middle east & beyond

September 2025 #15



EDITOR'S NOTE



Summer Whispers Beneath the Trees at Qube Art Gallery, Dubai — curated by Noora — The Divine Spark in collaboration with Purva Grover, editor of stories over art and author of The Trees Told Me So. The exhibition ran

We've all heard of the theory that likens people in our lives to leaves, branches, and roots. Leaves stay for a season and eventually drift away. Branches hold on until the storm arrives, and then they snap. Roots, however, remain steadfast — they ground us, nourish us, and become entwined with us for eternity.

It was these musings that led *stories over art*, our monthly digital magazine, to partner as the official media collaborator for the recently concluded exhibition Summer Whispers Beneath the Trees, at Qube Art Gallery, Dubai. Curated by Noora – The Divine Spark by Bhairavi Mistry, in collaboration with yours truly, the exhibition ran from August 13 until August 22. A heartfelt thank you to Qube Art Gallery for opening both their doors and their hearts — creating a space where communities could gather, reflect, and connect.

Last month, in conversations with a few UAE-based artists, we explored how both stories and artworks are like saplings: they need patience, nurturing, and care. Out of this dialogue bloomed an exhibition inspired by my book The Trees Told Me So — a gentle invitation to return to the wonder of childhood summers and to reflect on how nature quietly holds space for our emotions. As both an editor and an author, I had more than one reason to applaud this coming together. Selfishly, it allowed me to witness something deeply personal — the pages of my book, The Trees Told Me So, brought to life as art upon the walls.

Each tree in the stories, each artwork on display, became a keeper of something unspoken yet beautiful. The exhibition showcased the works of artists Moones Ben Romdhane (Tunisia), Heinz Katzenmeier (Switzerland), Natalia Schäfer (Germany), Marina Muradian (Kyrgyzstan),

Ankita Chatterjee (Singapore), Simon Kazanjian (Armenia), Karyna Lupashko (Ukraine), Sahar Riaz (Pakistan), and Dubai-based Indian artists Mona Biswarupa, Kiran Kumar, Sonnal Johaar, Ria Shanker, Natasha Desai, Sabah Anees, Jaya Phulwani, Ranjisha Raghavan, and Uma Ravichandran, alongside India-based artists Madhumita Bhattacharya and Bharti Singh.

We were also honored to welcome special guest Atul Panase — renowned watercolour specialist, UAE Brand Ambassador for Daniel Smith Artists' Materials, and leader at Fabriano in Acquarello, the world's largest international watercolour festival in Italy.

In many ways, this exhibition was a celebration of roots — of the artists who grounded our words in color, of the stories that found new homes on canvas, and of the community that gathered beneath these metaphorical trees to whisper their summer memories.

P.S.: In an era of ChatGPT and Paywalls, we're daring to create original content and offer it to our readers without a fee. Your support would go a long way. Subscribe to the portal and meet us on social media as well.



founder-editor hello@purvagrover.com

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SIGHT

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CONTACTS

Purva Grover, Founder-Editor Dolly Goel, Art Director

hello@storiesoverart.com storiesoverart.com All queries should be addressed to hello@storiesoverart.com stories over art is a monthly magazine launched in July 2024





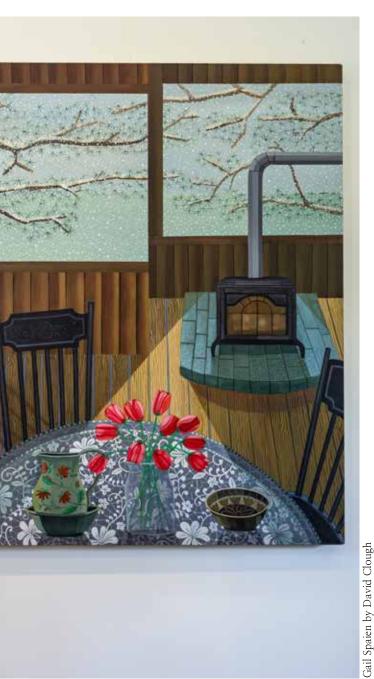


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A PAINTER'S POETIC GESTURE BLOOMS IN ALSERKAL

At Taymour Grahne Projects' new home in Alserkal Avenue, artist Gail Spaien invites viewers to enter quiet, impossible interiors—where flowers bloom, tables hover, and the laws of physics are gently ignored.



