



Portraits of Vikram Divecha created by non-professional artists. Photos by Antonie Robertson / The National

Artist Vikram Divecha puts new spin on phrase 'time is money'

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It is not often that an art exhibition starts off as an algebraic equation, but that is how Vikram Divecha approached his solo show, *Portrait Sessions*. For the exhibition, Divecha devised a formula to work out the value of time as it relates to the creation of art.

Rather than producing the paintings for the exhibition himself, he asked several non-professional artists to paint a portrait of him, for which he paid each of them Dh150. Each artist had to calculate how long they could afford to spend on the portrait based on Divecha's equation, by dividing the fee he was paying them by their hourly wage in their normal jobs.

This meant that low-paid workers could spend much more time on their paintings than people in highly paid jobs.

The results of the sessions are on display in Tashkeel. Some of the paintings are very detailed and lifelike, while several look half-finished. There are even experimental offerings, including one that is a monochrome collection of shapes and lines, and another that simply features the words: "This is a portrait of Vikram Divecha".

There are also empty spaces, as the project will continue until the exhibition closes – or until Divecha's budget runs out – whichever comes first.

Part of the premise for the project is that no information is given about any of the participants or the length of the sessions. As a result, while the show hinges on the value of time – and the huge differences in hourly wages in the UAE – it quite brilliantly democratizes the participants, and forces viewers to question their own economic status and the agreements they reach over their time and compensation for their work.

"The work starts with an idea about disparity but it is not about pointing at it – I am trying to work with the idea of disparity as a medium," says Divecha. "It is about time and effort – and the ultimate paradox comes in the fact that you cannot judge the value of a painting by how much time the artist has invested in it."

Divecha is the most recent graduate of Tashkeel's year-long Critical Practice Programme, which provides longer-term studio support, critique and - production opportunities for contemporary artists and curators living and working in Dubai.

His mentor, Debra Levine, an assistant professor of theatre at New York University Abu Dhabi, worked closely with him in examining his practice and putting together the exhibition.

"Vikram's project sheds light on the phrase 'time is money' in the UAE, and how time is allocated in relation to professional standing," she says. "Viewing the artworks among one another, the project's concept intimates that you can discern who got to spend more time with Vikram and paint longer – and who could not because of their 'higher' professional standing.

"It makes you look longer, and think harder – but what is most wonderful is that you can't really tell. And so a community, so often separated and valued by professional standing, becomes indistinct in *Portrait Sessions*."

Divecha often works with different sections of society and plays with the idea of ownership and control. In previous projects, he allowed labourers to lay bricks in haphazard fashion, gardeners to shape hedges to their liking, and an import-export company to control changing sculptures made of cardboard boxes.

He says that he places his "practice within the operations of commerce" – and by doing so, he subverts the system and asks us to do the same.

• **Portrait Sessions runs until October 13 at Tashkeel, Nad Al Sheba, Dubai.** www.tashkeel.org

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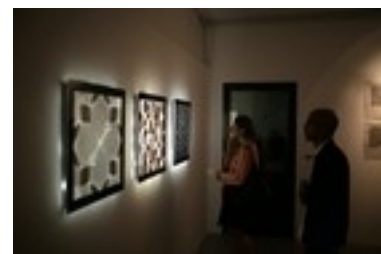
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