

GALLERY



BEYOND THE *TRADITIONAL*

AB GALLERY

AB Gallery's Heidi and Franz Leupi are not only pioneers in the promotion of Contemporary Middle Eastern art in the heart of Europe. As **Julia Häcki** discovers, they are also committed to broadening the concept of the typical 'white cube' gallery, offering artist-in-residence programmes and much more.



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Heidi and Franz Leupi have been in the art business for some 20 years and have always sought adventure in far-flung places. In 2003 they established Radical Gallery in Zug, Switzerland, a space dealing with European Contemporary art, and they subsequently organised numerous exhibitions in destinations such as Singapore, Mexico City and Las Vegas. Mediating between peoples and cultures is their passion and a cause that the couple have taken to heart. "We are totally dedicated to promoting art 24-hours-a-day, seven days a week, and keep in close contact with the artists," explains Franz, who, along with his wife, places great importance on personal connections. "Our artists are family to us."

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

The couple's interest in art from the Middle East was initially aroused during the 1996 Singapore Arts Festival, where they had participated with artists from their European roster. At the time, a friend who was a Singapore-based hotel general manager, was about to relocate to Dubai and told the couple of the emirate's nascent art scene. With their curiosity piqued, the Leupis visited Dubai and went on to curate two exhibitions with German and Swiss artists in 2005 and 2006 in the city's historical quarter, Al-Bastakiya. The success of these shows, coupled with the founding spirit of the young art scene they encountered, encouraged the Leupis to toy with the idea of creating a base in Dubai, and so they began making regular visits to the region. At the time, art protagonists from all over

Facing page: Gallery Directors Heidi and Franz J Leupi in front of *No Exit*, a mixed media installation by Iranian artist Shahram Entekhabi at AB Gallery Luzern in January 2010.

Above: AB Gallery's entrance in Zurich.



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the world were keen on establishing a foothold in the emerging art scene – Dubai’s ‘gold rush’ atmosphere was attracting people from far and wide. However, the Leupis were keen on a much longer-term perspective and sought to realise a strategic vision. “There were moments when we asked ourselves what are we doing this for, why invest all this time and money?” recalls Franz, “[but we realised that] this is where it’s all happening and we wanted to go for it.”

Dubai residents had actually warned the couple against visiting the Al-Quoz district, claiming that this ‘rundown part of the city’ was an industrial maze littered with warehouses and insufficient street lighting. Al-Quoz was, however, blossoming into the city’s up-and-coming art gallery quarter. During a visit in 2006, the couple visited Dubai’s The Third Line, which was showing *Perceptions* by *Latifa College*, an exhibition by Emirati photographers. The show also marked the Leupis’ first acquisition of Emirati art. The couple then stumbled upon the works of Shahriar Ahmadi just before the Iranian artist’s vernissage at B21 Gallery (now renamed Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde; Ahmadi is now represented by Etemad Gallery). This prompted them to extend their stay so they could meet the art-

ist. One thing led to another – including a trip to Tehran to visit artist studios – and a newer, refined plan surfaced: as opposed to showcasing Middle Eastern art within the region, the Leupis decided to promote it in Europe – and so the gallery’s new direction took off. “We didn’t want to have a gallery that merely experimented with exhibiting the works of Arab or Iranian artists just because regional art happens to be trendy,” explains Franz. In 2008, Radical Gallery staged *Across Borders*, an exhibition which not only showcased works by six Iranian and Arab artists but which also marked the gallery’s last show at Radical – the space then relocated to Lucerne and was renamed using the exhibition’s initials, AB, “to suit the focus,” says Franz.

WIDENING THE NETWORK

Aside from large Middle Eastern Diasporic communities in London and Paris, regional art was barely known in the heart of Europe and *Across Borders* was a pleasant surprise to residents. “The public expected to see folkloric art,” says Franz, “but were astonished at what they found and were hugely interested.” The Leupis noticed an increased enthusiasm among the public for get-

Facing page: On wall: Hassan Sharif. *Bridges*. 2008. Oil on canvas. 200 x 145 cm. On floor: Hussain Sharif. (Detail) *Cars*. 2009. Installation comprising 160 cars made of recycled material. Variable dimensions.

Below: Shahram Entekhabi. *Converts*. 2010. Mixed media on cardboard. Five pieces. 39 x 21 cm each. Image courtesy the artist and AB Gallery Luzern/Zurich.





