

## Culture

## ‘Collectivity’ explores the world of art in the UAE

N.P. Krishna Kumar

Sharjah

“Collectivity: Objects and Associations in the UAE Art World,” an exhibition curated by Laura Metzler at the Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah, is based on the theories of American sociologist Howard S. Becker, who approached art as “collective action” and an occupation.

The exhibition brings together works of art and objects from personal collections across the United Arab Emirates. Rather than being acquired from collectors, institutions or artists, the exhibited works come from the people who carry out the everyday labour that make the production, circulation and interpretation of art possible.

“The ‘Collectivity’ show is an inversion of the relationships we generally explore, a focus shift that allows for another way of understanding what ties us together as a community and industry,” Metzler said.

■ ‘Collectivity’ shifts focus from the artworks to the people behind the art industry in the UAE.

She referred to the processes behind “what makes an art work successful, how shows come together and how authority is developed.

“At the heart of it, there is always the artworks themselves but behind these objects there are chains of people carrying out tasks, building relationships and coming together to make the everyday business they navigate happen.”

Metzler used the format of the exhibition to experiment with tracing relationships within the UAE art world. She reached out to 298 people spanning more than 100 organi-

sations in the country. These individuals were asked to invite anyone they think fit into the criteria of being part of the art industry.

Each was given the opportunity to lend artwork or art-related objects they own along with a text explaining how and why they acquired it.

“The interpretation of art work and art object was left up to the participants and there was no intervention in the selection process beyond providing the initial framework or the logistical limitations that are present with any project. Multiple objects were allowed as long as they could be explained in one text of up to 350 words,” Metzler said.

While in most exhibitions the primacy of the artist and the collector is highlighted, Metzler’s show aims to look “at everything that makes this exchange happen and fills in the route between them.”

Metzler received submissions from 84 people. They work in all sectors within the art world: From commercial galleries to non-profit foundations, art fairs to framers, freelance workers to museums. The way the show is organised, the viewer must visually respond and interact with the work to learn its story, piece by piece.

Each submission has a number that corresponds to a catalogue entry. No information about the artist is included in the hanging.

The exhibition must be navigated with a digital catalogue on a website that is accessible from any phone or computer.

The objects vary significantly in scale, fiscal value, medium and production year and location. The common thread, however, is a deep personal connection each lender has to the object they have contributed, which is revealed through the digital catalogue.

A primary theme of the show is the notion of family.

Miranda McKee’s contribution is an impressive photograph by Denis Dailleux that features a body



Shift of focus. Artworks on display at the Collectivity Exhibition in the Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah.

(Provided by N.P. Krishna Kumar)

builder with his mother, a typically masculine figure softened by their interaction. Curator and collector Shobha Pia Shamdsani’s contribution is the last piece her father collected before he died.

The personal connection with a particular artist is another important and common occurrence. Laila Binbrek submitted a work she purchased and an object she was given from the same artist. Sultan al-Qassemi contributed a group of four works that were given to

him by artists.

There are many other ways the viewer can connect to these works. As Metzler said: “There are dialogues to be explored through the breadth of the medium and formal approaches, through the geographic references and larger discourses that are referenced by each artist.”

Giuseppe Moscatello, director of Al Maraya Art Centre, said he was enthusiastic about the show: “I am very proud of ‘Collectivity,’ which is a first of its kind, especially in this

part of the world.”

He said the concept resonates with art enthusiasts and connects with individuals and groups who are the makers of the art scene and are not necessarily involved in art regularly.

“I’m looking forward to developing and producing more of these concepts and eventually evolving into new formats for alternative and new trends.”

The exhibition is to run through August 17.

## Saudi female artists champion preservation of traditional houses

Karen Dabrowska

London

“Shift,” the first British exhibition featuring three Saudi female artists, laments the destruction of tradition and pleads for its preservation for future generations. It features the creations of Dana Awartani, Zahrah al-Ghamdi and Reem al-Nasser, whose visit to London was sponsored by the Mosaic Rooms, where the exhibition is staged.

