



'Children of Iraq', a work by Lebanese artist Robert Helou, catches the eye at this year's Art Dubai fair Getty

Dubai makes an enterprise of art

The city's growing artistic sector plays to its multicultural strengths but faces censorship and cost challenges, writes Camilla Hall

Dubai's gradual recovery from the nadir of its 2009 financial crisis is being played out in the familiar settings of offices, parks, hotels and warehouses - but also in the strikingly unconventional milieu of art galleries.

Like the international merchant traders who have long shifted goods through Dubai's freeways, a new generation of gallerists has made the city a centre for modern art, produced in places from Pakistan to Egypt and sold on to regional and global buyers.

"Dubai's entrepreneurial spirit goes very well with contemporary art," says Claudia Cellini of The Third Line, a bustling local gallery.

The growing scene is emerging as an interesting examination of Dubai's ability to recover economically and of its long-term ambition to be a city of true world stature.

While gallerists enthuse over Dubai's qualities as a cultural crossroads for the expatriates of all classes who flock to work there, its viability as an international arts centre will be tested by its culture of censorship, a lingering sense of economic uncertainty - and by soaring living costs that the economic downturn has only partially checked.

Lina Lazaar, who acquires works for London's Tate Modern and helped develop Sotheby's first auction of Arab and Iranian contemporary art in 2006, argues the art market is maturing and establishing itself sufficiently to survive such threats.

"The only protection against anything - whether recession or censorship - is quality," she says. "Great art protects itself."

In contrast to large-scale, state-driven art projects in nearby Doha and Abu Dhabi, Dubai's success has resulted mostly from independent galleries and small private-sector endeavours.

Dubai's cultural diversity and expatriate majority are playing to its advantage, with artists, buyers and enthusiasts all able to gain exposure to a swath of the

'As long as you're not disrespecting anything in the work then you're OK. For both, it's a learning process'

developing world that has close links with the city.

"When you're in Dubai you're basically everywhere at the same time," says Parisa Davarkia, who opened the first outpost of her Rira Gallery at the Dubai International Financial Centre, the finance hub that is also home to several art dealers.

The arrival of auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's, and the growth of Art Dubai, the art fair, have also boosted Dubai's credibility. Art Dubai, which began just six years ago, attracted more than 75 museum groups this year, similar to the numbers at leading international fairs such as Art Basel or the Frieze Art Fair.

While Art Dubai has emerged as the region's glitziest and best-attended art show, big projects are also under way in its petro-state neighbours. Qatar and Abu Dhabi are spending billions on galleries and museums such as Doha's Mathaf modern art gallery.

Although such projects will compete for attention, many nevertheless believe the net effect is positive.

"Look at the momentum of getting people here to go to the opening of Mathaf - they should also stop by Dubai. It's so close, so why not?" says Miranda McKee of Gulf Photo Plus, which runs a photography gallery as well as workshops and events for photographers. "It should be an interconnected web of support for the arts here."

While the Dubai art scene has proven relatively resilient during the financial crisis, it still grapples with cultural and legal limitations on public expression.

As the Arab awakening raises new themes for artists, Dubai's credentials as a Middle East art hub are being challenged by its reputation as a tightly policed city-state with little tolerance for political speech by foreign guests. Whether the emirate can accept controversial political art will be an important test, many say, as post-revolutionary artists come to the fore.

"As long as you're not disrespecting anything in the work then you're OK," says Malha al-Tabari, who has expanded her Dubai-based Artspace Gallery to a new outpost in London. "For both of us, it's a learning process."

Some say Dubai also provides an outlet for creative expression and exposure to artists oppressed in their home countries.

Mina Etemad, who in the 1970s played a pivotal role in acquiring works for Tehran's contemporary art museum, says the Dubai branch of her Gallery Etemad displays works by Iranian artists that are too controversial for the current regime.

But tolerance of expression remains conditional and its limits are often arbitrarily defined.

Another potential cul-

tural obstacle to artistic expansion is the sheer cost of subsisting in a city where the property bubble that swelled before the financial crisis has only half-burst.

The prevailing bureaucratic culture is also not exactly Bohemian: residents who work are required to be sponsored by companies and freelance employment remains barely developed.

But, for all the potential pitfalls, enthusiasts such as Ms Lazaar see Dubai as a city that might one day be synonymous with London, Paris or Rome as an artistic destination.

MORE ONLINE

For more news and analysis from the region go to www.ft.com/mideast