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Visitors to the Press opening of 'Birth Of A Museum' check out Cy Twombly's 'Untitled I-IX' (2008) (All images courtesy Louvre Abu Dhabi)

STARTING FROM SCRATCH: THE LOUVRE ABU DHABI'S BIRTH OF A MUSEUM

Kevin Jones takes a turn around the Louvre Abu Dhabi's preview of what it has in store for its – long-awaited – 2015 unveiling.

The Louvre Abu Dhabi. Opening 2015. Closer Than You Think'. So bellows a lone billboard on the road to Abu Dhabi's Manarat al Saadiyat, where the future museum's first large-scale exhibit is on show until July 2013. Boastful optimism? Clumsy backpedalling? Thoughtful reassurance? The roadside slogan invites several readings, due not only to compounded construction delays that have dogged the project, but also to recent news revealing bumpy relations between the august French institution and its Abu Dhabi partners.

Once inside the 'Birth of a Museum' show, yet another reading of 'closeness' springs to mind. Meandering amid the 130 works dotting the hushed galleries – the first acquisitions of the future collection – visitors come nose-to-nose with the very essence of what makes Louvre Abu Dhabi distinct – dialogue.

'You have many curatorial questions to tackle when you create a museum from scratch,' admits Laurence des Cars, Curatorial Director of the Agence France Museums, the 12-member consortium established with the signing of the 2007 Franco-Emirati agreement that sealed the Louvre Abu Dhabi deal. Yet the new-fangled museum is guided by the simple (and ancient) curatorial vision of universality. For des Cars, this means 'embracing a global effort to see, at one moment in time, what was happening in different corners of the world in terms of creation.' For the visitor to the 'Birth of a Museum' show, this means art that is in cross-cultural and inter-era conversations.



More hi-jinks at the press launch for 'Birth Of A Museum' (Courtesy Louvre Abu Dhabi)



Yves Klein is represented by 'ANT 110' (1960) at the Louvre Abu Dhabi collection (Courtesy Louvre Abu Dhabi)

From the outset, the works rebound off each other. In Yves Klein's 'ANT 110' (1960) from his 'Anthropometry' series, two curvaceous, yet abridged, body shapes (one male, one female) take on an odd primitivism next to a Botero-bodied but artfully articulated Bactrian (Central Asian) statuette, nearly 5,000 years old. Echoes continue between the 2nd century Roman 'Togatus' (a full-body 'vanity' statue commissioned by an orator), all marbly austerity and haughty uprightness, and the 'Standing Bodhisattva' statue, from roughly the same time, but in a vastly different region – the Peshawar Valley of present-day Pakistan. Sculpturally, the Roman's deep toga-folds and the swooping creases in the Buddha-to-be's garment hint at some common thread. Yet the meditative detachment of the Bodhisattva's face smiles in stark contrast to the patrician's frank gravitas.

'The collection is a collection of collections,' reminds, somewhat dizzily, des Cars. So dialogues are not just inter-artworks, but also between the collector who owned them and the culture from which the works came. In this context, the 'miniatures' of India-smitten American filmmaker James Ivory reveal a complex conversation. 'It is very interesting to have a bit of James Ivory's vision in the Louvre Abu Dhabi,' explains des Cars. 'Here is an American, a creator, looking at India through painting. How does he look at the other's culture? What does he take from it? And what did he give back?' she wonders.

These cross-cultural exchanges are a résumé of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, a snapshot of its 'universal' ambition. But can an intergovernmentally-spawned museum be truly universal? How can a largely French curatorial team avoid falling victim to a certain Euro-centrism?

'It is a complex balance,' admits the curator. 'It would be stupid to say that we are not going to deal with Italian painting because it is too Euro-centric. But we need to shake the model, to see it through eyes that bear a more complete vision.'

Asian art is a case in point. The Louvre Abu Dhabi has afforded a wide focus to Asian art, whereas its Parisian counterpart, traditionally, does not. Medieval sculpture (a Western denomination if ever there was one) stretches to include both European and Asian artworks produced during that period. 'Putting these pieces in such a chronological resonance has never really been done before in a museum,' confirms des Cars.

Laid end-to-end, the works in 'Birth of a Museum' might have

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Laurence des Cars, Curatorial Director, Agence France M

constituted a crass hit parade of the history of humanity. But thoughtfully-themed galleries ('The Sacred', 'The Western Gaze', 'Travelling Forms', among others) mete out the works into absorbing, multi-disciplinary clusters. 'There are no departments in the Louvre Abu Dhabi,' boasts des Cars. So, 19th century documentary photographs rub shoulders with a 13th century African hermaphroditic sculpture.

Walking through 'Birth of a Museum', there is an overwhelming sense of earnestness, of a will to impart, to explain, to convince. Unsurprisingly, education is the word on everyone's lips. Hissa al Dhaheri, Senior Project Manager with the Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority, speaks passionately of the robust educational programme that will support the Louvre Abu Dhabi, project up to and beyond its 2015 opening. 'We are continuously targeting different audiences through different media and a variety of programming,' she says. A spate of Masters' programs in Museum Administration have cropped up at the Sorbonne Abu Dhabi, as well as Zayed University, drawing flocks of students, encouraged by the impending museum powerhouse on the Saadiyat site.

As seemingly-endless streams of schoolchildren file into the 'Birth of a Museum' galleries, there is cause to wonder if we are not witnessing the start of a shift in local mindset. Could these youngsters become a generation for whom culture holds as prized a place as ski-slope-endowed malls and Ferrari-fuelled spectacle? Could art and architecture one day draw as many crowds as sales and shopping festivals? If 'Birth of a Museum' is any indication, it's closer than you think. **IBA**

'Birth Of A Museum' runs at Manarat al Saadiyat, Abu Dhabi until July 20th 2013. See www.saadiyatculturaldistrict.ae for further details