But We Cannot See Them

Tracing a UAE Art Community 1988–2008

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1988–2008

There was a house in the Satwa neighborhood of Dubai where artists, writers, and intellectuals took refuge in one another’s company. Many of them identified with a “new culture” of radical, formal, and conceptual experimentation, in both art and writing. 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. Some of the most frequent visitors were his art student Mohammed Kazem, the poet Adel Khozam, his brother Hussain, also an artist, and the artists and writers mentioned below.

On the east coast of the Emirate of Sharjah, there was a library in the town of Khor Fakkan run by an eminent poet, a friend and like-minded colleague to the Satwa house artists. This was Ahmed Rashid Thani. Around 1990, two young artists came to live at the library, and made it their studio: Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim of Khor Fakkan, and Abdullah Al Saadi from the mountains of the nearby Emirate of Fujairah. Each developed a distinct aesthetic and practice, drawing directly on the rocky, mountainous landscape around them. Ibrahim’s colorful, geometric paintings morphed into sculpture, which joined his land-art installations. Al Saadi produced volumes of nature studies, and environmental installations, derived from his travels by bicycle. Both came to know the Satwa house artists, and soon they were exhibiting their work alongside Mohammed Kazem and Hassan and Hussain Sharif.

For the first half of the 1990s, there was a sand dune on the border between Ajman and Sharjah, dubbed the “Sand Palace.” If you saw a bonfire burning there, it meant the Sand Palace was active. A poet might be reading aloud, a television actor who was also a newspaper writer might be discussing a play, or one of the visual artists might be playing music for the company gathered there.

Sharjah offered yet another kind of haven for these artists and intellectuals. The Sharjah Art Museum and the Emirates Fine Arts Society were among the few public places in the UAE where experimental...
artworks were exhibited at the time. Some of the UAE’s most heated aesthetic debates, public and private, grew out of the exhibitions in Sharjah, particularly the more experimental, conceptual projects by artists in this group. Controversy followed a number of their exhibitions. Every now and then a piece of artwork would just disappear, mistaken for refuse.

Most of the year, and in most of the UAE, however, there was nowhere to see the art of this community, despite their prolific output. Jos Clevers was a Dutch artist and curator who came to Abu Dhabi in the early 1990s. He sought original, contemporary, Emirati art. He had been told there was no contemporary art in the UAE. He met Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, who ushered Clevers into the Satwa house community, beginning artistic friendships that lasted until Clevers’ death in 2009.

The artist Vivek Vilasini migrated from a lively art community in Bombay to Dubai, where he made his sculptures in solitude for the first year. Right on the verge of giving up, after repeated efforts to find peers and exhibition opportunities, he finally tracked down Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, whose art he’d once seen in the Sharjah Biennial. Ibrahim introduced him to the group at the Satwa house, and, by the next day, Hassan had decided Vilasini must be in the upcoming exhibition at the Sharjah Art Museum. Two months later it opened, re-titled The Six (in 1996, with Jos Clevers, Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, Mohammed Kazem, Hassan Sharif, Hussain Sharif, and Vivek Vilasini). If it had not been for the Emirates Fine Arts Society, the Sharjah Biennial, and the Sharjah Art Museum, most of these artists might never have found one another. And if it hadn’t been for the continuity of their relationships, they might not have grown as they did. The counterpoint to the periodic exhibitions in Sharjah was the daily making of art, teaching art, reading about art, writing about art, and reading and discussing theory, philosophy, poetry, and so on in the homes and ateliers of these artists.

While Hassan’s home in Satwa looms large in the formative years of this community, those interviewed describe the house itself as quite modest: just a few rooms under an asbestos roof, piles and piles of books, and a small courtyard. Photos from that time show Hassan and his visitors sitting in the garden on generic white plastic patio chairs. The garden was part of a courtyard that was originally pavement. Inspired by Vivek’s plantings, and with his help, Hassan ripped up areas of cement to cultivate a garden of his own. Vivek recalls the courtyard when it was mostly empty and white. By the time Hassan moved out of that house, the plants had grown taller than him, and lined the courtyard.

The 1990s saw this community form and settle into a richly productive period. Ibrahim had an Atelier in Khor Fakkan, where he taught art, while Kazem taught at Hassan Sharif’s Atelier in Dubai. Abdullah Al Saadi traveled extensively from his base in Khor Fakkan, where he taught English in a local school while he developed a series of journey-based exhibition projects. A young mathematician and painter, Ebtisam Abdulaziz, was an early student of Kazem’s. Kazem and Hassan both taught the techniques of drawing, painting, and sculpture, but encouraged students also to pursue the underlying conceptual truth of each artistic gesture. Eventually Abdulaziz had a profound breakthrough that connected her mathematical practice to her artistic one. Soon she was teaching alongside her mentors and peers at the Dubai Atelier. She became the Atelier’s manager, a role that Kazem before her had taken on from Hassan. She began exhibiting with the group, first with Lines (2004), a two-person exhibition at the Sharjah Art Museum with Mohammed Kazem. She became part of this group.

Although these artists and writers did not define themselves as an “underground,” they were not easy for outside curators and writers to learn about or reach. Still, they all wrote about one another, publishing in newspapers and their Sharjah-based magazine, Al Tashkeel, slowly building an audience and educating one another.

As the 1990s came to a close, the era of the Sand Palace had ended. Vivek and Jos each returned home (Jos would come back to the UAE shortly). Ibrahim’s Atelier in Khor Fakkan changed directors, a painful loss that ultimately precipitated a rich chapter in his own creative development. Eventually the Satwa house was torn down to make way for new construction.

A businessman-turned-archivist, Abdul-Raheem, brother to Hassan and Hussain, documented and stored the artworks these artists produced, with the collaboration of his son Mohamed. In 2007, with support from the others and Jos Clevers, he founded The Flying House, named after a painting that Jos Clevers made when he lived in the UAE. Artists from the Satwa house and Sand Palace were invited to turn the house into a showcase for UAE's most heated aesthetic debates, public and private, grew out of the exhibitions in Sharjah, particularly the more experimental, conceptual projects by artists in this group. Controversy followed a number of their exhibitions. Every now and then a piece of artwork would just disappear, mistaken for refuse.

