

# MOJEH



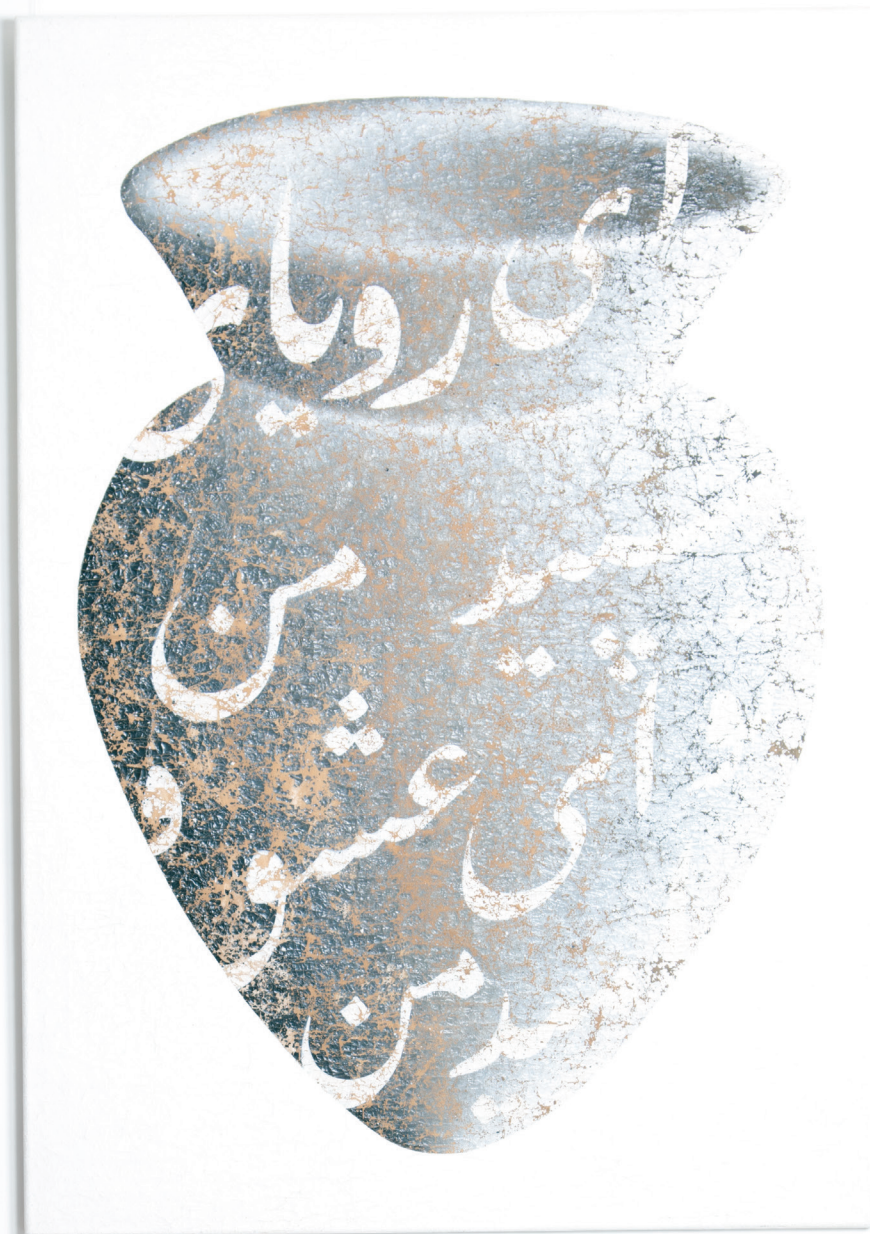
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THE NEW MOOD

# ART EDUCATION

From the auction house placing Middle East art on a global platform, to the foundation protecting its threat from war, we spotlight what Dubai's female art pioneers are looking forward to during Art Week

Words by Laura Beaney



Photography: Borna Ahadi

## KATIA NOUNOU-BOUEIZ

Director and head of Sotheby's Dubai

Once typecast as 'emerging' markets, Middle Eastern and Iranian art have soared to new heights in recent years, sparking an international awakening to the range and quality of works that spawn from the region. Internationally, institutions like the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and The British Museum are building their collections, but in the Middle East itself, momentum is growing with the establishment of international auction houses like Sotheby's, which opened its first Dubai showroom in 2017. The inaugural auction brought in Dhs13.2m in sales from buyers spanning 33 countries and set five artist records, with Iranian-born artist, Ali Banisadr's painting *In Medias Res* selling for Dhs1.69 million.