In the heart of Dubai's buzzing Alserkal Avenue, the rhythm of contemporary art gets a new note this September—one that's subtle, soft, and deeply personal. Taymour Grahne Projects, known for championing crosscultural artistic conversations, is opening the doors to its first permanent space in the region. And stepping in with them is American artist Gail Spaien, whose new solo exhibition Arranging Flowers marks both the gallery's inaugural Dubai showcase and Spaien's debut in the Middle East.

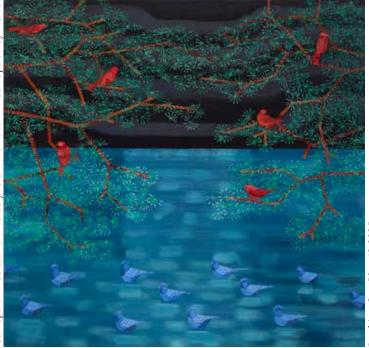
Born in 1958 and based in Maine, Spaien has spent more than thirty years refining a visual language that quietly questions the familiar. In Arranging Flowers, her paintings stretch beyond the conventional boundaries of still life and landscape. They occupy a liminal space—between dream and domesticity, between what's real and what feels emotionally resonant.

"Making a painting is like arranging a bouquet," Spaien shares. "Both are gestures of care—poetic reminders of a shared humanity."

It's a fitting metaphor. Her canvases brim with floral arrangements, patterned textiles, windows, tables, and vases, all orchestrated into compositions that seem to breathe with intentional stillness. But don't mistake them for quaint. These are scenes that shimmer with visual contradictions: tables float without a solid foundation, horizons are hinted at rather than defined, and depth is replaced by flattened patterns and spatial ambiguity.

Take Waypoints, for instance. The painting's central gesture is deceptively simple: a moonrise over the sea. But Spaien's focus lingers on the in-between. Apple blossoms and potted plants echo the rhythm of the seascape, pulling nature into domestic space. Cascading shades of blue dissolve the boundary between indoors and out, memory and moment.





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Elsewhere, in works like Habitat, Spaien toys with visual logic. A circular table adorned with an intricate white cloth floats mid-frame, untethered and surreal. In Ginkgo Leaves, vessels are anchored along the painting's edge. At the same time, the titular leaves hover above—a gentle nod to ikebana, the Japanese art of floral arrangement that balances natural forms with surrounding space.

Her interiors evoke presence through absence. The rooms feel recently exited, the silence meaningful. Her still lifes, much like Magritte's surreal portraits, become portals. "They're not renderings of real places," Spaien explains. "But they suggest the deep familiarity of memory—or the suspended unreality of dreams."

In this delicate visual world, simplicity

becomes structure. Decorative patterns aren't just embellishments—they're narrative devices. They imply histories, gestures, and the quiet rituals of daily life. Spaien's work invites us to pause, to observe the ordinary with wonder, and to see still life as a site of disruption rather than stability.

For Taymour Grahne, founder of the gallery, this introspective tone feels right for the launch of their Dubai chapter. "Gail's work creates space for reflection—on nature, memory, and the quiet rituals of daily life," he says. "It's a meaningful way to begin our journey here, presenting artists whose practices transcend borders and resonate across cultures."

Arranging Flowers does more than inaugurate a space—it sets the tone. The exhibition marks a moment of expansion for Taymour Grahne Projects,





which began in New York in 2013 and now enters

its twelfth year with a permanent space in the region's leading arts district.

In a city where skyscrapers shimmer and speed is often the default setting, Spaien's canvases ask viewers to move slower, look closer, and imagine the improbable. Here, flowers don't wilt. Tables don't need legs. And silence speaks volumes.