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Tracing a UAE Art Community

The accompanying book of interviews focuses on these artists and writers during the period from 1988 to 2008, from the community’s formation through its growing visibility in the new UAE art world that developed after the turn of the 21st century. The interviews reveal the historical contours of this artistic community, and how it created a climate in which the artists grew, thrived, and found their distinct voices. The interviews map out the landscape of their creative lives: with whom and what they were in dialogue; the kinds of challenges and breakthroughs that marked their progress; and how they come to identify and succeed as artists in this period in the UAE.

The exhibition that accompanies this book showcases the artists’ aesthetic connections over this period of their development, which saw them supporting and challenging one another through the difficult process of forging an artistic vision. In these two decades the community was resolving in its support for its members, in a place that did not yet appear to be able to provide such support. Their influence on one another’s work is visible, and intentional. Many of the artists were Hassan Sharif’s students at some point, but they became his peers.

He exhibited alongside them regularly, in some cases combined his installations with the work of his fellow artists, and he later even painted studies of their works.

The fact of dialogue is unmistakable throughout the group. Several exhibitions in this period featured installations made from tin cans: in one case it was an autobiographical collection by Abdullah Al Saadi, in another the cans were theatrical portraits by Hussain Sharif. Paper streaked with paint curling onto the floor might be an early experiment by Mohammed Kazem (if it has horizontal lines) or by Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim (if the lines are vertical). A series of wiry figurative lines might be an altered photograph by Ebtisam Abdulaziz, or a painting or sculpture by Jos Clevers, or an installation by Hussain. Earthy, mystical forms are visible in Vivek Vilasini’s massive installations and in Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim’s minute clay sculpture collections. Ebtisam Abdulaziz and Mohammed Kazem each used photography to document conceptual performances, but also to collect narrative and data from their surroundings.

All of the artists collected material from the world around them as media and content for their work. Jos Clevers returned to help curate. Art covered every surface of the house—the doors, windows, steps, walls, and trees. The house was also an experiment in form; it sustained a collection and housed an exhibition, but it was not a gallery, nor was it a foundation. But now curators could locate and see their work year round: they were on the map.

The year 2007 had a seismic effect as the structure of the UAE art world suddenly shifted: Dubai launched its first international art fair, and Abu Dhabi announced its Saadiyat museums project. With The Flying House effort, finally, the work of the community began to surface outside of Sharjah. By 2008, a team of world-class journalists had been hired to publish the English-language newspaper The National, which started covering The Flying House that winter.

That first year an Italian writer, Cristiana de Marchi, came to work at The Flying House. She curated the collection and wrote about it, extensively interviewing and comprehending the community centered there. She too made art and soon joined this community as a new voice, further rounding out its dialogue.

In 2009, the UAE had its first Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The refrain, “There is no contemporary art in the UAE” began to fade as the infrastructure for art generated better exposure for work made in the Emirates. It was still quite a while until commercial galleries began to represent these artists.

Shortly after The Flying House opened, Jos Clevers fell ill and passed away in 2009. Within a few years, the experiment of The Flying House wound down. Its contents were moved to a new location that for a time served as Hassan Sharif’s studio. Now it houses Sharif’s estate and archive.

The trajectory from a small community of unknown experimental practitioners to a group of well-established figures in the UAE arts scene happened in only a few years. Today, most of the artists mentioned here have participated in the UAE Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, many are collected by museums, and they continue to develop their individual voices. Their path, as well as what they have produced, also serves as an inspiration for emerging artists in the UAE, a kind of root structure for the cultural development of the Emirates.

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All of the artists collected material from the world around them as media and content for their work, blurring the lines between readymade,
autobiography, and mixed media. Their projects touched on performance, Conceptual art, and alternated between studio and post-studio practice. Even as each artist developed in distinctive aesthetic directions, their work maintained a quality of call-and-response, affection and mutual respect, competition and inspiration.

The Satwa house community was not anti-establishment, but its attitudes, aspirations, and artwork, diverged dramatically from the existing art practices in the UAE. Sometimes this divergence created friction with art establishments, but the community anchored itself in a positive attitude of aiming to grow a contemporary art audience, enthusiastically despite their relative obscurity. They were so prolific in many ways, they were invisible to art audiences, perhaps because their practice was “discovered.” They were motivated by innovation, critique, and productive risk-taking. They worked for enhanced arts infrastructure and arts education—Hassan Sharif took matters into his own hands on the education front, translating art books into Arabic for his students and fellow artists.

Of the Satwa group, it is the one who had found his footing, turning inward to focus on arts education and his own artwork. The intensive creative community that formed thereafter also shares certain traits with famous art historical communities. It has parallels with much bohemian Modernism during times of changing population (Paris at the turn of the 20th century, New York after WWII, Bombay after independence, Beirut before the civil war, Beijing after China opened its borders). It also shares key plot points with certain legends of avant-garde innovation and their rejection by the mainstream, of artists who eventually ascended into the art historical canon—again, Duchamp’s narrative and the support of his cohort both came to mind.

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Hassan Sharif’s career before 1988, which included co-founding the Emirates Fine Arts Society and his first attempt at establishing an Atelier in Sharjah, echoes the boilerplate version of the Paris Salon audition narrative of Manet and Duchamp. In those early years, after Sharif returned from studying art in London, he formed his own avant-garde group, complete with a manifesto and publication, and finally a scandalous one-day exhibition in 1985, all of which generated heated debates in the newspapers, among other reactions. As Nujoom Alghanem and Khalid Albudoor recall in their interview, it was not an easy moment; that first group dispersed, and Hassan retreated from overt, manifesto-driven presentation. By 1988, the year this survey starts, Hassan Sharif had found his footing, turning inward to focus on arts education and his own artwork. The intensive creative community that formed thereafter also shares certain traits with famous art historical communities. It has parallels with much bohemian Modernism during times of changing population (Paris at the turn of the 20th century, New York after WWII, Bombay after independence, Beirut before the civil war, Beijing after China opened its borders). It also shares key plot points with certain legends of avant-garde innovation and their rejection by the mainstream, of artists who eventually ascended into the art historical canon—again, Duchamp’s narrative and the support of his cohort both came to mind.

