

Interview with artist Reem Al Mubarak, conducted at the artist's studio on 25.11.2023 by Prof. Katarzyna (Kasia) Dzikowska

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Speaker Name	
Kasia Dzikowska	Please introduce yourself.
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>My name is Reem Al Mubarak. I'm a visual artist and an author. I graduated from Zayed University back in 2020 and my practice is multidisciplinary, which is influenced by poetry and nature. I majored in visual arts, I am a good painter and sculptor, basically a little bit of everything. That's what I like to call myself. Very eclectic. I find myself very interested in human experiences and interactions with humans, which is why my work is mainly participatory based.</p>
K.D.	I like that word, eclectic.
Reem Al Mubarak	Yes. It's beautiful.
K.D.	How long you've been in the creative industry?
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>I started my artistic journey when I was nine years old, and I tried to get myself into art here and there by attending courses, and workshops. When I started high school, my teacher encouraged me. She saw something in me and she told me to pursue it further. Then I got into university and majored in visual arts and that was the final push. And that's how I found where I truly belong, I would say.</p>
K.D.	Was your family supportive?
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>My family has always been supportive, especially my mom. My mom comes from a designer background. She's an artist as well, she always knew that she wanted me to become an artist one way or another. Yes, they've always been supportive. My dad does not get art much, but he does attend workshops with me, he attends exhibitions and he asks me what that artwork means. My parents are pretty supportive.</p>
K.D.	How have you developed your art career so far?
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>When I graduated from university, I took a gap year, since COVID hit the year I graduated. Back then all the opportunities stopped for the art scene. Then I got into The Salama bint Hamdan Emerging Artists Fellowship, cohort eight, and that got me back on track and made me realize that art is my passion and I want to continue it.</p> <p>I've been producing art. I've been exhibiting, but also I took the time to focus on my writing as well because it was the time when I was able to reflect and just understand who I am as an artist. But also, I took the time to figure out who I am as a writer.</p>

	<p>I merge both disciplines together and that's how I see myself now. I feel like I'm a beautiful balance between poetry and art and how to combine them together. After SEAF I started working at Manarat Al Saadiyat as a programming specialist. I take that opportunity of being an artist to create a platform for artists and creatives out there, whether they were storytellers, artists, photographers, whomever has that creative spark, giving them the platform to be able to create the way I am able to create as well.</p>
K.D.	<p>It sounds like SEAF was very important for you. Can you tell us a bit more about it?</p>
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>Yes, SEAF was a very important aspect. It unlocked my nature because when you're in the uni, you stick to specific mediums. You have the creative freedom, of course, but you're limited to the materials and the discipline and see what you're exposed to. So when I got into SEAF, most of the artists around me were filmmakers and photographers, I learned a lot on how to think of materiality in a different way.</p> <p>Materials don't necessarily come by being tangible. They can come in so many different ways like projection, light and shadow. I took that and tried to understand what I wanted to do more, and that's where I started unlocking more of my organic practice, I would say. Now my practice is mainly spontaneous. It's very well thought of, of course, but when I work, I don't intentionally think of what I'm practicing.</p> <p>I go with the flow of whatever speaks to me in terms of my surroundings, then that's when I started producing. And I feel like I understood myself better because of SEAF and because of the critiques I was given and because of the support that was shown throughout the ten month program, the artists there were very supportive and being exposed to many artists around you, who come from totally different disciplines, it makes you stronger in a sense, where you'll be able to think outside of the box in a way rather than what you were raised on or what you were taught.</p>
K.D.	<p>I would like to delve a bit deeper into your work. Could you describe your process? How you coming to the real analysis of art?</p>
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>My practice is usually spontaneous, and very organic. I'm very moved by poetry, that's the key word I want to highlight, because when I think of materials, I don't think of just the material being on its own. I think of the story that the interior is coming from. No matter what I'm working on, whether it is a rigid object, I create a narrative that makes me fall in love with the material, take that material, and make it something different, while still linking it to the metaphors or the stories I've created in my head. And then taking that story and shapeshifting it into a story that serves others to create an energy where people can come experience the art as if it's their own, rather than being mine and just putting it out there. So that's I would say, the gist of my practice. It's basically a narrative.</p>
K.D.	<p>Tell me about your mediums and techniques. You've mentioned you work interdisciplinarily, but are there any techniques and mediums that you prefer to work with?</p>
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>Honestly, I love working with all materials. I don't stick to one, I don't like to limit myself to one thing. I like to experiment with unconventional ways of how the material could work.</p> <p>For example, my main technique would be rock making with plaster. I make blocks and then break them. Then take parts and carve them for hours to shape them into rocks. After that, I paint over them. This is me working with plaster or gypsum in a different way, rather than just</p>