Arranging Flowers by Gail Spaien opens 18 September 2025 at Taymour Grahne Projects, Alserkal Avenue, Dubai.







In a bold new initiative blending tradition, endurance, and national pride, Emirates Foundation has opened registration for Misrah — a transformative cultural and physical journey designed to connect youth with the heart of Emirati heritage. Launched on 21 August 2025, this one–of–a–kind programme invites UAE citizens and residents aged 18 to 25 to compete for a coveted place among 100 adventurers who will embark on a 1,000km desert trek across the nation, travelling by traditional means, including camel.

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In a city where skyscrapers touch the clouds and digital convenience defines daily life, Misrah promises to ground young people in the rich, timeless roots of Emirati culture. Spearheaded by Active Abu Dhabi in collaboration with the Abu Dhabi Heritage Authority, the initiative seeks to empower a conscious generation through hands—on heritage immersion, physical challenge, and shared national values.

The trek is more than an endurance test. It's a cultural odyssey — designed to strengthen identity, build resilience, and deepen understanding of traditional crafts, folk arts, and the intricate relationship between Emiratis and their desert environment.

The experience begins in Abu Dhabi, where 500 selected applicants will undergo an intensive training phase. Over the course of two months, participants will master camel riding, learn to assemble saddles and traditional gear, explore the anatomy and care of camels, and immerse themselves in folk arts such as Al Ayala, Al Harbiya, and Al Taghrooda. They will prepare Emirati coffee over campfires, share oral folktales, and practice the art of san'a al-dhiyafa — welcoming guests with generosity and grace.

From this group, 100 will be chosen to continue

to the second phase — the 1,000km journey across the UAE desert. Travelling in traditional caravans, the participants will endure long days under the sun, navigating dunes with their camels, and sleeping under the stars. The journey will test physical stamina, mental grit, and teamwork, offering a perspective on life far removed from modern routines.

Mansour Al Dhaheri, Chairman of Active Abu Dhabi, calls the project "an inspiring milestone" that fuses "physical challenge with deep-rooted Emirati pride." He believes it will "shape character, enhance skills, and deepen appreciation for the richness of Emirati heritage."

The initiative is supported by a broad coalition of partners, from Abu Dhabi Sports Council to Mubadala Investment Company, PureHealth, the National Library and Archives, and Abu Dhabi Police, alongside numerous academic institutions and

cultural bodies.

Registration is now open for young citizens and residents eager to be part of this once—in—a—lifetime adventure. Applications can be made at www. activeabudhabi.com/misrah.







ALENA LAVDOVSKAYA'S THIRD ARTISTIC ESCAPE TO MILAIDHOO MALDIVES

This September, the celebrated fashion illustrator invites guests to immerse themselves in creativity and experience the beauty of the Maldives through exclusive open-air art masterclasses.

Celebrated fashion illustrator Alena Lavdovskaya will return to Milaidhoo Maldives for the third time, from 22 – 29 September 2025, bringing a fresh chapter of creativity where art, inspiration, and island serenity converge.

Following two highly acclaimed residencies, the internationally recognised artist—whose glamorous, emotive illustrations have graced the pages of Vogue, Harper's Bazaar, InStyle, and more—will once again share her signature vision and refined techniques with Milaidhoo's guests. Over a career spanning two decades, Alena has collaborated with leading fashion houses, luxury hotels, and high—profile personalities, earning a reputation for her intuitive eye for elegance and detail.

During her week-long stay, Alena will lead two exclusive group art masterclasses tailored for all skill levels. Whether a seasoned

sketcher or a curious beginner, participants will be guided to capture the Maldives' beauty through expressive brushwork and stylised form, drawing inspiration from the island's vivid colours and tranquil rhythms.

"Milaidhoo is pure inspiration," Alena

"Milaidhoo is pure inspiration," Alena reflects. "The colours, the natural grace of the island, and the timeless calm—it's a dream setting for any artist. I'm thrilled to return and create alongside guests eager to discover their artistic voice."

