

Award-winning Dubai poet and filmmaker will represent the UAE at the Venice Biennale 2019

Nujoom Alghanem is a significant figure in the history of modern UAE culture



Melissa Gronlund
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Nujoom Alghanem will represent the UAE in the Venice Biennale for art later this year, in a pavilion curated by the duo Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath.

Alghanem is a significant figure in the UAE art scene, and the broad range of her work – which spans poetry, filmmaking, and art – demonstrates the fluidity among these forms that were common when she began working in the 1980s.

Hassan Sharif's influence

Alghanem was born in Dubai in 1962, and became part of the literary scene that centred in Sharjah and sought to advance free-verse poetry. It had many overlaps with the burgeoning artistic scene also in Sharjah, at the Emirates Fine Arts Society, and in particular with Emirati artist Hassan Sharif and the so-called “Five” who later emerged as the best-known creators of that period.



Nujoom Alghanem reading poetry at the Southbank Centre in London. Stephen Lock / The National

In 2017, one year after Sharif's death, Alghanem made a film about the titanic artistic figure, called *Sharp Tools*. It showed the Dubai artist at work in his home-cum-studio, sitting outside in the garden, performing the repetitive manual labour that was necessary for his artworks, or chatting to her about his paintings.



A still from award-winning documentary 'Amal' by director Alghanem.

Alghanem's films

Her films often focus on singular characters, using her camera and questions to build up portraits of the figures. In *Al Mureed*, for example, which won Best Documentary in the Gulf from the Abu Dhabi Film Festival in 2008, she looked at a certain type of celebration around Prophet Mohammed's Birthday, via a longtime figure who leads them in Dubai. Like in *Sharp Tools*, Alghanem herself is a quiet presence in the film; the complex that hosts the ceremonies is near to the house where she grew up in old Dubai.

The voice of a poet

In addition to her numerous films, Alghanem has also released eight books of poetry, all in Arabic. The pavilion curators, Bardaouil and Fellrath, who are well known in the Gulf, emphasise both her writerly and cinematic achievements. "Alghanem is a driving force behind some of the most innovative literary positions and bold cinematic practises of the UAE and the Gulf," they said.

"Her evocative work is as profoundly concerned with expanding the formal components of her practice, mainly poetry and film, as it is with capturing the complexity of the human condition through telling remarkable stories about exceptional characters."

Venice Biennale 2019

Alghanem will create a site-specific commission for the 2019 pavilion, details of which will be soon be released. She's no stranger to Venice, as she was also one of the artists in the group show for the last Venice pavilion, in 2017, when she exhibited a

sound installation as well as a facsimile of an early poetry journal from 1985, which she made with the Aqwas collective.

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UAE contributions to the Venice Biennale are overseen by the National Pavilion UAE, and commissioned by the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation, based in Abu Dhabi. The National Pavilion is unique in the UAE art world as it is the only institution that represents all the emirates, and the pavilion shows generally return to an institution in the UAE after their exhibition abroad.

Alghanem said of the project: "As a woman, I have found it fulfilling to focus on extraordinary female stories from our society or the Arab world that are worth being highlighted. I am excited to be working on this new commission in collaboration with the curators and the team of the National Pavilion UAE."

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