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Special Report: **Destination: UAE**

Emirati artists and designers find inspiration close to home

Local and global talent has been fostered by new galleries, fairs and residencies



Alserkal Avenue

DECEMBER 10, 2016 by: Arsalan Mohammad

The United Arab Emirates has often been derided for the paucity of its cultural scene, its glitzy real estate projects and mile upon mile of retail malls. But the last decade has seen a surge of young artistic and design talent following the rise to international fame of Emirati artists Hassan Sharif and Mohammed Kazem. Both foreign residents and Emiratis have taken advantage of a drive to promote an artistic ecosystem.

Since contemporary art galleries began trading in the dusty Al Quoz industrial district of Dubai during the early 2000s, increasing numbers of culture-hungry expatriate residents in the emirate and in Abu Dhabi have participated in the rise of a local art scene, discovering and collecting works from across the Middle East. The launch of the Art Dubai fair in 2006 brought auctions, biennials and pop-up platforms.

Much of the progress has been focused on building infrastructure. Dubai now boasts an array of galleries, facilities and platforms, such as the [Alserkal Avenue complex \(http://next.ft.com/](http://next.ft.com/)

[content/280028fc-e220-11e5-9217-6ae3733a2cd1](http://www.ft.com/content/280028fc-e220-11e5-9217-6ae3733a2cd1)) that hosts residencies for local and global artists.

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Emirati women break with tradition to study in record numbers (<http://next.ft.com/content/1f84dbf4-a5ad-11e6-8898-79a99e2a4de6>)

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Art Dubai has brought a youthful, international crowd to the city every March and private awards and prizes have emerged, from the Abraaj Group Art Prize to the Sheikha Salama Foundation's annual fellowship with the Rhode Island School of Design.

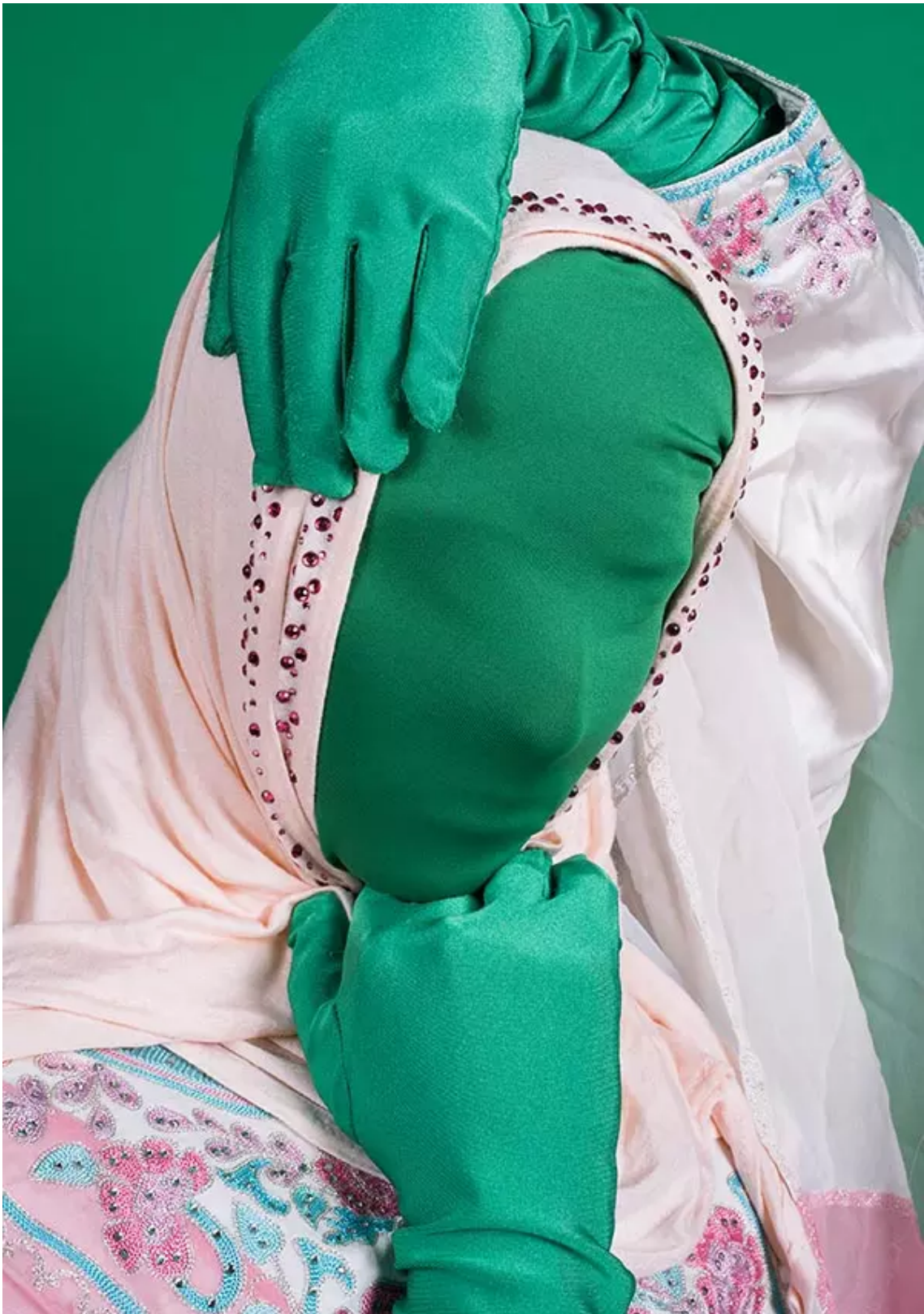
As Dubai's financial crisis started to bite in 2008, contemporary galleries began to move into Alserkal Avenue, a compound of industrial warehousing units in Al Quoz. Since then, it has expanded into a complex that houses more than 60 art, design and creative venues that include foundations, private collections and community projects. "That is an indication of the exponential growth that the creative sector has seen," says Vilma Jurkute, director of Alserkal Avenue.

