

THE RETURN OF SHARJAH BIENNIAL

SB15 is the fruit of a three-year project to realise the dreams of its curator, who died in 2019.

The influential Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor was known around the world for thoughtful exhibitions that displaced Western art from its central position and retrained the global focus upon art from the Global South. For the Sharjah Biennial's 15th edition, set to open on February 7, Enwezor proposed commissioning 30 works as a way to meaningfully activate this critical platform through the development of new work. Titled *Thinking Historically in the Present*, it will feature works by more than 150 artists from over 70 countries, presented at 16 venues across the emirate. They will build on Enwezor's ideas about the postcolonial world and offer a critical reimagining of history as well as the present.

Enwezor became involved in the curatorial process for Sharjah's biennial in 2018, when Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, president of Sharjah Art Foundation and director of the biennial, visited the Dakar Biennale. There, she met Salah Hassan, a historian and curator whose work traverses many institutions in the US and the recently founded Africa Institute in Sharjah, he helped her approach Enwezor.

Enwezor already held a special place in Al Qasimi's heart. His 2002 edition of Documenta—an important exhibition held every five years in Kassel, Germany—is considered a turning point in recent contemporary art history. It was a coming-of-age moment for Al Qasimi, who left with plans to turn Sharjah's biennial on its head.

Although he was already unwell at that time, he relished the opportunity to curate SB15. However, it became clear that he would not see the journey to the end. He died of cancer in March 2019. To ensure the integrity of Enwezor's vision, Al Qasimi formed the SB15 Working Group: Salah Hassan; independent curator Tarek Abou El Fetouh; Ute Meta Bauer, a professor and founding director of the Centre for Contem-



Alo Wala (2015), framed photography by Hassan Hajjaj. Part of the *My Rockstars* series.

porary Art Singapore; Chika Okeke-Agulu, a professor and art historian at Princeton University; and Octavio Zaya, an independent curator, art writer and executive director of the Cuban Art Foundation. In addition, an advisory committee includes architect Sir David Adjaye and Christine Tohmé, a curator and the director of Ashkal Alwan, an artists' association in Beirut.

In line with Enwezor's belief in Sharjah Biennial's disruptive power, 30 artists have been invited to embark on major commissions "that explore histories that continue to shape our present". The number marks too the biennial's 30-year anniversary. They include John Akomfrah, a widely respected British-Ghanaian artist and filmmaker, whose works investigate memory, post-colonialism, temporality, and aesthetics and often explore the experiences of migrant diasporas; Hassan Hajjaj, a Moroccan contemporary artist who fuses portrait photographs with pop-culture imagery to question the position of the modern Arab; and Hajra Waheed, a Montreal-based artist whose multidisciplinary practice ranges from painting and drawing to video, sound, sculpture, and installation. Other notables are Kader Attia, a French-Algerian artist who works across diverse media, exploring the effects of Western cultural hegemony and colonialism, and Almagul Menlibayeva from Kazakhstan, whose photography addresses social and ecological issues across Central Asia.

The works are as diverse in geography as they are in theme and context but come together to straddle the gap between history and future, east and west, and individual and society.—AS

Sharjah Biennial 15: Thinking Historically in the Present, February 7 to June 11, 2023.

COURTESY OF ALO WALA AND HASSAN HAJJAJ; OPPOSITE: CHRISTOPHE VISEUX

Culture

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Artist studios offer insight into how the cogs of creativity turn inside the artist's mind.



JACKET AND TOP BY MR. PORTER, TROUSERS BY PAUL SMITH

CULTURE

A NEW TAKE ON ARAB CINEMA

Telling stories deeply connected to Emirati culture, Abdulla Al Kaabi is winning international recognition. The young filmmaker is just getting started on his big ambitions.

Words by Nasri Atallah
Photographs by Moez Achour
Styled by Jade L. Chilton

I have been looking forward to meeting Abdulla Al Kaabi, and it's not just because he's an award-winning filmmaker. Photos of his home in *Architectural Digest* and *Harper's Bazaar* look like the kind of maximalist art-filled place I dream of. As I marvel at the furniture and artwork at the Jumeirah address, he tells me this is a temporary place while his actual home undergoes work. He could have fooled me. It feels lived in and welcoming, filled with stories and personal touches. The lighting is dim. The vibe is serene. Al Kaabi offers me a fresh coconut to drink from as we sit down to talk at the dinner table. He is relaxed in a shirt and shorts.

