

Home Truths



Mohammed Kazem.
Image courtesy of
ADMAF/Motivate.
Photography by Ammar
Al Attar

In his artistic practice, Mohammed Kazem articulates the changes that his native UAE has undergone in the last half-century through a multiplicity of perspectives and using a conceptual vocabulary – displacement and anchorage, light and sound, colour and gesture. These abstract signifiers reveal an artist who is constantly reinventing himself, via medium and moment, with his eyes firmly on the horizon – and beyond.

Words by Rachel Bennett

There is a series of well-known stories told about Mohammed Kazem: his fall from a boat, disorientation growing as an expanse of ocean enveloped; a longing for an oud, out of reach, in a shop window; his relationship with Hassan Sharif, his teacher and mentor, an atelier training where he learnt to paint and create. These stories intersect with grander narratives. The bewilderment of a boy in the sea found its way to the UAE National Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, the boy standing in for the wider cultural disorientation of a country's prolific development.

A story repeated initiates a cycle, evolving into a mythology; when a mythology takes root, personal details are shed, giving way instead to metonymic readings. The boy who fell into the sea returned in a boat to create works that cast off feelings of loss, escaping this mythology of placelessness through specificity. In *Directions 2002* (2002), Kazem the adult jettisoned planks of wood into the water – each bearing the quantified, digitised details of a GPS location. Like ineffectual life rafts, these analogue attempts

to guard against dislocation are a willing concession of the action's futility, each piece drifting across borders and time zones, away from its techno-tethered origin.

The American essayist Rebecca Solnit wrote in 2013 that a personal arsenal of anecdotes and mythologies are necessary tools of orientation. "Stories are compasses and architecture. We navigate by them, we build our sanctuaries and our prisons out of them, and to be without a story is to be lost in the vastness of a world that spreads in all directions like arctic tundra or sea."

These stories about Kazem suggest that displacement or being adrift doesn't occur in the expanse of desert or sea, but instead amid the tumult of change. Two photographic series from the late 1990s extend this navigational impulse, casting him as expeditioner contending with the consumption of land, as red and yellow flags are foisted into empty lots. Yet in *Photographs with a Flag* (1997) he moves freely around the pole, orienting himself, untethered from this arbitrary marker, his focus beyond that moment or place, engaged with a horizon that unfurls. When he speaks of his relation to his environment – social, national – he sounds engaged and curious, not lost; "The UAE is attached to me: I know its elements, and I investigate them constantly."

Despite this geo-spatial specificity, we're often at one remove, observing through a chain of intermediaries. In *Windows* (2003–05), some images use the pane itself as a framing/distancing device. In other shots, men clad in the characteristic blue overalls of construction workers look skywards, their gaze focused on something towering, something we cannot see. Although the series documents the development of the Shangri-La Hotel in Kazem's Dubai neighbourhood, we watch observations of – not the thing itself. This deferral shifts our attention from the construction industry – that subject we're too often told to anticipate from Emirati artists, the emissaries of a culture unmoored in a sea of change – to the idea of perspective. The series accumulates multiple vantages on a single happening, such incidents of observation serving as perspectives on perspective. Kazem is not charting a cultural disorientation here, but another, more phenomenological, preoccupation: how to get at the crux of an experience.

