



View of the entrance of Bait 15. Photography by Hanna Orłowski. © Canvas.



Left to right: Afra Al Dhaheri, Kris Mortenson and Hashel Al Lamki in Al Lamki's studio at Bait 15. Photography by Hanna Orłowski. © Canvas

BRINGING ART HOME

Five UAE-based artists have recently converted a villa to five artists' studios and a residency that doubles as an exhibition space in the Al Zafranah area of downtown Abu Dhabi. In a creative response to the lack of shared arenas for artists in the UAE, Bait 15 is an example of what can be done from the ground up, as **Nadine Khalil** finds out.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that Bait 15 was just a regular villa or house (which is what "bait" means in Arabic) numbered 15, until you step onto the front porch. On the side wall to the entrance, past the courtyard, is a painting by Finn Murray-Jones, *Sabeel* (2018), which depicts three gleaming black taps, looking dramatic underneath a neon strip of green light. Inside, one of Lamyia Gargash's evocative photographs of empty interiors, *My Great-Grandmother's Bathroom* (2005–6), is striking. A marine blue tiled bathroom with a chair and bucket positioned inside the shower, it hints at elderly care. In the centre, several arrows pierce the body of an impromptu wheelbarrow-like sculpture by Russell Hamilton, *The Residents Last Stand: Chief Red Beard* (2011), a reference to his Native-American roots. Adjacent is a recognisable series by Mohammed Ibrahim, *Sitting Man* (2013), of a headless figure whose hands rest on his thighs, repeated in different colour combinations.

"There's another work by Ibrahim upstairs," Afra Al Dhaheri explained, referring to an abstract painting in the Emirati artist's signature blocks of colour. "He had given it to the poet Ahmad Rashid and when he passed away, his family, who were trying to dissolve his estate, handed it to Mohamed Al Mazrouei, who lived here before us." Al Mazrouei is an Egyptian-born self-taught painter, writer and filmmaker who moved to Abu Dhabi in the 1980s and established himself by working for The Cultural Foundation and managing the Emirates Writers' Union.

"The work was made just before Ibrahim burned all of his artwork in 1999 [in a semi-performative act], so it was a survivor in a way," Al Dhaheri continued. "We had a lot of discussions about whether it should go into Ibrahim's gallery [Cuadro] and agreed that it should stay here, where it was found, in the house."



Afra Al Dhaheri in her studio at Bait 15. Photography by Hanna Orłowski. © Canvas.

Bait 15 harbours many such resonant fragments of other lives. I sat with Al Dhaheri, Hashel Al Lamki and Kris Mortensen in Al Lamki's studio space upstairs (each artist has one), which used to be Al Mazrouei's, as Al Lamki described the sentimental significance of the red chair he was perched on. It belonged to the Cultural Foundation's National Library in Qasr el Hosn – an architectural icon designed by Walter Gropius, which served as the UAE's first cultural centre. After the building closed for renovation, Al Mazrouei brought the chair to the house. "When we took over the lease, he told me, 'make sure you don't lose that chair,'" Al Lamki says. The studio was furnished with Al Lamki's surrealist paintings and ironic figurines, as well as a wall sculpture he made out of Al Mazrouei's leftover paintbrushes – a testament to the closeness between the two artists, who will have a show together at the NYUAD Project Space in November.

The missing people in the room, Tony Bragg and Maitha Abdalla, comprise the other half of the Bait 15 equation, which was formed when the five UAE-based artists realised they had a collective need

for a studio space, one which could also serve as a meeting place for likeminded creatives. The Salama bint Hamdan Emerging Artists Fellowship (SEAF) programme, a partnership with the Rhode Island School of Design (where Al Dhaheri attained her MFA), was the point of convergence for all of them. Bragg works as a studio manager for the programme in Abu Dhabi and Al Lamki and Abdalla are both recent graduates.

"It wasn't easy to get a license to rent a warehouse," Al Lamki added. "Bait 15 was really based on a need, it is what the system allows for and what we can afford. Within the collective, five of us have different sets of skills, so all the modifications you see here were done by us."

"We tore up the entire tile floor and built the walls ourselves for the show," said Mortensen, who used to work as an installation director when she was studying at Chicago's SAIC, and put up Bait 15's inaugural exhibition in May (which ran until 23 June under the title *Home*). "Our idea is to create an experimental, organic space that brings in other artists, since artists here don't have many spaces to show in that aren't



Camilla Singh. *Living Office*. 2008. Various mediums. 50 x 70 cm. Photography by Hanna Orłowski. © Canvas

either commercial galleries or museums. Obviously it's not about making money for us, it's about investing in the community. We want more spaces like this to exist," she emphasized.

