

# ArtReview Asia

Maryanto



Nature, culture and politics in Indonesia

# Mohammed Kazem

*by Stephanie Bailey*



*Photographs with Flags, 1997,*  
inkjet print on Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Rag  
Pearl 320 gsm paper, 50 × 70 cm

The Dubai-based artist wants us to feel what we touch, see, hear and perhaps even taste. His diverse and generous photographic body of work, much of it plumbing memories of growing up in the fledgling emirate, aims to show us how



*Directions 2002* (detail), 2002,  
colour video installation with sound, chromogenic prints  
and acrylic on wood panels



above *Tongue*, 1994, silver gelatin print  
on mounting board, 42 × 42 cm

facing page *Legs and Arms*, 1995, inkjet colour print  
on Hahnemühle paper, 46 × 70 cm



It was 1984 when Mohammed Kazem – fifteen years old, and one of six children of a Dubai cab driver – walked into the Fine Arts Society in Sharjah (which had been established only four years previously) with the intent to join. “I’d already learned everything I could at school,” he tells me with a smile as we sit down in his studio located in the Al Quoz industrial district in Dubai. At the Fine Arts Society, Kazem became a student of artist Hassan Sharif (with whom Kazem maintains a close friendship) as well as poets, writers and journalists, growing up amid the first wave of a new art in the newly established UAE. He describes the experience as like being in an academy or a salon, where those at the vanguard of the UAE’s artistic scene lived and worked together. At the time, the UK-educated Sharif was translating manifestos issued by various artistic movements, including Kazimir Malevich’s Suprematist manifesto, and publishing them in newspapers in order to demystify the strangeness of a new language of culture developing in this Gulf state, informed by knowledge being brought in from elsewhere by those who had gone to study abroad.

Sharif has a memory of Kazem at fifteen, which writer Christopher Lord recounts as part of his catalogue essay for *Sound of Objects*, Kazem’s 2015 exhibition at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde: Kazem had fallen in love with a classical guitar on display in a shop window in Dubai and was spending long stretches staring at the coveted instrument through the glass (since he could not afford the guitar, the young Kazem was not even permitted to enter the store). Apparently his fixation with the guitar was a desire to sense its vibrations; a wish to feel things out in the world that reflects an inquisitive approach the artist says has been present since he was a child, when he used to collect random items he found on the street – what he imagined to be fragments of both complete and evolving lives.

Indeed, it was Sharif who photographed some of Kazem’s most characteristic actions, many of which took place during a time when Kazem was working in the military. These include the well-known series *Tongue* (1994), which shows Kazem sticking his tongue into various familiar spaces, from the mouth of a water vessel to a keyhole.

### Kazem’s fixation with the guitar was a desire to sense its vibrations

In another series of photos, *Wooden Box* (1996/2016), we see Kazem standing behind and engaging with a single shelving unit of roughly his dimensions; in one he stretches to his full height, the top compartment framing his head; in others he bends his knees, crouches, looks around. The images are incredibly direct. They capture the essence of the encounter Kazem had with that guitar some ten years earlier, as he gazed through a glass barrier, wanting to touch an object that enthralled him. In these images, Kazem implores viewers to feel what they see. In the case of *Tongue*, a man, like a puppy, tentatively tastes the things around him. In the case of *Legs and Arms* (1995), we see Kazem’s feet and arms arranged in various configurations, captured in a tight frame against a backdrop of verdant grass. The work refers to Kazem’s childhood memory of entertaining himself when he was sent to the garden as punishment. In one closeup shot, the composition is abstract enough to create a sense of empathy; a sense, even, of sitting there, on that grass, looking down.

Fundamentally, Kazem has developed a practice that is fully engaged with the notion of feeling. But feeling manifests in different ways, according to different projects. As Lord has noted in his catalogue text, the artist has approached sound as a ‘self-made catch-all term to describe some otherwise hidden, inner kernel of his experience’ – for Kazem, sound is a feeling above all, and it is this hidden, inner kernel of experience that Kazem manifests in his work. His installation for the UAE Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale was an excellent diagram of how these two notions – sound and feeling – come together. Within a small, dark circular space, which visitors entered through a circular opening, a 360-degree projection of the sea circled a round platform upon which viewers could step. The projection offered a silhouette of a ship’s bow in front of this platform, creating the sensation of standing at the edge of a vessel, gazing out over the sea. On the floor, interchangeable GPS coordinates shone in blue from a dark screen, itself placed within a pool of water.

The work is immersive and personal. Embedded within the composition is an event that occurred when Kazem was eight years old, to which he referred to often in 2013 when discussing his Venice



