

Beyond The Frame – Contemporary Art in the Emirates – “Art in Embassies” program – United States of America, Ambassador’s residence in Abu Dhabi.

By Contemporary Practices Art Journal

Interview with the Honorable Michael Corbin, Ambassador of the United States of America to the United Arab Emirates, conducted by Omar Donia in January 2012

Since the 1960s, the United States of America’s understanding of the role of arts in bridging the gaps among cultures has been deepened by a program, Art in Embassies, that promotes dialogue in the form of visual art. With a mechanism of collaboration between artists, museums, galleries, and foundations worldwide, this program provides culturally diverse exhibitions that allow the public to positively interact with art and that advances freedom of expression through the invitation of exchanging ideas.

The latest iteration of this initiative is on display in the UAE, where the show, “Beyond the Frame”, curated by Isabella E. Hughes is currently on display at the Resident of the U.S. Ambassador. The exhibition showcases a group of emerging and mid-career Emirati artists alongside American artists who either live in or have strong creative ties to the UAE.

Not limiting themselves to traditional art, the UAE artists provided works that are related to the environment of the UAE and the region, yet with a global approach in terms of vision, techniques, and medium. On the other hand, the American works in “Beyond the Frame” are relevant to the region; such as the work by Sama Alshaibi, which deals with feminist issues and how women are perceived from the Eastern versus the Western points of view.

Artist included in the Show

Noor Al Suwaidi (UAE, 1981): Al Suwaidi holds a BA in Studio Art and a MA in Curating Contemporary Design from Kingston University, London. Since her early age, she has been fascinated with art and dedicated to it. Working in a variety of media, and exhibiting internationally as well locally, she had produced a

Diptych (Our Diptych, 2011) specifically for this show. The piece resembles a modern woman painted in a vague way, giving the viewer the liberty to comprehend the visual image according to his imagination.

Alanood Abdul-Rahman Al-Hammadi (UAE, 1987): Al-Hammadi is a 2010 graduate and holds a BA in Art and Design. For the work in this show, her first, she used pencil and paper to portray braids that are produced in different shapes and forms in different cultures. The series named (Jadayel, 2011 – Arabic word for braids) shows us the common factors among all human being (making braids), yet at the same time different in how we make them depending on our cultural differences, sometimes ethnic diversity and even in rare cases, as a religious symbol.

Fatma Al Mazrouie (UAE): Al Mazrouie holds a BA in Visual Art and Design and works in a variety of media. She is a mid-career artist with exceptional ability to mix the past with the present, the local and the international, and the ethnic with the out-of-box. She often works in investigating issues of womanhood and specifically stereotypes of Muslim women. When asked about her choice to use Umm Kulthum (Umm Kulthum, 2011) as a figure in her work, given the fact that she is the most portrayed artist in the region, she indicated that she approached the artwork from a rarely used angle: “I looked to her as a woman, a female who is fighting all the odds in the very conservative society of 1930’s Egypt.

I wanted to document the achievements of such an iconic female figure in the art scene and in the whole Middle Eastern region.

Amna Abdulla Al Zaabi (UAE, 1987): Al Zaabi holds a BA in Interior Design and works as a visual artist and interior designer. Her artworks and personal life are a mirror of what she tries to express, being surrounded by modernization while holding to one's roots and cultures. Her strong reactions to her surrounding environment is expressed by her mixed-media diptych; she comments on the diversity of the UAE and its perpetual change and modernization while holding to their traditions choosing to keep the UAE map as a base to emphasize the idea that culture never changes and the choice of difference in materials and colors to emphasize the idea of difference and modernization.

Ebtisam Abdul-Aziz (UAE, 1975): Studying mathematics before dedicating herself to art, Ebtisam works in a plethora of media, often exploring technology and mathematical concepts to create experimental work. In the work shown (*Words into art (5): I don't like to make art that's comprehensible, preferring to make art that forces the viewer to ask questions*, 2010) she sought to capture her philosophy of art in a visible, tangible way, based on precise and organized mathematical elements that she refers to as "System Art". Taking the imprecision's of thoughts and abstractions, and then translating them into precise, physical forms represents a faulty form of communication that is language itself.

