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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Contemporary Middle East



Kais Saliman "Untitled" 2009 PHILIP CHEUNG FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Brooke Anderson and Don Duncan

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(See Corrections & Amplifications item below.)

Amid the abandoned real-estate projects, bailout plans and downsized dreams of Dubai, an art market is flourishing.

Dubai has become the driver for an explosion in Middle Eastern contemporary art, with more than 60 art galleries as well as regional offices for international auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's. In neighboring Abu Dhabi, also part of the United Arab Emirates, satellites of the Louvre and Guggenheim museums are scheduled to open in the next few years.

Now, through Dubai's new institutional prowess, this energy is reinvigorating and transforming older, established art scenes across the region. In Beirut, long a cultural hub, at least five prominent new galleries opened last year, while Damascus is emerging as one of the Middle East's fastest-developing art markets. Both Lebanon and Syria are enjoying periods of stability with steady economic growth and record tourism—a favorable local climate for the changes afoot in Dubai.



Parviz Tanavoli's bronze sculpture 'The Wall (Oh, Persepolis)', was sold in April 2008 by Christie's for a record-breaking \$2.8 million (2.2 million euros) at a Dubai art sale. CHRISTIE'S

"Since May 2006, we've sold more than \$170 million (134 million euros) worth of art, which has exceeded our expectations," says Mike Jeha, director of Christie's Dubai, which opened in 2005 and commenced auctions in 2006. Compared with Dubai's signature sectors—real estate and banking—its burgeoning art market appears to be weathering the recession. Mr. Jeha says this is because, unlike abstract and often complex financial products, art "is very tangible. It's a physical asset with inherent value. Most people buy art for aesthetic purposes and not for investment. People are buying what they want, to hang it on their walls and live with it."

"Dubai still has a lot of expansive wall space to fill with art and connoisseurs with deep pockets to pay for it," says Khaled Samawi, owner of Ayyam, a

contemporary-art gallery that opened in Damascus in 2006 and has expanded to Beirut and Dubai. Next week it will make its second appearance at the Hong Kong International Art Fair, offering works by painters Salwan Dahoul and Khaled Takreti and sculptor Nadim Karam.

In April 2008, a 180-centimeter-tall bronze sculpture called "The Wall (Oh, Persepolis)" by Parviz Tanavoli sold at a Christie's auction in Dubai for \$2.8 million (2.2 million euros), a record for a modern Iranian artist. "It was the most memorable moment," says Mr. Jeha. "There was a real sense that the Middle Eastern art market had come of age."

With total sales in art at around \$15 million (12 million euros), the latest auction at Christie's Dubai last month showed that the buzz continues. "Les Chadoufs," an oil painting by the late Egyptian Mahmoud Said of a rural Egyptian scene with a geometrical desert backdrop, brought the highest price, breaking \$2.4 million (nearly two million euros)—more than 10 times the estimate.

A month earlier, March of Art Dubai, the premier art fair in the region, drew 18,000 people and some 72 galleries spanning more than 30 countries.

"One thing that stands out in Dubai is its energy," Mr. Jeha says. "It's electric and it's still new."

And the effect can be felt across the Middle East. The studio of 33-year-old Syrian painter Kais Salman, in an upscale neighborhood in the hills overlooking Damascus, offers a glimpse of where Syrian art is headed. His technique—a monochromatic, abstract expressionism—is a bold break from the art of his Soviet-influenced forebears, products of a Syria that was much more isolated than it is today. But the art techniques aren't the only things changing. Mr. Salman and his generation have seen their art appreciate up to sixfold in the past four years. Mr. Salman's canvases now sell for as much as \$21,000 (17,500 euros), offering him an income and working situation unprecedented for most Syrian artists. Mr. Salman's ascent parallels the fortunes of Ayyam Gallery, which represents him. Through Ayyam and, by extension, the auction houses in Dubai, he is reaching clients he once only dreamed of.

"The money I am making gives me more comfort, time and space in

which to really concentrate and work as an artist," he says during a break in his studio, where three half-finished portraits of women lie against the bare wall behind him. "Money has helped me become more professional."

Once largely government-supported, the Syrian arts scene is effectively privatizing, with a clutch of new private galleries like Ayyam bringing it into the larger nexus of Middle East art and normalizing its price tags. "I would say prices have appreciated 300% to 400% from ridiculously low levels," says Mr. Samawi, whose gallery now represents 20 artists, up from five when it started in 2006. "I think today Syrian art is still 50% undervalued."

The meteoric appreciation of contemporary Syrian art is just one of many indicators of the country's economic overhaul— from a closed socialist economy to a free-market one—initiated by President Bashar al-Assad since he took office in 2001. It is this transition, some say, that leaves Syria particularly exposed to the untrammelled effects of a globalized free market right now, not least in the arts.

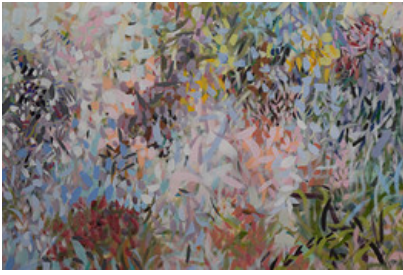
"What's happening to Syria is not necessarily a good thing," says Samia Halaby, a New York-based Palestinian artist and former art professor at Yale University's School of Art. As an artist, she is represented by Ayyam Gallery and has benefited from the bump in Syrian art. While she thinks it is generally a good development, she sees some danger in the forceful opening of the country.



