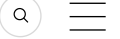


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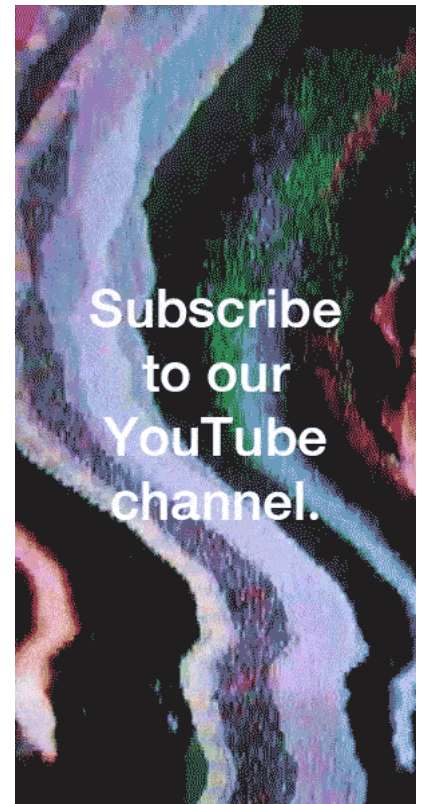
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FASHION BEAUTY CULTURE LIFESTYLE WATCHES & JEWELLERY SHOP



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Designed by UK-based Serie Architects, Jameel Arts Centre's stark white aluminium and concrete are contrasted with seven serene desert gardens.



CULTURE | ART AND DESIGN

Expo 2020 in Dubai, UAE: Explore the best of the city's arts and cultural scenes before the world's greatest show

A whole new world

Text: Aravin Sandran

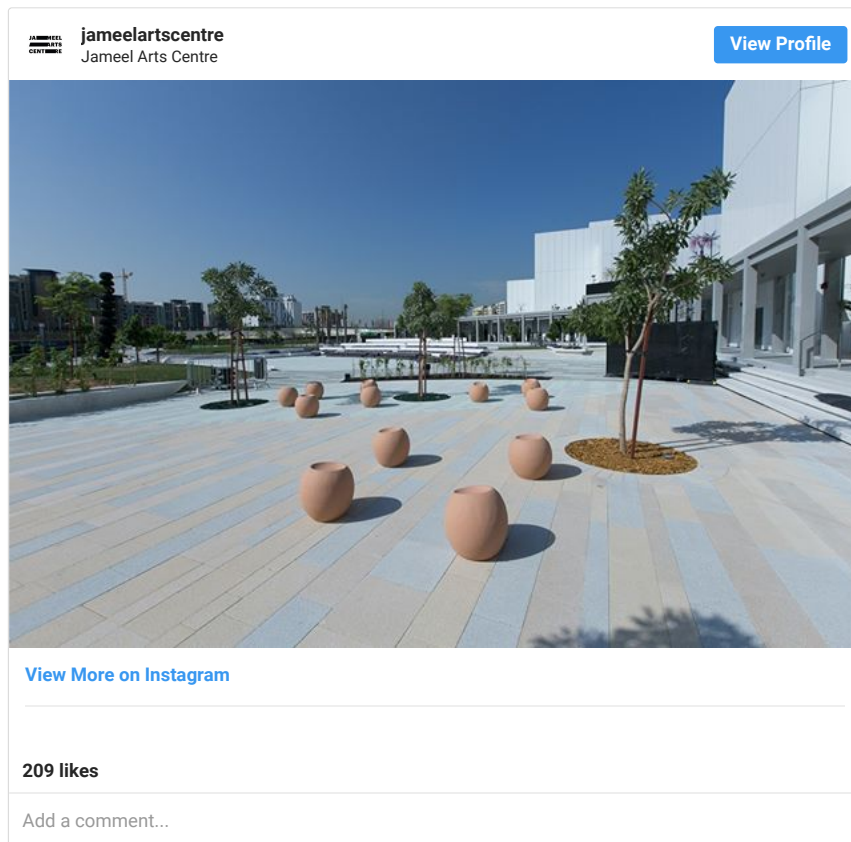
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Ask anyone in Singapore who hasn't visited Dubai about the city and they'll most probably rattle off about its [OTT skyscrapers that reach towards the heavens](#) or its conservative Sharia-based law system. Add to that, their only contact with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) state might be a flight connection on the way to Europe.

The truth is, Dubai is so much more than that. While the towering Burj Khalifa and beachside Palm Jumeirah are popular iconographies, Dubai has, in fact, a deeply tolerant and accepting culture that has allowed millions of expats from all over the

world to call it home and cash in on its tax-free policy since the 1990s. Over the last decade, though, the metropolis has moved beyond its reputation of being the well-moneyed and glossy 'Las Vegas of the Middle East' with growing arts and cultural scenes that feature both lavish starchitect-designed museums as well as ground-up movements in art, film, food, and sustainability to name a few. With Expo 2020 right around the corner, there couldn't be a better time for Dubai to counterbalance its louche and hedonistic ways.

