

THE SOUND OF ART

A school dropout in 1983, **Mohammed Kazem** has reinvented himself several times to become one of the few contemporary artists in the UAE and his latest – sounds in abstract visual language – and older works are on show in Dubai till Jan 4

Kelly Clarke

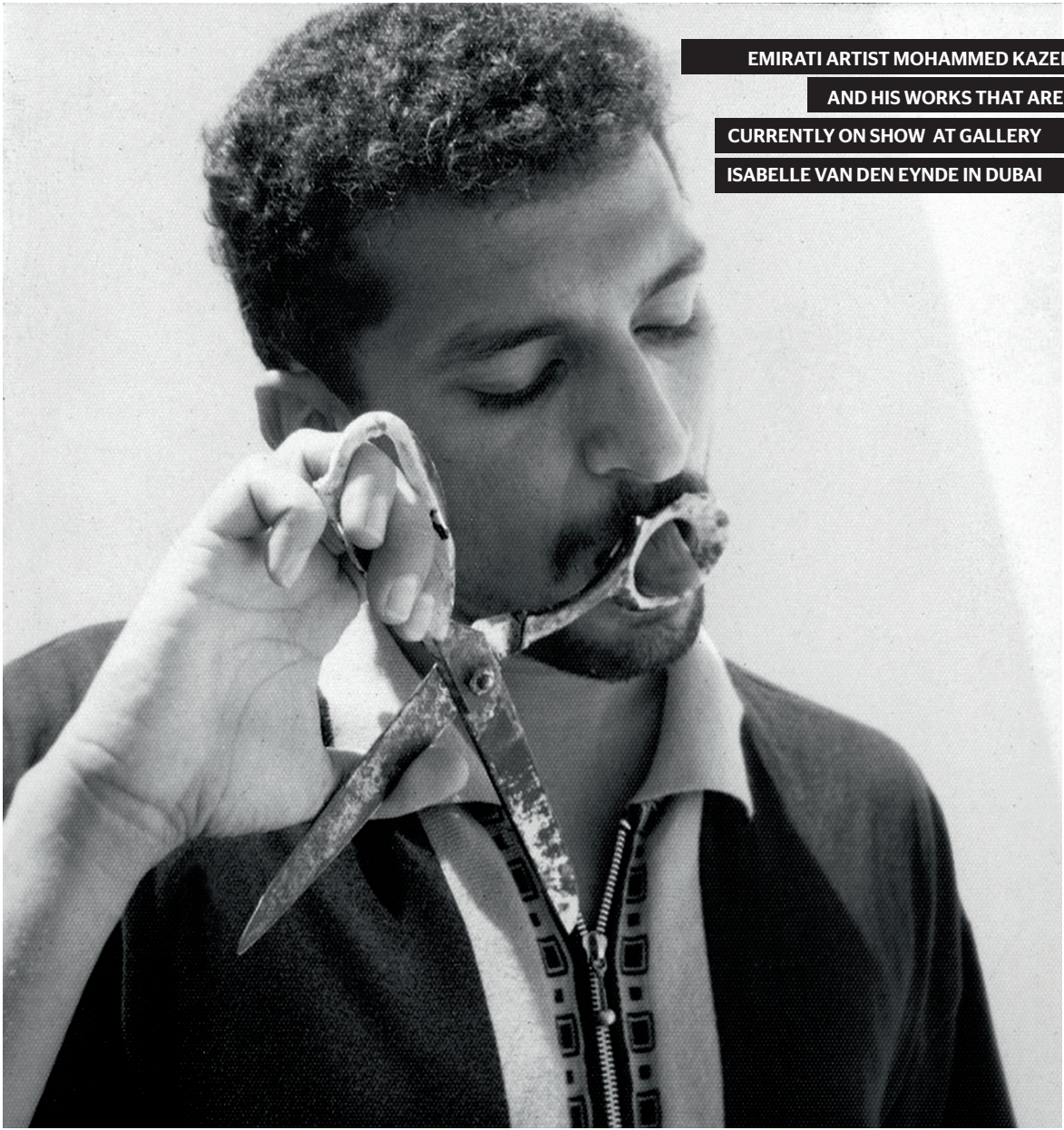
In 1983, aged just 14, Mohammed Kazem made the decision to drop out of school as he found the lack of artistic freedom “disabling”. Though a bold move, he is now celebrated as one of the most successful artists to come out of the UAE. “I left school because it was not catering to my artistic needs. I needed to do something more. To me, at that point, (school) was a waste of time.” Speaking to *Khaleej Times* from Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde in Dubai, Kazem talks candidly about his journey into the art world and touches on the challenges still being faced here in the UAE.

