

Monica Bonvicini. 2017. *Hanam*. 15th Istanbul Biennial. Image courtesy of Istanbul Biennial. The artist and Mitchell-Jones & Nash, New York. Photography by Sahir Ugur Eren



ART, DESIGN, TEMPORALITY AND CHANGING CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

In our in-depth reviews of the fairs that are drawing crowds this autumn in Istanbul, London, Paris, Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Beirut, *Canvas* looks at the cutting-edge art and designs, the changing nature of the fair circuit, and the possible impact on creative industries in the region and beyond.

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Brèves © ALBA

THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST OF BEIRUT

This year marked the first edition of Beirut's Design Fair, staged alongside the Beirut Art Fair. While admittedly more local than global, the latter serves as a vibrant platform to showcase the country's rich, diverse and ever-growing art scene. Now the design landscape is catching up, thanks to an aesthetic that's ultra-contemporary. **Elizabeth Harris** visits both fairs to find out what was hot and what didn't quite make the grade.



BEIRUT ART FAIR

Pascal Berthoud. *Mémoire d'architecture, le songe de beyrouth VII*, 2017. Grey pencil and watercolour on Arches 356 gr. paper, 90 x 130 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Gowen Contemporary, Switzerland

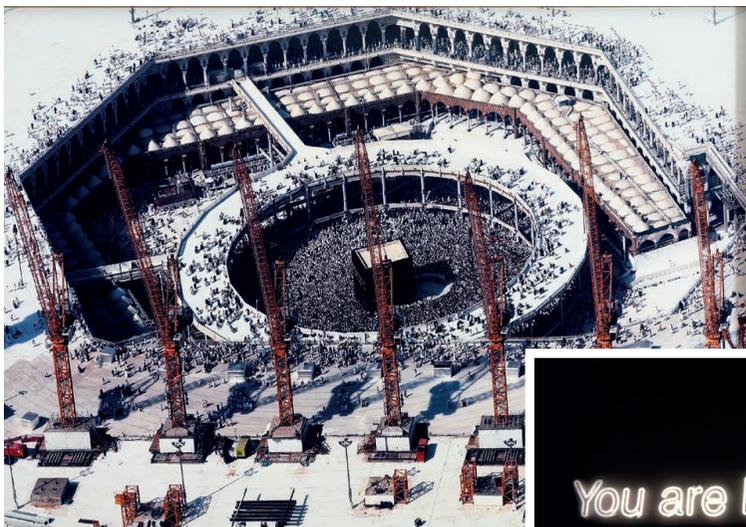


Rose Issa, Curator of the exhibition *Ourada: the eyes of Lebanon*. Image courtesy of Beirut Art Fair



Bertrand Planes. *City Summit*, 2017. Performance, installation & photographs, variable dimensions. Image courtesy of Wild Projects - GdB

Two young women giggled together at the sight of a man in a pinstriped suit strutting down a catwalk, his jacket cropped to reveal his hips and the small of his back. Palestinian artist Sharif Waked's 2003 video *Chic Point* juxtaposes stills from Israeli checkpoints – where Palestinian men are forced to raise their shirts or strip off their clothes to show they are not armed – with footage of men navigating this imagined space on a catwalk, wearing garments made to expose the parts of the body where a weapon might be concealed. Humorous and subversive, it explores the humiliating realities of Israeli occupation and the constant surveillance placed on Palestinians, contrasting the act of disrobing by choice with that of being forced to expose one's body at gunpoint. Attracting laughing crowds, Waked's provocative seven-minute film was one of the most popular works at the eighth edition of the



Clockwise from top left: Ahmed Matar. *Untitled I*, 2012. Laser chrome print on Kodak real photo paper, 124 x 177.5 cm. © Ramzi & Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation Collection.
 Elias Mammari. *You Are Here For Now*, 2009. Mixed media in cold cathode and rusting steel, 405 x 47 x 11 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.
 Mohamad Said Baalbaki. *One Hand Alone Can't Clap*, 2010. Bronze, 90 x 30 x 15 cm. © Saradar Collection. Image courtesy of Agop Kanledjian.
 Randa Mirza. *Issaf and Naila from El-Zohra was not born in a day*. Lightbox, 60 x 110 cm, edition of 3. Image courtesy of Galerie Tanit, Beirut, Lebanon.
 Ali Cherri. *Paysages tremblants (Beyrouth)*, 2014. Lithographic print and archival ink stamp, 4 pieces, 70 x 100 cm each. © Saradar Collection



Abdul Rahman Katanani. *After Six Days and We Will Be Back, Inshallah*, 2015. Corrugated steel, variable dimensions. © Ramzi & Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation Collection. Image courtesy of Agial Gallery, Beirut

Beirut Art Fair, which ran from 21–24 September. It was exhibited at the fair as part of *Ourouba: The Eye of Lebanon*, a nonprofit exhibition curated by Rose Issa. "I like the fact that there were works dealing with very serious matters but which made people laugh," says Issa, who borrowed works by more than 40 prominent regional artists from over 20 private collections in Lebanon. "They bring a sense of humour into the exhibition, despite the fact that the last ten years have been extremely hard for the Arab people." Given the routinisation of violence in the region, it's little wonder that a tragic sense of comedy resonated with fair visitors.