This year's masterclasses will draw inspiration from the textures and spirit of Maldivian life, including the fluid movement of marine life, the rhythmic beat of bodu beru drums, and the understated elegance found in everyday island moments. Set in a serene, open—air environment, each session will be an invitation to slow down, reconnect, and let creativity flow.











HALF A CENTURY OF HERITAGE: NMOQ CELEBRATES 50 YEARS OF CULTURE AND COMMUNI

In June 2025, the National Museum of Qatar marked its 50th anniversary, commemorating five decades of preserving the nation's vibrant cultural legacy. The celebration stood as a powerful tribute to Qatar's journey—from tradition to transformation.



The National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ) proudly marked its 50th anniversary in June 2025, celebrating five decades of preserving and showcasing Qatar's dynamic cultural heritage and history. Established in 1975 as the Qatar National Museum, the institution has long served as a vital cultural landmark, offering residents and visitors a profound connection to the nation's past. From its original home in the historic palace of Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al Thani to its transformation into the iconic Jean Nouvel—designed NMoQ, the museum continues to illuminate Qatar's history and cultural future.

The 50th anniversary coincided with the 20th anniversary of Qatar Museums, the nation's leading cultural organisation, responsible for developing and managing Qatar's diverse museum landscape. To mark these milestones, Qatar Museums participated in Evolution Nation, an 18-month celebration honouring Qatar's cultural journey over the past 50 years. The Evolution Nation campaign—curated by Qatar Creates, the national movement positioning Qatar as a global hub for art, culture, and creativity—highlighted key achievements, visionary projects, and the country's bold aspirations for the future.

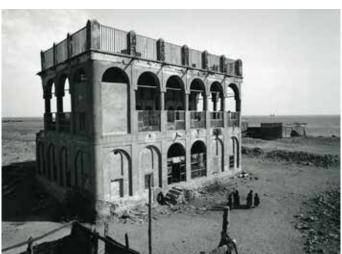
This landmark year honoured the enduring vision of Qatar's leadership, beginning with His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani, carried forward by His Highness the Father Amir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, and continued by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. Their unwavering commitment to cultural enrichment laid the foundation for institutions like Qatar Museums and NMoQ. Guided by a national vision that placed cultural heritage at the heart of identity and pride,

NMoQ brought this vision to life as a place where Qatar's story was preserved, experienced, and shared with the world.

Her Excellency Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, Chairperson of Oatar Museums, said. "Oatar Museums was born from the same vision that founded the Oatar National Museum 50 years ago, and passionately championed creativity, innovation, and cultural exchange, transforming the museum landscape into a vibrant ecosystem that celebrated our heritage and propelled us into the future. This vision, shaped and guided by the foresight of His Highness the Father Amir and His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim, laid the foundation for institutions like Qatar Museums and the National Museum of Qatar to flourish as cornerstones of national identity. The National Museum of Qatar, in particular, stood as a testament to our cultural identity and collective memory, a place where the stories of our people, traditions, and history were displayed. As we looked ahead, we reaffirmed our commitment, deeply rooted in preserving and showcasing our cultural heritage globally, ensuring that the essence of who we are would continue to inspire future generations. Together, we built a legacy where culture is a living, breathing force—one that connects communities, sparks imagination, and shapes the story of Qatar for generations to come.'

Since its founding, NMoQ has grown from a pioneering cultural institution into a cornerstone of Qatar's identity and heritage. It has played a pivotal role in educating generations about the nation's transformative journey, from its humble beginnings



