

## From the regional to the global market - MENASA artists in Western galleries

*By Zoltán Somhegyi*



Gohar Dashti: Today's Life and War 7 (Detailed), 2008, colour photographic paper, 50 x 75 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Kashya Hildebrand London



The art world have radically changed in many ways since the establishment of the first commercial galleries, Galleries are still among the most efficient structures in representing fresh, emerging and well-established artists. The world has become “smaller”, and much more “global(ized)”, and, with the help of the Internet, Still, it remains extremely important for artists to be present in as many parts of the world as possible: to be present not only “physically”, but more crucial is to have their works exhibited on the global market. Even though the centers of the art world have shifted significantly in the last two decades, cities that are traditionally considered as centers of art and the art market have remained attractive for artists to be present in. The MENASA region is obviously booming, therefore I was curious to see how they can be inserted in the Western gallery-world. The following article can be defined as an “interview-montage”: I made individual interviews, asking questions to nine gallerists who are working in Western countries, and represent MENASA artists. Here I am re-editing the original interviews, grouping the answers of the gallerists, according to four topics:

I. Origins and interest

II. Reception and dissemination

III. The collector and the collection

IV. Features and future.

My conversation partners in this global dialogue were:

- Naila Kettaneh Kunigk, Founder and Co-Owner – Galerie Tanit, Munich-Beirut

- Thaddaeus Ropac, Gallery Owner – Galerie Thassaeus Ropac, Paris-Salzburg

- Janet Rady, Director – Janet Rady Fine Art, London

- Yuli Karatsiki, Gallery Manager – Kalfayan Galleries, Athens-Thessaloniki

- Kashya Hildebrand, Founder – Kashya Hilderbrand Gallery, Zurich-London

- Leila Heller, Owner – Leila Heller Gallery, New York

- Rose Issa, Founder – Rose Issa Projects, London

- Sabrina Amrani, Gallery Director – Sabrina Amrani Gallery, Madrid

- Andrée Sfeir-Semler, Owner – Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut-Hamburg.

In the interview-montage, after my questions, I quote the answers according to the ABC-order of the official, name of the gallery – as in order they are listed above.

## **I. ORIGINS AND INTEREST**

**How and why did you get interested in the MENASA region? When did you start representing artists from these countries? How do you choose the artists? Are you interested in a special medium, topic, style, or form of expression? Do you often travel to the region to further discover the scene?**

### **Galerie Tanit**

Being Lebanese, although I lived in Germany for a long time, it was kind of meant to be for me to get involved in the Lebanese art scene, discovering the works of many artists. Walther, my partner, and I decided 10 years ago that showing some of these artists in a group show could be interesting. The show was entitled “Present Absence”. We exhibited works related to the issues of war and post-war and others in Lebanon. The artists were Fouad El Khoury, Joanna Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, Lamia Joreige, Gilbert Hage, Jalal Toufic and Akram Zaatari. These artists were relevant in the Lebanese art scene. They were starting to become internationally known and we needed to be showing more or less established artists since the public in Munich was completely unaware of the work being done in this region and it was crucial for us to deliver the best. From the beginning, we were interested in all forms of expression, in any medium or format. We thought that the medium always complemented the work. Later on we showed Nabil Nahas and in 2010 we organized a big show entitled “All about Beirut” in a public industrial place called “Whitebox”. The show was intended to present the Lebanese artistic creations to the Munich public. I travel a lot, and I’m always between my two galleries in Munich and in Beirut, but aside from a few Syrian and Iraqi artists I have never shown artists from different areas from the MENASA region. My focus was always on the Lebanese ones.

Our gallery program covers international contemporary art. While we do not specifically target MENASA artists, we do keep our eyes open on the art scenes around the globe. We started looking at Persian artists about ten years ago, at a time when everyone was focusing on the art scene in China. We started seeing works by artists from the Middle East, the most promising amongst them seemed to be coming from Iran. The country has

a very rich art heritage and immense culture. Tehran has had a well-reputed Art Academy for more than 100 years. We thought that there must be significant potential for young artists. When we first travelled to Tehran it was to visit the studio of one or two artists, who had just started to show internationally. Once on site, we discovered that there is a vast and well-forged community of promising artists leading a discreet parallel existence away from the public eye. It was all very confidential and underground, information on exhibitions was carried by word of mouth and only a small circle of art connoisseurs were given access. It was such a wonderful discovery, we decided to present some of the artists in Paris and organize a group show titled “Raad o Bargh”. Our selection comprised no less than seventeen artists, most of them living in Iran, some sharing their time between Tehran and another country. We were thrilled that most artists were able to travel to Paris for the installation and the opening. It was a beautiful experience to see the artists working together for this show, supporting each other with the installation of their work. At the selection, media, style or form of expression were secondary criteria, what triggered the decision to show an artist was the identity of their oeuvre. We regularly travel to the region. Just last month, we were in Abu Dhabi and Dubai and took the occasion to visit artist’s studios.

