

**MAPPING
COORDI-
NATES**

MOHAMMED KAZEM



Barrak Alzaid sits down with Conceptual Emirati artist Mohammed Kazem, who represents the UAE at the nation's third participation at the Venice Biennale.

S

ome years ago, Mohammed Kazem was out fishing with friends, and as they made their journey home to shore, he fell off the boat and into the sea. Unable to raise his voice above the roaring engines, the boat faded into the horizon, a line that seemed to revolve endlessly around him. As he waited anxiously for rescue, he faced an urgent need to locate himself within this expanse. Consequently, the poetics of location, dislocation and specificity have found their way into a number of works that not only track his own relationship to specific places, but reconfigure the very tools by which we measure and abstract these geographic sites. "I don't believe inspiration can just come to the artist, it takes training," says Kazem. "As you develop you get a variety of tools and a flexibility with those tools."

In a work like *Directions 2002*, Kazem deals with the broader dilemmas of ethics by drawing attention to the arbitrary natural flows of our environment. In this piece, he tossed chunks of wood into the ocean, imagining they are still floating around somewhere, disrupting geographical boundaries through wind waves. Though he extricates the wood planks from their function in the world by dispensing them to the sea, Kazem argues that he is not in fact responsible for this liberatory turn. Instead, "these pieces are free and it is they who achieve their freedom for themselves," he says. As they make their way across the waves, they present a particular ethics of freedom predicated on chance: the material frees itself by being free.

Kazem reminds us that we never perceive by vision alone, and his artwork demands an intimate encounter with its subject. The *Directions* project is expansive and the trajectory that started in *Directions 2002* continued in *Directions 2005*, a miniature room with an area of 100 centimetres. To engage with the piece the viewer must look through the opening of this cylindrical room, which contains an illuminated image of a circular horizontal scene, while the floor contains illuminated numbers that depict geographic coordinates (time, date and mean sea level). In an analysis of the work written by fellow Emirati artist Ebtisam Abdulaziz, Kazem comments that "the idea is to make the viewer feel that he or she is the piece of wood floating in the sea." This sense of dislocation and disorientation is an interpretation of the artist's own experience, but rather than simply fulfil an autobiographical mode, it introduces a new vernacular that is both experiential and conceptual.

Opening spread: *Photographs With Flags 1997–2003*. 2003. C-print. 100 x 100 cm. Images courtesy Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde, Dubai.

Facing page: *Directions 2003 (Autumn)*. 2003. Video projection, leaves and acrylic plate with geographical coordinates of a tree. Endless loop. Image courtesy the artist.

