

MENART FAIR: CREATING BRIDGES AND OPENING DOORS

Since its launch in 2021, MENART Fair has established itself as a highly respected showcase for galleries and artists from the Middle East and North Africa. Having recently wrapped up the third edition of the fair, Laure d'Hauteville, its Founder and Director, shares her thoughts on how artists from the region are bringing their often-challenging narratives to life through their work and, in turn, generating rising interest among the international collecting community.



The MENART Fair brings together galleries and the artists they represent from a wide range of countries with distinctive cultures spanning the Middle East and North Africa to the Gulf States. What are the benefits of having such a diverse mix of artistic scenes represented at one fair and what are the challenges?

MENART Fair represents galleries that can come from any country but they must present only artists from MENA (Middle East, North Africa) hence the name of the fair, MENA ART. The MENA countries are renowned for their traditional know-how, combined with the contemporary forms of a region rich in multiple influences: here, surprising, moving and original creations emerge. The art from MENA is the affirmation of a promising market. An unparalleled fair, MENART Fair presents the best of modern and contemporary creation in this geographically localised scene, including the countries of North Africa, the Levant, the Gulf and Iran. The artists

exhibited at MENART Fair are, for the most part, already recognised in their country of origin. The challenge is to make them known internationally, to open doors, to create bridges between cultures, to incite dialogues and to understand these regions differently. Art and culture bring people together.

The list of contemporary artists from the MENA region whose names are now recognised globally is growing. What do you think are the key characteristics of art from this part of the world that excite and attract collectors and enthusiasts?

This vast region has benefited – geographically and historically – from rich experiences, conducive to artistic creation and thought. The art of North Africa is marked by an openness to various Euro-Mediterranean, African and Arab cultural influences that can be found in all forms of modern and contemporary art. The artists' desire for emancipation from the former colonial powers encouraged them to create a more broad-minded art. Often rich in colour, figurative or abstract, what they have in common is the constant look at their cultures of origin, exile, the Mediterranean and no longer a solely local identity.

Near East has an extraordinary fertility of this troubled land. The Middle East is a region where both modern and contemporary artists have reappropriated their chaotic and unstable daily lives and integrated them into their art. Contemporary art in these regions is experiencing a strong development, driven by the Arab uprisings. Confronted with a duty to remember, the artists denounce the silences, the occultations and the unspoken, just as they proclaim their hopes. The Gulf States have a young art scene in full swing. The market for modern and contemporary art has existed locally for some 40 years and plays an important role for regional art. The development is extremely rapid; the place has become globally established in less than 15 years. Local contemporary art tends to occupy a predominant place (photo, video, digital and installations). As for modern art, it is all the more sought after because of its rarity. Art has always been part of the Persian DNA, much to the chagrin of those involved in the revolution. Art collecting has always been a favourite activity of the Iranian elite. The place is renowned for its liveliness and quality, so much so, that production continues to grow strongly. Despite the harshness of the regime, the production and market of art in Iran is growing steadily.



How has the MENART Fair developed over its three editions? Do you see its expansion as reflective of changes under way across the broader MENA art scene?

Since I launched Beirut Art Fair in 2010, which ran until 2019, and then MENART Fair in Paris in 2021, I've sensed a growing interest in the art of these regions. Nothing has ever been organised around MENA in Europe. There are art fairs specialising in African and Asian art, but never anything on MENA, even though it is a rapidly growing intercontinental region and it is important to trace the history of these territories through art. Institutions are buying works by our artists and exchanges between galleries are beginning to take place. I think it is a beautiful image for Peace!

What were the reasons for choosing Brussels as the location for the 2023 edition of the MENART Fair?

Belgium has always attracted me by the quality of its collections and its visionary approach. MENART Fair, an emerging fair, is well based in Brussels, especially at the Boghossian Foundation. Visitors had the opportunity to discover a plethora of artists, many of whom are recognised in their home countries. The event has a human size, gathering 24 galleries; collectors had the time to visit the stands, to talk to the exhibitors, to discover - besides the artists - young designers. More than a fair, we are a platform that creates bridges and allows links to be woven. Brussels is the capital of Europe, Brussels is, in Europe, the capital of art collectors.



The 2023 edition of the fair had many highlights. What added dimension do you think these collectively brought to the fair?

The fair was characterised by many strong exhibitions, all of which contributed greatly to the overall experience for participants and visitors. These included the tribute to Étel Adnan (eight ceramics from the Olivea series), which acquired added poignancy since it was one of her final projects before she passed away. These exceptional pieces have been produced by the Seine-Maritime Department in France, and thanks to them, we were able to share this beautiful exhibit in Brussels. The selection of small format works by leading contemporary MENA artists curated by Rima Nasser and Anastasia Nysten was another talking point, as was The Great Design Disaster installation, created by Gregory Gatserelia and Joy Herro, which references the carnage and tragedy caused by the Beirut Port explosion of August 2020 by creating a dining room scene destroyed and frozen in time. Another special event was the Round Table, moderated by the renowned author and journalist Dr Werner Bloch, which explored the notion of ‘Modernity’ in the context of intercultural globalisation. This took place as part of the launch of Brahim Alaoui’s book ‘Regard sur les artistes modernes et contemporains arabes’, and having him there in person to sign copies of his work was a special treat.

What personal standout memories have you taken away from the 2023 MENART Fair?

Definitely the warm welcome of the Belgians during my different trips to Brussels. Then, the kindness of the visitors, the interest of the collectors, the help of the institutions to guide us on the good people to meet, and the numerous messages of thanks that we had during and after the fair. This is the first time I have received so many messages of support! MENART Fair has a threefold objective: to satisfy collectors' interest in the art of the Middle East and North Africa, with guidance on its history and market; to allow Western galleries to create bridges to new artists; and to provide those from the Arab world with a unique opportunity to network with international experts. It was incredibly satisfying to come away feeling that we achieved these.

