

"I have always been interested in dance, movement and line as trajectory creating form and moving on into video with that, so it all fits together and completes a kind of circle," she says.

Chaouki Choukini

One of the most interesting finds during an exploration of the new shows is *Poetry in Wood*, a sculpture exhibition from Lebanese artist Chaouki Choukini.

Hosted by Green Art Gallery, the show is notable because it embodies the lifetime work of the artist.

Choukini has lived most of his adult life in France and has never shown work in the Middle East, so this is a seminal moment for him – and the work exhibits great maturity.

The pieces, made from a variety of woods, are semi-abstract forms, familiar in shape and size but not depicting anything specific. Many of them have a singular, slim column in the centre, which is reminiscent of a musical

instrument – and with Choukini's expert shaping of the wood, the pieces do exude a kind of rhythm.

“For me, wood is a living material,” he says. “Before it is wood, it is a tree with roots that are connected to the earth – so a piece of wood retains that life even after it has been cut, and in my work I try to maintain that life. I sculpt it with harmony and find rhythm with different volumes, surfaces and planes.”

Ahmed Al Faresi

Emirati artist Ahmed Al Faresi's solo exhibition at Showcase Gallery is one of the most intricate in terms of background story.

The exhibition is based on a fictional historical account in which a Native American tribe is culturally fused with a tribe of Arab nomads. The result is a shamanistic society and each artwork is intended to resemble a relic from this ancient society.

The level of detail in the works is impressive. Ranging from canvas to cheesecloth to a fishing basket, Al Faresi has chosen a variety of media to express his deeply woven ideas.

In what has become a trademark style, he uses antique objects within his work – so in ink drawings, an Indian sword, a Native American headdress and the thread from an agal appear. Badminton shuttlecocks, snakeskin and faux fur give other pieces texture and tell a fascinating story – and then, surprisingly contemporary graphic-style drawings show the breadth of his oeuvre.

Other highlights

While these four shows are standouts, there are plenty of others worth seeing, too.

Bodies at Lawrie Shabibi is a show by Pakistani artist Hamra Abbas, who recently moved back to her hometown of Lahore and bases her work on observations of middle-class religious practices in homes and in the city's public spaces.

At the heart of the exhibition are large-scale reproductions of souvenirs sold as mementos for pilgrims at the markets adjacent to holy mosques, which question the relationship between commerce and devotion.

At FN Designs, Syrian artist Sema Orouk is having her first solo show, a series of work that uses Islamic patterns and geometry as its base. Orouk is an architect and that is evident in many of the pieces in the show.

Two artists have come together at Carbon 12 to form a mute language in a show titled *Visceral Silence*. Monika Grabuschnigg and Christine Kettaneh use work that depict unreadable text and the outline of keys that would not fit locks to explore the use of language.

A trip to Alserkal Avenue this month would not be complete without stepping into *The Third Line*, where Iraqi artist Hayv Kahraman and the artist collective Slavs and Tatars are showing works.

Kahraman's practice uses delicately drawn female figures to tackle weighty issues, such as the violence of war.

Slavs and Tatars are perpetually concerned with language and history, and in this show they address the unlikely story of German Orientalism and what it can tell us about Europe's contemporary relationship to Islam.

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