### **Janet Rady Fine Art**

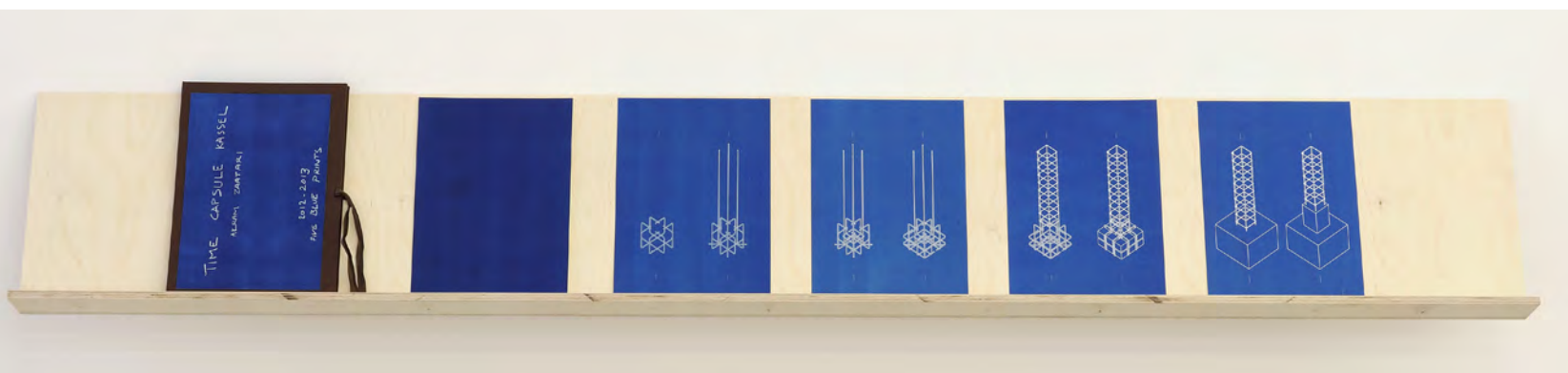
I have been interested in the region since the mid-1970s when I first visited Iran. I subsequently studied Persian and Islamic Art and Archaeology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London and went back to live in Iran for a year from 1983-84. I continued to be interested in the region and to engage with art from both Iran and the Arab World. It was the British Museum’s “Word Into Art” exhibition in 2006 which inspired me to start my business representing Middle Eastern artists as at that time there were very few commercial galleries showing art from this region. I was keen to give them a platform in London where they could showcase and sell their work. I was fortunate enough to be invited to join a curator on a trip to Cairo in December 2006 and she introduced me to several galleries and artists, including Khaled Hafez, who



Hadieh Shafie: 20900 Pages (Ketab series), 2011, ink and paper with printed & hand written Farsi Text Eshgh "Love/Passion", 122 x 122 x 8.9 cm, Private Collection - Bahrain. Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York.

was instrumental in helping me build my network of contacts. It's important for me that the artist has a specific message or story in their work. This does not have to be related to the region, it can be purely personal, although invariably their work will be informed by historical or geographical references. I work with artists using all forms of medium although from a practical perspective,

I focus on painting, photography and video art. I travel regularly to the MENASA region to visit galleries, art fairs, artists and collectors. I also make a point of going to exhibitions in other countries which feature Middle Eastern art as well as keeping in touch with International art trends, as it is important to understand MENASA art in the context of a broader picture.



Akram Zaatar: Time Capsule. Blueprints, 2013, Five pages with linen folio and cover, 29.7 x 21 cm each, Installation view: This Day @ Ten, Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut-Hamburg.