But there were also challenges unique to the UAE context, for when an underground or avant-garde art scene takes shape in an area burdened with a particular set of “regional art” expectations, strange forms of myopia set in. The international art world might see them exclusively through a regional lens, with the attendant ethnic or political clichés and expectations of what their art should therefore look like. Similarly, local and regional artists also had opinions about what kind of art Gulf artists “should” be making, and either criticized Hassan Sharif and the community around him as making art that was too Western, and not representing Emirati culture, or for making art that didn’t overtly address current political issues in the region.

One retort was that they were using materials readily available in the UAE, from Emirati prescient-day culture, and those happened to be things like cardboard, wire, rope, and rocks. Close observation of the world around them, collecting discarded objects, recycling trash into art, and mass production were all recurring themes that may, or may not, be considered political. The conceptual register of these projects engaged the boontown context of the UAE, and made it personal in the hand of each individual artist.

How can one contextualize this community art historically? The routes of cultural influence are complex, and defy Western/non-Western dichotomies. Locals went abroad to study in Egypt, Kuwait, the U.S., the UK, Japan, Pakistan, India, and returned with added layers of reference. Likewise, artists from as many different places lived among them, bringing their own perspectives to bear on their UAE surroundings. Every iteration of this community had some non-Emiratis at its core, and work coming out of Egypt, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Sudan influenced ideas as heavily as that from Europe and America. Influence wasn’t merely two-way, or East–West, it was, and is, kaleidoscopic far beyond that seen in Paris of the 1920s or New York of the 1960s.
Today the UAE is seeing a surge in interest in the history of UAE art, from the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi’s curators and young Fulbright scholars, all of whom aim to tell its history. Anyone attempting this work faces a daunting, bilingual, scholarly research task. Exhibition records are hard to track down, and coverage of the artists has thus far been inconsistent at best, particularly in English. Moreover, as the UAE Pavilion and catalogue at the 2015 Venice Biennale showed, exhibition history is far more varied than one might think. Many artists were working on many fronts.

The cohort outlined here was indeed only one facet of a large, diverse collection of artistic trajectories in the UAE in this period. We hope that this collection of interviews will, likewise, help lay a foundation for the production of a more firmly grounded history of UAE art.

We offer this exhibition and collected interviews with a caveat, one echoed by each of our interviewees: these were not “The Group of Five.” There were many more artists who made up the community, particularly when one counts journalists, poets, and filmmakers. Many do refer to a “group” when talking about these artists who frequently exhibited together, especially from the Satwa house community. In some accounts, the term “Group of Five” participates in the core of this community in his role as a writer and poet. To this volume he contributes his own history of this community, and a recollection of the library that he and the others read and discussed.

For the interviews, we tried to establish three things: the relationship of the individual artist to their artistic community, the members of that community, and how their peers and mentors affected their creative trajectory.

A few names repeatedly appeared as part of this cohort, among them, Khalid Albudoor and Nujoom Alghanem. Cristiana de Marchi joined the group only as our period ends, but as a curator of The Flying House she is privy to a deeper understanding of the undercurrents and context of this world than most.

We wish we could have interviewed Jos Clevers. With our re-publication of Hassan Sharif’s interview with him in 1999, we hope this book helps reconstruct his importance to this history.

It was a great loss that we were not able to interview Hassan Sharif, as he was becoming ill when we started this project, and has since passed away. We are deeply grateful to Cristiana de Marchi for sharing her in-depth interview with him from 2009, reviewed and approved by him but never before published.

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Finally, much of the research here would not have been possible without the excellent archival developed by Abdul-Raheem Sharif and his son Mohamed. This project aims to fill a modest but critical role: to provide source material on this particular community that clarifies and adds to what we know. Our hope is that the book of interviews can be a reference point for future scholars, whose work we look forward to reading.

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Finally, much of the research here would not have been possible without the excellent archival developed by Abdul-Raheem Sharif and his son Mohamed. This project aims to fill a modest but critical role: to provide source material on this particular community that clarifies and adds to what we know. Our hope is that the book of interviews can be a reference point for future scholars, whose work we look forward to reading.
This exhibition traces these artists’ aesthetic connections over a period of development that saw them supporting and challenging one another through the difficult process of forging an artistic vision. In these two decades the community was resolute in its support for its members. Their influence on one another’s work is visible, and intentional. Many of the artists were Hassan Sharif’s students at some point, and they became his peers. He exhibited alongside them regularly, in some cases combined his installations with the work of his fellow artists, and he later even painted studies of their works. The fact of dialogue is unmistakable throughout the group.

All of the artists collected material from the world around them as media and content for their work, blurring the lines between readymade, autobiography, and mixed media. Their projects touched on performance, Conceptual art, and alternated between studio and post-studio practice. Even as each artist developed in distinctive aesthetic directions, their work maintained a quality of call-and-response, affection and mutual respect, competition and inspiration.

This art community’s work diverged dramatically from the existing art practices in the UAE at the time, but the community anchored itself in a positive attitude of aiming to grow a contemporary art audience, and supporting one another’s growth in the UAE context. They worked for enhanced arts infrastructure and education—Hassan Sharif took matters into his own hands on the education front, translating art books into Arabic for his students and fellow artists. They worked enthusiastically despite their relative obscurity. In many ways, they were one another’s audience, critics, and arts infrastructure.

How can one contextualize this community art historically? The routes of cultural influence are complex, and defy Western/non-Western dichotomies. Locals went abroad to study in Egypt, Kuwait, the U.S., the UK, Japan, Pakistan, India, and returned with added layers of reference. Likewise, artists from as many different places lived among them, bringing their own perspectives to bear on their UAE surroundings. Every iteration of this community had some non-Emiratis at its core, and work coming out of Egypt, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Sudan influenced ideas as heavily as that from Europe and America. Influence wasn’t merely two-way, or East–West, it was, and is, kaleidoscopic.

Curated by Maya Allison with Bana Kattan

This project derives from research and interviews conducted by Maya Allison, Bana Kattan, and Alaa Edris.

