

The National



A new wave of art

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Last Updated: January 12, 2010 5:00PM UAE / January 12, 2010 1:00PM GMT



From the current show at B 21 'Wrap Me Up In You', an exhibition of 'festive' mixed-media works by Nargess Hashemi. Courtesy B21

The art calendar in the UAE is, so to speak, bumpy. There are great troughs of nothing while the sun is raging through July and August and curious little divots where the miscellaneous holidays of the nation's motley residents cluster and prevent much from getting done. Now, though, we have a pretty clean run across the pleasant uplands and this year's winter-spring season shows every sign of being a delight.

First up is B21, the reliably interesting gallery that led the Dubai art world's colonisation of the Al Quoz warehouse district. Yesterday the gallery opened a second Dubai show by the young Tehrani painter Nargess Hashemi, who is not the last talented Iranian we'll be hearing from in the UAE this year. She is, however, a relatively feted arrival in the Iranian art scene. One of her untitled canvases fetched \$15,000 (Dh55,000) at the Magic of Persia auction last year, placing her among the top 10 biggest sales of the night.

Her new show, *Wrap Me Up In You*, is an investigation of the meaning of family life in the Islamic republic. She is working from recent photographs of her own family gatherings, by contrast with the childhood material she mined in her first Dubai show, *Stories From The Boudoir*. The scenes are reproduced in black lines on tracing sheets, mounted on jauntily patterned wrapping paper.

Judging by the pre-opening images I've seen there's a sort of pointedly anodyne quality about them – a distant acknowledgement of the way the decorum of family life goes on, in spite of everything. The release for the show notes that five weddings took place in the artist's family around the time of last summer's election protests, which she took part in. There's a kind of surrealism about that.

*because
when it comes to
matters of the heart,
men and women differ.

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sense and simplicity

The XVA in Bastikya is next in line with a pair of distinct shows that open side by side on Sunday. The young London-based artist Al Braithwaite spent six years in the Middle East. For his second show at the gallery, *Hall of Mirrors*, he issues a sort of challenge to the West on behalf of the region. Ornate picture frames from the height of Europe's imperial past are filled with Braithwaite's own scratchy oil paintings of the Muslim world's political leaders. Gaddafi stands in place of Napoleon, for instance. The idea, Braithwaite says in his statement on the show, is to see "how it looks and feels when Daoud successfully slingshots a piece of rubble into the eye of Goliath".

Even more intriguing is the artist with whom Braithwaite is sharing the gallery. Abdunasser Gharem is a conceptual artist with a day job in the Saudi Arabian army. *Restored Behavior* is a collection of documents and artefacts resulting from performances he made around his home in southern Saudi Arabia. The show revolves around the properties of concrete as a guarantor of civic order and of rubber stamps as emblems of bureaucracy. That all sounds rather oblique but could make

for a revealing look at life in the kingdom, from a man with one of the most intriguing CVs going. It should be worth a look.

Last year Carbon 12 emerged as one of the most exciting new spaces in Dubai. The new year sees it in new premises – it has joined the party in Al Quoz –but working with a lot of familiar names. It leads off next Monday with a solo show by Farzan Sadjadi, a Tehrani painter whose career has been closely tied to that of the gallery since both of their beginnings. His near-parodically gloomy battlefield scenes, full of animal skulls, corpses, ravaged earth and baleful skies call to mind Goya both in subject and in frantic execution. Yet there's something else there, too: a warped playfulness, as if Philip Guston was looking out over the fields of the Somme

On February 25, Sadjadi is followed by Tobias Lehner, a Leipzig-based painter whose multilayered and jarringly coloured abstracts give the impression of being magazine collages but are in fact meticulously painted. The work is reminiscent of Lehner's fellow-countryman and Carbon 12 alumnus Markus Oehlen: hip, bracing, and highly crafted. On March 24, Sara Rahbar, an Iranian artist best known for polemical embellishments to the American flag, will be bringing more of her deceptively tidy textile work to Carbon 12.

Then we head straight in to spring with a two-man show. There's the emerging US-born and Dubai-based artist Hesam Rahmanian, who goes in for sardonic, splashy animal allegories in a style vaguely reminiscent of, well, Farzan Sadjadi (does any Dubai gallery have as many artists who seem influenced by one another as Carbon 12?). He's teamed up with a mystery Emirati guest, but we'll have to wait until nearer the show's opening on April 20 to find out who.

And, of course, there's the Third Line, probably the most dynamic gallery in the Emirates. It punches above its weight in terms of influence at home, functions as an emissary for the UAE's independent gallery scene abroad, and somehow manages to keep up a stream of sensitively curated, high-quality exhibitions in between consulting, putting out books, running design conferences and generally being all things to all culture watchers. Its first show of the decade, opening next Tuesday, will be a solo exhibition by the Iranian-born calligrapher Pouran Jinchu, whose work I have admired since I was introduced to it (by the Third Line) at Art Paris Abu Dhabi back in 2008. Her rubbings of prayer stones, embellished with geometric or scriptural designs, are as serene as anything you're likely to see this year: bubbles in which sacred syllables float into the air. There's a point being made about the nature of ritual and repetition and accumulated significance, but the works cast such a spell that one hardly perceives their argument.

Jinchu is followed on March 11 by one by Shirin Aliabadi, yet another Tehran-based artist. Her photographic work has been so visible at the various art fairs in the region that it's hard to believe this is her first solo exhibition. Her previous work looked at the way Western standards of beauty sneak into Iranian dress. In particular her Miss Hybrid series of platinum blondes in cherry lipstick and headscarves – portraits lush as magazine spreads and twice as witty – were a highlight at last year's Art Dubai. Her new show explores wedding make-up. It should be a treat.

The Meem gallery's first show of the year, which opens on February 15 is a joint show by the Iranian artists Pooya Aryanpour and Morteza Darehbaghi. Both go in for highly textured canvases in which national emblems and calligraphic designs combine in spaces of cavernous darkness. Darehbaghi's output seems to be statelier than Aryanpour's, occasionally calling to mind the UAE's own Abdul Qader al Rais. Aryanpour leans more towards gauzy forms that unravel among shadows, recalling Yeats's line about the rag and bone shop of the heart.

Finally, TheJamJar makes a late entry to the season with a solo show from the Pakistani graphic artist Fahd Burki starting on March 12. Protheses (not, as an early press release tantalisingly had it, Prostheses) is a show about the way we relate to our bodies and our bodies in turn relate to inanimate objects. Fahd contributed similarly heady and philosophical works to TheJamJar's Grey Noise show in 2008. His theme then was noise and silence, so making sense of embodied consciousness should be a doddle.

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