

## Inside Important Collections of Arab and Iranian Contemporary Art: Interviews with Leading Collectors and their Collection Curators

*By Isabella Ellabeh Hughes*



**Barajeel** - Strike Oppose Installation view - Courtesy of Barajeel Foundation

Art collecting and subsequently collectors are often removed from the public view. Although collectors are some of the biggest patrons of the arts and all the institutions and infrastructures that make up the art world—both in the commercial and non-profit sector, somehow collectors, perhaps with the exception of a few larger-than-life characters in the international art world, are often cloaked in mystique. In the past decade, the Middle East, a historic cultural center, has risen swiftly to become a major player in the international art scene,

with record auction prices set for Arab and Iranian artists and a plethora of new museums, private foundations and public collections continuously making headlines regionally and internationally. While many collectors keep their collection exclusively for private viewing, a band of collections in the MENA region and/or collections focused on Arab and Iranian art have begun to open their doors, sometimes quite literally, as is the case with the godfather of public collections in the UAE, the Farjam Collection in Dubai, or by loaning works

for public viewing, for instance, with the German-based Nadour Collection. Intimate interviews with seven collectors and/or their collection curators offers insight in to collecting practices and the vision behind some of the most important collections and collectors in this series of Q&A.

### **Huneidi Collection/Contemporary Art Platform, Kuwait**

Amer Huneidi has been collecting modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art for over a decade. Based in Kuwait, he is the founder of the visionary Contemporary Art Platform (CAP). CAP will open its doors to the public in late September 2011 and is poised to transform the cultural landscape of Kuwait and perhaps even the region. Planning an opening exhibition showcasing work from the collections of Kuwaiti collectors, the exhibition lineup that CAP has planned for its inaugural year is innovative and edgy, with exhibitions themed on everything from re-interpreting the Ramadan table with Kuwaiti design collective Bab Nimnin to graphic Iranian art. Located in the industrial Shuwaikh area of Kuwait, CAP is a 700-meter space, complete with a library, cinema, conference room and retail area. Focused on engaging the Kuwaiti public, particularly the younger generation, CAP will serve as a platform for a variety of public programs and will be collaborating with local Kuwaiti, regional and international arts organizations. In an intimate Q&A with Amer Huneidi and Liane Al-Ghusain, the Managing Director of CAP, they discuss the inspiration and vision for CAP, while Huneidi offers insight in to his own collecting practices.

### **Q&A With Amer Huneidi, founder of the Contemporary Art Platform**

**CP: When and why did you start collecting art?**

**AH:** Since 1998, I started to be interested to wanted to learn more about Arab art and artists and M.E. modern and contemporary culture

**CP: What was your first purchase?**

**AH:** Can't really remember but possibly Amin El-Bacha or Fatah Moudarres

**CP: Beyond the generic advice that collectors give, which is “buy what you love,” do you have any other advice to give to young collectors who are just beginning?**

**AH:** Buy what you like, you have to go through the learning process but if you can educate (or train) your eyes first you will be better off.

**CP: Did you always have the goal, even when you started collecting, to open your collection to public?**

**AH:** I never thought of it but I never had any reservations against it.

**CP: How do you choose which works to purchase, is it based on the aesthetics of the work, concept behind it or value?**

**AH:** All the above are important, I evaluate all angles.

**CP: Roughly how many new pieces do you add to your collection per year and do you go into each year with a goal in mind?**

**AH:** There is no rule; it depends on what I see (and like) and what I can afford.

**CP: You are the mastermind behind the Contemporary Art Platform, which sounds like it will be not only Kuwait's, but also one of the region's most innovative and important contemporary arts organizations. What was your inspiration for founding CAP?**

**AH:** Our plans are to concentrate on CAP Kuwait for the coming few years and then if there is need to expand and we find it helps us to be in other places we will consider it. The options are open.

**CP: Regionally and internationally there is an increasing commercial value, interest and popularity in Arab art, with an emphasis on labeling and presenting art as “Arab,” with some critics arguing that this emphasis on “Arab” pigeonholes regional artists. In your opinion, are Arab artists: artists who happen to be Arab or Arabs who are artists?**

**AH:** Artists who happen to Arabs sounds much better.

**With Liane Al-Ghusain, Contemporary Art Platform  
Managing Director**

**CP: When CAP opens its doors in the fall of 2011, it will present “Kuwaiti Modern & Contemporary Art Collectors: Nature vs. Nurture,” featuring 60 works from Kuwaiti collectors. How did you decide which works to include and, in turn, which collectors to approach?**

**LAG:** We hope for this to be an annual event, and so the aim in this year was to establish a meaningful exchange with the collectors to build on through the years. Even with those collectors whom we already knew, we wanted to make a concerted gesture in getting to know their collection, their idiosyncratic passions for collecting art, so we could watch it change and grow. It’s all part of telling the narrative of the Kuwaiti art scene.

**CP: When CAP opens its more permanent location in 2013-2014, will this be the permanent home for Mr. Huneidi’s collection?**

**LAG:** Yes.

**CP: Could you speak about the work that will be part of the permanent collection and if there will be an ongoing acquisitions policy?**

**LAG:** At the moment our body of work has a focus on Levantine modern painters. If I were to draw a parallel to the Western art world, which I am loathed to do but is inevitable, then what we are concentrating on now is making sure we have works from the painters that co-relate to the Impressionists, Fauvists, Surrealists, Cubists, Constructivists, Expressionists, etc., which in the Arab art world would include Hussein Madi, Fateh Moudarres, Benanteur, Mohammed El-Rawas, Amin El-Bacha, Dia Azzawi, Marwan Assab Baachi, Ayman Baalbaki etc.