I've caught him on the eve of a trip abroad. He's heading to the Cannes Film Festival as the ambassador for French luxury brand Cartier and for meetings around his upcoming film, *Camel Tears*, which is in development.

"The script is done," he says. "It's a love story between a Bedouin and his camel. I want to explore interspecies romance. It exists between humans and animals in Bedouin culture. A Bedouin would die for his camel and the camel would do the same. In today's modern society we forgot the importance of camels. They got replaced."

I volunteer that the Land Cruiser might be the culprit. We laugh. I feel lucky to be ushered straight into Al Kaabi's universe.

"It's an homage to this animal that made life possible here. If you were around 100 years ago and you met a Bedouin, a camel was an extension of his body. If that animal dies, he dies, too. It's his companion, food supply, transport, everything. Some of them live up to 50 years and they used to plan them to be born with the Bedouin." The film is presented as a stage play, a story within a story, told through the contemporary life of an Emirati woman who is an experimental theatre director putting on a play about a Bedouin.

"There's an immense generational gap between modern-day Emiratis and the generation just before them," Al Kaabi says. "The circumstances are so different. I want to explore the interplay between those two generations."

He has been exploring societal gaps since his 2016 debut feature, *Only Men Go to the Grave*. "Cinema is very different from any other form of media. You invest into watching a film. You come with a state of mind, coming there to open ideas, to see something new," he says. "That's what I did with *Only Men Go to the Grave*. It was controversial. It discussed cross-dressing, sectarian love, alternative love. It was a story of a family and its secrets."

The film was well received. It was screened at major festivals and took home a prize at the Dubai Film Festival in 2016, which came as a surprise to Al Kaabi. His little film had been a self-financed labour of love.

Camel Tears is less independent, with a producer and financing attached. "I'm on new ground," he admits. "It's a dance. Half of the job is how well you connect with the people involved in the project. A film is a collective piece of art. You have to honour that."

"I'm approaching the film with bigger hopes," he continues. "I'm hoping it reaches new heights, I have big aspirations for it. It's been almost three years since I started writing the film in Los Angeles in a workshop at USC [University of Southern California]."

The script already won a prize at the Sharjah Film Platform in 2021, selected from a crop of 100. "That was a big push for me. I'm getting a lot of support from Sharjah Art Foundation. They're fantastic," Al Kaabi says. "We're going to shoot it completely in Sharjah. The script naturally takes place there. We're also getting support from Shams [Sharjah Media City] and ADMAF [Abu Dhabi Music & Arts Foundation]."

Al Kaabi's stories explore the social issues he sees around him, but he is also invested in



TURTLENECK, TROUSERS, HAT ALL BY LORO PIANA



“In a country with 200-plus nationalities, imagine the stories going on here. The perspective we have is so unique. If you see what artists are doing in the UAE, it’s great. In film we can do the same.”

an ecosystem that can produce peers. When we discuss the lack of a major film festival, he suggests thinking even bigger, setting up a film institute. "In a country with 200-plus nationalities, imagine the stories going on here. The perspective we have is so unique. If you see what artists are doing in the UAE, it's great. In film we can do the same."

He sees a gap, with European funds ignoring stories from UAE filmmakers (Levant and North African films fare better) and an expectation from Arab audiences that independent films should only be one way, which I understood to mean either miserable or slapstick. "In France, cinema is a lifestyle. It's much more than entertainment. And we lack that in the Arab world," Al Kaabi says. He would know. He completed his studies in France, and his first short film, *The Philosopher*, featured legendary actor Jean Reno.

Al Kaabi also makes commercial films through his production company, El Booma Films. I ask him about the company's mascot, the owl. Various artworks in the dining room feature the nocturnal bird. "Growing up in Fujairah, we had a huge garden. At night I would always see owls," he explains. "My siblings would get freaked out. They hated it. But I was amazed by it. I loved the idea that we had very different strong emotions to the same thing." This seems like a through-line in Al Kaabi's work, looking at the same thing as those around him but having a fundamentally different reaction.