### Kalfayan Galleries

Greece is at the crossroads between East and West and we wanted this to be reflected in our gallery program as well, which has given us a unique identity. Therefore it was only natural for us to be interested in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East and to explore the dynamics of the art scene in that area by providing a forum for an exchange of ideas between East and West. The first exhibition that we organized was in 2007 with a solo presentation of the Syrian photographer Hrair Sarkissian with his series titled “Unfinished”. At the moment, Sarkissian’s “Execution Squares” series are on view at the TATE Modern in London as part of the museum’s permanent collection. Aside from Sarkissian, we also represent Vartan Avakian, Ala Dehghan, Raed Yassin, as well as artists whose work references the region, such as Greek Aikaterini Gegisian and Yiannis Hadjiaslanis and Greek-Egyptian Farida El-Gazzar. Furthermore, a central part of the gallery’s activities is the organization of gallery shows of artists from the region, such as Tarek Al-Ghousein’s in our Athens space in 2009, and the collaboration with regard to Museum shows both in Greece and abroad.

For example, in 2010 we presented a solo show of the Egyptian artist Anna Boghiguan at the Benaki Museum of Islamic Art, in collaboration with the museum. There is no prerequisite in the selection process as far as medium, topic, style or form of expression is concerned. Our gallery roster over the course of the

years includes artists of diverse backgrounds and means of artistic expression. Our active and dynamic presence in the MENASA region through our participation at art fairs such as Art Dubai and Art Basel Hong Kong among many others, as well as through our travels on the occasion of museum shows of our gallery artists or to make studio visits, offers us a valuable insight into the art scene of the region.

### Kashya Hilderbrand Gallery

The gallery does not solely focus on MENASA artists, although they are an important contingent of our roster, we also represent a number of international artists. I became interested in this region as a result of my exposure to Art Dubai seven years ago. Given my own Pakistani heritage coupled with the dynamic evolution in the region, I was intrigued to pursue a program that reflected these demographics.

My first exposure to the region came from my involvement with Iranian artist Farhad Moshiri. He was one of the first artists that our gallery represented and as a result of this experience, paved the way for other relationships to evolve. Our program represents a diverse eclectic mix of artists that represent the globalised world we live in.

We are very drawn to artists who live in the Diaspora, cultivate their discipline both abroad and domestically and struggle with the tension and anxiety that exists as a result of their own displaced feelings and emotions.

### **Leila Heller Gallery**

I opened my first gallery in 1982 in New York's Upper East Side on Madison Avenue. At that time I was not representing Middle Eastern artists, even though I am of Iranian origin, but rather focused my gallery's program on exhibiting emerging international artists as well as curating shows of modern and contemporary masters. It was not until a few years after I opened my gallery, when various Iranian artists who were living in the Diaspora such as Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Monir Farmanfarmanian, Y.Z. Kami, Nicky Nodjoumi and Massoud Arabshahi, approached me, eager to show in New York, that I exhibited artwork from the region. The focus of my gallery continues to be representing international artists and inviting curators to produce shows incorporating modern and contemporary masters. My interest in art from the region has never solely been because of my heritage; its basis has always rested on the fact that I truly believe that the artwork coming from the MENASA-based artists is strong. I believed they have a lot to offer to the cultural world and hence my deepest interest in what they have to offer to the outside world

I choose to engage with MENASA artists and markets because there is immense talent and growing opportunities in the region, which I want to be part of. There is no formula as to how I choose my artists. Primarily, I want the works of the artists that I represent to challenge and move the viewer.

Many of the top collectors and curators that I engage with have impeccable taste and are instrumental in introducing me to new emerging talents. My gallery team is also engaged in judging rising talent in the region. Most importantly, I am constantly traveling around the world several times every year to ensure having the proper opportunity to discover new art and meet the artists myself. While my gallery focuses on the artists from the Middle East, Turkey and the Central Asian countries, I also represent artists from different parts of the world from America, Europe and going as far as the borders of Asia; providing an interesting context and cross cultural dialogue within my program, and showing the diversity and complexity of what I show in my space.

### **Rose Issa Projects**

I am from the region, being half Iranian and half Lebanese. I am interested in how our artists, filmmakers and writers think and create. I am working with artists of the region since 1982. I was in Paris when the Israelis invaded Lebanon. I wanted to give voice to artists, about resistance and occupation. It was the first Arab film festival, and very successful, which proved that there was a demand for it. All mediums: films, paintings, drawings, video interest me. I travel a lot to Iran and the Arab countries.

