

**The Arts of the Emirates:
A Presentation on the UAE Visual Arts Sector**

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The Art of the Emirates offers a glimpse into the UAE visual arts sector through the voices of some of the many individuals who have helped shape it. From artists to gallerists, foundation figures to educators, every layer of this dynamic sector helps to power the creativity of the UAE nation.

Of course, this is not the first entrée into the visual arts for ADMAF. Established in 1996, the Abu Dhabi Music & Arts Foundation has been supporting the artists of the UAE and the wider Arab world for almost two decades; publishing seminal artist monographs, books and guides; delivering world-class exhibitions in the UAE, the UK and the US, supporting the professional development of artists through its Grants Scheme as well as its artists' advisory service, the National's Gallery;, holding arts education workshops in schools and universities, and rewarding artistic excellence through its portfolio of Awards, including the Christo and Jeanne-Claude Award for Emerging artists

Ever since the creation of the UAE in 1971, visual artists have been engaging in and reflecting on society. Through their thoughts, opinions and observations they have given us fresh ways of looking at the world around us. Over 40 years later, national visual arts practice is gaining credibility and recognition alongside the very visible movers and shakers of the international art market – the art fairs, art galleries and auction houses - who have established themselves in the UAE over the last 10 years.

Now is the time, ladies and gentleman, that the national artists of the UAE are stepping into the spotlight. Now is the time that the creativity and innovation of this country is being captured and conveyed by its greatest ambassadors – its cultural practitioners.

So, let us explore the dynamic diversity of the UAE's visual arts sector and its contribution to the country's vision.

The Art of the Emirates is incredible. In this presentation we shall see how artists continue to play an important role in shaping the nation's contemporary cultural identity – utilizing its natural resources, building upon its rich heritage, and helping to define a distinctive voice in a globalized 21st century world.

Artists are an infinite intellectual source – the only truly renewable energy, fuelling the quest for knowledge, generation after generation. Their contribution to the educational development of this country is of paramount importance.

As too is the growth of the arts educational infrastructure. With a firm foundation offering the best in arts teaching, the next generation can build upon the creative legacy, continuing those ongoing and necessary lines of enquiry.

And as the UAE seeks to diversify its economy, the emerging creative and cultural industries offer great potential in terms of employment, entrepreneurship, export and tourism. Its contribution to the UAE's development of its people's knowledge capacity as well as its international profile, to name but a few, is equally promising.

The 2030 Vision of Abu Dhabi is one built upon the creative energy of its people. ADMAF believes there are no finer advocates of this vision than the artists of the UAE.

As the UAE capital positions itself as a global capital of culture, it is its artists - its citizens - who sit at the very heart of this journey.

Let us go back to the formative years of the UAE and examine the main protagonists.

Nine years after Sheikh Zayed established the UAE, the Emirates Fine Arts

Society opened its doors in Sharjah. It soon became home to a pioneering artists' circle, and has fostered the careers of countless artists and curators. Its Annual General Exhibition (a highlight in the cultural calendar) remains the country's longest running arts event. The Society's program of workshops, seminars, publications, group and solo exhibitions over the last 35 years have helped not only to nurture talent but also to raise the level of understanding and awareness for contemporary and modern art among the general public.

The Emirates Fine Arts Society was where it all began. Here you see Hassan Sharif, widely considered the Father of UAE Conceptual Art. Following his studies at the Byam School of Art in London (where he studied on a UAE government scholarship), Hassan co-founded the Emirates Fine Art Society.

Between 1979 and 1985, he developed his constructive 'Semi System' project, composed of documentation, drawings and performance art. This 'revolutionary' approach to artistic expression was greeted with equal suspicion and fascination.

From his atelier in the Emirates Fine Arts Society, Hassan formed 'Al Khamsa' (The Five) a collective with his brother Hussain Sharif, Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim (who you'll see shortly), Abdullah Al Saadi, and Mohamed Kazem (Venice Biennale 2013).

Today, Hassan Sharif's focus remains firmly on the process of creation – the 'making' of art through repetitive action of mass produced items in response to the extreme consumerism and waste that is part of the way we live. (*Slippers and Wire*, 2009 / *Blue Knots*, 2014)

Today, his works can be found in public and private collections across the world.

Moving from conceptual to the figurative, Abdul Qader Al Rais is the 'Artist Laureate of the UAE'. Born in 1951, he was sent from Dubai to Kuwait as a boy following the death of his father. It was there in the libraries that he began leafing through books featuring the masters of the Renaissance, Impressionism, and other movements.