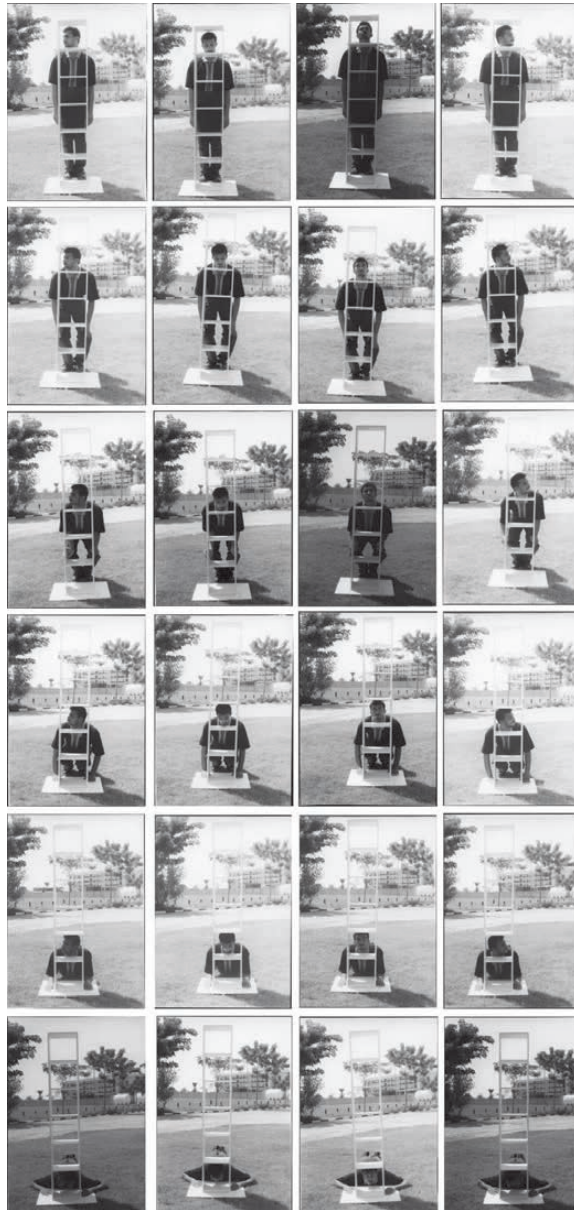
participation. As a boy, he fell into the Arabian Gulf while on a fishing trip, lost for some 30 minutes in deep water before a search party found him. He fell into the water again in his early twenties: he remembers the disorientation, and his need to know where he was, as he gazed out at the open water around him. ('I do not want to be lost again,' he told the writer Noelle Bodick in 2013.) The experience shaped him profoundly, and it informed the space he produced at Venice: an elevation of a personal memory into a heightened feeling, tempered by the passing of time. As Bodick writes, for Kazem, 'being lost... is not without conceptual interest or poetic value. It is, in fact, the theme – the loosening of the self into an environment.' This notion of loosening the self in the world lies at the core of Kazem's approach to his multifaceted practice. In a 2002 iteration of the project *Directions*, he threw ten wooden panels, inscribed with various GPS coordinates, into the sea, watching as the waves took them in different directions – what he considers a metaphor for a place expanding into the world, beyond its physical confines, crossing – as Kazem explains – borders.

There is a simplicity to Kazem's approach: a minimalism that reflects a clarity of intention. In the case of the *Directions* project, he describes using technology and nature as a way to "tell a story of the water", using "the GPS as a tool to raise social, political, natural and environmental issues". Here, form is key – for Kazem, throwing panels with GPS coordinates that correspond to physical locations into the sea is a form of abstraction, in that the location recorded by the coordinates is located elsewhere, always untethered to its permanent site of origin. It is a way of representing the world – and being in it – without using words at all. This of course relates to the way Kazem interprets his own concepts, sound included. "To me, art is about showing a way of thinking," he tells me. Speaking about the intention behind a series of paperworks in his studio that Kazem began during the 1990s (and which he further developed during a 2014 residency at the Watermill Center in New York), in which scratches have been scored into the paper's surface with scissors, he says: "The idea behind the series is how to visualise a sound. When you scratch you create a sound, but

the sound disappears; so then it becomes about how to keep the mark of the sound, and how to keep the sound as an infinite movement."

This understanding of sound as an infinite movement is crucial to understanding Kazem's practice as a whole. Reem Fadda, curator of Kazem's Venice pavilion, writes that he 'became interested in understanding, deconstructing and reconstructing the material element of sound and how it inhabits space'. But of course, we must remember what sound encompasses here – a vibration, and a sense of hearing, more than anything. In the case of *Sea Escape* (1999–2006), for example, Kazem photographs objects washed up on the shore – from a blue plastic container to a yellow fishing net, and pairs them with the GPS coordinates that record the location in which these objects were found – caught against land and sea. Remembering Kazem's relationship with sound, it is in the composition – the pairing of location coordinates to a real place, and their existence out there in the world somewhere – that makes a work, no matter what form it takes, resonate beyond language.

Yet, while the sea offers a concise space within which Kazem might explore a landscape in flux, the sense of fluidity water evokes is not lost when the focus of Kazem's study is the land. In his 1997 *Photographs with Flags* series, Kazem appears with his back to the camera next to flags representing sites in the Memzar desert marked out for development. ("It's all developed, now," he tells me.) In each image, Kazem gazes out to a view of the landscape or the sea, offering a kind of poetry – the story of the UAE expressed through the emblem of its postindependence. In every photograph, he wears a white shirt tucked into black trousers, holding a stance that recalls, to this writer, Tseng Kwong Chi's own body interventions in landscapes across the world: what Charles Hagen described in a 1984 *Artforum* review of Tseng's images as a 'statue-like, and almost architectural presence'. Here, Kazem shows a body lost not at sea, but on land, itself formalised through the abstraction of his own staging – always a back shot. The artist becomes anyone and everyone, which corresponds to the way Kazem relates to his work today. "I look at my practice as one project," he says. Kazem views the world as one, too. **ara**



*above* *Wooden Box* (detail), 1996/2016,  
24 gelatin silver prints mounted on paper board, each print 17 × 12 cm

*facing page* *Directions* (*Walking on Water*, UAE Pavilion,  
55th Venice Biennale, 2013), 2005–13 (installation view)

*all images* Courtesy the artist and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai