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Powerful storytelling by Arab artists marks the debut of the Bukhara Biennial

Hundreds of participants hail from no less than 39 countries

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As a UNESCO Creative City of Craft & Folk Art, Bukhara is suffused with the past. Its heritage lurks round every corner.

Now, its newly-restored historic landmarks are home to contemporary artistic creations, as part of one of the largest and most diverse art initiatives in Central Asia.

The inaugural edition of the Bukhara Biennial was launched earlier this month. It's an ambitious project, a 10-week-long interdisciplinary experience spanning visual, culinary and performance art, textiles, crafts, music, dance and architecture, all brought together under the evocative theme of *Recipes for Broken Hearts*.

As part of this overarching theme, artists from around the world have offered their unique 'recipes' for consoling the broken-hearted. Their ideas have been brought to life by the magic of local artisans.

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The Biennial is a massive undertaking. Developed by the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation, commissioned by Gayane Umerova, and curated by Diana Campbell, with Wael Al Awar as Creative Director of Architecture, it has debuted with over seventy site-specific commissions. Hundreds of participants hail from no less than 39 countries. And a distinctive addition to this vibrant cross-cultural celebration has come from Arab artists.

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Among those participating is Ahmad Angawi from Saudi Arabia. In conversation with The Kurator, he reflected on how participation in this inaugural art event has been both a personal and a spiritual journey. “I was born in Makkah, another city of timeless significance, and bringing my work to Bukhara [...] affirms my belief in the idea of ‘living tradition,’ where art is not separated from craft, philosophy, or community.”

The issue for Angawi is that many biennials are global in scale and somewhat detached from their local surroundings. In contrast, Bukhara’s inaugural edition emerges from a deep cultural fabric that is still alive.

“What makes it stand out is this authentic connection between heritage and contemporary expression, where art is not only shown, but also lived within the rhythm of the city, among its scholars and artisans. It is a biennial that celebrates continuity rather than rupture.”

Angawi’s ‘Algorithm of Healing’ is the result of close collaboration with Shonazar Jumaev. Their work represents a meeting point between traditional Bukharian woodcarving and the algorithmic legacies of two Central Asian thinkers, Al-Khwarizmi and Ibn Sina. The artist is clearly thrilled by the outcome.

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“During my time in Bukhara,” he says, “the most meaningful experience was working with the local artisans. These are people who carry in their hands a living heritage that goes back generations. Sitting in their workshops, watching how they cut, carve, and assemble objects with such patience and precision, I felt a deep sense of familiarity. It was as if I was back in Jeddah, in my Mangour workshop.”

But the connection went beyond the exchange of techniques and craftsmanship. It also deeply influenced Angawi’s own artistic practice. The artisans’ generosity and humility influenced him in unexpected ways as he began to see his work, not merely in terms of individual expression, but as part of a much larger chain of knowledge and craft connecting the two cultures:

“For me, these bonds are a reminder that art is never solitary; it is always made through a community, a dialogue, a shared devotion to beauty.”

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Another Arab participant is the Qatari filmmaker, Majid Al Remaihi. His project at Rashid Madrasa was accomplished in collaboration with Anhar Salem, who has lived in Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and Iskandar Hakimov from Uzbekistan. Reflecting on the broader theme of healing through shared experiences and cultural exchange, it is called ‘A Donkey Will.’ With this work, the collaborators explore the construction and fragmentation of historical narratives within the Arabian Gulf, using diverse media to show how memory, myth, and documentation intersect to shape our understanding of a place:

"The film is part of a larger installation, and it's centered around the figure of Juha — the archetypal wise fool. In the Arab world, we know him as Juha, but here in Uzbekistan he's called Nasreddin, so that already provided a point of connection.”

This shared archetype allowed for a more nuanced exchange: it was not so much about explaining oneself to the audience, as sharing elements that resonated.

"Usually in the art world, the dominant framework is the West and the East – how the West sees the East, or how the East responds to the West. But in this context, the dialogue is happening within the East itself. And that feels refreshing. For me personally, it felt liberating to create something for a context that shares certain cultural, historical, and even spiritual touchpoints."

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This meaningful exchange of cultural elements, narratives, and perspectives *within* the East is a natural outcome of history. Uzbekistan was a vital part of the Silk Road, which is deeply connected to Arab history:

"In a very particular way, Bukhara is significant to us as Arabs. There are all these historical and spiritual elements that we already connect to in this place, so this kind of exchange feels like a meaningful continuation of that legacy. It also reflects a shift in how cultural dynamics are evolving today, especially within the art world."

‘A Donkey Will’ explores the theme of *Recipes for Broken Hearts* by exploring companionship, humor, and storytelling as quiet yet powerful forms of healing.

"In the film, Juha is searching for his lost donkey — a story that, on the surface, is simple and folkloric. But that loss represents something deeper: emotional suffering, disorientation, maybe even the loss of wisdom itself. So, I tried to layer the narrative in a way that’s both accessible and open-ended. For me, the recipe for mending broken hearts is companionship."

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Other artists from the Arab World include well-known names, such as Dana Awartani (Saudi Arabia/Palestine), Wael Shawki (Egypt), Tarek Atoui (Lebanon), Laila Gohar (Egypt), Samah Hijawi (Jordan), and Sara Ouhammadou (France/Morocco). All of them have unveiled works, performances, and installations which owe their vitality to a collaboration between the artist and local artisans.

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