### **Sabrina Amrani Gallery**

Our interest for Middle Eastern and North African artists is natural due to our origins: I am a French Algerian while Jal Hamad (my partner) is a Spanish Syrian. We started to represent artists from the MENASA region from the very beginning, the first opening show of the gallery was with an Algerian artist, Zoulikha Bouabdellah. Since then, our concern has been to promote and position our MENASA artists in the international contemporary art market. We follow our eyes and hearts. We work with art we love and we need a strong connection with the artists. We are sensitive to conceptual and minimal art, but I think our first interest is for socio-political and cultural subjects, identity, space, architecture... any medium although installations are predominant. We travel as much as we can to discover different art scenes and meet artists.

### **Sfeir-Semler Gallery**

I was born and raised in Beirut, Lebanon, so an interest in the region is natural to me. It is home. I started representing artists from the Middle East after meeting Walid Raad through Catherine David. I was really impressed with the work he was doing and things took off from there. We developed a great professional relationship and friendship and he introduced me to other artists and it changed the entire direction of my gallery. When choosing artists I think the story that is being told and the way it is being communicated are the most telling features. I opened a second gallery space in Beirut in 2005 so I maintain a presence in the region and having this connection is important personally.



Hrair Sarkissian: Istory (No.12), 2011, archival inkjet print, 150x190cm. Courtesy of the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens - Thessaloniki.

## II. RECEPTION AND DISSEMINATION

**How is the reception of the artists from the MENASA region in your country and city? How well does the average visitor and collector know these artists? What could help to make the artists better known?**

### **Galerie Tanit**

At the beginning we had difficulties reaching the German public, but nowadays there is a growing interest in this region. It also depends on the work, for example Fouad EL Khoury was well received by this public, he had a one person show at the Lenbachhaus (The Municipal Museum of Munich) and later on some acquisitions. We believe that through the shows and publications that we and other galleries/ museums are doing, this art is gaining more visibility and the perception is changing.

### **Galerie Thaddaeus Rappo**

Our “Raad o Bargh” show was a huge success. Before this show, only few of our collectors/visitors were familiar with the work of Persian or of MENASA artists. The show raised so much interest with our collectors that we decided to show some of the artists’ work in more depth. As a result we did solo shows with Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh, Ali Banisadr, Mahmoud Bakshi, Farhad Moshiri and Shirin Aliabadi, and some of these artists are now part of our gallery’s program. We also publish catalogues, grant financial support to help with the production of works, and try to facilitate participation in exhibitions held at institutions, museums and events. We have also managed to place works in museum collections such as the Metropolitan Museum in New York and MOCA, Los Angeles.

### Janet Rady Fine Art

There is still a long way to go in London with regard to the reception of Middle Eastern art. Despite the growing number of galleries, exhibitions, festivals and now art fairs which feature MENASA art, whilst the reception is mostly positive, it is still not exposed widely enough to a general audience. For example, there were virtually no Middle Eastern works included in Frieze Art Fair this year (2013). One cannot really generalize, however it is true to say that Western audiences do not focus their attention on Middle Eastern art and will not be aware of artists from the region other than those who have crossed the threshold and become “International” artists, such as Mona Hatoum, Shirin Neshat and Shirazeh Houshiary. There are a variety of actions that could help raise the profile of these artists, specifically more public exhibitions, educational courses, outlets for publications (the publications do exist, but are not generally available in Western bookstores), and more galleries including Middle Eastern artists in their roster, particularly the younger ones.

### Kalfayan Galleries

Our gallery is the first and only Greek gallery with an established focus on the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, and the Greek public and press have responded enthusiastically to our gallery program, while at the same time we have placed works with prominent Greek collections. The museums’ response has been equally warm and we have collaborated on numerous exhibitions. For example Raed Yassin’s “Yassin Dynasty”-series is currently exhibited at the Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art. We have exhibited artists who are well-known internationally but who had never exhibited in Greece before, e.g. the show of Anna Boghiguian which we organized in collaboration with the Benaki Museum of Islamic Art in 2010. At the same time, we are dedicated to promoting and supporting the work of young artists from the region. We are very happy and proud that gallery artists such as Hrair Sarkissian, Raed Yassin and Vartan Avakian have gained international recognition. We have placed works with renowned museums and institutions such as the Tate Modern, Castello di Rivoli, Mori Art Museum and Sharjah Art Foundation and the artists have exhibited, for example,



Nabil Nahas: Untitled, 2009 acrylic on canvas, 120x80cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Tanit Munich.

at Sharjah Biennale, Istanbul Biennale, Venice Biennale, Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, FoMu .

