

Rooted in her experiences of growing up in Abu Dhabi, conceptual artist Afra Al Dhaheri's work examines the fluidity of hair as symbolising notions of time, memory, fragility and social reflection

words AYESHA S. SHEHMIR

STRANDS OF TIME



previous page, **AFRA AL DHAHERI**. *Indomie Curls*. 2021. Glazed white stoneware. 35x35x20cm
facing page, **AFRA AL DHAHERI**. *Hide and Seek No.2*. 2021. Glazed white stoneware. 30x14x35cm
below, Afra Al Dhaheri. Photo by Dalal Mubarak Najem



A large-scale, floor-to-roof cotton rope takes centre stage in a quiet room. It unfurls across the floor, depicting the perceived movement of long strands of hair, resembling tendrils in its shape and flexibility. This is *Tasreeha* (2020) by mixed-media artist Afra Al Dhaheri, made for the annual Beyond: Emerging Artists section of the Abu Dhabi Art Fair, curated by Maya El-Khalil. The sweeping installation – some strands tangled and some free – explores hair as a container of memory; an extension of the body which demonstrates the nuances in culture and represents different points in time.

Time is one of the most crucial elements in Afra's work. The artist constantly questions, "How do we process time?" In a seemingly short span, throughout the '90s until now, her hometown Abu Dhabi has seen a vast shift in the landscape. "I think that there's a lot of questioning about the notion of time, and what time feels like here versus in the west," observes Afra. "Or how we experience moments – slow or fast. That leads to this understanding of time and the way we experience it. We lose parts of our identity moving through change, [and there are] parts that fall within the cracks of moving forward. It becomes a very fragile moment. But at the same time, reflecting and responding to that is important. That summarises how we adapt as well to change, time and to ephemerality."

In this sense, Afra's conceptual work views hair almost as a measuring tape, exploring the layers and layers of meaning buried underneath. "This material that I am exploring and trying to understand, also has the capacity to hold form," explains Afra.

The artist also explores the ties between hair and memory. "I found myself looking at hair as a representation of time and as a presentation for memory," says Afra. "I dived into this idea of hair and what it represents personally, culturally or religiously." For the artist, hair symbolises a timeline: how long the owner has been treating, nourishing and maintaining it. For instance, short hair could reflect a recent change such as a cut, while longer hair may signify long-term experiences.

Upon viewing her work, it's clear it's impossible to untangle Abu Dhabi from Afra, as an artist and as a citizen. "I think that, just the fact of growing up here and





facing page and above, **AFRA AL DHAHERI**. *Tasreeha*. Installation views. 2020. Cotton rope. 600x600cm



facing page, **AFRA AL DHAHERI**. *Back-Combing*. 2021. Cotton rope. 255x130cm
above, **AFRA AL DHAHERI**. *To Tame and Contain*. 2021. Cotton rope, aqua resin and cement on cotton fabric. 53x120x5cm

witnessing all this development, all this change, became a predominant part of who I am, how I think and what I make," she admits.

"I think that this city has been instrumental in a sort of way. A guide almost, an assistant on how to understand process, change, architecture and landscape." All these themes are woven into Afra's work through her experiences of growing up in a city that's constantly under construction. Discussing her identity and Abu Dhabi, she expresses: "I don't think you can separate the two."

She's been noticed on the global map too. It's no surprise that Afra's work has been showcased the world over, at spaces as diverse as Cromwell Place in London and Ghent's Tatjana Pieters. From 20 January to 4 March 2021, Dubai-based Green Art Gallery was home to *Split Ends*, Afra's first solo show which explored the universal notions and social constructs of time, memory and reflection.

"You have this reminder in your head every few months that you have to go and trim your split ends. It's almost a reminder to come back, unpack and reflect," she expresses. "Due to this notion of a cycle, there's a reminder that exists within your body, as well as outside your body."

The exhibition room was divided with a large, interactive rope installation entitled *Fil Al Shaar* (2021), which, as renowned independent curator Munira Al Sayegh wrote, "insinuates a playful liberation of hair."

Afra explains, "The way that I presented it in the gallery, I kind of interfered with how the audience navigated through the space – so I deconstructed it, and almost created a wall with rope which you could enter through into a different area where there was a more intimate space. So I gave the audience the choice of taking that initiative independently of whether they wanted to go through the ropes or not. We did not mention, specify or give instructions of any kind to show if you could go through it or not. I think that it was very important for me to give the audience the choice of breaking this boundary. It was a primitive boundary that you could see through and lines that you could open and walk through."

In these immersive, interactive installations, the portrayal of hair is a nod to the differences in cultures, religions, genders and other associations around the world. In Islam, women often choose to wear a hijab as a form of empowerment and modesty, reporting that their spirituality and connection with Allah is maintained as a result. "But there's also a kind of romanticised idea of hiding something that is beautiful, or hiding something

that gives away some of your characteristics or some of your personality." Afra explores this very notion, expressing the depth of stories and understanding attached to a woman's hair.

The seed of artistry was planted at a young age. Growing up, Afra was an avid baker and her mother would always enrol her in craft classes, to hone her sewing and craftsmanship skills. "I've always been creative, my family says," she laughs.

"My dad would take me and my sisters to science museums when we travelled. And one of the memories that really stayed with me and comes back to me a lot in my practice today, is going to the science museum in the States. I think all of these things contributed, but I wasn't encouraged to take art as a career."

In fact, Afra's higher education began with a major in business, before she made the switch to art. It was one of her advisors who actually, after a counselling session, said, 'I think you should try art.' "I remember laughing, and I said, 'Well, I never painted or drew even when I was ten.' That, I think, was a very important moment in my life. Finally, I tried those courses and they changed my life – and here I am."

In July, Expo Dubai 2020 revealed their exceptional line-up of 11 artists set to participate in its Public Art Programme, from international talents such as Nadia Kaabi-Linke and Olafur Eliasson to local names like Shaikha Al Mazrou and Afra, who will contribute to what Expo describes as, "the first curated permanent, open-air art exhibition in the UAE."

As an artist who has never participated in public art before, Afra admits there was a shift in her *modus operandi*, for the project. "In this particular work, I had to consider my audience and in particular, this made me connect with my culture and people," she smiles.

"Considering where I'm from and considering the UAE, I asked myself, 'How can I use this opportunity to connect with my society? How can I use this opportunity to have people relate to the work because all my work is very conceptual?' So it was a moment where I had to put myself in other people's shoes. In preparing the work for Expo, I sat down with all these questions. I have to be clear, I have to relate and I have to connect with all the members of my community and society. I'm hoping that the work becomes that connection." ■

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