HADARA

SHARJAH'S JOURNAL OF CULTURE, BUSINESS AND IDEAS

SHEIKHA BODOUR AL QASIMI

On the business of publishing, the power of books, and climbing literal and metaphorical mountains

THE UNSEEN CONDUCTOR
Sound artist Tarek Atoui mixes visual and audible arts for immersive experiences

HOUSE OF WISDOM
Sharjah's futuristic landmark library pays homage to the Islamic Golden Age

THE ART OF TRANSLATION
Meet some of the gifted wordsmiths who open new worlds of literature to us

KHORFAKKAN AMPHITHEATRE SHARJAH

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Sharjah's spectacular 17,650-square-metre open-air Khorfakkan Amphitheatre was inaugurated on December 14, 2020 by His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohamed Al Qasimi, Member of the Supreme Council and Ruler of Sharjah. This dazzling new cultural landmark inspired by the grand design of the Roman Colosseum with a seating capacity of up to 3,600 spectators has turned the emirate's east coast enclave into a hub for tourism, wowing thousands of visitors who have flocked to the destination to soak up the atmosphere, attend concerts and film screenings.

#SeeSharjah

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1_Peter Horvath

Illustrator Peter Horvath, born of Hungarian descent into a lineage of photographers, began making pictures at age six. His ability to master bold compositions that convey complex concepts is what makes his work stand out. Peter has worked with a varied client list including *Vanity Fair*, *TIME*, and *The New York Times*, and his work is featured in the newly published book from Gestalten, *The Age of Collage Vol. 3, Contemporary Collage in Modern Art*.

2_Charles Shafaieh

Charles is an arts critic and journalist based in New York City. His writing on visual art, music, theatre, and literature has appeared in numerous international publications including *The New Yorker*, *The Irish Times*, *The Weekend Australian Review*, and *Artforum*. An editor-at-large at *The Brooklyn Rail*, he is also a frequent contributor to *Harvard Design Magazine*. In this issue, he profiled the Saudi-born, Dubai-based architect Sumaya Dabbagh.

3_Kate Hazell

Based in Dubai, Kate has worked in the publishing industry for 15 years, editing, writing, and styling for titles including *British Vogue*, *Dazed*, *Condé Nast Traveller*, *Vogue Arabia*, *Harpers Bazaar Arabia*, *Sorbet*, and *Esquire Middle East*. Throughout her career, she has worked to combine her passions for art and fashion, and has styled and interviewed names including Florence Welch, Naomi Campbell, and, for this issue, up-and-coming Emirati designer Shoug Fardan, and the driving force behind the Akwan concept, Lujain Abulfaraj.

4_Michelle Wranik-Hicks

For Michelle, travel is not simply a passion. She is a travel writer at heart, widely published in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *Condé Nast Traveller*, *CNN Traveller*, *The National*, and *The Daily Telegraph*, among others. Born in Australia to Czech parents, she has been based in Dubai on and off since 2008. For this issue, Michelle headed to Kalba to kayak amid the mangroves and to rejuvenate at a unique boutique hotel.

5_Wissam Shawkat

Wissam is an award-winning artist and designer based in Dubai, focused on Arabic calligraphy and typography. His work departs from classic calligraphy, yet maintains its craftsmanship. In 2004, he created a new script, *Al Wissam Style*, that is now widespread. More recently, he launched 'Calligraforms', an art movement based on the forms and graphic qualities of letters. His calligraphy and typography designs have appeared in many books and magazines. He has had many solo shows and participated in numerous group exhibitions.

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HADARA

ISSUE 4 / SPRING – SUMMER 2021

FEATURES

HOUSE OF WISDOM BY CATALIN MARIN

House of Wisdom designed by Foster + Partners

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Cover photograph: Sheikha Bodour Al Qasimi by Ivana Maglione.

COVER STYLIST: GEMMA JONES / MMG ARTISTS. HAIR / MAKEUP: IVANNA / MMG ARTISTS. THIS PAGE FROM TOP: SHARJAH ART MUSEUM COLLECTION; COURTESY OF SHOUG FARDAN; SHUKHRAT GAFUROV

HADARA

ISSUE 4 / SPRING – SUMMER 2021

Welcome

A year into a global pandemic, many people are mourning, and not just for the too many lives lost globally. We've also lost, at least for now, the small pleasures of socialising, of tapping the energy of a crowd of strangers, of travel to foreign lands with their unfamiliar sights, smells and sounds that fill our senses and remind us we're alive.

Books have been a solace to many. Virtual travel and conversations are available anytime, anywhere, by turning a page. In this issue, we ponder the written word in many ways. We speak with Sheikha Bodour Al Qasimi, publisher and President of the International Publishers Association, who was influential in elevating Sharjah as UNESCO World Book Capital. We speak with translators whose work allows us to explore new cultures. Translation is too often overlooked, when it is a delicate art unto itself. We also look at some new works in translation.

Translation came into its own during the Abbasid Caliphate era. Translations helped spread ideas and led to the Islamic Golden Age. Its beating heart was the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, a library but also a multicultural, intellectual gathering place. This House of Wisdom has reincarnations in this issue. Sharjah has unveiled its own House of Wisdom, the name a homage to that of the Abbasids and a declaration of Sharjah's ambitions as a centre of cultural and scholarly exchange, with a futuristic, technological twist. Within this House of Wisdom is a heart-wrenching work of participatory art by Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal, which also nods to Baghdad's House of Wisdom.

We see books, writing, art and history interconnect and weave around each other, like friends meeting for an intellectual discussion over coffee. Museums, for example, are important centres of cultural and intellectual exchange. We meet the head of the Sharjah Museums Authority, who brilliantly led the digitisation of collections so people could continue to connect to them despite Covid-19 restrictions. We visit a cultural pillar celebrating Sharjah's oldest history, Mleiha Archaeological Centre, and meet its designer, Sumaya Dabbagh. Archaeology and art overlap in Rayyane Tabet's exhibition at Sharjah Art Foundation. Art and calligraphy—and Covid-19—overlap in artist Juma Al Haj's debut at Tashkeel, while calligraphy figures prominently in Lujain Abulfaraj's educational toys.

And where would we be without those who write the first draft of history? *Al Khaleej*, the leading Arabic language newspaper, celebrates half a century of delivering the news. Author Naji Bakhti usually writes fiction but he gives us an intimate, intense trip to Beirut that is, sadly, real life.

Writers, translators, thinkers, artists and the places that celebrate them dominate this issue. We hope it gives you intellectual sustenance until we can all freely mingle and connect in person again.

TARIQ SAEED ALLAY
Director, Sharjah Government Media Bureau

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Briefing

SPRING–SUMMER 2021

Untitled **(1998)**

BAYA MAHIEDDINE COURTESY OF ELMARSA GALLERY

THE ARTIST WHO INSPIRED PICASSO

By Anna Seaman

This year marks the tenth anniversary of *Lasting Impressions*, an annual event that gives a retrospective to a prominent yet under-celebrated artist and highlights their outstanding contributions to the regional art movement. For this anniversary edition, Sharjah Art Museum will host an expansive show of work by the late Algerian artist Baya Mahieddine or, more commonly, Baya. Born in 1931, Baya was orphaned at five and, because she was unable to attend school, worked in the house of a wealthy Frenchwoman, Marguerite Caminat Benhoura, who later adopted her. Benhoura, a keen art collector and a good friend of Joan Miro, noticed her talent at making figures from clay. Under Benhoura's encouragement, Baya began to paint in her now recognisable Surrealist style that drew influence from folkloric traditions—though the artist herself rejected any form of classification. Her subjects were, invariably, women. Aged 16, Baya had her first exhibition in Paris through which she was introduced to artists such as Pablo Picasso and Andre Breton. Impressed by her spontaneity and her self-taught techniques, Picasso invited her to work with him in 1948 and his *Women of Algeria* series is said to be inspired by Mahieddine. Baya is truly an unsung artist and this display, curated by Alya Al-Mulla of Sharjah Art Museum and Suheyla Takesh of Barjeel Art Foundation, the largest of her work ever shown in the region, is unmissable.

Lasting Impressions: Baya Mahieddine *at Sharjah Art Museum until July 31*

Basalt Shards **(2017)**

EXQUISITE CORPSE

Rayyane Tabet's exploration into familial and archaeological history opens this month.

In northeastern Syria, at the turn of the 20th century, a German diplomat named Baron Max von Oppenheim oversaw an archaeological excavation in a fertile valley close to the Turkish border. Von Oppenheim, who was charting a route for the Berlin-Baghdad Railway, unearthed stone idols and Neolithic statues. The artefacts were eventually removed and stored in a Berlin museum, where they were later shattered during the Allied bombing of the German capital. Now, their story has been brought to life in *Exquisite Corpse*, an exhibition at Sharjah Art Foundation by Lebanese artist Rayyane Tabet. Tabet's great-grandfather, Faek Borkhoche, was von Oppenheim's secretary and translator on the Tell Halaf expedition, and his field notes, together with photographs that belong to the artist's family and related objects, provide the formal and conceptual spine of the exhibition.

Curated by Ryan Inouye, the show delves into the history of the Tell Halaf excavation. It features two newly commissioned works: *Portrait of Faek Borkhoche* (2021), which draws on material from archives, including his great-grandfather's never-seen-before field notes; and *Digital Surrogates* (2021), a web project which features documentation of Tabet's artworks, Tell Halaf artefacts and related material, and explores the possibilities offered by digital preservation. An older work, *Basalt Shards* (2017), an expansive installation of 1,000 charcoal rubbings made from the shattered remains of the Tell Halaf artefacts, has been reconfigured for this major institutional show. "In this exhibition, the drawings are spaced farther apart than in previous iterations, inviting viewers to approach each drawing on its own terms, while also encouraging appreciation of the scale of the composition and ambition of the artist's endeavour," explains Inouye. That endeavour, in Tabet's case, is for the artist to ask his audiences to consider the context of history and the mouthpieces through which it is told.

"One way of thinking about the show is as a meditation on the afterlife of an era that lives on in land, language, culture, objects, memory, people, ideas and law," Inouye says. "The recognition that comes with this also lends us a certain degree of agency in our present." **—AS**

Rayyane Tabet: Exquisite Corpse *at Sharjah Art Foundation until June 15*

TOP: FRED DOTT, HAMBURG; RIGHT: COURTESY OF LAWRIE SHABIBI GALLERY

HOMEGROWN HERO

Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim will represent the UAE at the 2022 edition of the Venice Biennale.

Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim has never been one to crave wide audiences. For decades, he has worked consistently and instinctively from his home studio in Khorfakkan, between the mountains and the sea. His work draws from nature and some of it is moulded from what he collects during walks foraging in the wilderness.

He has made mulch from leaves, sculptures from large, heavy stones and has become known for his abstract and organic shapes that are non-specific but somehow familiar to his viewers. He has not changed his methods or his attitude even as his prominence has grown. In fact, it could still be called a somewhat insular practice that has, over the years, brought him international attention. Nevertheless, he is undoubtedly a jewel in the crown of the UAE's nascent artistic community and it is fitting that he will represent the UAE at the 2022 edition of the Venice Biennale. The presentation will be curated by Maya Allison, executive director and chief curator of the NYUAD Art Gallery, who champions Ibrahim's innovation and the continual development of his artistic voice, something that she has witnessed personally through different collaborations with the artist.

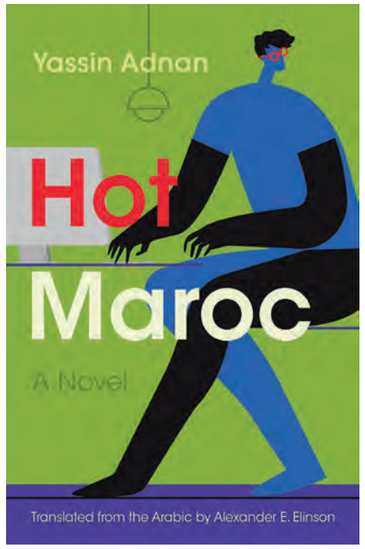
Since the inaugural presentation of the National Pavilion of the UAE at the Venice Biennale in 2009, when Ibrahim was part of the group exhibition titled *It's Not You, It's Me*, there has been a deliberate drive to a more artist-led approach. Truly homegrown and authentic, Ibrahim is the perfect choice for this respected platform. **—AS**

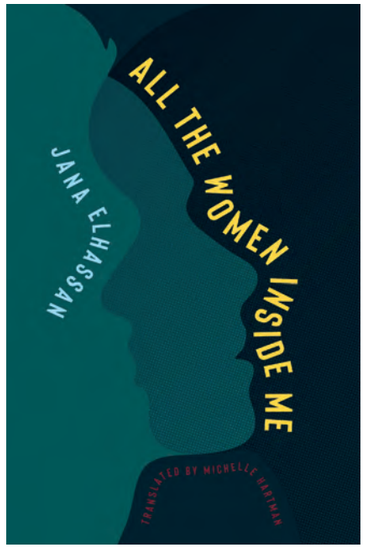
SEEING SHARJAH

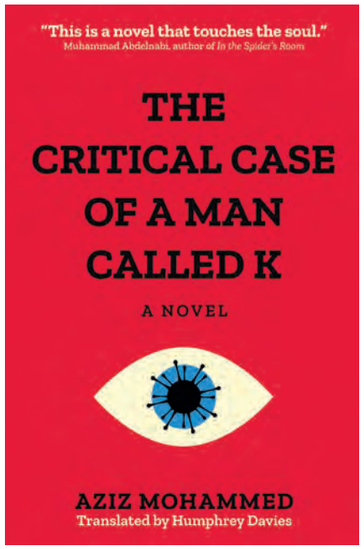
Photographer Subodh Shetty finds new subject matter amid the pandemic lockdown. By Ben East

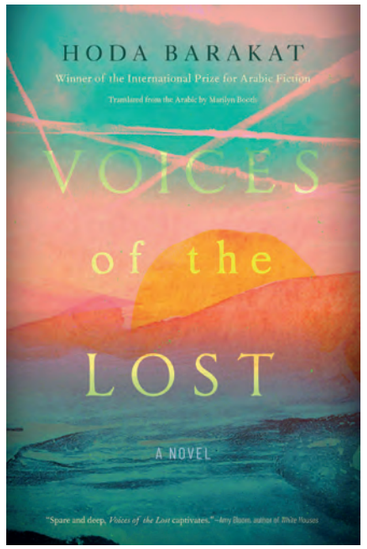
It was not a deliberate attempt to capture the unusual times in which we live, but Subodh Shetty's image of the fog clearing over the cinnamon dunes of Mleiha took on an added poignancy during the pandemic. "We've all gone through that fog, perhaps we don't know what's in front of us," he says. "But it will clear."

Shetty's striking shot was, however, a result of the pandemic. Travel restrictions forced the photographer to turn his gaze close to home. "I'd never shot in Sharjah, but once we were allowed out, I spent months in its deserts and mountains," he says. "They're incredibly beautiful." This image, and a small collection of others, won Shetty a #SeeSharjah photography prize and led to his work being exhibited at this year's Xposure International Photography Festival in Sharjah. The image had called to him. "I had to get up at 3am, climb Fossil Rock in the dark and fog, and get out my drone," he says. "It was hard. But I felt like I needed to take this shot."









BOOKS COURTESY OF THE PUBLISHERS; JEEP: XQUARRY

ARABIC LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

The latest translations from across the region illustrate the breadth and depth of its talent. By Ben East

One of the great benefits of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, the most important literary prize in the Arab world, is that the winning book is guaranteed translation into English. Just two years after Hoda Barakat won the prize for **Voices of the Lost**, Marilyn Booth's translation will hit bookshelves in March. But there are promising signs that other authors recognised by IPAF are gaining international attention, too—Arab fiction in translation in 2021 is something of a greatest hits of the prize's longlist stretching back a decade.

Voices of the Lost had been acquired by UK publisher Oneworld even before Barakat took home the $50,000 prize, a testament to the audience the Lebanese author can command. The book is a dark, unflinching examination of people on the margins of society. A series of anonymous letters detail lives adrift, the stories of migrants, exiles and wanderers looking for their place in the world.

It is perhaps more encouraging that Yassin Adnan's 2016 debut **Hot Maroc** will be published in English in May—comic Arab novels in translation are disappointingly rare. Adnan's exploration of Marrakech's digital underworld rightly made the IPAF longlist in 2017, the exposure it enjoyed surely set a path to translation for this close-to-the knuckle and bitingly satirical take on the way young people navigate the early decades of 21st-century Morocco. The translation by Alexander E. Elinson, released five years later, remains fascinatingly current.

Staying with contemporary issues, Saudi author Aziz Mohammed caused quite a stir when he tackled modern Arab life in his debut, **The Critical Case of a Man Called K**, which made the IPAF shortlist in 2018. After reading Kafka, the man called K is inspired to write his own diary and, though initially concerned about his dull existence, a life-changing diagnosis changes his outlook. Translator Humphrey Davies finds just the right balance between sensitivity and dark humour in a book that will be published in April by Hoopoe, and which—perhaps suitably—Mohammed has likened in tone to Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*.

April will also finally bring the English translation of Jana Fawaz Elhassan's **All the Women Inside Me**. The book was shortlisted by IPAF back in 2013—some indication of the prize's growing influence on interest in Arab authors' back catalogues (Elhassan was also shortlisted in 2015 for *The Ninety-Ninth Floor*, which was translated into English in 2016). *All the Women Inside Me* is a profound portrait of Sahar—a woman who struggles with loss, loneliness and oppression—and is undoubtedly a harrowing read. But there is hope to be found in imagination and friendship—which ultimately powers this important book, translated by Michelle Hartman, to its gripping conclusion.

Sahar Khalifeh is another author belatedly benefiting from the burgeoning interest in Arab fiction. Her second novel to be translated into English inside a year, this time by Aida Barnia, **My First and Only Love** explores Palestinian history—in particular the final days of the British mandate—from the poetic viewpoint of Nidal. It's wonderful to see this great Palestinian writer, 80 this year and a former IPAF chair of judges, finally enjoying global recognition following her own IPAF shortlisting in 2010 for *Origin and Branch*. This translation is released in March.

Finally, a book which somehow slipped under the radar of IPAF judges, Mohamed Kheir's **Slipping**. The first of this Egyptian author's excellent novels to be translated into English, *Slipping* sees struggling journalist Seif immerse himself into a fantastical exploration of Alexandria, which in turn leads him to dig deeper into the mysteries of his own past. The novel, translated by Robin Moger, neatly lays out the contradictions and the traumas of the Arab Spring.

OUTDOORS AND OFF-ROAD

A new off-road and adventure park in the Mleiha desert capitalises on the central region's dramatic geography. By Helen Jones

Set in an old quarry in Sharjah's Mleiha desert, at the foot of Jebel Al Faya, is the UAE's first off-road and adventure park. XQuarry's 600,000-square-metre site is designed to challenge those tired of the city.

At the heart of it is 20 kilometres of challenging, custom-built off-road trails that visitors are invited to tackle in their 4x4s (their own, for the moment). The tracks are mostly gravel and rock, obstacles will test drivers' technical skill—18 currently, including different surfaces, steep inclines and a huge mud pit. "There is no adventure venue like it in the UAE or even the region," says Daniel Birkhofer, managing partner at XQuarry. "It's not a theme park, but an honest, authentic experience." Among the first visitors was Sheikh Sultan Bin Ahmed Al Qasimi, chairman of Sharjah Media Council, who tackled the course in a Hummer H1, Mercedes G500, and a Jeep Gladiator Rubicon.

The site offers shaded areas for remote-control car enthusiasts including obstacle challenges and a racetrack. For those who prefer their challenges unmotorised, there is a 3km mountain-bike trail with jumps, hills, obstacles, and steep bends. Cyclists can also explore the 10km of trails that extend beyond the park to Jebel Al Faya. There is also the UAE's most challenging obstacle course including swings, nets, climbing and balancing through mud and water.

But you don't have to be a fitness fanatic to enjoy it, the sweeping quarry offers hiking trails suitable for people of all ages and fitness. Advanced hikers can scramble over rocks and up ledges to access the best vantage points in the park. Beginners can try shorter routes which are suitable for families with children and provide resting areas with shade.

A YEAR TO REMEMBER

A raft of new projects from Sharjah's most ambitious developer. By Catherine Bolgar

Few will remember the past year fondly, but the executives at Arada might. In January, the Sharjah-based developer launched its third project, Masaar, a community of some 4,000 villas and townhouses in the Al Juwaiza'a district of New Sharjah.

Masaar, or "path" in Arabic, has been designed to encourage healthy living and to reduce the stresses of urban life. Eight gated districts will spread across some 19 million square feet, bound together by a "green spine" of 50,000 trees and a network of footpaths. Green space will allow for forest walks, picnics, running, cycling and meditation. Social features include the Zad food truck zone. Construction of the first district, Sendian, will begin in June, with the first homes due for handover early in 2023.

