

April 11, 2015

Desert canvas

SHAILAJA TRIPATHI



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The London Royal College of Art's famous anonymous postcard exhibition in Dubai.



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

From Jitish Kallat's new series on time.

The works at Art Dubai spanned the range from contrasting to complementing, usual to intriguing and hackneyed to innovative.

At the ninth edition of Art Dubai — one of the biggest art fairs for the region of South Asia, West Asia and Africa — there was so much to take stock of. The works spanned the range from contrasting to complementing, usual to intriguing and hackneyed to innovative. While Iranian photo-journalist Kâveh Golestân's nude photographs at Madinat Jumeirah were covered with a silver sticker, at the Satellite space on Alserkal Avenue, an industrial area now hailed as the art hub of Dubai, Ghada Da's study of a female body in culture was rendered through yoni sculptures and long white scrolls bearing the print of a woman's menstruating vulva.

Art Dubai took its big ticket event — Global Art Forum — to Kuwait for the first time, and experts and thinkers ruminated about how technologies have transformed the art world. In the neighbouring emirate of Sharjah, which is hosting the 12th edition of the Sharjah Biennale, curator Eugenie Joo gathered 51 artists from across the globe to reflect upon Sharjah's ambitions, its present and possibilities.

Amid the festivity were quiet murmurs about Andrew Ross, a New York University professor, being refused entry into the United Arab Emirates for being critical of labour practices and the conditions of the migrant workers from South Asia. Ross was to be an observer of labour practices at the construction sites of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Guggenheim's upcoming outpost at Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi where the famed Louvre has also set up its base.

Art Dubai, however, continues to flourish. Antonia Carver, the fair director, described this edition as more global than ever with the inclusion of 92 galleries from 40 countries and 500 artists. It was bigger, more mature, with more solo booths, more installations and more performances. Several Indian and international galleries returned to the fair.

Sunitha Kumar Emmart, Bangalore and Delhi-based GallerySke's Director, said, "It is a great way to introduce us to patrons in the region, not just from Dubai, but from all the surrounding regions."

The fair was divided into Contemporary, Modern and Marker. Modern featured masters and their museum-quality works from South Asia, West Asia and Africa. Master printmaker Bruce Onobrakpeya's unique plastographs were brought by Mydrim Gallery of Lagos, Nigeria. The veteran artist had participated in the fifth India triennale in 1982 and even won a prize. Cape Verdian master Manuel Figueira showed under Perve Galeria from Lisbon; Shahid Sajjad was showcased by Art Chowk, Pakistan. Kaveh Golestan's photo-montages — curated by Vahi Mahlouji from the archive of the Iranian artist and photojournalist killed by a landmine in 2003 while covering the Iraq war for the BBC — were one of the highlights of this section. The sepia-toned photographs and nude human figures were in dialogue with animals and their body parts creating a fantastical world. Dhaka-based collector and the force behind the bi-annual Dhaka Art Summit, Rajeeb Samdani, made a few discoveries in the modern section. "This time, we discovered Pakistani modernist Shahid Sajjad, who was featured in the modern section and also Lala Rukh. This is the first time we have come across works by these artists and are in love with their works," says Rajeeb.

Marker focuses on one particular region. This year it was Latin America, a region so big that curator Ana Luiza Teixeira de Freitas found it difficult to cover it in just one exhibition. However, she tried to do her best by dealing with the region through different genres rather than the varied cultural ethos of the different countries in the continent.

Contemporary hosted more than 80 galleries selling everything from sculpture, photography, paintings, video art, sound pieces, installations among others. Dubai-based gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde reported strong sale. Madam Tussauds II — a 2015 painting by Rami Haerizadeh, Rokni Raerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian — reportedly sold for \$130,000. The painting was a part of a collaborative installation by the trio. London's Carroll/Fletcher had brought "Pulse Index", a star attraction that drew massive crowds owing to its interactive nature. Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's work records participants' fingerprints and the heart rate at the same time. The piece displays data for the last 10,925 participants in a stepped display that creates a spiral room of skin. Apparently, this work has also been sold at a whopping price.

A personal favourite was the solo of Jitish Kallat titled "Here after Here after Here" by the Paris-based Galerie Daniel Templon. This new set of drawings, videos, and photo-pieces are on the theme of time, recurrence, sustenance and the celestial. In the video work, Kallat morphs 30 rotis with the waning and waxing images of the moon. According to Victoire Disderot of the gallery, "Kallat's works raised an enormous interest — especially after the success of Kochi Biennale, which was dealing with quite similar themes. Almost all drawing pieces were sold, to buyers essentially from the West Asia for 10,000 \$ each."

Among the various non-profit sections, Global Art Forum occupies the top slot for its intellectual stimulus. This year the theme was "Download Update" where technologists, filmmakers, museum directors, art collectives, artists were invited to discuss the impact of technology on art.

For the first time ever, the Royal College of Art's famous anonymous postcard exhibition stepped outside London and guess where it came to. Art Dubai as RCA's Secret Dubai. Which artist's work is on the postcard you buy remains a secret until you pay for it. It's been held in the RCA campus for years now not only to help fund some students but also with the idea of encouraging people to buy art on merit and not the artist's name. Some 3000 postcards were displayed in the glass case priced at AD500 each. It was fun to watch the visitors guess the name of the artist likely to have made the postcard going by the names mentioned on the list.

The writer was invited by Art Dubai.