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Rem Koolhaas Infiltrates Dubai With an Expectation-Defying Art Center

The first show is a revealing look at Syrian art history.

Brian Boucher (<https://news.artnet.com/about/brian-boucher-244>), March 17, 2017



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SHARE Dubai is known for flashy excess. This mercurial city of almost three million



in the United Arab Emirates has been one of the architect [Rem Koolhaas](http://www.artnet.com/artists/rem-koolhaas/past-auction-results) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/rem-koolhaas/past-auction-results>)'s preoccupations for over a decade. Indeed, back in 2008, he proposed going big on the shores of the Persian Gulf with [a pitch](http://oma.eu/projects/waterfront-city) (<http://oma.eu/projects/waterfront-city>) for the six-and-a-half-square-mile Waterfront City development, where sprawling urban blocks were to be punctuated by dazzling, iconic structures—one of them a towering sphere.



Concrete, designed by Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA). Photo Mohamed Somji, courtesy Alserkal Avenue.

As a result, what may be most notable about this week's opening of the first actual project by Koolhaas's Office for Metropolitan Architecture in the Emirate is its modesty. [Concrete](http://oma.eu/projects/concrete-at-alserkal-avenue) (<http://oma.eu/projects/concrete-at-alserkal-avenue>), as the new art space is known, is a triumph of discretion, right down to the first show, a fascinating historical survey of portraits from Syria that gives a picture of the war-torn country's cultural heritage much bigger than the headlines.

A Modest Achievement

"I would expose myself to ridicule by saying that my intense participation in the Middle East culminates in this simple building, so modest in scale," Koolhaas said in a lecture at the opening, making it clear that he's mindful of that irony.



Office for Metropolitan Architecture partner Iyad Alsaka, Alserkal Avenue founder Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal, architect Rem Koolhaas, and Alserkal Avenue director Viilma Jurkute. Photo courtesy Alserkal Avenue.

All the same, he said, the building does register the impact of Dubai on his practice, but in a counter-intuitive way: the spectacle of the city's glimmering, supercharged towers, he said, made him think that visually unremarkable buildings that focus on function might be the best riposte. (He also described the Emirates, where people of 40 nationalities live side by side, as a chastening counterexample to growing nativism in Europe, not to mention the States).

Known for brassy developments like the world's biggest shopping mall and tallest skyscraper, the city hosts the Pritzker Prize-winner's first completed project at Alserkal Avenue, a cultural village on the site of a former marble factory. The building anchors a complex the size of a few city blocks, founded in 2007 and now housing over a dozen galleries, two of them international. At just 6,500 square feet, the building isn't much larger than some of the commercial venues that are its neighbors.



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By **Caroline Elbaor**
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The complex houses other businesses including fashion and design companies as well as vendors of classic cars and workers' uniforms. This mixture, Koolhaas argued in a lecture, suggests a way for the art world to escape its isolation and complacency.

Learning From San Diego

Alserkal Avenue is named for its founder, Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal, a member of a wealthy family involved in real-estate development and electrical energy, as well as other sectors of business. Beginning in 2007, offering favorable rents, he lured art galleries to this family-owned property. Dubai's Ayyam Gallery (<http://www.ayyamgallery.com/>) opened there in 2009, later joined by fellow locals including Isabelle van den Eynde (<http://www.ivde.net/>) and Carbon 12 (<http://carbon12dubai.com/>).

In 2012, Alserkal Avenue announced that it would sink \$14 million into expanding the complex to 500,000 square feet, adding a number of new buildings designed in the style of warehouses to mimic the complex's original industrial character. New tenants since 2015 include New York's Leila Heller Gallery (<http://www.leilahellergallery.com/>) and London's Custot Gallery (<http://www.custotgallerydubai.ae/>).



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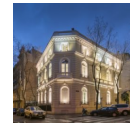
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By **Brian Boucher**
(<https://news.artnet.com/about/brian-boucher-244>), Mar 10, 2017

In a surprisingly unsexy art-patronage origin story, Alserkal told me in an interview that he had his first encounter with recent art in the galleries of San Diego, California, where he went to college. He also recalled seeing

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[Ansel Adams](http://www.artnet.com/artists/ansel-adams/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/ansel-adams/>)'s photographs in the gallery devoted to them at Yosemite National Park, though he noted that his father had long collected Islamic calligraphic art.

