

FRIDAY

Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim: Art is living, as environments are

Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, among the UAE's first generation of contemporary artists whose work is on display in the National Pavilion UAE at the Venice Biennale 2022, tells Anand Raj OK about the bond he shares with Khor Fakkan, his artistic process and his passion for nature

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Anand Raj OK

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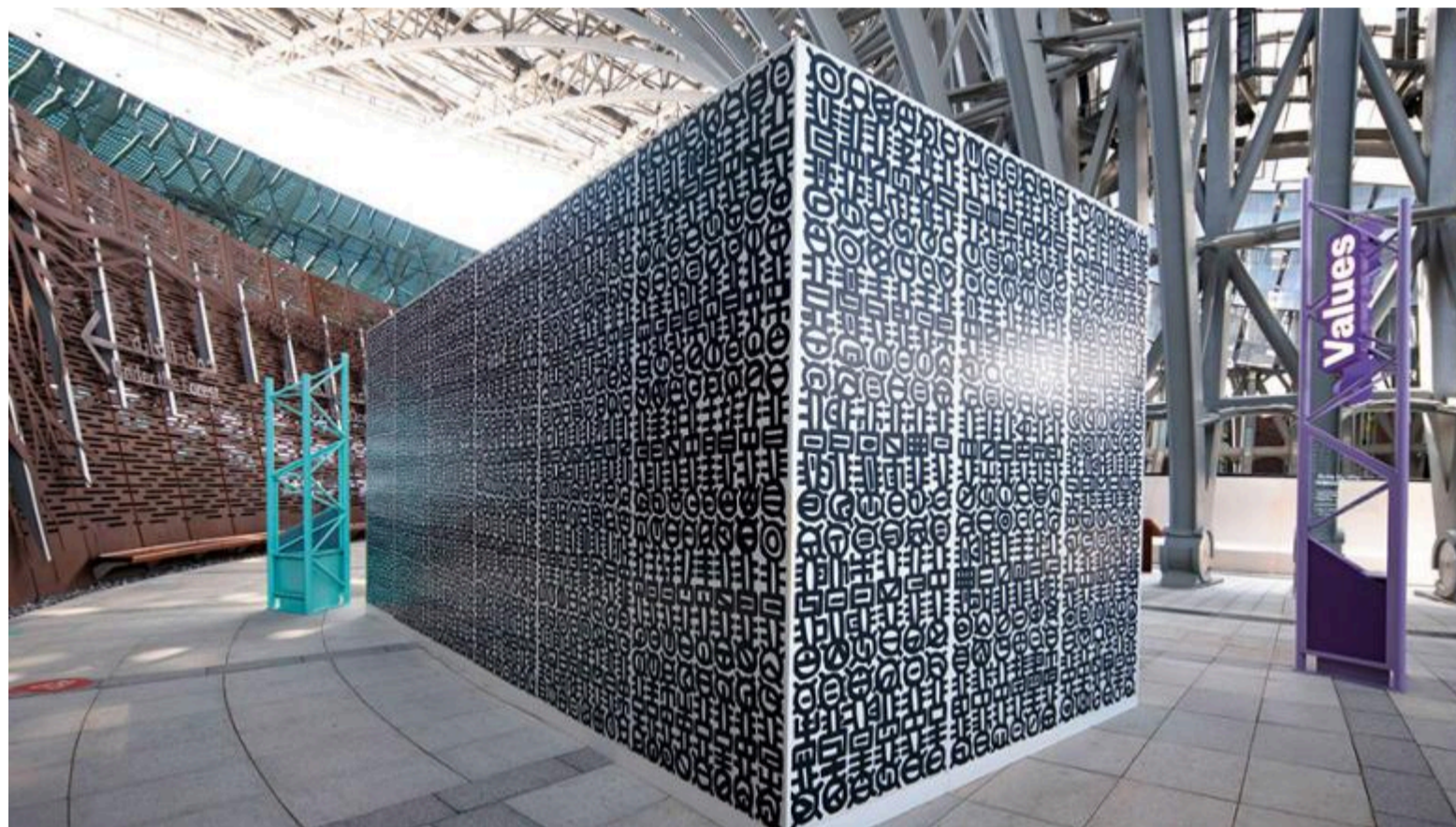


Art, says Mohamed, changes and it ages. "Each artwork has its own time, its own raw materials."

