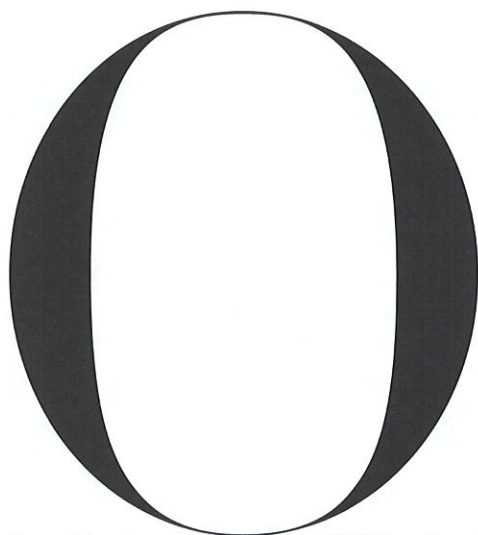


LAWRIE SHABIBI

2013 is Lawrie Shabibi's year. Following acclaimed presentations at Art13 and Art Dubai, the young (ish) Al Quoz gallery's policy of presenting unexpected and controversial art is paying off, with international acclaim and recognition. Noor al Kadhim meets founders Will Lawrie and Asmaa al Shabibi for a chinwag.

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Over the last few years, as the cultural landscape has changed in Dubai, amongst the movers and the shakers, the 'new kids on the block', and the flash-in-the-pans, one gallery's stature has steadily amplified since its arrival on the scene in 2011.

Lawrie Shabibi,

formed by Asmaa Al Shabibi and William Lawrie, is the first gallery that visitors come across as they enter Alserkal Avenue, located at Unit 21 in the complex of warehouses at Al Quoz that represents, next to the Dubai International Financial Centre, the city's greatest concentration of galleries. The gallery's minimalist, white exterior betrays the frequently unusual, and often eclectic, exhibitions inside. A piece of paper is stuck above the entrance to assure the public, 'WE ARE OPEN', lest we overlook it and pass straight on to Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, two doors down.

The partnership behind Lawrie Shabibi, which comprises Londoner and ex-lawyer of Iraqi origin (Al Shabibi) and former Director of Christie's Middle East department (Lawrie), may appear to be an unlikely one at first glance. But speaking to Lawrie and Al Shabibi, their mutual love of art and desire to work closely with artists, aligned the pair from the outset.

'We both felt there was something extra that could be added to the art scene in Dubai', said Al Shabibi. 'We stand out through our selection of artists. Our focus is more on mid-career and emerging artists, and we distinguish ourselves through the range of artists whom we show'.

