



FRAGILE



# a cubist approach to art cuadro

In the brave new world of Dubai, heads are rarely turned by the latest arrival in town. Yet the opening of what promises to be one of the most dramatic and exciting gallery spaces in this most rapidly changing of cities has really caught the imagination of art aficionados. Owned by Fatima Al-Shroogi and her son, Bashar, Cuadro looks set to establish new standards locally in terms of presentation and curation.

# gallery

Previous pages: Bashar Al-Shroogi with three life-size works by Marc Sijan. From left to right: *Buller Bob*. 2008. Polyester resin and oil paint; *Seated Security Guard III*. 2008. Polyester resin and oil paint; *Standing Guard*. 2008. Polyester resin and oil paint.

Below: Alex De Fluvia. *Secrets Dins El Mur II*. 2007. Mixed media on canvas. 180 x 99 cm.

Facing page: The gallery's reception with Hunt Slonem's *Rabbit Series*. 2007–2008. Oil on wooden board with vintage frame. Each work 40 x 30 cm.

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As Bashar Al-Shroogi explains, "For us, Dubai happened for a multitude of reasons, not least its role as a great hub for the region." With his family already living there after relocating from their native Bahrain, it may have seemed the natural choice, but Al-Shroogi is at pains to point out that he looked very carefully at a variety of options before choosing the UAE's burgeoning financial and business centre. It is clear that this is a man who thinks carefully about things. Born and raised in Bahrain, he studied architecture and art history as an undergraduate in Boston, USA, before moving to Barcelona in Spain for his MBA and, intriguingly, a degree in Ethics. He explains how he "found the whole subject of doing business ethically quite fascinating, as it opens up a whole new way of doing things, including structuring your business differently."

Al-Shroogi deciding to open an art gallery was hardly a new idea, however. He grew up with art – his mother, Fatima, paints and has been a guiding force behind the creation of Cuadro – and as a boy he was fortunate enough to have a studio at home. "I was very lucky really, with access to a pottery wheel and a kiln, and I used to experiment with glazes. It was all very hands-on," he recalls. He laughs, however, when asked if he used to produce actual works – "Well, yes, but they never got

seen, and so to me that means that they never completed their artistic journey."

## Ideas in Motion

Meanwhile, Al-Shroogi and his mother began to formulate their thoughts on how it might be possible to provide a platform on which Modern and Contemporary art could be presented in an accessible yet stimulating way. "The key for us was to provide a forum for dialogue, especially between East and West. We wanted to both represent and introduce international artists to the region and provide an opportunity for Middle Eastern artists, especially the emerging generations, to achieve greater recognition globally." Al-Shroogi realised that an essential component of the formula would be the use of the gallery as a showcase, but that it was even more critical that the artworks on view were absolutely fit for purpose. "So, we started building a collection. I went mainly

after pieces that had some academic significance, in the sense that they showed how art had moved from here to there, for example. They have to explain transitions, make connections and help people better understand art," he explains. And he includes himself in that: "There's so much to take on with art, and we are all learning about it, all the time."





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Therein lies the clue to Cuadro's real mission. This is more an arts centre than an art gallery, with a focus as firmly on education as it is on selling art. "Just popping the artworks on the wall doesn't do it for me," says Al-Shroogi, "I want to provide the complete loop, from introductory sessions on art and art history through to shows that present the best artists there are in an enlivening and accessible way."

#### The Cuadro Quarter

How, then, does this equate to what one sees on the ground at Cuadro? First impressions, never unimportant, are overwhelmingly favourable in this case. The gallery commands an enviable location in the Gate Village in the Dubai International Finance Centre (DIFC), at the apex of a luxury retail complex that includes high-end stores such as Marni, Issey Miyake and Vivienne Westwood. There is lots of

glass, plenty of clean, sharp lines and a host of tantalising views, both incidental and contrived, that give glimpses of the gallery and its contents from the outside, and allow those within the gallery to appreciate the elegant walkways of the Village with their limestone-faced buildings and fusion of Euro-chic and traditional Arab motifs such as perforated window screens.

