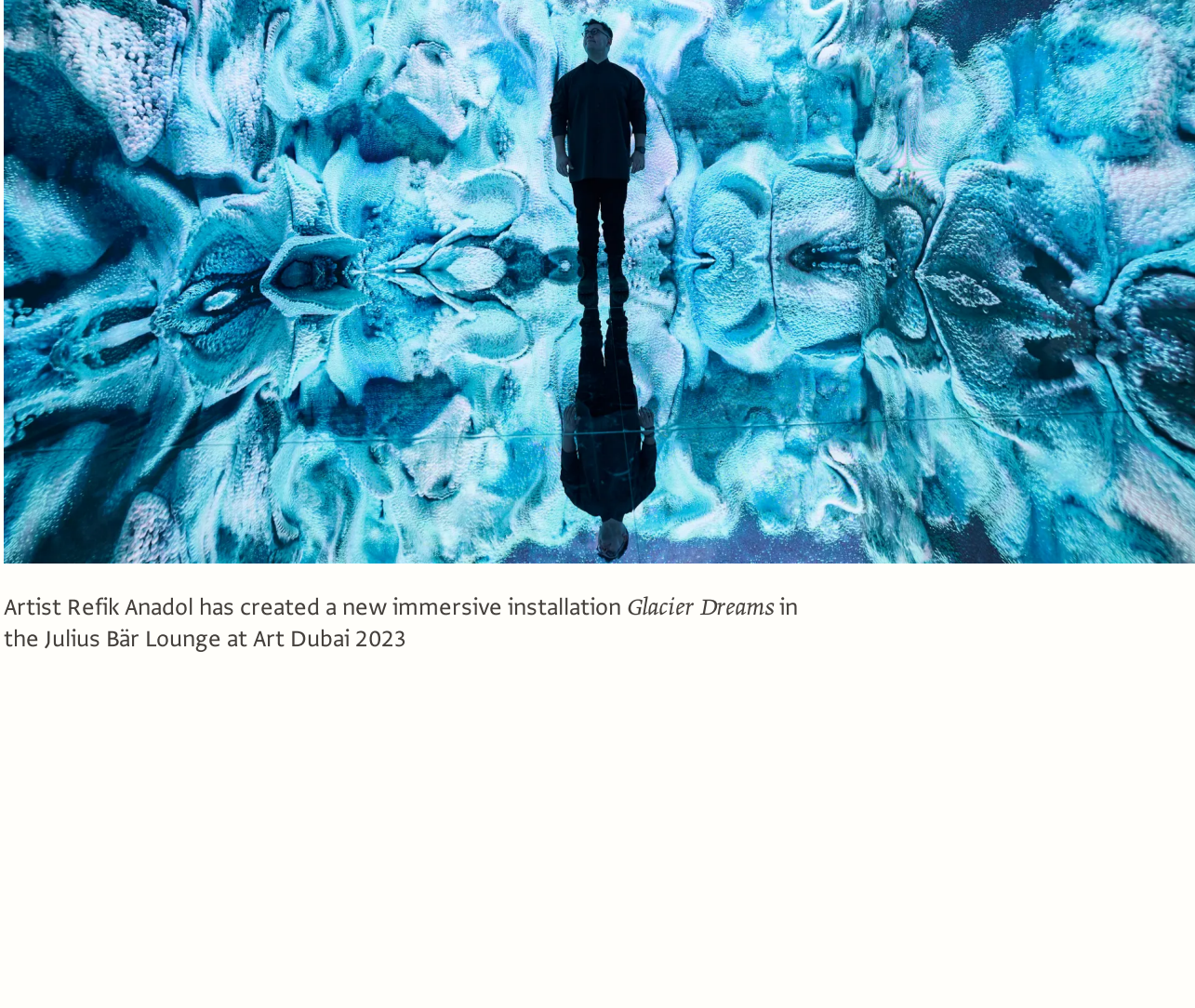


Art Dubai  
Analysis

## Art Dub-AI: artificial intelligence is latest buzzword at fair

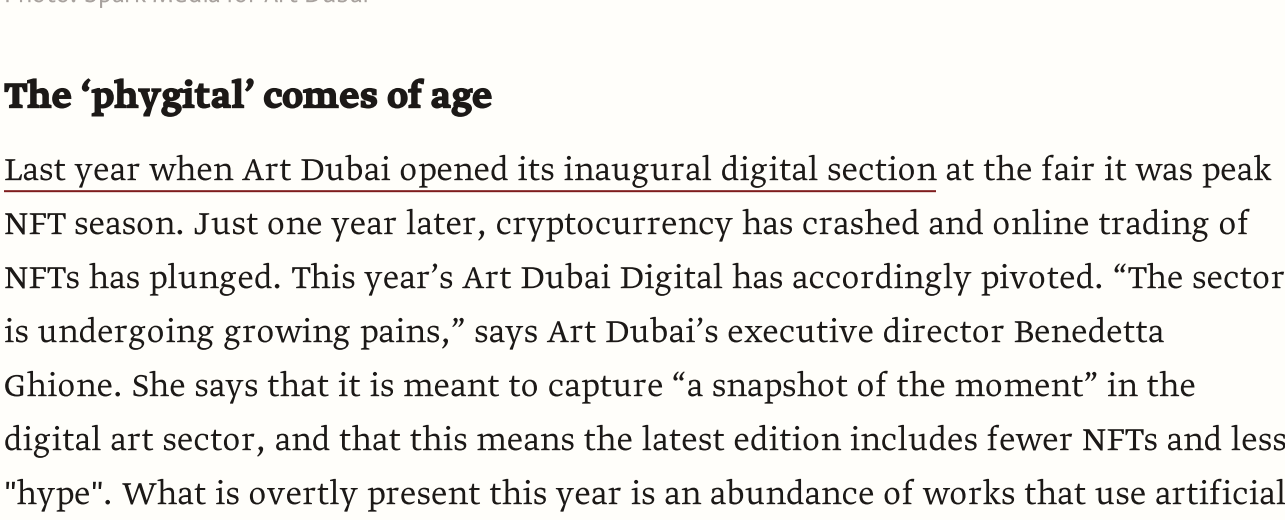
The event's 16th edition has an expanded digital section—here's what sold so far



Artist Kelli Anadol has created a new immersive installation *Clarice Dreams In* the Julius Bär Lounge at Art Dubai 2023

Art Dubai (until 5 March) is always a momentous occasion in the local glitterati calendar, and this year is no exception. Returning to the luxury Madinat Jumeirah hotel with an even bigger edition than last year—130 exhibitors compared to 100—there was an upbeat vibe within the swelling crowds. But were they buying or just sipping free Ruinart? Dubai's business is booming thanks to an influx of foreign—reportedly Russian—money and the dealers at the fair were optimistic that sales would reflect that.

