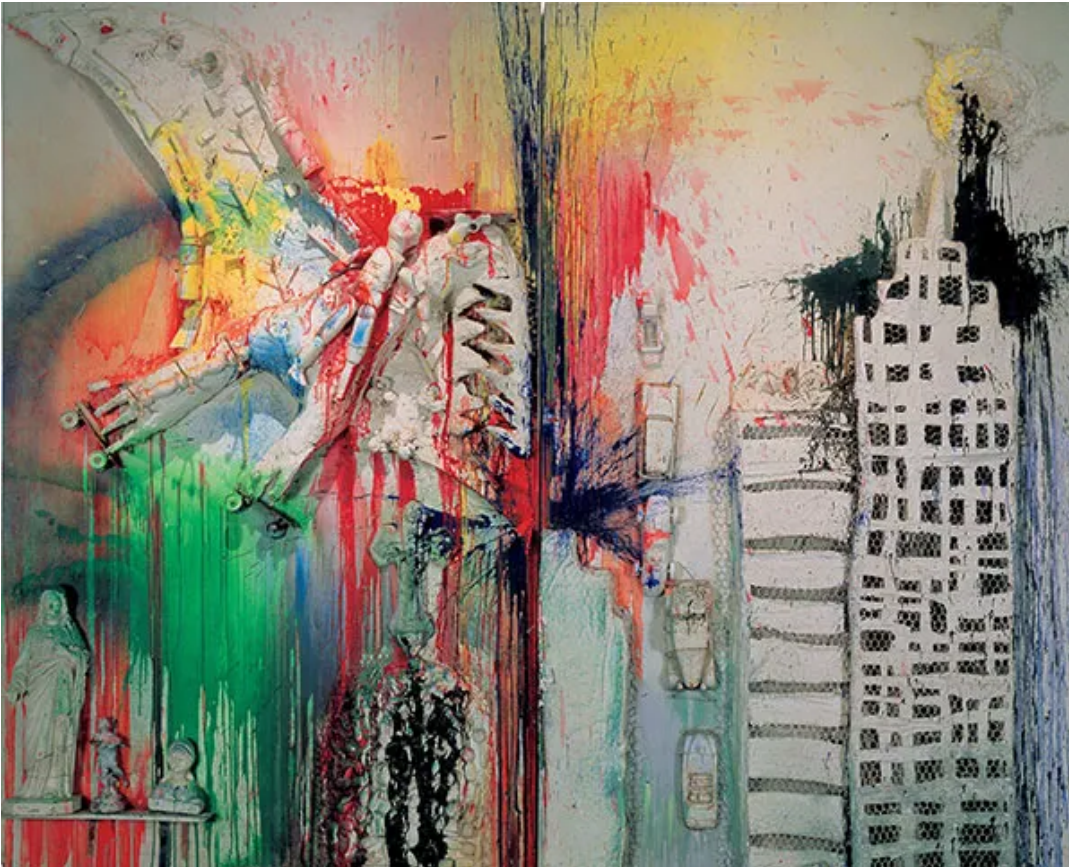


Guggenheim Abu Dhabi shows off its wares

An exhibition offers a taste of how the Middle East's mega-museum will be filled



'Pirodactyl Over New York' (1962) by Niki de Saint Phalle © Niki Charitable Art Foudation/Galerie Georges-Philippe & Nathalie Vallois/André Morain

Gareth Harris MARCH 17 2017

A new exhibition in the Middle East draws back the curtain on the growing collection of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, the long-awaited mega-museum on Saadiyat Island's cultural quarter. *The Creative Act: Performance, Process, Presence* (to July 29; Manarat Al Saadiyat visitor centre), includes 25 works by 18 international artists made since the 1960s.

The first collection-based show, *Seeing Through Light* in 2014, attracted more than 90,000 visitors. It told the history and story of light in art, with works by [Bharti Kher](#) and Dan Flavin proving popular. The follow-up is more esoteric, exploring the artists' role in conceiving and creating works in a variety of media by underlining their "methodology, inspiration, and innovations", according to a project statement.