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ting to know the region and realised that the gallery’s role went beyond simply selling beautiful artworks. This led them to set up the Oryx Foundation (named after the iconic desert antelope), which aims to promote cultural exchanges on an ambitious scale. As a not-for-profit organisation, it is supported by the gallery and includes a variety of opportunities under one roof. All seek to build bridges, and amongst them is an artist-in-residence programme with two studios and an apartment for artists from the Middle East. “The artists can work here for several months, in an environment away from their lives back home,” says Heidi; “First and foremost, their stay is meant to give them the scope to gain new experience.” The Leupis also invite collectors to the studios to meet the artists, an approach which, says Heidi, “creates a different kind of contact”.

AB Gallery’s Lucerne space is situated in the tourist city’s artistic neighbourhood, which is developing into a vibrant cultural hub. A two-storey former factory has been converted into an arts centre staging major exhibitions; the 800 square-metre space is also the meeting point for roundtable discussions, organised regularly by the Leupis and featuring panellists from the worlds of art, culture, politics and business. Such talks, the Leupis feel, are essential to raise awareness of the region’s art and artists, especially in the face of rigid stereotyping and cultural misunderstandings. This was precisely what happened with Iranian Shahram Entekhabi’s *No Exit* performance on the Rathaus-Steg Bridge in 2011. The Berlin-based artist staged *Rhizome*, an





exhibition which focused on the classification of rules within the context of the urban space. Entekhabi draped the interior of the gallery with red-and-white barrier tape and sought to do the same with the Rathaus-Steg Bridge, situated close to the gallery. The Leupis risked being fined as they had not secured the required permissions, but went ahead anyway with the project. "After the performance was done, the press got thrilled with the news and it was covered in print media and television," smiles Franz. Incidentally, the gallery is currently showing *InterAction: Art and Media Crossing*, an exhibition featuring the works of artists from Iran, Iraq and the UAE and which tackles media issues, particularly those surrounding the 2009 protests in Iran. "Art has to be progressive," insists Franz. "Provoking for the sake of provoking is not enough for us to include artists into our programme. We work very closely with our artists and this is why we place so much value on mutual commitment."

Very early on, the Leupis understood that they were in it for the long haul. "Our definition of 'long term' was never two or three years, but 10, 20 or perhaps more," admits Franz. Despite the hyped prices achieved at auction and elsewhere

by Middle Eastern art, they practice "Swissness" says Franz – a synonym for neutrality. The gallery has recently sold works by Arab artists to a private collection in Tel Aviv, for example. "Art has nothing to do with nationalities; it speaks its own universal language," stresses Heidi.

The Leupis have no regrets about their change in direction and are happy to have focused on art from the Middle East. "The ongoing and extraordinary dynamics of the [regional] art world never fail to enthuse us," they agree; "And every year, there are so many new facets and aspects to discover." Their new 200 square-metre Zurich space, opened in 2010, allows them the opportunity to showcase experimental art by promising young talents such as Iranian-born artists Baktash Sarang and Sara Abbasian. The couples' original idea of establishing a foothold in Abu Dhabi or Dubai remains something under consideration, but for now, they are more than happy being ambassadors of the East in the West. 

For more information visit www.ab-gallery.com

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Above: Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim. *The Culture Bridge from AB Gallery Luzern to the FLYING HOUSE Dubai*. 2010. Trunk wrapped in fabric. 500 cm.

Below: Myriam Schahabian. *Limits of Control*. 2010. A two-channel video installation projected on a car, 80 clay figures, a photo collage and a miniature painting. Various dimensions. Image courtesy Felder Vogel Luzern.

Above: A view of the interior of AB Gallery Luzern with works by Mohamed Abouelnaga. From left to right: *Manuscript 16*. 2008. Mixed media on paper. 50 x 50 cm; *Manuscript 17*. 2008. Mixed media on paper. 50 x 50 cm; *Manuscript 7*. 2011. Mixed media on canvas. 50 x 100 cm; *Manuscript 21*. 2003. Mixed media on paper. 200 x 100 cm; *Manuscript 23*. 2003. Mixed media on paper. 200 x 100 cm; *Manuscript 22*. 2003. Mixed media on paper. 200 x 100 cm.

All images courtesy AB Gallery Luzern/Zurich unless otherwise specified.