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ART

A Visit To Emirati Artist Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim's Khorfakkan Studio

BY

Anna Seaman



Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim at his studio in Khorfakkan

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The work of Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim incorporates the craggy mountainous landscape that surrounds him in Khorfakkan as he encounters humanity in nature

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Within minutes of entering Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim's home studio, he is regaling me with stories about the mountains. Despite the space that he has built behind his family villa in Khorfakkan being full of artworks and other interesting material such as portraits painted in the 1980s and family photographs, for Ibrahim, if you ask him about his work, his mind goes to the landscape. "Place is very important to humanity," he says. "Your personality is built by your environment."



An installation view of Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim's retrospective Elements at the Sharjah Art Foundation

Ibrahim is often referred to as a land artist. The small enclave of Khorfakkan, on the UAE's east coast where he was born and raised, is flanked on three sides by the rocky faces of the Hajar Mountains and they are surprisingly imposing. It is this very landscape that reveals itself in his work. Ibrahim uses found material collected from frequent forages into the mountains and forms sculptures from a papier-mâché mix of leaves, clay and soil gathered directly from the land. Several of his works consist only of stones or rocks brought back from the mountain and wrapped in copper wire. Even his paintings—usually characterised by a bright and almost garish colour pallet—are a direct response to the town where he has spent his entire life.

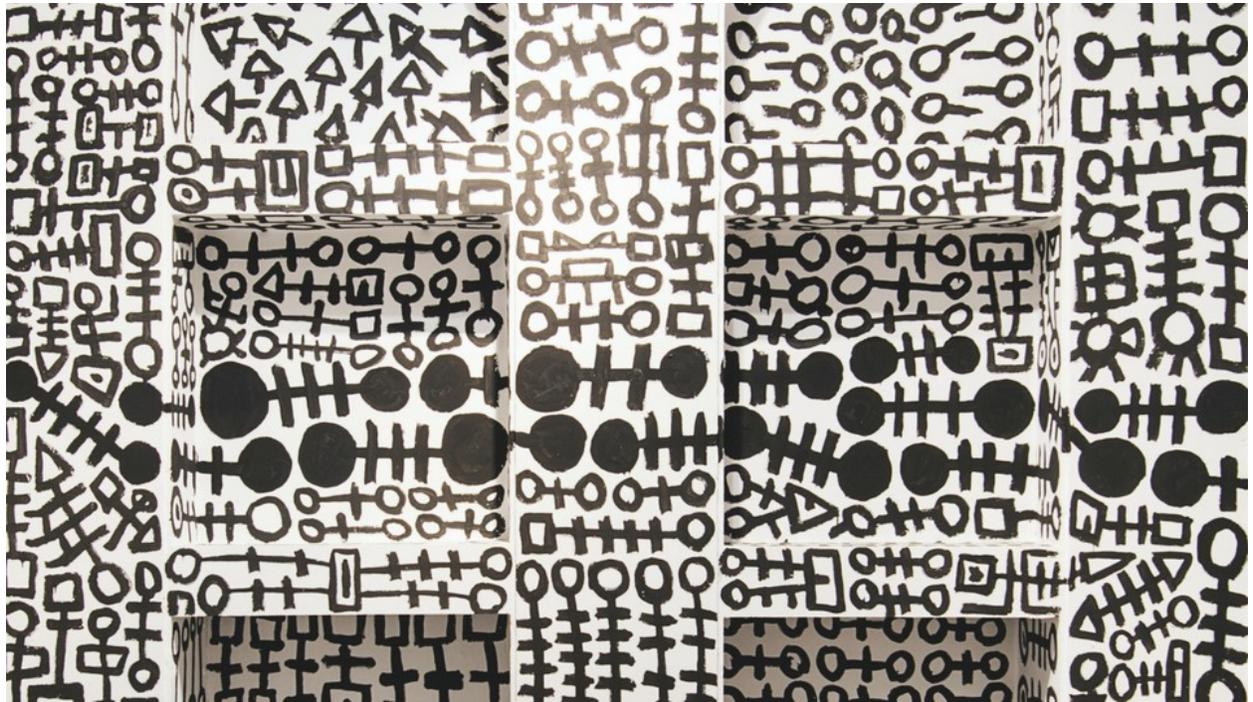
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Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim in his studio

“From the time I was born I only ever saw the sun rise,” he tells me. “When it started to set, it went behind the mountain so I never saw sunset throughout my childhood. Instead, the final hour of the day was wrapped in a grey shadow and it affected me deeply. I felt that I had been robbed of the colours of sunset and this encouraged me to discover colour; you can see a lot of colours in my work because of those early years.” Whether it is his large, bulbous and almost animated sculptural forms or his painted canvases, Ibrahim relies on pinks, blues, reds, greens and oranges to <https://www.harpersbazaararabia.com/art/artists/a-visit-to-mohammed-ahmed-ibrahims-khorfakkan-studio>

characterise his oeuvre. With the exception of one piece—a four-metre high photographic print showing the mountain with a large hole neatly carved through the centre, which was commissioned for the 2013 edition of Emirati Expressions and is aptly called *Sunset*—the average viewer would not normally think of the dappled light of a beautiful dusk when encountering Ibrahim’s work. However, after he tells me his tale, I can’t help but see new significance in his already entrancing pieces.