These remarkable figures provide further insight into the increased global appetite for the art of the region. "Being of Iraqi and Iranian descent, I was always exposed to the wondrous creativity that stemmed from this part of the world from a young age," shares Katia Nounou-Boueiz, director and head of Sotheby's Dubai. "Despite having grown up in London, I unfailingly found myself drawn to Middle Eastern art and felt a strong affinity to it." Katia, 32, carved out a career for herself defined by her passions, and in her position handles the works of leading masters from the Arab and Iranian world, from Mahmoud Saïd to Sohrab Sepehri. "I like art that tells a story and makes you feel, even if that story is dark," she shares. "One of the main elements that excites me about Middle Eastern art is that there is almost always a powerful narrative behind each work. The struggles of the geopolitics of the region, be it war or the Arab Spring, should be shared with the world, and art is an impactful way to do this."

During Katia's 11-year tenure with the auction house, she has experienced the market's rapid evolution, taking pride in the demand for diversity in the artists that Sotheby's represents. "What makes our auctions so special is that alongside works by 'blue chip' artists like Ali Banisadr, Mahmoud Mokhtar and Farhad Moshiri, we also focus on younger artists and new names. Many exciting artists made their auction debuts at Sotheby's last year, including Salah Yousri, Farshid Maleki, Youseff Sida and Mehdi Moutasha," she explains.

Artists from the GCC are also coming to the fore; last year Sotheby's reached international records for leading Emirati artists Mohammed Kazem and Hassan Sharif, as well as Saudi's Maha Malluh and Abdulrahman Al Soliman. There has also been an unexpected rise in global demand. "I'm surprised by how more and more frequently clients from the West are collecting art from the Middle East," says Katia.

Head of a Woman (1958) by Fouad Kamel, courtesy of Sotheby's



"In our recent London auction, a client had consigned a work by Armenian-Lebanese painter Paul Guiragossian – which was acquired by a buyer from a small town in Denmark!"

For Art Dubai 2019, Katia's focus falls upon the female gaze. "Women artists have been underrepresented for the past 30 years, and now finally we are seeing a move towards female empowerment," Katia confirms, explaining that this social shift has been echoed in Sotheby's Middle Eastern sales. "We are increasingly focusing on female artists who have been under the radar. At Art Dubai, I'll be looking out for works by Shaikha Al Mazrou, represented by Lawrie Shabibi gallery, and a personal favourite, Huguette Caland, who just had a show opening at the Tate St Ives." *Art Dubai runs from March 20 to 23 at Madinat Jumeirah; ArtDubai.ae*



Natalya wears dress, blazer and jewellery by Dior and shoes by Stuart Weitzman. She is photographed in front of Bakhodir Jalal's *Interflow* painting at Andakulova Gallery

## NATALYA ANDAKULOVA

Founder of the Andakulova Gallery

The art of Central Asia is as complex and compelling as the ancient narratives that flow from the region. It's an ethnic cauldron, comprising diverse diasporic communities, nomadic tribes and the myriad of faiths that span from Islam (the most prevalent) to Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and even Shamanism (in Siberia). Positioned at the heart of the storied Silk Road, Central Asia has long been a hub for trade and migration, and the location of radical social and political transformations that have impacted its art. The influence of early 20th century European art forms followed by the tsarist conquest of Turkistan, saw focus fall upon local craftsmanship, while the formation of the USSR left its heavy imprint upon the development of fine art. Now, the former Soviet republics have obtained national independence and their artists, liberated from state censorship and the restrictive climate of socialist realism, are enjoying creative freedom. Some dwell on tradition, reviving once forgotten crafts while others, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan veer towards the avant-garde. Culturally-loaded and at the crossroads of the old and new, it's precisely this world of unrepresented creative possibilities that's captured the interests of gallerist Natalya Andakulova.

"Can you blame me for being inspired by the art and culture that characterised my childhood?" quips the founder of Dubai-based Andakulova Gallery. Part Russian, part Uzbek, 36-year-old Natalya embodies the diversity of her homeland. Her eye for and appreciation of the art of her region took off as a student in Russia under the tutelage of acclaimed Uzbek painter, Mirzaahmedov Khakim. "He advised me on my first purchase, a painting of his, which only fuelled my appetite for more," she continues. As her collection grew, and through travel and research, Natalya became increasingly aware that the Central Asian artists she adored were lacking international prominence. Through the establishment of her gallery she aimed to address this disconnect, providing an international platform for emerging and mid-market contemporary Central Asian artists with a designated focus upon those from Uzbekistan. Andakulova Gallery presents an insight into the multifaceted and fragmented culture of Central Asia through its programme of artists working across varied mediums. Kyrgyz painter Yuristanbek Shygaev, for example, relays the ancient folklore and philosophies of his people



