

family AFFAIR

With a new headquarters in Dubai, The Jean-Paul Najar Foundation showcases the curative genius of its founder

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With the expansion of Al Serkal Avenue and the increase in the number of international galleries present in Dubai, the Al Quoz hub is now the Middle East leading pole of the arts. Amongst the newcomers, the Jean-Paul Najar Foundation stands apart. For one, it is not a gallery, but, in the words of Deborah Najar, the founder's daughter and head of the Foundation, a "mini-museum", the first in Dubai to present a collection of purely Western art. The collection is also unique in the period that it represents - conceptualist, postmodern American and European art - and the fact that many of the works that compose it have never been seen by the public. And perhaps the most remarkable of all is a certain belief - a guiding thread so to speak - that ties the artworks of the Foundation together: one man's collecting ethos that placed the human bond between artist and collector above the simple act of collecting.

Jean-Paul Najar began collecting art in the late 1960s and never stopped. Collecting was for him a primal need and brought him, in his own words, "satisfaction of the spirit". Active first on the Paris art scene, Najar quickly came to look cross-Atlantic, to artists such as Linda Francis and Lynn Umlauf. A communicator before a collector, he is known for having flown artists from North America to France for a chat, a hang-out, a possible purchase and the beginning of a life-long friendship. In time, this naturally sociable approach meant that a creative society formed and gravitated around him, people who came together to discuss art, philosophy, music. The collection he built over the next five decades was a collection premised on these exchanges; on a genuine interest for the work of artists as people and on the value of personal relationships. In this, Najar shares with a handful of other seminal collectors throughout the ages, the unsought privilege of re-defining the very concept of "art collecting", away from notions of "acquiring" and more akin to "passionate encounters with life".

Deborah says: "We see ourselves very much as implementing his

life-long vision", adding that "my father was very much about bringing people together. The decision to share the collection, which we will build on through an active program of acquisitions, is a way of ensuring that he continues to build these bridges". She sees the Foundation doing so based on three main responsibilities: "First is a responsibility toward the collection itself, and toward sharing it with the public in its entirety." For this, the Foundation plans a roster of three exhibitions per annum to both introduce the various European and American artists and chart the evolution and impact of conceptualist, post-modern Art. In addition, the Foundation plans to partner with institutions and collectors when needed to provide a complete visual and educational experience for the public. A partnership with the ESMOA museum in California will help train the Foundation's educators, opening the door for school and university visits and guided tours.

Many of the artists that figure prominently in the collection are still alive, and the Foundation's second responsibility is toward introducing their works to ever wider audiences. "This was especially important to my father, and something he actively promoted throughout this life," Deborah adds.

As visitors will discover, there is more than just artwork on display at the Jean-Paul Najar Foundation, there is also the art of collecting. And this is fitting, as the third responsibility Deborah sees the Foundation fulfilling is one toward collectors themselves. A meticulous and conscientious collector, her father bequeathed the Foundation complete records of his various communications with "his" artists: letters, photographs, receipts and media articles - inspiring, thought-provoking insights into the passion of collecting that tell the story of how Jean-Paul Najar was, in fact, living the experience of collecting more than he was collecting artworks.

The Foundation's opening this March coincides with a renewal of collecting enthusiasm in the Middle East, and the example set by Jean-Paul Najar can only be beneficial to those wishing to absorb the possibilities that come with nurturing a real passion for art, but also, and more significantly, for the creators of art themselves.