

A TALE OF TWO CITIES: THE DUBAI AND ABU DHABI ART SCENES

By: Simon Coates

Early 2011 and my wife and I are being whizzed around Dubai by a mutual friend, having decamped from London a few days earlier. Ending up in a "dosa" house in Bur Dubai, I ask him what's the difference between Dubai and Abu Dhabi? He thinks for a second before replying: Dubai is New York and Abu Dhabi is Washington. How so? Well, Washington is calmer, more considered - much like Abu Dhabi. Whereas Dubai is more glamorous and faster-moving like New York.

2011 was business as usual for Dubai's arts community. There was a light buzz surrounding the commercial galleries setting up in the Dubai International Financial Centre and the fifth edition of Art Dubai alongside the then-fringe "Sikka" art fair. The *Glitter Dust* documentary directed by Katy Chang reflected on the lives of local artists, and news bounced back and forth about new shows at another set of commercial galleries, this time in Dubai's Al Quoz industrial area. Dubai was cementing itself as the region's go-to destination for art and culture. The tale was somewhat different in Abu Dhabi. The Abu Dhabi Art Fair was in its third year - having been rebranded from ArtParis Abu Dhabi in 2009 - but there was little else. Apart, that is, from the ongoing news of a massive new cultural development and creative capital investment. Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island was to be transformed into a regional cultural hub with the addition of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, a branch of the Guggenheim museum (twelve times the size of the Manhattan equivalent) and the Zayed National Museum. Of these, The Louvre will be the first to open (in 2016). In the meanwhile, by 2015 the gallery count in Dubai had hit the fifty mark (according to regional arts guide Art in the City) with around eighty per cent operating as commercial concerns. Dubai now has a design district for private businesses and the Dubai Opera House is mooted to open in 2017. The "Sikka" arts event now forms part of Dubai's March art week along with a dedicated design fair and Art Dubai. And early 2015 saw the completion of the Alserkal Avenue development, situated in Dubai's Al Quoz area and already home to a handful of the city's art galleries and music venue The Fridge. Alserkal Avenue has become the self-styled arts hub for Dubai. Founder and developer Abdelmonem Alserkal is hosting the migration of disparate galleries to the area and there is even a curatorial edge, with the Alserkal development team behind a clutch

of seasonal events and commissioned art pieces, as announced by the organisation's public relations company, Sutton PR, towards the end of 2015.

Much is implied by comparing Dubai and Abu Dhabi with New York and Washington. Let's, in this context, use the comparison to look at what could be colloquially called the city's individual art scenes. And let's define an art scene. In his essay *Art + Life = Scene* David Burrows defines an art scene as a *distribution of presentations: a field of activity and intensive encounters but also articulations*. He goes on *...in this definition then, an art scene is not a professional network of individuals and institutions but an informal presentation of events in and as their effects, and therefore different to formal (physical and semiotics) organisations of art*. If, then, an art scene is set of presentations, encounters and articulations - and in the light of Abu Dhabi's big moves - is Dubai still leading the local cultural charge? New commercial galleries continue to open in Dubai, including the likes of the Leila Heller Gallery that already has a branch in New York. Why did you choose Dubai for your next gallery branch Leila? *I've been coming here for the last ten years and have been seeing the city blossom into a major hub in the arts in the region. Dubai is home to over fifty great galleries and many arts foundations that have contributed to making the city into an arts destination. Also the new development of Alserkal Avenue was such an amazing venue that it sealed the deal for me.*

Alserkal Avenue is also now home to the Custot Gallery, owned by Stephane Custot. Why did Stephane set up in Dubai rather than Abu Dhabi? *The main factor for deciding on Dubai was simply that I know the city better than I know Abu Dhabi, because of Art Dubai and other cultural events I'd visited a few times. From the first time I heard about the Alserkal district I found it a very appealing proposition due to its industrial feel and the fact that so many different industries rub shoulders there, it has a real vibrancy about it. The combination of its cheerful diverse character and the large exhibition spaces available finally won me over as I wanted to find a venue that could house large-scale sculptures and installations.*

The Jean-Paul Najjar Foundation - founded by the artist-patron's daughter Deborah following her father's death - has also set up a space in (you've guessed it) Alserkal. Here's the Foundation's

