

# How does Abdul Qader Al Rais fit into the history of art in the UAE?

A retrospective of the artist's work is on show now at Manarat Al Saadiyat



Abdul Qader Al Rais with his artworks at his exhibition at Manarat Al Saadiyat. Victor Besa / The National



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Abdul Qader Al Rais, a gentleman who is a master of colour, is the subject of the current show at Manarat Al Saadiyat entitled Abdul Qader Al Rais: 50 Years of Art.

It's hard to underestimate the importance of Al Rais to the UAE's art scene. He was a founding member of the Emirates Fine Arts Society in Sharjah and from 1989, he had a solo exhibition every year at the Cultural Foundation in Abu Dhabi, except for in 1996, when he had two. His work is in the collections of major government ministries and local and regional museums.

With this in mind, the Department of Culture and Tourism's decision to hold a retrospective of Abdul Qader Al Rais is an interesting one. The artist isn't lacking in representation in the Emirates, and he commanded a solo exhibition at the Institut du Monde Arabe earlier this autumn in Paris. His show in Abu Dhabi presents a selection of his hundreds of works, organised into six thematics that sketch out his career trajectory.

## An explosion of colour

Briefly, this is: his early, unmistakable talent for portraiture, wielded as a child and young adult in Kuwait, where he moved to, after his father's premature death. He took a break from painting in 1974 to 1982, during which time he destroyed a number of his figurative works. He was inspired to return to art-making after a road trip across the western United States. "I ran to the nearest art materials shop. I was crazy," he recalls.



A self-portrait painted in 1970 in Kuwait. Victor Besa / The National

He then began making awesome, majestic landscapes representing the UAE's mountains, wadis and deserts, as well as technically accomplished watercolours that captured the traditional architecture of Dubai amid the city's modernisation. Included in this show is his political work, such as his responses to the deposing of Muammar Qaddafi, the Gulf War and the First Intifada in Palestine – much of which is being seen here for the first time.

Later, the exhibition shows him turning away from figuration and towards abstraction – not abstraction as practised in Modernism, but an explosion of colour, flecked with calligraphy and underwritten by reverential devotion. It ends in a digital animation of his paintings. "I like it," says Al Rais, joking: "I wish it were bigger."

The show, curated by Sheikha Maisa Al Qassimi and Sara Bin Safwan, both of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, gives a solid introduction to Al Rais's art and, wonderfully, includes a catalogue with serious essays on his work. But I can't help feeling that Al Rais's paintings have been left adrift somewhat, with their attachment to technical

capacity as the art world has moved on to value other aspects of art, and the exhibition raises intriguing questions about how his work sits within the broader UAE output.

## A connection with contemporary art

Al Rais might be too big of an artist to have yet another solo show. What feels needed for him is contextualisation. It isn't clear, for example, how Al Rais fits into the narrative of contemporary art in the UAE as it's currently forming. He is a product of an earlier time of art-making, which was removed from the international market and discussions, and underlined instead Arab traditions and social representation.

Al Rais is himself aware of his disconnection to many young artists today: "They're not artists," he says of UAE art students. "They know art history. They have good intentions. They go [to art school] to become artists. They have their degree in installation art and video art. This is good, but it's not all art."



His paintings chronicle the UAE's past. Courtesy Department of Culture and Tourism

It might be useful to compare Al Rais, born in 1951 in Dubai, to Hassan Sharif, born in the same year in the same city. Recently Sharif (who died in 2016) has been positioned as the godfather of a certain strain of artwork: internationally focused, high concept, anti-aesthetic – the installation and video art of which Al Rais speaks. This is

the style seen at Alserkal Avenue, the Sharjah Biennial and, most likely, the kind that will be shown at Dubai's Jameel Arts Centre, and is what makes those places so relevant to the international circuit.

The Sharif story is a slightly simplifying narrative. Though he was influential to a group of Arab artists, a number of the artists living in the Emirates in the 2000s and 2010s who were not Emirati did not necessarily look to him as a father figure. In focusing on Sharif's time studying at art school in London, it also underestimates the amount of exchange between the Gulf and nearer locales, such as Cairo, Kuwait and Sudan. But that aside, the broad outlines of a story stand where Sharif and the artists around him (Mohammed Kazem, Abdullah Al Sa'adi, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, and his brother Hussein Sharif) were the pioneers of UAE contemporary art.

## But is contemporary art considered real art?

I've been waiting for a backlash to this, and have wondered what shape it would take: a validation of non-Conceptual idioms that were also present at the time? Research into the poets who worked alongside the visual artists? An unearthing of the UAE's cinematic history, particularly that of its short films? I'm not going to argue the backlash is here now. I think it will (and should) come from proper research that fully fleshes out the picture of the art scene across the Emirates in the 1980s to present.

But I do have an inkling that this "fleshing out" is happening here and there, from a few shows that foreground a historical angle rather than a teleological or thematic one. Among these would be Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi's 1980 – Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates, at the Venice Biennale in 2015, which gave a breadth of the UAE's output, particularly of the Emirates Fine Arts Society. Another is the current Artists and the Cultural Foundation: The Early Years, curated by Maya Allison and Alia Zaal Lootah to inaugurate the reopening of the Cultural Foundation in Abu Dhabi. Slightly differently, Cristiana de Marchi and Muhanad Ali's Is Old Gold?, at Ductac in Dubai in 2017, questioned whether the "pioneer" generation is in fact at all influential on young artists working today.



Abdul Qader Al Rais's work often addresses political concerns, which this exhibition highlights for the first time. This 1989 painting responds to the First Intifada in Palestine. Courtesy Department of Culture and Tourism

Learning more about Al Rais's work in a show such as DCT's forms a part of this counter-narrative, whatever it might become. In this case, the issue is also the debate between those who think that contemporary art – all those found objects and appropriated images – is not real art, which is painting, beauty and representationality. What makes this dilemma particularly relevant now is that, because the UAE's art history is in the process of being set down almost before our eyes, one can watch how questions of international validation, economic migration, and national cultural ambition select some practices as "pioneering" and leave others, as if childless, at "important".

For now, one hopes this exhibition seeds the ground for future areas of study: Al Rais's political tendencies, his use of the "nuqta" (or dot) within his hurufiyya practice, and particularly his Surrealism, as when the bricks around his figures seem to dislodge and float as squares elsewhere. This is 50 years of history, waiting to be woven into a larger tapestry.

*Abdul Qader Al Rais: 50 Years of Art is at Manarat Al Saadiyat until March 23*

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