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# SELECTIONS

ARTS / STYLE / CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND BEYOND



► FILTER CONTENTS

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## CULTURE

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## In the Library with Mohamed Al Mazrouei

written by **Anya Stafford**



Emirati painter, poet, writer and curator Mohamed Al Mazrouei discusses writers, shifting visions and the omnipresence of death

Only a rebellious mind could create images like Mohamed Al Mazrouei's. His primal, absurd paintings show figures in various stages of dishevelled undress, many with panic looming in their eyes. He defies definition, but can be called a neo-expressionist, twisting his subjects with unpredictable brushstrokes. Al Mazrouei is reluctant to put anything into a category, and is fiercely proud of being self-taught, rejecting formal education. "I am naked, and therefore free," he announces. This makes him a quirky but fun candidate for In the Library, shying away from the prescription Read This And Be An Artist.



As he unpicks his motivations, writers, poets and other artists come into the conversation. Al Mazrouei prefers to talk in terms of the writer, the mind behind the materials, rather than one book. The influence of Celtic writers on English literature is discussed: Dylan Thomas, James Joyce, Oscar Wilde. Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges and Virginia Woolf are mentioned too. Mohamed spent some time living in the U.K., having moved to the U.A.E. from his native Egypt in the 1980s. He goes on to praise fellow Emiratis Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim and Abdallah Moh'd Alsaadi, whose book *Sharm Coffeeshop* makes him smile. Al Mazrouei is a long-time member of the Emirates Fine Arts Society, having curated their current show *Noah's Ark*, featuring local and Bahraini artists.

“Salvador Dali said he literally ate his books, so that when they were digested the book and writer no longer existed. But he could not stomach Nietzsche,” he laughs. Austrian philosopher Wittgenstein is mentioned. “Reading is not about language but it's facing the memory of being here, by what we are as a material. So we read by doing nothing because we are still searching. In these terms you can understand all philosophers,” Al Mazrouei says. He describes how he always looks for another representation of an object. “If there's a chair, some might sit on it, some put it on the wall. Things will never change if we keep seeing a chair as just furniture.”



These “contrapositions” led the Oryx Foundation in Lucerne, Switzerland to invite Al Mazrouei to be artist in residence last year. His first European solo show in nearby AB Gallery followed. “Our collectors and art lovers were highly fascinated that an expressionist style like this can evolve in the U.A.E. For us as a Western gallery, it is therefore a huge pleasure to represent such an outstanding artist and character here,” says owner Franz Leupi.

Al Mazrouei’s ongoing practice usually involves freehand painting from wall projections — “blind drawing,” in that he doesn’t look at the canvas until the end. There’s a pile of folk percussion instruments in the middle of his studio, a work in progress. Another new project involves stunning replicas of the Fayum mummy portraits, lined up on the corner floor space. Death is something the artist says is constantly present in his work. He adores the short story *A Rose for Emily* by American writer William Faulkner, a meditation on decay and time, in that it “explains everything.”

*A version of this article appeared in print in Selections, The One-on-One Issue #35, pages 106-109.*

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*by* Anya Stafford

Anya Stafford is a writer living between the UAE and Ireland. She has over 15 years' experience as an online editor and writer for the likes of Google, Sony, Deezer and City Arts Centre Dublin. She recently completed first year of the MFA in Media through the National College of Art and Design, and before that the MSc in Interactive Digital Media in Trinity College, both in Dublin. Her ongoing research focuses on systems of art, and the aesthetics of ecosystems.

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