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To a fine art: The MENA art affair making a scene in Europe

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When surrounded by art she is in her element. In 1998, she established the first international contemporary art fair from the MENA region in Lebanon. The fair came to an end in 2005 following the assassination of former premier Rafik Hariri. In 2010 she created the Beirut Art Fair, which was a resounding success until the revolution and the explosion of the port brought it to a halt.

"I couldn't stop the work of many years," she tells me. "So I went to Paris to launch the MENART Fair."

It made sense: "In Europe, there are fairs dedicated to Asia or Africa, but nothing about the Middle East. It's a region with a lot of history and amazing artists, but no one knows them. An art fair can create a market."

Despite the success of the first two editions in France, the team moved the fair to Belgium. "If Paris is the capital of art, Brussels is the capital of art collectors and the capital of Europe," she says.

Visitors had the opportunity to admire 250 artworks and design pieces by 146 artists through a more intimate experience. Instead of booths, the galleries were offered spaces and rooms of the villa spread over two floors.

"We are a didactic art fair," d'Hauteville continues, "We take visitors around, they can talk to gallerists and artists to better understand the artworks. We also want to change misconceptions and educate people about the region. The paintings may look great, but if you dig deeper, the message is very strong."

The Toys, by Syrian figurative painter [Houssam Ballan](#), depicts two boys playing with figurines. Behind this seemingly lighthearted scene, however, lies a deeper story of the artist's personal tragedy of living through the war in Syria since 2011.

Despite having left Sweida for Beirut one year ago, the wounds are still very present. The artwork is a representation of his attempt to come to terms with the traumatic experiences he has faced.

"As you can imagine I have witnessed some pretty catastrophic things during the war," says Ballan. "However, what I am trying to convey is the inverse of such horrible scenes. Instead of depicting the realities of the war, I preferred to show my trauma as a contextual backdrop to two cheerful children playing with their toys."

"I wanted to show how light and happiness can sometimes simmer through the darkness but more importantly, I wanted to illustrate how two conflicting forces can exist in harmony with one another, in a certain moment," he explains.

The artwork, exhibited by Dubai-based gallery [Fann A Porter](#), was not created with the intention of appealing to the public or with the concern of how it would be perceived. "I just needed to produce it for myself," says Ballan.