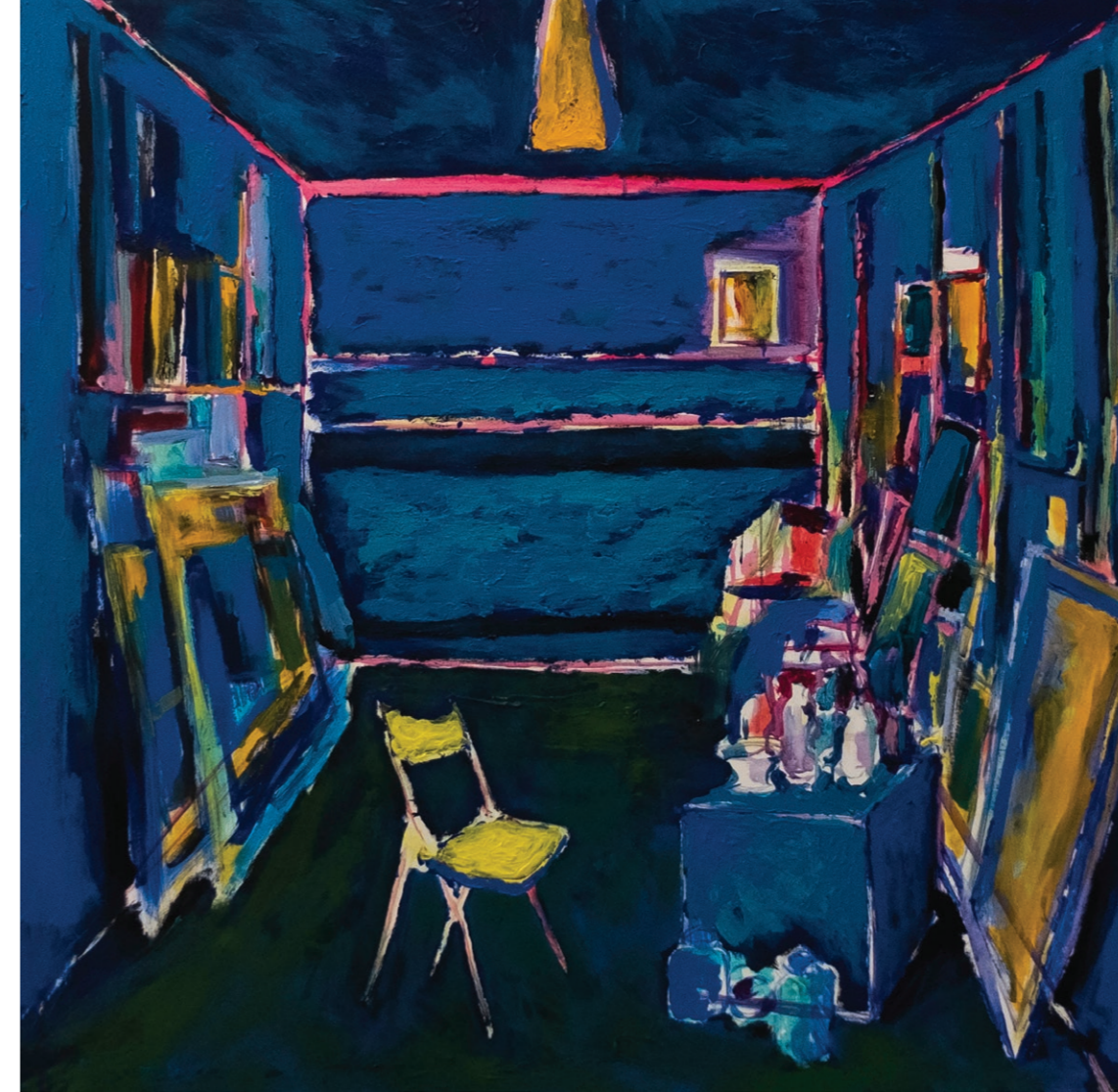
For an artist whose work is read as synonymous with the development of the UAE's cultural landscape, he travels intensely. Residencies produce works that are, if not site-specific, born of encounters with distant places. When we speak last November, he is starting a residency at the University of Cincinnati. A snapshot of his workspace shows a desk in a bare brick room abutting a wide window, grass and a highway beyond the plain frame – no high-rises



Mohammed Kazem. *Directions*. 2002. Colour video installation, with sound. 2 min 15 sec. 4 chromogenic prints, stickers and 2 acrylic on wood panels. 100.23 x 69.23 cm each. Overall dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde



Mohammed Kazem. *Neighbours*. 2018.
Watercolour on paper. 25 x 25 cm.
All images courtesy of the artist and
Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde



Mohammed Kazem. *Studio 1*.
2007. Acrylic on canvas. 120 x
120 cm. Image courtesy of the
artist and Gallery Isabelle Van
Den Eynde

here. That it's his studio is evident in the way he's caught winter-crisp shafts of light unfolding across the desk and onto the concrete wall. The mode of observing and receiving the light, not any hallmarks of the desk itself, is the clue. "There is no such thing as an unfamiliar place," he chides, when I ask him about the difference between working at home and working away, "I believe in the nature of the unknown: we tend to classify phenomena that we can't understand as unnatural – but they're natural, only our limitations make them seem otherwise."

The incidence of light as a moment of conjunction between beam and object is a potent way to understand his approach – but light, like sound, must be understood beyond the visual. When we first met in 2014, Kazem had just returned to Dubai from another residency at the Watermill Centre in New York to stage his first solo exhibition at Isabelle van den Eynde. As I grappled with his self-defined approach of locating sound in the form of silent scores – scratches on paper as visual representations of ethnographic objects that capture light, aurality, encounters – he explained, "Touch is not the sound of the object, it cannot sound itself, it's the connection, with my finger. It's a very primitive way of meeting things. Neither the subject nor the object have meaning without the other."

Since then, after two more solos at his Dubai-based gallery and another two in New York, a prolific rate of work has ranged through

scratches and photography to stage further experimentations with this primitive method of meeting things in sound and light. In this context, the title for his 2018 solo, *A Prime Activity*, rings ironic. Focused on his painting practice, the works teem with (seemingly ungrounded) people and places – figurative and elegiac, *Neighbours* (2018) and *Even the Shade Does Not Belong to Them* (2018) appear altogether less 'primal' than the apparently more elemental earlier works. Through a series of 1990s paintings of his studio, rendered in different media and vivid monochromatic shades, we understand that the prime activity remains true: to conjure the experience of spaces and places with a multiplicity of perspectives. The same obsessive and repetitive attention to observation is seen here – watercolours on paper reveal the social choreographies of clustering groups and families; early painterly experimentations depict the timbre of a room as light shifts and time passes – as modulations are heard in multiplicity.

The boy on the boat, lost in the sea, is not obsessed with charting a sense of disorientation, and he doesn't need the story to navigate. As he sits on his balcony at home in Dubai, observing light slide and fold, contorting geometrically across the wall, the artist is not lost. Knowing his place as a constantly shifting site of conjunction, Mohammed Kazem conveys perspective – "I am using my own existence as an element: I want to know where I am existing."