

Aisha Alabbar Gallery hosts works of top Emirati artist Najat Makki

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Untitled work from Dr Najat Makki in acrylic on canvas.

Muhammad Yusuf, *Features Writer*

Aisha Alabbar Gallery, Dubai, is presenting (Mar. 24 – June 30), the first solo exhibition of Emirati artist Dr Najat Makki titled *I Write in Colour*. Dr Makki is considered one of the innovators of the local scene and has contributed to the complexity and richness of its artistic expression through her experimentation with colour compositions and the use of fluorescent paints. Her consuming fascination with the semantics of colour and her skillful brush were harnessed at a young age, when she would witness the colour map of vivid herbs laid out in sacks at her father's spice shop. Thyme, henna, saffron and curcumin lured her, presenting a new picture of shade, texture and scent. To this day, Makki's practice is marked by daring surveys of new natural and synthetic materials, influenced by her reading of philosophy, poetry and her affinity for music. At times, she also opts for large scrolls, where paint bounces like music notes or rhythmic prose in melodic harmony.

Makki's fondness and resonance with Nature are palpable. Spending her college years digging her hands in soil to knead and mould clay in order to create her sculptures, she instantly recognised mankind's oneness with it. This opened her up to a visual palette that

encompasses warm earthy hues and cyan blue skies; velvety purple supernovae explosions and cosmic green; deep oceanic turquoise and granite greys.

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What inspired her in colour, followed in form: the radiance of circular suns and moons, the brilliance of crescents, the precision of hexagonal beehives, the triangular mountain peaks and sand dunes, the colour gradient in bodies of water and stretches of land. The elusive properties of the natural world are captured and transfigured onto canvas through colour and form, creating a hymn that harmonises her deep personal experiences of natural phenomena with universal seismic themes.

Nowhere is her fascination with life-giving and nurturing aspects of Nature more visible than in the female figures, defiantly breaking up her swathes and strokes of colour. Depicted in simple, abstract lines, mostly in profile and collectively gathered, Makki borrows from Ancient Egyptian relief carvings of female deities and mythological figures that embody tranquil stability, wisdom, strength and rebirth.

Upon a commission from the Sharjah Art Museum, she furthered her curiosity for excavating the artistic potential of the unseen by establishing a name for these figures: Venus of Meleiha. Inspired by the Meleiha Fort in Sharjah where hundreds of coins and moulds with the heads of figures from ancient civilisations were discovered, her mind journeys back in history to conjure up images of these females of bygone eras.

The celebratory figures are unabashed in their presence — making up for what she perceived was lacking in the representation of women in society. She has also maintained a visual journal which she calls Daily Diaries (2015- ongoing). Made of leftover scraps of paper and excess paint from her larger works, the miniature, sketch-like paintings capture an observation, a mood or a fleeting thought. Like a daily ritual, it allows her to study different textures, patterns, compositions and concepts without the restraint of an end product. The storyteller journals in words; but Makki writes in colour. Najat Makki (Dubai, 1956) is a pioneering Emirati artist best known for her curiosity for colour and dreamlike, abstracted depictions of the natural landscape of the UAE.



Untitled work from Dr Najat Makki.

What started as childlike wonder led her to Cairo, where she graduated with a Bachelor's and Master's degree in relief sculpture and metal from the College of Fine Arts (1982 and 1998, respectively). Upon returning to the UAE, the colourist and painter started exploring fluorescent paints through her work in scenography for children at the Ministry of Education, introducing the Gulf to a style of abstract painting that is characterised primarily by large fields of flat, solid colour spread across, creating areas of unbroken surface and a flat picture plane.

Her use of this material in contemporary art contexts created an unconventional viewing experience, often accompanied by UVA lights that elevated matter from canvas in lurid dimensionality. This experimentation was first debuted in her solo exhibition at Al Wasl Club in Dubai in 1987, marking a turning point in her career and gaining her regional recognition.

Makki later returned to the Egyptian capital to pursue a doctorate degree, making her the first Emirati woman to formally specialise in the philosophy of art (2001), adding a theoretical dimension to her practical aptitude and visual flair. She has exhibited widely in her home country and also internationally in Egypt, France, Germany, India, Jordan, Switzerland, Syria, Turkey and the United Kingdom. Her works are in the permanent collections of the Sharjah Art Museum, the Cultural Foundation in Abu Dhabi, Sultan Bin Ali Al Owais Cultural Foundation in Dubai, Women's Museum in Dubai and the Ministry of Culture and Youth in Abu Dhabi, among others.

Makki was the only female artist among the 15 showing at 1980 – Today: Exhibitions in the UAE, the National Pavilion UAE and the 56th Venice Biennale (2015), curated by Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi. Aisha Alabbar Gallery was founded in 2018 and is a platform that promotes pioneering Emirati, local and regional artists who work in a diverse range of artistic genres. The gallery also welcomes the exploration of fashion, cinema and other creative concepts. It hosts workshops as well as regular meet ups, talks and events. Founder-owner Aisha Alabbar is recognised for her contributions to the local art scene. She is also an established photographer.