Maitha Demaithan (UAE, 1989): The artist earned a BFA from Zayed University. She works in a variety of media, for this show including scanography using an A4 flat-bed scanner to create the artwork (*To the Moon*, 2009).

Demaithan's process involves individually scanning images and then reconstructing them digitally creating works that are based on emotions, feelings, and personal experiences. In the works presented, she thought of creating a piece of two figures in her most favorable environment being open spaces. Since she couldn't include herself, she included a silver pendant that she made and a girl that was wearing her cloths as a representation of herself.

Maisoon Al Salah (UAE, 1988): Al Salah holds a BA in Interior design and is definitely one the UAE's most

promising young artist's. With a vision that is ahead of her age and a real talent, her works are a juxtaposition of the figurative and the surreal highlighting her concerns about the contemporary as well as the tradition. Her interest in history is reflected in her work (1986, 2011) that references the shipwrecks and sunken airplanes that can be found in her country's coast. The name (1986) comes from a wreck call "MV Dara" which sank in April 8th, 1986 causing the death of 238 people, the worst shipwreck in modern UAE history. To perfect her art, she obtained her scuba diving license to explore the wreck by herself and illustrates these stories through her work.

James Clar (USA, 1978): Clar is a new-media artist who has a Masters from New York's Interactive Telecommunications Program.

Clar has been based between the UAE and the United States for the past five years. His works reflect his interest in the relationship between technology and art, often commenting on current events and society. His light sculpture (*Freefall*, 2011) is a part of a series; it depicts an illuminated figure in the motion of falling by using light filters that cast light and color onto the wall. Borrowing a visual technique used in animation, each piece uses the lines of light to emphasize the directional motion of the person.

Sama Al Shaibi (USA, 1973): Al Shaibi was born in Basra to Iraqi-Palestinian parents, then moved to the United States in her teens. Currently she works as an Assistant Professor of Photography at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Working in a variety of media, she is best known for her photography and experimental video works, which often delve into issues related to identity and culture; these she naturally relates to, given to herself being an amalgamation of different cultures. In her piece *Versus The Brother*, she uses a two-channel video embedded in a boxed frame to re-create her own experience with her brothers by projecting a fast car going round in circles against the image of a female protagonist, an acrobat. The acrobat twists and turns against a veil, and her placement alongside the reckless macho brother are suggestive of her desire to elevate her position.

We had the pleasure of meeting Michael Corbin, U.S. Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, who shed light on the exhibition, as well as the role of art in bridging gaps between nations.

Omar Donia: What made you think of curating a show in your Residence?

Michael Corbin: I am not an art expert, just an art appreciator; I am not an collector, but am in the privileged position of being the American Ambassador, and so have the ability to be engaged in issues that are related to cultural diplomacy. It is very important as a sign of working together with the local cultural to have links with the society we are present in. We have art and culture programs around. In general, they , that show American artists as a way to build bridges with our friends. What I wanted to do is to highlight a group of emerging Emirati artists, as well as American artists established here or who have links here. The exhibit acts as a dialogue. I wanted to add another conversation between what is happening in the UAE, being a very vibrant space, and what is happening in United States, by using this public space, is the Ambassador's Residence. We are stimulating a dialogue to create a way to start conversations about cultural diplomacy. I have enjoyed meeting the artists and talking to them, as well as having their insights about their works.

OD: Currently there has been a lot of uprisings in the region, what the media calls “the Arab Spring”, because of such revolution of common people against autocratic systems we, mandated to document the art movement, are witnessing a shift in the production of art production in terms of approach, techniques and vision. Do you think that art can change the society and people?

