

THE FUTURE IS OPEN:
ELVIRA DYANGANI OSE ON PUBLIC ART
IN ABU DHABI

Interview by Naima Morelli

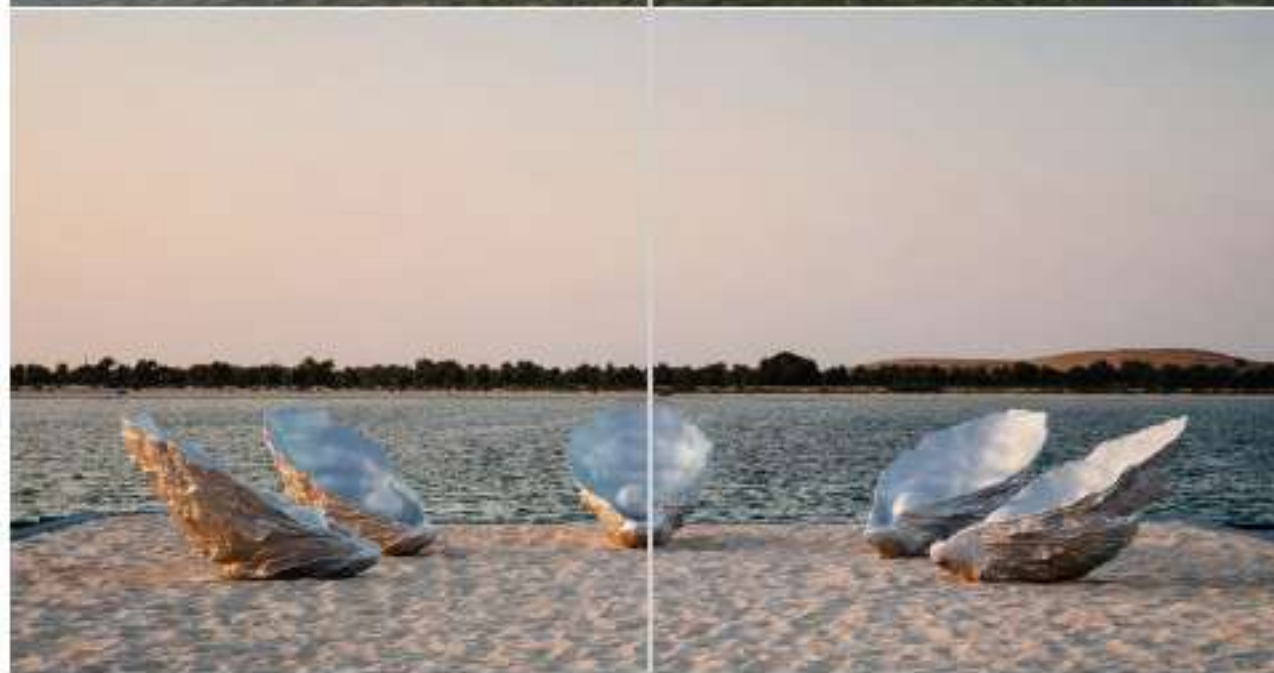
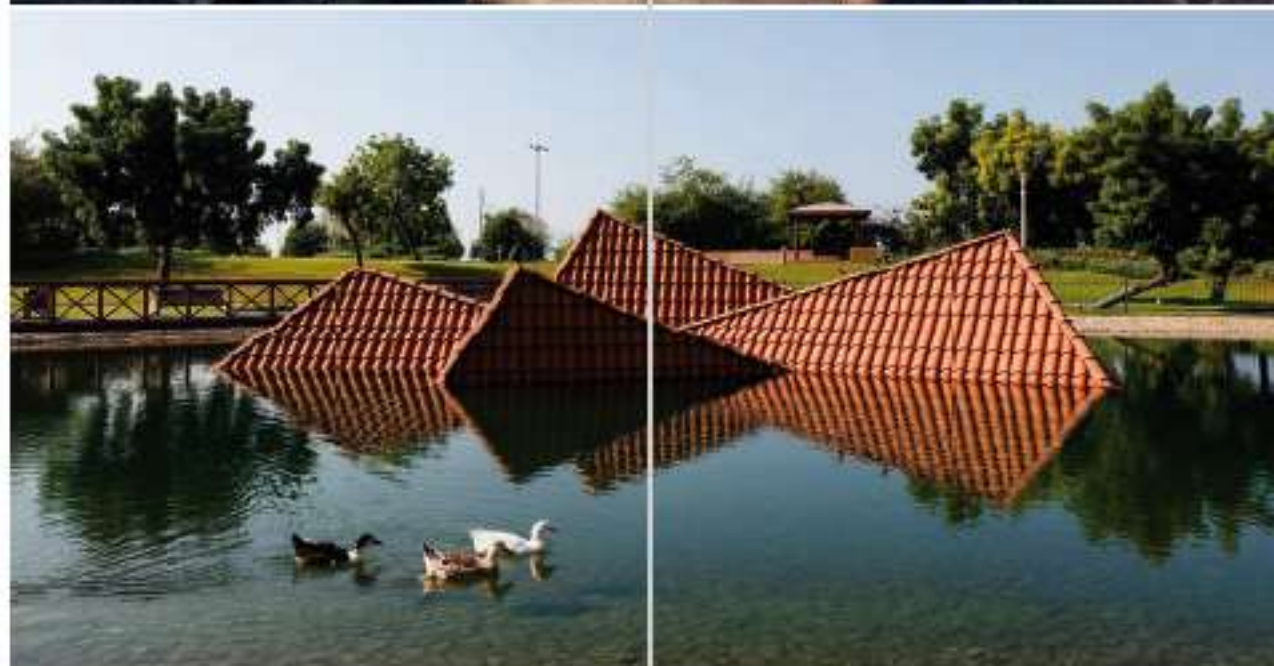
One of the most memorable moments in Abu Dhabi for curator Elvira Dyangani Ose came during her first visit to the Zayed National Museum, which opened in December 2025. There, she encountered artisans singing at the entrance – their presence striking against the museum's state-of-the-art architecture. Inside, the narrative of the nation unfolded through intimate gestures, including the image of the founding figure, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, standing barefoot in the desert.