He describes an idyllic childhood in Fujairah. "The nature was beautiful. Rock mountains, the Gulf of Oman, the Indian Ocean beyond. I lived a very quiet life growing up. I have seven siblings and a large extended family. Life was very family oriented. I went to a tiny school. Just 200 students from grade one to 12. We spent most of our time outside in my grandfather's palm farm. It was a beautiful life." It sounds like the ancestral stories he is looking to

connect to through film, and a world away from contemporary Dubai, where we are sitting. "There was a quietness growing up," he says.

While his emotional roots are in Fujairah, his cultural roots are in Sharjah, where he studied at the American University. "I feel like I still get educated in Sharjah. Whenever I'm bored or I need nourishment, I drive to see the exhibitions over there. It's mind-blowing to get those world-class exhibitions. I feel quite fortunate for that."

He will be doing some educating of his own soon. He recently completed a commission to create a film for Dubai's new maritime-focused museum. It tells the story of a young boy dreaming of becoming a pearl diver in 1920s Dubai. It's an ambitious 360-degree experience, sprawling across eight screens. "It was one of the most amazing experiences I've had in this profession. I can't wait to screen it," he says. It sounds thematically linked to *Camel Tears*. "Yes, of course, I was in that kind of world already. I worked with a local producer, local art director, and local theatre actors. It was an introductory foundation to *Camel Tears*, without me knowing it."

I ask him what a dream year looks like, five or 10 years into the future. "I dream of winning an Oscar, a Palme d'Or, a Golden Bear. I have my eyes set on the big prize. I will not stop until I reach that. I like to set goals and I like to achieve them, both in my career and personal life," he reveals with refreshing candour.

For now, we are sitting amongst his boxes of art and memories. Al Kaabi is a creator but he's also a builder. Even though the moment is ripe for making films and seeking personal success, there is the sense that it is also an auspicious time to build something beyond oneself. "It's an interesting time to be here," he says of the Emirates. "Everyone's building something. We're all part of the process of making something. It's tangible and inspiring. I'm happy to be here." ■



BLUE BLAZER, SHIRT, TROUSERS ALL BY GUCCI

ENTER THE STUDIO

Artist studios are defined by their isolation. A glimpse inside offers insight into how the cogs of creativity turn inside the artist's mind.

Words by Anna Seaman Photographs by Christophe Viseux



JUMA AL HAJ

Al Haj's work is inspired by texts that resonate with him—religious texts, personal diaries, notes or letters. Through his work, he dissolves grammatical structure and leaves nothing but the conceptualisation of the words they symbolise.

“Someone once asked me, ‘without a studio practice, are you even an artist?’ and I replied that sometimes I don’t even like being in my studio,” Stephanie Neville explains before breaking into laughter. Neville, whose studio is a purpose-built structure at the back of her home in Al Yarmouk, Sharjah, is a textile artist who spends many hours on painstaking and repetitive tasks such as embroidery or needlework for her pieces.

She describes her studio as “a thorn rather than a rose”; a place that she has to come to rather than an escape. “It sometimes feels like ‘going to work’ rather than the more enjoyable practice of art-making and I have a love/hate relationship with it for that reason,” she says.

Nevertheless, she is very protective of her space, where she stores the fabrics, wools and materials that she hoards. “I might be able to work without a studio, but then I might be without a husband,” she laughs. “He’s a neat freak, and I’m a mess. My studio is definitely my own private space where I am allowed to be as messy as I want to be.”

Also located in an outbuilding, this time on the grounds of his family farm in Al Falah, Khalid Al Banna has a more methodical practice despite also working with reams of fabric and swathes of textile. Inside his calm, quiet space, Al Banna sits at a simple table to cut collages. Around him, completed artworks hang on the wall, giving a sense of studio and gallery in one. It is also a sanctuary for the artist, somewhere he can get away from life. “I feel free inside my studio, with no limitations and obstacles to producing new artwork,” he says. “It is a place for reading and improving my skills. Also, it is an intimate place for gathering friends and discussing art.”

The studio for any artist forms an integral part of their practice, but it doesn’t have to be a physical space. An artist is always creating, so in that sense, the whole world is their studio. But, seeing inside an artist’s working space can often bring insight into their work and personality.

