Dialogues of tradition and modernity:
The development of contemporary art
in the United Arab Emirates

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Sophie Kazan
School of Museum Studies
University of Leicester

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Sophie Kazan

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Abstract

This thesis examines the development of contemporary art in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The UAE is originally a tribal culture and a dialogue has formed between its traditional identity, which is collected from the past and the nation's rapidly developing environment. How do these two realities coexist and how are they visually manifested in contemporary art by Emiratis?

In the UAE, there has been a literary silence on art and an absence of art critique. Thus for the purpose of this research an oral history has been collected with interviews and conversations with over fifty artists, UAE art specialists and collectors. The investigation also explores perceptions of art and located cultural themes that are particular to the Arabian Gulf region and in particular to the UAE. It argues that contemporary art by Emiratis must be seen as part of an expanded art world. The relevance of distinctions and geographical categorisations are questioned and the growing importance of local cultural traditions is highlighted, in the development of a global art. As part of this visually based narrative, themes of globalization, cosmopolitanism, tournaments of value and modernisms are observed in art and art practices from the UAE.

Far from stalling change, local traditions and beliefs have become motors of difference and drivers of development, channelling the country's aspirations and ambitions into the future. This observation of how dialogues of the past contribute to contemporary art, is relevant not only to the study of peripheral non-Western art, but also to global perceptions of contemporary art.

Acknowledgments

When I set out to explore contemporary art made by Emiratis, I found only a limited amount of literature about art, therefore I am indebted to many people, both in the UK and in the UAE for helping me to construct a visual and oral conversation with the past and for providing me with insight and information, so that this thesis could be written.

I am also indebted to my supervisor, Professor Simon Knell for his unwavering belief in my ability, to my second supervisor, Isobel Whitelegg. Heartfelt thanks to colleagues and friends in the UAE, particularly my mentor Salwa Mikdadi, Associate Professor in the Practice of Art History at NYU Abu Dhabi, the inspiring Manal Ataya, Director of Sharjah Museums Authority, Anna Seaman, Meagan Horsman and Janet Rady, in London. Thank you also to all the artists whose work I discuss in this thesis, for their trust in allowing me to see and know about their work. Thank you to Afra Al Dhaheri, Asma Belhamar, Gaith Abdulla, and to Naz Shahrokh for her un-ending support and for distributing my fieldwork interviews to her classes, which gave me insight into Emirati art student's views.

Finally, a huge thank you to my kind and understanding husband, Magellan, and also my children, my parents and brothers for all their encouragement. Thank you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

> *Our debt to tradition through reading and conversation is so massive … that in a large sense, one would say there is no pure originality. All minds quote. Old and new make the warp and woof of every moment. There is no thread that is not a twist of these two strands.*[1]

Emerson observes that tradition is an intrinsic part of human nature. In the quotation above, he invites the reader to consider broader aspects of human culture and the metaphorical twists of past and present woven into every moment. Though he mentions reading and conversation, Emerson's "debt to tradition" is also visual as he alludes to warps and twists of thread, which connect or bind past and present together. From the Latin *tradere*, the word tradition relates to the handing down or transmission of knowledge, doctrine, laws and ideas, while heritage, from Latin *hereditare* relates to the *heirloom* or state that is transmitted.[2] In Arabic, the same words تراث (pron. *Tourathou*) can be used to define both tradition and heritage.[3] It makes sense that a single word should define not only the passing down of a visual object, an artefact or element of ancestry from one generation to the next and that it should also define the manner in which it is transmitted.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven sheikhdoms created in 1971, whose historical context will be described in Chapter 2. Though founded relatively recently, the country's culture and icononography have been formed from many of the practical and spiritual traditions, heritage and values of the Gulf region.[4] Thus the nation's common visual language not only reinforces the country's unity but also plays an important role in strengthening the national identity of its people. This study observes the advent and development of contemporary art by Emiratis. It considers the role of art in the UAE as a located visual signifier, that reflects the country's traditions and its past and also its swift trajectory and development.

While Emerson saw aspects of old and new tied together in the "warp and woof" of every moment, the geographer and poet, Nezar Al Sayyad describes "tradition and modern," as binaries,

[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Quotation and Originality" in *The Complete Works* (New York and Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904; Bartleby.com, 2013), chap. 6, https://www.bartleby.com/90/0806.html.
[2] "Heritage" and "Tradition," Definition in the Collins English Dictionary, accessed 17 May 2020, https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/heritage.
[3] "Tradition," Definition in the Reverso English-Arabic Dictionary, accessed 17 May 2020, https://dictionary.reverso.net/english-arabic/tradition/forced.
[4] "UAE Vision 2021 National Agenda," UAE Government website, accessed 22 January 2019, https://www.vision2021.ae/en.

with modernity vanquishing out-dated tradition.[5] He describes them as "mutually dependent categories" and questions whether globalization has hurried the demise of tradition or resulted in a new understanding of the term. The philosopher, Kwame Gyekya identifies a similar political binary but notes that the modern present is all too often equated with Western values.[6] Ancient customs and monarchic systems in Europe, particularly in the United Kingdom persist, though paradoxically, media, technology and consumer brands encourage people to break with the past, to modernise, evolve and innovate. The message is that in a modern and developed society, old ideas should be replaced with new and "improved" systems. It is important to mention these conflicting discourses as a premise to this study. Not only does it explain why I chose to study art from the UAE, but also why an entire chapter (Chapter 3) is devoted to global art dialogues which can be related to art by Emiratis. Further questions such as whether a specific type of Emirati art exist and how far can a nation produce art that is both modern and non-Western will also be explored.

When I lived in the UAE from 2006 to late 2010, the sight of Emirati nationals, identified by their traditional clothing or national dress, seemed to stand in sharp contrast with the swift urban development, the cranes and diggers, endless modernisation and technological innovations that were transforming the country at the time. The notion of tradition coexisting with modernity seemed to be an intriguing paradox, particularly when I reflected upon the place of tradition within modernity. Incredulous British art historian friends doubted that a country possessing a system of tribal governance, strong traditional values, whose population wear national dress and carry out age-old religious rituals, can produce truly contemporary art. And yet, many of my Emirati friends are widely travelled and like many of their parents, completed their studies abroad. They are extremely aware of popular Western culture and modern-day concerns relating to gender pay gaps and global warming, for example, which resonate throughout both of our cultures. Why shouldn't contemporary art be made by Emiratis and celebrated internationally? Must a non-Western country be expected to give up its cultural traditions and traditional identity, in order for its contemporary art to be recognised? Stemming from this question are queries that will also be addressed regarding the genesis of art from the UAE, its defining visual themes and situation within global art discourses.

This study is art-based though it neither offers a systematic catalogue of art made by the artists of this young nation, nor does it provide an airtight definition of art by Emiratis. It simply serves to explore some of the art that has been created by Emiratis and questions how it may be

[5] Nezar Al Sayyad, "The End of Tradition or the Tradition of Endings?" in *The End of Tradition?* (London: Routledge. 2004), 7.
[6] Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

observed, in the hope that this knowledge will benefit the study of art and art environments. Literature and the study of art by Emiratis are still nascent. By offering examples of contemporary art within its cultural history and context, I hope to assist in creating greater familiarity and awareness of the nation's artists and their art.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of my thesis is to explore the dialogues of tradition and modernity in the timeline of contemporary art by Emiratis, to draw out and situate the work of these artists within contemporary art discourses; notions of globalisation, modernisms and cosmopolitanism. How can singular aspects of art by Emiratis be recognised within a global art landscape, and what is its significance to us as global citizens? To realise this aim, I pursue four objectives:

- To understand what is meant by tradition in a UAE context and to explore this concept, noting the dialogues that exist between tradition and modernity.
- To consider how the UAE's contemporary art practices can be understood through the lenses of contemporary discourses, such as cosmopolitanism, tournaments of value, expressions of globalisation and modernisms that are alive in existing debate about an expanded art world.
- To explore the advent of art by Emiratis. Having identified key artists in the early years of the contemporary art in the UAE, I will investigate how their work can be understood within the traditional/modern dynamic.
- To ask how Emiratis making art today realise and engage with the new opportunities and challenges of global inclusiveness and challenges of the contemporary art world?

Having based this study on Emirati artistic practice and existing art discourses, the fourth and final objective will be to consider the global implications of this study. This will provide an opportunity to observe why these located cultural themes are valuable to researchers in the UAE, to external observation of the UAE cultural context and to global research on traditional societies as a whole.

Methodology and Oral Histories

Liah Greenfeld's book, *Different Worlds* provides a valuable methodological model for this study. First and foremost, Greenfeld explores the art of Israel, another country founded in the 20th

century. She describes the country's art landscape by plotting four main areas of focus: the country's historical background, where she gives examples of specific artists as signifiers of artistic development, She considers the growth of an art world and its "gatekeepers" and finally turns to the ensuing art "publics."[7] As a sociologist, her study is situated; she maps a singular, national ecosystem by focusing on context and the creation and consumption of art through oral histories. Greenfeld paints a vivid art landscape and confirms that there is no single approach, no defining art model and no single art history.

Unfortunately, Greenfeld's example is incompatible on one major count and that is on the subject of "gatekeepers," (the gallery owners, influential writers, critics and curators that could make or break an artist's career). Greenfeld's allusion to "gatekeepers" is both reductive and unfeasible in the modern Emirati scenario, for two reasons. As shall be observed in this research, there appears to have been a delay between the emergence of art practices in the UAE and the teaching of art and art markets. Artists trained abroad, they organized exhibitions, exhibited and began to sell work before Emirati universities offered art courses and before many galleries or auction houses had opened. Homegrown art critics and curators in the traditional sense are still few in number and this may be due to the transformation of visual culture by the internet and social media. There are no longer single "gatekeepers" as Greenfeld implies since art is now exhibited and shared virtually and galleries or newspaper critics cannot have the same hold over the art world and public opinion that they once did. The "gatekeeper" role has been supplanted and it will be interesting to observe how artists gain success and recognition in a UAE's art world context, through this investigation of the UAE's art ecosystems, patronage and examples of artwork in Chapters 4 and 5.

Another methodological feature from *Different Worlds* that is extremely relevant to this research is that Greenfeld was met with a similar lack of literary resources, due to the country's short history. As a result, she devised a methodology based on oral history. She employed questionnaires, articles and interviews as a methodological technique to trace the development of art in Israel from the 1960s to the 1980s. Greenfeld supports the use of oral histories to gain an insight into a country's art tradition and gain an understanding of its visual history. In the case of this research, the experience of interviewing members of Emirati art organisations, collectors, writers and artists have helped to unpick the nature and importance of traditional beliefs, modern and contemporary aspirations, tiers of influence and other layers of understanding and creativity

[7] Liah Greenfeld, *Different Worlds* (Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

that exist within Emirati visual culture and cultural organisations. Greenfeld shares various lines of questioning that she found useful in her study. The various questions posed to both the artists featured in Chapter 4 and 5 and those asked of other interviewees will be listed shortly.

Interviews for this research took two forms: They were based on personal interaction in galleries, art fairs or events in the UAE such as Abu Dhabi Art, Art Dubai, the Al Burda Festival and Culture Summit, as well as various exhibition openings and galleries. Connections through friends or colleagues could also lead to conversations, which were then continued virtually, by electronic messaging or by email. This was an easy way of defying time zones and restrictions on the use of applications such as *Skype* in the UAE. Additionally, where interviewees were aware of the possibility of misunderstanding or misquotation, rather than forego an interview, I would transcribe the interview and offer it for amendment and correction. This insured total control over the message or information that was given, on the part of the interviewee and/or their organisation. It should be pointed out that this attitude to communication and discretion is often apparent in an Emirati context and far from reflecting any type of self-censorship, I would suggest that, in a multi-lingual and fast-paced country such as that of the UAE, it has become a means of ensuring that information given out for publication or permanent documentation is accurate and has not been misunderstood. It should therefore also be noted that hardly any of the interviews taken for this thesis were amended. Amendments made were often related to the spellings of names, correct dates or to give more precise information. The second means by which interviews for this research took place was largely reactive. Following the publication of a written article or presented paper, I contacted the author – often a non-Emirati - to ask for specific clarification or questions. These interviews were more focussed and taken from the subject's presentation at a conference or event. They were therefore more focussed, could be more candid and revealing.

The selection of interview subjects for the construction of the oral history in this research was both inclusive and intuitive. It was also dictated by availability in the UAE or London during the time of this study. Face-to-face meetings coincided with my visits to various art fairs, conferences and art events in the UAE. Added to my own personal history and work in the Abu Dhabi between 2006 and 2010, the oral histories presented in this thesis have, therefore, been used to piece together a very contemporary and unique moment in the development of art by Emiratis.

The choice of artwork included in this thesis was necessarily limited. In Chapter 4, the work of six artists was chosen because it hails from the first *pioneer* generations of artists from the UAE. Oral histories and the evidence available show that the artists working immediately before

and after the creation of the UAE in 1971 were relatively small in number and the majority were male. These artists had few resources, art materials and gallery representation and they actively sought to build an Emirati art audience through their art practice. As will be mentioned later, art was not taught in universities or in higher education. Additionally, an artistic career was not recognised as an appropriate job or a worthwhile occupation. Those that persevered with their art practice often worked concurrently in government or public sector jobs. I met most of these artists while working in the UAE in the 2000s. Many of them had established themselves with early galleries or arts organisations in Dubai or Abu Dhabi. The foundation for which I worked offered many artists opportunities for project funding, residencies and exhibitions abroad.

The second generation of artists, whose work is considered in Chapter 5 was selected from a wider pool of students and recent graduates who emerged from the UAE's newly established fine art degree courses and training programmes. These were mainly female. Artists whose work showed a consideration of context, referred to Emirati traditions, past customs or generations were particularly interesting to me and I made sure that I met them and learnt about their work. Most interviews were conducted in English, a language that is most commonly used in a contemporary art context in the UAE[8] though some were undertaken in a mixture of English and Arabic. My habit of transcribing interviews and use of email was extremely useful for these interviews in particular, since my understanding of the Emirati dialect is far from perfect. All those who kindly agreed to be interviewed are included in the following table.

At the start of this research, I felt that it would also be useful to gain an understanding of attitudes to tradition, art and the gage the extent to which people, particularly young people, were willing to give of their time and answer questions about their practice and culture. I therefore put together a short questionnaire, which my friend, the artist Naz Shahrokh, who teaches Fine Art at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, kindly agreed to disseminate amongst her students. This wider questionnaire is mentioned at the bottom of the table and the results are shared throughout this thesis in relation to the attitudes and perceptions of young people and artists studying post-2010. It is my belief that oral histories are an extremely valuable, if not vital form of narrative inquiry. "Human actors encode things with significance," Arjun Appadurai writes. "It is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context."[9] This chimes with the words of Abdullah El Reyes, the Director General of the UAE National Archive in Abu Dhabi. El Reyes has stated that both oral history and tradition are naturally drawn together because they are, "passed down

[8] Salwa Mikdadi, conversations with the author, 1-16 July 2020.
[9] Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things,* ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 5.

from generation to generation … documenting national experience" [10] to form a historic narrative.

"These memories convey a way of life and of thinking that remind us … of the perspectives and distilled wisdom of those who have gone before."[11] Before listing the interviews that took place for this research, it is vital to consider the various interview techniques and manners of collecting oral histories in greater detail. Though her research focuses on Italian Architecture of the 20th century, Silvia Micheli's methodological design is particularly relevant to the Emirati context because of her desire to give her research a voice and capture, "the spirit of the time."[12] Micheli also focuses on the importance of personal stories and memory; oral histories offer the opportunity to reassess critical understandings (or misunderstandings) of the past and to "produce a coherent history out of those individual stories." The use of oral history, personal recollections and ideas enrich this analysis. Micheli's method relies to a great extent on the gathering of data from a wide range of sources in order to ensure that interpretations are cross-referenced against each other and with other sources and literature, to create a well-rounded narrative. Both Micheli and Greenfeld support the use of short interviews of up to four or five questions compared to longer quesitonnaires, which are less likely to be completed.

Ethics is an important theme in this research; both the ethics at play within the UAE's visual history and the ethical gathering of information in mapping oral histories. Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann consider the ethics of qualitative research.[13] They focus upon the importance of dialogue rather than discrete questioning. They warn against, "warm, empathic interviews" that are "ethically questionable," and underline the importance of rigour and awareness of the extent to which questions are leading or left open is vital to the role of the researcher. In the same vein, Leavy's "Qualitative Interview Continuum,"[14] differentiates between a minimalist biography style of interview, aimed at gathering information in a short amount of time and oral history, which would be based upon several meetings over a long period of time. According to this method, interviewers and interviewees collaborate, converse and produce a personal story. While the internet has allowed easy back-and-forth of questioning and checking for accuracy as well and the

[10] Abdulla M. El Reyes, "To Learn from Past Experiences: Collecting the UAE National Archives," in *Museums and the modern world,* ed. Pamela Erskine-Loftus (Edinburgh & Boston: Museums Etc, 2014), 211.
[11] Abdulla M. El Reyes, "To Learn from Past Experiences: Collecting the UAE National Archives," in *Museums and the modern world,* ed. Pamela Erskine-Loftus (Edinburgh & Boston: Museums Etc, 2014), 211.
[12] Silva Micheli, "Reassessing 1960s and 1970s Italian Architecture – Oral Histories as a Method of Investigation," *Fabrications – Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand,* Vol.24, No.2 (November 2014): 198-213.
[13] Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale, "Confronting the Ethics of Qualitative Research," *Journal of Constructivist Psychology,* 18 no. 2, (15 August 2006): 157-181.
[14] Brinkmann and Kvale, "Confronting the Ethics of Qualitative Research," 157-181.

addition of points or ideas, the interview style adopted here for practical reasons and efficiency can be located between Leavy's two distinctions. It should also be noted that this research project gained ethical approval in December 2017. The application for ethical approval included a participant information sheet, a consent form and an email consent form for face-to-face and virtual interviews. Email and virtual interviews were vital in the research due to distances, time zones and religious holidays in the UAE, which made it difficult for subjects to respond during the daytime. Having worked in the UAE and conducted much academic and journalistic research on Arab and Islamic art, I was able to draw upon an extended network of Emirati artists and art professionals for the purpose of this research.[15] The role of the interviewer or research is vital to the manner in which information is gathered, the responses of subjects to interview questions and their analysis. Phillion and Connelly's research on *Narrative Inquiry in a Multicultural Landscape* focus on the part of the interviewer, working as a historian, whose job it is to analyse and weave the results of the research to situate personal knowledge into the process of research and narrative inquiry.[16] For Phillion, the personal history of the researcher will, consciously or unconsciously, be entwined into all communication with others, whatever the focus of research or study. The role of the researcher therefore adds to the multicultural dimension of research. This therefore necessitates, for the reader, an introduction to the author's cultural and academic background. Following the list of interviews, therefore, will be an overview of my background as a researcher and interviewer as well as a summary of my interest in the UAE itself. The need for transparency in gathering of research outlined by Phillion and Connelly, would also call for the inclusion not only my own analyses, but also include other diverse and complimentary discourses relating to contemporary art from the UAE or outside Europe, in order to allow the gathered oral histories to be situated within a wider, global context.

Interview fieldwork record

There follows a list of all the people who gave their time to this thesis by kindly agreeing to be interviewed or answered questions to help in this research. This list is organised chronologically, in two groups.

Interviews based on a research questionnaire given by email - The first group includes interviews that were based on a five-question questionnaire sent by email, which varied according

[15] Kris Stutchbury and Alison Fox, "Ethics in educational research: introducing a methodological tool for effective ethical analysis," *Cambridge Journal of Education* 39, no. 4 (December 2009): 489-504.
[16] Jo Ann Phillion and Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry in a Multicultural Landscape* (Westport: Ablex Publishing Group, 2002), 105-126.

to the interlocutor's occupation, position and context. Questions related to each subject's personal history or general opinions. For example, their opinion about the development of contemporary art in the UAE or in the case of artists, how public perceptions about contemporary art have changed over the years. Suggestions of ways in which artists, art organisations and galleries operating in the UAE could develop or enhance their global visibility were sought, as well as whether artists they felt that their identity as Emiratis had played an important part in their work and whether they had felt sufficiently supported in their careers. It was also important to allow people to only answered questions that they wanted to and add more information or opinion of they wanted to. This open attitude the interviews, which is backed up by Phillion and Greenfeld's work, has made the gathering of information more easy, it meant that I could return to ask additional questions if necessary. The avoidance or misunderstanding of questions also meant that I could go back and rephrase them, if possible, for future interactions or interviews. Generally, questions that were very broad in scope, such as "How do you feel about the development of contemporary art in the UAE" were met with responses to do with the growth of galleries and museums and the development of secondary education. There was a very positive reaction to questions related to national identity and national growth – generally, this seems to be a topic of national pride and satisfaction. Questions related to tradition and family were often ignored either because they were not necessarily understood or the interlocutor did not see their relevance. More attention will be given to local perceptions, priorities and privacy later in this study.

1	Amal Al Gurg	Artist	Nov. 2018
2	Azza Al Qubaisi	Artist	Nov. 2018
3	Karima Al Shomely	Artist	Dec. 2018 – Mar. 2019
4	Manal Ataya	Director of Sharjah Museums Association	Dec. 2018
5	Nasser Abdullah	Artist and ex-Chairman of Emirates Fine Art Society	Aug.–Dec. 2018
6	Steve Sabella	Artist and writer	Aug. 2019
7	Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi,	Commentator, Collector, Founder and Director of the Barjeel Art Foundation	Jul. 2017 and Dec.2018
+	18 Fine Art students from Zayed University, Abu Dhabi (names withheld)		Summer 2018

Contact or Follow-on interviews from presentations and literature - The second group of interviews were conducted following a person's expressing their opinions or experiences in a book, publication or lecture. Many interviews of this type sought clarification or further information from the authors and involved specific questions. They took place via email, Skype, Whatsapp and Facebook messenger. This was a more useful form of questioning for research

because it built on relevant knowledge and information, though questionnaire interviews given to the subjects above were vital to get a sense of, to quote Micheli, the "spirit of the time."

Each person's name is followed by a brief descriptor, based on the author's understanding of each person's speciality at the time. This will hopefully give readers an idea of the broad sources of oral history included in this study.

1	Ali Al Abdan	Artist and arts writer	3 Aug. 2017
2	Alison Collins	Majlis Gallery	Apr. 2017
3	Abdulqader Al Rais	Artist	Aug. 2017
4	Afra Al Dhaheri	Artist	Jul. – Aug. 2019
5	Anna Seaman	Arts Writer and Journalist	2017 – 2019
6	Asma Belhamar	Artist	Jul. – Aug. 2019
7	Caroline Louca-Kirkland	Managing Director, Christies' Dubai	July 2019
8	Cristiana de Marchi	Artist and Curator	Apr. 2017 – Mar. 2019
9	Deborah Najar	Director of JP Najar Foundation	Jul. 2019
10	Ebtisam Abdulaziz	Artist	Nov. 2018
11	Gaith Abdualla	Gulf art specialist and writer	Jul. – Aug. 2019
12	Iain Robertson	Author and art specialist, Sotheby's Institute	23 Apr. 2019
13	Janet Rady	Art specialist	14 Feb. and 21 Jun. 2019
14	Lamya Gargash	Artist	Nov. 2018 – Jan. 2019
15	Lisa Ball-Lechgar	Deputy Director Tashkeel	Oct. – Nov. 2018
16	Marjorie Scharzer	Museum Studies at University California, Berkeley	Nov. – Dec 2018
17	Mohammed Afkami	Art Collector	Jul. 2019
18	Mohammed Kanoo	Artist and Art collector	3 Aug. 2019
19	Mohammed Kazem	Artist	Apr. 2017
20	Mona Al Ali	Art specialist	2017 – 2019
21	Najat Maki	Artist	2 Aug. 2017
22	Nasir Nasrallah	Artist and Chairman of EFAS	Feb. – Apr. 2019
23	Naz Shahrokh	Associate Professor of Fine Art, Zayed University.	2016 – 2019
24	Nina Heyderman	Previously ADMAF, Abu Dhabi	Aug. 2017
25	Pamela Erskine-Loftus	Northwestern University, Qatar	Aug. 2017
26	Prof. Clive Holes	Faculty of History, University of Oxford	Sep. 2018
27	Rima Sabban	Associate Professor of Sociology, at Zayed University	20 Sep. 2019
28	Roberto Lopardo	Cuadro Gallery, Dubai	18 April 2019
29	Roxane Zand	Deputy Chairman, Sotheby's London	July 2019
30	Salwa Mikdadi	Associate Professor, NYUAD University	2016 – 2019

31	Shaikha Al Mazrou	Artist	Nov. 2018 – Feb. 2019
32	Suzy Sikorski	Middle East Art and Christies' Dubai	Nov. 2018 – Mar. 2019

As a postscript to this section, for those unfamiliar with the Arabic language, please note that the spellings of names in English are based on phonetics, therefore there may be discrepancies between, for example the spelling of HH Sheikh Zayed or the artists Najat Maki and Ebtisam Abdulaziz' names through this research. Quotes and references may allude to Shaykh Zayid, Najat Maki, Meky and Meki, Ebtissam and Ibtissam, Ebtisam and Ibtisam. These are not mistakes, simply different phonetic translations.

Other Source Materials

Two exhibitions and their accompanying books are particularly seminal for this period: *1980-Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates,* the exhibition and book for the 2015 UAE Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennial, curated by HH Hoor Al Qassimi, and *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community 1988-2008*, which took place at the NYU Abu Dhabi Gallery in 2017. Both books are extremely useful sources of oral history. They focus on the art community that arose in the UAE in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. The first offers interviews and newspaper clippings, images of artwork and original photographs of some of the UAE's first contemporary art installations. The second is focussed specifically around the artists who were associated with Hassan Sharif and their memories. One of the most exciting things about contemporary art by Emiratis is that its development was so swift and recent. Artists in both of these books remember how difficult it was to buy art materials and books about art in the UAE during the 1970s. They showed their work wherever they could, in peoples' houses,[17] in sports clubs and libraries, as shall be described presently, carving out a small art audience amongst their friends and colleagues. Nowhere is the excitement and feeling of the time captured more directly than in interviews or memories of artist gathered in these two books.

The rapid transformations and modernisation that occurred after the export of oil and the creation of the UAE in the 1970s and 1980s are described in Chapter 2. Though this is section is heavy in historical data, the chronology of how the UAE came about is vital to understand how art practices evolved in conjunction with the development of an Emirati art audience and in tandem

[17] Kevin Jones, "Beyond Safe," *Art Asia Pacific,* May-Jun 2015, 116.

with the construction of the country's museums, galleries, art institutions and art fairs. In this situation, the development of art becomes an important source of contextual and predictive information, particularly where literary evidence is also lacking. By exploring the practice of art, work by a number of artists complemented by oral histories and fieldwork interviews, this thesis observes the coexistence of tradition and modernity in the evolving art narrative of the UAE.

Studying the development of contemporary art in the UAE involves much more than simply documenting a national art history. Much of the art observed here pre-dates fine art, art history, curatorial and museum studies being offered by the UAE's higher education establishment. It also precedes the country's annual art fairs and super-museums such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the forthcoming Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and the Zayed Museum. Art and culture in the UAE have taken on an important economic and strategic role for the country and its ambitions and this will be explored further in the final chapter. This thesis focuses on the work of a select number of artists whose work represents some of the principle currents being explored by artists in the UAE. Nonetheless, I have mindfully integrated feedback, fieldwork and research from the various influencers, the museums, biennales, galleries, patrons, auction houses and art fairs into this narrative, in order to support and contextualise it.

Individuals develop art and as has already been noted, the emphasis of this thesis is very much on art by Emiratis. Much has been written by and about the late Hassan Sharif, an artist who has been christened, "the Godfather of Emirati art" in the press. I had the good fortune to meet Sharif at the opening of *Dropping Lines* in October 2010, an exhibition of artists from *The Flying House* that was held at the Salwa Zeidan Gallery in Abu Dhabi. Two extremely well documented exhibitions took place after Sharif's passing away. These provided much information and memoirs from his friends that help to construct an idea of what it was like to be an artist in his circle during the UAE's early years. *But We Cannot See Them,* at the NYU Gallery from March-August 2017,[18] and its accompanying catalogue, trace the UAE Art Community of which Hassan Sharif was a part. The retrospective exhibition, *I am the Single Work Artist* that took place at Sharjah Art Museum, from November 2017 to February 2018 and its accompanying catalogue are also very valuable sources of information for this study.

Challenges

[18] "But We Cannot See Them," NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery website, accessed 1 May 2020, https://www.nyuad-artgallery.org/en_US/our-exhibitions/main-gallery/bwcst-archive/.

It has been challenging to ground source relevant local information pertaining to contemporary art by Emiratis and it has also been necessary, at each step, to cross-reference oral histories and ensure that they are sufficiently independent. Emirati writer Gaith Abdulla suggests that "creatives" in the UAE do not share the same hard boundaries and politics as social scientists, journalists, scholars, and academics, there have been more open discussions and debates about art ideas and these continue to evolve.[19]

The internet and social media have democratised art, to a great extent and this means that art debates are no longer solely reserved for curators, art collectors or art patrons. The breadth of interviewees included in this research illustrates this. They include influencers and opinion leaders such as collectors Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi and Mohammed Afkami, directors and deputy directors of art locations such as Alserkal Avenue, galleries and auction houses such as Christies Dubai, art organisations such as Art Jameel and Tashkeel, artists, art curators and art writers. The latter should not be confused with art critics, particularly Emirati art critics, who are noticeable for their absence. What is more, it is important to question whether the notion of an art critic is authentic in the UAE. In the West, art critics have traditionally influenced opinion and played an important part in the development of art. The arts writer Donna Lorch[20] and Meem Gallery founder Charles Pocock[21] have disproved the lack of Emirati critical writing and this will be considered within the following chapters. It is interesting to note that Greenfeld describes art critics in Israel much as they might have been in Paris or London in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as knowledgeable gentlemen (usually) whose fearfully awaited review could make or break a career. Conversely, the identification of art critics and the concept of art critique are problematic in the UAE context. UAE art communities are not especially vocal and the idea of criticizing someone's work is seen as unkind.[22] Save for a handful of articulate Emirati writers, much of the literature about Emirati art that is not simply description is written by non-Emirati journalists.[23] Nevertheless, Derderian sees the potential of an Emirati critical, creative class that would play a role in developing and strengthening the UAE's contemporary art and boosting its "cultural infrastructure."[24] Pocock calls for the local media to be "tougher" and openly critical, in

[19] Gaith Abdulla, conversations with author, 20 August 2019.
[20] Donna Lorch, "Towards a Culture of Critique in the Visual arts of the Gulf Region," *Contemporary Practices,* Vol. XVI, no.20 (2015): 20-21.
[21] Charles Pocock, "The Art Insider," *What's On Dubai Magazine*, August/September 2012.
[22] Lorch, "Towards a Culture of Critique in the Visual arts of the Gulf Region," 20-21.
[23] Gaith Abdulla, "Culture of critique critical to develop UAE art scene," *Gulf News,* 26 October 2012.
[24] Elizabeth Derderian, "Critique as Infrastructure – Organic Growth and the Rise of Visual Arts Organisations in the UAE," *Ibraaz Essays* 10, (6 May 2016): 11.

order for "great art" to be produced, exhibited and celebrated.[25] His rousing, "the audience has the right to know what is really happening," suggests that this is more than a simple call for journalists working in the UAE to step into the "art critic" role, but also a call for increased transparency, which is another theme entirely. Pocock's opinion piece or disapproval of the lack of criticism is certainly justified, though since the Emirati art audience is still developing, general education about art may be a more realistic aim at this stage. It follows that for art criticism to be written and absorbed by an appreciative audience, people would need to feel confident of their opinions and understand the various artistic processes.

The dearth of information and objective criticism of art by Emiratis has been a challenge in this research and a huge bone of contention for people working in the art industry within the UAE and the Gulf. As Pamela Erskine-Loftus points out, the unwillingness to offer critique can also mean that art museums and organisations do not get their dues in terms or recognition or funding.[26] She suggest that the silence surrounding art and artists on behalf of Emiratis is tied up with an unwillingness to criticise or seem ungrateful to the organisations funded by the government. Mikdadi insists that this is not a cultural trait since Arabs and the nomadic *Bedouins* are known to have discussed and critiqued each other's poetry and verse.[27] Could criticism of visual representations be tied up with an unwillingness to impose judgement on another's creativity? Abdulla believes that the current style of reportage or journalistic indifference to art in the UAE is letting down Emirati artists. If they wish to work abroad, in an international art environment, he insists that Emiratis need to be open to foreign criticism.[28] Similarly, the UAE's "timid and congratulatory" journalism, "has failed its artists and its social art scene"[29] and art journalists seem to refuse to engage with the nation's art and artists. A culture of art critique is sorely needed, Abdulla says; to liven up a society, provide diversity or shade to the black and white.[30]

Critique has become important for the development of Western art history, but would a culture of art critique be authentic within an Emirati environment? Could Emirati art not find its own path for development rather than emulating the Western method of art critique? For *The National* newspaper's art writer Melissa Gronlund, this is an issue of confidence in the field of art

[25] "The role of the media is to make its audience aware, not to keep them in the dark. The world we live in is not all made up of roses and sunshine. The audience has the right to know what is really happening." Charles Pocock, "The Art Insider," *What's On Dubai Magazine*, August/September 2012.
[26] Pamela Erskine-Loftus, conversation with the author, 9 July 2019.
[27] Salwa Mikdadi, conversation with the author, 19 May 2020.
[28] Gaith Abdulla, "Culture of critique critical to develop UAE art scene," *Gulf News*, 26 October 2012.
[29] Abdulla, "Culture of critique critical to develop UAE art scene."
[30] Abdulla, "Culture of critique critical to develop UAE art scene."

and the answer lies in education: "better-educated people [would]… make better art and provide better critiques."[31] This may well reflect back to the fact that art was not taught in Emirati schools between 1979 and 2014.[32] Caroline Louca at Christies' Dubai believes that public opinion about art and the idea of art collecting is still developing. The emphasis must be on creating a stimulating and critical environment in order to widen tastes and broaden interest in the art market, thus enabling it to evolve more homogenously.

Currently, Louca says, the UAE art market can become repetitive because they (the collectors) all want the same thing. UAE galleries and auction houses want to retain buyers and engage with new collectors and they are therefore put under a tremendous amount of pressure to, "keep the circle going round."[33] Not everyone can have a Picasso or a Rembrandt. What is the solution? Louca suggests that art businesses need to adopt a more dynamic and instructive role, shedding light on fresh and more wide-ranging pieces. The hotly debated topic of art criticism will be explored further in the following chapters, in relation to the featured artists' work and again in Chapter 6.

There are artists whose work has been extremely important to the development of art in the UAE and whom I have not been able to include, either through lack of time or simply not having been able to meet them. These include Abdullah Al Saadi, Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim and Ahmed Al Ansari. I hope to be able to explore their work in future research. It is important to point out too that while many artists and art organisations were delighted to help in this research, on two occasions, artists were unwilling to give of their time and this was a challenge. Artists can be extremely busy with their work and commissions, so in one case, I was able to supplement the information gained from a brief conversation with the artist and information from their friends and literature. Whether deterred by the idea of questioning or by being approached by email, the second artist did not see the benefit of taking part in research about art by Emiratis. This unfortunately meant that his work could not be included for practical and ethical reasons and another artist was contacted.

Research Context

The research contained in this thesis reflects the developmental timeline of art by Emiratis. As

[31] Melissa Gronlund, "The art world is in need of a strong critical culture," *The National*, 14 July 2018.
[32] Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, "Opinion: The Art of Education," *Which School Advisor*, 21 May 2015.
[33] "It is the responsibility of all of us involved in art; the auction houses, the galleries and organizations, all of us, to explain and allow [collectors] to feel comfortable talking about art, being around art and buying art." Caroline Louca, conversation with the author, 5 August 2019.

such, it speaks most directly to regional studies of modernization and development and this bridges three principle groups: The first, researchers writing about art by Emiratis and other Arab-speaking countries. Secondly, this fits into a broader non-Western or peripheral sphere or sub-group. Finally, this research can resonate, as a regional example of wider thematic theories relating to visual and contemporary art by experts such as Hans Belting and Terry Smith.

To date, monographs and articles about "Emirati Art" often include the work of non-Emiratis who have lived in the UAE for many years. Not only does this research specifically address definitions concerning the nature of art by Emiratis, it also seeks to locate these artists and map their contextual and historical background, now and prior to the creation of the country in the early 1970s. Another important point to make is that the absence of art materials, art infrastructure and educational resources prior to 1970 in the UAE, should not be mistaken for a lack of creative history or *kunstwollen.* This research focuses clearly on art by Emiratis and therefore has sought to include historical context for the creation of art before the discovery of oil and the creation of the nation. To this end and in line with the methodology used by Greenfeld mentioned earlier in this introduction, newspaper articles, online resources and oral histories were used to fill in gaps in knowledge. For example, Anna Seaman, perhaps the most widely published journalist writing for the English language daily newspaper, *The National* as well as online and virtual media, has greatly contributed to this research through her articles and personal insights.

This study has been brought together in English. Did this affect the research context of the findings or the central questioning of art from the UAE? Conversations with colleagues working in universities in the UAE have confirmed that English is most often the *lingua franca* of art and art discussion in the UAE, as abroad, even amongst Emirati nationals. For example, the UAE-based art podcast "Tea With Culture" (TWC) presented by Hind Mezaina and Wael Hattar presents in-depth profiles on artists, filmmakers, writers and other creatives going on in the UAE and this is broadcast in English. Further attention will be given to the UAE's sociological distinctions and the potential for language to be seen as a form of heritage, later in this study.

One of the principle reasons that I undertook this study was to place art by Emiratis within a wider art narrative and to ensure that the work of artists from the UAE should remain an area of academic study. To this end, it is important to help situate art by Emiratis within a more global understanding of art and to consider existing art discourses by authors from a range of Western and non-Western countries (Chapter 3). This is not an exercise in comparison or positioning of East and West, regional versus global. Additionally, by helping to open up the work of artists from the UAE, I have become aware that the physical language used in the study of art and the

appreciation of art by Emiratis are often in English, as are the discourses observed here, to view the Emirati context. Additionally, in viewing art by Emiratis, researchers and art historians today may be faced not only with contextual information, which is both literary and visual in the form of art, but also certain terms, which assume a basic familiarity with the new and rapidly changing language of technology and innovation. It is also important to note Appadurai's exploration of the cultural dimensions of globalization and his thoughts on art as a commodity. He suggests that financial considerations cannot be ignored in a society that has known great development and prosperity due to the sale of oil. Since this is an art-based study, the art market and perceptions of art have been included in this study and are considered within the development of art by Emiratis, as part of the UAE's distinctive art ecosystem.

My work and experience with artists in the UAE has been extremely useful in my understanding and ability to research in this context. Pre-existing networks have allowed me to access artists and arts organisations more readily, knowing more about the artistic landscape and organisations in play. Interest in the region and my background in art history and study of Islamic art at the École du Louvre in Paris and at SOAS, which are described in a moment, have automatically provided a wide research context through which to consider this question.

About me – why the UAE?

A superficial challenge facing the investigation of art from the UAE and the Gulf region is that international press coverage continues to focus on sensationalist news: the cost of paintings, the construction of museum complexes or surprise at female representations of any form in non-Western art made by a Muslim artist. There is so much more to the UAE than flashes of religious intrigue or tales of commercial success amidst the glamour and glitz of the desert. Fresh narratives are emerging from a new generation of male and female artists from the UAE, as well as curators, and writers whom they have inspired.[34]

Before working in Abu Dhabi (2006-2010) my studies at L'École du Louvre (1993-4) introduced me to the discipline of Islamic art and I embarked upon an undergraduate degree at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) on the Art and Archaeology of Asia and Africa (BA Hons. 1994-7) with courses in Arabic and Islamic architecture, epigraphy and Islamic

[34] Antonia Carver, "Opinion: Antonia Carver, the Director of the Jameel Arts Centre, on What Most of the World Still Doesn't Understand About the UAE Art Scene," *Artnet.com,* 12 November 2018.

decoration. I also took part in a summer internship in the Department of Islamic Art at Sotheby's (1996) and in archaeological excavations in Beirut, Lebanon led by the Institut Français d'Archéologie du Proche Orient (IFAPO) in 1995. I was also involved in writing about Arab art and music, as the Arts Editor of a friend's blog, MiddleEastUK. My undergraduate study of non-Western art highlighted the importance of context, the definition of the artefact and the notion of perceptions. Following SOAS, I completed a Master of Studies (Mst) in the History of Art, at Oxford University (1997-8). This involved the study of art historical theory and the discourses of Riegl, Wolfflin and Panofsky, who are mentioned in Chapter 3.[35] I was briefly the President of a university society: the Arab Cultural Society, which organised events and hosted talks by prominent writers, poets and film-makers, who spoke about discourses related to the Arab condition, including Orientalism and Otherness, which are mentioned briefly in Chapter 3.

From 2006 to 2010, I worked at the Emirates Foundation, a non-profit, grant-giving organisation in Abu Dhabi, instigated by the Crown Prince HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. There I learnt much about Emirati culture from 2007 and became involved with the Art and Culture Programme, which worked to promote Emirati culture, artists and writers. This was an exciting time; the UAE's first pavilion at the Venice Biennale was inaugurated, international art fairs were held in Dubai and Abu Dhabi and plans for the Saadiyat Cultural District in Abu Dhabi, were announced. Since courses in Museum Studies were not yet offered at UAE universities, the head of the Foundation's Arts and Culture Programme, Salwa Mikdadi worked with colleagues at the JFK University at Berkeley, California, to create a multi-national foundation course for Emiratis. A customized syllabus was created, based on local culture and on the requirements of those wishing to prepare for work in the country's new museums. Luckily, I was directly involved in this project.

The buzz and excitement from the development of art in the UAE was extremely situated and few people in the UK and Europe knew much about the nation's burgeoning art scene. This surprising lack of recognition for the nation's art contribution internationally, inspired me to study Emirati art in greater depth. I also believe that there is a lot to learn from cultural exchange and communication intellectually, politically and socially. Inspired by these experiences and by the flourishing art scene in the UAE during the 2010s, I was keen to foster greater awareness of the UAE and its own artistic communities amongst members of my local art community, in St Ives. I therefore connected the Borlase Smart John Wells Trust (BSJW) with Zayed University in Abu Dhabi. This, I felt, would encourage organisations such as Zayed University to send artists on

[35] Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology – Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance,* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1972).

diverse art residencies and for art students and teachers to benefit from the unique artistic community of St Ives, as artists such as Patrick Heron, Barbara Hepworth, Naum Gabo, Francis Bacon, Mark Rothko and Lubaina Himid had done in the past. The artist Afra Al Dhaheri took the first Zayed Residency at Porthmeor Studios. Al Dhaheri is a teacher at Zayed University and she came to St Ives in the summer of 2019 joined by two Emirati collaborators, fellow fine art lecturer and artist Asma Belhamar and the writer and commentator, Gaith Abdulla. During a presentation to mark the end of their stay at the studios, the two artists introduced their work, their Emirati origins and aspects of UAE life that had inspired their art. The event was a huge success. It was fascinating to witness discussions and interactions between the three and the different generations of artists who had attended the talk - many of whom are British or Cornish and some of whom had known the original St Ives art community during the 1960s and 1970s. For me, the event confirmed the power of art as a positive force for bringing people together and the ability for differences to melt away once common themes and experiences have been discussed. For spectators unaware of art from the UAE who gathered at the BSJW in August 2019, the work of Afra Al Dhaheri and Asma Belhamar represented art from the UAE. This study will widen this experience, offer a broader understanding of art by Emiratis and also place it within its contextual timeline.

Structure of this thesis

The chapters of this thesis correspond directly with its four, core objectives. The following chapter plots a historical and geographical context relating to the creation of the UAE, which includes the legacy of HRH Sheikh Zayed, the UAE's ensuing development and the subject of soft power, all of which have become major themes in Emirati culture. The third chapter positions art by Emiratis through the exploration of the art discourses. Discussions surrounding Contemporary Art, Global Modernisms and Cosmopolitanism help to situate art by Emiratis and serve non-Emirati researchers to access the nation's art, suggest relevant references, language and aspects of global art conversations, where art by Emiratis may contribute. The UAE has been an extremely avid recipient of social media and it is interesting to consider whether the internet has helped or hindered the development of art. This sets the ground for further discussions about the location and categorisation of art by Emiratis in following chapters and the future of art from the UAE.

The development of art can be viewed in two periods. These will be observed in Chapters 4 and 5, which explore the new beginning of art in the UAE and its contemporary evolution and development, from the birth of the nation in 1971 to 2020. Because most of the artists featured in

this thesis are still practicing, Chapter 4 will focus on artists who began their artistic careers in the early years of the UAE, when the young country was still finding its feet. Chapter 5 will explore the work of a younger generation of artists, many of whom were born after 2000. Their UAE has a developed infrastructure, networks of roads, education, transport, healthcare, technology and citizens who feel connected to the rest of the world. The transformation that took place in the space of a generation cannot be underestimated and it has been said that development has displaced Emiratis, without their having to leave their towns or cities. Indeed this transformation affected not only the prosperity and ambitions of the country but also its visual landscape, its day-to-day life, the occupation and education of its people. What can be learnt about art by Emiratis in particular from this study and from the works shown? What elements are missing from existing dialogues and initiatives that could unlock the potential of Emiratis to play a more visible role in the contemporary art's world stage?

Having reflected upon the research and observations contained in the thesis' chapters and upon the dialogue of tradition and modernity in the development of contemporary art in the UAE, Chapter 6's conclusion returns to this study's aims and objectives. It explores what new dialogues have been opened, such as definitions of art by Emiratis and the location of art by Emiratis within an expanded art world. Chapter 6 summarises the principle contributions of this thesis, it explores the UAE's ambitions in the creation of art and how contemporary art by Emiratis can be expected to progress. Reflections on the relevance of tradition for contemporary artists today, how the development of art coexists with the country's race towards development, economic sustainability and modernity are also important. Do these apparent contradictions of old and new help or hamper the development of art by Emiratis? Can a situated approach to art help to uncover a new mechanism for the development of art that is separate to that experienced in Western art history? Are current art historical terms and themes sufficient and would this constitute a new canon for the study of non-Western art? These questions play an important role in distilling the importance and value of this research as a tool for observing art by Emiratis and as a device for future study.

Chapter 2: Tradition in a New Country

Reflecting on the creation of the UAE, the historian and long-time resident Frauke Heard-Bey notes, "The United Arab Emirates does not fit ordinary norms – be they the ones of political and social structure or of economic assets."[1] She remembers that when the country formed, the various tribal leaders each retained their inherited role, their status and most of their responsibilities.[2] The instigator or father of this union, His Highness the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan (1918-2004) ruled the largest emirate of Abu Dhabi from 1966 until his death in 2004. This emirate covers over 80% of the country's territory and is responsible for majority of the country's oil revenue. Nonetheless, as the nation's first President, Sheikh Zayed insisted that, as a united country, his emirate's riches should be shared with all the other emirates, just as all would also gain from his plans for the UAE's development and modernisation.

Mohammed Al-Fahim recounts, "Incredibly, Sheikh Zayed … announced that anyone in need could come to Abu Dhabi from anywhere in the Trucial States to receive money."[3] Seen from HH Sheikh Zayed's perspective, in a tribal region where a person's family or heritage indicates their social standing and future prospects, it was also vital that the rulers of the separate emirates maintain their own regional authority and separate identities. "A nation without a past is a nation without a present or a future," Sheikh Zayed is quoted as saying.[4] He believed that the UAE should see itself and be considered equal to all other sovereign nations. For him, Emiratis needed to be seen as the descendants of a deep-rooted, ancient and ethical civilisation. "These roots will always flourish and bloom in the glorious present of our nation and in its anticipated future."[5] In 1971, the UAE constitution was drawn up as a priority and the nation's various tribes met in the form of the UAE's Supreme Council, to guard against national threats and protect the country's united national identity.[6] The endurance and unity of the UAE proves that the fair manner of tribal government,

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[1] Frauke Heard-Bey, "The United Arab Emirates: Statehood and Nation-Building in a Traditional Society," *The Middle East Journal,* 59 (July 2005): 358.
[2] Heard-Bey, "The United Arab Emirates: Statehood and Nation-Building in a Traditional Society," 358.
[3] Mohammed Al-Fahim, *From Rags To Riches: A Story of Abu Dhabi,* (London: The London Centre of Arabic Studies, 1995), 135.
[4] "Sheikh Zayed in quotes," *Gulf News,* 31 October 2005, https://gulfnews.com/uae/shaikh-zayed-in-quotes-1.306268.
[5] "Sheikh Zayed in quotes," *Gulf News.*
[6] Morton recalls that this was "the successor to the old Trucial States Council" founded in 1952. This was a council that brought together the seven leaders of the various emirates in the Trucial States and the British Political Agent to discuss essential services in the region. The British protection of the region will be described later.

traditional values and ethics introduced by Sheikh Zayed have successfully borne the tests of time. What is more, this respectful political system can be seen as an indicator of the UAE's psychological beliefs system or culture. It is therefore fundamental to understanding its art and visual culture, just as the opposite may be true. This chapter will briefly sketch a setting for this study by describing characteristics of the Emirati region in the early to mid 20th century, the events surrounding the creation of the UAE and the nature of Emirati tradition.

Certainly, the legacy of Sheikh Zayed, affectionately known as "*Baba Zayed*" (Father Zayed) presents a popular and powerful icon. Anyone who met him, noted his wisdom and natural nobility, as shall be described in a moment. This chapter will explore and identify the culture traditions, the heritage, creative culture and historical context of the UAE created by Sheikh Zayed, in an effort to unravel common threads. And since histories are always written from a certain perspective it is important to complement this popular 'Founding Father' narrative by including a variety of other research, including anthropological and historical narratives and political reports, such as those drafted by the British protectors of the region at the time. This also provides important contextual references for Chapter 4 and 5's exploration of contemporary art by Emiratis.

What does tradition mean, in such a new country, how have traditions been identified, created and understood in the UAE and how can they be recognised visually? While the previous chapter observed that the Arabic term for tradition and heritage is the same, this chapter will explore not only the historical context of the country's creation, but also question what traditions exist in the UAE. Key themes that have been retained from the region's culture before the unification in 1971, include a deep-rooted and spiritual Islamic religious belief, *nabati* poetry, which was written and presented by men and *talie* embroidery, which occupied mainly Emirati women. Are these traditions uniformly understood or are they contested? This chapter helps to situate the present moment and context for art by Emiratis. With the research held in the following chapters about discourses and art practice, it culminates in a portrait of what art by Emiratis represents, what it stands for and how it is set to progress in the future.

Michael Quentin Morton, *Keepers of the Golden Shore: A History of the United Arab Emirates* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2016), 161 and 195.
Heard-Bey suggests that the council's meetings were infrequent and "The Threads of this informal political network usually came together in the hands of Shaykh Zayid."
Frauke Heard-Bey, "The United Arab Emirates: Statehood and Nation-Building in a Traditional Society," *The Middle East Journal,* 59 (July 2005): 358.

Before the discovery of oil

Al-Fahim vividly describes the tribal system of government that existed in the emirates that skirted the Arabian Gulf coast, in the late 1950s and early 1960s:

> The ruling sheikh was the all-powerful governor of his people, overseeing everything associated with their well-being and prosperity. He judged disputes between tribes and individuals; imposed fines or imprisonment; maintained the government coffers and treasury; declared war and negotiated people; supported the inland tribes with available finances and food supplies; levied taxes and tariffs, received foreign representatives and signed agreements on behalf of his people. He also charged taxes on pearl diving boats and in most cases owned several such vessels himself.[7]

The region's people were divided according to the region's landscape. The people of the coast or *Bahari*, were fishermen, merchants and members of the country's pearling communities.[8] They were naturally more exposed to the many different cultures and travellers along the Gulf coast compared to the *Jebali* people, who dwelt in the mountain regions of the country. The *Jebali* were generally settled (*hadar*) and farmed the land, using ancient underground water channels (*falaj*) that have been revealed in some archaeological excavations in Sharjah and Al Ain.[9] Another culture that existed in the region was that of the *Bedouin* or *Bedu* nomadic herding people. *Bedouins* roamed the desert, living from day to day, oasis to oasis, surviving from their livestock and engaging in tribal warfare.[10] Khalaf's research of the region during this period emphasises the importance of religion, which provided a strong, common thread in the daily lives of people living in the Emirates and encouraged tribal communities to be politically and socially interdependent.[11] Despite the unforgiving climate and arid surroundings, the *Bedu* lifestyle, has survived as a tradition or part of the UAE's modern or creative culture. Nomadic *Bedouins* play an important role in Emirati national identity and they are romanticised in literary accounts, such as the writing of Wilfred Thesiger. Sheikh Zayed also identified them as a common ancestor or legacy for Emiratis by Sheikh Zayed, as will be observed presently.

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[7] Mohammed Al-Fahim, *From Rags To Riches: A Story of Abu Dhabi* (London: The London Centre of Arabic Studies, 1995), 20.

[8] Sami Zaatari, "UAE's archaeological research gives insight into a rich past," *Gulf News*, 11 May 2017.

[9] Zaatari, "UAE's archaeological research gives insight into a rich past."