For the future, we hope to amass a collection that would be the regional co-relative of the Minimalists and the Young British Artists and beyond. Basically, we are going from the foundations of Modern and Contemporary Arab art to begin with, and then moving towards collecting what is relevant to the current moment. Specifically collecting contemporary and new media art from Egypt, Syria and Kuwait is what I think

we will be moving towards. I would love to collect artists whose conceptual work forms the foundation of the Arab avant-garde, from Mona Hatoum to Fatima Al Qatari. There is so much cultural output from the region that the most overarching challenge is tailoring our collection to meet the boundaries of Kuwait and its visual culture.

**CP: Are there any institutions that CAP have modeled itself on?**

**LAG:** I’d like for us to have the atmosphere of Pavilion Dubai, the cutting edge of a place like the PROA fundacion in Buenos Aires and the ever-impressive exhibitions of the Museum of Modern Art. Eventually I would like us to have the same kind of institutional influence as Darat Al-Funoon or Townhouse Gallery.

**CP: What void in the Kuwaiti art scene is CAP aiming to fill?**

**LAG:** The art experience. We want to offer a place that invites one to sit with art, to discuss it, as opposed to only thinking of buying it. In Kuwait I think we have aesthetic prowess almost to a fault. We know what we like, we know what is beautiful, but we don’t necessarily understand the concepts, the contexts behind it. I want to deliver meatier artist statements, greater historical perspectives and more hands-on opportunities with artwork. I want to synthesize the art dealer, the art school and the art historian at the CAP. Also, I think we can offer a new set of resources for budding artists—inform them of international art residencies and funding as well as give them space to meet, practice and teach.

**CP: A key component to CAP is to collaborate with arts organizations in Kuwait and abroad, assuring mutual exchanges of local and international artwork. Does this mean we can expect to see both Middle Eastern and international artworks presented?**

**LAG:** Yes, absolutely. Although the emphasis is placed on Middle Eastern artwork, we are interested in having international artists come from all over to present their works. We believe this will be inspiring for the artists themselves, and that it will be a great opportunity for them to create work inspired by their time in Kuwait and to lead workshops and studio sessions with budding



Fadi Yazigi, King Che, 2008, bronze, edition 7/8, 90cm - courtesy of CAP Kuwaiti artists.

**CP: How does CAP operate structurally? Is there a museum structure with curatorial and educational departments?**

**LAG:** There will be those departments once we gain steam, yes. For now, we are letting guest curators come in while we at CAP focus on developing the education portion. We are opening studio hours for artists, bringing in speakers for panels about things like the Middle Eastern art market and collecting art as an investment. We're offering painting and calligraphy classes to coincide with an exhibit on modern Arab abstract painters and one on Arab and Iranian graphic arts, respectively. We will expand into performing arts eventually and also set up a retail corner for the



Marwan Kassab Baachi, Marionette, 2010, oil on canvas, 130x194cm - Courtesy of Amer Huneidi Collection

exceptional design talent in Kuwait.

**CP: Some of your future projects aim to tackle some very pertinent, yet often not discussed subjects, such as issues about gender and propaganda in the Middle East. How do you decide on these subjects and why does CAP feel that they are important to address?**

**LAG:** I often feel with controversial issues like gender oppression and government propaganda, people are aware of them, but haven't interpreted or shared their own opinions. Art is the safest way to impose your worldview, and we want to give Kuwaiti artists the opportunity to challenge themselves and their community in a way that is productive.





Leila Pazooki, Moments of Glory, 2010, neon light tubes, transformer, variable dimensions, - Courtesy of Nadour Collection

### Nadour Collection, Germany

The Nadour Collection is a non-commercial collection consisting of contemporary art from the Arab and Iranian world with a strong and extremely educational website. The Nadour Collection was founded by Rüdiger K. Weng, a financial expert with a deep interest in the arts (he is behind the successful Weng Fine Art AG, a leading commercial art buyer, which trades and brokers upwards of 1,500 works of art internationally each year) and curator and art advisor, Diana Wiegiersma, with Weng and the collection based in Germany. Without a permanent space, the Nadour Collection loans its work for exhibitions in private and public institutions internationally, most recently having loaned work by Zoulikha Bouabdellah (“Silence”) and Majida Khattari (“Conversation”) to the Thessaloniki Center of Contemporary Art, Greece for the “Disquieting Muses” exhibition and Leila Pazooki’s “Moments of Glory” to Museum on the Seam, Israel for the “Westend” exhibition. Regularly updating its website, adding both images and text on the cutting-edge pieces in the collection, Diana Wiegiersma, the Nadour Collection curator, offers more insight into the collection and collecting practices of Mr. Weng in a Q&A”

### CP: Why did Rüdiger K. Weng found the Nadour Collection?

DW: The idea of the collection came from Rüdiger K. Weng’s interest in contemporary Arab and Iranian art.

### CP: Without a public space, can you explain how the Nadour Collection operates and how it connects with the public?

DW: The idea behind the collection is to show the artworks first by primarily putting them on loan to museums and art institutions, in addition to organizing and curating in the future thematic exhibitions based on the collection, also intended are loans to museums in Europe, the US and of course, the Arab and Iranian world. Also having exhibitions in museums is very important. This is the best way for people to have physical access to the artworks. We don’t want to have just one museum or build a pyramid around the collector; we really want to spread the collection all around so that people from all over the world can have access to contemporary Arab and Iranian art.

