

MOHAMMED KAZEM



Portrait of Mohammed Kazem outside his gallery in Dubai. Photo by Noelle Bodick for ArtAsiaPacific.

MOHAMMED KAZEM, *Directions (Triangle)*, 2006, aluminium and LED light, 88 x 214 x 3 cm. Courtesy the artist.

You Are Here

BY NOELLE BODICK

Mohammed Kazem was eight years old when he fell from a boat into the Gulf, his shouts overpowered by the motor and his frame battered by its turbid wake. He watched the stern disappear from view and listened to the rhythmic wash of the waves. It was quiet. After half an hour, the faint droning of a motor neared and the search party found him gasping for life.

Kazem was safe, but in his 20s, on a weekend fishing trip, he once again fell into the sea. He describes the feeling of disorientation, along with his desperate desire for a map, for coordinates or for any method to mark his place among the anonymous waves. “I do not want to be lost again,” says the now 44-year-old artist who, since the late 1990s, has made poignant, obsessive records of his movements through space. He lowers his chin slightly and smiles: “I hope there is no third time.”

Entangled in a web of computer cords and power wires, Kazem is at his gallery and studio Empty 10, situated in al-Quoz, an industrial neighborhood that houses much of Dubai’s art scene. The district lies beyond the tall, manicured downtown that has emerged over the course of Kazem’s life. A cab passenger embarking here from the city center will likely get lost; the tar on the superhighways is freshly poured and the taxi drivers newly immigrated.

But, being lost, as Kazem might note, is not without conceptual interest or poetic value. It is, in fact, the theme—the loosening of the self into an environment—of his ongoing series “Directions” (1999–) and the concept guiding his contribution to the upcoming Venice Biennale, where he will represent the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Allying art with digital technology, both “Directions” and the project for the Biennale use a GPS navigation system to record and chart geographic space. A 2000–01 edition of “Directions” presents four metal molds of the coordinates from undeveloped land plots across the UAE, each container filled with red and white sand from the corresponding locations. In a variation made in 2006, sharp aluminum numbers spread out across a wall, overlapping like the foliage of a tree canopy, while a soft blue light glows

invitingly behind the exacting decimals and degrees. For yet another edition (2002–05), the artist cast wooden planks labeled with local coordinates out into the shifting ocean waters.

In his gallery, Kazem, who has serious, dark eyes and a close-cut beard, stares at a pixelated band of sky and roiling water displayed on a laptop. The video simulates the sensation of being adrift, and will premiere as part of his installation at Venice. Beside him, two young film editors from Capetown, with edgy haircuts and tattoos, manipulate the footage, leveling the horizon and superimposing clouds on the sky. Happy with the edits, Kazem stands, squeezes their shoulders appreciatively and suggests that they avoid making any viewers seasick.

In a back room with large, white archive cabinets, he pulls out old paintings wrapped in tissue paper and folders of yellowing newspaper clippings about his friends’ past exhibitions, fondly flipping through the pages of fading ink as if sharing a family photo album. Kazem remembers that he was only 14 years old when he met the father of contemporary art in the UAE, Hassan Sharif, who after studying postwar art in the United Kingdom had returned to found the Emirates Fine Art Society in Sharjah. It is impossible to overemphasize Sharif’s influence, not only on Kazem, but on an entire generation of Emirati artists. Prior to Sharif’s translation of key art-historical texts into Arabic, Kazem recalls that there was a “gap not just between the audience and the art world [in the UAE], but between the artists themselves.” Today, the student and teacher still meet on an almost daily basis, and Kazem frequently quotes Sharif in conversation.

At the Fine Art Society, the young Kazem joined a flourishing community, studying with peers such as Ebtisam Abdul Aziz and poets Ahmed Rashid Thani and Adel Khozam. “You are not just born an artist,” he says. As a pupil from the mid-1980s on, he was a painter and worked through aesthetic questions by copying Cézanne and, later, Degas. After graduating, Kazem joined the military for a day job, and while organizing a storeroom, traipsing back

and forth to retrieve army supplies, realized he had “the flexibility to make art at any place.” All material—from shelving units to wall hooks to bath basins—became available to him as an artist, as long as the object could represent something “about where you are.” He explains, “I am always responding to my environment.”

As his country mapped the land, laying down a vast network of transportation and urban infrastructure, Kazem began to map his own subjective experiences. In an early work, *Autobiography 1* (1997), the artist measured the length and width of home appliances, creating distorted architectural drafts based on his childhood memories. “It is through inexactness,” he has written, “that I wanted to reach another dimension, enabling me to coexist with my objects.” His photo series “Tongue” (1996) also represents such an attempt. Sticking his tongue into domestic objects (water jugs, pipes), Kazem achieves an absurd bodily union with the outer world. A year later, Kazem began the series “Photographs with Flags” (1997–2003), portraying himself with his back to the camera, standing in the lonely deserts of Memzar, with blank flags planted beside him marking potential sites for future urban developments.

“My existence is important in my work,” Kazem says, without embarrassment. This does not mean his art is solipsistic or self-reflexive. Rather, Kazem’s documented body or tracked coordinates transcend physical or factual limitations and allow him to be at home in the world, whether among its banal, mass-produced objects, in the futurist desert cities of the UAE or adrift in the empty, blue Gulf.

Kazem turns back to editing the film, lightening the sky to achieve its natural clarity. While his recent project returns him to the sea, now, as a mature artist, Kazem will not be lost there: “I would like to measure the little waves I see on the seashore . . . I would like to measure my own experience by means of sea waves.”

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