

*National Pavilion United Arab Emirates at the 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia*

## **Veteran experimental artist Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim to represent the United Arab Emirates at la Biennale di Venezia 2022**

*Curated by Maya Allison, the National Pavilion United Arab Emirates' exhibition will showcase works from one of the founding leaders of the UAE's contemporary arts scene*

**28 September 2020, Abu Dhabi:** Ground-breaking painter, sculptor and land artist Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim will represent the United Arab Emirates at the 2022 edition of la Biennale di Venezia (Venice Biennale), in an exhibition curated by Maya Allison for the National Pavilion UAE.

Ibrahim is known for being one of the UAE's earliest experimental artists and an influential member of the UAE's now-historic avant-garde art community, which formed in the early 1980s. Through his form-led practice and handcrafted works, he responds to his environment, with keen affinity for the natural landscapes of the UAE. Major institutions that have acquired his work include the British Museum, Centre George Pompidou, Sharjah Art Foundation, Art Jameel, and Barjeel Art Foundation. His work was included in the Kochi-Muziris Biennial 2016 and numerous solo and group exhibitions internationally.

The National Pavilion UAE's 2022 exhibition will be curated by Maya Allison, Executive Director and Chief Curator of the New York University Abu Dhabi Art Gallery ("The NYUAD Art Gallery").

"I am inspired by the coasts, sierras and mountain lights of my home in Khor Fakkan, where my family has lived for generations," says **Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim**. "Here in the UAE we are surrounded by diverse and ancient landscapes as well as advanced urbanization. This tension is one of the concepts I explore in my work through organic materials, by allowing my subconscious to find the forms. I am delighted to be able to share my locally-rooted practice with a global audience at the Venice Biennale."

**Maya Allison** says, "When I first encountered a work by Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, its playful, abstract-yet-organic form electrified my curatorial senses. Later, discovering the depth and extent of his legacy was a watershed moment in my study of the UAE's contemporary art movement, which dates back half a century. Ibrahim continues to innovate, with a prolific daily practice and several flourishing bodies of work. He is one of the most important artists working in the UAE today, and has influenced generations of artists here. I am looking forward to an even greater international audience discovering this work with his solo exhibition at the Venice Biennale."

With this exhibition, the National Pavilion UAE is moving towards a more artist-led approach to curation in recognition of the strength of the UAE's artistic community. This comes as a reflection of National Pavilion UAE's growth as a pavilion, seen as a catalyst to the UAE's cultural scene. The selection committee appointed Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim for the 2022 exhibition and following discussions, the artist chose Maya Allison, one of the leading experts on the contemporary regional art scene, as his curator. This is not a first-time collaboration between Allison and Ibrahim, who have formed a strong working relationship across exhibitions such as *The NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery's But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community 1988-2008*.

"Since the UAE's inaugural pavilion in 2009, understanding and discourse around the UAE's incredible artistic community has grown immensely, encouraged by the research and platforms that entities like the National Pavilion UAE provide," says **Angela Migally**, Executive Director of the Salama bint



Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation, which commissions the National Pavilion UAE. “The UAE has so many artists whose work deserves global recognition, and the Venice Biennale is an opportunity for us to introduce them to an international audience on a new scale. We are making a conscious decision to move towards an artist-led approach for this reason, and Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim – one of the UAE’s most inspiring and unusual artists – is a very fitting choice for 2022.”

**Mariët Westermann, Vice Chancellor of NYU Abu Dhabi**, notes “We are immensely proud that the University’s Chief Curator, Maya Allison, will be curating the National Pavilion UAE at the Venice Biennale. We at NYU Abu Dhabi are deeply committed to contributing to the ever-evolving arts scene in the UAE. Similar to the spirit of the National Pavilion UAE, NYUAD and its Art Gallery shape our scholarly and creative endeavors through an intercultural and multidisciplinary lens. We look forward to the further engagement of our scholars, students, and the public with the work of Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim.”

The 59<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition of la Biennale di Venezia will be held between 23 April 2022 and 27 November 2022, under the artistic direction of Cecilia Alemani.

*Wetland*, the National Pavilion UAE’s upcoming architecture exhibition for the 2021 Venice Biennale, will open on 22 May 2021. The exhibition is curated by Dubai-based architects Wael Al Awar and Kenichi Teramoto, who are exploring a renewable, environmentally friendly cement alternative inspired by salt and mineral compounds found in the UAE’s Sabkha (salt flats). *Wetland* marks the National Pavilion UAE’s tenth exhibition at the Venice Biennale.

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**About the artist:**

**MOHAMED AHMED IBRAHIM**

Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim (b. 1962, UAE) is part of the UAE’s first generation of contemporary artists from the late 1980s, an avant-garde scene that included Hassan Sharif, Abdullah Al Saadi, Hussein Sharif, and Mohammed Kazem.

Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim came of age as an artist in the UAE in an era in which the visual arts were not yet valued culturally or taught in university degree programs. In 1986, when he met the late artist Hassan Sharif (a founding member of the influential Emirates Fine Art Society), Ibrahim was pulled out of a secluded practice and carved out unshakable friendships and collaborations that have formed the foundation for the creative community that defines the UAE today.

In March 2018 *Elements*, a survey of works spanning three decades of his practice, was presented at the Sharjah Art Foundation, curated by Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi. Ibrahim’s recent solo exhibitions include *The Space between the Eyelid and the Eyeball* at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai (2019), and a series of solo shows at Cuadro Gallery, Dubai (2018, 2016, 2015, 2013).