Mustafa Ali, a Syrian sculptor, in his studio in Damascus PHILIP CHEUNG FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Artists of Syria's older generation, such as watercolorist Etab Hreib, 54, once counted on the sprawling socialist state for most of their income. Now Ms. Hreib's pastoral watercolors are fast falling out of fashion. As the patronage transfers from the public to the private sector, she is selling less and less and her prices haven't budged. Like many other artists of her generation, she stands by, dismayed at the turn Syrian art—and its new generation—is taking.

"Now the arts have become like a market," she says in her damp, cluttered studio in Damascus, surrounded by piles of unsold canvases. "The galleries which are



Samia Halaby's 'Bright Wild Weeds' (2008) at the Ayyam Gallery in Beirut ALEXIS NAMDAR/AYYAM GALLERY

responsible for these artists don't care if the artist is good or bad. They don't care about art as a whole. All they care about is if it sells or not."

Some older generation Syrian artists, like sculptor Mustafa Ali, 54, have managed to make the transition. "We are working in the right way now in Syria," Mr. Ali says on a recent break from his latest sculpture, a monumental limestone piece commissioned by the government for use in a public park. During recent years, Mr. Ali has successfully grown his portfolio of private clients and says the value of a midsize piece of his has increased to \$20,000, from \$5,000 three years ago. "The country is advancing and its art is becoming greater. Syrian art is entering its golden age."

Mr. Samawi of Ayyam Gallery is unapologetic about the revolution that small galleries like his have triggered in the local arts market. Like the country as a whole, he says, Syrian art is integrating into the larger, global market and those who aren't happy with that will be left behind. "What's happening now is the creation of contemporary Syrian art and it's very different from what the older generation is doing," he says. Much of Ayyam's art now makes a stop at the company's new Beirut gallery, opened in late 2009, where it is selling to Lebanese and international collectors, who have beaten a path to Beirut's more mature art market for years.

A rapid



Photographer Nadim Asfar in his studio PHILIP CHEUNG FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Mr. Asfar's 'Les Constellations-Jour 15' (2009) PHILIP CHEUNG FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



'Untitled' (2005) captures a suburb of Beirut NADIM ASFAR

proliferation of galleries in that city is creating a new platform for young artists. Increased interest from Western museums and collectors is also giving confidence to artists in a country that is typically associated with conflict. Lebanese artist Chaouki Chamoun's acrylic-on-canvas "Toppled City," which brought \$145,000 (114,306 euros) at a Christie's auction in Dubai in

2007—about three times the estimate—is typical of a traditional Lebanese art mainstay: powerful commentary on the underlying instability of world events.

"We're a country coming out of war, and the local art scene is very rich. In a way it's virgin territory," says Lea Sednaoui, 24, a recent graduate of St. Martin's College in London and founder of the Running Horse, a spacious gallery in the industrial Maddawar district of Beirut. "People need to have trends and Middle East art is en vogue," she added. "I think the fact that there's a boom will change things."

Indeed, things are already changing. Many of Beirut's newer galleries are performing a public-service role, filling a void left by a government still grappling with postwar reconstruction and political reconciliation.

"Before, there was a lack of institutions and support," says Lamia Joreige, co-founder of the Beirut Art Center, which opened early last year. "The government didn't have a real budget for the arts. This has created a free and organic way for art to evolve outside of institutions." Unlike many of the city's older galleries, it operates as a nonprofit organization, educating the public about contemporary art, while simultaneously giving new artists a platform for their work.

Gallery owners in Beirut say phone calls and visits from curators in Europe and the U.S. are becoming more and more frequent, something they weren't experiencing just five years ago. This newfound verve has, in turn, given artists the confidence to experiment with other media that until recently weren't considered marketable.

Photographer Nadim Asfar, 34, used to make ends meet by taking pictures at weddings and doing work for advertising firms, exhibiting his photographic art work only occasionally. "At my first exhibit in 2004, people resisted," he recalls. "Galleries didn't really have experience with photography. In 2008, we had an exhibit, and we sold all of the pieces, and in several editions."

Today, Mr. Asfar exhibits at Espace Kettaneh Kunigk, a contemporary-art gallery that opened in Beirut last year.



Jean Marc Nahas at work in his studio in Beirut. PHILIP CHEUNG FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Whereas Beirut's art scene has enabled once-marginal artists like Mr. Asfar to firmly enter the commercial fine-art arena, many of Beirut's more established artists, like Jean-Marc Nahas, 46, are skeptical of the huge local shifts, driven by momentum emanating from Dubai.

"There are a lot of ignorant dealers making uninformed decisions," says Mr. Nahas, whose cartoon-like black-and-white sketches break from the conceptual-art-driven trends of the new Beirut art scene. "There's a lot of good work that isn't exhibited."

Still, there's no doubt that today, the region's art scenes are rapidly falling under Dubai's increasingly powerful orbit, bolstered by that city's growing portfolio of international art institutions.

"There are some serious long-term indicators now. The market is more sophisticated," says Saleh Barakat, founder of Agial; established in 1990, it's one of Beirut's longest-running contemporary-art galleries, and has a reputation for discovering new talent in the region. "There's a real renaissance now, and Dubai is a good platform for that."

Corrections & Amplifications:

Satellite museums of the Louvre and the Guggenheim are planned to open in 2012 and 2013, respectively, in Abu Dhabi. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated the museums are planned to open in 2012 and 2014, respectively, in Dubai.

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