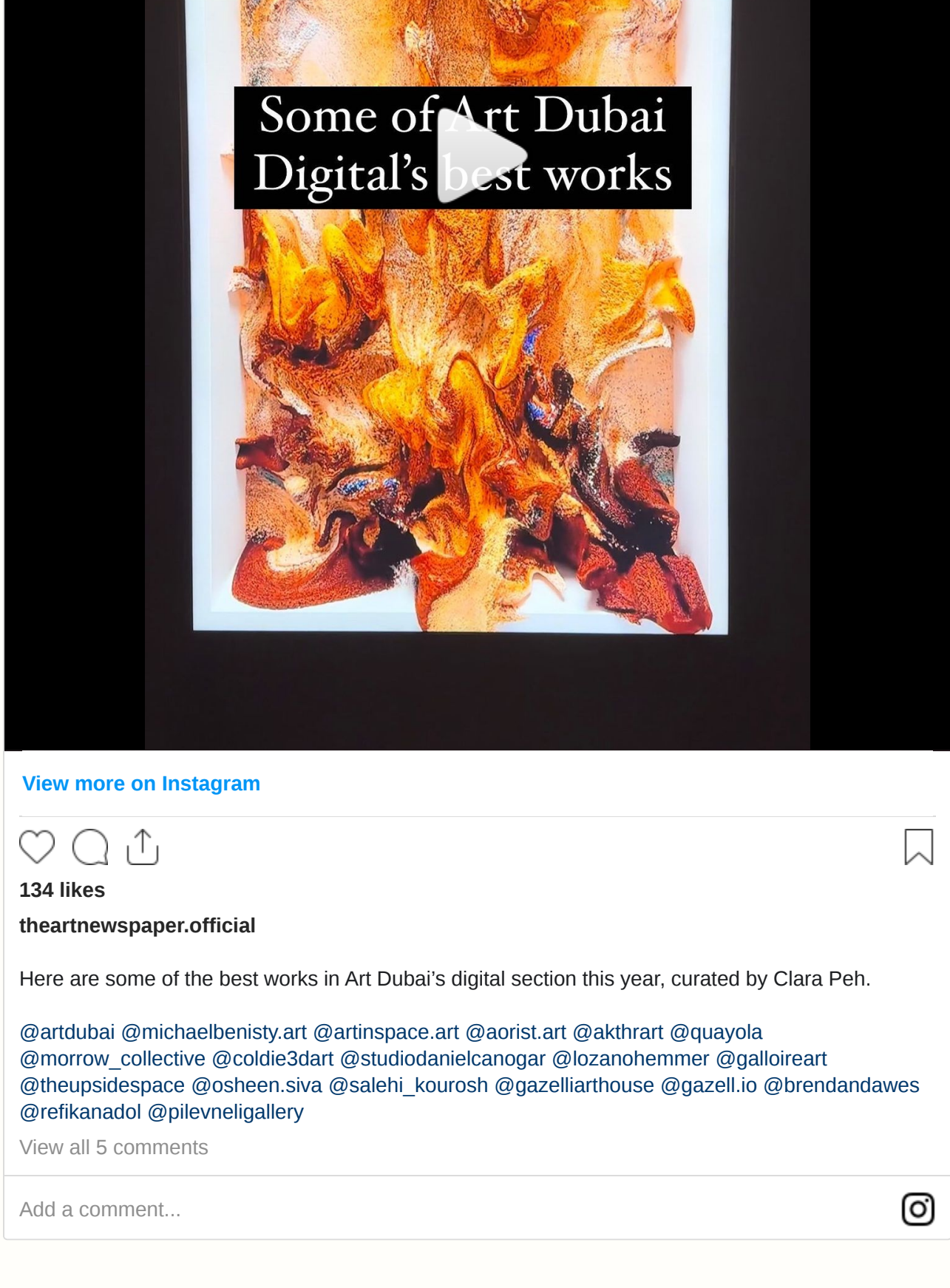
The art fair focuses on art from the Global South—a term broadly denoting Latin America, Africa, Asia and Oceania, and which the fair's commissioner for the talks programme Global Art Forum, Shumon Basari, points out was not readily accepted when the fair began using it ten years or so ago. This year it has increased participation from leading African and South Asian dealers and an expanded Art Dubai Digital section, which launched last year. “Art Dubai spotlights the Global South in a way that no other fair does,” says Nadine Abdel Ghaffar, the founder of Egyptian art company Art d’Egypte, who attended the VIP preview.



