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Artists who will always have Paris

Three gifted Emiratis have returned from France full of inspiration after three months immersed in their respective creative fields. Sponsored by the Emirates Foundation, the programme is intended to give UAE artists a career boost. **Anna Seaman reports**

With aspirations to open his own gallery and make a name for himself in artistic photography, Khameis al Hefaiti had more challenges to overcome than just getting the right light or capturing the moment on film.

A year ago, when he began his career as a press photographer, there was only one photography society in the Emirates and one public darkroom. The infrastructure to support him in his chosen career simply did not exist.

But Mr al Hefaiti, 28, stuck at it, and his perseverance is paying off. This summer he spent three months interning at the Speos Photographic Institute in Paris after he was sponsored by the Emirates Foundation.

He not only gained valuable insights into things such as darkroom development, digital imaging and the history of photography, but also had the opportunity to shadow established photographers.

Since his return, he has started his own photographers' association and has drafted a business plan for his gallery.

He said Paris changed his life.

"I was thirsty to learn as much as possible about photography, and going to Paris felt like I was jumping into a sea of knowledge," he said.

"It was more than just the practical experience; I also visited galleries, museums and took inspiration from everything I saw. It was the kind of thing I had been craving for. Now I am full of ideas and I am ready to help other photographers."

Mr al Hefaiti was one of three Emirati artists selected for the pilot scheme by the Emirates Foundation's arts and culture department. Ahmed Arshi, the programme's co-ordinator, said the aim was both to give a boost to talented individuals and the local arts scene.

"By selecting a few artists and helping them as much as possible then we are helping the community as a whole," he said.

"Every community is made up of individuals. This foreign residency programme will build the confidence of the individual artists who in turn will be able to pass on their knowledge. If one person helps 10 people and those 10 help another 10, then this kind of programme will have a wide-reaching effect."

Mr Arshi said the candidates had been carefully selected not only for their artwork but their personal qualities.

"We wanted them to develop their skills in Europe but also learn from experience. While they were in France they had to deal with institutions directly and curate their own work. Also they had to learn to cope by themselves in a completely different society."

The three successful candidates – the programme's first – also represented distinct creative fields.



Faiza Mubarak, a teacher and sculptor, spent three months in Paris and Dijon learning new creative techniques and approaches. Andrew Henderson / The National



Khameis al Hefaiti said France changed his life. Stephen Lock / The National

Besides Mr al Hefaiti, they were Faiza Mubarak, a sculptress, and Mohammed al Mansouri, a contemporary artist.

"This summer was a pilot and it was a real success," said Mr Arshi.

Ms Mubarak, the only woman to take part, said the experience was more than she could have imagined.

The 35-year-old primary school science teacher found out about the programme after her sculptures were spotted in the Emirates Expressions show at the Emirates Palace hotel last year.

"A representative from the foundation saw my work and called me in for interview," she said. "I was really nervous because I knew this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance. I had visited Paris and seen the sculptures at the Centre Pompidou, dreaming that one day I might be able to reach that level. So to be asked to go to work in France felt like I was one step closer to that dream."

Ms Mubarak spent 10 days in Paris during her internship, but the rest of the time she was in Dijon at Le Consortium, a contemporary art space and gallery run by a trio of French curators.

She was given her own studio and one-on-one tuition from the artists in residence.

Although she had to overcome problems with her job and her family to go on the trip, Ms Mubarak said she had made the most of every day.

"It was not easy to be allowed to go. I am a single woman and it wasn't acceptable for me to travel alone, so my mother and sister agreed to come. Then I had to get permission from work who didn't want me to go for the full three months."

"I had to plan everything down to the smallest detail, but it was worth it. I went to museums, galleries, exhibitions. I met artists who explained to me about different techniques and I managed to visit Venice and Geneva."

