

# This artist explores light and perception between French Impressionism and UAE culture



Artist and curator Alia Zaal

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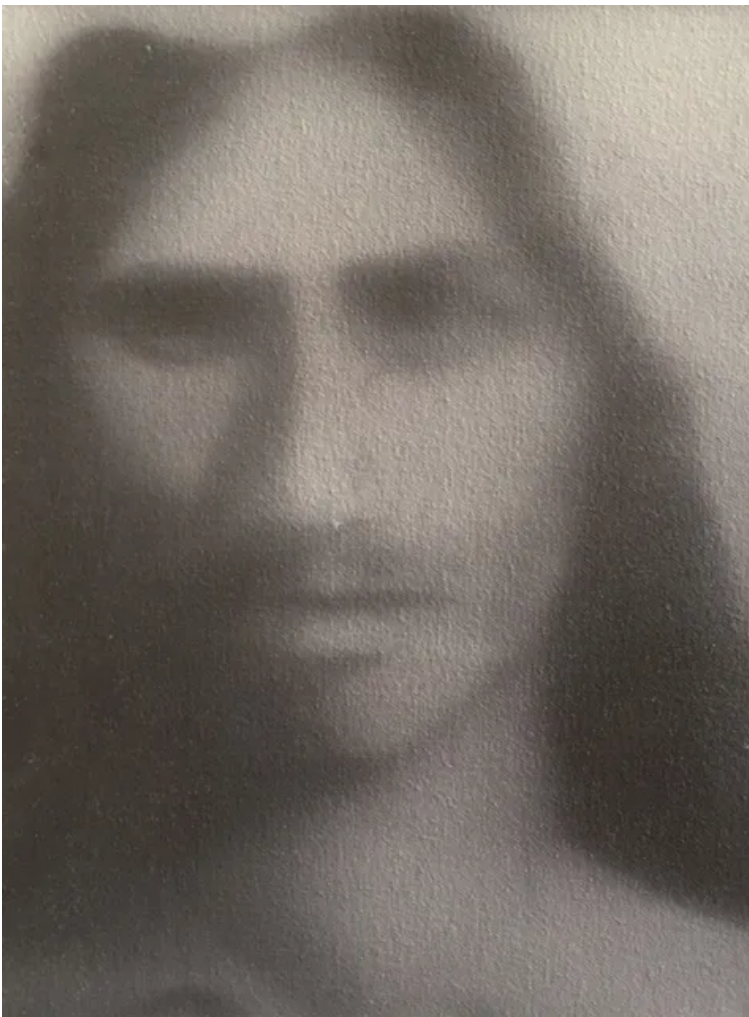
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## Naima Morelli interviews artist and curator Alia Zaal

There are many artists today inspired by 1800s French Impressionism. But what if the artist in question comes from the UAE? How does someone who grew up in surroundings where the extreme light needs to be shaded by window screens and the climate is sizzling hot, interact with the work of artists from two centuries ago, immersed in cloudy French weather?



*Artist and curator Alia Zaal*

The answer is to be found in the work of artist and curator Alia Zaal. She presented a show recently – "I Saw Time Passing (I)" — at Foundry Downtown, Dubai, based on her ongoing residency in the former house of the master of

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Impressionism, Claude Monet, in Vétheuil, France.

Responding to Impressionism, Zaal studied the natural landscapes of Vétheuil, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, both in their natural and artificial ecosystems, finding connections between her own UAE landscape and the impressionist one. The artist reimagines familiar scenes of the sea, the desert and the city lit by the sun, the moon and street lights.

Organised by her gallery Hunna, the residency took place over two separate stays in the course of one year. This was because the artist wanted to see the place in different light, in the spirit of Monet's paintings, who used to represent the same buildings at different times of the day. "I like Monet," notes Zaal. "However, among the impressionists the one I love the most is Cezanne, I used to copy him a lot. Nevertheless, the Vétheuil residency gave me the chance to look deeply into Monet's work, and learn from it."

One of the first subjects of interest for her in Vétheuil was the willow tree, a frequent subject of Monet's paintings; it reminded her of the ghaf, the UAE's national tree. "The ghaf is a historic and cultural symbol of stability and peace in the UAE's desert environment, but it's never presented as much as the palm tree," Zaal told me. "Following my explorations of the idea of perception, I find it interesting to paint a tree that you don't really know whether it's from the Middle East or from Europe. You can see a ghaf tree or a willow tree depending on the light I would represent it in."