An exterior view of Art Dubai 2023 at Madinat Jumeirah hotel  
Photo: Spink Media for Art Dubai

### The ‘phygital’ comes of age

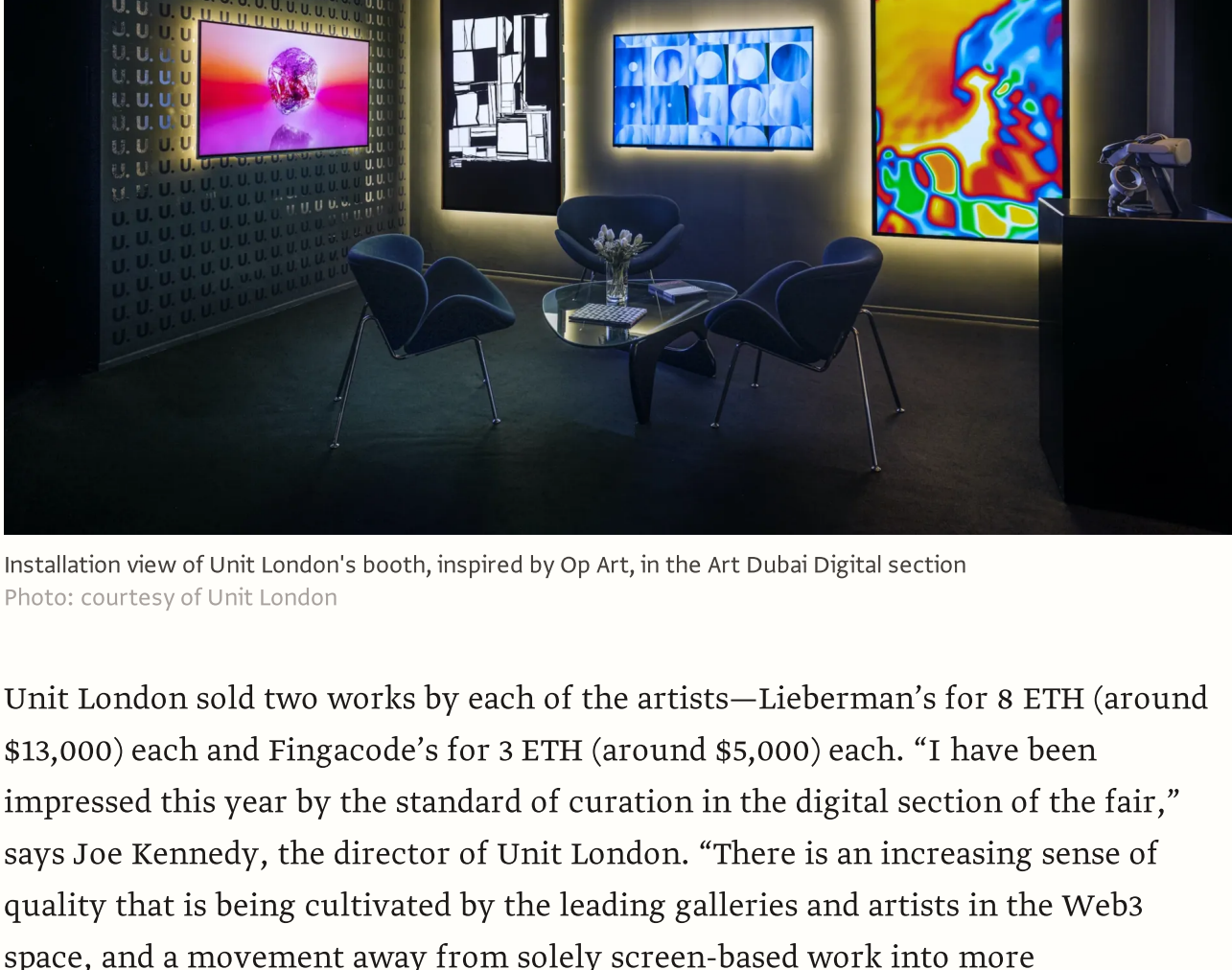
Last year when Art Dubai opened its inaugural digital section at the fair it was peak NFT season. Just one year later, cryptocurrency has crashed and online trading of NFTs has plunged. This year's Art Dubai Digital has accordingly pivoted. “The sector is undergoing growing pains,” says Art Dubai's executive director Benedetta Ghione. She says that it is meant to capture “a snapshot of the moment” in the digital art sector, and that this means the latest edition includes fewer NFTs and less “hype”. What is newest present this year is an abundance of works that use artificial intelligence (AI), the overtly digital buzzword. “While AI has been here for decades, it feels as if it arrived a week ago,” quipped Basari at the press conference.



