

NFTs and physical artworks stand side-by-side in new Dubai show

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► The experimental display considers the potential of mixing traditional and crypto art



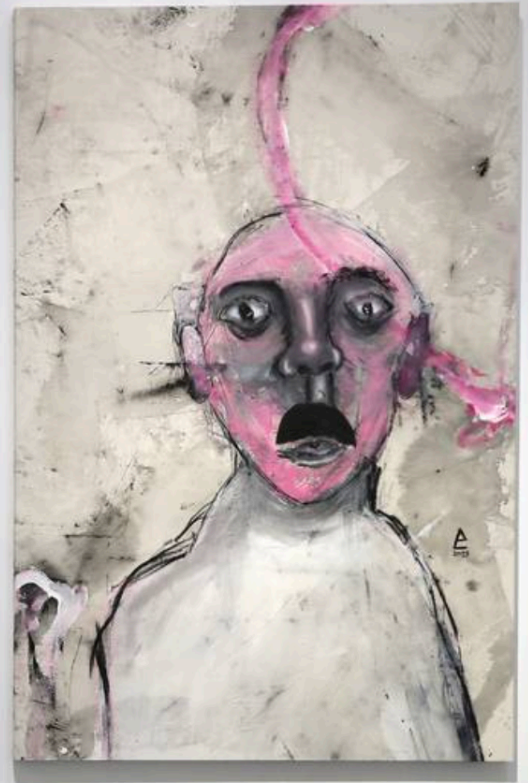
Physical and Digital artwork by Helidon Xhixha on display at the Firetti Contemporary Gallery in Alserkal Avenue. Pawan Singh / The National

When it comes to art, can the screen compete with the canvas? A new exhibition in Dubai raises this question, juxtaposing the tangible with the virtual by displaying physical artworks next to digital ones, or non-fungible tokens.

The group exhibition, titled NFT | IRL (the second half of which stands for “in real life”, internet slang for anything that exists offline), features the works of seven artists whose original pieces – paintings, sculptures and installations – have also been photographed, digitised, animated and converted into crypto art.

On the same wall as traditional mediums are mounted TV screens showing the NFTs, which feature the same subjects and elements, only now they are animated, accompanied by sound and played on a loop.

The NFT counterpart of Ahmed Emad’s painting *Time Passes Through Five Senses*, for example, takes its subject of a haunting figure with mouth agape and transforms it into an almost grotesque cartoon character, its eyes reeling left and right.



Ahmed Emad's painting 'Time Passes Through Five Senses', right, next to its NFT counterpart, at Firetti Contemporary, Dubai. Pawan Singh / The National

There are also animated versions of British artist Irvin Pascal's tribal-art-inspired geometric works on paper, with their circular and triangular forms rolling and sliding across the frame.

These works, along with those by Kadara Enyeasi, Josh Rowell, Jacques Vartabedian, Helidon Xhixha and Fatiha Zemmouri, are on view until September at Firetti Contemporary in Dubai, a new arrival to the UAE art scene that opened in March.

The gallery has collaborated with NFT curator Morrow Collective for the exhibition, which is an experimental venture for the gallery's founder, Mara Firetti. An art adviser for 15 years prior to establishing the gallery, she has taken on this hybrid approach for the first time.

"We want to show the contrast between the actual works and what can be achieved with NFTs," she says, calling NFT | IRL an "educational exhibition" aimed at collectors looking to purchase their first crypto artwork. It is a chance to see the possibilities, and limits, of showcasing traditional and crypto art together.



Gallery founder Mara Firetti at the NFT | IRL exhibition, on view at Firetti Contemporary in Alserkal Avenue, Dubai. Pawan Singh / The National

Morrow Collective, co-founded by Jennifer Stelco, herself a crypto artist and animator, worked with the artists in the show to produce the NFTs, discussing how elements could be animated and what sounds could be used to accompany them.

