

Harper's BAZAAR Arabia
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UAE Underground

A new exhibition at NYU Art Gallery in Abu Dhabi surveys one of the most important creative communities in UAE history

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Hassan Sharif. Cardboard and Coir, 1999, Variable dimensions 100 x 220 x 180 cm. Courtesy Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

There are two especially pervasive narratives that get dredged up when discussing development in the UAE. The first is that there was nothing and then, through a sudden deus ex machina (the discovery of oil, perhaps, or the founding of an art fair), there was everything. A thriving city where there was once only a pearl diving backwater; a robust commercial art scene seemingly out of nowhere. The second is “if you build it, they will come,” a prophecy so deeply entrenched so as to become self-fulfilling, except in the case of artists, what if they were here all along? Before the museums and residencies and

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biennials and commercial galleries and art fairs and all of the other arts infrastructure we might gesture to today?



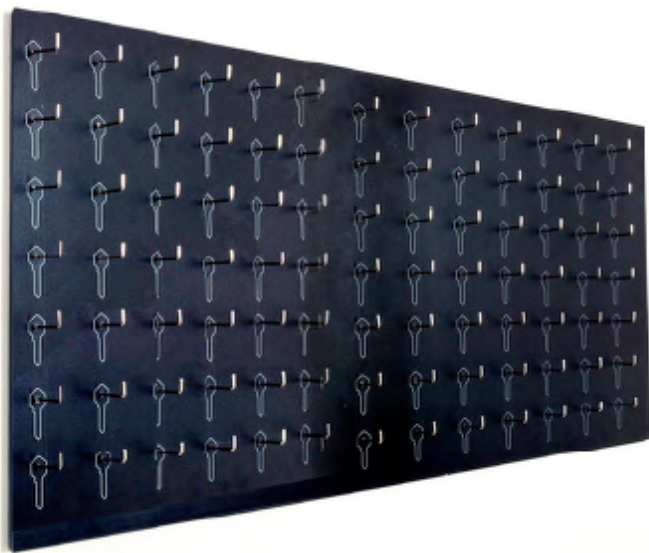
An installation view of *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Underground: 1988-2008* at NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery

A new historical show at the NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery addresses this early, fecund period of artistic development. Spanning the two decades leading up to the founding of Flying House it covers a time period where artists had few places to show their work outside of the recently established Emirates Fine Art Society's annual exhibition, and traces the shifting locus of cultural production from Sharjah to Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The show is named *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008*, after an early Nujoom Alghanem poem, and curated by Maya Allison and Bana Kattan. Crucially, this exhibition diverges from recent attempts to address this time period in its efforts to contextualise Emirati art in its broader cultural moment, most notably the concurrent literary movements that have thus far been largely ignored by art historians. It centres on the community of seminal Emirati artists that have come to be known as "the five"—Hassan and Hussain Sharif, Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, Abdullah Al Saadi and Mohammed Kazim—but also incorporates work from other artists, poets, and filmmakers of the time including artists Vivek Vilasini and Jos Clevers who were expats but nevertheless left an indelible mark.

The show is grounded in a restaging of some of the watershed exhibitions of the nineties, with some artists even recreating old pieces from that time. But at its heart is an exploration of community, and the way in which artists and poets, absent any infrastructural support or commercial concerns and with little access to outside

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developments, came together to challenge, reinforce, and support each other. The avant-garde poets of the time—experimenting with free verse, they called themselves the ‘New Culture’—had day jobs at newspapers, and provided the local art criticism of the period. In particular, Hassan Sharif made concerted efforts to translate art historical, postmodernist, and philosophical texts into Arabic; the discussions that sprang out of these readings would go on to provide the intellectual scaffolding for these poets and artists alike.



