

الجناح الوطني لدولة الإمارات
بينالي البندقية

National Pavilion UAE
La Biennale di Venezia

Press release

Conceptual art pioneer Abdullah Al Saadi to represent the United Arab Emirates at Biennale Arte 2024

- Emirati artist Abdullah Al Saadi will represent the UAE at the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia in 2024.
- Curated by Tarek Abou El Fetouh, the solo exhibition marks the artist's return to Venice following his project participation in the main exhibition at the 57th International Art Exhibition at La Biennale di Venezia in 2017.
- The 60th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia will take place from 20 April to 24 November 2024.

04 October 2023, Abu Dhabi, UAE: National Pavilion UAE has appointed Emirati artist Abdullah Al Saadi to represent the country at the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia in 2024, opening in April 2024. Abdullah's solo exhibition will be curated by Tarek Abou El Fetouh.

Considered a key figure in the development of contemporary art in the UAE, Al Saadi's prolific practice ranges from painting, drawing, sculpture, performance, and photography, to collecting and cataloguing found objects, and the creation of new alphabets. His work is informed by the UAE's landscape and his own family history, often exploring relationships between individuals and their natural and social environment. His thought-provoking body of work delves into personal constructions of meaning emerging from his immersion in nature, inspiring us to reflect on our relationship to the world. Starting in the 1980s, Al Saadi has consistently created the most distinctive and comprehensive body of work connected to the landscapes of the Arabian Peninsula.

In a statement, His Excellency Sheikh Salem bin Khalid Al Qassimi, Minister of Culture and Youth said: "The International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia is an important international platform for knowledge and cultural exchange. Since 2009, the National Pavilion UAE has firmly established itself as a leading platform for showcasing Emirati heritage and the rich tapestry of the local arts and culture."

His Excellency continued: "We will continue to support creative Emiratis as ambassadors for building cultural and creative communication with artists from various parts of the world, in line with the UAE vision and its mission. By empowering the next generation of creatives, we are building common grounds for the different cultures to meet and celebrate their diversity and creativity in the art and cultural fields."

"I draw my inspiration from my own story, my family history, and my environment," said **Abdullah Al Saadi**. "I am honoured to represent my country and show my work at the UAE National Pavilion at the Biennale Arte 2024. Since I was a student, four decades ago, art has been an integral part of my daily life. My art is the result of interactions with places, people, ideas, and aesthetics that I encounter every day where I live and in

my journeys. I find myself driven to document these experiences visually or in written diaries and contemplations, seeking to transfigure the ordinary with the passage of time.”

Some of Al Saadi’s most notable works include *Stone Slippers* (2013), a collection of slippers made out of stone accompanied by drawings, a visual metaphor of the life of a wanderer who is constantly travelling in search for something he ardently longs for, and which remains elusive. In *The Purl and Silk Journey*, presented in 2017 at the Sharjah Biennale 13, scrolls and drawings produced during in nature, mediated through the artist’s physical presence and the passage of time. In *My Mother’s Letters 1998-2013* (shown as part of his solo exhibition at Sharjah Art Foundation in 2014), the artist codifies a collection of objects left behind by his mother during visits to his studio—subtle markers of her presence in lieu of a written message in his absence, triggering in the artist the drive to create alternative alphabetical systems. His fascination with preserved historical manuscripts is expressed in *Al Saadi’s Diaries* (2016), a project presented in Venice in 2017 at the 57th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, titled “Viva Arte Viva”, curated by Christine Marcel.

The 2024 exhibition will be curated by Tarek Abou El Fetouh, with whom Al Saadi has recently collaborated on a public intervention in Expo 2020 Dubai with his exhibit titled *Terhal*, which stemmed from the artist’s experience with the UAE’s natural environment. Over the last 25 years, Abou El Fetouh has been dedicated to creating institutional platforms that provide opportunities for contemporary artists in the region through commissions, co-productions, touring projects, residencies, and events. His curatorial practice is influenced by classic Arab intellectual and scientific literature. Tarek Abou El Fetouh was chosen as curator for the National Pavilion UAE’s 2024 participation at the 60th International Art Exhibition at La Biennale di Venezia by the artist, in line with the pavilion’s ambition to encourage an artist-led approach.

“Abdullah’s practice has been, over the last forty years, a continuous engagement with changing environments as well as personal and cultural histories, creating points where they meet and interweave,” commented the curator **Tarek Abou El Fetouh**. “In his rich and diverse artistic practice, whether drawings, maps, diaries, or objects, Abdullah’s visual language remains recognizable through his passionate longing for immersion in nature; he constructs a unique relationship with landscapes, which goes beyond the familiar. I am delighted to be working with him once again, curating his solo exhibition for the National Pavilion UAE in Venice.”