A month before, Arada unveiled Naseej District (shown above), a mixed-use quarter within its Aljada megaproject whose cultural bent aims to bring together and showcase creatives of all stripes. Naseej means fabric, reflecting Arada's drive to weave together diverse skills, talents and backgrounds to turn this cultural quarter, with its 16 apartment buildings, into a coherent social space for Sharjah's creative community.

"Naseej District continues Sharjah's journey to embrace art and culture as a way of living," says Sheikh Sultan Bin Ahmed Al Qasimi, Chairman of Arada.

It also launched Manbat, a Friday farmers market at Aljada, starting with 30 stalls. The community initiative, a partnership with the Ministry of Climate Change and Environment, aims to connect local producers with consumers.

Arada recorded a 35% rise in sales in 2020, to reach AED1.75bn. The addition of Masaar brings the value of its project portfolio to over AED33bn.

RAIL TAKES TO THE SKIES

Sharjah unveils high-speed sky transport. By Helen Jones

Sky pods capable of travelling at 500 kilometres per hour were unveiled at the Sharjah Research, Technology and Innovation Park in January. The elevated electric transport, the first of its kind in the UAE, could offer a cost-effective means of transporting freight between Sharjah's east and west coasts.

Unitsky String Technologies of Belarus is building a 2km suspended track at the park, expected to be finished in May. A 400-metre test track is already operational, built to withstand the region's extreme climate. That pilot project will start trials with passengers in March. Within three years, it is hoped that a 130km sky track could transport freight from Sharjah to Khorfakkan, suspended pods hanging from a robust string rail.

The cost of building the network is comparable, or cheaper, than laying new roads or railways and would require less maintenance, says Oleg Zaretskiy, SkyWay Green Tech's chief executive. It consumes less energy than cars and the electric motor can be operated partly by solar or wind energy. By elevating the pods, the land below is preserved for alternative uses. The technology is considerably more advanced than a cable car, Zaretskiy says. "Ropes and rolling wheels restrict that format to low speeds because of friction and load. This is more like a railroad, with wheels rolling on a rail."

COURTESY OF ARADA; SHARJAH RESEARCH TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION PARK

Culture

MANAL ATAYA SETS AN EXAMPLE FOR THE DIGITAL FUTURE / TAREK ATOUI IS THE UNSEEN CONDUCTOR / BEIRUT'S BROKEN GLASS, UNBROKEN DEFIANCE / AN ARTIST INSPIRED BY PROVERBS / LITERATURE'S AMBASSADORS ARE ARTISTS, TOO / HASSAN BLASIM GIVES VOICE TO THE FORGOTTEN

COURTESY OF JUMA AL HAJ

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JUMA AL HAJ
An artist and Sharjah native joins the conversation about Covid-19 through art. His piece, *Untitled*, speaks of unbreakable bonds.

INFORMATION IS POWER

How Manal Ataya steered the Sharjah Museums Authority through 2020 to emerge stronger and set an example for the digital future.

Words by Anna Seaman
Photographs by Siddharth Siva

Sharjah Fort (Al Hisn) was built with coral stones collected from the deep waters of the Arabian Gulf.

COURTESY OF SHARJAH ART MUSEUM COLLECTION (2)

Museums are treasure chests—of art, history, nature, science—to be experienced with the five senses, in person. The Covid-19 pandemic shut down experiences of all kinds worldwide. Museums, typically tightly budgeted operations despite their often-opulent settings, faced an existential crisis.

Manal Ataya had long been planning a way to consult with institutions around the world about the future of museums when the pandemic gave the topic real urgency. Sharjah Museums Authority (SMA) quickly organised *The Evolving Museum: Adapting, Learning and Exhibiting in the New Era*, an online symposium held in December to share the lessons learned during 2020 and the very different future that museums are now facing.

"For major changes to happen in life, there has to be something that rocks the foundations," she says. "Museums, like a lot of other institutions, can get stuck in rigid paradigms and frameworks that they rely on. If this pandemic had not happened, museums would not have changed for many more years, perhaps decades. So, whilst this year has been really tough, there are also good things to have emerged, not least a change in outlook."

In March 2020, Ataya had to close all 16 Sharjah museums. Digitising the collections became urgent. In a matter of weeks, the permanent collection at Sharjah Art Museum as well as the Aïda Muluneh photography exhibition *Homebound* were live in the digital sphere. Additionally, a curated exhibition of objects from the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization was uploaded onto Museum With No Frontiers, a virtual museum portal.

"We were in a good position to react quickly," Ataya says. "Our team is flexible and, whilst it took a lot of work, we focused on the goal to make it happen."

The next step was to keep audiences engaged. SMA began hosting mini online workshops demonstrating arts and crafts activities that could be done at home. A webinar series in English and Arabic presented a wide range of subjects, such as poetry, heritage, history and customs. "We noticed a huge surge in numbers compared to events that we had hosted before in real life," Ataya says. "It was wonderful to see such a positive response and that people were hungry for content."

During her 15 years at SMA, with just over 12 years as Director General, Ataya has worked to implement the vision of His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohamed Al Qasimi, Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Sharjah, a vision for the emirate to stand out in the region for its dedication to knowledge, culture and the arts. His Highness entrusted Ataya with this mission when she was just 28, making her one of the youngest women to be appointed to a leadership position in Sharjah government. She recognised the stakes when Covid-19 hit and prioritised the safety of the 600 SMA staff as well as her audiences.

"[Covid-19] was something that nobody had ever imagined. Initially, it was frightening because the situation was so unknown and it was evolving so quickly. It was also psychologically unhealthy because suddenly we were all working from home, to maintain balance when your home is your office is almost impossible," she says.

"Having said that, when you are in a state of emergency, it is amaz-

"NO MATTER HOW MANY TIMES I SEE IT, IT ALWAYS STOPS ME IN MY TRACKS."

One of my all-time favourite pieces in the SMA collection is *Poem* by the Lebanese painter and sculptor Saloua Raouda Choucair. It is one of the oldest works we have; it is from 1960, but it feels timeless to me. This work is made of carved wood blocks placed on top of one another to create a vertical sculpture. Its rounded, organic forms and the visible grain of the wood give the work a tangibility and approachability.

No matter how many times I see it, it always stops me in my tracks because it seems to offer a new perspective. It is playful like a puzzle, cleverly carved and also very beautiful. Choucair was inspired very much by geometric designs in Islamic architecture and that is clear in this particular piece. I also find it special that she gave it this title because it likely is linked to her mother, who was a skilled orator and poet. Choucair herself labelled her works as "sculptural poems" within which she wanted "rhythm like the poetic meter, to be at once more independent and interlinked, and to have lines like meanings." (Quoted in *Mulhaq al-Nahar*, 23 September 1995.)

I am particularly drawn to her work as I feel an affinity to female artists and particularly love the minimalist and abstract qualities to Choucair's sculptures. She was unique and she lived a wonderful life. Sadly, like so many great artists from our region, she was only really recognised internationally when the Tate Modern in London gave her a retrospective in 2013. She died in 2017, age 100.
—*Manal Ataya*

"It has been a personal goal to enhance the representation of Arab artists and use the museum as a platform to showcase their work."

ing how your brain automatically reacts. I felt like my brain was already giving me solutions as things unfolded; it was then my priority to translate my thoughts into actions when it came to how best to lead the organisation and to keep the staff calm."

Research and education personnel pivoted to online content. Many support staff underwent additional training from home. "We were fortunate to be able to offer all staff job security," she says. "Ultimately, I wanted to ensure that we used this as an opportunity to press the reset button and think about how to bring about change and break down barriers by making access to art more democratic through digital platforms, trying to understand digital engagement and how best to apply it so we are not just communicating one way to our audiences."

Museums in Sharjah and around the world play many roles, particularly as ambassadors of education, cultural dialogue and world civilisation. Within the UAE, Sharjah's museums form an integral part of school curricula as well as college and university programmes. Students regularly visit the collections and participate in workshops specifically devised around their needs and interests. "We have become very focused on our communities and their diversity, creating and delivering all kinds of programmes for more inclusive experiences. At the same time, our museums are much needed and much appreciated sites for the affirmation and celebration of Arab-Islamic identity," Ataya says. "As far as our international visitors are concerned, our museums offer ample opportunity to learn about local traditions, heritage, art and culture—in an environment that is welcoming and encourages learning."

Since her appointment in 2008 to Director General, Ataya has opened six new museums: Sharjah Aquarium, Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization, Sharjah Heritage Museum, Sharjah Maritime Museum, Hisn Khor Fakkan, and Sharjah Fort (Al Hisn), which was a reimagining. Several others have gone through major refurbishment and reinterpretation projects. Through regular initiatives including school visits, mobile exhibitions, community festivals, social responsibility activities, and interactive workshops around exhibitions, SMA concentrates on reaching wider audiences. There are also initiatives that work with people with disabilities, cancer patients, the autism community, and inmates in correctional facilities.

"It has been important to me over the past 12 years to understand, evaluate and deliver initiatives that are consistent and provide for our audiences. I don't believe in one-offs or great messaging that has no substance behind it," she says.

Ataya has dedicated years to building partnerships with regional and global organisations to co-curate and organise international exhibitions. "It has been a personal goal to enhance the representation of Arab artists and use the museum as a platform to showcase their work and initiate alongside it educational programming and publication of their work, often for the first time in their careers."

An example is the annual *Lasting Impressions* series, which gives first-time retrospective exhibitions to well-established yet often under-celebrated Arab contemporary artists. This year, the tenth anniversary edition will spotlight pioneering Algerian artist Baya Mahieddine. The series also collaborates on exhibitions with Islamic collections around the world.

Ataya has joined hands with local universities to enable students to work in real practice and to find solutions to real challenges. She has established the SAWA Academy, a training programme between Sharjah and Berlin for students of museum studies.

As for the future, SMA is looking at strategies to ensure operations continue smoothly and to ensure accessibility, including talking to architects and designers about how to make the museums touchless as well as how to safely bring students back into the museums to allow learning to continue offline. More of the annual budget is allocated to cyber security and digital programmes, to further enhance the online experience.

The digitisation drive has broadened Ataya's platform. Over the years, she has spoken at more than 100 events locally and globally about the work of SMA, with the content reserved exclusively for attendees. In 2020, she participated in a dozen more, but as the events were virtual the content is available online for people to view and learn from. "For the first time in history, people all over the world are able to access the world of academia and the previously exclusive speeches made at conferences," she says. "Before you would need to be invited, pay fees and then travel to these events. Now anyone can virtually attend and access recorded content over and over again. This means that information has been democratized, one of the positives of the pandemic. Information is power and it deserves to be shared."

In October, Ataya was elected to the board of trustees for Hamilton College in New York, where she began her art studies. She is the youngest person on the board and the first international student to be elected. "This is one of my proudest achievements," she says. "Hamilton gave me an understanding of the world and taught me to challenge myself and others, for me to return to the college in a different way to help and support is wonderful."

Ataya remembers childhood museum visits as "a dream situation" for her endless curiosity. "I never get bored of learning and that is why museums will always be my priority. I truly believe that there are so many people whose lives would fundamentally change if they had access to somewhere that is informative, fun, free, and non-judgmental, and that is what a museum provides." ■

CULTURE

THE UNSEEN CONDUCTOR

Tarek Atoui is a visual artist and musician interested in the corporal experience of sound and listening. He has collaborated with Sharjah Art Foundation for more than a decade, culminating in Cycles in 11, his first institutional exhibition.

Words by Anna Seaman

OLI COWLING / TATE PHOTOGRAPHY

The first sound as you step into Bait Al Serkal is a deep bass pulsing like a heartbeat, not loud enough to be intrusive but certainly enough to warrant attention. Emanating from an initially unidentified source it invites you to find out where it is coming from. You feel you've entered a living, breathing organism. The magical, mystical 19th century building, one of Sharjah Art Foundation's star venues, seems to have acquired a heart, lungs and pulse with the exhibition *Tarek Atoui: Cycles in 11*.

The exhibition centres around sound, be that experimental music, innovative instruments, or the resonance of natural and man-made materials. And, while it comprises several separate artworks, the show feels intertwined and connected as a single body of work, sliding perfectly into its chosen venue. Bait Al Serkal's many rooms, hidden crooks and crevices lend themselves perfectly to this exhibition.

Atoui was born in Beirut in 1980 and moved to France in his late teens to write and compose electronic music. In 2009, he transitioned to visual arts and now hovers above an invisible line dividing the two genres. He experiments with sound and collaborates with artists, musicians and instrument makers to create pieces. In August, Atoui was awarded the 2022 Suzanne Deal Booth / FLAG Art Foundation Prize, one of the largest art prizes in the US, and has a show scheduled in Austin, Texas for spring 2022. But it was Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF) that gave Atoui his first platform, at the biennial in 2009, and has continued to host performances, workshops and experimental partnerships. Notably, in his 2012 project *Within*, he worked closely with hearing-impaired students from Al Amal School for the Deaf in Sharjah to use sound as a means of communication.

Within forms a pivotal part of this exhibition. Indeed, many of the works in *Tarek Atoui: Cycles in 11*, which was delayed from March 2020 until September due to the coronavirus, stem from this seminal work. The exhibition pays homage to the ongoing collaboration with SAF.

"A lot of my experimentation and research has started in Sharjah or is triggered by opportunities that the foundation gave me," Atoui says. "This was the opportunity to give something back."

Tarek Atoui: Cycles in 11 is more than an exhibition. It is an immersive experience to be seen, heard and felt

SHANAVAS JAMALUDDIN / SHARJAH ART FOUNDATION

The artist performs at the opening of *Tarek Atoui: Cycles in 11*. Sharjah Art Foundation, 2020.

OMAR RASHEED / SHARJAH ART FOUNDATION

with the entire body, aligning with a foundational part of Atoui's research: the 11-beat irregular yet rhythmic cycle of some forms of Arabic music, specifically the Taarab genre. *Pulses in 11*, an "abstract pointillist clock", is inspired by this research. It consists primarily of a large glass pipette filled with water and attached to a microphone stand. The water falls, in individual droplets, from the pipette into a smaller water basin linked to a speaker that produces a booming thud in an 11-beat cycle. This work acts as the heart of the show and also as its timekeeper.

"It comes from the idea of a metronome, giving the tempo and the pulse of the piece as well as marking an abstract rhythm cycle of 11 beats," Atoui says. "However, it is a trance-inducing beat with no beginning and no end. It is hypnotic, you get lost in it. It is a play on many things, but it announces the colour, the structure and the ideas that are within the wider exhibition."

As an anchor for the show, then, it is at once precise but abstract and, because it is such, it captures another important element of this presentation: the collision of the natural and the unnatural. Similar to the way *Pulses in 11* uses water to create sound, most of the other pieces use natural elements such as stones, rocks, bones and wood to reverberate against different surfaces—cymbals, wood blocks, tiles, slate, even the ground—to make their music. It seems, initially, as if Atoui is exploring an interest in what happens when two contradictory spheres of existence collide. However, it is actually the opposite.

"There is no dichotomy," Atoui says. "From the ancestral and prehistoric to the super high tech and algorithmic, everything is in symbiosis. Rather than opposition or contrast, they are all part of the same body coexisting at an equal level.

"If there is a statement behind this then it is about producing sound and making music. It is not about genre, temporality, technique, virtuosity or professionalism. It is about all these things together and what happens when you have all these elements in play."

The works in the exhibition represent the culmination of Atoui's ongoing exploration of different methods of listening, composition and performance. The spark of most of the pieces began in 2012 with *Within*, for which Atoui developed musical instruments for both deaf and hearing persons as well as exercises that can activate the whole body in the art of deep listening. In *Cycles in 11*, one room is given over to the *Within* project, filled with consistent sound. Inside the long, corridor-like space, the floor is covered in bean bags, tubes, pipes and wires connected to three separate artworks that create sounds. The central piece fills up with air—it resembles breathing lungs. The work layers physical and intellectual complexity, addressing subjective and objective listening for the professional ear, yet it also allows anyone of any age to enjoy.

"Whether you are one metre or seven metres tall, sound will flow to you in different ways. You can see it with your eyes through motion and objects and you can feel it by sitting on it or experiencing vibration. It is a listening experience," Atoui says.

The Wave, which occupies the central courtyard of Bait Al Serkal, is constructed of the instruments developed for *Within* as well as others from two separate projects, *The Reverse Collection* and *The Ground*—another long-term venture that evolved from five years of research in southern China. It also uses sound recordings made for *I/E*, Atoui's project on harbour cities (Abu Dhabi, Athens and Singapore) that he began in 2014. Its inspiration comes from the soundscape of the seashore when a wave crashes upon the beach and then recedes. The loudest instrument in *The Wave* is formed of black tubes that reach out like long limbs along the ground and rise up to emit their sound. Around this piece, which is called *The Horns of Putin*, and partly hidden in the undergrowth are smaller pieces that make their own noises. It is as if an orchestra is at work. That would make Atoui the unseen conductor.

"I prefer to say I am a composer," he responds. "I am working on combining sounds with moments of performance and moments of research. But I am also a connector, a facilitator, an educator, and an agitator and when all this comes together, that is what makes a great project. So yes, I am definitely a conductor as well." ■

***Tarek Atoui: Cycles in 11* is more than an exhibition. It is an immersive experience to be seen, heard and felt with the entire body. Installation view, 2020.**

SHATTERED GLASS AND TAXI DRIVERS

In the summer of 2006, following the Israeli airstrikes on Beirut, I rushed to help my mother pick the glass off my mattress. For my efforts, I received an almighty scolding. At 16, I was too young to handle shards of broken glass. After the internal conflict of 2008, now old enough to smoke and drink, I tried again. It was easier and quicker to do it herself, she claimed. This was not an attitude she had held about my share of the household chores growing up. In the intervening years, amidst political assassinations, car bombs and the like, she developed the technique of elbowing me out of the way as I made valiant attempts to reach for the odd sliver of glass or splinter of wood. After one window shattered twice in quick succession, my mother insisted that we have it boarded up. I sometimes catch her staring at it instead of through the glass of an adjacent window. I wonder if it is her favourite view from the apartment.

My family and I were fortunate, once more. For us, the extent of the Beirut port explosion on August 4th, which ended 200 lives and destroyed more than 300,000 homes, was shattered glass, remorse, anger and relief. After the first blast, my father pronounced that it was a mild earthquake or fireworks—or some simultaneous combination of the two—and went back to reading his book. After the second, my sister leapt from her old bed, below my parents' wooden-framed windows, and was flung across the apartment and into my arms. I had been standing in the hallway with my mother. None of us still believed in earthquakes or fireworks: an inevitable offshoot of my father's attempts to maintain calm in the face of chaos over the years. The conviction had long since deserted him, but he kept it up for appearances. It was the latter blast that sent a shock through the flat, knocking over books, shattering windows and propelling my sister. When we found my father, he was inspecting the glass. My mother had reached for the masking tape and the broom even before assessing the damage.

At 30, I resigned myself to the couch in the living room. I knew my role. I watched my father support the battered frame of the window against the ledge. I watched my mother apply two or three layers of tape, using her teeth to cut it down to the desired length, never once failing to estimate the size of the crack or the dimensions of the gap. As veterans of the civil war, they do this mechanically, detached and steadfast, unperturbed by the intense summer heat or the breaking news on the TV behind them. Etched across their faces, my mother's in particular, is guilt. It is as if she holds herself personally accountable for the explosion, as if the resulting debris is her perpetual burden which she must shoulder alone and not breathe a word about for fear that a *dammi* or *kasra* might shatter more glass.

In the end, I received a telling off from my mother anyway for coming back to Beirut, when I had made a home for myself in the UK for most of my 20s.

Throughout that year prior to the explosion, which featured the economic crisis, the collapse of the lira, and the revolution threatening to topple the corrupt ruling elite, there had been a burgeoning resentment amongst my contemporaries directed at the civil-war generation: my parents' generation. It was felt that our parents had let us down, that they had been complicit in their silence, in their "resilience" comprised of masking tape and broomsticks and not breathing a word for fear that a vowel or two might shatter a fragile state.

One of the earliest pieces of advice my mother gave me was not to "refrain from talking to strangers", but rather specifically to "refrain from talking about politics and the war to taxi drivers". At nine, I found this to be a reasonable request albeit one I did not expect to struggle with.

The war generation's unwillingness or inability to engage in the difficult conversations meant that the warlords were able to grant themselves amnesty and rob the country for 30 years without so much as an inquisitive nine-year-old holding a presumed militiaman turned taxi driver accountable for his war crimes.

A brief disclaimer here: not all taxi drivers are embittered former militiamen or part-time agents of the Syrian regime. Some of them double as primary sources for foreign correspondents.

A few days on from the explosion, I trod lightly past the remains of an unrecognisable Mar Mikhael street, handing out bottles of water to the youthful volunteers who swept the glass and rubble to the side of the road. I looked into their simmering, masked faces: some of them were younger than I had been in 2006. My mother was wrong, or so I thought. You are never too young to sweep the glass off the floor.

