

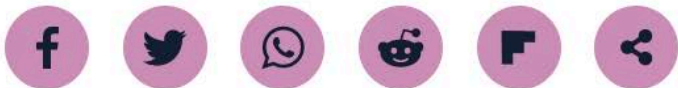
To a fine art: The MENA art affair making a scene in Europe

Culture

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Vittoria Volgare Dettaille | 28 February, 2023

The only European fair dedicated to modern and contemporary art from MENA, MENART Fair provides a window into this rich, cultural landscape too often underrepresented in the West. More than 200 works of art, from Morocco to Iran, were on show.



Chairs are overturned, shoes are abandoned on the carpet and a dining set is scattered on a table and the floor. It is the aftermath of an unknown disaster that could evoke the 2020 Beirut port explosion or, at the time of writing, the most recent quake that took the lives of more than 44,000 people in Syria and Turkey.

The Post-Disaster room is a compelling installation by The Great Design Disaster collective, founded by designers Gregory Gatserelia and Joy Herro, who work with an army of talented artisans to make the dreams of collectors come true.

The furniture and objects, found at the Beirut flea market of Basta, are all covered in recycled paper pigmented with charcoal, as if it was dust, to show a petrified moment, suspended in time.

"It's a poetic tribute to the Beirut blasts but also to the global geopolitical situation and conflicts," Lebanese designer Herro tells *The New Arab*. "Our installation will be universal, this is what will remain of our planet. We are sadly governed by uncontrollable mad humans."

"In Europe, there are fairs dedicated to Asia or Africa, but nothing about the Middle East. It's a region with a lot of history and amazing artists, but no one knows them. An art fair can create a market"

The scene, which is also a reminder to enjoy every moment we live, is described by the collective with a poem:

"The heart of disaster is unexpectedness, ill-preparedness, those stupid final thoughts we wish hopelessly to revise once thought. Accidents only happen when we don't expect them..."

The chandelier unstrung but still bright, the meal unfinished, never to be digested, drinks spilled and left where they fell, phones still ringing, of course, never to be answered – nobody's home, not even home itself."

A window into the MENA art scene in the heart of Europe



Picture exhibition view in the Villa Empain [photo credit: Sophie Carree]

The table scene was the first thing people noticed the first days of February when they walked through the doors of the stunning art deco Villa Empain, the Brussels home of the Lebanese Armenian Boghossian Foundation.

The installation was just the start of the MENART Fair, the only one in Europe dedicated to modern and contemporary art and design from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a region that in recent decades has seen a proliferation of creativity.

Yet, despite this rich heritage and a plethora of emerging talent, MENA artists often remain underrepresented in the West, exactly what MENART Fair founder Laure d'Hauteville set about to change.

After the success of its launch in Paris in 2021, d'Hauteville moved the third edition of the event to the capital of Europe.

When surrounded by art she is in her element. In 1998, she established the first international contemporary art fair from the MENA region in Lebanon. The fair came to an end in 2005 following the assassination of former premier Rafik Hariri. In 2010 she created the Beirut Art Fair, which was a resounding success until the revolution and the explosion of the port brought it to a halt.

"I couldn't stop the work of many years," she tells me. "So I went to Paris to launch the MENART Fair."

It made sense: "In Europe, there are fairs dedicated to Asia or Africa, but nothing about the Middle East. It's a region with a lot of history and amazing artists, but no one knows them. An art fair can create a market."

Despite the success of the first two editions in France, the team moved the fair to Belgium. "If Paris is the capital of art, Brussels is the capital of art collectors and the capital of Europe," she says.

Visitors had the opportunity to admire 250 artworks and design pieces by 146 artists through a more intimate experience. Instead of booths, the galleries were offered spaces and rooms of the villa spread over two floors.

"We are a didactic art fair," d'Hauteville continues, "We take visitors around, they can talk to gallerists and artists to better understand the artworks. We also want to change misconceptions and educate people about the region. The paintings may look great, but if you dig deeper, the message is very strong."

Coming to terms with the trauma of war



Houssam Ballan, Untitled, 2022 oil on canvas, 120x150 cm - Fann À Porter, Dubai, UAE

The Toys, by Syrian figurative painter Houssam Ballan, depicts two boys playing with figurines. Behind this seemingly lighthearted scene, however, lies a deeper story of the artist's personal tragedy of living through the war in Syria since 2011.

Despite having left Sweida for Beirut one year ago, the wounds are still very present. The artwork is a representation of his attempt to come to terms with the traumatic experiences he has faced.

"As you can imagine I have witnessed some pretty catastrophic things during the war," says Ballan. "However, what I am trying to convey is the inverse of such horrible scenes. Instead of depicting the realities of the war, I preferred to show my trauma as a contextual backdrop to two cheerful children playing with their toys."

