

# Dubai fair faces first real test

*Catering to local buyers, many galleries focus on Middle Eastern and Indian artists*

LONDON. The second edition of the Art Dubai fair (19-22 March) is bigger and broader in scope than the inaugural event last year. It has a new name (Gulf Art Fair, last year's title, has been dropped) and has almost doubled in size, while the exhibitors this year come from as far afield as São Paulo, Mexico City, Sydney and Tokyo. There will also be a stronger emphasis on Indian and Middle-Eastern art, which sold well last year.

When 41 art dealers decided to test the Gulf market at the first fair in Dubai last March, they knew they were taking a gamble. The tiny city-state, riding high on waves of petrodollars and in the grip of a frenetic building boom, has seen phenomenal economic growth over the past five years.

But were local Emiratis and the wealthy expatriate community ready to buy art? And if so, what would they buy?

Commercially, the results of the first edition of the fair were mixed. In an attempt to discover what was likely to be most successful, exhibitors brought a range of material, with an emphasis on non-figurative work or Western "brand names" such as Warhol and Damien Hirst. Galleries showing Indian and Middle-Eastern artists did best, (some sold out) but other exhibitors sold nothing.

White Cube from London is thought to have sold very little and is not returning this year; 11 other galleries have also dropped out. Nevertheless, the fair showed that there was a potential market for art in Dubai with 400 galleries applying for the 70 slots this year.

"The fair shows every sign of



Visitors to last year's fair admire an abstract work by US artist Sam Francis

emerging as a major art fair for contemporary Indian art," says Prajit Dutta (see p44), director of Aicon, one of a number of galleries showing in this field. Others include Gallery Espace of Delhi and Sakshi Gallery and Chemould Prescott Road, both based in Mumbai.

Galleries showing Middle Eastern artists include Green Cardamom (London), Atassi (Syria), El Marsa (Tunisia) and Grosvenor Vadehra (London). Other dealers are bringing Western works or even Tibetan art (Rossi and Rossi).

There is no doubt that the Dubai authorities are determined to establish an art market *ex nihilo* in the state. The Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC), which controls Dubai's burgeoning financial markets, threw its considerable clout behind the fair, buying a 50% stake in the event before it opened last year (it declined to reveal how much it owns today).

## Gagosian goes for Gupta

LONDON. Art dealer Larry Gagosian is hoping to sign the Indian artist Subodh Gupta; the two met for talks late last year. The artist is currently represented by Peter Nagy of Nature Morte Gallery in New Delhi and Jack Shainman Gallery in New York. Mr Shainman declined to comment. Mr Nagy says: "We have a show planned with Gupta for the season of 2009-10, which will travel from New Delhi to Bombay to Calcutta. We will also have work by Subodh at Art Basel in June and hope to include him in other fairs in the future. But that will be the extent of my working with Subodh on the international level, regardless of who he is represented by in New York or Europe." Gupta, the most successful contemporary artist from the subcontinent, has work in the collections of Charles Saatchi in London, and Marty Margulies in Miami, among several others. The artist's *Very Hungry God*, 2006, a skull composed of metal pots, is on display in front of French billionaire François Pinault's museum in Venice, the Palazzo Grassi (until July). According to one Indian dealer who asked to remain anonymous, Mr Gagosian is currently "chasing Gupta with a blank cheque-book". Gupta declined to comment while a spokeswoman for Mr Gagosian said that she "did not believe this to be correct".

"There is a strong desire to establish a cultural infrastructure in Dubai. The authorities believe that culture is a critical missing piece of the puzzle," says Mr Dutta. That "puzzle" includes vast shopping malls, the world's richest horse race, golf courses in the desert and off-shore housing complexes, which are selling even before they are built to wealthy Indians, Russians and Iranians. These often part-time residents appreciate Dubai's position as a hub between East and West, seven hours from London and China by plane.

Two other fairs have also been launched in the Gulf to cater for the emerging market there. British fair organisers Brian and Anna Haughton launched Art and Antiques Dubai last month in the Madinat Jumeirah arena while the second edition of Art Paris, the French modern and contemporary art fair, will be held in Abu Dhabi this November.

As with any new market, there have been teething problems. Many of the visitors to last year's Art Dubai were clearly unfamiliar with art, artists and the art market. Some buyers "bought" works but never paid for them; others took six months to complete the purchase. "We had people bargaining as if they were in the bazaar—they were asking for 40% discounts!" says Salma Feriani, director of the Tunisian and London gallery Le Violon Bleu.

There were also problems with the fair shippers (a new company has been appointed this year) and vexatious administration for the tax payable on anything sold at the fair and destined to stay in the country. This year, the fair itself has been granted a tax-free status

although a 5% duty is still payable on works remaining in Dubai. Pieces brought in temporarily and then re-exported out of the emirate by potential buyers will not be taxed in Dubai.

And the market in the Gulf is still evolving. The highest price paid at auction, at Christie's Dubai in 2006, was \$912,000 for Rameshwar Broota's *Numbers*, 1979 (est. \$80,000-\$120,000) that went to a private Indian collector. But, says Will Lawrie, specialist in Arab and Iranian Art at Christie's, "new collectors are quickly becoming familiar with the important names and the amount they will pay is rising."

Auction prices may be rising, but prices at the fair may be lower than last year, according to some dealers. "Someone who wants a Picasso is more likely to buy in New York or London, why should they buy it in Dubai?" asks Ms Feriani, while Conor Macklin, director of Grosvenor Vadehra, believes that "the market in Dubai will be for Indian and Middle-Eastern art, reflecting the local population."

But Ben Brown, director of the eponymous London gallery, disagrees: "If a Saudi billionaire goes to the fair and sees a Picasso at the right price, he'll buy it."

**Georgina Adam**

□ An open-air pavilion showing contemporary art from Pakistan, the only non-commercial display at the fair, will include work by Rashid Rana, Imran Qureshi and Naiza Khan. A satellite fair, the Creek Art Fair, takes place from 15-31 March in the Bastakiya district. **L.H.**

