

a certain SHADE of BLUE

*In the studio with cornerstone Emirati
pioneer painter Abdul Qader Al Rais*

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Drinking from a glass of juice made from mangos heavy on the trees of his own garden, Abdul Qader Al Rais perches on a red leather chair in his home-studio, where completed paintings lean against every possible surface, spilling out into the French Rococo-inspired foyer. Behind him is a half-finished watercolour diptych — storm clouds charge across the top half of the canvas in temperamental greys and purples, while the lower portion remains as immaculately blank as the artist's kandora.

Turning towards the canvas he says, "I mainly work in abstract. However, each year I do one large scale, realistic watercolour, which takes special thought and patience. I want people to look at the watercolours over and over but always find something different in the details. If you don't love what you do, it becomes clear in the final result."

Nearly a decade before the UAE was founded in 1971 — when there weren't any artists, galleries, or museums to speak of and the oil-rich economy was yet to boom, a young Al Rais made the countercultural decision to become a serious artist. He vividly remembers sharing a desk at school with a high-achieving classmate who chided him, "Don't waste your time with art. Art won't feed you."

The prediction couldn't have been any further from the truth. Today Al Rais is one of the most established names in Emirati art. His paintings are in the British Museum's permanent collection, hang in private palaces, government buildings, and cultural institutions around the Middle East including Mathaf and Barjeel Art Foundation, and are regularly offered as state gifts to foreign dignitaries by HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. Just as significantly, local Emirati children study Al Rais' work in school and thanks to a collaboration with Dubai Culture & Arts Authority, one of his abstract paintings made up of 21 canvases can be encountered zooming across the rails of Dubai's metro, wrapped around



Above:
Untitled work,
circa 1998;
Right: The
artist in his
home studio

the train carriages for the public to consider during the grind of a daily commute.

As a painter, Al Rais, who is in his sixties, is known for his wide range of styles, from Impressionism to Abstraction. He is just as likely to produce a photorealistic portrait of a traditional Emirati home with wind towers, beckoning courtyard, and palm tree, as he is to capture the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world. It is this tension — between preserving a proud past and embracing a visionary present with true audacity — that defines both the artist's practice and Dubai's inherent spirit.

In 1965, well before the internet, accessibility to air travel and art education abroad were commonplace, it was next to impossible to study at Western arts institutions unless one was from a remarkably affluent family. As a result, the modern Gulf artists including Al

Rais, came up in a relative vacuum, aware of Egyptian, Syrian, and Iraqi schools of art, but unable to exchange ideas or critique one another's works with the ease of today. He reminisces, "I was in love with art even before I went to school. At that time I was using chalk and pencil. I was a small boy but I was already in love." As a teenager who had just lost his father, Al Rais was sent to live with his older married sister in Kuwait, where he was first given oil paints. He was first exposed to the European art canon as he thumbed through book after book in a local public library, discovering Rembrandt, Raphael, and Michelangelo, followed by the French Impressionists all of whom he continues to refer to as "my first teachers."

Al Rais' initial experiments resulted in portraits similar to those that could be found by peering over the shoulder of an artist anywhere in Montmartre at that time. However, by 1968 he found his own voice and began to ground his paintings in the Gulf rather than emulating European urban culture. A first oil on canvas from the same year reflects Impressionism's sensual use of light and dashes



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of bright unexpected colour, yet incorporates local architecture and custom — as a melancholy young man deep in thought leans against a rough coral stone wall, while an older man in a kuffiya headscarf approaches from the narrow, sun-dappled alleyway beyond. *The Wait*, an oil on canvas and three other pieces were selected by Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi for inclusion in the UAE Pavilion at last year's Venice Biennale as the earliest examples of modern Emirati art predating the 1980s.

After his return to Dubai, Al Rais became one of the founding members of the Emirates Fine Arts Society — the first artistic collective in the UAE, established in 1980. Based in the heart of Sharjah, the Society provided a platform for experimental collaboration to some of the country's first dedicated artists and continues to do so until today. Among Al Rais' contemporaries at the Society were a group of artists who ultimately became the cornerstones of the UAE

art scene: Hassan Sharif (a groundbreaking conceptual artist who was the first to introduce performance art), land artist Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, Dr. Najat Maki (the first female artist to acquire a related PhD abroad), and Mohammed Kazem (whose teaching continues to push new generations of local artists to push boundaries).

It may be natural to assume that this prolific painter must have never gone through a period in which he struggled to find inspiration. However, following his first group exhibition in the UAE, Al Rais experienced a 12-year drought from 1974-1986 during which he took on a bureaucratic office job and questioned the very basis of his practice. Hopeful that his colleague would return to painting, Hassan Sharif stored Al Rais' canvases in his own studio for years and was not left disappointed. A 1986 trip to the USA gave Al Rais the perspective he needed to paint once again: "I was travelling between cities by car. The landscapes there compelled me to visit an art supply shop. When I got back to the UAE I had a new way of thinking and my hand felt different. I hadn't been thinking big enough until I took that break from painting."

From then until now, Al Rais has created nearly nonstop, producing a

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prolific body of work across the decades that was recognised by Sharjah Art Museum in 2012 with 'Lasting Impressions' a prestigious annual exhibition that offers a comprehensive retrospective view of a single influential artist's longstanding oeuvre.

In 1990, the painter's work became less photorealistic when he began a lifelong love affair with watercolour, defined by a signature

blue which reappears in most of his works, often out of context, splashed across doors, alleyways, wind towers and other elements of classical Emirati architecture. Al Rais' brush returns often to the subject of half open doors leading into traditional Emirati homes, which as a matter of pride are perpetually open to guests, family, and strangers alike. Both painter and viewer stand poised on the heavy wooden thresholds, as if balanced between a proud yet simple past and a more complex, globalised future. From the mid-90s, he painted a series of abstract watercolours ongoing until today, many of which incorporate Arabic lettering in a complex thuluth calligraphy style. "Abstraction is an international subject. I wanted to ground the work in the UAE which is why I added

the calligraphy," he explains.

When it comes to the flourishing UAE art ecosystem, Al Rais recognises that Christie's first auction in Dubai in 2006 changed everything. "Before 2005, no one asked me to encourage their child to become a full time artist, but after 2007, many parents have come to me and asked for advice on furthering their children's careers in the art world," he says. In a remarkable Emirate in which the ruler himself is a widely published poet, Abdul Qader Al Rais has helped pave the way for UAE society to accept artists — though they will always remain intellectual outsiders simply by their introspective nature — as critical members of society.



Abstract watercolour on paper;
Above: Untitled work, circa 2012