

# Building Foundations: On Global Patronage

If state-sponsored art has gone backstage in the world at large, then private foundations and patrons seem to have come to the forefront. In this special section, *Canvas* speaks to key figures at leading foundations and private museums that support and show art in the Middle East, North Africa and beyond. Considering art both as a site of engagement and a form of cultural citizenship, we look at the infrastructures that anchor the art scene and those who seek to develop them. Our journey takes us from the Arab world to the Far East and finally to Europe and Venice for the architectural celebration of the Biennale, by far the most prominent example of national patronage when it comes to the arts.

## Meet the Museum Directors, Foundation Heads & Patrons:

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# DEBORAH NAJAR

Co-founder of the Jean-Paul Najjar Foundation, Dubai

Deborah Najjar, Co-founder of the Jean-Paul Najjar Foundation. © JPNF



**Nadine Khalil: Why did you first decide to establish the Jean-Paul Najjar Foundation? And what is its raison d'être?**

Deborah Najjar: The JPNF came about as a joint project with my father, to bring artistic diversity to the UAE and continue to support the artists we collected and befriended.

**NK: When was the turning point for you to decide that this collection, which was nomadic, would be housed in Dubai?**

DN: It was the announcement of the Alserkal Avenue extension, and the possibility of opening a permanent space in Dubai's art hub.

**NK: Your father was Egyptian-Colombian and you grew up in France and studied in London – how do you reflect on the diasporic imagination in your role at the foundation?**

DN: Dubai by its multiculturalism was the natural platform for the international flow of ideas and discussions between North and South, East and West.

**NK: As you focus mostly on abstract and minimalist or post-minimalist artists, how do you thematize and curate your shows?**

DN: As we are in our first three years, we are still working on introducing our collection to the audience, as well as archiving and organizing the works. We focus on elaborating on the patron-artist relationship, and use our archives to illustrate it.

**NK: Are there expansion plans?**

DN: We are actively seeking and acquiring young artists who are aligned with our aesthetic and ideological choices in art.

**NK: Coming from a more corporate or for profit background as the Middle East Representative for Bonhams Auctioneers and the General Manager of De Beers Jewellers, what is it like to run a nonprofit?**

DN: The JPNF is a legacy-driven project, legacy of the collection and the artists, and this is our mandate. The corporate experiences influence how we operate, aiming for best practice in all we do, but we are philanthropic and sustainability is at the epicenter of our work.

**NK: Did you ever think of establishing the foundation elsewhere?**

DN: My father had numerous discussions, but nothing ever felt quite as right as Dubai.

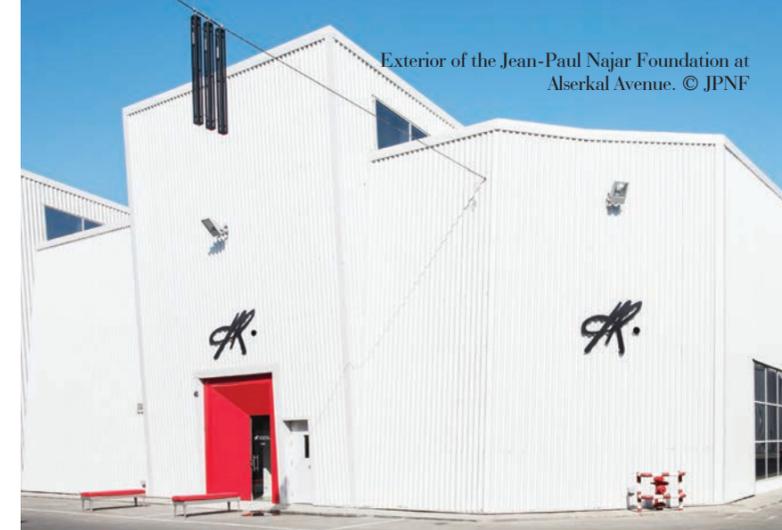
**NK: Does it matter where patrons/founders establish their institutions when it comes to displaying and promoting contemporary art from a particular region/movement?**

DN: The philosophy of an institution and the quality of a collection are the determining factors of success. Cities and regions have been revived by quality cultural offerings but setting up in a location with an already attractive offering is an accelerator.

**NK: How important is the art market in terms of what you do?**

DN: It affects our ability to acquire certain works.

**NK: How does this relate to building an infrastructure for the arts in countries in the Middle East with little or no state support?**



Exterior of the Jean-Paul Najjar Foundation at Alserkal Avenue. © JPNF

Interior view of the Jean-Paul Najjar Foundation: *Gene Highstein: Space and Place* exhibition. 2018. Photography by Musthafa Aboobacker. © JPNF. 2018. Image courtesy of JPNF



DN: The governmental support of the arts is an essential building block for the growth of the cultural ecosystem. Nonprofits particularly thrive in an environment where there is access to public funding, grants and support.

**NK: As a patron who has established a foundation for the public, or a private museum, can you comment on how you balance between private and public funding?**

DN: There is no balance, we rely entirely on private and corporate support.

**NK: What distinction does your institution make between art sponsorship and art patronage, and which approach do you concentrate on?**

DN: The true question is: Do you want to support arts in this part of the world or not? Whether it is patronage or sponsorship, it is in support of exhibition production and of the arts.

**NK: How will you continue developing this family-run structure of support?**

DN: The JPNF is run by a Board of Directors and art professionals with global experience. We also have some very active patrons – both individual and corporate – who support and advise on educational and curatorial matters.

**NK: How do you see the character and scope of support for art developing in the region over the coming years?**

DN: Reflecting on the past ten years, we can anticipate a continued growth in the art sector. There are a number of new museums and foundations opening that will expand the offering and launch a new chapter in arts in the region, as the market matures.

**NK: In our current state of affairs, who/what holds the most important role: the curator, the patron, the collector, or the foundation?**

DN: The artist. 🇮🇸