

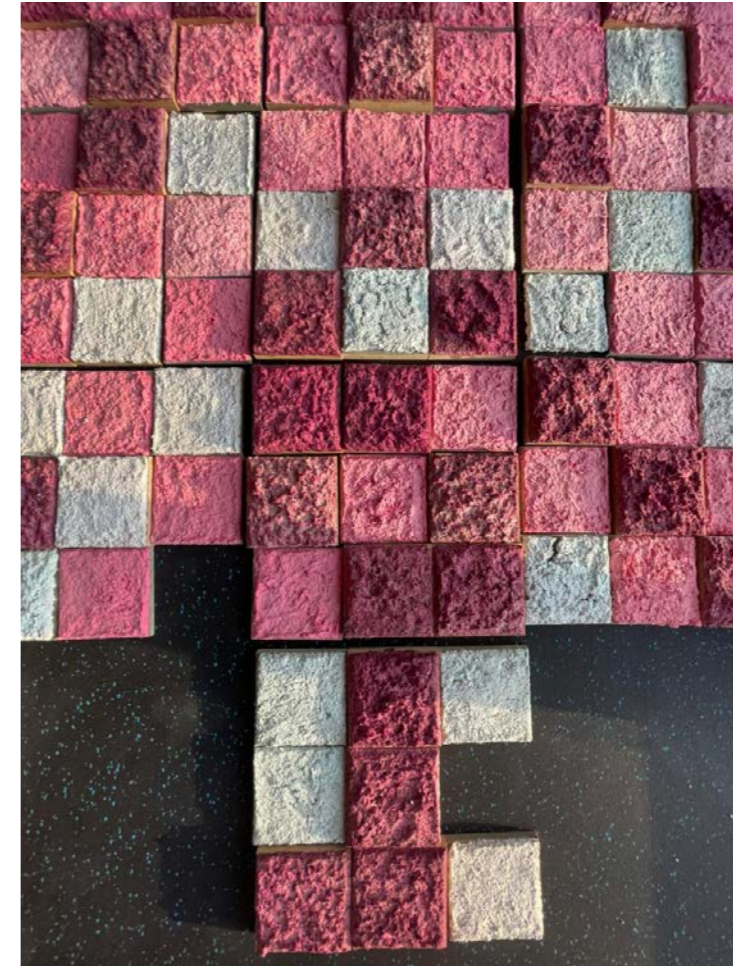
Khaled Esguerra. *electra: 005 (i just need to keep moving)*. 2021. From *Encapsulated Volume 1: Photoessays on Khaleejiness*. Published by SWALIF. Image courtesy of SWALIF and Salem Al Suwaidi

YOUNG VOICES FROM ABU DHABI

Young Abu Dhabi creatives are seeking to build spaces for artistic community and discourse while continuing to pay homage to their city. A growing demand to move beyond reliance solely on the big institutions is crescendoing into impressive youth-driven progress at grassroots level.

Words by Vamika Sinha

Zuhoor Al Sayegh. *You Carry Her Name*. 2021. Acrylic painted paper pulp, glue and plants on MDF and wood panels and garden sprinkler. Image courtesy of Warehouse421



What do we mean when we talk about the “Abu Dhabi art scene”? A layperson is unlikely to move beyond the presence of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, on the almost-banally spotless Saadiyat Island, designated as the city’s cultural district. Or Warehouse421, the dynamic port gallery at Mina Zayed, and Manarat al Saadiyat, a museum five minutes away from New York University Abu Dhabi, which has its own shiny art gallery. Despite their frequently impressive multi-layered shows and events, these spaces, with their cool glass exteriors and clinical white walls, are at both a physical and metaphorical remove from the bustle of downtown – the historic streets, alleyways, cafeterias and neighbourhoods teeming with the people and narratives that inspire so much art in Abu Dhabi.

Given the UAE’s aggressive development and international branding as a global hub, the city has changed rapidly in only a few years, with the arrival of the big cultural institutions numbering among the myriad high-profile infrastructural projects. But for many young people it’s their tender attachment to the Abu Dhabi of their daily memories – shuttling between islands, strolling along the corniche, after-school moments in multicultural residential enclaves – that matters most. Pouring this real-time nostalgia into their practices, these young creatives are yearning for the community and space – both physical and otherwise – to discuss and express what they are feeling and making, without having to depend on the usual outlets.

One space that challenged the status quo was Bait 15, an artist-led initiative founded in 2018 by five UAE artists: Maitha Abdalla, Afra Al Dhaheri, Hashel Al Lamki, Kris Mortensen and Tony Bragg, later joined by Zuhoor Al Sayegh after the latter two’s departure. Located in a villa in downtown Abu Dhabi, Bait 15 contained a downstairs exhibition space, library and room for social activity, with studios

upstairs. Its atmosphere was starkly different from the pristine formality of the big government-run institutions: warm, honey-coloured light fell onto unfinished works in progress and the paraphernalia of daily creativity – brushes, buckets, half-squeezed paint tubes, English and Arabic books. The collective provided emerging artists with a homely, resource-filled space along with mentorship, peer support and camaraderie.

In August Bait 15 announced that it would be closing, as its founding members would be focusing on their individual careers. Many mourned the loss of one of – if not the only – truly grassroots art space in the city, one that had challenged institutions and lobbied for more nuanced and inclusive discussions on the art scene. Leaving a vacuum behind, Bait 15’s closure stoked further discourse on the necessity for more homegrown artistic initiatives.