Lawrie Shabibi started out, however, with established names such as

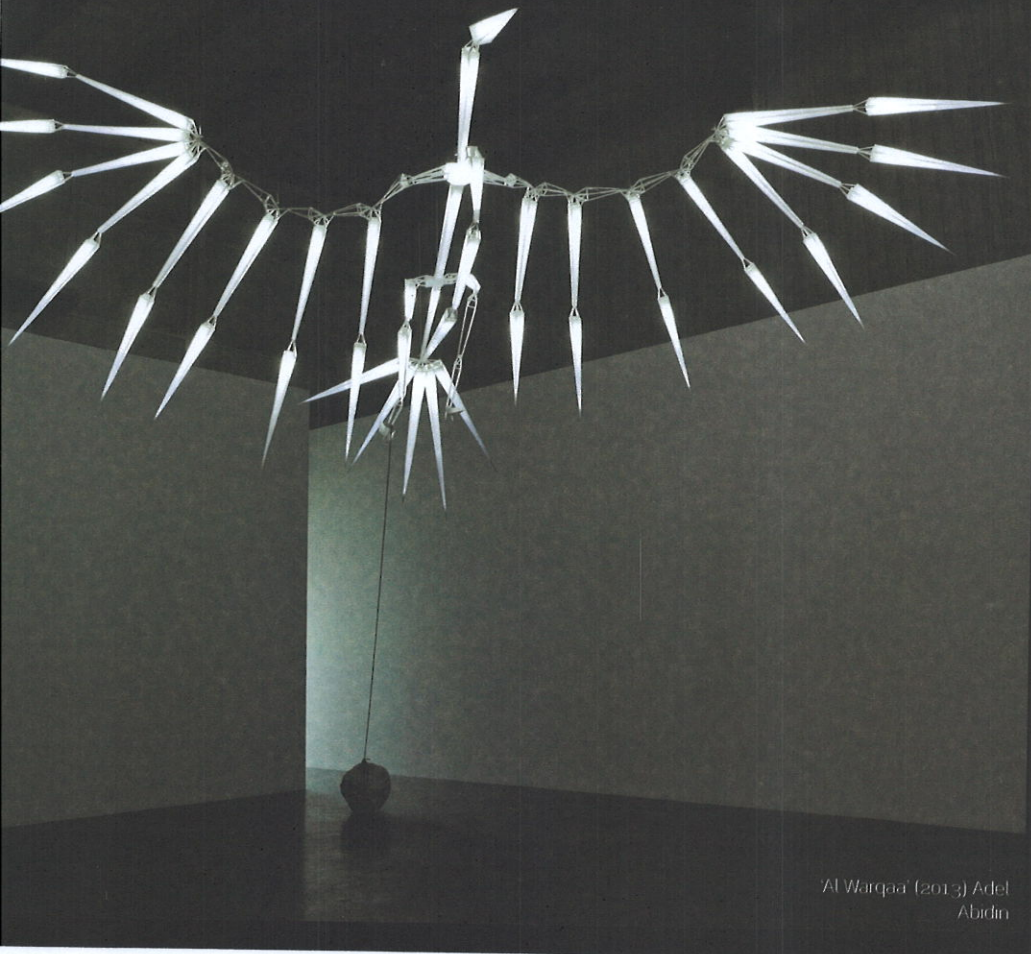


Cheery and cheerier:
Will Lawrie (left) and
Asmaa Al Shabibi

Selma Gurbuz, and Nabil Nahas, whose solo exhibition launched the space. 'We believed that this is important, because it places the art in context', said Al Shabibi. 'In a city like Dubai, where the emphasis is on the young and new, we believe it is important to show artists who are older than the city. Some of the artists we have shown are in their sixties, for example. They have influenced a younger generation of artists, and continue to do so. Some observers wrongly seem to think the Middle Eastern art market is only a decade old. By showcasing established names, we show there is a history and a past, and also that there is continuity from generation to generation.'

Unlike other galleries in the region, which often choose to play it safe and pander to traditional perceptions of what a Middle Eastern audience should be attracted to (and buy), Lawrie Shabibi have also tried to stand out through a diverse and sometimes contextually-provoking choice of artists, such as Wafaa Bilal, and Adel Abidin.

Their most recent exhibition, Abidin's 'Symphony', stood out as one of the most intensely political and emotive exhibitions during March's Art Week at Alserkal Avenue. Focusing on the tragic, discriminatory massacre of a group of 'emo' youths in Baghdad that caused shockwaves amongst the community in April last year, the Iraqi-Finnish Abidin presented us an immense skeleton of a dove, tied by a rope to a rock. The installation is suspended to the ceiling by metal cables. The bird sculpture is intended to be viewed in conjunction with a video installation that shows the clay corpses of the child victims, tied to strings, which frantically flapping doves try in vain to pull to the heavens. The reception area of the gallery has been turned into an ante-chamber,

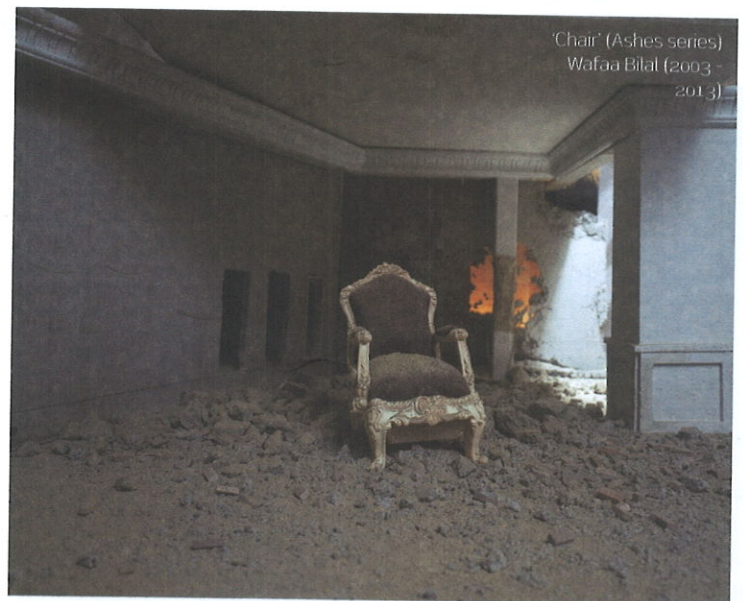


Al Warqaa (2013) Adel Abidin

'IF THE DUBAI MARKET IS NOT UP TO SPEED WITH THE REST OF THE WORLD, THEN IT IS OUR ROLE TO FILL THAT GAP AS MUCH AS WE CAN.'