	<p>puring it, I am breaking it apart and taking those broken parts and transform them into something else.</p> <p>I also like to work with objects that already exist and give them a new life in a way, rather than using the same purpose they were made to be. I would take them, and give another purpose. I don't have a specific material that I love to work with. A little bit of everything because I like to learn new techniques, new tips. I like to experiment with anything and everything I can get my hands on too. But it has to be something that's interesting to me.</p>
K.D.	Can you tell us a bit more about your art? Describe it.
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>My work is very inclusive. I create not for myself. It's an art not because I have a story to tell, but for my work to be able to hear the stories of everyone who interacts with my work. I feel that my work is a healing method, and I use it as a bridge between me and the audience to ask them to step into that bridge and consider rethinking whatever they're thinking about or whatever they think they already concluded.</p> <p>I give them that extra chance to consider rethinking and healing. That's mainly my practice. It's not for me as much as it's for the people around me. And I always tell the people around me that my practice is limitless and it's not something that I want to be rigid. I want it to be soulful and be able to be there for people. Because it's an extension of myself and I'm only one person I can't be there for everyone. What better way to be there for others than through my practice that could travel longer and further than I can? That's what my practice is about.</p>
K.D.	I can see the poet in you. That's your poetry, It's coming into your description of your art. And visually, I think that your work is very poetic because it's very delicate.
Reem Al Mubarak	It is, it's very soft. It's soft and it's very light-hearted, which is very important to me. People already have a lot on their plate. They don't want to come and experience art as something that's hard or heavy. They want to feel light. They want to be able to feel, hear and see. I feel often we forget that the art is not the main importance here. It is the audience. The audience are creating the intimacy between them and work. It you do that your job is done and you've done it beautifully. But if you create just for the purpose of having it out there and not respecting the boundaries or the audience, then I feel like you've missed that important element, which is the human interaction between person and art. What is art without humans and what are humans without art?
K.D.	Totally agree. What influenced your style?
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>I would say nature. I'm heavily moved by nature. I love nature in all its forms, whether it is the sky, the land, the rocks, rigid objects, or insects. That would be the main reasoning as to why I produce what I'm producing. It is being one with the ground and one with earth. I am a very meditative person and very spiritual as well.</p> <p>I often go out and look at Abu Dhabi or the UAE as a whole, just to realize how beautiful our country is. These kinds of ideas and the remembrance that we have the most beautiful creations around us make me want to create more and be productive even further.</p>

K.D.	And what motivates you to create ?
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>Poetry. Writing words in general, and people. I just love people in general. I love the small interactions I have with people, and it makes me want to do more and create more and write more, produce more. From a simple gesture like a smile to an actual physical interaction between me and a person that could literally push me to create a whole body of work because I get a glimpse of the person in front of me.</p> <p>And that multi-layers between a person and their inside is just so intriguing to me in terms of their ideas, their thought process, their energy, the way they love, the way they hate, the way they express themselves. To me, that's wonderful to look at. It motivates me to create more and push myself further.</p>
K.D.	I feels like you see yourself as a vessel rather than the main thing. A vessel where you can transform and show and amplify other people's feelings and desires and hope.
Reem Al Mubarak	Exactly. I wouldn't have described it better than you did. I do consider myself as a tool, speaking on behalf of others who can't express themselves the way we do as artists. We're very privileged to be able to communicate in so many different ways, whether you're a writer or or an artist or a photographer, you're able to. But not everyone has that privilege. I feel like I owe it to people to be able to be there for them with my work and be, as you said, a tool for them.
K.D.	Where do you think that ability to do art comes from?
Reem Al Mubarak	I feel like it comes from the core. It's not birthed from anywhere. And I do feel like people are scared of it sometimes, but not for the reason we think they are. They are scared of it because as I said, a lot of people can't express. When you're creating art, you're very vulnerable. You're putting yourself out to others and you are expected to have a tough exterior and be able to stand up for your art, speak for it, and be it's voice. I would say that's the fear.
K.D.	How art is vital to society.
Reem Al Mubarak	Art is important to society because there is no earth without art and no art without earth. It's just a beautiful harmony between them both. It's up to us as artists to take whatever is around us, create and use the metaphors or expressions that we're able to, to remind people of how the earth or how the art is in a way.
K.D.	Which part of the UAE are you from and how does that affect your work?
Reem Al Mubarak	I'm from Abu Dhabi and it affects my work deeply. It's crowded, yet peaceful, and being surrounded by so many people and buildings and noise and just energies everywhere is the reason I produce. But I am also interested in how Abu Dhabi is formed and how Abu Dhabi came about, This is why most of my work includes a lot of sand.