### Kashya Hilderbrand Gallery

Now that we have recently relocated our gallery to London we have found a wonderful and receptive collector base with individuals who welcome our diverse program. Clearly the interest often reflects the collectors’ own ethnic diversity. In London there is a strong Persian community and so those artists are particularly welcomed by collectors. Art fairs have also done a wonderful job of exposing collectors to new young and emerging artists. Clearly the combination of fairs, publications and biennales all add to the mix giving these artists a platform.





Amin Roshan: *Arena (detailed)*, 2013, acrylic silk screen with crude oil, 170x140cm, edition of 3. Courtesy of the artist and Janet Rady Fine Art, London.

### **Leila Heller Gallery**

The Middle Eastern art market is a niche to say the least. Often collectors are either very knowledgeable about the region, or they know a select group of artists who have international stature in the West (Shirin Neshat, Ghada Amer, Mona Hatoum, Y.Z. Kami etc.). Much of my business's role as a gallery engaged within the MENASA region is not only as a gallery, but also as a platform to introduce the Western market to the art of this region. Nevertheless, in the past decade knowledge of the region's art by the West has increased tenfold. Since I have been representing artists from the MENASA region for many years in New York, I have been able to cultivate a steady and strong group of collectors who are not only of Middle Eastern origin. The reception of MENASA artists is the same as any other artist. If the work is strong, the artist will garner

the attention of collectors, critics, and curators. Interest in the region has been stimulated on a global basis from the significant cultural investments made by the Qatar Museum Authority and government of the UAE in the creation of world-renowned museum collections. These museums will be the building blocks for increased cultural awareness within the region, and additionally will spark future cultural awareness of the region from an international perspective. Already we have seen some of the most important figures within the international art world visit the region to view Art Dubai, Art Abu Dhabi, and the Sharjah Biennial, as well as the exhibitions in Qatar. This interest will increase with the opening of the Louvre and Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi, and the continued exhibition programs in Qatar. Publications also play an important role in spreading knowledge to the global art platform on MENASA artists. Magazines such as *Bidoun* and of course *Contemporary Practices* have been fundamental in presenting work by artists to major audiences. The art world is always rapidly moving and I believe that the forward thinking initiatives that have taken place in the last decade in the region will ensure the continued support of MENASA artists and will only help educate and inform the global art community of the artistic wealth which exists there.

### **Rose Issa Projects**

There was a definite need in the 80s and 90s and 2000s. But in the last 5 years many new galleries are catering for a specific market. We publish, which is something needed. And not just coffee table books.

### **Sabrina Amrani Gallery**

Since the very beginning we have had a very good response from art professionals and the public in general. People come to the gallery with the curiosity to discover new voices and a different visual language. A very limited group of people in Spain already know the artist we work with, even if some of our artists have strong careers in Europe, the Middle East or North Africa. We promote our artists through publications, social media, exhibitions, art fairs, all the strings we have at our disposal, but support from museums is essential to position an artist on the market, it gives a valuable visibility for the artists.



Chant Avedissian: “SAWT EL ARAB” (The Voice of the Arabs), 2008, pigments and gum arabic on corrugated cardboard, 250x300cm. Courtesy of the artist and Rose Issa Projects, London.

### III. THE COLLECTOR AND THE COLLECTION

Are there “specialised” collectors, who only collect these artists, or is it more common that collectors “mix” works from different geographical areas? What would you recommend to someone who would like to start collecting MENASA artists? Why is it a good choice? What should new collectors be careful about?