"I wanted to show how light and happiness can sometimes simmer through the darkness but more importantly, I wanted to illustrate how two conflicting forces can exist in harmony with one another, in a certain moment," he explains.

The artwork, exhibited by Dubai-based gallery Fann A Porter, was not created with the intention of appealing to the public or with the concern of how it would be perceived. "I just needed to produce it for myself," says Ballan.

'What should we do for the world to see what happens in Palestine?'

Ramallah-based Zawyeh Gallery shed light on the harsh reality of life under Israeli occupation through the works of prominent Palestinian artists such as Khaled Hourani and Nabil Anani.

In his paintings Nap 1 and Nap 2, Hourani portrays himself lying on the edge of the Israeli-built separation wall.

The wall, which divides Palestinian communities, has been a recurrent theme in his work with men climbing it or children jumping over it.

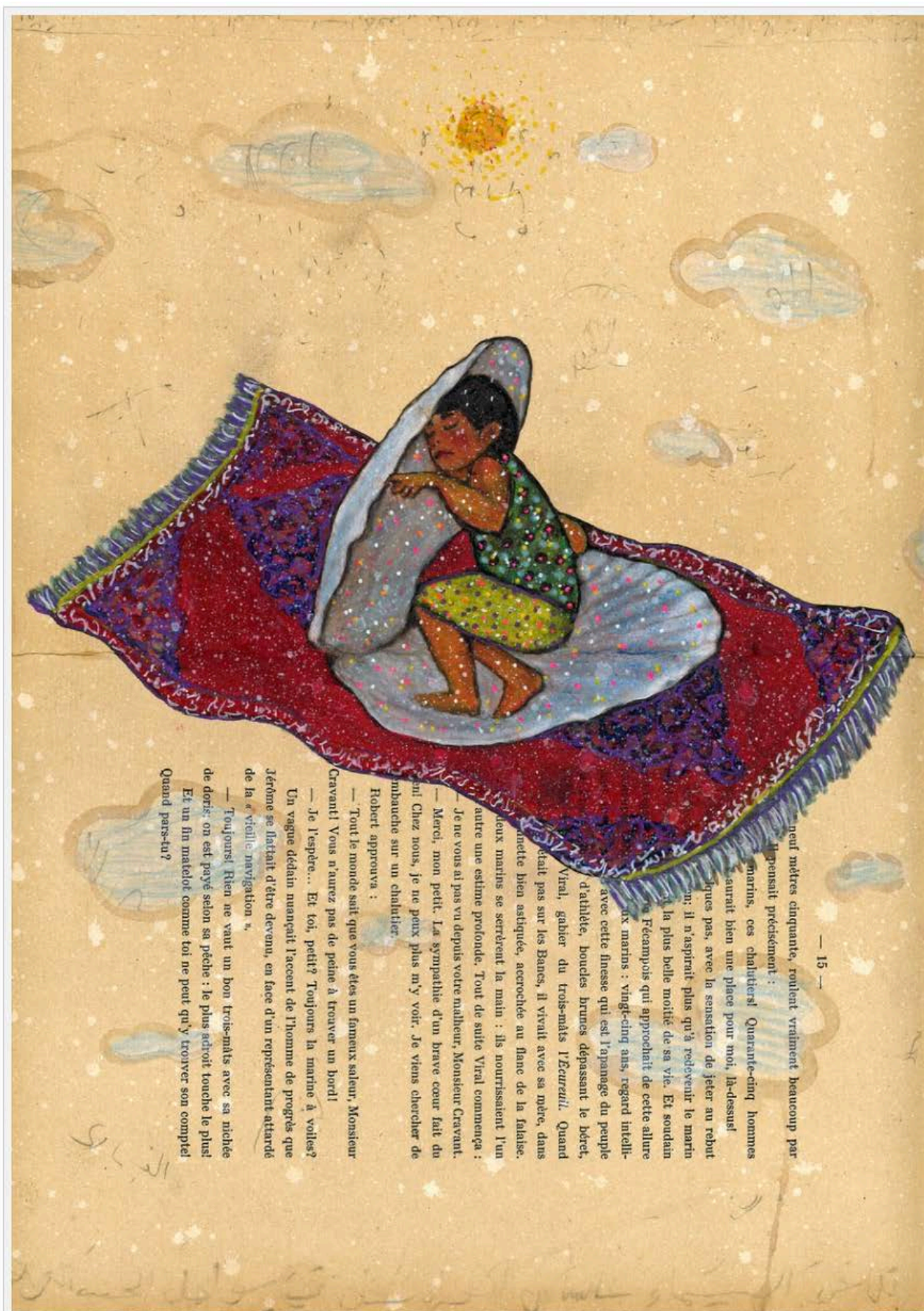
The overwhelming presence of concrete as a result of military occupation, together with the sun, is also a dominant feature in the work of Bethlehem-based Yazan Abu Salameh.