	<p>The main reason for that is that I believe that we're exactly like a rock. A rock does not form in a day. It forms over years, millions of years with a simple sand grain that could travel the entire world. And then they gather and they become a rock. To me, Abu Dhabi is like that. It started with a simple grain that transformed into the city we know and love right now.</p>
K.D.	<p>What is your connection to the desert?</p>
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>I love the desert. I don't usually go there a lot, but my grandfather used to take me to the farm and I was so interested in the sand and how it just is, and how soil forms. My work called Transparent explores that. This work talks about how when we were younger we used to be gullible and very transparent and as we grow older, we tend to build walls. However, the core inside us remains the same. No matter how old you get, you're still the child like soul. That idea came about when I was in the desert. I started making rocks out of materials there, using charred wood and materials like that.</p> <p>I've realized how in tuned I'm with the desert, although it's a place that I don't want to visit much. But when I do, I get a burst of creativity and inspiration, I want to produce more. Some people look at the desert as something that's dead or just blank. Whereas I see it as something that has a lot of potential, something that's so alive to the point where I just want to be one with it in a way, by creating and producing. Be there and be the tool or the voice for the desert as well.</p>
K.D.	<p>You feel very connected. Do you think it comes from visits with your grandfather?</p>
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>I think yes, I believe that I am tuned to it because it has a lot of memories. I also think that the more I think about sand in general, the more I realize how valuable it is. And it's so much more than something that's thrown away or something that we step on. But I would say yes, I'm definitely in touch with it and I feel like I belong to it.</p> <p>Because of memories I have of my grandfather and the joy that was there and how he taught us to see something as a potential of how it could be something rather than nothing. He always taught me how to look at the glass half full rather than half empty. I started loving every single thing that I see in the desert. Something as simple as an ant walking. And what could that mean? What did that ant have to go through to work all of these things? I would say it would have again, a spiritual journey and a very meditative and very well thought of.</p>
K.D.	<p>How much does connection to the desert affect the feeling of being an Emirati?</p>
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>It affects me very much. I would say when I travel anywhere that's in a desert or it has anything that has to do with the desert, I instantly remember Abu Dhabi. It's not because Abu Dhabi has a lot of sand per se, but because of how we grew up learning our history. Especially being in a very young country, only over 50 years old. It just shows me there is no limitation and no stop as to what could happen in the future. When I look at the desert outside, I feel very connected to it, I remember our past and how we became who we are and where we are today and that's because of the desert.</p>
K.D.	<p>You've talked a bit about childhood memories of the desert with your grandfather. Do those memories differ from your current experiences of the desert?</p>

Reem Al Mubarak	<p>Not really. It just makes it even more valuable. The older I grow, the closer I get to the desert. It is not different from how it was. I feel I connect to it more now. Because I got to know that my grandfather loved it very much.</p> <p>What is different is how I used to look at it as a young girl. I used to think that, I love playing with the desert or I love playing with the sand, but now I understand that it has so much more potential for what the sand or the desert could be. This is what makes me feel more connected to it.</p> <p>I don't look at the desert as just one thing but as parts and elements. And what these elements mean and what stories they have to tell. What did people think of the desert in the past and what do they think of it now? How mindset of the ideas between me and my grandfather are very connected and that makes me even love it even more. The older I get, the more I feel connected to it.</p>
K.D.	You talked about elements. Can you can you tell me what those elements are?
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>Yes of course, a big part of what I think of the desert, and it's very present in my practice, is the rocks and how rocks are formed. That's a big idea that I have throughout my practice and when I think of the rock and how did it forms, it comes from sand grains.</p> <p>I think of the desert as a whole, and instead of looking at it as just sand, I think about sand grains, where they come from, and how much they traveled. That idea just sparkles something within me, and it makes me excited. It is just so beautiful when you start realizing how connected you are with everything around you. You become more appreciative of the littlest of things and you need to remind yourself of that because it's just a magnificent thing to feel.</p>
K.D.	What does the desert mean to you?
Reem Al Mubarak	The desert is home. That's what it means to me. It's everything that makes a home. It's warmth, it's depth, it's life, it's everything, and it's inspiration. It's comforting. It's memories. That's how I would describe a desert. It's definitely my home. And everything that makes a home is a desert.
K.D.	Does the desert play a role in your artistic practice?
Reem Al Mubarak	It does in many different ways, not just the desert, but soil in general. Whether it is fertile or not. It is very present in my practice in so many different ways. Whether it is in one of the pieces I painted using sand; beach sand and desert sand and what those two mean as we are right in the middle between desert and sea. Sand is very intriguing to me. I started experimenting with it, but in a very subtle way, rather than being consumed by it. I started thinking of it metaphorically.
K.D.	How much do you identify with the desert and what does the desert mean to you?
Reem Al Mubarak	Desert means a lot, not in just an artistic way but as a person. I feel very connected to it, but that doesn't mean that when I go to greenery or forests, I do feel that way as well. I do, not just

