



## Meet six young artists at Abu Dhabi Art 2022 who are ones to watch

Abu Dhabi Art returned for 2022 with its biggest and most global programme to date. This 14th annual edition featured over 300 artists and 80 galleries from 28 countries and this year, thanks to guest curators Rachida Triki, Jade Yeşim Turanlı, and Riccarda Mandrini, special attention was paid to artists from across Africa as well as Turkey and regional names.

In amidst an impressive array of artist commissions, solos and happenings lay some unique encounters. My Life in the Metaverse was a group show playfully orchestrated by Dr. Omar Kholeif aka Dr O, which brought the avatar experience to life. CookBook was a culinary art adventure that, on the first night alone, fashioned rotating pineapples, moreish pão de queijo and earthen potatoes into tasty, sculptural forms. And Farah Al Qasimi presented a selection of her most seductive and smile-inducing photographic images as this year's visual campaign artist. The Abu Dhabi-born, Brooklyn-based talent blurs the line between authenticity and artifice to challenge postcolonial power structures, gender norms and notions of good taste.



The fair is an integral event for Abu Dhabi as the city steadily – and quite literally - builds its cultural renaissance. Since the late oughts, Saadiyat Island Cultural District has been rising up as a world-class arts and heritage hub. First came the Manarat Al Saadiyat cultural centre, where Abu Dhabi Art takes place. Then came the monumental Louvre Abu Dhabi, which celebrates its fifth anniversary this month. And currently being developed are the Arahamic Family House, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Zayed National Museum and Maritime Museum. Meanwhile smaller spaces such as Warehouse421 and NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery give voice to local talent and perspectives.

This all makes Abu Dhabi Art a rich ground for discovering emerging names from across the Gulf and beyond. As Dyala Nusseibeh, Director of Abu Dhabi Art, notes, “Abu Dhabi Art has played an integral role in the art eco-system in Abu Dhabi and the wider emirates, fuelling the appetite for art in the region. Over the years, we have bolstered the growth of the country’s cultural and creative industries and nurtured homegrown talent. We will continue to enable diverse perspectives, ensuring that Abu Dhabi Art is a place of discovery.”

Here are six new names that stood out at the fair.



### **Sarah Al Mehairi – Beyond: Emerging Artists**

Sarah Al Mehairi is one of three artists selected for 2022’s Beyond: Emerging Artists, an annual platform providing three young UAE artists the opportunity to nurture their practice and realise a new project for the fair. Born and based in Abu Dhabi, she studied at New York University Abu Dhabi and gained representation from Dubai’s Carbon12 upon graduating in 2019. Her multidisciplinary practice investigates materiality, form, identity and language and uses a process of continuous iterations to build narratives told through abstract and geometric structures. She’s also co-founder of the Jara poetry collective.

For Abu Dhabi Art, Al Mehairi developed a series she first began during the Salama bint Hamdan Emerging Artists Fellowship in 2020 that saw her rework discarded cardboard and styrofoam packaging into new forms and mediums. “It asked, what is a container, and is a container a package? That lead me to ideas of mass production and questioning the concept of an original. I’m breaking it down and rebuilding it to show that it’s just a constant reinvention of itself,” she explains.

The installation included 12 monoprints of cardboard packaging that she has remade to contain itself, progressively getting smaller each time. These were presented alongside a series of interconnected collages and floor standing structures that evoke concrete figurative sculptures. “My practice is often abstract and geometric but always goes back to a narrative or a body of some sort. You can’t forget the labour that has gone into producing the packaging, and my work is extensive and laborious as well.”

On being a young, woman artist in Abu Dhabi, Al Mehairi feels there’s never been a better time to be starting out here. “What I love about Abu Dhabi is the communities that grow here, within the university, and within private studios, and the fair brings people together. Being a female artist is celebrated and there are programmes that support your journey.”



### **Mohammed Khalid - Beyond: Emerging Artists**

Mohammed Khalid was also commissioned for Beyond: Emerging Artists. Originally trained as an architect, this Dubai-based talent comes to art through his personal and often whimsical experiences of the everyday. “I’m interested in the mundane. There’s a present-ness that happens as soon as you step out of the house, especially being situated in a country like UAE where there are so many factors that change all the time. So, the city becomes a medium and my practice acknowledges all of these nuances and systematics that happen.”

He’s an alumnus of the Salama bint Hamdan Emerging Artists Fellowship and Campus Art Dubai 7.0 and currently has his first solo show, Let Me Tell You Something, at Warehouse421. For Abu Dhabi Art, Khalid made a film about being stung by a jelly fish just off a Dubai beach. “This encounter made me wonder how this jellyfish got to this place. Because of Dubai’s man-made islands, jellyfish get trapped in the waters. So, I’m negotiating whether a man can undo this problem. And if I get this jellyfish unstuck by moving it from the Arabian Gulf into the Indian Ocean, does that benefit its life or mine?”



Khalid agrees with Al Mehairi that this is a special moment for young artists in UAE. “When I was a kid, art wasn’t seen as a career. Now kids can come and see art and believe there is potential for success. For my generation, the opportunities are quite expedited and we are receiving opportunities you wouldn’t get in other parts of the world so I’m grateful for that room to grow and the care being taken for the creative economy.”





