

A tribute to the beauty of nature

Featuring 40 works by Emirati and expatriate artists, an exhibition in Abu Dhabi is a celebration of the UAE's natural environment

Umm Al Emarat Park's open green spaces and verdant gardens are a popular destination for nature lovers of all ages, who have now been given a new opportunity to further explore the relationship between people and the environment around them.

The Art of Nature exhibition, which is housed in the park's new multi-use space, is open to the public until April 23. It features 40 artworks, including new commissions, by both Emirati and expatriate visual artists. It is organised by the Abu Dhabi Festival to celebrate the Environment Agency–Abu Dhabi's (EAD) 20th anniversary and is held with the support of Sheikh Hamdan Bin Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the Ruler's Representative in the Western Region. He's also the cChairman of the EAD.

Hoda Al Khamis-Kanoo, the founder of the Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation and Artistic Director of the Abu Dhabi Festival, said in an official statement: "The main visual arts exhibition of Abu Dhabi Festival 2017 continues ADMAF's commitment to the nurturing and furthering of contemporary arts practice in the UAE. In The Art of Nature, the beauty of our country is conveyed through artwork created by leading practitioners, emphasising the wealth of creative talent around us. "The Art of Nature" reflects how ingrained the local environment is in our culture and how deeply these roots are embedded within the nation. This is a milestone moment in our long relationship with the Environment Agency–Abu Dhabi as we celebrate its 20th anniversary with this exhibition."

The exhibition explores the natural beauty, diversity and rich ecosystems of the Emirate; from the desert, *sabkha* and mountains to marine and terrestrial species as well as flora and fauna.

Speaking of the exhibition, Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak, Secretary General of the EAD, said: "I am delighted that the inspiration that our natural world provides has manifested itself in this exquisite exhibition, artists of so many genre have captured the beauty of the emirates. This exhibition is a celebration of our natural environment, our rich cultural heritage and our growing and immensely talented artistic community. The exhibition has appeal to all ages, all nationalities. I would encourage everyone to attend. Similarly, I would encourage the citizens of the UAE to get out and our natural environment, where they too will benefit from its tranquillity and inspiration."

Among the works being displayed are the massive 1,440 image Lambda print Mapping Bu Tinah by Dubai-based photographer Roberto Lopardo. It documents his one-day visit to the unpopulated island of Bu Tinah, a Unesco-designated biosphere reserve. The Revival by Ranim Orouk depicts 3D printed antlers of disappearing Oryx to highlight efforts to bring this endangered antelope back from the brink of extinction. Sand-Land by Shaikha Al Mazrou, is a 225-square metre land project in the Ras Al Khaimah mountains that features concentric circles bounded by a square that visitors can enjoy using coordinates provided at the front desk of the exhibition. Flight by Amer Aldour, in which rounded blocks of sanded pine wood, powered by a mechanical simulator, move up and down in a row, to mimick the flapping of a falcon's wings.

Exhibition goers can likewise admire Beyond the City – Inside the City, by celebrated Palestinian artist Hazem Harb. It features photographs of the mangroves off the coast of Abu Dhabi island superimposed with images of the city.

“The idea of the project was born out in the context of preserving and archiving the memory of nature, and was also placed in the context of the sculptural to delay the dimensions of the trilogy,” explained Harb, adding: “The relationship of the natural reserve, inside and outside the city, is sometimes outside the context of the urban city, and sometimes inside it. This beautiful homogeneity enhances the aesthetic relationship between the city and nature.”

Art lovers may similarly find themselves being drawn to an ethereal installation inspired by dugongs. Entitled *Edge of the Meadow: Lady of the Sea*, it was created by Janet Bellotto, an associate professor and associate dean of the College of Arts and Creative Enterprises at Zayed University.

“I was very excited at this opportunity to explore nature, as much of my practice explores water, the sea and the environment around us ... as the dugong’s status is vulnerable, I considered what are the main causes for its death but also the important myths that it has engaged throughout history,” Bellotto said. “In particular, I focused on how dugongs get entangled in fishnets, where approximately 10 dugongs die each year in the UAE and their fragile feeding grounds of seagrass.”

Accompanying the exhibition is a broad educational programme under the patronage of Sheikha Shamsa Bint Hamdan Al Nahyan that features guided tours, artists-in-conversations, workshops and a dynamic activities area to inspire younger artists to engage with the nation’s flora, fauna and landscapes.

“The significance of using art and creativity to discuss with a public audience important issues of the environment and its fragility, is crucial for future sustainability,” Bellotto said. “It provides an opportunity of awareness and the hope to inspire others to think about the various aspects of nature that are explored. It also has allowed artists to give ‘environmental art’ a name here.”

Harb agreed and offered his hope for visitors and those participating in the exhibition’s rich programme. “I hope they take into consideration the beauty of nature and think about the conservation and protection of it,” he said.

That sentiment was echoed by Bellotto, who added that it is important to maintain continued dialogue across cultures and generations regarding conservation.

“I hope viewers will walk away with a sense of understanding of the fragile environment of ... all marine life,” she said. “That it might inspire others to further inform themselves about what they can do to protect the vulnerable marine life. Discussing and showcasing the issues that are being faced in our community is critical to sustain a positive future of nature and environment.”

Nathalie Farah is a writer based in Abu Dhabi.

To learn more about ‘The Art of Nature’ exhibition, please visit www.abudhabifestival.ae