

The Compleat Blogger

Mostly cultural thinkpieces. Will occasionally write something food-related to justify the name.

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Alserkal: Art In Dubai

Dubai is the modern-day crossroads of East and West. An eight hour's flight from two thirds of the globe, it is ideally situated to display a wealth of contemporary art from the Islamic diaspora, as well as Northern European artists. I have written elsewhere of the dichotomy at the heart of art curation in Qatar (<https://thecompleatblogger.wordpress.com/2016/01/19/luc-tuymans-intolerance-exhibition-at-alriwaq-london/>): a lot of money, but a lack of direction. Direction is thankfully not a problem in Dubai, as all points of the compass lead to this cross-continental city and its artistic enclave Alserkal.

Sited within what my brochure described as the city's 'gritty, industrial' district of Al-Quoz, I reached Alserkal following a 35 minute walk from a brief diversion at the fairly unremarkable Meem Gallery elsewhere in the city. Dubai is not built for walking. Understandable, given the summer heat, when a car's use is for mobile

air conditioning as much as transport. Filled with wide-eyed, cod psychogeographic ideas about using the opportunity to walk between the galleries as an opportunity to experience 'the real' Dubai, I was unable to indulge my inner flaneur, focusing too much on leaping between sandbank sidewalks while the real Dubai drove past me in a cascade of battered 4x4s and water trucks. The smell of Al-Quoz was quite something. Walking along 8th street, roughly parallel to the Sheikh bin Zayed road, Dubai's aorta, oil never left my nostrils. Oil in a host of flavours. Gasoline at filling stations. A tangy must escaping from print factories and bottling plants.

There was no gradual transition into urbanised grot about the space of Alserkal; it was just suddenly there, with the advertising posters and clean graphics on its outside the only real clue that it wasn't another motor works facility. The block was a grid of warehouse and lock-up spaces which were variously used as galleries, office spaces for design agencies and upmarket, organic coffee stations. Shoreditch on the sand, if you will.

Farhad Ahrarnia – Something For The Touts, The Nuns, The Grocery Clerks And You @ Lawrie Shabibi



Fahrad Ahrarnia. Something For The Touts, The Nuns, The Grocery Clerks And You, No. 17. 2015. Work on cardboard.

Having accumulated a good portion of sand in my shoes, and dodged litter blowing through the air along the road into Al-Quoz, the first gallery I visited appropriately had cardboard, and not canvas, as the medium. The press release heralded Farhad Ahrarnia's pieces as a recollection of Robert Rauschenberg's cardboard works, but they lacked Rauschenberg's structural play, being mostly utilised as a two dimensional surface. Ahrarnia took discarded boxes from the urban

centres of Iran and repurposed them as a backdrop for *tazhib*, a Persian form of gilding typically used to ornament books. Al-Quoz was an appropriate place for them to be displayed, being the engine of Dubai's manufacturing and packaging. The second half of the exhibition drew upon a different craft; that of *khatam*, a micro-mosaic technique which requires a methodical collecting of filaments of different materials (ivory, copper, and brass are common) which are cut at the cross-section to reveal the underlying geometric complexity. In Ahrarnia's version the strips are laid out in dynamic collages, which were often in deliberate homage to pieces by Lissitzky and Malevich. Ahrarnia was very open about his influence from the Russian Modernists, and to see Persian craftwork colluding with the Russian avant-garde was one of many pleasant surprises which Alserkal afforded.