In Shams Al Ard, the 30-year-old artist portrays how the sun reflects on an occupied geographical spot. "The sun of the earth represents hope and light behind the concrete walls, the apartheid wall, and the city," he explains.

He normally depicts Palestinian villages and cities "which all suffer under occupation. As for the nature of the land and demography, the light varies from one region to another."

"What should we do for the world to see what is happening here? For me, working every day is the hope," says Abu Salameh. "It may take time for foreigners to understand my message, but one day they will. This art is a collective cultural memory and identity that we must create and preserve, as it is part of our existence and our actions."

'Dreaming to be a flying carpet collector and travelling like Sinbad'



Bilal Bahir, Bachelard shell, 2020, mixed media on antique papers, 42X31cm- Gery Art Gallery, Namur, Belgium

Inspired by ancient Persian miniature drawings, 35-year-old Iraqi artist Bilal Bahir often depicts stories on pages of old books and newspapers. And the stories are always connected to the texts he draws on.

In *Bachelard Shell* (2020), displayed by Gery Art Gallery, a boy cuddles on a shell flying on a carpet on the background of a page of *The Poetics of Space*, a book by philosopher Gaston Bachelard.

Here Bahir, who left Iraq 15 years ago and is now based in Belgium, explores the universes of intimacy, memory, and childhood in Baghdad. "When I was a boy, I was dreaming to be a flying carpet collector and travelling like Sinbad. Perhaps it's the way to just forget the image of the Gulf War."

"Our house is our corner of the world," Bachelard wrote. "As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word."

"Today I start to draw those magic carpets and skip that memory into Utopia," Bahir adds.

Showing off opulence in the Gulf region

Female talents were also well represented. When counting the artists, the team at the fair realised that almost half of them were women.

Pioneers like Lebanese Etel Adnan or Syrian sculptor Simone Fattal were exhibited along with contemporary women's artists, whose work is as rich. The younger generation uses multiple media, including photos, video, AI, and installations.

The Gulf region was well represented by Hunna Art, a new gallery supporting only female artists from the Arabian peninsula.

"It is crucial to highlight the voices of Khaleeji women to bring attention to the issues that they face daily and to generate conversations about it on a global level," Kuwaiti-Ukrainian artist Amani Al Thuwaini (1989) says.

Employing mixed media, her work often focuses on the desire for opulence in the Gulf region and how cultural traditions are influenced by consumerism.

Her artwork *Staged* features embroidered silhouettes of people and places – including the iconic Kuwait water towers – on four linen panels.

Inspired by the Islamic miniature drawings, the four sequences depict the rituals behind a wedding in Kuwait, from the arrival of the fancy car to the preparation of the bride and the female runway-style dance floor.

The tapestry spotlights the army of helpers – a common sight in Gulf countries – who welcome the guests, help the bride get dressed, and serve food and drinks.

As their presence often goes unnoticed or taken for granted, Al Thuwaini embroidered them in gold, unlike the other characters in grey, to stress the crucial role they play in making the event possible.

The artist feels that her mixed background has influenced her empathy for 'the other'.

Defying Oman's dark ages with AI



Eman Ali, Banat Al Fi 9a (The Silver Girls), 2022, Fine Art Archival Pigment print on Hahnemuhle Pearl, 20x20 cm, Edition of 5 plus 2AP, Hunna Art (Dubai, E.A.U)



Eman Ali, Banat Al Fi 9a (The Silver Girls), 2022, Fine Art Archival Pigment print on Hahnemühle Pearl, 20x20 cm, Edition of 5 plus 2AP, Hunna Art (Dubai, E.A.U)



Eman Ali, Banat Al Fi 9a (The Silver Girls), 2022, Fine Art Archival Pigment print on Hahnemuhle Pearl, 20x20 cm, Edition of 5 plus 2AP, Hunna Art (Dubai, E.A.U)

Based between London and Muscat, Omani visual artist Eman Ali (1986) also questions the culture and societies of the Gulf, focusing especially on women's representation.

Banat Al Fi'9a (The Silver Girls) is the imaginary story of two young women daring to dream in Oman's 1960s, a period referred to as the dark ages because of the late Sultan Said bin Taimur's reclusive and backward policies.

He banned items like radios, bicycles, closed shoes, and sunglasses. When his son Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said deposed him in 1970, there were only three schools, one hospital, and only 6 km of asphalted roads. The day of the coup is today celebrated as Renaissance Day.

Through AI assistance, Ali's Silver Girls challenge oppressive rules.

"They embark on a journey through the country, a time when travel itself was a challenge. They navigate the era's restrictions and engage in outdoor physical activities and sports, an uncommon sight for women of that time. They embody the ideals of freedom and serve as beacons of hope," Ali says.

