

PENTA

Worldwise: Sharjah Art Foundation Founder Hoor Al Qasimi's Favorite Things

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Hoor Al Qasimi is passionate about blending worlds together through art.
Sebastian Bottcher

Growing up between Sharjah in the U.A.E., and London—the cultural capitals of their countries—Hoor Al Qasimi has always been intrigued by how communities that seem like polar opposites can co-exist naturally. Sixteen years ago, she was appointed to lead the Sharjah Biennial, a contemporary art fair. At 22, she was the only female on the board then, and was determined to bring different worlds together.

It takes guts to go against the headwinds in a Euro-Americentric art world. Now at 39, Al Qasimi is known to be a catalyst who brings international contemporary art to the United Arab Emirates, as well as taking local artists from the Gulf to a global stage.

In addition to spearheading the Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF), which she founded in 2009, and serving as a board member at New York's MOMA PS1, she also travels around the world for SAF's collaboration with local art institutions and museums, such as the upcoming one at Berlin's KW Institute for Contemporary Art.

"I believe that [different cultures] can learn so much from each other if we are given the opportunity to exchange ideas and work together. Not only would we learn about our differences but also about our similarities," Al Qasimi said. "Understanding each other enables us to be in solidarity with one another."

Her foundation, which is located in Sharjah's historic area, does exactly that by hosting exhibitions and activities such as performances, film screenings and artist talks to nourish locals of all ages.

Outside of the art world, Al Qasimi has translated her childhood dream of becoming a chef to owning a few restaurants in Sharjah, including Fen Cafe and restaurant at the Sharjah Art Foundation. The menu draws local inspiration from all over the world, just like her art curation.

Al Qasimi recently shared with *Penta* some of her favorite places, things, and art around the world.

My favorite neighborhood in the world is... Of course I love our SAF neighborhood —working in an area where there is street life and such a strong sense of community is so important. We're never bored of hearing children play outside our offices even when the random football hits the window! I recommend walking to and from various cultural

sites in Sharjah where you will come across different neighborhoods and get a better feel for the city.

The one thing in my closet I can't live without is... I have many things in my closet I need depending on the occasion, but one thing I definitely can't live without would have to be my red lipstick! No matter how tired I look or what I'm wearing, a quick application of red lipstick can make a big difference.

The best book I've read in the last year is... "We Won't Budge" by Manthia Diawara, a thought-provoking, deeply personal tale of the author's own experience as an African expatriate from Mali in France, and later on America, that examines immigration, race, and assimilation. At this fraught time where many governments are pushing for a more right-wing nationalist view, this book is a must read.

My favorite art museum in the world is... This is a tough one. There are many museums I find interesting for various reasons, but after a recent visit to Santiago I have to say I was so impressed by Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino (The Chilean Museum of Pre-Columbian Art). The sophisticated vitrine displays in the textile rooms were impressive, especially the way they protected the materials and colors through motion sensors.

A passion of mine that few people know about is.... Music. I've been playing the piano since the age of 5 and continue to do so. I play a bit of blues and rock licks on my Fender guitar, which I've had since I was a teenager. I also started learning the clarinet around 10 years ago. However, I am still at the beginner stage as I haven't had much time to practice.

The next destination on my travel itinerary is... I'm looking forward to going to Berlin for the opening of a major exhibition we organized at [the] Sharjah Art Foundation in

2017, *Hassan Sharif: I Am the Single Work Artist* (Feb. 29-May 3), at [the] KW Institute for Contemporary Art.

If I were to buy a piece of art, it would be ... *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* (2019) by Caecilia Tripp, which was commissioned by Claire Tancons for Sharjah Biennial 14 and was acquired for [the] Sharjah Art Foundation's collection. The work is a five-channel film installation in the shape of a pentagon, with openings for visitors to enter at each corner and a copper sculpture placed at the center of the screens. The film draws from several texts, writings and research by artists, historians, scientists, cosmologists, and includes a wonderful score and thrilling choreography that celebrates togetherness and a collective future.

The thing that gets me up in the morning is... I am an early riser as well as a night owl, so I don't really manage to get much sleep, but my work does motivate me and keeps me going as there's so much to do.

The restaurant in my hometown that I love to take a visitor to is... I opened a few restaurants in Sharjah which, of course, I love taking people to, but sometimes I like to go to the local restaurants in the neighborhood. One of my favorites is Maskoof, an Iraqi restaurant that serves a huge river fish that is butterflied and cooked around an open flame. It's the perfect dish to share if you're with a group of people.

A person who inspired me to do what I do is... It's no secret that [the Nigerian-born museum director and curator] Okwui Enwezor inspired me to do what I'm doing. Visiting Documenta 11 in 2002 was a life changing moment in my life that pushed me to get involved in [the] Sharjah Biennial that same year, and it has been my career ever since.

If I could have a drink with anybody, anywhere, it would be... During my college days in the late '90s, I had an interest in world cinema, particularly the films of Akira

Kurosawa and Andrei Tarkovsky. I was fascinated by their distinct styles and compositions. I would love to have a drink with both of them in an izakaya under the railway tracks in Ginza, Tokyo.