[10] These subcultures were economically, politically and socially interdependent created a common culture and social identity.
Suleiman Khalaf, "United Arab Emirates," in *Countries and Their Cultures*, Volume 4, ed. Melvin Ember and Carol R. Ember (New York: Macmillan, 2001), 2325-2331.
Donald Hawley, *The Trucial States*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970).

[11] Khalaf, "United Arab Emirates," 2325-2331.

> All that is best in the Arabs has come to them from the desert: their deep religious instinct, which has found expression in Islam, their sense of fellowship, which binds them as members of one faith; their pride of race; their generosity and sense of hospitality; their dignity and their regard which they have for the dignity of others as fellow human beings; their humour, their courage and patience, the language which they speak and their passionate love of poetry.[12]

In contrast, the region's coastline and ports had been on busy East-West trade routes for millennia. Archaeological excavations on the island of Marawah,[13] for example, reveal signs of pearl collection and ceramics imported from Mesopotamia and at Tell Abraq and Dibba, to the North, marine excavations have revealed the remains of ships that would have traded pearls, dates and dried fish with East Africa, China and India, in return for goods such as ivory gold, spices and textiles, around 2500BC.[14] This would have resulted in a regular influx of foreign traders and a class of coastal merchants and their families in the ports of Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah. These coastal towns and their inhabitants would have been more cosmopolitan and part of a more aspiring community or network than those living in more rural settings or smaller emirates. It will be interesting to observe in Chapters 4 and 5, whether the artists, particularly those who benefitted from government grants to study abroad, for example, are from the coastal cities of one of the larger emirates or whether they are from inland, rural areas or smaller emirates. During hot summer months, wealthier people would often travel inland to the cooler, mountainous regions such as Al Ain in the emirate of Abu Dhabi or to Ras Al Khaimah.

Also on the coastline, the pearling industry was both extremely lucrative for traders and also a dangerous and unforgiving job for men who pearl dived to support their families. Prior to the oil prospecting of the 1930s, the Arabian Gulf region was one of the foremost producers of natural pearls in the world.[15] According to Al-Fahim, pearling *dhow* boats stuffed with divers,

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[12] Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), 96-7.
HH Sheikh Zayed "was a man who commanded the respect, admiration and loyalty of the Bedouin living in the deserts around Buraimi as he did of the villagers".
Anthony Shepherd, *Desert Adventure* (London, Collins, 1961), 136.

[13] "Marawah Island: Signs of Early Life" *Abu Dhabi Culture*, accessed 27 July 2020, https://abudhabiculture.ae/en/experience/cultural-landscapes-and-oases/marawah-island.

[14] "Sharjah 2018 Underwater Archaeology Survey," The Nautical Archaeology Digital Library, 27 July 2020.

[15] People had a close relationship with natural pearls and pearl fishing or preparing the pearls for sale formed an important part of the country's shared past. "I recall that my grandfather often had white pearl dust in his mouth. He used to put pearls into his mouth, turning them between his inner lip and under his tongue. … His bones, he claimed, were strong because of the pearl powder."
Mustafa al Fardan, "The Book," Lest We Forget, accessed 30 September 2018, 236.

basic equipment and provisions would leave the docks during the summer months from May to September, when the water was warmest and the risk of shark attacks were at their lowest.[16] He recounts that the boats would only be allowed to return if there was a call-to-arms from the tribal ruler. Pearl fishermen survived for months at a time at sea, on a diet of dates, rice and fish with little fresh drinking water. They would spend hours diving daily, and their equipment comprised of a sack to gather the shells, a goat horn clip to close their nose and a rope tying them to the boat.[17] There is no doubt that the prospecting and discovery of oil transformed the way of life in the region. Donald Hawley, the British Political Agent to the Trucial States from 1958-1962, writes about the harshness and poverty of the region known as *The Trucial States*[18] before the discovery of oil.

The creation of the UAE

The Arabian Gulf was important to British trade and military interests throughout the early 20th century, since it was roughly half way between the United Kingdom and the India. Britain established an official "protection" over the region and the 1940s and 1950s saw her attempt to coordinate development programmes in the region and unite tribal leaders in a Trucial States Council (TSC).[19] From 1955 onwards the role of British Political Agent, based in Abu Dhabi, was established to convey and protect British interests in the region with a view to supervising a basic infrastructure, water supply, proper hygiene systems and healthcare in the region. Nonetheless, without a reliable road network, administration and communication in the region was an arduous task, particularly when conflicts arose between the various tribes. Already oil-rich Arab countries such as Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain were encouraged to contribute funds and resources to help improve the region's situation.[20]

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[16] Mohammed Al-Fahim, *From Rags To Riches: A Story of Abu Dhabi,* (London: The London Centre of Arabic Studies, 1995), 20-23.

[17] Al-Fahim, *From Rags To Riches: A Story of Abu Dhabi,* 20-23.

[18] Since 1820, the emirates' ruling tribal chiefs had been signing treaties and accords with the British Government. The area became known, in British dispatches and reports, as "The Trucial States." Frauke Heard-Bey, "The Gulf in the 20th century," *Asian Affairs,* 33, no.1 (18 June 2010): 3-17. Since this term bears colonialist undertones, henceforth for the purpose of this study, the region will be referred to as "the Emirates," prior to the creation of the United Arab Emirates in 1971.

[19] Donald Hawley, *The Trucial States*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970).

[20] This illustrates not only the extreme poverty and desolation of the emirates until the mid 20th century, but also the solidarity that existed amongst the Gulf's desert kingdoms. Hawley, *The Trucial States.*

Figure 1: Map of the United Arab Emirates
Courtesy of Shuttershock

Born in 1918, in the oasis town of Al Ain in the emirate of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Zayed was brought up simply and piously, the youngest son of Sheikh Sultan Bin Zayed Bin Khalifa Al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi. A tribal lord or sheikh by descent from the ruling Al Nahyan family, Sheikh Zayed, took an active interest in the land of his ancestors, the diverse people, and the animals that inhabited it.[21] As a young man, he spent much time with the *Bedu* tribes of the Emirati desert regions.[22] Thesiger writes about the honesty and spirituality of the *Bedouins* that he encountered, as well as their hard-working behaviour. He speaks admiringly of Sheikh Zayed, who was much liked by the tribesmen for his practical and informal ways and describes meeting the young sheikh who had, "…a great reputation among the *Bedu*," was respectful and friendly but also shrewd. Thesiger recalls them saying, "Zayed is a *Bedu*. He knows about camels, can ride like one of us,

[21] Khalaf notes that when the pearling industry was at its height, during the 19th century, encouraging trade with East Africa and Iran, the emirates saw a migration of African workers.
Suleiman Khalaf, "United Arab Emirates," in *Countries and Their Cultures*, Volume 4, ed. Melvin Ember and Carol R. Ember, (New York: Macmillan, 2001): 2325-2331.
[22] "H.H Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan (1918-2004)," *UAE national archives.*

can shoot, and knows how to fight."[23] Sheikh Zayed's life among the *Bedouin* tribes is seminal to this study since his admiration for the "simple ways of the desert," in many ways shaped the UAE of 1971 and the nation's culture.

When Sheikh Zayed's older brother, HH Sheikh Shakhbut Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, inherited their father's title and ruled Abu Dhabi from 1928-1966, Sheikh Zayed took on the rule of the emirate's Eastern region in 1946 and travelled throughout the country to visit people in remote, desert areas, gaining a deeper understanding of the territory, local customs and concerns.[24] As governor of the Eastern region, Sheikh Zayed saw the poverty of the *Bedouin* herders and pearl fishermen, their low-life expectancy and realized, despite the country's rich *Bedouin* culture and history, that education, healthcare and more modern infrastructures were vital to ensure the region's future success.

When oil was found near Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Zayed's older brother, Sheikh Shakhbut, was expected to jump into action, developing the emirate and pushing for social reforms. The British administrative presence and disagreement as to the handling of potential oil revenues have been credited for the bloodless coup of 1966, which left the young Sheikh Zayed as ruler of Abu Dhabi.[25] Political manoeuvring and economic decline in Great Britain meant that British Prime Minister Harold Wilson was under pressure to distance the country from her colonial and industrial past. In January 1968, Wilson decided to withdraw British military bases and political influence from the Gulf region. For the UAE, this amounted to abandonment by the British. Nearby Iraq and Iran immediately began to exert influence and vie for control over the region, much to the horror of King Faisal, of neighbouring Saudi Arabia and the United States President Lyndon Johnson.[26] As the leader of the largest emirates, Sheikh Zayed formed an alliance with the leader of the next largest and most affluent emirate, HH Sheikh Al Maktoum of Dubai and together, they held emergency discussions with the emirates of Sharjah, Umm Al Quwain, Ajman, Ras Al Khaimah, Fujairah, Bahrain and Qatar. While Bahrain and Qatar decided to declare their independence as autonomous countries, on 2 December 1971, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman,

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[23] Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), 214.

[24] "About the UAE." UAE embassy in Washington, accessed 13 December 2017. https://www.uae-embassy.org/about-uae/history/sheikh-zayed-bin-sultan-al-nahyan-founder-uae

[25] "Chief of chiefs," *The Times*. 18 July 1989, http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/ttda/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=TTDA&userGroupName=leicester&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=IF500553515&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0

[26] Keen to maintain the stability and peace that had reigned over the region during the British administration, HH Sheikh Zayed and the ruler of Dubai, HH Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum urged the British government to maintain their military presence in the Gulf, offering to reimburse any shortfall of funding. The British government refused.
Abdullah Omran Taryam. *The Establishment of the UAE 1950-1985*. London: Croom, 1987.

Umm al Quwain and Fujairah[27] signed a treaty of union *Al Etihad*, establishing themselves as a federation under one flag and went on to establish the UAE Council Federal National Council (FNC).[28] The United Arab Emirates (UAE) was born.[29] (Figure 1).

Sheikh Zayed wanted to empower Emiratis, so that they would see themselves as stakeholders or inheritors of the land and its riches. Though a drive to install a basic infrastructure had been begun under British guidance, Sheikh Zayed believed as was previously mentioned, that it was only fair that revenues from oil sales should go to its citizens. This is a crucial part of the UAE's cultural puzzle. Sheikh Zayed's speeches and declarations focus on unity and the importance of self-belief gained from knowledge and respect of both religious and tribal traditions.[30] This sense of confident self-belief can be felt today, in the attitude of the Emirati interviewees included in my fieldwork and in the work of contemporary artists today. Intent on highlighting the country's past, as well as inspiring its future, soon after the creation of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed instituted the UAE's National Archives and the Abu Dhabi Cultural Foundation soon after, in 1974.[31] The foundation included the country's first library, arts centre and theatre, events and classes were held (free of charge) at the foundation for people young and old, to make the culture of the UAE accessible to all.[32] With a strong belief in the value of education and high hopes for the development of the nation and its citizens, Sheikh Zayed founded the first university, the UAE University (UAEU) in Al Ain in 1976. Even now, in 2019, fifteen years after Sheikh Zayed's death, his huge contribution to the nation's sense of history and his insistence on its common culture means that he is a symbolic and iconic figure in UAE consciousness.[33]

The sharing out of returns from the huge oil reserves in Abu Dhabi was an obvious reason that tribal hatchets may have been buried and that other emirates' rulers supported Sheikh Zayed's

[27] Ras Al Khaimah joined the federation the following year.
[28] The FNC is a consultative council and parliamentary body, made up of 40 representatives from all seven emirates.
[29] The new UAE governing council elected Sheikh Zayed as their President and he was subsequently re-elected to the post every five years, until his death in 2004, when it went to his son, HH Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan.
[30] "Sheikh Zayed in quotes," *Gulf News*, published 31 October 2005, https://gulfnews.com/uae/shaikh-zayed-in-quotes-1.306268.
[31] According to the National Archives website, Sheikh Zayed had been born at Qasr Al Hosn and his wishing to keep archives of the nation close to home, shows their considered value.
"Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan," National Archives website, accessed 21 July 2020, https://www.na.ae/en/ourtresure/ff_zayed.aspx
[32] Nick Leech, "Abu Dhabi's Cultural Foundation to be revitalized" in *The National*, 12 February 2015.
[33] Sulayman Khalaf "United Arab Emirates," in *Countries and Their Cultures*, Volume 4, edited by Melvin Ember and Carol R. Ember, 325-2331. New York: Macmillan, 2001.
It should be pointed out too that in other emirates such as Sharjah, as will be seen in the following chapter, visionary rulers such as Sheikh Dr Sultan Al Qassimi have also prioritised culture as a form of education and development.

vision of unity and citizenship. Before looking more closely at specific visual elements of Emirati identity and tradition, it is important to ask why the concept of Emirati identity has remained so important.

In the UAE, UAE nationals lay claim either formally or informally to the exclusively right to many of its habits and customs such as owning an Emirati passport, property on which to live, education and wearing national dress.[34] The total population of the UAE in 2020 is of approximately nine and a half million people. Of this, 88% make up the growing number of expatriate workers and contractors being brought in to develop most aspects of the country's infrastructure and create new facilities. The native population therefore accounts for just 12% and therefore local Emiratis are vastly outnumbered.[35] This is an unusual situation and it will be discussed later in connection with national dress. Nonetheless, Heard-Bey asserts that the challenges of being outnumbered culturally, socially and politically by an expatriate population have, in fact, been the most "potent factor, which has helped all along to create the nation of the UAE."

> With all the social and economic inequalities, which are caused in any community by differences of geography, birth, education, and ability, the coherence among the privileged minority of national citizens is enhanced, not diminished by the daily confrontation with the many grades and shades of culture imported by the expatriate majority.[36]

The development of UAE traditions

Thesiger's writing describes Sheikh Zayed's strong ties to the *Bedu.*[37] His experience of the *Bedouin* ways may be reflected in the practical and hands-on way that he ruled; he preserved close ties with his people and personally oversaw the implementation of reforms.[38] Sheikh Zayed (Figure 2) also valued and rewarded loyalty amongst his followers. He made sure that he was accessible and approachable and kept an "open majlis."[39] His respect for the desert and love of

[34] Frauke Heard-Bey, "The United Arab Emirates: Statehood and Nation-Building in a Traditional Society," *The Middle East Journal,* 59, July 2005, 375.
[35] "United Arab Emirates Population Statistics," GMI website.
[36] Heard-Bey, "The United Arab Emirates: Statehood and Nation-Building in a Traditional Society," 375.
[37] Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), 214.
[38] "H.H Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan (1918-2004)," in the *UAE national archives.*
[39] The Majlis is a traditional Arab custom in itself; a seated area for public audiences held by a monarch or ruler, where people could gain an audience with the ruler "H.H Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan (1918-

nature saw him actively champion the *Bedouin* lifestyle: living in hard conditions, hunting for food, defending against foreign conquerors, honouring the *Bedouin*'s spiritual devotion to nature and natural landscapes. Though later wealth and modern comforts would make the *Bedouin* lifestyle obsolete, Sheikh Zayed remained a key supporter of the *Bedouin* life and it became engrained into the Emirati conscious. Sheikh Zayed would use desert animals particularly the desert falcon, camels, the country's natural landscape and its rich traditions as iconic symbols to inspire and empower his people, and he would cite them in his poetry and through his rousing speeches.[40]

Figure 2: Photograph of HH Sheikh Zayed.
Courtesy of Shuttershock for Editorial Use

2004)," *UAE national archives,* accessed 10 September 2018, http://www.na.ae/en/ourtresure/biography.aspx.
Many members of his family have maintained this tradition.
[40] "About the UAE**,"** UAE embassy in Washington website and Khalaf, "United Arab Emirates," 2325-2331.

What do we know about the *Bedouins,* their philosophy and visual culture? Prior to the export of oil from the emirates in the 1960s and 1970s and the creation of the union, very little documentation exists. This may be due to the *Bedu* nomadic lifestyle and to the region's low literacy rate before the establishment of a modern schooling system in the UAE, after 1971. Since pre-Islamic times, however, Rejwan points out that, "poetry was considered the highest manifestation of Arab culture"[41] and *Bedouin* poetry remains a very useful way of understanding Emirati thought, traditional culture and social history from this early time. Convivial and interactive pastimes such as listening or reciting poetry were greatly favoured over more reclusive and solitary acts such as reading or writing.[42]

Kurpershoek describes the character of the *Bedu* and their traditional culture that was comprised of a deep religious beliefs and a love of nature, which chimes with the beliefs or priorities embodied by Sheikh Zayed.[43] One of the principle forms of entertainment for the *Bedouin* tribesmen of the Gulf region from the 13th century until the oil wealth of the 1960s and 1970s was in the writing and recitation of poetry in the local dialect, that is also described as *nabati* poetry.[44] Dr Clive Holes, one of the principle authorities on *Bedouin* poetry in English, notes that Sheikh Zayed began to write poetry in the 1960s. Poetry was a unifying pastime because it drew upon the shared experiences of the people of the region, regardless of tribe and allegiance. The poem "How Beautiful The World Is," composed by Sheikh Zayed and translated by Professor Clive Holes, observes on the diversity of the Emirati landscape, the variety of its

[41] Nissim Rejwan, *Arabs in the Mirror: Images and Self-Images from Pre Islamic to Modern Times*, (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2008) vii.
[42] Clive Holes, *Nabati Poetry – The colloquial Poetry of the United Arab Emirates* (Ithaca Press, 2011), 1-2. Anwar Ahmad, "Zayed's poetry reflects his humanity, vision and love for nature," *Gulf News,* 23 February 2018.
[43] "These [Bedouins] are deeply pious men… Their faith, though vigorous and deeply held, had been naturally integrated into their life, along with other natural influences, such as the poetic traditions with which they have grown up."
P. Marcel Kurpersheok, *Oral Poetry and Narratives from Central Arabia,* (Leiden: E.J. Brill Academic Publications, 2005), vii-xvii.
[44] According to Holes, the earliest *Bedouin* poetry's main themes focus upon the landscape, hunting, love, boasting, animals, particularly camels or birds of prey. *Nabati* poems … would typically be sung in the lyrical 'shallah' style. He describes the playful *mradd* (answering back), *galtih (*entering or stepping forward) or *mursala* (correspondence) styles, performed these exchanges or responses. *Nabati* poems illustrate the omnipresence of God in the everyday lives of *Bedouins* and they would always end with an invocation to God or a disclaimer to request for the listener's forgiveness if the poet's work fell short of their expectation. Holes, *Nabati Poetry – The colloquial Poetry of the United Arab Emirates,* 9.

inhabitants and the "abundance" afforded by its newfound oil-reserves, brings tradition into the "world of men," a modern reality.[45]

How Beautiful This World Is

by HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan

Translated by Professor Clive Holes[46]

How beautiful this world is,
her flowers blooming bright;
Her trees and all her plenty,
her fruit that eyes delight!
Abundance has submerged her,
praise Him who rules our fate;
Her lands and seas and rivers
with bounties run in spate
And to her from all corners
come visitors in droves;
Relaxing in the shade of
her trees and floral groves.
Antelope and oryx
and noble mares abound;
The joy of him who sees them,
no limit can surround!
We praise the One who formed her,
with fold of noble stem;
And magnified her standing
In the world of men.

Love, pride, hunting and nature were important themes in early *nabati* poetry. However, later changes in the lifestyle and concerns of Emiratis can be gleaned from their poetry, along with the

[45] Holes describes a poetry exchange between HH Sheikh Zayed and the poet 'Abdullah bin 'Ali al-Shibani. It illustrates not only the ruler's outgoing nature, but also the social levelling of informal *Bedouin* poetry recitals.
Clive Holes, *Nabati Poetry – The colloquial Poetry of the United Arab Emirates,* (Ithaca Press, 2011), 9.
[46] Holes, *Nabati Poetry.* Reproduced with the kind agreement of Professor Holes.

growth of urban development. In poems such as "How Beautiful the World Is," Sheikh Zayed alludes his country's desert animals and its natural landscape to create an idyllic, paradisiac image of the UAE's heritage. Poems began to take on topical issues and were "based on observable social reality [for example] the Emirate's multinational work force… inter-ethnic friction and misunderstandings."[47] Changes in the subject matter of later *nabati* poetry to more mundane disputes and less active themes betray the gradual sedentarisation of the *Bedouins,* as oil was exported and the wealth of the country allowed them to settle. *Bedouin* life was transformed into part of the country's heritage or traditional past.

Thus, the UAE's newfound wealth in the late 1960s and early 1970s gave way to "the massive sedentarisation" of the *Bedouin* population and what Khalaf terms as the "wealth of high-consumption, air-conditioned life" or the abandon of rustic pursuits.[48] He explains that with the disappearance of many *Bedouin* encampments, camels found a new use with the emergence of camel racing, an "invented tradition" or sport to entertain the population and unify them in nostalgia for a common *Bedouin* past.[49] Hobsbawm defines an invented tradition as just such a traditional practice that develops or strengthens nationalism in that country.[50] The tradition has become institutionalised and camel racing, Khalaf points out, is now a seasonal sport, which necessitates much of the same regiment of training and breeding as horse racing. Hobsbawm gives examples of invented traditions being used across European history, where older beliefs and ideas are mined and adapted, "modified, ritualized and institutionalized" in a way that makes them both legitimate and relevant to an entire population, in order to "cement ... group cohesion."[51] . He also suggests that invented traditions play a role in asserting the authority of its rule, which ties in with the pageantry that Khalaf describes in his account of Sheikh Zayed's car entering the camel racing track, amid much fanfare, to allow the ruler to take his sea in the seating area in the centre of the track.[52] Should an invented tradition be seen as a ruse or a power-play? Hobsbawm and Ranger reason that the invention of tradition is made acceptable as a sociological or political tool since this is often done for the protection and benefit of a country. [53]

[47] Clive Holes, *Nabati Poetry – The colloquial Poetry of the United Arab Emirates,* (Ithaca Press, 2011), 9.
[48] Sulayman Khalaf, *Poetics and Politics of Newly Invented Traditions in the Gulf: Camel racing in the United Arab Emirates,* Ethnology. 39.3, University of Pittsburgh, Summer 2000, 243.
[49] Khalaf, *Poetics and Politics of Newly Invented Traditions in the Gulf,* 243.
[50] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition,* (Harvard: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3-6.
[51] Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition,* 12.
[52] Khalaf, *Poetics and Politics of Newly Invented Traditions in the Gulf: Camel racing in the United Arab Emirates,* Ethnology. 39.3, University of Pittsburgh, Summer 2000, 243.
[53] Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition,* 2-6.

Similarly, local governmental bodies (in the past, Abu Dhabi Authority of Culture and Heritage (ADACH) and Dubai Culture) have highlighting aspects of the past using *nabati* poetry. This is a performed oral activity that is recited to live audiences, as a performance and televised or sold as collections of poetry, to be read privately at home.[54] Though the idea of transcribing *nabati* poetry defeats the relevance and traditional performance of the poetry, it's status seems to have been elevated to becoming a national tradition, which can now be stored and cherished. It would therefore seem that *nabati* poetry has become an invented tradition.

Eric Langham and Darren Barker formed a UAE-based cultural-heritage consultancy, *Barker Langham* and their experience is extremely valuable in the context of this study. They quote Hobsbawm in their observance of how various values that show "continuity with a historical past" are created into a national tradition.[55] Just as Greenfeld drew on interviews and sociological analysis, so Langham and Barker drew on their practical experience. They learnt that events linked to traditions formed a powerful glue in bringing the country's local population together. They even felt that these had the power to propagate or inspire new traditions to be invented or "reinvented."[56] They compare this patriotic energy to the cultural revival that shaped Europe during the 19th century and resulted in the creation of museums, societies and the revival of national sports and traditional pastime.

Natalie Koch's incisive research into the geopolitics of the Gulf uses falconry as an example of an "ethnicized" or "heritage" sport.[57] She emphasises the balance that exists between invented traditions such as falconry and camel racing and the need to maintain a modern and "cosmopolitan" standing at a global level. Appiah provide further insight on the balance between feelings of identity, patriotism and modernity in his work on the "cosmopolitan patriot," in the following chapter. Meanwhile, Koch makes a parallel with the highly "gendered" elitism of falconry, a blood sport and more globalised sports such as the Abu Dhabi Formula One Grand Prix, introduced to Abu Dhabi in 2007. With this in mind, it might be important to consider too, when looking at the art created by male and female artists from the UAE in Chapters 4 and 5 whether artists distinguish between male sports and female pastimes. Which are more inspiring to artists? Koch observes falconry within a wider political context of Gulf Nationalism and the political context must be recognised. If this thesis were not focussed on art practice, it might be

[54] Eric Langham and Darren Barker, "Spectacle in Participation: A New Heritage Model from the UAE," in *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula: Debates, Discourses and Practices,* (London: Routledge, 2014): 90.
[55] Langham and Barker, "Spectacle in Participation," 86-8.
[56] Langham and Barker, "Spectacle in Participation," 85-98.
[57] Natalie Koch, "Gulf Nationalism and Invented Traditions," *LSE Blogs,* posted 13 June 2018, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/08/03/gulf-nationalism-and-invented-traditions/.

possible to view the protection of tradition, the preservation of heritage and the defence of national identity through invented traditions as a regional reaction to the political threats and violence affecting other Arab and Muslim countries at the time.[58] Rulers and decision makers in the UAE and across the Gulf would certainly have been aware of events in Mecca in 1979, prior to that, in nearby Iran, Egypt and Lebanon to name but a few. For now, it may be helpful to regard these invented traditions of *Bedouin* life, pearling camel riding and falconry, to borrow from Koch, as "key icons in nationalist imagery,"[59] reclaimed from historical pastimes and absorbed into UAE national identity. Chapters 4 and 5 will explore the extent to which this "nationalist imagery" has also been absorbed into the country's contemporary art.

Invented traditions have found their place in popular consciousness and even in daily life.[60] Khalaf describes living heritage sites such as Dubai Heritage Village, where employees re-enact traditions, transforming "time into space." [61] For Jacobs places such as these make traditions relevant to daily life and it is where they become "part of the nation's philosophy … and self-belief."[62] Similar in many ways to the living heritage sites is the "conservation" of the antique mud-brick forts of the *Al Jahili Fort* in Al Ain. Langham and Barker describe the way (new) mud is added to the building, as an innocent way of keeping local culture alive regardless of the "historic integrity" of the fort building itself.[63] This could be seen to go against the rules accepted Western preservation practice, however the importance of presenting a visually correct fortification appears to be more important to the Emirati conservation managers, than leaving the fort in its genuine state of historical disrepair. By continuing to repair the building, as would have been done regularly by local people in the past, the traditional building can be said to undergo traditional restoration that is respectful of the past.[64] The continual restoration of the *Al Jahili Fort,* according to Langham and Barker, also ensures that people are more actively involved and receptive to descriptions of the past. Just as traditions are invented and relatable in a modern

[58] Natalie Koch, "Gulf Nationalism and Invented Traditions," *LSE Blogs,* posted 13 June 2018, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/08/03/gulf-nationalism-and-invented-traditions/.
[59] Koch, "Gulf Nationalism and Invented Traditions."
[60] Sulayman Khalaf, "Poetry and Politics of Newly Invented Traditions in Gulf: Camel Racing in the United Arab Emirates," *Ethnology,* 39.3 (Summer 2000), http://www.pitt.edu/~ethnolog/.
[61] Sulayman Khalaf, "Globalization and Heritage Revival in the Gulf: An anthropological look at Dubai Heritage Village," *Journal of Social Affairs,* 19 no.75, (Fall 2002): 28.
[62] Jane Jacobs, "Tradition is (not) modern: Deterritorizing globalization," in *The End of Tradition,* ed. Nezar AlSayyad (Taylor and Francis, 2003).
[63] Eric Langham and Darren Barker, "Spectacle in Participation: A New Heritage Model from the UAE," in *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula: Debates, Discourses and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2014): 86-88.
[64] "… Structures change continually as layers of mud are added every few years to preserve them, underlining the belief that heritage is not something of the past; it does not stand still preserving a single period, but rather reflects that constant passage through generations, with each responding to and connecting with the past in its own way." Langham and Barker, "Spectacle in Participation," 86-88.

context, so vestiges of the past must surround the viewer and be a personal and multi-sensory experience. Langham and Barker conclude that successful allusions to the past are most appreciated by an Emirati audience when they include multiple instances of visual and active stimulation or "high-context communication."[65] Thus, it is important for people to see a fort (intact) in order to get a genuine idea of the past. They therefore suggest that in the UAE, the key to sparking the interest of local inhabitants is to allow them to feel involved and implicated in an intense and interactive way.

Could this desire to become involved with the past through interaction reflect what Sabban refers to the societal need to "engineer" the UAE's national identity?[66] Or perhaps, as Langham and Barker suspect, it originates with a fear of losing local cultural heritage in the face of so many foreign expatriate cultures. Through enacting the past, perhaps people are giving the impression of wishing to escape the realities of the present.[67] "Heritage is a living entity," writes Hassan Naboodah. Naboodah views the past as a fluid and creative concept that is open to emphasis or fictional re-telling. "The preservation of heritage provides the opportunity to draw on that heritage in contemporary, literary and cultural production, in the fields of the novel, short story, poetry and so on, thereby adding depth to the culture of the region."[68] This attitude to heritage and indeed to history, causes a Western art historian such as myself to question whether our serious chronicling of the past and consideration of evidence has not come to resemble too much of a courtroom. Of course, the question of who decides which manifestations of the past will be stored in popular memory and which will not, is an important concern. However the Emirati method of actively living, re-telling and recalling the past through invented traditions and enhancements, would allow people to learn and understand its methods and lessons more effectively. When observing examples of contemporary art by Emiratis in Chapters 4 and 5, it will be interesting to ponder upon references to the past such as camel racing, storytelling and poetry, national dress and *talie* embroidery, if indeed they appear. Emirati traditions will be described now in greater detail.

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[65] Eric Langham and Darren Barker, "Spectacle in Participation: A New Heritage Model from the UAE," in *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula: Debates, Discourses and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2014): 86-88.

[66] Rima Sabban, "State building. State branding and Heritage in the UAE." *LSE Middle East Centre Blog.* posted December 2018. blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/12/17/state-building-state-branding-and-heritage-in-the-uae/

[67] Langham and Barker, "Spectacle in Participation: A New Heritage Model from the UAE,"86.
Fred H. Lawson and Hassan al-Naboodah, "Heritage and Cultural Nationalism in the United Arab Emirates." in *Popular Culture and Political Identity in the Arab Gulf States,* Alanoud Alsharekh, & Robert Springborg eds., (London: Middle East Institute SOAS, 2008): 15-30.

[68] Hassan Al Naboodah, "The Importance of Heritage Preservation," *Museum International.* 3-4. Unesco (2011): 69-77.

Figure 3 & Figure 4:
Talie decorative piping in production on a women's robe (*abaya*)
Photograph by the author, 2009.

Talie decorative embroidery[69] (Figure 3 and 4) has become one of the traditional activities that are re-enacted, along with camel riding, bread-making, basket weaving and mixing perfumes at heritage villages around Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah, seasonal heritage celebrations and desert safari encampments.[70] Research by Mona Al-Ali from 2015 and that of Langham and Barker, published in 2014, confirm that interaction of this kind is more popular with the local population than museum visitation.[71] Karen Exell's work explores the impact of such studies on the curatorial planning and museum education of museums in the Gulf in recent years to actively create a more interactive and resonating experience for local visitors and these will be observed in a moment.[72]

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[69] "Six metal threads and four coloured threads are woven and knotted, using hard, circular cushion for support to form a decorative line of *Talie* approximately five millimetres wide. The *talie* is then sewn together into a shape or a thicker band several threads wide."
Sophie Kazan, "Unique Decorative Elements in the Traditional Dress of the United Arab Emirates," *Emirates Foundation, Arts and Culture Programme* (8 November 2009).

[70] Eric Langham and Darren Barker, "Spectacle in Participation: A New Heritage Model from the UAE," in *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula: Debates, Discourses and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2014): 88.

[71] In her 2015 PhD thesis, *Rethinking Visitors Studies in the United Arab Emirates,* Mona Al Ali explores the dwindling numbers and lack of engagement felt by museum visitors in Sharjah in recent years. Mona Rashid Saeed Ali Bin Hussain Al Ali, "Rethinking Visitors Studies in the United Arab Emirates" (PhD diss, University of Leicester. 2015.)

[72] Karen Exell, "Desiring the past and reimagining the present: contemporary collecting in Qatar," *University of Leicester: Museum & Society,* No.14. 2. (2016): 259-274.

"*'Our dress is our identity' (Malabesna heyya haweyyatna).*"[73]

Alzai al-watani (national dress) occupies an important place in the visual traditions of the entire Gulf region. As a visual reference to *Bedouin* culture, national dress plays a practical and emotional role in promoting a sense of unity amongst Gulf Arabs and members of each specific country, as different elements of the dress are emphasised, added to or worn differently. In the UAE, national dress was standardised by the Federal National Council in the UAE during the 1980s and as such, Idil Akinci cites it as an "invented tradition." The wearing of national dress or "performing the nation," as Akinci puts it,[74] has become an emotional boundary and "symbolic marker"[75] for the men and boys who were questioned as part of Akinci's fieldwork.[76] According to Khalaf's research on national dress in the UAE, it "provides the native Emirati with a sense of generalized cultural authenticity and connectedness to past traditions."[77] Worn by Emirati adults of both genders and by children on a daily basis or reserved for formal occasions such as National Day (Figure 8) it has become a symbol of patriotism and respect for traditions of the past.[78] Akinci's work on national dress and identity in the UAE is extremely revealing about the importance of national dress in Dubai, where she speaks to young Emirati citizens who were not alive when the nation was founded and who may not be aware of life before the institution of national dress.[79] Her study unlocks some of the tension surrounding the visual status of UAE citizens, the connotations of being a "real Emirati" and the function and functionings behind this invented tradition.

What is national dress exactly? In the UAE, as in many other Gulf countries, men wear a *kandora* robe, usually of a white colour for the hot summer months, but sometimes made in a variety of colours, of thicker and warmer materials for cooler months, with a *gutra* headscarf, held down by a black *agial* rope. The headscarf shields its wearer from the heat of the sun, sand storms[80] and keeps them warm on cool winter evenings. It is typically white in colour in the UAE,

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https://journals.le.ac.uk/ojs1/index.php/mas/article/view/642

[73] Sulayman Khalaf, "National Dress and the Construction of Emirati Cultural Identity," *Journal of Human Sciences,* Issue 11, Winter 2005.

[74] Idil Akinci, "Dressing the nation? Symbolizing Emirati national identity and boundaries through national dress," *Ethnic and Racia Studies Journal,* 43, No.10 (30 September 2019): 1776-94.

[75] Akinci, "Dressing the nation?" 1776-80.

[76] Eric Langham and Darren Barker, "Spectacle in Participation: A New Heritage Model from the UAE," in *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula: Debates, Discourses and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2014): 3.

[77] Khalaf, "National Dress," 243.

[78] Khalaf, "National Dress," 243.

[79] Akinci, "Dressing the nation?" 1776-94.

[80] Gina Crocetti Benesh, *CultureShock! United Arab Emirates : A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette.*

though regional and rural fashions may vary. My own research includes Figure 5, which illustrates some of the ways in which young men fold their *gutra* without an *agial,* around their heads in a *Hamdaniya* style that allows them to define themselves to other Emiratis as being from a specific region.[81] As Naboodah and Langham and Barker describe heritage and tradition in the UAE as a fluid and living entity, so national dress is considered, by the Emirati rulers on the FNC and by Emiratis alike, as "a source of pride for Emiratis."[82] Women wear a dark *abaya* robe, with a loose scarf or *shellah* over all or part of the head. Female national dress appears to be more about individual experimentation with colour and cloth variations or the application of certain motifs or sequins. Some women, particularly of the older generation, choose to wear a *burqa* over their nose and cheeks – as can be seen in the *Freej* cartoon still (Figures 6-7). The artist Karima Al Shomely's work explores the *burqa* at great length in Chapter 5.

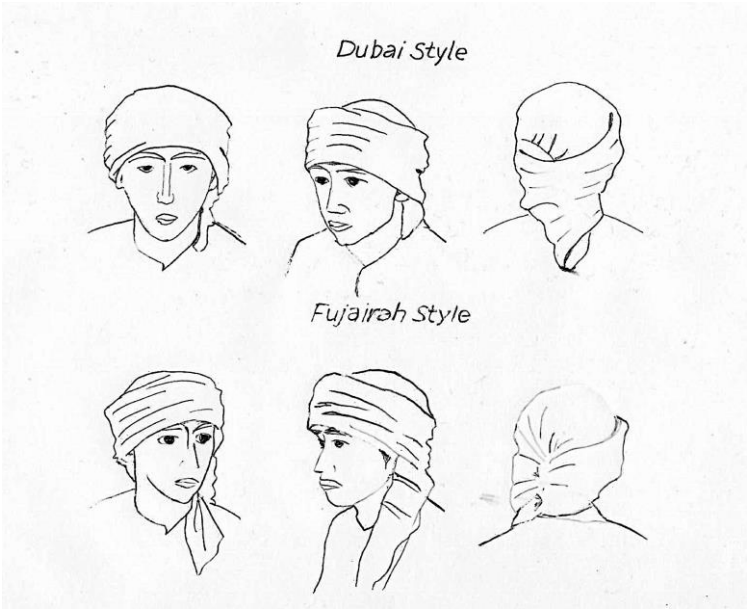

Figure 5: UAE regional headscarf styles. Drawn from photographs taken by the author, 2009.

The 3D television animated for children, *Freej* (Neighbourhood) created by Mohammed Saeed Harib in 2006, depicts a group of women in traditional clothing and a young boy, also in national dress, who constantly gets into scrapes (Figure 6 and 7). The series is popular in the Gulf and in the UAE – the boy, for example, wears his scarf in the *hamdaniya* style, which is popular with Emirati boys. *Freej* has caught the attention of young children and it encourages not only a definite sense of pride, ownership and identification, in the Gulf region, but it also normalises the wearing of local dress in a modern environment.

(United Arab Emirates: Cavendish Square Publishing, 2008.)

[81] Sophie Kazan, "Unique Decorative Elements in the Traditional Dress of the United Arab Emirates." *Emirates Foundation. Arts and Culture Programme* (8 November 2009).

[82] Anna Zacharia and Nick Leech, "UAE national dress is a living tradition," *The National*, 2 April 2014, https://www.thenational.ae/uae/uae-national-dress-is-a-living-tradition-1.278217.


Figure 6 and 7: Stills from the *Freej* television animation by Mohammed Saeed Harib,
Source: www.freej.ae – Unable to locate/contact rightsholder.

Emirati nationalism appears to have been a political priority in the early years of the UAE, to bolster the young country's national identity. As urban development and vast numbers of foreign labourers and managers entered the UAE during the 2000s, the UAE's local and federal governments again took steps to redress feelings of invasion through successive waves of *Tawteen* (Emiratisation). Langham and Barker explain the idea of learning by doing or "high context communication" that is particularly successful in a UAE environment, and the country has been able to achieve international standards in many technical and creative fields by bringing foreign experts to the UAE, to teach and explain. While this practical approach seems very straightforward, it also explains the huge migration of foreign workers to the UAE from 1970 onwards. It also explains the growing need to re-assert national identity and also provide educational and employment opportunities for Emirati citizens, so that they do not run the risk of being left behind by the country's rapid development. Emiratisation has become an important priority in the UAE government's Vision 2021 campaign related to daily life and Emirati identity.[83]

According to Akinci, national dress is instrumental in protecting Emirati culture and empowering Emiratis with a "secure point of identification." According to Akinci's fieldwork, the region's history has resulted in much racial diversity and the institution of national dress is an important identifier.[84] Her fieldwork has revealed tensions between "real Emirati" and "new"

[83] "Emiratisation," Vision 2021, UAE Government website, accessed 20 July 2020, https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/jobs/vision-2021-and-emiratisation/emiratisation-

[84] Idil Akinci, "Dressing the nation? Symbolizing Emirati national identity and boundaries through national dress," *Ethnic and Racia Studies Journal*, 43, No.10 (30 September 2019): 1776-94.

Emiratis, whose ancestors can be traced to Africa, Iran, Saudi Arabia or Central Asia, for example. She explores the questions surrounding status and who has the most right to wear national dress.[85] While this study focuses on contemporary art by Emiratis and can therefore gain nothing from exploring the country's migration rules and politics, it is important to identify this tension in order to situate it within an Emirati historical context and also visually, as examples of the contemporary art by Emiratis in Chapters 4 and 5 may refer to the country's indirect, multi-ethnic character. Recently, the FNC was asked to discuss the need for a formal policy to protect national dress,[86] because an increasing number of young people choose to wear western-style clothes, instead of traditional clothing. "The ministry focuses on national identity and loyalty to the nation,"[87] read one newspaper subheading, emphasising the fact that Emirati national dress is not simply a costume; it creates a context and supports the nation's attitude or belief system. The desire to be seen as cosmopolitan and to participate in global culture is understandable, particularly amongst teenagers and young professionals. The artist and art lecturer Afra Al Dhaheri, whose work will be explored in Chapter 5, observes that her young students have become increasingly relaxed about wearing headscarves and national dress in class or on class outings and this marks a change from when she herself was a student, some ten years ago.

Finally, no mention of Emirati national dress would be complete without referring to National Day or Flag Day, an annual national holiday in the UAE, which commemorate the signing of the union document (*Al Etihad)* uniting the seven emirates on 2 December 1971 and the creation of its flag. National Day is a highly interactive occasion, where Emiratis celebrate their flag and national dress, affirm the country's unity, its beliefs and history (Figures 8 and 9).[88] Shared traditions such as *nabati* poetry, heritage sports and the traditional *Ayala* dance, where men hold sticks or guns to remember past battles are enjoyed and celebrated. [89] Films or pictures of Sheikh Zayed reciting poetry, holding a falcon or watching camels racing are shared and reminders of the past are performed. On National Day, the UAE flag is raised, the national anthem is sung and the flag's colours (black, white, red and green) are echoed in flower arrangements, opulent jewellery, items of clothing and food, to express the country's pride and unity. [90]

[85] Idil Akinci, "Dressing the nation? Symbolizing Emirati national identity and boundaries through national dress," *Ethnic and Racia Studies Journal,* 43, No.10 (30 September 2019): 1776-94.
[86] Ola Salem, "FNC member worries about lack of national dress," *The National*, 7 January 2014.
[87] Salem, "FNC member worries about lack of national dress."
[88] Sulayman Khalaf, "United Arab Emirates," in *Countries and Their Cultures,* Volume 4, eds. Melvin Ember and Carol R. Ember (New York: Macmillan, 2001), 325-331.
[89] Khalaf, "United Arab Emirates," 325-331.
[90] "Made up of the traditional pan-Arab colours, what those colours represent is important in a special way to Emiratis. Red represents hardiness, bravery, strength and courage. Green represents hope, joy, optimism and love. It can also symbolise the country's prosperity. White represents peace and honesty. Contrary to

Figures 8 and 9: Logos for UAE Commemoration Day and the 47th National Day, in 2018.
Source: Shuttershock

Tradition is "not innocent of history… in fact it continually scavenges the past for props, masks and costumes," concludes Al Sayyad.[91] What is more, the historical sites, heritage villages and invented traditions gleaned from the past that have been explored so far in this thesis, provide important visual clues as to Emirati identity and the UAE's visual and creative culture. But how long can traditions, invented or not, thrive in the increasingly modern and globalised UAE? Far from being stuck in the past, Professor Edward Shils' work on tradition insists that it forms part of (contemporary) life and modern identity.[92] "All existing things have a past," he writes, "Critics of contemporary Western culture criticise it for having lost its traditions … Critics of societies outside the West criticise them for being too traditional."[93] Just as Emerson suggested at the start of this thesis, tradition is complex and multi-layered, and this is particularly true of tradition in the UAE. In fact, Pamela Erskine-Loftus proposes that tradition is used as a mechanism to control or strategically channel globalisation[94] and protect national identity in the Gulf. Developments are dominated by speed, "globalization did not happen to the Gulf States, but *by* the Gulf States."[95] Her suggestion here that the Gulf has come to own or author globalization, further supports the notion that a distinctly Emirati version of globalisation exists, with invented traditions playing an

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popular belief, the black band does not represent oil. It stands for the defeat of enemies and also strength of mind."
Yousra Zaki, "What Does the UAE Flag Mean?" *Gulf News*, 2 November 2017.

[91] Nezar Al Sayyad, "Global Norms and Urban Forms in the Age of Tourism: Manufacturing Heritage, Consuming Tradition," in *Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage,* ed. Nezar Al Sayyad (London: Taylor and Francis, 2001,) 15.

[92] Edward Shils, *Tradition* (University of Chicago press, 2006), 151.

[93] Edward Shils, *Tradition*,151.

[94] Pamela Erskine-Loftus,"Common Purpose and Uncommon Outcomes: The Cultural Transferability of Museums," *Reimagining Museums – Practice in the Arabian Peninsula,* Pamela Erskine-Loftus (ed), (Edinburgh and Boston: MuseumsEtc, 2013), 25.

[95] Erskine-Loftus,"Common Purpose and Uncommon Outcomes: The Cultural Transferability of Museums," 25.

important part. This will be explored in the following chapter and in the context of art discourses relating to the UAE. On the subject of time, it is also interesting to note that the very speed of progress or development that took place in the UAE over 1970s, 1980s and 1990s appears to be coming full circle, as the construction cranes and neon signs are themselves stirring feelings of nostalgia or "nostalgic discourse," amongst a young generation of Emiratis.[96] Will future generations see construction sites as part of an Emirati traditional landscape?

Shaping an Emirati narrative

The beginning of this chapter explored the creation of the UAE and the unique system of sharing federal power that exists. The role of invented traditions, their ability to solidify national identity, bring the country together and inspire a national visual culture has also been observed. Sheikh Zayed was one of the founders of the UAE and his leadership and persona played an important part in curating the country, its culture and beliefs. His legacy remains central to Emirati visual narrative; giant billboard portraits of the leader, online videos, images and quotations shared online ensure that he lives on in popular culture. 2018, the anniversary of his birth was proclaimed "The Year of Zayed."[97] Though they may refrain from wearing national dress daily, social media attests that young Emiratis have not lost their sense of national tradition. Patriotic images and inspiring quotes by Sheikh Zayed are continually shared and re-posted online.

If traditions are invented, who authorises them? The place of Sheikh Zayed and the presence of regional rulers, whose portraits occupy such a strong place in local visual culture, raise a number of questions surrounding the control that the UAE government holds over the country's narrative, its identity and visual culture. As has already been noted, the UAE's Federal Council is central to the notion of Emirati identity, customs and national dress. For the FNC, invented traditions such as national dress remain closely tied to national loyalty and patriotism.

While not celebrating National Day would certainly not amount to treason for an Emirati national, it is easy to understand the council's concern when the young Emirati population shows signs of abandoning national dress. But how can the country remain respectfully rooted in their traditional belief system and fulfil its potential as an innovative and aspiring nation? Erskine-Loftus writes about the integration of globalization into existing traditional social structures in the

[96] Afra Al Dhaheri, Asma Belhamar and Gaith Abdulla, conversation with the author in St Ives, 21 August 2019.
[97] "The Year of Zayed" website. Accessed 31 April 2020. www.zayed.ae/en/year-of-zayed/about/.

Gulf and she notes that young people have developed a "duality for everyday life with two ways of doing things."[98] This means that Arabic is often spoken at home, where national dress is worn with family and this is separated from life at school or work where English is spoken and globalisation, development and creativity come to the fore. Her research suggests that this duality or "intertwined spheres" is a lived experience where "globalization meshes with traditionalism."[99] It recalls Emerson's allusion, "There is no threat that is not a twist of these two strands."[100] How is this dichotomy maintained and how are Emirati values and traditions maintained in an increasingly globalised world? Erskine-Loftus and Al-Qassemi refer to the concept of "soft power," an exercising of power by a government that is not as a display of hard power or justice, but a gentle nudge of advocacy or support of an Emirati agenda, values and ideas.[101] Thus, soft power can help incentivise nationalist tendencies amongst Emirati nationals, drive change and even shape the Emirati narrative at home or abroad. Soft power, like invented traditions, becomes stronger through repetition and examples can include art exhibitions, fairs such as the Dubai World Expo 2020/21. These extol the success of the UAE, bolster Emiratis national pride, highlight and encourage their accomplishments. Cultural diplomacy is a term that is also used to promote such events amongst foreign nationals or outside the UAE.

Amongst these grand directives, it is also important to clarify the systems of patronage that exist within the UAE and the ways in which traditional culture is mounted within each of the three largest emirates in the UAE, Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah, for the benefit of the Emirati public and wider community. Understanding how patronage frames and is framed by tradition and visual culture within the principle art organisations and museums in each of these emirates will help situate contemporary art practice. It will also provide a lens through which to consider art discourses in the following chapter and the creation of art in Chapters 4 and 5.

[98] Pamela Erskine-Loftus,"Common Purpose and Uncommon Outcomes: The Cultural Transferability of Museums," in *Reimagining Museums – Practice in the Arabian Peninsula,* ed. Pamela Erskine-Loftus (Edinburgh and Boston: MuseumsEtc, 2013), 25.
[99] Erskine-Loftus,"Common Purpose and Uncommon Outcomes: The Cultural Transferability of Museums," 25.
[100] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Quotation and Originality" in *The Complete Works* (New York and Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904; Bartleby.com, 2013), chap. 6, https://www.bartleby.com/90/0806.html.
[101] Michael B. Greenwald, "The New Race for Contemporary Art Dominance in the Middle East," *Belfer Center,* October 2018.

Framing Tradition and Culture in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah

Abu Dhabi

The ruling Al Nahyan family of Abu Dhabi, are an example of the way in which the royal family members take an active role in supporting the notion of tradition or heritage in their emirate. Abu Dhabi is the UAE's wealthiest emirate, with a sovereign wealth fund of over 850 billion dollars and a population of just over 500,000 people.[102] According to Robertson, Abu Dhabi "holds the key to the future success of the Emirates' art market."[103] Royal patrons support their emirate's various non-profit organisations (NGOs) and some of its private companies thus ensuring a degree of continuity and coordinated practice across the emirate. Royal patronage, which may also be considered as regional government approval, ensures that local interests are protected within a nation with such a small indigenous populace. As if to seal this patronage or understanding, images of royal figures, framed and on billboards are reminders of a strong national culture and tradition.

The UAE's system of shared government has already been briefly described. According to this federal system, art and culture are the responsibility of each emirate. Thus the Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development supports the country's efforts nationally. The ministry's vision is broad as it works to support or "enrich the cultural ecosystem in the UAE" as a whole.[104] In Abu Dhabi, the Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism (DCT) established in 2012, replacing the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH) and the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority (ADTA) takes an active role in promoting the emirate's museums, its cultural events, tourism and its National Library. The evolution of these different government entities in recent years illustrates the growing emphasis of the capital towards an oil-free economy, which prioritises tourism. It confirms too the Abu Dhabi government's focus on culture, as set out by Sheikh Zayed.

When the multibillion-dollar Saadiyat Cultural District[105] was announced in Abu Dhabi's luxurious Emirates Palace hotel in 2007, the vision of world-class museums designed by famous

[102] Robert Kluijver, *Contemporary Art in the Gulf, Context and Perspectives*, self published, March 2013, accessed 16 May 2019. https://issuu.com/robertk1/docs/contemporary_art_in_the_gulf_for_pr
[103] Iain Robertson, *A New Art from Emerging Markets*, (London: Lund Humphries, 2011), 189.
[104] "United Arab Emirates Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development" website. Accessed 20 July 2019. https://www.mckd.gov.ae/en/
[105] Worrell recalls the unveiling of the multi-billion dollar master plan for the Saadiyat Cultural District on

architects being airdropped into Abu Dhabi's watery coastline seemed far-fetched. The latent cosmopolitanism of building museums "in the middle of the desert" was greatly scrutinised. Nonetheless, when the first of the Saadiyat Cultural District's museums, the Louvre Abu Dhabi opened in 2017 (Figure 10) in the presence of its celebrity architect, Jean Nouvel, the French President, Emmanuel Macron and many other French dignitaries who had flown in for the occasion, as well as representatives from international art organisations, representatives of the UAE federal government and Abu Dhabi's ruling Al Nahyan family,[106] these utopian ideas seemed suddenly feasible. The UAE's ambitions had finally aligning with the rest of the world and the museum's opening attracted much interest. Suddenly, the country's ability to transform grand aspirations into reality whilst maintaining its beliefs and traditions was set in stark contrast with the compromises and limited ambitions of other global nations to achieve their dreams. The manner in which the museum would be curated and the contents of its collections re-conceived, was open to much speculation since it also reflected the perceived political, socio-economic and cultural relationship between the two nations. The international media had many questions: they wanted to know, for example, whether traditional Islamic ethics would allow figurative representations in the museum. How would the UAE's ambitious museums house the Louvre's predominantly Western art collections? How would displays captivate both the Western museum visitor and an Emirati public that had, as Pocock and Lorch's articles point out, not been exposed to a critical art culture? Would either be compromised? Could an alternative Muslim-friendly collection be acquired for the Louvre Abu Dhabi?

Transporting the Louvre museum to the UAE was a challenge that the two countries' governments, managed by the French national museums group, Agence France Museums (AFM) and Abu Dhabi's own culture department had certainly anticipated. The museum would have its own collection though items would be lent by the AFM. A "universal" style of curation was planned by curators at the Louvre Abu Dhabi, to re-contextualise the French collection for an international audience.[107]

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31 January 2007, at the opulent Emirates Palace hotel.
Hanan Sayed Worrell, "The UAE's Emergence as a Hub for Contemporary Art," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington,* 10 July 2017, 16-19.