In the three pictures exhibited at the fair, she gives new life to the Omani traditional silver jewellery, transforming it into retro-futuristic material to adorn the girls.

The traits of the Silver Girls are sometimes not very well defined as AI technology still struggles with realistic representation. "This can result in oddities like distorted body parts, creating a strange and eerie feeling."

Ali doesn't mind, on the contrary, she embraces the uncanny. "I don't want my images to look exactly like real photos. I want viewers to recognize the AI-generated aspect of the work and evoke emotions rather than strive for a realistic representation. In line with my photographic style, I want my AI-assisted images to possess a surreal and otherworldly feel that is central to my narrative approach."

The 16-year-old Algerian artist admired by Picasso and Matisse

Women in floral dresses, musical instruments, bright nature and colourful fruits and animals are the recurring themes of iconic Algerian artist Baya, the pseudonym of Fatma Haddad.

Born into a poor family in the suburbs of Algiers in 1931, she became an orphan at the age of five. She then moved in with her grandmother until the age of 11, at which point she began working as a live-in servant for French artist Marguerite Caminat who recognized the girl's artistic potential and encouraged her to develop it.

When Parisian gallerist Aimé Maeght met her during a trip to Algiers, he fell in love with her art and invited her to exhibit in Paris in 1947, alongside the likes of Braque and Matisse. She was only 16 years old.

Despite her youth and lack of formal artistic training, Baya's unique style earned her international recognition. Breton, Matisse and Picasso admired her work.

She primarily used gouaches but also sculpted with clay. She lived in her beloved Algeria throughout her career, even during the Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s and the Civil War of the 1990s, refusing to seek safety abroad.

"There is a lot of purity and poetry in Baya's work. She has never been influenced by other artists. Her art is spontaneous, soft, and colourful, like children who love colours, and of great sensitivity. The woman, her universe, is represented with beauty and delicacy," d'Hauteville says.

Baya passed away in 1998, but her legacy lives on. Considered by critics a surrealist, she always refused to be categorised with Western labels and developed a style rooted only in her Algerian heritage.

For d'Hauteville Baya "is an artist who has dedicated her life to her family and her art, without worrying about what might be said about her. She created for her friends, her children, for herself, to please. Her paintings are a hymn to life!"

"Why birds? they ask me. Well, I like birds. Why butterflies? Well, because I like butterflies," Baya said in one of the rare interviews she granted. "I take pleasure in that, but I cannot say why my painting is like this or like that. When I paint, I am happy, I am in another world, and I forget everything. People tell me: Why the same thing? I find that if I change, I will no longer be Baya."

Standing up for a more tolerant society where men and women can live equally



*Ghasem Hajizadeh- Le Cabaret- 1979- oil on canvas- 130x162cm - AMENOR CONTEMPORARY x Simine
Paris - Paris France*

Despite the oppressive nature of the Iranian regime, artistic expression thrives in the country and among the diaspora.

Various galleries showcased Persian artists including the pioneer of Iranian pop art Ghasem Hajizadeh.

Born in 1947, Hajizadeh became one of the most important artistic figures of Iran before the Islamic Revolution of 1979. His paintings are now included in prestigious private and public collections in his home country and around the world, from France to Seoul.

His portraits of famous or legendary figures, rendered in strong colours, are inspired by old photographs and show a society where men and women live equally and freely.

Cabaret Jamshid, which was on display at the fair, was created in the same year as the Islamic Revolution. It is inspired by a picture taken at Cabaret Jamshid, one of the first to be established in Teheran in the 1940s.

These nightclubs entertained a mixed crowd. Women, including renowned ones like Googoosh, usually sang and danced on stage, and a band would play live music while alcohol and a variety of foods were served.

"Hajizadeh used to go to various cabarets, hang out, take pictures, meet people and then paint the portrait," says Leila Varasteh, from Simine Paris.

However, following the revolution, it became difficult for him to create art freely, as his work features images and characters from a bygone era of tolerance and inclusivity.

In 1986, the painter decided to move to France to convey what he calls "nostalgic fiction" through his portraits.

According to Varasteh, Hajizadeh denounces the imperfections of Iranian society but not only.

"He depicts historical errors, power struggles, and injustices. He also gives voice to the ones living at the fringes of society, such as prostitutes and homosexuals."

In Cabaret Jamshid, "the man in white was married to the woman on his right, yet he was also in a romantic relationship with the man on his left. Hajizadeh's paintings give the marginalised a space to laugh, dance, love, and live freely."

Vittoria Volgare Detaille is a journalist and translator with a focus on the Middle East. After having studied Arabic Literature, she collaborated with the United Nations and with the Italian Press Agency ANSA. She has lived in Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya and Kuwait for more than 10 years

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