MC: Art is a manifestation of what is going on, it is an extremely exciting time for art in this region, given the enormous changes that are happening now. The art being created now is representing the changes of what is happening in countries like Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria. These countries have an artistic tradition, and the kind of art that is now coming from this region, I think in 20 years is going to be considered a significant art from this period of history. People should be paying attention to it. I think art has a role in communication; it serves to speak about people and the enormous changes, through artists' freedom to express themselves.

OD: Do you intend to make this as an on-going show/initiative?

MC: Absolutely, I think that the Ambassador's Residence can be a platform for discussion; we host many types of events here, such as programs for visiting U.S. officials, cultural programs, and events that highlight our bilateral relationship in many ways. For example, at the opening for “Beyond the Frame” we host many guests visiting the UAE for the 2011 Abu Dhabi Art Fair, including one of the most important living American artists, Jeff Koons. These kinds of events are a chance for local talents to meet their peers from the United States. They are an opportunity to communicate what we think, I would like to also highlight one of the most important issues here is the fact that the UAE is a cosmopolitan place, with many different communities and societies that are living harmoniously and that can show their art and create here. Let's not forget the role of local government in developing art, for example incubators of the arts like the “Tashkeel” art space in Dubai. We are very pleased to know that the Saadiyat Island museum projects here in Abu Dhabi will be moving forward, including the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.

OD: Please tell us more about Art in Embassies.

MC: The program showcases American art and artists in U.S. official buildings around the world, including embassies and ambassadors' residences, as well as ways that American artists interact with their international counterparts. It gives us the chance to act as art ambassadors of our culture utilizing our public spaces.

OD: Do you support residencies in general to American artist?

MC: We support a range of programs that advance cultural diplomacy; I have seen in my career that allowing developed artists to come and share their experience and knowledge, for example bringing together experience and emerging artists, can have a very positive effect. I remember bringing a Philadelphia-based artist to Damascus; in a short time we found him

a workshop to produce art with a young Syrian artist, and an unfinished gallery space to show art produced jointly, which proved to be a thrilling and beneficial experience for both sides in terms of understanding each others cultures. We also support sending local curators and artists to American institutions to benefit from these established organizations.

OD: How can cultural diplomacy change the world?

MC: It is all about communication, and I believe that art is one of the key elements of communication. What is going on here [in the UAE] I haven't seen in many other parts of the Middle East, despite the rich art history in countries like Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. The development of spaces where artists can work and show their work, coupled with freedom of expression, is creating a vibrant art scene.

I would iterate the moment the we face here in the Middle East, where artists are finding new voices focusing on the enormous changes that are going on, has incredible potential. Previously, they have often been directed toward painting what is sellable; now they're going beyond that. . Artists are painting what they feel and changing/breaking the norms. This is also a moment when the West and the developed world is looking to what artists are producing. I hope that artists do not rush into ideas that just scratch the surface of what is happening; rather they need to search deep into the meaning of their newly gained freedoms.

OD: UAE as a hub of art in the region, do you agree or not?

MC: No question about it, the government has shown great support, and I believe with the Saadiyat projects going forward, the museums planned, and the huge number of private galleries that are open, especially in Dubai, there is no doubt about it. However, if I may add, that it's is not only being the hub of Middle Eastern visual art (that being your (Contemporary Practices Art Journal) focal point of interest); I would rather say we're seeing the UAE emerge as Cultural Hub, with other forms of cultural activities being performed and

supported, such as "Shaeer Al million" (The million Dirham poet competition), the Dubai Abu Dhabi film festivals), the Music festival in Abu Dhabi, just mention a few.

OD: Finally what would you like to see as a vision of art to the region?

MC: One idea, I think, is art in corporate spaces, and business support for the arts. Here in Abu Dhabi, we have Mubadala" as a good example, with works of art on prominent display at its headquarters. Think about what the other government buildings and corporate offices could be like if they were doing the same. It would be a wonderful opportunity to show art, and give a boost to the artists to produce more.