A note to the reader: the following pages discuss the works of the exhibition in the sequence one would encounter them on an exhibition tour, beginning with Hassan Sharif and ending with Ebtisam Abdulaziz.
The Artists

Ebtisam Abdulaziz
Jos Clevers
Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim
Mohammed Kazem
Abdullah Al Saadi
Hassan Sharif
Hussain Sharif
Vivek Vilasini
Hassan Sharif’s early career included co-founding the Emirates Fine Arts Society, along with his brother Hussain and many others. In those early years, after Sharif returned from studying art in London, he co-founded an avant-garde group, complete with a manifesto and publication. His early exhibitions generated both excitement and heated public debates.

By 1988, the year this survey starts, Hassan Sharif had found his footing, turning inward to focus on arts education, writing about art, and his own artwork. The intensive creative community that formed thereafter shares certain traits with famous art historical communities, which have produced webs of creative influence alongside distinct individual artistic innovation.

A philosophical passion for art motivated his practice:

“... there are spaces between words: art is these spaces, it is not the words. Art should be nonsense in order not to use it. If there is meaning it is not art. It is a cup, which you put in a kitchen and fill with water. If you have money you can buy it, if you have taste you can appreciate it, but you must not use it. Art must be without purpose, so you cannot use it. It must be useless in order to be unique. Otherwise if you make art for using it, then it is not art.”
Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim

Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim lives and works in Khorfakkan, UAE. Ibrahim’s work has exhibited in major institutions worldwide including: Kunst Museum, Bonn, (Germany); Sharjah Art Museum (UAE); Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Germany; Institut du Monde Arabe (Paris); and at the Sittard Art Center (Netherlands). He has participated in the Sharjah Biennial on seven occasions where he has twice received the First Prize for Sculpture (2001, 1999). Additional biennial participation includes the inaugural UAE Pavilion at Venice in 2009; Dhaka (2002, 1993); Havana (2000); Cairo (1998); and in connection with the Kochi Biennale (2016). Cuadro Art Gallery presented a comprehensive survey of his work in 2014 and 2016.

“I began to participate with Hassan in exhibitions in the 1990s; however, I was not only working on paintings, I also produced land art at home. I had some kind of a ritual where I would spend a week to 10 days on the mountain, in nature, moving rocks. Hassan and I were going by chance to Khor Fakkan, and I told him that I wanted to show him some of my works. When he saw it he said, “This is land art! What are you doing?!” I started to comprehend land art further; I found myself driven into this type of art, and that it was the right tool for me. But this did not mean that I abandoned painting altogether; the painting was always present no matter what. I started working and experimenting with natural materials, I mean all the materials available at home, cardboard or paper, tree branches etc., so I started focusing on such works. In the 1990s, I began to participate in exhibitions; my art-related information began to expand and deepen, and I gained a solid foundation.”
Jos Clevers

Jos Clevers founded the Sittard Art Center in the Netherlands. He lived in the UAE from 1994 to 1996, and returned periodically, until 2007 when he helped establish The Flying House. While in the UAE, he participated in many exhibitions and projects, and notably The 6 exhibition at the Sharjah Art Museum, in 1996, with most of the artists in this room. Clevers curated the Emirates 4 at the Sittard Art Center, Netherlands (1995), the first presentation of this UAE group of artists internationally. As he told Hassan Sharif in an interview in 1999:

“I would like to assure you that I am neither a professor nor an orientalist nor an anthropologist. I am just among you, not to discover you, but in order to reveal my unconscious side as an artist, to foster it more. Briefly, I don’t want to commit the same errors that were committed by the Europeans in the past decades and centuries. As an artist, I look forward to seeing artists who hear and respect each other... and all I have said so far is intimately related to a universal concept for art and culture affecting beyond doubt all human society. The content doesn’t unveil the form.”
Vivek Vilasini lives and works between Kochi and Bangalore, India. He has had solo exhibitions at multiple venues in India, including Arushi Arts (New Delhi), Sumukha Gallery (Bangalore), and Lalit Kala Academy (Kochi). His group exhibitions include: Beyond the Form at Bajaj Capital Art House (India); India, Public Place Private Space at the Newark Museum, (USA); In Focus: Contemporary Indian Photography at The Art Resource (India); the Krohn Conservatory (USA); Who Knew Mr. Gandhi? at Aicon Gallery (United Kingdom); as well as at the Sharjah Art Museum; and the Sharjah Biennial.

His imagery draws on mythology and cultural history as well as popular culture. When he was living in the UAE, he made large-scale sculptures that integrated both Indian and Gulf materials. At that time, he worked in solitude for a year, until he came upon the art of Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim in the Sharjah Biennial:

"See, most of the work on view at the Biennial was from outside the UAE. And here was somebody, locally, whose work was so radical. For me that was the most important thing, to meet one artist from the UAE who's doing work that I found interesting... Eventually I realized that it would be difficult to show my works in Dubai. Meanwhile, my room mates and friends were also worried as to what I would do with all these big works and no place to show them... When it became clear that it was not going to work for me as an artist in the UAE, I decided to search for that one artist whom I had met at the Biennial, who I thought might be able to appreciate the kind of work I was doing."

Vivek Vilasini

Brides of Seven Climes, 1996/2008
Panted fiberglass jars, cotton & coir
91 × 91 × 640 cm
Courtesy of 1x1 Gallery
Abdullah Al Saadi

Abdulla Al Saadi lives and works in Khorfakkan, UAE. He has exhibited extensively regionally and internationally. Museum exhibitions include the Kunst Museum (Bonn, Germany), and the New Museum (New York, USA). His work has been featured in numerous biennials including São Paulo (2004), Venice: UAE Pavilion (2011, 2015) and multiple Sharjah Biennials. In 2017, Al Saadi will participate in the Sharjah Biennial, the Antarctica Biennial, and the 57th Venice Biennale.

The work on view here includes that from his sojourn in Japan (1994-1996). His journeys generate both paintings and objects collected, together creating records of his experiences. As he describes it:

"[My time in Japan] had some influence. The first work I made was a long scroll, I painted the area where I lived. I used to go to museums and see long scrolls, and I brought some copies with me. That is the only artwork that I had made there, in addition to writing diaries, making sketches, collecting and examining cans."

