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Will Dubai's Alserkal Avenue be the Middle East's Next Great Art Hub?



Alserkal Avenue

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In the industrial district of Al Quoz, a group of warehouses offsets the city's shiny veneer with an edgy contemporary arts community of its own.

MEMBER BY MURAT OZTASKIN ON JANUARY 25, 2017

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Standing on 6A Street, a sand-swept, two-lane service road connecting the auto mechanics and storage facilities of Dubai's Al Quoz district, a question looms above: "When did you arrive?" Constructed of white LED lights atop a gated entrance to Alserkal Avenue, Dubai's leading arts complex, the text, one-half of American artist Mary Ellen Carroll's *The Circle Game* installation, faces out, questioning guests' arrival before they even enter. As soon as you do, just inside the main entrance gate, the installation's second half comes into view: "When will you return?"

The couplet's inverted order evokes a fitting sense of dislocation. Alserkal Avenue is the creation of Abdelmonem Alserkal, a local real estate heir, who, in 2007, opened the compound on the grounds of an erstwhile marble factory belonging to his family. While its façades of gray corrugated metal offer an angular, high-design nod to the industrial identity of Al Quoz, home to many of the city's labor camps, the community of galleries seems not to belong fully to either the grit of working-class Dubai, nor the gloss and glamor to the north, where the gleaming glass skyline of downtown is crowned by the soaring, step-like tower of the Burj Khalifa. No, Dubai's prospering arts scene has found its own aesthetic—international, edgy, intrepid, chic. And in Alserkal Avenue it has found its hub.

A two-year, \$55 million expansion completed in 2015 doubled Alserkal Avenue's square footage to half a million. Now, some 50 galleries, studios, cafés, bookshops, and public event spaces define the gated compound that has emerged as the city's creative nucleus. This weekend, starting January 27, the fifth edition of the Quoz Arts Fest showcases the abundance of the Avenue's fine-art offerings as part of a two-day program that also highlights local dance and choreography. Next month, from February 10 to 17, the district will host Gulf Photo Plus's 13th annual Photo Week, the first time the gallery will be showcasing its collected Photo Week exhibits at its home venue.



Mary Ellen Carroll, *The Circle Game* (2016). Courtesy CTP2Q15

"Al Quoz has become an epicenter for homegrown creative talent," says Alserkal Avenue's Lithuanian director, Vilma Jurkute, who arrived in Dubai in 2011 by way of New York, Chicago, and Europe. But in the last few years, Al Quoz's creative activity has gradually concentrated within Alserkal's walls. To celebrate her Al Quoz gallery's ten-year anniversary in 2015, Sunny Rahbar moved her Iranian-focused **The Third Line** (<http://www.thethirdline.com>) into Alserkal Avenue. "Our relocation was a coming-of-age move," she says, "where the gallery's expanding programming needed a new, larger, and more versatile space." Until Saturday, the two-level space hosts Tehran-based artist Golnaz Fathi's abstract ballpoint- and rollerball-drawn



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meditations on calligraphy, as well as turbulent, expressionist landscapes from Welsh-Iranian Alireza Masoumi. Starting February 22, the gallery will showcase the work of Pakistani-American artist, writer, and filmmaker Sophia al-Maria, who debuted her first U.S. solo exhibition at New York's Whitney last year—and whose self-coined mode, Gulf Futurism, confronts the light-speed transformations of Dubai and other oil-rich cities in the region.

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Leila Heller Gallery (<http://www.leilahellergallery.com>), one of the city's recent blue-chip imports, was also attracted to Alserkal Avenue's abundance of space. "We try to mount monumental exhibitions in Dubai, given the size of our gallery space," says Alexander Heller, son of Iranian expat Leila Heller, who opened her New York gallery in 1982. The 15,000-square-foot warehouse has played host to Malian photographer Seydou Keita's monumental midcentury portraits and large-scale, high-relief works from Frank Stella. Through March 6, it exhibits large bronze and stone works from British sculptor Tony Cragg. "We are able to achieve exhibitions here in terms of their monumental nature that are on par with large institutional shows," says Heller. "The space tends to dictate a lot of what we do."



Moroccan artist Hassan Hajjaj's exhibit "La Salle de Gym des Femmes Arabes" at The Third Line, March 2016. *Courtesy Musthafa Aboobacker*

Another star import, **Custot Gallery Dubai** (<http://www.custotgallerydubai.ae>), from Stéphane Custot of London's Custot-Waddington, has also brought in a roster of international artists—Bernar Venet, Robert Indiana, Marc Quinn—exhibiting in the region for the first time. "Alserkal Avenue combines an industrial feel, boho-chic visitors, community welcome, and massive exhibition spaces," says Custot, who opened in Dubai last year. "My artists are always more excited to bring in large-scale works after they meet the space." Through February 28, the gallery showcases British photographer Nick Brandt's enormous black-and-white panoramas that contrast Africa's perishing wildlife with its booming urban developments.

As Dubai's arts legacy is increasingly defined by imports, it remains unclear how many artists actually produce their work locally. (Art education was cut from UAE school curricula in 1978 and only reinstated in 2014, and the area still lacks a professional-level, higher-education arts school.) But the area's galleries are witnessing change. "There has been substantial growth in the number of artists living and practicing in the UAE," says Malini Gulrajani, founder and director of **1x1 Art Gallery** (<http://www.1x1artgallery.com>), one of the area's oldest, which relocated to Alserkal Avenue in 2015 from nearby Al Marabea Road. The emergence of homegrown and/or locally based artists is a natural progression, she says, stemming from "the development of an arts infrastructure, in terms of education and public/government initiatives, as well as a great gallery scene." Through February 28, 1x1 showcases a group show, "The Poetics of Absence," which addresses issues of memory and belonging—resonant themes for a largely expat city.



Photographer Nick Brandt's exhibition "Inherit the Dust" at Custot Gallery. *Courtesy Pia Torelli*

Fostering local talent is central to Alserkal Avenue's agenda. The 2015 launch of its programming arm, focused primarily on supporting artists from the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, moved the arts complex firmly into the territory of an arts organization. But for a city that, outside of the arts, models itself after imported work, one thing necessarily follows another. Says Custot, "Dubai has already positioned itself on the global map as a touristic and financial center—art and culture will shortly follow."

In the meantime, regional artists are at the heart of Alserkal Avenue's ten-year celebrations. Concrete, an OMA-designed events space, opens on March 9 with "Syria: Out of the Shadows," showcasing not-often-seen Syrian art from the UAE-based Atassi Foundation's collection until April 3. Says The Third Line's Rahbar, "With a little more than ten year under its belt, the Dubai [arts scene] is still relatively new. There is still room for a lot of 'firsts.'"

Alserkal Avenue, Street 8, Al Quoz 1, Dubai; alserkalavenue.ae

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