

UAE Pavilion's Venice Biennale exhibitions on display at Warehouse421

Melissa Gronlund | March 8, 2018



Installation view of Warehouse421's newest exhibition 'Untold Stories Retold Recent Exhibitions from the UAE's National Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.'

In a recent text, the cultural commentator Mishaal Al Gergawi pinpointed a few events that helped change the course of the arts scene in the UAE.

One of these was the UAE's first participation, in 2009, in the international art exhibition of the Venice Biennale, where the countries of the world compete for best national pavilion. Representation at the biennial is a mark of stature and pride – it's no surprise that representation at the Venice Biennale for architecture is among Saudi Arabia's initiatives towards promoting a new cultural image internationally. The UAE has now been going to Venice for nearly 10 years and has secured its pavilion on semi-permanent lease, where it holds an art exhibition (in odd-numbered years) and an architectural exhibition (in even-numbered years).

"The National Pavilion is the only exhibition that represents all the emirates," says Laila Binbrek, director of the National Pavilion, which coordinates the project. "This time, especially since we're bringing not just one, but two exhibitions – art and architecture – we felt we should take a step aside and explain exactly what we're doing. We're going in to our third architecture, we just did our fifth art, and we realised that there is still a lack of clarity around what it is we do and why it is important."

The two most recent exhibitions from the Venice Biennale are now on show at Warehouse421 in the exhibition *Untold Stories Retold*, allowing the public here to see the intensively researched projects that represented the nation abroad. The exhibition also includes a short introduction to the Venice Biennale and videos with the curators of the shows: Hammad Nasar and Michele Bambling, who curated the 2017 art pavilion.

The juxtaposition of the disciplines brings the differences in their display norms to the fore. Nasar's show,

Rock, Paper, Scissors: Positions in Play, is sparse on ancillary material, instead focusing its attention upon the artworks themselves.

The architecture exhibition, *Transformations: The Emirati National House*, is more didactic, putting its research on display, and is likely to be more at ease with communicating to broad audiences.

"The end product seems very different," Binbrek says, "But the methodology that goes towards each show is very similar, in terms of how we work with the curator. An art curator has to do a copious amount of research and interviews: meeting with the artist, reading background historical information, really understanding their practice."

Binbrek explains how art pavilion curator Nasar came across, through his research into her work, the radical poetry pamphlet *Silsilat Al Ramad* that Nujoom Alghanem distributed in 1985 with Khalid Albudoor, Hassan Sharif and Yusuf Khalil. Copies of it are offered to the viewers with a stick of chewing gum, just as they were when it was distributed in Sharjah – so you can enjoy your reading of it.

Nasar's show was organised around the idea of "play" as a means to engage with others and with art material, rather like the stick of gum that entices readers to pick up a radical poetry pamphlet. Vikram Divecha's *Degenerative Disarrangement*, for example, is made up of bricks that had been left after workers repaired a Dubai bus stop. He asks the install technicians to lay the bricks in the exhibition space within a certain time, opening up the pattern they produce to a game of chance at every occasion it is installed.

The architecture exhibition looks at the development of the sha'bī (folk) houses, the first modernised public housing that was built in the UAE in the 1970s. With the discovery of oil, residents moved from the typical arish, palm-frond-built houses to concrete ones with – as estate agents used to say – "all the mod cons": bathrooms, kitchens etc. The houses were arranged in neighbourhoods, reflecting how extended families lived near each other in tribal days, and the plans had enough flexibility so that occupants could add on bedrooms or living spaces as needed. The exhibition contains floor plans of the houses as well as photographs of still existing sha'bidomociles, most of which are centred in Al Ain, where the pace of development has been slower. One family, the Meqbalis, has lived in their sha'bi house since the 1970s, and kept records of the plans, the changes they'd made, and photographs through the years, and donated this archive to the exhibition.

The National Pavilion's mandate is to bring to light "untold stories" from the UAE, broadening international understanding of the country beyond its sometime reputation as a capital of the new, and helping to preserve narratives for the country itself.

The side-by-side presentation of the two most recent Venice Biennale exhibitions exemplifies the twin roles that the organisation – whose commissioner is the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation, which also runs Warehouse421 – plays. If *Transformations: The Emirati National House*, the architecture exhibition, looks back towards the past, *Rock, Paper, Scissors: Positions in Play* is widely recognised as looking forward. It is the first National Pavilion in which UAE residents who are not Emirati nationals were selected to represent the country (Lantian Xie and Divecha), reflecting the diversity of nationalities who are integral parts of the country's creative scene. The exhibition was well received, appearing on a number of top-10 lists, with many participating in the playful break the show offered, where visitors were asked to fold up paper airplanes (the contribution of the writer Deepak Unnikrishnan, who was part of the exhibition's wider programming) and send them from a first-floor balcony – an experience wisely recreated here, with a platform for the purpose of making paper planes zoom over others' heads. And who says art doesn't engage with broad audiences?

The National Pavilion exhibitions will be on show at Warehouse421 until June 24

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