

# Asmaa Al-Shabibi: inspiring creativity

Asmaa Al-Shabibi, co-owner of the avant garde Lawrie Shabibi gallery in Al Quoz, talks about ideal exhibit spaces, scouring for talent that gets better with age, and the growing appeal of female artists



Mike Peake

1 Aug 2016 | 11:04 am



Asmaa Al-Shabibi

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## How did you become a gallerist?

It followed on from a number of changes in my career. When I came to Dubai, I was a lawyer and then I worked with Art Dubai where I was the managing director of the art fair for three years. Eventually, I opened the gallery with Will Lawrie to bring in new artists to the region.

## Was that your main goal?

Yes. At the time, there was a big interest in art from the Middle East, which is still present, and we wanted to showcase artists who were different from what was on offer. We wanted to push the boundaries a little more. We were one of the first galleries to show installations and videos, for example, which feature prominently in our programme.

## How do you choose artists to showcase in your gallery? Do they come to you or do you track them down?

A lot of artists approach us, but very few are what we're looking for. One way we find artists is by viewing their work at museum exhibits or biennales. We are also introduced to some by curators. We've found that once people know what kind of artists we work with, they recommend others to us that they think we would like. Even at art fairs, if we see something we like, we contact the artist.

### **Is finding new talent a big part of the job?**

We're always on the lookout for new artists. If we go to New York on a business trip, we'll try and fit in a lot of studio visits with artists we're interested in. It doesn't mean we'll end up working with them all, but with some we will click.

We're not only looking for the kind of art that fits with our programme; we also need to like their personality. That's very important because you work very closely with artists all year-round. There needs to be a chemistry between us.

### **If there's a hot new local artist, would there be competition between galleries to represent him or her?**

There could be, but then again, every gallery has their own programme and aesthetic vision. Chasing a hot artist isn't really our focus, because we're more interested in an artist long-term.

### **Do many artists and gallerists live a rock and roll lifestyle?**

Ha-ha! I think that's the music industry! There is a glamorous side, which is maybe 20 per cent of what we do. People come to our exhibitions and it all looks wonderful and easy and there's beautiful artwork on the walls. But there's a lot of behind-the-scenes work that goes into it.

### **What kind of things?**

Everything from logistics to the actual production! A lot of times we get involved with our artists when they want to make something really complicated and we can spend months working with fabricators trying to get it right.

For example, at the moment, there's a massive installation at the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum in New York by one of our artists, Nadia Kaabi-Linke. Everyone is saying how amazing it is, but it was a lot of work to get that made, and my partner spent a good portion of three months just working on getting it done.

### **What's a typical day like?**

One of the things we're consistently working on is our next exhibition. We plan our schedule months in advance. Right now, I have a schedule in place until April next year, so I'm always in dialogue with artists.

We also regularly look at what we have to sell, so I'm often contacting clients, suggesting they come and see something, and we'll sit down at least once a week and have a think about that. Where are the leads or what are people interested in are constantly on our minds. We do a lot of selling to institutions, which is a priority, so every city we go to we will see the directors or curators of the museums we feel our work could be placed in. And then there's accounting and planning for global art fairs.

### **Is it OK to enter a gallery for a look, or should you only go in if you have deep pockets?**

It is a bit intimidating sometimes, especially the way some galleries are presented and then, when you go in no one really greets you. In some places you never know if you're supposed to be there. I think a gallery is a free museum, you can go in, have a look, read the text, get inspired. One thing people have always said is that we're really friendly and helpful. We're in a warehouse district where there are probably about 10 galleries, and it's not like Mayfair in London. It's more edgy than posh.

### **So there's no hardsell?**

No, but the fact that they've walked in, that they've come all that way, means they're already 50 per cent there. My job is to get the other 50 per cent. But if they have a good experience, even if they don't buy, they'll go back and talk about the amazing works – they'll have something nice to say. It's not just about selling, we're here to inspire people.

### **What makes for a great art space?**

Some people say that the Internet is going to be the demise of art spaces, but I don't think that's true. We find that selling online is not the same as when people walk in – unless they already know the artist or artwork.

When it comes to exhibiting, we look for good lighting and something very simple; at our gallery, we have a typical white cube and great lighting so that everything else is focused on the art. Every artist who has come for their first show will look at our really high ceiling and say, 'We have to do something suspended!' It inspires the artist. It's important to do so and push them to make something different.

### **What are people perceiving as a good investment right now?**

We're seeing a big trend towards older artists who may have been slightly overlooked in the past, specifically female artists. We have some artists in that genre and people are asking, 'What can I get?' We also have a few artists who are getting a lot of interest from museums, so I would say their work is probably a good investment as well. I don't really like to use that word, to be honest, because you never know with anything – be it shares, property, whatever – and in art it's probably even less clear to define what's going to be hot.

### **What art moves you?**

Oh gosh, that's a really difficult question! It's becoming increasingly difficult to buy something for myself because I've had so much exposure to art. I recently did buy something, a neon piece by James Clar that looks like it's falling down, and it says, 'Wheeee!' on it. I bought it because I thought it was fun and I was in this place where things were a little bit out of control in my life and I was really just going with the flow of this madness and it captivated me. I walked in and thought, 'This is exactly how I'm feeling at the moment.' Sometimes buying art happens just like that – you love something because you can relate to it. [www.lawrieshabibi.com](http://www.lawrieshabibi.com)

**Mike Peake**  
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