One month into the programme Ms Mubarak presented her first solo exhibition. It was four sculptures called *Dialogue Bird* where she explored the differences between Emirati and French cultures in the forms of birds made from wood and oil paint.

"In the UAE there are only a few galleries and at every exhibition you see the same faces. But this

was an amazing opportunity to show my work to a wider audience and get direct feedback."

Ms Mubarak said the internship had offered her a "gateway to a whole new world". The best thing, she said, had been not just the programme but the experience of living abroad.

"I am now more confident about my work and about myself," she said.

"My art is no longer a hobby; it is something I am committed to making a career out of. I now have an idea of what the art world is like outside the UAE and that kind of knowledge is invaluable. I am ready to tell others about my experiences and help those who are not able to travel."

Mr Arshi and his team are now considering applicants for the programme's second year, which begins in October.

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Rickshaw Run: 2,000km of adventure from India to Nepal

Five-man Abu Dhabi team will compete in two-week charity race

Jen Gerson

A motorised rickshaw may not be the fastest way to travel nearly 2,000km through India and Nepal, and certainly not the most comfortable – but it might be the most adventurous.

Five men from Abu Dhabi will compete next month in the Rickshaw Run, a two-week charity race that promises to be "quite chaotic" in a pair of unreliable, three-wheeled rickshaws.

Last year a team from Dubai won the event, beating dozens of other contestants on a trek from Kathmandu to Pondicherry. Now the Abu Dhabi team of British and Australian expatriates will try to keep bragging rights within the country.

The race, held twice a year since 2006, always has a different course, setting off from the previous finish. The event earlier this year ended in Goa, so the next one, starting on September 12, will begin there and end in Pokhara, Nepal.

George Foulsham, 33, an environmental scientist, said his team was currently charting its route, taking advice from Indian friends in the UAE. They have been warned some areas are too dangerous to traverse. "You can go along the coast through Mumbai," he said. "The direct route is to go right through the middle. That involves much smaller roads, one-lane roads, cows, donkeys, bicycles and big troubles. It's going to be quite chaotic."

The rickshaws, powered by 150cc engines, are described by the race organisers as "tin cans" and are notorious for frequent breakdowns.

Mr Foulsham expects to have to make dozens of on-the-spot repairs. "I've got to work out the mechanics of it," he said. "Rickshaws also

take fuel and oil mixed together. You have to mix it before you put it in. That will be a challenge, just fuelling up along the way."

Taking their cue from last year's winning Dubai team, the Abu Dhabi group will make the trip in two rickshaws, so if one group breaks down, the other will be able to drive around looking for parts and help.

"Our plan is to work in a convoy," Mr Foulsham said. He will drive one rickshaw and Graeme Mullin, 27, a trade and investment adviser with the British Embassy, will drive the other.

When the race is delayed by technical failures, Mr Mullin expects other pastimes to keep the competition alive. "We're taking cricket bats, a football and a frisby. We think we'll break down a lot," he said. "It's all about playing cricket. There is no real racing, the whole aspect is really to make it to the end."

All of the team members are looking for an adventure. "I love this sort of thing. I've done

all sorts of crazy adventures," Mr Foulsham said. "I've gone trekking in Nepal and I've hired a driver and gone around India. I absolutely loved that. It's an amazing place, the colours, and the people are all very embracing."

For Matthew Crabbe, a 31-year-old environmental scientist, the opportunity to travel and experience a new culture in such an unusual way is worth the inevitable frustrations involved with driving a tin can over a long distance.

"Going to India will increase my awareness and I say it as a message that increases people's awareness of humanity."

The team hope to raise Dh6,000 (US\$1,630) for the Frank Water Project, a charity that helps developing countries create sustainable water projects, and Maiti Nepal, which combats human trafficking.

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✪ With additional reporting by Mahmoud Habboush



Two of the Abu Dhabi charity team – Jonny Ing, left, and George Foulsham – with a replica of a motorised rickshaw. Rich-Joseph Facun / The National