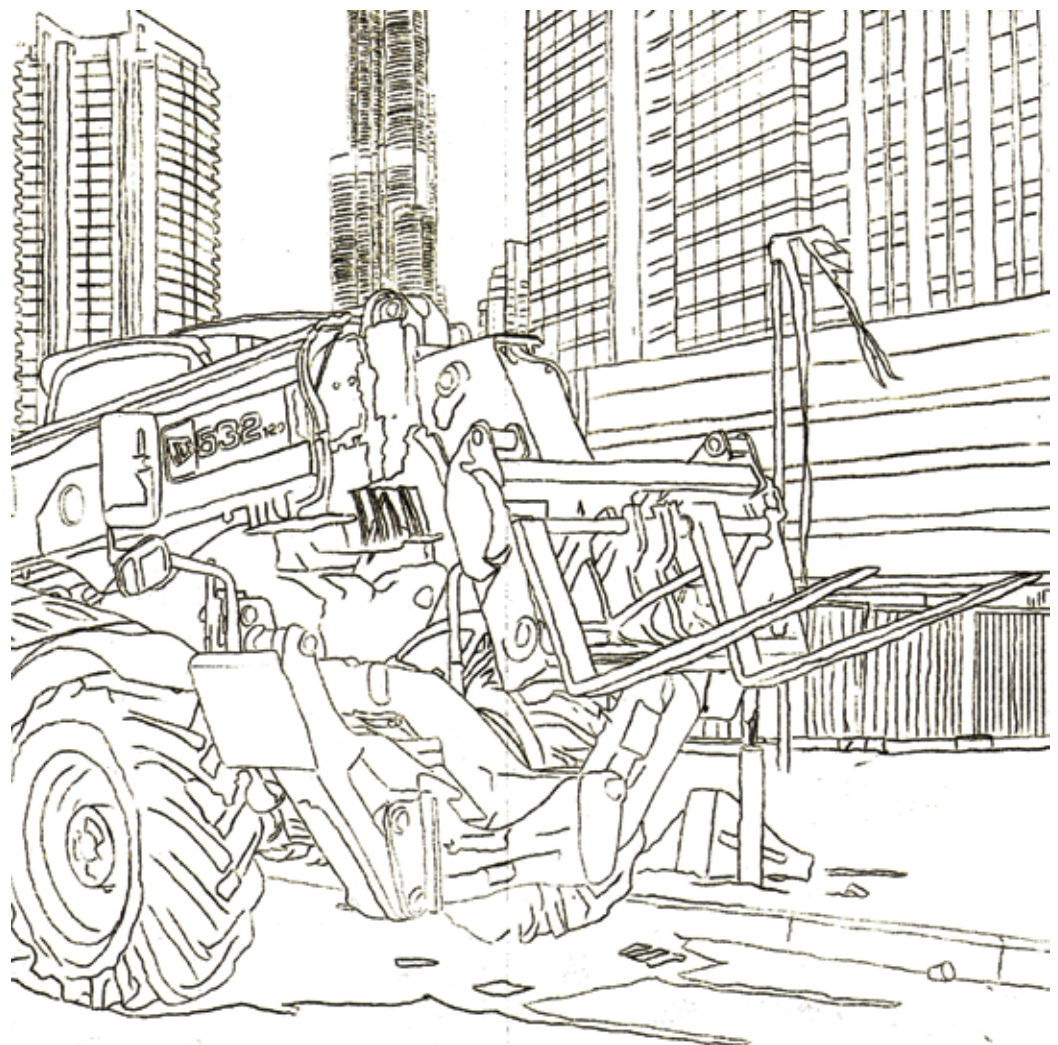
CONCEPT FORMATION

I sit with Kazem in his office at Empty 10, a studio and exhibition space in Dubai and a holding area for completed works and unfinished pieces, replete with an archive that overflows onto its various surfaces. He has been utilising these newspapers and clippings for a publication that will correspond with his



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solo show at the UAE Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (page 60) and it is clear that this is actually the storm before the calm. Our meeting comes at the end of a multi-week stretch of openings in Dubai that culminated with the debut of an epic 100-piece work at Art Dubai entitled *Window 2011–12*. The work captures his impressions of the Emirati landscape over a period of 20 years in spare pencil drawings.

Kazem, inspired by the documentary function of photography and film, conflates these media to compose still frames on carbon paper in which myriad settings and scenarios are set in a grid. The narratives multiply and become animated as reading the works becomes like reading words in a sentence; they can be rearranged to create new trajectories and new meanings. “When you move your head, you are connecting it like words in a sentence, you’re animating it. It’s not like an Arabic or English novel, you don’t have to read it left to right or right to left,” he explains. “So it’s a visual sentence that any audience can read, they become *jumal basariyya* (Arabic for visual sentences).” In a deeper layering that marks the significance of rhetoric in signage, the artist also captures words in the scenes he photographs and draws, each of which is an important addition to the understanding and renegotiating of the overall context in which he places them.

In many ways, the piece does offer a window into his practice and extensive body of work, and over the course of our conversation, Kazem and I look back at his progression as an artist alongside the development of an art infrastructure in the UAE. He began his practice when he was just 14 years old as a student of Hassan Sharif. “I learned from [Hassan] – ‘now you’ve started making your artwork, but you also have to keep track of it’ he’d say,” adds Kazem. He soon became deeply involved in conversations with other artists, writers and intellectuals of his generation and together they would write about broader art movements and in turn translate these writings into Arabic in an attempt to cultivate an audience for art in the UAE.

He expresses with fondness the encouragement he received from his mentor to continue his legacy of teaching and in 1999 began to supervise workshops, teaching the third generation of artists, including Abdulaziz, for nearly 10 years. He leans back and sighs as he recounts a decade of teaching and distills his pedagogy, which aligns neatly with his practice – to impart an impression without leaving an imprint: “When we are teaching we have to be so careful. Everyone has their own way before they come to art. So when they come to art, we attempt to teach the basics without affecting them, instead of cultivating their particular specialty.”