The collection is focused on work—Weng didn’t want to invest in building a building for the artworks. The

collection is in the making and will always be growing... it is a life-long project. Since we can't do a publication right now, which would also be difficult as the collection is constantly growing, we at least want the artworks to be accessible online so people can understand them. It [the website] is an educational tool; it is in French, English and of course, Arabic. Every two or three weeks, we reveal new artwork from the collection on our website. This way people can come back and always find something new, learn something new. We are also in the process of developing an informative newsletter.

**CP: What does Nadour mean?**

**DW:** It's Arabic and means an observation platform; a vantage point from which you can experience the pleasure of a new-found perspective, unexpected moment of transcendence.

**CP: Who is your target audience as you are based in Europe and loan your collection internationally?**

**DW:** We want to touch the wider public. The idea was, in the beginning, to share with other art lovers the discoveries of the collection and collector. Because it is a broad contemporary art collection, we are not trying to promote and foster one particular category, other than being contemporary Arab and Iranian art.

The idea behind the collection is really for people to see the diversity of the artworks and voices of the different artists because it is really not one scene—the Arab and Iranian art world—and sometimes it gets oversimplified. The text we offer on our website is important, as it is educational and is neither too complicated nor too simple and it gives keys to understanding better the art and artists, whether you are based in Paris, Casablanca, New York, Moscow or Dubai. This is a passion-based project, we want to share it with anyone who can share this passion and has an interest in discovering contemporary Arab and Iranian art.

**CP: When and how did the collection start?**

**DW:** Mr. Weng is really a collector—he has this sickness for collecting. A lot of people are always asking us what is the goal of all this, but there isn't a goal, it is a sickness, the best sickness, this collecting. Weng sees collecting as a learning process. He has always been

interested in history, art and archeology. He collected a lot of archeological documents and then of course there is a connection from his archeology collection to the Arab world, the ancient past. Through his work, he was asked to go to the Arab world and there he started to discover and meet living artists. This was a big deal for him because he was stunned with what was happening and by talking to the artists, learning about their projects and ideas, he wanted the moment to last. He could see there was a lack of museums spaces and structure to share these artists, especially outside of their regional context. So he decided that he wanted to share what he had found. It sounds a bit cheesy, but really it was by meeting these living artists and hearing what they had to say a few years ago that Weng was inspired to interact with the artists and collect. Now we are friends with many of them.

**CP: How involved is Mr. Weng with the collection?**

**DW:** We have great relationships with many artists and I am really focused on the collection, but you need to understand that Mr. Weng is a workaholic and always meets artists when he has the time, especially to meet in their studios. What I do is to try to select artists and do an initial filter- meeting with all the artists first, learning about their body of work, future plans and then when I think there is something really of interest, I show Mr. Weng and we discuss it. Sometimes we agree, sometimes we do not, and of course, sometimes I try and convince him when I truly believe something is very important for the collection. He likes to meet artists. I go to every fair, biennale, many exhibitions, read magazine. By all means I try to discover all artists in the Arab and Iranian world and Diaspora. As the curator, I am also trying to find the right museums around the world to propose museum projects with pieces from the collection. A great big one is coming up!

**CP: How many artworks are in your collection? How many do you buy a year?**

**DW:** Roughly 150-200 artworks are in the collection . Per year, I have no idea how many we buy. We've been seriously buying now for three years. We really buy with our heart, it is something organic and we are never thinking I need to buy "x" many or have a real budget.

**CP: Where do you hope the Nadour Collection will be 10 years from now?**

**DW:** We want to continue to make important, visible and witty shows in museums throughout the world and also in the Arab world in different, interesting spaces so we are not just catering to the same crowd. It's important for us to reach out to people in all socio-economic levels. We'd also like to continue to show in museums and do a publication.

In 10 years from now we would like people to appreciate the artists we are showing and maybe become a reference for people, scholars, museums and universities, showing them that it is not only the big auction houses, International fairs and galleries putting artists on the map because there is something very different about art and the art market. We are supportive of young budding artists. Commercial value is very important

for artist to survive in the current economical world, we are committed to promoting artists who produce experimental work that might not have commercial appeal. This is what I'd really like people to know; that what makes art is not its decorative value.

In 10 years from now, it would be great if the Nadour Collection can serve as a reference on what contemporary art is from the Arab world and Iran. We want to be an intellectual authority, if possible, of art for this region we are interested in, this is one way of seeing it. We are not saying that 'this is how it is, how it has to be,' rather, we are sharing our view, the artists' perspectives. There are quite a few pieces in the collection that really make strong statements, which differ from what the media says about the Arab and Iranian world. We want to make people think with the collection.

**Walid Raad, I Was Overcome With A Momentary Panic At The Thought That They Might Be Right, 2005, high density foam, 3m diameter - Courtesy of Nadour Collection**



### **Samawi Collection, Syria, Lebanon, UAE**

Cousins Khaled and Hisham Samawi run a variety of successful ventures in the commercial art world—the Ayyam Gallery, which although only founded in 2006, already boasts locations in Beirut, Dubai and Damascus, presenting avant-garde contemporary Arab talent, running auctions and producing publications and special events. Participating in some of the most important art fairs in the MENA region, Ayyam Gallery’s founders are avid art collectors. A cornerstone of the private Samwai Collection, which collects art from the Middle East and also international art, is making works from the collection available to the public through exhibitions. Most recently some pieces from the collection were on display in Beirut at the MENASA Art Fair in July 2011 in a non-profit sector of the fair, featuring witty work from the ever-thoughtful and progressive Ammar Al Beik. In a Q&A Khaled and Hisham Samwai open up about their collection, collecting practices and whether or not running an art gallery and auctions influences their collecting.

