



Sand-Land by Shaikha Al Mazrou. Satish Kumar / The National

Exploring the sprawling Art of Nature exhibition at Umm Al Emarat park

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Last year, Shaikha Al Mazrou began a project in the Ras Al Khaimah mountains by digging a square 15-metres across. Roberto Lopardo travelled to an isolated island to spend 24 hours by himself. Amal Adour bought 600 fishing weights in Deira, Dubai Creek.

The artists are among 20 contributors to the sprawling Art of Nature exhibition organised as part of the Abu Dhabi Festival. It is on show in a gallery at Umm Al Emarat park, inaugurating the new multi-use space.

The exhibition is curated by the Abu Dhabi Music & Arts Foundation to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi and the biodiversity of the UAE.

It is organised into four themes – Earth, sea, animals and plants – that together address the country's biodiversity and our place within it.

A number of works focus on the strange paradox of urban life, particularly in the cities of the Emirates, where one can be ringed by nature but oblivious to it.

Palestinian artist Hazem Harb created an installation of photographs of the mangroves off the coast of Abu Dhabi island superimposed with images of the city, placing the two side by side.

Lopardo, a photographer in Dubai, travelled to the unpopulated island of Bu Tinah, a Unesco- designated biosphere reserve, and created a visual diary of his 24 hours in seclusion there.

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He created 1,440 images, all shot on a digital camera, of desiccated coral, birds in flight and the skeletons of animals, using a torch to illuminate his subjects in the night.

He says that while analogue photography, using film, was all about capturing the perfect moment, shooting on digital is about accumulation. So he collected an abundance of images, one for every minute he was on the island.

Other works look at climate change and successes in the Emirates of rescuing species from endangerment.

Ranim Orouk shows 3-D prints of the antlers of disappearing oryx, which were at one time so endangered that there were only four left. Sheikh Zayed, the founding President of the UAE, famously took them to the Al Ain Zoo where they repopulated.

There is a long history of artists working in nature. In a Western context, landscape painting first emerged as a genre in the 1600s in the Netherlands, a time of rapid urbanisation in the country.

The invention of metal tubes to transport paint helped spur the plein air (open air) painting of the Impressionists in France in the late 1800s, where they were able to capture the different effects of light on the land at various times of day.

Much of the work in this exhibition harks back to the artistic phenomenon of Land Art, a largely United States-based movement from the 1970s, when artists moved out of the confines of the studio and the gallery and created work on and from the land. The most famous example is Robert Smithson's 1970 work *Spiral Jetty*, in which the artist bulldozed earth to create a 1,500-foot-long spiral in Utah's Great Salt Lake.

For *Sand-Land*, Dubai-based artist Al Mazrou has created an enormous land work of her own, covering 225 square metres, which features concentric circles bounded by a square. It clearly refers back to the Smithson work in its shape, but also relates to her own sculptural practice, in which she places geometric forms in tension with each other, or paints them on accumulations of technological waste. She says in a video accompanying the exhibition: "I treated the land as a stretched canvas".

The work will exist in the Ras Al Khaimah mountains until it erodes, which exhibition organisers estimate will take two years. Co-ordinates to the site are available at the front desk of the exhibition, and the drive takes about two hours from the capital. Visitors are encouraged to watch as the light rakes across the site throughout the day.

Other standouts of the exhibition include two works by Amer Aldour, *This Sea* and *Flight*, which visualise the sea and a falcon, respectively. *This Sea*, for which Aldour purchased the 600 fishing weights, shows them hanging by translucent threads in an undulating pattern.

In *Flight*, rounded blocks of sanded pine wood move up and down in a row, mimicking the flapping of a falcon's wings. Aldour says he chose to represent the Sakr falcon, which is native to this region. Behind the wood blocks is the machine that generates the movement – a gorgeous mechanical simulation of flight in a show about nature.

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