It appeared that the so-called ‘Crypto Winter’ may be thawing in sunny Dubai, promising a possible ‘Crypto Spring’.

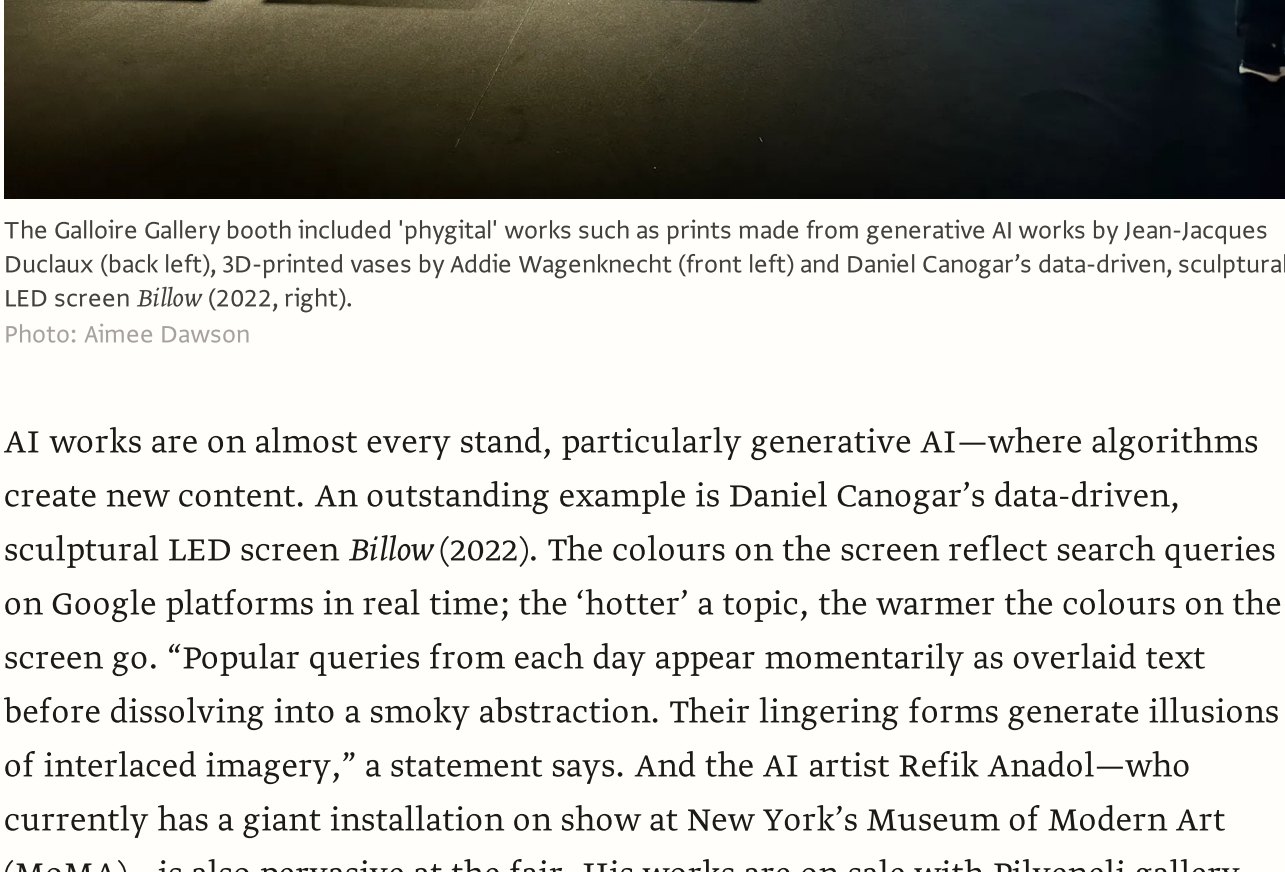
The section—that has 22 exhibitors compared to 17 in 2022, four of which are returning organisations, and is located in a separate building from the rest of the galleries—feels more curated this year and more alive to art historical context, tackling the impression that digital art is brand new. The fair uses the word ‘phygital’—a combination of physical and digital—to describe this hybrid approach, and this year the section certainly had more emphasis on the ‘phy’.

