

Three Solo Shows

Nasir Nasrallah, Zeinab Al Hashemi & Ammar Al Attar
Cuadro Gallery, Dubai

Cuadro Gallery presents three distinct solo shows featuring new experimental work by Zeinab Al Hashemi, Ammar Al Attar, and Nasir Nasrallah—Emirati artists from the younger generation who came of age as the country rapidly advanced and the contemporary art scene developed into the cosmopolitan hub it is considered today. These artists' distinct practices are linked in their grounding in the United Arab Emirates' urban landscape, but even more so in the power to pause and examine commonplace objects, places, rituals, and topography, and ultimately represent the ordinary in extraordinary new forms that feel at once foreign and familiar.

Nasir Nasrallah grew up in the heart of Sharjah tinkering with spare parts in his grandfather's antiquities shop in the local *souk*. His 'Stores' series revisits the souk lines in a rigid monochrome palette which compels the viewer to pause and consider the private life of each object that unfolds in the shadows once the customers have gone home and the shop lights have been shut off for the night. The curious influence of Nasrallah's engineering degree is evident in his ink drawings, which have a mechanical, blueprint-like quality to them—hinting that the artist is also a half-wild industrialist capable of bringing his inventions to life.

Ammar Al Attar returns to Cuadro Gallery with an investigative series of self-portraits centered around the act of prayer in Islam and the underlying explanations for each micro-movement of the ritual. This is both a continuation and a plot twist on Al Attar's previous series 'Prayer Rooms', in which he captured empty prayer spaces—from *portamosques*, to shopping mall and corporate prayer rooms, to makeshift outdoor areas—taking great care to document the aesthetics and purpose of the spaces rather than the forms of the attending worshippers. Here the act of prayer is isolated, compartmentalized, dissected, and celebrated, as Al Attar presents a project nearly two years in the making.

Zeinab Al Hashemi further engages with the physical geography of the UAE with new works from her ongoing 'Urban Phantasmagoria' series, in which she manipulates satellite images of the UAE to create digital kaleidoscopic tapestries. While all her previous projects have involved collaborations with skilled makers, Al Hashemi served as both labourer and artist as she conceived her new concrete maps—pouring sand-based concrete onto canvas, then imprinting the wet surface with natural objects taken from some of the very environments she has manipulated from above with her digital photography.

The Secret Lives of Teapots: Nasir Nasrallah

As a child, Nasir Nasrallah spent his free time tinkering with spare parts in his grandfather's antiquities shop set inside the old *Alarsa Souk* in the historic heart of Sharjah, which straddles the sea and a maze of coral-walled alleyways and courtyards. The shop's magical clutter stood out in contrast to his father's meticulously ordered cache of vintage coins, stamps, and bank notes. Both men's habits directly influence Nasrallah's practice today, which is equally

grounded in the universal human habit of collecting, Emirati material culture, and carrying out an exhaustive examination of the evolving concept of the city.

Nasrallah's studio is coincidentally situated just a few buildings behind his grandfather's former store in Bait Al Shamsi, a historic 19th century home complete with traditional wind towers which the government has repurposed into spaces for artists. Oddly, Nasrallah's space is fitted with the thick glass doors one would expect to find at the entrance to a store. Inside, canvases of all sizes lean against the musty walls echoing the aesthetics of the functional grocery, spice, and knick knack stalls in the *souk* beyond.

The curious influence of Nasrallah's Engineering degree in Telecommunications from Khalifa University is evident in his ink drawings on display at Cuadro—which have a mechanical, blueprint-like quality to them—hinting that the artist is also a half-wild industrialist capable of bringing his “Small Monsters” series to life with the flick of his pen with blinking eyes on legs or building a head-shaped house entered through an open mouth according to ‘Houses with Stories.’ Back in 2013, Nasrallah fed whimsical drawings and stories to the public imagination with a vending machine installation in the Tashkeel booth at Art Dubai, which dispensed stories in place of soda. It is nearly impossible to view these pieces without imagining the artist as a young boy cannibalizing his grandfather's antique contraptions, figuring out how they worked, then re-constructing their bodies.

