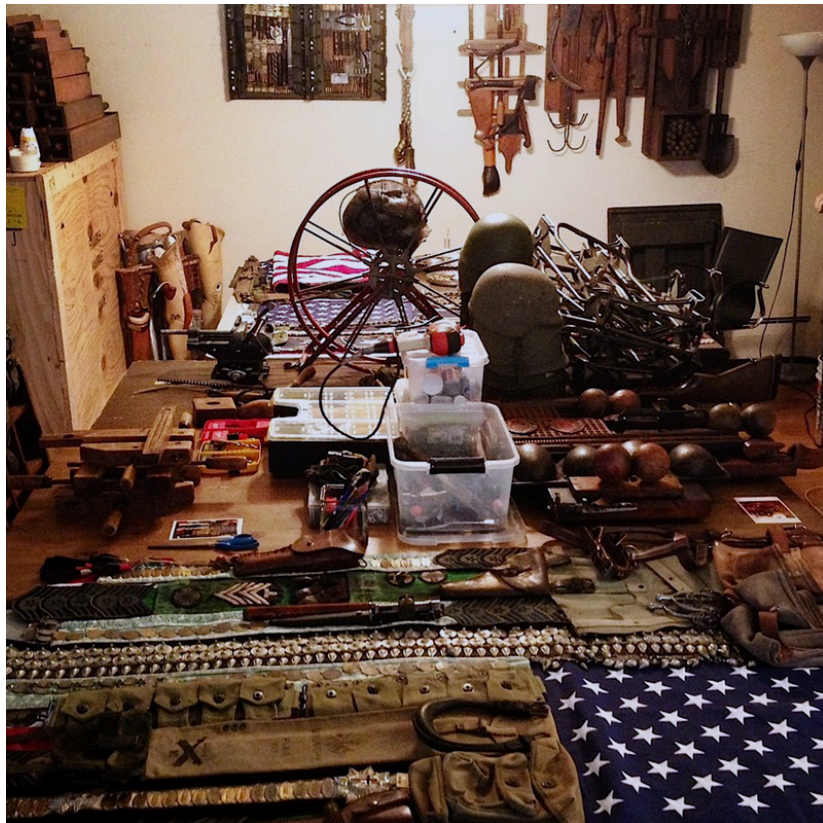


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THE FIRST COLLECTORS

By KATRINA KUFER

<http://alserkalavenue.ae/en/folio/the-first-collectors.php>



Artists are given many labels – creative producers, torchbearers for change, visual archivists – and this edition of *Asia Contemporary Art Week's FIELD MEETING*, the first to take place outside of North America in Alserkal Avenue, brings a new angle: artist as collector. However, while *FIELD MEETING Take 6: Thinking Collections* aims to reposition artists as the first collector and their studios as primary collections, New York-based curator Leeza Ahmady asserts that 'artist as collector' is neither a theme nor category under which she plugs artists, but rather, a framework in which she has observed artists working through across the world and Asia—itsself a collection of disparate yet intertwined cultures, outlooks and aesthetics.

FIELD MEETING Take 6 (25 & 26 January) will see artists from Turkey, Iran, Malaysia, China, and beyond present newly commissioned performances, lectures, curatorial talks, and pop-ups in a forum formatted as an exhibition rather than symposium. While Ahmady includes a special focus on the Far East, the conceptual framework spans far beyond the artists and professionals participating in the two-day event, and resonates with many of the artists represented by the galleries in the event's host venue and consortium partner, Alserkal Avenue.

Honing in on the first act of gathering and the artistic process of making sense of information and ideas, "it creates new insights from multiple lines of inquiry," says Ahmady. Without discrediting the key role of the market, private collectors, and institutions, she remarks that the preliminary stages of artists collecting their intangible or tangible materials are often neglected.

"I'm trying to emphasise other layers and nuances of collecting that are important for us to think about, so that the entire ecology of what it means to work within the art world is looked at as a whole rather than fragmented," she says. "We can benefit from looking at all the organs of this living being and getting a deeper understanding. It helps us not have black-and-white perspectives, and to think about what makes the art field work, not work, and how we can make a difference."

It sheds light not only on the arbitrary selection, inclusion, exclusion, and categorisation of what constitutes a 'collectible' or 'collection' across the wider Asia region, but the broader discourse on gatherings of "languages, ethnicities, religions, aesthetics, and philosophical states of mind, how they relate, co-exist, and have simultaneously been fragmented over centuries due to geo-political realities," says Ahmady.

Before the conditions and confines of 'collections' and 'collecting' can be analysed though, there is the essential element: the humble, often subconscious act of artists collecting ideas, knowledge, feelings, meanings and/or things. By realigning importance onto this process – not in terms of a hierarchy of value, rather an egalitarian take on artistic production – a dormant reality rises to the fore for the public, one which artists have long been innately cognisant of.

"These terms have never meant much to me," says New York-based contemporary mixed media artist Sara Rahbar, who is represented by Carbon 12 at Alserkal Avenue. She draws from autobiographical inspirations such as her birth in and departure from Iran following the Revolution, and her visceral works tackle the human condition with political undertones through sculptural assemblages that display cast bronze clenched fists through to bullets and vintage wooden tools.

"I collect and make objects very instinctively. I love collecting objects that ignite something within me – I can't explain it – it's just a feeling that I get about certain materials, shapes and colours, and I want to have them around me. I want to live with them and make them a part of my life because they are adding something to it," explains Rahbar.

Berlin-based Indian-French artist Nadira Husain likewise finds her assemblage of 'image signs and image symbols' an organic practice that informs her *oeuvre*, which considers how power structures condition our response to images. "I never considered this accumulation of motifs as a collection, but I have drawers full of them. They're the starting points or triggers for my paintings," notes Husain.

Istanbul-based artist Burçak Bingöl, whose work pursues alienation, memory, and failure, explains that she is constantly in search of 'moments of encounters, whether an architectural fragment or literary piece written about it, I keep searching for the missing part.'

The outsider eye looking in on the natural instincts of artists can lead to a renewed energy and circulation of connections and ideas, suggests Ahmady, helping clarify artists like Bingöl's production of "a big, long narrative where things connect to each other somehow." Ahmady adds that it is important to show what *is* happening, what *did* happen, and *who* did what because "when we focus on that, it becomes the layers of text which turn into the fabrics of history along the way."

The present is what really matters for artists and art professionals, and often the present is neglected in favour of discussions of what did *not* come to pass. It is vital to start from the beginning and spread that research-based knowledge far and wide, and artists prove the ideal channel: "It's always been artists whose initiative is to collect styles, materials, and processes beyond reaches of their own local arenas, and have transcended and evolved to unprecedented development of cross-cultural aesthetics," says Ahmady.

Yet while exchanges between art professionals, studio visits, and events such as FIELD MEETING simultaneously elaborate upon the final outcomes and the means through which they were arrived at, the internal driving force behind the collections in artists' studios and artists' minds, and the impact and amalgamation of these elements bears the most weight.

"The difference, for an artist, is that collecting is part of the process of art making," says New Delhi-based multimedia artist Ranbir Kaleka, who collects oral stories to create parallel 'visual events' serving as opaque metaphors containing multiple strands of varied possible readings activated by the viewers. "The collection somehow infuses itself into the mechanism of art creation," he says, sharing that collecting heightens sensibilities, surmised by conceptual photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto's quote: 'My collection is my mentor, it trained my taste and sensitivity.'

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