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Title: A conversation with Amélie Kalafat, Artistic & Partnership Manager of Menart Fair
Subtitle: A veritable catalyst for a burgeoning art scene, Menart Fair has been spotlighting modern and contemporary artists from the Levant, the Arab-Persian Gulf and North Africa every year since its creation in 2021.

We had the pleasure of interviewing Amélie Kalafat, Artistic & Partnership Manager of MENART Fair. Taking place in Paris, this year's fair will focus entirely on women artists, giving a voice to those who have been left unheard.

Kooness: Can you tell us about how Menart was born and the story behind the fair?

Amélie Kalafat: MENART Fair was born from the Beirut Art Fair in Lebanon, founded by my director, Laure d'Hauteville, who lived in Beirut for over thirty years. In 2019, the Beirut Art Fair celebrated its 10th anniversary, welcoming over 36,000 visitors from around the world in just five days. Who would have thought that the art of the MENA region could attract such a large audience? It took years to demonstrate to the Arab world that the art of their countries held significant value and deserved to be understood in a global context. This involved organizing studio visits, publishing books, writing articles in the press, and establishing an entire network to distribute information. Additionally, the artists from the MENA region are highly demanding. Now, it is up to us, with the support of institutions, to further develop their reputation here in Europe.

K: In which way do you think the fair has evolved in the last few years?

AK: The fair has undergone numerous changes over its four years of existence, but the turning point in the 2024 edition is likely the most significant. We are introducing many new features, both in the artistic selection and within the venue that will host us. First, a new location! MENART Fair is moving to the former Pierre Cardin Museum, located in the heart of the Parisian art district. This historic mansion will have the honor of hosting a selection of galleries curated by our new artistic committee, composed of four regional experts: Stefania Angarano for Egypt, Kalim Bechara for the Gulf and the Levant, Leila Varasteh for Iran, and Essia Hamdi for North Africa. But most importantly, for the first time, MENART Fair will be organized around a central theme: 100% female artists. This theme has brought a fresh dynamic and energy to our programming and inspired us to offer new experiences for our audience, including the creation of new sections, such as the 'Revealing Sector.' True to its mission of discovery, MENART Fair is expanding its commitment this year by dedicating part of its space to emerging talents and rediscovered artists. The new sector, titled 'Revealing Sector,' is partly supported by the MENART Friends association, providing visibility to original and unconventional works. Finally, we will also feature an 'Emerging Sector,' curated by Lebanese artist Sama Beydoun (artist and director of Shams Collective), presenting a group of seven promising female artists from the Middle East and North Africa, who are committed to fostering solidarity in today's climate of division.

K: What are the main characteristics that as a fair you look for in a participating gallery?

AK: We are interested in galleries with a strong vision, those that engage in meaningful research and documentation, publish catalogs, collaborate with museums, and introduce their collectors to new artists by thoroughly explaining their work. We value galleries that organize conferences and foster a deeper understanding of art. History must be followed, and artists are witnesses of their time. In some MENA countries, history could not or cannot be openly documented due to censorship or punishment. Thanks to artists, we can reconstruct events and gain a clearer understanding of cultural evolution. At MENART Fair, visitors will be able to grasp this through galleries like Picasso Art Gallery (Cairo), CAP Kuwait (Kuwait City), and Simine.Paris (Paris, specializing in Iranian artists), all of which exhibit pioneering artists who have shaped the art history of their region."

K: How does the Menart Fair impact intercultural relationships between MENA and Europe, and how do you see those relationships evolving into the future?

AK: Initiatives highlighting the MENA art scene are few, and our goal is to build a bridge between regional scenes and the Western market, where interconnections have been very discreet until now. Despite the richness of creativity in these regions, the MENA's influence in Europe is very weak. Even after studying art history before working at Menart Fair, I couldn't have named 5 artists from the region and had no knowledge of the MENA art landscape. There is a lack of resources and connections between our two regions. Menart Fair is therefore an artistic proposition made from a selection of essential galleries and artists, working to raise awareness and educate the European public about the artistic culture of these complex but highly creative regions. Over our previous editions, we have developed a very comprehensive program, aiming to deploy our channels of dissemination and understanding of this artistic ecosystem. Through conferences led by high-quality speakers, ready to provide the keys to a broad vision of the cultural offer of the MENA countries, breaking the clichés that surround them. Whether through performances, video and cinema, conferences on social and historical themes, or even through music, Menart Fair is a cultural getaway to the Middle East and North Africa. But Menart Fair is above all about showing that despite very complex political and social situations, the art scene there is more fertile than ever, conveying strong messages, historical testimonies, and a vision like no other

K: What is the main target public you hope to reach?

AK: We seek galleries with a clear vision, those that engage in rigorous research and documentation, publish catalogs, collaborate with museums, and introduce their collectors to new artists by thoughtfully explaining their work. We value galleries that organize conferences and promote a deeper understanding of art. History must be acknowledged, and artists serve as witnesses of their time. In some MENA countries, history could not—or cannot—be openly recorded due to censorship or punishment. Through the work of artists, we can piece together events and better understand cultural evolution. At MENART Fair, visitors will experience this through galleries like Picasso Art Gallery (Cairo), CAP Kuwait (Kuwait City), and Simine.Paris (Paris, specializing in Iranian artists), all of which showcase pioneering artists who have contributed to the art history of their region

K: This year's theme focuses on female artists, why and what is the main impact you hope to develop?

AK: The objective was twofold: firstly, to break down stereotypes and pay tribute to these women who have shaped the history of art in the MENA region, who were pioneers and major players in the development of regional art but whose names have faded over time, whose biographies have not necessarily been written, and therefore recognition has never been given, especially in the West where many preconceived notions exist about women in the MENA. People are not aware of the significant impact they have had and continue to have today. The second objective was related to the market. The statistics are shocking! Women in general are underrepresented and have insignificant prices compared to their male counterparts. When we focus on female artists from the MENA, the numbers are even more outrageous as only 1.5% are represented by international galleries. And it's not for lack of talent or creativity... Some galleries did not want to participate because their booth would not have been profitable if they only brought female artists, as they are cheaper. But if we do nothing, things will not change, which is why we wanted to take action. This theme is risky and represents a real challenge, but if no one acts, how can things evolve?

K: Have you faced any challenges when executing this year's theme?

AK: This choice was very challenging, as being a geographically focused fair, we are already limited in our selection of galleries. Adding a new selection filter further reduced our potential prospecting field, but it was very interesting because it allowed us to deeply understand the overall state of the representation of female artists from the MENA region by galleries on the market. This shocking observation gave us the desire to go even further in our approach and to open the doors of Menart Fair to other initiatives allowing them to give voice to all these creatives within new sections, such as the "Revealing" and "Emerging" sectors. But, above all with the publication of our catalog we aim to deliver a true artist's book offering a unique biographical resource and to give the recognition they deserve to all these female artists that are part of MENART fair

K: What can we expect from Menart's future editions?

AK: We aim to become a platform for exchange and discovery. We have already exported Menart Fair to Brussels in 2023, and we want to continue our development journey in other capitals, in Europe or near Europe, in order to disseminate, wherever we go, the beauty and creativity of artists from the Arab and Persian world. We also want, through our Menart Friends association, to organize "collectors to collectors" trips, taking our European collectors to discover other collections of their counterparts in MENA countries. We also want to organize conferences at universities (which we already do), raise awareness among young people, take them to visit MENA art exhibitions in European museums, and create connections between all these cultures