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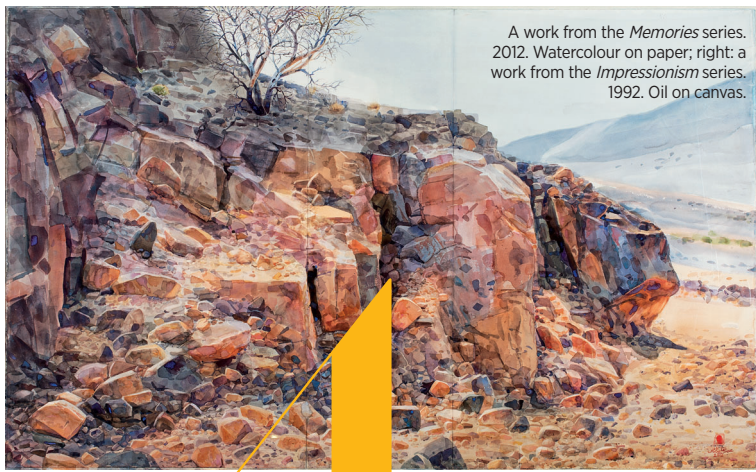


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A work from the *Memories* series. 2012. Watercolour on paper; right: a work from the *Impressionism* series. 1992. Oil on canvas.

Against the backdrop of a construction site of an emerging Dubai cityscape, a scant few palm trees stand in the foreground, the desolate scene composed of the lightly applied signature geometrical markings of the artist, a motif interwoven within his delicate paper works and canvases. This is 1989, and the Emirati artist Abdulqader Al Rais portrays his work, titled *A Sad Afternoon*, in delicate renderings of somber colours reflecting on the ever-growing changes of his society. Painted only two years after emerging out of a 12-year hiatus where he stopped artmaking in 1975, the artist was inspired to immediately document the changing landscapes of his home. In another work that same year, *The Past and the Future*, an elaborate door opens into a heavenly bright-lit landscape, at once rupturing the composition between darkness and light.

These telling landscapes and figurative works of the artist during the late 1980s and early 1990s narrate one of the most dramatic times during the UAE's growth and development, both for the artist's homeland growing up in the traditional Bastakiya and while contributing to the country's art developments.

In one of the most groundbreaking international shows for an artist from the UAE, Abdulqader Al Rais achieved his first international retrospective at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris earlier this September. Noted as the foremost painter of the pioneer generation of Emirati artists, Al Rais produced a body of work that spans intricate watercolours and paintings ranging from realistic to semi-realistic to abstract. Celebrating 50 years of his practice, his retrospective displayed works spanning from his earlier childhood growing up in Kuwait in the 1960s until today, showcasing his successful practice as a testament not only to his individual artistic talent but as an embodiment of the evolution of the national contemporary art scene.

Organised by Dubai Culture, the retrospective came during the 2018 French-Emirati Cultural Dialogue initiative as well as during the Year of



# Painting THE GULF

*In one of the most groundbreaking international shows for an artist from the UAE, **Abdulqader Al Rais** achieved his first international retrospective at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris earlier this September; writes Suzy Sikorski*

Above: *Impressionism* series 9. 1992. Oil on canvas

IMAGES COURTESY OF INSTITUT DU MONDE ARABE, PARIS

Zayed, making this an important event to bridge constructive dialogue between both cultures. The week-long vernissage featured panel discussions and presentations by leading cultural figures within the UAE, drawing attention to the country's rich heritage and variety of local initiatives that made it into a strong cultural centre within less than two decades.

Al Rais's early works narrate the earlier society of the region, documenting the precious moment and places leading up to the country's formation and development. At the age of seven, the artist moved to Kuwait, taking advantage of the free art tools offered by the government while learning from renowned artists in the state-owned artist studio, Marsam Al Hur. Flipping through books referencing works by Michelangelo, Raphael and Rembrandt, Al Rais was particularly attracted to Rembrandt's exploration into the light and shadow. He articulated Raphael's techniques within his style, ultimately helping him to sculpt his own 'vocabulary of heritage', recognised by his abstracted shapes and patterns and calligraphic letters that he has continued to experiment with in colour, line and perspective.

The artist noted visitors at his show were particularly captivated by his watercolours; their delicate, intricate lines and gentle colours are a testament both to a past history and individual artist technique that depicted traditional houses and massive wooden doors, fishing boats and pebbly landscapes.

"In the Arab world, artists are not as strong in watercolour," says the artist. "I don't have anybody in the Arab world doing work like mine. I began doing watercolor when I came out of my 12-year hiatus. It was 1987. I made small sketches of watercolour in Kuwait, but after 1987 I really was pushing myself. I actually learned how to paint watercolour in my office. At first my technique was like oil painting but I slowly began to understand how to use the material. I would do

sketches with my hand and feet. It looked like oil paint."

Most proud of his watercolours, the artist during the opening week led a live watercolour workshop at the Institut with visitors, along with with a short calligraphy lesson. Just as Al Rais was instrumental in enriching the younger generation of Emirati artists and in promoting his work onto the international stage through local initiatives, the retrospective highlights this important interdependence within all cultural actors in the local art community. Drawing attention to the UAE's rich heritage, the show and its related programming bring forth a renewed dialogue between different cultures and its efforts to continue enriching the UAE's unique art scene. ■

*Abdulqader al Rais ran until 21 October. Imarabe.org*



Clockwise from top left: *Obeid and Moz*, 1973. Oil on canvas; *Years of Glory*, 2016. Watercolour on paper; *We Are All With You*, 2015. Oil on canvas; *Wala'in Shakartom lazeednakom*, 2016. Watercolour on paper