#### Galerie Tanit

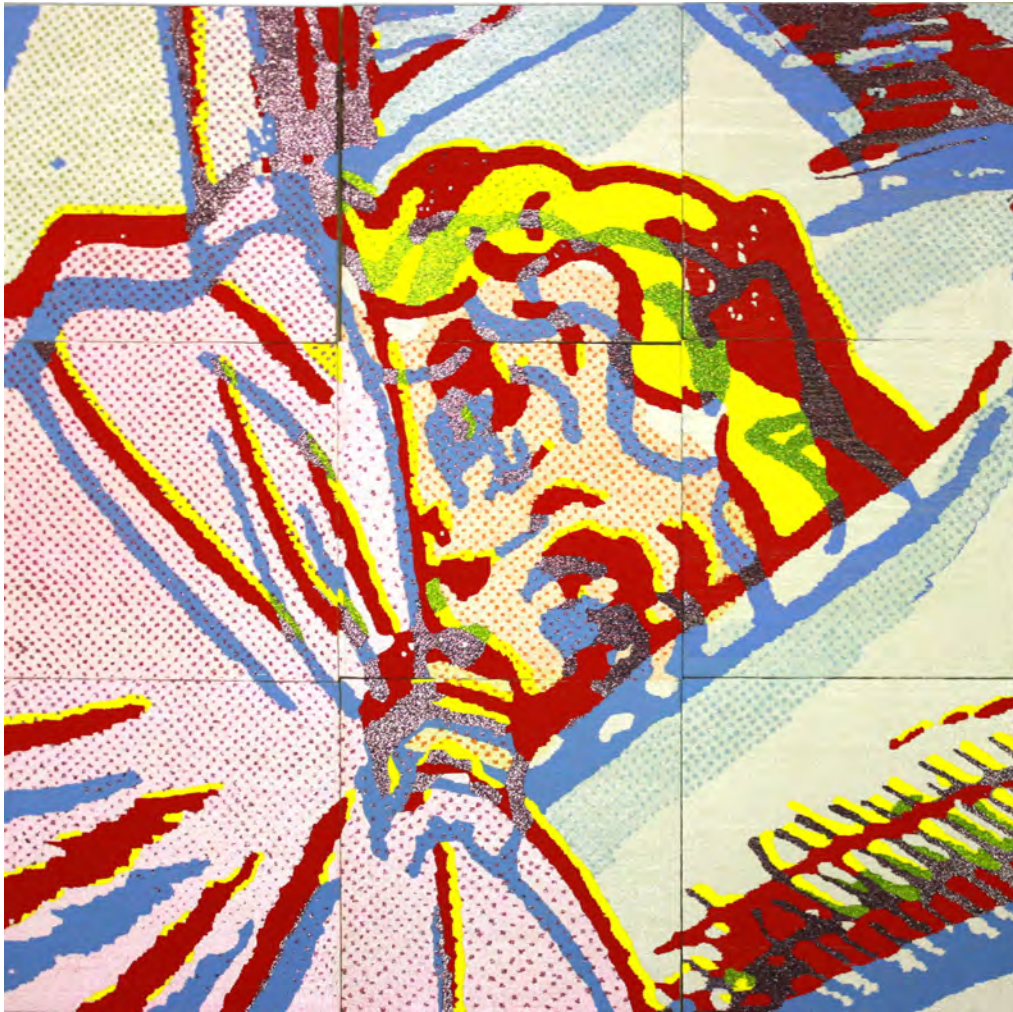
What can help the collectors – both those who are now starting, and those who already have an established collection – is visiting art fairs and Biennials. They are important vehicles of information, where new artists and fresh tendencies can be observed.

#### Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac

We know a handful of collectors that focus on artists from the region. There is a large Persian community in Europe and the United States, both of which are very supportive of their artists and knowledgeable about their work, although their collections are generally not limited to a geographic region. Like most of our loyal collector’s collections, they collect works by artists from different cultures and generations.

#### Janet Rady Fine Art

From my experience, whilst again not wanting to generalize, the collectors are still very much nationally focused, so Iranian collectors would buy Iranian art,



Farhad Moshiri: Spooked, 2011, hand embroidery and glaze on canvas on board, 270x270cm. Courtesy of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris-Salzburg.

Lebanese collectors, Lebanese art, Egyptian collectors, Egyptian art. Of course there are collectors who include works from different geographical areas in their collection but these are quite rare and Middle Eastern art would form only a part of the International scope of their collection. The MENASA region is vast and varied and the artists working in the region also vary enormously in style, form and content. Therefore, I would advise a collector to determine first general parameters for their collection, e.g. will it be a specific medium, content, country, period, price bracket? Where would the work fit within the context of their existing collection? It is always more exiting to look at the younger artists and of course, as with forming any collection, important to inform oneself as much as possible by reading about the

artists, going to the fairs, exhibitions, auctions, artist's studios etc. If one is collecting Modern, as opposed to Contemporary Art from the region, which is still very much underexposed and under researched, it is important to be satisfied about the provenance of the work as many forgeries exist. Always take advice from reputable galleries and don't be afraid to ask.