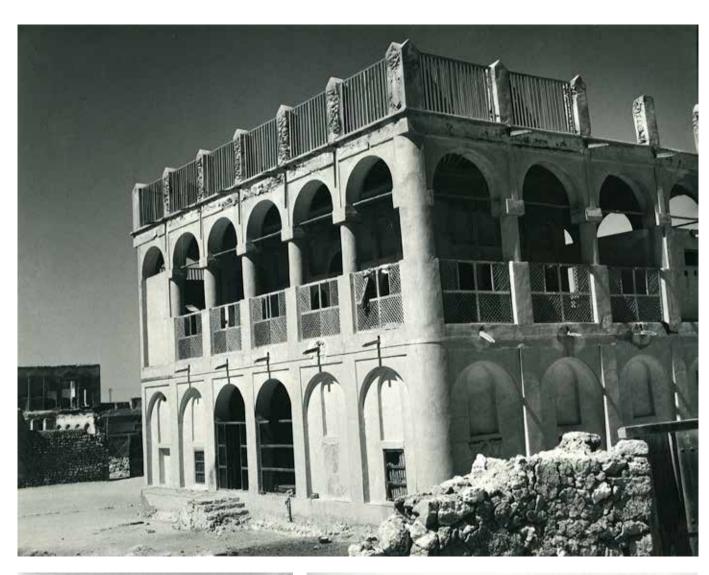


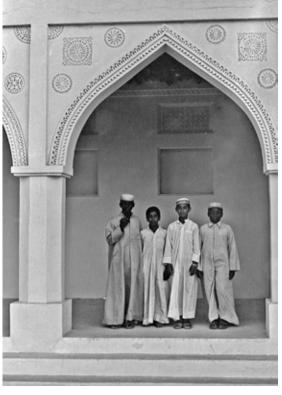
Qatar National Museum, Old Museum

















as a pearl-diving community to its emergence as a vibrant, cosmopolitan hub on the global stage. At its core, NMoQ stands as a tribute to the country's cultural identity. Every element, from its architecture inspired by the desert rose to its immersive exhibitions, was designed to honor and convey the rich traditions, values, and narratives that have shaped the Qatari experience.

By safeguarding oral histories, showcasing local craftsmanship, and exploring the diverse facets of life in Qatar, the museum reaffirms culture as both a heritage and living identity. It serves not only as a record of the past but also as an evolving platform for national self–expression, inclusion, and collective memory. Through immersive storytelling, groundbreaking exhibitions, and inclusive educational outreach, NMoQ not only supports Qatar's National Vision 2030 but also serves as a living repository of the values, traditions, and collective memory that defined the Qatari experience.

Sheikh Abdulaziz Al Thani, Director of the National Museum of Qatar, said, "The National Museum of Qatar is a reflection of our identity, our heritage, and our aspirations. As we celebrated 50 years, we paid tribute to our rich history, embraced the vibrancy of the present, and committed to inspiring future generations to cherish and continue this extraordinary cultural legacy."

In honour of this landmark anniversary, NMoQ will host a series of engaging events and programmes throughout the year, culminating in the opening of a special 50th anniversary exhibition in October 2025. These initiatives are designed to cultivate a deep sense of pride and collective ownership among Qataris and visitors alike, inviting all to participate in preserving Qatar's heritage for generations to come.

The National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ) preserves and celebrates the history of Qatar. It engages with its present and inspires the country's ambitions for the future. The Museum, which opened in March 2019, gives voice to the country's culture and heritage through artefacts, oral histories, music, films, and artworks.

Qatar Museums (QM), the nation's preeminent institution for art and culture, provides authentic and inspiring cultural experiences through a growing network of museums, heritage sites, festivals, public art installations, and programmes.

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Interview

LEONARDO PARTIDA PRIETO

Leonardo Partida Prieto is a self-taught Mexican plastic artist known for his fearless exploration of new and challenging forms of expression. Embracing innovative materials and unconventional tools, he continuously pushes the boundaries of his artistic practice. His distinctive style is marked by the use of layered textures and rich color tints, creating striking visual effects that captivate and provoke. For Partida Prieto, art is far more than a profession—it is a deeply personal passion and a spiritual refuge. Through his work, he expresses his innermost thoughts and ideas, inviting reflection, dialogue, and meaningful conversation.

