



Culture **Art & Design**

Paris art fair 'redresses imbalance' with female-only Arab line-up

Menart builds programme around women to spark change in male-dominated industry

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Menart Fair returned to Paris recently and, for the first time, its programme was solely focused on female Arab creatives. Staged at Galerie Joseph, the modern and contemporary art programme took regional artists, designers and galleries to Europe. It aimed to go beyond the question of gender to raise visitors' awareness of the diversity of female artists in a region often under-represented in the West.

This year, the fair, which ended on Sunday, gathered 29 galleries from 12 countries, with curated sections dedicated to emerging talents, special research-based projects and artists known for their cause-driven work or academic background.

“As in many other sectors, women artists suffer from under-representation and consequently under-valuation of their work,” Menart founder Laure d’Hauteville tells *The National*. “It’s vital to give them the space and spotlight they need to redress the imbalance in the market. The overall proportion of women artists in contemporary art fairs in Europe is around 38 per cent – an encouraging but insufficient figure.”

Last year, female Arab artists represented just 1.5 per cent of the artists at international galleries, according to a study conducted by the Art Basel Association, and only 2.5 per cent of the artists whose works sell for more than \$1 million. “Given the situation, we decided to make this year’s edition 100 per cent female,” says d’Hauteville. “Just as cultural institutions are increasing their initiatives to recognise women in the history of art, it’s time for the art market to implement concrete initiatives to promote and represent women artists.”

The challenges faced by regional artists are as diverse as the countries themselves. Female artists in the Arab world as a whole often contend with gender stereotypes that consider them as less talented and less creative than men, with cultural norms that confine women to the role of mother and wife, alongside limited access to the resources they need to develop their skills, their network and their career.



However, the visibility of Arab women artists is growing, with many galleries realising that, despite under-representation, the work of women artists from the regions is making waves. Changing social attitudes, an increase in access to education – particularly in artistic fields – and the rise of support platforms aware of the imbalance, are helping to right the scales slightly.

“Changes in the governments of Arab countries are also helping them to gain recognition and develop their careers,” d’Hauteville says. “The Egyptian government, for example, has set up art education programmes for women and organises exhibitions and festivals to showcase their work.

"Moroccan artists can take advantage of grants from the government's Visual Arts support fund. The UAE, and more recently Saudi Arabia, actively supports women artists by providing them with

numerous grants and residencies. As a result, 70 per cent of artists from the Gulf states are now women.”

Highlights from the fair included a beautiful yet tragic series of works by Lebanese artist Aya Haidar, titled *The Soleless Series*. They featured several canvas and rubber shoes that had fallen apart, decorated with intricate embroidery.

Presented by Kuwait’s Contemporary Art Platform, the project began in 2018 when Haidar undertook a three-month residency programme with Deveron Project, working directly in reintegrating Syrian refugee communities into the UK. Over the years, she has collected their worn-through shoes and stitched the stories they shared with her onto them.