	because of the greenery, but because I realize what's under, which is the soil and the sand and that again reminds me of the desert and where we come from.
K.D.	It's almost like getting back to this idea of a rock, or of a home, or of an anchor.
Reem Al Mubarak	Yes, whatever the foundation is. I keep remembering the foundation and I feel like that was implemented within me at a very young age, knowing the history of Abu Dhabi and how it came about. You understand the story that happened first, and that was the foundation for it, from a desert and to what we have right now. It's the same wherever I go. I just keep going back to that idea.
K.D.	Do you think that the desert is treated as a symbol?
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>Yes, I do think that people treat the desert as a symbol, I think it's so much more than that. They see it as a destination or a postcard place. Something so cliché, but it's so much more. It's not just something you sit on and watch the sunset. It has a story and also, as Emiratis, we owe it to our desert to listen to the stories it has to tell whether it is something we want to or not.</p> <p>People often look at the desert as a symbol, something to just sit, watch, and leave rather than try to understand what it is and be one with it. Once you take that extra step to understand what the desert is, you start to respect it so much more, love it, and grow a sense of healthy obsession with it. That's why I feel like people look at the desert as a symbol because it's the main natural habitat of the UAE, whereas it's so much more.</p>
K.D.	Does the desert have a symbolic impact on creative people in the UAE?
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>I think it's not a symbol as much as inspiration and I've seen it a lot. I see it present in so many people's practice, but in so many different ways, whether it was something as direct as sands or something as abstracted as colors. I do believe that the art scene here is heavily immersed and inspired by the desert, whether it is in a very direct way or indirectly.</p> <p>I see a much more conceptual connection with the desert, spiritualistic rather than realistic. When I see artists portraying the desert I wonder, is that connected to the fact that 100 years ago, Orientalism was so popular in Europe and, and people here, artists here don't want to get put into that box of orient, whatever it means.</p> <p>I think people are in tune with the desert here in the UAE. Our history and how the UAE is fast developing, but still keeping our identity and them noticing or realizing the changes that is the link. Artists still want to keep that in their practice, even if they didn't do it intentionally, it somehow does flow within their work and I feel like as an artist, you do get inspired by your surroundings quite a lot because it's something you see a lot and it's something you're bound to experience.</p> <p>It is the main thing and no matter where you go, no matter what you do, it's exactly as you being you. So as artists here in the UAE, we're inspired by the desert, it's engraved and it's kind of imprinted within us. No matter what we do, no matter how much we practice, no matter how contemporary we go, there will be a line or a thread within or a practice that is linked to the UAE one way or another, to the desert specifically.</p>

K.D.	Does the desert have a personality?
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>It does. Of course, it does. How could it not? The desert has a big personality, a beautiful one as well. Every spot you go to you realize how the personality differs. It's different when you're walking in the early morning. It's different when it's the afternoon, it's different when you start doing your practice with it.</p> <p>It's different when you're meditating, it just shows you different characters that the desert has. Once you decide to understand it and take that extra mile to listen, whether it was metaphorically or literally.</p>
K.D.	Is the desert still authentic?
Reem Al Mubarak	<p>It is still authentic and it is the way it's always been. It's just up to us to add ourselves into it in a way, not by manipulating the desert and changing it and transforming it into something else but how to build up on it and make it even more beautiful in a way.</p> <p>A closest example would be Manar Abu Dhabi, the public art, the one in Yas. They literally took part of the desert and brought it in a city amidst the mangroves. And that, to me, is kind of giving value to our desert and reminding the people around here of how valuable it is. So I do believe 100% that it is still authentic and that it's up to us now to add more to it in a way that doesn't take its authenticity, but make it even more valued and loved.</p>