

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

PAST FORWARD

An exhibition that takes the form of a traveling conversation about Emirati art, *Past Forward* introduces the world to eminent Contemporary Emirati artists through intercultural artistic dialogue **Rebecca Anne Proctor** discovers.

The power of intercultural dialogue through art couldn't be better expressed than through *Past Forward: Contemporary Art from the Emirates*, a traveling exhibition of contemporary Emirati art that is currently making its rounds across North America. Texas, California and Washington D.C. are the stops it will make as it displays paintings, photographs, sculptures, video installations and other media by 25 leading Emirati artists. The first major touring exhibition of Emirati art, the show was co-curated by Emirati artist Noor Al Suwaidi and Curtis Sandberg, Senior Vice President for Arts and Cultural Programs at the Meridian International Center, and bred by his excellency Yousef Al Otaiba, the Ambassador of the UAE in Washington D.C. While what might at first hand seem to be a typical exhibition of work by a certain nation, *Past Forward* is unique in that it strives to educate the public as well as forge a dialogue with art and culture in the US. "We had a shared belief in the importance of art to tell a story," says Sandberg. "There is a lot going on in the UAE. It's a cultural, flourishing and dynamic country and this project took place over several months born out of a shared US-Emirati vision."



(Left) Lateefa bint Maktoum. *The Last Look*. 2009. Digital print. 150 x 100 cm. Collection of Lamees Hamdan.

interesting things," says Sandberg. "The purpose was to tell the Emirati story." A friendship with Noor ensued and what began as a simple idea transformed into something more meaningful for both an Emirati and an American art audience. "Most of the works on show were pre-existing pieces," says Noor. "A few were commissioned, while others were on loan directly from artists or from curators. The idea was to illustrate the art history of the UAE through its artists." On display are also works made in Ajman, Dubai and Abu Dhabi – all of the emirates came together to represent the country's past and present through art.

"I think it was a surprise for the American audience," says Noor. "They were surprised to see video work as well as the diversity of

the media being used. Three generations of Emirati art were represented in the show and every artwork tells a story of its own. When you put everything in one room you can see how all of the artists have been working to make sense of the changes taking place in the UAE over time." The exhibition was ultimately a way for the American community to learn about the UAE and in so doing it was important to display works that communicated to an American viewer. "We were trying to find links to American schools of art, for example the Hudson River School that has formalist tendencies akin to the portraits of Abdulqader Al Rais and the photographs of interior spaces by Lamya Gargash," explains Noor. "If you look at the wallpaper in some of her [Gargash] photographs there are Mickey Mouse images. Others show empty rooms and demolished houses – scenes we thought would speak to an American audience because a house could be anywhere, as could elements from Pop Culture. But there is also a photograph of Lamya's Majlis work showing the interior of an Emirati home – something not common in the US." Other works include Latifa Al Maktoum's portraits showing the jewelry and *jalabiyas* worn by Emirati women relaying the message of the importance of tradition being passed down from one generation to the next.

But there is more. The exhibition serves as one layer of introduction to Emirati art while the other comprises a public program of panel discussions, school visits and workshops. "We had artists physically present to talk about their work as well as introduce the UAE," says Noor. "Other exercises included critiques with the artist and their work. It was really powerful, especially when we worked with children who didn't have access to art programs. Our target audience is not only the American art community, but also the average American. We wanted to introduce more and more people to works of art."

Beyond the power of the art on show, the overarching goal of *Past Forward* is to create an opportunity for regional, local and government institutional initiatives to foster partnerships between the US and the UAE. "Ultimately, the great partnership is to support the links between the UAE and the US – it is a big handshake that grows exponentially in different sections," says Sandberg. In all exhibitions and cultural presentations there is a narrative, but in *Past Forward* there is a particular story. "If we Americans were to tell our story to others it would be difficult because we are so stuck in our own world," adds Sandberg. "So, this is an opportunity to learn on both sides. A way to best appeal to American audiences, it touches me because the exhibition is something I would do for America – find similarities between cultures through artworks." And this visual and emotional connection through art as Sandberg so rightly states, fosters growth, cultural exchange and empathy. ■

PAST FORWARD OPENED ON 25 JANUARY AT THE FOWLER MUSEUM AT UCLA AND RUNS THROUGH 8 MARCH 2015. WWW.FOWLER.UCLA.EDU