Home included a healthy mix of emerging and established names, a couple of which are professors of visual arts at Zayed University. Looking at homes as contentious sites of both inclusion and exclusion, fragility/ambiguity and solidity/stability, the show evoked a quest for ways of being and settling, anchored by ideas of nostalgia, uncertainty and impermanence.

One of the eye-catchers was Camilla Singh's *Living Office* (2008), which pictures the artist through a grid outlined by a room-sized birdcage furnished with large plants and office equipment. Banu Colak's textile piece, *A garden far from home* (2017), evoked desert flowers and the Syrian artist Lama Alrommo's airy and expressionist, fluid paintings were framed and hung salon-style, "the way you would in your own house," as Mortensen noted. On the adjacent wall, *Writing Room* (2018) by Nujoom Al Ghanem, is a conceptual, shadowy ambient film punctuated by typing sounds.

Next to Al Lamki's studio was the rotating resident artist's studio, in this case occupied by Laura Schneider, who teaches at NYUAD. On the floor were ethereal home video projections in buckets of sand, *East Chop Beach* (1986, 2018), in which three children (her sister and two cousins) shared their make-believe stories of pirates and sharks in a space of memory and fiction. "The images become luminescent because of the refraction in the sand grains, the beach setting being a very playful yet profound one, and with a whole discourse around it associated with time," Schneider explained. This concept of the language of reminiscence relates to one of her ongoing archival projects of people's first memories. Also in her studio were precise drawings that colourfully layered old family photos with pre-photography (and almost fantastical) scientific wildlife illustrations. In a comment on the limited attempts to understand ourselves and the world around us, there were repetitions and disappearances of characters in this series, *Thymesia*. "I was very drawn to these images because there have been a lot of deaths in my family and an absence



Laura Schneider with her work *In the Yard, 1953 & Topsell's Gorgon, 1607*. 2018. Mixed media on paper. 35 x 28 cm. From the series *Thymesia*. Photography by Hanna Orłowski. © *Canvas*



Laura Schneider. *East Chop Beach, 1986*. 2018. Video projection, buckets, sand. 2:23 min looped. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist



Laura Schneider. *Kathy In the Yard, 1953 & Hippopotamus, 18th c.* 2017. Mixed media on paper. 35 x 28 cm. From the series *Thymesia*. Image courtesy of the artist

Background: Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim. *Sitting Man*. 2013. Oil on canvas. 82 x 65 cm. Foreground: Russell Hamilton. *The Residents' Last Stand: Chief Red Beard*. 2011. Wood, metal, bamboo, feather and sinew. 180 x 50 x 180 cm. Image courtesy of Bait 15



Inside view of Bait 15. Image courtesy of Bait 15



can offer you as much as a presence does," she said. By juxtaposing the scientific desire for knowledge with her own personal obsession to capture the part of family identity that's inherited, she sheds light on different narratives that are shaped by 'necessary fictions'. "I'm trying to get at that tension between objecthood that is static and truthful and people and histories that are constantly evolving."

A thread links Schneider's personal investigations into the origins of images and their memorial reproduction with Al Dhaheri's work in her studio on the ground floor, near the exhibition hall, which I stepped into on my way out. Responding to the rapid changes in her environment, Al Dhaheri had recreated the impact of the UAE's construction boom in delicate, layered compositions that combine airy fabrics with ceramic, cement and concrete. "Cement is like memory, it cracks with weight," she noted. "The materials that symbolize the sweeping changes we are experiencing are the machines and all the

things I associate with Brutalist architecture. When a tree breaks out through a crack in a building, that's an evidence of time and how trees adapt to the change. We need to learn from that." In some of her works, trees emerge from half-built buildings.

"We move so fast here, and I bring fragility into my work to show the gaps that exist between the generations. It's drastic when my aunt, who is only seven years older than me, had a completely different childhood from mine." Al Dhaheri then explained how she found out that her studio was formerly the bedroom of the landlord, Nawaf Al Janahi, son of Emirati actor Mohammed Al Janahi, from a popular 1970s TV series she grew up with. "Nawaf said to me, 'you picked that room? That's my childhood.'" A house of many homes, Bait 15 is evidence of how, when faced with gaps in the arts infrastructure, a group of artists can take matters into their own hands and create a much-needed informal network of expression and support. 📍