This interplay between public narrative and private gesture informs Dyangani Ose's approach to the upcoming Public Art Abu Dhabi Biennial (PAAD) titled 'Home: A Glossary for a Communal Sense of Place'. 'I didn't want to present a single interpretation, and that's the idea behind the glossary,' she explains. 'I'm curious about how the history of a place is presented, both in ways we recognize and in narrations we don't yet understand.'

A case in point is Mina Zayed, the old port, one of the biennial's key sites, now a creative hub. There, Dyangani Ose encountered an old fisherman's house – a remnant within a broader narrative of development. The more familiar story of tourism and regeneration sits atop this less visible layer of working lives left behind in the linear narrative of progress.

While Dyangani Ose is no stranger to established art systems, having recently concluded her tenure as director of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (MACBA), she identifies a particular energy in evolving cities. 'I feel it in places like Busan or Abidjan,' she notes. 'They are not burdened by fixed narratives as in Western capitals. There's a dismantling of inherited imaginaries and, along with it, a sense that the future is there to be written.'

As artistic director of PAAD (23 October 2026 – 15 February 2027), she brings her longstanding concerns with home and social space to this context. The biennial will kick off in Al Ain, followed by Abu Dhabi on 15 November.



NAIMA MORELLI
Public spaces have long been part of your curatorial focus and doctoral research. How does life in Abu Dhabi impact your thinking?

ELVIRA DYANGANI OSE
What intrigued me here was the power dynamics of city formation. Abu Dhabi is shaped by a master plan that consolidates a legacy in material culture, while projecting an open-ended future. Art, within this framework, can act as a critical tool, probing the boundaries between communal, institutional and in-between spaces.

NM You've pointed out that the biennial itself has no mega-project or grand urban planning driving it. What does that open up for you as a curator?

EDO A city is a much larger proposition than an institution. The level of the individual and of communal are taken into account and given room. I am interested in public art that meets the scale of everyday movement through a street in Abu Dhabi, while carrying historical weight. I pay attention to the tension between monumentality and history-making on one hand, and citizen participation on the other.

NM How do you approach two very different sites: the heritage site of Al Ain's oasis and the Abu Dhabi metropolis?

EDO In Al Ain, there's a dialogue between tradition and contemporary Emirati art. In Abu Dhabi, by contrast, Mina Zayed, the old port, remains one of the most challenging and beloved sites I've worked on, retaining its size from the 1980s and 1990s, before commercial expansion. The two facets of Abu Dhabi are complex, but exciting to think through.

NM What experiences can visitors expect?

EDO Alongside more contemplative works on history, participation and togetherness are central, through food, sound, meditation, poetry and play. Some works will appear in overlooked areas of the city, a no man's land.

NM What are some artist highlights for you?

EDO I'd definitely mention Ivan Argote's works, such as *The Other, Me and the Others* (2023),

which ask audiences to reconsider their relationship to public structures and spaces around them. Mark Bradford's practice invites audiences into materiality, while Marinella Senatore's participatory work, *I Contain Multitudes* (2022–ongoing), speaks to many communities. Shama Al Hamed reflects on the depth of UAE's artistic scene, while Ghanaian collective blackTARLINES' commission, *Forest of Umbrellas* (2026), bridges local and global histories. In Al Ain, Asunción Molinos Gordo extends our theme into land and rural knowledge.

NM Who is the biennial for?

EDO Anyone encountering the city: residents, visitors and those who have witnessed its transformations. There's something remarkable about how Abu Dhabi offers both legacy and futurality within a single lifetime.

NM Why does a project like this matter now?

EDO It comes down to resilience; an awareness that life continues and our responsibility is to remain conscious of the present moment. Our actions shape what comes next.

FROM TOP
Wael Al Awar, *Banzah*,
Public Art Abu Dhabi
Biennial 2024–2025.
Photo Lance Gerber

Seema Nasser, *Floating
Fragments*, Public Art
Abu Dhabi Biennial
2024–2025. Photo Lance
Gerber

Farah Al Qasbi,
Homesteads, Public
Art Abu Dhabi Biennial
2024–2025. Photo Lance
Gerber