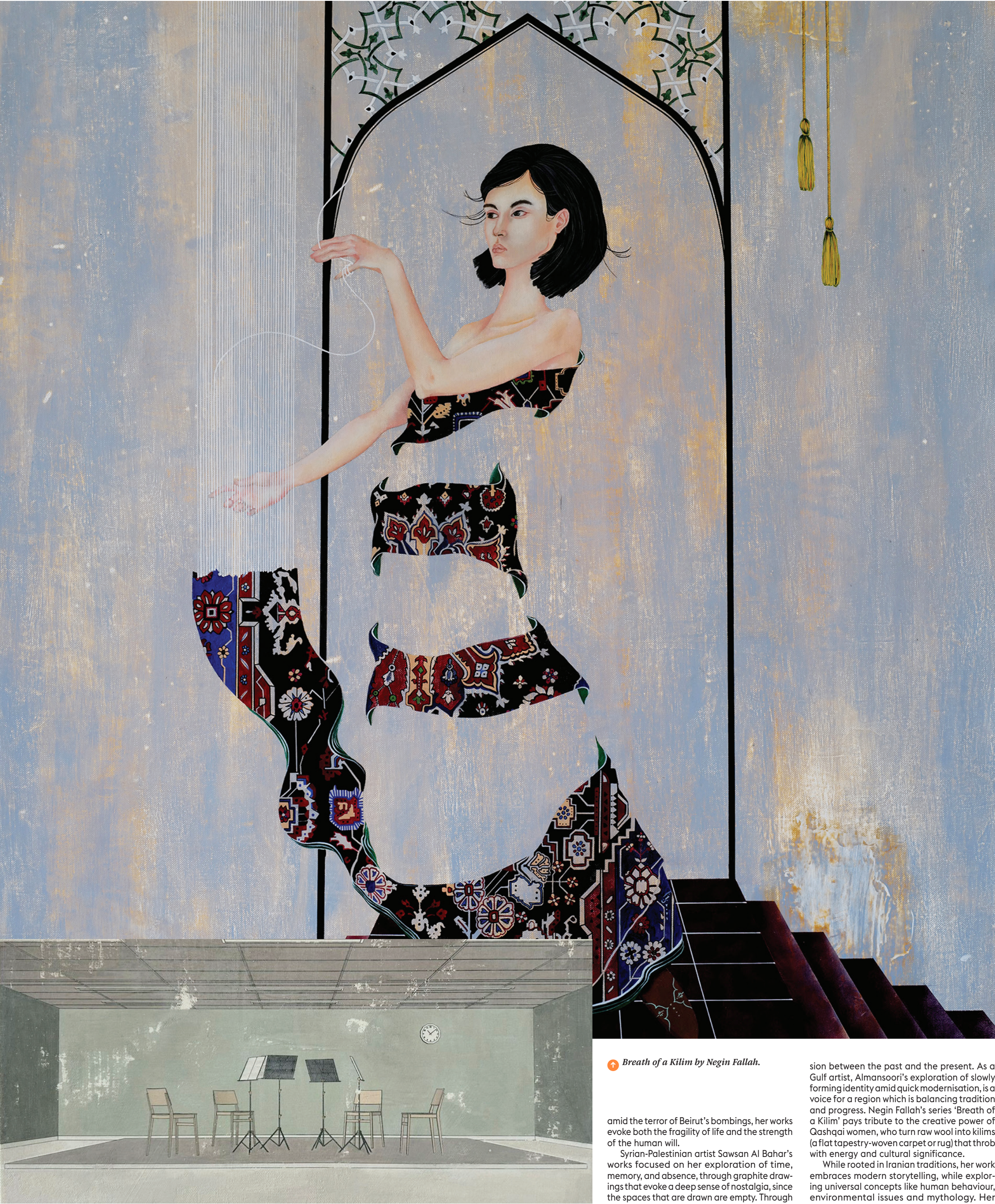


ARTS & CULTURE

Firetti Contemporary floodlights women of Middle East in Paris MENART Fair



DUBAI: Firetti Contemporary presented the works of four Middle Eastern women artists spanning three generations at MENART Fair 2024 (Sept. 20-22) in Paris' historic Marais district. The fair, in its 5th edition, focused exclusively on women artists in the MENA (Middle East, North Africa) region. This year's all-female edition honoured the legacy of pioneering women artists, while shining a spotlight on contemporary and emerging art makers. Featured artists explored themes of identity, memory and resilience; some of them drew on personal and collective histories of conflict-created trauma and inspirational cultural heritage.