Then I noticed their technique. It was poor, unbalanced and carried with it none of the swift, graceful movement of my mother. Sweeping glass is a different skill to sweeping dust. The former demands a firmer grip and more agile manoeuvers.

I suspect that was my mother's gift to me. She believed in raising a generation so ill-equipped to sort through the debris, so ill at ease with the act of sweeping the rubble, that it might busy itself with the task of toppling a corrupt regime instead.

For the many who lost their loved ones or their homes during the latest act of criminal negligence perpetrated upon the Lebanese people, the broomstick and masking tape solution would not do. On the evening of the 8th of August, I stood by the devastated Gemmayze Street, overlooking the clashes with the security forces at the heart of Beirut as gunfire, rubber bullets and tear gas were launched into the night sky. I believed in fireworks then. When the government announced that it would resign—the second in the space of a year—I believed that we could make the earth quake, too, or if not the earth then at least Nabih Berri.

Unfortunately, former PM Saad Hariri is preparing to form a government despite ongoing clashes with security forces in Tripoli as the ruling elite looks to consolidate power and further hamper the investigation into the port explosion. Fifty-five per cent of the population lives under the poverty line, with many having lost their jobs, their homes, their savings, their livelihoods, their lives or their loved ones.

In Lebanon, every year is so much more dismal than its predecessor that the next one is always bound to be better. A taxi driver told me that. I listened. And then we talked politics and the war.

Naji Bakhti *is a novelist based in Beirut. His debut,* **Between Beirut and the Moon** *(Influx Press), was released last August to critical acclaim.*

HASSAN AMMAR / ASSOCIATED PRESS

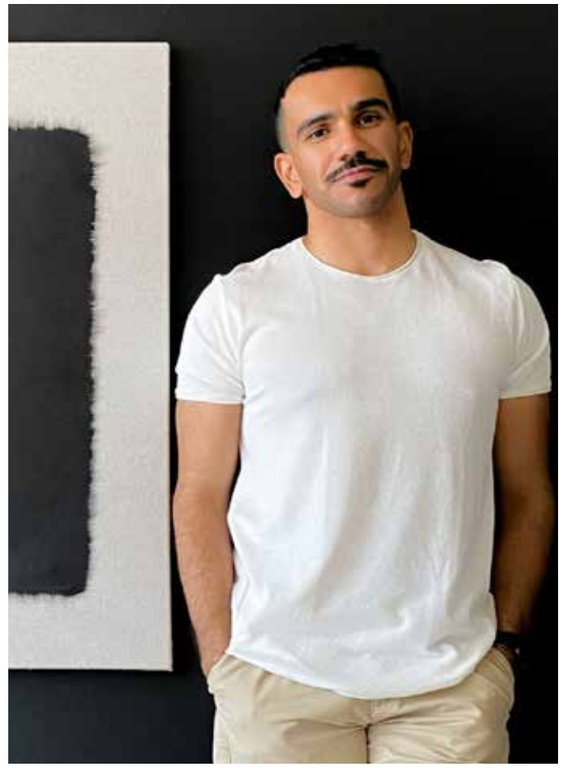
COURTESY OF JUMA AL HAJ

CULTURE

AN INVISIBLE RED THREAD

Juma Al Haj makes a statement about the pandemic with abstract takes on Arabic calligraphy.

Words by Ruba Al-Sweel



In the long debate over whether art can be viewed separately from the artist, Sharjah native and newcomer Juma Al Haj settles it: "My work features personal scribbles from my journal—I write almost daily." A graduate in visual communications from the American University of Sharjah, Al Haj confides that texts from different sources catch his eye and serve as a catalyst for his own diaristic soliloquy. Journaling, collecting thoughts for his art, is a ritual highly revered by Al Haj, given that he only moonlights as an artist but reports for work in the government sector every morning.

One such text inspired the work on view at Tashkeel's *Covid Conversations*, which closed on Jan. 4. The group exhibition by UAE-based artists and designers showcased works that respond to their diverse experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Featuring spirals and scrolling motifs with a technique underpinned by the abstraction of calligraphic patterns, Al Haj's *Untitled* (2020) is drawn from ancient Chinese lore which reads *"An invisible red thread connects those who are destined to meet, regardless of time, place, and circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle, but it will never break."* Hung solemnly like a prayer, red ink breaks up the stark whiteness of the canvas. Applied in careful meditation, the lines of abstracted Islamic lettering, while barely legible, are nonetheless formidable. Even though Al Haj laughingly proclaims that he's "…really good at English cursive, but atrocious at Arabic handwriting," this imperceptibility of text is no failure by the artist. Rather, it takes inspiration from a significant art movement that took place in the Arab world at the beginning of the 14th century, peaking again in the mid 20th century, called Hurufiya. Melding the traditional with the contemporary, the technique focuses less on readability and decryption, and more on deconstructing and foregrounding the formal elements of the Arabic letter.

"While the proverb is never actually written, I infuse the thickness of the strokes with the sentiment of the texts," he says. "I developed my own technique in loosening my hand and thickening some strokes, which helped me improve my Arabic handwriting significantly," Al Haj says.

Perhaps the fabled red thread of the Chinese proverb was least visible during a time of government-mandated isolation and decreased human connection, but Al Haj quickly recognised an emerging pattern of alternative connectivity. "I was on social media all day, and found myself reconnecting with people, hobbies and interests. I even made new friends online," he says, emphasising the irony of a global pandemic bringing the world to a halt of collective recalibration and prioritisation.

Isolation had the artist deliberate over a pre-united UAE, paying aesthetic homage to the former flag of Sharjah, which had a red rectangle on a white background. "The inspiration from this flag in particular is very personal. I moved back to Sharjah from the capital after a country-wide lockdown was announced. I felt it important to be with family," he explains.

The flag is an apt metaphor when speaking of unbreakable connections. A tapestry of interconnected threads, weaving in and out of vision, but never breaking apart. It's no wonder, then, that each line echoes with a sentimentality that is cathartic. Each line a thread in the Theory of Everything. ■

CULTURE

THE ART OF TRANSLATION

Ambassadors for authors, tour guides into foreign realms, translators broaden minds and markets beyond the borders of individual writers.

Words by Catherine Bolgar / Illustration by Wissam Shawkat

If books open new worlds to us, translations take us to worlds far from our own. How often do we think about the act, or the art, of translation? We celebrate composers like Elias Rahbani, as well as performers like Fairouz, who interpreted his music. If authors are like composers, then translators are like musicians, using their skill and creativity to bring the original to new audiences.

Sawad Hussain, a teacher and prize-winning translator of *Passage to the Plaza* by Sahar Khalifeh, *Catalogue of a Private Life* by Najwa Bin Shatwan coming this autumn, and *Mama Hissa's Mice* by Kuwaiti novelist Saud Alsanousi, sees translators as chauffeurs. "The author has one route. I'm picking up a bunch of passengers and we're going to the same destination but we're taking a different route. It might have different landmarks."

In *Mama Hissa's Mice*, for example, a character lisps, and Hussain at first included the lisp in the translation, but "it became a decoding exercise for the reader. So I made him stutter. The point was that a traumatic event affected his speech pattern."

Paul Starkey, the scholar, translator and chair of the judging panel for The 2020 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize, sees a literary translation as a "mirror image of the first work but it still has a creative element behind it. If you don't have artistic flair, then you would be better to do commercial translation."

Jonathan Wright, a journalist and translator of many prize-winning books, including *Jokes for the Gunmen* by Mazen Maarouf, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadawi, and *God 99* by Hassan Blasim, says, "I like to imagine that I produce something like the book the author would have written if he/she had been bilingual in English. Of course there's a complicated set of impossible assumptions in that, but we translators use our imaginations and put hard work into trying to overcome them and bridge the gap. It's much easier to produce a good translation of a good book than it is to write the good book in the first place, so the author must always take pride of place."

Translators are essential ambassadors for authors and their publishers. Few make a living from translating and, adding insult to injury, they sometimes are barely acknowledged.

"I still think that those publishers who refuse to put translators' names on the cover are just wrong. We are co-authors, co-artists. Publishers say it'll put readers off," says Marilyn Booth, scholar and translator of such prize winners as *Voices of the Lost* by Hoda Barakat, *Celestial Bodies* by Jokha Alharthi, and *Points of the Compass* by Sahar Tawfiq.

Book sales mostly held steady during the pandemic. Although translations make up only about 3% of books published in English, tales from afar provide vicarious travel, now more than ever.

"I always considered translation as an attempt to deepen our cultural understanding towards a new planet, without barriers and prejudices," says Osama Esber, poet, writer, publisher and translator of works by Toni Morrison, Michael Ondaatje, Terry Eagleton, Richard Ford, Bertrand Russell, Nadine Gordimer, Noam Chomsky and others. "Arab writers were influenced by good translations… Literary translation is a step to deepen writing and open new vistas for it. It contributes to a round table of dialogue between writers across the cultural barriers."

He cites the example of French poet Saint-John Perse, who was translated by two great poets: T.S. Eliot for English and Adonis for Arabic. "These are two great poets who translated a great poet. What is the result: a great translation," Esber says. "The way you use language is an important sign of a good translation. If you possess the language and know how to utilise its magic, you will be able to express the rhythm, emotions, and the voice of a foreign text, and here the other becomes the self, an exchange of roles."

Booth and Hussain read original and translated passages aloud to feel their cadence. A natural rhythm helps readers, Wright notes, and his news experience has taught him how "a slight rearrangement of a sentence can add massively to its clarity."

Like any art, translation has rules, fashions, challenges. One rule: respect the author's voice. "Sometimes I feel the writer dictates to me in Arabic. If I lose his/her voice, the translation will not be good. In poetry, the mission is harder, you have to be able to use language in a way that can embrace the voice and rhythm of the poet, who writes in a foreign language. It is as if you are walking on the edge of a cliff, but you should walk," Esber says. Adds Wright: "If you spend three months in the company of a fictional character, the character takes on a life of its own and starts to speak. The translator just has to listen, and it comes."

It isn't always easy. For Badria Al-Shihi's *The Girdling of Embers*, a historical novel that takes place aboard a boat from Oman to Zanzibar, Hussain struggled to convey the sailors' rough language. "If I went with something similar in English, it might sound like *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and that is not where you want the characters to go," she says.

The pendulum of how much of the original language to retain is swinging towards more, sometimes with an explanation of the foreign term in the context, but sometimes not. Readers are increasingly open to foreign words, even if they don't understand them. The old fashion of translating everything stripped out the foreign flavour that transports the reader. A reviewer panned one of Hussain's early translations for being too Westernised. Now she incorporates Arabic terms strategically, aware of the risk of jarring the reader, saying, "I don't mind if you feel uncomfortable."

Arabic, the native tongue of more than 200 million people, with about two dozen dialects, poses a special challenge. The language of literature is Modern Standard Arabic, or MSA. Because life plays out in dialect, some authors mix dialect and slang with MSA or write completely in dialect. Translators must decide how to express that.

MSA "is not the mother tongue of anyone on this planet," Wright says. "There's a massive price to pay for that. For a start, it excludes as potential writers the maybe 70% or 80% of the population who can hardly write MSA and the 50% or so for whom it is a great effort to read. It also excludes a whole domain of language that is close to people's daily lives and emotions… Some writers use MSA with extreme abandon, revelling in conceits and obscure words that many readers will not recognise. Others write in a rather cold, predictable and stereotypical way. Of course there are writers in Arabic who have used the language to great effect and their achievements are even more remarkable since they have been working with their hands tied behind their backs. But, for a translator, it's often hard to handle the flights of verbal fancy that some MSA writers insert into their texts and, on other hand, to resist the temptation to liven up the slightly bland language of other texts."

Regional differences, Starkey notes, are such that "if the book is in Iraqi dialect, then Egyptians would have trouble understanding it and it's not going to have wide appeal. That's a problem for writers as well."

Making novels available to a wider market is an important benefit of translation for authors. But it's hard to get publishers' attention, especially if the publisher doesn't have staff who can read the original or who attend book fairs in different regions. Publishers favour sure things, so Palestinians are expected to write about intifada, Syrians and Iraqis about war, Arab women about being oppressed. Hussain is shopping an out-of-the-box science fiction novel from Mauritania, called *The Outsider,* by Ahmed Isselmou. She struggled for two years to find a home for *A Bed for the King's Daughter*, an eerie microfiction collection by author Shahla Ujayli of Syria. It came out with University of Texas Press in January.

"All the publishers I approached said, 'it's too avant-garde, not Arabic enough, too much surrealism'," she says. "This is a short story collection that has been singled out by critics in the Arab world; shouldn't that be enough for you to take interest?"

Literary prizes boost translations' thin budgets. The Man Booker International Prize went to the first Arabic novel in 2019—*Celestial Bodies*, written by Jokha Alharthi and translated by Booth. The Sharjah Book Authority funds the annual AED1.3 million Turjuman Award for books in translation, to get Arabic works into the hands of non-Arabic readers. The International Prize for Arabic Fiction, sponsored by the Emirates Foundation in Abu Dhabi, goes to the best novel in Arabic each year, with $50,000 for the winner plus translation into English.

"In the last 20 years, it's amazing how it's changed," Booth says. "There's so much more buzz about translation now." ■

PAUL STARKEY

"Nobody translates out of their native tongue. You translate out of your second language into your native one. I've been writing in English all my life. There's no way I'll get my written Arabic to that standard."

SAWAD HUSSAIN

"You have to do a lot of editing, compared to other languages. The editing practice is improving, but editors are undervalued in the Arab publishing world."

MARILYN BOOTH

"We can only think about reality through words in our head. The way societies segment reality through language is crucial. It's a nightmare for translators but also really important."

JONATHAN WRIGHT

"The choice of an appropriate English word depends on the context, not on the Arabic word—who is doing what to whom, what were they talking about, what is the power relationship between them?"

OSAMA ESBER

"Translation helps us to see the other through his creative identity. This puts us in a different position, the position of listening, seeing and embracing the other through the intimacy of his creative self."

MARKUS PENTIKÄINEN / LEHTIKUVA / OTAVAMEDIA

HASSAN BLASIM, *GOD 99*

The Iraqi author masterfully depicts the devastation of conflict in his searing debut novel.

Words by Ben East

It has been billed as award-winning Iraqi writer Hassan Blasim's debut novel, but in truth *God 99* is so much more than that. A stark commentary on the violence of displacement, an important record of refugee life, and an autobiographical reflection on the value of writing as a salve, *God 99* is also confirmation that Arabic literature in translation can be irreverent, blunt and starkly, fearlessly modern. It feels like the next step in the journey of contemporary Arab writing, reflecting current concerns and in part rejecting classical Arabic, that began with Saud Alsanousi's *The Bamboo Stalk* and continued with Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*.

It's no coincidence that all three books were translated by Jonathan Wright, who was also entrusted with Blasim's short story collections *The Madman of Freedom Square* and *The Iraqi Christ*. There's a sense he "gets" not just the subject matter—in Blasim's work the battle to survive both in Baghdad and abroad—but the importance that it's conveyed in an accessible style. This is vital, crucial writing for English-language audiences.

And writing—"a bastion against wind and waves," as Blasim's protagonist puts it—is at the heart of *God 99*. Hassan Owl is (like Blasim) an exiled Iraqi living in Finland, who is inspired to blog about people who have had their lives "disrupted" in some way. Owl only gets a grant to finance his project, he notes cynically, because of the "miracle" of the humanitarian disaster, when vast numbers of migrants and refugees flooded into Europe. "They might have voices, faces, and stories to tell," he surmises.

So he goes to meet these disparate characters. A female DJ in Berlin finds refuge in techno after witnessing a Daesh sniper pick off her partner in Syria; an Iraqi baker changes career to make masks for those disfigured by suicide bomb attacks; a Finnish video game designer who escaped an assassination attempt as a baby works on a new title, which can only be completed if the character gets to a country and convinces the authorities he has a good reason to stay. Blasim's use of profanity and street Arabic further accentuate the brutality of survivors' stories.

If these people feel achingly real then that's because they mostly are. But Blasim also has an ability to write about desire, identity and trauma in an eye-openingly matter-of-fact way. Which brings us back to whether this is a novel at all. Really, it's a short story collection of post-war Iraq and migrant life, conveyed with the overarching device of Hassan Owl's interviews. That does mean some of the blog posts work better than others; the layering effect of *God 99*'s structure is powerful, but there are some scrappy moments in this collage.

Interspersed with the interviews is email correspondence Hassan has with a mysterious character called Alia, in which they discuss literary theory, translation and the power (or lack of it) of writing to effect change. In fact, they are taken from dozens of emails the late Iraqi writer Adnan al-Mubarak sent to Blasim over a period of 12 years. Blasim notes in the dedication that al-Mubarak was "saintly in a human sense and demonic in a creative one"—which is certainly a guiding principle of *God 99*.

Ultimately, the strength of this novel is to be found in standout lines, rather than memorable narrative. Like those from Mi, who escapes sexual persecution in Iraq via a mountain pass full of other trafficked people. What does he think of his new home in Finland? "For me, home is people: to have a few friends and loved ones around me… whether they live in the lovely fridge of Finland or in the lovely furnace of Iraq."

Maybe that's the great achievement of *God 99*; it puts words into the mouths of the alienated, the marginalised and the forgotten. ■

Design

A SAUDI-BORN ARCHITECT IS INSPIRED BY POETRY / A NEW AMPHITHEATRE SHINES A SPOTLIGHT ON KHORFAKKAN / FASHION DESIGNER SHOUG FARDAN DECODES HER HERITAGE / LUJAIN ABULFARAJ COMBINES HER PASSIONS FOR CALLIGRAPHY AND DESIGN

SAEED KHALIFA

50

SHOUG FARDAN
An Emirati fashion designer explores nostalgia and identity as she builds a contemporary brand.

ASSIYA JAGADEESH / ITP

DESIGN

CREATIVITY AND HEALING

Influenced by poetry and inspired by geology, Saudi-born architect Sumaya Dabbagh works to craft buildings that create experience and meaning.

Words by Charles Shafaieh

A curved sandstone structure rises gently from the ochre desert floor outside Mleiha, a small town 67 kilometres southeast of Sharjah City and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Rather than assert itself loudly in the landscape, the understated building is hardly visible against its Fossil Rock backdrop except when approached at close range. The sandstone takes on silver qualities in the light, while its jagged copper roof references both the area's ancient copper deposits and the mountain outcrop. The humble primacy of the the Mleiha Archaeological Centre's materiality directs attention towards the Centre's focal point: the Umm an-Nar Tomb. Constructed around 2300 BCE, it is the most important of the area's numerous funeral sites.

The 2,000-square-metre project's quiet dialogue with its surroundings exemplifies the practice of its designer, Sumaya Dabbagh, a Saudi-born architect who in 2008 founded her own firm, Dabbagh Architects, in Dubai. Last October, she added an Architecture MasterPrize to her collection of awards for the project, which was completed in 2016.

"I didn't want the building to overshadow the tomb, which has to be honoured and celebrated, so we gave it space around it in the form of a mini amphitheatre," Dabbagh says. "A professor of mine once said, 'If you have a hill and you put a building on top of it, it's no longer a hill because you've lost that profile.' This is the same idea. I wanted to add something without taking away anything. What's new has to build on what was there, rather than erase and start again. It's about creating a new memory for the next generation, too. I imagine this place in some years' time being deserted and people wandering around as if it's a ruin."

Dabbagh began cultivating this sensitivity towards her surroundings in her early childhood. Born in Jeddah on the kingdom's west coast, she recalls the frequent journeys her family took by car to her maternal grandparents' home in nearby Taif. The steep, winding road brought her through the rocky Hijaz Mountains, which spurred an interest in their geology. "That was the origin of my awareness of how geology and forms define the space around you and inform the way you are within that space," she says. She even studied geology initially. "Then, growing up, I found similarly fascinating that buildings have become the geology of our cities, so that early interest led me to architecture."

Mleiha Archaeological Centre, a curved sandstone structure that rises from the ochre desert floor.

GERRY O'LEARY PHOTOGRAPHY

GERRY O'LEARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Entering the field was not a simple task. Dabbagh spent her teenage years in the United Kingdom and, in 1983, received a scholarship from the Saudi government to study at the University of Bath. She enrolled as an architecture student, but two years into her education the kingdom, which banned women from studying or practicing architecture from the mid-1980s through to the late 2000s, said they would revoke the funds unless she changed subjects. Fortunately, her parents supported her decision to continue as planned and helped pay the remaining tuition.

That she is so unique amongst her peers is no cause for celebration though. "A generation of women weren't allowed to study architecture, which was a loss for the upcoming generations," she says. "I didn't have any role models, and they don't either. Gender is not always relevant, but in my case it was, because it impacted my opportunities and education." This lack of diversity applies elsewhere in the region too. Just last year while walking onstage to accept a prize at the Middle East Architect Awards, Dabbagh realised she knows no other female architects with their own firms in the UAE. "Because it's relatively easy to work here, I assumed there would be more, but sadly there aren't."

