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National Pavilion UAE  
La Biennale di Venezia



## PRESS RELEASE

NATIONAL PAVILION UAE AT THE BIENNALE ARTE 2024 OPENS WITH THE SOLO EXHIBITION  
*ABDULLAH AL SAADI: SITES OF MEMORY, SITES OF AMNESIA*

- The Pavilion of the United Arab Emirates at the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia stages *Abdullah Al Saadi: Sites of Memory, Sites of Amnesia*, an exhibition of work by the prolific, multidisciplinary Emirati artist Abdullah Al Saadi curated by Tarek Abou El Fetouh.
- Opening on 20 April 2024, the exhibition unfolds like a narrative with many chapters and conjures the atmosphere of Abdullah Al Saadi's studio.
- The exhibition invites audiences to encounter Al Saadi's singular world through a performed reader of his four-decade-long practice.
- The exhibition presents Al Saadi's chronicles of eight journeys in the wilderness, the beings and objects that accompanied him, and the sensory record of these journeys.
- A publication, titled *Sites of Memory, Sites of Amnesia* and edited by Tarek Abou El Fetouh and Rasha Salti, accompanies the exhibition.

17 April 2024, United Arab Emirates

The pavilion of the United Arab Emirates at the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia opens with *Abdullah Al Saadi: Sites of Memory, Sites of Amnesia*, curated by Tarek Abou El Fetouh. The exhibition features eight works by Al Saadi and offers a reflection on his decades-long artistic practice. Working from his studio in Khor Fakkan, United Arab Emirates, the artist immerses himself in nature to create vivid, subjective readings of the world and his place within it. Rather than simply drawing inspiration from nature, Al Saadi forms an intimate dialogue with his environment and embraces a close,

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multifaceted connection with the natural landscape. This process recalls techniques of composition in classical poetry from the Arabian Peninsula, in which poets journeyed into natural settings to write their poems. Sharjah-based curator Tarek Abou El Fetouh worked closely with the artist on a new reading of his practice for the Venice exhibition, examining the shifting dynamics of collective memory.

*Abdullah Al Saadi: Sites of Memory, Sites of Amnesia* conjures the atmosphere of the artist's studio and the rituals he practices with a set of reflections and associations that have formed over many years. The exhibition brings into focus the relationship between memory and forgetting, and between manifestation and disappearance. Visitors are invited on a journey of exploration of the works that are on display and others that are concealed in boxes and chests, awaiting discovery. Performers are present throughout the Biennale's run to engage with visitors and offer them an interactive, performed reader of the exhibition. These performers are professional actors as well as students from the Sharjah Performing Arts Academy who are also participating in the pavilion's flagship Venice internship program. They share stories and respond to the audience's interests to create individual trajectories through a web of narratives, concepts, texts poems, and the artist's diaries. Each story contains several chapters and leads to another, contributing to an immersive, evolving experience of Al Saadi's artistic practice.

The relationship between poetry and traveling has long been vital in Arab culture. The exhibition foregrounds Al Saadi's sensory and aesthetic interpretations of the natural environment of the UAE and draws connections with the tradition of classical poetry from the Arabian Peninsula, in which poets immersed themselves in nature before beginning their compositions.

Sheikh Salem bin Khalid Al Qassimi, Minister of Culture of the United Arab Emirates: "A presence at the Biennale Arte is an important part of the UAE's international cultural activities. It is simultaneously a way of bringing artistic practices from the UAE to the world, and of bringing an international audience to some of the most exciting and important creative work taking place here. Abdullah Al Saadi has been a crucial voice in the art scene in the UAE for more than forty years, and I am pleased that audiences in Venice will have a chance to encounter his work in this elegantly curated presentation. My profound thanks go to the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation and Tarek Abou El Fetouh for bringing this project to light, and to Abdullah Al Saadi for inviting us to join him on his journeys."

Laila Binbrek, Director, National Pavilion of the United Arab Emirates: "Throughout his long and multifaceted career, Abdullah Al Saadi has carried out an extended dialogue with the landscape of the UAE, and in particular with his home of Khor Fakkan. He is one of the most distinctive and influential

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voices in Emirati art, and his body of work, which is both meditative and actively engaged with its content, continues to offer new insights and invite new readings. Tarek Abou El Fetouh's innovative restaging of Al Saadi's studio in Venice, with a vital performative component, is a testament to the enduring relevance of this remarkable artistic practice. I am thrilled that UAE and international audiences alike have this opportunity to encounter Al Saadi's work in a new way. It is an example of the pavilion's ongoing work to tell untold stories about the arts in the UAE."

Tarek Abou El Fetouh: "I am delighted to be working with Abdullah on this exhibition. To represent the UAE in Venice is a great honor, and Abdullah's work over more than four decades offers an eloquent statement on the multilayered history of Emirati contemporary art on the world stage. In this exhibition, Abdullah invites us into his creative world, uncovering connections with the landscape and articulating a historical connection with the tradition of classical poets from the Arabian Peninsula. The performance brings a sense of immediacy and intimacy and constitutes a performed reader\* that underscores the inherent subjectivity of personal experience and memory. My hope is that it will lead to many new stories and multiple new directions for interpretation."

Abdullah Al Saadi: "Traveling and getting to know the environment that surrounds me has always been an important guiding force in my work. I have been making art every day for the past forty years, and I am glad to have this opportunity to share my artistic journey with audiences from around the world. In this presentation in Venice, I hope visitors will enjoy retracing some of the travels I have made in years past. I also hope this exhibition will lead to thinking about the world around us, and our place within it."