STEPPING INTO ART

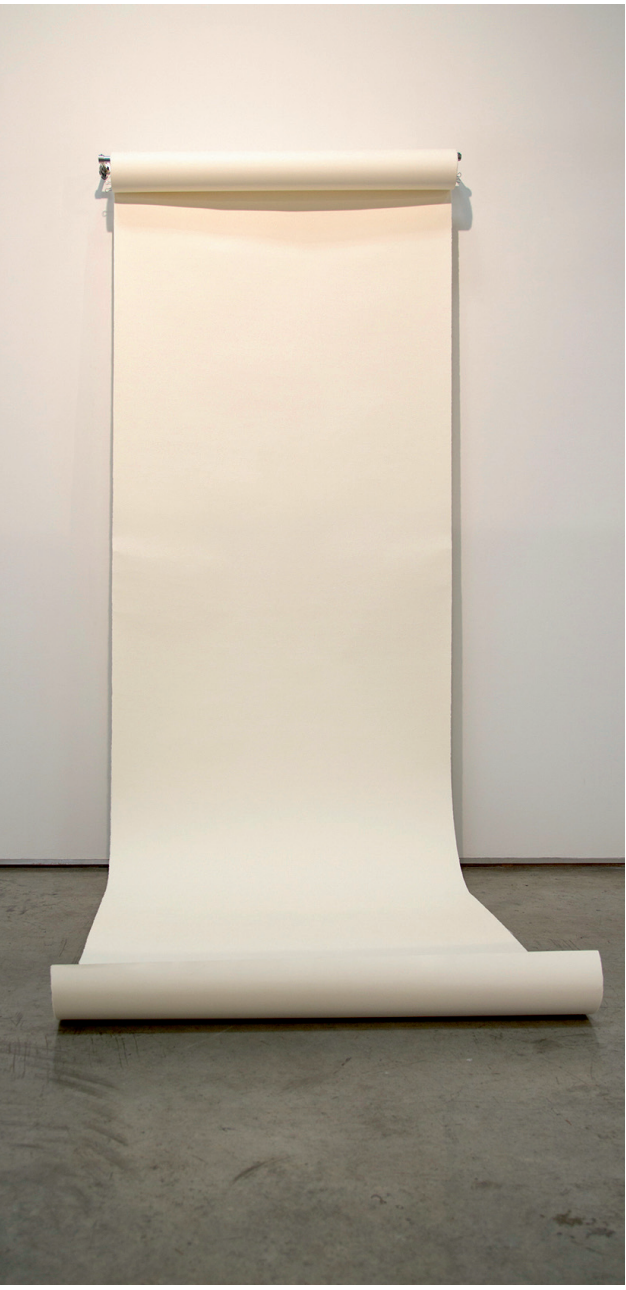
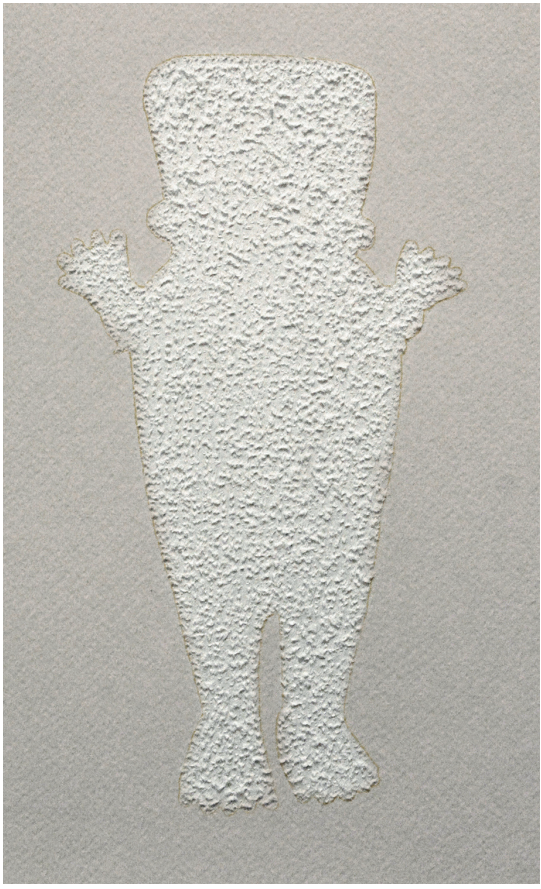
A young school dropout with an urge to express himself through art, Kazem says his lack of qualifications left him with little choice but to join the Army. “I knew I wanted to pursue art but at that time in the UAE, it was barely spoken of. So, because I hadn’t graduated, I went into the army.” Using the environment around him to bring life to everyday objects and surroundings, Kazem’s keenness to explore new methods of art offered a form of escapism while serving in the forces. Though at that time he was still not established as a “serious” artist, a desire to work with the environment around him began to blossom within. It is this desire to dig down to the intrinsic nature of things which he still maintains in his work today.

