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## A Conversation With Curator Nada Raza On Online Art Consumption

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The selection of works exhibited at this year's Abu Dhabi Art questioned the primacy of the material, following the shift to consuming art online. Despite the possibility of viewers dismissively scrolling past without appreciating the content, virtual art fairs present opportunities for [curators](#) to research and capture fleeting, insightful moments of life.

Nada Raza began her career in 2005 in Dubai, when she curated an art show from Pakistan for The Third Line. She then proceeded to join the international art curatorial team at Tate Modern, helping build their collection of South Asian modern and contemporary art and developed transnational research across the collection. Currently, she is the Curatorial Advisor at [Alserkal Avenue](#) in Dubai and working on her doctoral research at the Courtauld Institute in London.

Entitled *A Picture Held Us Captive*, Nada's latest venture at [Abu Dhabi Art](#) this year took its name from a quote by the late philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. The theme for the exhibition was digital exhaustion and the online art experience, which is heavily reliant on the primacy of the easily digestible image. "Virtual galleries are simulacra," says Nada. "It is completely reliant on your ability to visually process 2D images even in a 3D or VR environment."

The curator drew inspiration from her nephew who is visually impaired, yet instantly recognises her voice and footsteps despite irregular visits. "I am amazed at his learning experiences," she says. "I began to contemplate sound and memory, particularly text, because of the online experience is completely dependent on language."

*A Picture Held Us Captive* was based on existing works by artists shown in the UAE. One artist was featured every day during the online edition of Abu Dhabi Art, allowing for a focused pause within an array of digital distraction. Nada shares insights on five specific artworks displayed at the exhibition: "I chose works by Farah Al Qasimi, Michael John Whelan, Sarah Al Mehairi, Fazal Rizvi and Augustine Parades. These works vacillate between hope and despair, emotions we can all relate to, especially during the current pandemic."

Farah Al Qasimi's video *Everybody was Invited to a Party* (2018) playfully deals with the slippages of language. A video from 2007 by artist Michael John Whelan follows a solitary character who obsessively watches films of the sky; highlighting the monotony of routine and a yearning for freedom. Hailing from Abu Dhabi, Sarah al Mehairi's online series of conversations with fellow artists brilliantly acknowledges the urgency of building a community through artistic and critical engagement, while Fazal Rizvi's *Blue Drawings* are an exquisite combination of digitally rendered image and text, accompanied by an audio soundscape, an excerpt from a longer work. His practice engages deeply with distance and memory. Augustine Paredes's project was produced during the lockdown and is a sensitive and personal response to accepting the loss of loved ones.

Art galleries and institutions, both in the UAE and around the world, are making a conscious effort to represent varied cultural experiences by including people who identify with those communities. Nada, optimistic about the changing attitudes of curators says, "I'm happy to see more diversity and inclusion in art spaces. Next, it is imperative to build radically different institutions to support our work rather than trying to fit into pre-existing paradigms."

The growing popularity of virtual art events has led to an adjustment for artists, curators and viewers alike. The new medium has clear benefits and challenges. Digital exhibitions allow audiences to be critical and contemplative. Using google analytics, curators can measure who is viewing the work and how much time is spent on each piece. It has also become easier to connect with artists and large audiences.

Nada strongly urges art institutions to improve the platforms and end-user experience; and let go of the idea that things will 'return to normal' as this will result in the loss of massive online audiences. In future, the curator would like to commission work that is designed only to be experienced online, pushing the boundaries of the digital medium and engaging with technology in critical and innovative ways.