Three sections build a lucid and considered narrative: “Performance” looks at artists who have put “carefully choreographed or spontaneous actions” at the heart of their practice, with works on show by Pakistani artist Rasheed Araeen (“Chakras I”, 1969-1970/1987) and Dubai-born Mohammed Kazem (“Directions 2002”, 2002).

In the “Process” section, films, videos and archival documentation shed light on the working methods of Niki de Saint Phalle, Günther Uecker and Shiraga Kazuo. The “Presence” section looks at art based on physical acts, and how artists fill their works with themselves and others (the German-Egyptian artist Susan Hefuna’s “Notations” drawing series, 2011, is a centrepiece).

All the works are taken from the museum’s collection, sending out the signal that the project is (finally) on track. When the emirate and the New York-based Guggenheim Foundation joined forces in 2007, the planned opening was 2012, later put back to 2014.

“All design and preparatory structural works have been completed,” a spokeswoman says. Once construction tenders have been awarded, further details on project timelines will be announced. A dedicated curatorial team is comprised of three full-time Guggenheim staff, who split their time between New York and Abu Dhabi, and three full-time Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority staff.

A source close to the project says that the launch of the Louvre Abu Dhabi later this year also on Sadiyat Island will be the “catalyst for the Guggenheim to move quickly”. And after Helsinki city council rejected plans to establish a Guggenheim outpost in the Finnish capital last December, the Guggenheim Foundation can’t afford another flop.

But how the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will fill its 13,000 square metres of gallery space and develop a distinctive vision has been a subject of feverish art world speculation. Valerie Hillings, curator and manager of curatorial affairs at the Abu Dhabi Project, discusses how the show flags up the “transcultural” framework of the collection which “does not adhere to the concept of nationality as defined by political boundaries of modern nation-states”, she says (global art, in other words).

Artists now respond more to cultural commonalities than patriotic affiliations, she stresses. “The collection emphasises intertwined histories among countries, within regions, and across continents,” Hillings says. “This methodology, coupled with the desire to move beyond colonial terminologies, led us to focus on ‘west Asia’, encompassing the Gulf, Iran, the Levant and Turkey, rather than the ‘Middle East’.”

There are some important art historical pieces in the show. The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi collection includes the complete set of documentations of Hassan Sharif's 1980s performances realised in both London and Dubai. The Dubai-based polymath, who died last year, made waves in the conservative UAE with his early conceptual works. In the early 1980s, Sharif travelled deep into the Hatta desert outside Dubai where he presented startling live art works – sometimes jumping in the sand or tying rocks together – to a handful of friends.

Any emphasis on performance art is a boon, says the independent curator Yasmina Reggad. “We must take into account that as long as performance and live art are not part of the arts curricula, it is important to present performance art, be it video or photographic works, archival and documentation material,” she says. Sharif drew on Fluxus, the 1960s avant-garde movement dubbed the “do it yourself” school in light of its random performances and trademark works crafted from everyday materials.

Fluxus concepts also underpin a major new commission in *The Creative Act* by Hesam Rahmanian, Ramin Haerizadeh and Rokni Haerizadeh, who have been based in Dubai for the past eight years. The multi-room installation, entitled “Another Happy Day”, promises to be a head-spinning trawl through western and Middle Eastern art and culture from the 1930s to today.

Video recordings of plays by Samuel Beckett, objects by Fluxus practitioners such as Robert Filliou and Alison Knowles and works by other artists, such as Tehran-born Nargess Hashemi and Laleh Khorramian, will be dotted around the immersive installation. Sasha Kalter-Wasserman, the assistant curator, stresses that viewer participation is pivotal to the sprawling piece, which will be a work in progress up to and beyond the opening.

Another highlight is the series “(In)_Situ_0103”, “(In)_Situ_0131” and “(In)_Situ_1119”, by Kuwaiti photographer Tarek Al-Ghoussein. He was commissioned in 2010 to create the works, which focus on the site of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. The images show Al-Ghoussein “virtually concealed by the mounds of sand and building materials that punctuate a scene framed by cranes”, says Kalter-Wasserman and show that the curtain really is being raised on the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.

‘The Creative Act: Performance, Process, Presence’ to July 29; Manarat Al Saadiyat visitor centre; guggenheim.org