[106] "Louvre Abu Dhabi: UAE Museum Unveiled by Emmanuel Macron," BBC News, 8 November 2017, accessed 13 May 2019, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-41919905.

[107] Hanan Sayed Worrell, "The UAE's Emergence as a Hub for Contemporary Art." *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.* 10 July 2017, 17.

> Visitors to the Louvre Abu Dhabi will see a kind of summation of the whole history of humankind that focuses on what is common in humanity.[108]

Figure 10: The Louvre Abu Dhabi, interior courtyard.
This shows Jean Nouvel's roof design and *Germination*, Giuseppe Penone, 2005.
Photograph by the author, 2017.

The Louvre Abu Dhabi's broad curation style received mixed reviews from artists and curators, though Mikdadi points out that the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York adopted a

[108] Quote by the scientific director of Agence France-Muséums and curatorial driving force behind the Louvre Abu Dhabi, Jean François-Charnier.
Nick Leech, "Visitors to the Louvre Abu Dhabi will see 'a kind of summation of the whole history that focuses on what is common in humanity,'" *The National*, 23 September 2017.

similar curatorial approach after its expansion.[109] According to Souraya Noujaim, the Louvre's Scientific, Curatorial and Collections Manager, the museum is pointedly moving away from conventional curation and organisation in the museum towards a more contemporary approach, that discourages any explicit readings of works of art and gives a fresh approach to the works on show by prioritising "transculturality and global perspectives."[110] Statues and paintings depict figures that are all decently clothed, though Noujaim suggested that the aim is to dissolve boundaries between the disciplines of art history, decorative arts versus fine art, east versus west.[111] This is described as a highly developed form of curation, which prioritises expansive variety, education and is diplomatic in its layout. Commentary and labels are short and monolingual. In the museum's monumental halls, sculptures of the Buddha stand alongside statues of Roman emperors, holy books and Islamic art treasures, medieval, Chinese, Indian and other civilisations are juxtaposed. Though this morass of culture may seem confusing or unsophisticated to international art visitors, it illustrates the emirates' longstanding multi-cultural residents from the pearl industry to modern times. Some have suggested that the Louvre Abu Dhabi is an exercise in Emirati cosmopolitanism or an attempt, by the country's top-down system of government, to shape an international narrative that included UAE visual culture. Arguably, the museum's global curatorial style has meant that contemporary art by Emiratis is not given a great degree of focus, however Islamic art objects and manuscripts, along with other non-Western cultures are given a more equal weight to the traditional Western artefacts that often dominate European and museum collections. This "re-centering" of an art narrative will be further explored in the following chapter. In many ways it could seem as if the Louvre Abu Dhabi was being hosted by Abu Dhabi *for* the UAE.[112] While this thesis is not a specific study of museology in the UAE, the museum's place within the discussion of tradition and modernity and its ability to bridge the gap between Western museum practice and the Islamic sensibilities and customs of Emirati traditional culture is remarkable. The Louvre Abu Dhabi also provides an important example of the exhibition of Western art in non-Western countries.

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[109] *Billionaire Magazine* applauded the Louvre's curatorial appeal to world cultures as "a meditation on universal human values."
Melissa Twigg, "Inside the Louvre Abu Dhabi," *Billionaire Magazine,* 12 February 2018.
Salwa Mikdadi, interview with the author, 19 May 2020.
Dale Berning Sawa, "'Art history isn't the neat package that you think it is'- First look at MOMA's $450m expansion," *The Art Newspaper,* 10 October 2019.

[110] Melissa Gronlund, "Middle of what? The Tricky Business of Labelling Regional Art," *The National,* 9 January 2019.

[111] Gronlund, "Middle of what? The Tricky Business of Labelling Regional Art."

[112] Anna Somers Cocks, "Louvre Abu Dhabi Embraces All Religions and Displays the Complexities of the Worlds' Mind," The Art Newspaper, 8 November 2017.

Since the UAE's arts and cultural initiatives are led by regional governments, it is important to consider the powerful role of non-governmental (NGO) art and culture organisations in implementing country-wide cultural programmes, offering grants and participating in the general development of art by Emiratis. A large number of these are based in the country's capital, Abu Dhabi. The Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation (ADMAF) for example, was founded by HE Huda Alkhamis-Kanoo in 1996, the Sheikha Salama Bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation (SHF) was founded by Sheikha Salama Bint Hamdan in 2010 and previously, the Art and Culture Programme of the Emirates Foundation, an NGO initiated by HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, was extremely active in supporting a nascent Emirati art and culture tradition from 2006 to 2012. These organisations took part in stakeholder meetings surrounding the Cultural District, in particular the Louvre Abu Dhabi, between 2007 and 2012 and offered their own experience of supporting art, art professionals and art audiences in the UAE. ADMAF established an annual festival of music in 2004 and held a pivotal role in supporting art, creativity and music in the UAE by growing art and music audiences through local and international exhibitions, two of which will be described in a moment. The Emirates Foundation's Art and Culture Programme worked not only to promote Emiratis in the field of art and literature through foreign residencies, by funding post-graduate studies and a museum studies foundation course to inspire new curators to work in the museums, as was outlined in the introduction. SHF runs the Salama bint Hamdan Emerging Artists Fellowship (SEAF) gained by artists such as Afra Al Dhaheri (see Chapter 5) in partnership with the American Rhode Island School of Design, in New York. SHF now runs the UAE Pavilion for art and for architecture at the Venice Art Biennial.[113]

Most art and culture NGOs in the UAE[114] exercise a country-wide remit that regional governments do not have, though there is an element of consistency as these continue to rely upon royal patronage and the high-level network of government ministers and their families that this entails. NGOs such as ADMAF and the SHF have been empowered to represent the country's interests at national and international events, such as the Venice Biennale and therefore exercise a great deal of diplomatic power. An example is "Three Generations,"[115] an exhibition organized by ADMAF that was first held at Sotheby's in London during the summer of 2013, before moving to

[113] "Arts, Culture and Heritage," Salama Bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation website, accessed 10 October 2019, http://www.shf.ae/en/what-we-do/arts-culture-heritage/.
[114] Louise Ryan, "Crossing Borders: Contemporary Art in the United Arab Emirates," *Academia.edu*, (2015).
https://www.academia.edu/5031317/Crossing_Borders_Contemporary_art_in_the_United_Arab_Emirates_Introduction_Displaying_and_collecting_art_forms_from_the_Middle_East.
[115] *Three Generations*, Sotheby's London, 23 July - 9 August 2013, Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation. https://admaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/THREE-GENERATIONS-CATALOGUE-2013.pdf

the United States, the following year.[116] The exhibition featured the work of twelve Emiratis from a variety of emirates and from different generations, whose worked shows the diversity of the country's short but robust art tradition. Ryan notes the obvious political and diplomatic importance of the exhibition, including the curatorial decision, to include the work of so many female Emirati artists. The *Three Generations* exhibition had the "potential [to] shatter stereotypes, redefine identities, build cross-cultural understanding on national and international levels."[117] Similarly, ADMAF's *Portrait of a Nation* exhibition in 2017 presented the UAE as a nation, first in Abu Dhabi, during the ADMAF Festival 2017, and later in the me Collectors room in Berlin, Germany.[118] It is interesting to note that the tone taken in all literature and speeches surrounding these events is nationalistic and hardy, congratulating artists for their role in "building the very fabric of cultures by offering their perspectives on the world"[119] and breaking down, "barriers to cross-cultural understanding and encourage global dialogue."[120] This seems to be an example of the soft power approach mentioned previously and which is favoured by the Emirati government to promote itself and national interest. The *Three Generations* exhibition catalogue in particular has all the rhetoric of an international exercise in cultural diplomacy, with ADMAF's royal patron, the Minister of Culture, Youth and Community Development, communicating his desire to, "communicate the essence of the UAE cultural identity to the world..."[121]

At the edge of the New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) campus on Saadiyat Island, stands the NYUAD Art Gallery. Modelled on historic academic American galleries such as the Harvard Art Museums, the gallery has its in-house curator, a library and programme of events. And while this thesis will only lightly touch upon these institutions, this glance at the emirate of Abu Dhabi has been enough to conclude, for example, that the Louvre AD and NYUAD Gallery are both very much entrenched in the future, present and past. Ultra-modern and innovative in their design, both are subject to the national government's intentions and royal patronage but because of their names, they are part of a global as well as national heritage. The continual fusion

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[116] *Three Generations* moved to the Cleveland Clinic Arts and Medicine Institute in 2014, then back to Al Dhafra in the UAE.
Ryan, "Crossing Borders: Contemporary Art in the United Arab Emirates," 2.
[117] "Arts, Culture and Heritage," Salama Bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation website.
[117] Louise Ryan, "Crossing Borders: Contemporary Art in the United Arab Emirates," *Academia.edu,* (2015), 3.
https://www.academia.edu/5031317/Crossing_Borders_Contemporary_art_in_the_United_Arab_Emirates_Introduction_Displaying_and_collecting_art_forms_from_the_Middle_East.
[118] Anna Seaman, "Portrait of a Nation travels to Berlin," *The National,* 28 August 2017.
[119] *Portrait of a Nation*, ADMAF and Abu Dhabi Festival 3-30 April 2016, 14.
[120] *Three Generations*, Sotheby's London, 23 July - 9 August 2013, Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation.
[121] This was the previous name for the Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development.
"ADMAF Presents Three Generations at Sotheby's," exhibition catalogue, 23 July – 9 August 2013, Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation, 2013, 9-13.

of modernity and tradition is ever-present numerous aspects of Emirati daily life. That is the spark that inspires this thesis.

Dubai

While Abu Dhabi's museums have attracted much national and international press coverage, Dubai is seen as the commercial art centre for the region and a hub for artists from around the world to meet, exhibit and sell their work.[122] Abu Dhabi and Dubai's warring past and key roles in the union of the UAE make them complimentary neighbours and their treatment of tradition defines them, to a great extent. Dubai's business-friendly legislation has resulted in a mushrooming of galleries, as well as museums, private foundations, non-profit exhibition spaces open to the public.[123] The emirate's laws ensure that galleries and private museums benefit from limited autonomy and as a result, Dubai boasts a thriving, international arts community, with numerous galleries and two art districts.

Figure 11: The Etihad Museum, Dubai.
Photograph by the author, 2017.

[122] "Nowadays, Dubai is established as the commercial art center for the region and the city is also a key meeting point for artists, especially those working in Iran, Pakistan and other neighbouring countries." Antonia Carver, "Opinion: Antonia Carver, the Director of the Jameel Arts Centre, on What Most of the World Still Doesn't Understand About the UAE Art Scene," *Artnet.com,* 12 November 2018.
[123] Pamela Erskine-Loftus, conversation with the author, 9 July 2019.

Dubai Culture and Arts Authority (DCAA) was set up in 2008 by HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, UAE Vice President, Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, with a vision to transform the city into, "a global, creative and sustainable city for culture, heritage, arts and literature."[124] DCAA or Dubai Culture aims support the arts of the emirate and it does so with commercial flair and professionalism. A fleet of glitzy corporate sponsors and luxury businesses support the Dubai Art Season.[125] It offers an Artist-in-Residence (AiR) Dubai programme and intercultural interaction between Emirati and international artists and audiences. Within the city is Alserkal Avenue, an art district with the largest groups of commercial galleries and commercial art spaces in Dubai that also organises charity events and festivals.[126] Established in 2008 in the industrial Al Quoz area of Dubai by Emirati businessman and patron Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal, Alserkal Avenue is run by a professional director and houses luxury boutiques, cafes and galleries, including the Lawrie Shabibi Gallery that represents Sheikha Al Mazrou, the IVDE Gallery that represents Mohammed Kazem and the Green Art Gallery, that represents Afra Al Dhaheri, all of whose works are included in Chapter 4 and 5. These galleries and the artists that they represent have played a pioneering role in shaping the contemporary art market in the UAE. While, Sotheby's and Christies' have offices in Dubai's International Financial Centre (DIFC) the older, Deira and the Al Fahidi historic neighbourhood around the Dubai Creek is home to galleries such as XVA Gallery and one of the UAE's first art galleries, the Majlis Gallery, founded by Alison Collins.[127]

Dubai is also home to what Erskine-Loftus describes as one of the closest things that the UAE has to a national museum. The Etihad Museum (Figure 11) opened in 2017, at the spot where the union declaration of the UAE was signed.[128] While Dubai's Municipal Museum is situated in a building located in the old creek neighbourhood of Dubai, the Etihad Museum was designed in the form of a scroll by the Canadian Moriyama and Teshima architects.[129] It presents an inspiring reminder of the nation's creation and houses original vestiges of the 1960s and 1970s;

[124] "Dubai Culture Story," Dubai Culture. Accessed 25 April 2019. https://dubaiculture.gov.ae/en/Pages/default.aspx#story
[125] The Dubai Art Season includes the Art Dubai international art fair, The Sikka Art Fair held in the historical Al Fahidi area of Dubai, World Art Dubai, a more affordable spread of art galleries from around the world, Middle East Film and Comic Con (MEFCC)[125] and a myriad of other smaller events.
[126] "About Alserkal Avenue." Alserkal Avenue website, accessed 21 June 2019, https://alserkalavenue.ae/en/index.php
[127] "XVA Gallery" website, accessed 21 June 2019. www.xvagallery.com
"The Majlis Gallery" website, accessed 21 June 2019. www.themajlisgallery.com
[128] "About the Etihad Museum," Etihad Museum website, accessed 21 June 2019, http://etihadmuseum.dubaiculture.ae/en/Pages/default.aspx
"Etihad Museum/Moriyama & Teshima," Archdaily, accessed 21 June 2019, https://www.archdaily.com/886191/etihad-museum-moriyama-and-teshima
[129] "Etihad Museum/Moriyama & Teshima," Archdaily.

memorabilia and photographs of key events in the country's transition to nationhood. Films and interactive panels also help to bring to life events of the time and a giant flagpole in the courtyard outside flies the nation's flag. Figure 11 was designed to be a place of national importance and it attempts to unite the experiences and histories of the nations' different emirates. A large mural map of the country by Abdulqader Al Rais that is displayed on the wall of the gallery's main entrance, is discussed in Chapter 4.[130]

Tashkeel in Arabic means forming or shaping. Tashkeel is a unique creative space with several studios for artists and designers. It was established in 2008 by HH Sheikha Lateefa bint Maktoum, who is herself an artist, to nurture and develop contemporary art and design practice in the UAE.[131] Though the Etihad museum can be seen as a national museum, Tashkeel is very much focussed on promoting its energetic community of artists from the UAE and abroad. It therefore represents the entrepreneurial and dynamic spirit that has come to characterise the emirate of Dubai.

Figure 12: View of Sharjah Art Museum.
Source: Shuttershock for Editorial Use

Sharjah

"Chronologically, the development of a visual arts culture began in Sharjah,"[132] writes Zakharia, of the third largest emirate after Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Sharjah has gained the reputation for

[130] The mural is pictured and discussed in Chapter 4.
[131] "Tashkeel - About." and "Tashkeel – Exhibitions," Tashkeel website, accessed 21 June 2019, www.tashkeel.org/about and https://tashkeel.org/exhibitions.
[132] Sulaf Zakharia, "Contradictions and Development: Market and Art Culture in the UAE," *Nukta Art – FACTIVA*, (December 2011), 6.

being, "a place people live in rather than simply visit as tourists"[133] and its ruler, HH Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qassimi, is a British-educated academic. A firm believer in the instructive role of museums, education and culture, under Sheikh Dr Al Qassimi, Sharjah's public art programmes and other initiatives place art at the foreground of development.[134] Sheikh Al Qassimi instigated The Sharjah Art Biennial in 1993[135] and founded the Sharjah Museums Authority, which became Sharjah Museums Department, in 2006. Bouchenaki refers to the Sharjah as a "pioneer in the creation of museum infrastructure."[136] Under Sheikh Dr Al Qassimi's rule, fifteen museums have been created in the emirate for a population of under seven million people.[137] While Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Cultural District announcement in 2007 lays claim to a host of international art museums, Sharjah is certainly the country's leader in smaller, ethnographic and specialist museums. It also remains the home of the country's only biennial and therefore arguably stands at the cutting edge of museology and contemporary art practice by Emiratis.

In 2003, HH Sheikh Dr Al Qassimi handed over the running of the biennial to his daughter, HH Sheikha Hoor Al Qassimi,[138] a Slade graduate, which gave the event a new dynamism and independence. She had visited other national biennials and international art fairs such as the Documenta art festival in Kessel, Germany and was keen to make the Sharjah Biennial an international, interactive endeavour that was relevant to modern-day life. While Sharjah already possesses the Sharjah Museums Department, which is headed by Manal Ataya, to run the emirate's many museums, Sheikha Hoor created the Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF) in 2009, an NGO to run the Sharjah Biennial and to support the creation of contemporary art by Emirati and other international artists through exhibitions, art commissions and events such as the March

[133] Paul McLoughlin, "UAE Founding Stones." *Brown Book TV.* accessed 11 May 2017. http://brownbook.tv/founding-stones/

[134] Sheikh Dr Sultan Al Qassimi said that, "In order to be truly effective, a deep understanding, knowledge and appreciation of what constitutes the local history and heritage as well as the religious, cultural and national identity is very important."
Manal Ataya and Deemas Aisha Rashid "Museums and the Representation of Islamic Culture: Sharjah Case Study," *Museum International* 63, no.3-4, (March 2013), 59.

[135] The Sharjah Biennial was instituted in 1993 by the Department of Culture and Information.

[136] Mounir Bouchenaki. "The Extraordinary Development of Museums in the Gulf States". *Museum International*, 63, no 3-4, (September 2011), 93. Practically, Sharjah's
Department of Culture and Information is the body that administers to all the emirate's artistic endeavours, though the Sharjah Museum Authority (SMA) founded in 2006, runs the emirate's museums.
"Our Museums," Sharjah Museums Authority, accessed 14 May 2019, www.sharjahmuseums.ae.

[137] Sharjah's 2020 population is now estimated at 1,684,649, according to the UN World Urbanisation Prospects, quoted on the World Population website.

[138] Alex Greenberger, "Sharjah Art Foundation Director Sheikha Al Qasimi Named Head of International Biennial Association," *ArtNews*, posted 27 September 2017, http://www.artnews.com/2017/09/27/sharjah-art-foundation-director-sheikha-hoor-al-qasimi-named-head-of-international-biennial-association/

Meetings.[139] The emirate also hosts at least two other active non-governmental art organisations that have contrasting and complimentary roles: The Emirates Fine Arts Society (EFAS) and The Barjeel Art Foundation.

Emirates Fine Arts Society, which will be mentioned again in Chapter 4, was co-founded in 1979/1980 under the auspices of Sheikh Dr Al Qassimi, ruler of Sharjah and by artists including Hassan Sharif, his brother Hussein and Abdulqader Al Rais. Its role is to support and promote artists at grass-roots level, through workshops and exhibitions. Another vibrant entity based in Sharjah is the Barjeel Art Foundation. Owned by the charismatic Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, the foundation is responsible for the management, preservation and exhibition of an unparalleled collection of modern and contemporary Arab art.[140] The foundation lends its collection to international galleries and museums to promote the story of art from the Gulf, including that of the UAE and Al-Qassimi has voiced his desire to buy art, "from every major Contemporary Arab artist" for the foundation.[141] This intention summarises not only the country's grand ambitions in the realms of contemporary art in general, but also recalls the strong sense of Arab solidarity encouraged by HH Sheikh Zayed.

This chapter has mapped the historical, ideological and organisational context of the UAE in order to provide a landscape for the discourses to be considered in the following chapter and the art practices to be observed in Chapters 4 and 5. Invented traditions such as the wearing of national dress have revealed some internal tensions and the strong control that the government holds over the Emirati narrative and culture. Artists such as Karima Al Shomely and Afra Al Dhaheri,[142] whose works are observed in Chapter 5, re-examine and reflect upon elements of the past through their work. It will be interesting to consider the extent to which invented traditions have been absorbed by these artists in their practice. The importance of patronage and the framing of culture and tradition have been considered in each of the three largest emirates. Just as the country's federal system of government respects and maintains each emirate's individual authority, so this brief exploration of art organisations and patronage in each emirate emphasises regional characteristics; the emphasis on non-profit organisations in Abu Dhabi, commercial galleries and auction houses in Dubai and a proliferation of small, largely ethnographic museums

[139] March Meetings, is a series of art discussions, which happens around the same time as the biennial, see Sharjah Art Foundation website.
[140] An engaging and influential man, Al-Qassemi is an academic and a columnist who is also very active on social media and kindly agreed to answer some questions for this thesis.
"Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE," Universes in Universe, accessed 14 May 2019, https://universes.art/en/specials/barjeel-art-foundation/
[141] Ali Khadra, "Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi." *Canvas Magazine.* 6. no2 (March-April 2010): 70-72.
[142] Afra Al Dhaheri, conversation with the author, 8 July 2019.

in Sharjah, for example, to name but a few differentiators. The following Chapter 3 draws upon relevant art discourses and explores the unique brand of globalization that is shaping life and art in the UAE.

Chapter 3: Positioning Art by Emiratis

Before the establishment of the UAE, visual culture in the region was largely ornamental. Surviving examples include geometric, non-figurative architectural designs on religious, royal or civic buildings,[1] Islamic calligraphy and decorative crafts such as weaving, *talie* patterned piping and henna body art were practised in the Gulf region.[2] Until the early 2000s, fine art and art history were not taught in higher education, therefore many Emiratis wishing to pursue their studies and art careers, applied to local governments, NGOs and foundations for grants to study at universities abroad.[3] A fairly unique or "post-modern"[4] situation arose in which the art practice of Emiratis developed more quickly than the country's art infrastructure; its art institutions, museums, galleries and universities. Contemporary art created by Emiratis developed ahead of their country or proceeded change. The extent to which the art in this and the following chapter shaped the country's creative agenda is questionable, however the role and power of art to innovate in the UAE is certainly a key theme here. As this research seeks to define art by Emiratis in this context and unique situation, broader questions emerge related to definitions and perceptions of art in the UAE as well as broader cultural themes and national identity. Historically, the UAE was a British Protectorate and so, how far is the art produced by Emiratis centred on a Western narrative, an Eastern or Islamic narrative? Can non-Emirati viewers appreciate art by Emiratis? Does an art history or aesthetic by Emiratis exist and if not, why not?

The previous chapter observed that the Emirates region is in a constant state of development, seeking to better itself and broaden the realm of possibility. This means that art

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[1] Richard Ettinghausen and Oleg Grabar, *The Art and Architecture of Islamic 650-1250* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 22-23.
"Emirati culture hasn't traditionally been a visual culture. It has strong oral and literary traditions."
Janet Rady, telephone interview with the author, 14 February 2019.

[2] Henna designs are drawn onto women's skin as temporary ornamentation during weddings and celebrations.
Michele C. Ziolkowski and Abdulla S al-Sharqi, "Henna: an ethnographic approach," *Liwa Journal of the National Archives,* 7, no.15, June 2016, (Abu Dhabi: National Archives Printing Press, 2016), 3-18.

[3] The UAE has demonstrated a commitment to sending Emirati students abroad since the early 1970s. These included: Ibrahim Mustafa and Fatma Lootah studied in Iraq, Obaid Al Hajeri, Abdul Rahman Zanail, Hamad Al Suweidi, Mohamed Yousef, Abdul Rahim Salem, Najat Maki, Obeid Suroor and Muna Al Khaja went to Egypt. Hassan Sharif studied at the Byam School of Art in the UK.
Ali Al Abdan, "The Arts in the UAE: A Brief History," in *Portrait of a Nation,* (Abu Dhabi: ADMAF and Abu Dhabi Festival, 2016), 34-35.

[4] Antonia Carver, "Opinion: Antonia Carver. the Director of the Jameel Arts Centre on What Most of the World Still Doesn't Understand About the UAE Art Scene," posted on 12 November 2018, *Artnet.com.* https://news.artnet.com/opinion/antonia-carvar-op-ed-1392775

made by Emiratis is not always simple to de-code[5] and therefore discourses related to non-Western art could help the viewer or researcher's perceptions of local art and assist them in structuring their observations. For students or researchers engaged in studying art from the UAE, it is difficult to avoid generalisations - not to be confused with definitions - particularly when seeking to understand and share ideas about the art of a nation that is not widely discussed in British academia. For example, art by Emiratis can partially relate to Islamic and Arab art treatises, though the previous chapter's exploration of the UAE's contextual history has revealed the UAE's many influences from abroad. As a result, discourses about contemporary art and the art of other developing, non-Western nations are also relevant in this case.

Returning to the aim of this thesis and its investigation into the nature of art by Emiratis, this chapter will consider how contemporary art practices can be situated within the lenses of cosmopolitanism and modernity and what these mean in a Emirati context. Using the writings of various theorists, including Partha Mitter, Simon Knell, Arjun Appadurai and Walter Mignolo, this chapter reflects upon how best to approach and write about art from the region, for the benefit of future studies. It is also important to consider how useful or necessary categorization or compartmentalization is, in relation to the (short) history of art by Emiratis.[6] In approaching unfamiliar art, descriptive terminologies can sometimes create complications for writers and readers. Definitions such as "Indigenous," "Modern," "Contemporary" or "Conceptual" art that were born in the Western art history are frequently offered to the study of "non-Western art" – another term again, which will be discussed shortly. Though the original aim of these terms or labels has been to focus understanding or further study by situating the object being described within the viewer or the reader's understanding, I have attempted to rely on as few terms as possible. Where these are included, they attempt merely to justify or offer clarity to an object or a moment, while remaining respectful to both artist and context.

Another important point is that this is not a study of comparison and Western art will not be held up as a key reference. Certainly, relating to or being related by art discourses can acknowledge the role of an artist from the UAE vis à vis a global art history and this is useful, if only to explore its differences. The chapter observes how these values may be identified within art

[5] Pamela Erskine-Loftus, "Common Purpose and Uncommon Outcomes: The Cultural Transferability of Museums," *Reimagining Museums – Practice in the Arabian Peninsula,* ed. Pamela Erskine-Loftus, (Edinburgh and Boston: MuseumsEtc, 2013), 22.

[6] The artist Hassan Sharif rejected categorisation in art and in the exhibition of artworks. He said, "[In the past] when they started to write the history of art, they just wrote about European art – and ignored art from Africa, Islamic art, Latin American art. Now they're making the same mistake again by creating exhibitions that categorise in this way."
Christopher Lord, "Hassan Sharif: Make It New," Harpers Bazaar Art, 14 July-August 2014, 46.

discourses on cosmopolitanism and modernity and will investigate what art has come to represent, in the eyes of art dealers, collectors, art institutions and artists in the UAE is also included in this chapter. It will also be useful to identify or suggest a lexicon to describe art by Emiratis for the purpose of future study.

Centring art by Emiratis

> "Western patterns of modernity are not the only "authentic" modernities … though they enjoy historical precedence and continue to be a basic reference point for others."[7]

The recognition of art located outside, "Western patterns of modernity," represents an important starting point for this consideration of UAE contemporary art. Just as the previous chapter observed that the notion of tradition bears connotations of the past and inflexibility, so "non-Western," suggests a similarly definitive state. It is a term used to describe art from a myriad of countries, including the UAE, for lack of any easy alternative. "Non-Western" art will not necessarily be "Eastern," so the term is also contradictive. It assumes a Western axial emphasis and is problematic because it bears hegemonic, negative connotations that define a body of art by what it is not. Should art that cannot be predictably fitted in to the Western European definition of art or traditional art history, such as that of Ernst Gombrich's *The Story of Art,* for example, be defined so harshly? Diverse nations outside the Western narrative can be acknowledged thanks to the sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt's contribution to research on perceptions of art and creators of art beyond the European or North American art history models. Eisenstadt also underlined that fact different nations can have different "modernities" and realities and that these realities may have been born from a country's complex historical or political context, yet they can also be flexible and worthy of attention. [8] Eisenstadt has written about creative cultures from around the world and he describes the prescribed systems and values developed on the Western model by sociologists such as Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. His work explores how countries outside the accepted (Western) art historical model strive to gain the same recognition in art and modernisation that had hitherto been the reserve of Western art.[9] The need to emulate or gain

[7] Shmuel. N Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus,* (Winter 2000), 3-24.
[8] Eisenstadt mentions an "Eastern" Axial force; that of Eastern and Islamic civilisations. He cites sociologist Daniel Lerner's notion of modernity as being part of a wider changing and trans local community.
Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities: A Collection of Essays*, (London: Brill, 2003), 497.
Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," 15.
[9] Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Tradition, Change and Modernity,* (New York: Wiley, 1973), 121.

recognition by Western standards is observed by Knell too, in the following section on national identity. Eisenstadt's scrutiny of the Western axial hold over art and art institutions is also central to Mitter's writing, as shall be mentioned in a moment. In fact, this Western axial hold over art, over modernity and over many other areas such as academia, technology, finance and business, for example, is certainly relevant in the UAE. It is illustrated by the country's recourse to Western specialists to help in the country's development, as was previously mentioned. Having set its sights on distinguishing itself as a competitive and modern nation, it is perhaps not surprising that the Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Cultural District planners set their sights on bringing the Louvre and the Guggenheim museums to the capital. These museums surely represent the height of Western civilisations and art, so to bring them into an Emirati context, for the benefit of Emirati citizens who no longer need to travel to Europe or North America to enjoy global art and can see them as their own, is extremely symbolic of the UAE's cosmopolitan consciousness. The museums also stand as a statement or refusal to remain on the sidelines of the global art historical narrative.[10] The Louvre Abu Dhabi's universal style of curation, is also a prime example of the country's desire to widen or re-centre the hitherto Western art narrative, into a more global art narrative.

How to describe art by Emiratis and what sort of language should be used? Partha Mitter approaches this question, in the case of Indian art, by voicing his belief that art history must be reconsidered or re-focussed away from the accepted Western narrative. He suggests, nonetheless that accepted Western art historical terms should be used to describe "peripheral art," a term he uses to describe art that does not fall within the accepted Western art narrative. The solution, for Mitter, is to situate Indian art within European art historical understanding. So for example, when he describes Indian art, he does so in English, using the same language commonly used to describe (Western) artworks and he uses, "a qualifying epithet … to speak of any other: East European modernism, Chinese modernism, Indian modernism and so on."[11] Mitter therefore employs terms such as "Indian Modernism" to describe a moment in Indian art. This label is problematic because although Mitter succeeds in bringing Indian art into central focus, gains its acceptance within a Western art historical context and presumably makes it accessible to global audiences, in my view, it is a compromise, for two reasons.

Firstly, it could be suggested that Mitter's qualifying epithets do not engage with the Western "axial hold" over art history but maintain the notion of art history as a purely Western territory. Would an Indian artist, for example, be expected to study Western Modernism, in order

[10] Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Tradition, Change and Modernity*, (New York: Wiley, 1973), 121.
[11] Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History an Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *The Art Bulletin* 90, no.4, December 2008, 531-548.

to place themselves within a local Indian version of this style?[12] What Meecham terms as the "broadening of art history to include… modernist moments in other cultures,"[13] seems unfair on peripheral or non-Western art because it supports the single totalitarian (Western) narrative.[14] Though African and Asian art inspired the Cubist, Modernist and Abstract works of artists such as Picasso in European art history, for example, art history students are rarely required to learn more about the cultural contexts and art of these countries. Secondly, would it be ethical or correct to suggest that art created after 1971 in the UAE could be labelled as Emirati Modern Art or an example of Emirati Modernism? Such a masked comparison would certainly create more confusion than it would satisfy. Though Mitter's epithets suggest solidarity or equality amongst nations, could the use of these terms limit or neutralise their meaning, in this case, making them less Indian or less Emirati?[15] It could be suggested that any references to these terms by historians and researchers invites immediate comparison and conscious or unconscious judgement. Though the invention of relevant and original terms for different stages of art from around the world is hypothetically necessary, it would also be extremely time-consuming and may not be helpful for the exchange of art ideas and practices regionally and nationally. The next section will therefore focus on underlying values that could be used in the study of art by Emiratis and suggest alternative definitions that could be used to describe it.

Values and Definitions

The finite nature of oil as a commodity has contributed to a closer link between the creation and consumption of art and tourism. In this context, tourism has been absorbed into an active version of culture that includes events, fairs and considers the UAE within an international context. As was touched upon in the previous chapter, an example of this close link between tourism and culture in Abu Dhabi is the decision to invest in world-renowned museums within the Saadiyat Cultural District, in 2007 and the creation of the Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism

[12] Here I refer principally to Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters* and Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History an Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *The Art Bulletin* 90, no.4, December 2008, 531-548.
[13] Pam Meecham explains that although, "Modern art … [was] once confidently allocated a time-period of c.1870 to 1970,"[13] based on a largely European political and social agenda, a growing awareness of non-Western cultures has meant the broadening of art history to include, similar and more recent Modernist moments in other cultures that were experiencing a similar breaking away from ideas of the past.
Pam Meecham, *A Companion to Modern Art*, (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 1.
[14] Pam Meecham, *A Companion to Modern Art*, 1.
[15] Mitter's use of art terms out of their original context can lead to confusion. He recalls meeting Edward Said, he expressed his sympathy for Orientalism and was told by Said that he could choose to return home, whereas Said, a displaced Palestinian, could not.
Keith Moxey and Partha Mitter, "A Virtual Cosmopolis: Partha Mitter in Conversation with Keith Moxey," *The Art Bulletin* 95, no.3 (September 2013), 383.

(DCT) in 2012. Inspired by economic concerns for the nation's oil-free future, in the UAE there has been a series of public and private investments in art fairs, galleries, museums and cultural events, instigated or patronised by the ruling elite and run by non-governmental organisations, local individuals or expatriates in partnership with local business owners. Paired with new art events and spaces is the realisation mentioned in Chapter 2 that culture needs to be animated to appeal to a wider audience and also the importance of high-context activities so that people can experience their past in way that is relevant to the high-paced speed of development of modern times.

This research explores what contemporary art means in the UAE, what it looks like (in Chapters 4 and 5) and what it represents. Seen thus, Appadurai's work on the politics or tournaments of value is extremely relevant to the attitudes to art in the UAE, "where culture is understood as a bounded and localized system of meanings."[16] He touches upon the importance of value in the UAE, the varying forms that commodities can take as elements of value and how these equate to art. Art is seen as, "both a privilege of those in power and an instrument of status, rank, fame or reputation."[17] Auction houses, art galleries, fairs and museums in the UAE are cultivated or acquired for the purpose of the UAE's cultural and economic elevation. In a way, their success confirms the status of art as a commodity or a key asset with an important economic and social value.[18] Appadurai works to demystify art objects as "commodities" or "the stuff of "material culture""[19] and his detachment allows him to explore the movement of commodities within a range of interest groups and social arenas. It would be foolish, for example, to ignore the economic and socio-political implications of the Louvre Abu Dhabi and its transportation of so many impressive examples of ancient European, Eastern and Islamic Art to the UAE. Art is a particularly rousing commodity for countries such as the UAE because, under the right conditions and with the necessary investment and centres of education, it can be created as well as consumed. This renders the creation and development of contemporary art by Emiratis such an exciting concept and focus of study.

Time and the idea of making time will be observed in the art of Afra Al Dhaheri, in Chapter 5. Appadurai also touches upon the notion of time and its swift passage, which represents an important element of the UAE's development. He describes "a causal break between past and present," which, in the case of the UAE's creation and intense path of development, can be seen

[16] Arjun Appadurai, *The Social life of things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 15-21.
[17] Appadurai, *The Social life of things,* 15-21.
[18] Appadurai, *The Social life of things,* 15-21.
[19] Appadurai, *The Social life of things,* 15-21.

not so much as a rupture with the past as a break or rupture into the future.[20] It is important to highlight this in view of the country's cultural development and its national sense of identity. The speed of development in the UAE has certainly affected this research and will no doubt mean that regional structures or programmes that have been described shift considerably in the coming years, also that much more work is produced and hopefully, many more international exhibitions and sales of art by Emiratis have taken place. That is the nature of the UAE. The UAE's cultural respect for tradition and religion has absorbed new ideas and aspirations and has thus been transformed into a multi-layered and advanced reality. That is this why the UAE's traditional belief system provides such an important grounding. Modern infrastructures, continued development and construction continue to shift and pattern around the reality or realities that exist within the UAE.

In approaching unfamiliar art, descriptive terminologies can be enlightening, but they can sometimes create complications for writers and readers, therefore the terms used in this thesis are few and justified where possible, for clarity and in order to remain respectful to artist and context. The decision here to focus upon the regional context of the UAE is supported in the writing of Donald Preziosi, who states that art history is founded "upon a series of assumptions regarding the meaning or significance of objects of human manufacture." His research relates the value of art to its "historical genealogy."[21] Though this appears to be useful in the study or understanding of art and its development, it means that categorisations and labels are so often sought, in order to group or neatly tidy art into schools of art or historical moments in art. The classification of an understood Western art model, such as Mitter attempted to do by "re-centring" peripheral art using epithets can be useful, since it allows art historians and observers of art to access an artwork, its "meaning or significance" more readily. As has already been mentioned, the UAE's pre-history as a British protectorate and its many long-term European residents mean that the nation had a rich exposure to Western culture, education and values. It may be tempting to place art by Emiratis into a wider grouping of Arab, Middle Eastern and perhaps also Orientalist, Muslim and Islamic art. But is this helpful and is it justified?

The region occupied by the UAE was never an official colony. The country's cultural attitudes, Emirati ruling families' delight in horse-racing and their attendance at several English

[20] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization,* (Minneapolis, Minn; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3.
[21] Donald Preziosi, *The art of art history: a critical anthology,* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13.

universities have led the anthropologist Razvi Uzman to refer to the UAE as a post-colony.[22] As has already been described, The Majlis Gallery, one of the UAE's first commercial art galleries was founded by a British expatriate and many of the UAE's first artists, post 1971, such as Hassan Sharif were sent to art schools in the UK and Europe.[23] While Edward Said's *Orientalism* disapproves of the romantic *Orientalist* attitude of coloniser over colonised in a post-colonial reality, it must be recognised nonetheless that the travelling accounts of writers such as Thesiger in *Arabian Sands*, are extremely useful. They help to construct a subjective view of the region's past, the character and dress of the *Bedouin* for example and their manner. Thesiger also relates his impressions and first-hand exchanges with the charismatic Sheikh Zayed, which are extremely valuable.

How can art from the UAE be described? The term Arab Art, which may include art by Emiratis, is objective though extremely broad as it would geographically include the whole of the Arabian Peninsula and all countries where Arabic is spoken, which stretches from Africa to parts of East Asia. As has already been noted, "non-Western" or "peripheral" art are also terms that consider a Western axis. Art from the "Middle East," as Salwa Mikdadi points out, is confusing and unhelpful, since it begs the question: "Middle of what? East of where?"[24] The artist Hassan Sharif, who will be discussed later, disproved of the term "Emirati artist," because he felt that the artist had a responsibility to be active in society regardless of his location or origin.[25] Sharif felt that defining an artist by his or her nationality, which Mitter supports in his use of terms such as "Indian Modernism," though superficially useful for a study such as this, is ultimately too definitive and poses more problems than it satisfies. While Sharif warned against the idea of labelling artists by their nationality or assigning a 'false' origin to art,[26] "Emirati artist" is therefore a problematic term. It is also misleading because artists from many different countries call the UAE their home. Throughout the initial process of research for this thesis, the question of "What is an Emirati artist?" posed problems for some of the Emirati or UAE-based interviewees:

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[22] Rizvi Z. Uzma, "Critical Heritage and Participatory Discourse in the UAE," *Design and Culture*, 28 February 2018, 57-59.

[23] This is a reference to artists such as Hassan Sharif and Najat Maki who were among the first to travel abroad for their studies in art, during the 1970s, after the creation of the UAE.

[24] Melissa Gronlund, "Middle of What? The Tricky Business of Labelling Regional Art," *The National*, 9 January 2019.

[25] "Art has become part of the society…This is really not the time for expressing yourself comfortably in your corner. The artist must hurry…"
Cristiana De Marchi, "Interview with Hassan Sharif," in *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008,* ed. Maya Allison (UAE: Akkadia Press, 2017), 255.
"…I feel bad about these categorisations – "This is Arab contemporary art," "This is Arab modern art" and so on…""
Christopher Lord, "Hassan Sharif: Make It New," Harpers Bazaar Art, 14 July-August 2014, 46.

[26] This was included in his writing on his website www.hassansharif.com much of which has disappeared since his death.

did I mean UAE-based? UAE inspired? The focus of this research is on art by Emiratis in the strictest sense (i.e. holders of the UAE passport). This study focuses exclusively on art made by Emirati nationals, in order to maintain an element of "located-ness" and in order to observe the effects of the country's history, its situation and development. After discussions with Emirati and non-Emirati colleagues and as a tribute to Sharif, references to Emirati art or Emirati artists will be replaced by the more mindful and less definitive term, art by Emiratis, or in this case, contemporary art by Emiratis.

> "…Modern, modernist, traditional and indigenous visual arts being produced all over the world…[are] no longer … positioned relative to some broad, all-encompassing narrative of art's historical development (such as modernism followed by postmodernism)."[27]

The reason that this study has chosen to observe contemporary art is because unlike a term such as traditional, modern or modernist art, as mentioned above in the citation from Terry Smith's paper on the picturing of world art, contemporary art relates to time itself. Time and the swift passage of time, as has been pointed out earlier in this chapter, are extremely relevant in the UAE. A speaker at the Abu Dhabi Culture Summit in 2019, Wanda Nanibush, Curator of Indigenous Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario, succinctly defined contemporary art as "art made by artists now..."[28] Certainly, contemporary art can mean different things to different people in different contexts. Smith observes a wide variety of art from around the world in his study, which shows that the term is flexible and inclusive. Contemporary art, in the UAE and elsewhere, without the staid constrictions of chronology, can express the "multiple ways of being in time with others."[29] Smith notes that, "It has become a state of periodness, of being perpetually out of time, or at least not subject to historical unfolding."[30] Smith identifies with the energy of change in emerging new worlds such as the UAE and he also notes the differences and challenges that exist for artists and art as they grapple with regional differences and changes brought about by globalisation. He identifies "three broad currents" in art and at least one of these can be identified in the work of younger artists in Chapter 5, as they face the challenges of a moving art world.[31] Smith points out

[27] Terry Smith, "Worlds Pictured in Contemporary Art," in *Regionality/Mondality – Perspectives on Art, Aesthetics and Globalization*, eds. Charlotte Bydler and Cecilia Sjöholm (Södertörn: Södertörn University Press, 2014), 260.
[28] Wanda Nanibush, email exchange with author, 30 April 2019.
[29] Terry Smith, "Contemporaneity in the History of Art," A Clark Workshop 2009, Summaries of Papers and Notes on Discussions,' in *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture* 1, (2011), 5.
[30] Terry Smith, "The State of Art History: Contemporary Art," *The Art Bulletin,* 92, no.4, (1 December 2010), 374.
[31] Smith, "The State of Art History: Contemporary Art," 374.

that global contemporary artists are "nevertheless situated in [their] specific local context."[32] He focuses on the importance of contemporary art as an actor in the development of change: "Geopolitical change has shifted the world picture... [and] contemporary art may be becoming an art *for* the world – for the world as it is now, and as it might be.[33] The following chapters explore how the actual practice of art as an actor of change was taken up by the artist Hassan Sharif and artists who worked with him.

Situating Art from the UAE

An important concern that must be addressed in this chapter is how contemporary art can be situated within an Emirati context and more broadly, to observers of global art. When looking at works of art in a broad contemporary context, Knell encourages the questioning of the viewer's sociological and art historical preconceptions. He notes that (even) art historians, "can so easily fail to observe the authorial and editorial museology and institutionalism,"[34] affecting their vision of an art object. He explores a universal cultural context and a cultural consciousness involved in the production and consumption of art that transcends nationality or location.[35] Knell also chronicles key dialogues in the history of modernist discourse and urges a re-assessment of ways of seeing, giving value or worth to a work of art.[36]

> The challenge is not to extend Western art history to map the world but to see, appreciate and respect Mongolian art from Ulaanbaatar and through Mongolian eyes … Worth, value, achievement and significance are attributes that must privilege this situated looking. Indeed, if we are to make sense of local or national histories of art, understanding these dynamic processes of determination and evaluation is as important as understanding the art itself.[37]

Knell's writing is useful to this study of art by Emiratis because he champions the idea of "situated looking" to consider art that is not created within a Western culture or a Western

[32] Smith and Saloni Mathur, "World Currents in Transition Beyond Globalization," *Historical Presence in Visual Culture Contemporaneity* 3, no.1 (2014): 165-173.
[33] Terry Smith, "Worlds Pictured in Contemporary Art," in *Regionality/Mondality – Perspectives on Art, Aesthetics and Globalization*, eds. Charlotte Bydler and Cecilia Sjöholm, (Södertörn University Press), 261-2.
Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History an Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *The Art Bulletin* 90, no.4 (December 2008): 531-548.
[34] Simon J. Knell, "Modernisms: curating art's past in the global present". *The Contemporary Museum*. (London: Routledge, 2018), 3-28
[35] Knell, "Modernisms: curating art's past in the global present," 3-28.
[36] Knell, "Modernisms: curating art's past in the global present," 31.
[37] McLean, *Across Cultures: Indigenous modernisms in Central Australia,* 2012.

understanding of art. Not only does Knell's approach recall Eisenstadt in his references to "multiple indigenous modernities" but he also observes the role of national museums in empowering and strengthening national engagement within a country and its impact on national identity.[38] As was noted at the beginning of this chapter, the advent of museums in the UAE happened around the same time, or a little later than the creation of art, therefore Knell's exploration of national and contemporary museums is relevant not only to museums and galleries that already exist in the UAE, but also to those that are being built. For example, initially billed as the UAE's national museum, then renamed *The Zayed Museum* is the building project designed by Norman Foster that is located within the Saadiyat Cultural District in Abu Dhabi, due to be completed in 2021.[39] It was initially planned in collaboration with the British Museum in London but has since been re-focussed to become a purely Emirati museum focussed on the UAE's founding father. Besides, the UAE's national museum already exists. Like several museums in Sharjah and the *Al Fahidi Fort* museum in Dubai, it is largely ethnographical and focuses on archaeological finds to tell a story rather than represent a lived identity. The National Museum in Al Ain was commissioned by HH Sheikh Zayed himself, in the desert city of Al Ain in 1969 before the official creation of the UAE, which is contradictory, like so many other aspects of the UAE's art ecosystem – of which more later.

Erskine-Loftus suggests instead that the *Etihad* museum in Dubai, mentioned in the previous chapter, is the closest thing to a national museum in the UAE today. She describes the race to author a national museum or to claim a national narrative as a similar to a "land grab."[40] For Knell, the role of a national museum is to define a nation's identity or a distillation of how it wishes to be seen. In the case of the *Etihad* museum, the whole building refers directly to the country's cultural memory and the creation of the nation, from the flagpost outside where the treaty of the union was signed in 1971 and the building's curved scroll shape to imitate the constitution document (*Al Etihad*)[41] by Moriyama and Teshima, to its contents and the artwork on its walls, which includes a map mural by Abdulqader Al Rais (Chapter 4). Defining itself as "a dynamic 21st century museum… inspiring its visitors with the story of the founding of the UAE," the museum is a curated experience; it is set out in such as way that the visitor is directed around

[38] Simon J. Knell, *National Galleries: The Art of Making Nations,* (London: Routledge, 2016), 116.
[39] Lubna Hamdan,"Zayed Museum set to open in 2021…" 19 November 2019, *Arabian Business.com.*
[40] Pamela Erskine Loftus, conversation with the author, 9 July 2019.
While Knell's discourse suggests that a country's national identity is reflected in these buildings, here it seems that the ambitions involved in the creation of these buildings themselves, are helping to shape the country's development and aspirations. The national gallery as an institution can aid the nation in establishing commercially viable art and sustain a high profit industry.
[41] Dubai History Museum, accessed 30 October 2019, www.visitdubai.com

it, with points of focus highlighted, lighting and interactive displays.[42] At a few paces from the main *Al Etihad* museum building, an older structure, which is open to visitors, where the country's first official meetings and receptions were held, gives the museum complex a sense of setting or place-making and it also balances the ultra modern architectural design of the museum. This creates a lived historical experience to visitors, but also a contemporary sense of accomplishment and purpose. The dual representations of past and present, local and modern appear again and it will be exciting to see whether these are translated into art in the next chapters. Art has the potential to raise a country's standards of education and lead to cultural aspiration, according to Knell. This also recalls HH Sheikh Dr Al Qassimi's belief in the instructive potential of art and the civic role of art and culture mentioned in the previous chapter.[43]

Knell underlines the importance of the curator and also the sociological, psychological and art historical involvement of the visitor, who are also engaged in nation-making.[44] The inclusion of the spectator or visitor in the museum experience is interesting and a similar idea is revisited in the work of Nasir Abdullah, where audience involvement helps to create a work of art, in the next chapter. To further stress Knell's point about national museums representing how country's wished to be seen, it is poignant that *Etihad* museum's 1971 commemorative photograph of the signatories of the union, counts all seven emirates' rulers though, as mentioned in the previous chapter, we know that Ras Al Khaimah joined in 1972. This corrected historical moment recalls Langham and Barker's description of the repairs made on the Al Jahili fort and the concept of invented traditions mentioned in Chapter 2. As Knell suggest, this correcting of the past reflects on the desire to gain foreign recognition, the wish to define the country's independent, national perspective and possibly also their desire to emulate a "Western canon"[45] or art history. It also relates to the theme of power and consistency.

Why is consistency so important? Clear, consistent communication is vital in a country with so many foreign residents. HH Sheikh Zayed was consistent in his speeches, which focussed on the same themes of nature, the country's Bedouin past and the importance of the past and tradition, which underpin Emirati culture. Similarly, in the UAE a strong visual culture or consistent imagery, from national dress to images of Sheikh Zayed on billboards, all point to a strong and stable country and government. The curation of a national narrative and the role of

[42] "Live Our Heritage," Etihad Museum website, accessed 21 June 2019, http://etihadmuseum.dubaiculture.ae/en/Pages/default.aspx
[43] Simon J. Knell, *National Galleries: The Art of Making Nations,* (London: Routledge, 2016), 116.
[44] Knell, *National Galleries: The Art of Making Nations,* 116.
[45] Knell, *National Galleries: The Art of Making Nations,* 49-117.

museums and governments in shaping and strengthening national identity will be discussed in greater detail, particularly in relation to the writing of Beck and Appiah.

The UAE's reputation and economy will undoubtedly benefit from the prestige of gaining universally known galleries and museums designed by impressive world-class architects, commissioned to bring the glamour of the Western "museum dream" to the UAE. Michael Greenwald describes the "explosion of capital investment in museums, airports, architecture, art shows and universities to the tune of billions of dollars," in the Gulf in recent years. Greenwald, Erskine-Loftus and others point out the competitive desire that exists amongst aspiring Arab nations such as the UAE, to be recognized globally as an "art and culture hub" for the Middle East.[46] Greenwald refers to the collector Sultan Sooud Al-Qassimi in this development and the latter's work to ensure that art is recognised as a sound economic and strategic investment, giving the green light for building projects such as national museums.

As this thesis has already suggested, the finite nature of oil reserves mean that regional and federal governments see art and culture as potential areas of investment, aware that UAE's artists, for example, and its museum professionals will need to maintain and fill the international museums and exhibition halls in order to sustain worldwide interest and a national income, in the years to come. The way in which a nation chooses to curate its past and its art not only reveals much about its identity as a nation, but also in its hopes for the future.[47] In his reflections on invented traditions, Anthony Smith compares a nation to a cultural artefact[48] and this idea of a museum or gallery as a national mine of information is interesting in an Emirati context, due to the lack of literature available. The importance of having a fixed place to show the history of the nation is a little contradictory too, for an originally nomadic desert society. While Knell sees the museum curator as an author or director in creating a nation's narrative,[49] so it would be easy to consider HH Sheikh Zayed, the founding father of the UAE as the first curator of visual culture in the UAE.[50] From this time onwards, the role of ethical protector and defender of the UAE's

[46] Michael B. Greenwald, 'The New Race for Contemporary Arts Dominance in the Middle East,' *Analysis and Opinions: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School,* October 2018, 7.
[47] Simon Knell, *National Museums, New Studies from Around the World,* edited by Simon Knell, (London: Routledge, 2001,) 37.
[48] Anthony Smith, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism,* The Menahem Stern Jerusalem Lectures, (Bandeis: Historical Society of Israel, 2000) 58.
[49] Simon Knell, *National Galleries*, 11.
[50] "Sheikh Zayed, the beloved father figure of the country, provided the guidelines for the UAE's peaceful and rapid rise to prosperity, but also helped bring about a remarkably tolerant society."
Robert Kluijver, *Contemporary Art in the Gulf. Context and Perspectives,* (Self Published in March 2013), 100.

reputation and visual brand has, to a great extent, become part of the UAE government's official remit.