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Partida Prieto has participated in numerous exhibitions at renowned museums, art galleries, and art fairs worldwide. One of the most significant accolades in his career came when he was selected by the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, Paris, to participate in the renowned Salon des Beaux-Arts at the Carrousel du Louvre. He is now based in Abu Dhabi. Since moving to the UAE, he has encountered diverse cultural perspectives and personal experiences that he has incorporated into his outstanding artworks.

What inspired you to create a sculptural tribute to Sheikh Zayed, and how did you begin conceptualizing it?

The conception of this artwork came to me while I was in the Liwa Desert in January 2023. I stood at the top of a dune early in the morning and saw my shadow being cast by the sunlight. In that magical instant, I imagined an artwork that could interact with various spaces and backgrounds by subtly merging with them and playing with the shadows, rather than being placed as a foreground element. I've been calling the UAE my home for nearly five years now. Being there in the desert on that day and feeling so grateful is why I thought of His Highness

Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, Founder of the UAE, and no one else.

What's the significance of these materials and dimensions?

I wanted the piece to be almost real size. I don't know how tall Sheikh Zayed was, but I was convinced that if the piece stood around 180–185cm tall, it would work for what I had in mind. When it comes to working with wood, I prefer to do everything by myself, and cutting wood is something I enjoy doing. I know how to do it, which is why I chose wood. Regarding the number of timber beams I used for the piece, it was the exact amount needed to achieve the required height.

What does this visual choice mean to you?

An iconic picture of Sheikh Zayed inspires the piece. This picture was taken in the 1960s, shortly after he was named the Ruler of Abu Dhabi, and it was taken during a parade with the Armed Forces. This picture is in black and white, and it worked perfectly to create this piece. I could trace his silhouette with the wood, leaving this space in between, the so-called negative space, and it worked in perfect harmony to give dimension to a flat piece.



How did you balance traditional craftsmanship with modern symbolism?

My art is modern because I strive to create as much impact as possible. However, I love working with my hands; cutting and sanding the wood is like therapy for me. I could use technology to my advantage and work ten times faster, but the feeling is different. I continually invest 100% in each piece, both physically and emotionally. The result is modern, but the process is traditional; more than a balance, it's a journey.

Why did you choose to mark Sheikh Zayed's 105th birthday?

The 105th was a coincidence: I finished the piece exactly at that time, May 2023. But the summer was around the corner, and I knew I had to think about a new name because by the time I could have started showing the piece, the 105th mark would have been long gone. Then I thought about "The Founding Father," and that is the most appropriate name, the

perfect name.

As a Mexican artist, how did you navigate the cultural responsibility of honoring an Emirati leader?

Yes, I am a Mexican artist, but I am a resident of the UAE. This is now my home, and I love living here. I'm so grateful, and that's why I wanted to create this piece, a piece of the Founding Fathers. Without Sheikh Zayed's vision, everything would be completely different. It's even more special for me since I'm based in Abu Dhabi.

How has the UAE community reacted to the piece?

The community has reacted very positively towards the piece. It's very different from what they have seen, and they love it especially when we play with lights and cast shadows, which is the primary purpose of the whole piece. I still need to take it to the desert, that's where the idea was born, and that's where I need to see the piece interacting with nature.



DOHA DESIGN DISTRICT AND VCUarts QATAR COLLABORATE TO FOSTER SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH DESIGN



Doha Design District (DDD) and VCUarts Qatar have collaborated with artist Abdelrahman Al Muftah to design an innovative, sustainable sanctuary for Qatar's native Bulbul birds. The Bird Cluster project, which includes a planter, bird nest, watering tray, and feeding tray, has been brought to life in Msheireb as part of DDD's commitment to advancing Qatar's Vision 2030, a future driven by sustainability and innovation. By encouraging collaboration and empowering emerging designers, this project exemplifies how DDD and VCUarts Qatar are cultivating local talent to create impactful solutions that benefit the community.

Dana Kazic, Director of Doha Design District, said: "This collaboration with VCUarts Qatar and Abdulrahman Al Muftah reflects our mission to nurture creativity and empower young designers to address real—world challenges through meaningful design. By merging sustainability with innovation, we're not only working towards contributing to our national vision but also inspiring the next generation of designers to think critically about their role in shaping a better future for our society."