Ibrahim's public works include: *Falling Stones Garden* (2020), Al Ula, Saudi Arabia, commissioned by the Royal Commission for Al Ula and Desert X; *Grocery* (2019), Madinat Zayed Market, Abu Dhabi, UAE, commissioned by Ghadan 21, Government of Abu Dhabi as part of the For Abu Dhabi initiative; *Untitled* (2019), Reem Central Park, Al Reem Island, Abu Dhabi, UAE, commissioned by Aldar Properties PJSC in partnership with Abu Dhabi Art; *Kids' Garden* (2019), Sheikh Khalifa Medical City, Abu Dhabi, UAE, commissioned by Abu Dhabi Health Services Company; and *Bait Al Hurma* (2018), Al Mureijah Square, Sharjah, commissioned by the Sharjah Art Foundation as part of the exhibition *Elements*.

Ibrahim's group exhibitions include participations in *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008* at The NYUAD Art Gallery (2017); *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Yay Gallery, Baku (2015); the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Kochi (2016); the 53<sup>rd</sup> Venice Biennale, Venice (2009); the Sharjah Biennial (1993, 2003 and 2007); and the Dhaka Biennial (2002 and 1993). Select institutional exhibitions include the Kunstmuseum, Bonn (2005); the Sharjah Art Museum, Sharjah (2005 and 1996), the Ludwig Forum for International Art, Aachen (2002); Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris (1998); Sittard Art Centre, the Netherlands (1995), and the Exhibition for the Emirates Fine Art Society in the Soviet Union, Moscow (1990).

He received the first prize for sculpture at the Sharjah Biennial in 1999 and 2001 and has been a member of the Emirates Fine Arts Society since 1986, founding Art Atelier at the Khor Fakkan Art Centre in 1997. He has participated in artist residencies at Trans Indian Ocean Artist Exchange, Kochi Murzi Biennale, India (2016); A.i.R Dubai (2015); Le Consortium, Dijon, France (2009) and Kunstcentrum Sittard, the Netherlands (1994-1996, 1998-2000).

His works have been acquired by significant international collections, including Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah; Sharjah Art Museum, Sharjah; Art Jameel Collection, Dubai; Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah; Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha; Kunstcentrum Sittard, Sittard; The British Museum, London; and Le Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

Ibrahim is represented by UAE based contemporary art gallery Lawrie Shabibi. He works and lives in Khor Fakkan, United Arab Emirates.

### **About the curator:**

#### **MAYA ALLISON**

Maya Allison is founding Executive Director of The NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery and Chief Curator at New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD), a degree-granting research university in the liberal arts tradition. NYUAD shapes its scholarly and creative endeavors through an intercultural and multidisciplinary lens. The university has a deep commitment to support the work of UAE artists, and will launch an MFA program next year. Here, The NYUAD Art Gallery connects disciplines and integrates global and local dialogues in its exhibitions both in the main gallery, and the Project Space, as well as supporting emerging artists with the annual Christo and Jeanne-Claude Award.

Allison's curatorial specializations intersect two areas: artistic communities, and installation art. Her most recent project, *Speculative Landscapes* (NYUAD Art Gallery, 2019) gathered four rising UAE-based artists who work in immersive, experimental installation. Her curatorial projects that included book-length publications include *Slavs and Tatars: Mirrors for Princes* (Curator, JRP Ringier/NYUAD Art

Gallery, 2015), *Diana Al-Hadid: Phantom Limb* (Curator, Skira / NYUAD Art Gallery, 2016), *But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988-2008* (Lead Curator, NYUAD Art Gallery, 2017), and *Zimoun* (Curator, NYUAD Art Gallery, 2019).

Outside the university, she has guest-curated a number of projects in the UAE, including *Artists and the Cultural Foundation: The Early Years* (Lead Curator, with book publication, Cultural Foundation Abu Dhabi, 2018), a 30-year survey of 18 UAE artists.

### **National Pavilion UAE – la Biennale di Venezia**

Through participation at La Biennale di Venezia (Venice Biennale), the National Pavilion United Arab Emirates - La Biennale di Venezia (NPUAE) supports the arts and architectural practices of the UAE on an international platform, and promotes a cultural dialogue between the UAE and the international community.

The UAE's participation at La Biennale di Venezia commenced in 2009 with a national pavilion at the 53rd International Art Exhibition, and has continued in subsequent editions of the art exhibition. It is currently participating for the fourth time in the International Architecture Exhibition, which runs from 22 May 2021 through 21 November 2021.

The National Pavilion UAE also organizes the Venice Internship, offering opportunities to young residents of the UAE through a one-month internship on site in Venice acting as custodians and docents of the National Pavilion. Rotated on a monthly basis throughout the six months of the biennale, the different intern groups oversee the daily operations of the exhibition and participate in an educational program, run in partnership with Ca' Foscari University and other cultural institutions in the UAE and Venice.

The National Pavilion UAE - La Biennale di Venezia is commissioned by the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation, and supported by the UAE Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development.

### **Commissioner: The Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation**

The Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation (SHF) is a private not-for-profit foundation committed to the cultivation of a more creative, connected and thriving UAE community. Based in Abu Dhabi, SHF oversees a diverse portfolio of not-for-profit programs and initiatives spanning the arts, culture, heritage, human development and early childhood development in the UAE and internationally. Underpinning SHF's activities is a common ambition to invest in the knowledge and capabilities of the UAE people in order to support them to unlock their full potential.

### **Supporter: Ministry of Culture and Youth**

The Ministry of Culture and Youth works to enrich the cultural ecosystem in the UAE through initiatives and policies that stimulate the development of the cultural and creative industries and its contribution to the country's GDP, developing new legislation and policies that promote integrated media growth in the country and creating avenues for the youth to invest their capabilities in the aforementioned fields.

The Ministry of Culture and Youth is responsible for empowering and engaging the youth in the UAE by enhancing their leadership skills, involving them in decision-making process and programs, and giving them opportunities to contribute to the creative development of the country.