The gallery Gazall Art House is showing a series of AI works by the artist Brendan Dawes, who has been working digitally for the past 30 years, and Unit London Gallery are showing colourful geometric works by artists including Zach Lieberman and Fingacode that reflect the legacy of Op Art. This framing is in part the work of the curator of the section Clara Che Wei Peh, a Singapore-based writer and curator specialising in NFTs and digital art, particularly of the Global South. Sales in the digital section seemed much stronger on the VIP days this year—it appeared that the so-called ‘Crypto Winter’ may be thawing in sunny Dubai, promising a possible ‘Crypto Spring’.



Installation view of Unit London's booth, inspired by Op Art, in the Art Dubai Digital section  
Photo: courtesy of Unit London

Unit London sold two works by each of the artists—Lieberman's for 8 ETH (around \$13,000) each and Fingacode's for 3 ETH (around \$5,000) each. “I have been impressed this year by the standard of curation in the digital section of the fair,” says Joe Kennedy, the director of Unit London. “There is an increasing sense of quality that is being cultivated by the leading galleries and artists in the Web3 space, and a movement away from solely screen-based work into more multidisciplinary presentations that span virtual reality (VR), extended reality (XR), sculpture, projections, performance and installations—really pushing the boundaries of what people envisage ‘digital art’ to be.”