Her determination to commit to her goals regardless of norms or boundaries, such as simply being a Saudi female architect, has continued in her practice. Consider her Mosque of Light, currently under construction in Dubai. The sleek structure made of sustainable, locally made glassfibre-reinforced concrete contains a delicate pattern of triangular openings. A deconstruction of traditional Islamic designs, these features scatter light within the mosque and help cool its interiors. This novel modern design, however, violated Dubai's strict regulations for mosque architecture. "The main objection was that we have very few external windows. We have windows in very specific places, because if you control how light comes into a space, you create drama," she explains. "It didn't make sense for a progressive city like Dubai to single out one building type and freeze it in an outdated mode of thinking. But our client was happy with our design and was able to take it higher up in government, and I believe those guidelines are now being reevaluated and, hopefully, updated."

This sensitivity to drama and light speaks to the importance Dabbagh places on the intangible in architecture, which transcends the visual iconicity of glass towers and other ostentatious buildings that define so many contemporary skylines. "Like with any form of art, you want to be moved," she asserts, passion audible in her voice as she describes her inspirations who include architects Alvaro Size, Peter Zumthor, and Zaha Hadid. "I'm influenced by poetry and how it evokes feelings. Walking through a threshold, brick and mortar evoke feelings, too. Some places have taken my breath away. I wrote my dissertation on Carl Jung and visited his house in Switzerland, which was built in several stages and reflected his internal development. For me, design is about the experience and meaning you create for users that stay with them."

Good design concerns the entire body as well as the mind. It is unsurprising then that, since university, Dabbagh has practised Iyengar yoga and even taught it for many years. This type of yoga "emphasises alignment and is very precise. It's actually a bit like architecture in that way," she says, smiling. "It gave me so much awareness of my physicality on one level and my thoughts on another. It's continuous awareness, a self-discovery, and something you never stop learning, because bodies are so complex." She sees even more parallels between her two practices, which unite her passion for creativity and healing. "My interest in yoga is with my internal landscape and environment—the way I perceive the world and my relationships. That was kind of an internal search, and architecture was a way to put that in physical form with the sensations, feelings, and experience that physical form can bring." ■

The jagged copper roof references the area's ancient copper deposits and the nearby mountain outcrop. The project's quiet dialogue with its surroundings exemplifies the practice of its designer.

KHORFAKKAN TAKES CENTRE STAGE

At the foot of Al Sayed Mountain, a new amphitheatre rises from the rock formation to provide a new cultural landmark.

Words by Rima Alsammarae

SHARJAH GOVERNMENT MEDIA BUREAU

An 11-metre-wide waterfall cascades 45 metres down over rocks, mimicking the scenery on Khorfakkan's mountains when it rains.

Perched above the Gulf of Oman, a colossal amphitheatre gleams bright, its stage set for a rich cultural future while invoking the timelessness and durability of the past.

The monumental 17,650-square-metre arena's design mixes classic Romanesque and Middle Eastern elements, with columns, arches and geometric patterns. The amphitheatre, its scale and setting is part of a broad plan to unlock the tourism potential of the enclave on Sharjah's eastern coast. Open-air events will host 3,600 spectators at a time; some 18,000 people visited the new landmark within a week of its opening.

The inaugural event on December 14 featured a two-hour film, Khorfakkan, based on a book by His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohamed Al Qasimi, Ruler of Sharjah, that documents the city's valiant defiance of the Portuguese invasion of 1507. His Highness himself officiated at the opening.

"The Portuguese invasion is a little-known chapter of the UAE's history, but the bravery and sacrifices of the city's residents played a formative role in carving the foundations of our national identity," said Mohamed Hassan Khalaf, director general of Sharjah Broadcasting Authority, producer of the film. "The turnout for the screening attests to the fact that moments that shape history and connect the present with the legacy of the past leave a lasting impression on the current generation."

The amphitheatre project was challenging not only for its size and location but also the incredibly short 11-month time frame. Designs were finalised in January 2020; the mountain was excavated and construction and finishing touches complete by December, despite restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Throughout the amphitheatre complex, Roman architectural influences blend with Middle Eastern design. Two sets of 11 columns stand before the imposing stone façade, which features 234 arches and 295 columns. Geometric patterns adorn surfaces and doors. Natural stone, marble imported from Oman, was used for the flooring, seating, elevations and the cladding for interior walls. Shipped as huge slabs it was cut and processed locally to meet the exacting schedule.

"The legacy of Roman architecture has left a lasting mark with its tradition, continuing to influence design, especially that of public buildings the world over," says Sheikh Sultan Bin Ahmed Al Qasimi, Chairman of Sharjah Media Council, which will manage the facility. "They were also great innovators who adopted new construction techniques, used new materials, and uniquely combined existing techniques with creative design to produce a whole range of new architectural structures, such as the basilica, triumphal arch, aqueduct and amphitheatre, among many others. The fact that many of the structures they built survive to this day is a testimony to their practicality, longevity and aesthetic value."

Khorfakkan Amphitheatre incorporates those traits. Open to the salty breezes of the Gulf of Oman, it also has an air-cooling system built into the stone seats to allow year-round use. Energy efficient water chillers in dedicated service buildings are connected to the amphitheatre. Elevators provide access to those unable to use the integrated steps.

A huge plaza extends beyond the stage, encouraging visitors to step back and look up at the amphitheatre, especially at night, when it's dramatically lit. While the amphitheatre is framed by the dominating Al Sayed moutainscape, the plaza extends outward towards the main street, like the outstretched arms of a bowing animal, announcing the landmark's presence.

Leading to the semi-circular arena, large wooden double doors on either side of the plaza are decorated with stained glass panels and gold *mashrabiya* elements. To the left of the arena, and inside the building, a rectangular majlis containing large oriental rugs, olive green velvet seating, and a mosaic portrait of His Highness the Ruler, offers a meeting place for high-ranking officials and performing artists.

Angling from the top of the amphitheatre, an 11-metre-wide waterfall cascades 45 metres down over rocks, mimicking the scenery on Khorfakkan's mountains when it rains. "It is a joy watching people gathering in front of it, taking pictures while children try to catch light sprays of water," says Sheikh Sultan Bin Ahmed.

Near the top of the waterfall, an 80-seat restaurant and café would look just like a cave but for the spectacular views from its wall of windows. At the top of the complex, a pathway between the waterfall and restaurant offers sweeping views.

The venue is off to a roaring start. A New Year's Eve concert featuring Emirati artist, and Khorfakkan native, Hussain Al Jassmi and Egyptian singer Angham sold out on announcement. Only 50% of the venue's capacity was used under Covid-19 safety measures. But perhaps the star attraction was the venue itself.

His Highness the Ruler is committed to the development of the emirate's cultural and artistic landscape, says Sheikh Sultan Bin Ahmed. "His Highness takes great pride in our rich Arab and Islamic heritage, our civilisational legacy. The amphitheatre goes a long way in realising his vision of bringing art and culture closer to the residents and visitors of the eastern region. It highlights the role of cultural and artistic centres in the comprehensive and sustainable development of Sharjah." ■

COURTESY OF SHOUG FARDAN

DESIGN

DECODING HISTORY

Taking inspiration from three generations, Emirati designer Shoug Fardan's work is an exploration of nostalgia and modernity.

Words by Kate Hazell

It's not new or unusual for a designer to draw from the rich culture of the past to inspire their work in a modern context. Shoug Fardan, one of the latest young designers to emerge from the UAE, is looking to her heritage to spark a narrative about what it means to be an Emirati woman today. "I want women [who wear my clothes] to question where they've come from, what their heritage is, and where they're going," explains the 27-year-old Dubai native.

Fardan grew up surrounded by creativity. Her mother, Aisha Juma, is a multimedia artist exhibiting across the region and internationally. Her aunt, Fatma Juma, is also a visual artist with whom Fardan collaborated for her second collection. Fardan studied at New York's prestigious Parsons School of Design, graduating with a degree in Fashion Design in 2017. "While I was in New York, I feel like I found my identity," she reminisces. "Being Emirati was interesting for most of my professors, so it made me think about who I am, where I've come from, what my history is, and implement that throughout my work."

In that history, her mother and grandmother loom large. In her senior year at Parsons, Fardan reflected on photographs of her grandmother in the 1970s wearing clothes she had made herself, deconstructing and then reconstructing traditions by mixing the shayla [headscarf] and burghu [a traditional face covering] with sharp modern tailoring. The images inspired Fardan to create clothes that express individuality, setting the tone for her brand. "My grandmother's style, mixing eastern and western codes, was a part of my identity growing up and has been inherited in the way I dress, and now the way I design," she says.

Returning to Dubai after graduation, Fardan hired a tailor, set up a studio in the family home, and launched her label, Shoug, in 2018, around an exploration of nostalgia and modernity. While her debut collection, *Imported*, experimented with genderless silk pieces and floral prints, it was her second collection, surreaList, where Fardan found her feet. She collaborated with her aunt, whose minimalist sketches adorn monochrome dresses and outerwear inspired by traditional pieces but with structured silhouettes. The shapes fluidly envelope the body in a way that's modest yet starkly modern. "For me, fashion is all about art but on the body," says Fardan. "One of my passions is looking at pieces that move with the body and how fashion corresponds with humans." Fardan fuses feminine and masculine narratives to challenge traditional gender norms. "In my community, gender is stricter than in other countries, yet men wear dresses; it's the traditional garment for them, which is funny for me. So I want to explore that in my work in the form of masculine dresses, for instance."

Fardan is working on her third collection, a collaboration with Azyame, an incubator programme for young designers, an initiative of the Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council in Sharjah. As part of the programme, Fardan is working with Emirati artisans who produce strips of fabrics using the talli technique, a traditional Emirati weaving process that involves twisting and braiding different strands of thread together to create long strips of textile with intricate patterns. "It's been challenging to incorporate the colourful, complex technique into my aesthetic that's characterised by earthy colours and minimalism, but I definitely want to work with more local artisans to preserve our heritage going forward," she says.

Her 10-piece collection is due to be released later this year. Fardan aims to keep building her brand in a way that allows her to produce one collection a year with key pieces that are luxurious yet versatile, wearable and progressive, and a reflection of the evolution of cultural norms in the UAE. Her outerwear, for instance, can be worn as a traditional abaya or just as easily thrown over jeans.

"From the women that I've met who buy my clothes," she says, "one thing I think they all have in common is that they want to feel different in their everyday lives. They want individuality." ■

GENERATION NEXT

Lujain Abulfaraj's passions for design and calligraphy collide in her latest project which aims to make Arabic-language learning fun.

Words by Kate Hazell

TASHKEEL: COURTESY OF LUJAIN ABULFARAJ

Takween is a toy made up of modular shapes that can be connected to build every letter in the Arabic alphabet.

The smooth curls and artistic staccato shapes that form the structure of the Arabic language have been the source of endless inspiration for the modern design world. Yet, when 32-year-old Lujain Abulfaraj realised her three-year-old son was struggling to communicate with her Arabic-speaking father, she could no longer stand by and watch the younger generation become alienated from the ancient language.

"My kids love learning, they're inquisitive and curious, but the way Arabic is taught today is not good enough," the Dubai-based mother of two says in an Americanised accent common among Arabs who grew up in the region and who were taught English in an international school. "My son started to dread Arabic classes, which upset me. I realised I had no idea how to raise a bilingual child, and many of my friends with young children felt the same."

It's a common struggle across the GCC. Young families are embracing rapid globalisation, yet while English becomes more prominent across a modernised Arab world, the younger generation, who might not see the importance of Arabic to communicate and evolve, are disconnected from the mother tongue of their heritage.

Abulfaraj grew up in Saudi Arabia, where Arabic was spoken at school and in the home. English was an important part of the school curriculum both in KSA and in Kuwait, where her family moved when she was nine. Her mother, a passionate Montessori teacher, immersed the young Abulfaraj in self-directed activity, hands-on learning, and exploratory, collaborative play. Her father was CEO of a publishing and distribution company, which meant that the young creative also grew up with books, newspapers, and magazines throughout the house, helping her subconsciously absorb ideas about font, typography, and design. Being immersed in Arabic at home, in her surroundings, and at school meant the language seeped easily into Abulfaraj's consciousness, something that's

Another of Abulfaraj's designs, the Malaab series, created colourful playgrounds crafted from letters of the Arabic alphabet. Here the letter Kaff in Riyadh, for Saudi Design Week, 2019.

not the case for young children growing up in the GCC today.

After studying visual communications at the American University of Sharjah, Abulfaraj co-founded a Dubai-based design studio, Twothirds, in 2016. But at home, she struggled to find design-focused toys and books in Arabic that would help her teach her children the language (she has a son, now nine, and a five-year-old daughter). So Abulfaraj launched Akwan.me—akwan means "universes" in Arabic—an ecommerce platform that curates educational toys, tools, and books that are in Arabic and that have a contemporary edge. As a design aficionado, Abulfaraj places importance on the aesthetics of educational tools. "Pretty much everything I found that was good quality, well designed and fun was in English," Abulfaraj explains. "There was a lack of good Arabic learning tools, and when I did find something it was after a lot of digging. So I founded Akwan as a purpose-driven company to help parents like myself."

Abulfaraj also took classes in typography and calligraphy, with the hope of realising an idea that was evolving in the back of her mind where she could use her skills to reinvigorate the love of the Arabic language. Knowing the importance of interaction and exploration to engage children in learning, Abulfaraj designed a toy made up of nine modular shapes that could be connected magnetically in multiple ways to build every letter in the Arabic alphabet. It's a simple idea, but one that took a lot of patience, editing, and reworking. Abulfaraj spent three years ironing out the concept, spending hours in classrooms and with focus groups, involving children in the design process and asking for feedback on prototypes.

"One of the most important lessons I took from studying at AUS was to critique my own work as a designer," she says. "So my first step was to research vigorously. I found that it's important to respect the child's taste and not to assume certain things prior to the design process. I noticed that by using the same shapes to form different letters, kids started to notice patterns and the repeated, similar shapes that occur in seemingly very different Arabic letters." She also ran the letterforms past designers in her community, including Layth Mahdi, Ghaya Bin Mesmar, Lara Assouad, Wael Morcos, Mohammed Sharaf, and her Twothirds business and creative partner, Sara Al Arif. The final product, Takween, launches later this year on Akwan.me, and is made from a non-toxic, anti-bacterial resin that's eco-friendly and robust. Most importantly for Abulfaraj, it combines functionality and form, core attributes in any quality design product.

The aim is for every bilingual family in the GCC to have one in their home, "like Lego," Abulfaraj says hopefully. "I want to raise my kids to be global citizens, to be compassionate about the world but who don't forget where they've come from. I want them to be proud of their culture. Also, for me, reading the Quran gives me guidance; it keeps me grounded. The Quran is really hard to explain because everyone interprets it in their own way, so for my kids to be able to understand the ancient scripture and interpret it for themselves is a huge gift." ■

COURTESY OF LUAIN ABULFARAJ

Business

NEWSPAPER AL KHALEEJ MARKS 50 YEARS IN PRINT: THE ARABIC-LANGUAGE BROADSHEET HAS BEEN WITNESS TO LANDMARK EVENTS THAT HAVE SHAPED THE ARAB WORLD

ILLUSTRATION BY PETER HORVATH

A WITNESS TO HISTORY

Arabic-language daily broadsheet Al Khaleej marked its 50th anniversary in October. The newspaper, which predates the union itself, has shaped the UAE's media industry.

Words by Ashleigh Stewart
Illustrations by Peter Horvath

"Other newspapers focused on Abu Dhabi and Dubai; we covered all five other emirates that didn't have a newspaper. We spoke to the whole country."

Raed Barqawi chooses his words carefully. For a living. The executive editor of *Al Khaleej* looks back with pride over the paper's 50 years since it launched as the UAE's first daily newspaper. Barqawi's own career, spent entirely at *Al Khaleej*, covers 35 of those years.

Al Khaleej has thrived by speaking truth. In a country where much of the media is government funded, it has maintained its independence amid a populous media industry. For a population of about 10 million, the UAE now has 17 daily newspapers—eight in Arabic, four in English and five in Malayalam.

Barqawi insists that being mindful of sensitivities doesn't mean avoiding tough questions. "You just need to find a different way to say it," he says.

Take the time when, at the tender age of 27, he had to interview the deputy finance minister in Abu Dhabi. The minister told him to go away, but agreed under Barqawi's insistence to answer a couple of yes or no questions.

"He was shocked, he was very busy. I said 'is the budget bigger than last year?' He said yes. I said 'is it a bigger deficit than last year?' Yes. It took me five minutes. And I was so happy and wrote a lovely story and it was the front of the paper the next day," Barqawi recounts.

"The deputy minister called me saying 'Bloody hell, what did you do to me? Did I say all of this?' And I said 'Yes, you did.' He laughed and said I'm a good journalist."

Al Khaleej is widely credited with shaping the UAE's media industry. The Arabic daily was founded in Sharjah by brothers Abdullah Omran Taryam and Taryam Omran Taryam on October 19, 1970, the year before the UAE became an independent country. Weekly Abu Dhabi publication *Al Ittihad*, which launched a year earlier, had the only printing press in the country. So, for the first 18 months, *Al Khaleej* was printed in Kuwait and flown in to Sharjah each morning.

Al Khaleej took an eight-year hiatus from 1972, when the Taryam brothers were given governmental positions; Abdullah became Minister of Justice and Taryam was the first UAE Ambassador to Egypt. During that time, more publications launched in the UAE.

But it was *Al Khaleej* that rose to prominence. In 1982, *Al Khaleej* journalist Adly Barsoum landed an exclusive interview with Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, during the Israeli invasion of Beirut.

In its 50 years, *Al Khaleej* has been witness to events that have shaped the Arab world. In 1982, journalist Adly Barsoum landed an exclusive interview with Yasser Arafat during the Israeli invasion of Beirut. In 1988, the newspaper broke the story that the Iran-Iraq war was over. The newspaper spoke out about foreign influence on Arab nations and advocated the Palestinian cause.

What really set *Al Khaleej* apart, Barqawi says, is the way it dedicated itself to "all Arabs" of the UAE. The paper spoke out about foreign influence on Arab nations and advocated the Palestinian cause. International bureaus were set up to ensure Arab expats felt connected to their homelands.

"Other papers would write two stories about something; we would write 50 stories," he says. "Other newspapers focused on Abu Dhabi and Dubai; we covered all five other emirates that didn't have a newspaper. We spoke to the whole country."

Like the nation, *Al Khaleej* rose from modest beginnings. Journalists were brought in from across the Arab world. One was Barqawi, then a 22-year-old Jordanian who arrived in the UAE fresh from studying journalism in Bucharest, Romania. His English was poor and he had no experience.

"I knew nothing in journalism. The only thing I knew was from a book. I'd never done an interview or written stories," Barqawi says.

Budgets were tight. Barqawi recalls taking shared taxis from assignment to assignment—a ride from Sharjah to Dubai cost two dirhams. *Al Khaleej* ran 20 pages and focused on local news and international

"The Arab world is not ready for paywalls. That is the difference between us and the West. You have to be editorially stronger and work more on exclusive stories to push people to pay for it."

Arab affairs. The editorial staff numbered about 60, compared with 200-some now. It was a paper for the people, Barqawi says.

"We used to go to the villages, to the mountains, to every place, even by bicycle to see what people needed. We were transferring what was happening in the government to these people, and they were telling us what they needed, too. We were doing our part in the building of the country," Barqawi recalls.

Culture was a small section, and business, where Barqawi landed, was even smaller. Thankfully, he says, the two people on the section at the time were crucial mentors. One had attended the same Bucharest university: Riyad Mickdady, now executive editor-in-chief of rival *Al Bayan*. Barqawi recalls those heady days with fondness.

"In those days there was no mobile, no fax, no nothing. We were proper journalists. People were always willing to chat, they were happy to see journalists. There were no PRs. It was great."

Al Khaleej became known for its exclusives. One of "the best stories in our history," Barqawi says, was when the paper broke the news that the Iran-Iraq war had ended, on August 20, 1988.

"Our correspondent in New York was there when [the ceasefire] was signed, away from the media. He had good contacts. Reuters picked it up from us and then it went around the world," he says.

By the 1990s, the oil boom was creating a metropolis in the desert. *Al Khaleej*'s business coverage grew from two pages to a 40-page pullout section. Parent Dar Al Khaleej publishing house added five more publications. *Al Shuruq*, a monthly political magazine launched in 1970, became a weekly in 1992. Family magazine *Kul Al Usrah* launched in 1993. *Gulf Today*, *Al Khaleej*'s English sister publication, launched in 1996, as did monthly business magazine *Al Iqtisadi* and children's magazine *Al Azkiyaa*.

"The '90s was when it was all happening in Dubai," Barqawi recalls. "The CEOs, the government officials, us, we all grew up together."

These close relationships with sources include some of the UAE's highest-profile figures—including His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai and Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE, and His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohamed Al Qasimi, Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Sharjah. Sharjah's Ruler reads *Al Khaleej* with a cup of tea at 3am every morning, Barqawi says.

