

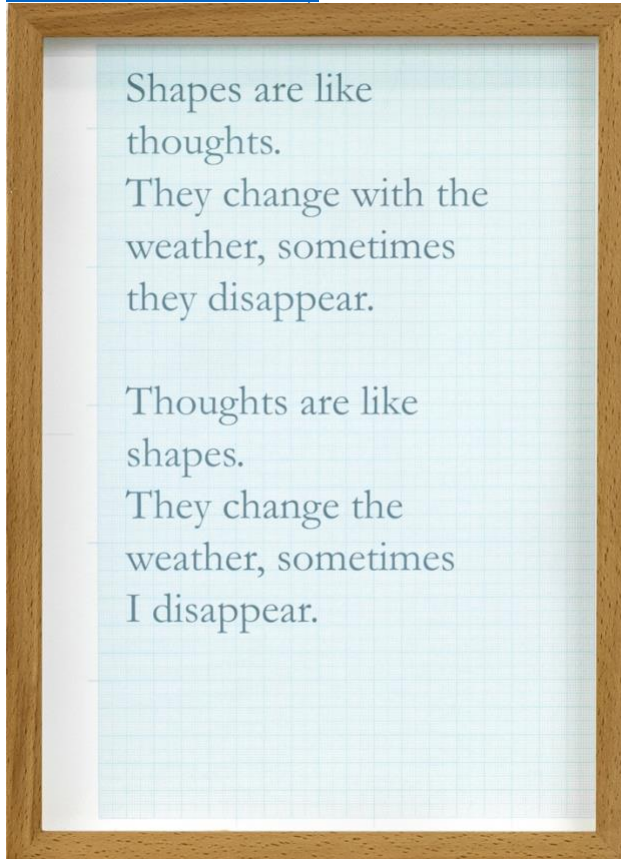
The National

27 September 2022

Sarah Al Mehairi celebrates the art of walking in latest exhibition at Dubai's CARBON 12

By Afshan Ahmed

<https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/art/2022/09/27/sarah-al-mehairi-celebrates-the-art-of-walking-in-latest-exhibition-at-dubais-carbon-12/>



The Emirati artist steps forward with *When the Ground Was*, having hit the pavement around the world for inspiration

Walking is cathartic. It can slow people down enough for them to notice that crooked street sign, the streak of colour on a white wall, weeds growing between brick pavers or a communal bench missing some slats.

These are the types of momentary observations enjoyed by [Sarah Al Mehairi](#) during her walks, which have been amplified in her new solo exhibition *When the Ground Was* at [CARBON 12](#) in Dubai.

Inside, six sculptures made out of concrete pavers, which are laid out in abstract shapes on the gallery floor, bring to mind the popular 1980s video game Tetris. For an artist who wants people to disassociate themselves from things they are conditioned to accept, Al Mehairi is delighted by this response.

"I invite people to be 'unlearners' because I want them to challenge common knowledge, like what time it is or what an object is," says the artist, 24, who is one of the youngest Emiratis to be represented by a gallery in [Dubai](#).

When the Ground Was is a tangible diary of all the inconsistencies Al Mehairi takes note of during her walks and the patterns she draws from them. The pieces in the exhibition reimagine those fleeting thoughts and moments.

The artist hands out an activity sheet to visitors to help them navigate the space, though she believes that they'll find their own routes in the progression of her works in the exhibition.

It begins with a concrete paver floor installation, *Un-Everydayness*, a wayfinder with sharp corners that forces observers to move in the direction of her next series of works on the wall.

Shapes Are Like Thoughts opens with text written down as post-walk reflections, from which a series of shapes embossed on paper is inspired. "I wanted to start off with something sensitive. I've tried to capture shadows of things that I noticed during my walks, so you can't see it straight on," she says as she approaches a frame with the outline of a stop sign, recreated from images taken during these walks.

From here, one's gaze instinctively turns to the centre of the space, where another concrete paver sculpture *Watch Your Step* is laid out on the floor, this time with certain blocks painted in yellow and red. The colours are reminiscent of caution and hazard warnings on the road. At the far end of the gallery lie three more concrete paver slabs that are consciously imperfect. The subtlety in the awry block combinations within the pieces are meant to raise questions.

"With these sculptures, it is all about irregularity," she says. "Within them I look at the idea of a mishap on the floor. I'm trying to understand whether the person laying the blocks wants to make their mark or if they simply ran out of colour. What was the intention behind it?"

Al Mehairi's aesthetic unearths the narrative of a city by bringing its overlooked characteristics to the foreground. Playing with geometry, lines and grids, she invites the viewer to take a non-linear walk in the spaces that she visited. She experiments with breaking the grid in the *No Day Without a Line* and *Adjustments of the Daily* paper series, which includes collages, acrylic gouache and embossing of lines and shapes — all a constant reminder of strolling through urban areas.

"A lot of these works are derived from walks in Abu Dhabi, with some of them in different countries," says Al Mehairi, who studied art and art history at the New York University Abu Dhabi and started researching the project in 2018.

"Some of my research is from walks in other countries, like Norway and the United States. No matter what time or place, the only thing that stays constant is the actual act of walking. The stimuli may be different but at the end of the day, when my work sits together, it creates a non-place."

Digressing from her usual subdued colour palette, these walks have brought a pop of bright colours into her works. *Momentary Palettes*, the final series of works on paper in the exhibition, is a documentation of colours in flowers, fallen leaves, a wrapper on the ground or the sky on that day and the emotions they evoked.

For the first time, the artist has dabbled in large paintings. *When the Ground Was a Changing Season* and *When the Ground Was a Celebration* are canvases fusing abstraction with imagery of literal objects, like a cigarette butt, hazard language and confetti on the ground.

The artist's association with CARBON 12 began in 2019 when she presented her university capstone project *Between*. She has also been part of group exhibitions at Tashkeel, Warehouse 421 and Sharjah Art Museum.

Al Mehairi says her works are meant to celebrate her environment in some way. She will present further art born out of walking this November as a participant in this year's Abu Dhabi Art's Beyond: Emerging Artists programme.

"This did not start as my practice at all," says Al Mehairi. "It was just the idea of wanting to go for walks and they generated all these ideas. After a while, this became my practice and now I say that walking is my practice. I can't have a practice without walking."