

'I wanted to think of artists both as self-taught and as professional, as famous and not famous, as people who can teach us something to see things. **If you just stick to the masters and professionals, you sort of frame art as visual entertainment**' – the Venice Biennale curator Massimiliano Gioni

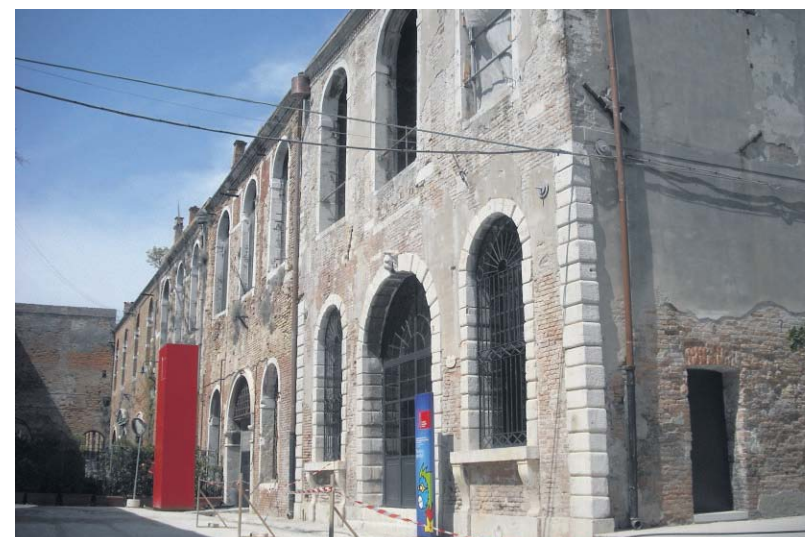


Munch 150, the largest-ever exhibition of the paintings of Edvard Munch, is staged to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the birth of the artist. About 270 works will be on show at two venues: **the Oslo National Gallery for the period 1882-1903 and the Munch Museum for the period 1904-1944**. Until October 13. Visit [www.munch150.no](http://www.munch150.no)



# The next wave

David D'Arcy talks to the Emirati artist Mohammed Kazem about his installation at the UAE Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, where he is, rather unusually, the country's sole representative



of a Dubai taxi driver, "but my parents couldn't support me. The only solution was to be in the military. They gave me \$1,000 a month, which was good for me at that time. I used it to buy materials."

For most of his time in the army, Kazem was a warrant officer in charge of supplies. He continued to draw and paint and to study the history of art in his spare time. "I am influenced by Impressionism – Claude Monet, Cézanne, post-Impressionism, then Cubism. I went through the European traditions all the way to Picasso," he recalled. "Then, by that time [the artist and critic] Hassan Sharif was my mentor, and we kept what you might call a mental workshop going for all those years."

While he never gave up painting and still draws, Kazem was evolving towards an art that was closer to his origins and to his own imagination. "You cannot stand behind the easel and draw the desert and say: 'This is my heritage.' It doesn't work," he said. "Contemporary art is taken from everywhere."

In an essay for the pavilion's catalogue, Sharif writes that "the driving concept behind Kazem's works is to invade the viewer's awareness in a disarming or embarrassing manner and what distinguishes his works is their insistent inquisitive nature".

And not just in the UAE. At 39, Kazem travelled to Philadelphia for an advanced degree at The University of the Arts. Joseph Girandola, then the school's dean, was struck by "his distinct attention to everything around him. Everything – from the leaves fall-

ing, to the streets being covered with leaves where each person's footprints would make their own mark and stay for a brief moment until the wind came and erased those marks, much like someone walking in the sand on the beach, when a wave would come.

"He had the ability to look around him and think artistically of every situation," said Girandola, who was in Venice for the opening of the UAE Pavilion.

On the first day that the pavilion opened to visitors, *Walking on Water* had an improbable effect, given its themes of loss and uncertainty. The project became its own GPS, attracting critics, museum directors and art dealers.

By mid-afternoon, an approximate count estimated more than 1,500 entries. Crowds would clog the pavilion the following day, waiting in the white-walled antechamber to enter Kazem's 360-degree enclosure. Watching the visitors as if he were surveying a vast stretch of water, he observed: "I'm showing my thought. I'm not just showing my work. It is a way of visualising how I am thinking."