Regardless who they are, Barqawi doesn't let his contacts off easy.

"People get lazy, they don't want to push back. But Sheikh Mohammed is always pushing us."

In 1994, Barqawi became the editor of the business section. In 2004, he became managing editor of the newspaper. A decade later, Barqawi was named executive editor. It was one of the last acts of the late editor and founder Abdullah Taryam, who suffered a stroke and died the day after he signed the document bestowing upon Barqawi his new title.

"I love my newspaper. They're my family," he says. "I've never resigned, because they are a part of me."

Fifty years on, *Al Khaleej* is facing the same pressures as newspapers globally. Print circulation has plunged from a height of about 60,000 copies in 2003 to 32,000. The numbers last year took an added hit due to not printing as much for airlines grounded by the pandemic. The paper has also shrunk from about 60 pages to between 44 and 48.

"There were no sports, no cultural events, no business deals," Barqawi says. "What can we do?"

Like the rest of the industry, *Al Khaleej* is trying to figure out how to make money from its online offering, to compensate for declining ad revenue in print. For now, that means investing in digitally savvy journalists, making the website stronger, offering more exclusives, building up social media channels and using targeted ads. What it does not mean is a paywall. Emirati weekly business magazine *Arabian Business* was the first to put up a paywall in June and more are expected to follow.

"The Arab world is not ready for paywalls," Barqawi says. "That is the difference between us and the West. You have to be editorially stronger and work more on exclusive stories to push people to pay for it."

While he believes some newspapers will merge in the coming years, and others may go digital-only, *Al Khaleej* will not be one of them. Its demographic is primarily older readers, who prefer physical copies. *Al Khaleej* will stay relevant by continuing to do what it does best—diligently serving the local population. It means it won't diversify to become a pan-Arab voice. It began by representing the Arabs that make up the UAE, Barqawi says. And that is how it means to go on, as a family.

"Taryam used to say that when you arrive to a newspaper as a new journalist, leave your passport—we are the same. Indian labourers, journalists, others," Barqawi says. Now, Khaled Abdullah Omran Taryam, chairman of the publishing house and the editor in chief of *Al Khaleej*, says exactly that to the staff. ■

FOR THE LOVE OF LITERATURE

SHEIKHA BODOUR AL QASIMI

Sheikha Bodour Al Qasimi is passionate about books. She uses her influence to grow Arabic content, to promote Arabic works, and to ensure Arab youth, wherever they are, can see their culture, their identity, in print. But her new global challenge is perhaps her greatest to date.

INTERVIEW BY CATHERINE BOLGAR

PHOTOGRAPHS BY IVANA MAGLIONE

STYLIST: GEMMA JONES / MMG ARTISTS. HAIR / MAKEUP: IVANNA / MMG ARTISTS

CEO of Kalimat Publishing Group, founder of the Emirates Publishers Association, and now President of the International Publishers Association, Sheikha Bodour Al Qasimi has put Sharjah on the global literary map. She works constantly to bring people together in the service of literature. She brought the UNESCO World Book Capital to the emirate and was active in the creation of the House of Wisdom, a library for the 21st century. She keeps adding chapters to her story.

As you embark on the presidency of the International Publishers Association, what is your primary mission?
I assumed the IPA presidency at a historic moment. The challenges the publishing sector faces resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic are unprecedented. The most important goal for me now is to help stabilise the industry, to transition from the pandemic into the future with minimum damage while benefiting from the opportunities presented by this crisis. During my term as Vice President, I conducted an industry-wide survey with our members, which come from over 80 countries, to understand the challenges they have faced during this difficult year. Published in November, this report will help us develop our post-Covid recovery plan.

More broadly, what do you hope to establish as your legacy with the IPA?
The fact that I am the second woman in IPA's 125 years to assume the presidency, with another female executive as VP, is itself a groundbreaking change. It signals IPA's seriousness about diversity and inclusion and sets a good example that will be followed by other international organisations. I also want to make sure we are truly diverse in our association. During my term as Vice President, I reached out to publishers associations in Africa, Latin America and Asia to encourage them to join so that we can truly represent publishers around the world.

I organised three regional seminars, in Lagos, Nairobi and Amman, to engage with publishers on the ground and support their initiatives. I launched the African Publishing Innovation Fund in partnership with Dubai Cares to fund publishing projects across the African continent. This year, we are focusing on remote learning and digital education solutions to combat the negative effects of Covid-19 on children's education in Africa.

I also want to support IPA's two pillars, which are copyright and freedom to publish around the world. As President, I aim to uphold and defend these universal values to ensure the publishing industry can thrive in the face of adversity.

You created Kalimat in response to your young daughter. How do your children's experiences shape your work as a children's book publisher?
In a way, my children are my inspiration. I set up my publishing house in response to their frustration at not finding interesting books in Arabic. They give me invaluable feedback about the books we publish at Kalimat and some other book ideas we want to print. They also inspire me with book ideas as I watch them grow and develop. Their honest feedback is representative of the voices and imagination of their generation. I learn from them about what content works and what doesn't. I also learn from them how they want the content to be presented. As my children have different ages, I have learnt to understand the different trends in the market, and what works for different age groups. At the end of the day, we want to publish books that grab their attention with all the distractions that surround children these days.

What do you look for in a good children's book?
When it comes to children's books, less is undoubtedly more. It is hard for the writers because it requires an adult to get into the child's heart and mind and understand all the little nuances that make up the magical world inside a child's brain. In Kalimat, our mission is clear: we want to publish quality Arabic books that will attract Arabic-speaking children and youth to read Arabic books. This mission defines our choice of authors, illustrators, and topics or stories. We have a wonderful team of editors and designers who look at every detail. We also work with skilled illustrators from around the world to bring the stories to life.

What do Emirati youth like to read? How do you negotiate the delicate dilemmas of young adults without upsetting parents?
Like their Arab counterparts, Emirati youth yearn to be part of their country's cultural development while keeping a global outlook. They want to read a wide variety of content that has universal truth but is personally relevant to them. Our young readers have evolved, they want to learn about their culture through their own eyes, but they also want to read about science fiction, suspense, and futuristic works.

"Our primary mission is to add quality Arabic content to the region and support Arab writers who have the talent and drive to become international successes."

I don't see my role as a publisher as someone who should teach children what's wrong from what's right. I believe that's the parents' role. Our role is to make great books that inspire young children and adults to read. We choose topics that broaden their horizon and open their mind to ideas and cultures they might not be familiar with. Books are mirrors that reflect our societies but also windows that show you glimpses of other cultures around the world. My dream in life is to witness societies that are respectful of each other's differences and embrace our diversity in all its shapes and forms.

What do you enjoy reading? Do you like audiobooks, or does hearing someone else's voice distract from the imagery you create as you read?
My taste in books is really diverse. I enjoy all genres and I try to keep up with the latest releases. I recently did a publishing tour of Africa and got familiar with many African authors which I've subsequently published into Arabic. I also enjoy reading about spirituality and mysticism, and this has influenced the books we publish at Rewayat [a publisher of books for adults]. I do enjoy audiobooks, especially if I'm commuting or travelling. I especially enjoy listening to non-fiction, like Malcolm Gladwell's books in his own voice.

What are a couple of offerings from Rewayat that you are especially excited about?
I'm extremely excited about Rewayat because venturing into adult fiction and non-fiction was a challenge for me. Kalimat was always recognised as a children's publisher, so getting great authors to publish was difficult at the beginning. However, we started with a strategy of translating powerful classics that weren't available in Arabic like Truman Capote, James Baldwin, Michael Ondaatje, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ian McEwan and many others. I loved the diversity of the narratives that we were bringing to the Arabic literature genre. We have some great Arab authors that we publish now. For me, publishing is an opportunity to create a platform for intercultural dialogue and give a voice to the voiceless, the marginalised and the hidden. Especially the voices of women and minorities.

Rewayat's literature section has such an eclectic selection, who chooses the books? Are authors eager to be translated into Arabic?
We follow a rigorous process in selecting the books we publish. Our primary mission is to add quality Arabic content to the region and support Arab writers who have the talent and drive to become international successes. It's always a balancing act between commercial viability and literary value, and I think we were successful so far in selecting the books we translate or publish. There is growing interest

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from international writers to be translated into Arabic, considering the market’s size. We are always on the lookout for international writers who can add value to our readers. I believe that publishing gives us the opportunity to change the narrative on some outdated stereotypes that have put certain people into boxes. It’s a game changer when you hear first hand from the author what their views are, what it’s like in their home country and what they stand for. Immediately it changes perceptions, and prejudices are dissolved. I feel privileged to be able to create a bridge between the reader and the author.

You travel a lot with your work. Do you enjoy it? You are also an accomplished mountain climber, how did you get into that?
I used to travel a lot for work before the pandemic and it was a great opportunity for me to learn about publishing around the world and meet fellow publishers. I also love to travel for pleasure and explore new places. I got into mountain climbing after climbing Kilimanjaro six years ago. Since then, I have climbed Mount Toubkal in Morocco, Mount Elbrus in Russia, Everest Base Camp in Nepal, Druk Path in Bhutan, Los Illinizas in Ecuador and some mountains in Patagonia, Chile. The hardest one for me was Mount Elbrus in Russia because it was a very technical mountain and ice climbing was involved. I never underestimate a mountain, I have an enormous amount of respect for them. In ancient cultures, they believed the gods dwelled in the mountains and permission had to be granted before anyone could climb them. Some mountains are considered sacred, and it’s important to respect the land you are in. On my way to Everest Base Camp, we visited a Lama to ask for permission and blessings before continuing our journey.

You don’t climb mountains to be seen, you climb mountains to see the world. The climbs for me are very spiritual and transformative journeys. I enjoy the solitude and quietness when I’m in the wilderness. It allows me to connect deeply with my inner soul and hear what she has to say. As you climb, you also shed what no longer serves you and release thoughts and ideas that have held you back. So it’s quite liberating. Of course, when you reach the summit, the joy of achievement is insurmountable and you get a mountain high from being so close to the sky. The journey down has its own magic.

You were 29 when you founded Kalimat. How was it to be not just new to publishing, but also young and a woman?
One of the most important lessons I learned from my publishing journey is that you need to trust yourself and move forward when you have a passion for something. There will always be challenges. There will always be nay-sayers and doubters. Every journey has its obstacles and it’s through these that you grow and learn the most. There was a diversity and inclusion problem in the publishing world, I noticed that I was the only woman in high-level meetings or committees, especially in IPA. This led me to found PublisHer, a global networking and mentorship platform for women in the book business.

Was Sharjah World Book Capital all you had hoped it would be?
I am very proud of the Sharjah World Book Capital legacy. It further cemented Sharjah’s position as an emerging global cultural centre. It also reinforced our commitment to leverage literature, education, and the power of narratives to tell a different and new story about this part of the world.

Our theme reflected our intentions and objectives. “Open Books, Open Minds,” says a lot about Sharjah and its philosophy behind building a culture of books and reading. We designed our WBC events and activities to bring people from different backgrounds closer and introduce them to different cultures. We aimed to be more inclusive, we wanted to encourage people to be more accepting of each other for being different. I was impressed with how the community got together seamlessly. It warmed my heart to see families with young children enjoying their weekend or evening around books and reading activities, together with hundreds of other people from different backgrounds. That was the whole point behind our programme.

How does the House of Wisdom fit into the vision of Sharjah’s future?
The House of Wisdom is a natural evolution of Sharjah’s cultural infrastructure investment. We are inspired by the wisdom and influence of our ancestors, who once were at the heart of the development of global civilisation. The HoW also reflects the knowledge-based culture vision of HH Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohamed Al Qasimi, UAE Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Sharjah. He has been developing the emirate of Sharjah with the unique vision of putting human development at the forefront of its priorities.

I really like how the building combines a futuristic look and feel together with a traditional Arabic aura. You immediately feel that you are in a special place, and you are reminded of the power of books in uniting people. The HoW marks Sharjah’s transformation into a truly 21st century cultural hub.

Why did you create Kalimat Foundation?
I believe that access to books is the right of everyone, especially children. Unfortunately, not every child in the world does have that access, and that was a frustrating and painful thought for me as a mother and

“Our mission in Kalimat Foundation is straightforward: empower underprivileged Arab children with the power of books and reading to create a better future.”

as a publisher. I decided to do something about it, which was why I started the Kalimat Foundation for Children’s Empowerment (KF) in 2016. Although publishing is a multi-billion-dollar business worldwide, there is still a degree of altruism to it. Every day, publishers worldwide contribute to the education of millions of people who cannot afford books. It’s a fact that I am very proud of as a publisher.

Our mission in KF is straightforward: empower underprivileged Arab children with the power of books and reading to create a better future. We build libraries for and share books with Arab communities in rural areas, hospitals, orphanages, and schools; with Arab children affected by war and living in refugee camps and shelters; and Arab children with disabilities. Through this initiative, we have reached more than 100,000 children across 14 countries.

KF also donated Arabic books to libraries in Europe to provide Arab children, immigrants, and refugees with books written in their mother tongue, with a view to enhancing their cultural identity and strengthening emotional communication with their countries of origin.

We launched the Ara, “I can see” initiative to provide reading material for blind and visually impaired children all over the MENA region. We distributed around 400 titles in audiobook, large-print, and Braille formats across four schools in Jordan and several entities dedicated to helping the blind and visually impaired. I am humbled by the impact of the foundation in the lives of thousands of Arab children whose only escape from a painful present are the pages of a book that promises a better tomorrow.

What is the Ubuntu Love Challenge?

Mamadou Kwidjim and I launched the Ubuntu Love Challenge at the early stages of the pandemic last year to uplift the spirits of millions of people around the world who were in the grip of despair and fear from an uncertain future. We believe in the core philosophy of the ancient African wisdom of Ubuntu, “I am because we are.” It emphasises our interdependence and interconnectedness as a human family. So, in a way, we wanted to change the energetic vibration around the world and be there for all of those who were feeling down, lonely, desperate, pessimistic, helpless, and empower them to become more resilient and hopeful. Obviously, we couldn’t create the global impact we hoped for just the two of us. We called other change-makers, and we were pleasantly surprised. Almost everyone we invited joined the challenge. Participants organised massive food drives, offered online education support, distributed donated laptops to support distance learning for children, and launched large-scale initiatives to support start-ups and entrepreneurs, to name a few. We decided then to launch the Ubuntu Foundation. Its principal objective is to elevate human consciousness through projects that support our planet’s regeneration. ■

AGENTS OF CHANGE

The fifth edition of Sharjah's Xposure International Photography Festival showed the power of photography to make real and lasting change and the impact of a story well told.

WORDS BY ANNA SEAMAN

SERGEY PONOMAREV

This previously unseen image of the Arch of Triumph in Syria's ancient desert city of Palmyra was taken in 2014. The Roman monument was destroyed shortly after by ISIS forces.

With the sky tinged red by the morning sun cresting upon the horizon, the Arch of Triumph in Syria's ancient desert city of Palmyra looks even more majestic. Captured by Sergey Ponomarev in 2014, a few months before the magnificent triple-arched Roman monument was destroyed by ISIS forces, this is possibly the last journalistic image taken of the landmark. Ponomarev, a prominent Russian photojournalist, was in Syria in 2013 and 2014 covering the war. This February, a collection of his images was on show at Sharjah's annual Xposure International Photography Festival. This particular shot of Palmyra's landmark in the dawn light was being exhibited for the first time.

"It is my honour to bring it here and to show it to the public," he tells Hadara. "It was a struggle to shoot this image, to get access at sunrise as well as to navigate the country during the war. But I decided to show it here because this monument is only a memory now and this is my testimony to the heritage of Syria and the region."

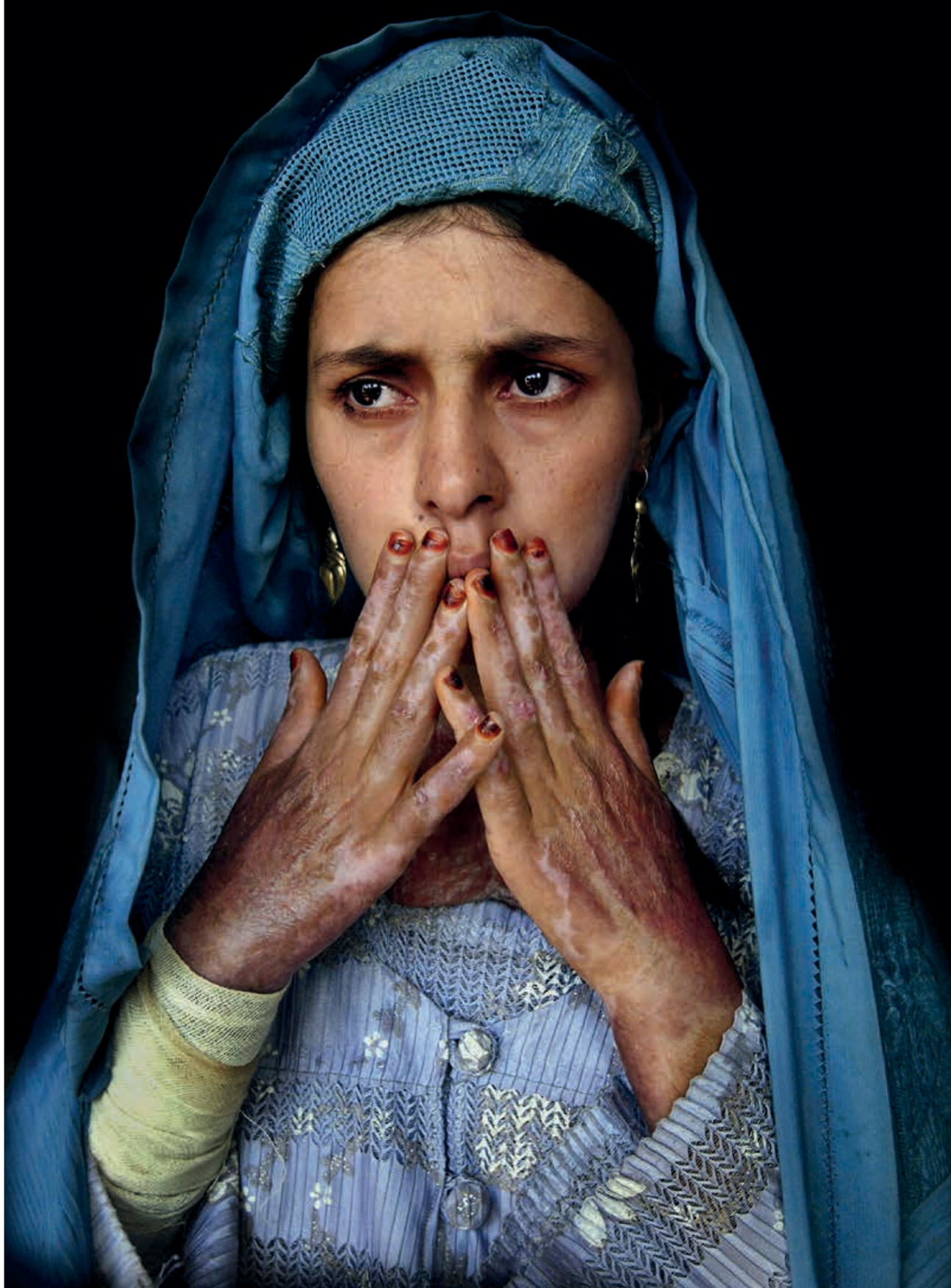
Ponomarev's time in Syria opened his eyes to the migrant crisis that was beginning to affect Europe and his coverage of it earned him a Pulitzer Prize in 2016. The Russian was one of many internationally acclaimed photographers in Sharjah for the fifth edition of the festival, which he says was characterised by its dedication to the art of photography in all its forms, commenting on how landscapes, portraits and artistic images were juxtaposed with gritty journalistic and narrative-based exhibitions. "It is very interesting to have this conjunction of generations in one space," he says. "It sheds new light on existing stories and also helps us see our own images in new contexts."

Educating both the public and amateur photographers is something that the founder of the event, Sheikh Sultan Bin Ahmed Al Qasimi, Chairman of Sharjah Media Council, prioritises. "Xposure is a place of learning; it is a unique platform to acquire knowledge from the masters, discover inspiring new work, and exchange ideas and artistic expressions through engagement with the larger photographic community," he says. "Xposure nurtures and promotes the art of photography in diverse genres, and the festival serves as a bridge between the regional and global photographic communities to scale up their professional network."

The consensus amongst all attending the four-day event was gratitude that it was happening in real life, amid so many Covid-19 restrictions and cancellations globally. Clearly, the organiser—Sharjah Government Media Bureau, headed by Sheikh Sultan Bin Ahmed—pulled out all the stops to make it happen.

