



CULTURE

MATERIAL MAN

Taking a measured approach to reconstructing the past and presenting it as contemporary art, Khalid Al Banna straddles the generational shift of his home town Sharjah through his wide and varied practice.

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Above: DYNAMIC OF MOTION (2019). Al Banna uses textiles to address how traditions change and are diluted in a rapidly evolving consumerist era. Right: INTERSECTION 7 (2020). Intersection is a series of abstract works on paper.

Although he says he is from the city, the so-called city of Sharjah that Khalid Al Banna refers to from his childhood was vastly different to the skyscraper-filled metropolis of today. Born in 1975, Al Banna grew up in the ‘freej’ neighbourhoods that characterised the urban centres of the UAE in the years just after unification. Freej is a word that only exists in Khaleeji dialect, it describes the intimate, village-like settlements where everyone knew each other and life had a gentle pace.

Being raised in the freej but growing up alongside his country of birth that metamorphosed in front of his eyes had a huge impact on Al Banna. It made him forward thinking and ignited his creativity but simultaneously imbibed him with a sense of nostalgia for the rapidly disappearing traditions of his ancestors. Both these characteristics come through in his art, which is an homage to the past but constructed in a way that reflects the urban landscape that he watched spring up around him.

Al Banna’s studio is nestled away in an outbuilding on the family farm that falls beyond the scope of Google Maps, located down a dusty track on the desert outskirts of Sharjah city. Visiting him there, his yearning for a way of life once lived is clear. Yet, stepping inside his studio is a peek inside his hive-like mind. The walls are covered with his artwork, which is an exploration into colour and form. Perhaps the most striking of these are three circular panels hanging on the largest wall. They are a riot of texture and tone comprised of hun-

dreds of thousands of pieces of shredded material, sourced from the ubiquitous textile markets in downtown Sharjah. The fuchsia pinks, neon greens, deep purples, crimsons and blues merge together in an almost Pollock-like splattering of colour yet the artworks are thick with texture too. The material is the kind that Emirati women traditionally use to make dresses and would be worn under the black abaya. Adding layers to the bold and bright colours are embellishments such as traditional talli embroidery, metallic threads, crystals, beads and mirrors. As a final touch, Al Banna has stiffened the fabric with glue—sometimes adding a sprinkling of glitter too—and the finished products are not only pleasing to the eye, but finely balanced pieces of art that are rich in both composition and meaning.

Inspired by the memories of his mother, grandmother and female relatives and in an effort to safeguard tradition, Al Banna embraces his medium despite it being unusual for a man to work with fabric and textile. Indeed, Al Banna often gets pigeonholed into the wrong box by people first viewing his art. But he laughs off such confusion.

“People always assume I am a woman when they see my art; it is something I am used to,” he smiles. “However, for me the challenge has nothing to do with gender; it is much more about creating something that people take seriously. It is a challenge for me to convert these traditional handicraft materials, which represent the past, and to present them as pieces of contemporary art.”



THIS PAGE: IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST; OPPOSITE: IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND AISHA ALABBAR GALLERY, DUBAI



In fact, Al Banna's concept is neither whimsical or fluffy. He takes a measured and meticulous approach to his art, seeing it as building an edifice of his past, that can carry forward for generations.

"My early memories of my grandfather taking me on an abra to see his friends in Dubai or my father taking me to the souks in Ajman are so vivid to me that I can see them in my mind like a video clip," Al Banna says. "The past for me is something I treasure dearly and I'm using my art to remember the beauty of life back then. I am trying to bring the past into the present by transforming traditions into fine artworks." To achieve this, he relies on his education in architectural engineering.

"When I was enrolling in university there were no options for me to study fine art," he remembers. "The nearest thing to satisfy my love for drawing was architectural engineering, where I found I could express myself." Al Banna graduated in 1998 from UAE University in Al Ain. From there, he joined the Emirates Fine Arts Society and, fascinated by textures, began experimenting with the residue of Turkish coffee for his earliest works. Under the tutorship of Palestinian-Jordanian artist Yaser Dweik, Al Banna began learning how to use ink for etching and during this time found an obsession with the colour black.

"It began with the etching but then I saw all the tones that you can get from using only black, so I started to try to control this and spent many years working only in black and white," he explains. His monotone works also started his journey into collage, which is the one element that defines Al Banna's varied practice today. He has moved into many media, including glass, plastic, wire sculpture and

paper but they are all, in one way or another, collages.

"A collage is a construction," he says. "And my work is all about construction. In fact, it is architecture. I am not practicing real architecture as I studied in university but I am practicing my own kind of architecture. I am not restricted to the laws of physics or nature. In my work, there is more freedom. I am establishing my buildings, not in real life but in my imagination."

From his black-and-white paper abstract collages to his signature textile works, Al Banna's work has volume, depth, form and balance even if it is only on one plane. For his most recent exhibition, *Layered Contradictions* at Aisha Alabbar Gallery in Dubai, Al Banna entered a new dimension: sculpture. His latest series is based on the dome-shaped cage fishing nets called gargour. For these, he has wrapped wires with fabric and metallic threads and moulded them into the awkwardly constructed domes to represent the traditional fishing tool. The imprecise nature of the sculptures summarises the charm of Al Banna's work. They bear all his trademarks: tradition vs contemporary; colour; texture; and form, but also show a key part of his artistic practice—the desire to continually evolve.

"These are new but the series is ongoing, I feel that there is a lot more to come for me here. All my pieces have their own value but all of them have a relation to me and to my technique of building my own space in the art world. I am an engineer, I think I will always see myself as such, but through that I am working without any limits. There are no limits to my imagination." ■



Left: the artist in his studio. Above: GARGOUR 1 (2021). This sculptural composition has steel rods wrapped in multi-hued fabrics redolent of traditional fishing nets in the UAE. A continuation of Al Banna's research into Emirati heritage.