

## **Art Fair Illustrates Abu Dhabi's Commitment to Culture**

By Nazanin Lankarani

ABU DHABI — Since 2006, when it signed agreements with the Guggenheim Foundation and the Louvre to establish world-class museums on the nearby island of Saadiyat, the oil-rich emirate of Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates, has placed culture high on its public agenda.

The Abu Dhabi art fair this month was a striking example of how the policy is working.

“Abu Dhabi Art is part of a greater vision to build transnational cultural institutions to ensure that the Arab world is not isolated,” said Rita Aoun Abdo, director of the cultural department of Abu Dhabi's Tourism Development and Investment Co., or T.D.I.C., which co-organized the fair and is the agency behind the development of Saadiyat Island.

The T.D.I.C. started the fair last year in collaboration with the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage to serve a dual purpose: plant the seeds of a local art market and bring into the region high-quality art worthy of the bare walls of its future museums.

Judging by the impressive roster of this year's 48 international and regional participating galleries — including the likes of Gagosian and Acquavella from New York and White Cube from London — the event was a success.

Though sales were spotty, the primary stated objective of most top international galleries was to establish a relationship with the T.D.I.C., which not only organizes the fair but also owns the museums under construction and finances the public acquisition of art.

“We are here not so much to sell but to help build an infrastructure to support the future museums,” said Tim Marlow, co-director of White Cube. “Unlike last year, where we showed a range of works by different artists, this time the idea was to do a museum-quality show and go deeper into a single artist's career.”

White Cube presented a one-man show of Damien Hirst's early works and sold a diamond cabinet, titled "Sadness," for £2.5 million, or about \$4 million, to Sheika Salama bint Hamdan al-Nahyan, chairwoman of the fair's host committee and wife of Sheik Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and patron of the event.

The New York dealer Larry Gagosian put part of his private collection on display in September at a temporary exhibition space on Saadiyat Island near the museum construction sites.

The show, rumored to be for sale, will run through January and is titled "RSTW," for "Rauschenberg, Ruscha, Serra, Twombly, Warhol and Wool," all artists in the collection.

The T.D.I.C. denied any plans to buy Mr. Gagosian's collection, but works by all the same artists were available for sale at the Gagosian booth at the fair.

By closing time Sunday, Sheika Salama had also acquired a stainless steel piece by Anish Kapoor, the only work presented in the booth of Kamel Mennour, who had also curated a separate exhibition, in cooperation with the Giacometti Foundation, both in Paris. That exhibition, in the lobby of the Emirates Palace Hotel, contrasted works by Daniel Buren and Alberto Giacometti.

A first-time exhibitor, the New York gallery Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art, brought several museum-quality pieces, including Frank Stella's "Damascus Gate (Stretch Variation II)" from 1970, a monumental abstract painting of overlapping arcs measuring 3 by 15 meters, or 10 by 50 feet, and priced at \$5 million.

The work is the last in private hands of the artist's "Damascus Gate" protractor painting series, the other two already being held by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.

“There is a lot of enthusiasm, given the possibilities offered by the future institutions and private collections,” Mr. Nahem said. “I see great potential here and a genuine interest in art that goes beyond trend or simple curiosity.” He said the Stella piece was on reserve for “a very serious buyer.”

Other confirmed purchases, by Sheika Salama and by the Qatari museum Mathaf, included works by artists from the region, an important recognition for local artists and a good reason for many exhibitors to tailor their selections to the needs and tastes of a growing local collector base.

“Our pieces have a natural collector base in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent,” said Ali Bagherzadeh, founder of Xerxes Fine Arts, based in London, who sold a piece titled “Twisted Melody” by the Pakistani-born Simeen Farhat to Sheika Salama.

The Agial Art Gallery in Beirut confirmed a sale to Mathaf of a piece by the Lebanese artist Nabil Nahas.

In a region where art appreciation and art collecting have long been traditions limited to the ruling classes, setting an example goes a long way.

“It is important for us to be part of a regionwide cultural movement that has spread to Doha, Dubai, Kuwait and Beirut,” Mr. Bagherzadeh said. “This can only be good.”