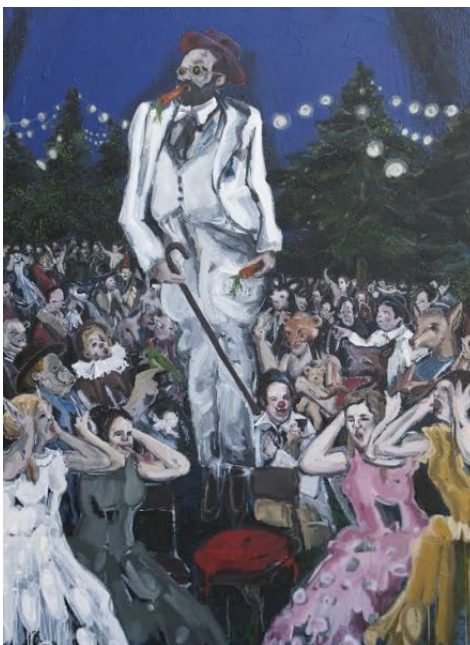
Lawrie Shabibi (<http://www.lawrieshabibi.com/>), *Al-Quoz 1*, *Al Serkal Avenue, Unit 21*

Ramtin Zad – Retrospective @ Salsali Private Museum

The Salsali Private Museum was a terrific space, with immaculate lighting piercing through black walls and black ceiling to allow details like the impossibly radiant tail of an acrylic peacock to shine through. There was not a dull piece in this exhibition, with Zad commanding an impressive and consistently penetrative style through painting, drawing, and sculpture.

On the back wall were the most imperious pieces, large canvases with different scenes united by cornucopias of people writhing and melding in forms which approached the botanical. A constant throng shapeshifting from man to beast to flower. Crowds flew on the backs of eagles. Rabbits, bears, humans and deer danced and ate and fucked at the centre of dark woods. Canvases with dramatically flat perspectives sucked me in as vigorously as the intense landscapes of late Van Gogh or Kiefer. Thick brushstrokes depicted crowds of spectre-spectators, their flesh with the slippages of candle wax, all in a carnivalesque turn reminiscent of the recently exhibited James Ensor at the Royal Academy.

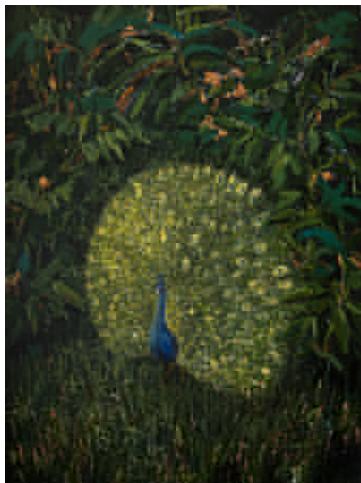
Ramtin Zad, *Magician*. 200×150 cm. Acrylic on canvas. 2015.
Courtesy the artist and Salsali Private Museum.



The paintings touched on places and symbols from Persian folklore which would chime readily with a native viewer (the Damavand mountain, mythological symbol of Iranian pride and resistance, is namechecked in one piece), but less so with ignorant Westerners like myself. That soon, however, became irrelevant: Zad still provided overwhelming sights which packed a punch regardless of prior knowledge. As the press release described, Zad fused a private language of his unconscious with mythological archetypes – not knowing the man or his cultural language that well, I should have felt cut adrift. But I never felt alienated – in the city where simulacra towers rise out of dead ground, I felt alive.

Some paintings had a millennial air, especially one which had a Moses figure cleaving apart the Red Sea, towering over one of Zad's distinctive masses of figures. The painting's title was given as 'Return of Trump'. An enigmatic one, as the painting seems incredibly timely, though it was actually painted in 2012. I emailed the artist to try and get to the bottom of it, but without a reply my best guess is that the title is a later addition to the piece. Still, at a time when the new American president is keen to roll back rapprochement with Iran and paint it as the international enemy number one again, vibrant Iranian artists like Zad are needed to speak out for his country, and he did so with aplomb.

How does Zad see himself? A self-portrait at the end of the gallery held a clue, with the artist as a 'Magician', levitating from a chair in front of a crowd that mixed people with anthropomorphic animals, or



Ramtin Zad, *Peacock*. 200x150cm. Acrylic on canvas. 2015. Courtesy the artist and Salsali Private Museum.

maybe just people wearing masks. Irreverent yet self-confident, it was a profile fitting a man who paints so powerfully despite not being much past thirty.

