

Marwan Shakarchi's clouds light up public art in UAE

N.P. Krishna Kumar

Sharjah

Iraq-born Marwan Shakarchi recently drew significant attention and caught the public's imagination through street art and murals, concepts that are fairly new in the UAE art scene.

Shakarchi, who was raised in London, is also relatively new to the Emirates' art scene, having moved there two years ago but he has made an impact after executing two major works – Jedariya, a mural initiative in Sharjah by the Maraya Art Centre and at the German International School in Dubai.

"For me, anything that has the power to make you think twice, take a step back, question or unexpectedly shock you is powerful," Shakarchi said of public art. "Aside from public art beautifying an overinflated media environment and giving life to a surface in the midst of the selfishness it shocks you into thinking."

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**Iraqi-born artist
Marwan Shakarchi**

The United Arab Emirates, he said, has begun to invest in public art. "It takes time. It takes persuasion and it doesn't come without restriction but it is definitely prevalent, more so now than ever before," Shakarchi said.

Before he moved to Dubai to pursue a full-time career in the arts, Shakarchi made artistic forays in other parts of the world, including Japan, Tunisia, Spain, New York, Lisbon and Portsmouth.

While pursuing a corporate career in London he experimented with art in his spare time. This is when he came up with the image of a cloud caricature with 'x's for eyes and forged his identity as *Myneand yours*.

When asked about the "cloud" image that he had made his permanent signature, he said he found that "repetition has an inherent power to be memorable and with a symbol comes something an audience can begin to identify with. The cloud provides this identity and attempts to open a dialogue."

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On whether he can make it relevant in all contexts, Shakarchi argued: "Its current relevance is amplified through its placement and narrative and I think perseverance gives an audience who might not have paid attention at first a reminder to pay attention this time around."

"The positive reactions of the audience have been heart-warming and rewarding for us. *Myneand yours* has specifically attracted with high interest the youth becoming a landmark in the neighbourhood," said Maraya Art Centre Director Giuseppe Moscatello, who commissioned Shakarchi for the work titled *There's an Angle to Everything*, which takes up an entire side of a building in Al Khan, a suburb of Sharjah.

The recent mural at the German International School, titled *The Girl Who Changed It All*, was the result of a collaboration between Shakarchi and the students who made creative suggestions for the final work.

"The wall in Sharjah felt like a bit of a triumph," Shakarchi said. "A lot of work went into making it happen and in a place like Sharjah, where murals have never existed, to show someone something new



There's An Angle to Everything, the mural commissioned as part of the Jedariya initiative by Al Maraya Art Centre, which takes up an entire side façade of building in Al Khan in Sharjah. (Photo by Jo Askew)

is a privilege. It became a bit of a guessing game as to what was happening. Curiosity is crucial and without it we remain controlled."

The wall at the German school in Dubai is more private but equally as effective. Viewers are mainly eager young minds. "Maybe, I can help them understand from a young age that you don't have to follow the *status quo*," he said.

Shakarchi's projects are intended to bring people together. He said if he can integrate that into involving people who can help expand the project, this seems like a natural progression. "Building a community of people around your work is

just as important as the substance of what you create," he said.

Shakarchi recalled the moment when he decided to change from corporate life to being a full-time artist: "I made the switch at my lowest point. It was either I made a change or I signed up for therapy and hoped to find a place for the corporate world in my bones."

The risks involved and managing the transition summed up his characteristic candour.

"The fear of the unknown has the power to trap us," Shakarchi said. "In fact, fear has the power to prevent us from ever doing anything. I still haven't overcome that

fear – I probably never will – but I have learnt to embrace and enjoy it. I welcome feeling uncomfortable as it reminds me that I am pushing myself rather than just accepting."

In the case of the commercial work that Shakarchi has done, the artist has been lucky to work with clients who have a similar vision and given him the freedom to work on what he feels makes artistic sense and learn something along the way.

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Dheisheh refugee camp youth archive life in colours on grey walls

Malak Hasan

Bethlehem

Refugee camps worldwide serve as a stark reminder of loss and longing. They are usually grey, cramped and dismal. Palestinian refugee camps are no different.

Shabby, drab concrete buildings are separated by narrow alleyways that lack basic infrastructure but are the main playgrounds for schoolchildren. The walls are generally long and dull.

