

## What to expect from Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim's exhibition at Venice Biennale 2022

The National Pavilion UAE will also release a companion publication to the pioneering artist's work titled *Between Sunrise and Sunset*

Nestled between Fujairah and Dibba on the country's eastern coast, Khor Fakkan is exceptional at dawn. The sun rises from behind the Gulf of Oman and the greens, browns and blues of the city and its natural landscape come alive under the direct sunlight. The city falls into shade after noon, however, as the jagged, rocky heights that surround it block out the sun. Colours mute and continue growing dimmer until the sun sets unseen beyond the Hajar Mountains.



The mountains and colours of Khor Fakkan inspire Emirati artist Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim's work. Photo: National Pavilion UAE La Biennale di Venezia

Khor Fakkan's geography and extraordinary colour palette is the inspiration for [Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim's](#) oeuvre. The city's corals and cliffs are featured in his art as allusions or artistic materials. Their patterns and textures appear in his paintings. In sculptures such as *Fresh and Salt*, they are used as a medium in themselves.

No different is the [exhibition](#) the Emirati artist will be unveiling at the coming [Venice Biennale](#) for the National Pavilion UAE. Featuring human-sized, abstract and organic sculptural forms, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim: *Between Sunrise and Sunset* draws from Ibrahim's deep connection to the local environment of Khor Fakkan, and particularly of his home town's mountains.

At the Venice Biennale, which will be running from April 23 to November 27, the exhibition will also be a vantage point celebrating the four-decade career of one of the country's most seminal experimental artists.

Curated by Maya Allison, executive director at New York University Abu Dhabi Art Gallery, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim: *Between Sunrise and Sunset* bares the fascination Ibrahim has with the mountains of his home town, as well as their influence on one another.

"The ocean is right there, but for him it's always been about the mountain," Allison says.

The curator, whose collaborative friendship with Ibrahim traces back to a decade, says the show at the biennale will be broader in scale than his previous work.

"The installation is a manifestation of that movement from colour to black and white between sunrise and sunset. It will fill the centre of the space. And as you walk around it, my hope is that you will have a very sort of physical relationship to it in the sense of, you know, these are sort of body sized forms. Moving from colour to black and white, from sunrise to sunset."

"There's another layer to this," she says. "Ibrahim also thinks of the installation like a land mass, like the UAE, with one side receiving sunrise, and the other witnessing sunset."

The work is also meant to reflect on this year's theme of the Venice Biennale.

This year's event, the 59th, is being curated by Italian curator and artistic director Cecilia Alemani, who lives in New York, under the theme *The Milk of Dreams*. It questions the representation of bodies and their metamorphoses, and the connection between bodies and earth.

"In resonance with this theme, Ibrahim's biomorphic sculptures cluster in undulating colour and movement — suggesting bodies, mutation and metamorphosis," the National Pavilion UAE's description of the work says.

"These forms arrive from his physical dialogue with the materials of the work: accretions of papier-mache are built up over loose skeleton structures that shift and settle into their final position as he works. Often incorporating actual earth, leaves, tea, coffee and tobacco, the texture of the forms derives from his raw materials."

The installation at the Venice Biennale will give visitors a potent taste of Ibrahim's artistic methodology, but it will be a single work. A companion eponymous publication, which will be released at the biennale, offers a deeper look at Ibrahim's works and career, exploring his contribution to UAE's art history.

Co-edited by Allison and Cristiana de Marchi, *Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim: Between Sunrise and Sunset* marks the first monograph of the artist. The book showcases key examples of Ibrahim's oeuvre along with essays from the editors as well as from art experts and practitioners who academically or personally explore the disparate work.

The book also includes texts by the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation, commissioner of the National Pavilion UAE, and Noura Al Kaabi, the UAE's Minister of Culture and Youth.

The book comprehensively explores Ibrahim's work and documents a facet of the country's long-standing experimental art community. It is as much monograph as it is a glimpse into the foundational era of contemporary art in the UAE.

"We approached a number of writers who come from very different areas of expertise," de Marchi says. "For instance, Nada Shabout is exploring the context of the UAE art scene in the late 1980s and 1990s through the publication of the Emirates Fine Art Society. We have an introduction by Salwa Mikdadi and an academic text by Venetia Porter, and this is more in the first section, which along with my extensive essay, covers an academic perspective of the work."

The book's second half, *Sunset*, delves into recollection, de Marchi says.

"In this second section, we focus on memories from different individuals who had a relation or met Mohamed Ahmed over the years. In this section, we have Adel Khozam, a poet and writer from the UAE and long-time friends of Mohamed Ahmed. We have Vivek Vilasini, who is an Indian artist who lived with the group in the 1990s. We have Fumio Nanjo, former director of the Mori Art Museum in Japan, who also gives us perspective on the UAE landscape in the 1980s and 1990s. He happened to travel to the region at a very early stage. Then we have Munira Al Sayegh, who is a young Emirati curator who collaborated and curated Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim during a residency in 2015, and who is really exploring the significance of Mohamed Ahmed's work for the younger generation."

The last section of the book features an interview between de Marchi and Ibrahim, where the two discuss the artist's influences, his practice, his collaborations and his travels.



Ibrahim, left, and artist Vivek Vilasini plant an Indian gooseberry tree in honour of Hassan Sharif, in Munnar, India, in 2016. Photo: Vivek Vilasini

“We explore his approach to the creative aspect of his life through the lens of significant friendships,” de Marchi says. Ibrahim is part of a distinct group of UAE artists referred to as “The Five”. This tight-knit avant-garde community also included the late Hassan Sharif, Abdullah Al Saadi, Hussein Sharif and Mohammed Kazem, and was one wrought of mutual mentorship.

“Indeed, each brought distinct knowledge to the group,” Allison writes in her essay in the book titled *On Not Knowing*. “Hassan Sharif had studied art in London and particularly responded to the work of Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys and Fluxus — and it is through this lens that the work of this community is most frequently interpreted.

“Hassan’s brother Hussain studied theatre scenography in Kuwait. Mohammed Kazem studied music and is a proficient oud player. Abdullah Al Saadi studied English but also spent a year looking at traditional art in Japan.”

As for Ibrahim, his studies took him from Pakistan, where he explored archaeology, to Al Ain, where he studied psychology. He came of age as an artist in the UAE in an era in which the visual arts were not yet valued culturally or taught as university degree programmes. But in 1986, Ibrahim met Hassan Sharif, a founding member of the influential Emirates Fine Art Society, and was pulled out of a secluded practice to an artistic methodology that blurred the lines between friendship, mentorship and collaboration, as well as set the foundation of today’s UAE creative community.