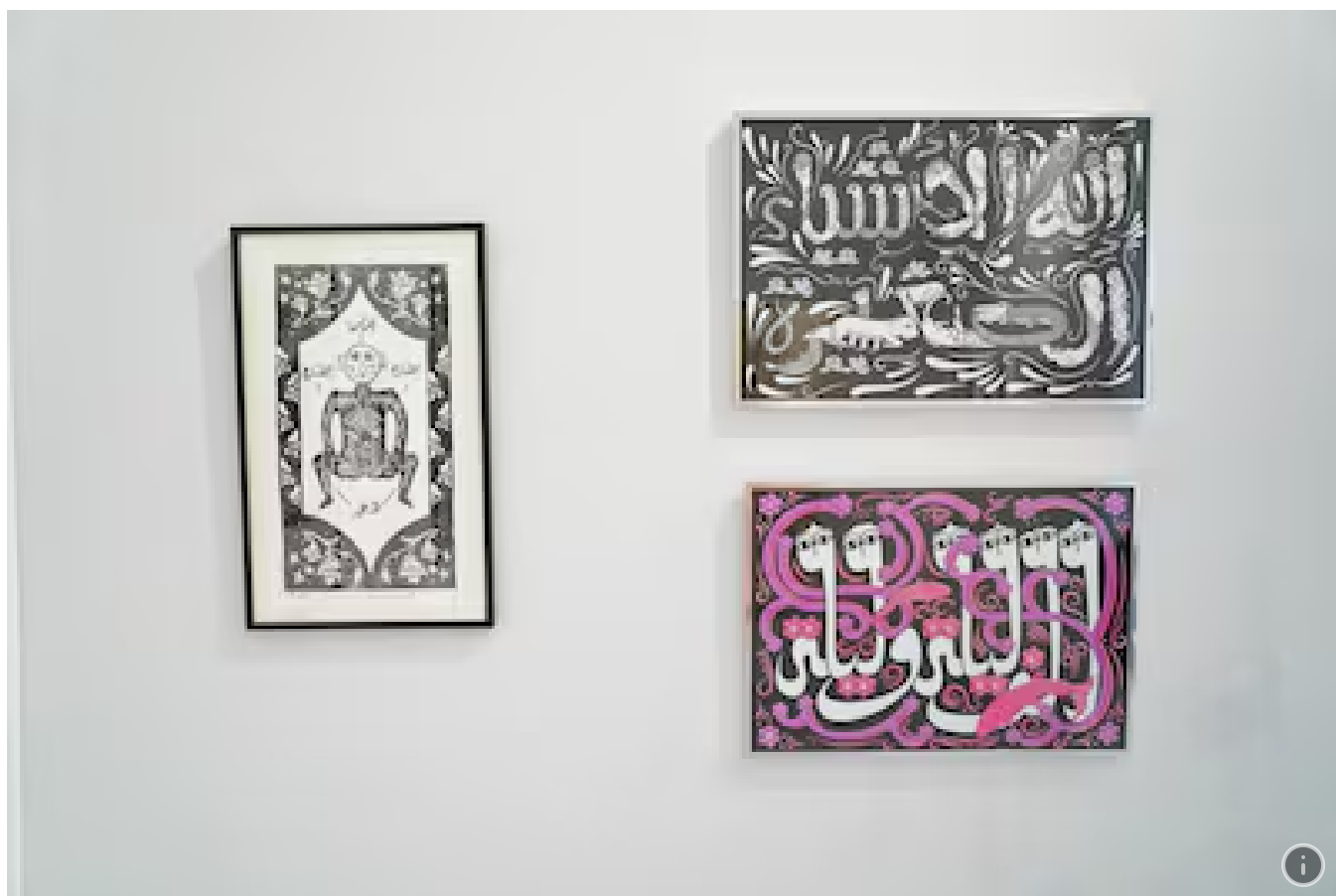


“The whole series is centred on displacement, forced migration, borders, families – predominantly women – and their stories,” Haidar says. “I was the only Arab speaker that they came across in over two years. We were having conversations about their experiences of migrating from Syria, across Europe and into the UK. The shoes have actually been worn down and discarded. I collected them for the series, over a few years.”

Haidar says her main medium, craftwork, is also deeply rooted in feminism. “There’s the saying: ‘Men fight with the sword, but women fight with the needle,’ and this notion of embroidery – women sewing as a collective, having conversations about their day-to-day while their children play at their feet is – is where all that history gets passed down,” she says. “Even though there’s so much happening in the world

in politics, borders, occupation and all of that, sewing and crafting, and especially embroidery, is an act of resistance.”

At the booth of Doha's Wusum Gallery, young Qatari artist and graphic designer Zainab AlShibani presented three silkscreen prints in a striking black-and-white style. They sat alongside a hanging mobile titled *Cyclical Remanence*, with similar symbols and figures found across her artistic practice hung from the strings.



"Most of them explore mythical and medieval forms," she explains. "I really started playing with the form of the mobile in the past few months, and I really like the way it brings fragility to an artwork, whilst being an interesting way of displaying visual motifs. Having them float around and spin provides them with a life, so every time the viewer encounters them, they're always in a different composition, and it's almost like they're doing their own thing."

Iranian artist Vishka Asayesh showcased several metal sculptures with Simine Paris gallery, celebrating the female form and capturing the essence of movement and fluidity in bronze. The small figures resembled what was historically considered the perfect female form in Persia – fuller figures associated with health, fertility and femininity – and are inspired by the artist's love of dance, creating sweeping complications that look like choreography in stasis.

Growing up in Iran, a place with strict censorship laws and many restrictions on women, did not deter her from an artistic path. "In a way, censorship makes you creative as well, because you have to struggle and find a way around their rules," Asayesh says. "Women in Iran are so strong and they're so feisty,

especially after this recent feminist movement, they have become more courageous and they have learned a lot. Art has a way of inspiring courage too.”



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The Arts Edit

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