In response, the hum of change is growing louder and more insistent. The creation of the social media-led cl-u (Creative Linkup) is helping to connect young people from varied creative fields to find opportunities to collaborate, in turn fostering stronger bonds within the scene. Meanwhile, the emergence of SWALIF, a new youth-run art platform and publishing house, has inspired fresh explorations of art and literary development, Gulf identity and lateral frameworks of critique, while also functioning commercially. Its successful partnership with Manarat al Saadiyat produced the *Khaleejiness* exhibition (see page 24), which showcases work by several local emerging artists and provokes conversations on what it means to make contemporary art in and about this region.

This natural buildup of grassroots development has shown how such initiatives can successfully work together with larger institutions to bolster the capital’s art scene. Care and support are key, especially with regard to the young people who are striving to channel their love for their city while also advocating their right to develop as creatives in a place where they have found immense meaning and inspiration.



Above: Ali Al Hosani. *Mise en Abyme*. 2020; Right: Ali Al Hosani. *Untitled*. 2020. Images from *Encapsulated Volume 1: Photoessays on Khaleejiness*. Published by SWALIF. Images courtesy of SWALIF and Salem Al Suwaidi

Ali Al Hosani

Artist

My experience at Bait 15 showed me how much potential the Abu Dhabi art scene and culture has for further growth. This year it has expanded exponentially with the emergence of the cl-u (Creative Linkup) and the SWALIF collective, and I am thankful that I was able to participate in these initiatives. But there is still so much more room to develop. We need to embrace critique and start addressing difficult discussions surrounding our collective and individual identities through art.



Amina Yahia

Artist

Abu Dhabi is the perfect place for emerging artists and curators. Its young art scene is inclusive in a way that enables us to experiment boldly within our practices and exceed many creative limitations. Personally, I have found a lot of opportunities for mentorship and growth. There's a general love of art and a supportive community, which I particularly felt during my time at Bait 15. Artists like Hashel Al Lamki and Maitha Abdalla have been central to my progression as a young artist this past year.



Amina Yahia. *Te'rafy? تعرفي؟ (Do You Know?)*. 2021. Oil on canvas. Image courtesy of the artist



Arthur de Oliveira

Artist

Abu Dhabi's art community is still relatively small, so it's common for artists to hear about each other and then to meet down the line at some event or programme. The frequent exhibitions and investments in regional talent are also providing a fresh perspective to the city and its complex social structures. Most of the artists in my own circle grew up in the UAE, whether as expats or nationals, and are now creating an interesting contrast between art generated within the country and art that has been imported.



Above: Arthur de Oliveira; Right: Arthur de Oliveira. *The Jiu Jitsu Project (Presence is Alignment)*. 2021. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Images courtesy of the artist

Banat Collective

Independent curators

Our collective was created with young people in mind, who are steering Abu Dhabi in a thrilling direction. We have realised however that there is a huge demand for safe and conducive spaces in which to have uncomfortable conversations, such as on identity and gender, which is what we think our current exhibition on womanhood, *As We Gaze Upon Her* (see page 24) at Warehouse421, is going to do. Our goal is to showcase such underrepresented, underexplored narratives and bring people closer together.



Above: Banat Collective (Sara bin Safwan and Sarah Alagroobi). Image courtesy of Warehouse421; Left: Aarti Sunder. *Setting Fire to the Sun*. 2019. Video, colour and sound. Image courtesy of Warehouse421



But not for too long because healthy neuroticism is an asset in the work place. Focus that stress, motivate yourself to work.



Fatema Al Fardan
Artist

The future of the art scene in Abu Dhabi is inquisitive and interrogative. It currently exists through big-name institutions, but the future seems to promise space for more organic opportunities and initiatives, featuring art and artists that are localised to our SWANA region. The role of young people here is to continue to help create sustainable artist-run spaces and to lead grassroots initiatives that create pockets of safe space for discussion and constructive critique.



Fatema Al Fardan.
Photography by
Vamika Sinha

Salem Al Suwaidi
Collector and founder of SWALIF

Young collectors typically don't have much purchasing power, but I find that collecting is slowly becoming more accessible. With SWALIF, I aim to sell works by regional artists at accessible prices and to encourage my peers to collect. As MENA-based young people, collecting pieces from our own community is the best mechanism through which we can establish an ecosystem that highlights and celebrates our generation, while keeping within our limited resources. Abu Dhabi is moving, but we need to make sure that its people are part of the journey.



Below: Salem Al Suwaidi;
Right: Almaha Jaralla. *Khalifa City
landscape*. 2020. Acrylic on canvas.
Images courtesy of Salem Al Suwaidi



Fatema Al Fardan. *My Turn*. 2019. Archival print on fine art paper. 40.64 x 60.96 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist

Virtual exhibition view of *Alternative Dimensions*.
2021. Curated by Maitha Al Omaira



Maitha Al Omaira. Photography by Salama Al Falasi



Maitha Al Omaira
Independent curator and artist

Over the past few years, I've felt growing reassurance as the Abu Dhabi art scene has blossomed. The future looks promising because the present already is, and I think the country sees that too. As creatives, we are given immense support by the country; they are investing in young people and trusting us with the future. What we see today is only a fraction of what the art scene is on the way to becoming, for which I'm very grateful.



Sarah Almehairi. *Gentle Giants*. 2021.
Paper on mat board. 84.1 x 59.4 cm.
Image courtesy of Carbon12 Gallery

Sarah Almehairi
Artist

As a young multidisciplinary creative, now is an exciting time to be a part of the Abu Dhabi art scene. The increased support for the literary arts, performing arts and research, areas that haven't always been adequately recognised, is especially welcome because, as artists, we often switch and flow between different creative fields. It is also encouraging to see more artist-led initiatives bringing new voices to the landscape and adding to that diversification. These homegrown initiatives are essential to a developing art scene



Sarah Almehairi.
Photography by Mashael Alsaie