ENGAGING WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

Despite an active and rigorous dialogue amongst the two generations of artists and key curators, it wasn’t until 2000 that the cohesion of this group of artists became visible on a platform outside the UAE. Three of ‘the group of five’ artists (comprised of Kazem, Sharif, Hussain Sharif, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim and Abdullah Al-Saadi) showed work at the 2000 Havana Biennial and in 2002, the group was assembled for an international audience. Jos Clevers, director of Ludwig Forum for International Arts, organised a show entitled *5/UAE* in the first European exhibition of their works. For Kazem, his works present narratives deeply connect-

Facing page:
Above: *Autobiography: No 5–1996 (Tongue)*, 1996.
Documentary photographs.
Variable dimensions. Image courtesy the artist.

Below: (Detail) *Window*, 2011. Pencil drawings. 25 x 25 cm. Image courtesy Art Dubai.

This page: (Detail) *Directions (Circle)*, 2011. Flowers. 400 x 400 cm. Image courtesy the artist.



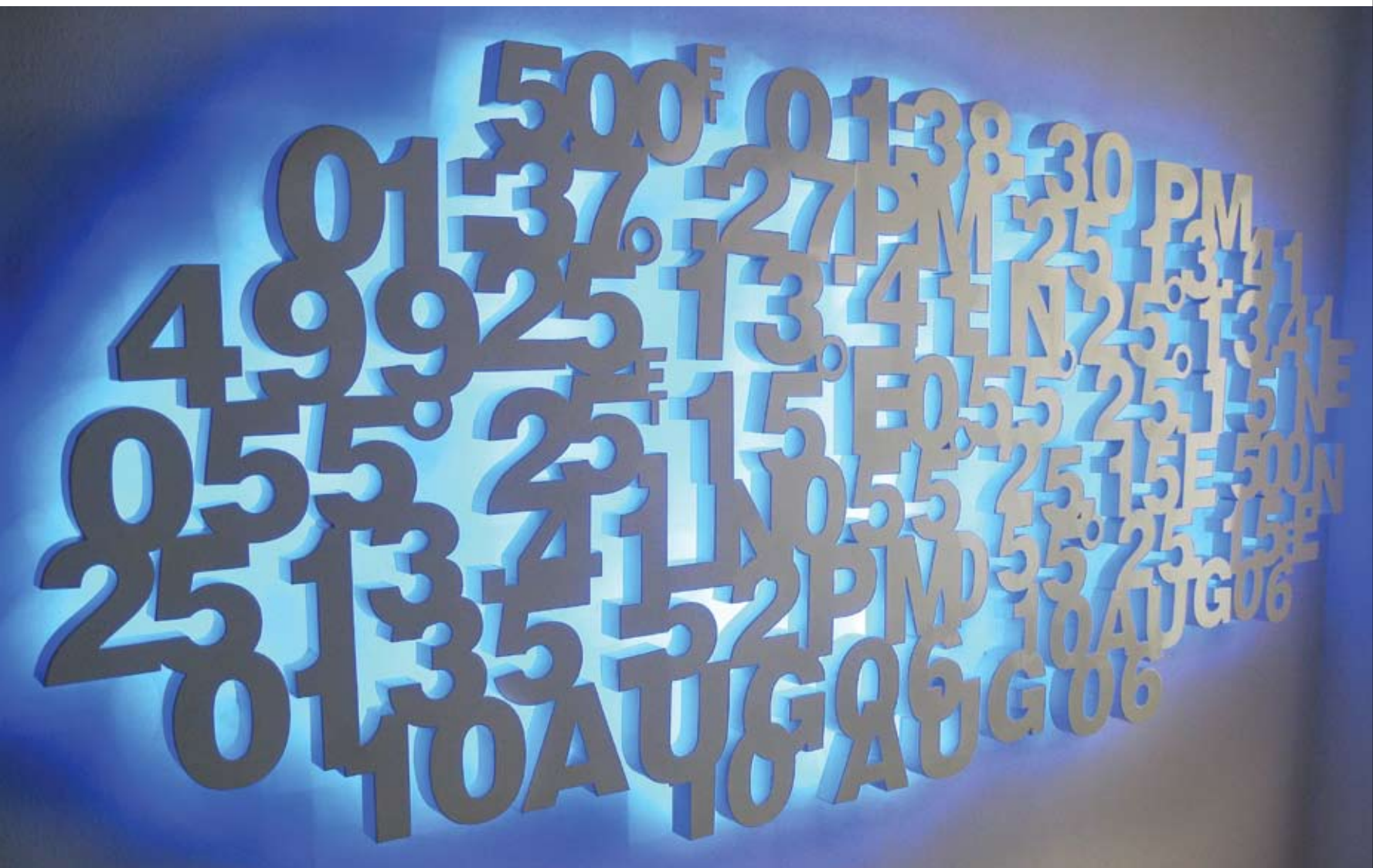
PROFILE

ed to the social and political moment in which he occupies. Clevers, a close friend and curator of the first and second generations' works says about Kazem's experience (from the 2006 *Windows* catalogue): "An artist creates his own environment wherever he is. He doesn't only belong to his local environment, he belongs to the greater universe and is thus affected by all the transformations that take place in our world today. Therefore, Kazem's art and ideas are a reflection of today's understanding of the world. His work reflects his point of view concerning events that surround him as he believes that through art we can interpret time. That is why Kazem's works are so important: they provide us with a window through which to look at history and to become more aware of ourselves and our time."

The personal stories that Kazem relays in such series as *Autobiography*, which he began creating in 1990, are an introspective investigation of his life, whether it be his physical body, or his relationship to the UAE. As such, a certain set of ethics has developed in Kazem's work, a relationship between the artist and his environment. In *Autobiography*

No 5 – 1996, Kazem takes portraits of himself as he sticks his tongue into objects and settings that are part of our everyday life, from keyholes to scissors. This charged gesture is not simply a highly quotidian representation of sexualised behaviour, but rather speaks of the artist's encounter with his world, a methodology slightly unhinged from the everyday encounters that most people have.