#### **Kashya Hilderbrand Gallery**

Our experience with Abu Dhabi and Art Dubai over the years would suggest that Middle Eastern collectors are slowly developing a more diversified pattern and diversifying their collections to represent numerous geographical regions. With the Internet, collectors have a great opportunity to research the regional artists,



Zoulikha Bouabdellah, *Cauchemar*, 2013, red lacquer on paper, 182x290cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sabrina Amrani Gallery, Madrid.

understand their intent and to educate themselves. With the enormous social and political changes erupting in the region, artists have a powerful platform and language from which to express themselves.

### **Leila Heller Gallery**

There are various routes taken as individuals begin to collect, none necessarily right or wrong. Personally, I always advise collectors to engage with art publications and exhibitions to grow a basis of knowledge before they begin to collect. I always tell my collectors to read every art publication that is applicable to their collection, and not solely to view art, but rather question art.

I encourage collectors to step outside of the broad framework of collecting well-known well-established artists, with emphasis on creating niche collections around a concept, idea, medium, geographical region, or period, in which they can merge emerging and other established artistic talents.

I help my collectors find their collecting vision and try to expose them to the broader art world through visits

to art fairs, biennials, museums and artist studios, not confining them to my artist roster and niche. I always request them to read and make more informative decision of what they collect.

### **Rose Issa Projects**

Collections come in every form; some collect by nationality, others just good work. I prefer the latter. Check the artist, the gallery, public institutions, ask around, other artists, collectors, museums and then go with your heart and eye. Although works of artists that had passed away command large amount due to rarity, I prefer living artists, to avoid fakes.

### **Sfeir-Semler Gallery**

Of course there are both types of collector. It is not really the geography that they are interested in but the concept and context. There is a lot of young talent here. Collectors shouldn't be guided by what is hot on the market or what sells in auctions. Collect what speaks to you what you relate to and understand.

#### IV. FEATURE & FUTURE

**Do you see any particular features that could be characteristic in the description of the region's art? What do you think of the future of this region and its artists? Will it continue to boom, or is the interest shifting to other countries?**

##### **Galerie Tanit**

I believe that they have a great future, a brilliant one. At the moment many modern artists are being rediscovered, and their work is being re-evaluated to consider what they gave to the scene. As for the contemporary ones, they have the chance right now to compete with other artists from anywhere in the world and pretty soon, I think, we will get to a certain equality.

##### **Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac**

We are not interested in "ethnic art". An artist's work needs to have a strong identity and universal language, rather than regional features to find a place on an international platform. Both the Istanbul and Sharjah Biennials have brought forward many interesting artists from the region. These artists often share a debate about gender and social issues, as well as environmental and urban problems. These are all questions that they address from their personal perspective. They are the same topics you might encounter in New York, Berlin or any other city in the world.

##### **Janet Rady Fine Art**

There are the stereotypical works featuring veils, calligraphy, or political imagery but it would be wrong to assume that all art from the region focuses on these tropes. Personally, I believe one of the strongest features is the originality of the work, the different perspectives that the artists are taking from their counterparts in the West, and an ability to combine Western and Middle Eastern critical analysis, which produces a much more genuine oeuvre as a result. It is difficult to generalize when art has become such a globalized commodity. I certainly see interest in top quality Middle Eastern art growing. International Museums are now seriously collecting Middle Eastern art, possibly more than private individuals, and if the funding can be found to show these works, then I think the future is very bright .

##### **Kalfayan Galleries**

It is the artistic work itself that defines the success and longevity of an artist's career and not his/her ethnic background. Ultimately, time is the determining factor. We believe that there is a lot of talent in the region and we are looking forward to its growth.

##### **Kashya Hilderbrand Gallery**

Each artist's visual language is of course varied, but clearly there are some common exogenous forces at work that act as a common denominator that deeply move and motivate these artists. It would appear that this is a seminal decade for Contemporary art from the region and that the momentum will only intensify. The commitment from the UAE in particular, at this time, to art and culture and to raising awareness is creating a virtuous cycle of interest and participation from collectors all over the world.