Museums are still being constructed and museum studies courses are still being completed in the UAE. The diversity and spread of museums in the UAE varies greatly and this may give daily life in the UAE a sense of being curated or coordinated from above. Elements of the country's fabric, such as *Al Etihad* (signature of the UAE's union) are emphasised time and time again. It is the name of the Dubai museum, but also that of Abu Dhabi's national air carrier, with images of the nation's *Bedouin* past, falcons, camels and romantic photographs of HH Sheikh Zayed displayed in airports, on the tail-fins of planes, on giant billboards, books, newspapers, in shops and offices. This curated visual memory fuses with the nation's genuine visual and interactive displays of affection for a much loved and missed leader. Regular visual reminders of the nation's historic past, its identity and its values seem engrained as much in the contemporary mind-set as in its visual culture. For a nation whose Emirati population is outnumbered ten to one by expatriates, visual reminders of the past, such as the wearing of national dress described in Chapter 2, play an important role in supporting and strengthening native Emirati values in the face of strong Western and Eastern axial influences. It seems almost natural that, as the UAE grows into an increasingly technologically driven and globally aware nation, these visual reminders of tradition and Emirati identity become integrated into a progressively electronic and contemporary visual culture.

The UAE's huge transformation and continued development in the museums sector are testament to the nation's focus and determination to be "among the best countries in the world," by 2021.[51] "Over the last decade within the Gulf, museums have become a status symbol of nationhood and modernity," says Erskine-Loftus, confirming that UAE's vision of sustainable development is embedded in the notion of the museum. [52] As the power of cultural diplomacy was mentioned in the previous chapter, so Greenwald refers to the use of "museum diplomacy," as a tool to shape the agenda of the Gulf states quickly and effectively.[53] The continual top-down shaping of any narrative or curation of daily life, seen outside the museum, could be perceived by

[51] "UAE Vision 2021 National Agenda," UAE Government website, accessed 22 January 2019, https://www.vision2021.ae/en.
[52] Pamela Erskine-Loftus, "What is the relationship between western museological practice and philosophy and display in the Sharjah Art Museum, United Arab Emirates?" PhD diss., International Centre for Culture and Heritage Studies, School of Arts and Culture Newcastle University, 2010: 1.
[53] Michael B. Greenwald, "The New Race for Contemporary Art Dominance in the Middle East," *Belfer Center,* October 2018, 12.

the casual non-Emirati onlooker as an artificial formulation of ideas or a censorship of reality.[54] Could a person see censorship where another sees the forming and propagating of a national narrative? Lopardo describes the shaping of the past in the UAE as a natural form of cultural reserve that exists in the art of Emiratis: "It is just part of the culture… People are treated very well, there is wealth and so citizens of the state are not encouraged to question the state – it is not censorship, just the reality."[55]

How can museum visitors be encouraged to fairly appraise international art, asks Knell and this reflects very much the situation in felt in the UAE, by Emiratis and non-Emiratis alike. He suggests seven methodological elements, which includes seeing works of art as truthfully or contextually as possible, as if through an Emirati's eyes.[56] This emphasis on authenticity, seeing with Emirati eyes or hearing the voice of the artist, curator, writer and poet as a way of accessing a contemporary art, is a valuable task. It is also necessary, in the light of the dearth of literary information in this case, the use of interviews and oral history. Looking around at the "emiratisation" efforts of the country's government, its "Vision 2021" to host the 2021 World Fair and conscious efforts to promote UAE-based higher education and other professional opportunities, international cultural exhibitions, travelling exhibitions or events such as the UAE Pavilion at Venice Biennale, since 2009, all mean that the Emirati perspective is accessible.

Terry Smith writes about world picturing or placemaking in the context of art is, "definitive of our contemporaneity."[57] "Placemaking, world picturing and connectivity are the substance of contemporary being," he writes and the "task of contemporary art history: is to trace "the currency of each artwork within the larger forces that are shaping this present."[58] This can relate to the connected and interlinked arrangement of art organisations and initiatives that contribute to the fast-paced development of the country's art and culture. The notion of situatedness, when brought into the present becomes all the more powerful because its definitions

[54] Steve Sabella, "Is the United Arab Emirates Constructing its Art History? The Mechanisms that Confer Value to Art." *Contemporary Practices,* IV, (2014): 122-132.
[55] "Emirati art tends not to be too political. This … is not censorship, just the reality. There is a respect for the past and a will not to reactivate it but to protect and preserve the past. Things are changing so rapidly." Roberto Lopardo, conversation with the author, 19 April 2019.
[56] "The situatedness of art objects and institutions means that their value can be read in relative terms; that a particular work of art might mean something quite different to the nation that possesses it than it does elsewhere."
Simon Knell, *National Museums, New Studies from Around the World,* edited by Simon Knell, (London: Routledge, 2001) 2-46.
[57] Terry Smith, 'Worlds Pictured in Contemporary Art', in *Regionality/Mondality – Perspectives on Art, Aesthetics and Globalization*, eds. Charlotte Bydler and Cecilia Sjöholm, (Södertörn University Press), 241.
[58] "There will be no single story … but rather many parallel, continent but identifiable specific histories," Smith, 'Worlds Pictured in Contemporary Art,' 241.

of place or "local consciousness" and its picture of the world become true of the present time and of the contemporary world.

The idea of perceiving non-Western works of art in a situated manner also recalls Erwin Panofsky's *Studies in Iconology.* The latter developed a strata of appreciation for work ranging from appreciation of a work's "pure form,"[59] where a viewer did not or could not access its iconographic meaning, to a second layer of conventional or contextual meaning, followed by a deeper intuitive and iconological understanding of art. This could be gained by a viewer who is experienced in the work of an artist, or their particular context.

> Our identifications and interpretations will depend on our subjective equipment, and for this very reason will have to be corrected and controlled by an insight into historical processes the sum total of which may be called tradition.[60]

Panofsky's manner of iconological interpretation underlines the importance not only for a situated approach on the part of the researcher, to art by Emiratis but also of the need to position this art within contextual frameworks, for it to be understood in a global environment. It therefore seems that an investigation of select art works, complemented by interviews with artists and art influencers is a valid method of understanding the root of Emirati contemporary art, observing its characteristics and ascertaining its cultural implications and implications on Emirati culture.

Positioning Art by Emiratis

The juxtaposition of traditional values and global aspirations mean that "cosmopolitanism" or being "cosmopolitan" in the UAE are tied up in complex dialogues of development and globalisation. Indeed, cosmopolitanism could be seen as either a measure of success or a mark of disloyalty. It should be pointed out that the Greek root of the word *Kosmou politês* or "cosmopolitan" relates Hegelian and Kantian definitions alluding to man's perceptions of the world and his place within it.[61] Ian McLean coins the term, "Aboriginal Cosmopolitans," to describe the journey of Aboriginal artists, such as Anatjari Tjampitjinpa, from an ethnic situation

[59] Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology – Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance,* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1972).
[60] Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology – Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance.*
[61] Nussbaum, M. C. (1997). 'Kant and Stoic Cosmopolitanism'. *The Journal of Political Philosophy,* Vol. 5, No.1, pp.1-25.

to a Westernised existence.[62] It would be incorrect to suggest that all examples of cosmopolitanism relate to indigenous cultures wishing to emulate Western ideals. Though Western creative culture embodied by its museums, auction houses and cultural activities; the Louvre and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, the Abu Dhabi Formula 1 Grand Prix and the import of Sotheby's and Christies auction houses, for example, have featured prominently in Abu Dhabi and Dubai's development, it important to bear in mind the original Greek definition of cosmopolitanism and remember that this is not simply an adoption of Western ideas.

In an Emirati context, Ulrich Beck suggests that cosmopolitanism can be identified as a lens or "vision" through which to observe the world, a "conceptual reconfiguration of our modes of perception"[63] or "boundarylessness."[64] He sees it as a more advanced philosophy or an outlook, "a second modernity … the era of reflexive modernity in which national borders and differences are dissolving."[65] This sits well with Erskine-Loftus' research on the balance of daily life for Emirati citizens where the speaking of Arabic and traditional customs happen in a domestic setting and people naturally exist within a more cosmopolitan lifestyle during working hours.[66] The notion of a boundary-less modernity resonates with the international sense of understanding and difference brought about by the digital age and globalisation, such as that existing in the UAE's major cities. Beck's description of the "global sense of boundarylessness," which epitomises many aspects of Western culture, starting with art events and fairs but these also draw together diverse cultural mixtures, for the purpose of developing knowledge or understanding.[67] It is easy to see how cosmopolitanism in the UAE results in a future-facing optimism borne out in many of the UAE's pan-cultural initiatives, a drive or energy to take on new challenges and take part in these, with a renewed sense of national pride.

Beck's research distinguishes between globalisation and cosmopolitanism and this helps to deepen understanding of the type of perceptions that exist in the UAE. His writing suggests that cosmopolitanism involves enjoying diversity and "the development of multiple loyalties,"[68] whereas (neoliberal) globalisation is a belief in transnational sameness. This is very much in tune

[62]He describes this development as from a "naked existence into the modern world of blankets and government rations," Ian Mclean, "Aboriginal Cosmopolitans: A Prehistory of Western Desert Painting," edited by J Harris , *Globalization and Contemporary Art.* (West Sussex:Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 147-160.
[63] Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision,* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2006), 2-23.
[64] Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision,* 2-23.
[65] Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision,* 2-23.
[66] Pamela Erskine-Loftus,"Common Purpose and Uncommon Outcomes: The Cultural Transferability of Museums," *Reimagining Museums – Practice in the Arabian Peninsula,* Pamela Erskine-Loftus (ed), (Edinburgh and Boston: MuseumsEtc, 2013), 25.
[67] Erskine-Loftus,"Common Purpose and Uncommon Outcomes…," 25.
[68] Erskine-Loftus,"Common Purpose and Uncommon Outcomes…," 25.

with the balance and shared loyalties that Emiratis of all ages engage with on a daily basis at work and at school, for example. People are not being asked to give up their own traditional beliefs, simply to take on a wider set of understanding and loyalties. Beck also reasons that it is possible to be cosmopolitan and adopt a vision of boundarylessness and at the same time, protect an independent sense of nationhood and be anti-globalism.[69] This chimes with Appiah's notion of the "cosmopolitan patriot" that will be described in a moment. Beck's references to the expression of a "cosmopolitan outlook" or "cosmopolitan reality" while also remaining situated in an Emirati moment, is reminiscent of Lamya Gargash's photographs of one star hotel rooms in Chapter 5. Gargash retains a clear sense of regional difference and a defined sense of Emirati identity, yet her photographs also acknowledge the existence of an on-going expatriate narrative. This is part of, "a new cosmopolitan realism,"[70] where an artist can appreciate and be inspired by a diverse number of art models or cultures and maintain both their sense of belonging to their own culture and their sense of openness to other cultures.

Cosmopolitanism has a positive effect of globalisation; forming "part of the structures, networks and materials that allow certain processes to operate in distinct spaces and times," suggests Wakefield.[71] What seems to distinguish Beck's view of cosmopolitanism in this context, from Wakefield's is that the latter observes how cosmopolitanism has infiltrated Emirati culture and cultural mindsets to date. Beck's vision of cosmopolitanism is more extended and is indeed boundaryless; He includes both the UAE's practical achievements to date and also the path and intentions that cosmopolitanism is forming for itself, with its increasing reliance on high-tech, its moves to world connectivity and futuristic ambitions. Finally, a cosmopolitan person or country need not necessarily deny their tradition or nationalism and this is borne out in the balance of tradition and modernity that exists in the UAE. Kwame Anthony Appiah's writing on cosmopolitanism, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* offers insight into the means by which Emirati artists and to some extent, the Emirati public, engages with ideals of the past,

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[69] Pamela Erskine-Loftus,"Common Purpose and Uncommon Outcomes: The Cultural Transferability of Museums," *Reimagining Museums – Practice in the Arabian Peninsula,* Pamela Erskine-Loftus (ed), (Edinburgh and Boston: MuseumsEtc, 2013), 25.

[70] "…the cosmopolitan outlook means that, in a world of global crises and dangers produced by civilization, the old differentiations between internal and external, national and international, us and them, lose their validity and a new cosmopolitan realism becomes essential to survival."
Erskine-Loftus,"Common Purpose and Uncommon Outcomes: The Cultural Transferability of Museums," 25.

[71] "Cosmopolitanism … is intimately bound up within complex power structures and struggles. In Abu Dhabi the aim is to instil national pride within a global outlook while providing citizens with the tools for living in a global world."
Sarina Wakefield, "Hybrid Heritage and Cosmopolitanism in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi," *Reimagining Museums – Practice in the Arabian Peninsula,* Pamela Erskine-Loftus (ed), (Edinburgh and Boston: MuseumsEtc, 2013), 103.

development and advancement with the aim of participating in a growing global art practice. It is possible to be an Emirati and to also be part of a global contemporary practice - to be cosmopolitan and a patriot. He describes, for example, his Ghanain father quoting Diogenes and his wanting to be a citizen of the world. Though Appiah's father was fiercely cosmopolitan, he was also a patriotic man who was attached to his home and surroundings.[72] "Nations matter morally to people," Appiah concludes, and so the idea of the cosmopolitan patriot came about. Knell notes that, "Culture – even cosmopolitan culture – is always situated,"[73] and this is as true in the case of Appiah's father as it is in examples of art by Emiratis, observed in Chapters 4 and 5. In the UAE, regional traditions of the past are married with the international development and technology of the future; cosmopolitan change or development is entwined with globalisation and development on a national scale. Rather than being the means to an end, cosmopolitanism, in the UAE, is a lens, as Beck suggests, adapted in the country's top-down government system, on the road to globalisation, because it allows people to be global and remain situated.

To explore what new definitions and value systems related to art by Emiratis and the UAE art market, it will be interesting to briefly consider a paper about the UAE's own Sharjah Biennial in 2013 by Walter Mignolo. Mignolo describes the importance of Sharjah as the site for a biennial: "historic and present, social, natural and political. It is a place that encourages thinking and negotiating with others." The semiotician deconstructs the notion of "West" and "East" as "two western concepts… founded on both economic growth and cultural confidence" and suggests that the 2008 biennial provided an opportunity to reassess, "the Westerncentrism of knowledge in modern times and reconsider the relationship between the Arab world, Asia, the Far East, through North African and Latin America." "No longer is the world dominated by the local Euro-American historical narrative of the 'epoch of changes,'" Mignolo continues, highlighting the importance of locality and artists' "own local memories and histories," as inspiration for their work. [74] In this context, Mignolo sees Sharjah as an indicator of the growing regional centres within an international art landscape, "erasing the long history of 'Centre and Margins." He considers the biennial, an event taking place "beyond Europe," an "open spaces for artists, memories, cultures, languages, sensing and knowledge."[75] His references to an "epoch of change," is not only reminiscent of Mitter's work on art of the peripheries, but also chimes with Robertson's writing about growing non-Western aesthetics and new markets that will be described in a moment and

[72] Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots," *Critical Inquiry,* Vol.23, No.3, Front Lines/Border Posts (Spring 1997). The University of Chicago Press, 617-639.
[73] Knell, Simon J. "Modernisms: curating art's past in the global present". *The Contemporary Museum*. (London: Routledge, 2018), 28.
[74] Walter D. Mignolo , "Re:Emerging, Decentring and Delinking – Shifting the Geographies of Sensing, Believing and Knowing," *Ibraaz,* 005, 8 May 2013, 3-6.
[75] Mignolo, "Re: Emerging, Decentring and Delinking," 4.

also Khaled Ramadan's article, "New Arab Art Order." Ramadan looks at the ways in which the contemporary Arab world is being re-defined by "a new generation of image-makers who are … offering alternative sources of information and entertainment and enjoying increased social awareness from across the region."[76] Ramadan believes that a new "visual order" and visual language is being created by contemporary Arab art. He sees a new geographical "re-arrangement" of global artistic production and the "re-centring" of Abu Dhabi as the centre of art and culture in the UAE and the Arab region. "Visual thinking is a new kind of contemplation taking place in the Middle East,"[77] writes Ramadan.

Within Ramadan's vision of a new art order artists are "visual thinkers" or "resistors," which calls to mind philosopher Giles Deleuze's idea of strength and persistence in art. His redefinition of the role of the artist is interesting because it may help Western onlookers to understand why artists from the UAE do not feel that they have to shock and rebel in the same ways that contemporary artists, such as the YBAs did in Britain in the 1990s. This recalls the words of Jean-Paul Engelen, the Director of Public Art at the Museums Authority in neighbouring Qatar. Engelen describes his work with local audiences as a conversation or introducing a different language, "we don't have to start with the swear words. In Europe, we didn't go from Michelangelo to Damien Hirst in a decade."[78] Ramadan's mention of "visual thinking" also ties in with the growing use of social media in the UAE channels such as *Instagram* and *Pintrest,* which are exclusively visual.

Iain Robertson's 2011 and 2019 research focuses on developments in the Gulf region's art markets and also further East, to art markets and perceptions of art in Iran, China, Hong Kong and Singapore. He examines the fusion of "Western-style internationalism and local cultural enhancement."[79] His books attest to the thrilling speed at which economic changes and trends are taking place in developing non-Western markets and also the changes affecting our increasingly global perceptions of world art. Robertson notes that Western art and Western aesthetics are no longer touchstones to art markets and art practices and he is pragmatic as he observes the shift away from a "Western modernist ambition."[80] Robertson questions how prestigious British art

[76] Khaled Ramadan, "New Arab Art Order," *Contemporary Practices* XV, (2015): 1.
[77] Ramadan cites Deleuze's: "Creating is not communication, but resisting ... Art is what resists: it resists against death, servitude, infamy, shame". These image-makers do not in themselves form a resistance against a particular system but are rather manifestations of resistance through thinking images and sounds." Ramadan, "New Arab Art Order," 1.
[78] David Batty, "The Rise of the Gulf Art Scene". *The Guardian,* 16 April 2012, accessed 13 September 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/apr/16/rise-of-gulf-art-scene
[79] Iain Robertson, *A New Art From Emerging Markets.* (London: Lund Humphries Publications, 2011), 190.
[80] Robertson, *A New Art From Emerging Markets.* 190-191.

auctioneers such as Sotheby's may have lost control of the art market narrative owing to the new world order that is forming.[81] In an increasingly virtual world, he also questions the survival of the magical potency of the "object d'art" in an increasingly globalised world.[82] A myriad of new, individual definitions which engage with each of these nations, their particular values and aspirations are to be expected as they "detach themselves from the value system operated by the international art market," says Robertson and this may indeed by true of art by Emiratis.[83] This echoes the words of Vilma Jurkute, Director of the Alserkal Art District in Dubai, who is mentioned at greater length later in the chapter. She notes that, "being part of an emerging art scene…We can create our own definitions and models that are locally relevant and resonate with our local networks of talent."

Art as a global signifier

Futuristic notions of visual thinking, virtual networks and the powering of art by new methods or technologies all fit in with the UAE's contemporary vision for development. The UAE's "emerging art scene" is not restricted by century-old art historical traditions, as in the West. One of those writing about art in a global and electronic age that is not moored to Western narratives is Hans Belting. Belting's questioning of the need for a single definition or view of art, his interrogation of curation and ways of exhibiting artwork[84] resonates with the possibilities open to development of contemporary art in the UAE at the beginning of the century. Even terms such as art and artists can be understood differently amongst the nation's diverse population and globally. Belting suggests that the flip side of a country's natural ethnocentrism or focus on nationhood is that everything outside, becomes "an expression of "Otherness.""[85] This could explain the seesaw that has formed in the UAE between contemporary development and assertions of national identity and nationhood to respond to feelings of otherness in the community.

Belting suggests that conceptual art has become particularly successful in the UAE, because it could be seen as, "a critical response to the concept of art." Contemporary art by

[81] Iain Robertson, *A New Art From Emerging Markets.* (London: Lund Humphries Publications, 2011), 1.
[82] "[While] the West fetishizes object, in the Arab world there is less of an emphasis on old objects..." Iain Robertson, telephone interview with the author, 23 April 2019.
[83] Iain Robertson, *A New Art From Emerging Markets.* 196.
[84] Hans Belting, "The Plurality of Art Worlds and the New Museum," in *Facing Forward: Art Theory from a Future Perspective,* Hendrik Folkerts, Christoph Lindner and Margriet Schavemaker, eds. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 93-4.
[85] Belting, "The Plurality of Art Worlds and the New Museum," in *Facing Forward: Art Theory from a Future Perspective,* 93-4.

Emiratis and particularly the work of Hassan Sharif, Shaikha Al Mazrou and examples of conceptual art in general, will be observed in the following chapters. Belting's writing appears to mirror Knell's work on "situatedness," and whereas Knell recommends looking at art through the eyes of a person of that culture, Belting, considers the way artworks can be seen differently in different locations and therefore art needs a specific audience, "who identifies with the cultural and social premises" to unlock it's meaning. As a writer who is familiar with the Emirati context, Belting's work is extremely valuable to this research and it is examined more directly in the following section on the UAE's unique art ecosystem.

Meanwhile, it is safe to say that the fast pace of the UAE's development and urban growth has a huge effect on the country's culture and the mentality of its people. Nadia Mounajjed suggests that examples of UAE development, such as the tall *Burj Khalifa* tower acts as a "global signifier," or icon to economic development and strength overseas and at home. They infuse in the country's art, embolden attitudes, aspirations and expectations of its citizens, artists, art viewers and growing art collectors.[86] In some parts of the world, Knell writes that national museums have the power to shape commercially viable art traditions and educational standards, however in the UAE, the emergence of museums, art and business markets, the boom of the internet and financial markets have become intertwined. Kevin Jones observes that the UAE arts system is a "petri-dish of contradictions, aspirations and discourse."[87]

"Today we see more artists placing their work either on online auctions or directly from their Instagram accounts or social media," writes the art collector and commentator Sultan Al-Qassimi.[88] A habit may be forming in which Emiratis or people living in the UAE have become used to seeing a dual representation of traditional or Emirati visuals placed alongside contemporary, global images online or in a curated environment. Al-Qassemi points out that the allure of Emirati art is often entwined in the traditional versus modern duality that perseveres in the UAE and there is also an, "expectation [from art collectors] that Emirati artists should produce works that reflect traditional Emirati scenes and …works [that] are Emirati enough." This is not an Orientalist attitude brought in from abroad, in the sense that the expectation is from local Emirati and Gulf nationals, as well as international audiences.[89]The cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi have grown up and develop rapidly thanks to their robust and powerful business communities and networks. Seen in this context, it is almost as if art buyers form the region and international visitors are looking for a stamp of authenticity or guarantee for their purchase. Deborah Najar, co-

[86] Nadia Mounajjed, "Dubai's Mystified promise of globalization," *Ibraaz,* May 2013 2, 3 and 6.
[87] Kevin Jones, "Beyond Safe," *Art Asia Pacific,* 93, (May/June 2015): 116.
[88] Jones, "Beyond Safe," 116.
[89] Al-Qassemi, interview with the author, December 2018.

founder of the Jean Paul Najar Foundation, a private museum in the Alserkal Avenue district, observes a protectionist reaction from her museum's visitor:

> People are in Dubai and so they want to see art by local or regional artists … or important international works alongside local artists' work. They see this as corroborating the importance of the local or regional artist.[90]

Art by Emiratis in the UAE is thus seen as a signifier of development, an affirmation of global economic success. At one of Christie's first auction in Dubai, in 2008, where *Bishra (Announcement)* (Figure 22) a triptych by the artist Abdulqader Al Rais, whose work will be seen in the following chapter, sold for over 1 million UAE dirhams (over £213,000)[91] an unprecedented sum. It became the first work of art by an artist from the Gulf to be sold at auction and Worrell remembers the excitement and uncertainty which preceded the auction that, "was hailed as the emergence of a regional market for art with sales of Arab Indian, Iranian, and Western art at $8.5 million, doubling presales estimates..." This was a huge coup for a country that could not, at the time, boast of such an impressive art infrastructure. Christie's Dubai's then Managing Director, Jeha recalls, "At the time of our first auction, there were only about five galleries active in the UAE, and no museums or art fairs had been founded."[92] But as the country launches into the 21st century it may be that success can no longer be equated solely with the Western art and art market model.

A unique art ecosystem

Art organisations in the UAE hold an important role in helping artists to gain international experience, through further education and residencies and gain access to other artists and artistic practices. The artist and prior Chairman of EFAS, Nasser Abdullah remembers that artists in the UAE had little exposure to outside influences and to foreign artists, thus events such as the EFAS annual exhibition, was an important way for them to present their work to an international audience.[93] Though artists in the UAE still need to establish themselves, form networks and gain

[90] Deborah Najar, telephone conversation with the author, 14 July 2019.
[91] Hanan Sayed Worrell, "The UAE's Emergence as a Hub for Contemporary Art," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.*
[92] Michael B. Greenwald, "The New Race for Contemporary Art Dominance in the Middle East," *Belfer Center*, October 2018, 5.
[93] "The society accepted all artists, regardless of nationality and for many local artists, this was the first time that they had encountered foreign artists and observed their different practices. The EFAS annual exhibitions, therefore, played an important part in showing work by Emirati artists and in placing it within

more international visibility, according to experienced Middle East art consultant Janet Rady, an art market is quickly forming with Christies sales taking place with international art fairs, gallery districts such as Alserkal Avenue in Dubai and all nine factors set out by Steve Sabella in his 2008 article "Is the UAE Creating its Own Art History?" in place.[94]

> I believe we're at a crossroads: old models just don't work anymore, which means there's an opportunity for us to deconstruct, depoliticise, and dislocate the status quo. [95]

Vilma Jurkute, the Director of Dubai's successful art district, Alserkal Avenue since 2011 reflects on the development of art and art districts in the region and concedes that while success may still be synonymous with Western models, to a greater extent, she believes that Dubai has gained the reputation as a conduit for art. Jurkute explains that, "This has contributed to the development of a "unique art ecosystem," in the UAE, with its own unique commercial model.[96] Her comparison of the UAE to the art scene in New York during the 1970s and London in the 1990s emphasises this as an important moment or heyday. It also encapsulates the excitement and energy surrounding the creation and consumption of contemporary art by Emiratis that is happening. She recalls that many galleries and auction houses initially opened in Dubai with exhibitions by well-established European and Middle Eastern artists that had already established collectors, for example, in Alserkal Avenue the Ayyam Gallery focused on Syrian artists and the Green Gallery exhibited work by Persian artists. Both galleries have now begun to exhibit work by Emiratis and the Green Gallery now represents the artist Afra Al Dhaheri, who is featured in Chapter 4. This indicates the growing belief in the UAE as a place for serious investment in other sectors.[97]

The avid collector of art, financier Mohammed Afkami, who has expressed his confidence in the UAE art market, supports this. The Alserkal Avenue galleries, the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Dubai and Abu Dhabi Art fairs can be seen as indicators of a growing market and help to

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both a local and an international context." Nasser Abdullah, Email conversations with the author, September 2018 -April 2019.

[94] Steve Sabella, "Is the United Arab Emirates Constructing its Art History? The Mechanisms that Confer Value to Art." *Contemporary Practices,* IV, (2014): 122-132.
The nine factors listed by Sabella are: Relative political and economic stability, education, government policies, museums, biennales, galleries, collectors, auction houses and art fairs.

[95] "Vilma Jurkute on how Alserkal in Dubai is Reimagining Cultural Spaces for Urban Sustainability," 13 February 2020, *The Place Brand Observer.*

[96] Vilma Jurkute, Telephone interview/talk with the author, 27 February 2019.

[97] "…the [art] market development did not happen by itself. Dr. Anwar Gargash … recently recalled how, throughout the 1990s, he and a few Emirati colleagues would call friends before each opening at the now internationally recognized Green Art Gallery, encouraging them to support local artists and local business." Antonia Carver, "Opinion: Antonia Carver, the Director of the Jameel Arts Centre, on What Most of the World Still Doesn't Understand About the UAE Art Scene," *Artnet.com.*

solidify the nation's reputation as, to quote Afkami, "the undisputed capital of the Arab Art world."[98] Just as a "top down" system of governance monitors and regulates art and culture on a regional level, so Jurkute notes "interrelated eco-system" of the UAE art market, with its galleries, artistic centres, auction houses and museums creating a self-perpetuating web of artistic growth. For example, Rady explains that private collectors can prefer to interact with the artist personally and buy artwork is a way of showing their belief in him or her as artists. This leads to confusion in galleries and "friendly buyers" can artificially heighten prices at auction though this is a located market, which is still developing internationally.[99]

Art events such as the Sharjah Biennial attract a largely international audience and local Emirati engagement has grown in recent years. This is perhaps due to UAE universities offering art-related degrees and young Emiratis have become more involved in such events. The British art journalist Anna Seaman, who was the arts editor for *The National* newspaper, observes these changes and suggests too that the UAE government has responded to the country's development and growth of non-Emirati residents by focussing on their local heritage and traditions. "As the country has become more comfortable with these changes, people [began] engaging with events such as the Sharjah Biennale." Seaman suggests that the Biennial's Director, Sheikha Hoor's decision to exhibit work by non-Emiratis and by people from all over the world was liberating to the country's art culture.[100] She describes a new space that was created within the Art Dubai 2019 art fair, for an exciting new generation of young Emirati artists; the UAE's millennial generation, also mentioned in Erskine-Loftus' research. These are young people who have grown up in an affluent UAE where rapid development, high-speed internet, fluency in English and fast-paced living has become a normal part of life. She suggests that though traditions are still respected, local customs understood and Arabic is still spoken with family members, the *Bedouin* past of this new generation seems further away.[101]

The on-going conversation between tradition and modernity, international systems and local customs is references by many writers, particularly with regard to the UAE's developing art market and multi-layered art ecosystem. And while the decision of what constitutes art in the UAE seems to rest very much with local audiences art, as shall be seen in the work and development of the pioneer generation of artists, described in Chapter 4, so the art experience, with its museums, auction houses and art fairs respond to Western models. Belting the challenge faced by museum curators and exhibition directors to balance local and foreign interests:

[98] Mohammed Afkami, email interview with the author, 3 July 2019.
[99] Janet Rady, Telephone interview with the author, 14 February 2019.
[100] Anna Seaman, Telephone interview and email exchanges with the author, April 2019.
[101] Seaman, Telephone interview and email exchanges with the author, April 2019.

> One and the same artwork may change its meaning when traveling from one place to the next. Similarly, the notion of art in general neither simply owns one single meaning nor can it lay claim to universal significance. In other words, it needs an audience who identifies with the cultural and social premises that make a specific art world.[102]

Belting has visited the Louvre Abu Dhabi and he also writes about the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, questioning the possibility of a truly, "global museum," to show a new art world a dynamic, genuine and original viewpoint.[103] He ponders whether the art museum and by extension, art itself, will survive this global age and recognises that whereas, in a colonial context, objects and artefacts would have been collected in order to present evidence of the culture of that place, modern times have transformed this desire completely and this recalls again the Emirati predilection for lived, "high context" experiences, mentioned by Langham and Barker, instead of flat documentation. What differentiates Belting's research from other discourses that have been cited in this thesis is that he seems to keep past and present, art and culture distinct or at least consequential. He considers the UAE as a location where the Western model of art is no longer relevant.[104] What is particularly powerful about Belting's vision and experience of the UAE is his idea of the artist as a keeper of collective memory and traditional conscious. This notion will be taken up again, using examples of artwork in the following chapters.

A final note on definitions: A term that has not been mentioned in regards to art by Emiratis is the term indigenous, which is defined as produced, living or growing in a region.[105] It is difficult to refer to the development of contemporary art in the UAE as indigenous to the Emirati region in practical terms, because as shall be seen in the following chapters, the training and inspiration for so much of the work produced by Emiratis outside of the UAE or was taught or formed by the art or art knowledge gained in North Africa, Europe or the US during their art training, residencies or exchanges. Harney and Philips' *Mapping Modernisms: Art, Indigeneity, Colonialism* may agree and notes that the term "indigenous" is appropriate to some cultures more than others. As has been shown in this thesis, the UAE's swift development, its on-going

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[102] Hans Belting, "The Plurality of Art Worlds and the New Museum," in *Facing Forward: Art Theory from a Future Perspective,* Hendrik Folkerts, Christoph Lindner and Margriet Schavemaker, eds. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 93-4.
[103] Belting, "The Plurality of Art Worlds and the New Museum," in *Facing Forward: Art Theory from a Future Perspective,* 93-4.
[104] Belting, "The Plurality of Art Worlds and the New Museum," in *Facing Forward: Art Theory from a Future Perspective,* 93-4.
[105] *Indigenous*: Produced, growing, living or occurring natively or naturally in a particular region or environment. Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

innovation and tireless attainments mean that it is often presented in the press and in academic writing as a futuristic or "future-oriented" society.[106]

The aim of this chapter is to explore art discourse in an attempt to find or create a lexicon to define art by Emiratis. However, in the future-orientated and technologically developed supercities of the UAE, Seaman's remarks about the equalizing nature of being a young millennial in the UAE and Belting's work on the artist as the keeper of a traditional conscious and collected memory lead to questions regarding the growing redundancy of a language that is specifically related to art. Looking ahead, what direction is art by Emiratis taking and what can be expected of visual arts and culture? Appadurai notes the deterritorising and globalizing form of electronic media, of mass "oral, visual and auditory mediation,"[107] on communication, conduct and on value. His writing, which will be remembered in the following chapters, presents cosmopolitanism and glamour as forms of subliminal communication in themselves. He suggests observing cultures by way of "global cultural flows … ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes." Appadurai suggests that as people become more mobile and deterritorised so "emotional ties and attachments," link them to their homeland or "imagined worlds" in a more fervent way.[108] Is this what has occurred or will occur for artists and to visual culture in the UAE?

These ideas will be revisited in the context of Afra Al Dhaheri's work though it is also interesting to look back at the writing of Hassan Sharif, who warned against the nostalgia of identity.[109] Nasir Nasrallah's *Vending Machine* art and Maitha Demithan's scanned portraits in Chapter 5 are testament to the changing global landscape of art. While Sharif considered nostalgia to be a step backwards and focused instead on the importance of artist's continued involvement in society, to observe, adapt and stay up-to-date, this contradiction, like the contradiction of tradition and modernity is, as shall be seen in the next chapter, one that many artists would continue to build on.

How best to approach contemporary art by Emiratis? The UAE's visual culture is carefully curated and prioritising a situated and contextual approach is perhaps the most sensitive and

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[106] Antonia Carver, "Opinion: Antonia Carver, the Director of the Jameel Arts Centre, on What Most of the World Still Doesn't Understand About the UAE Art Scene," *Artnet.com.*

[107] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large – Cultural Dimensions and Globalization*, Public Worlds Volume 1, (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3.

[108] "These landscapes thus are the building blocks of what… I would like to call *imagined world,* that is the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically disputed imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe,"
Appadurai, *Modernity at Large – Cultural Dimensions and Globalization*, 3.

[109] Cristiana de Marchi, "Interview with Hassan Sharif," *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008,* edited by Maya Allison,. (UAE: Akkadia Press, 2017), 260-265.

rewarding way of approaching this study. From this brief analysis, "Futurescape," to misquote Appadurai, the term, which combines all elements of modernity and globalisation, might best describe products of the Emirati contemporary time, which includes ideas and all manner of visual culture and art. The idea of building a largely man-made island of museums, linked to the main island of Abu Dhabi by bridges, is a prime example of a futuristic and "new type of colonisation."[110] The UAE's immense wealth and influence means that the country is attempting to re-centre art to correspond not only to Western models, but according to its own priorities and its own futuristic world view. Though cosmopolitanism could be attributed to a Western axis, the emphasis of the UAE's fresh value system is less dependent on old-world pedigrees and boundaries. As Noujaim, stated at the opening ceremony of the Louvre, "the museum is moving away from not only regional specificity, but also conventional classifications, such as decorative arts versus fine art… dissolution of boundaries between the various disciplines of art history."[111]

As this investigation of art discourses closes, elements of Knell's notion of situatedness,[112] Appadurai's work on tournaments of value and futurescapes, Mignoli's work on local memories and histories, Beck's writing about the cosmopolitan lens and Belting's thoughts about artists being the keepers of a collective memory stand out in this dialogue about contemporary art by Emiratis. This chapter began by questioning the importance of categories and labels through various discourses related to art by Emiratis, in an effort to decode and locate it within an expanded art world. What Jurkute politely refers to the UAE's "unique art ecosystem," Jones describes as rife with contradictions. These are not derogatory but simply reflect the complex nature of the region and the multiple layers of understanding that exist within the Emirati visual context. For foreigners seeking to decode and capture art by Emiratis, just as for Emiratis themselves, as artists and as investors, a balance exists between local visual culture and values and the rapidly developing and globalised language of art and international museums that is also present in the UAE futurescape. And while Emirati visual culture and traditions mentioned in Chapter 2 remain visible in daily life, so change and rapid development have also become dependable constants. Before turning to examples of art by Emirati artists in the following chapters, it is important to remember the words of the artist, teacher and self-styled philosopher, Hassan Sharif:

Art is not made to be understood; it is not a train that carries you to a specific destination.

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[110] Poulin, T. L. (2010). "An Oasis in the Desert? Issues and Intricacies Concerning the Louvre-Abu Dhabi Museum Expansion." *Inquiries Journal/Student Pulse*, *2*(02).
[111] Melissa Gronlund, "Middle of What? The Tricky Business of Labeling Regional Art," *The National*, 9 January 2019.
[112] Simon Knell, *National Museums, New Studies from Around the World,* edited by Simon Knell, (London: Routledge, 2001) 2.

We, the audience, have to get out and walk into new spaces.[113]

[113] Lisa Ball-Lechgar, "Hassan Sharif – Minimal Excess," *Canvas,* (January/February 2008), 162.

Chapter 4: A New Beginning for Art in the UAE

Though the UAE was created in 1971, the area "has been a cradle for the visual arts for over 300 years," writes the poet and artist Ali Al Abdan. Al Abdan describes how a 17th century poet, Al Majdi bin Dhaher, painted camels and palm trees for his guests on the walls of his home using date molasses.[1] Frustratingly, the international media has portrayed art as a recent import to the region, due perhaps to the recent museum building projects, auction sales and artists posting images of their work on social media.[2] Though this and the following chapter observe and analyse work by artists from the beginning of the country's creation until the present day, some artists were active before 1971 and many were producing work before the Cultural District announcement of the Louvre and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi in 2007.

It is not surprising that the misconception surrounding the birth of art irritates many Gulf art enthusiasts, including the founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi. Al-Qassemi has become a forceful advocate and commentator of art from the region. He encourages artists, organises art events, discussions and studies of the region's rich artistic legacy, which he sees as inherited from *Bedouin* and Islamic culture.[3] It will be interesting to observe the extent to which this heritage is recognisable in the work of many of the artists in this chapter. Al-Qassemi sees the arrival of Egyptian and Palestinian teachers in the 1950s, as a contributing factor to the development of art in the region. This will be mentioned again, particularly in connection to the artists and Abdulqader Al Rais and Najat Maki. In fact, Maki's relates her decision to study art to being inspired by an Egyptian art teacher at school.[4]

In Chapter 1 the anthropologist Liah Greenfeld's mapping of Israel's art history is cited as a methodological source. She conducted a thorough survey of all artists, critics and galleries active throughout the country's history. It would be difficult and unrealistic to reproduce this complete methodology in the case of the UAE, because documentary evidence is scant. Instead, this research traces the development of art by Emiratis by bringing together oral histories, personal experience, evidence gleaned from interviews and by observing examples of art works produced

[1] Ali Al Abdan, "The Arts in the UAE: A Brief History (1971-2000)," In *Portrait of a Nation*. ADMAF and Abu Dhabi Festival, 3-30 April 2016, 34-39, http://www.admaf.org/en/media/get/20160620_8-PORTRAIT-OF-A-NATION.pdf
[2] Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, "Correcting Misconceptions of the Gulf's Modern Art Movement,"*Al Monitor*, 22 November 2013.
[3] Al-Qassemi, "Correcting Misconceptions of the Gulf's Modern Art Movement."
[4] Al-Qassemi, "Correcting Misconceptions of the Gulf's Modern Art Movement."

along its timeline as visual evidence and to produce a living history of sorts. During the span of time observed for this research, two progressive phases of art can be detected. The first, to be considered in this chapter, is the art made by Emiratis at the time of and in the years that followed the creation of the UAE. This chapter examines the work of artists who were practising or who began their careers in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Was their art practice a response to visual traditions and elements of Islamic art traditions that had gone before? If artists had benefitted from art training abroad, did this affect the influence of their work on others? What part, if any, does national identity or identity as part of a wider Gulf or Arab nation play in art by Emiratis working in this period?

The following Chapter 5 observes the work of a contemporary generation of artists that Anna Seaman described as millennial artists in the previous chapter. These artists grew up in a very different, technologically advanced and urbanised UAE, during the 1990s and 2000s. In both chapters, attention will be directed to the way in which the chosen artists have responded through their work to the growing development in the UAE, the different forces at play in their work and references to local traditions, global ideas and modernity. These chapters will also consider how art by Emiratis can be defined, located and situated in time. And finally, to what extent could their work be observed through the lenses of art discourses explored previously and does it make them any more relatable for future global art study?

As was mentioned in Chapter 1, since the nation's universities did not offer fine art until the 2000s, from the 1970s onwards, individual emirates offered travel grants for promising students to study abroad. Of the six artists whose work is observed in this chapter, Mohammed Mandi, Abdel Qader Al Rais, Najat Maki, Hassan Sharif, Mohammed Kazem and Ebtisam Abdulaziz, half of them benefitted from grants to study abroad early in their careers. The artist and calligrapher Mohammed Mandi, studied calligraphy in both Cairo and Istanbul, Najat Maki was one of the first female artists to obtain a grant to study in Cairo and Hassan Sharif, travelled to London, returning in the early 1980s with a degree in art from what is now Central St Martins. A fourth artist, Abdulqader Al Rais' spent his early years in Kuwait where he learnt art techniques, as part of his primary and secondary education. The fact that the two remaining, younger artists, Mohammed Kazem and Ebtisam Abdulaziz, gained a foundation in art without leaving the UAE illustrates not only the tremendous debt that is owed to the generosity and instruction of the artist Hassan Sharif, but also to a great extent, to the rapid rate of development in the UAE during the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, which made this possible. In her article on the rise of the visual arts in the UAE, Elizabeth Derderian uses the term *Jeel al-ruwad* (the pioneer generation) to describe artists working during this time, before extensive use of the internet, social media and famous

curators became common.[5]

Though these artists represent only a selection of artwork being produced at the time, the gender balance that it presents illustrates the preponderance of male artists during this period. Though there was no art audience as such, no art training, few galleries and although art was not seen as an appropriate career, it is interesting to observe in the case of each of the four male artists included in this chapter, what inspired each to embark upon their artistic careers. In this context, it will be interesting to consider what art by Emiratis has come to represent. We can also observe the gender shift that occurs in Chapter 5, as female artists begin to make up the majority of art students at UAE universities and are responsible for a large proportion of art produced today.

Chapter 2 and 3 of this thesis outline the importance of visual culture, traditional heritage and imagery in the UAE, as national identifiers and as means of communication or soft power. The art produced by the six *Jeel al-ruwad* pioneer artists in this chapter who were active during the first four decades of the UAE can be characterised by their broad diversity and experimentation. Taking a loose chronological style, this chapter will observe examples of art by each artist, each of whom have represented the UAE in international exhibitions. Elements of these artists' practices and their attitude to their work is observed, in order where possible to understand their role within the development of art in the UAE. One of the principle reasons that I undertook this study was to place art by Emiratis within a wider art narrative and in order to ensure that the work of artists from the UAE should be established as an area of academic study. To this end, a consideration of existing art discourses included in Chapter 3 will be touched upon in the context of some of these artists' work. References to Emirati visual traditions and Islamic art, as well as suggestions of modern, international and global forms will be observed, as well as the emerging dialogue between traditional and modern.

* * * * * * *

The work of Mohammed Mandi (Figure 13) is an ideal place to begin this exploration of art by Emiratis. His art career began in the Islamic art tradition of calligraphy and evolved into large canvases of colourful abstract paintings that would be at home in contemporary art galleries and museums around the world.

Mandi is the UAE's most renowned calligrapher. Whereas Western art and visual culture

[5] Elizabeth Derderian, "Critique as Infrastructure – Organic Growth and the Rise of Visual Arts in the UAE," *Ibraaz Magazine* 010_00, 6 May 2016, 51.

often employs words and inscriptions to supplement or describe an image, in the case of Islamic calligraphy or calligraphy written in Arabic, "writing became the main – and sometimes the only – element of decoration."[6] Sheila Blair refers to the "pivotal role of the word in the religion of Islam."[7] This and the years of training needed to become a calligrapher, have elevated the role of the calligrapher historically, to being one of discipline and piety. As a highly-trained professional, calligraphers traditionally supported the achievements of powerful rulers, were instrumental in created a powerful national brand or identity for a country through the use of chosen scripts, floral details or motifs.

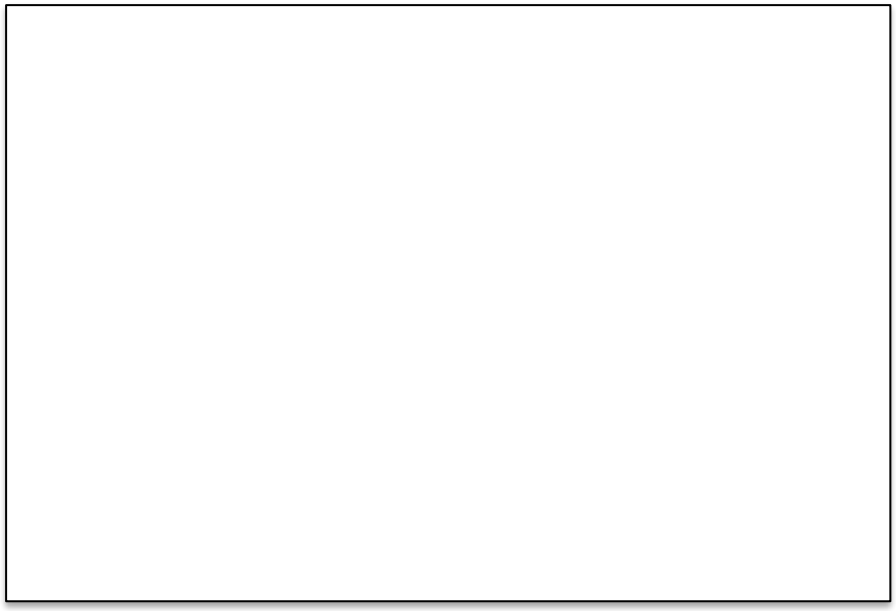

Figure 13: The artist and calligrapher, Mohammed Mandi.
Image removed due to copyright concerns.

Born in 1940, Mandi recalls seeing calligraphy for the first time as an adolescent. "It was like looking at a picture, not letters or words. I was fascinated by its beauty."[8] After finishing school, he became an apprentice to a master calligrapher, as was the custom for those wishing to enter into the discipline of calligraphy. Mandi graduated from the Arabic Calligraphy Improvement School in Cairo in 1977, where he learnt calligraphy under Master Calligrapher, Syed Ibrahim.[9] After completing his training in Cairo, he gained a grant to study under Hassan Chalabi in Istanbul.[10] Mandi focussed on learning Chalabi's distinct calligraphic techniques and his work absorbed

[6] Sheila Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 4-5.
[7] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 4-5.
[8] Anna Seaman, "The artist in everyone's wallets," *The National*, 20 March 2010.
[9] *Portrait of a Nation*. ADMAF and Abu Dhabi Festival, 3-30 April 2016, 187-188. http://www.admaf.org/en/media/get/20160620_8-PORTRAIT-OF-A-NATION.pdf
[10] *Portrait of a Nation*. ADMAF and Abu Dhabi Festival, 3-30 April 2016, 34-39, http://www.admaf.org/en/media/get/20160620_8-PORTRAIT-OF-A-NATION.pdf

elements of Ottoman ornamental designs.[11] When he returned to the UAE in the 1980s, he was offered the role of official calligrapher. Mandi created the government ministry logos, designed the UAE's bank notes for the Central Bank (Figures 14 and 15) and he soon found himself designing not only banknotes for the Bahraini and Syrian governments, but also the calligraphic design for the UAE, Bahraini, Omani, Qatari and Kuwaiti passports. Mandi was given studio space in the National Theatre in Abu Dhabi, the UAE's capital, where he still works and holds regular workshops and exhibitions of his calligraphic and artistic work.

Figures 14 and 15: Ten and Five Dirham UAE banknotes, designed by Mohammed Mandi.
Photograph by the author, 2018.

Developments in graphic design software and digital printing during the 1990s and 2000s posed a threat to the calligraphic tradition and it undoubtedly contributed to Mandi's turn to abstract painting, in the early 2000s. Mandi pivoted his creativity to large-scale and more colourful works on canvas that combine words, colourful lines and letters. Not only does this mean that Mandi has freer reign with the use of colours and shapes, but also that he is not tied to the strict rules of calligraphy. Though unquestionably founded in Islamic art tradition, his rhythmic repetitions, linear shapes and colourful designs have come to characterise Mandi's contemporary artwork and an example is *Al Burda* (Figure 16).

Al Burda بُرْدة refers to a mantle or cloak, in Arabic, which is often associated with a

[11] Anna Seaman, "The artist in everyone's wallets," *The National,* 20 March 2010.

poem honouring the Prophet Mohammed.[12] This solemn religious reference with the repeated name of the prophet Mohammed depicted in Figure 16, seems out of place amidst the busy, abstract layering of patterns in Mandi's large and busy canvas. *Al Burda* was painted in 2014 and exhibited in the UAE and Germany, as part of ADMAF's *Portrait of a Nation* exhibition. The artist points out that the layered Arabic letters within the painting and colourful repeated patterns relate to the "traditional cycle of songs or poems."[13] The painting has been described as a reflection of the passage of time, which is extremely relevant to the theme of development and references to the swift passage of time that have already been alluded to, in this research. The artist's use of dark, henna-coloured notes in the centre of the image, the use of gold to highlight the repeated name of the Prophet Mohammed in the centre and the fine, almost invisible shapes hidden in the background could recall illuminated musical or calligraphic manuscripts. They show the artist's mastery of brushwork and even lines.

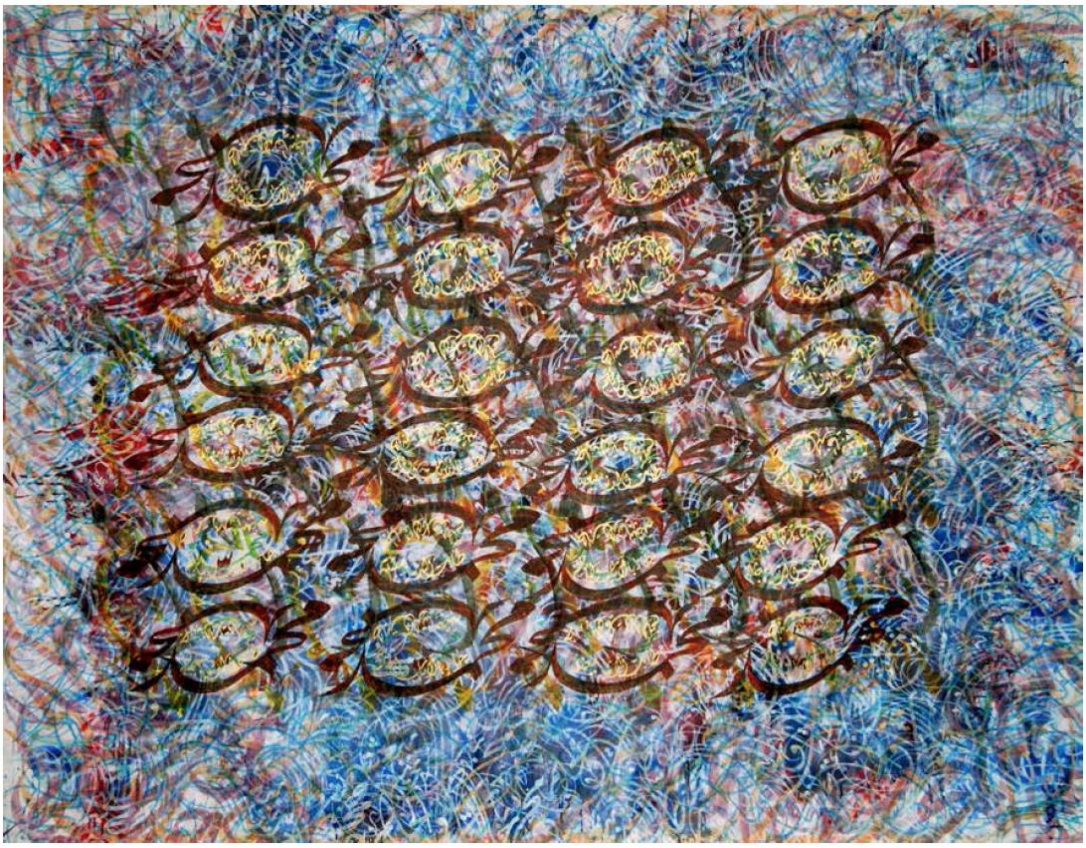

Figure 16: Mohammed Mandi, *Al Burda*, 2014
Ink, acrylic and gold on canvas
Courtesy of Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation (ADMAF)

[12] "Al burda," BBC Religions, posted 30 May 2019, http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/art/alburda.shtml.
[13] *Portrait of a Nation*. ADMAF and Abu Dhabi Festival, 3-30 April 2016, 186-7, http://www.admaf.org/en/media/get/20160620_8-PORTRAIT-OF-A-NATION.pdf

Historically, calligraphers have not always been recognised as fine artists, perhaps because their work is so disciplined and also that very few of them have been known to sign their work. This raises important debates as to whether calligraphy can be recognised as an art or as a craft and artists, art collectors and Islamic or Arab art historians questioned for the purpose of this research, have all have differing opinions.[14] The previous Chairman of the Emirates Fine Arts Society (EFAS) the artist Nasser Abdullah, points out that EFAS has always had artist members who are calligraphers and considered themselves artists.

