



Deepak Unnikrishnan's Gulf Return (text and paper planes). Part of the UAE National Pavilion's exhibition *Rock, Paper, Scissors: Positions in Play*, at the Venice Biennale. Courtesy National Pavilion UAE.

Venice Biennale 2017: UAE National Pavilion is an artists' playground

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May 15, 2017 Updated: May 16, 2017 11:12 AM

As the UAE Pavilion was readied for the opening of the Venice Biennale, paper aeroplanes were strewn across a brick floor with yellow markings.

To the untrained eye, they might have looked like the result of some celebratory fun and games from the young members of staff who had just finished the week-long installation work at the Sale d'Armi (Weapons Room) in the Italian city's old fort, the Arsenale, ahead of the start of the Biennale last Saturday.

But the planes are a part of *Rock, Paper, Scissors: Positions in Play*, the exhibition hosted by the UAE Pavilion, as are the bricks daubed with yellow paint.

Five artists are featured at this year's pavilion: Nujoom Alghanem, Sara Al Haddad, Vikram Divecha, Lantian Xie and Dr Mohamed Yousif. Curator Hammad Nasar says that in the past 10 years, both in and outside the UAE, he has observed a sense of playfulness in older artists like Hassan Sharif and Mohammed Kazem, as well as in the younger generation who are also exhibiting in Venice.

When he started planning the exhibition, he asked himself two questions.

"Where is this play coming from and how is it nurtured, because play in the UAE is not the first thing that you're thinking about," says Nasar. "And why are people doing it?"

He reached one early conclusion: "Play is part and parcel of making a place home."

That statement was echoed by Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, Minister of Culture and Knowledge Development, who said, "such effective participations create cultural interactions between artists from different backgrounds, allowing them to be part of the global cultural movement".

Behind Nasar in the gallery, there is a row of oars arranged in a wavelike pattern. It is the work of Yousif, who trained as a sculptor and then spent years in the theatre. Nautical imagery is nothing unusual in the UAE, although this work features neither ship nor sailors.

Nasar translates an inscription that appears in Arabic: "The rhythm of the oars under the water." Oarsmen traditionally sing when they row, and the oars arranged by Yousif, says Nasar, "looked like musical notation".

Music or not, rowing is hard work, but soon enough, we were back on the subject of play.

"Let's use a surfing metaphor," Nasar says. "The best way to use a wave is to ride it. Play has that element: you ride what life throws at you. He's doing sculpture in which the body is absent – but completely there."

A few steps away, the small courtyard of bricks with the yellow paint is another "playground", titled *Degenerative Disarrangement*.

The artist, Divecha, brought the bricks from Dubai, where they had been discarded after road workers repaired a bus stop.

The project was first shown in Sharjah in 2013. Divecha shipped all four tonnes to Venice then rearranged them in a different, random order.

He and Nasar suggest that using the bricks in a work of art allocates a different value to them from their normal, everyday use. The paper planes, which visitors are encouraged to throw from a platform, feature a text from NYU Abu Dhabi-based creative writer Deepak Unnikrishnan playing on the notion of the "Gulf Return" that South Asians bring home with them after working as expatriates in countries such as the UAE. The works become symbols of what Divecha calls "Venice Return".

"It will go back [to the UAE] in November with this new value accrued by entering a far more important art circuit," he says.

Divecha also plays with public expectations in another work, *Bathing Boulders*, for which he took rocks to be placed in a temporary sculpture garden and washed them with water.

They have since been reduced to rubble for road works and other construction projects, but videos of the rocks being gently cleaned are now on view.

Nothing could be further removed from the harsh texture of stone than the pinkish-yarn wrapped around one of the pavilion's upright iron support beams. This is *can't you see how i feel*, a work by Al Haddad.