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Clockwise from above, *Walking on Water* in its Venice incarnation; the Arsenale in Venice, outside and in; the curator Reem Fadda; and the artist Mohammed Kazem. Courtesy the National Pavilion of the UAE; courtesy the Venice Biennale



When it came time to consider projects for 2013, Reem Fadda, the associate curator of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, who curated the UAE Pavilion, asked Kazem what he had not been able to achieve. The project came up again.

"I saw how important he is in the shaping of what has become a contemporary art scene in the UAE, a conceptual art scene with him taking a leading role in bringing it to the younger generation," Fadda says. "He has an intuitive relationship to the arts, but also a deep intellectual knowledge. It's not limited to the scope of the UAE. There is a global dialogue happening in his practice."

"I knew of this maquette that was standing there from 2005, wishing to be made," she recalls.

"Venice lends itself to a momentary experience of an artist, so I thought this project would be absolutely fantastic, because it shows a vision of an artist, with complete sophistication in material development. It was very simple from the first day. Mohammed talked about adding things, but my feeling was: less is enough."

"Logistically, even for us, it was a big challenge. We had to develop new technology for this work, so you can imagine how difficult that would have been in 2005."

The project teamed up with Igloo Vision, a firm from Birmingham, England, which had worked on projects for the US military, among other clients. The number of projectors showing the sea vertically and horizontally expanded from four to 15. "This way, the audience really feels that it is lost," said Kazem. Work on the installation in Venice took 20 days.

It's a long way to the Venice Biennale for Kazem, who enlisted in the army at 17. Now 44, the artist is officially retired from the military, although he reports for annual reserve duty – which was postponed, a friend said, so he could install the pavilion in Venice.

"I left school at 14. I wanted to focus on making art," said Kazem, the son

*Walking on Water* is an experience. In a chamber designed by Mohammed Kazem, images and sounds of a rough dark sea surround you. There is no horizon and the constant churning of the waves begins as a dizzying feeling of uncertainty that soon gets overwhelming. The sound of the rough water makes sure that you don't hear much else. Visitors stumble out, glad to be on what feels like dry land, sensing the power of art trying to conjure the power of nature.

Kazem is the sole artist representing the United Arab Emirates in the UAE Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale. (Pavilions normally show a range of artists.) His ambitious work will be on view at the Arsenale in Venice until November 24.

For those visitors whose knees were weak – sometimes after a mere 30 seconds in Kazem's installation – the artist was in Venice, ready to talk about his creation. It sits on the second floor of the Sali d'Armi of the Arsenale, above the Vatican Pavilion and next to the South African Pavilion – nothing if not a globalised location. The encounter with the sea has its roots in his own biography, he explained.

"I used to fish all the time," he said, explaining that he was pulled to safety when he fell out of a boat twice

when he was young. But a third fall from a boat would be a nightmare that he still can't forget.

"One night we were coming back and it was dark. I fell out of the boat. I was lost. They didn't hear me because of the sound of the engine. I was swimming in different directions, because when you're out in the deep sea, you can't see the horizon. Then they noticed I wasn't there, and they came back."

Kazem was saved. But finding him was anything but certain. Remembering swimming in the dark without a sense of where he might find safety, he said: "At the time, we used the GPS to find the location of the cage we used for fishing and I thought: 'Why am I not using this for my existence? If I had, you'd know where I am now.'"

It would be many years before Kazem's experience found its way to the Venetian lagoon, another place defined by its special relationship to the sea.

In 2002, he experimented back home with throwing wooden panels into the sea, assuming that some would float beyond the borders of the UAE. The photographs of those panels drifting away were shown at the 2002 Sharjah Biennial. Kazem saw

those drifting objects as symbolic GPS co-ordinates. This early work and *Walking on Water*, now in Venice, are meditations on the borders between nations, he said.

Three years later, in 2005, Kazem built a maquette for what would later become *Walking on Water*. "At that time it cost me around US\$400 [Dh1,469]. I just wanted to visualise what I was trying to do."

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Mohammed Kazem artist