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House Of MAJLIS

Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi is putting Arab art front and center for all to enjoy – from the walls of his home to those of his foundation’s recently reopened wing at the Sharjah Art Museum

Photography AMIR HAZIM *Words* AMANDA RANDONE

S pray-painted onto the stark white wall on the outside of a Dubai villa, above a stretch of glass doors and across from a rectangular turquoise pool, is a large calligraphic artwork by the Tunisian street artist eL Seed. The home belongs to Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah, and the exclusive piece in his yard is a visual interpretation of a love poem he has performed that was originally written by the UAE’s founding father Sheikh Zayed.

“EL Seed likes his work to be appreciated by the public, but my house hosts so many people it’s almost a public space,” Al-Qassemi says over Zoom from his Sharjah office where he is surrounded by books on history, architecture, music, and poetry – some of which he’s authored. The Emirati royal and scholar is a prominent figure in the art world, and the house he’s referencing is one of two twin villas dedicated to his mission of showcasing regional creativity and its plurality. Located in Dubai’s coastal neighborhood of Jumeirah, both properties have been used for majlis, the Arabic word for “sitting places” during which impassioned community members from diverse backgrounds gather to learn and exchange ideas. This has included visits from Arab

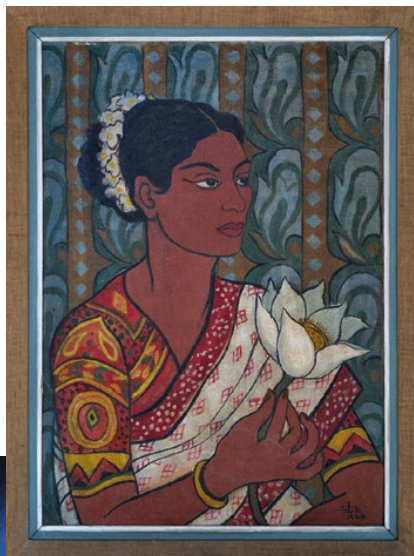
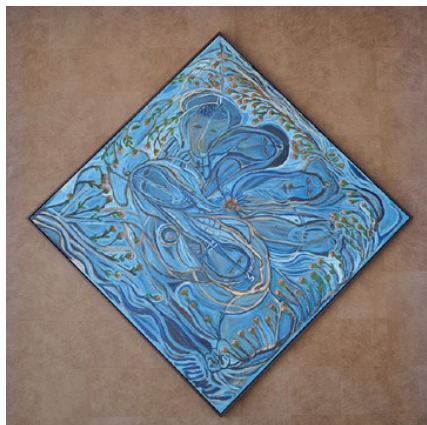
thought leaders such as Syrian-Armenian writer Razmig Bedirian, Palestinian artist and activist Samia Halaby, and Kuwaiti sculptor Sami Mohammad. “Part of this is the idea that a rising tide lifts all boats; the fact that if you share knowledge then your friends and your associates and your community becomes more educated. They’re all lifted.”

Al-Qassemi’s passion was ignited as a university student in Paris exploring the city’s museums and galleries in the 1990s. Upon returning to the UAE in 1998, his interest in modern and contemporary Arab art began to develop and evolve, eventually leading him to build a private collection that is one of the largest of its kind. That collection was made accessible to the public with the establishment of the Barjeel Art Foundation in 2010. Because Al-Qassemi’s ongoing majlis serve to bolster awareness about the foundation and its programming, he’s quick to point out that the cultural gatherings organized at his Dubai home are not entirely altruistic: “The benefit for me in this is that I am showing works by Arab artists [at Barjeel], so the more people know these names, the more visitors I will have, the more appreciation for the art I will have.” For this reason, Al-Qassemi has exported the salon-like discussions that

began several years ago to cities across the globe. During the pandemic, he brought them online as well, hosting more than 50 conversations on YouTube. “When I went to the US, I started a series of talks in New York and then in Washington and then in Boston. Then I moved to Berlin and I started a series of talks there. Wherever I go, I try to host these cultural dialogues for everybody, opening up cultural spaces, usually at home as much as possible.”

Smaller talks at the Dubai villa – like the one in 2014 with renowned Lebanese-Palestinian collector Ramzi Dalloul for an intimate audience of 15 – have sometimes occurred around a table beneath a painting by Iraqi artist Faisal Laibi Sahi. The work, titled *The Café*, is three meters long and depicts, in vibrant primary and secondary colors, different groups of men speaking

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
Barjeel's *Kawkaba* exhibition in partnership with Christie's; *Blues for the Six Martyrs*, 2020, oil on canvas, by Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq (born 1939, Omdurman, Sudan); *The Lotus Girl*, 1955, oil on canvas, by Nazek Hamdi (born 1926, Egypt/died 2019, Cairo)

“We show work the South Asian community in the UAE would feel an affiliation to. They can feel like, ‘Hey, that’s what my mom looks like, my grandmother looks like.’ For me, this is important”

with one another over tea and shisha. Sahi’s communist leanings are noticeable in the way the elite subjects in the painting look back at the viewer while members of the working class turn their heads away. There is a newspaper with visible stories about revolution and war, a person reading a nondescript book, a man in military garb.