The gallery spaces are, quite simply, stunning. Ranged over four levels, they cover a total of 1200 square metres. Most striking of all is the main ground-floor gallery, which is divided longitudinally by two rows of pivoted fins, four in each row and capable of rotating 360 degrees, thereby giving a total of 16 display surfaces and the flexibility to create a variety of different 'looks' and layouts to the space. A central alley works like a catwalk, and cleverly creates an atmosphere that is simultaneously intimate and grand. "From



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a curatorial point of view we wanted each piece to have its own 'space' in which to sit," explains Al-Shroogi. Sculptures, for example, have dedicated plinths and backboards. The type of fin layout installed at Cuadro has been used in other galleries, but too often the specification of the fins and their supports has proved inadequate to cope with anything more than infrequent repositioning. No such risk here – the fins are made of double-width sections of wood and then laminated to provide maximum strength. They could probably twirl all day without a problem.

Such attention to detail is something of a Cuadro hallmark, from the brushed steel benches to the concrete gallery floors, which strike a slick and gritty urban note and were created in one complete section, thereby avoiding the

unsightly seams that characterise similar surfaces in galleries the world over. An obvious and recurring theme in the design of the gallery, inspired by the name Cuadro, is the form of the cube or box, a profile that appears consistently in the spaces – Al-Shroogi's office is a central glass cube in a square gallery, for example. Thoughtful design brings visitors through small spaces into larger ones and allows for maximum flexibility in terms of gallery division.

One aspect of Cuadro is fixed, however: one gallery will be dedicated to exhibiting works by young artists from, yet not limited to, the Middle East: "I regard this as a central part of what we do," says Al-Shroogi, "and it is vital that up-and-coming artists get space in which to show their work." However, he is keen to point out that he believes art is being excessively pigeon-holed – "I've never looked at art in terms of 'regions'. I don't like those labels. To my mind, good Contemporary art is good Contemporary art, full stop."

Facing page: Gary Komarin. *Landscape with Cup*. 2008. Mixed media on canvas. 213 x 183 cm.

Above: Left: Ernst Van Leyden. *Karin's Birthday*. 1957. Oil on canvas. 183 x 121 cm.  
Right: Works by Alex De Fluvia, including *Secrets Dins El Mur II*. 2007. Mixed media on canvas. 180 x 99 cm. Far right: A Rahim Sharif. *The Indian Philosopher*. 2006. Oil on canvas. 100 x 110 cm.



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#### The Frills of it All

Cuadro will not be the only art gallery in the DIFC complex. At least five others have premises there, but Al-Shroogi is relaxed about their presence, regarding it as a positive strength: "Every gallery is different, and each has its own niche. The presence of several galleries will increase overall footfall, and we all stand to gain from that." He also has firm ideas on what sort of gallery he wants Cuadro to be: "Many galleries can be intimidating and I definitely don't want that sort of atmosphere here. This will be a place in which we will aim at combining a

relaxed ambiance with the highest professional standards."

It is the 'extras' available at Cuadro that single it out as having the potential to attain these standards. There is an artist's studio (artist residencies are high on Al-Shroogi's agenda), a restoration room for conservation work, and a vast – 240 square metres – series of storage units, each independently climatically controlled. Having a purpose-built facility for conservation work is undoubtedly a shrewd move, with growing awareness of the importance of caring for artworks properly. Particularly impressive is the lecture space



with capacity for 200 people, but which can also serve as a double-height gallery area capable of housing some of the largest works ever to come to Dubai.

All in all, Cuadro is an extraordinary achievement to date. Other Dubai gallerists have every right to feel a touch

Above left: Wall from left to right: works by Gary Komarin. *Landscape with Cup*. 2008. Mixed media on canvas. 213 x 183 cm; *A Wilder Blue*. 2008. Mixed media on canvas. 152 x 122 cm; Untitled. 2008. Mixed media on canvas. 150 x 120 cm. Central sculptures in office: life-size works by Marc Sijan. *Photographer*. 2008. Polyester resin and oil paint; *Seated Man*. 2008. Polyester resin and oil paint; *Maid I*. 2008. Polyester resin and oil paint. Right wall, from left to right: works by A Rahim Sharif. *Tank*. 2007. Oil on canvas. 120 x 140 cm; *Bathtub with telephone and shoes*. 2007. Oil on canvas. 120 x 140 cm; *Bathtub with hat*. 2007. Oil on canvas. 120 x 140 cm. Above right: Marc Sijan. *Maid I*. 2008. Polyester resin and oil paint. Life-size.

envious. As ever, though, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. An inaugural show opens in November and then Cuadro will be launched, marking its opening with a series of lectures and events designed to ask questions such as "How do we look at art?" and "How do we talk about art?" Basics, yes, but it is only through the provision of such tools that art can reach the unfamiliar and uninitiated. Not all galleries do this, and if Cuadro fulfils its artistic mission then Dubai will be an infinitely richer place. ☰

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