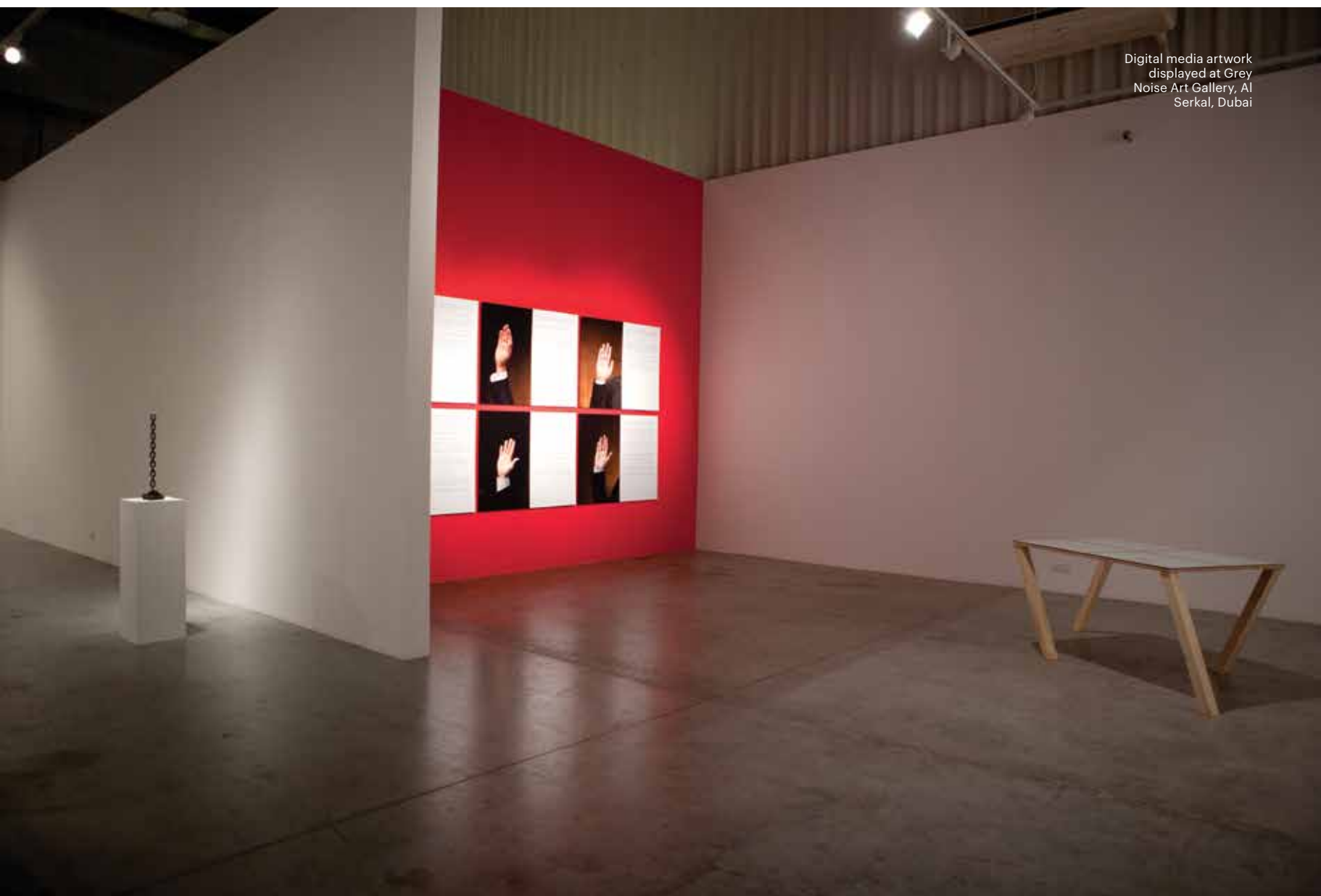


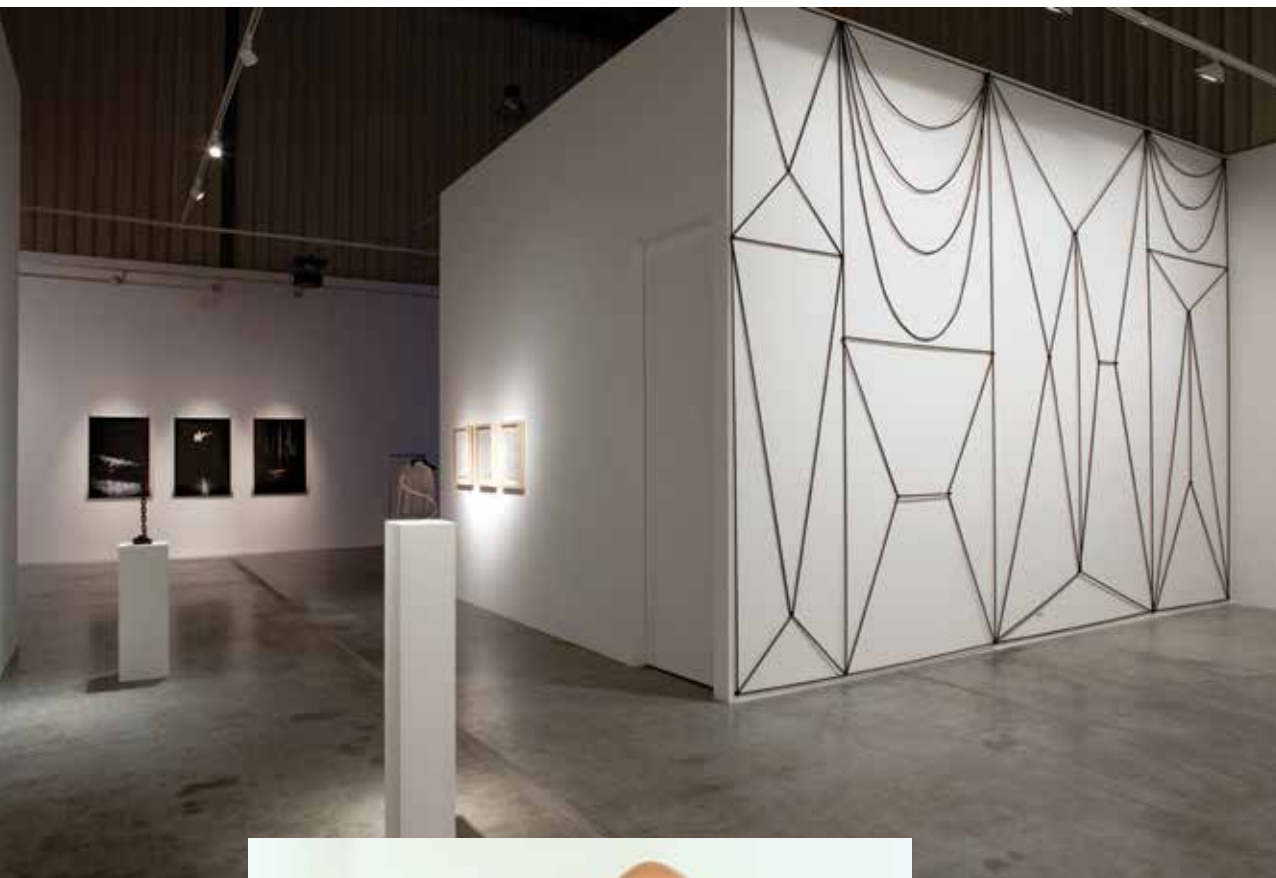
Digital media artwork
displayed at Grey
Noise Art Gallery, Al
Serkal, Dubai



When The Medium Becomes The Message

Exploring Art Dubai for sound, visuals and other forms
of digital media that are shaping the rise of the new
media culture in the Middle East.

BY PRIYANKA PRADHAN



“Many new media artists are coming, particularly from Beirut and Cairo, but also increasingly from the rest of the Gulf. It’s a growing trend and more artists and collectors are becoming interested in this form of expression.”



Clockwise from above: Digital media artwork displayed at Grey Noise Art Gallery, Al Serkal, Dubai; artist Joe Namy; artist Wafaa Bilal with his new media work; co-founders of Grey Noise art gallery, Umer Butt and Hetal Pawani



FROM THE RE-CREATION of a quaint Iranian cafe scene from the 60s using spliced up black-and-white movies, to an abstract sound artwork that enquires “Where does dance go when it dies?”, there’s a lot of new media art to be discovered at Art Dubai this year.

The regional creative community is increasingly experimenting with new media to give a fresh perspective, testing out technology and even adding a sense of humor to the somber mood that seems to permeate the regional art space today. Globally, a democratization of art has spawned the rapid growth and influence of new media art in the span of the past two decades, but in the emerging Middle East art market this liberalization of art mediums is only beginning to be explored and understood.

One cannot find a better example than inter disciplinary artist Joe Namy’s presenting his work at Art Dubai. He is using the medium of sound to explore traditional forms of dance in the UAE and the roots of electronic music.