When I go on a trip, I must make an artwork. I do not just go for entertainment. Even the bike trip around the world, I wanted to make artworks during this trip and write the diaries of my trip, I mean, I must make something. I did not want to simply roam the world on my bike. I began making internal trips. After university, for example, I made trips from Al Ain to Sharjah and Sharjah to Al Ain, and from Al Ain to Khor Fakkan. After that, I made a trip on the bike to the tops of the mountains, which was the first time I went into the mountains, and I came to Ras Al Khaimah and Fujairah.

Abdullah Al Saadi: installation view
Hussain Sharif is a multidisciplinary artist who lives and works in Dubai. He has participated in major exhibitions regionally and internationally including: Cultural Diversity and The 6 at the Sharjah Art Museum in 2005 and 1996 (UAE); 5 UAE at the Ludwig Forum in 2002 (Germany); UAE Contemporary Art at the Institut du Monde Arab in 1998 (France); Emirates Arts: 4 UAE at the Sittard Art Center in 1995 (Netherlands). In addition to participating in six Sharjah Biennials, his work was in the Dhaka Biennial (2002); and the Cairo Biennial (1998). His solo exhibitions include Paintings, Oil and Collage in 1992 at the Sharjah Cultural Center. Hussain is one of the founding members of the Emirates Fine Arts Society.

Hussain Sharif’s practice intersects with that of Abdullah Al Saadi and Mohammed Kazem in their impulse to capture their environment via collecting bits of it through pictures or objects. His work invites particularly imaginative readings, and storytelling. He also investigates repetition as a site of change:

“In repetition, as much as we try to uphold the rules and steps that we first make, it is inevitable that a change occurs in the work. Change occurs by coincidence; vanity, time, and mood also play a role. Things featured in that work are remnants of the environment and daily life, including metals, wood, and plastic. Despite their differences, I try to make them homogenous. I try to bestow a new meaning on a meaningless item through changing its shape, incorporating it with something else, putting it in another place, or combining it with another substance.”
Mohamed Kazem

Mohamed Kazem lives and works in Dubai, UAE. He has been participating in the Annual Exhibitions of the Emirates Fine Arts Society in Sharjah since 1986, as well as numerous editions of Sharjah Biennials, receiving first prize for installations in 1999 and 2003, and in 2007, co-curated the Sharjah Biennials. Kazem’s work has appeared in many international exhibitions at institutions such as the Mori Art Museum (2012), Boghossian Foundation (2013), Gwangju Museum of Art (2014), and Here and Elsewhere at the New Museum (2014). He has exhibited at the Venice Biennale three times, including a solo presentation for the UAE in 2013.

Kazem’s multi-disciplinary practice centers on documenting his physical relationship to his environment, often using non-traditional methods such as GPS codes and his own body as material. He was a teacher to Ebtisam Abdulaziz at the Atelier in Dubai, and before that he was a longtime student of Hassan Sharif. Rather than influencing each other’s work, one can trace the philosophical connections among them on the topic of art education itself:

“First, I believe that every person has a particular way of thinking and living, even before they join any course to learn the basics of art in general. I noticed that teaching is a critical issue, because we must aim to teach students and provide them with all the information they need on visual arts, without affecting their individuality. We ought to try to guide them, for example, without influencing their special style. The final goal should not be to witness the graduation of 10 artists, who are the same version of one another. We must focus on their special style because everyone has one.”

Mohammed Kazem

Mohammed Kazem installation view
Photo: Li Zhang
Ebtisam Abdulaziz is a multidisciplinary artist based in Washington DC, USA. Her work has been included in landmark exhibitions including: the 2013 Houston International Fotofest: Emirati Expressions at Manarat Al Saadiyat, UAE; 25 years of Arab Creativity, at L’institut du Monde Arabe, France. Her work has shown at international museums such as the Mori Art Museum (Tokyo, Japan); the Denmark National Museum (Copenhagen); Vitra campus Museum (Weil am Rhein, Germany), and the Sharjah Art Museum (UAE). Abdulaziz participated in the inaugural UAE Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2009 and the Benin Biennial, in West Africa in 2012.

Several of the works on view here are from the artist’s first major exhibition of conceptual work. In her interview for this project she explains how her studies with Mohamed Kazem and this community affected her own artistic practice:

“I discovered that art does not only mean that you know how to make artworks literally... the issue was to discover my way of thinking, to discover myself more... I was subjected to an internal shock, I discovered that I was making paintings which I did not like, this was not me... by the end of 2004, I made a new series that was completely different from the paintings I used to make. The new series was installation that integrated mathematics and geometry. The exhibition marked a change and a shift from the Ebtisam who used to produce paintings, to Ebtisam who produces conceptual installations.”
If innovation were a road, then reading would be the motor of our passage. If art were the sky, reading would be a hot air balloon to take us to its limit. If great dreams were difficult and full of impossibility, they could become a reality on a paper of poetry. When an artist sums it up on a canvas, or when a poet encapsulates it in a stanza, the conscience shakes and stagnant water trembles within the imagination.

This essay will attempt to trace a number of changes and tremors caused by reading among the generation of modernity in the UAE. By this we mean a generation of artists and writers who split away from the idea of blind imitation and who broke down the barriers of fear and routine in order to reach new and untapped areas of thinking and questioning. Indeed, it has been reading—reading of the self and reading of the other—that has bridged great gaps and created a launching pad to dive into a sea of modernity.

The UAE emerged as a modern state in 1971, finding in its youth that the doors were open to engage in experimentation with the country’s gradually increasing openness to the world. Helped by the early emergence of modernity in the Emirates, with its prevailing moderate outlook away from religious and sectarian extremism, and due to there being few cultural references in the country of great influence as was the case in other Arab countries and civilizations, in addition to the emergence of formal education being delayed until the fifties, the UAE at the time was unable to muster but a few influential names within thought and culture. In this way young people found a clean slate in front of them ready to accept with an open mind the various intellectual currents of thought.