There are two interesting parts to Awartani’s work: “I went away and forgot you. A while ago I remembered. I remembered I’d forgotten you. I was dreaming.” The first part is a film shot in old Jeddah, showing a ray of sunlight through the window of an abandoned house with a traditional Islamic tiled floor. The floor is an installation of hand-dyed sand, which the artist sweeps away in the film.

The floor of sand is recreated in a small gallery next to the main exhibition space in the Mosaic Rooms. The two works summarise the effect of urban development in Jeddah, where traditions are sacrificed to what is seen as progress.

Through her installations, Ghamdi, who is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Art and Design at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, translates traditional architectural styles from south-western Saudi Arabia into modern art.

“Through my work I would like to explain that traditional architecture is being destroyed and is disappearing because the inhabitants leave



Unique insight. From a video titled “I went away and forgot you. A while ago I remembered. I remembered I’d forgotten you. I was dreaming.” by Dana Awartani, 2017.

(The Mosaic Rooms)

their houses for modern homes and now this traditional architecture is (struggling) to find life,” Ghamdi said.

“I want to tell the story and preserve the memory of traditional architecture. I want to apologise for its loss. All my work reflects the traditions and the emotions of the past. I know the past is gone but I want to remember the traditional house I grew up in in Saudi Arabia. I want to wake the people up and ask

them to preserve the past because if the past goes away it cannot be replaced.”

Ghamdi’s work consists of a large wall installation built at the Mosaic Rooms gallery especially for the “Shift” exhibition. It is made of multiple layers of mixed sand, clay and cloth, which evoke the material memory of a traditional Saudi city, bringing the past into the present, which is dominated by industrial and highly finished contemporary

edifices. Ghamdi created a similar installation July 2 in the Great Court of the British Museum.

Taking part in Shubbak, London’s biennial festival of Arab art and culture, was a dream come true for Ghamdi. “It is like a window for me to see London,” she said, unable to contain her excitement. “When I was asked to show my work at Shubbak, I couldn’t believe it. Saudi Arabia has a different culture to London and I wanted the people here to see Saudi art.”

In the downstairs gallery at the Mosaic Rooms, Nasser’s “Silver Plate,” a resonant multimedia installation, represents a woman’s experience of her past, present and future.

The visitor encounters a dual screen video installation of two opposing states in conversation with one another. One video shows fingers drumming on a silver plate, a traditional celebratory act at weddings. On the other, water slowly drips onto a small plate, a simple phenomenon that increasingly begins to suggest something unsettling. The videos play on a continual loop and the repetition reinforces the oppressive atmosphere, which is representative of the past.

Multimedia producer and curator Frederique Cifuentes said Ghamdi, being a university lecturer and an artist, wants to emphasise the need for all Saudi women, regardless of their socio-economic background, to be empowered through art.

“This means that those who cannot afford a private driver to move around should benefit from a more accessible and affordable means of transport to reach their studio or gallery to showcase their work or

simply go to museums to see artwork or to travel abroad to attend residency programmes or festivals without being prevented by their guardian,” she said.

“I also hope that those privileged women will pave the way for their female colleagues, by giving them access to their network.”

The exhibition provides insight into some of the exciting art practices emerging in the young contemporary Saudi art scene.

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“‘Shift’ demonstrates the importance of art as a space which these young artists are using to start conversations on contemporary circumstances and issues and to look towards the future,” the Mosaic Rooms said in a statement.

“The artists respond to their experience of accelerated change in their country, in the built environment of their cities and in domestic spaces. Caught between a future driven by globalisation and rapid urban development and a past at risk of erasure, the artists consider their own position and reflect on what is important to them as individuals and as part of a wider collective.”

The “Shift” exhibition is to take place through September 2 at the Mosaic Rooms in London.

Karen Dabrowska is an Arab Weekly contributor in London.