

**Motor city**  
A paint-splattered Bentley brings the spirit of Jackson Pollock to Alserkal Avenue, Dubai

**Opposite**  
Asmaa Al-Shabibi in the Lawrie Shabibi Gallery: 'We want to make art as accessible as possible'



# DESERT

Multimedia creatives transforming industrial space into an arts hub? Seen it all before? Not in Dubai, you haven't. **Georgina Wilson-Powell** meets the locals who are putting Al Quoz on the international art map. Photography by **Siddharth Siva**



# BLOOM

## Explorations / Dubai

Under the dry heat of the Middle East sun, canvas-covered trucks rumble over potholed roads, small twisters of dust and sand kicked up in their wake. Across this district of Dubai called Al Quoz, low-slung warehouses straddle huge plots that only two decades ago were mostly desert. The desert remains, but parcelled into huge sand lots that separate out the businesses and the labyrinthine network of roads and commercial cul-de-sacs. It is not a place you'd expect to find art. Let alone credible contemporary art and a thriving creative community.

Alserkal Avenue opened in 2007. Its galleries-in-warehouses concept is hardly news to the artsy capitals of London, Berlin or New York – but in Dubai, a city that is still thought of as a cultural, as well as actual, desert, the initiative has been unique. This is a city that famously champions the bigger-is-better, money-talks kind of vibe. Alserkal Avenue eschews that and provides a platform for residents and visitors to become familiar with international contemporary artists in different disciplines – whose work often comments on the social and political issues of the Middle East.

While the past seven years have done little to make this arts-filled concrete and steel side street any easier to find (it's off 8th Street), Dubai's introduction of road names for the first time last year gives visitors a fighting chance of discovering a collection of companies that have come together to take over this former marble factory and its warehouses. Twenty different creative organisations now call it home, including galleries that focus on Middle East and South Asian contemporary art, photography studios, design agencies and non-profits.

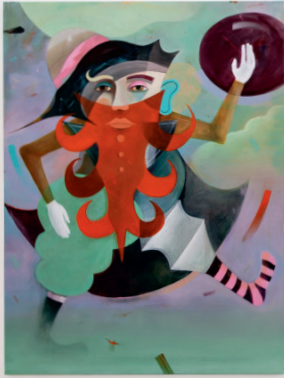
It's not much to look at from the outside during the day – Dubai still lacks street culture in general – but in the evenings and weekends, local hipsters and young artists gather here to chat or smoke shisha against the backdrop of the city's only decent graffiti. The outdoor space really comes to life, though, when Alserkal Avenue hosts annual evening festivals, with live street art, demonstrations and music that draw much wider crowds.

'We have been based in Alserkal Avenue since we set up our art gallery in 2010,' says Asmaa Al-Shabibi, director of Lawrie Shabibi gallery. Her space specialises in conceptual artists: most recently, it housed an international group exhibition, curated by London's William Lunn, that used photography as part of a broader multimedia experience. 'Given that the warehouses are in a very large, sprawling industrial area, it made sense to us from a practical perspective that the gallery should be in close proximity to other galleries.'

While only pockets of Dubai's population will have even ➔



**Back on dry land**  
The Al Quoz neighbourhood located on the edge of the desert; the director of Carbon 12 gallery Kourosh Nouri installing *Conchita* by Bernard Buhmann (above)



heard of Alserkal Avenue, it has grown in international recognition as a hub for emerging and mid-career artists from both the Levant and further afield. And its success goes back to that old adage, strength in numbers.

In a spread-out and constantly changing physical landscape, not well served by public transport and with a disparate and complex population, visiting multiple art galleries in a day in Dubai previously required several taxi rides. Now that a large proportion of the city's most respected arts companies – such as music and performance space The Fridge – has moved to the same street, the area is attracting more visitors and feels more cohesive.

'Having all the galleries together is beneficial, as people are given the opportunity to see a wide range of art in a pedestrianised area in one visit,' says Al-Shabibi. 'In fact, we tend to collaborate with other galleries on the timings of our openings and other events. We recognise that people lead busy lives and we want to make the art as accessible as possible.'

This, in turn, is attracting bigger artists to exhibit in

Dubai, helping to bolster Alserkal Avenue's role in fuelling interest in the city's creative community. While the festival Art Dubai has been held in the city for the past eight years and attracts high-level international curators, the more community-led arts scene has been hampered by the city's most enduring trait, the transient nature of its inhabitants. It's impossible to build momentum when key players constantly move on, but it is finally starting to feel as though the city has an arts scene that goes beyond individual talent.

This could also be helped by the number of Syrian, Egyptian, Iraqi and Palestinian artists who have found refuge in Dubai's safe haven over the past few years. As turmoil unfolds around the Middle East, Dubai has remained a calm centre in a violent world, where contrasting messages can be conveyed through sculpture, paint and photography. Ayyam Gallery in particular has worked with many Syrian artists who have become a disparate force after the downfall of Damascus.

The man who has brought all of this together is Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal, an Emirati



**Clockwise from left** The founders of Versus Art: Nemanja Valjarevic and Nina Trojanovic; Bernard Buhmann's *The Pretenders* at Carbon 12; the reel thing: arts hub A4 Space; a prop at The Fridge