Salsali Private Museum (<http://www.salsalipm.com/>), Al-Quoz 1, Street 8, Al Serkal Avenue

Bernhard Buhmann – Modern Times @ Carbon 12

Bernhard Buhmann was another ringmaster, conjuring tricksters and jesters of his own, albeit on rigorously portioned canvases. Half of the pictures were figurative paintings constructed from 4x3 square grids. These were the stronger, and just about justified the artist's claim that the pictures invoked the split of identity facilitated by social media. However, I felt that Buhmann was caught between continuing his usual character shapes and types, and engaging with post-internet art. For what it's worth, I find Douglas Coupland's [pictures](https://www.coupland.com/visual-arts) (<https://www.coupland.com/visual-arts>) in the latter field to be similar, but much more effective.

Bernhard Buhmann, *Mister D*. 200x130cm. Oil on canvas. 2016. Courtesy the artist and Carbon 12 gallery.



Likewise, though the abstract paintings which constituted the other half of Buhmann's show weren't bad, and were a commendable effort at trying on a different hat, they lacked the freewheeling charm of his early paintings. Buhmann's art seems to be self-consciously receding to straighter and crisper lines, and I missed the steampunk world of aeronautics and harlequins and from his prior output. *Modern Times* treads much of the same territory as his previous show *The Pretenders* (<http://carbon12dubai.com/exhibitions/bernhard-buhmann-pretenders/>), but cannot say it as well as *The Pretenders* did, that show being the chrysalis of Buhmann's career so far. Those paintings, loosely based on circus performers assembled out of bright colours and animal faces and disproportionate body parts, made the more nuanced, yet more impactful, statement on identity.

Carbon 12 (<http://carbon12dubai.com/>), Unit 37, Alserkal Avenue, Street 8, Al-Quoz 1

Safwan Dahoul – Miniatures @ Ayyam Gallery

A dark room away from the glare of the Dubai sun was the ideal setting for Safwan Dahoul's haunting dream visions. A continuation of his long-running *Dream* series, *Miniatures* was a departure in form, transferring his pictures to a smaller scale. The gallery trumped up these miniatures as being like storyboards, and this was true to an extent, but the comparison faltered through giving too much preference to film. This wasn't some incomplete or deficient work,

waiting to be built up into something more. These were intimately rendered vignettes where the physical size of the pieces were crucial to their claustrophobic feel.



Safwan Dahoul, *Dream 139*. 10x10cm. Acrylic on wood. 2016. Courtesy the artist and Ayyam Gallery.

Dahoul has stated that his Dreamer, though she is a woman, is a version of himself. But that undersells his ability to capture something inherent to female experience. One of the most affecting sights I saw in Alserkal was a triptych in the corner of this exhibition, focusing on the dreamer's belly: first with a close-up of it, then a close-up which revealed a foetus inside, then finally the woman's belly with her arms crossed in front of it. It could have been in protection, in enchantment, in memory, or something else entirely, but each interpretation held a new well of feeling. It's the exhibition in microcosm: symbolic, elusive, and all the more powerful for it. With such small paintings, Dahoul left elusive and allusive pointers to what's happening in his native Syria, like the triptych where his dream-protagonist appeared to dissolve before the viewer's eyes. These miniatures were paintings as portholes, with passing glimpses into portals of a female psyche. I felt distinctly like a voyeur, with the dreamer's expression impassive through it all. Visually, Dahoul's dreamer looked European, French even, with a close-cropped bob of black hair. But hung closely together, and with a distinct narrative edge making a viewer less likely to contemplate in front of them, the vignettes could have been a comment on the passage, upheaval and suffering of Syria's refugees.

