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Regional art under the hammer: Dubai galleries partner with Sotheby's to raise money for Covid-19 fund

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Seven galleries from Dubai's Alserkal Avenue have teamed up with Sotheby's for a charity auction.

Ten per cent of sales from the online event, which will be open for bidding from Thursday June 18 to 25, will go to the Covid-19 relief fund run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

"Having seen how people reacted to Alserkal Avenue's [rent-waiving] [Pay It Forward initiative](#), it was clear that there was an appetite to do something together as a community," says William Lawrie of Lawrie Shabibi, one of the participating galleries in the auction, entitled This Too Shall Pass: Bridging the Art World.

The auction hopes to achieve between \$800,000 and \$1.2 million (Dh2.9m and Dh4.4m) in sales, with 63 lots drawn from The Third Line, Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Carbon 12, Green Art Gallery, Leila Heller Gallery, 1 x 1 and Lawrie Shabibi. The artists included are mainly regional, with works from Shaikha Al Mazrou, Chaouki Choukini, Monir Farmanfarmaian, Hassan Hajjaj, Mohammed Kazem and Zineb Sedira, and more than half of the participating artists are marking their first Sotheby's sale with the initiative.

"We have a good balance between modern, museum-quality works for more established collectors, and we also wanted to introduce a new generation of artists that the galleries have nurtured over the years," says Ashkan Baghestani, Sotheby's head of contemporary curated sales, who is leading the project from the auction side.

Lawrie Shabibi is submitting a painting by Moroccan artist Mohamed Melehi, who has recently become the subject of increased international attention: *Soleil Oblique (From the Wave Series)*, 1971, with an estimate of \$80,000-\$120,000.

A Mohammed Kazem abstraction of almost Klein blue, made this year, is offered by Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde. The estimate for the Emirati artist's work is \$18,000-\$25,000. Green Art Gallery is consigning an elegant Chaouki Choukini sculpture made of carved oak, *Claire de Lune* (2018), with an estimate of \$30,000-\$40,000.

The auction will be of help to the Dubai galleries, which were hit hard by the cancellation of Art Dubai and March's Art Week – when they typically make a substantial proportion of the year's sales. They have since come together by information-sharing and strategising as a group, and some have donated works to other initiatives in Alserkal Avenue under the charitable Pay It Forward scheme.

"I can think of few communities that are as connected and supportive of one another as the Alserkal Avenue galleries," says Baghestani. "I've known many of them for a long time, as friends and colleagues, and admire what they have done for artists and the market in the Middle East."

New practices in the art world

Collaborations between commercial galleries and auctions are unusual, though they are gaining in popularity during the pandemic.

In March, Sotheby's launched a gallery network to help support the primary market, offering around 20 established US galleries a secure online marketplace in which to conduct private sales.

La Biennale Paris, an art and antiques fair scheduled for September, recently announced it will not go ahead as planned; instead, dealers will consign works to a sale organised by Christie's.

“This is a time when people need to be open to new ideas,” says Baghestani. “I’m happy that after years of trying to find different ways of engaging, finally the primary, secondary and tertiary markets are interacting. The lines are a bit more blurred. It opens an infinity of possibilities in terms of partnerships.”

Typically, commercial galleries sell art on the primary market, splitting the sale of an item 50 / 50 between gallery and artist. Auctions are considered secondary or tertiary market. The consignor of the work receives the money from the sale, with the auction house taking a commission from the seller and a premium from the buyer.

In this case, 10 per cent of the hammer price will go to the UNHCR’s Covid-19 appeal. Sotheby’s will take a buyer’s fee on top of that, but is waiving its commission from the seller. Each gallery will split the remaining share with its artist.

Lawrie concurs that the Covid-19 crisis has changed many longstanding practices in the art world. Information and resource-sharing has become more common – and dealers are becoming more open about budgets and pricing.

During this May’s online Frieze New York event, for example, most of the participating galleries listed the prices of their artworks publicly on their stands – flouting longstanding practices in which prices are kept private or, more accurately, in which prices depend on who’s asking.

“The rules that we’ve had up until now – it’s really clear that they don’t apply in all cases,” says Lawrie. “Practices that were entrenched are being re-evaluated, and you can see there are other ways of doing things.”