

International Ideals – by Christopher Lord, November 17, 2011.

To get a sense of Abu Dhabi Art (ADA), with 50 galleries clustered in the newly erected UAE pavilion on Saadiyat Island, it is necessary to think back to the original idea by which this fair defined itself.

“International” was the buzzword that kept coming up, both by speaking to the directors of the event through to the press conference before opening night. But what, in the context of an art fair, does it mean when we say “international”? If it means that this feels like a big and important fair that could be anywhere – then yes, this is international. Many of the names here are ingrained into the gallery list for Art Basel and Frieze.

London’s White Cube has opted for a more daring approach to presenting its rich, varied stable- beyond the perfunctory Damien Hirst works here, the gallerist Jap Jopling has brought along the likes of Raqib Shaw, who created fantastical, chaotic paintings that use acrylic, enamel and rhinestones to mask the violence inherent in each, as well as a huge, ominous ash-on-linen painting by Zhang Huan. Once again, Gagosian Gallery is here (with an excellent huge work by Richard Prince that depicts a faded cowboy charging through a desolate American desert) along with Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, Lisson Gallery and Aquavella Galleries. All of this big-hitter bunch certainly make up the feeling of a grand, international- standard fair.

And they’ve all brought the big guns with them. Hauser and Wirth’s fantastic solo show of Louise Bourgeois is a highlight, showcasing pieces as recent as 2006, including a large museum-scale installation, *Cell (Black Days)*, in which the French-American artist contains, within a caged assemblage, a chair in a bell jar and a series of stuffed, sickly dresses. After previous years, when Bourgeois’ *Maman* spiders loomed over the art fair floor, it’s good to see a slightly less obvious representation of the varied oeuvre of this late contemporary great.

Moving on to Saadiyat Island has also been a resounding success. Despite a schedule that pushed the final touches right up until the last minute, the event now feels, as the New York gallerist Tony Shafrazi puts it, “much more serious. Everything is very near each other, that makes it well planned, centralised and efficient,” he says. Shafrazi has exhibited with the ADA before, and this time around brings tapestry-size late works by Keith Haring, the master of cartoony streetisms, and several big, boisterous pieces by Jean-Michel Basquiat.

With some experience of both the city and the fair, Shafrazi is pointed about the way forward in Abu Dhabi’s cultural aspirations: “You don’t just have to wait for the art galleries to come here once a year, and you don’t have to publicise that you’re building the biggest museum in the world. Forget the building, the building comes later, make the collection now.” While many galleries reported solid interest and a number of very likely sales on opening night, the acquisitions team from Abu Dhabi’s nascent museums appeared to be holding back until later in the event.

But “international” could also mean a fair that, say, put a Bolivian art gallery next to a great new space from eastern Russia, or an excellent Australian gallery alongside Morocco’s top exhibitor. It would be great to see a show that represented a broader

spectrum of known and lesser-known galleries from East and West rather than a selection that is international because it has a guest list that could be for any of the bigger fairs in the world.

There are still some fine booths here, however, beyond all those big names. The Bidaya section of the event, which focuses on one exciting and emergent gallery takes a close look at Volte from Mumbai. This a worthy look at the output of this dynamic space, including strange pieces by Fareen Butt, in which she paints with crushed gemstones.

Galerie GP & N Vallois from Paris brings an excellent work by Arman, a sculptural form of compacted pieces of a Renault car, which has a yawning, abyss-like grandeur in its form, aptly named *The Cathedral*. And the reliable Leila Heller Gallery has a huge room full of Firooz Zahedi's photographs of Elizabeth Taylor in Iran from the 1970s.

The local galleries have also nailed it better this time around, steering well clear of packing out their booths. Dubai's Meem Gallery has opted for just one piece, ad two accompanying studies for a large painting by Dia Al Azzawi—a four-panel *Guernica*-like revulsion at human cruelty. Ayyam Gallery, another Dubai space, has also stripped things down. “When we used to do art fairs, we'd just get a bunch of paintings in,” says Hisham Samawi, the managing partner of the space. “It got crowded, so now we're trying to let the booth breathe, with fewer pieces that tend to be more expensive but are very eye-catching.” “This is, for us, almost the first real Abu Dhabi Art. It's very exciting to see what they can do in their own venue.”