It is worth mentioning that while Dahoul is conversant with early 20th century artists' investigation of dreams, and shares traits with Picasso in his manipulation of the female form, dreams are traditionally important in Arabic culture. Medieval Arab cultures composed volumes and volumes of 'dreambooks', encyclopedias designed to be used to unlock the symbolism of objects which presented themselves in dreams. And unlike the self-contained, diagnostic dreams of Freudian psychoanalysis, these dreambooks had a divinatory role, where they revealed something hidden yet imminent in the world, instead of the dreamer's anxieties. For a series that is based around

dreams and unreal worlds, it had an oblique yet incisive analysis of Dahoul's native country, particularly since the Year Zero of 2011. Even on a purely conceptual basis, the questions loomed large: with the horror happening in Syria, who is to say that reality is less surreal than a dream? Are we collectively daydreaming through humanitarian crisis?

Having worked on his *Dream* series since 1987, Dahoul ought



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Ayyam Gallery (<http://www.ayyamgallery.com/>), Units 11-12 Al Serkal Avenue, Street 8, Al-Quoz 1

Thaier Helal – Landmarks II @ Ayyam Gallery

Just over the other side of the road was an exhibition of Dahoul's compatriot, Thaier Helal. For all that a Western observer might wring their hands about the difficulty at representing the chaos of the world, those problems pale in comparison to those faced by Syrian artists, who must try to come to terms with the displacement, devastation, and death incurred by the ongoing Civil War. Thaier Helel's latest effort is more oblique than his 2012 exhibition *In Army We Trust*, which pilfered the iconography of the Syrian army. Helal looked deep within the earth for *Landmarks II*, representing the cartography of his native land through mixed media on canvas. His pieces were as much sculptural as they are pictorial, with layers of crust and sediment erupting from the canvas. Grit, glue, sand and salt layered with paint in a process depicted in an illuminating video on display at the exhibition, which hit the perfect middle ground between academic over-explanation and brevity.

Thaier Helal, *Sand*. 190cm diameter. Mixed media on canvas. 2016.

The works were powerful, and not in a handwavy spiritual sense. They weren't idly romantic visitations, in a way that English art at times of war very often is; they were hard, concrete, and did a solid job of deferring to nature as the supreme authority in Syria's fate, the judge of what will emerge through decay or rebirth.

Ayyam Gallery (<http://www.ayyamgallery.com/>), Units 11-12 Al Serkal Avenue, Street 8, Al-Quoz 1

Nick Brandt – Inherit The Dust @ Custot Gallery



Nick Brandt, *Underpass With Elephants*. 2015. Photo credit: Nick Brandt. Courtesy Custot Gallery Dubai.

As with Safwan Dahoul, Nick Brandt presented a body of work which was part of a long-running series, but could still be enjoyed in its own right. Brandt took monumental photographs of animals he snapped for earlier projects, and cleverly choreographed enormous prints of those around the urban sprawl of East Africa. Elephants loomed out of factories and landfills; zebras stood on railway lines. They were all shaded with Brandt's distinctive monochrome, a technique which made the pictures, and the people and animals within them, look like preemptive memorials.

The pictures were all the more effective from being shot on location, rather than edited in post-production, thanks to the chance encounters of elements in the photograph. So a family of elephants propped up beneath an underpass were viewed with awe by homeless children,

and the zebra originally photographed by a lake had his surroundings seamlessly overlaid with those of a fetid waterway surrounding a factory. A chimpanzee appeared to mournfully examine the wreckage of a landfill.

When scale is so important, occasionally it can be difficult to appreciate finer details, particularly in the smaller works, having got used to large prints which aimed to impress a reaction upon the viewer instantaneously. But the smaller works had their charms too, like the photograph which showed a ranger crouching by two dispossessed elephant tusks so that his body shape resembled the elephant's head. It's always tempting to divorce aesthetic impact from social conscience, to think that the ivory tower of art is apolitical and amoral. But ivory is hardly apolitical, as Brandt's tusks remind us. It was a mark of the exhibitions in Alserkal to marry those artistic and political tendencies, sometimes held as contradictory in Western art. Yet it is difficult to imagine that, if we were to undergo something as catastrophic as the Civil War which has afflicted Safwan Dahoul and Thayer Helal's homeland, for example, we would feel the same way.