For this reason, dialogues of Modernism in poetry and art called for by Arab intellectuals since the
sixties in Beirut, Egypt, and Iraq, found itself a foot -
hold with the new, educated generation in the UAE, especially among young people. Found within such
dialogues and books are issues that touch on the
cosmopolitanism and dream for advancement, away
from the misery of the greater questions. A new form of
poetry (whether through vowelled Arabic grammar
or that which does not depend on metre) appeared
in this battle.

In the section that accompanies this volume,
we have allocated a reading area. In it we have
attempts to bring together a collection of books
that influenced the formation of thought as well
as a collection of names that we see today as the
generation of modernity in the UAE. This includes
poets such as Habib Al Sayegh, Dhabia Khamis,
Ahmed Rashid Thani, Adel Khozam, Khalid Albudour,
Abdulaziz Jassim, Maisoon Saqr, Nujoom Alghanem,
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fine art, remained conservative, and a rebellion
against its form emerged in the mid-eighties. Thus
began the battle between the conservative
generation, who found a real threat in modernity to
their identity of their generation, and the youth that
found in it the possibility to achieve their distant
aspirations, particularly as they had witnessed
everything around them change, from architecture
and buildings to streets and the oppression of the
civilian nature by the consumer lifestyle.

This generation, however, has a clear and thorough
explorative knowledge of other modern philoso-
phies, especially Roland Barthes in his books Writing
Degree Zero and The Death of the Author. These
introduced the concept of the text, writing, the
reader or reading. The new issue presented by the
book is to re-read the meaning of the text. Interest in
linguistics also included Ferdinand de Saussure, who
presented theories in semiotics, down to Jacques
Derrida and his philosophical approach to “disman-
teling a text,” as well as Michel Foucault in his great
project on the history of gender and his books, The
Birth of Tragedy in high, philosophical poetry. It was also shocking.

Exploration among philosophical books stretches
back to the era of the Ancient Greeks and to
Aristotle on the Art of Poetry, in Plato’s Dialogues
and, of course, Socrates and other works that are
read within the scope of ancient philosophies,
including Nietzsche’s book The Birth of Tragedy
about the Ancient Greek era. Along this philosoph-
ical line that they walked, some of them dug deep
into the roots while others passed by quickly, and
Within Philosophy

References in this reading collection vary between
different artistic disciplines, the first of which is
the birth of a new and permanent concept.

Of course we add here books and other references in
philosophy, including books on Islamic Sufism, such
as Al-Hallaj and especially his Tawseon, as well as
Al-Nafri and his book Attributes and Dialogues, with
many stopping at the Sheikh after the spread of his
famous saying “As much as one’s vision widens, one’s
expression will narrow,” a saying many resorted to
in order to connect the core of modernist poetry
projects. We must, of course, admit that the gener-
ation of modernity dug deep into the works of
the Sufi Sheikh Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi and his writings
The Bazel of Wisdom and The Meconn Conquests. It did
do despite the difficulty of reaching an interpretation
of its goals due to the ambiguity of the language and
high specificity.

These allocated pages for
culture and the arts as well as weekly issues dealing
with culture, translation, film, and visual arts. These
dailies increased the level of discussion and
debate, with many names appearing that called for
rejection of the past and many spreading their
ideas, thoughts and translations that were shocking
to the conservative community. On the other hand,
there were others who continued to reject and
resist this great delinquency towards modernity.
Books and readings were the weapons of both sides
in this battle.

Within the exhibition that accompanies this volume,
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However, the battle of modernity did not truly
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Al-Ittihad, Al-Khaleej).

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others again collected what they could from here and there. However what concerns us is to emphasize that modernity in the UAE has a very strong philosophical base and that the project of modernity in its depths was one of knowledge. When we read the book: Logical Philosophical Treatise by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, we feel Hassan Sharif’s presence. For years Sharif cited the words of this philosopher who devised an approach to language that rebelled against traditional philosophies of linguistic analysis of daily discourse, considering that dialogue is the means by which human beings express ideas.

In this context, the rest of the big philosophical names such as Dante (Divine Comedy), Gilles Deleuze, Kant, Heidegger, Spinoza, and Hegel are not absent. There is also full knowledge of books in the same philosophical context, including, of course, Das Kapital by Karl Marx and the psychoanalytical books of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung as well as Karl Marx and the psychoanalytical books of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung as well as Jean-Paul Sartre’s Being and Nothingness and a long and never-ending list of other books within this context.

We add to this list books from art schools and trends as well as schools that shook the foundations of the arts in general. The Dada and Surrealist schools were the most prominent and famous, particularly as they were established as a branch in Egypt with Georges Henein during the forties. Surrealism—linked with an imaginary thread—extended to art, poetry and other forms of rhythmic writings and experimentation. However, most of those from the generation of modernity in the UAE did not adhere to Surrealism and did not adopt it. Nevertheless, everyone was floating in a sea of discovery, traveling between Russian Formalism or adopting ideas within new Expressionism. In this way, artists moved freely from impressionism to Cubism to Abstractionism and collage, finally reaching a place where they would break moulds and add new elements to a painting in order to create art, as did Hassan Sharif and the rest of the youth with him. The important point here is the breaking of the mould, with such transitions being made in accordance with the foundations of knowledge, not just for the sake of rebellion or the blind imitation of modern art trends. The poets knew well the experimentation they presented in this pattern of thought experiments, whether it be from the work of Salvador Dalí, or in the works of André Breton, Tristan Tzara, and Apollinaire.

The important point here is to focus on the core idea, namely, that these contemporary philosophies were strongly associated with art and language in particular, as well as the arts in general. In this way poets found fertile ground to plant their intellectual questions and search for viable answers to them. In the midst of such transfers, many were stopping to look at the theses of contemporary Arab intellectuals. Among them was Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, who presented the great project “Formation of the Arab Mind” that followed the epistemological approach in analysing and proposing that the Arab renaissance would not be possible unless intellectual output was similar to an era of notation, based on knowledge and criticism, with a critique of the mind produced by it.

