The Gallery

THE UNIVERSITY GALLERY

NYU Abu Dhabi's Art Gallery on Saadiyat Island unites regional and international artists within a public university space. The gallery's founding director Maya Allison writes about its vision and mission to connect with the community through art.

A CURATORIAL MISSION

When deciding to develop an exhibition — whether it originates from our curatorial team or from a guest curator or scholar — we review its content as it relates to our core mission. That is: will this subject feel relevant, regionally, as well as internationally? Does it resonate with the unique project of NYU Abu Dhabi? Any exhibitions also resonate differently depending on location. In selecting each project, we consider our role as a University Gallery, our position on Saadiyat Island, our audience in the UAE, and the larger global conversations.

As a result, a very specific curatorial platform has emerged. It takes the form of three themes: The Environment, built and natural; Arab and Islamic history and culture; and Art in Global Dialogue. All of these topics require some urgency for residents of the UAE, the students in our university, and for the arts generally. They are distinct topics, but enable exhibitions across media and history, with art from around the world.

Thus for our exhibitions focus on contemporary work, but in the coming year we will announce a number of historical exhibitions, curated by specialists in their fields. The most important focus for the gallery is scholarly, experimental, and relevant exhibitions that engage a varied and broad audience on a relatively intense scale.

TO ME, THE BEAUTY OF THE UAE IS HOW QUICKLY CULTURAL DIVISIONS DISSOLVE

MAYA ALLISON

INVITING THE PUBLIC

Our campus is a bit unusual for the UAE in that we are open to the public, and anyone may visit the gallery during opening hours without an appointment. Getting that word out there has been our first challenge.

In November 2014, we opened On Site, a group exhibition that drew together artists from the UAE and abroad. This show served as a “housewarming” for the space, to initiate it as a venue where the local creative community could come together and connect to its larger art worlds. The exhibition brought together eminent Emirati and international artists, including Ehab Abdulrazzaq, Tarek Al-Ghannaim, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Barmi Mubguy, Rashid Al-Hasan, and Mary Temple.

In the coming year we will initiate a series of events meant to bring local and university communities into dialogue. Soon we will also announce a monthly “family day” when we host art activities and tours for people of all ages. We are collaborating with the NYU Abu Dhabi Institute to generate artist talks and exhibition-related dialogue for both the community and the university. I’m very pleased that we have recently added Aida Edra to our team, an artist and educator originally from Sharjah who has a deep appreciation for the value of art in our UAE community. She will be heading up our budding outreach and programs initiatives.

ART AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

I often get asked about how I programme for audiences in a city with so many co-existing cultures. The shorthand for this is “east versus west.” To me, how quickly cultural division dissolve within the UAE: we exist in a daily how slipperly are. For someone I locory work in the west — but of course — “Western” imply a perspective of the west. This dichotomy is a great schism about curating art and vigil.

For our first major commissioned show, collectively we present the new installations in Le Corbusier’s original work — “mirrors for princes for kings” — Machiavelli. This referenced points had a year ago that there was an art world that, until excluding American artists. We now able to legibly appear.

Now we are preparing a major solo show by Diane Al Hadid, Phaemon Lim, that makes electroacoustic sculptures, her work. Al Hadid pens (contemporary gallery and perhaps the pedal) in dialogues: on ancient and Renaissance art history; have a remarkably expansive project as meditations on memory and imagery preservation of art across time and co-existence.

The Phaemon Lim exhibition will be joined with two other museums: the Vienna Biennale, the works premiered, and Brown University Gallery, which is collaborating on a survey has essays by Renaissance art historian and contemporary art historian Aalmania. The exhibition will be curated from the Middle East.

As a non-commercial gallery, a service-driven exhibition space, we hope to support our artists and our co-existence. I am excited to see the arts community continue to develop in a way we are encouraged to be a part of it. NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery is located on Saadiyat Island.
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As a result, a very specific curatorial platform has emerged. It takes the form of three themes: The Environment, Built and Natural; Arab and Islamic history and culture; and Art in Global Dialogue. All of these topics register some urgency for residents of the UAE, the students in our university, and for the arts generally. They are distinct topics, but enable exhibitions across media and history, with art from around the world.

