

*Artist Run New York: the Seventies*  
Installation shot, March 2017  
© Jean-Paul Najar Foundation  
Photography by Musthafa Aboobacker

# ART AND SOUL OF A MUSEUM

JEAN-PAUL NAJAR FOUNDATION

**Kevin Jones** discovers why, as a tightly curated non-profit organisation in the industrial, and largely commercial, quarter of Alserkal, the Jean-Paul Najar Foundation is unique among Dubai's art spaces

**I**t's hard to ignore the voices. They linger in the sparse space, hovering as you contemplate a work or glide up the stairs. They ricochet off the walls, dance across display cases, sometimes even (cheekily) weave themselves into the narrative of an unsuspecting guide as she explains a shapely steel cylinder gracing the floor. They rustle in the archives, revelling, reminiscing. They are feisty yet refined, their tales stirring, moving. These are the voices of the 40 artists intimately wound up in the life of collector Jean-Paul Najar (b. 1948, d. 2014). They are testament not only to the late Egyptian-Colombian's commitment to the challenging artists – and art – of the 1970s, but to collecting itself as a creative act. No, this space – the Dubai home of Najar's eponymous foundation – isn't haunted, nor is it the site of some permanent nostalgic sound piece. It just has a perceptible soul.

Like many of its arty neighbours, the grey corrugated-iron-clad hulk of the Jean-Paul Najar Foundation (JPNF) lumbered into life in 2015 with the expansion of Alserkal Avenue – some 76,000 square metres added onto

the original neighbourhood's rickety rows of galleries, garages and creative business spaces. Architect Mario Jossa, a then-retired heavyweight who cut his teeth at Skidmore Owings Merrill in the 1950s before joining Bauhaus *monstre sacré* Marcel Breuer's office in New York, was coerced away from his French retreat long enough to design the foundation's minimalist lair. Breuer's firm was responsible for the former Whitney Museum of American Art on New York's Madison Avenue (now the Met Breuer), and Jossa played an important role in crafting that edifice's signature modernist allure. Unsurprising then, that he should turn to another institution for his fleeting comeback. For, unlike its commercial neighbours in this warren of warehouses, the foundation is in fact a museum.

In March 2016, the inaugural show – *Jean-Paul Najar: Vision and Legacy* – comprised letters, postcards, books, photos and exhibition ephemerae that conjured a narrative evocative of the intensity of relationships between the Paris-based Najar and the artists who peopled his world. A black-and-white shot



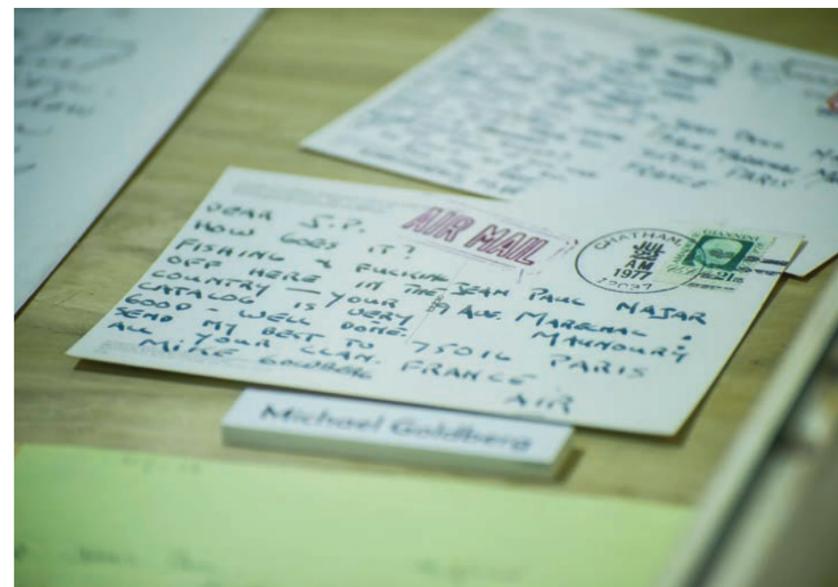
Above and below: Installation shots of *Artist Run New York: the Seventies*. March 2017. Photography by Musthafa Aboobacker; Jean Paul Najjar and his daughter Deborah in Barcelona in 1990  
 Opposite (right): Postcards by Michael Goldberg. *Jean-Paul Najjar: Vision and Legacy*. Inaugural exhibition. March 2016. Photography by Brigitte Godsk Right: Deborah Najjar Jossa. Photography by Sueraya Shaheen  
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of a sprightly Najjar alongside painters Antonio Semeraro and Pierre Dunoyer, the trio crouched over a work on the floor; a colour Polaroid of sculptor Richard Nonas at an opening; a postcard from AbEx painter Michael Goldberg, sending news of his bucolic vacation along with compliments on the production standards of a catalogue; a watermarked onionskin typewritten page with syncopated marginalia by New York-based artist Lynn Umlauf (Goldberg's wife). Far from an indulgent eruption of nostalgia, these documents are institutional bedrock – no show in this space can be fully understood without the complicity of these voices. And once you hear them, they never fully leave you.

