

SELECTIONS



ARTS-STYLE-CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND BEYOND

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INSIDE THE ISSUE A TOUR OF VARIOUS ARTISTS' STUDIOS
NAZEM AHMAD AND HIS PRIVATE COLLECTION - ALBERT BOGHOSIAN AS CURATOR
ARTISTIC LITERATURE - CULTURAL NARRATIVES LANDS IN KUWAIT

MOHAMMED AHMED IBRAHIM

Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim is one of UAE's foremost artists. He has spent his life exploring land art and has a deep-seated interest in materiality and abstraction of form. Hailing from Sharjah's Khor Fakkan, where he also has his studio, he's considered to be one of UAE's pioneer five conceptual artists. The 56-year-old artist has exhibited his work across the globe, in such places as Dubai, Cuba, Cairo, Paris, Moscow and Dhaka, and he participated in the Venice Biennale in 2009.

Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim in his home studio in Khor Fakkan, Sharjah. Photo by Natalie Naccache





Details from the studio,
photos by Natalie
Naccache



We are sitting here in your studio and in your house, almost in the shadow of Khor Fakkan's mountains. Talk about your relationship to the natural environment and how it informed your work.

Ever since I was a child I was curious about all nature. I would go camping, make my own tent and spend a lot of time alone. When you are alone in nature you have a lot of dialogue with yourself. I would hear sounds, words coming from the mountain, rocks, stones, plants and creatures. I think this was the most influential part of my childhood.

How did you turn these experiences into visual art?

I think it came naturally to me because I had such a relationship with nature. I started noticing my own position around 1983 when I began to select certain stones in the mountain areas and turn them upside down. I found that the colour was lighter underneath

and as I turned them over again and again, I realised I was the first person to those stones, and I was living a visible trace. Looking back, I think it was my first performance although I wasn't aware of it at the time.

When did you become aware?

Well, in 1989 during my conversations with Hassan Sharif, he pointed out that I was making land art. When I recognised that, I started to look for information and realised that I was not alone. One of my discoveries then was Robert Smithson.

Whether you paint, draw or make sculptures, your practice revolves around abstract shapes, which you have described before as being a kind of primordial marking. How do you arrive at these forms?
In the beginning I was interested in the shapes of everything that surrounded me and the more I looked, the more I started to see symbols. For example, a car became to me a line joining two circles, just as a pair of



glasses has the same shape. I spent a lot of time drawing and repeating these symbols until the point that my hands were working but my brain was thinking of something else and the symbols simply flowed from my hands

So, in a way, you could say your work is a meditation on repetition?

Yes. When you spend so much time doing one thing, you reach new places in your mind. My work is certainly like meditation for me, and it is also about discovery into my own consciousness. For example, I take a lot of shapes from what I see when I close my eyes. We think when we close our eyes that our vision stops but it never stops. There is a space between the eyelid and eyeball, and it is in this space that I find my shapes.

Do you consider your audience?

Audience is, of course, important but it is my first priority. Primarily, I am making, doing, creating and following an inner calling. There is something inside of me that drives me to do what I do, and I think the ones who truly appreciate me are a specialist audience. They are the ones to whom I want to show my message.

What do you mean by specialist? Do you feel that the audience needs to have specialist knowledge to understand your art?

It is not about understanding. It is only about feeling. Ideally, I like someone to come and see my work and to leave without asking any questions. I don't want to say anything, I just want someone to read the work and take from it whatever they want.

But you mentioned your message, what message is that?

We can read each other without talking. Just through the art piece. We have a dialogue together through the art piece, our conversation becomes through the artwork.

Perhaps your most striking works are your brightly coloured sculptures made from found material, why do you choose these colours?

Khor Fakkan is surrounded on three sides by the mountain, which keeps away the sunset. As I grew up the afternoons would be filled with a different kind of light, not a shadow or sunset, but a grey light. When I did eventually see the light of a sunset, it was like an explosion in my eyes, so it is for this reason that I like to work with bright colours.

And, so we come back to talking about the mountain. Do you still visit the mountain?

Yes, of course. As often as I can. I like to walk, sometimes for many hours. I collect branches, stones and small pieces that call to me and I go even in summer. I like to feel the humidity and the harsh environment, it makes me feel alive.

Can you describe your daily routine in your studio?

I can spend from 10 to 12 hours a day in my studio but no one day is the same. Sometimes I start my day with a cup of coffee and breakfast, sometimes I go straight to my studio. The work I do depends on my mood. I like to listen to music but I have no specific schedule.

Are there any personal objects in your studio that you feel you cannot work without? [The artist picks up a spherical object that appears to be a mass of twisted wire and thread.]

Inside here, there are three or four pieces of stones here that I collected from Hatta mountains during my residency with Art Dubai where I worked with Munira Al Sayegh. We made up stories about the stones on the way back to Dubai. At the time, I was living in Hassan Sharif's house, and I wrapped the stones in wire and placed them on his desk. Then we also

Sculptures found in Ibrahim's studio. Photo by Natalie Hacoche



started making up stories about them, and I took some of his material and added that to the wrapping. It became a very close object to me especially after he died, I feel that it holds some of his spirit.

You talk of your material almost as if it has a personality – would that be a fair assessment? I work with what is around me, but I only choose that which calls to me. I have spent all my time dealing with my material because I feel it belongs to me but in general, the language that I choose to use with my material, objects, shapes and colours belongs to everyone.

Ibrahim fills his studio with pieces of his own art that are inspiring to him. He builds sculptures from the materials he finds in the mountain and favours bright colours. Photos by Natalie Naccache