Custot Gallery (<http://www.custotgallerydubai.ae/>), Alserkal Avenue, Unit 84, Street 6A, Al-Quoz 1.

Abderrazzak Sahli – Tolerance And Peace

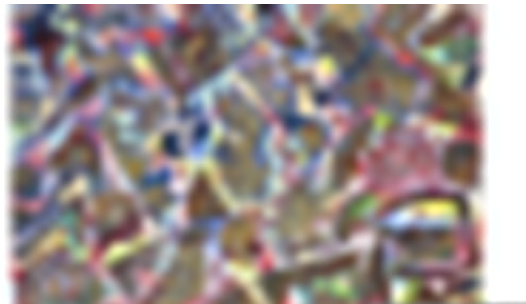
Yesterday Is Tomorrow's Memory: Modern Art From North Africa @ Elmarsa Gallery

I technically entered Elmarsa in error, as the gallery was in the process of transitioning between exhibitions. But, true to Alserkal's openness, the staff were perfectly happy for me to amble around their work-in-progress space and get almost two whole exhibitions for the price of one...which was still free, as all of these gallery spaces were.

Downstairs, a posthumous retrospective of Abderrazzak Sahli was being dismantled. As with Farhad Ahrarnia, the twin influences of Islamic abstract art and the Russian avant-garde were held in parallel. In contrast to the abrupt angles and shapes of Malevich and Lissitzky, Sahli's canvases danced with fluid forms which were much more vibrant and cartoony. Think Miami, not Moscow. Some of the more neon shaded paintings could be screenshots from the intro credits to an early 1990s kids' TV show. But the title of *Tolerance And Peace* alerted the viewer to Sahli's high-minded intentions. He said that his work '[translated] diversity' and that the 'clutter of objects' in it was 'nothing

but a representation of the crowd'. For Sahli the crowd is a heterogeneous dance, diverse underneath uniformity, like sand under a microscope. His later works vibrated and shimmered like the most aquatic Paul Klee paintings.

Abderrazzak Sahli, *Untitled*.
120x120cm. Acrylic on
canvas. 1993. Courtesy
Elmarsa Gallery.



Against the rainbows casting out across the gallery, some austere works stood out, consisting of white shapes against a black background which had the concentrated intensity of Matisse's cut-outs. Without colour, the focus could switch to Sahli's use of shape. As ever, the danger to read too much into abstract painting looms large, but the overwhelming *impression*, at least, was of tumbling leaves, crescent moons, and dynamic human forms, arms outstretched. It certainly felt crowded, even in the austere pieces, and it made an interesting counterpart to Ramtin Zad's wild, fleshy brush strokes when painting his pile-ons of spectators, as Sahli came off as much more confident and celebratory of gatherings of things and people.

Though this exhibition focused on Sahli's paintings, there was dialogue with his sculptural work, and some of his paintings communicated ideas which were also realised by him in three dimensions. The abundance of works which consisted of frames-within-frames evoked the image of the illuminated manuscript; the decorated word. Similarly, the cut-out style of the austere works made overtures to a specifically Arabic architectural form: *Mashrabiya* latticework. Used in windows and dressing screens, it's a type of wood design where the wood is peppered with small holes which allow light and air pass through, but maintain privacy as one cannot be clearly seen through them. It's often used in screens which would allow women to undress behind when indoors. Abstracted from a design context, and shot through with Sahli's distinctive colours and rhythmic shapes, the door motif is, in the coloured works, made sexy with

suggestions of glimpses and teases. In the austere ones, there is a more concentrated focus on illumination from darkness or ignorance, or freedom from tyranny.



Nejjib Belkhodja, Abstraction Numero 64. 99x64cm. Oil on canvas. 1964. Courtesy Elmarsa Gallery.