**CP: When did you begin to collect art and what was your first purchase?**

**KS:** My first owned piece of art was a gift from my father by British Impressionist Sir George Clausen in 1984 when I was at university in California.

**HS:** The first piece I bought was in 2007 when I went to the art fair in Abu Dhabi. I bought a cool sculpture by Angela Palmer. Not long after, I went to a Christie’s auction and bought a piece by Samia Halaby that was done in 1978. That was when I became a collector.

**CP: When did you first conceive of the idea to open the Samawi Collection to the public via public exhibitions and why?**

**HS:** We have each been collecting for a while and had put together a collection we were proud of. We felt that it was important for people to know that we aren’t just art dealers but collectors as well.

**CP: Since you’ve begun to display the Samawi Collection publicly, do you collect keeping the public audience in mind or is collecting and choosing work based on your personal preferences and interest?**

**KS:** My personal preferences and interests. That said, I try to collect with an exhibition in mind.

**HS:** I only buy things that move me personally. I find that if you stick to buying what you like, after enough time you will be able to find a common thread in certain works that you can present in an exhibition.

**CP: Beyond the generic advice that all collectors give, which is to buy what you love, do you have other advice for budding, new collectors?**

**KS:** If you love the piece and you can afford it then buy it. There is safety from buying from a reputable gallery an artist you love that is supported by the gallery.

**HS:** Stay away from Arab modernists that seem like a great buy because if it is a great buy it is probably a fake.

**CP: Within the past few years there has been locally, regionally and internationally a fervent interest in contemporary Arab art. Do you find the label “contemporary Arab art” to be limiting at all or pigeonholing artists?**

**KS:** The top artists in the Arab world today know they are making great International contemporary art. They just happen to be Arabs.

**CP: From your perspective are Arab artists first artists who happen to be Arab or are they Arabs who are artists?**

**KS:** They are creative humans first who happen to be artists from Arabia.

**CP: Where do you envision your collection 10 years from now?**

**KS:** Hopefully in a private museum that I am dreaming of creating. I wish I can exhibit my collection to the masses to benefit from my passion/hard work.

**CP: After speaking with Hisham, I learned that there are plans for making the Samway Collection more accessible via an online presence, could you speak a little bit on this?**

**HS:** We already promote the collection online via our gallery’s website. The book we published on last year’s exhibition is online and available to download. you can also have a copy visiting our gallery.





Luay Kayyali, Untitled, Oil on Canvas, 172x190cm - Courtesy of Khaled Samawi Collection.

**CP: Last year you had a very successful exhibition in Dubai featuring works from the collection, could you speak about your next public exhibition?**

**HS:** The next exhibition is planned for February/ March and will present works that are quite different from what people are used to seeing from us. We not only collect Middle Eastern art but international art as well from a variety of media. This next exhibition will show a different side of the Samawi Collection.

**CP: To purchase a work for the collection, do both of you have to like the work?**

**HS:** No, we each buy what we like for our personal collections but we do consult each other to see what the other thinks. That being said, we do have a similar eye for things so very rarely does one of us purchase something that the other doesn't like as well.

**CP: Besides collecting, you run the very successful Ayyam Gallery, with locations throughout the Arab world. Are there any distinct differences in the collectors and/or collecting practices of your clients in Dubai, Damascus and Beirut?**

**KS:** Most of our clients are art patrons who love the



**Safwan Dahoul**, *Untitled*, 1997, Acrylic on Canvas, 80x60cm - Courtesy of Khaled Samawi Collection

Middle Eastern art scene, specially sponsoring and collecting younger artists. They are all partners with us.

**CP: Has the experience of selling artwork and running an auctions affected your outlook towards collecting artworks?**

**HS:** I try to keep everything separate and only buy things that I like personally, but being in the industry does expose you to a lot of art at auctions, art fairs and gallery shows so it does help the collection because you see more art and you become more aware of the current movement and the needs in the art market.

### **Salsali Private Museum (SPM)/Salsali Collection, Dubai, UAE.**

Dubai's newest museum opens in November 2011 in the Al Quoz neighborhood, founded by the charismatic Iranian collector, Ramin Salsali, who is based between Dubai and Germany. An avid collector and eternal patron of the arts, Salsali has been honored twice by the Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Patrons of the Arts Awards. Salsali has an impressive collection of over 500 works with roughly half of the work belonging to Iranian artists, including Sara Rahbar, Hadieh Shafie, Farideh Lashi and Reza Derekshani. Keenly interested in supporting both emerging and established Arab and Iranian artists alongside international artists, Salsali's new museum, the Salsali Private Museum, is the first private museum in Dubai and will showcase not only exhibitions featuring work from his collection, but also from other collections, fostering cultural and artistic exchange. Calling Dubai his "second home," in a Q & A with Salsali, he speaks about his hopes for the SPM to serve as a point of inspiration to inspire new collectors, as well as a vehicle for greater knowledge on contemporary art.

