

## **Creative breakthroughs: the path to becoming an international artist**

Emerging and mid-career artists thrive on exposure, community and access to new markets. Two shows taking place between London and Hong Kong bring a sense of dynamic opportunity to both artists and collectors

“After moving to Abu Dhabi, I had a spacious studio for the first time,” says Simrin Mehra Agarwal, an Indian-born artist who has been practising in the UAE for more than a decade making intricate drawings, paintings and large-scale sculptures. “I used to make small-format works but, once I had studio space, I challenged myself and created monumental works covering the entire walls and floor.”

Trained in New Delhi and London, Agarwal is one of three artists whose work has been chosen for inclusion in Beyond Emerging Artists, supported by HSBC. The initiative from Abu Dhabi Art, with HSBC as its global partner, gives backing to emerging UAE-based talent through mentorship, curatorial support and international exposure.

Agarwal is not only an artist, but also a skilled diver. “Through my research, I’m trying to give people an insight into what I’ve been exploring underwater,” she says. “Wrecks and reefs, archaeological sites: you see corals bleached by rising sea temperatures, and sunken vessels of war that have transformed and become organic over time.” In her practice, she aims to build awareness of critical and urgent issues around the impact of war, climate change and loss of biodiversity.



© Simrin Mehra Agarwal, War Machines- III, 2024

With its proximity to the sea and abundant opportunities for artists, the UAE location has made good career sense for Agarwal. “There’s a growing art ecosystem here. Several residencies and museums have been established, and the government is promoting artistic talent,” she says. “The support I received by being part of Beyond Emerging Artists enabled me to create an installation composed of a monumental sculpture, large-scale murals and a video piece showing a hybrid form – part coral and part machine – in different states of degeneration.”

## Artists in dialogue

Beyond Emerging Artists has been shown in prestigious venues both in Hong Kong (at Sotheby’s Maison) and in London (at the Saatchi Gallery). The two other artists with work in the show were Fatma Al Ali, an Emirati artist whose work includes sound art and contemporary sculpture based on insights from archive documentation and oral histories; and Dina Nazmi Khorchid, a Palestinian artist based in the UAE who explores cross-cultural identity and natural processes, specialising in contemporary textiles.



“I embrace every exhibition as a moment to push myself to expand my work,” says Khorchid. “Over the past couple of years, much of my process unfolded through travels, residencies and being outdoors.” A residency in Vermont saw her begin a body of work that made its way into Abu Dhabi Art Fair in 2024, followed by shows for Beyond Emerging Artists, supported by HSBC. “Bringing these emotive and immersive pieces together was very rewarding,” says Khorchid. “My exhibition pieces honour the wilderness and explore the psychological connections between humans and nature as spaces of both grieving and healing.”

One of Khorchid’s pieces in Beyond Emerging Artists was a ceramic installation featuring 48 porcelain flowers; others are textile-based, featuring trees submerged in water. “Trees are these strong, solid beings, yet in water they start to move, adapt and migrate,” she says. “As the pieces travelled, the audience changed, and I was curious to see how they responded. Seeing the work in Hong Kong had a different feel to Abu Dhabi. Being at the Saatchi Gallery in London was another amazing opportunity.”



© Fatma Al Ali, I Picked Up a Coin and Heard a Whisper, 2024

Al Ali felt equally glad to be reaching a new audience, with her work seen in conversation with that of the other artists. “My practice is all about questioning the way our history is told and recorded,” she says. “So it’s interesting to take it to communities that are far removed from my own.” She emphasises that resources are only part of what it takes to make art. “Part of the work is diligent research, reading archives and then trying to process that information into my art practice.”

## **By bringing Emirati artists from Hong Kong to London, we are showcasing the UAE's growing role as a hub that bridges East and West**

“By bringing Emirati artists from Hong Kong to London, we could showcase the UAE’s growing role as a hub that bridges East and West,” says Mohamed Al Marzooqi, CEO of UAE, HSBC Bank Middle East Limited. “What we are also witnessing is a powerful trend within the UAE itself: an acceleration in art curation and collection that reflects both the country’s roots and its vision for the future,” he says. “HSBC’s support for Abu Dhabi Art reflects our belief

that cultural dialogue is as vital to long-term prosperity as capital flows. Both help to shape the relationships and understanding that underpin global growth. Art and culture, like trade and finance, flourish on openness and exchange.”

## **Collectors, patrons, tutors and supporters**

Emmanuel Awuni, a Ghanaian-born British artist who studied at Goldsmiths and the Royal Academy, is further ahead in his artist journey: his residencies and exhibitions have included solo shows in London, and group shows, including at Sadie Coles in the UK and Kunst Museum Solingen in Germany. Awuni’s work, which includes figurative sculpture and abstract paintings, featured in *Different Perspectives*, an exhibition of nine contemporary artists whose works are part of HSBC’s permanent art collection, which includes works dating back to the late 18th century.





© Emmanuel Awuni, Bethesda, 2024

“Growing up in Ghana, we didn’t call it art,” says Awuni. “It’s understood that everybody can do something creative. We’d go to the riverbank and collect clay to make toys. Anything that was around that was malleable was material.” At secondary school in Kent, UK, his ability to draw and paint was regarded as remarkable. Awuni nevertheless came close to becoming a professional footballer, but when an injury hampered his sporting ambitions, he applied to art school.

“I won the Jack Goldhill Award for Sculpture at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition [in 2021], which allowed me to focus fully on my practice,” says Awuni. “From that point on, I met so many collectors, patrons, tutors who not only believed in my work but also provided a kind of support you can’t put a price on – amazing people like Dan [Lancaster, curator of HSBC Global Art Collection].”

**Holding a space for artists coming together is as important as showing the work**

Of the Different Perspectives show, supported by HSBC, Awuni says, “Holding a space for artists coming together is as important as showing the work, because it’s about knowledge sharing.” His long-term ambition is to open a museum in Ghana, he says. “I want it to be an archival project that also offers a platform for artists from across Africa.” It’s a

vision that brings his story full circle, from shaping clay as a child to shaping a space for the next generation of creators.

As part of the Different Perspectives exhibition, Awuni’s works were also seen in both Sotheby’s Maison and the Saatchi Gallery. “Through our global network, we put on exhibitions in spaces that have exceptional reputations and high visitor numbers,” says Daniel Lancaster. He notes that the exhibition gave some of the artists their first opportunity to show to a London or Hong Kong audience. “It’s important to show your support of artists at an early point,” he says. “That’s when artists need it the most, and the impact is much greater.”