The generation of modernity in the UAE also approached many Arab theses such as that of Nasr Hamed Abu Zaid, Taha Hussein and Abbas Mahmoud Al-Aqqad down to Adonis in his book The Fixed and Variable and The Time of Poetry. Adonis presented a shocking truth in his criticism of the Arab mind in the face of modernity, especially when considering that Arabs practice “Western” modernity and a shocking truth in his criticism of the Arab mind in the face of modernity, especially when considering that Arabs practice “Western” modernity and the Arab Mind produced by it. The Time of Poetry. Adonis presented a shocking truth in his criticism of the Arab mind in the face of modernity, especially when considering that Arabs practice “Western” modernity and the Arab Mind produced by it. Adonis presented a shocking truth in his criticism of the Arab mind in the face of modernity, especially when considering that Arabs practice “Western” modernity and the Arab Mind produced by it. Adonis presented a shocking truth in his criticism of the Arab mind in the face of modernity, especially when considering that Arabs practice “Western” modernity and the Arab Mind produced by it.

At the level of novels, this generation stopped at learning and studying the classics and narratives of Arabic poetry (there are many), such as Panchatontra and One Thousand and One Nights, among others. Though many looked at the classic novels by Agatha Christie and Charles Dickens for example, or Victor Hugo and Baltaz, their depth stopped at the works of only the most famous novels in the world, such as Henry Miller’s Tropic of Cancer, Alberto Moravia’s Me and Him, Hemingway’s Old Man and the Sea, and William Faulkner’s Sound and Fury, Umberto Eco’s Name of the Rose, Hermann Hesse’s many works including Steppenwolf, Journey to the East and The Glass Bead Game, while also encompassing Kazantzakis with Zorba the Greek, Report to Greco and Rock Garden, attempted to undermine the old and well-established constants in solid traditional outlooks. The focus of research was in the mentality of the voices of modernity and its writers and artists.

Novel, Poetry and Cinema

In comparison to what happened with philosophy in the thought of the generation of modernity in the UAE, there are many other references in the novel, poetry, music, art, and cinema.
along with the classics of Russian literature including Mother by Maxim Gorky the famous works of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Lermontov, Chinghiz Aitmatov and the works of Anna Akhmatova, in addition to a charming book that everyone loves, My Dagestan by poet Rasul Gamzatov. These are addition to a charming book that everyone loves, Aitmatov and the works of Anna Akhmatova, in Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Lermontov, Chinghiz works such as Charles Baudelaire's Ahmad Shamlu and Farrukh Farah Zadeh, and French to the Persian mystics such as Rumi, Shams Tabrizi, this large quantity of knowledge of the world novel is also offset by a good knowledge of the Arab novel, such as the works of leading authors, the first among them Naguib Mahfouz, Youssef Idris, Ghalib Halasa, Hanna Mina, and Amin Maalouf as well as a long list of other Arab novelists. Poetry was strongly present in the consciousness of this generation in all its other parts of the world, such as Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Jose Saramago, Juan Rulfo, Milan Kundera and many others.

This large quantity of knowledge of the world novel is also offset by a good knowledge of the Arab novel, such as the works of leading authors, the first among them Naguib Mahfouz, Youssef Idris, Ghalib Halasa, Hanna Mina, and Amin Maalouf as well as a long list of other Arab novelists. Poetry was strongly present in the consciousness of this generation in all its various types, schools and trends, the old and the new, Arabic and the works in translation in addition to the Persian mystics such as Rumi, Shams Tabrizi, Ahmad Shamlu and Farrukh Farah Zadeh, and French works such as Charles Baudelaire's Flowers of Evil, Rimbaud's A Season in Hell, Elza by Louis Aragon, Saint- John Perse's I, Baz, Lautréamont's Songs of Maldoror and Gaston Bachelard in all his works, including The Poetics of Space and The Poetics of Reverie—the list goes on.

In poetry and literature this generation possesses knowledge of almost all countries. Arab literature had a strong presence, represented by both the classics and contemporary poetry. In the many meetings that have always been held in homes and cafes, poetry has always been present, starting from East Asia with Japanese haiku poetry, Chinese Tao philosophy and the sayings of Confucius, all the way to India with Tagore, and Africa with Wole Soyinka. The generation of modernity in the UAE read everything, not forgetting to draw on its modernity of the finest aesthetic ideas, before moving on to America with the Beat movement of Allen Ginsberg's famous poem Howl and Jack Kerouac, then to Mexico with Octavio Paz, and Chile with Pablo Neruda, and Argentina with Jorge Luis Borges. All this happened for one reason and that is the desire to discover.

Faced with this passion for knowledge, the people of this generation also went to the cinema, to Federico Fellini's cynical and absurd critique of society concerning violence, to Akira Kurosawa in Japan, Alfred Hitchcock in Britain and America, and Stanley Kubrick in America. The list goes on, with other films also making the list for having been stuck in the mind and sought after to find the ideas that formed the twists and turns in the history of public cinema.

Visual Arts

The generation of modernity in the UAE was not satisfied with just novels, poetry and philosophy; artists read poetry, and poets read about art, with cinema also being present in their discussions, while also being able to find their higher passion in music, dance and all that makes life beautiful. In the fine arts we find many writings by Hassan Sharif in which he presents a list of definitions by artists from outside the traditional circle of fame. While people had heard about Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí, Hassan spoke, wrote and published about Marcel Duchamp and his artistic work The Large Glass, Kandinsky, who established the principles of Abstractism and music in artwork, Kazimir Malevich and his great work Black Box that went far away from the idea of Abstractism. Then we come to Joseph Kosuth who believed that all art works after Marcel Duchamp were conceptual in nature. The philosophy of Conceptualism centers on the principle that the idea is the real goal of art instead of the artwork itself and its artistic effect.

Perhaps Hassan Sharif, along with a number of artists, read many art books as well as books dealing with the history of the visual arts in the English language by virtue of a desire to also read and study, however there was a real lack of books dealing with artistic formation, particularly in Arabic. There were merely translations of Western books dealing with general art, and some books on the philosophies that entered into art, such as the analysis of core subjects. However, it is certain that many discussions and debates concerning art were had on a daily basis in meetings and forums created by this generation for over forty years.