"Especially in the time of a pandemic, the arts are not a luxury but a way to heal communities," Sheikh Sultan Bin Ahmed says. "No digital encounter can fully replicate the captivating experience that physical interaction with the art form of photography offers. For our participating photographers as well as festival attendees, Xposure offers unparalleled opportunities to connect with a globally diverse photographic community. Their presence here, amid an ongoing pandemic, attests to the increasing importance of this dynamic platform to showcase their work."

War-time images, such as Ponomarev's, were a large part of the exhibitions. Paula Bronstein's captivating narratives from the war in Afghanistan depicted pain and suffering but in beautifully shot, and often portrait-style images that convey the untold stories of violence and injustice. Ron B. Wilson's photo essay on 9/11 brought audiences into the centre of that chaotic day in New York almost 20 years ago, and KM Asad's remarkable black and white stills of a garment factory collapsing in Bangladesh highlighted the tragic exploitation



PAULA BRONSTEIN

In her powerful photo essay, Bronstein bears witness to the complexity of daily life in Afghanistan. Masooma, badly burned from self-immolation, highlights the many challenges women in the country face.

TRAN TUAN VIET

Burning incense is a ritual that symbolises the spiritual and cultural values of the Vietnamese. Over many years, Viet sought to capture the culture and people of his homeland.

BRENT STIRTON

(This page) Starting before dawn, Sheikh Rashid Bin Butti Bin Maktoum Bin Juma Al Maktoum, a member of the Dubai royal family, trains his falcons in the desert outside Dubai.

FRANCESCO ZIZOLA

(Opposite, top) Zizola's exhibition, *Mare Omnis*, is part of a long-term project documenting the relationship between man and nature. This image, *The Trap*, was taken in Sardinia in 2018.

ABDULLA ALBUQAISH

Sharjah-born Albuqaish specializes in taking cityscapes, combining his passions for photography and architecture. This image is titled, *The Power of Light*.

of cheap labour in his hometown of Dhaka. The power of photography to unite and build connections was the driving force behind the event's curation and selection.

Brent Stirton, a South African documentary and wildlife photographer, was showing an exhibition of work that was originally shot for *National Geographic* in 2017 on falconry in Dubai. Conservation and sustainability issues, he says, are a great bridge between the Middle East and the West. "It is a tremendous common value system that we should explore more. It is almost entirely because of the Arab world that falcons survive today," he continues, referring to his work on show in Sharjah. "The birds reached a point of near extinction in the '60s and '70s because of commercial pesticides, but thanks to the heritage of falconry in this part of the world, a great deal of money was poured into saving them. This is a genuine conservation success story on a wide scale."

Animals and their habitats were some of the visual highlights of the event. Daniel Kordan's intimate and yet otherworldly portraits of Mongolia's last surviving eagle hunters did more than illuminate the beauty of the birds. They also revealed details of life in the country's remote Altai region. Francesco Zizola's exhibition, *Mare Omnis: The Sea as a Sacred Relationship between Man and Nature*, depicted underwater scenes in black and white that added to both the drama and the beauty.

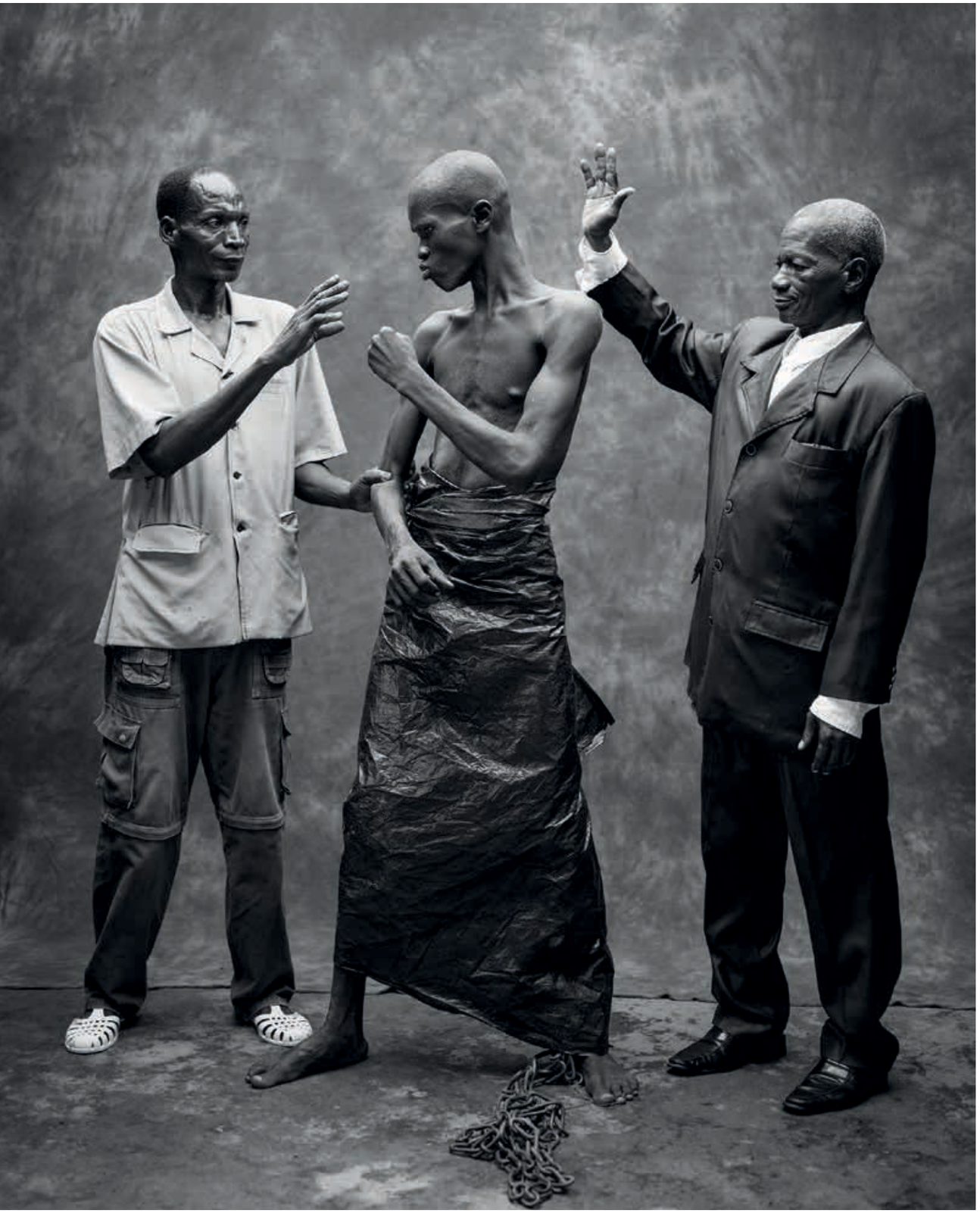
Zizola delved into the idea of visual narrative during his talk, which formed part of the continuous programming across the four days allowing visitors to hear and learn from the photographers. "Poetry is the code through which humans can confront a purer idea of truth, where language shows its inability to touch what it describes," Zizola says.

Harmony and poetry were the subject of Tran Tuan Viet's portrayal of the visual allure of his home country, Vietnam. Colour and form unite in his images to give them a painterly quality so that they are enchanting to stand in front of. A woman who is sewing a fishing net in the coastal province of Ninh Thuan appears to be engulfed by it and a man who rolls bright red bundles of incense sticks in Hanoi looks to be sitting amid a field of blooming flowers.

Whilst beauty and aesthetic pleasure are at the heart of what photography represents, it is also the ability of a piece of art to highlight a neglected story that makes it so powerful. It is for this reason that Sheikh Sultan Bin Ahmed says that the work of Robin Hammond was a standout contribution to the festival. The New

DANIEL KORDAN

Kordan's work captures the beauty and magic of the natural world, highlighting its diversity and fragility. In Western Mongolia's Altai region, a small group of nomads keep the tradition of eagle hunting alive.



MUHAMMED MUHEISEN

(Top) Muheisen tells the stories of those whose voices are rarely heard. Hamagai Akbar, 5, is an Afghan refugee at a makeshift school in a mosque on the outskirts of Islamabad, Pakistan.

ROBIN HAMMOND

(Left) Yendani Mathieu, centre, lives with a mental health condition. He is usually chained to a tree in the grounds of the Pentecostal Church of Bokiccenag, in northern Togo.

Zealand-born photographer has been producing work on mental health and neurological disorders since visiting South Sudan in 2011. He learned then that people with mental health conditions were chained and locked away. Hammond visited a prison and was shocked to discover dozens of men and women living in the most horrific conditions. Since then, he has used his work to change the perception of mental health.

Sheikh Sultan Bin Ahmed says that Hammond "brings out the emotional rawness of the vulnerable in countries and humanises their stories through technical brilliance. Through his visual storytelling, Hammond's work has been instrumental in advancing human rights of the mentally ill. This body of work showcased at Xposure is a testament to the monumental impact one photographer can make to influence nations in taking the remedial actions to better lives," he says.

The impact of a single image or a collection of images can have a lasting effect on its viewer, but sometimes on the subject itself. Muhammed Muheisen, a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner and *National Geographic* photographer, presented an exhibition called *Voices* about refugees' plight across the world.

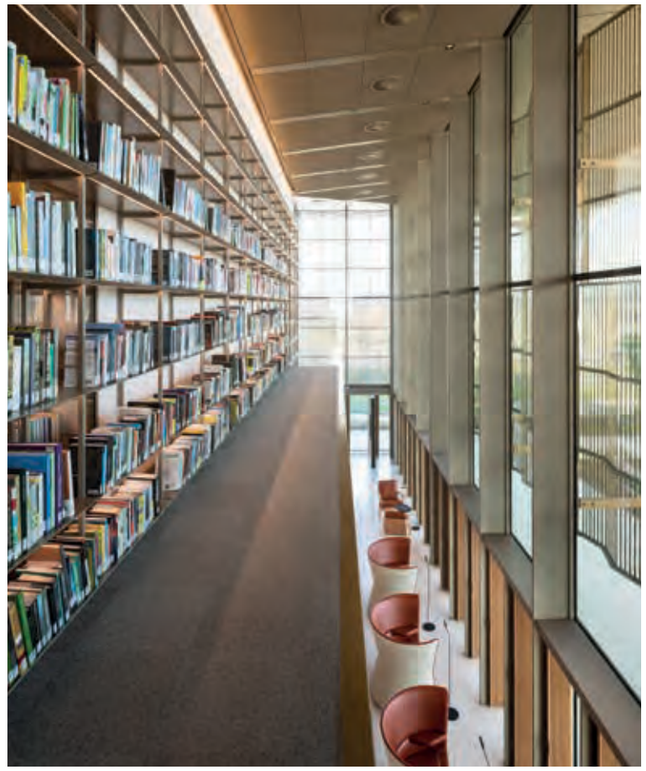
"At the back end of my work I have a foundation, and whenever I share these images I get a message from people who want to be involved," he explains. "So, simply, Xposure helps me not just to share pictures but to make an actual difference to help real people."

At the event's closing ceremony, after more than 8,000 people visited, Sheikh Sultan Bin Ahmed recognised the lensmen involved, calling them "agents of change". In a passionate address, he says that the pictures at this festival serve as reminders that change is needed. "Their images spur awakening and rally the masses," he says. "These photographs reaffirmed my belief that the trials humanity faces today will surely pass. We will overcome them, and the outcome of our experiences will reflect in greater resilience." ■

BEACON OF KNOWLEDGE

Sharjah's HOUSE OF WISDOM builds on its storied Baghdad namesake as a marketplace of ideas and cultural exchange, aided by the latest technology.

WORDS BY CATHERINE BOLGAR
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CATALIN MARIN



The building, designed by architects Foster + Partners to be a landmark, is essentially a glass cube encased in delicate, vertical ribbing. The Scroll, designed by Gerry Judah, is a contemporary interpretation of the ancient Arabic scroll.

What is the role of a library in the 21st century? Sharjah's newly opened House of Wisdom is challenging stereotypes and inviting in new possibilities.

"The House of Wisdom reimagines libraries of the 21st century," says Marwa Al Aqroubi, its director. As expected, it's a repository of books (more than 100,000 eventually, plus 200,000 e-books) and diverse digital resources. But it's about far more than reading. It is designed to be a true marketplace of ideas, where people can connect, discuss and trade thoughts. "While we learn from books, we learn equally through people and their diverse perspectives, through discussions and experimentations," Al Aqroubi says. "As a monument commemorating Sharjah's tenure as UNESCO World Book Capital 2019, it was fitting that the House of Wisdom be designed as a futuristic social and knowledge hub supported by innovative and cutting-edge technologies."

Some of those technologies include the "book espresso machine" to print and bind books on demand in minutes. The Al Jazri Lab is equipped with 3D printers, laser and vinyl cutting machines and computer numerical control tools. Someone with an idea can access the large online library of open-source designs or get help turning original plans into tangible objects. The makerspace is especially useful for students from nearby University City to produce prototypes without investing in expensive equipment.

Until about a generation ago, libraries were strictly for books, and rather unwelcoming. "You had to climb high steps. You were really entering a temple," says Ken Worpole, a social historian and author of many books on architecture, landscape and public policy, including *Contemporary Library Architecture: A Planning and Design Guide*. "Now the buzzword is transparency. They're no longer temples of knowledge; they're now meeting places of ideas. People using them are bringing in ideas as well."

The House of Wisdom has numerous spaces to bring people together—meeting rooms and a conference room, pods suspended above the central courtyard, exhibition spaces, an auditorium and a café. The space is flexible to allow for diverse uses, whether book or film clubs, art shows or other social gatherings, but also to allow it to adapt to future uses not yet imagined.

The design also emphasises transparency, with glass separations and long sight lines. Stepping into the spacious lobby, you can see through to the dense greenery in the central courtyard. You can look up to the mezzanine, with the Al Jazri Lab and other activity spaces enclosed—for quiet—behind glass. You can see out to the formal gardens or to The Scroll, the 36-metre-tall, Gerry Judah-designed contemporary interpretation of the ancient Arabic scroll that stands like a sentinel before the building. You can glance over to the "Little Reader Space," with children sprawled on colourful oversize cushions, playing games,

"As a monument commemorating Sharjah's tenure as UNESCO World Book Capital, it was fitting that the House of Wisdom be designed as a futuristic social and knowledge hub."

making crafts and looking at books. Adult readers occupy quieter corners, including the Ladies' Diwan.

The building, designed by renowned architects Foster + Partners to be a landmark, is essentially a glass cube encased in delicate, vertical ribbing. The cantilevered roof stretches 15 metres beyond the building, looking like a sheet of paper floating on top.

"It's a transparent building," says John Blythe, one of the partners on the project for Foster. The building is on a slight mound, making it stand out, while also lowering the car park just below the line of sight for the most part. The result "elevates and gives the building prominence. It's a beacon on the main road that runs by."

By night, the building glows invitingly. By day, it maximises natural light without heat thanks to clever design, traditional in concept but modern in execution. The overhang shades the glass walls for much of the day. Fixed vertical screens of aluminium filter the light on the upper storey. On the ground level, hinged shades made of laser-cut bamboo—chosen for renewability—are adjustable, personalising comfort.

"We tried to allow people to create their own environment in the building," Blythe says. "The screens take a lot of heat out."

The central courtyard recalls traditional Islamic architecture. Open to the sky and filled with plants and water features, it provides a connection to nature and a place to relax.

The House of Wisdom translates the vision of HH Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohamed Al Qasimi, Member of the UAE Supreme Council and Ruler of Sharjah, to make the emirate a truly global cultural hub. Its name stakes out its ambitions.

The original House of Wisdom, or Bait Al-Hikmah, was built in the late 8th century in Baghdad. Scholars are divided about the honours—whether Al Ma'moun, the seventh Abbasid caliph, created the House of Wisdom or extended the library of his father, Caliph Al Rasheed, in size and scope. Regardless, for four centuries, the House of Wisdom attracted scholars from around the world.

"It was a brand-new world at the time," says Wisam Abdul-Jabbar, adjunct professor of intercultural education at the University of Alberta. With the arrival of the Abbasids around 750 CE, "the empire remapped itself. Moving from Damascus to Baghdad wasn't just a strategic shift toward trade routes on the Tigris River, but a mental and cultural change."

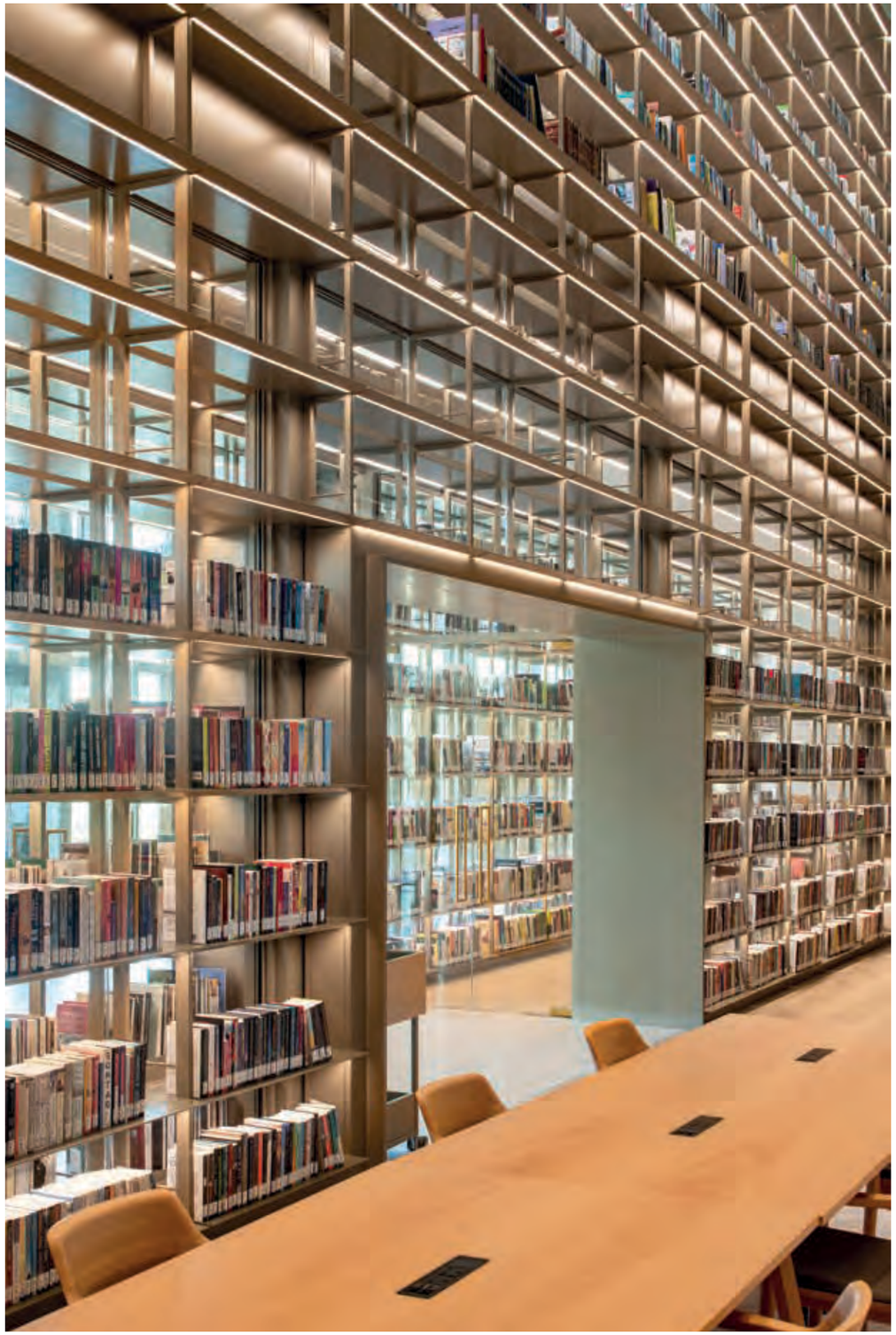
The Abbasid House of Wisdom became an intercultural centre for research, with outreach programmes and external events. While Europe was languishing in the Dark Ages, the Islamic world entered its golden era by standing on the shoulders of the Greek giants and going even further, with discoveries in science, medicine, mathematics and more that are used to this day. The House of Wisdom held a vast library, notable for its translated books. Al Ma'moun funded the Translation Movement of great works from Greek into Arabic, paying translators the weight of completed books in gold.

"The funding was so extravagant that scholars could actually make a living out of doing research. Knowledge reflected status," Dr. Abdul-Jabbar says. "Al Ma'moun initiated salon discussions and debates. Invited speakers shared discoveries and discussed their thoughts and opinions. Different research clusters organised meetings.

"This wasn't exclusively about knowledge," Dr. Abdul-Jabbar adds. "It was also entertaining, like *Jeopardy*, where participants demonstrated intellectual prowess."

The Abbasid House of Wisdom came to a brutal end in 1258, when Baghdad was sacked by invading Mongols. They

Marwa Al Aqroubi, director of the House of Wisdom. Opposite: today's libraries liberally use windows to connect with the outside world, far from the temples to books of the past.