Rab McClure, Professor and Director, MFA in Design, VCUarts Qatar, said: "The Bird Cluster project embodies significant ideas. It stands out for its research—driven design approach, supported through the collaborative efforts of VCUarts Qatar and Doha Design District. This work exemplifies the kind of locally rooted, socially conscious design we strive to

cultivate, creating projects that help to advance the broader vision of a sustainable urban environment for all."

Al Muftah worked closely with DDD and VCUarts Qatar to ensure the structure was both sustainable and innovative. Inspired by traditional Qatari architecture, the design seamlessly integrates into the urban landscape while providing functional nesting spaces for smaller birds. The compact yet secure structure features entry points specifically designed to exclude larger invasive species, ensuring a haven for Qatar's native Bulbul birds. This attention to detail highlights the project's dual focus on preserving biodiversity and maintaining harmony with the environment.

Abdulrahman Al Muftah, designer of The Bird Cluster, expressed: "Working with Doha Design District and VCUarts Qatar's Boost Lab to bring this project to life was truly rewarding. As a designer, I'm passionate about integrating flora and

fauna into public spaces because it creates environments that support biodiversity, allowing multiple species to thrive together. For me, thoughtful design goes beyond aesthetics – it's about understanding and considering the broader environmental impact of what we create. Every design decision ripples outward, affecting not just human users but entire ecosystems."

This initiative emphasises the broader significance of collaborative efforts between DDD and VCUarts Qatar. By bringing together creative minds, local expertise, and forward-thinking design principles, projects like this make meaningful contributions to society, benefiting both the environment and the community. Through this partnership, DDD and VCUarts Qatar continue to demonstrate how design can be a powerful tool for driving positive change and building a more sustainable future for Oatar.

CRESCENT ENTERPRISES RENEWS PARTNERSHIP WITH SHARJAH INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH





Crescent Enterprises today announced the renewal of its Platinum Partnership with the Sharjah International Film Festival for Children & Youth (SIFF). Now entering its 12th consecutive year, the partnership reflects Crescent Enterprises' enduring commitment to youth development, artistic expression, and intercultural dialogue.

Organised by FANN – Sharjah Media Arts for Youth and Children, SIFF has grown year on year to be recognized as the region's leading film festival for emerging young creatives. The 2025 edition, taking place from October 6 to 12, will feature a compelling programme of films by both established and emerging Arab filmmakers, while bringing together a global community of creatives, educators, and young audiences.

Sheikha Jawaher bint Abdullah Al Qasimi, General Director of FANN and SIFF, commented: "SIFF has grown into a truly global platform that not only inspires young filmmakers, but also reinforces Sharjah's commitment to cultural dialogue and creative innovation. Our long-standing partnership with Crescent Enterprises ensures that we continue to create meaningful opportunities for children and youth to share their stories, explore diverse narratives, and connect with the world around them."

The partnership with SIFF aligns with

Crescent Enterprises' broader commitment to cross-cultural collaboration, including its ongoing support of the Arabian Sights Film Festival in Washington, DC, USA – now in its 11th consecutive year.

"At Crescent Enterprises, we believe in the transformative power of cross—cultural exchange and community connection," said Tushar Singhvi, Deputy CEO of Crescent Enterprises. "We are proud to continue supporting SIFF as a platform that empowers the next generation of storytellers. Film is a universal language, one that connects people across borders and perspectives. Through our partnerships, we aim to

foster an environment where young people can express themselves, explore diverse cultures, and shape a more empathetic, connected world."

Crescent Enterprises is a multinational company based in the UAE with strategic investments across sectors. Sharjah International Film Festival for Children and Youth (SIFF) is the first children's film festival in the UAE and the region, organized by (FUNN) Sharjah Media Arts for Youth and Children and established under the patronage of Her Highness Sheikha Jawaher Bint Mohammed Al Qasimi (wife of His Highness, the Ruler of Sharjah).

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