As such, modernity in the UAE would not have held up in the face of that reality which, according to some, was formed from the outset unless it was based on real principles, the principles of philosophy, poetry and the question of art and its relationship with the artist and the world around him. They are the same principles that we read about in the poems of this generation and their artistic and visual works. This reading area established at the American University in Dubai will bring together the contents of the collections owned by some from this generation. However, it is also a microcosm of what could soon be provided of the books that attracted this generation and those that were constantly referenced amongst them as the source of the discussions and conversations that went on between them, in addition to being a source for journalistic and analytical writings that were aided by the introduction of new perceptions in art, literature and life.
Adel Khozam

Adel Khozam is an Emirati poet, writer, and journalist who plays an active role in the cultural scene of the UAE, as well as in other neighboring Arab countries.

Since 1984, he has published three poetry collections, dozens of television and documentary scripts, and five books. His books cover various topics such as: the history of Emirati visual arts, the history of theatre in the Emirates, a novel titled The White Shadow, a book titled House of the Wise Man and his latest book Life Through The Third Eye, which has been translated to English and won The Gold Seal From Trafford Publishing House in the United States of America.

Khozam has written music for theatre and the cinema and was recently chosen as a Jury member for the Dubai International Film Festival in 2016. He was formerly Deputy Director of the Sama Dubai channel. Khozam holds a bachelor’s degree in Business Administration from UAE University.
Jos Clevers
Netherlands, b. 1951

Spoon, 1996
wood, linoleum and iron wire
Loan courtesy The Flying House

Untitled, c. 1995
acrylic on wood
Loan courtesy Foundation Collection Jos Clevers

Untitled, c. 1995
acrylic on wood
Loan courtesy Foundation Collection Jos Clevers

Untitled, c. 1995
acrylic on metal
Loan courtesy Foundation Collection Jos Clevers

Anthem no. 1, 2008
mixed media, paper and glue
Loan courtesy the artist and Cuadro Gallery

Animal no. 1, 2008
mixed media, paper and glue
Loan courtesy the artist and Cuadro Gallery

Animal no. 2, 2008
mixed media, paper and glue
Loan courtesy the artist and Cuadro Gallery

Mohammed Ibrahim
United Arab Emirates, b. 1965

Directions 2001 (Landscape) (from a series), 2001
chromogenic prints with paper captions mounted on paper
Loan courtesy the artist and Casa de la Cultura

Mountain Tops, February 3-4 (group of 9), 1999
mixed media
Loan courtesy the artist and Casa de la Cultura

Mohammed Kazem
United Arab Emirates, b. 1969

Rectangles 2001 (Landscape) (from a series), 2001
chromogenic prints with paper captions mounted on paper
Loan courtesy the artist and Casa de la Cultura

Hangers, 1995-2017
steel and acrylic paint
Loan courtesy the artist and Casa de la Cultura

Keyboard, 1995
steel hooks and vinyl on wooden board
Loan courtesy the artist and Casa de la Cultura

Telex, 1994
mixed media, paper, glue
Loan courtesy the artist and Casa de la Cultura

I am in Japan (Takemasa Handscrew), 1995-1996
scroll-book, edition
Loan courtesy the artist and Casa de la Cultura

Hassan Sharif
United Arab Emirates, 1951-2016

Cardboard and Coir, 1999
cardboard and coir
30 x 160 x 10 cm
Loan courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

Cardboard and Glue, 2003
cardboard and glue
30 x 160 x 10 cm
Loan courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

Cloth and Paper 2, 2005
cloth, paper and glue
30 x 160 x 30 cm
Loan courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

T菲尔 - 厨 - Move in India, 2007
bathroom mat, copper tube and wire, plastic combs, cloth, double-sided tape and wooden door with glass
203 x 31 x 5 cm
Loan courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde
Slippers and Wire, 2007
slippers, wire and wooden door with glass
203 × 91 × 5 cm
Loan courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and
Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

The Flying House 32, 2008
oil on canvas
150 × 100 cm
Loan courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and
Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

Cloth & Wooden Pegs No. 17, 2006
cardboard, glue, cloth, wooden pegs, pen and
paper
27 × 36 × 33 cm
Loan courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and
Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

Hose and Caps, 2007
cardboard, cloth, cotton socks, cotton rope,
jute string, marker
36 × 31 × 13 cm
Loan courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and
Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

Hose and Caps, 2007
cardboard, plastic bottle caps, hose, various
cotton fabrics, marker and coir
52 × 70 × 11 cm
Loan courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and
Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

Sandpaper, Pencil, Sharpener, 1982-2007
cardboard, plastic bags containing sand paper,
pencil, pencil shavings and steel sharpeners.
5 photographs mounted on cardboard.
framed photographs: 59.5 × 42.5 cm
5 photographs: 59.5 × 42.5 cm
Loan courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and
Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

M. A. Ibrahim's Sculpture No. 2, 2005
oil on canvas
150 × 100 cm
Loan courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and
Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

Gingko, 2008
copper
63 × 52 × 41 cm
Loan courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and
Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

Cloth and Paper 2, 2005
cloth, paper and glue
30 × 168 × 165 cm
Loan courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and
Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

Seck, 2007
cardboard, cloth, cotton socks, cotton rope,
jute string, marker
36 × 31 × 13 cm
Loan courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and
Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

Hussein Sharif
United Arab Emirates, b. 1961
Installation, 1995
cement, found objects
600 × 210 × 30 cm
Loan courtesy the artist and Salwa Zeidan
Gallery

Untitled (newspaper), 1994
mixed media on newsprint
70 × 51 cm
Loan courtesy the artist and Salwa Zeidan
Gallery

Untitled (newspaper), 1996
mixed media on newsprint
70 × 51 cm
Loan courtesy the artist and Salwa Zeidan
Gallery

Vivek Vilasini
India, b. 1964
Brides of Seven Climes, 1995/2008
painted fiberglass jars, cotton and coir
91 × 91 × 640 cm
Loan courtesy the artist and 1X1 Gallery

The Secret of Shadows, 1996/2017
terracotta and wood
245 × 445 × 310 cm
Loan courtesy the artist and 1X1 Gallery
Installation view: Abdullah Al Saadi
Photo: Jae Song

Installation view: Jos Clerens, Vivek Vilasini, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Hassan Sharif.
Photo: Jae Song