

UAE at 50: artist Mohammed Kazem reflects on the rapid rise of the country's art scene

The artist cites local initiatives such as the Sheikha Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation and international museums as developments that keep him optimistic for the future

Alexandra Chaves Dec 2, 2021

Mohammed Kazem is perhaps one of the country's best witnesses to art history. He is part of it.

Counted as one of the "five", a group of artists who spearheaded Conceptual art in the Emirates in the 1980s and 1990s, he has not only been sustaining a multifaceted, decades-long practice, but has also been active in curating exhibitions, teaching and mentoring young artists over the years.

As the UAE celebrates its Golden Jubilee, Kazem reflects on how rapidly the art scene has evolved – from once-in-a-year shows in the 1980s to an amalgamation of galleries, institutions, collectives and increasingly global events today.

Born in 1969, Kazem grew up at a time when being an artist was not seen as a viable career path. Even as a child, however, he was pulled towards creativity and curiosity – not only drawing, but venturing into Dubai's streets, collecting objects to bring them home.

He was fascinated by figures in his neighbourhood, including a Pakistani man who ran a sign shop, cutting letters for advertising or painting calligraphy on boards and a Chinese man producing sketches around Al Ghurair Mall. He also notes the small guitar and music shops dotting the streets of Old Dubai. "I felt that I was closer to these things. You feel it even when you're young," he recalls.

At 14, he dropped out of school to focus on his art, joining the Emirates Fine Arts Society a year later, where he was mentored by pioneering artist Hassan Sharif, who helped to establish the organisation in 1980.

Kazem, together with Sharif, Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, Abdullah Al Saadi and Hussein Sharif, cultivated a different kind of art scene from what came before. Their works were more conceptual, but also responsive to the environment, whether in a material or social sense.

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Reception of these more unconventional pieces was not always warm. "We received a lot of criticism from audiences and even artists who were more focused on painting and sculpture, and more conventional European traditions. There was a gap between the artists and the art, but that's also because there was little arts education," he says.

Though the Emirates Fine Arts Society staged a show every year, other art initiatives, from the late 1970s towards the next decade or so, were few and far between.

"The lifestyle was slow. The demand was slow. The requests were slow," Kazem says. "There was no market for art. We were all just waiting for that annual exhibition. Artists would probably have one solo show every two or three years. Many of those artists had a job [outside of art]."

He was one of them. As an aspiring artist in the mid-1980s, he says he could not afford to buy materials, so he joined the army at aged 17 to financially support himself and to find opportunities to study abroad.

All the while, he kept his practice active, producing and showing works when he could. Because the community was so small and arts education so sparse, artists donned various hats.

“We were teaching young artists, but we were also curating the shows, making publications, writing stories about the work in the main newspaper. We were playing different roles, even trying to get artists to understand the rules of the central government and policies of the UAE,” he says.

In tracing Kazem's career, you can also chart the rise of Contemporary art in the Gulf, including the formation of institutions and private entities that would form the local art market.

For Kazem, the year 2003 is a significant one. Though he had participated in the Sharjah Biennial in the 1990s, he says the initiative was very different then. “It was based on the participation of different countries, so associations would hang artworks that were available. It wasn't curated or designed, and there were no commissions. It was like a bazaar,” he says.

When 2003 came around, however, Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi took over the reins of the Sharjah Biennial, co-curating the sixth event and becoming director, a role she has kept ever since. Kazem was one of the participating artists, winning a prize for his installation.

“Many things have changed since 2003. It was when Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi came back from the UK and it was the first time the biennial had an artistic director,” he says. “The gallery boom was also starting.”

Though a handful of commercial galleries existed, the arrival of more curated programming came about in the early 2000s, when spaces such as The Third Line and Traffic flourished. Then in 2007, the Gulf Art Fair, which would later become Art Dubai, was born.

In 2013, Kazem received one of the highest achievements for many artists – representing the UAE in a solo presentation at the Venice Biennale. Though the country had participated in the prestigious art event two years prior, it was in 2013 that the UAE was permitted a permanent pavilion in the Arsenale exhibition site. It was the first Gulf country to secure such a long-term agreement.

Walking on Water, curated by Reem Fadda, featured Kazem's installation Directions 2005/2013, an immersive, 360-degree projection of the sea joined by sounds of churning waves, with various GPS co-ordinates flashing in a chamber. Inspired by his personal experience, the work was meant to replicate being lost at sea.

The dates in the title tell the story of how the work had developed, according to what was possible in terms of production. Kazem recalls how he and other artists struggled in 1980s and 1990s to produce some of their artworks –there simply weren't enough curators, companies, manufacturers and technology to help create them.

“When I went to the biennial, I was able to visualise my work after about eight years,” he says.

Artists now have a bigger network of professionals to collaborate with in order to produce their work, he says. “The new generation of artists here can customise their works or play with bigger scales using the right materials. Back then, curators and art consultants weren't here. Today, many people who have studied abroad or have moved here from abroad bring their skills in areas like exhibition design.”

Careers in arts and culture, as well as design, have also become viable. “Many things have happened that allow today's artists to live and work through their art, which was not possible 20 or 30 years ago,” Kazem says, citing spaces such as Alserkal Avenue, Jameel Arts Centre and organisations such as the Sheikha Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation in supporting artists. Not to mention the establishment of international museums such as Louvre Abu Dhabi – where Kazem's work is on view and currently shortlisted for the museum's first Contemporary art prize –and the coming Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.

All these developments keep him “optimistic”, though he says that education remains the most important element to building an arts ecosystem. He says he hopes to see not only more visual art taught in local schools, but also subjects such as philosophy and psychology. Then and now, this gap remains “one of the main challenges” in the country.

It's not only artists who prop up the industry, after all. He knows that as far as developments go, they are only as successful as the people who thrive in them. “You can build a nice museum, but if there are no art historians, art designers, curators, if these don't exist, then you cannot work.”