"We consider ourselves to be the first contemporary art museum in Dubai", says Murad El Zagal, youth programmes coordinator at Jameel Arts Centre, which opened in November 2018. "It is a private collection, but a lot of the way we operate is in a non-profit manner." The arts centre has also ventured beyond its purist 'Sha'abi'-inspired whitewashed galleries with the Jaddaf Waterfront Sculpture Park, which was realised through a partnership with Dubai Holding. Until June 2020, Egyptian artist Hassan Khan's large-scale, multi-lingual musical artwork 'Composition for a Public Park' (pictured below) — which was awarded the Silver Lion at the Venice Biennale in 2017 — graces the promenade.



Strangely enough, unlike London or New York City where much of the art scene congregates near the financial heart of the city centre to attract collectors, Dubai's art scene is bolstered almost entirely by art enclave Alserkal Avenue in the gritty industrial neighbourhood of Al Quoz. Previously an expansive family-owned marble factory, it was transformed and expanded by Emirati businessman and patron Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal in 2008 into a thriving community that consists of art galleries, culinary hotspots, not-for-profit organisations, homegrown lifestyle concepts, and UAE's only vinyl record store. Manufacturing and the art of making is still very much part of its spirit, though; local bean-to-bar chocolate maker Mirzam impresses with its delectable selection of Emirati flavours that are wrapped beautifully in artist-designed wrappers.



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Arguably one of the city's best known creatives, Butheina Kazim's travelling cinema toured UAE's public spaces and took over arts venues for a few years before finding its flagship home in Dubai, in partnership with Alserkal Avenue in September 2018. The standalone single-screen arthouse cinema screens contemporary and independent films in a similar vein as Singapore's The Projector. Designed in collaboration with an artist collective, the theatre exudes the comfortable vibes of a granny's living room. Think retro wallpaper, vintage cinema seats, and mix-and-match chairs and bean bags. I caught up with her to find out more about the challenges facing the cinema and the city at large.



Founder Butheina Kazim speaks in Cinema Akil's cosy wallpapered theatre.

Do you remember a time before Alserkal Avenue existed?

It's strange, because we function right now as if we've always had this. Dubai's art scene has become richer and deeper with more depth and range for discovery and adventure even though it remains transient, fast-moving, and primarily consumerist-led. There's a sense that creatives are beginning to view Dubai as a place to stay, grow, contribute, and invest with their hearts, minds, and wallets.

Everybody who's working within these spaces are carrying some sort of major torch. They aren't just creating a community; they're doing everything from ecosystem-building, challenging legislative frameworks and policies, education, and public outreach.

Walking around Alserkal Avenue and exploring Dubai's arts and cultural scenes, I've noticed that there are more than a few of artworks and exhibitions right now that touch on gender and feminism. Would you consider Cinema Akil part of that movement?

Absolutely, we are a feminist-centered space. Most of our team consists of women and that carries through in our programming, which is centered around films that are about and by women, especially women of colour from the region. This is something that we've been conscious of and very proud to continue to push.

As an art house cinema, the topics that you touch on could potentially be quite difficult. What has your experience been like, in terms of censorship?

Cinema Akil is a homegrown concept and we wish to be very mindful of the local sensitivities, apprehensions, and cultural parameters that exist here. We work very closely with the National Media Council to make sure our films are screened beforehand. On the flip side, I believe our role is to push back and challenge the types of films that are being shown here. We want to continue doing this work in the

long-term so we believe in small incremental changes through the language of cinema that raises awareness and broadens consciousness.

In what ways do you hope Dubai's art and cultural scenes will evolve in the future?

It is important that Dubai remains a space for artists and designers to be able to live and create. That has been one of the biggest challenges that all of our institutions face. The talent and content that we are working with are not made by people who live here. For instance, whenever we want to profile a filmmaker, we have to fly them in but we don't receive the same sort of engagement because there isn't a natural creator base here. It also becomes a lot more expensive. Hopefully, it will change with the introduction of the new artist visa. Another challenge is, making it more affordable for cultural enterprises to operate and exist here in terms of legislation, licensing, zoning, and the costs associated with it. It's not the most colourful aspect, but the sustainability of the cultural scene lies in these details.

I would also like to see Dubai and its neighbouring states find original voices of their own through indigenous and regional practices rather than replicating art communities and markets in other countries.

I hope public funding also takes shape not only for the creation of creative brick-and-mortar spaces, but also programming so that we can see sustainable growth.

Buro. recommends...

Alserkal Avenue

Spanning 500,000 square feet, [this cultural district hosts a vibrant community of art and cultural organisations](#) and offers one-of-a-kind experiences including the Quoz Arts Fest, which happens next on 24 and 25 January 2020.

alserkalavenue.ae

Art Dubai

The Middle East's leading art fair brings together the region's best galleries, artists, and collectors. The next edition takes place from 25 to 28 March 2020.

artdubai.ae

Bateel

This renowned gourmet boutique's selection of premium dates make the perfect gift.

bateel.com

Frying Pan Adventures

Indulge at the city's hidden culinary spots during themed walking feasts that are led by well-informed insiders.

fryingpanadventures.com

Jameel Arts Centre

This independent institution exhibits contemporary art from its extensive private collection alongside bold outdoor commissions on the Jaddaf waterfront.

jameelartscentre.org

Platinum Heritage Desert Safari

Discover Dubai's picturesque desert landscape and native wildlife while riding in a vintage 1950 Land Rover in this sustainable safari experience.

platinum-heritage.com

Sheik Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding

Tuck into traditional Emirati cuisine while getting all your questions about Dubai's culture answered in a safe and open environment.

cultures.ae

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