

Motor city

A paint-splattered Bentley brings the spirit of Jackson Pollock to Alserkal Avenue, Dubai

Opposite

Asmaa Al-Shabibi in the Lawrie Shabibi Gallery: 'We want to make art as accessible as possible'

Entrance



DESERT BLOOM

Multimedia creatives transforming industrial space into an arts hub? Seen it all before? Not in Dubai, you haven't. **Georgina Wilson-Powell** meets the locals who are putting Al Quoz on the international art map. Photography by **Siddharth Siva**



Under the dry heat of the Middle East sun, canvas-covered trucks rumble over potholed roads, small twisters of dust and sand kicked up in their wake. Across this district of Dubai called Al Quoz, low-slung warehouses straddle huge plots that only two decades ago were mostly desert. The desert remains, but parcelled into huge sand lots that separate out the businesses and the labyrinthine network of roads and commercial cul-de-sacs. It is not a place you'd expect to find art. Let alone credible contemporary art and a thriving creative community.

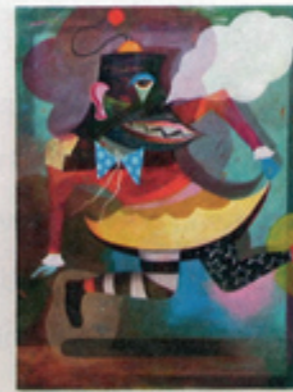
Alserkal Avenue opened in 2007. Its galleries-in-warehouses concept is hardly news to the artsy capitals of London, Berlin or New York – but in Dubai, a city that is still thought of as a cultural, as well as actual, desert, the initiative has been unique. This is a city that famously champions the bigger-is-better, money-talks kind of vibe. Alserkal Avenue eschews that and provides a platform for residents and visitors to become familiar with international contemporary artists in different disciplines – whose work often comments on the social and political issues of the Middle East.

While the past seven years have done little to make this arts-filled concrete and steel side street any easier to find (it's off 8th Street), Dubai's introduction of road names for the first time last year gives visitors a fighting chance of discovering a collection of companies that have come together to take over this former marble factory and its warehouses. Twenty different creative organisations now call it home, including galleries that focus on Middle East and South Asian contemporary art, photography studios, design agencies and non-profits.

It's not much to look at from the outside during the day – Dubai still lacks street culture in general – but in the evenings and weekends, local hipsters and young artists gather here to chat or smoke shisha against the backdrop of the city's only decent graffiti. The outdoor space really comes to life, though, when Alserkal Avenue hosts annual evening festivals, with live street art, demonstrations and music that draw much wider crowds.

'We have been based in Alserkal Avenue since we set up our art gallery in 2010,' says Asmaa Al-Shabibi, director of Lawrie Shabibi gallery. Her space specialises in conceptual artists: most recently, it housed an international group exhibition, curated by London's William Lunn, that used photography as part of a broader multimedia experience. 'Given that the warehouses are in a very large, sprawling industrial area, it made sense to us from a practical perspective that the gallery should be in close proximity to other galleries.'

While only pockets of Dubai's population will have even



heard of Alserkal Avenue, it has grown in international recognition as a hub for emerging and mid-career artists from both the Levant and further afield. And its success goes back to that old adage, strength in numbers.

In a spread-out and constantly changing physical landscape, not well served by public transport and with a disparate and complex population, visiting multiple art galleries in a day in Dubai previously required several taxi rides. Now that a large proportion of the city's most respected arts companies – such as music and performance space The Fringe – has moved to the same street, the area is attracting more visitors and feels more cohesive.

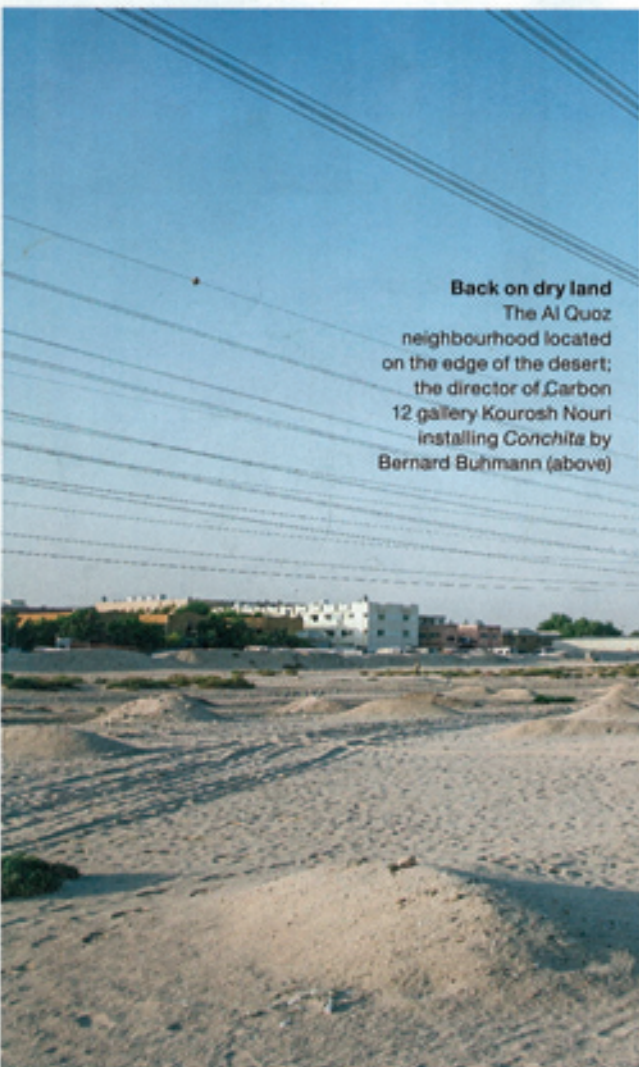
'Having all the galleries together is beneficial, as people are given the opportunity to see a wide range of art in a pedestrianised area in one visit,' says Al-Shabibi. 'In fact, we tend to collaborate with other galleries on the timings of our openings and other events. We recognise that people lead busy lives and we want to make the art as accessible as possible.'