## Her father's influences

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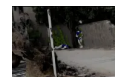


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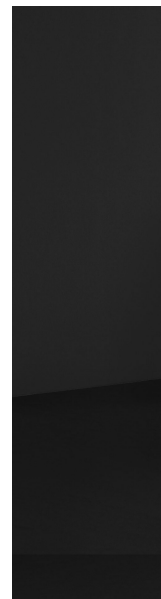
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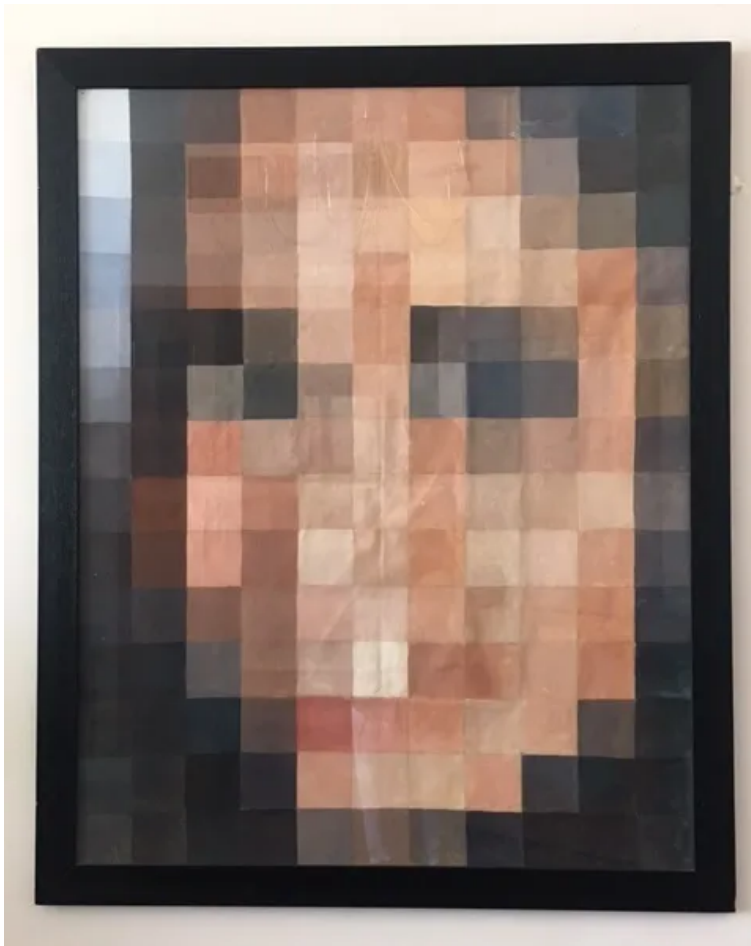
Zaal began to be interested in light to understand better the weak eyesight of her father, whose drawings have fascinated her since childhood. "My father was born with a talent for drawing and art making. But because he had weak eyesight, he was forced to approach art a bit differently, paying a lot of attention to detail."



Her father Zaal, a name that she adopted for herself instead of her actual surname Lootah, grew up in the 1960s and 70s, at a time when art teaching was in its infancy in Dubai, and they would have teachers from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon or Kuwait: "After studying art, my father started working in television, painting backgrounds. He also exhibited his work, and was part of the oldest exhibition documented in the UAE in the '70s. Then he started working on something else with my grandfather, but he never gave up art. He would still draw every day."

Art is indeed an integral part of the daily communication between father and daughter: "When I check our WhatsApp messages, there are drawings every day. It's a way of communicating between us." The entire family is into art, as her father taught his wife to draw, and Alia's siblings are also creatives: her late brother was a sculptor, one sister is a graphic designer and the other is a fashion designer.





*Artist and curator Alia Zaal*

Zaal recalls that when she was at art school in Sharjah, it was again another interesting time for the development of art in the UAE. The art world and art schools were trying to be more international for the first time, and getting closer to other cultures. "I had one teacher who was very influential for me. She had us studying Islamic art and Asian art side by side with Western art, and she would take us students to visit artists' studios."

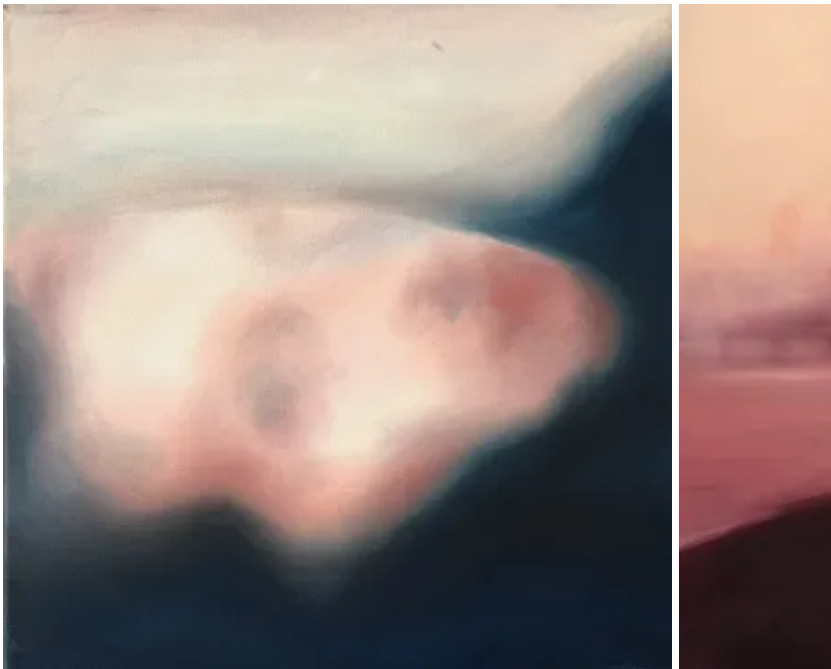
However, in the process of establishing an international art scene in the UAE, Zaal believes that many of the local pioneering artists whose work wasn't consistently documented – including her father — run the risk of being forgotten. This is why she will have an upcoming exhibition in Dubai where she will show her own work

alongside her father's for the first time, tracing his influences on her art. The working title is "Through his eyes".