Wael Hamadeh retreats to his studio, a room piled high with paints, canvases, rolls of paper and other materials, to access what he calls divine inspiration. “Actually, my studio is my brush mediation room,” he says. “I develop a relationship with my brushes that is like a long friendship. When I work, it is like meditating with the brush and it will take you to new dimensions. For me, it is like a euphoria to access a link to this divine source of energy.”

Hamadeh, whose studio is in his home in the Al Taawun area of Sharjah, close to the Dubai border, says that sometimes this connection to his materials calls him to his studio without his control. “It may sound strange but if I can get to a stage where nothing else distracts



A Dialogue with Substance (2021) Acrylic on canvas,
by Shrutika Gosavi. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



SHRUTIKA GOSAVI

Gosavi’s art is contemporary figurative using elements of symbolism and surrealism. Inspired by the human body, nature, spirituality, identity and perception, faceless human forms with exaggerated body parts and gestures often fill her canvases.





KHALID AL BANNA

Al Banna's work is shaped by his study of architectural engineering. Like an architect, he starts with a flat surface and builds works that are conceptually and materially storied. His formations, influenced by the principles of design, also seek to subvert them.

me, I can create anything I see in my mind. The world is so beautiful, a reflection of God's creation."

This spiritual and almost sacrosanct connection with the studio is something that Shrutika Gosavi relates to. "My studio is a sacred place for me. People who visit my studio always say that the place has amazing vibes, that it is very calm, and I think it's because I have spent days and nights working and putting all my energy there," she says. Her space is also strictly off limits to anyone else because of this delicate energy balance. "I even want the air inside to stay as it is, the way I have left it."

Elham Shafaei, a multidisciplinary artist who works from her living room in her apartment in Al Khan on the Sharjah corniche, says when she makes art she has to find a place of silence. "My works are about my experience as a human being, so they come from deep inside. The act of silence is important to me in my studio; it allows me to filter my thoughts." Often using the floor as her space to produce, Shafaei's workspace is an extension of herself, a place she describes as her "meaning of life".

Juma Al Haj also works from a home studio in the Halwan suburb, but unlike Shafaei he only gets to use the space at weekends. His work is related to journaling and most of it is text-based, so he is able to begin the creative process from anywhere. However, it is when he gets to his studio that he becomes fully functional. Inside his space, which is light,

airy and voluminous, there are things that trigger his nostalgia. "I've intentionally furnished my studio with pieces from my childhood, from which I find inspiration. My studio space is like a time capsule of cherished memories."

Artistic practice, however, is not always an individualised process. Some artists prefer to work in communities. In 2019, Nasir Nasrallah, an experimental artist, founded a group studio called Marsam Al Sahel, in an old villa in the coastal area of Al Rifaa. It is not only a place for work but also for discussion, social gatherings and impromptu critique sessions. "For me, it is important to be surrounded by others as it encourages experimentation," Nasrallah says. "The studio also allows me to be messy and playful, which is crucial for my practice."

Conversely, Tor Seidel, a German artist, photographer, filmmaker and author, has a utilitarian attitude to his studio. He previously rented a unit in an industrial zone, and having enough space to support his photography practice was most important. He is a professor at the Fine Arts College, University of Sharjah, where he now uses the lab and studio. "I have worked in many places. The atmosphere, of course, determines the attitude of how you work. But in recent years I've become more disciplined, and a place to work has more of a functional meaning, so I have to get things done." ■

