

Art in the Desert

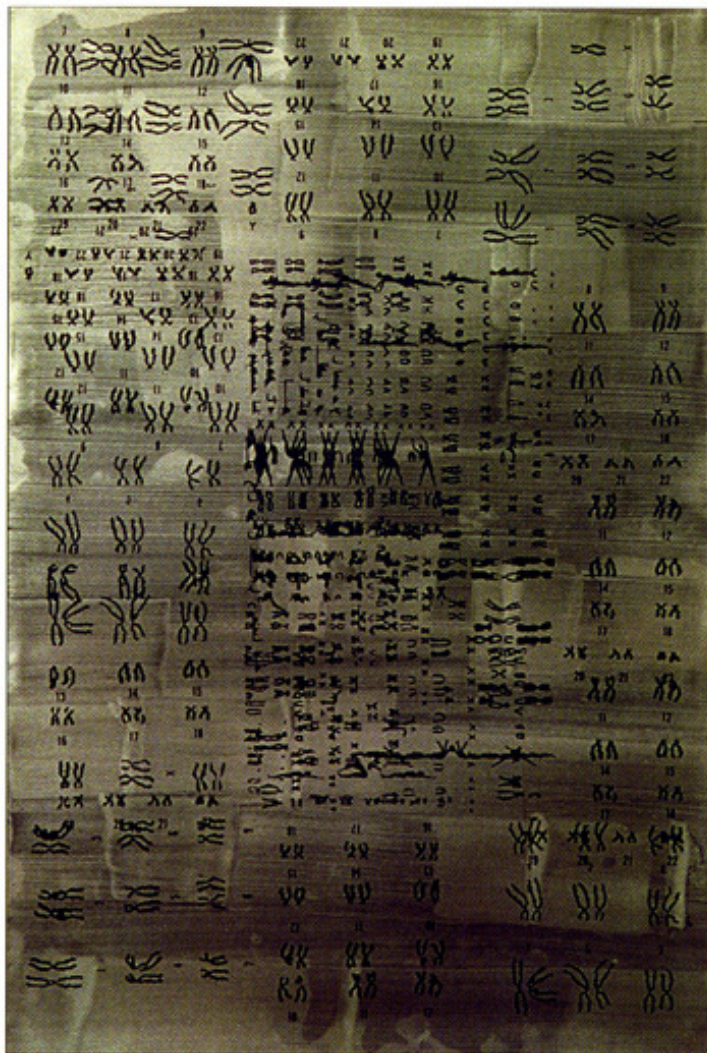
The United Emirates and Abu Dhabi

By Deborah M. Colton

The United Arab Emirates consists of seven states including Sharjah, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Is this Middle Eastern federation becoming a new world class destination for the arts? Although Western interest in the arts in the UAE started in the 1980s with a very fine international museum being built in Sharjah, it seems as though the future center for arts and culture will become Abu Dhabi; at least, there certainly has been much talk about Abu Dhabi lately. This city lies on a T-shaped island jutting into the Persian Gulf, and is known as the richest city in the world largely due to the oil industry. Of its 900,000 population, eighty percent are expatriates. This city's well-to-do have money to burn: recently a license plate bearing simply the number 1 was sold at a world record fourteen million dollars at a charity auction. Additionally, Abu Dhabi is continually leaping into the news as it makes huge corporate investments in US businesses in order to diversify from relying on oil. Unlike Dubai, a neighboring emirate that prides itself by building artificial islands and the world's tallest skyscrapers, Abu Dhabi is investing its time and money in becoming a major art world destination.

The vision for this desert land of wealth and intellect is ambitious, but attainable. Plans for a 670 acre cultural district on Abu Dhabi's natural Saadiyat Island (Island of Happiness) are already well underway. The world's largest Guggenheim—the only one in the Middle East—has been conceptualized and designed by celebrated architect Frank Gehry. Gehry sees the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi as an opportunity to push the architecture of museums a step further than he did in Bilbao, Spain. Other plans include the more classical Louvre-related building in Abu Dhabi, which will be designed by award-winning French architect Jean Nouvel. There are also plans for a performing arts center by Zaha Hadid, a maritime museum by Tadao Ando and a national museum and nineteen arts pavilions bordering a canal. Plans for one of the first major bio-art centers are underway as well. The Sorbonne University already has a campus in Abu Dhabi and New York University is planning to build a liberal arts college in the coming years; additionally, Yale University is considering an art institute encompassing art, architecture, music and drama directly across from Hadid's performing arts center.