This practice quickly evolved and from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, he started to capture more epic landscapes, drawing the viewer into the work. His *Photographs with Flags 1997–2003* is a series that reflects on the temporality of development in the UAE. Each photograph was taken in Mamzar in Dubai, with the artist looking out forward into the desert and toward emerging infrastructure of roads and buildings. The photograph functions as an object that overlays the future onto the present and the past, presenting now-completed building projects in their infancy and offering a reflection on the transience of his own past within this present moment. Born in 1969, Kazem grew up with the advent of the discovery of oil and just as the various states that comprise today's UAE





Facing page:
Directions (Triangle), 2006.
 Aluminium and LED light.
 88 x 214 cm. Image courtesy
 Gallery Isabelle Van Den
 Eynde, Dubai.


This page:
Directions 2005. Video
 installation, engraved acrylic
 panels, LED lights and
 leaves. Variable dimensions.
 Image courtesy the artist.

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began to bring together their political agenda into a cohesive united state. This moment of indeterminacy is particularly evident in these works and the viewer is staged as the artist, an individual who occupies the space of the potential future captured in the image in her own present, is forced to look back and through Kazem's point of view.

Looking forward to the Venice Biennale, it is important to note that this also represents an extension of his teaching as well as his artistic practice. As an Emirati artist, he has committed himself to a deep investigation of the UAE and his relationship to it over the last 30 years. On an international stage, this offers audiences from across the world a deeper insight into not only the history of the UAE, but the art historical significance of the work Kazem has produced in those years. Dr Lamees Hamdan, the Commissioner of the UAE Pavilion reflects on the role Kazem plays in this international platform as having "been a critical part of the fabric

of every Sharjah Biennial from 1993–2007 [...] The 2013 Pavilion stands to strongly communicate internationally the depth of Contemporary art practices in the UAE."

Kazem's contribution to the development of art in the UAE and the interpretive framework his art presents is significant, as Reem Fadda, Associate Curator, Middle Eastern Art at the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and curator of the UAE Pavilion in Venice, indicates: "By engaging with the work of Kazem we can witness the urban modernity of an emerging nation through the eyes of its individual artists." This perspective invites us to investigate individual artists' contributions to the Contemporary art landscape and our modes of engaging with the social, urban and natural environments. 

For more information visit
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