A NEW CHAPTER FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

"The bright stars of the skies are far to touch;
but there are other shiny stars that you can touch easily:
The books of the libraries!" —**Mehmet Murat Ildan**

In an era when information from anywhere is available at our fingertips, a new generation of public libraries is grabbing attention with bold design and amenities that expand the very definition of "library." And with it, come new library patrons.

"Libraries have been rediscovered by young people," says Ken Worpole, a social historian and author. "No doubt, access to free use of the Internet is paramount now—so many people don't have that. Because it happens in a building that is light and modern and has the presence of books, it does give it a degree of seriousness. The library is not a fun palace. It's got a 3,000-year history that's part of culture."

Libraries as collections of clay-tablet texts date back to 2600 BCE in what today is southern Iraq. Similar archives and libraries of clay tablets were found across the Gulf and Middle East. The Library of Alexandria in Egypt made that city into a centre for scholarship. The spread of Islam was accompanied by a spread of literacy, as the Prophet's followers encouraged newcomers to read and memorise the Quran.

While past libraries were designed as temples to books, which one entered in order to shut out the world beyond, today's libraries liberally use windows to connect with the outside world. To avoid canyons of books, shelving is low enough to see over, and is often on casters so it can be moved aside for events like book clubs, poetry readings or discussion groups. Librarians are rearranging books, too, to mix and match fiction and non-fiction, as well as different kinds of authors, to create a new culture.

BIBLIOTHECA ALEXANDRINA, an immense complex shaped like a sundial tilted toward the Mediterranean, opened in 2002 near the site of Alexandria's ancient storied library. Designed by Norwegian architectural firm Snøhetta, the 11-storey cylindrical library has a capacity of eight million books, but so much more: special libraries for the visually impaired, for children, for maps, for multimedia; four museums; four art galleries; a planetarium; a conference centre; and a laboratory for restoring manuscripts, among other things. The grey granite cladding is carved with texts in modern and extinct languages.

DOKK1, in Aarhus, Denmark, revives former dockyards on the city's eponymous river. Schmidt Hammer Lassen designed the building as a "mediaspace," and the library calls itself "the citizens' house" where residents can access local government services. In addition to a café (now de rigueur in public libraries), it has play areas, a children's theatre and multimedia, including games.

TIANJIN BINHAI LIBRARY has a glowing sphere at its centre, called "the eye," which houses an auditorium. Floor-to-ceiling shelves, with integrated stairs, undulate around the sphere like waves lapping at a shore. The futuristic space, designed by MVRDV, is bathed in stark white. Two roof decks offer spectacular views. ■

FROM TOP: PHILIP GAME / ALAMY; SCHMIDT HAMMER LASSEN ARCHITECTS; OSSIP VAN DUIVENBODE

Bibliotheca Alexandrina (Alexandria, Egypt)

Dokk1 (Aarhus, Denmark)

Tianjin Binhai Library (Tianjin, China)

An exhibition by Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal marked the 1258 destruction of the first House of Wisdom.

are said to have thrown so many manuscripts into the Tigris that the river ran black with ink for seven days. The House of Wisdom was so thoroughly destroyed that no archaeological remains have been found.

Sharjah's House of Wisdom pays homage to the Abbasids in several ways. Al Rasheed Hall is a high-tech conference room equipped with the latest audio-visual aids, while Al Ma'moun Exhibition Space brings art and culture to a diverse audience. And Sharjah's collection includes 11,000 books in different languages.

Another nod to Baghdad: the House of Wisdom's first art exhibition was *168:01* by Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal. The title refers to the 1258 destruction of the first House of Wisdom and the ink-stained river: a week equals 168 hours. "After that, what do we have? White books, washed of ink," Bilal explains. "Now add one minute, to turn the clock backward."

The exhibition consists of shelves of plain white books. The public is invited to turn the clock backward by replacing a white book with a book on a table. The books have been requested by university libraries in Iraq, where looters destroyed 70,000 books in 2003. Exhibition goers donate books, undoing the destruction and turning the shelves "back into the colours of knowledge." Bilal invites donors to keep the white books as reminders of their participation and to fill them with words, with sketches.

"I wanted an element that was participatory, that was rewarding for the people in both the conflict and comfort zone," Bilal says. "You give something and they give you back a book.

"*168:01* is to restore the materiality of books and knowledge in them but also to restore human spirit. Modern destruction is very profitable. When dust settles, places are left behind to treat their wounds. I want to reverse the plot—I have an emotional connection to the place and have a moral responsibility to rebuild a place that built me."

A native of Kufa, Bilal fled Iraq after refusing to fight for Saddam Hussein. After two years in a refugee camp, he found a new home in the US. "I rebuilt myself," he says, getting a degree in art, then a graduate degree. He has been teaching art at New York University for about 12 years.

On the walls around *168:01* is another project by Bilal, *The Ashes Series*, an unusual collection of photographs. Bilal collected press images of the destruction of his homeland and recreated them in miniature scale, then photographed them—a photo of a model of a photo of a physical place. "Like a dollhouse," he says, but sometimes the scale is off just enough to be disconcerting, "to trigger something unsettling in the viewer's mind."

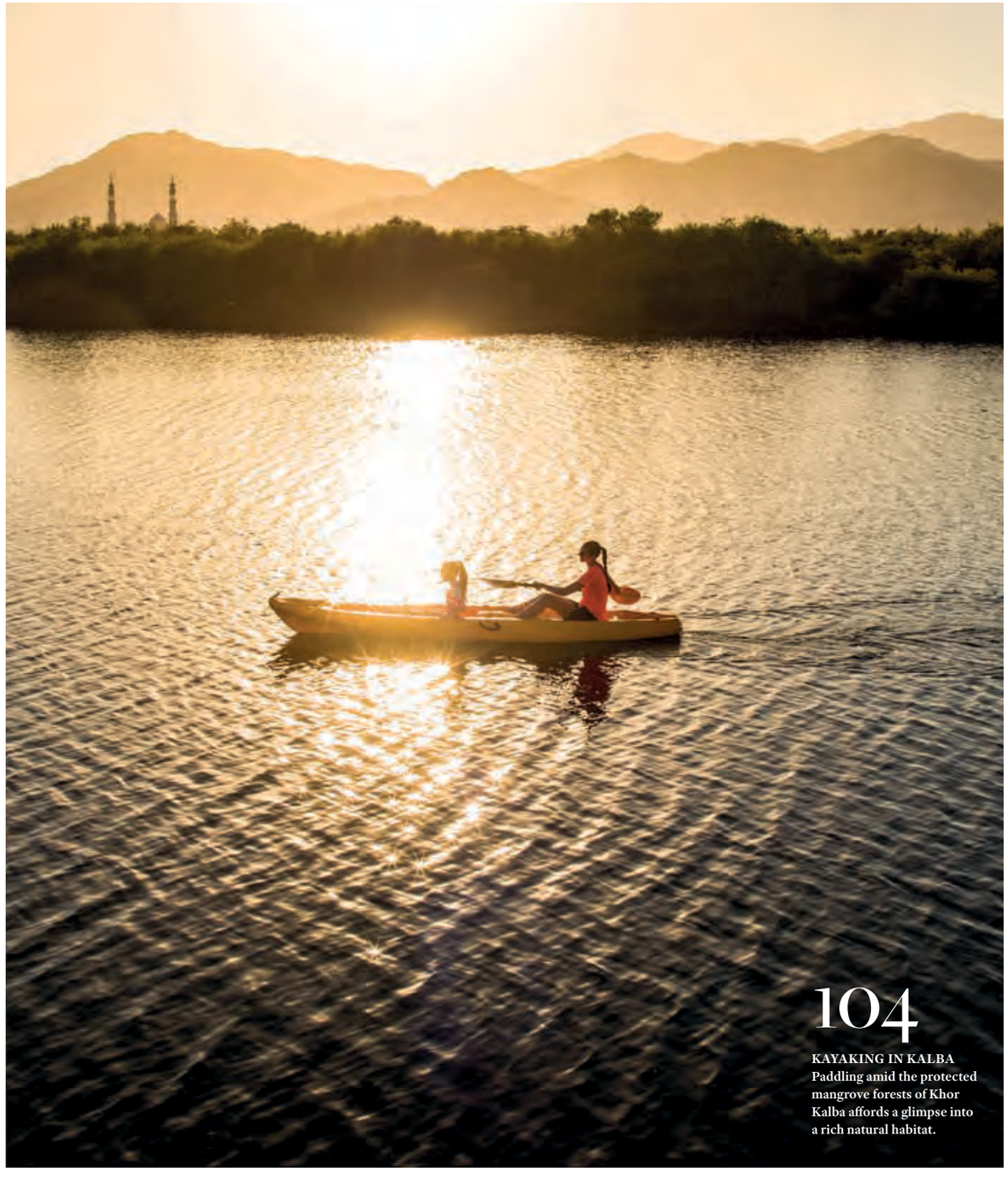
The ashes are the even bigger kick in the gut. Each model was covered with 21 grams of ashes. "Scientists say that when a person dies they immediately lose 21 grams of weight," he says. "It's the symbolic weight of a human soul."

Together, the projects mourn the senseless destruction of war and offer hope of a new beginning based on knowledge and connection. They could not have a better venue than in the new House of Wisdom, which is picking up the mantle from the Abbasids and creating a new centre for thinkers from all realms.

"The House of Wisdom was conceived with the idea of becoming a permanent residence for curious minds, dreamers, and learners, and most importantly, to bring people and culture together," Al Aqroubi says. "Also designed as a space to enhance cultural understanding, tolerance, and cross-cultural communication between nations, all our programming will align with these goals. This will surely solidify Sharjah's legacy as a bridge between cultures and a safe space for coexistence." ■

Travel

A BOUTIQUE HOTEL BETWEEN THE MOUNTAINS AND THE SEA OFFERS SERENITY IN ABUNDANCE / A TRIP TO THE EAST COAST'S PROTECTED MANGROVES ALLOWS FOR UP-CLOSE CONTEMPLATION OF NATURE



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KAYAKING IN KALBA
Paddling amid the protected mangrove forests of Khor Kalba affords a glimpse into a rich natural habitat.

THIS PAGE: SHUROOQ. OPPOSITE: VISIT SHARJAH

BETWEEN THE MOUNTAINS AND THE SEA

An abundance of earth and serenity. Mysk Kingfisher Retreat offers a getaway to nature, without giving up on life's luxuries.

Words by Michelle Wranik-Hicks
Photographs by Shukhrat Gafurov

Some views you never tire of, and the one from a private tent at Mysk Kingfisher Retreat, overlooking a deserted stretch of beach and the Gulf of Oman, is among them. The intimate eco-retreat comprises only 20 luxury tents, constructed amid the dunes adjacent to the Al Qurm Nature Reserve, one of the Middle East's oldest mangrove forests. It's one of three boutique properties in the exclusive Sharjah Collection by Mysk, which immerses guests in some of the emirate's most exquisite natural experiences. The reserve along Sharjah's eastern coastline is one of the most important wetlands in the UAE. Home to rare birds, turtles and even a herd of gazelle that roam the scrublands between the mountains and the sea, it's a place of quiet beauty.

The tents are deceptively modest-looking structures that boast tasteful, discreetly luxurious interiors in a muted palette of earthy tones. The canvas ceilings are canopied, with sisal rugs underfoot and lashings of natural wood. Along with a king-size four-poster bed with a plump duvet and crisp white linen, patterned cushions add interest. A large, airy bathroom features a stand-alone bathtub and organic bath amenities. Next to a sitting area, there's a coffee machine and a minibar stocked with Hildon mineral water—the preferred choice of the British royal family.

With ocean and mountain views, the tent's many windows are designed to maximise the outdoors-in effect, letting in light, the colour of the sand and the ocean. You can even see the sea while showering. Floor-to-ceiling glass doors offer both a view to the beach and the opportunity to spill out from bed and straight onto the shaded terrace, where there's a private plunge pool and sun loungers with striped towels and ikat-print cushions.

Aligned with the vision of low-impact tourism, the retreat is intended to have as light a touch as possible on the environment. Each tent has a beach clean-up kit to encourage guests to participate in nature conservation. Cars are not permitted, so as to protect the delicate mangrove ecosystem. To get around, guests can either use fat-wheeled bicycles—two are parked outside my tent—or request a golf buggy. Most of the time, I simply walk, strolling along pathways lined with stones and rope-wrapped driftwood. Along the way, the indigenous plants are accompanied by small wooden signs identifying the various coastal species.

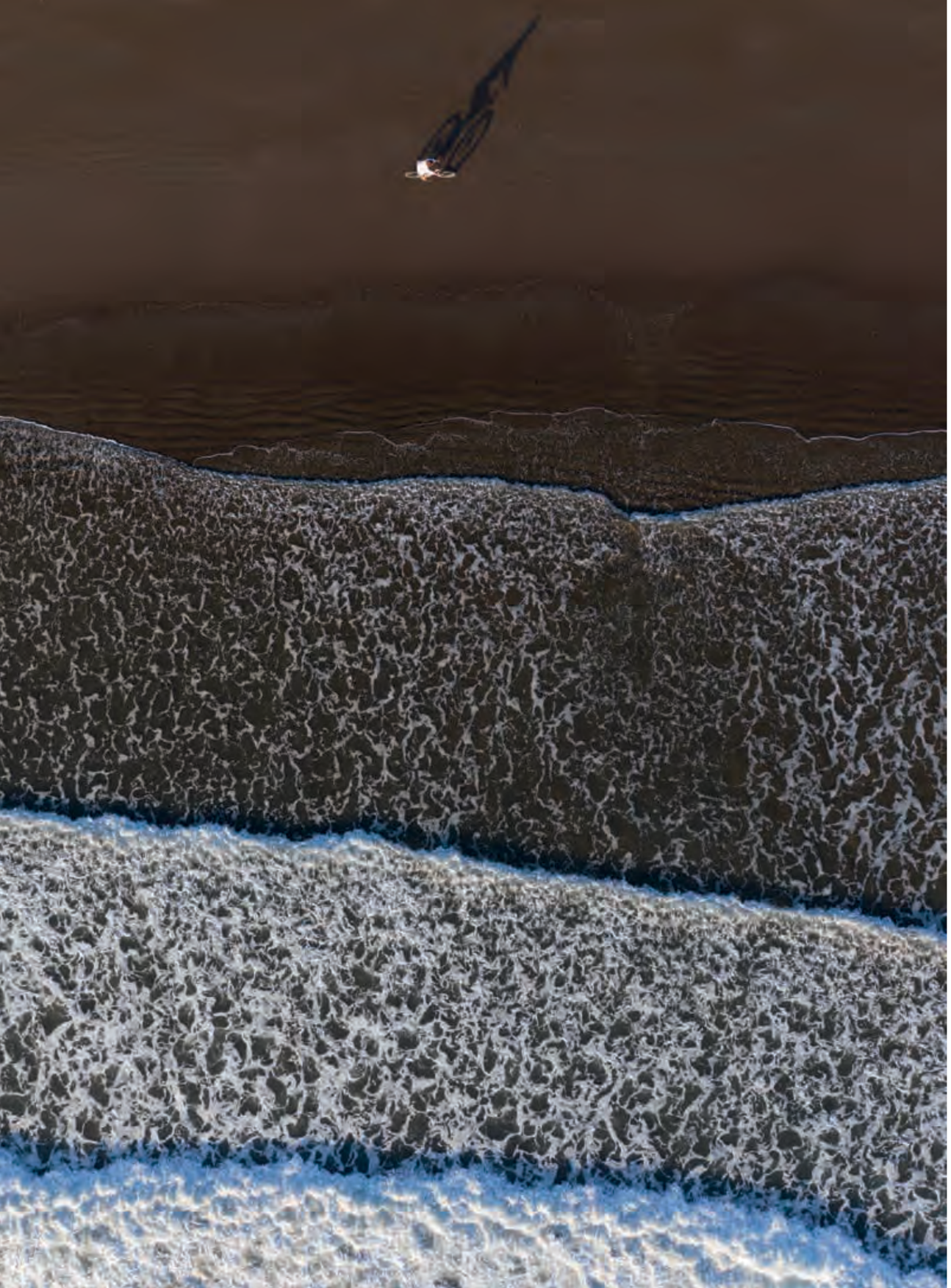
Walking is encouraged at Kingfisher and forms part of a daily agenda of swimming, sunbathing and relaxing, or combinations thereof. The idea is that guests reconnect with nature and detach from their worldly troubles and slow down—literally as well as figuratively. Even the mantra, "Abundance of earth, serenity and you", speaks to this notion.

Nature excursions are an important part of the experience. An activities manager stops by my table at lunch to check whether I might be interested in kayaking through the mangroves that afternoon, joining a nature walk that illuminates the importance of the ecosystem,

Discreetly luxurious guest tents are decorated in a muted palette of earthy tones that echo the scenery outside. Canvas ceilings are canopied, with sisal rugs underfoot.

With ocean and mountain views, the tent's many windows are designed to maximise the outdoors-in effect, letting in light, the colour of the sand and the ocean.

Floor-to-ceiling glass doors offer both a view to the beach and the opportunity to spill out from bed and straight onto the shaded terrace.



or even—somewhat curiously—take part in a treasure hunt. Though doing absolutely nothing seems to be perfectly acceptable. Nobody is made to feel guilty should they decide to spend an entire afternoon on their terrace. What guests do with their time—whether it's dawdling along the beach, joining every outing, or simply staring at the horizon in meditative silence—is up to them.

I find myself slipping easily into Kingfisher's unhurried rhythm. I wade in the shallows and trace patterns in the tidal flats where shells are swept in clusters. I wander back to the tent periodically to make myself another coffee before curling up—once more—on a sun lounger to savour the view. In the late afternoon, the sky is cloudless and crystalline. A gentle sea breeze stirs the coarse coastal grass. The skies turn pastel at dusk. In the mauve-glowing twilight, ghost crabs venture from their burrows to scuttle among the dunes.

Dinner that evening is served in the main tent, an elegant space that also functions as a reception and sitting area. Cosy armchairs and dividing shelves are placed in such a way to impart privacy, no matter where you choose to sit. A small library holds books on Arabian birds and the archaeological discoveries of Mleiha. On a nearby table, a pearlescent shell is inscribed with a handwritten message: "Refresh your mind and enjoy your stay."

During winter, guests dine outside on the lantern-lit terrace alongside the main infinity pool and two large sunken fire pits. The flickering firelight illuminates a feast of spiced seafood, lamb-shank biryanis, seared-to-perfection steak, warm flatbreads, hummus, and beautiful spreads of cold and warm salads, ordered a la carte. The watermelon and feta salad uses mint grown in the chef's herb garden, where along with basil and capsicum I'm told the tomatoes are "growing like crazy." The retreat is also in talks with beekeepers, exploring the idea of harvesting honey on the grounds.

A local touch is always present, from the slices of fresh watermelon sourced from nearby farms, to Kalba seashells in jars on each table. While sampling some of the traditional Emirati cuisine, I'm told that the chef's balaleet—a sugar-sweetened vermicelli, cardamom, rosewater and saffron dish—was perfected by an Emirati grandmother, who tweaked the recipe to her liking during her three-day stay.

Guests also have the option of dining privately. Staff can arrange a personal barbecue at your tent. I opt for a cup of tea after my meal instead, wrapped in a blanket beneath the stars. On the moonlit night, the beach is as peaceful as ever—just the sound of the tide rolling to shore and the call to prayer in the distance.

At dawn, beneath a sky striated with orange, I walk barefoot to the water's edge. The sight of the tent canopies against the rugged mountains in the distance, burnished ochre in the rising sun, is arresting. At this hour, the landscape has a quiet, numinous beauty. Best of all, I have it all to myself. An abundance of earth and serenity indeed. ■

MYSK HOTELS (RIGHT)

Calm reigns along the private beach, facing the Gulf of Oman. The unhurried rhythm allows for wading in the shallows, tracing patterns in the tidal flats, or exploring the empty beach on fat-wheeled bicycles.

KAYAKING IN KALBA

A trip to the east coast's protected mangroves allows for up-close contemplation of nature and its complex ecosystems.

Words by Michelle Wranik-Hicks

SHARJAH TOURISM

Al Qurm Nature Reserve is off limits to motorised boats. Left, an Arabian Collared Kingfisher, a rare subspecies found only in Khor Kalba.

LEFT: JOHN PEREIRA/EPAA; SHUKHRAT GAFUROV

My paddle silently slices the mirrored surface of the waters of Khor Kalba, at the confluence of mountains and coastal dunes along Sharjah's east coast. The kayak glides easily over the calm waters, giving me the opportunity to observe the rich wildlife in the protected wetland, part of the Al Qurm Nature Reserve, home to possibly the oldest mangroves in the Arabian Peninsula.

These ancient coastal trees—thought to be around 300 years old—are a sanctuary for juvenile fish, turtles and crabs. The gnarled branches also provide refuge to an exceptionally rare bird, the Arabian Collared Kingfisher. The subspecies, marked by brilliant turquoise plumes and a white collar around its neck, is found nowhere but on the eastern shores of Kalba and two areas in neighbouring Oman.

