

The cultural oasis



MARAYA
ART CENTRE



مرايا
مركز للفنون

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Opening last March with ambitions to nurture and develop the nascent art scene from its Sharjah base, the Maraya Art Centre is moving towards its goal

Although Giuseppe Moscatello brought a wealth of experience in the art world with him when he moved to the UAE, it was the woman at his side who arguably gave him the most insight into the Emirati cultural community. The Italian artist and curator, who studied in the University of Rome, married an Emirati woman from Sharjah and moved to the emirate in 2007.

Immediately he immersed himself in the UAE art scene, visiting universities and artists' studios to learn as much as possible. Two years later, when he was asked to advise on the renovation of the Maraya Art Centre in collaboration with The Shelter and the Barjeel Foundation and under the supervision of the Al Qasba Development Authority, he jumped at the chance.

'I quickly understood there was not a big and established scene in the UAE as you would find in Europe but it was exciting because it was starting now.'

'Coming to a completely different environment was very interesting. I realised I could make a vast contribution.'

The Maraya Art Centre officially opened in March 2010 with the Abraaj Capital Art Prize Exhibition and it now functions as a three level space by the waterfront in the Al Qasba cultural district in Sharjah. The first level makes up The Shelter, a multimedia haven for artists seeking to make their own impact on the local scene and the second level features a permanent exhibition of the Barjeel Foundation dedicated to Arab art. The top level is where Moscatello, the curator of the centre, pursues his goal of nurturing and promoting young artists from the region.

'We do exhibitions for local artists, we do educational initiatives related to art, design and architecture and we have now started an exchange and residency programme. This work is at the heart of what we do because we want the centre not only to function as an exhibition space but also a bridge and a platform for creative minds from the region so they can come here and then spread out all around the world.'

In June, the centre hosted a project called



Giuseppe Moscatello and Mandy Merzaben

'Roaming images', in collaboration with the Macedonian Museum of contemporary art of Greece and the Thessaloniki Biennale.

It was a three-day workshop moderated by the Greek curator Sotirios Bahtsetzis, under the artistic direction of Christos Savvidis, the director of the Macedonian museum where the artists were asked to define their relationship with the cultural heritage of the Arabic peninsula. The results were shown in an exhibition at the centre and the participants plan to travel to Greece in September to take part to the Thessaloniki Biennale. 'The UAE is a place between the East and West and commercially it is a hub. In terms of

culture and art this place can be a catalyst for international change,' says Moscatello.

Although it is a wide vision and they are only one-and-a-half years in, month by month Moscatello is getting closer to his vision. The centre is working with universities, with the Fine Art Society and the Emirates Photography Society for exhibitions and workshops. 'We are embracing wider communities,' he says. 'The most important thing is that different groups in Sharjah related to arts and culture come together and I think the Maraya Centre is a kind of link between them. We want to help the whole art scene to thrive.'



of people, including students, dignitaries, members of international museums (such as MOMA in New York and The Mori Art Museum in Japan), to people passing through Al Qasba. Being able to run in conjunction with exhibitions and events organised by Maraya has only enhanced Barjeel's aspiration to have a wider reach with the community at large.

How do you think the centre and Barjeel have helped to expand the artistic landscape of Sharjah and the UAE?

As a relatively new development, the Maraya Art Centre provides an alternative viewing space for art. Although the landscape of Sharjah's artistic community is already mainly non-commercial, the centre is able offer some of Sharjah's best cultural qualities in one place: a non-confrontational viewing space and an opportunity to engage in cultural activities and discussions that are rich in content.

Do you think there are enough people in the immediate area who appreciate and make use of Maraya?

I think the centre and the foundation are gaining a greater focus both locally and internationally, however we are looking to have that interest translate into more traffic in the space. At the moment we are actively engaging with local universities, cultural institutions and international curators to collaborate on interactive projects that we can be based in the centre and our gallery. I think the centre is especially ideal for students as an off-campus educational space that can supplement their curriculum.

Do you think there should be more places like Maraya in Sharjah?

I think it is essential to have spaces that facilitate public viewing and offer a range of options for learning and cultural exchange. Creating more content-based exhibition spaces with a mandate to promote high standard critical work is one of the most important facet of any developing art community. More places like Maraya would allow for wider cultural interest in art production, viewing and education.

For different groups related to arts and culture to come together, Maraya Centre is a link

Mandy Merzaben is the gallery manager and curator at the Barjeel Foundation. The foundation is essentially the private art collection of Sheikh Sultan Saood al Qassimi, who has declared it open to the public and whose mission is to see the works placed in international institutions so as to give Arab artists a louder global voice. Here Merzaben talks about the Maraya Centre.

Does it help the goals and mission of the Barjeel Art Foundation to be placed in the Maraya Art Centre?

The centre is an ideal position for the Barjeel Art Foundation because the goal for us was to have the collection available for public viewing in a way that was not exclusive. I am happy to note that our openings, receptions, tours and discussions have had a diverse range