**CP: When and why did you start collecting art?**

**RS:** I've been collecting art since I was in my 20s, so for over 20 years now. I have a very emotional approach to art, rather than looking at the price and provenance of the piece. My artworks are like my children. I see collecting art as a way of life—for me, art is like air and water. From my point of view art is no more a luxury, it is daily life.

Art is important because anything related to art can calm you down, can make for a better and more tolerant, peaceful world. It is proven that in societies where culture is developed you have less aggression, less contempt for others. This power that art has, I believe in and it fascinates me.

**CP: Why are you opening your collection to the public audience?**

**RS:** I feel that it is my duty to give back to this society, to Dubai that has so welcome me. It is an unusual



**Reza Derakhshani**, *Divided Landscape of a blue Monarchy*, 2011, Mixed Media on Canvas, Dyptech each 140X85cm - Courtesy of SPM.

environment; we have 142 nationalities and 43 religions in Dubai. It really is a role model for the entire Middle East, so why not extend this idea of being a role model to the arts by opening a museum? I am very proud that they [Dubai] have recognized my support for the arts, but I see a need missing, the need for more education and, especially in Dubai, for a museum.

**CP: What is the mission of the Salsali Private Museum?**

**RS:** It's a place to show art, to inspire and educate the public and to encourage and support new collectors. Because art betters society, promotes more respect for other people and cultures, it should be part of the

infrastructure of Dubai, open to all, which is key to the museum. I ask so many people, friends, "why don't you collect art," and their responses are always time, money and expertise. The museum will hopefully inspire people to collect art, to understand it.

**CP: What advice do you have for collectors?**

**RS:** Go to galleries, museums, learn about art. Learn about art through the process of growing your collection and develop good relationships with galleries and artists. It is a myth that art is always very expensive, you can start with supporting emerging artists for the same price as a nice handbag that most people buy without a





**Sara Rahbar, Flag #16 - Use this distance to forget who i am, 2008, textiles & mixed media, 170x91.5cm - Courtesy of SPM.**

second thought in Dubai. Instead of another handbag or car, buy art!

**CP: Where do you hope to see the Salsali Private Museum in 10 years from now?**

**RS:** Thriving, and I would like to raise money for an artists' residency. I believe that residencies is how you can build real artists, those who really represent the culture and the environment they live in. It would be good to have at least five artists continuously in residence from different counties that will bridge the gap between the western developed art scene and the Middle Eastern developing one.

### **The Mokbel Art Collection, Beirut, Lebanon**

The Beirut-based Mokbel Art Collection is distinct and focused. Founded by Johnny and Nadine Mokbel in the late 1990s, it is an encyclopedic offering on all things related to modern and contemporary Lebanese art. Supporting emerging Lebanese artists alongside Lebanese contemporary and modern masters, the Mokbel Art Collection aims to raise awareness on what it believes to be one of Lebanon's, and subsequently Lebanese art's, distinctive national character, which it explains in its mission statement, saying that, "Lebanon is often said to follow a 'third way,' meaning it is neither European, nor Asian or American but uniquely Lebanese. In this sense, we believe that Lebanon, with its vast multi-cultural and its intense history, has affected many of its artists through social and personal issues that have helped create a form of art like none other, a depiction of an emotional aspect of Lebanese life, and therefore, a particular style of art." The multi-tasking husband-and-wife team make their collection accessible to the public through their website and also by loaning works from their collection to non-commercial exhibitions. In 2010, Johnny and Nadine Mokbel founded the Art Collectors Society (ACS) to support emerging and established Lebanese artists and to encourage collectors. In a Q&A, Johnny Mokbel explains how the collection was founded, the many hats he wears as also the collection's curator, and his dream of one day having a room within a museum for the personal collection.

**CP: When and why did you two start collecting art?**

**JM:** As a young man I wanted to be an illustrator or architect but it never happened. Later on I started buying African tribal sculptures and sometimes paintings made by African artists and some others by anonymous Arab artists. I never thought about buying art seriously until the year 1999.

**CP: Your collection is dedicated solely to Lebanese modern and contemporary artists. Besides artists being Lebanese, what other attributes attract you to artworks?**

**JM:** Besides being Lebanese, the artwork must be of a high standard, meaningful to me and affordable.



**Fouad Elkoury, Born Loser (Diptych), 2009, Ink jet print mounted - Courtesy of Barajeel Foundation.**

**CP: What was the first piece you purchased?**

**JM:** It was in 1999 and we started our collection by buying two Paul Guiragossian oil on canvas paintings.

**CP: Is there an overall goal that you have with the Mokbel Collection?**

**JM:** I never intended to collect on this scale – really, that is the truth. But the more I began looking at shows and visiting galleries, the more remarkable work I found, so I just kept buying. This precious collection of handpicked masterpieces has now become a multinational project dedicated to supporting already established Lebanese talent, as well as promoting new Lebanese artists on their rise to fame. From artists like Paul Guiragossian, Shafik Abboud, and Jamil Molaeb to Ayman Baalbaki and Benoit Debbane, a diverse assemblage of different styles and eras come together in our gallery.

The Mokbel Art Collection views its commitment to Lebanese art as a social responsibility and is currently working on more efforts to encourage young talented upcoming Lebanese artists, whose artwork is part of The Mokbel Art Collection, by increasing their exposure to the Art World and introducing their brilliant work to the public masses.

**CP: Although, at the moment, you don't have a permanent public space, do you plan to open one in the future?**

**JM:** My dream would be to have a room dedicated for it in a museum. I don't want the collection dispersed as that destroys the whole vision of its foundation and purpose. It is like my work of art.



