Rahel Aima

Dubai and Sharjah: four shows to see now

Lawrence Abu Hamdan's largest retrospective to date and Naeemeh Kazemi's painterly escape from quarantine are among the highlights

With the juggernaut of the Saudi art scene looming, Dubai is doubling down to assert its place as the wider MENASA region's key art hub. The city's busiest month, March, traditionally sees several fairs and satellites, as well as a spate of new museum and gallery shows all clustered around what's become known as Dubai Art Week. This year, several new galleries are set to open too. Here are some highlights to look out for in Dubai as well as in Sharjah, where the annual March Meetings program, focusing on the afterlives of the colonial, promises to be especially strong.



Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Daght Jawi: A Live Audio-Visual Essay. Performance view during 'Air Pressure', Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, Frankfurt, 2021. Photo by Christian Schuller. Courtesy of the artist.

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Lawrence Abu Hamdan, 'The Sonic Image' Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah Through July 4

Turner Prize winner and sonic investigator – or 'private ear' – **Lawrence Abu Hamdan** is at the forefront of artists working with sound and the politics of listening today. Using forensic techniques, the Dubai-based British-Lebanese artist reverse-engineers sonic leakages and traces to reveal otherwise-hidden armatures of surveillance and carceral control, as well as concepts of ambient, atmospheric violence. His multisensory installations span subjects from torture in Syrian prisons and the Nuremberg Trials to palatography (a technique used to identify which parts of the mouth are used when making different sounds), and the use of voice analysis for lie detection, now used by everyone from border forces to insurance companies. This major retrospective, Abu Hamdan's largest to date, asks how we can visualize what cannot be seen, only heard, with a central question: What does it mean to sonify images? In addition to a range of older works, the show includes a new commission, *Air Conditioning*, as well as a new site-specific performance that takes place in a nearby quirky 1970s building shaped like a flying saucer.

Naeemeh Kazemi, 'La La Land' series, 2020–21. Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai.

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Naeemeh Kazemi, 'La La Land' Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai Through May 1

Unable to access her studio during the pandemic, Iranian sculptor Naeemeh Kazemi turned to painting. The resulting 'La La Land' (2020–21) series depicts a riotous fantasia of an imagined refuge crowded with hothouse flowers, tropical foliage, tentacled creatures, and all manner of fungi with an immensely pleasurable more-isn't-enough maximalism. The works thrum with ecological and pandemic anxiety, invoked subtly through symbolism, references to classical painting, and a sense of being wholly suffocated by a too-bright, too-lush, tangled web of plant and animal life. The canvases are as transportative for the viewer as they were for Kazemi, as she tried to escape the confines of quarantine through painting.

Installation view of Shreyas Karle's exhibition 'Shifting the Center Table', Grey Noise, Dubai, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai.

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Shreyas Karle, 'Shifting the Center Table' Grey Noise, Dubai Through March 31

Goa-based Indian artist Shreyas Karle's exhibition 'Shifting the Center Table' provides a rare respite and a welcome change of pace from everything else around it. It takes its title from an Aveek Sen text that proposes the center table as a site of domestic and curatorial display, and it considers how the act of arranging objects on various surfaces affects our perceptions of space. There is no literal center table in this show, but the titular bit of furniture feels present all the same in its marked absence. The floor is a dusty cornflower blue. A plethora of household objects gathered from Karle's Goa studio – restive sage green curtains, some cotton blankets, a dish rack filled with ceramics, all manner of small vignettes of carefully arranged knickknacks, a selection of floor tiles – conjure up a space that is firmly domestic, and even well-loved. There is a sense of standing in a home where long conversations take place and which holds the memory of its inhabitants, albeit with a rather wistful air.



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Left: Vikram Divecha, Untitled Scene (Aimless Calligraphy, March 2), 2022. Right: Vikram Divecha, Untitled Scene (Aimless Calligraphy, August 3), 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai.

Vikram Divecha, 'El Dorado' Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai Through May 1

Abu Dhabi's El Dorado Cinema, which specialized in cinema from the subcontinent, was a beloved old institution whose founding predated that of the UAE. When it closed in 2017, Dubai-based Indian artist Vikram Divecha found a projectionist's diary as the theater was being cleaned out. Isolated in a dark booth for decades, the projectionist's figure echoes that of the alienated migrant workers who would flock the cinema nightly to get a shot in the arm of home – unacknowledged, then as now. In this exhibition, the projectionist becomes the main character for once. Marginalia reanimates the marginalized: Divecha uses the diary to create a fictional character that is invoked through oil paintings and works on paper which reference the saturated hues of South Asian cinema and overlaid with the projectionist's notes. Amidst the echoes of the UAE's recent 50th anniversary celebrations, they encourage the viewer to consider who we choose to remember and why.

Rahel Aima is a critic, writer, and editor based in Dubai.

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