



Artist Vikram Divecha. Jeffrey E Biteng / The National

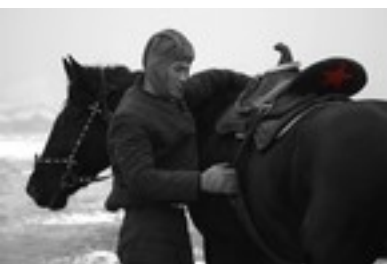
Artist Vikram Divecha turns the daily toil of UAE labourers into works of art

Anna Seaman

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Vikram Divecha is one of five artists who will represent the UAE at the Venice Biennale next month in Italy. He is also one of three UAE-based artists exhibiting artworks at the ongoing Sharjah Biennial. Yet his work is rarely found in a gallery.

His practice revolves around intervention and interrupting existing systems, and producing art that involves other people – addressed as collaborators by the artist. These co-artists, though, are not art professionals. He often works with labourers, calling this way of working "found processes".

"I work with available material, labour and space and I try to hijack situations of infrastructure and operations of commerce," he says.

In Sharjah, for example, he is working with municipal gardeners – mostly farmers from Pakistan – to plant seeds and grow crops on a roundabout, as a way of questioning the notion of ownership of land in a transient society.

In 2014 he took the same gardeners through a three-month drawing workshop, asking them to come up with hedge designs that are now permanent sculptures in Al Majaz Park.

This year, Divecha's first solo show – *Minor Work* – is being hosted by Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde in Alserkal Avenue.

"Most of my work happens in large outdoor spaces, so I had to think about how to bring that work into a more intimate setting," he says, adding that many of his works have been created for non-profit institutions and so the exhibition also questions the notion of commerce.

Enlarged framed photographs of pages from the sketchbooks used by the gardeners for the Al Majaz project hang on the walls. Although initially discarded, they are now pieces of art in a gallery. If sold, a portion of the profits will go to the gardeners. Here, Divecha is cleverly investigating ideas of value, authorship and agency.

Perhaps, the most memorable work in the exhibition is the *Road Markings* series, in which Divecha again worked with labourers, spending several nights with RTA workers in charge of road markings. He would allow their machines to make yellow lines on pieces of cardboard as they were painting them along road edges, as well as other familiar markings such as rumble strips and directional arrows.

"For me, these are painterly gestures," he says. "When I think about these marks made on the floor, it is the most basic form of mark-making."

By intervening in this routine work, Divecha made the labourers artists, and presents these simple lines as shapes and patterns that hold their own as pieces of contemporary art.

"He has transformed an infrastructural tool for city planning into a means of gestural and formal expression," the gallery statement reads.

The paint itself, which is thermoplastic and applied at 200 degrees, is also a fascinating medium. For some of the pieces, Divecha encouraged the road crews to use spare paint to experiment.

The results – pieces where the paint was pooled, or poured in a dripping formation – can be legitimately viewed as abstract art.

Other series include *The Remapped Sweeper Route*, a set of drawings Divecha made for a daily performance project involving five street sweepers who work in the area surrounding Sharjah Art Museum.

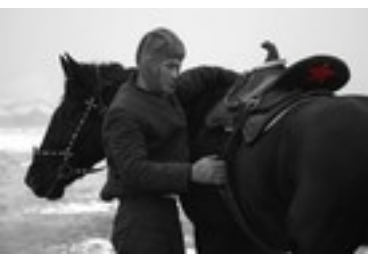
Divecha remapped each sweeper's usual route so that it ended outside the museum's entrance, and then marked them on photocopies of a map of the area. This serves to draw attention to the workers' labour, which is normally overlooked.

The other four artists who will represent the UAE at next month's Venice Biennale are Nujoom Alghanem, Sara Al Haddad, Lantian Xie and Dr Mohammad Yousif.

• ***Minor Work* runs until May 11 at Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde. For more details, visit www.ivde.net**

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