هَوَفَتِي مِنْ غَزَّةَ ،  
 تَعَلَّمُ اللِّغَةَ الْإِنْكَلِيزِيَّةَ وَحَدَهُ ،  
 تَقَدَّمُ بِطَلْبِ الْكُتُبِ عَلَى مَنْحَةِ فُولْبَرَايْتِ ،  
 كَتَبْتُ فِي طَلْبِهِ أَنَّ السَّبِيلَ الْوَحِيدَ لِتَحْقِيقِ  
 حُرِّيَّةِ فَالَسْطِينِ وَسَيَادَتِهَا لَا يُمْكِنُ فِي الْعَنْفِ ،  
 وَلَا فِي الْمَفَاوِضَاتِ ،  
 بَلْ فِي تَحْصِيلِ الْمَعْرِفَةِ .  
 حَصَلْتُ عَلَى الْمَنْحَةِ  
 رَفَضْتُ إِسْرَائِيلَ مَنْحَةَ تَأْشِيرَةِ الْخُرُوجِ .

**CP: The Mokbel Collection's website is a wonderful resource of educational information where you've made much of your collection accessible. How do you decide on the content for the website and do you employ a curator to assist with content writing?**

**JM:** It is true if I tell you that I decide about its content randomly depending on my humor and that I am the curator of my collection. I enjoy what I am doing and love to keep it this way, at least for the time being.

**CP: You recently participated in Menasart Fair's non-commercial exhibition, "Great Collectors in Lebanon," where you shared with the public in a pop-up museum format some pieces from your collection in Beirut. Do you plan to exhibit your collection abroad?**

**JM:** Well, we already started doing so as Ayman

Baalbaki's work titled 2:15pm was showing at "Opening The Doors" exhibition featuring works from Art Patrons, secured by Christie's and sponsored by TDIC ([www.tdic.ae](http://www.tdic.ae)), exhibited in Gallery One at the Emirates Palace, Abu Dhabi, UAE from 3 November 2010 till 6 January 2011. We see this as a start and I why not doing it again?

**CP: Besides the generic advice that collectors always give to new collectors, which is to "buy what you love," do you have any other advice to share with emerging collectors?**

**JM:** Yes, do not buy just because the artist is sympathetic or nice, have your own judgment and follow your own feelings.



Huda Lutfi, Democracy is coming, 2008, Mixed Media on Canvas, 35x45cm - Courtesy of Barajeel Foundation Foundation.

**CP: Where do you see the Mokbel Collection in 10 years from now?**

**JM:** Contemporary to its time. It is my vision now and I don't think it will change soon.

**CP: Do you include Lebanese artists living in Diaspora as well as those residing in Lebanon in your collection?**

**JM:** Yes! As long as they are Lebanese it works.

**CP: How many new pieces do you tend to buy each year—do you go into the year with a goal to purchase “X” number of new works?**

**JM:** Depending on how many masterpieces I would have the chance to see each year.

**CP: Any information as to where the public will be able to see your collection on display publicly next?**

**JM:** On our website: [www.mokbelartcollection.com](http://www.mokbelartcollection.com), it's public and it is free.

**Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE**

Sharjah's Barjeel Art Foundation, although only over a year old, has already a cemented track record of producing thought-provoking exhibitions, often exploring themes related to contemporary culture,



**Hassan Hajjaj**, *MaliciousLook*, 2000, Edition of 10, Lumbda Print and mixed Media, 84x59.5cm - Courtesy of Barjeel Foundation.

Arab identity and politics. The foundation produces a variety of rotating exhibitions throughout the year and also partners with various international arts organizations, lending its work and/or collaborating. Featuring the work of Egyptian artist Raafat Ishak at the Venice Biennale in the Pan-Arab exhibition “Future of a Promise” and loaning Saudi artist Abdul Nasser Gharem’s “Men at Work” to the Institute of Foreign Cultural Relations, Berlin, are only two examples of the Barjeels Art Foundation’s recent collaborations with outside organizations. The Barjeel Art Foundation was founded by Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi, a noted political commentator, businessman and non-resident fellow at the Dubai School of Government who has a deep interest in contemporary Arab art and culture. Firmly committed to education and reaching out to the public, the Barjeel Art Foundation hosts an array of public

programs, including tours, workshops, lectures, panel discussions and art critiques. Speaking with Mandy Merzaban the Collections Manager and Curator, she explains the reason behind opening the collection to the public, muses on strengths and weaknesses of the UAE art scene, and offers insight in to the response that the public has had to the Barjeel Art Foundation in a Q&A:

#### **Q&A with Mandy Merzaban, Collections Manager and Curator**

**CP: When did Sultan begin to collect art and what was the first purchase?**

**MM:** The collection began around ten years ago and the first major purchase was by Emirati artist Abdul Qader Al Rais.

**CP: When was the idea to open Barjeel to the public first conceived and why?**

**MM:** The idea to open the collection to the public was a couple of years prior to our official opening in March 2010. The preliminary objective with Barjeel was to share a portion of the collection in a gallery space in the form of curated exhibitions. A major part of this objective is to develop a public platform to foster nuanced dialogue about contemporary art practices, so our interest is not just in having a gallery but sharing the collection abroad, hosting discussion driven events and actively collaborating with other institutions and museums both regionally and internationally.

