

Rewriting history and building community: Abu Dhabi in the Emirati art environment

Starting this year, Abu Dhabi is building a contemporary art scene tending to the local community, and is positioning itself as the main taste-maker in the discourse on the Global South in the Middle East

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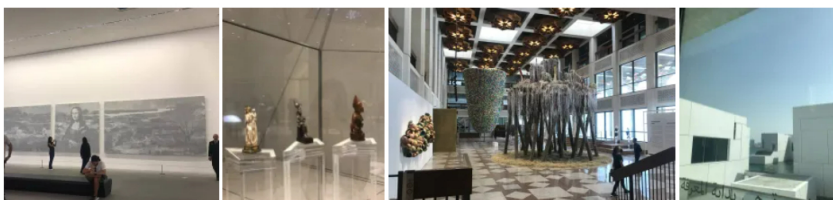
Starting this year, Abu Dhabi is building a contemporary art scene tending to the local community, positioning itself as the main taste-maker in the discourse on the Global South in the Middle East.

In one of the rooms of the **Louvre Abu Dhabi**, scenes of what resembled a 1600s European tapestry series drew me in. It was of Queen Hecuba from the Iliad carving out a man's eye with a knife.

Besides the crudeness of the scene, what caught my eye were little decorative clouds, something I used to see in Chinese and Southeast Asian fabric. As I approached, I noticed that one of the women helping in the act of vengeance had slightly Asian features and clothing. The artwork description indicated that a Portuguese-style school created the work in Macao in 1920.

This was one of the many examples at the Louvre Abu Dhabi looking at the folds of art history with the ambition of rewriting it. In doing this, it takes an almost quantum physics approach, looking at the relationships between objects rather than the singular artwork. Therefore, it's not about presenting, say, the Mona Lisa, but rather about how the Mona Lisa interacted with other cultures and minor narratives in Florence at the time.

That's how the permanent collection in the Louvre Abu Dhabi is structured. In the first few rooms, you see a lot of triptychs: an Athena from Ancient Greece, an African goddess and a Guanyin from China. Right off the bat, the visitor witnesses an attempt to bridge the so-called Global South, providing a parallel view of different traditions from Mesopotamia to Egypt, India and Renaissance Europe.



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As you proceed in the museum, the dialogue and interaction continue to Modernism, the Avant-guards and, finally, Contemporary art. It's a huge scope, and the selection is minimal and sparse, more like a curation than a museum display, in line with contemporary museum display trends.

These fresh curatorial perspectives on traditional narratives take place in an aesthetically wonderful building, thanks to Jean Nouvel's design, and just as infamous because of the hideous treatment of the workers that constructed it.

Located on the waterfront position on Saadiyat Island, designed by the Emirate of Abu Dhabi to become a cultural district, the Louvre Abu Dhabi doesn't operate in a vacuum. It will be joined by a series of projects, some locally initiated, as well as being brand-exporting operations.

The Global South discourse

This year, we are witnessing that Abu Dhabi is slowly but continuously working to create an art ecosystem with real impact on the international art community. The emirate is interested in positioning itself as a third way compared to the super-established Sharjah and the market-driven Dubai.

Abu Dhabi is indeed pushing the community component and setting up new critical criteria thanks to its museums and initiatives.

An example of this is the Abu Dhabi Cultural Foundation. Located in the heart of Abu Dhabi, next to the historic White Fort (Qasr Al-Hosn) and the House of Artisans (a museum of crafts), it exemplifies the emirate's effort to position itself as a community space, providing a library, a children's centre and a workshop venue.

The major show in place was by Cameroonian visual artist **Pascale Marthine Tayou**, presenting installation, sculptural and mixed media works examining the scarcity and excess of resources in the contemporary landscape.

This is yet another sign of the willingness to showcase artists' works at the forefront of the dialogue on the Global South as a prosecution of the discourse initiated by the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

Interestingly, the show also has a sub-section dedicated to children, presenting works by Tayou himself, re-adapting them to be interactive for kids in a way that is neither banal nor patronising.

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The Abu Dhabi Cultural Foundation has been directed by Palestinian curator **Reem Fadda**, a key figure in the art development of Abu Dhabi.

A curator with an international background, Fadda also directs the Abu Dhabi Cultural Programmes and is a powerhouse who, for years, has been working to bridge the MENA region with the international art world, curating a number of independent projects and biennales.

From 2010 to 2016, Fadda also worked as associate curator of Middle Eastern Art for the upcoming Guggenheim Abu Dhabi Project, shaping the key narrative of West Asian and North African art within its collection and curatorial vision.