> "...Calligraphy was always part of the Fine Art tradition in [our] country and the region because it represents one of the most important icons of the identity of the Arab World which is language."[15]

"People emotionally relate to [calligraphy]," asserts Mandi, "in a way that they will never do with art that comes from a computer"[16] and this point will be emphasised again by the artist Amal Al Gurg in the following chapter. Figure 16 has an abstract form, but it also belies the restraint, attention to scale and repetition gained from rigorous calligraphic training. Though advances in calligraphic software and standardized fonts in recent years have sought to replace the writing of traditional angular *Kufic* calligraphy and rounded *naskhi* scripts, the art of a calligrapher can indeed inspire feelings of beauty and wonder that Mandi seeks to transmit through his paintings. The rethinking of Islamic art in modern times and its influence on cultural identity and contemporary narratives is a dialogue that has been taking place within the Gulf for a number of years. The biannual *Al Burda* Festival, which bears the same name as Mandi's work (Figure 16), was first organised by the UAE's Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development in 2018. Attended by the Mohammed Mandi and various other calligraphers, artists, curators and writers, as well as royal patrons, the event sought to explore how people today and particularly young people living in countries around the Gulf, could engage more readily and find relevance in Islamic art.[17] This illustrates the strong desire in the UAE to engage with art and culture on its own terms, supporting local artists and artists from the Gulf and proudly highlight their common, Arabic and Islamic inheritance. Later in this chapter are examples of work by Al Rais and Maki that include Arabic letters in order to refer, perhaps in a similar way, to their common Arabic heritage.

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[14] Janet Rady, interview with the author, 14 February 2019.
[15] Nasser Abdulla, email conversation with the author, 20 November 2019.
[16] *Portrait of a Nation*. ADMAF and Abu Dhabi Festival, 3-30 April 2016, 187, http://www.admaf.org/en/media/get/20160620_8-PORTRAIT-OF-A-NATION.pdf
[17] "Al Burda Festival," United Arab Emirates Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development., accessed 9 June 2020, https://www.burda.ae/en/about-festival/.

The second artist whose work is included here has been fêted as, "the Artist Laureate of the UAE."[18] Abdulqader Al Rais was born in Dubai, however his father died when he was very young and at the age of six he was sent to live with his sister, in Kuwait.[19] At the time, during the late 1950s, Kuwait was the largest oil exporter in the Gulf and had a liberal form of Islamic culture. The Kuwaiti government prioritised education and the school curriculum, often taught by Egyptian teachers, was renown throughout the Arab world.[20] Though Al Rais says he is a self-taught, his well-rounded primary and secondary education in Kuwait included art instruction and he attended youth groups such as the *Marsam Al Hur* (Free Art Studio) where he received additional art training, free studio space, art materials and exhibition opportunities.

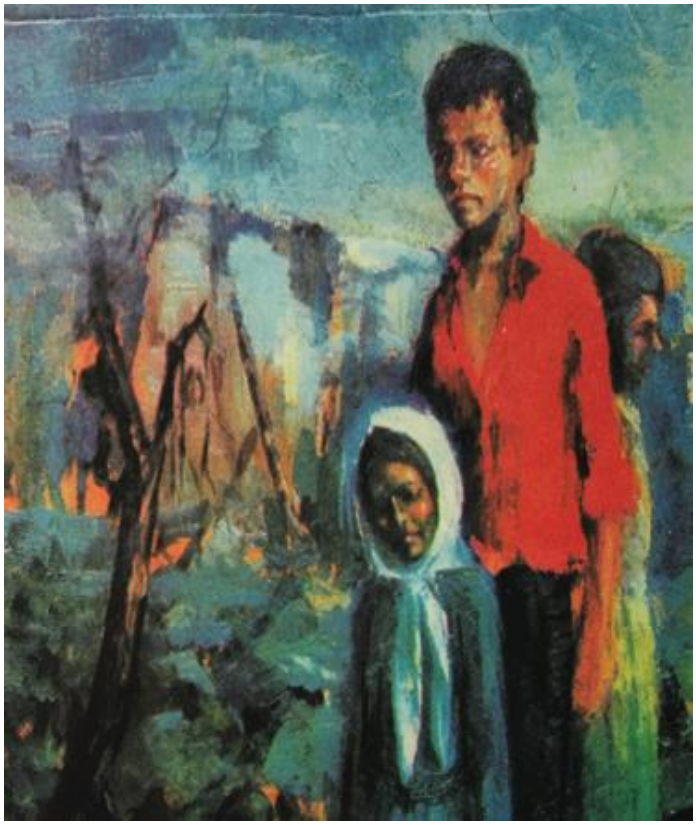

Figure 17: *Al Intithar (The Wait)*, 1968
Oil on canvas.
Copyright owned by Abdulqader Al Rais.

[18] Lisa Ball-Lechgar, "The Arts of the Emirates: A Presentation on the UAE Visual Arts Sector," *Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation and The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 29 October 2015, https://agsiw.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Lisa-Ball-Lechgar-Remarks.pdf.
[19] The history of education in the emirates prior to 1971 attests not only to the sheer poverty of the region, but also to the solidarity that existed and continues to exist amongst Arab countries. Financial aid, teachers and teaching materials that it received from Arab countries such as Egypt and Kuwait.
[20] Alia Alhebsi, Lincoln D. Pettaway and Lee Waller, "A History of Education in the United Arab Emirates and Trucial Sheikhdoms," *The Global eLearner*, 4. no. 1 (2015): 1-5. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303642770_A_History_of_Education_in_the_United_Arab_Emirates_and_Trucial_Sheikdoms

Unlike artists who had grown up in the UAE, Al Rais had access to artists' monographs and materials such as charcoals and oil paints, which he was taught to use. In 1965, when he was 14 years old, Al Rais' work featured in an exhibition with other young artists and three years later he took part in the Kuwait Spring Exhibition, which travelled to Geneva, Athens, London and Madrid.[21] Al-Qassemi writes about Kuwait as a centre of art production and appreciation in the Gulf during the late 1950s.[22] Kuwaiti galleries and art spaces exhibited work by important international and pan-Arab artists and did not appear to avoid political or controversial themes. *Al Intithar (The Wait)* (Figure 17) and *The Fear* (Figure 18) are some of Al Rais' earliest surviving oil on canvas paintings. Al Rais was an accomplished painter, inspired by the work of Renaissance Masters, Impressionist and Post Impressionist paintings that he would have seen in art books. Mikdadi also recognises the influence of Palestinian figurative artist, Ismail Shamout in Al Rais compositions, colours and handling of paint. This is certainly possible because Shamout attended the College of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1950 and Al Rais would have been familiar with his work through the latter's Egyptian art teachers in Kuwait.[23]

Figure 18: Abdulqader Al Rais, "The Fear," 1968.
Oil on canvas
Copyright owned by Abdulqader Al Rais.

[21] "Abdulqader Al Rais - text interview," Mideast Art, accessed 20 May 2020, https://www.mideastart.com/blog/abdul-qader-al-rais-text-interview.
[22] Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, "Correcting Misconceptions of the Gulf's Modern Art Movement,"*Al Monitor*, 22 November 2013.
[23] Salwa Mikdadi, interview with the author, 19 May 2020.

Al Mullah writes that, as someone living far from home, Al Rais was affected by the events surrounding the Israel-Palestine war of 1967 and the refugee crisis that followed.[24] *Al Intithar* is one of a number of paintings that he made at the time and the boy's bright red shirt, the black outlines and shadows, the girl's white scarf and the greenery behind them recall the colours of the Palestinian flag.[25] *Al Intithar* was the first painting that Al Rais sold, to a European collector, in 1969.[26]

The Fear (Figure 18) shows the young Al Rais' painting using bright colours and visible, energetic brush strokes that are is reminiscent of the work of Post-Impressionist artists such as Paul Cezanne and Paul Gauguin. The a local scene in Figure 18 shows sandy-coloured, mud-brick architecture and a young, male figure dressed in the manner of the Gulf and wearing a loose robe with simple leather sandals. The boy is waiting or hiding and he turns his head, to the passing man, who is in more formal, national dress. The painting's composition is not complicated and, like Figure 17, it is set along the centre of the canvas, and yet the combination of Al Rais' painterly style, which is so reminiscent of the work of late 19th century and early 20th century European artist with the Gulf street scene may never have been seen before. The Fear won first prize in the Tashkeeliya First Youth Exhibition in Dubai in 1975.[27]. Both Figures 17 and 18 date from 1968 and Al Rais is likely to have shown them in the Kuwait Spring Exhibition. Al Rais would continue to paint figurative scenes and landscapes in the same painterly style, but gradually began to incorporate brighter colours and also Arabic letters, as in Figure 21, which further emphasise the artist's origins and refer, albeit vaguely, to Islamic calligraphy.

As has already been noted, there were very few private galleries in the UAE and none represented local Emiratis in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Newspaper coverage of art exhibitions was basic and often relied on press releases provided by the organisers. The movements of each emirate's royal family, however, often attracted attention and interest therefore patronage played an important part in the development of contemporary art in the UAE. Artists' work was encouraged or at least recognised by the presence of members of the local royal family at their exhibitions. For example, HH Sheikh Hasher Bin Maktoum Al Maktoum, then Director of the

[24] Alya Al Mullah, ed., *Lasting Impressions: Abdulqader Al Rais,* (Sharjah: Sharjah Art Museum, 2012.)
[25] Ebtisam Abdulaziz, Hoor Al Qassimi et al., *1980-Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates,* (Venice: National Pavilion United Arab Emirates, 23 Feb 2016).
[26] *Lasting Impressions: Abdulqader Al Rais.*
[27] Two years previously, the same library had been the setting for one of the country's first group exhibitions with work by: Abdul Rahman Zainal, Fatma Lootah, Durayyah Abbas, Sayed Al Mousawi, Younes Al Khaja, Zaal Sultan Lutah, Abdullah Ibrahim Atiq, Ruya Khaled, Abdel Fattah Kazem, Boura Abdel Aziz, Shamsa Jumaa and Kazem Mohammed Rasoul.
Portrait of a Nation, (Abu Dhabi: ADMAF and Abu Dhabi Festival, 2016), http://www.admaf.org/en/media/get/20160620_8-PORTRAIT-OF-A-NATION.pdf

Dubai Department of Art, opened Al Rais' first solo exhibition at Dubai Public Library, in 1974. This was one of the country's first art exhibition venues and the exhibition may also have included Figure 18.[28] Though it became common practice for members of an emirate's ruling family to inaugurate exhibitions and public events, Al Maktoum's presence also suggests that the located subjects and sense of national identity in Al Rais' paintings tapped into the vision or national image that the government wanted to support. Al Rais' work continues to be appreciated by influential people and collectors in the UAE and his retrospective exhibition at the Institut du Monde Arab in Paris, was a symbolic and diplomatic gesture by the French government, whose hosting of Al Rais' vivid Emirati landscapes and abstract calligraphic paintings, such as Figure 21 was meant to represents the two nations' close relationship.[29]

Figure 19: Abdulqader Al Rais, *Decay*, c.1980
Oil on canvas
Copyright owned by Abdulqader Al Rais.

(Right) Figure 20: Abdulqader Al Rais, *Malqaf (Wind Tower),* c.1980
Oil on canvas
Copyright owned by Abdulqader Al Rais.

[28] Ali Al Abdan, "The Arts in the UAE: A Brief History (1971-2000)," in *Portrait of a Nation,* (Abu Dhabi: ADMAF and Abu Dhabi Festival, 2016), 187, http://www.admaf.org/en/media/get/20160620_8-PORTRAIT-OF-A-NATION.pdf

[29] "Abdulqader Al Rais – Retrospective Exhibition," Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, accessed 13 December 2018, https://www.imarabe.org/en/exhibitions/abdulqader-al-rais.

Despite Al Rais' success, in the 1970s and even today, being an artist is not recognised as a realistic or sustainable vocation in the UAE. Many artists including Mohammed Kazem, later in this chapter and Nasr Nasrallah in Chapter 5, had to look for jobs to supplement their income. [30] And so Al Rais became an inspector for the Ministry of Labour and he began a Bachelors degree in Sharia Law in 1974, at the University of Al Ain. He continued to paint when time would allow.[31]

It was perhaps because Al Rais, as a boy, had benefitted so greatly from the opportunities of *Marsam al Hur* in Kuwait, that he recognises how important it is for artists to feel supported in their work, to have space to exchange ideas and exhibit their work. Al Rais co-founded the Emirates Fine Arts Society (EFAS) in a building given by the ruler of Sharjah, Sheikh Dr Sultan Al Qassimi, near the port in Sharjah, with fellow artist Hassan Sharif, Sharif's brother, Hussein. The recognition of art and artistic practices brought about by the creation of EFAS was a very important first step for artists working in the UAE at the time.

A major theme in the work of artists at in the 1960s and all the way through until today is the relentless buildings and development of UAE's cities and the changes that globalisation has had on the local lifestyle and customs. Though Al Rais' work has never sought to challenge the government or status quo, his early training in Kuwait meant that he knew that art could be a vehicle for covert political or social criticism. Earlier the question arose of whether contemporary art in the UAE has the power to shape its creative agenda and Figures 19 and 20 see decorative examples of the region's traditional architecture standing in ruins. Al Rais is showing the cost of the development to traditional architecture and perhaps also to the home and family life, as it had been. The buildings in Figure 19 and 20 are made in the indigenous style using coral and shell stone, unbaked or baked (*sarooj*) mud brick supported by palm trunks and chandal wooden joists.[32] Al Rais would continue to depict architectural elements such as columns and window grills, as well as tiles or pattern motifs, using a brighter and more colourful style and layering that is reminiscent of Cubism. He later also includes elements of Arabic calligraphy, as has already

[30] Mohammed Kazem recalls, "No one was working professionally as an artist in the 1980s and 1990s," "Mohammed Kazem," in *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008,* ed. Maya Allison (UAE: Akkadia Press, 2017), 98.
Dubai: Modern and Contemporary Art, Auction, 18 October 2016, Christies Dubai.
[31] Some sources suggest that Al Rais gave up painting between 1974 and 1982, however Figure 19is dated from this period.
Aspirational Art: A Private Collection Dedicated to Emirati and Arab Artists (Dubai: Emirates Investment Bank, 2013), 4-5.
Anna Seaman, "Inside the Dubai Home Studio of Emirati Artist Abdulqader Al Rais," *The National,* 7 July 2015, 245.
[32] Alya Al Mullah, ed., *Lasting Impressions: Abdulqader Al Rais,* (Sharjah: Sharjah Art Museum, 2012.)

been mentioned and as shown in Figure 21, either as a homage to the country's national character or Arab heritage or simply as a way of recording or storing the past.

Al Rais' paintings resonate with Belting's idea of the artist as the keeper of a traditional conscious and collected memory and his ability to gather up so many identifying features and characteristics of Emirati and Gulf identity have well have contributed to his success and notoriety.[33] For example *Malqaf (Wind tower)* (Figure 20) depicts the traditional cooling system used in old buildings to trap cool air and channel it downwards, through the tower and into the interior of the building.[34] It is a nostalgic portrayal of traditional Gulf architecture, but it also allows non-Emirati viewers the chance to observe and learn about traditional styles of Emirati architecture that are now rarely seen in the country's busy cities. Al Rais was given a second solo exhibition in 1987, a third in 1988[35] and during the 1980s-2010s attracted many local art patrons.[36] It was around this time that the UAE's earliest professional art gallery, the *Majlis Gallery,* opened by Alison Collins in her home in 1978, moved to its present location in the old *Bastakiya* neighbourhood of Dubai in 1989.[37] It is interesting to note that the gallery did not display work by local artists because, according to Collins, there simply wasn't a market for it. Collins found that paintings and engravings of Arabian landscapes in the Orientalist style were popular with foreign and local collectors throughout the 1970s and 1980s.[38] Seen in this light, the composition of Figures 19 and 20 by Al Rais, are not dissimilar to this descriptive and romantic style, a style in which artists and art gallery visitors of the time were used to seeing local landscapes depicted.

Al Rais' paintings became progressively brighter and this development could reflect a change in the UAE's situation and the mood of the nation's creative industries, as described in Chapter 2 and 3. Emirati residents were exposed to a wider range of visual culture; more galleries

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[33] Hans Belting, "The Plurality of Art Worlds and the New Museum," in *Facing Forward: Art Theory from a Future Perspective,* eds. Hendrik Folkerts, Christoph Lindner and Margriet Schavemaker (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 93-4.

[34] After he completed his degree in 1982, it has been noted that Al Rais' work is smaller in scale and he produced mainly watercolours and drawing. This may be beause he would paint during his lunch breaks.

[35] *Aspirational Art: A Private Collection Dedicated to Emirati and Arab Artists*, (Dubai: Emirates Investment Bank, 2013), 4-5.

[36] Aisha Stoby, *"*Modern Art Pioneers: An Introduction to Artists Communities in the GCC," in *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008*, ed. Maya Allison (UAE: Akkadia Press, 2017), 13-30.

[37] The *Majlis Gallery* began as informal soirées in the home of Alison Collins, a British interior designer in 1978. In 1989 the family moved out and the house became a permanent gallery.
"About," The Majlis Gallery website, accessed 21 June 2019, www.themajlisgallery.com

[38] The *Majlis Gallery* began as informal soirées in the home of Alison Collins, a British interior designer in 1978. In 1989 the family moved out and the house became a permanent gallery.
The Majlis Gallery website.

and museums were being built, fine art courses introduced, auction houses such as Christies Dubai were appearing and artists had every reason to be optimistic.[39]

Figure 21: Abdulqader Al Rais, *Untitled,* 2008
Watercolour on paper
Copyright owned by Abdulqader Al Rais.

Figure 21 is from the artist's *Impressionism series* and it features the looped shapes of the Arabic cursive letter "wa," floating in the bottom of the painting and intertwined with its mirror image. The "wa" featured here, is the only letter in the Arabic alphabet that is also a word – it means "and."[40] Al Rais may have been remarking upon the on-going and unfinishing changes going on around him. As has already been mentioned, he also began to include Arabic letters as a symbolic nod to Arab identity. The inclusion of Arabic letters in paintings, regardless of calligraphic rules of proportion is called *hurufiya* and it is seen in work by other artists, including Najat Maki.

Al Rais may have been familiar with the way in which Renaissance Masters' works used symbols to sign their work. In calligraphy and printed Arabic script, diamond shapes are often used as stylised dots and Al Rais is particularly fond of using these as motifs in his painted work (Figure 21 and 22). Though he signed some of his earlier paintings, Al Rais adopted the diamond

[39] Michael B. Greenwald, "The New Race for Contemporary Art Dominance in the Middle East," *Belfer Center,* October 2018.
[40] *Abdulqader Al Rais, 50 Years of Art* - Manarat Saadiyat, 20 December 2018 – 23 March 2019. Abu Dhabi: Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority, 2018, 15.

shape, as an identifying stamp or signature. Again, he may also have wanted to reassert his Arabic roots by signing a symbol inspired from Islamic art.

Figure 22: Abdulqader Al Rais, *Bishra (Announcement) triptych*, 2007-8
Oil on canvas
Source Courtesy of Christies Dubai.
Copyright owned by Abulqader Al Rais.

Christies was the first international auction house opened in Dubai and the first Emirati artwork to be sold, as mentioned in the previous chapter, was the painting above (Figure 22) by Abdulqader Al Rais, in 2008.[41] *Bishra,* is largely abstract, bright and painterly in the Impressionist/Post-Impressionist style that Al Rais has come to be known for. In the foreground, the loops and curves are reminiscent of Arabic calligraphy, complete with Al Rais' colourful diamond punctuations. The Christies sale no doubt solidified Al Rais' international reputation and garnered the artist international and commercial success. Hopefully the profits were also able to offer some sort of stability to the artist's practice though Al Rais continues to create painterly landscapes and abstract works which include calligraphic designs to this day. His work is familiar to a regional, national and international art audience and it could be suggested that Al Rais' success lies in its ability to balance Western artistic practice with local subjects making his works familiar with a range of audiences.

Finally, Figure 23 is one of Al Rais' largest works and it was commissioned to hang in the entrance of the Etihad Museum in Dubai – as mentioned in Chapter 2. Though many of Al Rais' paintings bear Arabic letters, in Figure 23, the map of the UAE is highlighted using words. These list the individual emirates and the word "union" embedded in the central design of the painting, along with further script in the blue sections of the sea. The names of the seven founding sheikhs

[41] This was the "International Modern and Contemporary Art in the Middle East" sale in October 2008. Information and image comes courtesy of the artist and Suzy Sikorsky at Christies Dubai.

who signed the union treaty (*Al Etihad)* to which the museum is dedicated, are also listed and these are interspersed with Al Rais' characteristic diamond shapes.[42]

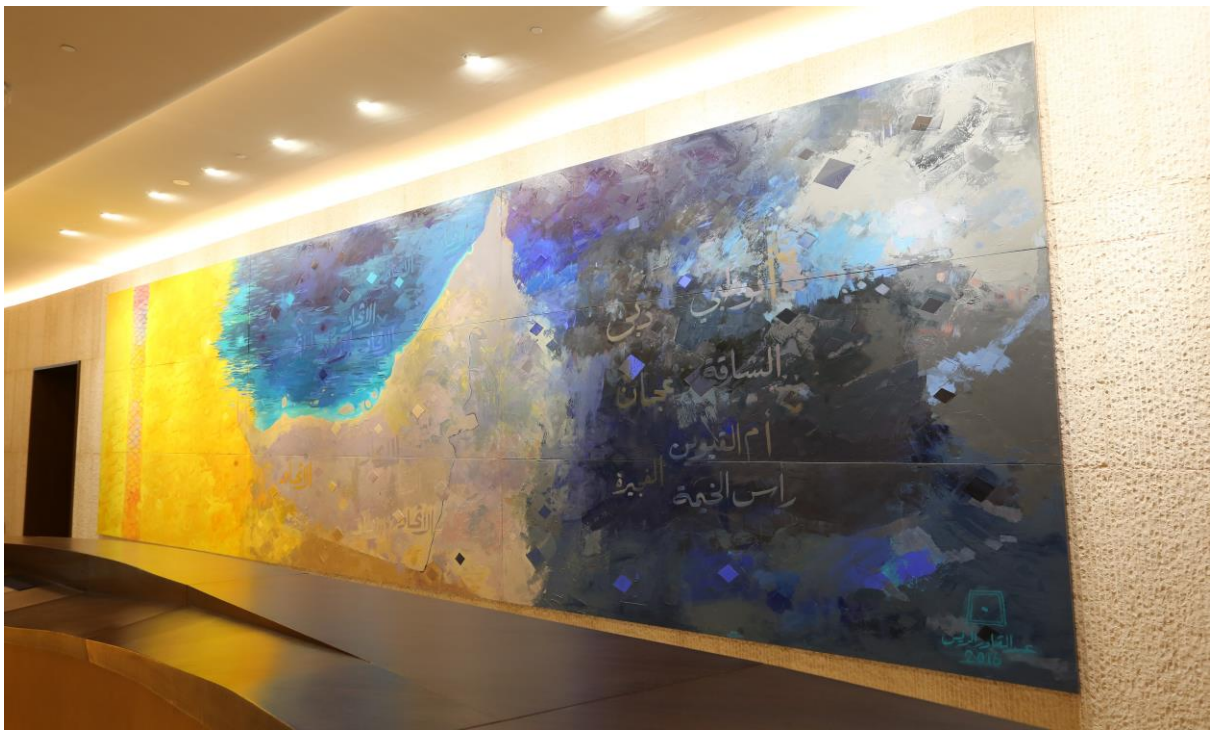


Figure 23: Mural by Abdulqader Al Rais
in the corridor of the Etihad Museum, Dubai.
Copyright owned by Abdulqader Al Rais and photograph by the author, 2018.

Here and in Al Rais' more recent work, there seems to be a progress or shift away from the balance that he had maintained between his Western painterly styles and Islamic art motifs, towards a more homogenous contemporary Emirati narrative that is filled with *hurufiya* calligraphy and diamond shapes, the vibrant colours of the sea and the desert and a bright vertical stripe of patterning, which could resemble a carpet or a digital pixilation, to the left of the mural.

Another artist who delighted in colour and also included Arabic letters in her work is Najat Maki, an artist born in 1956. Though she went to a school in Dubai, her school followed the more liberal Kuwaiti curriculum[43] and like Al Rais, an Egyptian teacher taught her art from a young

[42] "About the Etihad Museum," Etihad Museum website, accessed 21 June 2019, http://etihadmuseum.dubaiculture.ae/en/Pages/default.aspx

[43] A benevolent and wealthy neighbour, from 1952 until 1967, the Kuwaiti government shared its curriculum with UAE schools, provided books and educational materials and teachers were sent from Egypt. Emirati students travelled to Kuwait for their final school examinations
Alia Alhebsi, Lincoln D. Pettaway and Lee Waller, "A History of Education in the United Arab Emirates and Trucial Sheikhdoms," *The Global eLearner* 4. no. 1 (2015): 4.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303642770_A_History_of_Education_in_the_United_Arab_Emirates_and_Trucial_Sheikdoms

age. “She taught me to think like an artist,” recalls Maki.[44] As a young artist, she became “infatuated with lines, colours, games of light and shadow.”[45]

Figure 24: Najat Maki, *Composition*, 1979
Mixed Media
Copyright owned by Najat Maki.
Courtesy of Sharjah Art Museum, 2011.

Maki’s father owned a successful herbal medicine shop in Dubai and until this day, Maki continues to live in the busy Deira area of Dubai. Figure 24 is an early painting, which illustrates Maki’s affection for texture and experimentation and her love of vivid colours, which could have been inspired by watching the ladling of potions and herbs into bottles and bags in her father’s shop. [46] “At home, I watched my sisters make cushions and curtains from brightly coloured materials. I learned about light and shadow from watching my mother fold our clothes.[47] Maki’s art practice began and continues to be an organic response to her family and surroundings. She remembers painting and scratching on the walls of their home, which resulted in her family buying her art materials and paper. Maki’s parents encouraged her passion for creativity and this illustrates not only that they were comfortable financially, which may also have made it easier for Maki to launch her artistic career, but also that they were broad-minded.[48] This is borne out by Maki’s decision to follow her teachers’ advice and apply for a grant to study art abroad, a decision

[44] Najat Maki, meeting with the author, 2 August 2017.
[45] Darwish, Hind Bin ed., *Najat Meky. Lasting Impressions Session2* (Sharjah: Sharjah Art Museum and Sharjah Museums Department, 2001), 5.
[46] “It was full of boxes of all different herbs as well as indigo dye and alum-block. I used them all to paint on paper bags. That’s when I started to love colour,” Maki remembers.
“Najat Makki,” Prabook, accessed 15 August 2020, https://prabook.com/web/najat.makki/3773950
[47] “Najat Makki,” Prabook.
[48] “Najat Makki,” Prabook, accessed 15 August 2020, https://prabook.com/web/najat.makki/3773950

more commonly taken by male students. As a result, in 1977, at the age of 18, Maki was one of the first Emirati women to gain a foreign study scholarship and she left her home in Dubai for the College of Fine Arts in Cairo, where she studied sculpture.

Figure 25: Najat Maki, *The Circle Collection*, 1979
Mixed Media
Copyright owned by Najat Maki.
Courtesy of Sharjah Art Museum, 2011.

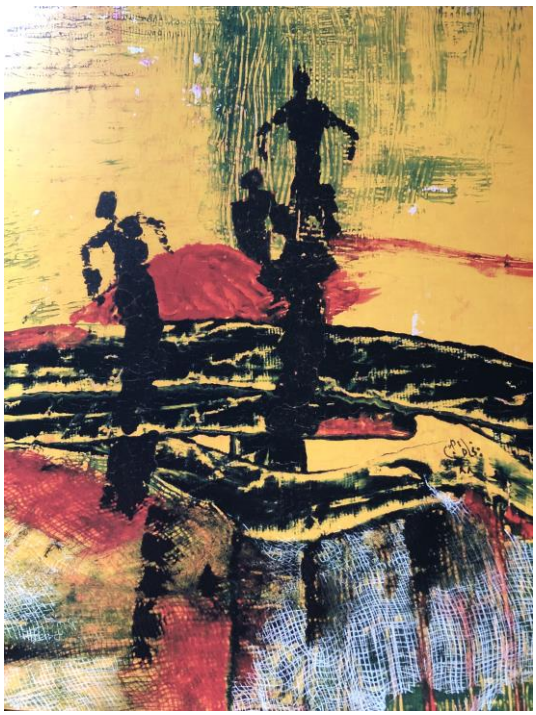


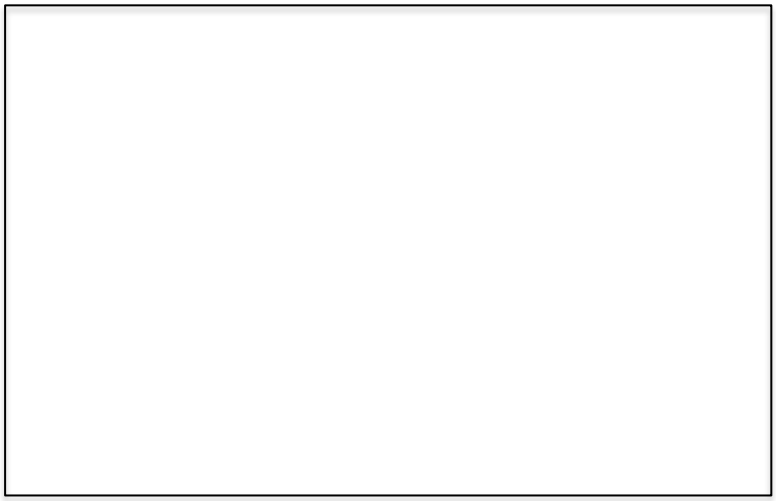
Figure 26: Najat Maki, *Composition*, 1988
Mixed Media
Copyright owned by Najat Maki.
Courtesy of Sharjah Art Museum, 2011.

Returning to the geographical description of the UAE at the start of Chapter 1, it is interesting to consider the urban and relatively cosmopolitan backgrounds of the three artists covered so far and the patriarchal nature of Emirati culture at the time. Mandi from Abu Dhabi was encouraged to travel to fulfil a career in calligraphy, which would have been deemed a highly respectable and pious occupation for a boy growing up in the emirate at the time. Al Rais' love of art grew from the access that he had been given to art materials and youth clubs devoted to art and creativity, which were encouraged by the Kuwaiti government. Though he was already a selling artist, when Al Rais returned to Dubai, it is telling that he pursed his artistic career, but found a public sector job and enrolled for a degree in law to support his family. Maki's family lived in the centre of Dubai. Her father was clearly a learned man and not only would Maki not have felt pressure to find a job, but she was also encouraged to pursue studies abroad and see the world.

While working towards her sculpture degree, Maki discovered Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism. This translated into her sculptures and also into her paintings, which she continued to produce, particularly on visits home to the UAE and immediately after her return. The paintings shown in Figures 25 and 26 strong, expressive lines and experimented with media and colour. A

female figure appears to be standing on a balcony or at a window with a brightly coloured backdrop in Figure 25, and figures can be recognised amidst the vibrant yellow lines of desert sand and blue waves in Figure 26. Maki felt that, "each colour has its own pulse. The world's composition imposes a specific vision and creates a dialogue with the viewer."[49] They illustrate a strong sense of shape, line and show Maki's delight in forms and organic colours, which also translate into her sculptures and two-dimensional work.[50]

When Maki returned from Egypt, her first exhibition took place at the Al Wasl Sports Club in Dubai in 1989 and for the next ten years, she continued to split her time between art and family life in Dubai. She welded metal and even when she returned to the UAE in the 1980s, continued to experiment with different materials including clay and fibre, looking for rhythms, colours and patterns in Emirati daily life. She took greater notice of the henna that was used to decorate women's hands and feet at wedding celebrations, for example and the patterns and shades of textiles. [51] Her love of sculpture translates into her paintings, where compositions focus on shape, form and sensation. She explores natural colours, pigments and relates to the region's landmass and people, particularly its women. Ryan describes how Maki uses her fingers rather than brushes to apply both henna and saffron, colours traditionally associated with Emirati culture to her work.[52]



[49] "Najat Makki," in *Portrait of a Nation,* (Abu Dhabi: ADMAF and Abu Dhabi Festival, 2016), 187, http://www.admaf.org/en/media/get/20160620_8-PORTRAIT-OF-A-NATION.pdf
[50] Darwish, Hind Bin ed., *Najat Meky. Lasting Impressions Session2* (Sharjah: Sharjah Art Museum and Sharjah Museums Department, 2001), 2.
[51] Najat Maki, meeting with the author, 2 August 2017.
[52] Louise Ryan, "Crossing Borders: Contemporary Art in the United Arab Emirates." 1-15. *Academia.edu.* (2015), 5. https://www.academia.edu/5031317/Crossing_Borders_Contemporary_art_in_the_United_Arab_Emirates_Introduction_Displaying_and_collecting_art_forms_from_the_Middle_East

Previous page
Figure 27: Najat Maki, *Takween, (Formation),* 1984.
Welded metal.
Image removed due to copyright concerns.

Maki is the only female artist of the fifteen included in the UAE in the UAE Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015 entitled, *1980-Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates*. *Takween (Formation)* (Figure 27) are two of the five sculptures that were chosen for this exhibition and they illustrate Maki's dramatic and sensory creative style. Her sensory relationship to the earth and its colours are a powerful inspiration for her art practice, though academia has also become an important creative channel for the artist. After a decade in the UAE, Maki returned to Cairo to research for a doctorate in Islamic coinage, which she completed in 2008.[53]

Having completed her PhD, Dr Maki accepted an invitation to represent the UAE at the Second International Sculpture Symposium in China. The location of the symposium and Maki's decision to take part show that Maki has inherited her parents' broad-mindedness and openness to new places and new challenges. While she focussed much of her creative energy on her country's landscape and its people, her openness to international opportunities such as this and her home in the buzzing, multi-national city centre of Dubai are reminiscent of Appiah's writings on the "rooted cosmopolitan."[54] It is fitting that Maki's contribution to the Chinese symposium should be two monumental figures in clay that represent the relationship men and women have with the world, with society and their role as representatives of UAE society (Figure 28 and 29). The sculptures stood on a square plinth on which she drew floral shapes and carved reliefs based on the fortified tower building of the Al Hosn Palace and Cultural Centre in Abu Dhabi.[55] Sadly photographs of the plinth could not be sourced.

[53] Darwish, Hind Bin ed., *Najat Meky. Lasting Impressions Session2* (Sharjah: Sharjah Art Museum and Sharjah Museums Department, 2001), 2-58.
[54] Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots," *Critical Inquiry* 23, No.3 (Spring 1997): 624, https://www.academia.edu/5958530/Cosmopolitan_Patriots
[55] *Najat Meky, Lasting Impressions Session2*, 2-58.

Figure 28: Najat Maki at the 2nd International Sculpture Symposium China, 2008
Copyright owned by Najat Maki.
Courtesy of Sharjah Art Museum, 2001.

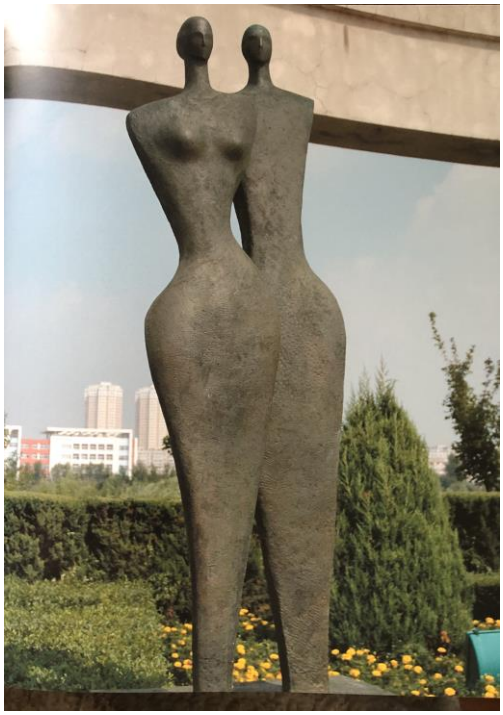


Figure 29: Najat Maki, *Figures*, 2008
2nd International Sculpture Symposium
Copyright owned by Najat Maki.
Courtesy of Sharjah Art Museum, 2001.

Maki's more recent paintings continue to explore the radiant colour and textures of the Emirati landscape. Figures 30-32 have been exhibited as part of ADMAF's *Portrait of a Nation* exhibition in the UAE and Germany and also in the Lasting Impressions exhibition held at the Sharjah Art Museum in 2010, to celebrate Najat Maki's work.[56] Horizontal lines seem to ground Maki's vibrant colours and expressive brushstrokes as she continues to explore colour combinations, mixed media and textures. The EFAS, based in Sharjah, has played an important role in Maki's art practice and this will be mentioned a little later in the chapter.

[56] *Najat Meky Lasting Impressions*, 2-58.

L to R, Figure 30, 31 and 32: Najat Maki, *Untitled, Untitled 1* and *Untitled 2*, 2012, 2014 & 2014
Mixed media on canvas
Copyright owned by Najat Maki.
Courtesy of Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation (ADMAF).

While Maki's work is very much a reflections of her relationship with the nature and the world around, Hassan Sharif thought a lot about the role of art and his responsibility as an artist. Having begun his career as a political cartoonist, Sharif felt that it was important to share his ideas and widen public perceptions through art. He was an extremely active and curious person, who enjoyed writing and communicating. Art had not been taught at Sharif's primary and secondary schools in the Dubai, but his talent for painting and drawing meant that he was often asked to create posters and other teaching aids for his fellow pupils. He drew caricatures inspired from life around him and when he left school, sold them to local magazines and newspapers.[57] Sharif's early years focussed almost entirely on drawing and he took part in the First and Second Youth Exhibitions at the Dubai National Theatre in 1974 and 1976. In 1976, Sharif was given a solo exhibition, "Caricatures," at the Dubai Library and it is important to point out that Sharif's artistic career began in caricatures. While Sharif was a great draughtsman, it is important to note the importance of wit in his work and the fact that he felt that at art audience and their reaction was so important. While he took part in these exhibitions, Sharif longed for a broader creative outlet. De Marchi remembers, "Hassan wanted to shake things up."[58]

Art was not seen as a suitable profession for the young Sharif and his parents did not want him to be an artist. According to Sharif, this was because his mother felt that painting women's

[57] "The conspicuous materiality and critical eye that characterises his work today was present in his caricatures long before his exposure to courses in art history,"
Kathy Zarur, "Hassan Sharif: Process and Materiality," *Contemporary Art and Visual Culture Broadsheet* 41, no 2, 2012. https://www.academia.edu/6169850/Hassan_Sharif_PROCESS_AND_MATERIALITY
[58] Cristiana di Marchi, conversation with the author, 6 December 2018.

features went against Islam. Nonetheless, he decided to apply for a government scholarship to study abroad and gained a grant first to complete an art foundation course at Warwickshire College in Leamington Spa in 1979,[59] then to apply for a BA in Art at the Byam Shaw School of Art in London, which is now part of Central Saint Martin's College in 1980. Several oil paintings and drawings survive from Sharif's time in London and the artist was soaking up various artistic styles, acquiring ideas, questioning attitudes and looking for new experiences that would be brought up in his later work. Tam Giles, his tutor recalls that, "he was brilliantly subversive."[60]

Returning to Appadurai's reflections, Sharif's time in London was a decisive moment of rupture for Sharif as his eyes were open to a realm of new possibilities and ideas. In London he was greatly inspired by the art going on around him and also writings on art and philosophy. The British Constructivist artist and sculptor, Kenneth Martin, wrote about the generation of form, particularly inspired Sharif. Martin focussed on social constructivism and "the act of assembling" individual elements.[61] The juxtaposition of elements to create a single moment or work of art inspired Sharif to create his *semi-systems*, which will be explored shortly. It seems that the "environmental" character of British Constructivist art appealed to Sharif. This meant that, when making a work of art, Sharif observed not only the subject of the work that he was embarking upon, but also the surroundings and the light. Looking forward, he also wanted to consider the movement of the spectator around the work.[62]

Meanwhile, in the UAE at the time, Al-Qassemi recounts that the education system had undergone considerable change, due to regional religious and political concerns. "Music and art education in UAE secondary schools ceased entirely by 1979 … until September 2014."[63] When he returned to the UAE, Sharif expected his work to incite discussion, cause people to question the meaning of art and society in a way that had not been done before.[64] But the lack of art education

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[59] "[My parents] didn't like [my being an artist] of course. My mother tried to dissuade me from painting women's eyes or hair, since it is prohibited by Islam. But I insisted on doing it."
Interview with Cristiana de Marchi, "Hassan Sharif," in *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008,* edited by Maya Allison, Bana Kattan and Alaa Edris, (UAE: Akkadia Press, 2017), 250-265.
[60] Kevin Jones, "Beyond Safe," *Art Asia Pacific*, 93 (May/June 2015), 102, http://www.artasiapacific.com/Magazine/93/BeyondSafe.
[61] Paulina Kolczynska, "Paths to the World. Paths Home," *Nafas Art Magazine* (September 2009)., https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2009/hassan-sharif/.
[62] Part of a quote by Lawrence Alloway, curator of the exhibition *British Constructivist Art.*
Sam Gathercole, "British Constructivist Art," *British Art Studies*, 3 (2016).
[63] Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, "Opinion: The Art of Education," *Which School Advisor*, 21 May 2015, https://whichschooladvisor.com/uae/school-news/opinion-the-art-of-education.
[64] "In London, I discovered philosophy and I was interested in the very question of what art is, in how to paint not from the technical point of view… but from the Conceptual one."

in schools meant that people could grow up without having held a paint brush and without having had the opportunity to explore colour and line. This thought may have influenced Sharif's decision to co-founded EFAS his brother and Al Rais in 1980. He felt that he had a responsibility to share what he had learnt in London, to show young artists that they were not limited by their country or culture. "They have invested in us in sending us abroad to study art and we are now trying return the results of those studies, and our experiences, to our country." [65] Sharif firmly believed that art has the power to enlighten and to provoke society.[66]

Sharif's return to the UAE and his decision to teach and mentor young people in art and creativity would have a massive effect on Emirati creative culture and on the lives of many young artists, particularly Kazem and Abdulaziz, whom he first taught at EFAS. EFAS played an important part in the art practices of both Sharif, Maki and Al Rais in that it represented a transitional phase or bridge between art training that they had experienced abroad; in Kuwait for Al Rais, Cairo for Maki and in London for Sharif. By attending discussions and taking part in workshops at EFAS in Maki's case or by teaching classes, in Sharif's, the society helped to re-establish them into their own country, allowing them to speak to other like-minded artists and take part in exhibitions. This could have allowed them to re-contextualise their ideas and practices, drawing them back from the colonial or Western teachings or in Sharif's case, it seems to have been a springboard for him to explore new ideas and new challenges.

In 1983, Sharif staged an exhibition entitled, "Positive and negative," at the Al Ahli Sports Club in Dubai, with other members of EFAS.[67] He created a conceptual piece with boxes and files and his brother Hussein drew a self-portrait from which he made 300-400 copies, which each became increasingly distorted. This was Hussein's first conceptual work, under Sharif's tutelage and it is an early example of Sharif's nurturing and inspiring a younger artist to explore the human form and focus on drawing and on repetition.

Cristiana de Marchi, "Hassan Sharif," in *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008*, edited by Maya Allison, Bana Kattan and Alaa Edris, (UAE: Akkadia Press, 2017), 252.

[65] Paulina Kolczynska, "Paths to the World. Paths Home," *Nafas Art Magazine* (September 2009), https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2009/hassan-sharif/

[66] Kevin Jones, "Beyond Safe." *Art Asia Pacific*. 93 (May/June 2015): 102, *http://www.artasiapacific.com/Magazine/93/BeyondSafe*

[67] The exhibition was later subtitled, "the Four" after the number of artists who took part: Hassan, his brother Hussein Sharif, Abdul Rahim Salem and an abstract artist, Abdullatif Al-Smoudi, from Syria. Talal Mualla in Emirates Fine Arts *Society, Hassan Sharif (1951-2016),* (Sharjah: Emirates Fine Arts Society), 2017, 54.

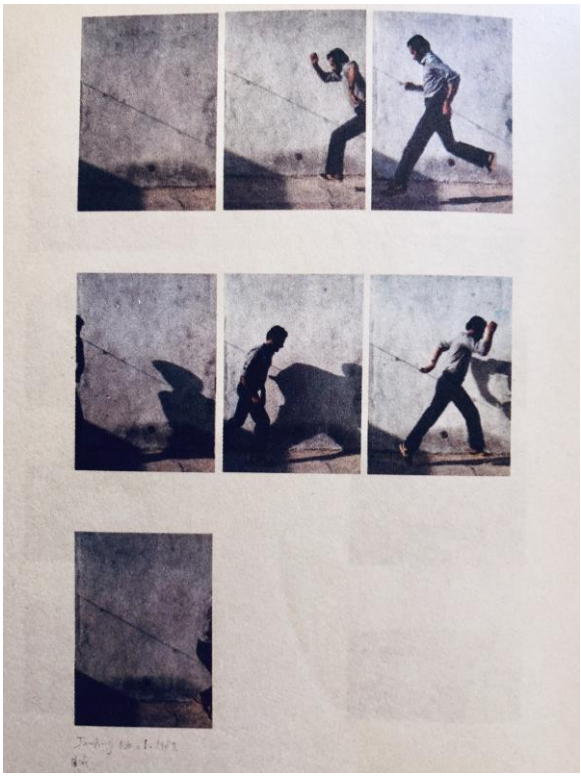

Figure 33: Hassan Sharif, *Jumping No.1*, 1983
Photographs mounted on cardboard
Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.
Courtesy of The Estate of Hassan Sharif.

Figure 33 is an example of some of the work that Sharif was producing at this time. It explores movement and environment and shows Sharif jumping in an outdoor space. Though the idea of conceptual art was foreign to many of the exhibition's visitors, Sharif was unwillingness to compromise his ideas and his determination for his fellow artists to understand and exhibit art that genuinely expressed who they were and how they understood the world. Sharif had a large collection of books about philosophy and art, which he shared amongst his writer, poet and artist friends. Not only would Sharif have wanted to stay up-to-date with the art practices, he worked fervently not to be left behind and wanted to "contradict the usual clichés of Arab art,"[68] by producing art that had international resonance. He may also have felt that he was giving his friends an advantage over other artist who had not studied in Europe or the United States. Constructivism and Post-Constructivist thought can be related to the New York art movement and Fluxus inspired experimental European groups of the 1970s and 1980s, through "music, mathematical drawings, performance, happenings, and film."[69] Sharif invited friends and some students

[68] Annette Lagler, "A Different Journey to the East, the Art of the Five from the United Arab Emirates," in *5/UAE, Zeitgenössische Kunst der "Fünf" aus den Vereinigten Arabischen Emiraten,* Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen, 2002, 13-14.
[69] Paulina Kolczynska, "Paths to the World, Paths Home," *Universes in Universe, Nafas Art Magazine,* https://www.ivde.net/usr/library/documents/hassan-sharif/nafas-art-magazine-paths-to-the-world-paths-home-2009.pdf

such as Kazem, meet, talk about art and try out different ideas. Following Constructivist ideas about form and documentation, Sharif began to record and calculation simple actions such as jumping (Figure 33), which he would perform, film, photograph and draw. Sharif would sometimes work alone though he began to gather a fledgling audience of young artists and poets for his performances and experimentations during the 1980s and early 1990s, in the desert, the street or in his back garden in Dubai. They were recorded using film or video. His calculations, which also consider unpredictability, time and repetition helped to create what Sharif termed *semi-systems.*[70] Sharif would, according to Kolczynska, accompany his semi-systems with complicated drawings and calculations, such as "One to Eight" (Figure 34).

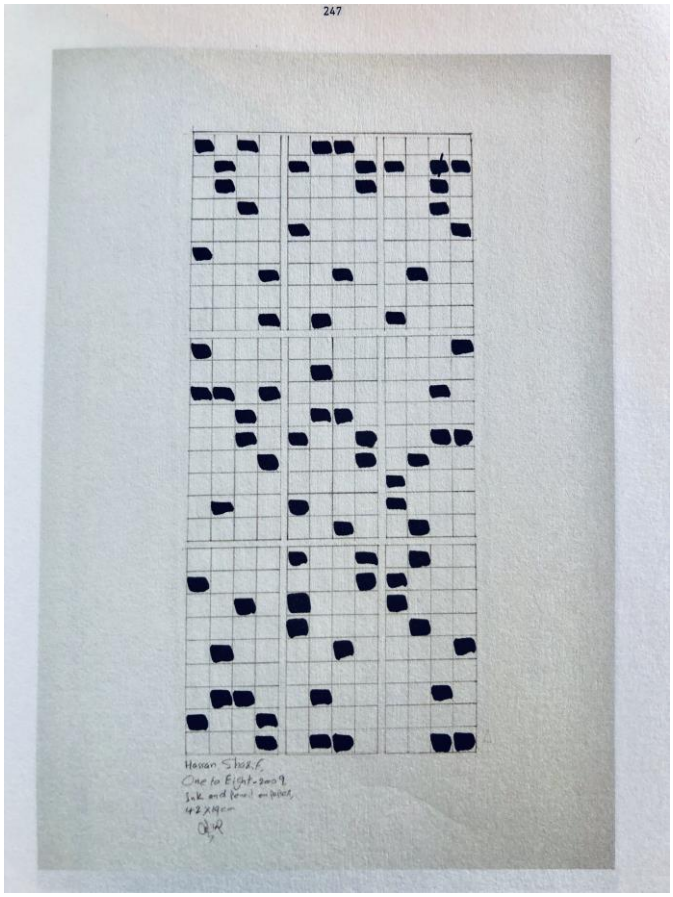

Figure 34: Hassan Sharif, *"One to Eight,"* 2009
Ink and Pencil on Paper
Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah.
Courtesy of The Estate of Hassan Sharif.

Fellow artists were drawn to Sharif's fresh ideas about art, his curiosity about their work and his generosity with both his time and with books and articles that he kept and that he shared with others if he felt they would be useful. [71] Two artists whose work particularly resonate with Sharif, re Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, who lived in the smaller port city of Khor Fakkan and Abdullah

[70] Hassan Sharif: People think there is a very complicated idea behind these semi-systems. Actually I use numbers (1-2-3 or 1-2-3-4) and then I manipulate them, I play with them … most of them are horizontal lines … I create a process in manipulation...
Cristiana de Marchi, "Hassan Sharif," in *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008,* edited by Maya Allison, Bana Kattan and Alaa Edris, (UAE: Akkadia Press, 2017), 261.
[71] Cristiana de Marchi, "Hassan Sharif," in *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008,* edited by Maya Allison, Bana Kattan and Alaa Edris, (UAE: Akkadia Press, 2017), 252.

Al Saadi from the coastal emirate of Fujairah to the North of the UAE. Both artists would visit Sharif and his friends when they were in Dubai and they were sometimes invited to show their work in the same exhibitions, such as "The Five" exhibition, which took place in Germany in 2002. Their work shows a deep connection with their home environments and landscapes and uses drawing, painting and collage as well as installations and sculpture. Allison compares the "UAE Art Community" that revolved around Sharif between 1988 and 2008 to avant-garde artistic groups in Paris at the turn of the century, to New York after the Second World War or Bombay after independence.[72] While these comparisons may seem useful for a Western audience to understand the feelings of novelty and the undercurrents of change that characterised the 1990s and 2000s, it is most important to emphasis here that amidst the rapid development going on in the Gulf region and the UAE at the time, artists such as Sharif's reaction was to focus on documentation; self-documentation through film and photographs and documentation of the landscape and its people, in whatever means they could. This is arguably when Sharif's presence and his influence as an artist, a mentor and as a friend or listener were so important. He provided an environment where ideas however subversive or disruptive could be discussed and evaluated.[73]

On the strength of the Al Ahli exhibition in 1983, which stood out as something new and experimental, Sharjah's Department of Culture and Information granted Sharif a space to make and teach art. The *Maraijah Art Centre* opened in 1984 and Sharif set about organising a "One Day Exhibition," with the artist Abdul Rahim Salem, a member of the EFAS who had trained at the College of Fine Art, in Cairo. The exhibition was made up of various everyday objects, such as stones hung from strings and folded paper, arranged in a haphazard manner inside and around the art centre, recalling Marcel Duchamp's *ready-mades.*[74] This notion, where the artist defines objects as art would have appealed to Sharif, for not only did it empower artists to explore conceptual art and a broad range of media, but also because the Emirati art audience was still developing and art writers are not inclined to be critical. The artist is at the centre of Sharif's notion of art and he or she continues to be so, in the work of his students, Kazem and Abdulaziz in this chapter and in most, if not all, of the artists in the following chapter.

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[72] Maya Allison, "Introduction," in *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008,* edited by Maya Allison, Bana Kattan and Alaa Edris, (UAE: Akkadia Press, 2017), 8.

