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## Resurrecting the past

Two Dubai-based Iranian artists try to preserve the rich maritime heritage of the city

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By Jyoti Kalsi, Special to Weekend Review



A black-and-white shot taken by Dariush Zandi of dhow reflections on water

Image Credit: Supplied

Dariush Zandi and Shaqayeq Arabi's latest exhibition, titled Sinking Ships, is a nostalgic look at a way of life that is fast disappearing. The show, featuring a series of old photographs of Dubai and installations of a restored dhow and fishing nets, celebrates the close relationship that the people of the UAE have had with the sea, and highlights the need to preserve traditional culture and values for future generations. The two Dubai-based Iranian artists have recreated the past to explore notions of deterioration, fragility, vulnerability and changing cultural landscapes.

Zandi came to Dubai in 1978, and as an architect, town planner and urban designer, he has been directly involved in the development of the city. He has a passion for photography and has been documenting the city's changing landscape with his camera over the past three decades. He has also explored the desert and the wadis of the UAE and has shared his experiences and photographs through the Off-Road in the Emirates books. Arabi, who is a painter, sculptor and installation artist, shares Zandi's love for the outdoors, and the couple spends as much time as they can camping out in the desert and sailing in the creeks.

The photographs selected for the show were taken by Zandi 30 years ago. The black-and-white pictures offer a glimpse of the pristine beauty of the area around the Dubai Creek in those days. They include dramatic images of dhows casting their reflection on the water and traditional fishing nets arranged on the shore like modern abstract compositions. Also seen are the boatyards by the creek, sunken dhows waiting to be repaired, the shacks where the fishermen wove their nets, and the birds and the greenery that abounded in the area.

"In those days, just a short walk from my home would take me to the creekside, which was like being in the wilderness. I loved to go there on Friday mornings and take pictures. A recent request from a friend for some of my photographs sparked the idea of exhibiting these pictures. These images are poignant because, today, the wooden dhows are being replaced by fibreglass boats, and most of the boatyards do not exist anymore. The shacks where the fishing nets were woven by hand are also abandoned now," Zandi says.

The installation accompanying the photographs is an old dhow that the couple fished out of the creek and restored. The weather-beaten wooden boat, covered with barnacles, and with a huge chunk missing on the side, speaks volumes about the changing times. "During our excursions we have come across many abandoned dhows left to rot and fall apart in sandy graves, buried beneath the shifting tides in the creek. And it makes us sad to see this neglect. The dhow is an integral part of the history of the UAE. It played a key role in pearl diving, fishing and trade, which were the main sources of livelihood then. It was the symbol of a seafaring nation. This installation is a reminder of the UAE's heritage and the need for preserving it," Arabi says.

Creating this installation proved more difficult than they had expected. "Last year we had seen hundreds of abandoned dhows in the Dubai Creek, but when we went looking for one this year, there were none. The thought that they had been disposed of made us even more keen to highlight this issue. We searched the creek in Umm Al Quwain and spotted this decaying dhow in the water. We had to wait till the tide was low enough to get to it, and it took us hours to salvage the pieces. After we brought it to the gallery, we had to figure out how to fit the pieces together, just like the original boat builders had done. We felt like archaeologists piecing together a moment from the past," Arabi says. They also found some abandoned fishing nets in the creek, which they have filled with pieces of coral to create another resurrection of the past.

"We all have to ensure that future generations do not forget the role of the dhow in the development of this country. We are happy that we have been invited by a school to work with the students on restoring another dhow. And we hope this show will inspire viewers to respect traditions," Zandi says. "We travel around the world and have seen that everywhere traditional ways of life are disappearing in the wake of modernisation. We know that modernisation is necessary and good, but, old traditions must be cherished and preserved."

*Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthusiast based in Dubai.*

*Sinking Ships will run at Total Arts at the Courtyard until April 30.*

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