EXCAVATING THE PAST, ILLUMINATING THE PRESENT

Curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath take us on a tour of Art Dubai and highlight their favourite pieces. Looking at things from a curatorial perspective, both describe their picks as falling under the theme of looking to the past to understand the present. As a common thread developed, the works’ dual nature of straddling two worlds creates a unique rhythm when walking through the fair.

Paradise Row Gallery (B23)
Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin - The Prestige of Terror

Broomberg and Chanarin’s set of prints were created in Cairo in 2010 for an exhibition at the Townhouse Gallery that commemorated an artist collective that was founded in Cairo on 19 January 1939 and called itself Jama’at Al-Fann Wal-Hurrriyyah. (The Art and Liberty Group) The Group comprised of a core number of intellectuals and artists who aligned themselves primarily with Surrealism. While many of the artists who were affiliated with the Group did not work in a Surrealism style, they seem to have been attracted, or at least sympathetic towards Surrealism’s leftist revolutionary project. Through the Group’s activities, artists could implement a number of both, creative and political projects alike, that resonated with a rejection of what they perceived as an imported salon-like artistic academicism endorsed by an oppressive Colonial/Monarchic regime and a conservative middle class bourgeois morality. The duo reprinted several slogans or statements they excavated from some of the groups publications on a printing press from the same period and presumably on the same paper on which the original pamphlets were printed.

Grey Noise (A10)
Mehreen Murtaza

Mehreen Murtaza’s work has framed the at times reductionist or simplistic, modernist view of Middle Eastern life and art. Her approach of representation and the idea of making art as a pointer to a short-lived phase during the 1950s to the 1970s. Kader’s references to the banlieues evident, his clusters of individuals, and his use of imagery of the Expositions Coloniales emphasise the continuity between colonial modernity and current economic, political and cultural realities amongst immigrant communities scattered along the North South Mediterranean axis. The work contains with the dominant historiography by which modernity has been inscribed as a Western construct that was aped, to a less successful extent, by the colonised periphery.

Alexander Gray Associates (A22)
Hassan Sharif and Luis Camnitzer

It’s hard to pick a specific piece in this installation; it is more about an art dialogue. The artists have much in common – Sharif was a pioneer in the UAE while Camnitzer was a pioneer in Latin America; they’re both very conceptual artists, and for lack of a better saying there’s a fantastic dialogue. These are two artists who grew up in completely different places where it was uncalled for them to create Conceptual art and they were making work that was so Avant-garde and visionary. They just got together and you could even have a hard time telling which piece is by which artist. There’s a certain fragile and ethereal quality to the way the works sit in a three-dimensional space, it’s very unassuming and whispers to you. The more time you spend with it, the more layers it reveals – you have to allow time to share the space with the works.

Aicon Gallery (B21)
MF Husain - The Mirage

The timely tribute to late Indian artist MF Husain staged by the Grosvenor Vadehra is a noteworthy endeavor. Yet, an unassuming gem lies at Aicon Gallery, tucked in a corner, almost unnoticed. The 1960 abstract work stands out as a pointer to a short-lived phase during a period mostly known for the artist’s more iconic horses. The work manages to elude the prevalent rhetoric that has framed the at times reductionist or Western-centric discourse surrounding the artist’s work. This painting points the case for a re-investigation of a less explored aspect of the artist’s work and makes for an argument that maybe there is something more to search for in his collective opus.

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