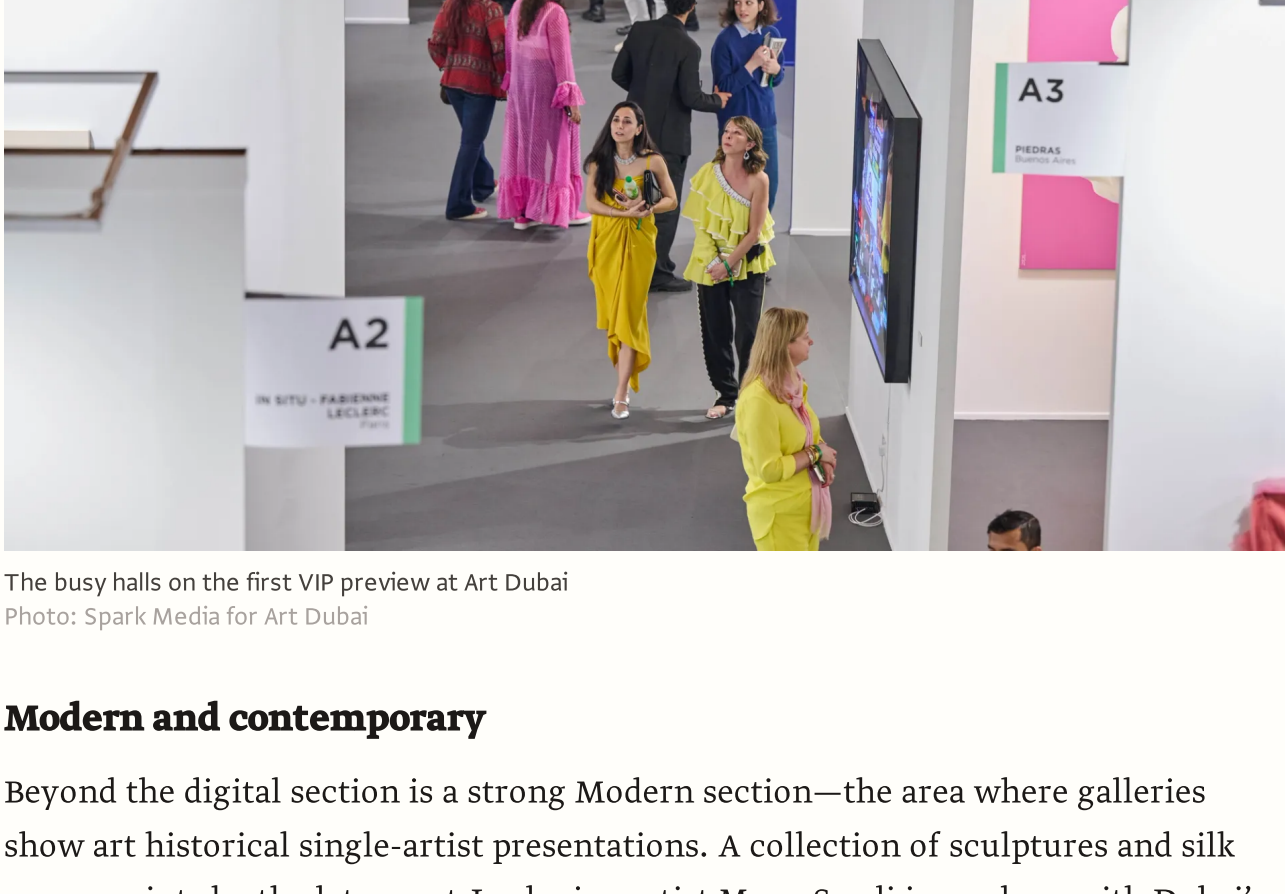


The Galleries booth included ‘phygital’ works such as prints made from generative AI works by Jean-Jacques Duciaux (back left), 3D-printed vases by Addie Wagenlechner (front left) and Daniel Canogar's data-driven, sculptural LED screen *Willow* (2022, right).  
Photo: Aimee Dawson

AI works are on almost every stand, particularly generative AI—where algorithms create new content. An outstanding example is Daniel Canogar's data-driven, sculptural LED screen *Willow* (2022). The colours on the screen reflect search queries on Google platforms in real time: the ‘hottest’ a topic, the warmer the colours on the screen go. “Popular queries from each day appear momentarily as overlaid text before dissolving into a smoky abstraction. Their lingering forms generate illusions of interlaced imagery,” a statement says. And the AI artist Refik Anadol—who currently has a giant installation on show at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)—is also pervasive at the fair. His works are on sale with Pilvenli gallery for between \$100,000 and 200ETH (around \$380,000) and his immersive commission in the Julius Bär VIP lounge of the main fair regularly had queues out the door (despite the critic Jerry Saltz describing Anadol's MoMA work as a “Glorified Lava Lamp” ☹️).

The digital section felt more confident this year—Ghione agrees that it is slicker and has experienced less of the technological hiccups that came with launching a new cutting-edge exhibition. Competition for a place in the section was also much tougher says Anna Seaman, the co-founder and curator of MORROW Collective, which returned to the digital section this year. It is presenting one booth of art from leading regionally based artists and a second booth, in collaboration with VISA, “showing some of the biggest names in crypto internationally”, Seaman says.

On the VIP days, the gallery sold 36 of their 300 sets—a bundle package of art from the six artists showing in its UAE First Immersion display—for \$950 each. The collections are open for the general public to purchase from 3 to 5 March. UAE NFT reported the most sales in the section: 1,031 NFTs of Alexis Christodoulou's *Discreet Landscapes* series were sold for \$320 each, and one for \$3,200 as well as six physical works for \$2,500. It also sold 210 NFTs of Jason Seife's *A Modern Genesis* for \$320 each (it is important to note that these works are for sale online simultaneously, so not all of these sales will have been made at the fair).



The busy halls on the first VIP preview at Art Dubai  
Photo: Spink Media for Art Dubai