In Dheisheh, a refugee camp on the edge of Bethlehem – a Palestinian town south of Jerusalem – however, the grey walls have been turned into a splendid colourful archive of life, a symbol of resistance and sacrifice.

Graffiti and murals in Dheisheh have evolved from being short political messages to become an extension of the past.

Malik Shaheen, 19-year-old from Dheisheh, had his days split between school, home and the surrounding streets. A rusted staircase was the favourite meeting place for Shaheen and his friends until December 2015. Israeli military forces killed him during a street protest. Now, an adjacent wall bears Shaheen's portrait to honour his memory.

The painting of Shaheen attracted thousands of visitors. His name was spray-painted on almost every wall in the camp to preserve

the memory of a youth whose life ended with a bullet.

Since 1967, Palestinians have used street art – mostly graffiti and murals – to defy Israeli military rule. The Israeli occupation denied the population the rights of freedom of expression and opinion.

The grey walls have been turned into a splendid colourful archive of life.

Hafez Omar, a Palestinian researcher in art and politics, said refugee camps in general have been at the forefront in a long journey of struggle against the Israeli occupation.

Following Israel's seizure of the West Bank, including Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip in 1967, Palestinians were banned from engaging in politics. "They used graffiti to announce a general strike or spread an important message," Omar said.

Israel censored newspapers and magazines and frequently suspended publications from being printed and distributed. However, Israel could not censor or destroy all the walls.

It was deemed as a patriotic and a courageous act when a masked Palestinian sprayed political messages because, once caught, jail time could be four years under the pretext of inciting the population against local authorities.

Even after the Israeli military withdrew from Dheisheh, the tradition continued and the camp has turned into a colourful archive of Palestinians' aspirations, dreams, losses and hopes for a brighter future.



Palestinian refugee Mariam Hamash, 86, sits in front of a mural on the 68th anniversary of Nakba, at Dheisheh refugee camp near the West Bank city of Bethlehem, last May.

Ayid Arafah, 33, is an artist from Dheisheh and one of thousands of internally displaced Palestinians who grew up reading and learning Palestine's history while playing in the streets of the shantytown.

"My first drawing was a tree and a bird," he said. "My school-teacher asked my classmates and me to draw what we want and we all chose to paint nature maybe because this is what we longed to see in the camp."

Arafah is one of the most famous graffiti and mural artists in Dheisheh. Men, women and children rush to greet him in the camp. His name is clearly visible under some very remarkable murals in the camp.

"When Malik died, his friends approached me to draw a portrait for him on the wall where they used to spend most nights," Arafah said. "The staircase was known to be his place and it will continue to be."

The faces of martyrs, leaders, poets and writers make up the biggest percentage of drawings on Dheisheh's walls. To Palestinians in the camp, which is made up of displaced people from 46 Palestinian villages, the walls have become part of their collective memory.

Mohammad Salameh, 16, said the portraits, the messages and the memories on the camp's walls are the way children came to know about the individuals who sacrificed their lives for the Palestinian

cause.

"I lived in the streets and grew used to them. If I had lived in a home, I would have drawn on a paper but the street is where we grew up and the walls have become our paper," he said.

When Salameh moved from Saudi Arabia with his family, he hated how the camp looked. "At first, I was disgusted by all these 'writings' but when I looked closer I came to know my country better," he said.

Graffiti and murals in Dheisheh have evolved from being short political messages and temporary slogans to become an extension of the past, an act of resistance and survival and an affirmation that Palestinians have not lost hope.

Arafah said: "I have written the names of our 46 villages and towns and I have drawn the faces of our martyrs. Despite how important this is, I aspire to see diversity and add more colours in the murals and graffiti."

After he travelled abroad, Arafah said he realised it is imperative to instil hope in the hearts of the camp's children. He now tries to incorporate more colour into his murals and portraits. The change is evident. While martyrs were usually drawn in black and white with serious faces, they now have wide smiles and lively stares.

"Our aim is not to make the refugee camp beautiful or a permanent place, because this is not our home but we must advocate for life and hope in a better future," Arafah said.

Malak Hasan, based in Ramallah, has reported on Palestinian-Israeli issues for more than five years.