



## More Than a Mall: Inside Dubai's Growing Art Scene

By **MARISA MAZRIA-KATZ** Wednesday, June 24, 2009

### Related

#### Travel



10 Things to Do in Dubai

#### Dubai Photos



Get the Most Within



A visitor looks at work by Iranian artist Afshin Pirhashemi at Christie's in Dubai in April 2009

ALI HAIDER / EPA



### Most Popular »

[Full List »](#)

#### MOST READ

#### MOST EMAILED

1. Same-Sex Marriage Boosted in Two States
2. Presenting Kate Upton, Sports Illustrated's 2012 Swimsuit Cover Model
3. Jeremy Lin Makes Us All American
4. After Whitney Houston, Musicians Say: I'm Afraid
5. The Lesson of the Laptop-Shooting Dad
6. Attacking Israel's Diplomats: The View from Iran
7. As its Single Ranks Swell, Japan Wonders 'Where's the Love?'
8. Buffett Rule Shares Flaw with Tax it Would Replace
9. The Loving Story: Loving v. Virginia and the Photographs of Grey Villet
10. Why American Kids Are Brats

### More News from Our Partners

- [Dumping on Dubai: Have Hard Times Hit the Emirates?](#)

#### Newsfeed

- [Google Doodle Animates Valentine's Day With Simple Love Story](#)
- [Sorry, Marty: The Artist's Uggie Wins Top Dog at Golden Collar Awards](#)
- [Top 10 Famous Love Letters](#)

#### More on TIME.com



The handful of squat and humble warehouses that make up Dubai's unofficial creative district bear little resemblance to the emirate's legendary multibillion-dollar skyline. But in just three years, around 30 galleries and cultural institutions have set up shop in this dusty neighborhood. In the process, they have helped inspire private and governmental initiatives designed to alter the perception that Dubai is nothing but a characterless, globalized marketplace of vulgar shopping malls and exploited workers.

The swell of creativity — in both fine art and commercial design — has been generated mostly by returning Dubai natives keen to reproduce cultural scenes they experienced while working or studying abroad. "When I came back to the city, I noticed no one was doing anything with the talent that existed here," says Sunny Rahbar, co-director of the Third Line gallery, one of the first spaces to exhibit local and regional artists. Within months of the gallery's September 2005 inaugural show, Christie's held its first auction in Dubai — bringing in \$8.5 million — and the Art Dubai fair was established.

**(See 10 things to do in Dubai.)**

- [Attorney: Pakistani court gives spy agency ultimatum](#)
- [Violence erupts as Greece ponders terms for new bailout](#)

#### HuffingtonPost



[Grammys 2012 Worst-Dressed: See Who Crossed Into Tacky Territory \(PHOTOS\)](#)



[Whitney Houston Dead: Singer Dies At 48](#)



[Best And Worst Grammys Dresses Of All Time \(PHOTOS\)](#)

#### Rotten Tomatoes

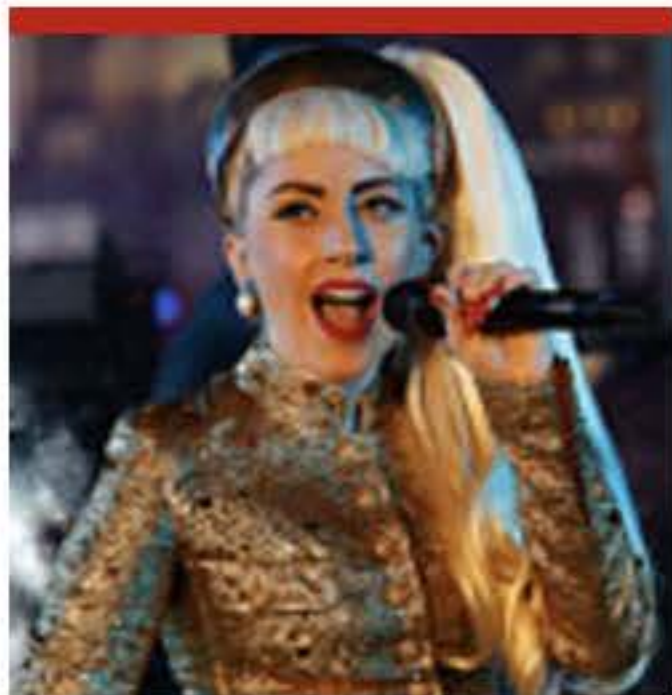
- [RT on DVD & Blu-Ray: The Rum Diary and Take Shelter](#)
- [Box Office Guru Wrapup: The Vow Leads Booming Box Office](#)
- [Awards Tour 2012: BAFTA Awards Winners](#)



## New York Fashion Week



## Top 10 Fashion Video Ad Campaigns



## The Top 10 Celebrity Restaurants

Despite the boom in construction that took place before the global recession, there are few towers in Dubai that offer space or facilities for artists. It was precisely for this reason Sheika Lateefa al-Maktoum, daughter of the late ruler of Dubai, Sheik Maktoum bin Rashid al-Maktoum, founded Tashkeel — an unassuming arts center comprising exhibition spaces, painting and film studios, a darkroom and a digital-printing lab.

**(Read about Dubai real estate after the recession.)**

Maktoum's decision to establish Tashkeel was made while curating a graduate exhibit of up-and-coming Emirati artists. She quickly discovered that nearly all those featured were working in isolation. "I felt a space that brought them together and created a community was needed in the U.A.E.," she says. The success of the Third Line gallery's growing roster of local artists served to underscore the need for Maktoum's initiative. "All of a sudden, there was a shift. People started looking at art as a commodity."

Similar endeavors to groom local talent have met with some success in the retail fashion sector — one of Dubai's chief tourist attractions. Brand-conscious punters have traditionally been the main market, but in these less extravagant times, there is greater appreciation for the local designers behind the merchandise at S\*uce Boutique (pronounced Sauce). The growing number of loyal consumers has emboldened the owners to launch the S\*uce Incubator, a project that recruits, manages and nurtures regional designers.

A similar initiative is taking place at Traffic, the Middle East's only contemporary-design gallery and store, and the brainchild of Dubai native Rami Farook. Here too, a growing group of regional unknowns is struggling to gain attention. Annual design competitions have confirmed Farook's earliest suspicions that the expertise not only exists in Dubai, but can also hold its own against the imported competition. Farook put his faith to the test earlier this year, when he initiated Traffic's manufacturing division — producers of the city's first range of locally designed furniture.

The brand-new Dubai Culture and Arts Authority (DCAA), meanwhile, is overseeing the implementation of new museums and the development of the city's art and design talent. At the forefront of its agenda is building affordable housing and creating part-time employment for artists, as well as devising a feasible grant system. The authority is also a driver of the U.A.E.'s participation at the Venice Biennale. In a bid to create a fresh image for the seven-member federation, DCAA director Dr. Lamees Hamdan gave Berlin-based curator Tirdad Zolghadr carte

blanche to fashion an 800-sq-m pavilion into a space that expresses artistic passion. Hamdan realizes the pavilion's title — It's Not You, It's Me — may come across as brash, but "It's about us, the U.A.E., and it's unapologetic," she says. "Like it or love it, this is who we are." Many cities that began life as mercantile enclaves — Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai — have gone on to develop thriving cultural scenes. There's no reason Dubai can't flaunt its newfound creative talent too.

**See TIME's Pictures of the Week.**

**See pictures of Dubai.**

---

			
PRINT	EMAIL	REPRINTS	SHARE

---