Thus far our exhibitions focus on contemporary work, but in the coming year we will announce a number of historical exhibitions, curated by specialists in their fields. The most important focus for the gallery is scholarly, experimental, and relevant exhibitions that engage a varied and broad audience on a relatively large scale.

TO ME, THE BEAUTY OF THE UAE IS HOW QUICKLY CULTURAL DIVISIONS DISSOLVE

MAYA ALLISON

INVITING THE PUBLIC

Our campus is a bit unusual for the UAE: it is open to the public, and anyone may visit the gallery during opening hours without an appointment. Getting there by bus or train has been our first challenge.

In November, we opened with On Site, a group exhibition that drew together artists from the UAE and abroad. This show served as a "heating up" for the space, to invite it as a venue where the local cultural community could come together and connect to its larger art world. The exhibition brought together eminent Emirati and international artists, including Ehwan Abdulhadi, Tarek Al-Ghousaini, Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, Basim Magdy, Rashid Rana and Mary Temple.

In the coming year we will initiate a series of events meant to bring local and university communities into dialogue. Soon we will also announce a monthly "family day" when we will host art activities and tours for people of all ages. We are collaborating with the NYU Abu Dhabi Institute to generate artist talks and exhibition-related colloquia for the community and the university. I am particularly pleased that we have recently added Alaa Adbul to our team, an artist and educator originally from Shajah who has a deep appreciation for the value of arts in our UAE community. She will be leading up our outreach and programs.

ART AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

I often get asked about how 1 programme for audiences in a city with so many co-existing cultures. The shepherd for this is "east versus west." To me, the beauty of the UAE is how quickly cultural divisions dissolve. This is also true within the student body of NYU Abu Dhabi: we exist in a universe that reminds us daily how slippery the terms "east" and "west" are.

For someone from China, the UAE is to the west—but of course, "Eastern" and "Western" imply a Euro-American perspective of the world. Noticing this false dichotomy is a great position from which to think about curating and audience. It keeps me alert and vigilant.

For our first major solo show, we commissioned the research-based artist collective Saser and Tatars. They were doing new installations in response to the medieval "mirrors for princes" genre of advice literature for kings—Niasewaell wrote the most famous one, The Prince. But these artists looked to the Islamic tradition of this genre, and focused on text produced in the Uyghur region of China, which has a long and rich Muslim history. The artists connected that work to today's popular "western" culture of self-help texts. They literally mix and mingle "eastern" and "western" references, and audiences from varied cultures found multiple points of entry into their work.

We had a young Arab man write to us that this was the first time he felt there was a place for his heritage in an art world context. Yet this is art, and it was shown almost exclusively in a Euro-American context. The art itself was able to reach a new level of legibility and meaning thanks to appearing in Abu Dhabi.

LOOKING FORWARD

Now we are preparing a major solo exhibition of the work of Zina Al Dad, Phantom Limb, premiering in March. She makes elaborate, towering sculptures and wall pieces. Through her work, Al Dad contests the contemporary "white cube" (of the gallery, and of the pedesdul) in dialogue with art history, drawing on ancient and Renaissance art historical references. Her forms have a remarkably expressive, poignant quality, yet remain subtle, as meditations on memory and imagined history and the perseverance of art across time and culture.

The Phantom Limb exhibition grows out of a collaboration with two other museums: the Vienna Secession, where several of the works premiered, and Bowers University's David Wilmuth Bell Gallery, which is collaborating on the publication. The catalogue has essays by Renaissance art historian Richard Tarnower, contemporary art historian Alan Gutman, and Guggenheim Curator for the Middle East and North Africa.

As a non-commercial gallery, a small museum, a research-driven exhibition space, we are a particular nutrient to our ecosystem. I am excited to see our surrounding arts community continue to develop in the years to come, and we are honoured to be a part of it.