But how has this soulful museum carved out its niche in the hotbed of consumerism that is Alserkal Avenue, awash in commercial galleries, edgy eateries, purveyors of home furnishings and even a classic car dealership?

Deborah Najjar Jossa, daughter of the eminent collector and daughter-in-law of the re-invigorated architect, had already settled in Dubai when the aged Najjar was looking for a home for his collection of abstract, post-minimalist art from the 1960s and 70s. A former Bonham's executive, Najjar *fille* threw herself into the task of setting up the foundation with gusto, and hasn't looked back since. Buoyed by an immediate expansion-era partnership with Alserkal Avenue (which lost no time in grasping the value of a non-profit institution as a complement to its offering), the foundation quickly sought accreditation from the International Council of Museums (ICOM). University and school partnerships followed, with the likes of the American University of Dubai, the American University of Sharjah, Zayed University and NYU Abu Dhabi, where the late Najjar's library is housed and made available to scholars.



The non-profit structure – whether civic or self-owned museums, private foundations – is an odd beast in the UAE. Confusion exists even among audiences. “More than half of our visitors will still ask if the works are for sale,” admits Najjar Jossa. The foundation's branding was recently changed to make its institutional status explicit: the phrase “a contemporary art museum” now snuggles below the foundation's name as a qualifying strapline, reinforced by the #jpnfmuseum hashtag. As an institution, the JPNF is hungry for numbers; “footfall” is a word that crops up ceaselessly in Najjar Jossa's discourse (it currently stands at 20,000 visitors since the space's opening). An educational series called *Eyeballing* – a session concentrating on a single work, the title borrowed from a Judy Rifka piece from the late 1970s – and children's workshops (the most recent of which was a Gordon Matta-Clark-inspired collage-fest) fine-tune the outreach, which harks back to the heyday of the sprouting arts scene in the emirate, when galleries would programme exhibition-agnostic screenings and talks, just to cultivate audiences.

“The foundation is a radical idea for Dubai,” says curator Jessamyn Fiore, who, like Najjar Jossa, is at the helm of a paternal estate of her own. As the stepdaughter of American artist Gordon Matta-Clark, who figures prominently in Najjar's collection, Fiore manages his legacy. Curator of the inaugural JPNF show, Fiore also put together the foundation's *Artist Run New York: The Seventies*, which ran until the end of June this year, featuring a decade-long survey of New York artists who rejected the commercial market – a fitting show for a space that itself bunks the reigning transactional model. In a first for the fledgling foundation, half of the pieces hail from the collection, while the rest are on consignment from private collections, other institutions or the artists themselves. Discoveries abound, like the largely forgotten Suzanne Harris and her floor-bound turtle-like sculptures, or her video, *Flying Machine/The Wheels* (1973), which has her careening through thin air. Other moving image works get activated over time, like Joan Jonas' riling single-channel video *Song Delay* (1973), giving way to Nancy Holt's *Going Around in Circles* (1973), and then Lawrence Weiner's *Green as Well as Blue as Well as Red* (1976). Robert Grosvenor's minimally elegant *Steel Pipe* (1975) lounges on the floor, while a four-panel

fabric piece by Tina Girouard, *Air Space Stage* (1972), wafts overhead. Keith Sonnier's ever-amusing *Air to Air* (1975) is a sound installation based on captured coast-to-coast phone conversations between staff in LA's Ace Gallery and New York's Leo Castelli Gallery (talk about voices inhabiting a space!). And in a flourish of cultural accommodation, a screening of Matta-Clark's film *Food* (1972), documenting his artist-run restaurant, was accompanied by a Ramadan *iftar*.

Show after show, the collection is the inspirational pool into which guest curators dive. Yet it is not a static reservoir or a sacrosanct archive. Rather, it is constantly growing, from its initial acquisition of a James Bishop painting in 1968 to Najjar Jossa's most recent addition, culled at Art Dubai in 2017. There's a sense that such collecting is informed by somehow second-guessing her father's tastes, fathoming what his vision might be, when confronted with today's artistic crop. “There are so many questions I would have liked to ask him,” Najjar Jossa laments. Like her father, she is intent on forging links to the contemporary. More than simply upholding the legacy of a collection, Najjar Jossa is actually prolonging a legacy of relationships. Najjar was a galvanizer, a veritable magnet for thought-provoking artists who rallied to his Paris base. More patron than mere collector, his bond-building spark dates back to 1968, when the 20-year-old Najjar walked into Paris' Grand Palais to see *The Art of the Real: U.S.A. 1948-1968*, a MoMA-bred exhibition. “For my father, this was an absolute revelation,” Najjar Jossa continues. “He began to research extensively, to form his own points of view. Instantly, he wanted to exchange these thoughts with the artists whose art was making him think. So he started to build these relationships.”

What she has managed to do, perhaps better than any other art venue in Dubai, is re-examine the possibility of the cultural space and, in so doing, to challenge the standard white cube. 📍

Jean-Paul Najjar Foundation's new exhibition will be a solo show by Pierre Dunoyer that will run from September 13 to October 23.