Abou El Fetouh has been working extensively across the UAE since 2009 when he was appointed as one of the curators of Sharjah Biennial 9, and later curated a major exhibition titled *The Time is Out of Joint* for Sharjah Art Foundation, co-produced with Asia Art Center in Gwangju, Korea (2016). He also curated *Durub Al Tawaya*, an annual performance programme at Abu Dhabi Art (2013-2018) and the Public Art Programme for Expo 2020 Dubai, the first-ever curated permanent open-air art exhibition in the UAE (2021). Abou El Fetouh is currently Senior Curator and Director of the Performance Department at the Sharjah Art Foundation. He has also curated numerous exhibitions regionally and internationally, including *Rituals of Signs and Metamorphoses* (2018) and *Captive of Love* (2017) at Red Brick Art Museum, Beijing; *Lest the Two Seas Meet* (2015) at Museum of Modern Art Warsaw; and the exhibition of *Home Works 6*, Ashkal Alwan, Beirut (2013).

Angela Migally, Executive Director at the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation, said: “The Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation’s relationship with the National Pavilion UAE has spanned across several exhibitions showcasing the best of the UAE’s art and architecture practices. We are committed to supporting the UAE’s creative and cultural ecosystem and the Pavilion has been a crucial platform to share thought-provoking stories from the UAE at one of the most important global stages in the world, La Biennale di Venezia.”

Laila Binbrek, Director of National Pavilion UAE, said: “Abdullah’s central position within art history of the UAE is also reflected in his participation in two previous National Pavilion UAE group exhibitions, in 2011 and 2015. It is incredibly gratifying to include his work once again in this year’s Pavilion, this time for a solo exhibition, curated by Tarek Abou El Fetouh, who has spearheaded groundbreaking projects across the Emirates. We look forward to sharing yet another untold story of the UAE in 2024 through the lens of Abdullah’s work.”

The exhibition will be on view in April 2024 at the National Pavilion UAE’s permanent space at the Arsenale – Sale d’Armi in Venice.

The 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia will take place from 20 April to 24 November 2024, conceived by Brazilian curator Adriano Pedrosa, director of the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP). Pedrosa is the first appointed Latin American curator for the International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia and his exhibition will focus on artists who are themselves foreigners, immigrants, expatriates, diaspora, émigrés, and refugees, as well as those who identify as outsiders in other senses.

Currently “*Aridly Abundant*”, exhibited at the UAE National Pavilion at the 18th International Architecture Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, is on view until 26 November 2023. Curated by Faysal Tabbarah, it investigates what architectural possibilities can become possible when we reimagine arid landscapes as spaces of abundance. A [virtual tour](#) of the exhibition is available to view on the National Pavilion UAE website.

The National Pavilion UAE is commissioned by the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation and supported by the Ministry of Culture and Youth. For more information on the participation of the UAE at the International Art and Architecture Exhibitions of La Biennale di Venezia over the years and the open call process, please visit nationalpavilionuae.org or follow the National Pavilion UAE on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#).

-Ends-

For press inquiries:

Brunswick Arts

+971 56 503 4850

NPUAE@brunswickgroup.com

To join the conversation follow National Pavilion UAE on [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [Twitter](#) and use the hashtag #UAEinVenice

About Abdullah Al Saadi

Abdullah Al Saadi is an Emirati artist who lives and works in Khor Fakkan and is one of the “Pioneer Five” conceptual artists, who, in the 1980s, bolstered the contemporary art scene in the UAE and influenced a generation of artists in the region. He studied English literature at the United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain, before studying Japanese painting at Kyoto Seika University in Japan between 1994 and 1996.

Al Saadi's work ranges from painting, drawing, and the creation of lengthy artists' notebooks to the collection and systematic categorisation of found objects and the invention of new alphabets. A great affinity with nature and rural life informs the artist's practice, which explores local environments as well as intersections of personal and cultural history.

In 2021, his work was included in the permanent Public Art Programme of Expo 2020 Dubai. He also participated in a number of group and solo exhibitions, including the Sharjah Biennale 12 & 13 (2015, 2017); The 54th and 56th International Art Exhibitions of La Biennale di Venezia (2011, 2015); *Here and Elsewhere*, New Museum, New York (2014); *Al-Toubay*, the Sharjah Art Foundation (2014); *Emirati Expressions: Realised*, Manarat Al Saadiyat, Abu Dhabi (2013); *Languages of the Desert*, Kunstmuseum Bonn, (2005); Sao Paulo Biennale (2004); and *The Art of the Five from the United Arab Emirates*, Ludwig Forum for International Art, Aachen, Germany (2002). The artist currently lives and works in Khor Fakkan.