The government recently unveiled D3, a dedicated zone aimed at encouraging international design companies to set up in Dubai. There, ideally, experienced designers will integrate with a local pool of talented Emirati millennials, upon whose shoulders rests an ambition to make the country a source of skilled art and design professionals.

"I think the future looks promising," says Sultan Sooud al Qassemi, founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah. "[Art] is an industry that is here to stay. It won't be one of Dubai's main industries but it'll be stable and slowly growing over the next decade."

Emirati artists and teachers discuss a developing art scene

Farah al-Qasemi, photographer, Abu Dhabi, studying at Yale School of Art



It's Not Easy Being Seen, Farah al-Qasemi © Farah al-Qasemi

What themes and concerns drive you?

For my recent Alserkal Avenue commission *It's Not Easy Being Seen*, I became interested in the invisible acts of physical and emotional labour that women carry out on a daily basis. I used a green screen as a metaphor for photographic visibility and made a sequence of images, as well as video.

Can one have a fulfilling career as a young artist within the UAE?

We are lucky [as citizens] to have so many institutions as platforms for young artists. We must extend those opportunities to other UAE residents. We need to continue working towards a self-sustaining, outward-facing, artistic community.

How do you contrast the experience of being an artist in the US and UAE?

It's very different. In the UAE, we're still working towards critical dialogue — I think there's a tendency to err on the side of praise rather than criticism.

Janet Bellotto, artist and professor at Zayed university, Dubai



© Janet Bellotto

Can young artists make a serious career in the UAE these days?

I think it really depends on your ideas and determination. While many cities are still experiencing a struggling economy, there are opportunities for emerging artists — in particular for nationals and UAE residents. But there is still a need for non-profit platforms and spaces where artists can experiment and test their ideas. Also we need competitive grants for the arts.

How have your students evolved in their approaches in recent years?

It is important to see what else is happening in the world — how different artists are using materials. I think Instagram, and other social media platforms have a major impact here.

Students today are used to seeing interdisciplinary practices, like installations and video projects, and so these ideas are more accessible. Also, as there is more information about the

art that is being exhibited locally, the vocabulary is becoming more familiar.

Noor al-Suwaidi, Emirati artist and curator who studied in the UK and US



© Noor al-Suwaidi

How do you contrast the experience of being an artist at home and abroad?

There is a gap, but I graduated over 10 years ago and it's a different landscape today. Back then, I would search to find an art show but now we are spoilt. There are so many events that I can't attend them all! That's a sign that the cultural scene has evolved and grown.

