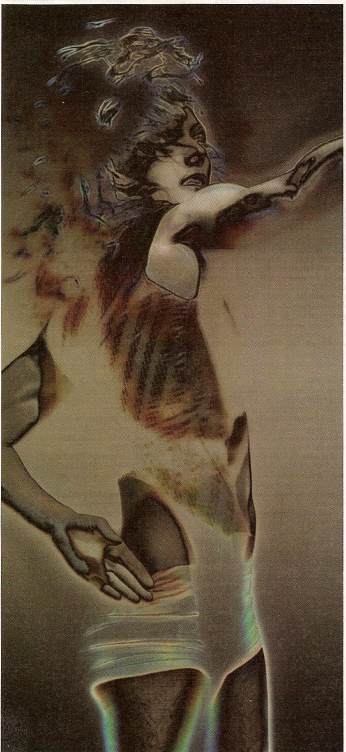


Art & Culture

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Castles in the air

As Dubai prepares to host its second **Pecha Kucha Night** – a short, sharp shock of music, dance, art and design – Catherine Jarvie chats to artist and choreographer Nadine Thouin about how to tell city's history in under seven minutes



In the cool of the evening in the final, balmy month of 2007 there was something unusual afoot in Dubai's industrial sector, Al Quoz. The area that, in recent years, has become home to some of the city's most interesting art galleries, is no stranger to various openings and happenings. But the steady stream of people who descended on The Third Line gallery in December, must have made even the most blasé of art crowd-sated staff at next door Spinneys Warehouse turn their heads.

Over 350 people gathered that night to witness the Dubai launch of *Pecha Kucha Night*, the self-proclaimed 'movement dedicated to creative and experimental art, fashion, architecture and everything else in-between'.

Originally conceived in Tokyo in 2003 by two architects (UK trained Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham of Klein Dytham Architecture) as a place for people to network and exchange ideas and contacts in an informal and open-minded space (*Pecha Kucha* translates colloquially as 'chatter' in Japanese), the nights have since expanded internationally. Regular *Pecha Kucha* events now take place in over 110 cities across the globe, taking in all the usual art and design suspects (London, Paris, Barcelona, New York), as well as a good sprinkling of some that might at first glance seem a little more surprising (Ljubljana, Schiedam and Albuquerque, to name but a few).

One look at what the night offers, however, and it doesn't take long to see the attraction of the event. In what amounts to something not unlike a creative hit-and-run, each of the night's presenters is given a chance to show 20 images for 20 seconds each, giving them just six minutes and 20 seconds to discuss their project or work before the next presenter is up. The format allows the maximum number of people to showcase their talent over the course of one evening while – rather more importantly, depending on which side of the stage you're sitting – ensuring that the lovely audience that's gathered to hear them don't have time, during any one presentation, to get bored.

The forthcoming Dubai event will boast 10 new presenters alongside a specially devised group performance, the brainchild of French Canadian Nadine Thouin, a multidisciplinary artist and choreographer whose CV includes credits with everyone from the world-famous Cirque de Soleil theatre troupe to choreographing for the 2007 Hollywood blockbuster based on Frank Miller's graphic novel about the Battle of Thermopylae, 300.

Thouin is no stranger to challenges

– thrives on them, in fact. 'I like to play with risk and danger,' she agrees with a laugh, 'that's why my career goes from one extreme to the other; I always want to play, like a child... When the play's over the child jumps on to the next thing, and it's like that in my life as well.'

As if developing a 14-strong performance piece incorporating dance, music and visuals that aims to tell the story of Dubai's growth 'from a grain of sand to a 250-storey building' in under six and a half minutes wasn't challenging enough, Thouin piled the pressure onto herself further by conceiving the piece in just 25 hours.

The process involved selecting the music (an original piece by Abstract Collision), overseeing all the artwork (with Paral Averil), choreographing Latin dance specialists Piso Caliente and generally taking full creative control of the project from start to finish ('It's more like a kind of coaching, being in a group with me,' she reveals when asked about her approach to collaboration, adding with a friendly laugh, 'You jump when you're coming on board or you don't').

As someone who has always been a pretty savvy barometer of international cultural trends (her career has so far taken her from New York to Europe and then on to China 10 years ago, where she became a cultural ambassador to Asia, staging the first Canadian-Chinese dance collaboration in conjunction with the Beijing Modern Dance Company), Thouin has recently moved to Dubai, attracted by its emerging art scene and rapid creative growth. Her performance at *Pecha Kucha* reveals her fascination with the city's development, hence the all-encompassing scope of her piece.

'Everyone wants to know where Dubai is from and where it's going,' she explains. Thouin is fascinated by the way the emirate has developed from a 'simple way of living' into something that is the 'total opposite' in a relatively short space of time. 'It's the parallel,' she continues, 'where we are in time between Dubai's desert roots and the present day. It's kind of like taking a step back, to reflect on what Dubai is today.'

As concepts go, it's undoubtedly ambitious, especially considering the rigours of *Pecha Kucha*'s rules. But Thouin remains unfazed: 'Like to put seeds in the earth and let them grow,' she smiles. 'It's really exciting to see which kind of flower is going to come out.' We predict it will all come up roses – for Thouin and *Pecha Kucha Night*. *Pecha Kucha Dubai takes place at The Third Line, Al Quoz 3, beside Spinneys Warehouse, April 9, 8.20pm. For more information call 04 3411 367 or visit www.pecha-kucha.org/cities/dubai.*