

COLLECTOR PROFILE: ELIE KHOURI

by Iain Akerman

One of the most influential men in regional media, **Elie Khouri** has become what he calls a 'serious' collector during the course of the past five years and has his eyes set on some big prizes

"Look at this red box. It's something that I like a lot. It's something that summarises what we do in our business, which is making sense of chaos," says Elie Khouri with a smile and the slight hint of a laugh.

We're sitting in Khouri's office in Dubai Media City and the red box in question is Organised Chaos by Belgian conceptual artist Arne Quinze. It's one of many pieces of art, sculpture and design that pepper his office and the wider halls and corridors of the Omnicom Media Group MENA, of which Khouri is chief executive officer. In fact, he has helped make the company's regional HQ more akin to an art gallery than that of a media powerhouse.

"You know our business very well Iain and you know politically how difficult it is; how challenging it is," adds Khouri. "Art is a glimpse of hope. It's a light at the end of the tunnel. It's a passion I want to take further and eventually look at ways to take it to the next stage."



Khouri may be one of the most powerful and influential men in regional media and advertising, but he has been collecting art for years. Sculpture, photography, painting and pieces of design constitute his ever burgeoning collection, but it was only five years ago that

he became what he describes as a 'serious' collector.

"Serious collecting is when you start to buy 15 or 20 pieces at least every year," he says. "Before that I was collecting casually, buying things that I liked, but I wasn't really addicted to it. All collectors – or serious collectors – have an addiction to buying and collecting art and it gets into your blood.

"I focus on contemporary art and buy work from all over the world, as well

as from this region. I have this thing where I want to support the local art scene, so that's my drive behind buying some of the local artists' work, but mainly I'm buying international pieces, although the galleries here have, unfortunately, limited exposure to



Nabil Nahas,
Serendipity, 2013,
acrylic on canvas-
Lawrie Shabib Gallery

international work. They only support Middle Eastern, Turkish and Iranian artists and although I know some of them have relationships with international artists, I buy stuff from London, from New York, from Paris, and a lot on the web these days. The web is becoming a source of inspiration and also acquisition of artwork.”

As the regional head of OMG, Khouri oversees the operations of three leading communication planning agencies – OMD, PHD and Resolution – as well as several specialist companies and units. With a workforce of 420 people and an expanding footprint across the region, he has limited amounts of time to focus on anything outside of work. However, that hasn't stopped him from becoming a member of START's honorary committee, a non-profit organisation estab-

lished by Art Dubai. He also supports the Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon (APEAL), a non-profit organisation dedicated to showcasing and encouraging Lebanese artists.

“Art to me means beauty, connectivity and happiness,” he says. “I think about five, six, seven or eight years ago I looked at myself and said ‘Elie, you really have to start to enjoy life’. I was working, working, working and there should be life after work. I should be able to take holidays, look at beautiful things, start hobbies and what have you. So immediately, the first thing that attracted me was art collecting. It maybe goes back to the early days of my childhood when I used to watch my father, who's a chef. He always used to cook in front of me and I always used to be by his side when

he was cooking. And when he started mixing those ingredients and those colours and putting shapes together and concocting beautiful meals, this I think is when you start appreciating forms and shapes and colours. And cooking is a form of art. So maybe that's where I got it, from the family. Also, I've always been somebody who's keen on design, someone who's keen on fashion and style; I love to explore new material, I love craftsmanship. All of that is part of my personality."

For Khouri, the style and creativity of an artist's work is of the utmost importance, whilst he buys on the basis of originality. He also requires a connection with the style of the artist, with any given piece having to mean something to him.

At present he is looking to acquire pieces by Brazilian artist Vik Muniz and New York-based contemporary visual artist George Condo, although he has his eyes on bigger prizes. "I would like to eventually buy a Jean Dubuffet; I'd like to buy [a piece by] Basquiat, but these are too expensive. So you have to keep an eye on something and then when you have an opportunity you buy it."



#28 Ben-2012-Block
Print, hand printed on
paper with coffee stain
and hand painting-
Opera Miami Gallery

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His collection is spread and curated across his homes in Dubai and Beirut, the offices of OMG, and a handful of holiday properties, with the rest kept in storage and rotated when deemed necessary. "I love all the things that I own, but you have a stronger connection with certain pieces because they relate to you. So those I tend to curate in the house based on size, based on of course colour, and based on the depth of the field when viewing. Some pieces you have to see them from far, others you need to be closer to to appreciate the meaning. But it depends on the location, the depth of field, the colour schemes. This is how I curate pieces."

A regular at Frieze in London, Art Basel in Miami, and both the Dubai and Abu Dhabi art fairs, Khouri cuts a fine figure as an art collector. He researches the best galleries, seeks to further his knowledge in art, and pursues work that has originality at its core. "It's a lovely passion. It takes you away from the business side of things," he says. "You're looking at something beautiful; something so very relaxing. It's what I need. It's what I enjoy. It helps relieve the chaos." ■