Views of Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim’s work on Bait Al Hurma. 2018. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation

One of the UAE’s greatest living artists, Ibrahim was friends and a close friend of the late Hassan Sharif, as well as one of “the five”—a moniker given to five conceptual artists who formed *The Flying House* collective. His is an artistic career that he forged largely on his own. “In 1980, when I graduated from high school I wanted to study art but there were no options for me to do that,” he remembers. “So, I taught myself.” His brother-in-law, who was studying in the UK, sent him art books that he would pore over, trying to comprehend and translate them concurrent to his own studies in psychology at Al Ain University. Through this somewhat arduous process, Ibrahim started to find his visual language. A turning point was when he met Sharif in 1986 and

they formed a close bond. By sharing their artistic discoveries and struggles, Ibrahim found his voice.



Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim. Various works. Mixed media installation. Dimensions variable. Installation view: Sharjah Art Foundation (2018)

“Until then I was painting more traditional subjects such as portraits and landscapes but this was not my vision; this was not what I wanted to say.” As he tuned into his subconscious thoughts and started to notice small details, such as the shape of doodles he would make whilst on the phone or the common shapes in everyday objects, his artwork took on the artistic expression that Ibrahim is known for today. *Primordial*, a canvas painted in 1988 depicts abstracted forms, is strikingly

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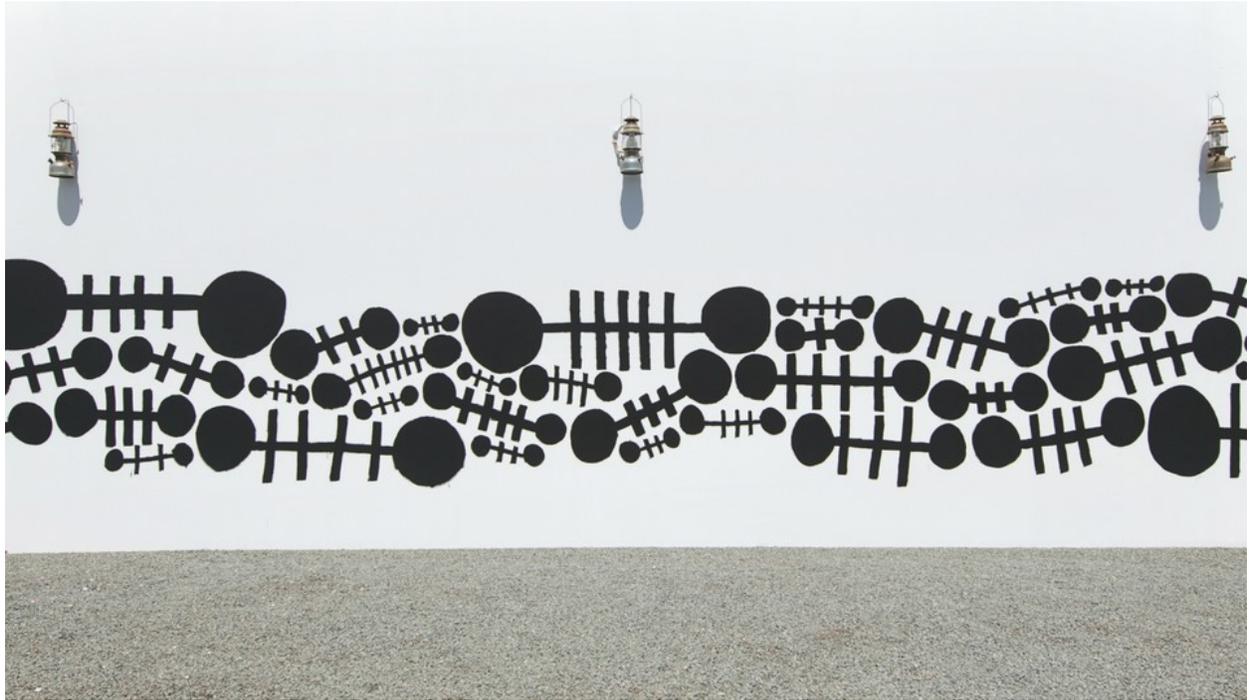
telling of his later practice. A snaking blue line, which could be the branch of a tree, pulls the viewer's eye through the composition, otherwise scattered with circles, squares and rectangles. When condensed, these are the shapes that constitute his later symbol drawings. In the lower left corner of the 1988 pieces, the beginnings of Ibrahim's vertical lines appear—a gesture that recurs throughout his oeuvre.



Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim in his studio

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The painting is the oldest work in Ibrahim's large retrospective currently open at the Sharjah Art Foundation. The show brings together pieces from the past three decades showing several canvases populated with vertical lines, colourful papier-mâché sculptures on white plinths, an outdoor installation of wrapped rock collections, and an entire room dedicated to his now recognisable geometric symbols.



Views of Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim's work on Bait Al Hurma. 2018. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation

While Ibrahim is content with the increased interest in his work, he is somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of a retrospective. "It is a very important show for me but it is also a crossroads and I find it a dangerous one because I am not sure what comes next," he says. "At the moment, I am waiting to see if I will go right, left or straight ahead. It could be another turning point for me." Ibrahim's exhibition in Sharjah is a vital progression in the artist's career. Here he uses simple aesthetic structures to explore his deep fascination with memory; both from his personal experiences and the kind of innate memory found in our DNA, which he describes as a "primitive urge." His works touch us all just as the surrounding landscape that influences his intriguing sculptural formation. Ibrahim's is a universal art.

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Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim: Elements runs until 16 June 2018 in Gallery 3, Bait Al Hurma, Bait Makrani, Al Mureijah Square, Sharjah Art Foundation