While studying, Nasrallah concurrently took art courses at The Emirates Fine Arts Society, working under Mohammed Kazem, who was one of the country's first conceptual artists to pave the way for today's established contemporary art scene. Nasrallah explains, “Mohammed showed us that art is more than a still life. I was very confused at the beginning. At first I asked myself, *Is this really art at all?* But now I've become part of the tribe.”

Through Kazem, he was introduced to Cezanne, and the French painter's influence can arguably be found in both ‘Markets’ and ‘Stores.’ Just as Nasrallah's work is grounded in Sharjah, Cezanne's body of work was also bound within the city where he was born and lived, Aix-en-Provence. Elements of local culture are deeply evident in Cezanne's famous still life painting, ‘Apples and Oranges (1895-1900), from the orchard-ripened blush of the weighty fruits, to the feminine scallops of the pure white tablecloth, draped like a woman's discarded dress.

Markets, Nasrallah's color-soaked 2012 series, served as a study for the subsequent year's ‘Stores’ a portion of which is being shown at Cuadro. Selecting 20 views of specialty stalls, Nassir reflected the serialization of various fruits, vegetables, and wooden crates that takes place in local specialty stalls, at times breaking the shapes down to such abstraction that it became disorienting to recognize commonplace objects, forcing viewers to be more present in the everyday curatorial act of selecting one's food.

While ‘Stores’ (which was awarded first prize at the Emirates Fine Arts Society's annual exhibition in 2013) continues with the same theme, here Nasrallah's lines are less animated and more painterly, and he has limited himself to a rigid monochrome palette which compels the

viewer to pause and consider the private life of each object that unfolds in the shadows once the customers have gone home and the shop lights have been shut off for the night. His trademark Khaleeji teapots are tucked into corners in places, hinting at the idea that these traditional symbols of family and the *majlis* are also silent observers of conversations and receptacles of secrets with a life of their own. It is questionable whether the paintings can really be classified as still life at all—or if they ought to be read as a series of revealing self-portraits.

The Floating Desert: Zeinab Al Hashemi's 'Constructionism'

Anyone who has experienced the exponential growth of Dubai is familiar with the sounds of the city's construction culture—an industrial birdsong of creaking cranes and jackhammers that permeates the place.

A cement mixer churns loudly in the centre of Zeinab Al Hashemi's 'Constructionism.' A projector is concealed in the barrel and shows a shifting video map onto the gallery's sterile wall beyond, creating a living wallpaper that is impacted by visitors' silhouettes and movements. The constantly shifting, ever-evolving nature of the map is analogous to the city's breathless pace and the way that the land's topography itself has been manipulated by human hands and vision.

Both 'Til The End of Time' and the new mixed media on canvas beyond represent the conceptual artist's ongoing experimentation with concrete, a material made from sand sourced in the local desert. Last year a sculpture painted with concrete to look like a massive cinder block, landed outside of Cuadro Gallery in DIFC.

The Dubai-born Al Hashemi says, "We are always moving, always on the go. We never pause. I want to capture the energy of the city." She attempts to freeze time, isolate and exaggerate place. Her practice is built on taking common (even stereotypical) elements of the UAE environment and culture—from camels in the desert, to the actual map of the country itself—and rendering them unrecognizable and futuristic. At times Al Hashemi has been referred to as an artist and at others as a designer—these are labels that mean nothing to someone whose art is bent on transcending categories and definition.

She describes all her previous projects as "collaborations"—from the interactive camel hide installation that debuted at Abu Dhabi Art's Emirati Expressions exhibition earlier this year, to massive fishing net-inspired sculptures installed near the beach. She has always worked closely with and learned from scientists, fishermen, rope makers, woodworkers, welders, and skilled labourers in order to direct the fulfilment of a vision.

In 'Lost & Found' her newest work, Al Hashemi introduces the notion of pouring and quickly forming concrete as an experimental, private performance art, in which artist becomes both cartographer and construction worker and is forced to work rapidly and mindfully to mark points on the wet medium with blocks of charcoal before it dries. The charcoal she has chosen

to use to mark the map of concrete references cooking fires in the desert, the shisha pipes that are smoked in traditional coffee houses, the kohl women burn to outline their eyes both for beauty and to deflect the sun's glare.

