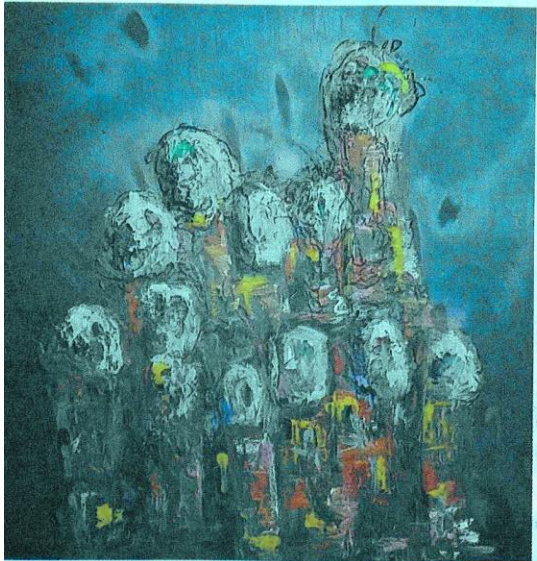


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Right: Hidden.



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TOUCH AND GO

Muhammad Yusuf profiles an artist who does not leave her subjects as they are, but touches them in new ways



Sanaa Merchant

Sanaa Merchant is a young artist who is keen to give a modern touch to traditional Arabian themes. She is an aficionado of calligraphy also – but renders it with a fouch of abstraction. It gives a personal impress to them.

In fact, if you think closely, you can see the evolution of regional art itself in her works – traditional to modern to abstract. Which is not a surprise, given her relationship to the UAE: she was born in Abu Dhabi, lives in Sharjah and works in Sharjah and Dubai.

She likes to use vibrant, bold colours, work in pen and ink compositions, in intense detail. Many things inspire her: architectural heritage, mosques, minarets, jewellery and ornaments, khanjars (traditional daggers) and coins. But most of all, she is inspired by her surroundings, since she was born and has been brought up here.

Merchant is very fond of featuring intricate patterns in geometrical shapes. Initially, she did medium sized water colour paintings. They evolved into large sized paintings on canvas.

Modern abstracts, Arabic letter forms and the contemporary style in lettering and abstracts are her current concerns. She is not one to leave experimentation – she is constantly trying out new ideas and styles to update her practice.

Having held several exhibitions - at Sharjah Ladies Club, Burjuman Address Hotel, Kempinski hotel, Mercato and the University of Sharjah, to name a few, Merchant has also been commissioned custom projects for Norton Rose, Kempinski Bahrain and other private clients. She also conducts private art classes, as she feels that society needs to be exposed to art.

“Art eases my mind and helps me stay focused”, she says. “It uplifts me and I believe that art is for everyone: one just needs to break free from the norms. It is an inspiring love affair where the canvas is the lover; the paint sweetly embraces; the colours are a vivid palette of moods and feelings and each painting is a different phase of the amour.”

“I develop a telepathic connection with each piece, controlled by strong emotions, which resound in a sudden blend of hues, only to become a lucid picture again. My work is about the imperfections that surround life, and still make it precious, as it is in the case of love”.

She talks to Time Out about her art

*** APART FROM BEING BORN INTO AND SURROUNDED BY IT, WHY ARE YOU INSPIRED BY ARAB CULTURE?**

I like the fact that social loyalty and family values are of great importance in Arab society, whilst self-reliance, individuality and responsibility are embedded there at the same time as well.

*** IN WHAT WAY DO YOU GIVE A MODERN TOUCH TO TRADITIONAL THINGS LIKE ORNAMENTS AND CALLIGRAPHY?**

In the past and even now, ornaments have a certain set way in their forms and designs. They are sold in souks even today. Being inspired from the cultural souks where I saw only brass and silver forms, I started to apply vibrant colours in the form of paintings to create depth and diversity which would attract viewers to see further and be enhanced by the details of the paintings itself.

When it comes to calligraphy I

was always being enticed with colour. I started using different forms of colours such as acrylics, inks and natural colours on various surfaces to see what effect they would give, thus moving from traditional norms to the modern.

*** ARE YOU A MORE INDOOR THAN OUTDOOR ORIENTED ARTIST?**

Yes, you can say that, since I prefer a quiet environment to think, experiment and concentrate on my art forms. Having said that, when the weather is cooler here, I do also sketch or paint outdoors; but this is usually with subjects that are more relaxing and I can use fewer tools.

*** WHY DOES COLOUR ATTRACT YOU?**

Colour is a visual language in itself that permeates our actions and reactions in everything that we do; it somewhat plays a major role in our sense of identity, the choices we make, in our relationships with the world that surrounds us.

Colour highly attracts the eye and focuses our attention to send across intended messages represented in a piece of work. Whether I want to create something bright or dull, simple or complex, theoretical or experimental, the persuasive power of colour attracts and motivates, creating strong visual statements, as the eye is usually drawn to what it can easily perceive. And what better way to achieve this than with the vibrancy of colours!

*** APART FROM COMMISSIONS, HOW DO YOU SELL YOUR WORKS?**

I participate in various exhibitions, fairs and exhibit in public areas in hotels.

*** ARE YOU A PROFESSIONAL ARTIST OR ONLY DO ART BECAUSE YOU LIKE IT?**

It started off as a hobby since I have completed my fine arts from Edexcel London back in school. Since then I have never looked back. I am not sure whether I classify as an artist or as a professional.

Art to me must mean more than itself - not just secluded to a type. It needs to have depth. I would rather say I am an artist since I love what I do. Having said that, when it comes to my commercial clients specifically hotels and interiors, one needs to deal professionally.

*** WHAT ARE YOUR FAVOURITE COLOURS? WHY?**

Blue, red and peach - I can create as many tones and gradients sparingly with them. They create accents and add vibrancy to my works.

*** HOW DO YOU GET YOUR IDEAS? BOOKS? ART FAIRS? GALLERY VISITS? READING? PHOTOGRAPHS? MEMORIES? ALL OF THESE?**

All of these, except reading. Visual impact is very important and artists should never limit themselves to just one norm. It is always good to explore and experiment.

*** WHAT IS THE SMALLEST SIZE YOU HAVE DONE AND WHAT IS THE BIGGEST?**

The smallest is 20 x 20 cm and the biggest is 3 metres x 1 metre.

*** YOU HAVE AS YET ONLY SHOWN IN THE UAE (WEBSITE INFORMATION). WHY HAVEN'T YOU EXHIBITED ABROAD?**

I have exhibited in Beijing in the Times Art Museum in 2014 (it is mentioned in the PDF on my website) and I do plan to participate further in museums in Europe and in places where the aim is cross cultural communication and exchange.