**CP: Since opening Barjeel, does the foundation collect keeping the public audience in mind, or is collecting and choosing work based on personal preferences and interests?**

**MM:** I think the collection process is a lot about developing a personal preference that includes a range of interests and genres. Collecting a diverse range of pieces that are strong conceptually is foremost. I think exhibiting good critical work is more informative and engaging for the average viewer or participant, so in this regard our personal preferences are perhaps also in line with public interest.

**CP: Beyond the generic advice that all collectors give—which is to buy what you love, do you have other advice for budding new collectors?**

**MM:** I think it is important to get more than one opinion when it comes to acquiring a work, as well as doing a bit of thoughtful research and reading beforehand. It is also good form to seek out younger artists, who are less established but have a great work ethic that is consistent and a strong conceptual drive.

**CP: Within the past few years, there has been locally, regionally and internationally a fervent interest in contemporary Arab art. Do you find the label “contemporary Arab art” to be limiting at all or pigeonholing artists?**

**MM:** This is an interesting question. I think the complexity of the term “Arab” is not clear in the label “Arab Art” when it is used to describe the product of artists from, or connected to, the Arab world. Not all artists from the region or in the Diaspora would label themselves “Arab artists” nor should they necessarily be labelled. However, Arab identities consist of a spectrum of differences, disparities and nuances as well as ideas of unity; they are shaped by complex socio-political conditions of the past and present. Since it is a general term, I think the limitations of the label depend on how the term is used and whether these complexities are addressed.

**CP: The work in the collection is often quite charged, filled with content, commentary and reflection on the artists’ behalf. Do you collect artwork that is ever appreciated solely for just its aesthetics or must there always be content behind it to draw you in?**

**MM:** I think something that is purely aesthetic without content; context or criticism is more decorative than ‘art’. I suppose we tend to make a point not to collect artworks that would make good mantle pieces and focus on acquiring work that presents some form of social, cultural or institutional critique. Sometimes these works have appealing visual qualities while other times they may not because the focus of the work may not be aesthetic. I think creating something that has content and a persuasive argument can be used as a tool to communicate with viewers and encourage dialogue

on a range of issues whether it is prejudice, occupation, gender or cultural identity.

**CP: What is the greatest strength and greatest weakness of the UAE art scene?**

**MM:** The UAE has a lively commercial art scene comprising of numerous commercial art galleries in Dubai, art fairs such as Abu Dhabi Art, Art Dubai as well as Christie’s and Bonham’s auctions. Sharjah’s many museums, the Sharjah Biennial and other concurrent events that emphasise the educational value of art production highlight a keen interest in cultural development and the value of collections of art and artefacts. However, there are a number of key areas that require further development to build a nuanced art community, which extends beyond the marketplace. More non-commercial initiatives that have a mandate to promote, exhibit and publish work of a high standard and criticality by emerging and established artists in the region will shape the foundation of the UAE art scene. In addition to this, more attention should be placed on the value of artwork maintenance to help preserve collections for the future.

**CP: What has the reception been to the Barjeel Collection and Foundation?**

**MM:** The reception has been quite positive both locally and internationally. We have received a lot of great feedback from visitors, who range from passers-by who stumble on the gallery upon visiting Al Qasba, to visitors from international museums and galleries, students and dignitaries.

**CP: What has been the most challenging aspect of opening and running a contemporary art foundation?**

**MM:** The challenges are creative, administrative and logistical when it comes to both opening a collection to the public and developing a plan or mission for a foundation. We try to make sure our exhibitions are thoughtful and contribute to an accessible understanding of contemporary art practices through how we describe, shape and display the collection.

**CP: A key component of your mission is to bring young people into Barjeel. Could you speak a little**



**bit about your programs and efforts that cater specifically to young people?**

**MM:** At the moment we are coordinating with universities locally to bring students to see and use the space for discussions, lectures and critiques. The Maraya Art Centre, at which our gallery is located, presents a great opportunity for students to both view and talk about art in a comfortable atmosphere. We are also building partnerships with local organisations to implement more workshops in the space.

**Farook Collection, Dubai**

Based in Dubai, the Farook Collection is the brainchild passion project of the perpetually curious, self-described ‘social historian’ Emirati collector, Rami Farook, who is also behind Traffic Gallery, one of the most progressive contemporary art galleries in the MENA region. Both in the Farook Collection and in the artists represented by Traffic, there is a strong emphasis on highly probing conceptual, experimental work. Rami Farook, although instinctively entwined with local and regional art, culture and politics, has an international perspective and is keenly interested in the ability that art has as a tool for documentation, record-keeping and reflection on contemporary events and the world around us. The Farook Collection is housed in the Traffic warehouse space in Dubai’s Al Quoz neighborhood, where there are two galleries, offering a mix of commercial shows, exhibitions featuring the collection, public programs, artistic residencies and a store called PRINT. In a Q&A, Rami Farook shares the inspiration for his collection, his thoughts on the local Dubai art scene and his interest in contemporary culture.

**CP: How, why and when did you start collecting?**

**RF:** I bought a few pieces in 1999 and 2000, just on the street, in Boston and New York when I was in university. And this left an impression on me. I stopped working for the family business in 2007, took a vacation, went to London and decided to visit a show at the Serpentine Gallery curated by Damien Hirst, there was Warhol, Ermin and a bunch of other artists and this triggered something in my brain and eyes. I remember buying the catalog and then I had the urge that I wanted to learn more. I came back and opened Traffic, which began as a

design gallery. Then I went to Paris and Frankfurt, saw many exhibitions, saw Amir Fallah at The Third Line in Dubai. Around this same time the first installation of Art Dubai occurred and on the opening night I came across a small LED piece, it was a Jenny Holzer, but at that time I didn’t even know who she was, and a Shezad Dawood, which I bought and spent 20,000 pounds on the Holzer and 60,000 AED on the Dawood, which brings it into perspective—what is the value of art? And this is why I think art is a good business because it is so democratic, responding directly to demand. So this was the beginning of my collecting. By October 2009 I had about 50 works and did a budget and started travelling specifically to build relationships with galleries.

