

UAE art from 1980s at Venice Biennale

Silvia Radan (Reporter) / 30 January 2015

Works of 14 Emirati artists to be on show in a retrospective from May 9 to November 22



The Emirates Fine Arts Society's exhibition in 1981. – Supplied photo Shaikha Hoor Al Qasimi

Dubai — Hassan Sharif may be in his 60s, he may be one of the most accomplished Emirati artists, yet he is still learning, still studying, still keeping a curious eye over the wonders of life.

Starting with caricatures and drawings in the late 1970s, his artistic style has evolved with the times, Sharif being known today as a conceptual artist.

For the second time in his art career, Sharif will represent the UAE National Pavilion at the Venice Biennale this year. And he won't be doing it alone!

From the fathers of the Emirati art movement to the youngest generation of UAE artists today, 14 artists have been selected by Shaikha Hoor bint Sultan Al Qasimi, director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, to represent the UAE National Pavilion at the 56th International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia, taking place in Venice from May 9 to November 22 in an art retrospective from the 1980s onwards.

“Being chosen as the curator for the National Pavilion UAE has given me the chance to reflect on my own experience growing up and working alongside many of the artists in the UAE during that era. This theme is close to heart as the work and the relationships developed have impacted my personal journey working in the arts in the UAE,” Shaikha Hoor told Khaleej Times.

Titled “1980 – Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates”, the UAE exhibition at the Biennale will present artworks by Ahmed Al Ansari, Moosa Al Halyan, Mohammed Al Qassab, Abdul Qader Al Rais, Abdullah Al Saadi, Mohammed Abdullah Bulhiah, Salem Jawhar, Mohammed Kazem, Dr Najat Meky, Abdulraheem Salim, Hassan Sharif, Obaid Suroor, Dr Mohamed Yousif and Abdulrahman Zainal.

“Looking back at exhibitions from the 1980s, I have come across a number of interesting artworks, mainly sculptures and paintings by now established artists, as well as works by lesser known ones,” said Shaikha Hoor .

“It is important to state here that the focus is on the artworks, not the artist. My aim is to show the diversity of art practices and the history of the art scene in the UAE at this period in time,” she went on explaining.

The curator was inspired to present a 40 years retrospective of Emirati art at the Biennale by the

archives of the Emirates Fine Arts Society, a non-profit association that was formed in 1980 in Sharjah.

It is the first time that the UAE will be represented by these many artists at the Biennale, previously being just solo exhibitions or very small group ones.

A once-every-two-years art, cinema and music event, the Venice Biennale is the biggest and longest art show worldwide, with dozens of countries taking part in the art exhibits, usually presenting their most creative talent.

The UAE joined the Venice Biennale for the first time in 2009 with a solo exhibition by Lamya Gargash, Emirati photographer and filmmaker. While the country's participation was welcomed, the exhibition itself received a lukewarm review.

The Second Time Around was the title of the second participation, in 2011, a far more creative and representative art pavilion, featuring Emirati artists Reem Al Ghaith, Abdullah Al Saadi and Shaikha Latifa bint Maktoum, who presented individual art concepts set in same-size spaces, meant as islands on their own.

In 2013, the UAE was back to a solo exhibition, a video installation by Mohammed Kazem, a seascape about being lost at sea, comprising a 360-degree projection of the sea and illuminated interchangeable GPS coordinates within an enclosed chamber.

“Over the last decade, the UAE art scene has experienced a surge in international recognition and appreciation, however many are still not aware of the depth and diversity of our artists, who have been working decades longer than the current art boom,” said Shaikha Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan, founder of the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation. “This exhibition represents an opportunity to document, share and expand upon a key period for the country's art history,” she added.

A publication including previous writings and articles on the art scene in the UAE since the 1980s, as well as some personal memoirs from a number of artists, will be presented alongside the Biennale exhibition.

“Participation at a prestigious event such as the Venice Biennale provides a platform to highlight the depth of contemporary art practices in the UAE at an international level, and gives local artists the opportunity to showcase their art to a wider audience and to engage in cultural exchange and dialogue,” concluded Shaikha Hoor.