A conceptual artist who enjoys working with natural materials and creating land art, Mohamed, one of the founding member of the Emirates Fine Art Society, is among the UAE's first generation of contemporary artists and a member of a dynamic avant-garde scene. Taking inspiration from primitive symbols and psychological concepts- he has a degree in psychology from Al Ain University – he has always nurtured and cherished the bond that he shares with the environment of his birthplace – Khorfakkan, the largest town in Sharjah's East Coast that lies sandwiched by the Gulf of Oman on one side and the Hajar mountains on the other.

“I am inspired by the environment and the natural landscape of the UAE and specifically that of my hometown of Khorfakkan,” says the 60-year-old artist.

One of the region's best known experimental artists, Mohamed has had his works exhibited not only across the UAE but also in Berlin, Spain, Germany, Bagladesh, Cuba, Egypt and France, among others. His works are also part of the collections of Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah Art Museum and Kunstcentrum Sittard, in the Netherlands.



Hugs by Mohammed Ibrahim was at Terra the Sustainability Pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai

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Now, Mohamed is representing the UAE at the Venice Biennale 2022 that opened last week (April 22) and continues until November end. The National Pavilion UAE will be showcasing Ibrahim's new work in an exhibition curated by Maya Allison, Executive Director of The New York University Abu Dhabi Art Gallery. The work is a room-filling sculpture made up from 128 abstract and organic papier-mâché elements titled, “Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim: Between Sunrise and Sunset”.

“My connection to the nature of Khor Fakkan reflects the local landscape in this exhibition, Between Sunrise and Sunset, and all my works, and I incorporate local materials in the works,” says the highly acclaimed artist. “Art for me is living, as environments are. It changes and it ages. Each artwork has its own time, its own raw materials, and the effort and thoughts behind each of my works is different. There is a constant dialogue between me and the artwork while it is being made and once it is complete.”



From the objects that he has created to his drawings, they all appear to be marking time on a chronological canvas that encompasses the different elements in nature

Image Credit: Supplied

Mohamed's explanation clearly drives home the bond he shares with his local environment – a bond visible in his works and the materials he works with. From the objects that he has created – many shaped like ancient tools, bones or fossilised tree trunks and branches – to his drawings, they all appear to be marking time on a chronological canvas that pretty much encompasses the different elements in nature.

The exhibition in Venice will be accompanied by a book, the first comprehensive one on the artist. Co-edited by Maya Allison and Cristiana de Marchi, and multiple contributing writers, it documents the artist's journey, work process, and art forms while also documenting the history of the UAE arts scene.

Excerpts from an interview with Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim:

Your meeting with the late artist Hassan Sharif led to you entering the art scene of the UAE. Could you tell us how that meeting came about and what that meant to you?

I met Hassan Sharif in 1986, through my college classmate, the poet Ali Al Andal. Ali saw the paintings I was making and arranged for us to see Hassan's solo show at the Emirates Fine Arts Society. Through Hassan, I met Hussain Sharif – his brother – Abdullah Al Saadi, and Mohammed Kazem, and we became great friends and collaborated to explore new visions of what could be possible through art. Hassan and I had a similar vision and ideas, and it was exactly what I needed back then, as I was working on my own and didn't have many connections with other artists. This meeting was pivotal, as it introduced me to other artists in the UAE and Arab world.

In 1995, an important exhibition bringing us together was at the Sittard Art Centre in the Netherlands. The director at the time was Jos Clovors and it was another group exhibition that paved the way for the evolving arts scene from the UAE to the world.



An installation at Reem Central Park at Al Reem Island in Abu Dhabi

Image Credit: Supplied

In 2002, Hassan, Hussain, Abdullah Al Saadi, Mohammed Kazem and I participated in an exhibition titled 5 UAE, held in Germany. This exhibition was a key moment for the UAE's contemporary art scene. We were shaping the UAE's art universe and influencing generations of artists in the region. We are all part of the first generation of contemporary artists in the UAE (1990s–2000s), avant-garde artists. Along with the late Hassan Sharif, I became a founding member of the Emirates Fine Art Society in the 1980s, forming the basis of the creative community that defines the artistic scene of the UAE today.

