

## **A land artist who finds beauty in everything**

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Abdullah Al Saadi's fondness for collecting objects dates back to his high school years. Reem Mohammed / The National

Abdullah Al Saadi's studio in Khorfakkan on the UAE's east-coast is full of evidence of his lifelong commitment to collecting objects. Nondescript grey stones, meticulously arranged by size, are stacked on metal shelves. Leaning against a wall is a collection of scarecrows, made from discarded biscuit tins and old clothes, created for an installation in Sharjah in 2013. Bird feathers, neatly laid out in a row, fill a picture frame.

## **GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK**

The Emirati artist's fondness for collecting and preserving objects dates back to his high-school years, when he began recording his memories of the UAE art scene in the 1980s in an expansive diary, which now forms an essential part of the catalogue for the UAE National Pavilion's current exhibition at the 56th Venice Biennale.

1980 – Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates surveys more than 40 years of art through the work of 15 artists, and contributions such as Al Saadi's are rare, considering that there has been little documentation of the history of the national art scene.

Al Saadi's organic sculptures also feature at the biennale, marking the second time the artist's work has been shown in the UAE Pavilion (the first was in 2011). The series, called The Cavity Room, consists of installations made mostly from the skulls, horns and bones of animals native to Khorfakkan. "I always loved art and as soon as I graduated from school I opened my own studio at home. I started to collect things around me and produce art from them," says Al Saadi, who was born and continues to live in his modest family home in Madha, a small village on the UAE-Oman border. He also holds a full-time job at a local school in nearby Kalba, where he teaches English.

Just like his diary, which is an indispensable part of the UAE Pavilion catalogue, Al Saadi's land art is a reflection of his life, and his works are a hint of his personal stories.

For example, the artist says he went through a period of gathering dead insects, which he remembered from his childhood, followed by a decade-long obsession with sweet potato, once a dietary staple in the area, and which his father, a farmer, used to cultivate.

Al Saadi's most recent exhibition, held last year, relives more such memories. It showed a series from 1998 called My Mother's Letters – a poignant collection of objects that his mother used to leave behind in his studio to let him know she had visited while he was out. Also on display was The Watermelon Series, watercolour impressions of the mountains inspired by his 4-year-old son, who once said that the triangle-shaped watermelon he was eating resembled a hill.

Despite enjoying a second showing at one of the world's most important art festivals, Al Saadi is determined to remain focused on his art, heritage and memories. "I do not set out to reveal the details of life," he says. "I just capture what is around me, to express my ideas. With My Mother's Letters, for example, I was not only telling the story about my mother but about all mothers. With the bones, I was questioning our relationship with animals. I use my work to show parts of my life that I'm sure are common with people all over the world – I am not just interested in stories, but also in shape and form."

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- 1980 – Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates runs until November 22 at the 56th edition of the Venice Biennale.
- Every week, A&L will profile one of the 15 artists displaying their work in the UAE Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, which runs until November 22

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