Alserkal was inspired to create an arts village by the example of formerly industrial, now newly developed areas like London's Shoreditch and New York's Meatpacking District. Koolhaas himself is known for repurposing historic buildings to serve as cultural facilities, à la [Milan's Prada Foundation](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/take-a-look-inside-fondazione-prada-285271) (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/take-a-look-inside-fondazione-prada-285271>) or [Moscow's Garage Museum of Contemporary Art](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/dasha-zhukova-rem-koolhaas-garage-museum-moscow-307077) (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/dasha-zhukova-rem-koolhaas-garage-museum-moscow-307077>).



Koolhaas delivers a lecture in front of Concrete. Photo courtesy Alserkal Avenue.

But considering that the buildings repurposed to create Concrete were erected in 2012 and never served any industrial purpose, the new center presents a curious simulation of such a trajectory. Though Dubai has been settled for thousands of years, it has seen an explosion of construction in recent decades, powered by the Emir's drive to create a megacity. It is hardly known for historic structures.

The city's art scene, too, is defined by newness, and the week saw not only the Art Dubai fair, but also [a new outpost of auctioneer Sotheby's](https://news.artnet.com/market/sothebys-dubai-makes-890801) (<https://news.artnet.com/market/sothebys-dubai-makes-890801>) and [the announcement of a new venue](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/art-jameel-met-museum-partnership-new-space-893888) (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/art-jameel-met-museum-partnership-new-space-893888>) for the nonprofit Art Jameel.

Though small, Concrete's building itself is airy and bright, with 30-foot ceilings, skylights, and a front wall of translucent polycarbonate. The distinctive stepped shape of the façade preserves that of the surrounding warehouses, and features four large panels that form doors which pivot so that the whole front can be open to a courtyard, where Koolhaas delivered his lecture. Several walls inside, one of them weighing 10 tons, are movable so that the space can be subdivided to accommodate up to four separate exhibitions or events.

"Everyone Would Have Expected a Show of War Art"

Rather than launch with a glitzy show of blue-chip art that might have been in keeping with Dubai's reputation for excess, Concrete opens on a relatively sober note. Drawn mostly from the holdings of the [Atassi Foundation](http://www.atassifoundation.com/) (<http://www.atassifoundation.com/>) and organized by Mouna Atassi, who formerly ran a gallery in Damascus, and independent curator Rasha Salti, the exhibition "Syria: Into the Light" studies Syrian portraiture.

It's a genre which, a catalogue essay points out, stretches back to the beginnings of known civilization in that region, in the form of tomb portraiture.



Tawfik Tarek, Untitled, 1924. Courtesy Atassi Foundation.

The works in the show come from the last century. A pair of piercing eyes gazes out from a portrait of an unknown sheikh from 1924, one of the earlier examples here. A gray background highlights the impassive, bearded face under a vivid green turban.

The work is by [Tawfik Tarek](http://www.artnet.com/artists/tawfik-tarek/past-auction-results) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/tawfik-tarek/past-auction-results>) (1875-1940), a modern master. Tarek, Atassi explained to me, was one of the first Syrian artists to head to Paris for his education, and the painting could as easily be by the hand of an Orientalizing Gallic practitioner.

Among the most recent works in the show are four untitled works from 2016 by Hiba Al Ansari (b. 1983) that incorporate actual black ISIS masks smuggled out of Raqqa, the group's main stronghold. Al Ansari places the masks against backgrounds made of bedspreads, an allusion to ISIS's practice of forcing women into service as sexual slaves. Facial features on the masks are defined by belly dancer-style beads—a feminization of their subjects that would doubtless provoke a murderous rage.



Ahmad Moualla, *People and Power* (2011). Courtesy Atassi Foundation.

A 40-foot-wide painting by Ahmad Moualla (hanging on that 10-ton wall) brought me right up against my preconceptions about contemporary Syrian art, of which Atassi graciously disabused me. *People and Power* (2011), packed with dozens of figures across the breadth of the canvas, seemed on first glance to depict a war-era street demonstration.

But no. Atassi pointed out some figures carrying drums and others that seem to be acrobats: this is, in fact, a representation of the theater.

“Everyone would have expected a show of war art,” she said. “That would have been the easiest thing in the world to do.”

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