On his return to the UAE, he pursued studies in Sharia Law, but began forging a parallel career as an artist - documenting in watercolor and oil the landscape of his family's neighborhood: the doorways, pots, palm trees, and other functional elements that evoke the Emirati spirit. In 2006, he became the first Emirati artist to be sold at auction, selling at over AED one million.

Since early 2000, Abdul Qader's more abstract investigations utilizing the typographic vocabulary of Arabic calligraphy began to gain momentum. A style that he continues to develop.

The last 12 years have also seen the rise of the Arts Patron among the thirty-something generation of Emiratis. Many have followed the example of members of the UAE's ruling family, including Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi of the Barjeel Foundation (est. 2003) and Sheikha Latifa bint Maktoum Al Maktoum, Tashkeel (est. 2008), who said:

"We need buyers to buy and artists to be challenged and to make new and interesting work. That work should be intelligent, engaging and forward thinking. The use of local material can be explored in order to create work that is regionally unique yet cutting edge enough that it can stand on its own two feet on the international market."

Sheikha Hoor Al Qassimi of the Sharjah Art Foundation (est 2009) is also included in this group.

ADMAF works with several national universities in their campuses across the seven Emirates of the UAE. While many offer credited courses in subjects such as graphic design, photography, applied communications; Zayed University and Sharjah University offer Bachelor Degrees in Art and Design.

Today, the College of Arts and Creative Enterprises (CACE est. 2012) of Zayed University prepares students to become creative leaders in the arts and related industries. Its mission is to provide student artists and designers with an opportunity to explore and develop their own creative ideas while contributing to national initiatives in culture in the United Arab Emirates. Its curriculum for the major in Art and Design has been

developed to be consistent with the accreditation standards of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD) in the United States.

Its alumni list is proof of its impact on the UAE creative and cultural industries: HH Sheikha Latifa bint Maktoum Al Maktoum before she graduated and opened Tashkeel, and HH Sheikha Wafa bint Hasher Al Maktoum, who went on to open FN Designs. Alumni also include Maitha Demithan, Sheikha Maryam bint Sultan Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, plus many more.

The College of Art and Design of the University of Sharjah offers programs leading to the Bachelor of Arts degree in Fine Arts, Fashion Design with Textiles, Graphic Design and Multimedia, and Interior Architecture and Design.

Shaikha Al Mazrouei, Lecturer at the University of Sharjah, received an ADMAF Grant for an MA in Fine Arts at Central St. Martin's London.

New York University in Abu Dhabi (est. 2010) is also positioning itself as an Arab Art Academic Hub in the region.

Let us look now at the artists themselves and how they explore and examine the concept of belonging.

The landscape of the UAE has been physically changing at a dramatic rate. This rapid transformation has naturally impacted on the sociological, psychological and cultural landscapes of the nation – people's sense of belonging, the question of identity (How does one define oneself both as an individual and as an Emirati?), the impact of globalization on society, and the psychological impact on a society undergoing such change.

I begin with one of three alumni of American University right here in Washington DC, featured in *The Art of the Emirates*.

Mohammed Al Astad was born into the coastal Al Hammadi tribe of Khor Fakkan, nestled between the Hajar Mountains and the Indian Ocean.

He employs the forces of his surrounding environment to form evocative statements entrenched in memory by using a technique he calls 'beach tombs'. By burying iron, canvas and other found objects in sand for up to three weeks, he creates abstract works that are utterly unique – the product of Mother Nature. Al Astad was the first UAE citizen to obtain a BA in Graphic Design from American University in 1998.

Turning from the sea to the mountains, Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim has a special relationship with the Hajar Mountains. This intimate, inner dialogue with nature drives his pioneering artistic practice.

In 2013, a monumental photographic work depicting a mountain in Khor Fakkan with a hole carved into it to potentially reveal the sunset was presented as part of *Emirati Expressions: Realized*, which featured previously unrealized projects. An equally historical exhibition was the 2014 opening show of New York University Abu Dhabi's gallery on its new Saadiyat Island campus, which exhibited Ibrahim's seminal work, *Stones Wrapped With Copper*.

Like Hassan Sharif, Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim uses man's detritus to question the way we respond to the natural environment; and how this response has changed in the UAE over the last 40 years.

In a country where citizens represent no more than 15 percent of the UAE population, the identity question weighs heavy. How does one assume the guardianship of a cultural history in an ever-more globalizing society?

How does one remain connected to the generations before when the gap between them is growing ever distance?