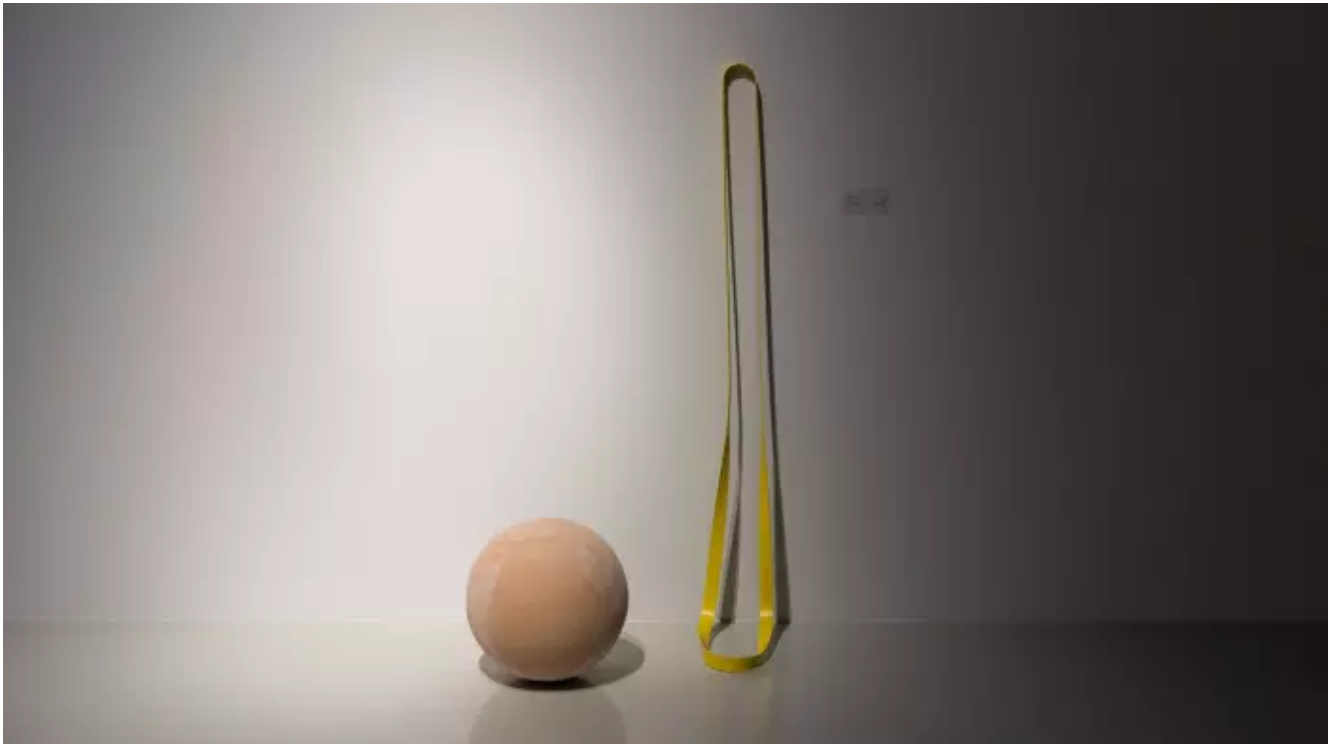
Finding your art tribe was hard then, but now it is easy to connect and stay updated because of social media platforms. I think social media plays a huge role on how artists and curators connect all over the world today.

Who would you cite as an especially important influence? And how do you want your work to evolve?

My works are personal in nature and come from my own experiences. The books I read influence me the most, along with music and travelling.

I believe artists have a role to add beauty, hope and positivity in the world, especially at a time when so much negativity is happening in this region.

Shaikha al-Mazrou, Emirati artist and teacher at the University of Sharjah



© Chito Pachica Photography

Has the drive to develop a cultural industry been tied to the policy of diversifying output in years to come?

Art should not be considered primarily an economic asset, although obviously artworks do have financial value. We should concentrate on the aesthetic and intellectual quality of the creation, and resist over-commercialisation of culture.

Does Dubai promise young artists the possibility of a successful career? How have foreign influences affected recent generations of Emirati artists?

In the middle of the boom of the creative industry in this city, one can have a successful career with a well-paid job. The development of arts infrastructure can lead to a more optimistic future. But this country has never been really isolated — especially in recent history.

Therefore, the western influence was inevitable but it is not the only reason for the inspiring internationalism we are seeing, which is anyway characteristic of the art and design scene.

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