'Palms and Stars' exhibition by Nabil Nahas



'Chair' (Ashes series) Wafaa Bilal (2003 - 2013)

housing a morgue of clay corpses made by the same rocks, in the same dimensions, that kill were used to stone the children to death.

Although Wafaa Bilal's contribution to Lawrie Shabibi's stand at Art Dubai 2013 - photographs of miniature models of Saddam Hussein's destroyed palaces (from his 'Ashes Series') - represents one of his less provocative contributions, Iraqi-born Bilal is acclaimed in international spheres for his radical online performance and interactive works, with '3rdi' probably best-known of all. In a case of taking one's commitment to artistic exploration to the absolute limit, Bilal had a camera surgically implanting to the back of his head to transmit images to the web spontaneously, making a statement about the surveillance society that we live in today. The artist described the project as addressing 'a need to objectively capture my past as it slips behind me from a non-confrontational point of view. It is anti-photography, decoded, and will capture images that are denoted rather than connoted, a technological-biological image'.

Both Abidin's and Bilal's offerings are examples of strongly political engagement with unusual and esoteric media and techniques. What drew these artists, whose work has (to date) mainly been exhibited outside of the Gulf, to the attention of a foundling gallery in Dubai, in an art scene that is by and large, apolitical in nature?

For Al Shabibi, the gallery's choice of artists and works on display are determined by reference to one of Lawrie Shabibi's primary objectives: to show 'relevant and innovative' art. 'For me,' explains Al Shabibi, 'art is relevant when the works have something important to say about the world we live in, whether it is about politics, socio-politics, gender, fashion, consumerism or the like. It is innovative when the artist translates an observation in an evocative and original way. We look for

works that are visually interesting, and also draw the viewer into asking more questions'.

For a commercial Dubai gallery, Lawrie Shabibi's willingness to work with such individualistic artists such as Abidin and Bilal is admirable. It is also canny, given the speed at which new art forms and styles are absorbed into the city's cultural fabric (and marketplace).

'To some extent we take a commercial risk, yes', Al Shabibi admits. 'But I am always surprised though by how hungry this market is for art that pushes the boundaries. If the Dubai market is not up to speed with the rest of the world, then it is our role to fill that gap as much as we can whilst operating as a commercial gallery'.

In this respect, it also helps that Lawrie Shabibi have successfully managed to push the boat out beyond Eastern waters, and into Europe. 'At first, most clients of ours were locally based but now quite a large majority are abroad,' Lawrie says. Lawrie Shabibi was one of only five galleries from the Middle East represented at Art13, London's newest art fair, in 2013. Moreover, having sold over 80% of their consignment, they



'Full Metall Jacket'
installation view,
Shahpour Pouyan.



A rare quiet moment
at the booth at Art
Dubai, 2013



Opening night for
Nadia Kaabi-Linke's
recent exhibition

were one of the most successful, with work by Asad Faulwell, a rising star already coveted by American collectors, and Shahpour Pouyan's arsenal of intricately-fashioned missiles causing a stir with collectors, critics and visitors to their (rather draughty) corner booth. However, the undoubted quality of the work is only one factor. Cultural proximity is another. Lawrie and Al Shabibi's British background meant they were in tune with their audience. 'We were very comfortable conversing with visitors, and I think that made a difference in terms of developing a relationship with first-time clients' said Al Shabibi.

The gallery also distinguishes itself through its committed engagement with the South Asian art world, picking up on the ancient tradition of trade between the two regions. 'In Dubai', Al Shabibi explains, 'it's impossible to ignore that relationship, and this inspired us to include this area in our programme. Having said that, we are also looking further afield to continents that also echo the Middle East in some way'.

As to where the Middle East art market will be in ten years' time,

Lawrie Shabibi are hopeful that the emphasis will be less on the 'market' and more on public art, and institution building. 'I feel like a record player when I say this, but so far the commercial market has slowed down and little is happening outside of this. I also hope that Western interest in the clichés of Middle Eastern art - the Orientalism that we see over and over again, for example - will have subsided and that art from the Middle East will be free of such labelling and expectations.'

These aspirations may be over-ambitious for the time being, given that Al Shabibi is talking about a relatively new market that has not yet fully been understood or explored by the West, and one where the influence of 'politically-oriented' works remains strong.

Being Londoners, both Lawrie and Al Shabibi are used to viewing contemporary art from both vantage points. Consequently, their gallery's eclectic, frequently radical programme may act as a forerunner of sorts to the changes that will come in time to the region, and give an insight into external practices. Unit 21, Al Serkal Avenue, is definitely one space to keep a close eye on, going forward. **HBA**

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