

REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIENT GALLERY

FEATURE: NAHLA AL TABBAA. PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF THE ORIENT GALLERY

The Orient Gallery's Hala Jardaneh Tieby shares her experiences with Amman's evolving art scene.



Hala Jardaneh Tieby, founder of the Orient Gallery

Patrons of the Orient Gallery will be familiar with the way it has helped shape Amman's cultural landscape for the last 18 years. Modestly working behind its doors sits the founder, Hala Jardaneh Tieby, who has impacted the development of both Amman's visual art scene and some of the city's success stories.

Surprisingly, to those who know of Hala and her work, her undeniable passion for the arts did not stem into a career immediately. Her skills as an accountancy graduate helped provide a practical foundation to her artistic skill set. We sat down with her hoping to understand how her business thrives, who are the artists she supported in their early careers, the effects of the Gulf art scene on Amman and reflect on her most memorable exhibitions.

As the art scene in Jordan evolved, Hala's insight into the market from a business perspective sheds light onto the state of the art

scene today, particularly her exposure to the Gulf's spending power. She explains how Amman's scene benefits from this new power and also notes some of the inherent challenges that have arisen simultaneously.

She believes that the quality, artistic skills and expression available have undoubtedly improved, evolved and that audiences have grown better prepared to appreciate them. "The Gulf has made collectors learn how to buy good art by good artists. But the manner in which The Gulf has done so has also upset the market in many ways. Artists can no longer bring their prices down from established market rates set by auction houses, and this is not helpful to the Jordanian market at this stage in its evolution."

Additionally, she is all too aware of the problems that come from the marketisation of creativity, highlighting the fundamental



Orient Gallery showroom

question – is a work worth the price it is sold at or not? Hala maintains that the balance between creativity and selling can be made through experience, intelligence and honesty. “The collector needs to accept the price,” she maintains, “but if the artist’s work is not worth the \$10,000 on the price tag, perhaps not even \$1,000 in my own eye, I will have to look at the price range again.”

Despite these challenges Hala asserts that her “passion is for the art and the artist, not for the profit. It takes a long time to build a reputation amongst artists and collectors – one has to be extremely patient,” she stresses to those thinking about going into the gallery business.

It is through translating the creative ideology into practical business skills that Hala has fostered the careers of many of the region’s successful artists today. The distinctive linear stylings of Fadi Daoud burst through the public veil, thanks in no small part to his first two exhibitions at the Orient Gallery in 2003 and 2004.

Beirut’s Georges Bassil was lured to Amman too with *Sweet November*, in 2004, whilst he was still on the road to international renown. The solemn artistic sensitivities of Syria’s Sabhan Adam were also supported with an exhibition at the Orient Gallery, in 2000. Hala’s endeavour to bring international names to Amman signifies her deep passion to help talented Arab artists find success on a global stage.



1. Acrylic on canvas by Hilda Hiary

She speaks of world-renowned jeweller and friend Azza Fahmy for whom Orient Gallery is an agent. Initially Hala had reservations in working with the commercially successful Egyptian designer. "I believed at the time that a gallery was about displaying artwork...I realised that her work was art – that she wasn't just a jewellery designer, but a true artist."

Hala recalls one of her most memorable group exhibitions, *Children of Gaza* (2013), introduced a new layer of expression into the gallery. "It meant so much to me, because it had a worthy cause," she says. Another, *Wadi Rum Retreat: East and West Meet Around a New Compass* (2006), transcended the gallery space from its roots as a collaborative union of many great artists across continents in scenic Wadi Rum; it was a process she thoroughly enjoyed. The first exhibition in the new Abdoun location, in 2011, celebrated a plethora of artists with whom Hala has developed close relationships with over the years.

This relocation not only signified the gallery's success, but also became a physical sign of the growth of Amman's artistic community and the ability to combat the city's limitations. "I was looking for a new space, away from the traffic, with independence. As soon as I



2. Oil on canvas by Serawan

“MY PASSION IS FOR THE ART AND THE ARTIST, NOT FOR THE PROFIT”



3. Acrylic on canvas by Mohammad Al



4. Paintings and sculptures on



5. A collection of art on exhibit at the

saw the curves of the house, the architecture of the space, I felt it. This was the place." With the move, she finally felt liberated enough to showcase the gallery's long-term collection on a separate floor, honouring success with permanency instead of the fleetingness of temporary displays or stagnation in basement storage boxes.

To know Hala professionally, or personally, is to understand just how hard working and insightful she is. Hala was quick to recognise the importance of marketing through social media, magazines and the press. "In 1996 there were no emails, social media, SMS. Communicating with collectors involved picking up the phone and sending cards," she reflects and continues to invest in the opportunities provided online today.

Even still Hala explains: "it is difficult to identify the collector market here and it is equally difficult to target all those collectors at a local level." Despite every marketing campaign and effort, the Amman "audience is still very niche," she adds.

In a constantly developing marketplace, and with the impact of the very politics that inspire the region's artists, Hala provides guidance to those looking to expand on her work. "One major rule is to never push for sales. The collector has to love the painting when they want to buy it, but you must always remember the truth behind the situation – that they have the right to simply look at the artwork, without necessarily buying it, and enjoy an exhibition as an educational experience," she says. "You can't convince them".

Perhaps it is the abiding ethos to her staff that symbolises her road to success the best. "As long as we do our job, really well, the rest is out of our hands, but we must always try our best nonetheless."



6. Oil on canvas by Ghassan