

Contemporary art: Spotlight falls on the collectible generation

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In April, a painting by the Lebanese artist Ayman Baalbaki went for up for sale at Christie's auction house in Dubai.

The catalogue estimated the price of "Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom", a prescient meditation on revolution consisting of an impasto portrait of a man in a red keffiyeh mounted in the style of a martyr's shrine, at between \$50,000 and \$70,000. It went for \$206,500.

"Ten years ago, I used to beg people to buy [Baalbaki's work] for \$6,000," says Saleh Barakat, the director of Beirut's Agial gallery.

Lebanese art, like that of the rest of the Middle East, is experiencing something of a boom. Artists such as Ayman Baalbaki and Walid Raad are sought after by collectors and curators worldwide. Last year, a Washington museum staged an exhibition of contemporary art from Lebanon.

For some, the sudden spotlight is disorienting. "It's not like when we started in the 1990s," says Marwan Rechmaoui, a conceptual artist whose explorations of the urban space of Beirut have been bought by the likes of Charles Saatchi and London's Tate Modern gallery.

Marwan Rechmaoui is part of a group of artists who came of age, artistically, in the post civil war period, and who have come to define the contemporary art scene.

Like many of his generation, Mr Rechmaoui spent his formative years abroad because of the war, giving him a cosmopolitan outlook.

When he returned in the 1990s, he would meet friends every Tuesday for

three hours of intellectual discussion. Topics ranged from the political situation in the Middle East to internet pornography and the French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu.

"From these discussions, our work emerged, but always in different ways," he says. "This is where the shift from the generation before us came. We became very critical of everything."

Mr Rechmaoui and his contemporaries tackle themes such as war, memory, and identity in a variety of media; such as photography, video and archive, something the local market took a while to adjust to.

"It was very hard for us to get people to accept photography as a piece of art," recalls Joy Mardini, an independent art dealer and consultant. "People were asking 'where is your handicraft?'"

The current surge in demand for Lebanese art is welcome, but also dangerous, Mr Rechmaoui says. "Some of them are drifting. They believe they are international and famous," he says. He jokingly speculates that the vogue for Middle Eastern art will be over by 2015, as the global elite move on to their next fad.

Gallery owners, however, insist that there is nothing faddish about the demand. "It's not about vogue, it's about being discovered," says Khaled Samawi, founder of the Ayyam gallery, which has offices in Damascus, Beirut and Dubai. Mr Samawi points out that Chinese art, the "craze" of the 1990s, has not been abandoned but simply became mainstream, now fetching 20 or 30 times the price of Middle Eastern art.

"I don't think it's a boom-bust cycle. If it is, there isn't much of a boom – 99 per cent of the talented artists in the Middle East are selling for less than \$100,000."

Lebanon's success is the culmination of a long tradition of working artists

and galleries, owners say. "Nothing has changed for me, the only difference is that the Financial Times is interested," says Mr Barakat, the Agial gallery owner. "[The boom] is the result of serious artists doing serious work supported by serious galleries."

While Lebanon's local art market is relatively mature, no one can deny the role of the Gulf in creating the boom, which is generally dated from 2005, when Christie's opened its first auction house in the region. Southeby's quickly followed.

There are now more than 60 art galleries in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and branches of the Louvre and Guggenheim museums are to open in the coming years.

Khaled Samawi insists, however, that the stereotypical image of Gulf sheikhs buying up culture in the manner of the arriviste families of Renaissance Italy is completely wrong.

He attributes rising prices to a "new breed of collectors": 30- to 50-year-old well-educated Arabs living all over the world – "a Lebanese gentleman who lives in London or a Palestinian gentleman who lives in Venezuela." The Gulf is merely a commercial centre, he says, pointing out that 70 per cent of the work he sells there is exported.

Since the start of the boom, new gallery spaces and projects, such the Beirut Art Centre, have opened. But more needs to be done for Lebanon's art scene to achieve its potential, say insiders.

"We need more government support and scholarships," says Ms Mardini. "That's what's missing. We have artists, galleries, auction houses. The only thing that's missing is a culture minister with a real portfolio."

According Mr Samawi, the whole Middle Eastern market needs more development.

“You need more art patrons. Corporate collections in the Middle East are non-existent,” he says, adding that the region needs “museums, more collections in public places and more professional galleries”.

Nonetheless, the process is starting, says Mr Samawi. Along with the wave of regional turmoil, there is, he says confidently, “an art revolution going on in the Middle East”.