At 8am, when the pastel wash of sunrise has long faded from the sky, I'm ready to explore the reserve in a kayak—the activity is offered through a stay at the nearby Mysk Kingfisher Retreat. I kayaked in these waters more than a decade ago, a time when the fragile ecosystem was under threat from activities like spearfishing and crab hunting. To the relief of conservationists, the Sharjah Government intervened, closing the mangroves to the public in 2012 and declaring the site a nature reserve. The following year, the conservation zone became only the third site in the UAE to be recognised by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, and Khor Kalba was listed as a globally important wetland.

Mangroves are a vital coastal ecosystem, they create an essential habitat for thousands of species and help to protect the coast from erosion and damaging storms. Mangroves are also recognised for their important role in mitigating climate change, absorbing carbon from the atmosphere and burying it in the waterlogged soil below.

While Khor Kalba's protected status means that visitors are unable to access the narrow mangrove channels, it's still possible to get close to the forest exterior on kayaks or stand-up paddle boards. During our leisurely paddle, there's plenty of time to study the primeval branches and roots, where the water swirls with nutrients. As we glide past the dense, shaded canopies, the scent of salty decomposition fills the air. Tiny fish dart in the shallows. Save for the occasional splash from our oars or a crab scuttling between the roots, there's total stillness. The water rises and recedes as it has done for thousands, if not millions, of years, almost as if the wetlands were calmly breathing.

In the eight years since it became a protected reserve, the delicate ecosystem in the Khor Kalba mangroves has flourished, says John Pereira, a conservation biologist with Sharjah's Environment and Protected Areas Authority (EPAA).

"The channels used to be extensively gillnetted and overfished, which meant the fish and its supporting breeding populations never had a chance to establish balanced, mature communities," he says. "Now when we fly the drone and do our surveys, we see life everywhere. It's quite amazing."

SHUKHRAT GAFURDOV

A mosque comes into view, its white minarets outlined against the grey-brown mountains. Egrets and cormorants skim the surface of the lake.

The dense mangrove forests protect the coast, offer a home to many species, and capture carbon from the atmosphere.

The EPAA estimates that between 130 and 145 kingfishers live among the mangroves. Their numbers have remained stable for the last eight years. The highly territorial birds are usually easy to spot, perched on the edge of the mangroves, where they nest among the branches, often inside part of a hollow trunk. Kingfishers are naturally socially distanced creatures, Pereira says, and nest 100 to 150 metres from their neighbours during the breeding season. It is during these months, between March and August, that the birds are most obsessive about personal space.

"During this time, they are very aggressive to other kingfishers," he says. "They do a lot of territorial calling and vocalising." Kingfishers' dinner time is at low tide in the mangroves, when it's easier to hunt. The lithe birds, with their blue wings and white chests, defy the laws of physics as they slice through the water to snatch up small crabs and fish.

When Khor Kalba's water recedes, it surges through an estuary and out to the Gulf of Oman. We are carried along by the gentle tide to an expansive lake that was constructed several years ago alongside the Kalba corniche. A mosque gleams into view, its white minarets outlined against the grey-brown mountains. In the distance, egrets and cormorants skim the surface of the lake. A heron lands on a mud flat, looking for lunch. When our arms tire, we pause and float beneath a piercing blue sky, looking out for turtles, or at least their heads emerging from the water as they come up for air.

During a recent aerial survey, a record 187 turtles were seen across the mangrove habitat. Green turtles are the most common species finding sanctuary within the mangroves, with occasional sightings of hawksbill and loggerhead. The lake has proven especially popular with juvenile turtles. The booming biodiversity has won over biologists, who at first were cool to the idea of an artificial lake in such a delicate area.

"We err on the side of safety," Pereira says with a laugh. "We're very annoying like that. Any biologist would have said, 'Please don't dredge a man-made lake next to the mangroves, that's not the best thing to do.' But now we find that there is algal growth, marine life has started establishing, and the lake is one of our core areas for turtle activity."

There are further development plans to sustain the viability of the mangroves, but this time it's through an impressive education centre. With architecture inspired by the shape of a sea-urchin, the development is taking shape on the edge of the estuary near Kingfisher Retreat. When it opens, it will enable tourism to support conservation in a meaningful and enjoyable way with interactive exhibits designed especially for children. After so many years completely closed to the public, the majestic mangroves will welcome visitors via a two-kilometre mangrove walkway. There are also plans for a specialist turtle rehabilitation facility and aviaries for Kalba's coastal birds—including three kingfishers, which the EPAA has raised in captivity. The chicks are quite the success story in the quest to protect the species. They were hatched in incubators at the Kalba Bird of Prey Centre, and are being cared for by a dedicated team at Al Hefaiyah Mountain Conservation Centre. Once ready, they will move to the new mangrove centre, allowing everyone to appreciate the birds and their beautiful habitat—rare and fragile, yet thankfully, protected. ■

SHARJAH TOURISM

The Edit

IN OLD SHARJAH'S SOUK AL ARSA THERE IS A HIDDEN TEMPLE TO HALWA / NAWAR AL QASSIMI TAKES A MOMENT TO REFLECT ON ALL THAT SHE IS GRATEFUL FOR / COLUMNIST MANAR AL HINAI CELEBRATES THE GREAT ADVANCES MADE BY EMIRATI WOMEN

SEBASTIAN CASTELIER

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FROM MUSCAT WITH LOVE
Sticky, buttery halwa is a must at any celebration. We celebrate this most Omani of desserts.

KHALED ALAZEM

A TEMPLE TO HALWA

Devotees know that the UAE's best halwa is to be found in Sharjah's Souk Al Arsa. Like family, halwa is present at the milestones in our lives.

Words by Mufaddal Husein

At the heart of Sharjah's heritage district—a cluster of low-rise, honey-coloured buildings and a tangle of winding alleyways, or *sikkas*—is the Souk Al Arsa, one of the oldest marketplaces in the UAE. The souk's walkways are covered, shaded by palm-frond thatch. The shops brim with antiques and treasures: old coins and telephones, model dhows and dallahs, gas lamps and incense burners, brass mortars for grinding coffee and spices.

Inside the souk, where the main path is joined by an alleyway, a tantalising aroma is carried on the air, at once sweet and delicately aromatic. Tucked away in this alley is a hidden temple to halwa, the most traditional of Omani desserts. Al Omani Sweet Factory is home to perhaps the best halwa in the UAE, certainly it is one of the oldest.

Omani halwa first came to the Emirates with goldsmiths from Muscat who worked in the souk fashioning jewellery to local tastes. The smiths would bring the sweet molasses-hued halwa from their trips home, it proved so popular that halwa makers from Muscat soon set up shop in the souk. Not to be confused with Levantine and Turkish halva made with tahini sesame paste, Omani halwa is made with ghee (clarified butter) and caramel and jellified with cornflour. Lighter halwa, similar to Turkish delight, cut into cubes and wrapped, is called *masghati* in southern Iran.

Here, the mixture is cooked in wide copper cauldrons, raised on a platform above the fire. Crouched on a low stool beside the cauldron, dressed in white shalwar kameez, is the halwa maker. He sits back to back with his colleague, one a reflection of the other, fans whir beside them to offer respite from the heat. It requires a skilled artisan to keep the bubbling-hot mass within the confines of the cauldron, stirring constantly with a long wooden-handled paddle to keep the mixture soft and fluid. There are no thermometers, the maker knows instinctively that it is at the right temperature. The stirring is physically demanding yet meditative. As he stirs, he blends in ingredients—rosewater, walnuts or cashews, pistachios or sesame seeds, and spices.

Halwa flavoured with cardamom and saffron are highly sought after during Eid. Families order well in advance, buying tens of kilos to serve guests and visitors at the communal sufra, often by the head of the family who pulls out chunks by hand as a sign of his respect and generosity towards his guest.

Halwa is best eaten fresh and warm—customers often take it home in heat-retaining pots. Biting into it, it is sticky and buttery with the crunch of nuts and sesame seeds, and the delicate fragrance of spices as it melts on the tongue. The texture is a blend of toffee, jelly and fudge. It can be eaten with a spoon, but typically a bite-sized piece is pinched away with the fingers. The tactile stickiness is a pleasure of its own.

Halwa is a fixture of any festivity at home—for Ramadan, births, marriages and homecomings—and it is always on offer in the majlis. Without it, a celebration would be incomplete. ■

SOMETHING FOR THE WEEKEND WITH NAWAR AL QASSIMI

It's been a little over a year since the first case of Covid-19 was detected in the UAE. The past few months have been interesting to say the least, definitely the longest time most of us have gone without travelling. We saw quarantine trends emerge on social media, businesses shutting down, and travel come to a complete stop. On the positive side, local tourism has picked up, with the pleasant weather many of the UAE's residents have spent time hiking and cycling. I spent the past few months exploring some of my favourite nature spots in Sharjah, and visiting my favourite restaurants whenever it was safe to do so.

While there is still uncertainty about what will happen next, the pandemic made me stop and reflect on how grateful I am for so many things. I treasure my friends and the bonds that have grown stronger thanks to our "Covid-bubble". I appreciate more the time I've been spending in nature, which I took for granted in the past. I am reminded of how lucky I am to live in the UAE, which has a rich culture and so much to see and explore. For this issue, I wanted to share some of my favourite places to visit, and some interesting places that I have stumbled upon, hoping it will inspire you too to go out and explore. ■

1. My friends and I snuck into the abandoned **AL QASIMI HOSPITAL** to take photos. We found medical equipment, dental health posters from the 1990s, and an old coin-operated Santa Claus ride. 2. Restored, the iconic **FLYING SAUCER** recently reopened, an incredible art venue. I loved Lindsay Seers and Keith Sargent's site-responsive installation that marked the reopening, *Nowhere Less Now3*. 3. There is a museum for everything in Sharjah, even in the middle of the desert. You can't miss the monster trucks parked outside the **OFF ROAD HISTORY MUSEUM**. 4. **BUHAIS GEOLOGY PARK**. You will find eerie Martian-like landscapes and a trail up to the mountain for the most phenomenal views. 5. Newly opened **ARK CAFE** on Sharjah beach road has a great menu, fun interiors, and really beautiful views. 6. I spent a day walking around **SHARJAH PORT**. When you reach Souk Al Jubail, you will see fishermen unloading their catch. You can also watch a fish auction inside if you go early. 7. Another early-riser tip: visit **OJ'S NEIGHBORHOOD EATERY** for breakfast. Not only are the pancakes the best in town, but they look exactly like the pancake emoji. 8. I took some time off and went to **KHORFAKKAN**. I woke up to views of the ocean and mountains every morning. Khorfakkan has some of the UAE's most beautiful beaches. 9. **KHORFAKKAN AMPHITHEATRE** recently opened. It's one of the most impressive and unique theatres in the region.

Photographs by Nawar Al Qassimi

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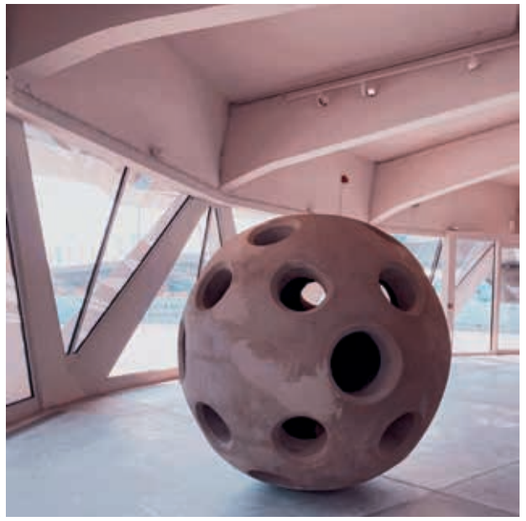

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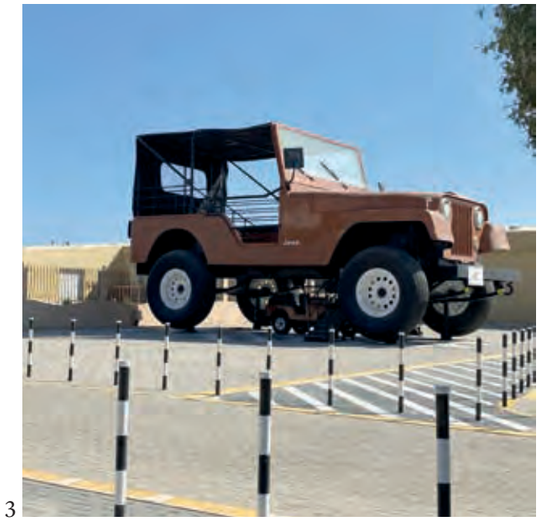

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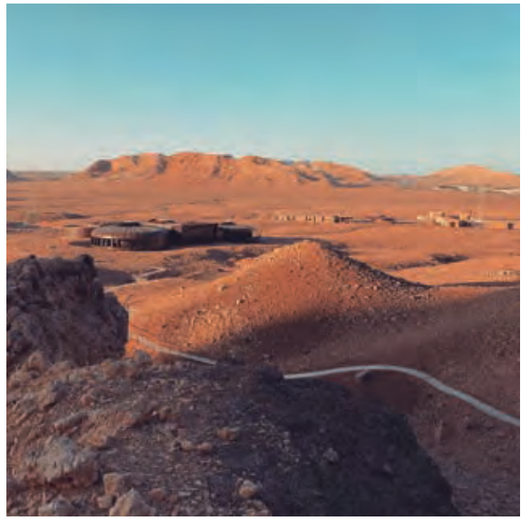

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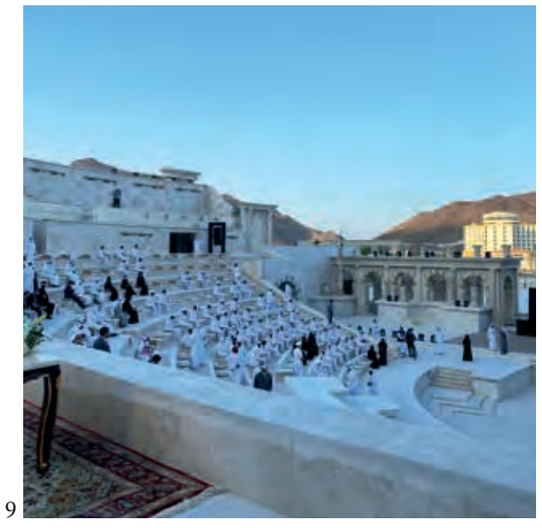


ON THE FRONT LINE

Why we must celebrate Emirati women every day this year.

Words by Manar Al Hinai / Illustration by Sumayyah Al Suwaidi

Unable to travel due to the Covid-19 crisis, I time-travelled instead amongst old family albums. Flipping through snapshots of my great aunts and grandmothers in their youth, I could see not only them but also the vast development that took place in the region over the past century and how rapidly our lifestyles and options have changed.

Fifty years ago, my great aunts and my grandmothers had limited options when it came to careers. My maternal grandmother had one career option: teacher. Today, young women can teach, of course, but they can also become astronauts or aerospace engineers.

As we celebrate International Women's Day this month, and our nation's 50th anniversary this year, I am proud of the progress the UAE has made and how it competes with leading nations across various sectors. But I am especially proud of the noteworthy progress made toward women's empowerment.

Today, more Emirati women than men are enrolled in secondary education. Emirati women comprise 70% of all university graduates in the UAE. They are also ahead in sciences: 56% of UAE graduates in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), are women.

In business, Emirati women are leading the way, not just in the UAE, but also in the region. The UAE had the highest number of women—23—on Forbes' 100 Most Powerful Arab Businesswomen in 2020. Female entrepreneurs account for 10% of our country's private sector.

Our women hold significant roles on the global stage. HE Reem Al Hashimy, Minister of State for International Cooperation and Managing Director of Expo 2020, and her team have been working relentlessly for over six years to bring together the World's Fair later this year. HE Sheikha Bodour Al Qasimi is currently President of the International Publishers Association, the first Arab to hold this role since the organisation was founded in 1896.

When the Covid-19 crisis hit us, our Emirati women—doctors, volunteers, officers, and researchers—were on the front line next to our fellow men, combating the spread of the virus, and making sure no one was left behind. Her Highness Sheikha Hind Bint Maktoum Bin Juma Al Maktoum's "10 Million Meals" campaign secured donations to feed Covid-hit communities in the UAE. Our women are helping shape our policies, our economy, and society. The UAE ranked first in the female parliamentary representation index of the IMD Competitiveness Yearbook 2020, with women making up 50% of parliament members.

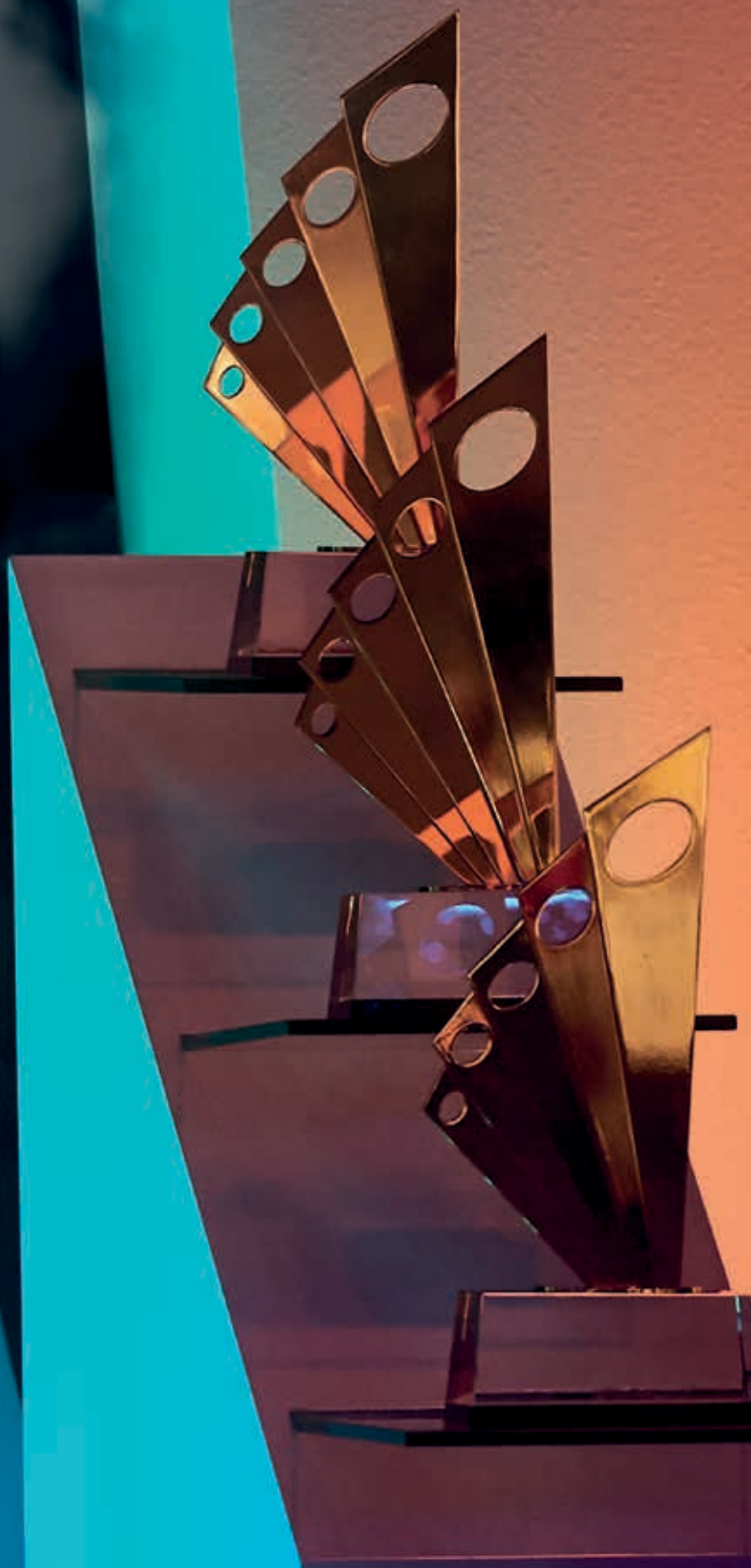
Emirati women are a testimony that even amidst life-threatening challenges, they are on the front lines, helping, thriving, raising families, and succeeding. This is why we should celebrate them, not just on March 8, International Women's Day, but every day this year.

They say that "Behind every great man is a great woman." I say that "Behind every Emirati woman is an entire nation."

Manar Al Hinai *is an award-winning Emirati writer and entrepreneur*

International Government Communication Centre

المركز الدولي للاتصال الحكومي



FROM SHARJAH TO THE WORLD

The research-based platform aims to be the official centre for developing government communication skills in Sharjah and UAE, presenting itself as a vital reference in the field locally, regionally, and internationally.

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