[73] Aisha Stoby, *"*Modern Art Pioneers: An Introduction to Artists Communities in the GCC," in *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008,* edited by Maya Allison, Bana Kattan and Alaa Edris, (UAE: Akkadia Press, 2017), 13-30.

[74] Hassan Sharif remembers: There was a written plan on a paper placed in the studio's bathroom. I didn't want to tell the viewer how I chose the stones, I wanted him to ask me … But no one asked … [and] no one noticed the paper.
Ahmad Rashid Thani, *Hassan Sharif, A misunderstood artist in the UAE,* trans. Mohamed Aydabi, accessed 10 October 2016, www.hassansharif.com

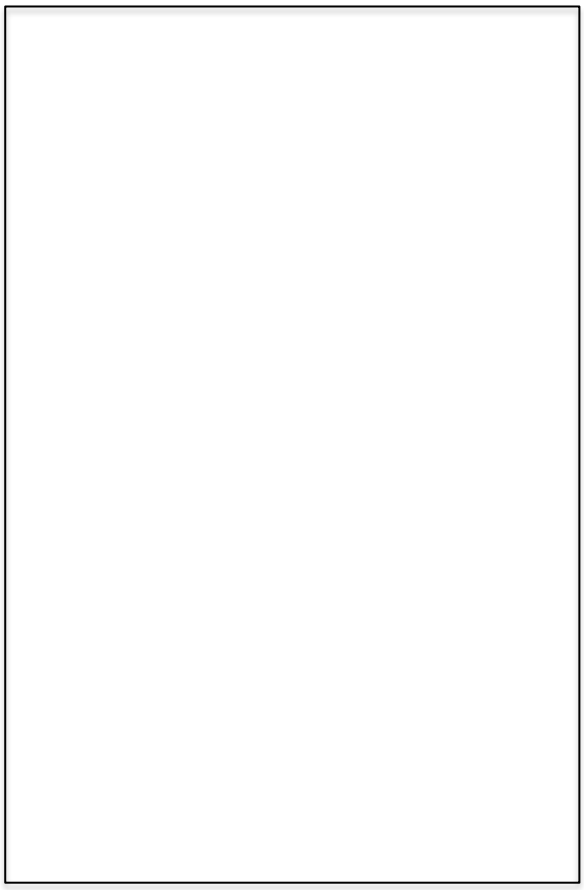

Figure 35: Hassan Sharif,
Photographs of the Second "One Day Exhibition" in Sharjah Central Market, 1985.
Image removed due to copyright concerns.

This was the first of two exhibitions, which Sharif held in the market, "… in alleyways and on public walls."[75] From this, Sharif began to gain the support of a greater number of artists and writers.[76] Sharif was often concerned about the lack of Emirati an art public, because his work was, "too modern for some people. We are not arrested or censured; we are respected, but our art is misunderstood and that is why we are not properly supported. [77] The market exhibition was a way of taking art to the public because Sharif was desperate to gage the reaction of people in the street as they were exposed to new ideas and to new modes of expression.[78] Figure 35 depicts the second "One Day Exhibition." It shows installations spread out in Sharjah's busy central market

[75] Hoor Al Qassimi, "The Past Seen From a Possible Future: Relationships between Materials Objects and Memories of a Society," in 1980-*Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates,* (Venice: National Pavilion United Arab Emirates, 23 Feb 2016), 30.

[76] For the One Day Exhibition, "Hassan [Sharif] and Abdul Rahim [Salem] prepared stones hanging down the wall and papers on the floor in an alley near the Maraijah studio."
"Khalid Albudoor," in *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008,* edited by Maya Allison, Bana Kattan and Alaa Edris, (UAE: Akkadia Press, 2017), 48.
Al Qassimi, "The Past Seen From a Possible Future: Relationships between Materials Objects and Memories of a Society," 30.
Artist, poets and actors who gathered and exchanged ideas at the Maraijah Centre included: Khaled Badr Obeid, the artist and filmmaker Nujoom Al Ghanem (Albudoor's wife) Ahmed Rashid Thani and Naji Al Hady.

[77] Paulina Kolczynska, "Paths to the World, Paths Home," *Universes in Universe, Nafas Art Magazine,* https://www.ivde.net/usr/library/documents/hassan-sharif/nafas-art-magazine-paths-to-the-world-paths-home-2009.pdf

[78] Hassan Sharif, "Revisiting Emirati Contemporary Art of the 1980s: A selection of experiments," in 1980-*Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates,* (Venice: National Pavilion United Arab Emirates, 23 Feb 2016), 155.

and expresses the bemusement of passers-by. Jones refers to Sharif's "two-pronged 'provoke and support' approach,"[79] because while he was extremely supportive of other artists, he was also very determined to provoke an Emirati art audience into existence. Sharif wanted to normalise contemporary art and to do this, he had to challenge society and encourage people to interact in some way with art and artists. His activities succeeded in causing reactions, but they were not always positive and they resulted in the closure of Sharjah's Al Maraijah Centre. This was a minor setback for the energetic and determined Sharif who founded an art studio under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and the Authority of Youth and Sport in Dubai in 1987, The Dubai Art Atelier.[80] Some of the young artists who had attended EFAS, then the Al Maraijah Centre in Sharjah, such as Mohammed Kazem and the maths student, Ebtisam Abdulaziz came to the Atelier.

Sharif was determined to forge ahead despite limited resources and he gradually gained more support. Though the Al Maraijah Centre in Sharjah had been made to closed by Sharjah's regional government, Sharif was invited to present work at the first Sharjah Biennial in 1993. Though many still questioned the point and the value of his work, this was an important step in solidifying Sharif's reputation and developing the idea of contemporary art in the UAE. One of Sharif's works sold to a member of the Qatari royal family[81] and this marked a new beginning or a new acceptance of Sharif and his work. As Allison points out, his house and studio in Satwa gained a mythical status:

> There was a house in the Satwa neighbourhood of Dubai where artists, writers and intellectuals took refuge in one another's company… It is said that if you had a key to the house you were welcome any time, day or night. The artist who lived there made art from the refuse of daily life around him. This was Hassan Sharif.[82]

Dubai in the 1990s was being transformed by mass-urbanisation and development. Al Rais' paintings attest to the destruction of traditional houses in favour of new tower-blocks and Sharif became increasingly concerned about the quantity of mass produced items being brought into the country, the loss of traditional *Bedouin* crafts.[83] Sharif thought about the collective memory of

[79] Kevin Jones, "Experiments and Objects 1979-2011: Hassan Sharif," *Art Asia Pacific* 85, (Sept/Oct 2013), 116.
[80] Jones, "Experiments and Objects 1979-2011: Hassan Sharif," 116.
[81] Kevin Jones, "Beyond Safe". *Asia Art Pacific*, 93, (May/June 2015), 121.
[82] Maya Allison, "Introduction," in *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008,* edited by Maya Allison, Bana Kattan and Alaa Edris, (UAE: Akkadia Press, 2017), 2.
[83] "Hassan Sharif," *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008,* 48.

"readymade" or manufactured objects and this led to his *Objects series*, which he began in 1982 and continued until his untimely death in 2016.[84] Figure 36 is from Sharif's *Objects series.*[85]

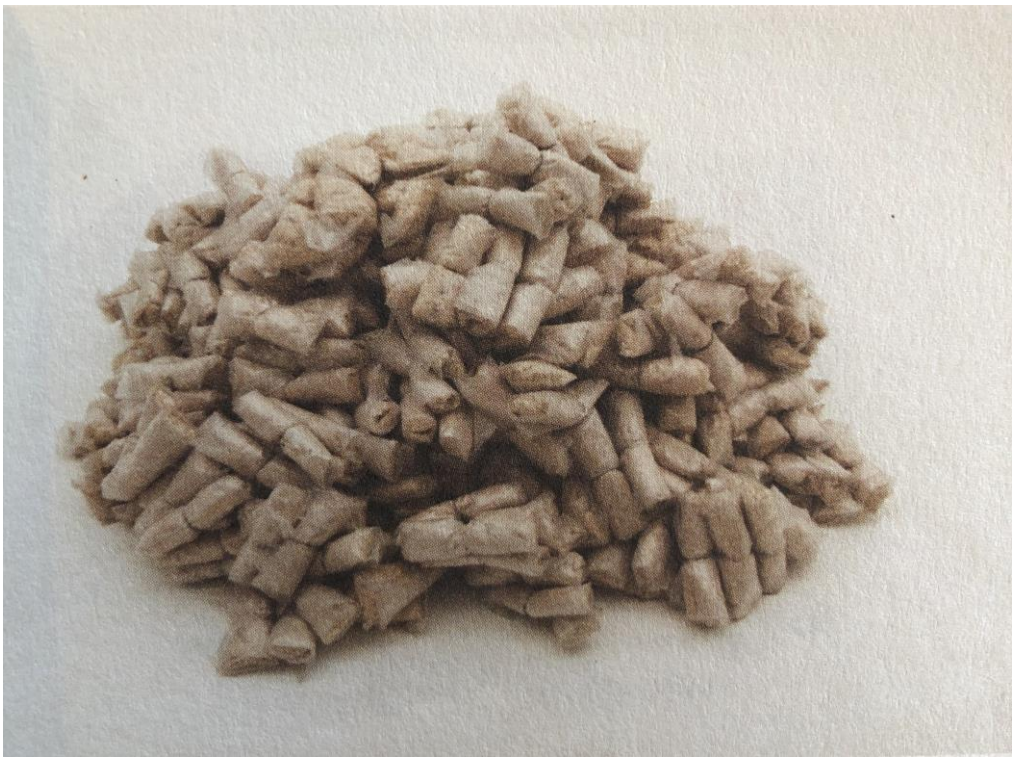

Figure 36: Hassan Sharif, *Cotton, Plastic Bags and Wire*, 1995
Cotton, plastic bags and wire.
Courtesy of The Estate of Hassan Sharif.

It shows a heap of plastic packages of cotton bound in wire that had been gathered, prepared and re-worked by Sharif to echo the repetitive reparation of nets for fishing along the Gulf coast, particularly before the growth of mass fishing trawlers or the readying of provisions for storage in preparation for winter or for transportation. The act of transforming objects for Sharif, using time-consuming movements and traditional techniques of knotting, weaving and folding had to be carried out, respectfully and rhythmically, almost like kneading bread. Sharif was determined to ensure that these traditions and customs were kept alive in the local conscious, so that they were not forgotten.

[84] Kevin Jones, "Beyond Safe". *Asia Art Pacific*, 93, (May/June 2015), 119.
Hassan Sharif: "Although my works are composed in series, my aim is to destroy the continuous monotony of the industrial producer. I do so by overloading my work with realism in order to evoke social, political and economic awareness."
Nasser Abdullah, Layla Juma and Patricia Millns eds., *The Silver Jubilee 1980-2005*, The UAE Fine Art Society 2006, trans. Mohammed Al Waddah Yousif Aydabi, (Sharjah: Emirates Fine Arts Society, 2006), 117.
[85] "Hassan Sharif," *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008,* 48.

> One important factor is time. Every work is created with a consistently repeated movement of the hand, like meditation, not in the Islamic tradition but rather more in a modern or post-modern sense. In the end, this process is materialized in each object so that it bears the time of its creation in itself. [86]

Figure 37: Hassan Sharif at 7th Sharjah Biennial
Image removed due to copyright concerns.

Figure 38: Hassan Sharif, *Combs,* 2016
Copper wire, hair combs.
Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah.
Courtesy of The Estate of Hassan Sharif.

Figure 37 and 38 show further installations from Sharif's *Objects series;* collections of mass-produced objects that he chose to re-purpose and give "back to society" in a way that is reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's concept of readymades.[87] *Combs* (Figure 38) is a wall hanging made up of multi-coloured, mass-produced plastic combs that Sharif had collected and re-purposed. Sharif's work challenges the notion of the artist and authorship, which would have been difficult for local audiences to understand. Figures 37 is a photograph taken at the 7th Sharjah Biennial exhibition in 2005 where both Sharif and his student Mohammed Kazem, whose work

[86] Christopher Lord, "Hassan Sharif: Make It New," Harpers Bazaar Art, 14 (July-August 2014), 40-47.
[87] "People ask me, "Why you are using a slipper? A slipper is cheap." But I like this cheapness. I like ugly, I like the bad side of whatever society says is good… By bringing them into my studio, I give them back to society." Lord, "Hassan Sharif: Make It New," 40-47.

will be seen overleaf, were invited to present work. This was the second edition of the UAE biennial to be direct by HH Hoor Al Qassimi, the daughter of Sharjah's ruler.[88] Al Qassimi has written about the need to welcome a "new era for contemporary art in the Gulf" and bring new examples of contemporary art to Sharjah.[89] The Emirati art public was gradually getting used to the installation work made by Sharif and his friends. Sharif, Kazem and Abdulaziz were amongst the 70 artists invited from 25 countries to the event. It seems that Sharif had the last laugh however, despite the official desire to embrace new art and new ideas, Sharif's work for the exhibition, an arrangement of found objects was mistaken for rubbish and swept away by local workers, at the end of the exhibition. [90] He was delighted to have provoked such a reaction.

Though Sharif's work was mistaken for rubbish in 2003, his ideas and teachings were extremely influential and his website included many articles and opinion pieces that he had written or that had been written about him. The artist's inspirations were broad and inclusive because they included not only traditions and crafts indigenous to the UAE and the Gulf, but also ideas that he had taken on during his travels abroad. It is important to note too that for Sharif, his work was not one of definition, but of exploration and he was not searching for political or cultural stability.

Here it is interesting to note mention Sara Angel Guerrero-Ripperberger's research on Latin and Arab artists who see observes feel the need to re-work previously accepted concepts and attitudes to give themselves an illusion of political and cultural stability.[91] Of course, this research has clearly shown that that UAE history has escaped the themes of displacement and post-colonialism that can define so many Arab nations. Perhaps the most useful way of observing and analysing Sharif's work, attempting to understand its significance, what he was trying to achieve and to appreciate his contribution to the development of contemporary art by Emiratis, is by using Knell's writing on contextual understanding and situated looking. Considering the rapid development going on in the whole of the Gulf region at the time and realising how different this must have seemed to the reality of Sharif's childhood in the 1960s, for example, and the time before he left for London in 1979 can help to explain the artist's reaction to development, globalisation and also to the sudden influx of mass produced items (Figures 36-38).

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[88] "Hoor Al-Qasimi." Slade School of Fine Art website. Accessed 12 May 2020. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/slade/events/hoor-al-qasimi.

[89] "Sharjah Biennial 2003 in the context of SB 15 in 2021." *Universes in Universe.* Accessed 27 April 2020. https://universes.art/en/sharjah-biennial/2003.

[90] "Hassan Sharif," Sharjah 2005, 7th Sharjah Biennale 6 April – 6 June 2005 Tour, *Universes in Universe.* Accessed 27 April 2020. https://universes-in-universe.de/car/sharjah/2005/eng/museum/imp-31.htm With thanks to Dr Gerhard Haupt.

[91] Sara Angel Guerrero-Rippberger, "Panethnicity. Postidentity and artist groups in Latin America and the Middle East 2003-2010." *Notes in the History of Art* 31. no. 3 (2012): 53-63. www.jstor.org/stable/23208595

The rapid modernisation and construction was transforming the landscape and causing the *Bedouin* lifestyle, for example, to be lost. This insight into the Emirati context and an attempt to see Sharif's work through Emirati eyes is very helpful in building an idea of time and place and it also helps to understand Sharif's motivations as an artist. It would be possible to draw similarities between Knell's exercises in locatedness and his suggestion of entering into a work of art or seeing it through the eyes of someone from that culture, to the notions of high-context communication that were mentioned in the previous chapter. Sharif left a monumental legacy that is especially evident in this posthumous retrospective exhibition at Sharjah Art Foundation in 2017 and 2018, "I am a Single Work Artist."[92] This title is taken from Sharif's belief that an artist's practice is in many ways a revolving repetition of his creativity, which spans his lifetime.

Two of Sharif's students, Mohammed Kazem and Ebtisam Abdulaziz are the only two home-grown Emirati artists to feature so far in this thesis.[93] Kazem, born in 1969, before the creation of the UAE and Ebtisam Abdulaziz, born in 1975, when the UAE was in its infancy, could both be said to be of the first *pioneer* generation of artists, because they are encountering many of the same reactions from a public that was unaware of its role as an art audience and which still questioned whether conceptual art and performance could be art. The UAE's staid society, that had rejected the work of Sharif in the 1980s, greeted Kazem with similar incomprehension and confusion in the 1990s though, as shall be seen in a moment, Kazem's gradual acceptance would result in his being invited in 2013 to represent the UAE in a large solo exhibition for the UAE Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale, *Directions* curated by Reem Fadda.

UAE culture in the 1980s and 1990s was focussed very much on economic development, business and trading and as in any developing society, a person's success, particularly a man's success, is often judged on their ability to acquire material goods and wealth. This proved a daunting prospect for Mohammed Kazem, who had left school at the age of 14 with no qualifications. He joined the army as a way of supporting himself and took part in Sharif's art classes in his spare time at EFAS from 1984 onwards, then the *Maraijah Centre* in Sharjah.[94] He

[92] *Hassan Sharif Retrospective: I am the Single Work Artist*, Sharjah Art Foundation, 4 November 2017 – 3 February 2018, curated by HH Sheikha Al Qassimi, 7, https://issuu.com/gallery32/docs/collector_collecting_catalogue/11

[93] Both artists received scholarships and funding to study and take part in residencies abroad later in their artistic careers.

[94] "I was working in the army, Hassan was working in the ministry [the Ministry of Education] Mohammed [Ahmed Ibrahim] was in the police, Abdullah [Al Saadi] was a teacher… Most of them could not find a good job until now, if they did not work as journalists .. the writers could not even sell their books. These discussions influenced the work and maybe the style of the artists' work," Mohammed Kazem.

became friends with Sharif and was in many ways his *protégé*. Kazem would often find himself holding his camera while the latter experimented with film and installations.[95] Later he would also teach in Sharif's various studios and ateliers.

Figure 39: Mohammed Kazem, *Tongue series*, 1994
Silver gelatine print on board
Copyright Mohammed Kazem. Courtesy of the Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde.

"Mohammed Kazem," in *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008*, edited by Maya Allison, Bana Kattan and Alaa Edris, (UAE: Akkadia Press, 2017), 101.
[95] Christopher Lord, "Hassan Sharif: Make It New," Harpers Bazaar Art, 14 (July-August 2014), 40-47.

The speed of development in the UAE is illustrated by the fact that for Abdulaziz, born only a few years later, art was seen as a way of being true to oneself and developing a sense of artistic expression. "I think I was born as an artist," Abdulaziz announced in an interview, which illustrates a possibility that would have been unthinkable for Kazem only a few years earlier.[96] Although both Kazem and Abdulaziz inherited Sharif's situated approach to contexts, using research and calculation, as a woman, Abdulaziz' work also looked at gender, a theme that she confronted directly as a woman working in a patriarchal society. Sharif often encouraged his students to study specific moments in art, to understand conceptual and installation art and to learn about specific movements that he felt could inspire them and help their work to develop.

One of Kazem's early works, the *Tongue series* (Figure 39) recalls the art of Fluxus, a movement that he would have been familiar with through Sharif's teachings or through his friendship with the artist and the many other artists and visitors of all nationalities, who met at Sharif's house and studio. Figure 39 portrays photographs of Kazem using the tip of tongue to explore objects such as a pair of scissors or a keyhole, objects only be big enough to slide a slim, narrow object or one's tongue. Kazem, experimented with sensuality and the melding of foreign bodies, much as the Fluxus artists had done in America at the end of the century and the notion of becoming one with art, using his body and performance to create a living art, which was one of Fluxus' tenets. Kazem's attitude is concentrated but playful, though it may not have been incidental that the American Fluxus movement that rejected the affluence and prosperity taking over America during the 1960s was also relevant to the UAE's rapid urbanisation at the time.

It had been over ten years since Sharif's temporary exhibitions in Sharjah Market had caused the *Maraijah Centre* to close. Kazem's daring exploration of environments using his tongue did not arouse a great deal of criticism or critique however observers now did not understand how this could be art. They did not see the point in Kazem's performances and thought they were a joke. He recalls how one viewer angrily told him to, *"*go back to painting,"[97] which in his mind belied their lack of experience and knowledge about art. Though Kazem was a little deflated, this lack of understanding of his work by Emirati viewers was perhaps a good thing because it made Kazem more determined. He continued to teach and to work and his *Tongue series,* was acquired several years later by Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, for the Barjeel Art Foundation and his been shown in various international exhibitions.

[96] Brigitte Werneburg, "The Politics of Numbers – A Visit With Ebtisam Abdulaziz," *ArtMag,* Deutsche Bank, 2011.
[97] Kelly Clarke, "The Sound of Art with Emirati Artist Mohammed Kazem,"*Khaleej Times,* 12 December 2014.

Between 1999 and 2009, Kazem taught in Sharif's Dubai Atelier.[98] From approximately 2005 to 2013 and perhaps as a result of misunderstanding of his work, Kazem explored themes of isolation and disorientation in the *Directions series,* (includes Figure 40 and 41). The artist had absorbed many aspects of the Constructivist philosophy from Sharif and this included the collection of data and the calculation of movement.[99] *Directions* recalls Kazem's exploration of isolation, his visual interpretation of the UAE and global identity. Figure 40 is a 360 degrees video installation constructed around a viewing platform and designed to give the viewer the feeling of being on the bow of a ship. All around a film shows a dark, swaying and stormy sea and the sound of the wind and rolling waves can be heard. The experience gives viewers a disorienting sense of endlessness.

Figure 40: Mohammed Kazem, *Directions,* 2005
Video installation, LED light and engraved acrylic panels
Copyright Mohammed Kazem.

Figure 41: Mohammed Kazem, *Walking on Water*, 2013
Installation with aluminium & LED light
Copyright Mohammed Kazem.

[98] Cristiana de Marchi, "Mohammed Kazem, the Perspective Approach," *Contemporary Practices.* XIII. (2013) http://www.contemporarypractices.net/essays/volumeXIII/10.pdf
[99] deMarchi, "Mohammed Kazem, the Perspective Approach."

As part of the series, the artist also threw ten pieces of wood into the Arabian Gulf and noted the geographical coordinates of the boat and of the lost wood as shown in Figure 41 – *Walking on Water*. Kazem evokes the feeling of being lost beyond borders in the series, through both the casting away of the wood and by calling to mind his own experience of almost drowning in the Indian Ocean several years prior. The work skirts politically sensitive issues of disorientation of Emiratis owing to the vast number of foreigners in the country and it could also refer to the UAE's status globally, as a country on the peripheries of Western artistic practice, as evoked by Mitter in the previous chapter.

While Sharif was extremely vocal about art and about the country's swift modernisation away from traditional crafts, for example, Kazem is more reserved. He has not overtly taken up the fight against pre-fabricated items and yet, as his career has developed, Kazem appears to peel back popular and ready-made culture to focus increasingly on nature, on people and personal identity. A consideration of the aims and methodologies present in Kazem and in Sharif's work will be picked up at the end of the chapter. Figure 42 and 43 are part of the work shown in Kazem's solo exhibition at the Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde in Dubai in 2014-15, which focussed on the visual representations of sound. *Sound of Objects* (Figure 42) are papers bearing scratches and *Weight of Sound* (Figure 43) is a glass vial of paper shards that appear to be collected from the "Sound of Objects" scratches. They record not only movement and sound, but equate the weight of the paper slivers to the weight of the sounds of them being torn. For Reem Fadda, who curated Kazem's solo exhibition at the 2013 Venice Biennale UAE Pavilion, Kazem's art is a visual testament to the changes and evolution of the UAE: "A living artistic synthesis of a critical debate over the modernity and the global reality of the citizen and nation-state."[100] At the centre of Kazem's art and indeed the art of many or all of the artists contained in this research is recognition of modernity and development on an individual, micro level and on a larger national and international level. The balance of the personal and global dimensions of the UAE reality will be particularly evident in much of the work by Emiratis in this thesis and Chapter 6 will consider whether it could be a trait of art by Emiratis. Erskine-Loftus notes to the layered reality in the UAE, where Arabic language and customs dominate home and family life and English is spoken at work or school, as well as amongst the huge multi-national expatriate populations centred around Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah.

[100] Fadda Reem, "Mohammed Kazem." posted 20 October 2012. http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/33570/mohammed-kazem/October 20. 2012.

Figure 42: Mohammed Kazem, *Sound of Objects*, 2014
20 scratches on paper
Copyright Mohammed Kazem.
Courtesy of the Gallery Isabelle
van den Eynde.

Figure 43: Mohammed Kazem, *Weight of Sound*, 2014
Paper shards, glass and cork
Copyright Mohammed Kazem.
Courtesy of the Gallery Isabelle
van den Eynde.

Kazem's recognition of the multi-ethnic quality of the UAE in general and his local neighbourhood in Dubai in particular is illustrated by Kazem's the *Neighbours series*, created for his 2018 solo exhibition at the Isabelle van den Eynde Gallery in Dubai.[101] The series includes a photograph of an air conditioning unit poking out of a brightly coloured building and a collection of quickly executed watercolours paintings that depict people queuing for a bus. These *Neighbours* are dressed brightly and are of a variety of statures and shapes. Kazem evokes the ethnicity and movement, the hustle and bustle and urban diversity that has now characterises the UAE's cities.[102]

Before becoming a member of EFAS and before attending Sharif's classes, Ebtisam Abdulaziz gained a bachelor's degree in mathematics and modern sciences. A bright student who delighted in the colour and observations of life around her, Abdulaziz was delighted when her teacher, Hassan Sharif, gave her a book on Systemic Art, which relates natural and social systems to conceptual art. She immediately set about using abstract and geometric forms with mathematical references and plotting distances. *Ten Triangles,* (Figure 44) for example, sees Abdulaziz measuring angles and using geometry and symmetry, much as Sharif had done in his

[101] Lesley Ann Gray, "A Prime Activity: Mohammed Kazem," *AsiaArt Pacific web review* (2018), http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/WebExclusives/APrimeActivity.
[102] Noelle Bodick, "You are Here Mohammed Kazem," *ArtAsiaPacific*, no.83 (May-June 2013), http://www.artasiapacific.com/Magazine/83/YouAreHereMohammedKazem.

semi-systems. She began to record the number of cars that she saw on a road or their number plates, using numeric systems like a personal code through which to express more complex ideas and social commentary.

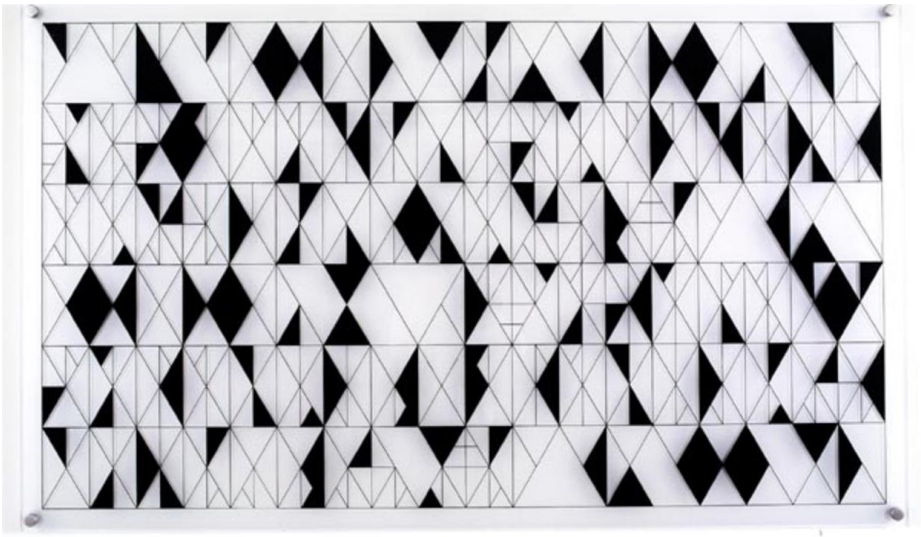

Figure 44: Ebtisam Abdulaziz, *Ten Triangles*, 2004
Ink on Perspex
Copyright owned by Ebtisam Abdulaziz.
Courtesy of Brigitte Werneburg and Deutsche Bank.

Figure 45: From the *Numbers and Lifetime series*, 2004
Photographs
Copyright owned by Ebtisam Abdulaziz.
Courtesy of Brigitte Werneburg and Deutsche Bank.

Abdulaziz' early photographic series (Figure 45-7) approach timeless themes of class and gender that could be understood by viewers of all nationalities, Emirati and non-Emirati UAE residents. Abdulaziz was particularly interested in the diversity of women living in the UAE and her pointed observation and suggestions were appreciated for their subtlety and wit. Abdulaziz is direct. Her *Numbers and Lifetime series,* (Figure 45) shown at the 7th Sharjah Biennale in 2005 features a collection of women's hands, each of which evokes a different character from which the viewer can construct a portrait. Figure 45, for example, bears a modern watch and intricate henna tattoo.

Each photograph offers clues as to their owners' age and socio-cultural background. In *Life in a Bag series* (Figures 46 and 47) Abdulaziz employs x-rays to explore the contents of various women's handbags, from which the viewer is again invited to piece together a portrait or idea of its owner. The method of scanography mimics the security systems used in airports and the exercise highlights the intimate nature of a woman's handbag and the extent to which they can offer clues as to their owners' socio-cultural status and personality. For example, the stuffed designer handbags could highlight the over-consumption among a portion of the country's residents, compared to the hard-working reality of many of the city's expatriate workforce. Another canvas handbag simply holds a wallet and a bunch of keys.

Figure 46 Ebtisam Abdulaziz, "Life in a Bag series," 2009
X-ray photographs
Copyright owned by Ebtisam Abdulaziz.
Courtesy of Brigitte Werneburg and Deutsche Bank.

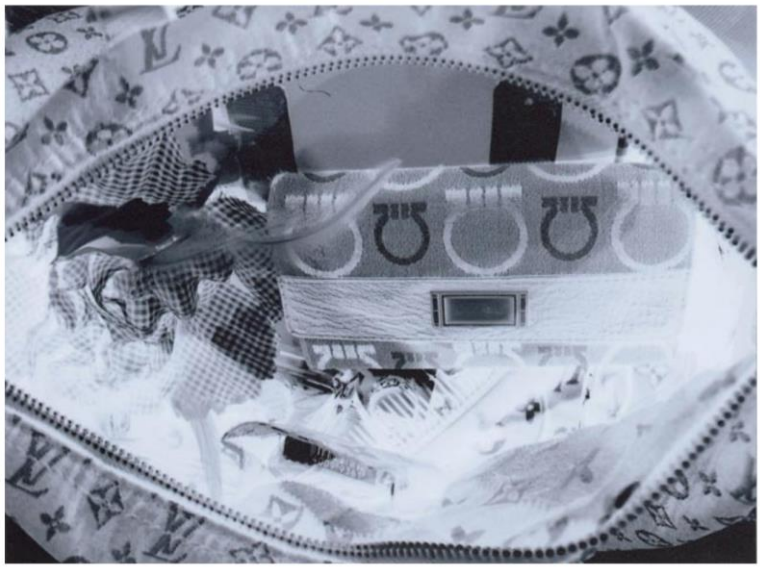

Figure 47 Ebtisam Abdulaziz, *Life in a Bag series*, 2009
X-ray photographs
Copyright owned by Ebtisam Abdulaziz.
Courtesy of Brigitte Werneburg and Deutsche Bank.

Perhaps Abdulaziz' best-known work is a series of photographs based on a performance, the *Autobiography series* (Figure 48), which featured in a solo exhibition of her work at the Sharjah Museum of Art in 2007. Abdulaziz found a way to explore topical and shocking themes in a way that would not disrespect the traditions and culture that are so important to the UAE and to the

cultural identity of its people. The project stemmed from her work with number patterns and the potential for people to represent and be represented by numbers. Perhaps considering their implications in her own life, the "Autobiography series" performance grew to include thoughts about the privacy of numbers and exposure, as well as issues of gender all in a UAE context. For *Autobiography series,* Abdulaziz had a black full-bodysuit made, which she stencilled with bright green numbers, which supposedly represented her financial details and bank codes.

Figure 48: Ebtisam Abdulaziz, *Autobiography series*, 2012
Photographs of the performance and installation
Copyright owned by Ebtisam Abdulaziz.
Courtesy of Brigitte Werneburg and Deutsche Bank.

Abdulaziz wore the all-covering suit and posed for over 70 photographs in the streets of her native Sharjah. Like Kazem, Abdulaziz was using it as a tool to create a living art in a similar way to the Fluxus artists. Thanks perhaps to the anonymity of her bodysuit Abdulaziz staged her performance in public, unlike Kazem. This recalls Sharif's two exhibitions in Sharjah's Central Market because Abdulaziz, though concealed, would have been able to experience peoples' reactions to her and she could was able to create unexpected tableaux in coffee shops, on building sites and on rubbish piles in the street with unsuspecting waitresses, workers or street cleaners. Nonetheless, the photographs are entirely revealing and therefore shocking on another level and this is borne out by Abdulaziz' bodysuit and her body language throughout the performance.

Abdulaziz dares the viewer to think past the limitations of her body, by challenging traditional ideals of how a woman should dress and by questioning the limits of privacy. During a recent discussion about contemporary art in the UAE, the contemporary artist, Shamma Al Amri, whose work explores etymology and the layers of understanding of Arabic words, gave insight into Emirati notions of permissiveness that chimes with the art of Abdulaziz. In response to questions about self-censorship by artists in the UAE, al Amri noted that political or feminist statements can and are made in art by Emiratis. To a bemused audience, she added this comes at a cost and that Emirati artists can feel a tremendous pressure to become translated. How are political or subversive ideas expressed? Compared to Western artists, she continued, Emiratis do not feel the need to insist on a topic. "You don't need to shout… [Just] poke at an idea."[103] Indeed, installations and photographs such as Abdulaziz' *Autobiography series* and *Blue Freedom,* which will be observed shortly, are mute interventions that are also highly suggestive. Perhaps the lack of voice in her performances and the black suit make Abdulaziz' visual tableau all the more arresting, as she gently pokes at the contradictions of today's society. Is this an extension of the soft power employed by Emirati governance or a commentary about cyber security? In Figure 48, her faceless, suited figure explores unusual places around the city. Perhaps the beauty and power of Abdulaziz' work is the mystery that it creates. She pokes at an idea and does not comment or translate it for the viewer. She succeeds in challenging public ideas with energetic performances or installations in a way that does not question cultural permissiveness. Abdulaziz respects the viewer's space and also seems to invite them to question aspects of their society in a similarly mute fashion.[104]

In many ways, the style of Figure 48 and the following Figure 49, are reminiscent of the Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta whose body art and installations explored aspects of her identity and Afro-Cuban roots. Mendieta's *Body Tracks,* 1974,[105] for example, portrays the artist transforming her body into a brush to make marks against a white wall. The performance, which was also photographed, explores notions of ethnicity and the artist's role as a female artist. This is not dissimilar to Abdulaziz' intention in Figure 49 and the fact that Abdulaziz' physical appearance is masked in an all-covering bodysuit suit makes her interactions and her message all the more nuanced. It is important to point out too that Abdulaziz does not use her body in a sensual way, as Mendieta did by removing her clothes or as Kazem did, by using the tip of his

[103]"Shamma Al Amri," interview by Sarah Al Mehairi, Artist Talks series, 1 June 2020. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCF46U40QKOVGYXXyJf4LEIg

[104] The UAE is not a repressive society and this is particularly evident due to the fact that Abdulaziz' art is consistently inventive and complex, despite having moved from the UAE to the United States, in recent years.

[105] Kaira M. Cabañas, "Ana Mendieta: "Pain of Cuba, Body I Am"." *Woman's Art Journal* 20, no. 1 (1999): 12-17, www.jstor.org/stable/1358840.

tongue. Nonetheless, images from the "Autobiography" performance prove that a traditional Islamic society, such as that in the UAE, can be questioned and challenged by subtle and un-sensational means that are respectful of cultural sensibilities.

Figure 49: Ebtisam Abdulaziz, *Blue Freedom*, 2013
Photograph of the performance
Source: "Emirati Expressions Realised"[106]

Blue Freedom, (Figure 49) features the artist painting herself into a Perspex sphere: Is this freedom or self-incarceration? Though the *Life in a Bag* and *Numbers and Lifetimes series* explore issues of gender and class, this performance and the vision of the artist, a young Muslim woman, her body and hair modestly covered wearing an all-covering bodysuit, seeking to blot out her existence entirely, by painting herself into a Perspex sphere or bubble is heart-breaking. She is making herself more isolated and remote by her own actions: Is this a form of activism in itself or is the artist showing the viewer what might happen if women do not open their minds or express themselves? The purpose of sharing artistic practices and art from by Emiratis is not to create comparisons or to over-interpret or breathe new meaning into work by contemporary artists from the UAE. Nonetheless, I feel that it is important to point out here the importance of the image above (Figure 49) in exposing the sense of isolation and shocking hopelessness of the artist, without confrontation and without showing the viewer any kind of hostility, aggression or emotion. This recalls the words of Engelen in the previous chapter about the way in which artists

106 Kevin Jones, "Emirati Expressions: Realised," Nafas Art Magazine, October 2013.

from the UAE seem to use of a different language. His remark that, "in Europe, we didn't go from Michelangelo to Damien Hirst in a decade,"[107] seems to consider the work of artists from the Gulf on a different, perhaps faster track than Western art traditions.

Before summarising the work of the six artists in this chapter and their representation of a *pioneer* era of art in the UAE, it is interesting to consider the development not only of art by Emiratis but also of the Emirati audience. I will refer to Cristiana de Marche's article on the development of performance or body art in the Gulf, since this has been a major part of the last three artists in this chapter: Sharif, Kazem and Abdulaziz. De Marchi observes that Sharif's performances, which includes *Jumping* (Figure 33) and Kazem, *Tongue series,* (Figure 39) for example, mark an initial phase of performance art in the UAE. They show an awareness of the body and space and this may be related to notions of national identity as the artists were situating themselves within a new nation. Another strand in De Marche's schema is related to work that illustrates or uses the body to communicate gender and gender roles. This is particularly relevant to the work of Abdulaziz. Because of practicalities and the lack of art audiences, performances were often performed alone and recorded through photograph or film and De Marchi also notes the uneasiness that art audiences would feel as their role flitted between that of spectator and voyeur. I was able to experience this first hand during a screening of Abdulaziz' *Structures* (Figure 50) in the presence of a group of young, Emirati students, during the opening of the Abu Dhabi Art fair, at Medina Saadiyat in 2017.

[107] David Batty, "The Rise of the Gulf Art Scene," *The Guardian*, 16 April 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/apr/16/rise-of-gulf-art-scene

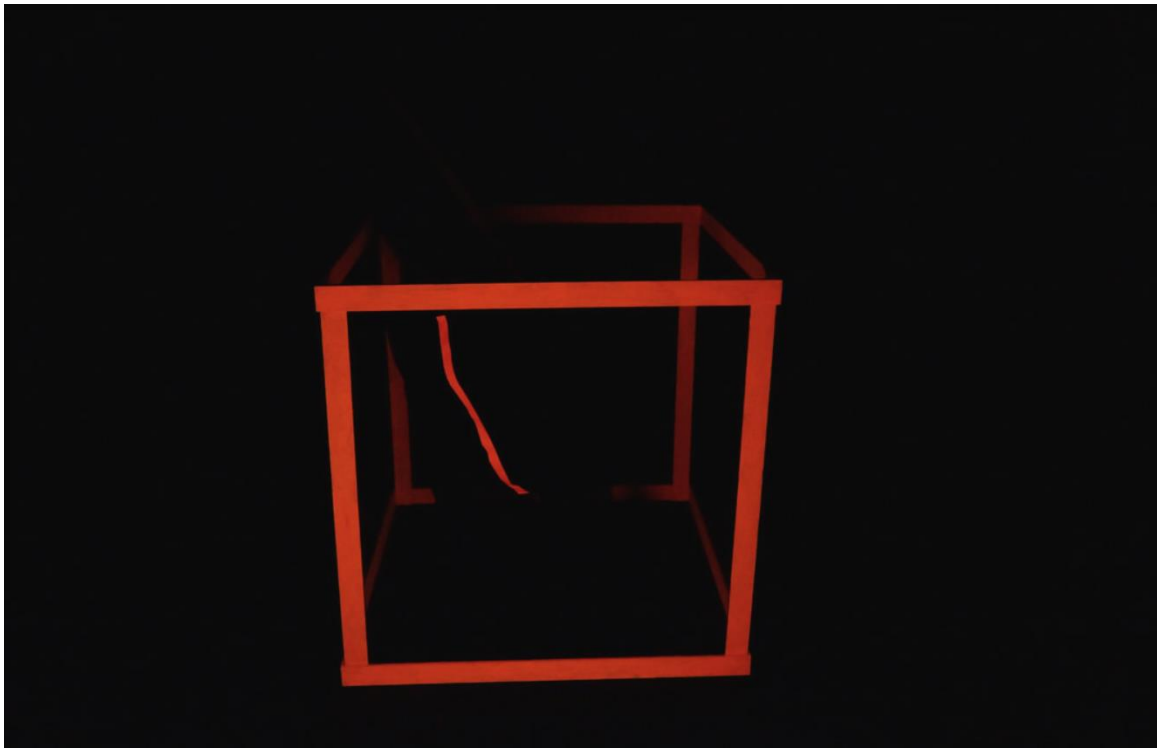

Figure 50: Ebtisam Abdulaziz, *Structures*, 2015
Still from the video, 2 minutes 46 seconds
Source: The artist's website[108]

As the film began, in a small alcove of the exhibition hall, a dark figure rose out of the box and after several minutes the figure (Abdulaziz) proceeded to smash the box structure to smithereens, with surprising vehemence. It was interesting to observe the reaction of the young students' as awkward silence gave way to exclamations and surprise. Hushed whispering gave way surprisingly quickly to interest and calm acceptance. This could illustrate how young Emiratis, both artists and viewers, who have grown up in an environment of constant development, have begun to observe change not only as a form of normality but also as a precursor to growth. Sabban suggests that (young) audiences in the UAE increasingly observe things at multiple levels and this would result in a broader ability to assimilate new data, fit into new situations and quickly take on new challenges.[109] Her research and my observation at Abu Dhabi Art 2017 reinforce the importance of dialogue surrounding traditional contexts and the growth of modernity within the development of contemporary art from the UAE.

* * * * * * *

[108] Ebtisam Abdulaziz, the artists' website. Accessed 26 May 2020. http://artistebtisamaziz.com/
[109] Rima Sabban, conversation with the author, 20 September 2019.

This chapter has charted the development of art by Emiratis from the country's establishment in 1971 until the 2000s, through a brief but diverse selection of work by six artists. All of these *pioneer* artists' work questioned form, explored new media, experimented with style and interpretation, including Mandi, whose art was born from century-old Islamic calligraphy. Art education or the lack of art education has been an important factor in the development of art in the UAE. Neither Sharif, Kazem, nor Abdulaziz were taught art at school and though other artists growing up in the UAE in the 1950s and 1960s may have received a basic foundation, art materials and books were extremely limited. This may explain why the youngers artists who found art after leaving school, found installation and performance art particularly accessible and why they do not feel limited to any specific media.

At a time when the UAE itself was creating an infrastructure and finding its feet as a nation, these artists were also seeking to define themselves and their view of Emirati identity amidst the shifting landscape. This was, to a great extent, about coming to terms with their traditions of the past and their present reality, defining themselves and their view of Emirati identity amidst the shifting landscape. All of these *pioneer* artists' work questioned form, explored new media, experimented with style and interpretation. Their works do not obey an ordained canon but themes are formed naturally around the idea of the past being confronted with the rapid development which continues to rock the country. Though the patronage of art was described in relation to the opening of exhibitions and support of organisations such as EFAS or the Sharjah Biennale, the emphasis during this period was clearly on the development of an art infrastructure and the positioning of the UAE within a global art world. It is interesting to observe similarities or points of contact between work by these artists and work by the next *al-jadid* or new generation of contemporary artists, in the following chapter.[110] The artists Karima Al Shomely, Maitha Demithan, Lamya Gargash, Alia Al Gurg, Shaikha Al Mazrou, Afra Al Dhaheri and Nasir Nasrallah each negotiate the discussion with tradition and modernity, in different and complimentary ways.

[110] Elizabeth Derderian, "Critique as Infrastructure – Organic Growth and the Rise of Visual Arts in the UAE," *Ibraaz Magazine* 010_00, 6 May 2016, 51.

Chapter 5: Contemporary UAE

In 2010, the UAE's Prime Minister and Vice-President and Ruler of Dubai, HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum launched a vision for the country's development by 2021, the date of its Golden Jubilee: Vision 2021.[1] This initiative, drafted by over 300 members of the UAE's federal and local governments, focused on indicators to measure the country's progress in specific areas of agreed growth namely in the fields of education, security, healthcare, a sustainable environment and infrastructure, a strong economy, and a cohesive society with a well-preserved identity. The emphasis of Vision 2021 focussed on empowering individuals' creativity and on building the nation's "Vibrant Culture," a culture of which Emiratis could be proud.[2] The document came at the end and perhaps as a result of what Worrell refers to as 2000-2010 "the pivotal decade" for art in the UAE.[3] It marks the UAE's commitment to several international projects that would transform the country's relationship with the rest of the world, in terms of the UAE's art, its visual culture and diplomatic relations. These include the Saadiyat Cultural District announced in 2007, the creation of international art fairs in Abu Dhabi and Dubai in 2007 (Art Paris Abu Dhabi, later called Abu Dhabi Art and Dubai Art), as well as the UAE's first national pavilion at the Venice Biennial in 2009. There is no doubt too that the opening of Christies in Dubai and the sale of Al Rais' painting in 2008 for 1 million Dhs (Figure 22) is an important benchmark for the Emirati art market and saleability of art by an Emiratis. Considering the trials undergone by Kazem by angry viewers that were described in the previous chapter, it is surprising that five years later, his conceptual work, *Directions series*, should be selected for the UAE's highest honour: a solo exhibition in the UAE pavilion at the Venice Biennial (Figures 40 and 41). This marks a significant development in the Emirati appreciation of contemporary and conceptual art. It is significant that Sabella lists biennials and auction houses as two of the nine factors that were intrinsic to the creation of an Emirati art history or its own art ecosystem.[4]

Another huge change to impact the Gulf in the early 21st century has been the internet and social media. These form a great part of the lives of Emiratis today, particularly younger

[1] "UAE Vision 2021 National Agenda," UAE Government website, accessed 22 January 2019, https://www.vision2021.ae/en.
[2] "UAE Vision 2021 National Agenda."
[3] Hanan Sayed Worrell, "The UAE's Emergence as a Hub for Contemporary Art," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington,* July 10, 2017, 5.
[4] The nine factors are: Relative political and economic stability, education, government policies, museums, biennales, galleries, collectors, auction houses and art fairs.
Steve Sabella, "Is the United Arab Emirates Constructing its Art History? The Mechanisms that Confer Value to Art," *Contemporary Practices,* IV, (2014): 122-132, http://stevesabella.com/CP%20Volume%20V.pdf

generations. Derderian defines the new *Jeel al-jadid* generation of artists as those born to a developed and more internationally connected UAE, with a ready-made "cultural infrastructure" compared to than that of the previous generation.[5] A 2013 report reveals that the UAE population had one of the highest internet penetration figures in the world (71%)[6] while a further study reports that Emiratis spend almost 3 hours a day on social media.[7] While globalisation and the internet have on the one hand made life easier, they have also helped to deconstruct cultural systems and made cross-cultural understanding more accessible. How has this affected Emirati identity and the limits of acceptability?

Elements of globalisation, modernism and cosmopolitanism can certainly be identified in the work of Karima Al Shomaly, Maitha Demithan, Lamya Gargash, Alia Al Gurg, Shaikha Al Mazrou, Afra Al Dhaheri and Nasir Nasrallah. The work of artists in the previous chapter was partly chosen because their work was included in major exhibitions or international events. In this chapter and today, the internet means that artworks can be seen internationally, at the click of a button. The work of artists in this chapter were chosen because they explore a wider variety of media and are palpably more topical and relevant to international themes than the art of Chapter 4, created only years before. It will be exciting to observe the impact of technology on traditional culture and consider any tensions that these create.

Since the 2000s, a growing number of UAE universities have offered art course, art history and museum studies and these have, for the greater part, been taken up by female students. This indicates not only the popularity of art amongst female students, but sadly also the continued pressure on male students, still traditionally seen as the breadwinner of the family, to get a proper job and earn a steady income to support their families. Most artists chosen here are women and this expresses the abundance of female artists working today compared to men. It should be noted too that many female artists in this fifth chapter also hold down a second job, as an artist, an academic, a lecturer and not forgetting the role of being a mother. Finally, while home life is traditionally kept extremely private in the UAE, as in many Arab countries, in the work of the artists of this chapter, there is greater openness and the viewer is brought into the home and amongst family members, particularly in the work of Gargash and Demithan. It will be interesting

[5] Manal Ataya and Deemas Aisha Rashid, "Museums and the Representation of Islamic Culture: Sharjah Case Study," *Museum International* 63, no.3-4 (March 2013), 59, http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/muse.12007/abstract.

[6] "Internet Usage in The Middle East – Statistics and Trends," Go Gulf website, 2 August 2013, https://www.go-gulf.ae/internet-usage-middle-east

[7] **"**UAE Social Media Statistics 2019," Global Media Insight, posted 1 September 2019, https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/uae-social-media-statistics/.
Chris Nelson, "UAE use of Instagram and Snapchat rockets ahead of global average," *The National*, 28 September 2016.

to explore the extent of this and to ascertain the impact of the internet and social media on Emirati contemporary life and on art by Emiratis.

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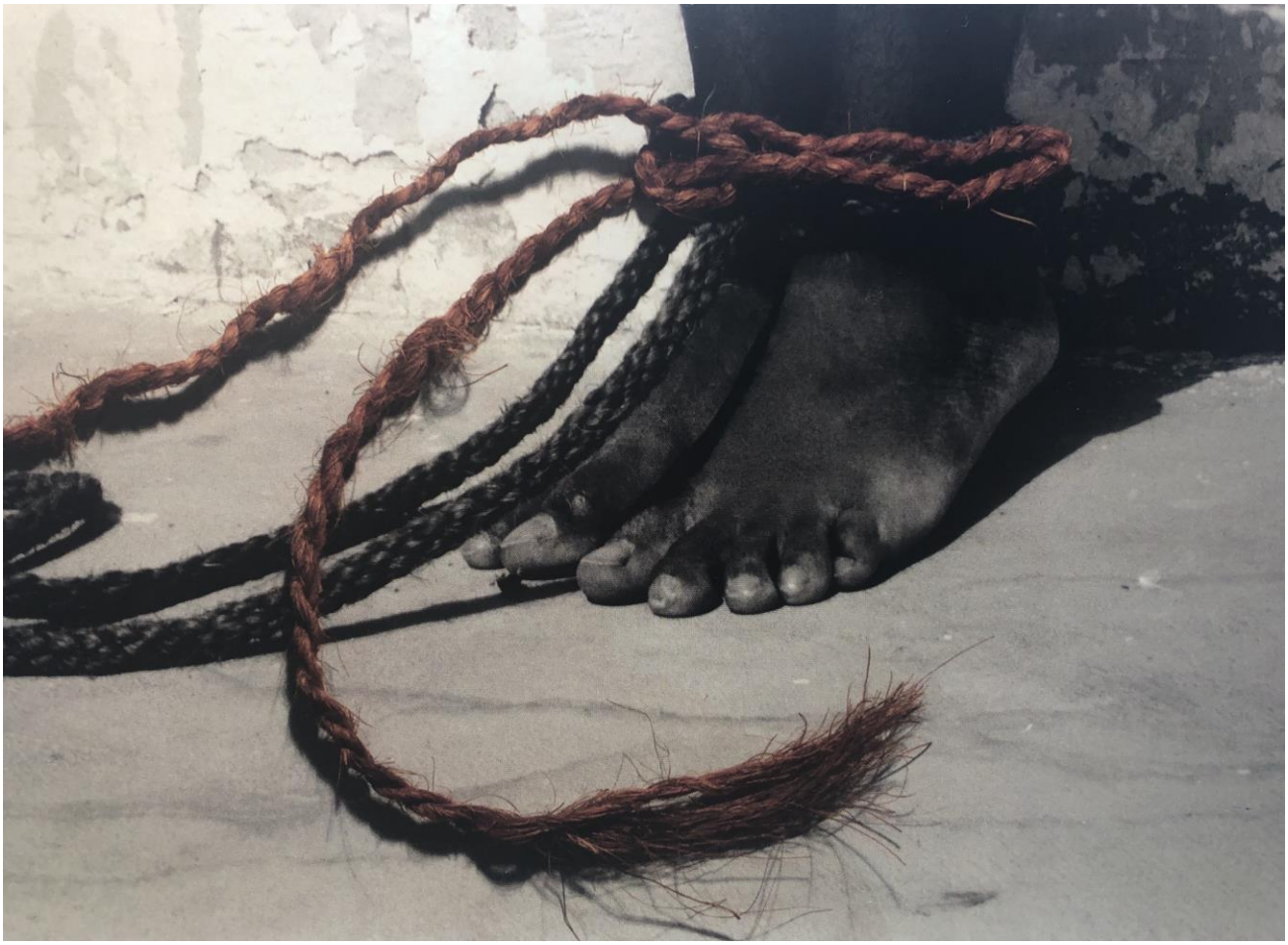

Figure 51: Karima Al Shomely, from the *Internal Dialogue series*, 2005
Photograph and mixed media
Copyright owned by Karima Al Shomely and Courtesy of Emirates Fine Arts Society, 2006.[8]

Karima Al Shomely is an artist, an academic and member of EFAS. Figure 51, from Al Shomely's The *Internal Dialogues series*, is an example of her work that specifically focuses on cultural associations with the past. It is a simple yet powerful black and white photograph of bound legs that is pierced with a red rope, to emphasise the restricted movement. In the previous chapter, black and white photography was used as a medium to depict scenes from his Kazem's *Tongue series* performance (Figure 49). Here, Al Shomely uses the medium again, though in the style of documentary journalism. The image resembles the bare feet of a prisoner standing awkwardly on a dusty floor. Al Shomely highlights the violence of the image by using a red rope. She seeks to

[8] Nasser Abdullah, Layla Juma and Patricia Millns eds., *The Silver Jubilee 1980-2005*, The UAE Fine Art Society 2006, trans. Mohammed Al Waddah Yousif Aydabi, (Sharjah: Emirates Fine Arts Society, 2006), 249.

grab the viewer's attention, perhaps to emphasise the scene's unease and emotion. Is the red rope part of the artist's internal dialogue or detainment? Is she being held back physically or mentally, as a human being or as a woman? To understand *Internal Dialogues series*, Al Shomely's desire to study fine art could be relevant. Since UAE Higher Education did not offer art degrees in the 1980s, she gained a degree in Accounting and Economics and began to work as an accountant until the early 2000s, attending courses at EFAS and what art events she could, visiting the Sharjah Biennale in 1998.[9] Seen in this context, this scene could reflect Al Shomely's stifled individuality or creativity. When the artist was finally able to study art in 2007, she enrolled on the newly opened College of Fine Arts and Design's BA course in Fine Arts, at the University of Sharjah. After she completed the course, since post-graduate fine art studies were not yet common in the UAE, Al Shomely gained a grant, like artists such as Najat Maki and Hassan Sharif in the previous chapter, to study abroad. She enrolled on a Masters course in Fine Art at Chelsea College of Art and Design in London in 2009 then received an ADMAF scholarship to Kingston University, to research a PhD.