This, in turn, is attracting bigger artists to exhibit in

Dubai, helping to bolster Alserkal Avenue's role in fuelling interest in the city's creative community. While the festival Art Dubai has been held in the city for the past eight years and attracts high-level international curators, the more community-led arts scene has been hampered by the city's most enduring trait, the transient nature of its inhabitants. It's impossible to build momentum when key players constantly move on, but it is finally starting to feel as though the city has an arts scene that goes beyond individual talent.

This could also be helped by the number of Syrian, Egyptian, Iraqi and Palestinian artists who have found refuge in Dubai's safe haven over the past few years. As turmoil unfolds around the Middle East, Dubai has remained a calm centre in a violent world, where contrasting messages can be conveyed through sculpture, paint and photography. Ayyam Gallery in particular has worked with many Syrian artists who have become a disparate force after the downfall of Damascus.

The man who has brought all of this together is Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal, an Emirati



Back on dry land
The Al Quoz neighbourhood located on the edge of the desert; the director of Carbon 12 gallery Kourosh Nouri installing *Conchita* by Bernard Buhmann (above)



Clockwise from left The founders of Versus Art: Nemanja Valjarevic and Nina Trojanovic; Bernard Buhmann's *The Pretenders* at Carbon 12; the reel thing: arts hub A4 Space; a prop at The Fringe

philanthropist with a personal passion for collecting art, an interest which he says he inherited from his father. While he was studying real estate in the United States, he began to understand the power of bringing artists together to help reinvigorate industrial areas (as seen in the Meatpacking District in New York City and London's Shoreditch) and realised that Dubai, with its endless industrial districts moments from glitzy hotels, was ripe for a spot of artistic gentrification. The promise of cheap rent and large floor space is an attractive proposition to creatives in any city. The factory space that Alserkal has upcycled into an art hub sits only a kilometre back from the coast's most iconic structure, and one of the world's most expensive hotels, the sail-shaped Burj Al Arab.

And there's more to come. By the end of 2014, Alserkal Avenue will double in size, taking it to half a million square feet, at a cost of £8.65m, funded by the Alserkal family. It will be home to an alternative café, project spaces, outdoor events facilities and spaces for artists' studios. These elements – hardly revolutionary in other more established cities – will bring a level of professionalism to the burgeoning art scene in Dubai that has so far been missing. They have the potential to develop a true creative hub, where visitors can eat, drink and shop, as well as view exhibitions such as Green Art Gallery's recent group show of drawings from Middle Eastern storytellers.

'We receive fourfold demand for the spaces available. ■



In the frame
Works on paper: Hikayat
by Arab artists at the
Green Art gallery



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From top Graffiti art by Steffi Bows, Enforce 1 et al; Hetal Pawani (left) and Umer Butt, directors at Grey Noise Gallery; the café at A4 Space

Dubai has evolved to become a cosmopolitan city in a very short period of time with an arts scene that is fairly young, but already serving as a commercial arts hub regionally,' says Alserkal. While his vision is leading the charge, director Vilma Jurkute is responsible for the Avenue down on the ground. She is passionate about the latest opening within the expansion, A4 Space, and explains its importance in a city that severely lacks cultural spaces of any kind.

'A4 is the only collective space with multipurpose areas, dedicated to supporting and nurturing emerging talent,' says Jurkute. 'We've become a home for all cultural activity. Our events extend across art, fashion, design, film, performing arts, literature and music. Our programming will be dedicated to inspiring Dubai creatives to realise their ideas.'

Elsewhere at Alserkal Avenue, a free community space houses a screening room, project space, café, a concept store that will sell pieces from Alserkals' on-site artists and a book collection. Built up through the collaborative project LeaveYourNote, the collection encourages visitors to donate an inspiring book, inscribed with a note. These books will become an evolving international library, Jurkute describes as 'by the people, for the people.'

While the art world has started to sit up and take notice of the exhibitions taking place amongst the dirty factories and those rumbling trucks, Alserkal Avenue is still, in many ways, one of Dubai's best-kept secrets. It might be all chic beach clubs and designer malls on the surface, but there's certainly more to this city – you just need to know where to look for it.

Georgina_WP

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