Issa's exhibition formed the backbone of the fair, both physically and metaphorically. Covering 400 square metres in the centre of the fairground, it included a wide range of paintings, sculptures, photographs, installations and video works exploring the idea of what it means to be Arab in the 21st century. It also provided a valuable insight into the tastes of Lebanon's private collectors, from whom Issa borrowed works spanning a decade of conflict and uprisings, and reflected on everyday life in the Middle East.

Chic Point was paired with Iraqi artist Adel Abidin's hilarious video work *Consumption of War*, in which two besuited businessman duel with fluorescent light bulbs resembling lightsabers. However, many of the works on show were unsurprisingly darker in nature. Lebanese

painter Ayman Baalbaki evoked Lebanon's civil war in his signature style through an enormous painting of the famous Barakat Building, riddled with bullet holes and shrouded in scaffolding. Another of his iconic works captured the bombed-out carcass of an MEA plane.

Issa's astute pairings of works that explored similar themes helped to highlight the shared concerns and anxieties of the region's artists, and their common thread of resilience. It also enabled renewed ways of looking at the aesthetic approaches of artists during different moments in time. Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum's ceramic sculpture *Witness*, a tiny and fragile reproduction of Lebanon's Martyrs' Monument, was displayed alongside Lebanese sculptor Mohamad Said Baalbaki's *One hand alone can't clap*, a bronze recreation of the statue's missing arm. Lebanese artist Ali Cherri's lithographic print of a black-and-white archival map of Beirut was hung near Saudi artist Ahmed Matar's photograph capturing construction cranes towering over the Kaaba in Mecca, both works highlighting the rampant destruction of heritage across the Middle East.

Featuring the region's most talented artists in a contextual manner, *Ourouba* was undoubtedly the high point of the fair, which this year included 51 galleries and 230 artists. The commercial booths varied widely in quality and approach, some choosing to showcase work by a wide range of artists – not all of it well-matched – while others exhibited



KRJST Studio. *Recollection III*. 2016. Mohair, linen, rafia, acrylic, 330 x 220 cm.
Image courtesy of Art Sablon, Belgium

They bring a sense of humour into the exhibition, despite the fact that the last ten years have been extremely hard for the Arab people. - Rose Issa

a single artist. The overall diversity of the fair was an improvement on previous years, with several new international galleries raising the overall quality and scope. Another decisive factor may have been the influence of the fair's selection committee, which comprised local collectors Basel Dalloul, Abraham Karabajakian and Tarek Nahas, who were appointed last year. Commercially, the fair appears to have been a success – according to the organisers, 88 per cent of galleries made sales, with some surpassing \$500,000 in total.

Albareh Gallery from Bahrain showcased work by young Lebanese artist Abed Al Kadiri. Blending together scrawled charcoal sketches with colourful oil paint, his huge canvases explored the destruction of Iraq's national heritage at the hands of ISIS. The project was inspired by a gift from the Iraqi modernist master, Dia Azzawi – a copy of the

Maqamat al-Hariri, written by Muhammad al-Hariri al-Basri in the early 12th century, with colourful illustrations by Yahya ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti.

A second non-profit focus, a display of 49 stylised black-and-white illustrations by Algerian artist Rachid Koraïchi and inspired by Khalil Gibran's seminal work *The Prophet*, fell a little flat. Stripped of the text that provides them with context, Koraïchi's illustrations were hard to engage with and those looking forward to seeing Gibran's original 1920s illustrations were greeted with poor quality reproductions hung on an exterior wall.

Particular highlights included a selection of small, autumnal-hued abstract mixed media works on paper dating from the 1960s by prominent Armenian artist Sarkis, at Paris-based Galerie Nathalie



David & Nicolas. *Loulou Rocking Chair*.
© Joy Mardini Design Gallery



Gold Cuts © Tarek El Kassisouf



David & Nicolas. *Bree' Carafe & Candle Holder*. © Joy Mardini Design Gallery

Obadia, which was a first-time participant at the fair. Agial Art Gallery's booth was also a standout, with a group show featuring works by Modernist painters Saliba Douaiby and Aref Rayess as well as by contemporary artists including Oussama Baalbaaki and Taghreed Darghouth, who exhibited a stunning new acrylic painting *The Tree Within: A Palestinian Olive Trunk*.