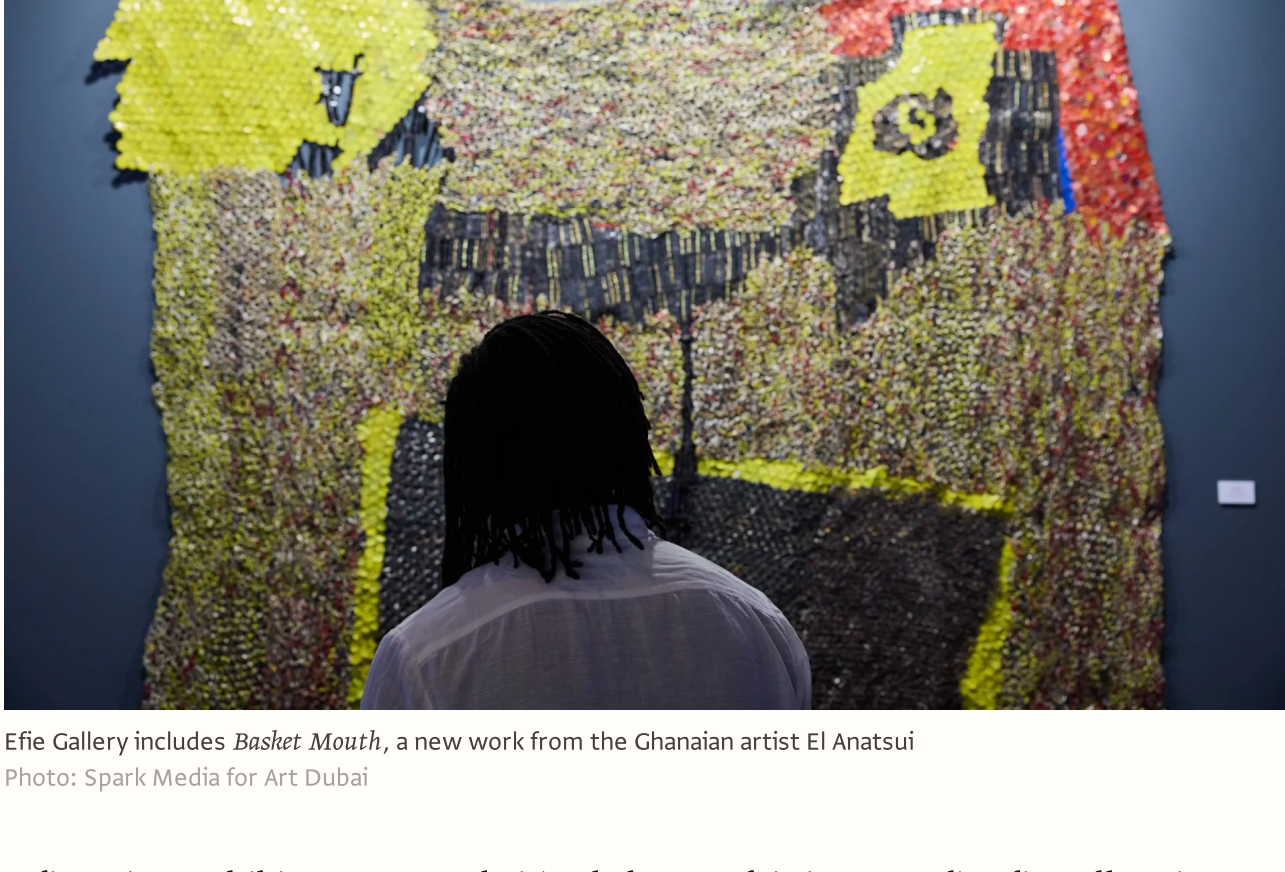
### Modern and contemporary

Beyond the digital section is a strong Modern section—the area where galleries show art historical single-artist presentations. A collection of sculptures and silk screen prints by the late great Jordanian artist Mona Saudi is on show with Dubai's Lawrie Shabibi gallery. Most of the works are from the late 1970s and 80s, and incorporate texts by Mahmoud Darwish—the famed Palestinian poet who was a friend of the artist. The display includes Saudi's never-seen-before sketchbooks and drawings, which offer an incredible insight into the artist's practice and process. Seven pieces sold for \$18,000 each and the sculpture *Plenitude* (1998) sold for \$160,000 to an international collector. Other stellar presentations included works by the Syrian-German painter Marwan, with Sfeir Semler gallery; the Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, with The Third Line gallery; and the Ghanaian photographer James Barnor at October Gallery. Gallery One sold two works in their Modern section on the VIP days, with one work by Samir Salameh selling for \$40,000 to an Emirati collector.



A collection of works by the Jordanian artist Mona Saudi are on show with Dubai's Lawrie Shabibi gallery  
Photo: Aimee Dawson

The contemporary section—normally the most popular and expensive category for art—felt a little flat this year and sales on the VIP days seemed to reflect that. Nonetheless, the London-based gallery Kristin Hjellegjerde sold seven pieces at the preview to individual collectors based in Dubai, the Middle East and Europe, including Nasir Tanbouli's *Magical Encounter* (2022) for \$25,000, Kimathi Mafafo's *Your Gate Tells a Story I* (2023) for \$12,000 and Bea Bonifini's *Pendulum Soul* (2022) for \$20,000. The Istanbul gallery Dirimart sold two works: Seckin Pirim's *Not a Mirror* (2022) for \$40,000 and Peter Zimmermann's *Mays* (2016) for €35,000 (around \$86,400). The Dubai gallery Taheri—which is showing a selection of young artists from the Gulf: Nasser Almulhim, Ziad Al Najjar and Hsabel Al Lamki—sold ten works in total ranging from \$2,000 to \$15,000.