GETTING THE BALL ROLLING

In 1987, well-known artist Hassan Sharif founded the Art Atelier in the Youth Theatre and Arts, Dubai. The first such dedicated art centre in the country, Sharif, who is now a close friend and mentor to Kazem, encouraged children from all over the country to tap into their inner creative side — a side which was usually silenced in schools across the country, Kazem says. “Hassan opened the art workshop for children interested in art. He had a very small budget but it was a real success.” And it was around this time that Kazem’s career in art began to take shape. Joining Sharif as a member of the Emirates Fine Arts Society, Kazem was called on to take over the Art Atelier in 1999 and from then on, his dominance on the art scene grew from strength to strength. Now acknowledged as one of the ‘Five’, an informal group of Emirati artists at the vanguard of conceptual and interdisciplinary art practice, Kazem shares his key to success with *Khaleej Times*. “Nobody is born an artist. You are born with a talent but you have to work at it.” But he says this is a common oversight bred within the minds of many young artists today. Donning a ‘get rich quick’ attitude, many fail



EMIRATI ARTIST MOHAMMED KAZEM
AND HIS WORKS THAT ARE
CURRENTLY ON SHOW AT GALLERY
ISABELLE VAN DEN EYNDE IN DUBAI



to truly immerse themselves in the industry’s rich heritage. “This is a message missed by many people nowadays. It is so important to know your culture, know the polices of

where you’re practising your art and know the history of art too.” **DILUTING THE ART TABOO** A well-travelled artist who has taken up residencies in India, Germany and the US, Kazem spent his early career teaching people how to paint. “At that time, it was only really conventional art that was accepted in the UAE. People would say, ‘if you can’t paint you’re not an artist.’” So in the early 1990s, Kazem decided to steer away from conventional methods and exhibited a selection of photographs showing him sticking his tongue

into different objects. Aptly named ‘Tongue’ (1994), his vision for the works was to affirm that “subjectivity is active in the artist’s body”, but as it went on display in Sharjah, Kazem says the feedback he received reiterated the fact that conceptual art was still a foreign method to many. “People told me to go back to painting because I was good at it. To them they were praising me, but to me it was criticism. They were not forward thinking.” But to develop, you need to take criticism, he says. “The way they criticised was wrong. It was bias. Constructive criticism has to be unbiased and you need

to back it up with new angles and the right wording, especially when it comes to contemporary art.” Though the art scene is still very young in the UAE, Kazem says it is gaining momentum thanks to the dedicated sectors championing art and culture here. But big steps still need to be taken to get it to where it should be. “Culture, policies and education in art still need to change here. And I think we need a big focus on public art as it is lacking.” However, he does add that he is optimistic things will continue to improve in the future.

archive full of artefacts from a vast span of eras and civilisations, Kazem touched these objects with the end of his finger and recorded the sound they made. He then set about rendering the broader subjective sound of each object as scratches on paper — which form a Braille-like network of bumps. Using this technique to describe sounds in an abstract visual language, where lines and dots punctuate his work, Kazem says though he has a passion for music, he wanted to bring a new dimension to his art. “I play the Oud because I like music but I wanted to bring sound to visual art. Scratching allows me to do this.” Collaborating with the gallery’s artistic director, Christopher Lord, Kazem says Lord persuaded him to introduce some of his works from the 1990s to the exhibition, which had links to the current theme. Works from the 1990s reappearing in ‘Sound of Objects’ are ‘Tongue’ (1994), ‘Legs and Arms’ (1995), and ‘Showering’ (1998), all featuring Kazem himself as the anchoring object. After ‘Sound of Objects’, Kazem is looking forward to participating in next year’s Sharjah Biennale 12. *kelly@khaleejtimes.com*

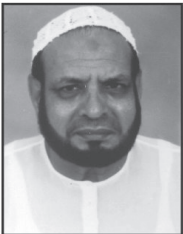


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