Mohammed Kazem. Keyboard. 1995. Hangers and sticker on board. 80 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

While each edition of the Sharjah Biennial and the occasional externally-curated exhibition, as well as the group's own travels abroad, provided the artists with insights into what was happening in the art world at large, for the most part their frames of reference were each other. Sometimes this resulted in them unwittingly yet independently making similar work. Gallery director Allison cites the examples of Mohammed Kazem's early GPS works and Abdullah Al Saadi's paintings of his desert journeys, both of which looked to document their immediate landscapes albeit in very different ways. More similar was an exhibition for which Hassan Sharif and Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim discovered that they had both produced sculptural piles comprised of little balls; with a playfulness that characterised much of the group's interactions, they combined their works into a single large pile that mixed Ibrahim's paper-mache and dirt spheres with Sharif's slightly larger black ones. Also on view is a certain intergenerational meshing, where former

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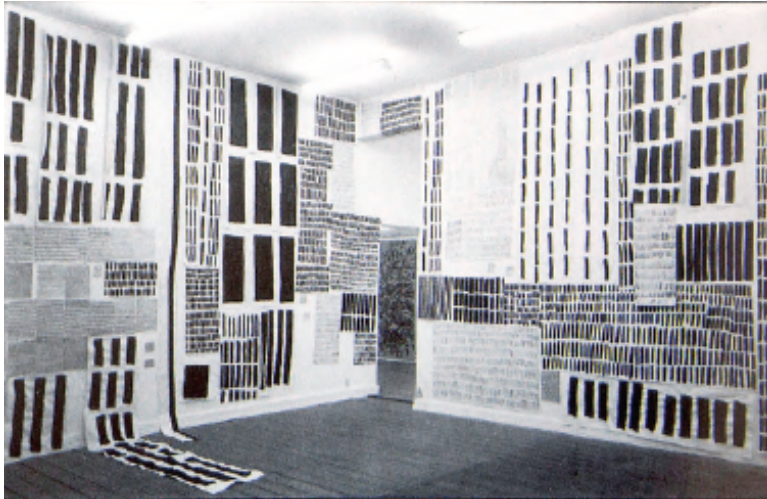
students taught by Hassan Sharif's—and later, Kazem would go on to become colleagues and collaborators, showing with their former mentors.



Ebtisam Abdulaziz. Line. 2004. Wall installation

In particular, Allison cites the example of Ebtisam Abdul Aziz, one of the few women in this group, who began taking classes in 1999, before arriving at a kind of impasse around 2004. She realises that she hates her work and they are not the kind of art she wants to make, and entirely gives up painting for a few months, instead writing about the questions she is thinking through. Reaching out to her former teacher Kazem she tells him she's having a crisis and can't make art, and would he show her writing to Hassan Sharif? Shortly after, Sharif himself calls up the young artist and explains what she has produced is conceptual art and says, "Ebtisam, welcome to conceptual art;" she quickly becomes a member of the group.

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Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim. Lines. 1995. Paint on paper, installation view. Courtesy of the artist

It was exactly these kinds of anecdotes that provided the initial impetus for the show, which flows not from the heretofore largely unmined archive but instead from oral history. A mammoth catalogue, which marries over 300 pages of recollections—the curators tracked down and interviewed every living artist, writer and poet active during this period—with newly commissioned scholarly essays will accompany the exhibition, along with an extensive program of talks and screenings organised by Alaa Edris.



Etisam Abdulaziz. Untitled 1. 2008. Photography on aluminum

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And perhaps there's something of a more reflexive mood in the air: in a rare coincidence, two other shows this spring and summer all explore this same subject matter. "I think it's just the zeitgeist we're now in the moment where we're looking back on a 30-year-history of really rich artistic practice," Allison ventures. "It's a very typical time frame art historically to start looking back so I think it's sort of the natural life cycle of an art community and a necessary step. I expect that our show will be one of many, many, many, more to come and hopefully many which can go much deeper. This is an opening salvo, and one of several!"

<https://www.harpersbazaararabia.com/art/exhibitions/a-uae-underground>