## Katharien de Villiers – Osart Gallery

South African artist Katharien de Villiers attained her MFA in installation from KASK, Gent and lives in Cape Town. She has enjoyed solos at SMITH Gallery and A4Arts Foundation in Cape Town and Osart Gallery in Milan, who brought her to Abu Dhabi Art. She's also exhibited at Zeitz MOCAA and has her work in the collection at the Nirox Foundation. Working across sculpture, painting and installation, she uses hi-lo materials to create tactile works that ask the viewer to consider the power play between the object and the gaze.

The works on show at the fair came from her series Narcissus' Solitude, 2022. Drawing on ideas from Greek myth through to Ways of Seeing, she has recreated images found on Instagram that caught her own eye for the way they seduce the viewer. We encounter a mask-wearing skateboarder, Britney at her finest, shirtless wrestlers in the ring and a lonesome man lying in the grass, among other heroes. Flag-like canvasses are encrusted with acrylic, lead and oil paints as well as glass, glitter and googly eyes.

"Narcissus' Solitude is an exploration of the perceptions of self, the construction of the idea of an iconic self, and the manipulation of the viewers' perspective in terms of how the subject desires to be seen, and controls those variables," de Villiers says. "I choose my images based on their appeal to the savage taste for the amazing, the overstuffed, the grotesque, and the absolutely sumptuous, with an edge of low-price. It says to its viewers, 'You too can have the incredible, just like a millionaire.'"



## **Lounis Baouche – Foreign Agent**

Algerian artist Lounis Baouche studied at the Regional School of Fine Arts in Azazga and has enjoyed solos at Ifru Design Gallery, Algiers, Paris Internationale 2021 and Liste Basel 2022. His practice spans painting, drawing, ceramics and installation and works often feature naïve characters as a way to unpack how authority, oppression and resistance shape social interactions. His world is one steeped in pop culture and dystopia as a way to highlight the folly of the contemporary collective experience.

“At the heart of my work are nostalgic moments of my time,” Baouche says. “The inexperienced hand, imperfections, geometric shapes, vivid colours, narrative fragments and bizarre scenarios are recurring motifs, which form a very daring, carefree and curious miniature world. My works exude a childish anarchy that invites the absurd through a formal and minimal aesthetic language.”

At Abu Dhabi Art, a series of acrylic paintings presented a cartoon-like street fight, shark infested pavements and a ghoulish figure who lives to steal cigarettes. They are at once inviting, humorous and deeply disturbing. Some of their urgency stems from the artist’s feelings toward artistic freedoms in Algeria. “Here there are two extremes. Visual artists close to the regime have to be on the side of abstract and academic art, as if these art forms at the service of the dictatorship. There are also those of us who try to resist through their art by finding in their work a means of existing.”



## **Aziz Jamal – ATHR Gallery**

Aziz Jamal is a Saudi Arabian artist who graduated from the Eastern Washington University and won the 2019 Ithra Emerging Artists Prize, going on to participate in several group shows in the US and Saudi Arabia. His practice includes sculptures, video, drawings and installations and leans toward zooming in on the incongruous and often eccentric in order to examine the bigger picture. He repurposes found materials and combines them with favourite materials such as cement and soap in order to evoke a passing of time and contradictory social realities.

At Abu Dhabi Art, Jamal presented the sculpture *Vacant* (2019), which appears to be a miniature city scape made from Pepto-Bismol-pink objects. Are they buildings and monuments, funfair rides or simply trash? Of his piece, Jamal says: “*Vacant* was fuelled by contemplations on often disregarded objects in urban landscapes. Understandings of space are usually limited to the space objects occupy and never the negatives they accidentally design. The inner crevasses and outlines of things create an almost negative and neglected area. This work celebrates the neglected as a collective that mirrors the environment it has previously inhabited. A symphonic play of hollow space in concrete form.”



### **Khalif Tahir Thompson – Zidoun Bossuyt**

“I chronicle the lived and imagined experiences of and between human beings,” says Khalif Tahir Thompson of his portraiture. “I believe painting can be a tool in considering the emotional, psychological complexity of an individual's story and identity. By creating imagery that connects one to the realm of another, I alter perception and invoke empathy towards my subjects, depicting their reality across a visceral lens.” This New York-born artist does this by building rich surfaces – canvas built up with a collage of handmade paper, fabrics, fibres and printed matter – upon which his oil paintings of family, friends and cultural figures are steeped in warmth and feeling.

Tahir Thompson is currently pursuing an MFA from The Yale School of Art and was a member of Kehinde Wiley's Black Rock Senegal residency in 2022. His signature use of printed letters and numbers float across constructed settings – from bedrooms to beaches – nodding to the artist's interest in continuing the conceptual



conversations around contemporary Black portraiture led by the likes of Kerry James Marshall and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. “The atmosphere of each piece hosts distinct environments that fluctuate from tangible to ethereal, framing the viewers' perception towards their pain, joy, resolve, and role in the world in which they live,” he adds.

Words Helen Jennings

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