

ART WITHOUT BORDERS

MUHAMMAD YUSUF **PROFILES A SWISS NATIONAL FOR WHOM ART IS WHAT ART DOES**

Garance Massart-Blum is a familiar smiling face in UAE's art circles. Co-resident of snowy Zurich, Switzerland and sunny Dubai, she is the owner, along with partner Milena Brendle-John, of Massart Brendle Art Curating and Advising (MBACA), an art advisory that provides a wide range of art services and creates bespoke tailor made art programmes, individual projects and events for a bewildering array of clients.

She was recently in Dubai where she squeezed out time from her punishing schedule to speak to Time Out about everything under the art sun. To begin with, there was no ice to be cracked, since she "loves this country" and has been living here since more than a decade ago, when Dubai Marina was still a construction site.

"Dubai is a big, growing city, and the art scene is flourishing," she said. According to her, the emirate is living history and will move further. "There is still a lot to be done. There is a need more public art," she said, encouraged by the fact that corporates have now begun collecting art.

MBACA's services layers colours across the whole canvas and include, besides arts acquisition and arts sourcing, commissioning site specific art works for public and private spaces and logistic management, including shipping, installation, storage, insurance and maintenance of art-works. It also develops collection databases and cataloguing systems for inventories.

Before establishing her company, Massart-Blum worked for nearly a decade as an art consultant and independent curator in Europe and in the Middle East. With a double Bachelor's Degree of Arts in History of Art and International Relations from Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, USA where she received a distinction for her dissertation, she also holds a Postgraduate Degree in Art Curating from Zurich University of the Arts (ZHDK).



Garance Massart-Blum

She does not set any store by the stereotypical image of Switzerland as a land of time-pieces and cheese. "There are more art collectors in Switzerland than anywhere else in the world!" she exclaimed. She ticked the following boxes that make the country an art destination: there are innumerable foundations, insurance companies and banks like UBS and Julius Baer, which are big collectors.

Switzerland has an enviable art background too. The Dada movement, with its anti-war art politics, began in Zurich in the 1910s. Switzerland is of course also the home of Alberto Giacometti, renowned sculptor, draughtsman and printmaker and the colourist Paul Klee. Despite the relatively

small number of internationally famous artists, there are considerable art collections in renowned museums around Switzerland, including provincial ones.

A specialist in contemporary art dating from the 1960s to now and also classical modern art, Massart-Blum keeps a keen eye on every school of art, created in Europe, America or the Middle East. Conceptual art, installations and videos are fair game. "I have a lot of portraits in my house," she added smilingly, completing the circle.

How does she reconcile these variations? "I like extremes!" was her explanation. Right now, she is doing up a new headquarters for a big corporate house in Europe with 20,000 employees, by buying art

for it. "It is important for staff to be surrounded by beautiful art," she said. Convincing clients is not an easy job and client servicing is a subtle and delicate art, with many sensitive touch points. One has to look at the taste, budget and age of the buyer or collector.

"Some want emerging artists while some want Picasso!" she said. "I have to see what the client wants." She tops up her knowledge by going to art fairs (as many as possible), following new artists, keeping track of the prizes they win and by visiting studios. "How can you sell what you do not know?" she asked.

The result is ceaseless travelling. "Like doctors, art advisors have to learn new techniques from conferences," she said. "I am always moving, since new artists are always emerging." Multi-lingual, she can switch effortlessly between French, German, English and Spanish. Her favourite artist is Francis Bacon, whose "distorted characters, fleshy absurdity and social questioning" she finds arresting. "I used to go to Tate Gallery when I was ten," she said, "and look at him in awe."

She would like to think of Dubai as an art hub, important for the region, though not as an art city. "Art cities like New York, Paris, Berlin or London have thousands of artists, while Dubai is a place where history is still in the making," she said.

Among her hot picks in the region are Iranian calligraphy, Iraq-born UK-based architect Zaha Hadid, Iran-born US-based visual artist Shirin Neshat, Iranian painter Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Saudi photographer Maha Malluh and Athr Gallery of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. In fact, she is already gathering Athr artists for a massive European project.

"I am giving back to society by promoting art," she said. "Art inspires, asks questions and explains things. Art creates encounters, allows people to escape and enhances lifestyles. Art communicates."

Photograph: Prashanth Mukandan

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