



Curators of next UAE National Pavilion say they want to 'do something that hasn't been explored'

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Melissa Gronlund
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The UAE National Pavilion has announced Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath as its curators for the next Venice Biennale, which opens next May.

The two are well known in the UAE art world: they are the curators behind the current Ways of Seeing show at the Art Gallery at NYU Abu Dhabi, and last March they organised That Feverish Leap into the Fierceness of Life, a survey of five Middle Eastern modernist movements that was held in the Modern section of Art Dubai.

"We've been coming here for years and we know a lot of artists' practices," says Lebanese-born Bardaouil. "We're interested in shedding light or showing things that people don't expect or that has been less represented in previous editions, perhaps coming from different disciplines."

Bardaouil was an assistant professor of art history and performance studies at the American University in Dubai from 2005 to 2008, when he was offered a position teaching art history at the Tisch School of Arts, part of New York University.

It was in New York that Bardaouil met Fellrath, a German former professor of economics at LSE who was then the managing director of the Chelsea Art Museum. The two immediately began collaborating, with the show Iran Inside Out – which launched just as the Green Revolution was getting under way in 2009 – and ItaliaArabia, which explored connections between Arab and Italian artists.

The success of these exhibitions led them to formalise their partnership, with the moniker Art: Reoriented, and they have since gained a reputation for well-researched, scholarly historical shows and their focus on the Middle East. Their biggest project, Art and Liberty: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938-1948), investigated the little-known works of Egyptian surrealists and exhibited at locations including the Centre Pompidou in Paris and Tate Liverpool.

They also bring their pedagogical backgrounds to shows of contemporary work: for the instalment of Jeddah art week 21, 39 – which they curated last year – they initiated a year-long mentorship programme for the young Saudi artists they worked with, rather than focusing solely on the ultimate show.

For the Venice pavilion, Fellrath says, "We want to do something that hasn't been explored. We want to advance the discourse within the context of the National Pavilion. At the moment, we're looking at all the past editions to see how we can further the dialogue."

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"We're very excited," Bardaouil adds. "It's a great platform to do something that can truly engage with all the preconceived notions of what this particular part of the world stands for and what they should or shouldn't do. It's a way of complicating the narrative and taking to a different level while still having something very artist-centred."

Last year's pavilion, curated by Hammad Nasar, focused on the notion of play via works by Nujoom Al Ghanem, Sara Al Haddad, Vikram Divecha, Lantian Xie and Mohamed Yousif. It was the fifth time the UAE participated in the biennial, which is a major art world event, and was the first time non-Emiratis participated in the country's representation.

The National Pavilion is supported by the Sheikha Salama bint Nahyan Foundation and overseen by Laila Binbrek. "I've known Sam and Till for a while and have been following their work over the last 8 years," Binbrek tells me. "In that time, they've produced some exceptional exhibitions and contributed valuable thinking to the cultural discourse of the region, so I'm delighted that they've been appointed to curate the National Pavilion UAE in 2019 following our rigorous selection process."

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