The concept for the future museum is similar to the one of the Louvre in this sense, namely featuring Jean-Michel Basquiat and Jackson Pollock alongside artists from Peru, the Philippines and Nigeria, asking who was first to influence the other.

Public Art Abu Dhabi: A focus on the community

Fadda speaks of the community as the cornerstone of the future development of the emirate: "We will insist that works commissioned for these major programmes will transform places and resonate with the people in a meaningful way. These artistic projects will become the gateways for our creative community and a way for Abu Dhabi to project forward to the world."

The idea for this public art programme is to have creativity and infrastructure meet, engaging residents in their everyday lives and transforming the United Arab Emirates (UAE) capital into a more liveable place while inspiring a sense of civic pride. The ambition is to promote, protect and progress the emirate and transform Abu Dhabi into a global centre for culture.

The upcoming Public Art Abu Dhabi programme constitutes several initiatives: Manar Abu Dhabi, a platform showcasing light artworks celebrating the city's mangroves and archipelagos, launching in November 2023 and a Public Art Abu Dhabi biennial opening in November 2024.



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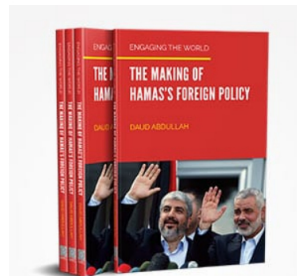
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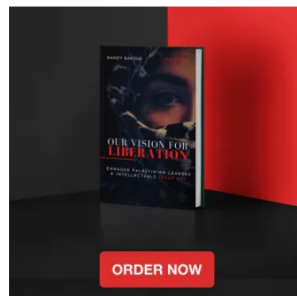


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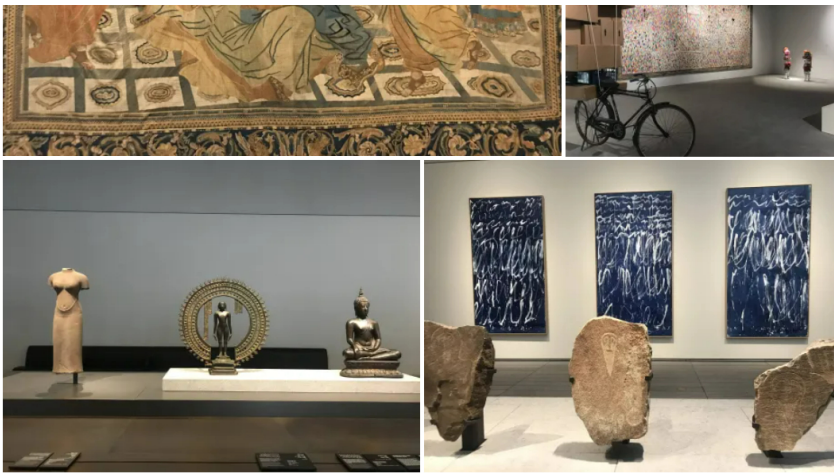


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It all started in March with the unveiling of the public digital media artwork called *Wave* by artistic collective D'strict, right on top of Abu Dhabi's Cultural Foundation, with wave footage realised using an anamorphic illusion technique, recreating a perpetually surging three-dimensional wave.

Another element of the development of the emirate will be the Public Art Abu Dhabi Biennial, opening in November 2024, which will see Fadda collaborating with Israeli curator Galit Eilat after having worked together at the community-based project *Liminal Spaces* in Palestine, Israel and Germany.

"The biennial will commission and exhibit a vibrant, inclusive and varied selection of artists rooted in the UAE and the region while also keeping with its mandate on including artists from all over the world," shared Eilat.

It is clear that in its vision, Abu Dhabi is bound to contribute to shaping the narratives not only for the Middle East, but globally.

As I finished by walking in the permanent exhibition of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, I ended up in a room that married human mark-making from over 4,000 years ago from Saudi Arabia with Cy Twombly's *Untitled i-ix*. These blue canvases muse on calligraphy by an artist inspired by children's language and tribal cultures.

An end of times that is also a beginning.

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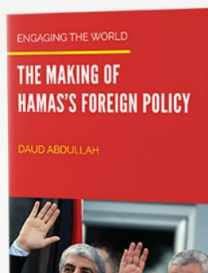
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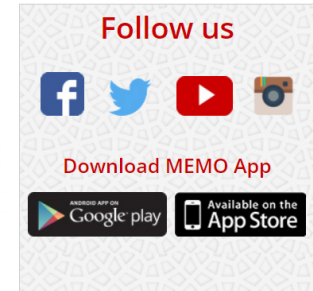
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