

## Virtual galleries get real at the Beirut Art Fair

By India Stoughton



Art Chowk, Semeen Faisal, Red Flame 2011, enamel on resin, 68.6 x 66 x 15.2 cms

In the space of less than 20 years the internet has become a crucial tool for both individuals and businesses worldwide. Art galleries too are finding it an increasingly valuable resource, some even abandoning physical gallery spaces for an exclusively online presence. However, physical art fairs are still a valuable resource, even for online galleries, providing a specialised environment and increased international exposure. This year two high-profile online galleries from the MENESA region, Art Chowk -- based in Pakistan -- and Art Bahrain, will be supplementing their worldwide virtual presence with a physical appearance at the Beirut Art Fair.

“We believe it is time for us to enter the art market,” says Art Bahrain’s Maria Vivero. “Beirut... is the best place to begin our groundbreaking participation not only because of its geographical position -- as it brings together the European, the Mediterranean, East and West -- but more profoundly because of its intellectual judgments and value systems.”

The gallery is not solely an online presence. “We are more like a nomadic gallery,” says Vivero. “Artbahrain.org online gallery is to support the artists, to give them global exposure and make a sale. We do not take commissions on

the online sales. We exhibit art[ists] online only after they were exhibited in a gallery or any other physical art space.”

Art Chowk, by contrast, uses its online presence in tandem with its physical gallery space. “Running an online portal obviously has lower operating costs than a brick and mortar version of a gallery, and can access a larger audience,” says Camilla Hadi Chaudhary, one of the gallery’s founding directors. “It has also created more awareness of our physical gallery’s programme.”

Both galleries say that most buyers are willing to spend large amounts of money online only after research. “Most collectors buy works of artist they are familiar with,” says Vivero, while Chaudhary explains: “We have had clients buy artworks of around \$50,000 based on an image. They were well informed about the artist and hence had a clear understanding of the work beforehand... [but] there are clients who will want to see the work beforehand, especially if the work is above a certain monetary value.”

“The computer screen has its obvious limitations in representing art,” adds Chaudhary. “Having a physical gallery provides access to artists and artworks that would not be possible with only an online presence. We hope to introduce our artists and our programme to a new audience through participating in the Beirut Art Fair.”

“First and foremost, our objective is to showcase art by Bahraini artists -- to be physically seen by art lovers, art enthusiasts and collectors from the MENASA and all over the world,” says Vivero, who adds that the Beirut Art Fair “will allow us to see how the public will react to the art on display.”

Art Bahrain will exhibit work by Bahrain’s leading contemporary artist Rashid Al-Khalifa, while Art Chowk’s booth will tackle the concept of fragility, exhibiting hand-carved calligraphy by Simeen Farhat, contemporary miniatures by Asif Ahmed and delicate painted jewellery by Zara Mahmood.