

## The wrong kind of Israeli: Avi Shlaim on life as an Iraqi Jew

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# The Menart Fair in Paris signals that art from the Middle East-North Africa is leading the market



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September 20, 2023 at 1:49 pm



Team photo from left to right: Amélie Kalafat (Artistic assistant) Clara Alabed Alnaef, (Partnership & communication), Joanna Chevalier (Artistic director), Laure d'Hauteville (Founder & fair director), Tara El Khoury Mikhaël (Gallery relations), Léonie Racy (Scenographer), Camelia Esmaili, (Special Project Advisor) [@Irenederosen]



by **Naima Morelli**  **naimamorelli**

The successful Menart Fair that just concluded in Paris is showing how artists from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are leading the conversation, while also opening up new perspectives in the European cultural arena.

Sometimes we think of art fairs as places where art collectors just go and buy, whereas museums and biennales are where the “real art” happens. However, in an art system ruled by the market, fairs extend well beyond a mere buy-and-sell business. Just like auctions, they are the places telling us where art is going, while also exerting a real cultural influence.

“We’ve noticed recently that a growing number of French and European galleries are including artists from the Middle East,” explained Laure d’Hauteville, founder of the Menart Fair, which has just run its fourth edition in Paris from 15 to 17 September. “Institutions are preparing exhibitions on artists from the Middle East and North Africa for 2024.”

The fair successfully managed to leverage the growing interest in modern and contemporary art from the MENA region in Europe and was dedicated to artists from the Levant, Arab-Persian Gulf and North Africa. More than 31 galleries from 11 countries were presented at the Palais d’Iéna, under the artistic direction of Joanna Chevalier.

In this sense, walking among the elegant grey and dust-coloured columns of the 1939 palais, which for a weekend was filled with vivacious and bright paintings, can feel almost metaphorical. The fascinating Parisian building by architect Auguste Perret represents the old guard. The eye-catching canvases, bold installations, political sculptures, surreal ceramics and even dances and performances from the MENA region represented the new values that are coming to the heart of Europe.

“Thanks to Menart Fair, the public and art professionals had the chance to discover new talents and observe the evolution of those they know,” said d’Hauteville. “A new market in Europe is taking shape.”

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The truth is that art lovers today need to be keenly aware of what’s going on in this part of the world, marked by incredible cultural diversity and unconventional visual languages. Amidst the work of these artists, they could find new lines of research that look at historical, social and political narratives as well as dominant representations with a different eye. This is much needed in the heart of Europe at the moment, in order to build a nurturing line of communication, based not only on a theoretical but also an emotional understanding.

Born in Dusseldorf, the Paris-based d’Hauteville is a former journalist who specialised in culture between France and the Middle East. She has had the



opportunity to familiarise herself with the art scene since 1991, when she became passionate about arts from the MENA region.

Determined to promote dialogue between the Middle East and the West, she founded her first art fair, “Artuel”, in Beirut in 1998, which she directed and curated until 2005. “This was the first international modern and contemporary art fair in the region,” she told me.



She then proceeded to create and direct a number of fairs: JABAL, a fair dedicated to the discovery and recognition of young emerging artists in Lebanon; the Artparis-Abu Dhabi Fair; the Beirut Art Fair; and the 2014 Singapore Art Fair.

In 2021, she finally conceived and developed the Menart in Paris, the first fair dedicated to galleries presenting artists from the Middle East and North Africa, which she then succeeded in expanding to other European capitals, including Brussels.

In line with today’s investments in art, it has not been not surprising to find galleries from the three Gulf countries that are today massively attracting art audiences, leveraging the soft power of art: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Artistically, we know these countries mostly for big-scale governmental projects, so it’s very interesting to get acquainted with the parallel discourse that the private galleries are bringing forward.

However, the most interesting gallery at Menart which operates heavily in the Gulf is one that doesn’t have a physical space quite yet. It is called **Hunna**, and it has been mentioned several times here on *Middle East Monitor*, as an example of a space that is adding interesting layers of complexity to the narrative of the Arabian Peninsula in Europe.

Founded in 2021 by French researcher and curator Océane Saily, Hunna represents exclusively women artists based in the Gulf, and it is ultra-contemporary in its approach to the region. The artists in Hunna’s roster look at



matriarchal lines, power dynamics, the woman's body and its representation, as well as the history of the Arabian Peninsula.

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Among the works Saily had in her booth in Paris were surreal paintings and sculptures by Alymamah Rashed. She was inspired to create these images of slugs, snails and larvae by her research on the mythology, objecthood, artefacts and lost fragments of Failaka Island in Kuwait, a fascinating post-apocalyptic place marked by a strange history.

The real protagonists of this edition of Menart, though, were Lebanese artists, accounting for one-third of the galleries at the fair. "Despite the economic crisis in Lebanon, the art market demand for Lebanese artists is still very strong," d'Hauteville pointed out. Given her strong ties with Lebanon, she is determined to keep offering support and visibility to a country which is still struggling. "Like the Menart Fair which we exported from Lebanon to Europe, many artists presented at this edition are originally from one country, grew up in a second country, and work or reside today in a third country. These personal trajectories are reflected in artistic productions that are at the crossroads between East and West."

Indeed, several artists present at the fair are part of what we can call "third culture artists". These are artists of a mixed background who feel a deep sense of belonging to the MENA region and explore these roots in their art.

This is certainly the case with designer Nada Debs at the Parisian Galerie BSL who calls her style "East and East". Her unique practice blends cultural languages that at first seem incompatible: the minimalist refinement of Japan (the Far East) and the ornamentation of the Middle East. Born in Beirut to Lebanese parents, she grew up in Japan and now works between Beirut and Dubai. She wishes to preserve the know-how of the eastern regions while reinventing them, almost as an act of rebellion.

At Menart she presented some pieces from the series "Stitched Horizons", whereby embroidery meets furniture design. The series includes five pebble chairs, decorated with embroidery on the back. This is the result of a collaboration with an association of female refugees in Lebanon. The materials

Nada chooses all tell a tactile story. For her, the human hand is a voice, and the artisan is a storyteller.



Another significant example of a third culture artist who was very much sought-after at the fair is Lien Hoang-Xuan, who is of Vietnamese-Tunisian origins. Her works illustrate this multitude of references. She creates imaginary cities inspired by Saigon, Tunis and Beirut. She uses many references from classic lyric literature or love songs and sweet pop-culture clips, which she combines with superstitious symbols and folkloric visual motifs.

She never fails to present gold figures alongside snippets of writing. Her work at the booth of the gallery Revie Projects almost looks like the pages from a comic book belonging to King Midas. The artist, who currently lives and works between Paris and Beirut, says that her work “questions elegiac themes, such as the lament of love, nostalgia through sculpture, painting and video.”

Menart was a successful fair. According to the organisers, it welcomed 5,727 visitors over four days, and out of the 230 works exhibited, 128 were sold. The idea was to have an all-encompassing experience that would involve not only different art forms, but also other museums scattered around the city, including the work of Lebanese sculptor Samar Moeghabael at the Musee de l’Homme.

While Middle Eastern and North African countries are today seeing a variety of hyper-developed and multi-layered art scenes, it’s clearly still very important for them to be in Paris, in the heart of the art establishment. This is not only to have their paintings hanging in Parisian homes, but also to expand the conversation around the Arab world, turn over the paradigm of the perceived clash of cultures, and introduce new elements of beauty and curiosity to the cultural conversation in Europe.

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