Art Fairs

Volta Finds Its Niche in Basel, Offering Exciting New Work by Emerging Artists at Affordable Price Points

A highlight of this year's fair is the Cultural Pavilion Spotlight presentation by the Jeddah's ATHR Foundation.

Dorian Batycka • June 16, 2022

Kamiar Maleki knows how to create valuable experiences on a minimal budget. At Volta, an art fair he took over in 2019, with editions in both New York and Basel, Maleki has managed to steer what were once two teetering fairs into new and exciting directions.

While it may seem on the surface that it lacks the superstar power of Art Basel, the city's preeminent art fair, and despite competition from the other satellite events—including Liste, Design/Miami, Unlimited, and June—Volta is slowly but surely starting to carve a special and somewhat considerable niche in Basel's dizzying fair circuit.

After taking over Volta months before a global pandemic, Maleki joked that life was easier back when he was known only as a collector. “I got better dinner invites when I was just a collector,” he said. “Life was so much easier.”

Volta was originally founded in 2005 as a collaboration between dealers and friends with the aim of securing a platform for emerging international contemporary art, setting itself apart from some of the city’s other art fairs like Liste, which focuses primarily on young galleries.

From left to right: Hamza Serafi, Kamiar Maleki and Mohammed Hafez. Courtesy Volta Basel 2022.

Maleki, 44, had more than 15 years of experience in the art world before landing at Volta. Between 2016–18, he worked as the director of Contemporary Istanbul (CI), overseeing the fair’s growth in terms of size, and number and quality of galleries.

“My time in Istanbul was great,” Maleki told Artnet News. “It showed me that an art fair is not only about showcasing art, but about the interaction with galleries, artists and collectors. Fairs are all about discovery and international collaboration.”

Running an art fair during a global pandemic was not easy, he added. In December 2022, Volta was forced to cancel its fair in Miami mere days before it was set to open.

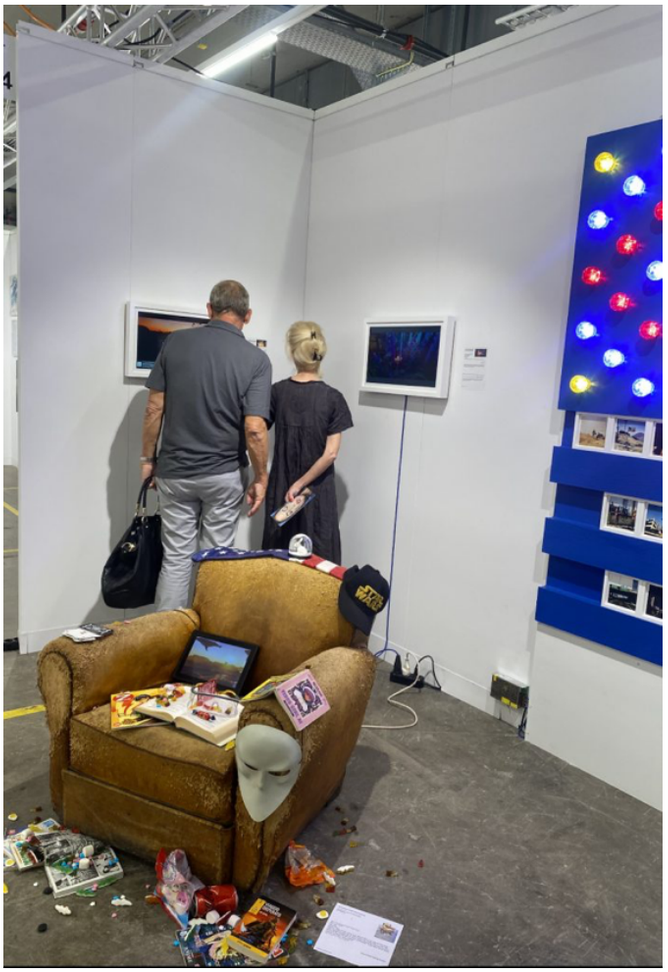
“The pandemic forced me to think outside the box and re-align expectations,” Maleki said, adding that “we learned lessons that helped us to rebrand and strategize. This year, there is more excitement than ever before, with 67 galleries participating from 25 countries. We’re back in Basel in a big, big way.”