“I feel I am working toward a new conception of listening, by re-examining the basic mechanisms for how we understand sound,” he says. “The tools and techniques I use are appropriated from everyday

technologies developed for listening. My approach to sound is mostly rooted in music, not necessarily in music itself but everything around music: history, economy, distribution, consumption, identity, etc. There are so many issues wrapped within the role of music in our society and how we listen.”

Namy is among 50 new media artists out of the 500 artists that are exhibiting their works at Art Dubai.

Antonia Carver, Fair Director of Art Dubai, says: “Many new media artists are coming, particularly from Beirut and Cairo, but also increasingly from the rest of the Gulf. It’s a growing trend and more artists and collectors are becoming interested in this form of expression. Earlier, only institutions were collecting new media art because people usually don’t think of buying a sound piece or a video



Clockwise from left: Antonia Carver, Director, Art Dubai; right and below: Artist Wafaa Bilal at work



artwork for their homes. But now more private collectors are trying to understand the medium. You can, as buyers, buy rights to reproduce new media art and have your own share in that artwork.”

Valuation for new media art usually takes into consideration the format of the number of limited editions and rights to reproduce the work. “It’s a bit hard to get your head around it because the new media artwork may be a CD which you may use and show sparingly, but then the artwork becomes even more special, because you’d be one of only three or four people in the world with the right to own, show and reproduce that CD,” Antonia adds. “It goes up in value over time, obviously, as the artist grows to be known better and as the influence of new media art grows, as well.”

This potential is attracting regional gallery curators and collectors, as is the intrigue of the new medium itself. Umer Butt, co-founder of Grey Noise, a new gallery based in Dubai, says: “Moving image is becoming an important part of contemporary art practice. It’s overlapping cinematic choreography. It’s interesting how material becomes your content. Material exploration is something I’m very interested in, and the visuals my artists are making are very diverse in their language.”

But this new-generation artwork could sustain itself in the Middle East, if it succeeds in stepping out of the “new fad” bracket. Antonia emphasizes a rise in demand from institutions and collectors within the UAE, saying: “Patrons such as Sultan Al Qasimi of Sharjah, who has been investing in video work for the Sharjah Foundation, are encouraging new media art in the country. There is demand, and the medium itself is also well suited for this region, as taking this form of art to some places in the Middle East is much easier than bigger art forms. There’s ease of transport for new media artwork which, I think, is fueling the growth and influence of this category of art, especially in the Middle East.”

More importantly, new media art is allowing artists to express themselves remotely and influence a larger audience through technology.

Iraqi-born American artist Wafaa Bilal, who is known internationally for his online performance-based and interactive works on international

politics, says: “The artist no longer needs to be confined to a specific place in order to express him or herself. The audience too needn’t be in a physical place to experience these works of art. New media allows people to create and become their own distribution channels. New media is really helping to drive social change throughout the world. People’s ability to access democracy is emphasized with mobile gadgets. I think advances in technology and mobile devices lend themselves to that trend. If we think about it, the medium becomes the message itself. It enables people to have a greater sense of connectivity. I’d call this the thumbnail generation effect.”

Some of Bilal’s most prolific work includes art created using a camera, surgically implanted on the back of his head, to spontaneously transmit images to the web, 24 hours a day, as a statement on surveillance. In 2010, in his work titled “...And Counting”, he used his own tattooed body as a medium, by depicting a map of Iraq with dots that represented Iraqi and US casualties in invisible ink, seen only under a unique black light.

But while new media art has appeal for artists and collectors, it has also faced challenges. According to Bilal, “One of the challenges for new media art is the limitations imposed on the freedom of the platform itself by limiting the access to a site or amount of activity that an individual can create online. This is a politically driven idea of censorship. For instance, you do not censor a person from broadcasting or downloading things but you do censor the amount of downloading. This is driven by larger entities beyond the public control or interest. If the platform is not censored there’s a greater opportunity for people to engage others and create work that’s not limited to a physical existing institution.”

Namy adds: “The current scope of new media art is reflective of a wider trend of culture production in the region, with artists working as best as they can in the absence of proper infrastructure. Institutional support - governmental, academic, museum and gallery spaces - for sound/art is dismally limited, and sound/art is not easily ‘monetised’ like sculpture or painting, so most of the sound artists I know are self-taught and rely on peer support, having to travel outside the region for education and exhibition opportunities.”

However, the adversity faced by new media artists is paving the way for a powerful voice. Namy says: “I’m not trying to reinforce the cliché of the struggling artist, but the lack of support forces us to be more innovative.”