### "Anonymity" and "Outside my Window"

The exhibition will include an early series, "Anonymity" from 2008, which came from a set of personal reflections. "Growing up in the UAE, you are used to the fact that we all wear the same clothes, black or white, and we have similar names such as Alia, Ahmed and Mariam. We have common family names like mine, Lootah. This made me wonder what it is that makes us individuals. We don't show who we are culturally."

An additional inspiration came from some drawings by her father. "He would draw the sons of the ruler of Dubai without their faces, just the ghutra and the kandura and the moustaches, but you would definitely know who is who without any facial feature."

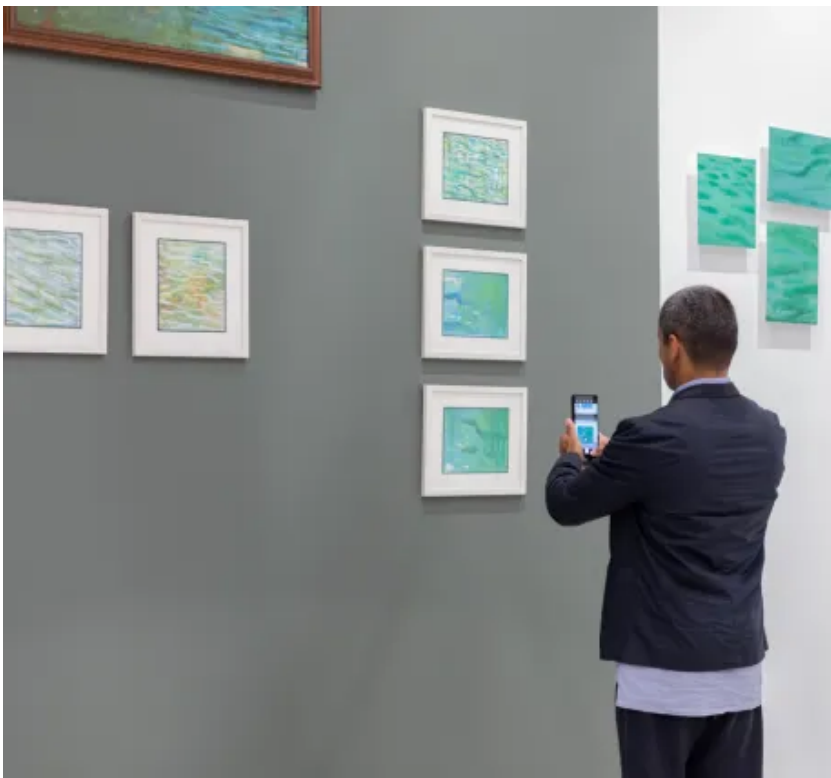


Zaal then started to pair these two ideas, representing the members of her own family, pixelating their facial features, to stress this idea of identity, identification and perception. She

then challenged her father to recognise the family members from her representations. Even if the faces were blurred, he never failed to spot the right person by some proportion, or capturing a vision of ensemble.

The artist kept on exploring these reflections on perception, applying them to cities rather than individuals. She had them converge in a series called "Outside my window".

"At the time I was moving between Abu Dhabi — which is close to the sea and I lived in a high rise — and Dubai, where my home is closer to the desert and is on the ground floor." Despite the two cities being relatively close to each other, the two landscapes felt so radically different to the artist, because of the positioning of her houses, as well as the different views.





Moreover, moving between the two cities she would observe how the differently-tinted windows of cars would reflect a different landscape. The result of these reflections was a series of paintings where the urban landscape is hazy and never the same, letting the viewer wonder about the individual nature of perception.

### A holistic approach to curation



Alongside her art, Zaal is also a curator, working for big institutions as well as independent projects. "My experience at the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which took place in its early days, taught me that the way you set up an exhibition is a bit like doing a painting, moving things here and there, changing the positioning of artworks in the way that they interact with each other."

She recently curated a solo exhibition of Hashel Al Lamki at Alserkal Avenue in Dubai, called "Pulse". "It was nice to work with one single artist, rather than on a group show. He is a friend of mine, so we could take the time to spend ten months working on the production."

Zaal doesn't have a set schedule to divide her curatorial work from her art. "It's all interconnected. If I work for an institution it's my day job, but when I do it with friends we just spend time together in the evenings and talk art. So it's more a flow of things."

Along with the show with her father, Alia Zaal will also have a new show in Dubai called "I saw time passing II" at Foundry Downtown in Dubai, and a third one in France in December.

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