

From March 18 to 21, **Design Days Dubai** will showcase creations from **29 galleries from around the world**, a 30 per cent growth in participation over this year's edition. The 2013 event will feature exhibits and workshops, as well as a section focused on sustainable design. Visit www.designdaysdubai.ae

Grappling with a certain ambiguity

Christopher Lord looks at new work by the Iranian artist Ahmad Amin Nazar

The direct literary references, demon-head masks and shadowy characters from the *Shahnameh*, Iran's 10th-century epic poem, have vanished from Ahmad Amin Nazar's new paintings. The works appear stridently stripped down compared with his last Dubai show in 2010, especially without the greyish fugue of watery acrylic or ink that gave his earlier scenes their blasted feel.

But Amin Nazar has concentrated that chaos in the violently somersaulting characters seen here in *Salto*, a show of forthright, flourishing brushstrokes that declare themselves in a paint-speckled white space. Muscular bodies lock together and can appear embattled or embracing depending on which angle the work is viewed from (subtly directed by the tiny arrows that the artist has placed above his signature in several pieces here).

When Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde last exhibited Amin Nazar's work, it hadn't been seen outside of Tehran in 17 years. The show revealed an artist deeply attached to the literary and miniaturist traditions of Iran, yet resigned to their uncertainty in a present defined by its volatility. The heroes and tyrants of a mythos that informs so much of Iran's sense of self were presented as paunchy and dissolute, rendered in Amin Nazar's visceral style.

But *Salto* is strikingly physical in its direction. The images are consistently large – some two metres wide – and the artist crafted them

by walking around the works on the floor of his studio, with footmarks on the paper as testament to his presence.

The bodies themselves serve to heighten that physicality. There's a writerly economy to his brushstrokes here – without any of the complex shades of his earlier pieces and, in the absence of heads and hands, the bare and sinewy construction of these gymnasts contains its own knotted energy.

"As humans we are a big bundle of ambiguities and complexities," says Amin Nazar via a translator. "One minute we're full of hope and goodness and kindness, the next minute we're bereft of all that and become so het up and agitated that mindlessness can take over, leading us to an act of aggression or violence."

Schooled in etching and intaglio printing, Amin Nazar later tutored a generation of artists in universities around the country and his own home – notably fellow Iranian painter Rokni Haerizadeh.

But his own work had fallen off the radar of contemporary Iranian art, partly due to the reclusive nature of the artist but also to the upheaval in the decades following Iran's 1979 revolution; the exhibition's accompanying text describes him as part of a "lost generation" of Iranian artists.

Amin Nazar's works on paper featured in the British Museum earlier this year. *Salto* offers further insight into this unduly neglected artist.

● **Until January 10 at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Alserkal Avenue, Al Quoz, Dubai**



Three to see at DIFC

art competition



The second edition of the International Emerging Artist Award is still accepting applications. Supported by Sheikhha Wafa Hasher Al Maktoum, the competition is open to contemporary artists from around the world and features two categories: one for Emiratis and one for foreigners. All types of media are accepted. The submission deadline is December 31 and the prize is an international exhibition roadshow that will take the winning artist's work to galleries in Dubai, Singapore, Istanbul and Marseille. For details, visit www.emergin-gartistaward.com.

We may be in the midst of a seasonal lull, but a trio of solid shows continue in Gate Village, the hub of galleries and spaces at Dubai International Finance Centre, writes **Christopher Lord**

The Seat of Perception

One of the more curious additions to Ayyam Gallery's roster, Walid El Masri has long had a contemplative fascination with the chair. Scratchily wrought paintings of straight-backed chairs and rockers seem to drift off the edges of his canvases. Below that, we see a monochromatic void – occasionally shot through

with arbitrary whips of paint – leading down to a gaseous blot of paint that acts as a reference point of perception in the piece.

El Masri's work is more a play of colour and perspective than anything too cerebral. Ayyam says that this voluminous void at the bottom of his canvases is, for the artist, a space in which one can forget everything. By repetitively painting an ob-



Top left, a woman in a burqa at a polling booth in Yemen, 1997; above, women enduring a sandstorm in Rajasthan, 2000. Courtesy Steve McCurry / The Empty Quarter



Ahmad Amin Nazar, *Untitled 2012-23*. Courtesy Ahmad Amin Nazar / IVDE