Al Shomely decided to focus on Emirati female culture for her PhD thesis, which was entitled: An Intimate Object: A practice-based study of the Emirati *Burqa*.[10] Non-Arab commentators and members of the public can be forgiven for regarding this facial adornment as a symbol of female subjugation, however in the UAE, the *burqa* occupies an important place within the costume and traditions of women in the Gulf. The *burqa* is traditionally made of leather and Indian cotton, soaked in indigo dye.[11] Al Shomely's interest in wider social, political and philosophical challenges of being an Emirati woman fed into both her thesis and into her artwork.[12]

[9] "I saw a print on canvas totally [covered] in different tones of red… and this work made me ask myself about the different types of techniques."
Karima Al Shomely, interview by the author, November – December 2018.
[10] Karima Al Shomely, interview by the author.
[11] Indigo trees grown in nearby Oman were used to prepare the cloth for the Emirati burqa.
Sharifa Alhinai. "7 things you didn't know about the burqa," Sekka Magazine, 1 August 2018.
[12] "Karima Al Shomely," interview by the author.

Figure 52:
"*Braqa'a"*
(plural of *burqa),*
2017
Ink on paper
Copyright owned by Karima Al Shomely.

Figure 52 shows the diverse shapes that the *burqa* underwent over time and across different regions of the Gulf that the artist visited as part of her research. Al Shomely painted these *burqas* using the indigo dye, which was also used in the production of the *burqa* by specialist tailors. (see Figure 56-58).[13] *Bedouin* women and those living in rural communities in the 1950s and 1960s[14] traditionally wore leather *burqas* over their faces, to conceal their appearance in public, as a form of privacy and it continues to be worn on traditional or ceremonial occasions.[15] The *burqa* as a traditional accessory is infused with an elevated level of tradition and cultural memory. Al Shomely's works on the burqa focuses on the face covering as a traditional item and also as a living heritage object.[16] The *burqa*'s traditional and iconic power is so entrenched in Emirati tradition and in the lives of so many women, including her own life and family history, that the exhibition that Al Shomely curated upon completing her PhD in 2017, *The Emirati Burqa: An intimate Object,* at Sharjah Heritage Museum, generated great interest from all quarters.[17] It traced the *burqa*'s iconic role, as an important part of Emirati heritage,[18] and its evolution through photographs, films, paintings and installations. The disappearance of the *burqa* as a traditional practice, in modern times, is also expressed through photographs of a *burqa* submerged in sand.[19]

[13] Karima M. A. Al Shomely, "An intimate object: a practice-based study of the Emirati Burqa," PhD diss., 2016, https://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/id/eprint/36327/
[14] Al Shomely, "An intimate object: a practice-based study of the Emriati Burqa."
[15] Sapna Dhanwani, "30 seconds with Karima Al Shomely," *Gulf News,* 29 November 2017.
[16] "Exhibition in Sharjah takes intimate perspective on Emirati Burqa," Al Arabiya.net, posted 19 November 2017, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2017/11/19/Exhibition-in-Sharjah-takes-intimate-perspective-on-Emirati-Burqa.
[17] "Exhibition in Sharjah takes intimate perspective on Emirati Burqa."
[18] "Exhibition in Sharjah takes intimate perspective on Emirati Burqa."
[19] "Exhibition in Sharjah takes intimate perspective on Emirati Burqa."

Figure 53-55: Karima Al Shomely, Stills from *Khait (Thread),* 2014
Snapshot video, 2.48 mins[20]
Copyright owned by Karima Al Shomely.

During 2013 and 2014, Al Shomely continued to explore the *burqa,* through a three-part performance art piece recorded in three snapshot videos. Al Shomely's research states that the Emirati *burqa* was often worn to protect women's faces from the desert sun it is typically worn after marriage. The three films represent a visual construction, deconstruction and demystification of the *burqa's* forbidding nature. First, in *Khait, (Thread)* Figure 53-55, Al Shomely depicts a woman in national dress, wearing a *burqa* and operating a thudding "Butterfly" sewing machine to slowly and intently stitch pieces of cloth together to form a *burqa*. The seamstress picks up the burqa's purple dye on her fingers. It serves not only as evidence to show the way in which *burqas* are traditionally made, but also creates a visual record of their context. Al Shomely defies the *burqa's* reputation outside the Arab world as a form of confinement by presenting the viewer with a woman wearing a *burqa* making *burqas,* and thereby supplementing her family income as a seamstress.[21] Al Shomely adds, "The sound of the machine shows the woman's psychological state, the drudgery that is her life; despite her tiredness, she must carry on."[22]

[20] Karima Al Shomely, *Khait,* accessed 16 May 2019, https://vimeo.com/220429093
[21]"Karima Al Shomely," in *Portrait of a Nation,* (Abu Dhabi: ADMAF and Abu Dhabi Festival, 2016), 184, http://www.admaf.org/en/media/get/20160620_8-PORTRAIT-OF-A-NATION.pdf
[22]"Karima Al Shomely," in *Portrait of a Nation.*

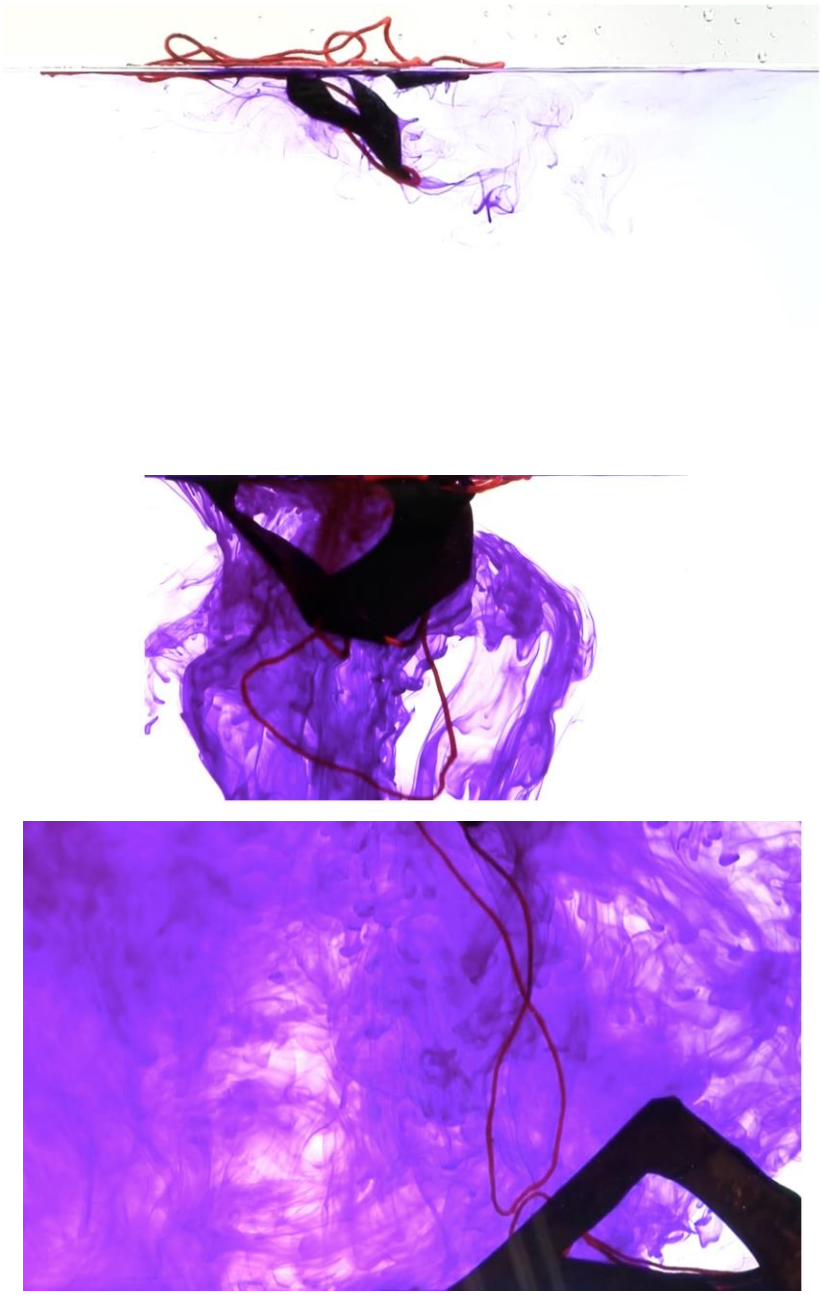

Figure 56-58: Karima Al Shomely, Stills from *Neel (Indigo)*, 2014
Snapshot video, 2.03 mins[23]
Copyright owned by Karima Al Shomely.

Al Shomely's second film installation, *Neel (Indigo)* shown by Figure 56-58, depicts a *burqa* being submerged in a tank of water and the clouds of purple, indigo dye detaching themselves in swirling clouds. While Al Shomely explores woman's role as creator and worker in "*Khait,"* (thread), in *Neel (Indigo)* she invites the viewer to witness the active loss of the UAE's traditional past, through the deconstruction of the *burqa*. The effect of the dye detaching itself from the *burqa* in water is nonetheless beautiful and mesmerising.

[23] "Neel" 2014, by Karima Al Shomely, *vimeo.*

> When I submerged the burqa in water, the indigo escaped immediately, as if the fabric was bleeding, much like the disappearance of burqa in contemporary society. The bleeding burqa is both an object and a subject a metaphor for a changing society. Representing the narrative of memory, it is an active witness to a lost past. [24]

Al Shomely's work expresses the ritualistic and iconic significance of the *burqa*, using art to express what cannot be expressed in words; her identity as an Emirati Muslim woman, the historical traditions of her native Emirates and her place within them.[25] This echoes Smith's discourses on the ability of art to resonate resonating with complex contemporary conditions of, "the time, age or period."[26] The anachronistic quality of the *burqa* is expressed subtly, through the use of an antique sewing machine and the beautification beliefs associated with the dark indigo dye of the *burqa*. Al Shomely is appealing to her contemporary audience to save these traditions and their significance for women from being lost to the past and as such her work again chimes with Smith's idea of the contemporary and "multiple ways of being in time with others."[27]

Al Shomely's third snapshot video, *Zeena (Adornment)* Figure 59-61 is, according to Ghazal, named after a bridal beauty regime. It features the artist, dressed in white robes and headscarf, rubbing water onto a *burqa* to detach some of the indigo colouring then applying it to her face. Her face slowly becomes darker and darker until it becomes completely blue in appearance.

> Here we witness a personal, private moment of Emirati marriage customs. Wearing white to create a colour contrast, the metal tins around me represent a woman's personal life. In a mirror, I observe myself as a bride, applying the indigo dye from the *burqa* textile. As my fingers touch the *burqa* and my skin, intimacy is heightened.[28]

[24] "Karima Al Shomely," in *Portrait of a Nation,* (Abu Dhabi: ADMAF and Abu Dhabi Festival, 2016), 184, http://www.admaf.org/en/media/get/20160620_8-PORTRAIT-OF-A-NATION.pdf
[25] "My works are messages about some impactful issues and through the art; I have freedom to show these issues." Karima Al Shomely, interview by the author, November – December 2018.
[26] Terry Smith, "The State of Art History: Contemporary Art," *The Art Bulletin,* 92, no.4 (1 December 2010), http://doi.org/10.1080/0043079.2010.10786119.
[27] Terry Smith, "Contemporaneity in the History of Art," *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture* 1, (2011), 5, http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu.
[28] "Karima Al Shomely," in *Portrait of a Nation,* (Abu Dhabi: ADMAF and Abu Dhabi Festival, 2016), 184, http://www.admaf.org/en/media/get/20160620_8-PORTRAIT-OF-A-NATION.pdf

Figure 59-61: Karima Al Shomely, Stills from *Zeena* (Adornment), 2013
Snapshot video, 3.37 mins[29]
Copyright owned by Karima Al Shomely.

In the *Zeena (Adornment)* performance, shown by Figure: 59-61, Al Shomely offers interesting insight into traditional beautification procedures using indigo. Could this be the artist's way of getting to grips with contemporary issues to do with femininity and power? In "*Zeena*," Al Shomely anoints herself with the *burqa*'s indigo dye, creating a dark, obscuring mask, which could represent her blocking herself out of everyday life, as Abdulaziz had done in *Blue Freedom* (Figure 50) or that she is applying the dye like a war paint when she is hidden from the group. Al Shomely is actively taking part in a process of beautification or transformation. Thus, her snapshot videos of the *burqa* can be considered as a form of Activist Art. Unlike Abdulaziz' *Autobiography,* which saw the artist exposing herself through numbers, in *Khait* and *Neel*, produced around the same time, Al Shomely is actively demystifying the *burqa* by reducing it to its basic elements. She invites viewers to watch its demise; as the indigo dye of the *burqa* seep out into the water. In *Zeena,* Al Shomely actively uses its properties (in this case, the indigo dye) to obscure her face, supposedly as a means of beautification. As a contemporary artist, Al Shomely's exploration of Emirati tradition and the cultural and social role of the *burqa* has been a huge source of inspiration, because it is active as well as informative.

All three video performances featured in Abu Dhabi Music and Art Foundation's (ADMAF)'s *Portrait of a Nation* exhibition in Abu Dhabi and in Berlin, in 2016-2017.[30] The role of non-profit organisations such as ADMAF in promoting the UAE internationally was touched upon in Chapter 2. *Portrait of a Nation* was one of the first fully comprehensive exhibitions of contemporary Emirati art to be shown internationally and to be supported by a full-colour brochure. It featured the work of 50 contemporary artists and its catalogue provided biographical

[29] *Zeena,* 2013, by Karima Al Shomely, *vimeo.*
[30] "Portrait of a Nation," Nafas Art Magazine, September 2017, https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2017/portrait-of-a-nation/.

information about the artists, a timeline and various essays. The exhibition's catalogue is a valuable resource; as much an exhibition catalogue as a diplomatic tool, it charts the development of Emirati contemporary art since 1971, historically and geographically, showing the different Emirati regions and a vast array of artists' work from past to present. The abundance of styles and media create an impression of profusion and creativity, which is not doubt the point.

It should be pointed out at this point that for the European reader, very little information exists about the *braqa'a* (plural of *burqa*) worn by *Bedouin* women in the West, since (male) Western writers and anthropologists of the 19th century, would not have had access to female society or customs.[31]Thus, Al Shomely's art practice and focus on the *burqa* is not only creative project, but also represents the culmination of documentary and anthropological research. She works to deconstruct the *burqa* and at the same time re-connect contemporary understanding and creativity with this traditional accessory and process.[32]

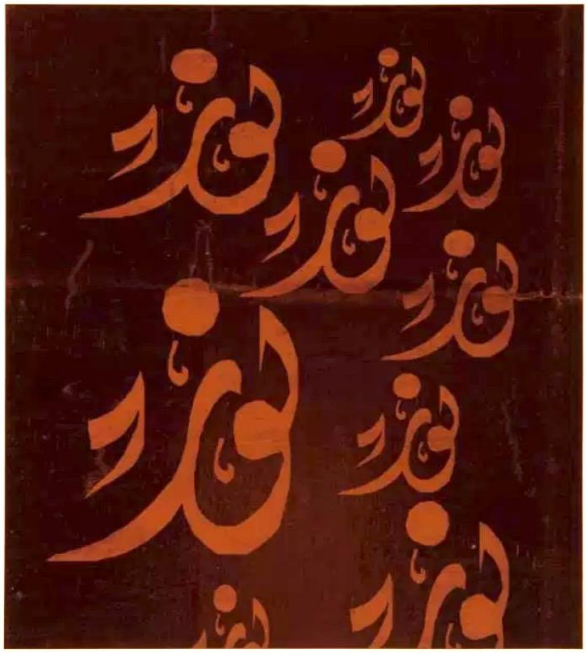

Figure 62: Karima Al Shomely, from the *Noor* series, 2017
Burqa textile
Copyright owned by Karima Al Shomely.

Al Shomely's *Noor series,* Figure 62, is an example of Al Shomely's two-dimensional work and it refers to "the divine *noor* (light) carried by the Prophet Yousef."[33] She uses *burqa* textile to portray the word *noor* (light) repeated over and over again, like an ornamental motif or a religious incantation in rounded, *naskhi* cursive script using deep orange pigment that is reminiscent of

[31] Rym Ghazal, "The burqa," *The National,* 31 May 2009, https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/the-burqa-1.559449.
[32] Simon J. Knell, "Modernisms: curating art's past in the global present," *The Contemporary Museum*. (London: Routledge, 2018): 7.

[33] "7 things you didn't know about the burqa," Sekka Magazine, 1 August 2018, https://sekkamag.com/2018/08/01/7-things-you-didnt-know-about-the-burqa/.

henna, on a black background. Seen in the context of her previous investigation and deconstruction of the *burqa*, here it is stripped back into a meditative and spiritual role where only its basic and conceptual elements remain. Al Shomely suggests that the light coming out of the darkness is like a woman's eyes from under the *burqa* and her repetition of the word, in Arabic script alludes to her "root" or identity, as a descendant of these traditions.[34]

Like Maki, Al Shomely chooses natural media and basic materials such as henna and includes *hurufiya* letters to refer to her native landscape, folk beliefs and themes of gender or basic identity. Contrary to Maki, however, Al Shomely presents the viewer with a simple and stark image of the repeated words, which are more reminiscent of Mandi's later layered *Al Burda* abstract work, originating from calligraphy, with all its religious connotations. Emirati national dress, as was pointed out in Chapter 2, offers a rich source of aesthetic and traditional inspiration for artists and this is particularly noticeable in the work of Maitha Demithan, later in this chapter.

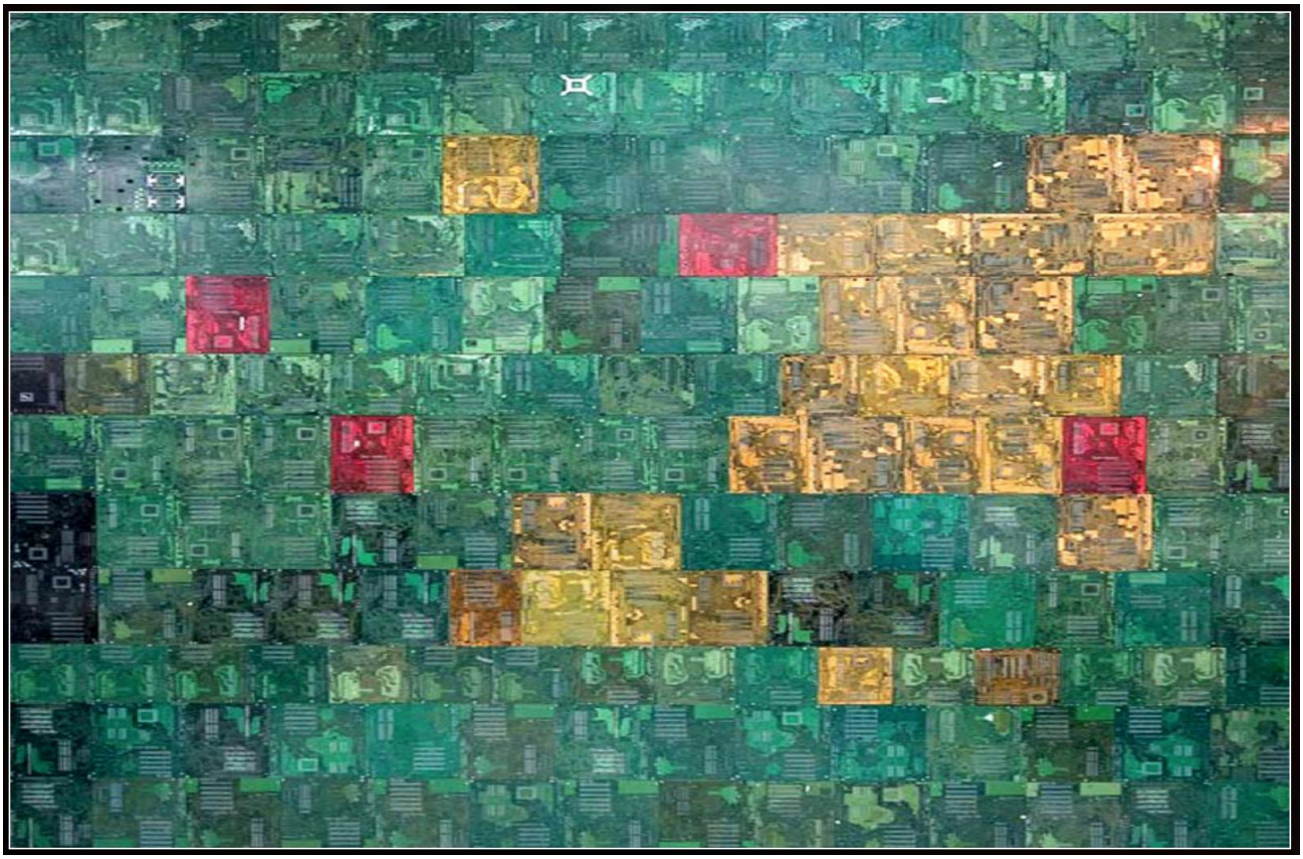

Figure 63: Shaikha Al Mazrou, *Circuit Boards*, 2011
Printed circuit boards on mdf
Copyright owned by Shaikha Al Mazrou and Courtesy of the Vega Petroleum website.[35]

[34] Karima Al Shomely, interview by the author, November – December 2018.
[35] "Shaikha Al Mazrou," Vega Petroleaum website, accessed 7 November 2019, http://vegapetroleum.com/v-factor/private-view/

An obvious development that came with the cultural awakening of the UAE, the growth of secondary education and the influence of pioneer artists such as Hassan Sharif to focus upon ideas rather than form is the development of conceptual art and installation. Shaikha Al Mazrou's path to studying Fine Art at the University of Sharjah, involved her first enrolling for a BA in architectural engineering. This may well have impacted upon her art practice as she experimented not only with conceptual art and installation, but also with sculpture, three-dimensional shapes, technology and multi-media.

While Sharif collected plastic combs (Figure 38) and flip flops to express his dismay at mass production and critique the UAE's growing consumer society, Al Mazrou collected "old" technologies such as circuit boards (Figures 64) that reflect a similar sense of de-valuation and uselessness. It sees her re-purposing outdated circuit boards into a large, colourful tableau that also illustrates the nation's constant desire to be at the front of change, to develop and advance in digital and technological markets, which are so quickly outdated. Having gained her BFA at the Sharjah College of Fine Arts' BFA degree,[36] Al Mazrou then obtained funding from ADMAF in 2014 to study for a Masters degree at the Chelsea College of Fine Art in London, where she focussed on materials and sculpture with great success and won an MFA Student Prize.[37]

[36] The university that Al Mazrou and Al Shomely attended, the University of Sharjah's College of Fine Arts, was the first university to offer Bachelor of Fine Art (BFA) degrees, with Zayed University (ZU) in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, the American University of Sharjah (AUS) and the American University of Dubai (AUD) following behind with similar course and degrees in Art History and Museum Studies being offered later by the same universities and other newer colleges such as *The Sorbonne Abu Dhabi* and *NYU Abu Dhabi*, opening in 2009 and 2014 respectively.

[37] "Interview with Shaikha Al Mazrou," *Tea with Culture Podcast,* Listen Notes, 10 October 2018, https://soundcloud.com/teawithculture/interview-with-shaikha-al-mazrou.

Figure 64: Shaikha Al Mazrou, *Scales*, 2015
Mixed media
Copyright owned by Shaikha Al Mazrou.
Photograph by the author, 2015.

Figure 65 is the result of the *Beyond: Emerging Artists* project, which was commissioned by the Abu Dhabi Art Fair 2017. As part of the project, the artist Mohammed Kazem and Cristiana De Marchi became mentors and curators for a small number of young artists, including Al Mazrou. She was invited to a foundry in Switzerland and given free reign to explore its material archive with the aim of creating new work. Figure 65 is the result, a tower-like column made up of ten different materials from the archive, including marble concrete, bronze and copper. *Scales* uses a mathematical equation (in this case the *Fibonacci* sequence) to give order and pattern to different materials and according to Al Mazrou it is a tribute to Hassan Sharif's emphasis on organising data.[38] It is unexpectedly academic and reminiscent of Sabban's remarks about the need for young artists in the UAE to find original ways of addressing social change.[39] The strong, upright column could also express the nation's strong *Bedouin* beginnings and unfaltering Islamic faith. The diverging colours and materials that make up the column could symbolise the UAE's diverse population and its constant will to drive onwards and upwards, exceeding limitations.

William Lawrie, co-owner of the Lawrie Shabibi gallery in Alserkal Avenue art district in Dubai, visited Al Mazrou's graduation show at the Chelsea College of Art. She is now one of a handful of

[38] The idea of making work that refers to a 13th century Italian mathematician, to organise the weight or measurements of the stone materials so that a number is the sum of the two numbers that precede it. "What is the Fibonacci Sequence?" Tia Ghose, accessed 15 June 2020, Live Science.com.
[39] Rima Sabban, conversation with the author, 20 September 2019.

Emirati artists represented by the successful gallery and she also teaches at the University of Sharjah's College of Fine Art (CFA). Figures 66 and 67 were included in Al Mazrou's first solo exhibition in 2018 at the Lawrie Shabibi gallery, *Expansion/Extension.* They are large-scale, brightly coloured and deceptively playful-looking steel sculptures resembling malleable beanbags or cushions that were scattered around the gallery or leaned against its walls. The oversized objects not only invite a viewer to appreciate the paradox of appearance and materials or misleading perceptions, but also to consider the artist in a magical and mysterious role, elevating seemingly solid materials through expansion and extension. [40]

Figure 65 and 66: Shaikha Al Mazrou, *Excel, Engage and Extrude,* 2017
Painted steel
Copyright owned by Shaikha Al Mazrou.
Courtesy of the Lawrie Shabibi Gallery.

[40] *Expansion/Extension,* 17 September – 1 November 2018, Lawrie Shabibi Gallery, https://www.lawrieshabibi.com/exhibitions/61/overview/

Having observed Abdulaziz' all-covering and yet revelatory bodysuit, works such as Al Shomely's deconstruction of the *burqa* and Mazrou's hard though soft-looking shapes above, a recurring theme in the artwork by Emiratis that have been covered in this thesis is clearly a delight in the paradoxical, the contradictory, the confrontation of past and present, expected and unexpected. Does this evoke an engagement with difference or excitement in diversity that has been nurtured by the UAE's constant changes and transformations? Or perhaps the use of opposites is a means of engaging with the viewer, attracting their attention amidst the constant flow of information and busy everyday life?

An artist who challenges viewers' perceptions by suggesting that all is not as it seems is the graphic designer Amal Al Gurg. Al Gurg came to art through her interest in the discipline of calligraphy and she uses the contemporary media of screen-printing to explore the shapes that words produce in space. An example is *Copper Prayer* (Figures 68 and 69) uses two letters: a vertical *alef* letter and a curved letter *lam* L, to form the reflected and repeated word "Allah" or God, as well as the shape of a kneeling person in prayer. Just as Chapter 4 questioned the status of calligraphy in the work of Mohammed Mandi as an art form, so graphic design has occupied a liminal place in the contemporary art tradition. One of Al Gurg's best known works to date is the large-scale two-colour screen-print, *Amalgamate* (Figure 69) is made up of only two letters: the vertical *alef* letter in gold and the curved and dotted *thal* letter. In the work, Al Gurg ensures that the cursive script is legible, evocative and also suggestive of the differences or boundaries between the sexes. According to arts writer Anna Seaman, who has been following Al Gurg's work for many years, "The letters do not touch, so the work acknowledges societal restrictions of gender segregation yet the finished piece also celebrates [their] unity."[41] Figure 69 is compelling and powerful in its clarity, simplicity and also its daring. In the work, Al Gurg's use of *hurufiya* calligraphy in an objective and artistic way; her use of calligraphy connects with the past and explores new paths of self-expression.

[41] Anna Seaman, "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly," Islamic Arts Magazine, 26 May 2018, http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/the_diving_bell_the_butterfly/.

Figure 67 Amal Al Gurg, *Copper Prayer*,
Screen-print
Copyright owned by Amal Al Gurg.

Figure 68 Amal Al Gurg, *Copper Prayer*, with annotations made by the artist, 2017
Screen-print
Copyright owned by Amal Al Gurg.
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 69: The word *Allah (God)* in Arabic on which the image is loosely based.

Al Gurg's focus on the meaning of the words or letters, their shapes and the shapes that they create in space echoes Clive Bell's theory of Significant Form, which focuses on the way in which the organisation and arrangement of shapes, lines and colours are capable of moving the viewer regardless of their representing recognisable objects and regardless of aesthetic judgement.[42] Citing Bell in the context of Emirati calligraphy may seem alarming, however his hypothesis on significant form perfectly expresses the power that letters and calligraphy can have in an Arab context to move people.

[42] Clive Bell, *Art* (London: CreateSpace Independent Publishing) 2011, 6.

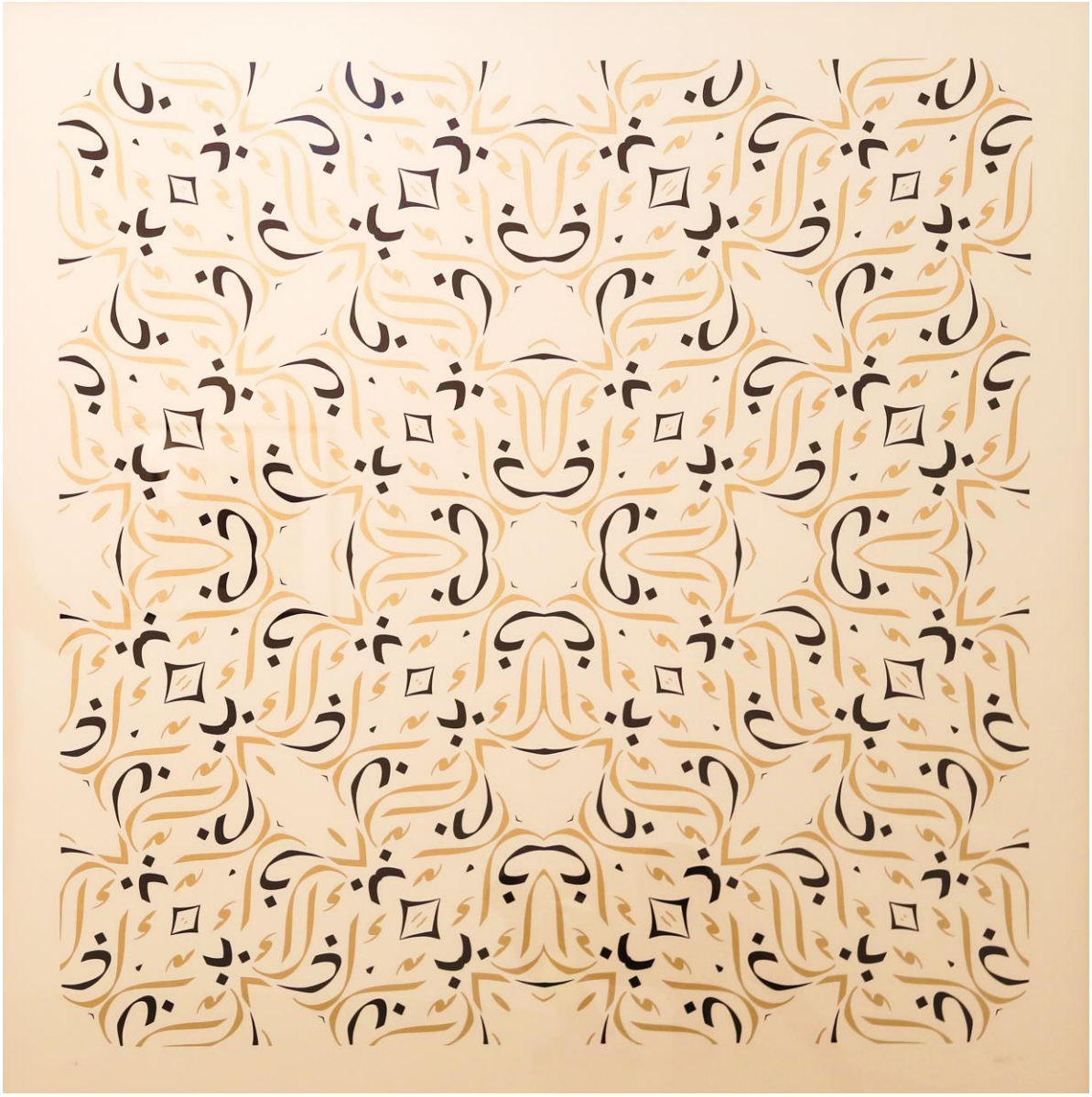

Figure 70: Amal Al Gurg, *Amalgamate*, 2017
Screen-print on paper
Copyright owned by Amal Al Gurg.
Courtesy of Tashkeel, 2017.

This is reminiscent of Abdullah's reference to calligraphy as, "one of the most important icons of the identity of the Arab World."[43] In Chapter 4, Mandi remembered how he felt the first time that he saw calligraphy and Al Gurg describes her first experience, "Standing on the ground floor and looking up into that dome [Haghia Sofia] with Qu'ranic scripture of Surat Al Noor written in Çeli Thuluth [by Mustafa Izzet] moved something inside me." Recalling these moments of inspiration to them as artists, Mandi and Al Gurg create a definite artistic shift towards the Eastwards and this relates to the writing of Partha Mitter about peripheral art[44] and it is the focus of Iain Robertson's

[43] Nasser Abdulla, conversation with the author, 20 November 2019.
[44] Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History an Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *The Art Bulletin* 90, no.4, (December 2008), 532.

work on the diminishing influence of Western aesthetics and value systems on art markets in Asia and Latin America, for example.[45]

Figure 71: Interior of the Haghia Sofia
This photograph shows calligraphy on the interior of the dome
and decorative roundels by master calligrapher Mustafa Izzet.
Courtesy of Shuttershock for Editorial Use

Around 2008-2010, an alignment of creative outlets and non-profit organisations focussed on the arts, began to appear in the UAE. These included EFAS in Sharjah, the Emirates Foundation Arts and Culture Programme, the Sheikha Salama Foundation's Young Artists' initiative based in Abu Dhabi, the JamJar art spaces and the Tashkeel art studios, where Al Gurg attended her first calligraphy class. Tashkeel in particular played an important part in introducing young people to the potential artistic careers, and these including Maitha Demithan. Demithan joined the art centre in 2008, after leaving school, just as she was embarking upon an undergraduate degree in Fine Art at Zayed University, in Dubai. She became interested in portraiture, particularly the way in which portraits can offer clues as to standing and position of individuals and the nations that they represented. Using the facilities at Tashkeel, Demithan developed her own medium of scanography. Unperturbed by the small A4 scanner, she took mulitiple A4 scans and piecing them together to create elaborate tableaux of figures in traditional Emirati costumes and animals (see Figures 73 and 74). This involved hours of colour correcting using image software, but the result was striking. These were exhibited at a group exhibition in Tashkeel in 2009, to great success.

[45] Iain Robertson, conversation with the author, 23 April 2019.

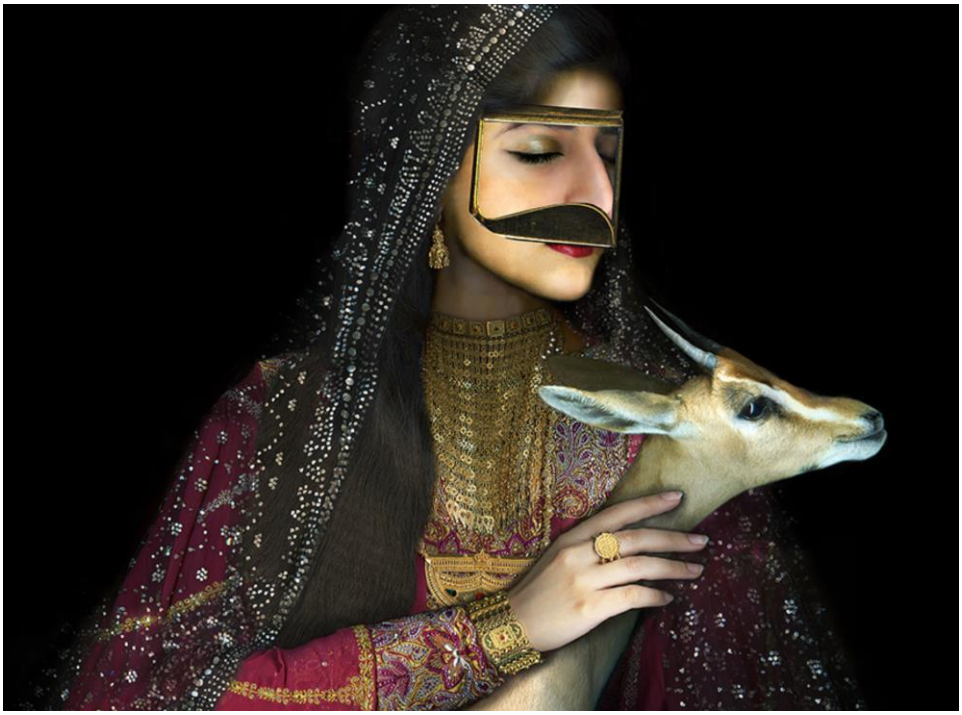

Figure 72: Maitha Demithan, *Gazelle*, 2018
Scanograph
Copyright owned by Maitha Demithan.

Figure 72 is the portrait of a woman, dressed in elaborate Emirati dress, wearing a burqa, jewellery and full make-up with an Arabian gazelle. The animal bears special significance in the UAE for its gracefulness and beauty and beautiful women are often compared to gazelles. The power of iconography in Demithan's images is packed with visual references and this, together with the figure's ornate costume and sideways pose is reminiscent of 18th century Qajar paintings. While Demithan may not have considered Qajar portraits as an inspiration, it was important to show this possible similarity because it relates to Eastern art traditions and illustrates the importance of art by Emiratis as an art tradition that appears to situate itself not only between tradition and modernity, but also necessarily between East and West. While Demithan's subject's eyes are closed here, due to the bright light of the scanner, for example, the medium of scanography and colour correction technology she uses gives Gazelle a layered sense of illumination and two dimensionality.

Demithan's scanned portraits became larger and more ornate and they began to include several people as well as children and animals. Demithan's subjects are often members of her own family in Emirati national dress and they appear to be floating against a black background, because of the effect of scanography. Curator Noor Al Suwaidi, suggests that the real significance of Demithan's work, is not the brightly coloured figures in national dress, but the dark, silent spaces around them:

> …The noise that change has created, almost as if the past is whispering to the future while we are standing in the present. Demeithan depicts symbols of tangible Emirati culture by scanning these elements to create a digital collage that enhances their attributes."[46]

Demithan's work is particularly significant too, because it was selected for the *Past Forward: A Contemporary Art from the Emirates* exhibition of art by Emiratis, curated by Al Suwaidi in 2014-2016, which toured the United States. The exhibition featured work by Al Rais and Abulaziz, as well as work by Al Mazrou and Gargash, which will be seen later in this chapter. *Past Forward: A Contemporary Art from the Emirates,* can be seen as a similar cultural-diplomatic project to the *Three Generations* exhibition at Sotheby's in London, organised by ADMAF in 2013 and ADMAF's later *Portrait of a Nation* exhibition in Germany in 2016 and 2017. Both of the latter exhibitions incidentally also feature work by Demithan and this may suggest that her timeless, immobile figures, flawlessly presentated in national dress may also appeal to a sense of national pride and capturing of Emirati identity. She was also invited to show at the Brisbane Biennial (2009) the UAE Pavilion at the Shanghai Expo (2010) and various other exhibitions such as *Emirati Vision* in Berlin (2010) and *Emerge* in Venice (2011). Demithan's tableaux in this genre appear to represent the past brought up to date through technology. The use of technology to evoke the nation's rapid development may also be relevant here, and the scenes could allude to the surreal or isolated sensation felt by Emiratis who retain an isolated sense of identity when amongst family members and at home.

[46] *Past Forward – Contemporary Art from the Emirates*. Touring exhibition at different US locations. May 2014 – May 2016. Curated by Noor Al Suwaidi.
http://www.meridian.org/pastforward/authors/shaikha-al-mazrou/

Figure 73: Maitha Demithan, Ajyal *(Generations)*, 2012 Scanography Copyright owned by Maitha Demithan. Source: *Contemporary Practices*[47]

In *Ajyal*, (Figure 73) Demithan exploits the medium of scanography to suggest layers of meaning. She depicts a man in traditional Emirati dress, wearing a *guthra* robe and *agial* headress who is holding a racing falcon, the bird that symbolises the Emirates and a quail, the falcon's prey. Al Suwaidi suggests that the quail and the older hand of a man standing behind the man and out of eye-shot in this portrait, "is a metaphor for elders feeding their heritage to future generations."[48] It represents the notion of family, inherited ideas or traditions of the past, that remain present, though out of eye-shot, in the lives of young Emiratis today and this recalls elements of Sabban and Erskine-Loftus' writing about Gulf youth culture.

[47] "Lamya Gargash," Artist's Profile, Contemporary Practices, accessed 17 May 2019, http://www.contemporarypractices.net/artistessay/Lamya%20Gargash.pdf.

[48] [48] *Past Forward – Contemporary Art from the Emirates*. Touring exhibition at different US locations. May 2014 – May 2016. Curated by Noor Al Suwaidi. http://www.meridian.org/pastforward/authors/shaikha-al-mazrou/

Figure 74: Maitha Demithan, *Mutajadid,* Exhibition at Tashkeel, Dubai, 2014
Scanography
Copyright owned by Maitha Demithan.
Source: Tashkeel[49]

Figure 75 Maitha Demithan, "Mother," 2017
Scanography
Copyright owned by Maitha Demithan.
Source: The artist's website[50]

[49] "Tashkeel - About." and "Tashkeel – Exhibitions," Tashkeel website, accessed 21 June 2019, www.tashkeel.org/about and https://tashkeel.org/exhibitions.
[50] "Maitha Demithan," the artist's website, accessed 26 May 2020, https://www.maithademithan.com/

Following the success of her portraits, Demithan began to deconstruct the medium of scanography that she had created. In Arabic, the word *mutajadid*, suggests something that is constantly changing yet remains the same – a reference perhaps to the state of the UAE, or to Demithan's own life, her work and the time consuming task of scanography. Much work had gone into Demithan's first images (Figures 72 and 73) and so *Mutajadid* (Figure 74), the name that Demithan chose for her first solo exhibition at Tashkeel in 2014, is a deconstruction of her perfect, colour-corrected portraiture style.[51] *Mutajadid* features collections of compound figures made out of the various individual scans of bodyparts, such as arms and legs. The figures, which are no longer portrayed in Emirati national dress are surreal and Demithan renders them on the same black background where they create abstract shapes in space. She explained to Seaman her need, at this point, for "something more physical and more honest" and a desire to get closer to her work. [52]

Demithan did not abandon her scanned portraits altogether, however and 2017 saw her create one of her most unusually candid portraits and her first self portrait, *Mother* (Figure 76). It reveals the growing pressures on her life as a mother, holding her two small boys with one hand and as an artist, with her camera in the other. It is a feminist portrait and one that exposes a woman's struggle to juggle her various responsibilities. Demithan tellingly uses two mis-matching scans in an otherwise very polished image (seen here between the arms of her two boys) to express the untidy task of motherhood. Figure 75 belies a new honesty and insight into the life of the artist that was not common in art by Emiratis from previous generations. Demithan's work stands out as a valuable example of Emirati visual culture and its transformation through the medium of technology, not least because the majority of contemporary artists working in the UAE today are female. It is also indicative of the perceptions and the role of the artist in society.

In the case of young Emirati men, despite the huge developments and cultural advancements that have taken place over the last forty years, the fact remains that an artistic career must come second to the need to hold down a paying job to support one's family. This was true in Al Rais' decision to study law at the beginning of his artistic career in the 1980s, just as it is true

[51] "Mutajadid – Maitha Demithan," Tashkeel Exhibition 22 January – 27 February 2014, https://tashkeel.org/exhibitions/mutajadid

[52] Anna Seaman, "Emirati Artist Maitha Demithan Reinvents the Technique of Scanography With Intriguing Effect," *The National*, 18 February 2014, https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/emirati-artist-maitha-demithan-reinvents-the-technique-of-scanography-with-intriguing-effect-1.262992.

for the next artist, Nasir Nasrallah, 30-40 years later. Nasrallah took classes at EFAS while completing a BEng degree in telecommunications at Khalifa University, exhibiting his work at national and international exhibitions. Impressively, while beginning a career at the UAE telecommunications firm *Etisalat*,[53] Nasrallah even become EFAS Vice President from 2006-2012. It was not until 2011, when the artist took a post in the Department of Culture and Information, then at Sharjah Art Foundation that his two worlds began to merge.

In Front of the Coulisses, (Figure 76) was exhibited at the 10th Cairo Biennale in 2006, while the artist was still working for *Etisalat.* It features a series of superimposed photographs that explore both the range of vision and the act of looking at a scene, suggesting the dual visions of a place by the photographer and the viewer, the conscious and the subconscious, the real and the unreal. It is as if the camera becomes like a telephone line, with the interlocutor and the receiver playing an equal part. Responses to the UAE's changing environment and the interaction between an individual's internal world and the outside world are a recurring theme in Nasrallah's work. He is an extremely active artist in the sense that he seems to be constantly reaching out to the viewer, which is a novelty since UAE culture is made up of many different ethnicities and people tend to be quite reserved in public.

[53] "Nasir Nasrallah," the artist's website, accessed 16 May 2019, http://nasir.ae/

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Figure 76: Nasir Nasrallah, *In front of the Coulisses,* 2015
Photographs
Copyright owned by Nasir Nasrallah and Courtesy of Sharjah Fine Art Society, 2006.[54]

Remarkably, Nasrallah's artistic practice and style seem to have been influenced by his telecoms background and this is illustrated by the artist's emphasis on interaction and sharing with the viewer. As will be described in a moment, this takes the form of sharing prints, postcards or artistic processes with viewers and while this could be seen as part of a performance or interactive art, it is also in line with Emirati hospitality and tradition. In his work Nasrallah also tries to be extremely transparent and he approaches the artistic process and the act of seeing with great honesty, which could be a purposeful effort or an element of Nasrallah's hailing from a share-all, 21st century social media generation. *The Story Converter*, (Figure 77) is an installation that Nasrallah presented at the Sikka Art Fair in 2012 [55] and later at the Sharjah Biennale in 2013[56]. It takes the form of a wooden trolley on wheels divided into small squares and people were invited to insert their hand and write a secret. Since they could not see what they were writing, this resulted can result in abstract lines and doodles but according to Nasrallah, the emphasis is on conceptual mark-making as an expression of a person's individuality and identity. "Handwriting comes from your mind through your hand...," he says, "it is an indication of the body. Drawing is the same thing."[57] As well as collecting impressions from his various audiences for the purpose of the installation, Nasrallah, who visited schools, universities and people with disabilities at Sharjah's City for Humanitarian Services for the project,[58] was encouraging and inspiring people to explore their creativity and identity. It is interesting to note that the role of the artist is becoming increasingly flexible and adaptive.

[54] *The Silver Jubilee 1980-2005*, The UAE Fine Art Society 2006, trans. Mohammed Al Waddah, Yousif Aydabi. Nasser Abdullah, ed. Layla Juma and Patricia Millns, (Sharjah: Emirates Fine Arts Society, 2006), 249.
[55] "Nasir Nasrallah," the artist's website, accessed 16 May 2019, http://nasir.ae/
[56] Hanna Orlowski, "Hidden Messages, Nasir Nasrallah Takeover at the Jamjar," Canvas Magazine 14, no. 6 November-December 2018, 54-55.
[57] Orlowski, "Hidden Messages, Nasir Nasrallah Takeover at the Jamjar."
[58] Orlowski, "Hidden Messages, Nasir Nasrallah Takeover at the Jamjar," 54-55.

Figure 77: Nasir Nasrallah, *The Story Converter*, 2012
Interactive mixed media
Copyright owned by Nasir Nasrallah.
Courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation.

Figure 78: Nasir Nasrallah,
The Stories Vending Machine, 2013-18
Interactive mixed media installation
Photograph taken by the author, 2019.
Courtesy of Tashkeel.

The Story Converter is an object and a process; having collected 150 stories for the *Story Converter*, Nasrallah adapted the texts and drawings into a book and a seven metre long frieze. It brings together the visual stories or secrets that are genuine, un-self conscious forms of expression, but also his curated responses to them.[59]

Nasrallah's engagement with the viewer and his deconstructing the act of creativity from an artwork could be understood as a levelling of the playing field between artists and non-artists. In this way, he also redefined his role as an artist to inspiring and sharing creativity with viewers and bringing art to everyday people in their own communities. *The Story Converter* is about interacting in the community and creating exchanges with people based on creativity. Could this have happened 10 or 20 years ago? While the theme of perception, the existence of an Emirati aesthetics and the question of whether art critique is needed in the UAE will be taken up later in this and the next chapter, it should be noted that Nasrallah's *The Story Converter*, project took place in 2012. This was the same year that Pocock made a desperate call for the media to be more critical because "the audience has the right to know what is really happening."[60] Would a critique of Nasrallah's work that questioned whether it is a

[59] Hanna Orlowski, "Hidden Messages, Nasir Nasrallah Takeover at the Jamjar," Canvas Magazine 14, no. 6 November-December 2018, 54-55.
[60] Charles Pocock, "The Art Insider," *What's On Dubai Magazine*, August/September 2012.

worthy form of conceptual art or listing the artist's influences have been helpful to audiences in this instance? Just as Greenfeld's identification of a gatekeepers mentioned in Chapter 1, is irrelevant to the Emirati context, so perhaps the UAE's swift transition to become a technologically aware superstate means that the influence of the media and the need for critics or gatekeepers is also outdated. Have hashtags, trending stories or summary instagram photographs taken the place of the art critic?

The Stories Vending Machine, (Figure 78) was commissioned by Tashkeel for the Art Dubai international art fair the following year and it works along similar lines. A playful nod to the automation of life in Dubai, where everything is easily accessible, Figure 79 could also be seen as a gentle prod at the Emirati public to become more involved with the creation and consumption of artwork. It may also have been meant to awaken the visitors' urge to shop during the art fair, by offering affordable works at the onset. Later, in 2018, Nasrallah expanded this idea to produce *The Atlas of Imaginary Places*, filling the machine with fictional and magical short stories and drawings.[61] Nasrallah's merging of artistic practices, of past and present, of fiction and reality, of lines, words, photography and installation offered a steady and open narrative that reflects his own perception of the world around him, and the UAE's ever-changing urban landscape. He continually includes the viewer, offering them something to keep or a chance to access the creative process, thereby forming their own personal responses to art.

Figure 79: Nasir Nasrallah, Are We All Connected? 2018
Installation
Copyright owned by Nasir Nasrallah.
Courtesy of JamJar, Dubai, 2018.