About Tarek Abou El Fetouh

Tarek Abou El Fetouh is currently Senior Curator and Director of the Performance Department of Sharjah Art Foundation. Abou El Fetouh's previous curatorial projects include the Public Art Programme for Expo 2020 in Dubai (2019-2021), *Durub Al Tawaya*, an annual performance event at Abu Dhabi Art (2013-2018); *Rituals of Signs and Metamorphoses* (2018) and *Captive of Love* (2017) at Red Brick Art Museum, Beijing; *The Time is Out of Joint*, Sharjah Art Foundation and Asian Culture Center, Gwangju (2016); *Lest the Two Seas Meet*, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw (2015); *Home Works 6*, Ashkal Alwan, Beirut (2013); Sharjah Biennial 9 (2009); *Roaming Inner Landscapes*, Bibliotheca Alexandrina and Garage Theatre, Alexandria (2004); *Windows* (a multidisciplinary festival of contemporary arts), Minya and Cairo (2004); *DisORIENTATION*, House of World Cultures, Berlin (2003) and *It's Happening in the Garage*, Jesuits Cultural Center, Alexandria (2000).

Abou El Fetouh established innovative initiatives in the Arab world and has sought to develop conversations among practitioners both regionally and internationally. He founded the Young Arab Theatre Fund (YATF), renamed Mophradat since 2015, which is a Brussels-based foundation working in the field of contemporary visual and performance arts. He initiated the Meeting Points Festival of Contemporary Arts (MP) in 2003 and curated the first four editions of the festival (MP1 to MP4), which took place in several cities in the Arab world. Abou El Fetouh served as the artistic director of MP7 with the Zagreb-based collective WHW (2013-2014), MP6 with curator Okwui Enwezor (2011-2012) and MP5 with curator Frie Leysen (2007-2008).

National Pavilion UAE – La Biennale di Venezia

The National Pavilion UAE is an award-winning pavilion that curates the untold stories about the UAE's arts and architecture through its participation in the International Art and Architecture Exhibitions organized by La Biennale di Venezia and provides a high-profile platform for curatorial concepts that address critical international conversations from a distinctive local perspective.

For every participation in the International Art and Architecture Exhibitions of La Biennale di Venezia, one of the world's most significant and rigorous cultural platforms, the National Pavilion UAE appoints and works with curators, artists, and contributors to conceive, research and develop an exhibition and accompanying publication that advance and preserve understanding of the UAE's cultural landscape.

Since 2009, National Pavilion UAE's exhibitions have explored the nation's cultural evolution from 20th-century experimental artists to the diverse contemporary scene. In 2021, National Pavilion UAE's exhibition titled *Wetland* curated by architects Wael Al Awar and Kenichi Teramoto, was awarded the Golden Lion for best National Participation at the Biennale Architettura 2021, coinciding with the National Pavilion's 10th participation in the International Exhibitions of La Biennale di Venezia.

In parallel with its exhibitions in Venice, the National Pavilion UAE engages with communities in the UAE to support the growth of the local cultural and creative industries, through public programming and professional opportunities. Alongside an extensive pool of artists, curators, researchers and partners who have contributed to its exhibitions over the years, the UAE's Venice Internship program has provided training and hands-on experience to more than 200 interns, many of whom are now successfully working in the cultural sector.

The National Pavilion UAE is an independent non-profit organization, commissioned by the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation and supported by the UAE Ministry of Culture and Youth.

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.

La Biennale di Venezia

La Biennale di Venezia was established in 1895 and is today acknowledged as one of the most prestigious cultural institutions. La Biennale di Venezia stands at the forefront of research and promotion of new contemporary art trends and organizes events in all its specific sectors: Arts (1895), Architecture (1980), Cinema (1932), Dance (1999), Music (1930), and Theatre (1934), alongside research and training activities. The history of La Biennale di Venezia is documented in its Historical Archives located at Marghera Venice and in its Library at the Giardini's Central Pavilion. The International Art and Architecture Exhibitions have had a new structure since 1998. In recent years, La Biennale promoted new educational activities, training programmes (Biennale College), conferences and panels in its headquarters at Ca' Giustinian, close to San Marco square.