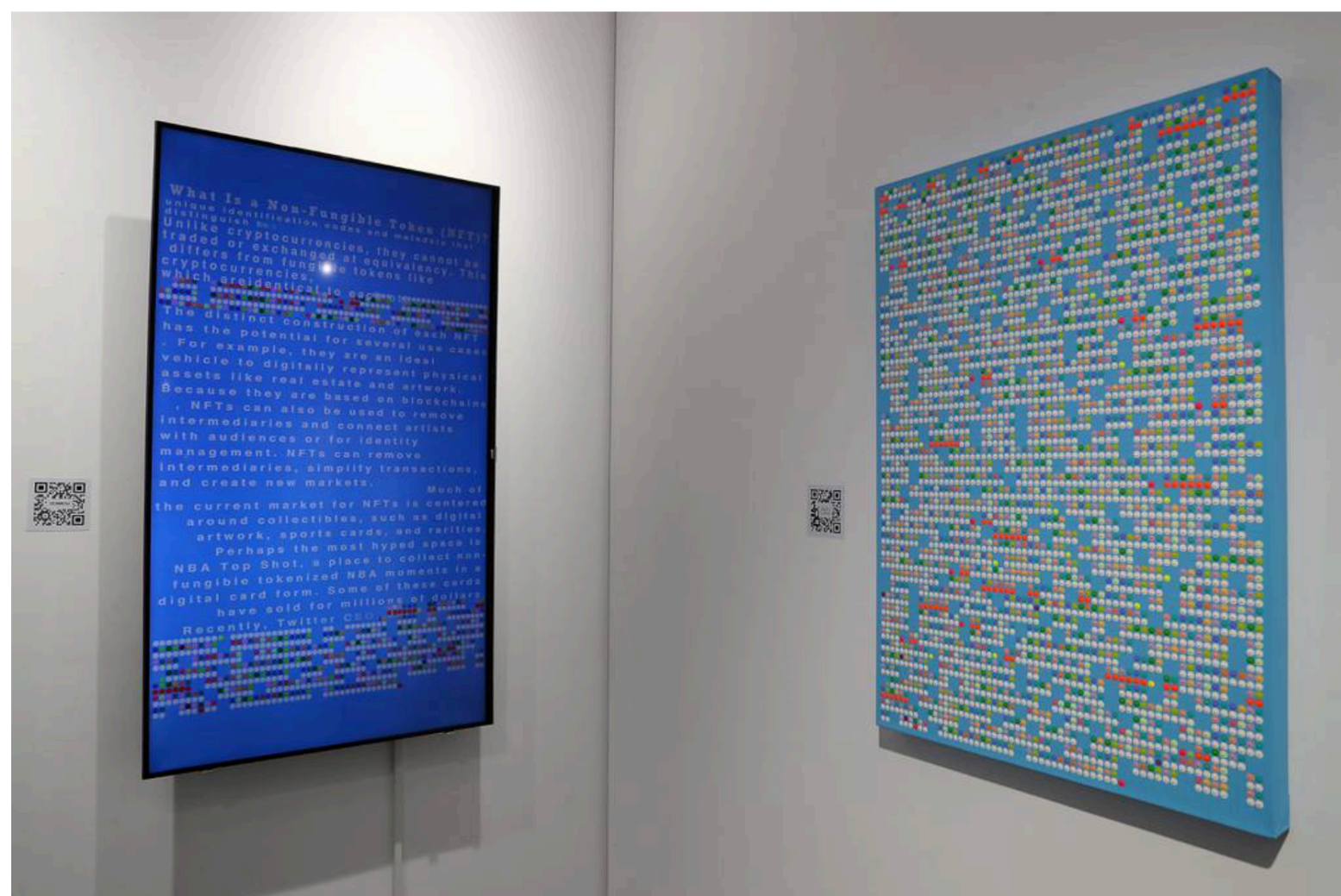
When it comes to pricing, both have agreed for the NFTs to be valued at 50 per cent of the material works, which range from \$2,000 to \$10,000, with the exception of Xhixha's stainless steel sculptures, which are listed at more than \$60,000.

Firetti says the higher prices take into account the cost of shipping, storing and exhibiting the pieces, as well as their immutability in comparison to the digital files that can be readapted at any time.

Proceeds of sales from the physical works will go entirely to the gallery, while Morrow Collective will keep all the cryptocurrency from the NFTs. "We believe that the future of art is NFTs and physical art going hand in hand, and not trying to cancel out the other," Stelco says. But while an agreement on economic value can be determined, the same cannot be said when it comes to aesthetics.

Some, like Rowell's pastel paintings, are complemented by their digital doppelgangers, largely because his work is already preoccupied with technology. Using dots, colours and patterns, Rowell creates his own codes on the canvas. These resemble the surfaces of integrated circuits or microchips, while simultaneously being Braille-like.

In *What is an NFT?*, Rowell writes out a message in the painting that is deciphered through the NFT animation. Despite this, however, the digital work falls short of proving that it can or should be considered as an artwork on its own.



Josh Rowell's 'What is an NFT?', part of NFT | IRL at Firetti Contemporary. Pawan Singh / The National

The same problem is amplified in Xhixha's NFT, where the fluid textures of his stainless steel *Earth* are animated to ripple like water, and Vartabedian's *Human Pattern 6*, with the crowd in the painting marching in the animation. In these instances, the NFTs are redundant, adding little to the original works, conceptually or visually. If, perhaps, unique digital creations – meaning, not derived from another work – had been placed in dialogue with traditional pieces, the effect might have been different.

For Firetti and Stelco, however, the main goal is to find new audiences. "Our aim is to spread the message of our artists and reach younger art lovers in the digital world," Firetti explains. "There is a lot of art online that is not properly shown and curated. We want to change that."

Morrow Collective hopes to bridge traditional and crypto art. In May, the curators worked with galleries including Carbon 12, 1x1, Zawyeh Gallery, Tabari Artspace, XVA Gallery and Andakulova Gallery, all from Dubai, as well as Aicon Gallery in New York, to present Genesis, which sold digital versions of existing artworks from the galleries' inventories on the NFT platform Open Sea. "Our original plan was to create room for art galleries in the NFT sphere ... Our starting point was to use existing art from gallery partners so we could move quickly on the idea. All we needed from our galleries were high-resolution images of the art and a signed MOU," Stelco says.

Turning physical works into digital ones seems counter to the initial allure of NFTs – digital artists, whose works are immaterial and can be duplicated, would now have the mechanism through which they could authenticate their creations and provide proof of ownership to collectors. In addition, NFT technology could have disrupted the gallery representation model, with artists no longer needing the same mediators to reach collectors.

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The NFT art space has not quite followed this path, and Morrow Collective and Firetti Contemporary certainly are not the first to stray from it. By the time NFTs had their breakthrough moment in March with the \$69 million sale of Beeple's *Everydays – The First 5000 Days*, Christie's, which handled the sale, had already set its sights on the crypto market. This week, it announced its first NFT auction in Asia.

In the US and China, digital art galleries have showcased in physical spaces as a way to lure potential collectors.

And while the world of NFTs, made up not only of crypto art, but also collectibles and other digital media, remains ever-changing, collectives such as Morrow and gallerists such as Firetti see the technology's long-term potential. "This is the future of art, and we want to be a part of it," Firetti says, echoing Stelco's earlier sentiment. How far that future stretches is anyone's guess.

NFT | IRL is on view at Firetti Contemporary, Alserkal Avenue, Dubai, until Wednesday, September 15. More information available at firetticontemporary.com