The opening ceremony was attended by Sheikh Salem bin Khalid Al Qassimi, Minister of Culture of the UAE; Her Highness Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, President and Director of the Sharjah Art Foundation; His Excellency Abdulla Ali Al Saboosi, UAE Ambassador to Italy; His Excellency Saeed Kherbash, Chief Executive Officer of the Arts & Literature Sector at the Dubai Culture Authority.

A publication, titled *Sites of Memory, Sites of Amnesia*, edited by Tarek Abou El Fetouh and Rasha Salti, and published by Kaph Books, accompanies the exhibition. It is richly illustrated and structured around a chronicle of Al Saadi's journeys in his own words. In addition to documenting the artworks, the publication expands on the exhibition's curatorial approach and invites writers to engage with Al Saadi's work. Contributors include Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, Dr. Aisha Bilkhair, and Younes Mashish (pseudonym), who offer their readings of Al Saadi's practice. The book is available for purchase at La Biennale di Venezia bookstores and online [here](#).

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The National Pavilion UAE expresses special thanks to the Sharjah Performing Arts Academy for their collaboration, which reflects the pavilion's ongoing commitment to supporting artists, curators, and scholars who present untold stories of the UAE on a global stage.

This exhibition marks the National Pavilion UAE's eighth participation at the Biennale Arte. The 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia is now open until 24 November 2024. A virtual tour of the exhibition is available on the [National Pavilion UAE website](https://nationalpavilionuae.org).

The National Pavilion UAE is commissioned by the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation and supported by the Ministry of Culture, with a permanent pavilion at the Venice Biennale's Arsenale – Sale d'Armi.

For more information on the participation of the UAE at the Biennale Arte 2024, please visit [nationalpavilionuae.org](https://nationalpavilionuae.org) or follow the National Pavilion UAE on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/nationalpavilionuae), [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/nationalpavilionuae), [Twitter](https://www.twitter.com/nationalpavilionuae).

#### Notes to editors

\*A performed reader is a spoken guide to Al Saadi's practice that is enacted by performers.

Al Saadi's creative process in relation to the traditions of poets from the Arabian Peninsula:

Abdullah Al Saadi's practice echoes ancient poets as he crafts not an objective record but a sensorial, affective, and aesthetic interpretation of the land. His immersive process seamlessly intertwines with the traditions of old poets, contributing to a rich historical continuum and collective memory.

From the perspective of Arab culture, in which the artist was reared, his journeys are close to a contemporary iteration of a practice that dates as far back as the pre-Islamic era and that was common to poets, whose wanderings in nature inspired them to write verse. Their poems often began with a description of the natural setting around them. In their understanding, nature was a portal to their own interiority and a meditation on their lived experience. The contemporary Syrian poet Adonis proposed a radical reconsideration of medieval, pre-Islamic (or *jahiliyyah*) poetry, in *Anthology of Arabic Poetry (Diwan al-shi'r al-'arabi)*, a three-volume florilegium published between 1964 and 1968, and seminal work of literary and cultural criticism, in which he argues that medieval poetry did not merely reflect a reiteration of the poet's social and material reality but, rather, that it transcended that reality to project a realm of possible other worlds.

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### 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); the São Paulo Biennale (2004); and *The Art of the Five from the United Arab Emirates*, Ludwig Forum for International Art, Aachen, Germany (2002).

### About Tarek Abou El Fetouh

Tarek Abou El Fetouh is currently Senior Curator and Director of the Performance Department of the 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

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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).

### **About the 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, including experimental twentieth-century artists and the diverse contemporary scene. In 2021, National Pavilion UAE's exhibition, titled *Wetland* and 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 two hundred interns, many of whom are now 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.

### **About the 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

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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.

### **About the Supporter: The UAE Ministry of Culture**

The Ministry of Culture works to enrich the cultural ecosystem of the UAE by supporting the country's cultural, art, and heritage institutions. It provides a platform for artists and innovators, promotes cross-cultural dialogue, and delivers dynamic productions and experiences that represent the UAE's rich and eclectic culture on a national as well as an international level. The Ministry's key mandates include investing in youth and empowering them and building a knowledge-based economy for a sustainable future.

### **About the Sharjah Performing Arts Academy**

The Sharjah Performing Arts Academy (SPAA) is a world-class facility galvanising communities, showcasing local and international creative talent, and leading the way in higher education for professional performing arts. Opened in 2019, and born from the progressive vision of His Highness Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, Ruler of Sharjah, SPAA is the only academy of its kind in the Middle East. SPAA offers the opportunity for candidates to study full-time Bachelor degrees in Acting, Production Arts, and Musical Theatre, in addition to the Trinity Level 6 Diploma in Professional Dance, with programs led by highly qualified professionals and educators using intensive, practice-based training. Through the generosity of His Highness the Ruler of Sharjah, fully funded scholarships are available for eligible students each academic year.

### **Pavilion of the United Arab Emirates**

60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia  
Arsenale – Sale d'Armi  
Venice  
Italy

### **Opening hours**

Giardini and Arsenale venues, 20 April–24 November 2024

Summer opening hours: 11 am–7 pm (from 20 April to 30 September. Last admission 6:45 pm)

Until 30 September, Arsenale venue only: on Fridays and Saturdays extended opening until 8 pm (Last admission 7:45 pm)

Autumn opening hours: 10 am–6 pm (from 1 October to 24 November. Last admission 5:45 pm)

Closed on Mondays (except 22 April, 17 June, 22 July, 2 and 30 September, and 18 November)

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Please find hi-res images and the full press-releases here: [2024 Media Downloads](#)

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