The mixed media on canvas is both a departure from and continuation of Al Hashemi's ongoing 'Urban Phantasmagoria,' which also uses the UAE map as a starting point. Five new works from the series are installed at Cuadro. Collaborating with Google Earth and various governmental offices to source satellite images of the UAE, Al Hashemi then manipulates the shots into kaleidoscopic digital photographs that while technically documenting the country's topography, also create new celestial bodies or floating deserts. To the viewer, the photographs impart a disembodied sensation of hovering over the earth from the highest point imaginable, as though the artist has managed to break free of the rules of time and build her own galaxies of the mind.

Salah: Ammar Al Attar

It is not coincidental that Ammar Al Attar's 'Salah' is installed in the space at Cuadro Gallery that lies directly over the mosque in Dubai International Financial Centre. In the series of "performative" self-portraits more than two years in the making, the Ajman photographer takes apart and puts back together the act of prayer in Islam. This is both a continuation and a plot twist on Al Attar's previous series 'Prayer Rooms,' in which he captured empty prayer spaces—from *portamosques*, to shopping mall and corporate prayer rooms, to makeshift outdoor areas—taking great care to document the aesthetics and purpose of the spaces rather than the forms of the attending worshippers. Here the act of prayer is isolated, compartmentalized, questioned, and ultimately fulfilled on film.

Al Attar's memory works cinematically, clicking from one moment to the next like the retro Kodak slide projector he has salvaged and incorporated into the show. "When we learned how to pray, nobody taught us why, they just told us we have to do it," he says. In school, his teacher climbed onto the table at the front of the classroom and taught the young boys how to pray, "movement by movement." While he was shooting 'Prayer Rooms' that Al Attar began to wonder about the meaning behind each part of the ritual.

First he poured over articles written not only by religious scholars—who quoted the *Qur'an*—but also by Western physicians including Robert Kenzi, who conducted a study in which patients with pancreatic cancer prayed five times daily and radically improved in health.

When Al Attar began to pray as the first stage in the project, initially it wasn't a performance at all. He would set up a Nikon film camera on a timer and go through the movements alone against an ink black background in his studio, with only the sound of the camera's systematic flashing to keep time. He realized that the movements from standing to full prostration were significant—but he was just as intrigued by the meta-movements—by how someone shifts in

tiny, precise gestures from position to position, as well as the mathematical quality to the repetitions, which vary in each of the five daily prayers.

Next, Al Attar brought a simple camera to an abandoned out building on a rural farm. He prayed outside, but also took time to isolate each of the movements and meta-movements. Although he was alone, a weathered tree stooped from age and wind appears to bend beside him in community, and one can almost imagine the photographer praying in a row of men shoulder to shoulder as is the custom inside a mosque.

Al Attar set out to examine the Prophet Mohammed's injunction, "The earth is a mosque for you, so wherever you are at the time of prayer, pray there."¹ Bur Dubai is an older area of the city which is noisy with pedestrians, impatient taxi drivers, shopkeepers, and cafeterias. He nervously chose a particularly busy corner, hid a camera nearby and unceremoniously began to pray, directly pressing his body and face against the gritty asphalt. At one point someone placed a carpet at his feet. Reviewing the footage, it became clear that passerby had changed their directions in order to avoid walking in front of him. In the images, his snow white *kandora* on the dappled sidewalk is striking and sets him apart as a modern day pilgrim in a moment of surrender.

Just as Al Attar should not be labelled a documentary photographer, it would be short-sided to simplify these pieces by referring to them as documentary photography—they were not simply created in order to explain the steps of prayer or instruct non-Muslims about its practice. This project is a performance—the first stage in an ongoing journey in which photographer and camera intimately circle a pillar of faith.

-Danna Lorch

¹ <http://sunnah.com/muslim/5>

Reference
In-book reference

: Sahih Muslim 520 a
: Book 5, Hadith 1