Associate Director Eve Grinstead on what made them choose Dubai: *When discussing possible venues for the Foundation, our founder and collector Jean-Paul Najjar was keen to be in a hub for the arts, surrounded by other established actors. We looked at different options in Europe and the USA, but when the Alserkal Avenue expansion was announced, he knew that would be the right place to be. We were so lucky to meet with Abdelmonem Alserkal and Vilma Jurkute who absolutely loved the project and immediately offered us a space at very special conditions. Abu Dhabi has an incredible number of institutions coming up, and is always very interesting - we hope to have ongoing partnerships and joint events with institutions based there. As a private museum, funded by corporate sponsorships and individual donors, we needed to be where most collectors are, where the galleries are, and in 2013 when Jean-Paul made the decision, that was in Dubai. Whilst the Alserkal project undoubtedly deserves the bouquets, is it worth reflecting on the fact there is no equivalent in Abu Dhabi? Not yet, anyway and do the arrival of these organisations and galleries constitute a localised art scene development? Or do the Abu Dhabi institutions pending arrival count towards a better foundation for a nascent art scene? At this point it's worth introducing another factor into the discussion: the arrival of the New York University at the Saadiyat complex. Part of the NYU global complex, the Abu Dhabi branch has offered courses in the liberal arts since 2010. Furthermore the university houses its own arts centre, furnished with performance and project spaces and an art gallery that is managed and curated by Maya Allison. Since its opening in late 2015, Abu Dhabi's new mixed-use space Warehouse 421 has hosted free performances. In 2015 the NYUAD arts centre programmed performances from the Kronos Quartet, Les Ambassadeurs, visits from the Theater Mitu and Phantom Limbs theatre companies, a series of film nights, cross-genre music concerts and more. Dubai has hosted a number of exhibitions and events across the commercial gallery districts although it is genuinely difficult to find equivalence to the events listed above apart, perhaps, from the Shakespeare's Globe Theatre troupe performing Hamlet at the somewhat careworn DUCTAC venue. Given our paradigm of an art scene based on Burrows' definitions, does Maya think that Abu Dhabi is overtaking Dubai in terms of cultural development? *I don't view Dubai and Abu Dhabi in direct comparison as they are such different kinds of cities. Both have cultural offerings, distinct from one another, and both are rapidly growing their cultural sectors in different forms.* Maya goes on to illustrate the two cities cultural offerings in terms of cultural capital: *Abu Dhabi emphasizes growing its non-commercial cultural sector - our universities, of course, the coming museums and the new Mina port space Warehouse 421 projects as the most recent example.**

It is worth noting that while one doesn't buy or sell art in these contexts, their "cultural capital" does in fact have positive economic consequences on the community. And of course, these institutions increase our general quality of life, as residents of Abu Dhabi. Dubai, meanwhile, leverages its reputation for sophisticated commercial activity through its fast-growing gallery scene and a rich cultural life blossoms around the commercial centre of these galleries. In this case, commercial activities generate cultural capital, which in turn supports the economy.

So I expect that, over time, this will result in growth of cultural capital in both cities. The strategies are different, and - this is important - interdependent. Dubai and Abu Dhabi feed and nourish one another's cultural economies, and both also benefit from the rich cultural contribution of Sharjah.

Regionally-based arts professional and writer Rachel Bennett has this to add about Abu Dhabi: *There's been a twenty-plus year maturation of foundations and organisations which are focused on everything from grants to education, events, the export of Emirati culture and the import of other art forms to help foster and support the appreciation of the scene. That history of Abu Dhabi is often overlooked, but it is absolutely essential for what is a really long term, ambitious vision for the Emirate and for the country more broadly.*

Back to the dosa house conversation in 2011 and the New York/Washington notion. Evidence may suggest that Abu Dhabi's measured long game is the opposite of Dubai's *joie de vivre*, certainly in terms of what's on offer culturally and with reference to Burrows' defined presentations and experiences. However there's a further ingredient to add to the mix: that of the life that can be breathed into a creative climate by an educational arts establishment. The arrival of NYUAD is not just a physical one: it brings established academics and fosters students with an appetite for learning, all of whom naturally and organically build an informal art scene of their own. And the effect of such a broad-thinking environment - by no actual intended design - will create additional, valuable cultural capital. It has been pointed out that there is a kind of yin and yang thing going on between the Dubai and Abu Dhabi art scenes. In fact Maya Allison underlines the view that both cities are interdependent and the new gallerists in Dubai note that they are very happy with their proximity to Abu Dhabi, all of which breeds a healthy creative and commercial environment. But, for now at least, the true essence of an art scene - its intangible informality - is being directly influenced by the new communities growing around the campuses and halls of Saadiyat Island.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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