

Bidding for a wider audience

SEAL holds 3rd annual silent art auction of Lebanese art at Mark Shilen Gallery in New York

By Adla Massoud

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NEW YORK:

Go East. Young collector. Go East. That at any rate is what a nonprofit organization managed to convince a hearty crowd of 300 New Yorkers to do on a Sunday morning. The art? Modern. The appetite? Voracious. The reason? Read on ... Social and Economic Action for Lebanon or SEAL held its third annual silent art auction and brunch at the Mark Shilen Gallery in New York's trendy Soho on November 13. The benefit sale laid out a kaleidoscopic portrait of Lebanese contemporary art ranging from the symbolic to the surrealist, and, even though they are not professional auctioneers and cannot compete with the likes of Christies and Sothebys, SEAL managed to raise \$35,000 with the sale of 33 pieces.

All of this, says SEAL's President Philippe Asseily, constitutes a vote of confidence and proves that "the efforts and activities of the last few years have resulted in more people knowing about our organization and most importantly in people trusting SEAL."

Social and Economic Action for Lebanon was established as a New York based nonprofit group in 1997. A group of businessmen and women came together to create an organization capable of taking action against the severe current economic and social problems facing Lebanon.

"We decided to co-found SEAL because while there are many charitable organizations in Lebanon, few if any focused exclusively on economic development and strived to reduce poverty and empower the underprivileged across all religious sects," explains one of the company's five directors Philippe Tager.

Since the SEAL board of directors consists solely of people who work in the financial industry, how did they go about gathering artwork?

"Everyone at SEAL works on a volunteer basis. We basically did a lot of research for the auction and relied greatly on our personal networks and contacts," Asseily says.

The result is an intriguing mix. The auction featured such well known talents as Marya Kazoun who was recently invited to participate in the 51st Venice Biennale, hugely popular Lebanese-American painter Nabil Nahas, Wahid Nahle and Lebanese-Canadian artist Marwan Sahmaranim whose donated nude composition caused a bidding war to break out.

Bidders were also able to discover the works of other artists such as Magida Chaaban, Yasmine Chatila, Annabel Daou, photographer Sueraya Shaheen whose work has been widely published in the Financial Times and New York Times, Sara Abalan, Mariam Hallab, Denise Nassar, Yasser Badreddine, Diane Ayoub, Lamia Joreige, Joanna Saikaly, Josette Mennassa Patterson, Saad Ghosn, Ziad Naccache, Hala Schoukair, Robert Frangieh, Roula Sorour, Lilia Abdel Sater, Antoine Azzam, Wajih Nahle and Summayyah Samaha.

The proceeds from the art auction will sponsor future SEAL projects such as microlending both in Southern and Northern Lebanon, computer training in the Batroun area, tree nurseries in the Hermel/Akkar region and class sponsorship at public libraries.

The nonprofit has so far funded 15 projects ranging from farming to tailoring, embroidery, seal salt, organic oil production, business education and computer training for disabled individuals.

"We also partner with local NGOs. We work hard on closely following up the projects that we finance and use our Web site to communicate as our main too for communicating SEAL with potential donors," says Asseily. "Last year was our most successful year so far, we raised \$100,000. I hope the encouragement will persevere and that we will raise more funds in the future."