

TOBY ARTS : The gallery with a fashionable twist



Sheik Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, left, Sheikha Lulu Al Sabah, center, Michel Haddi, right.

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Renowned, international fashion photographer Michel Haddi produced the photographs for the inaugural exhibition at the TOBY ARTS gallery, which opened recently in Dubai as the latest project of the quintessentially modern thobe designer Hatem Al-Akeel.

Yes indeed, Al-Akeel has hopped onto the arts bandwagon, even though astute art consumers dictate that “art and fashion are two different things”.

Let’s meet the man behind the TOBY brand to find out whether the TOBY ARTS gallery really aims to display serious art, or is just a stop-over gallery for the fashionable elite. Art meets fashion? We’re about to find out!

“I have always been inspired by art,” said Al-Akeel. “In fact, I started using pop art in my first thobe collection in 2007, infusing Andy Warhol and René Magritte. I am proud to be one of

the first to not only infuse western and eastern fashion in a garment, but also to have first used western art adapted on traditional eastern fashion.”

His latest project, TOBY ARTS is a multi-disciplinary platform for contemporary art, fashion and design. The gallery does not represent any artist, so the space will not function like a typical art gallery. JAMM art consultancy will host a number of art and design exhibitions in a year, exhibiting works of artists that are represented by top art galleries outside the Middle East. The space will also be used for educational purposes, such as lectures and panel discussions and also for fashion shoots. Ultimately, Al-Akeel hopes it will be a space where creative minds can meet and ideas can be shared.

TOBY ARTS is based in Dubai because it has become a creative hub for art buyers and dealers from across the globe interested in modern and contemporary Arab art.

As a hotbed of talent, artists from across the Gulf, North Africa, the Levant and Iran are being successfully filtered through Dubai’s galleries. From just a handful of young, hopeful art lovers back in 2004, Dubai has grown a multitude of white-walled spaces providing contemporary local and international artists a home for their work.

Al-Akeel and his business partner Sheikha Lulu Al Sabah, who heads JAMM art consultancy, chose to first exhibit Michel Haddi’s photographic works. “He symbolizes the merge between art and fashion, which appealed to us,” said Al-Akeel. “Being an established French photographer, he is also half-Algerian which is very much part of our ethos. We feel happy to have chosen his work, as the opening of TOBY ARTS attracted a great turn-out.”

There are many more expositions to come at TOBY ARTS. “Our next joint exhibition with JAMM will showcase the works of André Meyerhans, a Swiss architect who lives and works in Dubai. We will focus on his design works, such as chairs, stools and tables, and his jewelry. His works are part of an investigation to find a contemporary language in Arab architecture. The artworks we display will always have an innate relationship with design, fashion and high-art! In my opinion, arts and fashion go hand in hand. One cannot do without the other,”

Al-Akeel believes the sudden interest by patrons in the Gulf arts movement means there is a serious inclination towards helping it develop “Art can not only be used for inspiration but also as a great medium for expression and a source of business. Our youth needs to know that the possibilities are endless and that, if they have a passion or talent, they need to nurture it and cultivate their art.”

TOBY ARTS, too, would like to contribute to the development of the arts in the Gulf region and beyond. “We believe in collaborations and bringing creative minds together. Toby Arts will be a place where ideas, exhibitions and art projects can be realized. JAMM works with both new and emerging contemporary artists.”

Al-Akeel promotes his TOBY PEACE bracelets that have been seen on the wrists of celebrities, royalty and socialites. The proceeds fund the Palestinian Children’s Relief Fund. Very recently he was named as a regional friend of TAG HEUER for a social responsibility project, “Smart Water For Green Schools”. It aims to raise money for water sanitation in developing nations.

“It’s an honor for me to be considered as a friend of the watch brand. My role will be to influence and create additional awareness for this great cause. Being chosen as a Middle Eastern friend of the brand, I hope to encourage our region to give back. I have always believed in giving back and will continue to do so with the Green Cross and Toby Peace.”

For more information, visit www.urtoby.com and www.jamm-art.com