Could you paint for us, in words, the UAE art scene of the 80s?

Back then the art scene included some Arab artists and a small number of Emirati artists who studied abroad and graduated from art schools in Egypt and Iraq. At the time, the cultural and visual art scene was limited to these artists, as the art movement and audience were both still very nascent. The concept of visual art – in the formal sense – was new to the UAE and the art ecosystem was very small.

An artist is like all other human beings – they're part of a society, they are affected by what happens in this society and also have an effect on it. The only difference is that artists see things differently, as they always look at things from an art context or perspective. Artists link everything to art – the simple acts of walking, seeing things, and hearing the news are all seen through an art lens. This, in turn, is reflected in the artist's art production, because as an artist – at the end of the day – one has a message and a work that they are producing.

You once said, "I create my art out of a need, not for someone or something". What do you attempt to say through your works?

In my work I am not trying to create a new language or alphabet, but what I try to achieve is the ultimate abstraction and simplification of forms. The dot is the starting point for a shape, and what I try to do is reduce any form back to that simplest shape – a dot.

Europe, there are other artists that I felt a strong appreciation for, such as Saloua Raouda Choucair, but it's very difficult to access and learn about artists outside of Europe because the art world is so oriented towards Europe, even in the Arab world.

You work largely with natural materials and create land art. What led you to choose these media and forms?

When I saw an article about Picasso's Guernica in a newspaper, it was the first time that I realised how art can go deep. But it wasn't until later that I realised that I would become an artist – even though I had always been making drawings and paintings. I materialised my inspiration by the environment and the natural landscape of the UAE, and specifically that of my hometown of Khor Fakkan, into art. *Between Sunrise and Sunset* is a perfect illustration of my connection to the nature of Khor Fakkan – it reflects the local landscape in the very theme of the exhibition and also incorporates local materials in the works themselves.

How important is experimentation when it comes to artistic practice?

Experimental and conceptual are two things that work together. You cannot separate them. Everything has a concept, and everything is an experiment. I view both as important as these terms alone create limitations.

When it comes to sculpting, I experiment with the material first, which can take some time, ranging from 10 minutes to a month. I experiment with coffee, tea or tobacco, and with grass or leaves. I then use the material prepared to make the objects. I start without a predetermined plan. Using cardboard or a box, I start with a dry object and add material onto the structure. I then watch as the dry structure becomes wet and starts to move. It feels like life is coming to this dry structure, and it starts taking its own shape. I do not interfere during the process; I sometimes either add more or take some parts away, until myself and the object are both satisfied.

How does it feel to be chosen to represent the UAE at a Biennale di Venezia 2022?

My appointment is a great honor and comes with great responsibility. I am thrilled to be engaging with some of the world's most intriguing artists and concepts. The Venice Biennale is the ultimate platform where artists from different fields of the art world come together for each of the biennale's editions to showcase, discuss and be part of the global art discourse, and I look forward to representing my country alongside my curator, Maya Allison, and be part of this dialogue.

What is the message you want to send out through your work at the Biennale?

The 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, under the theme *The Milk of Dreams*, questions the representation of bodies and their mutation to other forms, and the connection between bodies and earth. In resonance with this theme, the sculptures I'll be presenting at the exhibition cluster in undulating colour and movement – suggesting bodies, mutation, and the process of transformation.

How would you describe your exhibition series *Between Sunrise and Sunset*?

Between Sunrise and Sunset was inspired by Khor Fakkan's unique nature and its location – with the Hajar mountains towering over it on one side, and the sea opening it up to the vastness of the world on the other side. The exhibition, which has three parts, one colourful, one earthy tones, and one black and white, reflect the tension between Khor



A section of his work **Between Sunrise and Sunset**

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Between Sunrise and Sunset is a three-fold story. The coast-to-coast story is a story of the east of the UAE where you find the villages, and the west is about the cities. Between each coast, there are the other two components, the people and communities, and the earth's natural landscape.

Between the different villages and the towns, life is different. The time zone is different between sunrise and sunset, which sees the change in colours and the shadows. The natural landscape between the east and the west of the UAE changes in the type of sand, for example – there are differences in the mountains, valleys, and the deserts as well. This rich natural offering differs from one city to another. The traditions and the accents change from the west to the east coast – giving a rich diversity.

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