

Zeinab Alhashemi talks about the art she has created for the Qasr Al Hosn Festival

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Zeinab Alhashemi says her art seeks to weave together the intricate stories of for Qasr Al Hosn. Antonie Robertson / The National

Suspended and representative of moments frozen in time, Zeinab Alhashemi's sculptures hang in the old Cultural Foundation building at Qasr Al Hosn, one of the most significant historical spaces in Abu Dhabi.

The art consists of fluorescent red-wire frames upon which she has strung old mariner's rope to symbolise the many strands of her concept: the tension between past and present, the history of the building and the pioneering spirit of her ancestors.

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Alhashemi is one of three Emirati artists chosen to create public art at the two-week long Qasr Al Hosn Festival that opens on Wednesday, February 11. Her work, titled Link Between Worlds, comprises five abstract triangular shapes inspired by the sails that used to power dhows in and out of Abu Dhabi.

The other two artists are Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, a renowned land artist from Khor Fakkan, and Abdullah Al Saadi, who also lives and works in Khor Fakkan and who was one of three artists to represent the UAE at the Venice Biennale in 2011.

Alhashemi says her installation seeks to weave together the intricate stories of Qasr Al Hosn.

“I am always influenced by the space I work in and I can’t help looking for stories and history,” she says. “Qasr means shield or fort, and this place acted as a defence. It protected the city over many generations and was also the location for a lot of decision-making by different rulers, including Sheikh Zayed.”

Taking that as a starting point, Alhashemi became interested in the fusion of past and present and wanted her artwork to function as a metaphor for the whole building.

“The ropes represent history and the metal frames represent the present,” she says. “In some places the ropes are ‘alone’ because they take their own path. In life, this has to happen for there to be change and I wanted that dialogue to be present in the sculptures themselves.”

Alhashemi also says that an important part of this piece was to work with traditional craftsmen – something she considers central to her practice.

“I constantly collaborate with local artisans in my work and for this, I found traditional rope makers who helped me with the Manila rope I needed for these structures.”

That this will be in the public domain for the next two weeks is also really important to Alhashemi, who has always been an advocate of public art.

“I have worked on public installations before, but this is my biggest in terms of scale and site-specificity. Finally we are seeing people interested in commissioning artists to work within the city and it is a great sign,” she says.

Ibrahim’s project Siga (siga is a traditional goatskin sack used to churn milk into butter) is a series of sculptures made from materials found in the surrounding landscape and these are composed into an abstract form.

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Al Saadi, whose oeuvre runs the gamut of painting, drawing, creating artist's notebooks, collecting and systematically categorising found objects and the invention of new alphabets, has created a piece called Our Mountains, Our Camels.

The large-scale interactive sculpture – its lines are derived from mountains and the camel's hump – is a “monolithic playground” where the audience is invited to engage physically with the work. The commission is a continuation of his body of work that draws from his interpretation of elements in the landscape of the UAE.

Sheikh Sultan bin Tahnoon Al Nahyan, the chairman of Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority, says that this year's Qasr Al Hosn programme was created to offer visitors an all-round cultural experience and “has been redesigned to include new elements and activities that seamlessly fuse the traditional with the modern”.

“With Qasr Al Hosn Festival, we are not just celebrating monuments. We are celebrating the people who have carried the story of a nation generation to generation,” he says.

“We are looking to illustrate the importance of conserving the fort as a symbol of great significance in Emirati history, protecting our national identity and heritage through passing down our most valued traditions.”

- Qasr Al Hosn Festival runs from Wednesday, February 11, until February 21. Visit www.qasralhosnfestival.ae

<http://www.thenational.ae/arts-lifestyle/art/zeinab-alhashemi-talks-about-the-art-she-has-created-for-the-qasr-al-hosn-festival>