Women in the Middle East have always been central to the region's artistic traditions. Iranian women, for example, were the artisans behind the renowned Persian carpets, weaving intricate patterns since the Safavid dynasty. In Palestine, women preserved familial and historical lineages through 'tatreez' embroidery, which visually narrates stories of identity, heritage, and durability. Similarly, Bedouin women enriched the Gulf with their exquisite 'Al Sadu' and 'Khoos'

➤ *Rehearsal Time* by Sawsan Al Bahar.

textiles, used for practical and symbolic purposes, including creating tent dividers and coverings that embody Bedouin culture.

However, a misconception persists in which Middle Eastern women are often viewed (particularly in the West) through the prism of Orientalist prejudices, reducing rich identities to outrageous fantasies. The misconception of the international community overlooks women's eloquent contributions to both art and society as a whole. The consequence is that Middle Eastern women represent only 1.5 per cent of artists showcased in international galleries (Study by Art Basel Association, 2023).

This highlights the crucial role of galleries like Firetti Contemporary and the MENART Fair in Paris, both of which are dedicated to amplifying the real voices of women from

the region and challenging misconceptions, while using art as a vector of change. Firetti Contemporary's booth exhibition titled 'Her Home, Her Identity' curated by Celine Azem, celebrated the strength and tenacity of women in the MENA region. It explored shared experiences of trauma and cultural legacy, bridging diverse perspectives through the lens of Middle Eastern women themselves. The curated works delved into themes of identity, memory, and displacement, highlighting the narratives of the four represented artists.

The booth featured the work of Annie Kurkdjian, Sawsan Al Bahar, Salmah Almansoori and Negin Fallah. Each of them brought their individual narratives to the fair. Annie Kurkdjian, Lebanese-Armenian artist (born 1972), channels her trauma, affected by experiences of the Lebanese Civil War into her art; her art pieces are often described as a "breathing tragedy". Her subjects, depicted in distorted, grotesque postures, reflect the emotional weight of war, loss and displacement. Having been deprived of her father during her youth and growing up

➤ *Breath of a Kilim* by Negin Fallah.

amid the terror of Beirut's bombings, her works evoke both the fragility of life and the strength of the human will.

Syrian-Palestinian artist Sawsan Al Bahar's works focused on her exploration of time, memory, and absence, through graphite drawings that evoke a deep sense of nostalgia, since the spaces that are drawn are empty. Through desolate yet familiar settings, she captures the emotional weight of memory, underlining the painful absence of those who once inhabited these spaces. In these silent zones, she provides a haunting connection to the past, provoking a meditation on displacement, identity, and the impermanence of life.

Emirati artist Salmah Almansoori's works captures the idea of change, remembrance, and the formation of identity in a region undergoing rapid transformation. Her work is more than just a reflection of the UAE's evolving landscape — it is an intimate portrayal of personal and private connections to places. In 'Who I Became Within These Walls' she pursues memories through collected artifacts such as tiles, gathered from her abandoned family home in Ghayathi. Each object and tile is a piece of her past, imbued with the emotions and stories tied to herself. The forgotten objects turn into documents of her personal history and the formation and evolution of her personhood in a world that sometimes changes too fast for her to accept.

In 'I Reminisce in Colours', she uses vibrant hues to reconstruct moments that create ten-

sion between the past and the present. As a Gulf artist, Almansoori's exploration of slowly forming identity amid quick modernisation, is a voice for a region which is balancing tradition and progress. Negin Fallah's series 'Breath of a Kilim' pays tribute to the creative power of Qashqai women, who turn raw wool into kilims (a flat tapestry-woven carpet or rug) that throb with energy and cultural significance.

While rooted in Iranian traditions, her work embraces modern storytelling, while exploring universal concepts like human behaviour, environmental issues and mythology. Her multidisciplinary approach spans painting, sculpture and printmaking and Fallah seamlessly blends heritage with modern perspectives, offering a fresh take on Persian cultural identity. Firetti Contemporary's participation at MENART Fair 2024 emphasised the critical contributions of Middle Eastern women artists, while showcasing their power and transformative impact on global cultural discourse. "Art is a powerful vehicle for social change", said Mara Firetti, CEO and founder of the gallery, while pointing out its mission to amplify the voices of underrepresented artists — especially women — in the art world.

This year's fair highlighted the often overlooked artistic heritage of the MENA region and actively challenged international stereotypes. Both Firetti Contemporary and MENART Fair vindicated their roles as platforms for reclaiming narratives and addressing cultural marginalisation, while underscoring the importance of visibility and recognition for women artists in the global context.

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