



## Learning as an Art form

Emirati artist *Shaikha Al Mazrou* explains how education has shaped her creative journey

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“I always knew that I enjoyed drawing, and I knew that art was something that I wanted to indulge in,” says Shaikha Al Mazrou, an Emirati artist known for her sharp forms and eye-catching installations. “I studied architecture first, but as soon as I heard about the College of

Fine Arts and Design at the University of Sharjah I dropped out immediately and decided to switch to art.”

The decision has paid off: The Sharjah-born artist has made waves with her thought-provoking sculptures and installations over the past few years. But Al Mazrou by no means viewed herself as a master of the arts, particularly in the beginning. “I went into college not knowing anything about art history,” she says. “This institution has moulded me into the artist I am today.”

From the off, Al Mazrou has been an avid learner, a ‘hungry artist’ as she describes herself. After graduating, she gained a Masters from the Chelsea College of Fine Art in 2014. She then returned to the UAE where she is currently a sculpture lecturer at her alma mater, where she started her journey. Throughout our discussion, she speaks passionately about the importance of education and in bringing opportunities to local students.

“Education is very important for the region,” she says, adding that the art field now is very fertile ground. “But unfortunately



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our school system does not put a spotlight on art, so I really want to bring about that change, give back and be a part of this responsibility to educate students from an early age.”

So far, Al Mazrou is making good on this promise. Along with lecturing at the university, she is actively showcasing her own work through exhibitions and personal projects both locally and internationally. After returning from London, Al Mazrou signed a contract with the Lawrie Shabibi gallery in Alserkal Avenue and began her career as an artist. Her first solo exhibition there, *Expansion/Extension*, has just concluded after a two-month run.

“For this exhibition, I created seven different works in a range of colours,” she explains. “Being fascinated by material, I wanted to take normal metal sheets that are used in industrial fields and transform their physical form, changing their context, and using the power of colour to give a three-dimensional shape.”

In describing her work, Al Mazrou explains that it is less about storytelling and more about challenging perceptions. It comes mainly from the school of minimalism, with a focus on industrially made works. “You find dichotomy quite a lot in my practice – something looks handmade, but isn’t, or soft, but is actually metal.”

Such themes will be again showcased in one of her biggest projects yet, with Al Mazrou being chosen to provide an installation for a much-anticipated major art centre, which is opening in Dubai this month.

“When I was first approached by Jameel Arts Centre, I was given a brief titled ‘Artist Garden’, so I started thinking of the given space, which was the courtyards between the buildings,”



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Shaikha Al Mazrou; *Ironic Experiments*, 2017; *Enlarge*, 2018; 189; 2010; *Tension II*, 2014. OPPOSITE: *Sand-Land*, 2016, land art created on site at Al Shawka – an Abu Dhabi Festival 2017 commission



she says of her process for this particular piece. “The idea of the courtyard kept coming back to me – what is a courtyard? It is indoor, yet outdoor, it’s external but also internal. So I started to develop ideas around a greenhouse as a metaphor. It is a manmade structure, yet its contents are natural and nurtured by the elements and human hands.”

The result is a large-scale, six-structure installation made entirely from glass. “Each one will be a gradient from green, to darker green, to completely clear,” she says. “So it is almost a metaphor, a linguistic reference of this greenhouse where the absence of the plants is projected within the glass.”

With plenty of work lined up over the next few months, including an exhibition in Italy, the artist continues to reiterate the importance of education in propelling the region’s art scene, especially in the UAE. “Today we see international museums and galleries across the country, so growth is definitely apparent,” she says. “But we have to invest in education above all else in order to build the country’s art scene, and not just through fairs, but also in schools.”

Al Mazrou hopes that with the continued support of the government, the field will continue to flourish. “When I started school, we were only four students in fine arts, and today we witness 16 to 22 students enrolled. I can say I am optimistic.” □