



Inside Abdul Raheem Salem's Sharjah studio

We begin our summer series of profiling the artists representing the UAE at the 56th edition of the Venice Biennale.



Abdul Raheem Salem at his studio in Sharjah. He expresses his creativity through the mediums of sculpture, abstract art, installations and performance art. Antonie Robertson / The National



Anna Seaman
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Abdul Raheem Salem came from humble roots to establish himself as one of the UAE's leading artists. Born in Dubai in 1955, he spent his childhood by the seaside in Sharjah and Dubai. When his father died, he and his mother went to live with his grandmother in Bahrain, where she was one of the house staff for a large family.

By the time he was 14, Salem was already making sandstone sculptures and was showing his work in Bahrain. In 1981, he graduated from Cairo University with a degree in fine arts specialising in sculpture, and returned to the UAE to teach art in

public schools.

It was during this time that he began making sculptures out of gypsum and wood, which went on to be displayed in several Emirates Fine Arts Society exhibitions, and which were selected by Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi for the UAE National Pavilion at Venice Biennale 2015.

“It was a good feeling to see those sculptures again,” says Salem, one of 15 artists chosen for the show, titled *1980 – Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates*, which includes more than 120 pieces of art dating to when the local contemporary art scene began to take shape.

“It is also a very important subject to choose to represent the UAE,” he adds. “The 1980s was the base, the starting point for the art scene as it is today. It was a beautiful idea. We artists are not like flowers in the desert, coming without any support. No, we have roots, we have a history and when people see this, they can appreciate it.”

However, although the artist says he can still see himself in his early sculptures, they are vastly different from the kind of work he went on to produce – paintings.

“[The sculptures] have a lot of energy of that time of my life but it is not representative of what I like to see in my work now,” says Salem, gesturing to the stacks of canvases crowding him in his studio in Beit Al Shamsi in Sharjah, a stone’s throw from the Emirates Fine Arts Society headquarters. “When I left sculpture, it does not mean I didn’t like it but I couldn’t go on with it any more. My subject matter changed to something that simply couldn’t be captured in sculpture.”

Salem is talking about an ancient legend, told to him by his beloved grandmother, about a slave girl called Muhaira who was very beautiful and was approached by many men to be their wife. One of them, bitter at being rejected, cast a spell on her. She became crazy, lost everything, became homeless, and died on a winter’s day after burning in a fire she had lit herself.

The tragic character has filled his imagination, taking shape as a lifelike figure in all his paintings since 1993.

Then, five years ago, he began depicting her in abstract art.

“Now I express her in colour and emotion,” he says. “She is no longer a story, she is part of my life.”

Salem, who also has a history of performance art and installations with prominent artists such as Hassan Sharif, works full-time at the Ministry of Education as an adviser on art education.

“This generation is very lucky. They have many opportunities to learn, to buy material, to show their work, and people also appreciate art now. It is totally different to what we had and I like to give the new generation advice on how to make the most of it.”

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