##### **Leila Heller Gallery**

I don't think that there are any particular characteristic features to which you could reduce the art from the MENASA region, or any other region for that matter. Art is the same all around the world: artists are commenting on their socio-historical contexts, they are exploring their identity, re-evaluating and challenging concepts and much more. The global art market is never focused on one region alone and with the growing number of international art fairs it is becoming more and more global. It is true that the MENASA region has witnessed growth within its market, but, compared to the global art market, it is a minuscule element. The Chinese, Indian and Brazilian art markets, for example, are also booming which is linked to the growing economies of these countries. Nevertheless, Dubai alone has established itself as an arts center. I think that the Middle East will enter the global art platform in a more significant way than it already has with the opening of the museums in Abu Dhabi, and the expansion of exhibition programs in Qatar. Saudi Arabia is also becoming a major force in the art from the region, and Saudi Arabian artists have found international stature. The regional art market has made significant strides, but there is still considerable room to grow from a regional market to a segment of the global market.

### **Rose Issa Projects**

As for the features of this art market, I think MENASA artist are perhaps more courageous politically? They have their hands on the pulse of the region. Art may seem a fashion, but is not. It is a necessity. The best works will be filtered and play their role in art history.

### **Sabrina Amrani Gallery**

I feel it is a very exciting moment for the MENASA region, which may be only the beginning of a very long process in which the market and the local art scenes become structured. Museums and institutions are growing as the artists do.

### **Sfeir-Semler Gallery**

Each artist has their style that changes across the region. Of course we see similar concepts based on their individual histories and the nature of their environment. It will definitely continue to rise. There are trends that come and go but most artists from the region are not passing trends, but have insightful, provocative, and powerful work.

### **Conclusion**

From these answers we see a really fascinating overview: a broad variety of approaches, encouraging reasons for interest in the region's art, stimulating strategies and very positive hopes for the future of the scene. Many of the gallerists started representing MENASA artists because of personal reasons, or under the influence of a strong impact and inspiration when first encountering the scene. Personal investigation of the region is highly important to the gallerists, therefore they often travel to the MENASA countries to find new artists and trends. They feel that this segment of the art world is still relatively underrepresented, even though it has significant aesthetic and economic potential. When selecting artists, the technique, medium or style is less important, what counts much more is the originality of the work and the authenticity in the manner of expression. As for the reception, most of the galleries had difficulties at the beginning, since the artists were less well known. But after their pioneering work, the audience – both the private collectors and the institutions – responded very well, and the different

communities with people originating from the region and living in the Western metropolises welcomed the showing of the works of artists from their home. Still, it seems that the establishment of more forums could be ideal for the dissemination of the artistic values that these works incorporate.

Apart from concentrating on the “big names”, the inspiring variety of the scene should be presented in different ways: publications, lectures and educational programs. The participation of artists in fairs and biennials, as well as the placing of their works in renowned private and public collections are all essential. Like my dialogue partners pointed it out, the region's art scene is heterogeneous and rich, and cannot be simply reduced to some general characteristics. It is exactly this multifaceted variety that can be interpreted as a kind of guarantee of the steadily growing reputation of the scene and of the growing curiosity in its artists. It is not an ephemeral trend, a quick and superficial focus, but a well-based interest, and the growing number of collectors, as well as the impressive museum-projects – some of them still under construction –, mean a strong base for further development of the MENASA region's inspiring art scene.

#### *About the Writer:*

*Dr. Zoltán Somhegyi (1981) is a Hungarian art historian, teacher and writer and currently based in Izmir, Turkey.*

*As a researcher of art history and aesthetics, he specialized in Eighteenth and Nineteenth century art and art theory, having written his PhD-dissertation on German Romanticism. Apart from being an art historian of classical arts, his other fields of interest are contemporary fine arts and art market trends, with a special focus on the arts of Turkey, the MENASA region and Central Asia. Dr. Somhegyi curates exhibitions and participates in international art projects using his expertise to demonstrate and transfer the art practices and scene in the countries of regions he cover to the international art arena. He is also an independent consultant of Art Market Budapest – International contemporary art fair. Currently he holds the position of an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Architecture of Izmir University in Izmir, Turkey. He is the author of books, artist catalogues, and more than two hundred articles, critiques, essays and art fair reviews in different international art publications.*