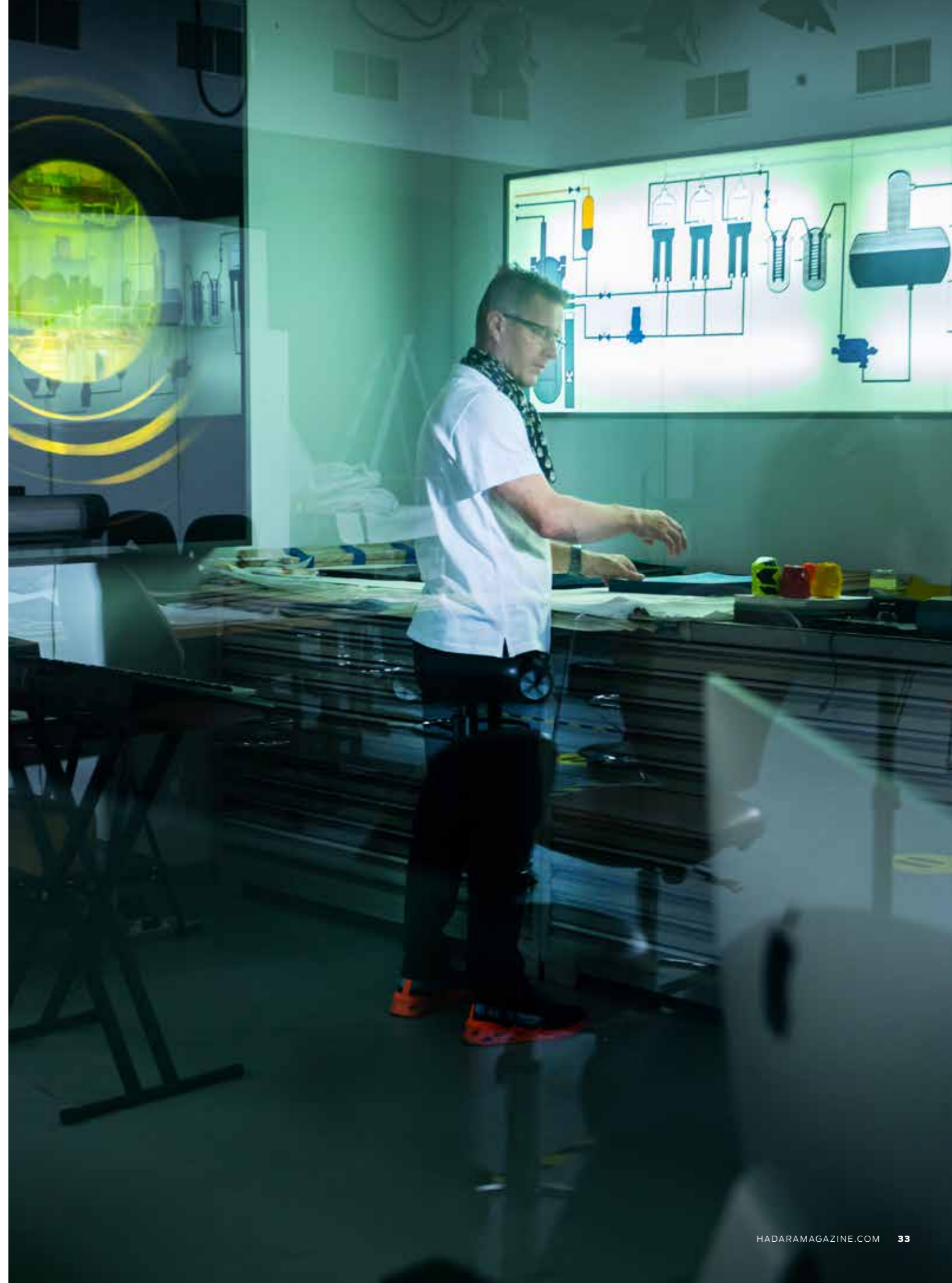


STEPHANIE NEVILLE

A South Africa-born contemporary conceptual artist, Neville works with textiles. She employs traditional handmade techniques to express a feminist identity, and delves into the complexities of diaspora, memory and absence. Her work is often confessional.

TOR SEIDEL

Since 2017, German artist and academic Seidel has lectured in the Fine Arts programme at the University of Sharjah. He has exhibited in Sharjah, Dubai, London, Miami and Berlin, among others. Previously he worked as a commercial photographer.





**NASIR
NASRALLAH**

For this Emirati artist and curator, art is about experimenting with and synthesising materials, be they physical objects, ideas or theorems. His work is a personal response to his environment and the people and places he encounters, notably the objects he collects.

ELHAM SHAFAEI

Born in Iran, Shafaei pursued her master's and PhD in Malaysia. For the latter she examined the role of melancholia in creative life. The notions of melancholia and loss continue to be integral to her artistic temperament.



WAEEL HAMADEH

Born in Lebanon in 1969, trained in Edinburgh College of Art, and living in Dubai since 1995, Hamadeh's paintings and sculptures are greatly influenced by the colours, folklore, and rich heritage of his homeland.