Fair director Laure d'Hauteville and artistic director Pascal Odille also revived a section launched last year dedicated to emerging artists, though the overall impact of this year's selection was not as strong. Entitled *Revealing*, it consisted of single walls, rather than whole booths, each dedicated to a young artist. Much of the work was rather bland, but standouts included an installation by Egyptian artist Mohamed Monaiseer at Mashrabia Gallery – which also made a

splash at last year's fair – featuring more than 120 tiny illustrations on handmade paper, exploring Egypt's vanishing herbal traditions and the plants and substances used in traditional healing practices.

The decision to excise design from the art fair programme, an aspect which had blurred its focus in previous editions, helped give this year's fair a more cohesive feel. Meanwhile, along came the first edition of the Beirut Design Fair, linked to the art fair by the VIP lounge. Co-founded by Guillaume Taslé d'Héliand and Hala Moubarak, the new fair aims to draw attention to Lebanon's rising and vibrant product and furniture design scene.

"We wanted to help the Lebanese understand that there is a huge, incredible design scene in Lebanon, the most important in the whole Middle East," says d'Héliand. "We didn't invent anything, we just



revealed the facts." Thanks in part to its positioning, the first edition attracted over 16,000 visitors – compared to the art fair's 28,000 – and with 44 exhibitors it was a strong opening edition.

Highlights included *Stouff*, an avant-garde reinvention of the traditional Lebanese stove by Anthony and Marie-Lynn Daher of MAD Architecture and Design. Made by artisans in the mountains of Lebanon, the piece was inspired by the traditional Lebanese stoves the designers knew from their grandparents' homes. The angular modern take features asymmetrical metal panels and is designed to maximise heat output while minimising wood consumption.

One of the aims of the design fair was to highlight the connection between designers and artisans in Lebanon, explains Moubarak. Many designers collaborate with local craftsmen to execute their designs, utilising traditional skills that are in danger of disappearing. "It's important to talk about this, because if designers don't give work to craftsmen then somewhere along the line, we will lose a lot of our history, memory and heritage," she says.

Other highlights of the inaugural edition included the Joy Mardini Design Gallery booth, which had a well-curated selection of works by



Carla Baz, Charles Kalpakian and David/Nicolas. The latter duo showcased a selection of sleek, timeless works, including traditional Lebanese glass water jugs given a contemporary twist with a gold spike at the base, as well as a table based on traditional Oriental brass tables with folding wooden legs, reinvented as a single, minimalist circular pane of glass over an elegant black folding base with gold accents.

Tables – a perennial design challenge – also held centre-stage at the Beirut Makers' booth. Stephanie Bashir's *Ocular* tables are ingeniously slotted together from pieces of laser-cut Plexiglass and can grow vertically or sideways to fit the user's needs. Ghouyoum's *Carambole* table, inspired by the exotic star-shaped fruit, is made in Lebanon using raw cast aluminium. The pentagram-shaped table consists of five separate segments, each marked with a series of concentric circles, like the ripples that form when a stone is thrown into a calm lake.

For sheer malleability and innovation, Rami A. Mattar of Brut Designs stood out with his creative concrete building blocks. Each hollow cube of smooth concrete – all handmade and reinforced with a steel core – can be paired with wood or metal and rearranged to transform into

tables, chairs, stools, shelves – whatever the imagination suggests.

Other designers showcased innovative lighting sculptures. Marie Munier applied her training as a jeweller to create a lamp that was at once bold and delicate, consisting of tightly woven nets of golden wire ringed by two dramatic circles. Ahmad Khouja, director of DAMJ Design + Craft, showcased a selection of works inspired by mathematics and nature, featuring playful shifting geometric patterns. Among them was *Wall Tears*, a modular light made of organic-looking white plaster forms, each pierced with four, six or ten holes – reminiscent of peas in a pod.

D'Héliand says that for the fair's second edition next year he plans to include regional and international designers in the line-up, while ensuring that the focus remains local with 60 to 70 per cent of the exhibitors hailing from Lebanon. "We really want people from Lebanon and abroad to understand that there is incredible creativity in the country and that it's the most legitimate place in the region to become the capital of design," he says. Artisanal and eclectic in technique, minimalist and contemporary in aesthetic, the Lebanese design scene is one to watch closely in the years ahead. [E]