Asgar/Gabriel, *Untitled* (2022). Courtesy Galerie Ernst Hilger.

For the first time this year, Volta is including a sprawling display of works by ATHR Foundation, located in a new section of the fair called the Cultural Spotlight Pavilion, which Maleki said he thought about after visiting all the national pavilions at EXPO 2020 in Dubai earlier this year. “What we want to do with this pavilion is to partner with the major movers and shakers from different art geographies,” he said. “We’re super excited to have Hamza Serafi, a pioneer of Saudi conceptualism, as Volta’s inaugural partner for the cultural spotlight pavilion this year.”

The ATHR Foundation threw a private dinner on June 14 at Noonh, attended by the likes of Chris Dercon and Aaron Cezar, both of whom have long-standing connections to the cultural scene in the Middle East and Northern Africa. In celebration of its Volta presentation, the dinner toasted the emerging class of Saudi artists present in its booth, including Aisha Zakiya Islam, Alaa Tarabzouni, Asaad Badawi, Fahad bin Naif, Lujain Faqerah, Nojoud Alsudairi, Obadah Aljefri, Sahrish Ali, Sara Brahim, Zahra Bundakji, Zena Amer, and Rajaa Al Haj & Yasmeen Alsudairy.

The foundation builds on the legacy of ATHR Gallery, founded in Jeddah in 2007 by Hamza Serafi and Mohammed Hafiz, whose booth in the main Art Basel Fair this year showcased works by the Saudi artist Ahaad Alamoudi. ATHR gallery has been a crucial space nurturing the art scene in Jeddah for nearly 20 years, and is widely considered one of Saudi Arabia’s more wily, independent-minded art spaces. The gallery also regularly shows at a number of other international art fairs, like Frieze in London.



Installation view of Yuri Catania's work *Videogame* with Casa Galleria at Volta.

And forgoing the normal fees taken by commercial galleries, the ATHR Foundation is giving 100 percent of its sales at the fair to its artists. Co-founder Hamza Serafi told Artnet News that 30 percent of the booth had been sold by June 15, with most works priced modestly (by Basel standards) between CHF1,000 to CHF10,000 ($1,035 to $10,350).

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Volta also welcomed a number of first time exhibitors to the fair this year, including Dubai's Tabari Artspace. Founded in 2002 by Maliha Tabari, the gallery has been a pioneering force in the Middle East art scene for more than two decades, known for working with artists like Hazem Harb, Maitha Abdalla, Hashel Al Lakmi, Sarah Shihadi and others.

Tabari had two artists on display in her booth, Samah Shihadi and Michael Halak, both of whom use art as an investigative mechanism to explore their lived experiences in Haifa, Israel. They each approach their work as an intersection of sociology, spirituality, gender and culture, with Halak displaying a cardboard box cut out in the silhouette of a mountain range in an occupied area of Palestine near to the Lebanese border. The booth sold two works by the artists at Volta, each priced between $9,300 and $18,600.

Michael Halak, *Grains* (2022). Photo: Dorian Batycka.

Over at Iram Art's booth there is a solo presentation of works by the acclaimed Indian artist Narayan Chandra Sinha. All of the works are dedicated to the basic components of the elements and raw materials he found in his surroundings growing up. Spare car parts are a common motif, since Sinha spent a lot of time around an automobile factory near his home in Kolkata. According to the gallery's owner, Harssh Shah, two works were sold by June 15, one $12,700 and the other for $1,550.

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The affordable price points at Volta are in fact one of the fair's biggest draws. The most expensive piece sold so far this year was a $155,000 painting by the street artist Aboudia, who was born in Côte d'Ivoire and now lives in Brooklyn, by the New York-based Ethan Cohen Gallery. Total sales at the fair by June 16, were a little above $1 million, according to Volta representatives.

VOLTA Art Fair Basel runs from June 13–19, 2022.

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