Mashrabiya can be found all over the medina squares of North African cities, which was in turn the structural motif toyed with by Nejjib Belkhodja in the group exhibition upstairs, *Yesterday Is Tomorrow's Memory*, a 'greatest hits' collection of post-War artists from the Maghreb. The clarity of line and colour in his work is staggering, especially considering it predated digital art – from a distance, you could mistake one of his paintings for a QR code. I had a sense that among the North African artists, there was a willingness to embrace structure and form within abstract expressionism which would be anathema to some of the more self-directed North Americans. I felt that the Abstract Expressionism exhibition, just finished at the Royal Academy, was striking enough, but even in a shed on the outskirts of Dubai, artists from Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria et al more than held their own against Pollock and co in Burlington House's grand halls.

There is something of Franz Kline's enigmatic calligraphy in Rachid Koraichi's etchings and sculpture, but of course the latter artist has a solidified relationship with Arabic text and symbol, whereas Kline's relies on vagueness in his brushstrokes. Not to say that Kline is a worse

or less educated painter (far from it), but it's worth pointing out that the African artists' manipulation of text went beyond source material into something essential to their identity and self-expression. Nja Mahdaoui made pure art out of calligraphy; Khaled Ben Slimane fused it with pottery. At the other end of the scale, Aly Ben Salem's *Le Jardin d'Eden* was an outpouring of Oriental life and colour to make Henri Rousseau's head spin, depicting two alluring women spangled together in a torrent of flowers, reeds, birds, forged by daring tones of blue and black. To make another overwrought comparison to a Western artist, it was a painting which made Klimt look impoverished. It was sheer magic, and any attempt to make a weedy critical comment was dashed by the saucily insouciant expression in the central figures' eyes.

Aly Ben Salem, *Le Jardin d'Eden*.
74x52cm. Gouache on paper. 1950.
Courtesy Elmarsa Gallery. Please
note this picture has been
unintentionally cropped.




The deep reds and oranges of Emna Masmoudi and Asma M'Naoaur burned with the Mediterranean sun, the Rothko to the Pollockian intensity of lines bedecking Mahjoub Ben Bella's art. Elmarsa should be applauded for including Masmoudi and M'Naoaur, as they represented the more recent vanguard of women in North African painting. If there was one downside to the overall experience at Alserkal, the relative paucity of women was one. But then again, that's a criticism which has been made of abstract expressionism all over the world: that it is, to put it bluntly, a load of cock waving.

Yesterday Is Tomorrow's Memory dipped a toe in the water for a colourful, thoughtful, and still fertile art scene and has allowed me to uncover even more artists from Tunisia and countries north of the Sahara which were not represented, and find out their communication with artists from Arabia, the Levant and beyond. Viewing it in close

proximity to the Royal Academy's Abstract Expressionism show was a convenient coincidence, but the wealth of Maghreb art more than matched those lofty standards.

Elmarsa Gallery (<http://www.galerielmarsa.com/>), Unit 23, Alserkal Avenue, Al-Quoz 1

After Elmarsa, I walked out of the last warehouse into a nondescript gravel car park, and my visit was over. Compared to Dubai's more well-known (and more central) sights, Alserkal is modest and quiet. Yet the voices it contains needs to be heard. I visited Dubai the week that the new American president signed an executive order limiting travel to his country from Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. It goes beyond saying how short-sighted, narrow-minded, and plain callous that was, and it is hard not to feel pessimistic about how the Arabic world at large will be demonised into super-villainy over the next four years. Cross-cultural communication with the Arabic world is now more vital than ever, and art has a role to play in that. It may be the case that the artists are barred from travelling to their own opening nights (as happened to Thayer Helal in London), but their work has the ability to talk to us when they are silenced.

FEBRUARY 23, 2017 COMPLEATBLOGGER ALY BEN
SALEM, ARABIC, ART, BERNHARD BUHMANN, DONALD
TRUMP, DUBAI, EMNA MASMOUDI, FARHAD AHRARNIA,
ISLAM, MAGHREB, NEJIB BELKHOUDJA, NICK BRANDT,
PAINTING, RAMTIN ZAD, SAFWAN DAHOUL  LEAVE A
COMMENT

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