Many artists seize upon core elements that form the fabric of Emirati traditional practices. By re-appropriating them, giving these objects a new sense of aesthetic appreciation and/or functionality, they become both representational forms and evocative statements, resonating with emotion and memory.

This work by Maitha Demithan (26 years old) is familiar to the many thousands of visitors in the US who visited *Past Forward*, the touring exhibition of Emirati art co-curated by another alumni of American University, Noor Al Suwaidi.

Working on Inkjet print/photoshop/scenography, this particular piece *Ajyal* (Generations) shows Maitha Demithan's brother in the traditional *thob* and *ghutra* holding the highly symbolic falcon embraced by the ever-present guiding hand of their grandfather. An incredibly powerful and intimate work that shows Maitha's maturity as an artist.

Later this year, Karima Al Shomaly will become the first Emirati woman ever to hold a PhD in Fine Art. Karima has exhibited worldwide for many years but her latest solo show in London is the result of a three-year investigation into the burqa.

The Emirati Burqa: An intimate object examines the form of face covering worn in the UAE since the 18th century. Based upon extensive research, the exhibition - in which this work was presented – was not only an ethnographic study but a creative investigation of the burqa's materiality and universal symbolism.

One cannot talk about art without design. The two practices go hand in hand. In just four years, Khalid Shafar has merged his business acumen and design skills into the UAE's first Emirati design studio.

His signature *Palm* series combines traditional elements of UAE culture with contemporary furniture design, from stools and coat stands to lighting. In other collections, he incorporates the *agal* (traditional headwear) into designs and also takes inspiration from Islamic geometry. Aside from his hectic schedule, Khalid also finds time to mentor the next generation of creative entrepreneurs as part of ADMAF's training program, the Cultural Excellence Fellowship.

ADMAF is delighted to have co-commissioned this work, 'The Nomad' which premiered at London's Shubbak Festival of Arab Culture this, and will be presented at Dubai Design Week this month and the Abu Dhabi Festival next April.

The Nomad is a contemporary reference to traditional *arish* (palm tree) architecture of the Gulf. Rather than casting aside the past completely in favor of more modern architecture practice, Khalid (along with other Emirati practitioners) are advocating a reinterpretation of the country's architectural past. Using modular building techniques Khalid offers a new outdoor design which functions both as a social space and a sculptural installation where visitors can sleep, eat, drink and meet – a *majlis* for the modern man, woman or child!

Like many of the artists presented in *The Art of the Emirates*, Hamdan Butti Al Shamsi does not pursue a fulltime professional career as a visual artist. A former school teacher, he has just got a new job as a translator at the Municipality of Al Ain.

Whether it is painting, photography, collage, calligraphy, digital art or video, Hamdan is continually trying his hand at new forms of expression. It is not that he is continually searching for his chosen medium, rather, that he is on a personal journey to assert his individuality and finds that each new idea warrants a different format. He believes that one of his most important roles is to document the heritage of his country in artistic forms and is therefore currently working on a project to collect Polaroid snaps from people all over the UAE.

This work *State of Mind* (now in the ADMAF art collection) was the flagship image of the first ever exhibition of Emirati art in a healthcare setting, which took place at Cleveland Clinic in 2013.

Hamdan was inspired by the saying "He who is used to a whole loaf of bread, will never be satisfied by a single bite." Hamdan certainly is emulating the figure in his own work – a man whose ambitious spirit, strong will and determination is driving him along the road of innovation.

In our final artist, we see how the legacy of Hassan Sharif is reflected in the work of Ebtisam Abdulaziz. Like Hassan, Ebtisam is blurring not only the boundaries between arts and sciences. Her work reflects a strong academic grounding in mathematics and sciences. There is a profound systematic approach to her work but also present is an element of play as

she pushes her own boundaries and those of perception in the viewer.

Today, Ebtisam uses a variety of mediums to reflect her many complexities, but it was this work *Autobiography* in 2007 which really jettisoned her into the spotlight.

Here, she portrays one of the more negative aspects of modern society, where the individual is rendered useless in a world where profit is everything. "The video is of a deliberate moving scene," she says. "The same one we take part in every day, except I present it in a cynical manner that mocks class divisions. It is a cynical critique of consumerist societies signifying the transformation of the human being into a code or a set of numbers." This is something, we can all relate to I think.

I hope that this has given you a taste to discover more and delve into *The Art of the Emirates*. As ADMAF continues to document the UAE visual arts sector, we look forward to sharing our findings with the world.

Thank you.