Efa Gallery includes *Asheh Mouth*, a new work from the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui  
Photo: Spink Media for Art Dubai

A first-time exhibitor at Art Dubai (and also at a fair in general), Efa Gallery is run by a Ghanaian family team: Valentina Mintah and her sons Kobi and Kwame Mintah. The gallery opened last year in Dubai's new Al Quoz Creative Zone, close to the well-established Alserkal Avenue district that is full of galleries and creative enterprises. “It's been great to see high numbers of international collectors, curators and museum directors in Dubai alongside the UAE arts community who have championed galleries like ours from the start,” says Kwame Mintah, the gallery's director. “We decided to show two generations of artists on our booth to create a bridge between some of the pioneers of the contemporary African art scene like El Anatsui and rising talent like Isshaq Ismail and have noticed different generations of collectors with diverse interests also coming into the fair.”

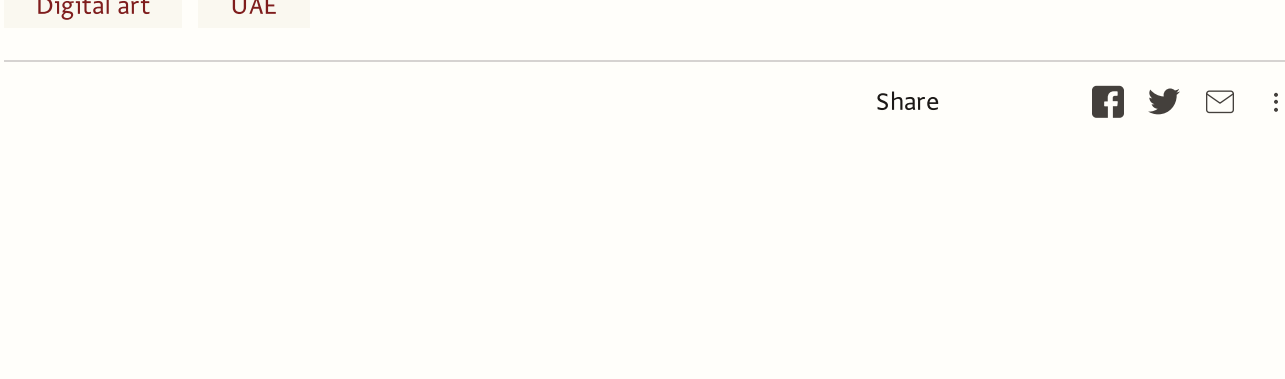
The booth included *Basket Mouth*, a new work from the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui—who was announced last week as the next artist for Tate's huge Turbine Hall commission later this year. It remained unsold on the VIP days but the gallery did report some early sales: Aboulaye Konaté's *Etude de vert Touraig AK# 7* (2018) for \$52,000 and Naila Opiangah's *Les dupes et les chanceux* (2023) for \$10,000 and several works were on reserve.

### Luxury life

Luxury goods—an everyday commodity for many in the emirate—are always present at the fair but this year has seen the French beauty and fragrance brand Guerlain join the list of the fairs sponsors. It held an exhibition outside the main fair halls, tied to the 170th anniversary of Guerlain's “Bee Bottle” for perfume, which fairgoers have to walk through to get from one hall of exhibitors to another. It joins other luxury sponsors including BMW, the jewellery house Boghosian, the champagne company Ruinart and the Swiss wellness centre Clinique La Prairie. The new sponsorship is another financial boost alongside fresh five-year commitments from the current partners, the investment firm ARM Holding and the Swiss wealth management group Julius Baer—although as a part-public, part-private company the fair doesn't depend on these commitments of sponsorship. “We have always been a sustainable business, but these commitments help us plan confidently further into the future,” Ghione says.

And what of the apparent influx of Russians to Dubai? There was a huge growth in travel between Moscow and Dubai in 2022 compared to 2019, with some routes seeing 228% more passengers. For the first quarter of 2023, bookings to Dubai for premium class seats on Russian flights are already 103% ahead of the same quarter in 2019, according to travel data company ForwardKeys. The UAE hasn't sanctioned Russians as many countries in the West have so there is talk of a lot of so-called dirty money entering the country. This sudden flood of people is driving up real estate prices and once-struggling sectors like entertainment and hospitality are picking up again. Ghione says Art Dubai has not seen a notable increase of any particular nationalities on their invite or patron list and gallerists were unsurprisingly tight-lipped about any Russian customers. So only time will tell what effect this potential new audience will have on Dubai's art scene.

• [Hear more about Art Dubai 2023 on The Week in Art podcast here!](#)



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