*Malevich Tank* by Almagul Menlibayeva



*My Silk Road to You 10* by Almagul Menlibayeva

through new techniques, placing them in a contemporary context, while the late Max Penson (a personal favourite of Natalya's) documented the economic transformation of Uzbekistan. The legendary photojournalist took the country as his adopted home and captured its rapid transformation from a traditional feudal society to a modern republic. "Dubai was a natural location for my first gallery," she explains. "Its ethnic mix reflects that of Central Asia, and from a business perspective, it's a prime location. I don't have to travel to London, New York or Hong Kong to meet buyers, because they're already here!" Now, in its sixth year, the gallery and its regional focus are fulfilling the visions of its founder, attracting increasing international attention. Looking to Art Dubai, Natalya reflects on the inaugural edition of the aptly named Bawwaba (meaning 'gateway' in Arabic), a section of the fair and programme which spotlights artists from Latin America, the Middle East and Africa, as well as Central and South Asia. "It's truly a gateway to the world," she enthuses. "This new structure offers visitors greater access and allows them to engage more deeply with artists and galleries from non-western geographies like Central Asia. With its freshly defined programming including films, Art Dubai speedboats along the full spectrum of art making. All bases have been covered; every section taken into consideration; each taste catered to." During Art Dubai, Andakulova Gallery will display the works of contemporary Kazakhstani artist and curator, Almagul Menlibayeva whose portraits of lone, yet powerful women aim to capture the modern condition. *The works of Almagul Menlibayeva will be on display at Andakulova Gallery from March 6 to September 20; Andakulova.com*

*Camouflage Centaur* by Almagul Menlibayeva





Photography: Borna Ahadi

## SHIREEN ATASSI

Director of the Atassi Foundation

In October 2018, Syria's National Museum of Damascus reopened its doors following six years of closure, enforced by war. Some might consider this a step towards 'normality', but for others it's a stark reminder that their country's cultural heritage must be preserved. Years of unrest have seen ancient artifacts ravaged and damaged in the crossfire, while antiquities were looted for sale abroad. The destruction of the 2,000-year-old Lion of Al-lât statue by militants and the abandonment of the Damascus studio of celebrated contemporary painter, Tammam Azzam, further emphasises that art from every period of Syria's rich history has been placed under threat. Yet it refuses to be snubbed out.

"Since the conflict started in 2011 it has become vital to us that we help preserve and promote Syrian art," explains Shireen Atassi, the 46-year-old director of the Atassi Foundation for Arts and Culture. "The voices of artists today rise to counter destruction and violence, to make sense of it and to persevere. Their talents and work are sources of hope, identity and inspiration for future generations," she continues. And, much like the work of the artists that it nurtures, the Atassi Foundation is another symbol of resistance.

The Atassi family's patronage of the arts began in 1986, a time when Syrian art was relatively closed off to the rest of the world. Sisters Mouna and Mayla Atassi worked together to transform the attic of their family bookstore into the city of Homs' first private art gallery. Atassi Gallery rapidly expanded to fill the building, its walls brimming with local art, and it became an unprecedented space for intellectuals and art appreciators to connect and collect. "When I worked at Atassi Gallery with my mother during the early 1990s, I was surrounded by Syria's artists, writers, poets, and filmmakers," recalls Shireen. Over the years that followed, the gallery exhibited some of Syria's most celebrated artists – including Fateh Moudarres, Abdullah Mourad and Ahmad Durak Sibai. It moved to the capital of Damascus in 1993 and continued to play a pivotal role in shaping Syria's creative landscape, pursuing ambitious programming and cultivating a vibrant environment for cultural exchange.

When the inevitability of war ensued, the conflict saw Syria's institutions close their doors in their droves, as civilians fled. The Atassi Gallery's 30-year journey took a fresh turn as the Atassi family, along with their art collection, left for Dubai in 2012. Rather than simply reopening in a new destination, the family felt compelled to take their long-standing role, supporting Syria's artists, a step further, with the establishment of Atassi Foundation – the joint vision of mother and daughter team, Mouna and Shireen. "Syrian art



*Nightgown* by Nagham Hodaifa, courtesy of the Atassi Foundation for Arts and Culture

is quite peculiar in that it has kept its authenticity without following the traditional western schools," considers Shireen. "The year 2000 was a turning point, because the Internet became widely available in Syria and artists got a window to access art globally. However this window of access was only one way: the world didn't get a glimpse of art in Syria." That's where the Foundation comes in. Atassi Foundation launched as the only non-profit organisation during Art Dubai in 2016. "It was a gamble," says Shireen. "But all of our exhibitions to date have taken place in this city, so we feel it's our platform." Acting as a safeguard for modern and contemporary Syrian art, the Atassi Foundation has amassed one of the most comprehensive collections, but as a non-profit, it also plays a critical role in developing the careers of the next generation of Syrian artists, connecting them with international audiences through partnerships with institutions such as The British Museum and Canada's Aga Khan Museum. Indeed, the Atassi family have built a legacy, yet they continue to face the future. Shireen and Mouna are currently busying themselves with a summer symposium, the initiation of a prize for young art writers, as well as throwing weight behind their research initiatives, including the Modern Art Syria Archive (MASA). During Art Dubai, Atassi Gallery will exhibit *Personal Revolutions* – a collective show drawing together the works of Syria's contemporary female artists, who have revolted against tradition, society, subject, and even technique. *Personal Revolutions will be on display at Alserkal Avenue from March 9 to April 9; Atassifoundation.com*