Are We All Connected? (Figure 79) sees Nasrallah drawing on the windows of the *JamJar* art space in the Alserkal Avenue gallery district in Dubai. The title could be a reference to Nasrallah's

[61] "Ten Years Later," exhibition catalogue, Tashkeel, 63-65, accessed 21 September 2019, https://cdn2.assets-servd.host/mysterious-eland/production/exhibitions/10-Years-Later/Catalogue-10-Years-Later.pdf.

telecommunication background or an invitation into *JamJar's* creative space. Regardless, it sees Nasrallah encouraging viewers, yet again, to interact with art and playful visual narratives. Inspired for this project by his grandfather's journal, in which the latter recorded, "the birth date of everyone born in the neighbourhood because people back then often couldn't read or write."[62] Nasrallah's drawings and markings serve to remind the viewer of the importance of writing, drawing and documenting by hand, in modern times when people often use computers or telephones to communicate. True to form, Nasrallah also provided postcards containing details of the drawings, for viewers to take home, "for them to question both the artwork and the words that are missing in their part of the picture."[63] He also invited visitors to write about personal experiences on the postcards and post them back to him from wherever they were in the world, thus adding to his collection of stories and giving them a global dimension.[64] Nasrallah's art practice is exciting and innovative in the way that it reaches members of the public and in doing so, disrupts the traditional notion of art and the art market. The shifting away of understanding and perceptions about art production and appreciation from a traditional, Western model was broached in Chapter 3 and it will be taken up again in the work of the two remaining artists in this study, Lamya Gargash and Afra Al Dhaheri and again in the following and final chapter.

Lamya Gargash studied photography at the American University of Sharjah, under Kuwaiti artist and photographer Tarek Al-Ghossein. She then gained a scholarship for a Masters at Central St Martins in London and explains that throughout this experience, she kept "coming back" to herself and her cultural beliefs.[65] Gargash developed a practice that focuses on interiors that are devoid of human presence[66] as a way of exploring the Emirati cultural make-up; the way people inhabit space, particularly the unrepresented and often unrecognised workers and labourers who inhabit the nation's cities, their shops and services, making up such a large proportion of the population.

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[62] Hanna Orlowski, "Hidden Messages, Nasir Nasrallah Takeover at the Jamjar," *Canvas Magazine 14*, no. 6 November-December 2018, 54-55.
[63] Orlowski, "Hidden Messages, Nasir Nasrallah Takeover at the Jamjar," 54-55.
[64] "Are We All Connected?" *The JamJar - A Community Arts Space*, 14 September 2018, https://www.thejamjardubai.com/.
[65] "Lamya Gargash," telephone conversation and emails with the author, January 2017 – January 2019.
"I'm fairly reserved because of the nature of my culture, faith and society but [my art]… truly represents who I am."
"Through the Lens." The Galleria. Al Maryah Island. Accessed 17 May 2019. https://www.thegalleria.ae/en/magazine/through-lens/
[66] Like many landscape or architecture photographers, Gargash prefers to focus on, "the modernist architecture [of urban Dubai] associated with the urban development and optimism of the 70s," Elizabeth Stoney, "Lamya Gargash: Inside Abu Dhabi," *Tribe Magazine,* no.2, 2016, 60-65.

Gargash's *Familial Spaces series* document the interiors of some of the city's one-star, budget hotels, often used by travellers on a budget, in the bustling Dubai neighbourhood of Deira.[67] The hotel rooms and lobbies in Figures 81 and 83 portray somewhat dated and gaudy interiors that dampen the ultra-luxurious image of the Dubai and the UAE, so often extolled in the media. They portray the genuine ambition, expectations and daily lives of the one-star traveller to the city, a demographic that is often overlooked. In each photographed space, Gargash also places a framed photograph of her grandmother, in order to make the rooms a sense of ownership of time and place. "My photographic work … focuses on the idea of cultural and social changes within space," she says. "How time has altered the way we communicate and go about our day via space and its composition."[68] The privacy observed and respected by local Emirati families and women specifically, could be seen as an obstacle to visual representations and narrative images.

Figure 80: Lamya Gargash, *Eagle Lobby*, 2009
From the Familial Spaces series
C-Print photograph

[67] Antonia Carver, "Lamya Gargash," in *Its Not You, It's Me – Catalogue for the United Arab Emirates National Pavilion for the 53rd Venice Biennale*, (2009), 114-118.
[68] "Through the Lens." The Galleria. Al Maryah Island. Accessed 17 May 2019. https://www.thegalleria.ae/en/magazine/through-lens/

Examples of art by female artists such as Maki, Abdulaziz and Demithan portray the female form in either a vague, abstract or concealed manner or use brightly coloured clothes or accessories such as the *burqa* to cover their faces. Abdulaziz portrayed women using their hands or the contents of their bags (Figures 44-47) in much of her early work and she became particularly known for her all-covering bodysuit. Gargash does away with this charade entirely and chooses to photograph environments that are devoid of people, preferring to offer clues as to the presence of their inhabitants. This becomes a mysterious game, a little like Nasrallah's concealed art-making projects, in which the viewer is presented with a visual scene as evidence from which to divine the habits or customs of the space's occupants. Without human narrative in order to gain a new understanding of place through the details that are suddenly more noticeable, like relics of things left behind.[69]

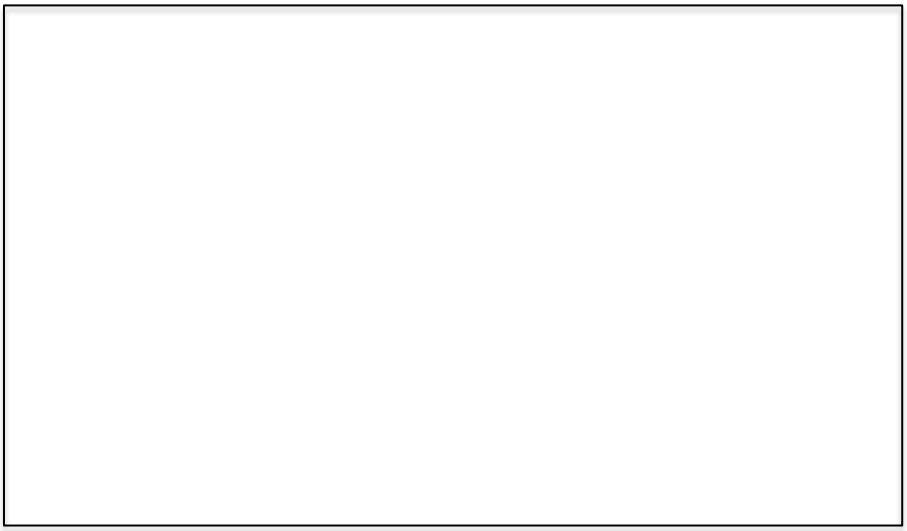

Figure 81: Lamya Gargash in the UAE Pavilion, at the 2009 Venice Biennale
Image removed due to copyright concerns.

Gargash's sensitivity to the growing urban environments and her attention to colours and composition are reminiscent of the work of Al Rais observed in the previous chapter. She strikes a balance between tradition and modernity and uses film, rather than digital photography as a nod to the past, for example. This may have been one of the reasons that Gargash was invited to represent the UAE in its first pavilion at the Venice Biennial in 2009 with the photographic series, *Familial Places* (Figures 82).

> Change has occurred in such a fast pace that trying to recollect old memories seems like it happened so long ago. The banal intrigues me, and I find much beauty in what many overlook. The details are just as important.[70]

[69] Elizabeth Stoney, "Lamya Gargash: Inside Abu Dhabi," *Tribe Magazine,* no.2, 2016, p.60-65
[70] Elizabeth Stoney, "Lamya Gargash: Inside Abu Dhabi," *Tribe Magazine,* no.2, 2016 p.60-65


Figure 82 and 83: Lamya Gargash, *Familial Spaces series,* 2008
C-Print photograph
Copyright owned by Lamya Gargash.

Some of the photographs in Gargash's *Familial Spaces series* (Figure 83 and 84) reveal the rarely seen accommodation of low-income visitors to the UAE.[71] These photographs have a documentary or sensational appeal because they are unfamiliar to well-to-do locals and international art viewers. Through light and composition Gargash attempts to exploring the peculiarities and memories of a place, teasing out not only its humanity, but also its references to the city outside the window, the rapid pace of life outside in which the inhabitants of the room play a part. They are a testament to the UAE's rapid development and the continued hard work that goes in to maintaining its forward and future facing brand, as noted in Chapter 3.

In the *Majlis series* (Figures 85 and 86) the viewer is brought into the private, familial spaces occupied by a range of Dubai dwellers, from humble homes to palaces, which surely belong to members of the Emirati government or royal family members. The word *majlis* describes the Arabic-style of sitting around a room, often around a ruler or chief. This highlights the Arabic cultural practice of sitting together, as was previously described in the context of Sheikh Zayed and his descendants, also recalls the nation's nomadic *Bedouin* origins of sitting around in tent. Returning to Erskine-Loftus' observations in the introduction of this thesis, concerning the duality that exists in everyday life for young Emiratis today and the notion of the "traditional dress, customs, traditions and Arabic of home life, in opposition to the life of work:

[71] Photography was introduced to the UAE in the late 19th century were candid, ethnographic photographs taken by foreign travellers and posed studio photographs.
Sheikha Jasem Mohammad Mubarak Al Suwaidi, remembers that during the British administration, "Agfa brand cameras used to be brought from India."[71]
Maria Botros, "Female Emirati photographer's snapshot of a life less ordinary," *Gulf News*, 11 April 2015. https://gulfnews.com/lifestyle/female-emirati-photographers-snapshot-of-a-life-less-ordinary-1.1489585.

English, commerce, university education and retail consumption,"[72] it is interesting that Gargash has chosen to bring elements that are traditionally Emirati and hidden from professional life into public view. Shown at the 2009 Sharjah Biennale, Figures 85 and 86 recall Abdulaziz' "Life in a Bag series," where the artist presents the viewer with the contrasting existence of the haves and have-nots. While Gargash's images simply document, it is as if the photographer is inviting her (global) audience to see into the more private side of her culture or her country, joining her in observance of its social differences and contradictions. It is difficult not to compare the traditional seating areas and images of modest sitting rooms well-worn seats, dog-eared cushions and blankets, bereft of its owners alongside colder and more formal sitting rooms, which boast chandeliers and silk cushions. The latter's uncomfortable seats and bright lighting of the affluent and cosmopolitan clearly lack the warmth and camaraderie of the more humble homes.

Figure 84 and 85: Lamya Gargash, from the *Majlis series*, 2008
C-Print photographs
Copyright owned by Lamya Gargash.

Much of Gargash's works observes the relationship between past and present, tradition and modernity. The photographer documents daily life, traditional customs and themes at various levels of UAE society.

[72] Pamela Erskine-Loftus, "Common Purpose and Uncommon Outcomes: The Cultural Transferability of Museums," *Reimagining Museums – Practice in the Arabian Peninsula*, (Edinburgh and Boston: MuseumsEtc, 2013,) 25.

Afra Al Dhaheri also observes daily life and particularly the notion of time, though her stance is extremely physical and as a multi-media artist, her work delves directly into the materiality of Emirati life, its contradictions and originalities. Like Gargash, Al Dhaheri completed her undergraduate studies in the UAE, at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi and then applied for a scholarship to pursue her post-graduate studies abroad. She was one of the first recipients of the Salama bint Hamdan Emerging Artists (SEAF) programme launched in 2013 to develop artistic practice over a 10 month period, in the UAE and at the Rhode Island School of Design in the United States and then returned to Rhode Island to complete an Masters (MFA), which has allowed her to apply for a teaching post, at Zayed University, on her return. According to Al Dhaheri, the experience abroad shaped her academic and artistic career. She experienced collaboration with foreign artists, learnt about different working methods and new media, used many different media and developed a strong studio practice. This idea resonated greatly with the young artist because it meant that making art could be seen as a job, with working hours. "Time is really important in my work – in the UAE [where change happens so quickly] I feel it is important to slow down time." Studio visitors and open studios also meant that, as an artist, she would be asked about her practice and would not only have to communicate this, but it also allowed her to gain perspective on her own identity and cultural background.

Figure 86: Afra Al Dhaheri, *Unloaded*, 2015
Acrylic, charcoal, bleach, medical sutures on fabric

This all contributed to Al Dhaheri's art practice; her relating daily life to past memories through touch and the sense; materials and sculpture. Her work reflects on the UAE's multi-ethnic community, development through the progress of time and the continuing conversation with past and present, traditional and modern times.[73] *Unloaded* (Figure 87) is the culmination of Al Dhaheri's time in Rhode Island. It draws on many of her first experiences working abroad, her increasing awareness of herself as an artist and the new methods and media that she discovered:

> … my head was full of ideas and teaching and I worked on intuition. *Unloaded* is large in scale – the canvas is bigger than me. It shows perspective drawings in my earlier work … the work that I had done on recollections of space... I spent a lot of time on the canvas, doing acrylic washes, bleaching it then coming back the next day, tearing it… it really shows the "push and pull" of my artistic practice and the tension between me and the canvas. I was looking at the rips and thinking about curing the canvas, healing it: My dad is a cardiologist and my sister is a doctor, so I asked him for some medical sutures which I then used to seal the tears! I began to understand the importance of material, its use and relevance in the work of an artist. [74]

Al Dhaheri's time abroad represents an artistic liberation as she realised her power as an artist and the broad range of materials at her disposal, particularly glass and cement. Cement and concrete have always been a familiar sight and texture to Al Dhaheri, growing up in the UAE where she remembers the common sight of cranes and construction work around her house. She reflects that: "As soon as that phenomenon of rapid change and development started taking place, more and more things started to become ephemeral."[75] Al Dhaheri moulds concrete base blocks for her glass-work and uses quick-setting concrete as a modern and easy to handle material in her work or as a primer on paper and canvas. Through the growth of trees amidst the rubble of a building site or grass in the cracks of old tiles, Al Dhaheri observes the intrusion of nature on a futuristic or modern concrete development or building site. Her MFA thesis, *The Past is Today,* included hand-built ceramic branches, with are set, like uneven and isolated shadows into concrete bases. Since then, Al Dhaheri's work is littered with references to the past or to notions of time.

[73] Memories are "an essential part of a human being's existence.
Afra Al Dhaheri, "The Past is Today," (Masters thesis for Master of Fine Arts, Department of Painting at Rhode Island School of Design, USA, 2017), 9.
[74] "I [find] myself endlessly fascinated by materials that convey a process of memory, or even have a sense of memory in their qualities." Afra Al Dhaheri, conversation with the author, St Ives, 8 July 2019.
[75] Afra Al Dhaheri, "The Past is Today," 17.

Figure 87: Dhaheri, *Preserving Impatience*, 2017
Glass on percaline and ceramic
Copyright owned by Afra Al Dhaheri.

In Figure 88, Al Dhaheri invites the viewer on a holiday visit to her grandmother's house where she recalls the latter asked her to pour tea out of a metal cooking pot, into small teacups. Her grandmother was disappointed to see that, as her granddaughter quickly set out the tea and poured the boiling water into the teacups, one of the teacups cracked:

> She asked me, "Why do you rush? Have patience and warm the cup first so it would adjust to the temperature of the tea," remembers Al Dhaheri. "My art is my way of slowing things down, looking and exploring the materials. [76]

In memory of her grandmother's warning, Figure 88 was made by pouring molten glass into traditional teacups, which caused them to crack. It illustrates the violence and disruption of modern life on time-old traditions and she describes the glass process as, "sealing memories."[77] Like many young Emiratis of her generation, Al Dhaheri has grown up in an increasingly high tech world, seeing construction cranes and concrete all around her, also experiencing the slow tea-making of her grandmother at home, where time is slow. This confrontation of unhurried ritual meeting modernity and speed represents the conjoining of past and present and recalls Appadurai's notion of rupture in Chapter 3. The glass displaces or crates a rupture with the traditions of the past.

The fast pace of the UAE's development and urban growth has had a similarly transformative effect on the country's culture and the mentality of its people. It has resulted in

[76] Afra Al Dhaheri, conversation with the author, 8 July 2019.
[77] Afra Al Dhaheri, conversation with the author, 8 July 2019.

feelings of displacement, particularly in the older generation, but development could also, in the case of the UAE, be deemed a "global signifier" because it infuses the country's art, has resulted in novel ideas, transformative themes and new attitudes, aspirations and expectations.

The architectural evidence of change that Al Dhaheri saw in Dubai, the moss or shrubs that would swiftly grow on a quiet building site and her interaction with her grandmother's traditional way of life compared to her own, have meant that much of her work focuses on the passing of time. Al Dhaheri's own concept of time is extremely situated. She is aware of the different ways in which people see the passing of time and that many people in the UAE regard rapid change as a normal way of life. She recalls an exchange with a fellow in her MFA course in the US, when she referred to a 20 or 40-year-old building as, "old" and was incredulously told, "That's not old!"[78] As the nation continues to push towards new challenges, unique experiences and innovation, time and the way the past is seen or recognised has become an increasingly important and layered theme for Al Dhaheri.

Figure 88: Detail from Afra Al Dhaheri, *Who Has Time For It?* 2016
Steel pipes, rope, cement and plaster
Copyright owned by Afra Al Dhaheri.

Who Has Time for It? (Figure 89) is an installation based on the traditional Emirati *talie* weaving technique practised by women in the Gulf region and particularly in the UAE (Figure 3). For this installation, Al Dhaheri hung large blocks of plaster and cement, using heavy ropes to literally give weight or significance to the traditional and painstaking handicraft. Processes such as *talie,* the application of *henna* to women's skin and the preparation of *oud* perfume are amongst the ritualistic and traditional practices associated with women which continue to inspire artists such as

[78] Afra Al Dhaheri, conversation with the author, 8 July 2019.

Al Dhaheri and Maki. *Who Has Time for It?* is, in many ways, a monument to rituals of the past and to the slowing down of time. The title's question and the use of cement gives the past modern relevance and transforms the image of the *talie* tradition into an invitation or a dare to onlookers to make time for past interests and out-dated activities.

For Al Dhaheri, as for many young Emiratis, reality or daily life is multi-dimensional. In her art, Al Dhaheri outlines this nostalgia for a different time and a different reality within Emirati culture and she notes the way in which time slows and actions become more deliberate when one observes the processes of the past. Naturally, it would seem that viewers who understand Al Dhaheri's visual references to the country's past and are captured. Her work echoes common sentiments and traditional themes such as coffee cups or *talie*, can be recognised by an Emirati audience, whom Al Dhaheri takes on a journey that bridges modernity and tradition deliberately, in the easy manner of a young Emiratis of her generation, who is familiar with the multiple layers and conversations between past and present. She frames a familiar, local past with a modern and global present. The energy and intricacy of Al Dhaheri's work mean that it is also appealing and accessible to international audiences and her contextual references also chime with Appadurai's writing about transnational connection and his notion of "communities of sentiment." Though Appadurai's research does not include the UAE, he observes the nearby Indian and Iranian cultures and suggests that a "new sodality"[79] is being formed through the creation of local, community experiences on a global level, with the help of social-media, multi-media and global communication. These communities may focus on feelings of home and of personal belonging in scope, however they are also virtual or "transnational, even post-national [sodalities] … [and] operate beyond the boundaries of the nation."

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Finally, since social media and technology, contemporary and conceptual art continue to become enmeshed in contemporary life across the globe, can the rapid trajectory of creative culture and art from the UAE offer clues to observers from other nations, as to the future role of art in the UAE and the world? Certainly the internet, virtual communications and social media, whether directly recognised in the practice of art or not, has had a deep, philosophical effect on human connections and perceptions. It could be argued that photography, film and the instantaneous posting, sending

[79] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization,* (Minneapolis, Minn; London: University of Minnesota Press), 1996, 8.

and receiving of images on personal computers or mobile phones can lead to a greater appreciation of traditional practices such as the pouring of tea, the *burqa*, calligraphy, stories and spaces, because they can be observed in the viewer's own time. The viewer can ponder, deconstructed and re-assessed images on many different levels and in different layers, they can share them with others, champion them through postings or exchange views about them on social media or blogs. Considerations of the conversations created by the work of these artists, the construction of communities of sentiment, to follow Appadurai's concept, or constructed online communities, as well as the notion of constructed traditions from Chapter 2, will be reflected upon in the next and final chapter.

As well as benefitting from modern arts education and its transmission, much of the contemporary artists' working in this chapter emanate a sense of connectivity and self-awareness, linking to the past and looking to the future. This sets them apart from the *pioneer* artists included in Chapter 4. While the *Jeel al-ruwad* artists who produced works observed in the previous chapter worked to forge an Emirati visual identity and bring traditions of the past into the present, the *Jeel al-jadid* generation of artists continue to be inspired and stimulated by Emirati national dress, *Bedouin* traditions, local customs and landscapes, but are also looking ahead into the future. A new openness alluded to in the work in this chapter, has also meant that a more robust dialogue now exists between Emirati artists and their audiences, which include the local Emirati art audiences and international art viewers. Many of the artworks in this chapter are examples of conceptual art and some are installations. Emiratis are seeking more defining and directorial roles in their art practice by creating the work or concept and also guiding the viewer into their idea.

At the beginning of this chapter Worrell is quoted as referring to the beginning of the 21st century as the "pivotal decade" due to the structural changes taking place and art higher education being offered in the UAE at the time. This was also a pivotal time for artists in the UAE and this chapter has shown that in a short space of time, art by Emiratis began to define a new and relevant form of art that is increasingly open and forward facing. The final chapter of this research explores the result of this study, what common themes exist and what is the wider role of art by Emiratis? The UAE is a nation with a strong desire to remain traditional and yet develop modern ideas, new technology and be seen on an international stage, as equal to or leading other countries.

As this on-going discussion between tradition and modernity within the development of contemporary art comes to a conclusion, it becomes increasingly important to question what shifting concepts signify to us as global citizens. How can the UAE's contemporary art practices be understood through lenses such as contemporary, cosmopolitanism, globalisation and

modernisms and existing debates about an expanded art world? Where is art by Emiratis situated within these located cultural themes, to external observation of the UAE cultural context and to global art research as a whole?

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Looking back, the alliance of the seven emirates to form the UAE, in 1971, represents not so much a split with the past as a breaking of new ground or a rupture into the future, to use Appadurai's phraseology.[1] Emerson's caution at the beginning of this thesis that, "old and new make the warp and woof of every moment" emphasises the daily co-existence of past and present in Emirati culture. Examining the UAE's history in Chapter 2 reveals that during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the government's focus lay not so much in creating new laws or paths, but in selecting or unearthing old ones and in establishing a trajectory of change. For pioneer artists described in Chapter 4, the challenge lay in establishing themselves and their art, in identifying an art audience and to some extent, an art market. Once established, the importance for both artist and viewer, has been to not forget the lessons of the past but rather to use traditions and visual culture of the past to shape, inspire and power the future. This also stands remarkably close to the philosophy of the UAE's founder, HH Sheikh Zayed:

> He who does not know his past cannot make the best of his present and future, for it is from the past that we learn.[2]

This philosophy of learning from the past and using its lessons to make the best of the future is at the root of much of the art by Emiratis observed in this study. It can be seen as a continuous dialogue between past traditions and the modern development that has shaped the visual culture of the UAE, Emirati identity and aspects of daily life that have inspired and developed alongside it.

Central to this thesis has been the desire to uncover the nature of the UAE's quiet but buoyant art tradition and chart its development. The combined methodology of literary research with oral testimonies and art-based evidence has proved useful in this regard. Through this study, characteristics of art by Emiratis have emerged and these will be discussed now. It should be noted that these are not an absolute definition of art by Emiratis. One of the study's objectives has also been to open new dialogues and suggested new patterns of perception and understanding, to us as global citizens and as researchers of art.

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[1] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*, (Minneapolis, Minn; London: University of Minnesota Press), 1996, 3.

[2] "Sheikh Zayed in quotes," *Gulf News*, 31 October 2005, https://gulfnews.com/uae/shaikh-zayed-in-quotes-1.306268.

The young nation's rich visual culture is seeped in local traditions such as *talie* embroidery, national dress, pearl fishing, *nabati Bedouin* poetry and scholarly Islamic calligraphy, explored in Chapter 2. It describes the massive sociological changes that have transformed the UAE, such as the sedentarisation of the *Bedouin* tribes and physical changes to the country's culture, its landscape and skyline and the huge influx of expatriates are just some examples of the isolation of Emiratis, the sociological and psychological effects or displacement that has happened to Emiratis without their needing to leave their country. Though positive, because they show the UAE striving to reach its targets and exploring new challenges, the country's continual state of development, paired with the local population imbalance can be felt in many examples of art produced by Emiratis of all generations. Examples are Mohammed Kazem in the *Directions series*, Abdulaziz' *Blue Freedom*, in Chapter 4 and Demithan's *"Mutajadid* and Nasrallah's *The Stories Vending Machine*, in Chapter 5. Though the country was not officially colonised and did not undergo revolutions or struggles for independence, Guerrero-Ripperberger's study of Arab and Latin American artists' work might nonetheless be relevant here. Many of Abdulaziz, Kazem and Sharif's performances see the artists seeking to re-define their environment, explore it with their tongue (Kazem) or ascertain their place within it (Abdulaziz). Guerrero-Ripperberger suggests that artist in a post-colonial context attempt to come to terms with their changed reality in a similar way.[3]

Continual changes and development in the UAE has also meant that dialogues between tradition and modernity, past and present are necessarily fluid and flexible concepts. Tradition and modernity could be described as shifting and juxtaposing concepts. Tradition remains both a negotiated concept at a public level and an accepted constant or way of life, at a personal or individual level. It is as if the UAE's creative reality could be defined by its lack of definition. Nonetheless or with this understanding, cultural tourism has found its place on the map, at a local, national and international level and in art districts such as Dubai's Alserkal Avenue and the Louvre Abu Dhabi. UAE art veteran Antonia Carver's opinion piece on *artnet*, urges an open vision of the UAE's contemporary art scene. "Dubai embraces both the local and the international, and does not see these positions as binary, but intertwined."[4] Carver's words, the opinions of other art specialists interviewed in this thesis and some of the works observed here too maintain that it would be a mistake to try to see art from the UAE through a single or particular lens. It would also

[3] Sara Angel Guerrero-Rippberger, "Panethnicity. Postidentity and artist groups in Latin America and the Middle East 2003-2010." *Notes in the History of Art* 31. no. 3 (2012): 53-63. www.jstor.org/stable/23208595

[4] Antonia Carver, "Opinion: Antonia Carver. the Director of the Jameel Arts Centre On What Most of the World Still Doesn't Understand About the UAE Art Scene," posted on 12 November 2018, *Artnet.com*, https://news.artnet.com/opinion/antonia-carvar-op-ed-1392775.

be a mistake to see art by Emiratis according to a purely Western art narrative since, as Engelen notes, we are looking at a different language that is rapidly developing. Carver emphasises the need for flexibility on behalf of the viewer, avoiding neat comparisons and thematic timelines, as this thesis has tried to do. Jones describes the UAE's richness, as a "petri-dish of contradictions" and this celebrates the originality of art by Emiratis. Certainly, these dominant themes or contradictions, such as the meeting of tradition and modernity, are located cultural themes that co-exist in a way that add life and poetry to this traditional society.

The continually functioning and digressing themes that exist within the UAE's art ecosystem form an original context that takes time to understand. They represent an important catalyst in the creation of Emirati visual culture and have shaped the means and speed by which development has happened. Though many of those interviewed for the purpose of this thesis speak of an "Emirati art ecosystem," few speak of a recognisable theme or style in the art created by Emiratis present or past, such as, for example the dot paintings of Aboriginal Australians. Though the highly decorative aesthetics of Islamic art are important, they are not guiding factors in this contemporary art or art made now. Perhaps this is because Emirati creatives do not, as Abdulla points out,[5] share the same hard boundaries as sociologists and journalists. It is also important to remember that the UAE is made up of tribal emirates, which are officially responsible for the culture and art development in each region today.

Emiratis born after 1971 have grown up in a constantly shifting and expanding contemporary society where limitations are constantly exceeded. There is a true sense of "boundarylessness"[6] and cosmopolitanism here, as described by Beck. Young Emiratis and many of the artists working today do not situate themselves solely in national terms, though they appreciate traditions, focus on local contexts and refer to global themes. The country's culture has grown to embrace change and also hold on to traditions with great determination. This flexibility may mark the UAE out as a genuinely globalised nation. Paired with its enduring sense of tradition; the UAE's tractability also serves to define it.

Tradition is the motor that drives modernity and inspires innovation. Located in the past and also within the UAE's original and post-modern art ecosystem, "it is an instrument for

[5] Gaith Abdulla, conversation with the author, 20 August 2019.
[6] Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision,* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2006), 3.

achieving modernity,"[7] as suggested by Erskine-Loftus. The UAE's burgeoning contemporary art "industry" continues to drive positive change with art being used as a vehicle not only for development, but also for cultural diplomacy and communication. In many ways, progress and change have become the norm for art by Emiratis and therefore the high-speed notion of time and persistent drive should be feature on the hypothetical list of characteristics or at least the inspirations for art in the UAE.

Certainly tradition and the past can represent different things to different people at different times. Amongst the art produced by the pioneer generation of artists in Chapter 4, this can be illustrated by Mandi's work, which refers to traditional Islamic calligraphic art and to Sharif's installations, which also re-enact the actions of the past; ancient fishermen in the Persian Gulf or *Bedouin* women kneading bread. The Emirati region's own, timeless physical environment and nature have provided inspiration for traditional *Bedouin nabati* poetry as well as the colour and texture of Maki and Al Rais' paintings. For younger artists of the *Jeel al-Jadid* generation, featured in Chapter 5, the UAE's past is more distant, though just as powerful. It seems fitting that Nasrallah uses a child-like drawing style to portray stories and recollections of the past. For him, the style is not regressive or naïve, but it plays an energetic and subjective role in creating new ways of seeing, exploring and engaging with new audiences. The past is transmitted or summoned either through the re-enactment of tradition, the wearing of national dress, for example or through family life and stories.

Living in an increasingly balanced reality, where both traditional Emirati and a more globalised daily or professional life have their place, artists such as Nasrallah, Al Shomely, Demithan and Al Dhaheri delight in the fringes or balance of the "two strands." They see tradition and modernity, past and present, fact and fiction as part of the same reflection of Emirati life itself. Their art recalls a past through traditions; through objects and memories. Artists now actively seek to physically re-creating the past. Al Dhaheri's *Who Has Time for It?* is a re-construction or construction of *talie* weaving, where concrete and iron poignantly replace the silk cushions and thread of the traditional craft. Tradition can be seen not only as a mechanism to control or channel globalisation, as Erskine-Loftus suggests, but also as Al Sayyad imagines, a powerful scavenger who, like the artist in many ways, inspires and feeds into contemporary Emirati visual culture.[8]

[7] Pamela Erskine-Loftus, "Common Purpose and Uncommon Outcomes: The Cultural Transferability of Museums," *Reimagining Museums – Practice in the Arabian Peninsula,* (Edinburgh and Boston: MuseumsEtc, 2013), 25.
[8] Nezar Al Sayyad, "Global Norms and Urban Forms in the Age of Tourism: Manufacturing Heritage. Consuming Tradition," in *Consuming Tradition. Manufacturing Heritage* (London: Taylor and Francis.

Demithan's use of scanography creates flawless portraits where her beautiful subjects, wearing intricate national dress are caught in time, captured by the past like the portraits of older civilisations. This recurring dialogue is certainly an important element that sits at the root of art by Emiratis.

Though artists working in the UAE have been confronted by continual development and construction, each generation has had its own challenges. This thesis has revealed the ways in which the first *pioneer* generation grappled with a lack of art audience, few materials or art training. Modern times have provided friendlier audiences and added opportunities for artists, younger generations of the younger artists working today. Artists today have missed out on early art education and many have therefore undertaken alternative studies before fine art degrees or BFAs were offered in the UAE. For Al Sayyad, the dichotomy lies not so much between tradition and modernity, as between tradition and globalization. He notes that, " In this global era … the consumption of tradition and the manufacture of heritage are two sides of the same coin."[9]

This research has steered away from defining an Emirati aesthetic, having already shown the impotence of the terms *Emirati Art* and *Emirati artist.* Nonetheless, traces of Emirati traditions, elements of heritage, conversations between tradition and modernity, past and present have all been observed in the art by Emiratis observed in Chapters 4 and 5 and also from the descriptions of the art departments, educational organisations and NGOs such as EFAS, ADMAF and EF, which complemented the country's education systems in Chapter 2. Ever since the discovery of oil and the creation of the nation under HH Sheikh Zayed's guidance, grants offering Emiratis the opportunity to study abroad have been given and the UAE's ever present multi-ethnic culture has imprinted itself in different ways on the nation's way of life.

While the Emirati art ecosystem's development is multi-layered, as pointed out by Jones and others, artists from this small country's indigenous population have been very driven and remarkably successful in representing their country at major national and international art exhibitions and for taking part in residencies and fellowships in various institutions and universities around the world. It would be naïve to suppose that all of this would have happened without the vast wealth that the discovery of oil provided. Nonetheless, contrary to occasional acerbic press articles, art by Emiratis, its content, media and the complexity of its subjects should not be dismissed or defined by this good fortune.

2001), 15.

[9] Nezar Al Sayyad, "Global Norms and Urban Forms in the Age of Tourism: Manufacturing Heritage. Consuming Tradition," in *Consuming Tradition. Manufacturing Heritage* (London: Taylor and Francis. 2001), 15.

Many if not all the work of artists explored in this thesis have focussed on the UAE itself, its location, landscape, elements of identity, aspects of modern Emirati life such as overconsumption, overdevelopment, feelings of isolation, modernity and change. This is done in a manner that is neither accusatory nor confrontational, nor could these artists be accused of self-censorship. At this concluding moment, it is important to ask what elements are missing from art by Emiratis or from the discourses used to observe these works?

Certainly, students of Western contemporary art history may notice the lack of nude figures, the lack of swear words or images of anger and frustration that have resulted in age-restrictions in some European or North American exhibitions. This thesis' focus on the UAE is founded on difference. Just as the term "non-Western art" is not helpful in defining a country by what it is not, so questioning why brutal languages and shocking images are not portrayed in art by Emiratis is not helpful either. Nonetheless, the body, either through image of bodies kneeling in prayer as shown in Amal Al Gurg's *Copper Prayer* (Figure 67) or as a concealed form in Abdulaziz' performances (Figures 8-50) have served to define aspects of Arab and Islamic visual culture. It is perhaps no surprise that perceptions of the body have inspired artists since the earliest years of the UAE. The body's movement in space occupied Sharif's "Jumping series" photographs and performances (Figure 33), Maki focuses on the contours of the female form in her paintings and sculptures (Figures 25-6), Kazem's *Directions series* has already been mentioned and Abdulaziz' gradual self-concealment or personal isolation is acted out in *Blue Freedom* (Figure 49) as she paints herself into a glass bubble. The latter's *Numbers and Lifetime series* (figures 45-6) and Kazem's earlier *Tongue series* (Figure 39) also allude to parts of the body, the hand or the tongue, as if searching for proof of its identity.

In her essay on performance and body art, De Marchi observes that through challenging perceptions, a sensation of the unfamiliar is activated[10] that draws in viewers and helps to create an audience. The idea of unfamiliarity, when considering the performance work of some of the earlier artists that have already been cited, such as Abdulaziz and Kazem, as well as art pieces such as Al Gurg's *Amalgamate* (Figure 70) or Demithan's *Mutajadid series* (Figure 75) assemblage of limbs also challenge viewers' notions of art in different ways.

Nowadays in countries like the UK or the United States, being an artist or having an artistic lifestyle is not unusual. This is not the case in the UAE and the careers of artists in Chapter

[10] Cristiana DeMarchi, "Mindful Body – An Introduction to Body Art and Performance in the Gulf," *Contemporary Practices,* 14 April 2016, 148.

4 and 5 from Al Rais to Nasrallah have been disrupted by the practicalities of "getting a proper job" to pay the bills. Dubai gallerist Roberto Lopardo, remarks that artists who are Emirati are doubly committed because they must often work twice as hard to pursue an artistic career alongside their paying job and family commitments. This means that for many Emirati creatives, art exists in parallel to real life and it cuts across the layered home and work life that Erskine-Loftus describes.[11] Art is the place for performance, for observation and imagination and this comes across very much in the work of Nasrallah, Abdulaziz, Al Shomely and Demithan, for example, whose work shows her juggling her work as an artist with that of being a mother. Is this a characteristic of the role of the contemporary artist in the UAE today or simply a symptom of how globalisation, development and the cost of living are transforming life everywhere?

While this study has considered art from the point of view of a non-Emirati, what has it revealed about how art is regarded in the UAE itself? Robertson's work on emerging and changing markets suggests that new aesthetic values have the power to shape or transform the art market. Various tournaments of value are in play at a local level, in the UAE; though Emiratis do not see art as a necessity, it is recognized as valuable commodity, a conduit for development, a symbol of luxury, consumerism and also of tourism, which are important to the country's future growth. Sabella's article, "Is the United Arab Emirates constructing its own art history," discusses the notion of value. Ryan and Appadurai's work on tournaments of value and the latter's work on commodities also observe the development of art in a society where tradition and modernity interact on a daily basis. Sabella suggests the importance of growing up in a country with "a functioning and coordinated art infrastructure,"[12] to allow people to become "art savvy." The values and perceptions that artists gained from childhood and throughout their early lives is vitally important and artists mentioned in Chapter 4 contrast greatly from those in Chapter 5, where globalisation and modern technology has woven itself into the Emirati *zeitgeist*.[13] Jurkute notes that, "the youth will play a fundamental role in shaping this future discourse within the creative realm." [14] She suggests that after emphasising development and progress for so many years, the country must map its expected outcome and ensure accessibility and opportunity for future

[11] Pamela Erskine-Loftus, "Common Purpose and Uncommon Outcomes: The Cultural Transferability of Museums," *Reimagining Museums – Practice in the Arabian Peninsula* (Edinburgh and Boston: Museums Etc, 2013), 25.
[12] Steve Sabella, "Is the United Arab Emirates Constructing its Art History? The Mechanisms that Confer Value to Art," *Contemporary Practices,* IV, (2014), 6 -132.
[13] "Consuming art is a form of addiction but, unlike normal drugs, art addiction requires more time to influence the brain..."
Sabella, "Is the United Arab Emirates Constructing its Art History? 6 -132.
[14] "Vilma Jurkute on how Alserkal in Dubai is Reimagining Cultural Spaces for Urban Sustainability," The Place Brand Observer, 13 February 2020, https://placebrandobserver.com/vilma-jurkute-interview/

generations.[15]

The younger generation of contemporary artists, whose art is observed in Chapter 5, were not forced to engage directly with an uncomprehending and sometimes hostile early local audience, as Kazem or Sharif had done. The internet is certainly one of the reasons that the growth of the UAE's art market did not have to rely on a single gate or gatekeepers, to return to Greenfeld's model. It has also provided a means of sharing work without exposing the artist, softening or broadening the visual perceptions of a local and international population. This and the swift development of the UAE itself also meant that audiences are also perhaps necessarily more receptive to change, to the unknown, to innovation and to art. The success of an artist or a work of art has become part of a larger story with multiple values and multiple influencers. Certainly, the internet is a great social equaliser and it has succeeded in breaking down distances for communication. As a result, the UAE enjoys connection with many different art cultures and exposure. The UAE's previous openness to foreign talent and ideas and its need of help and expertise from abroad, first for the pearl industry, then oil speculation and export, international diplomacy and development has been complemented by technology. The UAE's multi-national or globalized creative culture means that artists from the UAE and from the UK, for example, can share inspirations and cultural references.

It is increasingly important to observe Knell's notion of *situatedness;* his inclusive observance of non-Western nations contextually and amidst their rapid development and multi-national influences. Furthermore, it might also be important to question whether all art, whether by Emiratis or by Belgians, by Maoris or by North Americans should not be viewed in the same inclusive and situated manner. The internet has also resulted in a speeded up of time, as noted in Al Dhaheri's *Who Has Time For It?* There may no longer be a need to identify the past and present from each other, since they are brought together so closely in a nation where so much emphasis is placed upon the future.

Until 2007-2008, art and artists from the UAE had limited global visibility and that may be why writers such as Mignolo and Ramadan call for a more situated, re-definition of Arab art. At events such as the Sharjah Biennial, under HH Sheikha Hoor's direction, the nation's art is represented amidst the work of other world artists. Though events such as this are not intended to define or promote art by Emiratis in any particular way,[16] large multi-national exhibitions such as

[15] "Vilma Jurkute on how Alserkal in Dubai is Reimagining Cultural Spaces for Urban Sustainability."
[16] Alex Greenberger, "Sharjah Art Foundation Director Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi Named Head of International Biennial Association," ArtNews, posted 27 September 2017,

the Sharjah Biennial may allow Emiratis to feel or be seen as part of a broad global art story that sees them represented by galleries and showing work at international art fairs. The lack of national emphasis enables artists from the UAE to find their natural place more easily amongst other ultra-connected, rapidly developing and future-facing nations. This style of exhibition may also serve to corroborate the importance of the art of local or regional Emiratis.[17]

The Sharjah Biennial presents a wonderful opportunity for artists keen to showcase their skills on an international stage, but it can be confusing to audiences seeking to recognise elements of Emirati culture in their work or identify cultural markers. Is the UAE missing out by not encouraging local viewers to gain a greater understanding of the nation's contemporary art and artists? This could lead to increased dialogue on art, a wider exchange of ideas, an informal or popular form of arts education and eventually a greater number of Emirati art critics, as suggested by Gronlund.[18] A broader knowledge of art by Emiratis would also allow international art viewers to gain a greater understanding of the UAE through its art and promote cross-cultural understanding, as was shown by my experience with Afra Al Dhaheri and the St Ives artists in 2019.

Sabella's article asks, "Is the UAE constructing its art history?" alludes no doubt to the nation's top-down plan of development for its post-oil economy. It also emphasises the nation's determination to see alternative patterns and construct, in this case, an alternative art history. But what is Emirati art history or the history of art by Emiratis? The notion of constructed pasts and constructed traditions that have arisen in the UAE were echoed in Appadurai's writing about the growth of emotional attachments, "communities of sentiment" or constructed virtual communities. Ramadan's work on "visual thinking" and Belting's observations on the alternative traditional reality in the electronic and digital worlds may be relevant to situate art by Emiratis. Mitter's work on the Western axial hold over art history suggests that a challenge for the art of any nation on "the cultural periphery" would be to "re-centre" it within a Western art narrative.[19] He suggests that the answer lies in using epithets and Western art historical categorisation, which arguably raise more problems than they satisfy. Though Emiratis might locate their own art tradition as a culmination of the past, the idea of engaging with family and re-enacting the past through storytelling or through events such as *National Day* suggests that the past is being transformed

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http://www.artnews.com/2017/09/27/sharjah-art-foundation-director-sheikha-hoor-al-qasimi-named-head-of-international-biennial-association/

[17] Deborah Najar, telephone conversation with the author, 14 July 2019.

[18] Melissa Gronlund, "The art world is in need of a strong critical culture," *The National*, 14 July 2018, https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/the-art-world-is-in-need-of-a-strong-critical-culture-1.750185.

[19] Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History an Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *The Art Bulletin* 90, no.4, December 2008, 532.

into an illusion of the present. With research showing a growth of the number of Emiratis online, could virtual "communities of sentiment," whether based on the past or the future, be set to rival and then replace national cultures and cultural identities in an ultra-connected and increasingly fast paced digital world? And while much of the art by Emiratis included in this thesis do not necessarily obey rules dictated by Western art historical narrative, might the location of Emirati art with reference to relevant art discourses not encourage a deeper exploration of both the value of artistic theoretical thought and the art practice of Emiratis?

Returning to the need to identify or define art by Emiratis, an undeniable characteristic of art by Emiratis is its ability to be unexpected and defy generalisation. For example, though many of the artists mentioned in this thesis studied abroad, examples have shown how many engage creatively with others and pass on their training and understanding of art, as Hassan Sharif did in the 1980s and 90s. Not only is this generosity amongst artists and determination to share experiences or breakthroughs an important pattern in the creation of art by Emiratis and the formation of an art audience, it also embodies HH Sheikh Zayed's notion of learning from the past and the region's *Bedouin* hospitality. In an interview, Shaikha Al Mazrou emphasises the uncomplicated and shared nature of art in the UAE, "to inspire and get inspired back … it keeps my momentum and my own practice going too."[20]

Nasrallah's installations are as significant in what they represent, as in what they do and their openness to others. By disassociating the finished work of art (and any possible ensuing judgment) with the act of creation itself, Nasrallah prioritises communication. This recalls the one day exhibitions that Sharif organized in Sharjah Central Market (Figure 35) where art works were dotted around the market to incite reactions and to blend in with the hustle and bustle. Perhaps the hope was that finally, both art works and audience would merge into one. In *The Story Converter* (Figure 78) and *Are We All Connected?* (Figure 80) Nasrallah involves members of the public into what Langham and Barker may refer to as "high-context communication."[21] Having brought art to his audience, just as the Louvre Museum was taken to Abu Dhabi, perhaps Nasrallah's aim is to build an engaged art audience or community; and eventually construct an art historical tradition in this way? Though no aspect of this directly entails a dialogue of values, tradition or modernity, the examples of Nasrallah's work in Chapter 5, involve sharing or bringing into the present, personal experiences or stories that have been lived or inherited from the past. The artist's recollection of

[20] "Interview with Shaikha Al Mazrou," *Tea with Culture Podcast,* Listen Notes, 10 October 2018, https://soundcloud.com/teawithculture/interview-with-shaikha-al-mazrou.
[21] Eric Langham and Darren Barker, "Spectacle in Participation: A New Heritage Model from the UAE," in *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula: Debates, Discourses and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2014), 87-8.

the past through stories and drawings, draws together the profound nationalism, global awareness and aspirational drive that characterizes Emirati culture. It also relates to Appiah's work on cosmopolitan patriotism, as do so many of the other examples of art by Emiratis in Chapters 4 and 5.

The second objective considered in Chapter 3 relates art by Emiratis to art discourses and this can raise thorny issues, which will now be addressed. Though Western art history has justified the importance of critique, artists and also art writers in the UAE are not especially vocal. The lack of a critical voice could be a cultural trait. Why should art traditions remain solely located on a Western axis and why should Emiratis compare and critique the work of artists as a way of developing art or validating the place of artists within a Western-style art historical construct? Hassan Sharif emphasized the need for his friends and students to learn about the different art movements, including for example Modernist and Constructivist art. He did this to encourage them to learn more about art in general, to be able to speak to other artists internationally, about their inspirations, to describe their work and to be able to learn about themselves, while observing the work and challenges of other artists. Art was a challenge and a struggle for many of the first pioneer generations. It was not taught at primary and secondary levels in Emirati schools from 1979 to 2014 and artists interviewed here also recall that art materials were always scarce. This explains the lack of robust art critique by Emiratis and also perhaps the need to situate or corroborate art by Emiratis onto a global art horizon, which has been attempted through the research conducted in this thesis. It represents a positive step towards redressing the balance swinging in favour of countries with a long-established art tradition and developed critical voices, which will be addressed in a moment. The dialogue between art by Emiratis and art discourses developed in Chapter 3 involves analysis and evaluation. It is an academic exercise that is not one of comparison or measurement. Similarly, examples of art by Emiratis chosen in Chapters 4 and 5 show that art can offer fresh perspectives and open new or alternative dialogues for viewing art made in this uniquely connected and at times determinedly disconnected environment.

The brief historical summary given in Chapters 2 and picked up in the case of each artist, in Chapters 4 and 5, explains that when art was taught in Emirati schools and indeed Kuwaiti schools in Al Rais' case, it was generally by Egyptian teachers. Paradoxically, it is difficult to relate much of the work by artists in this study to that of artists from elsewhere in the Arab world, to art from the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia or countries with more long-established fine art tradition, such as Lebanon or Egypt. Conversely, when exploring much of the artwork in Chapter 4 and particularly Chapter 5, references have been made to the Western art groups such as the Impressionists, the Constructivists and Fluxus more than once. When Abu Dhabi sought to

become an art hub and was looking to heighten its international reputation as a centre of culture, the emirate imported the *crème de la crème* of world museums to the UAE: Musée du Louvre and the Guggenheim. Could it be that references to Western painting and art styles, such as Al Rais' references to the Old Masters, to the Impressionist series are purely aspirational? Would such aspirations not stand in opposition to the UAE's traditional roots? It could be suggested that the UAE's swift trajectory into the future and towards globalization has mean that, whilst retaining its strong traditional beliefs, it has a grown to have a lot more in common with the globalized cultures of the West than countries in its direct proximity.

From what has been gathered for the purpose of this thesis and from the few quotes by the founder of the UAE, HH Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan, it is clear that the UAE's intention is to carve a different path altogether that focuses on the future and on development. The determination and speed in which the Emirati art ecosystem has been created, suggests that the UAE will defy expectation and construct its own particular art history and original way of seeing. Robertson's study of the emerging art markets and the effects of globalisation detect a disruption of traditional auction houses, their valuations and the appraisal of art. He observes that whereas auctioneers in Europe would, in the past, have been able to evaluate art from around the world, an aesthetic shift has altered the previously accepted Western understanding of art.[22] Like Mitter, Robertson describes an increasingly powerful move away from the West. Though Eastern art markets are not explored in this thesis, their growth could indeed have a balancing effect on the supremacy of Western art, thereby encouraging a re-centring and re-evaluation of the importance of art by Emiratis, in the eyes of a global art community and global art markets.[23]

Perhaps key to any exploration of art within a society that is not the writer's own is an acknowledgement of personal differences. Smith describes the multiple ways of "being in time with others,"[24] the importance of flexibility and openness in contemporary art. This chimes well with the various examples of art by Emiratis in Chapter 5. Contemporary art by Emiratis has become part of the modern moment and the inverse is also true. Moreover, in a modern world where computer software is capable of creating graphics that can replace the years of study of a calligrapher or calligraphic artist, so Smith's writing substantiates the importance of the artist and

[22] The picture is changing dramatically… Though the Western post-war ecosystem has formed the basis for many of these markets, these are responding less and less to the West.
Iain Robertson, telephone conversation with the author, 23 April 2019.
[23] Iain Robertson, *A New Art from Emerging Markets* (London: Lund Humphries, 2011).
[24] Terry Smith, "Contemporaneity in the History of Art," A Clark Workshop 2009, Summaries of Papers and Notes on Discussions,' in *Contemporaneity - Historical Presence in Visual Culture* 1 (2011): 5, http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu

justifies the need for art now.[25] The UAE is a forward-facing nation, hurtling towards the future. Discourses emphasising the strength and contemporaneity of art create a powerful image of the potential of art by Emiratis in the future. Here the lines blur between the power of iconography and the use of soft power in a diplomatic or legislative context. Nonetheless, just as the UAE government's initiatives and visions of the future map a never-ending plan for innovation and development, so the role of the artist and art by Emiratis, will surely play a massive part in the nation's future.[26] Art has become the visual and often interactive means by which the past is remembered. Art and visual culture plays an important role in activating a sense of national identity. Seen otherwise, the march of globalisation and the passage of time have made art by Emiratis the glue that holds the nation's traditions and memories to the present moment.

Finally, if the research contained within this thesis could contribute in any way to the study of art by Emiratis and indeed to the discourse of art created both within and beyond a Western art narrative, it would be to underline the importance of the traditions of the past, twisted as they are within the "warp and woof of every moment" of the present.[27] This investigation of the discourses and dialogues has highlighted the many facets of art by Emiratis and has suggested ways in which the contradictions and particularities of art can be bought together into an inspiring new language, defined by its difference.

Change and development, social media and technology, contemporary and conceptual art have become enmeshed in the modern Emirati reality. As a result, artists from the UAE, a nation seeped in tradition, have shown themselves capable of moving beyond Western dictates and even national characteristics altogether, to create art that is flexible and truly contemporary: for the world as it is now, and as it might be.[28] If the internet and globalisation have fragmented the traditional designs of nationhood, cultural and philosophical boundaries so the continued growth of the UAE's art infrastructure, the progress of the Saadiyat Cultural District, the increased art and museum studies courses being offered in UAE universities, the growth of galleries, exhibitions and the steady proliferation of art patrons, artists, collectors and curators continue to represent

[25] Terry Smith, 'Worlds Pictured in Contemporary Art', in *Regionality/Mondality – Perspectives on Art, Aesthetics and Globalization*, eds. Charlotte Bydler and Cecilia Sjöholm, (Södertörn: Södertörn University Press, 2014,) 241.
[26] Smith, 'Worlds Pictured in Contemporary Art', 241.
[27] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Quotation and Originality" in *The Complete Works* (New York and Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904; Bartleby.com, 2013), chap. 6, https://www.bartleby.com/90/0806.html.
[28] Terry Smith, "Worlds Pictured in Contemporary Art," 261-2.
Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History an Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *The Art Bulletin* 90, no.4, December 2008, 531-548.

important signifiers for development of this young nation's contemporary art tradition. They are testament to Emiratis' creativity and self-belief.

> "All the picture was prepared. It was not a matter of fresh thinking, but of simply putting into effect the thoughts of years and years."[29]
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> HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan (1918-2004)

[29] Peter Hellyer, "Year of Zayed: remembering the vision of an innovative and inspirational leader," *The National*, 4 May 2018, https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/year-of-zayed-remembering-the-vision-of-an-innovative-and-inspirational-leader-1.727313.

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