

# Asmaa Al-Shabibi

## What is your background? Was there art around when you were a child?

My mother was an artist and dealer, and so we had art on our walls and artists coming through the house quite regularly. In many ways we take things like that for granted and often rebel against it. I studied law in the U.K. and trained as a solicitor, and I practiced banking and finance law in London and Singapore for about nine years.

## How did you decide to shift your focus from law to art?

It was really one of those stories about being in the right place at the right time. I decided to quit law but wasn't sure what to do, other than needing to be more creative. In 2007 I came across an advert for the inaugural DIFC Gulf Art Fair, later renamed Art

Dubai, and got so excited. The fair itself blew me away, and I immediately called them up and asked to join their team. The art scene in Dubai was nascent—the fair was a smaller operation back then—but the people behind it were ambitious and had real vision. It was a steep learning curve for me. One aspect of my role was fund-raising, and the pivotal moment was securing a headline sponsor at the 11th hour. I was also involved in the initiation of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize, which is the largest such prize in the world at \$1 million annually. I left after about three years because I wanted to work directly with artists.

## When did you open your gallery?

After I left Art Dubai I was thinking of opening a gallery and approached William Lawrie, then the Middle East specialist at Christie's, as a neutral person who would be able to give me some pointers as to what was missing in the market. In the course of our meeting we realized we had a lot of the same ideas. A few weeks later he called me up, and we opened in March 2011. For me, the process of putting together shows is the most interesting part of the art scene and really what drew me to the business.

## How did you choose your specialty?

Initially, working with artists from the region made sense given that we are based in Dubai, which for years has been a trading port between East and West. However, we deliberately aimed for a more diverse roster of artists so as not to concentrate on any one country from the region.

## What is the most challenging part of running an art gallery today?

### What is the most rewarding?

Unlike a city like New York or London, the population in Dubai and the proportion of people interested in art are small. More important, there are no museum directors and very few curators or writers, especially writers for international art publications. This is quite frustrating, as it feels sometimes that our exhibitions take place in a void.

**AGE:** 41

**HAILS FROM:** London via Baghdad

**PRESIDES OVER:** Lawrie Shabibi, Unit 21, Alserkal Avenue, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

### GALLERY'S SPECIALTY:

Contemporary art from the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia

### ARTISTS SHOWN:

Hamra Abbas, Sama Alshaibi, Asad Faulwell, Selma Gürbüz, Nadia Kaabi-Linke, Nabil Nahas, Driss Ouadahi, Shahpour Pouyan, Marwan Sahmarani, Gazelle Samizay, Yasam Sasmazer

**FIRST GALLERY SHOW:** "Palms and Stars," a solo exhibition by Nabil Nahas, in March 2011

VITAL STATS

I am confident this will change over time as our artists and the gallery gain more international exposure. The most rewarding part is seeing the career of an artist take steps in the right direction because of the efforts that we make.

## What is your local art market like?

### How is it changing?

The art market in Dubai saw tremendous growth over the last seven years, but I would say that it has reached a plateau. There are now a large number of art galleries in relation to the number of collectors in the city, and so there is a lot more competition than there was a few years ago.

## What sets your gallery apart?

We have a roster of young artists, all under 40, but we also put on two shows a year with established artists such as Nabil Nahas, Farghali Abdel Hafiz, and Selma Gürbüz. In a young city like Dubai I believe that this is important, as it puts the younger shows in context. And we'd like to dispel the myth that Middle Eastern art is a new thing. Likewise, I'd like to do away with the notion that art from this region is only political, about war or about the sad plight of women. Although art should certainly provide a sociopolitical commentary, I look for artists who convey these messages in an intelligent and more abstract way, such as Wafaa Bilal, Sama Alshaibi, and Nadia Kaabi-Linke.

## If you were not an art dealer, what would you be doing?

I would be a full-time collector and art patron! But if I could really have it my way, being an Olympic gymnast was my childhood dream. ☐