I read the Saatchi book and he says you become a collector when you run out of space.

**CP: Why did you decide to open a public collection?**

**RF:** The collection was always public because even back when Traffic was a design gallery, I had the collection on the walls. But when we moved into this new space in November 2010, a real art center, it was about making the collection public. For me it’s about showing my collection, it’s about the discussion that the works produce, the questions they raise, whether it’s topics related to art, but really, it is actually, I think, the state of the world.

**CP: Do you collect now with the public audience in mind?**

**RF:** For me, my focus is on collecting for the concept of an exhibition. For example, a past exhibit, “The State,” was about 9/11, fear and displacement and for “Uppers and Downers,” I documented the state of the world from a financial point of view.

**CP: The Farook Collection, although heavy on Arab and regional artists, is also very international, which is a bit different from most collections in the region. Why have you chosen to collect and show international artists alongside Arab artists?**

**RF:** For me what it comes down to first is the work, not nationality. My focus is on concept and theme and also dialog that the work creates.





**Shilpa Gupta**, Untitled, 2009, flapboard, Duration ca. 20 min, 70.87 x 8.58 x 9.84 in (180 x 21.8 x 25 cm), 45 kg, Edition 3/3(Inv# SHGU-0036.3).

**CP: What are your thoughts on the Dubai art scene's impressive growth spurt?**

**RF:** The art scene here is growing organically. In less than ten years, Dubai has become a real arts hub. Dubai is like London 100 years ago, but it's important to maintain heritage and history too alongside all the growth and progress.

**CP: How many pieces are in your collection and how many do you buy each year?**

**RF:** Definitely there are over 300 pieces; I tend to buy around 100 a year. But for the next few months I'm taking a break from buying to catalog my collection. I'm very involved with my collection, I do the whole thing, research, meeting artists, finding work, overseeing the transaction.

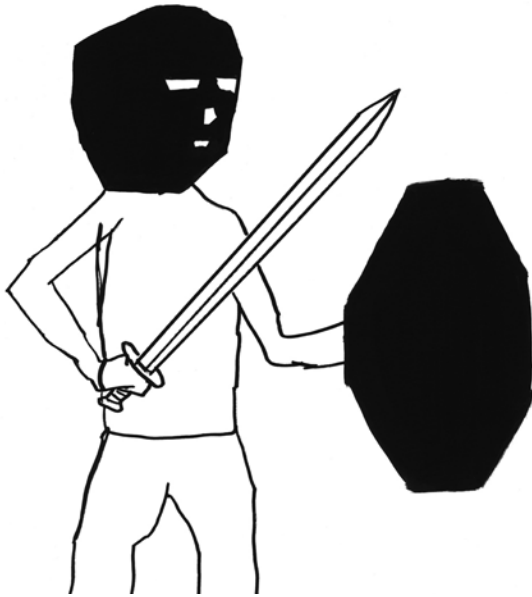
**CP: Beyond the generic advice that all collectors give—which is to buy what you love, do you have**

**other advice for budding, new collectors?**

**RF:** Don't buy for investment, know what you can afford, and if you are serious about building a collection, create a budget, educate yourself, read and focus on artists who you believe in. It's also always better to see work live, I personally don't like seeing work online. My education on contemporary art all came from collecting, working and having relationships with artists.

**CP: Where do you hope to see Farook Collection in 10 years? RF:** One day I'd like to loan my collection to the city of Dubai. It would be great if there was a contemporary art museum here in 10 years.

## FIGHT INJUSTICE



**DAVID SHRIGLEY**, Untitled (Fight injustice), 2011, Drawing, Ink on paper, 29.7x21cm (11.69 x 8.27 in), Unique work.

*Isabella Ellabeh Hughes is an independent curator, critic and art and cultural projects consultant with international experience in both the commercial and non-profit art world. She has worked for a variety of museums, art fairs, galleries and cultural organizations in the US, United Arab Emirates and UK and contributes to the journal Contemporary Practices, Persianesque, Brownbook and is the Dubai Editor for ArtAsiaPacific. Hughes has curated exhibitions at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC, the Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle, Transformer, Washington, DC. Hughes specializes in contemporary art with an academic interest in the rise of transculture and focus on art from the Middle East, Asia, the Pacific and their respective diaspora. Hughes has a BA in Art History from Boston University and an MA in Museum Studies from Johns Hopkins University. A frequent public speaker on contemporary art and cultural diplomacy, Hughes recently had the honor*



**DAVID SHRIGLEY**, Untitled (Burn all flags), 2011, Drawing, Ink on paper, 29.7x21cm (11.69 x 8.27 in), Unique work.

*of being a keynote speaker, speaking on the subject of contemporary art as an agent of cultural diplomacy for the International Symposium on Cultural Diplomacy in the USA in May 2011 and has spoken at the University of Hawai'i, Transformer, Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, The Fridge and most recently in July 2011, at the Cafesjian Museum.*