In keeping with these ambitions, Abu Dhabi now has a major international art fair. With a passion for the arts and a longtime interest in the Middle East, two dynamic French women, Laure d'Hauteville and Caroline Clough Lacoste, created the first international art fair in Abu Dhabi: the Art Paris Abu Dhabi Art Fair. In November 2007, the Art Paris Abu Dhabi Art Fair featured 47 galleries from France, Germany, Syria, Lebanon, Tunisia, Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland,



Top Right: Suzanne Anker, *Symbolic Species*, 2000; Above: Michael Somoroff, still from *Illumination*; all works displayed at the Abu Dhabi fair

India, Iran, Belgium and Monaco. I had the honor of being the one USA dealer in the fair, partnered with Galerie Brigitte Schenk of Cologne, Germany, a well-established gallery who has worked with royalty in the Emirates for over eight years.

The Art Paris Abu Dhabi Art Fair of 2007 opened with its preview night at the 7-star multi-million dollar hotel, the Emirates Palace, an opulent and lavish Arabian style palace with massive teams of well dressed servants and more Lamborghinis and Bentleys pulling up to the valet that one could ever imagine. The art fair was opened on the VIP preview evening by His Highness Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. His wife showed her appreciation for art; it is rumored that she arrived the day of the opening and purchased about 80 pieces in roughly half an hour. The Prime Minister of Arts and Culture was also in attendance, as were many other dignitaries from the United Emirate and other nations. It was easy to see the influence of Abu Dhabi's large expatriate community as art lovers from Europe, Asia, the Americas and Australia swelled the crowds.

The Deborah Colton Gallery showed a few of our science-based artists including Suzanne Anker and Michael Rees, as well as other favorite artists from our stable, like Lowell Boyers. Michael Somoroff's *Illuminations*, which was launched on the grounds of the Rothko Chapel a little over a year ago, was also featured along with small sculptures of the grand installation and the accompanying video that debuted last summer in Chelsea and the Aldrich Museum. The art fair's clientele was extremely well educated in the sciences, and took immediately to the intellectually stimulating works of Anker and Rees. Somoroff's *Illuminations* was the only video work presented at the Fair and received a great response due to fine quality of the

work on the huge plasma screen. The work of Rees was shown by appointment via his interactive software *Sculptural User Interface*. This work creates a language to form a synthesizer; users can type words onto a keyboard and view the resulting sculptures on the screen that they may also interact with. *Sculptural User Interface* was the only work of its kind shown in Abu Dhabi.

The usual artistic heavyweights were also present at the fair; Brigitte Schenk's Joan Miró pieces captured much interest, while her Andy Warhol Marilyn works on paper were presold to the Royal Family before the exhibition even opened. Other works at the Fair ranged from contemporary to Modern, and from photography to sculpture to works on canvas. Modern and contemporary art from the Middle East and Arab world were joined by such legendary names at western booths as Picasso, Basquiat, Dalí, Haring, and Vautier. Having a broad range of art shown throughout the fair, with a diverse international audience, the first Abu Dhabi Art Fair was a large success for all involved.

If you're eager to sample the artistic offerings of the UAE, this month, from March 19th through 22nd, a contemporary art fair, Art Dubai (www.artdubai.ae), will take place at the Madinat Jumeirah resort in Dubai. About seventy galleries from the Middle East, Asia, Europe, North and South America, North Africa and Australia will participate. Although this exhibition focuses more on Indian and Iranian buyers, this long standing art fair has received considerable attention. During my time in the UAE, I found the people to be gentle and friendly, the hotels, service and food exquisite, and the environment exotic yet elegant. If you can manage to attend, I'm sure you'll enjoy your time in this burgeoning center for art and culture.



Above Right: Michael Rees, *Sculptural User Interface*, 2007. The *Sculptural User Interface* is an interactive installation where users can type words and make and interact with virtual sculptures based on them.