“I wanted a painting there that was immediately catchy, that allows your eyes to wander while you’re sitting there for an hour or two, that could also kickstart a conversation about the history of the Arab world,” Al-Qassemi says. “It almost looks like a timeless piece, it could be anything

from between the 50s to the 70s, which is a period in which [the artist] was active and learning and showing in Baghdad before he left. How come there are no women? How come people look pacified? Which book is he talking about? Was it the revolution of Iraq in 1958 or was this another revolution? This military person – is that a spy?”

After eight years of spurring conversations around that table, *The Café* has been swapped out for Tunisian-American Nadia Ayari’s *WildFlowers* in which ominous cog-head figures appear in a field of pink weeds. As the Dubai majlis resume this fall, Al-Qassemi looks forward

to welcoming a slew of guests along with whatever questions Ayari’s work will provoke among them. In addition to feeling ready for a change, Al-Qassemi wanted to highlight more female Arab artists in the space – a commitment that is ever-present in all his endeavors, personal and professional. Now, when a majlis attendee enters the villa’s living room, their gaze will likely go from *WildFlowers* straight to a bright blue, diamond-shaped abstract acquisition by Sudanese artist Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq before noticing a daring but understated abstract painting by Lebanon’s Moazaz Rawda.

From the walls of his home to the walls of museums across continents that draw from the Barjeel Art Foundation, Al-Qassemi is known to push for equal representation of male and female artists. For Barjeel’s *Kawkaba* exhibition in partnership with Christie’s this past summer in London, he insisted on celebrating a lesser-known female artist in the show’s marketing collateral. The poster, done by Lebanese designer Marwan Kaabour, ended up featuring a painting by Samia Osseiran Jumblatt, also Lebanese, titled *Formative Radiation*. It has since emerged as a widely recognized image associated with the region.

“I feel like we [in the art world] are perpetuating this myth that there were just four or five good women Arab artists. No!” Al-Qassemi says emphatically, and with a smile. “I didn’t even know about [Jumblatt] until a year or two ago. So for me, because we used the machine that is the marketing machine of Christie’s, their iconic stairs [leading to the exhibition], the prominent placement of the work, the blasting of it on social media – all of these things created an icon of an artwork.”

Dr Ridha Moumni, deputy chair of Christie’s for the Middle East and North Africa, described *Kawkaba* as a “cultural homecoming” for Arab visitors who were able to marvel at artworks from their countries of origin. It also introduced international guests and London residents to underrepresented talent from the



region, nurturing a deeper familiarity with its artistic heritage and legacy. “Visitors were pleasantly surprised to discover that *Kawkaba* not only maintained a gender balance but also shone a spotlight on the region’s minorities, capturing the broad spectrum of our artistic landscape,” Dr Moumni says. “Sultan’s passion is incredibly infectious, and it’s impossible not to be drawn into his enthusiasm... He possesses a unique ability to drive significant projects forward.”

With *Kawkaba* having come to a close in late August and the recent end of *Taking Shape*, another Barjeel exhibition that toured the US for three years, Al-Qassemi is bringing many of the pieces that have been on loan back to their home in Sharjah. On September 20, Barjeel reopened its space at the Sharjah Art Museum with an exhibition titled *Parallel Histories*. There are about 130 works on view until the spring of 2024, many of which have not been shown in Sharjah and in some cases, anywhere else. That

includes the newly famous *Formative Radiation*. In true Al-Qassemi form, he believes the highlights are artworks by women artists such as Egypt’s Amy Nimr, Morocco’s Meriem Meziane, and Syria’s Hala Kouatly, to name a few. There are sculptures by the Iraqi artist Moazaz Rawda – whose abstract painting is in Al-Qassemi’s Dubai villa – and work by Habuba Farah Riccetti, a Brazilian of Lebanese origin who has never been shown in a group of Arab artists (“She was very happy; she’s 92 years old now!” Al-Qassemi quips).

The Lotus Girl, by Egyptian artist Nazek Hamdi, is an especially poignant piece depicting a lady in a sari that was exhibited at Kala Bhavana Institute of Fine Arts in India. “I like that we can show work that the South Asian community in the UAE would feel an affiliation to. They can feel like, ‘Hey, that’s what my mom looks like, that’s what my grandmother looks like.’ For me, this is important,” Al-Qassemi says.

In background, from left: Chile, 1969, oil on canvas, by Mahmoud Sabri (born 1927, Baghdad, Iraq/died 2012, Maidenhead, England); Untitled, 1960s, oil on canvas, by Muazzez Rawda (born 1906, Baghdad, Iraq/died 1986, Beirut); Untitled (Lilia), 1990, acrylic on canvas, by Rafik El Kamel (born 1944, Tunis/died 2021, Tunis)

The memorandum for the long-term display of the Barjeel art collection at the Sharjah Art Museum, which closed temporarily for the Biennale 15, was first signed in 2018. Manal Ataya, the former director and current advisor of the Sharjah Museums Authority,

was involved in those proceedings. Since then, she attests, Barjeel has been an important platform for Arab artists to gain visibility and recognition. Al-Qassemi’s endeavors outside the museum have proven to extend the reach of that effort even further. “Sultan’s local initiatives, such as publications and majlis gatherings, have fostered a supportive ecosystem for emerging artists, enthusiasts, and creatives,” Ataya says. “This nurturing environment inspires and empowers the rising generation to explore their artistic potential and contributes to a broader global understanding of Arab art.” □