

The Bunker

Dubai Marina's sudden appearance seems to epitomise the emirate's glitzy fairytale growth. Thankfully, an underground culture is beginning to seep through all that concrete. We visit Carbon 12 gallery which is certainly underground (and by certainly, we mean literally).

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Facing page: Carbon 12's underground space is sparse. Here, works by Alireza Massoumi are the only adornment; **Left:** Gallerist Kourosh Nouri in front of a work by Thierry Feuz, whose cosmic works are on display at the gallery this month

The unbearable honesty of neon lighting is the first thing that hits you when you enter the bunker-like space that is Carbon 12, Dubai Marina's newest and most underground gallery. "The bunker quality makes it feel like the fragile art is safe and has its own temple," explains gallerist Kourosh Nouri, whose love of art and his decade's experience as a collector has led him to open this gallery.

With raw concrete ceilings and exposed industrial piping, it would be misleading to say that the gallery is welcoming, but Nouri thinks that it is important for visitors to feel comfortable. "Very often we get people coming in here and spending an hour looking around, I know they're not buyers, but I don't mind. I almost feel like we're replacing museums. Art is a very universal thing. Don't be intimidated by the fact that you don't know everything, but do look at art without prejudices and without sarcasm. There are many people who are reticent about art."

That said though, Nouri is somewhat reticent about political art. "None of our artists are political. The world is ugly

enough, you know?" So what is the element that unites the work of his 21 represented artists? "I don't want the gallery to be categorised that easily. But I can say that the entire collection is very human, either through the fear of a lack of humanity, or due to an excess of humanity in the work." He points to a work by Gil Heitor-Cortesao, a Portuguese artist whose cinematic, hyper-realist paintings of empty architectural spaces seem to literally ache for their lack of inhabitation. Then he points to a piece by Tor-Magnus Lundeby, whose oil paintings show such an homage to the digital form that they leave a fear in even the least technophobic viewer that humans may one day take second place.

With names like these on their books, as well as others like Markus Oehlen, a member of the 'Junge Wilde' movement, and Katherine Bernhardt, whose edgy female portraits seem both a mockery and a homage to the fashion industry, Carbon 12 have some seriously impressive pieces. But they also have affordable art. "The price range of the art is anything from Dhs10,000 to Dhs700,000," Nouri tells me. "Yes, art has a speculative aspect as well as an investment one, but it is also a passion. ♡



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Above: The gallery has two main rooms. One (in the foreground here) feels like a shelter for the inhabitant art, the other (in the background) is a more traditional space; **Above right:**

You have to descend these industrial stairs to enter Carbon 12

I started collecting 12 years ago, very modestly, with only a few hundred dollars. Instead of going to a Scandinavian furniture maker and spending Dhs1,000 on a canvas you'll throw away in three years, buy art! There is such incredible choice."

But Nouri continues to point out that variety does not guarantee depth. "Opening a lot of galleries doesn't necessarily mean a quality artistic life. My hope is that Dubai doesn't become the trash can of the art world. What I mean is that in the rest of the world there is an aura surrounding Dubai: one of money, oil, and real estate. This attracts has-beens to the art scene, people

who come here just hoping to sell. It is, sadly, a money-driven industry."

Nouri does not lament this too much, rather he sees great power in his chosen discipline, contemporary art. "Contemporary art doesn't have proper restrictions, and this freedom is magical. Art and artistic creativity is not there to hurt anybody, it is about pure intentions to create." Carbon is a necessary element in the existence of all living things, and it seems that quality contemporary art is just as essential for Nouri as is the very air he breathes. That said, we're still not sure about his gallery's choice of neon-lighting. †