

ART INCUBATORS

Being an artist can be a hard, solitary endeavour. Many artists remain invisible, never gaining recognition or gallery representation. And those who do make it inevitably find themselves confronted with other challenges, such the constant pressure to create – sometimes at the expense of experimentation, self-reflection and an engagement with the art community. **Nadine Khalil** takes a look at a new cycle of UAE residencies that promise to change the game for artists in Dubai.



TASHKEEL'S IN RESIDENCE

Although Tashkeel can lay claim to one of the UAE's oldest residencies, having co-hosted the A.i.R. programme for Art Dubai in collaboration with the Delfina Foundation since 2008 (when it was founded by Lateefa bint Maktoum), it only started its first design residency earlier this year. And it feels about time, given that the Tashkeel label Tanween, which supports a maker culture of local designers and limited editions, is one of the richest sources of design talent in the region.

"During the past six years, more than 40 artists from over 15 countries have taken up the opportunity to spend time with us here at Tashkeel, engaging in experimental creative practice in a range of media and genres," explains Lisa Ball-Lechgar, Tashkeel's Deputy Director, from the non-profit's relatively remote headquarters in Nad Al Sheba on the greener outskirts of Dubai. Tashkeel also has a second charming location in the old city of Al Fahidi. It is best known for The Critical Practice Programme, which entails a full year of studio support and mentorship for UAE-based contemporary artists who do not have gallery representation. Past residencies have included a unique 11-month New Media residency (in collaboration with ISEA International) and boast an impressively diverse roster of street artists, sound artists and visiting curators.

Whatever the kind of residency, the access provided to facilities, such as a dark room for photography, digital printers, a 3D studio with a laser cutter and a textile printing studio, is unparalleled in the UAE. And this can play a major role in moulding a resident's artistic practice. As Ball-Lechgar points out, it was during his one-year residency at Tashkeel in 2013 that the now-established calligrapher artist eL Seed began to develop three-dimensional forms in his work and create monumental sculptures (previously he had been using expansive surfaces as his canvas). So, with this emphasis very much on exploring new techniques and materials, the new design residency (which ran from September to December last year) was geared towards enabling two new residents to push the boundaries of their textile practice.

Christine Müller is an Austrian-born, Basel-based textile artist who specialises in screen printing on both fabric and paper. During her residency, she looked to the ethereal motif of flags fluttering in the wind, being particularly inspired by the impressive Union House flags at the Etihad Museum and how best to render that effect in material. Her final series of 26 screen-printed flags, *Contemplating the Current (No.1-26)* drew from the many-pointed stars so prevalent in Islamic art. "Building on the star pattern grid, I deconstructed, combined and overlaid elements to find a multitude of unusual visual expressions," she said, adding that she was struck by finding herself in a city where diverse styles of ornamentation were such a dominant feature. "My own designs explore the star pattern from a postmodern perspective, and where better to develop my understanding than in the postmodern city of Dubai?"

The second resident, UK-based Fay McCaul, walked me through her work displayed in the end-of-residency exhibition, *In Residence*. Her specialty is knitting and she likes to combine traditional techniques with new technologies and innovative materials. "Knitting is so temperamental – if a hole develops, it just ladders. So if anything goes wrong, I have to do it all over again... I did a project at university where I tried to bond

unusual fabrics together – that's when I discovered knitting. I use knitting as a process to hold materials together."

Presenting a range of wall-coverings, window screens and partitions, McCaul's works are an exercise in tactility and shifting light; playful, iridescent and colourful. "I like to mix it up a bit. I've always been inspired by reflection and by things that change depending on the light, it's integral to my work. I'm a bit magpie-esque in that way," she remarks on her use of reflective materials such as gold and silver mirror tiles, copper acrylic, holographs, fibre optics and LEDs.

Her pieces were first noticed at the Crafts Council show at Design Days Dubai, where she exhibited for three years in a row. "Lateefa saw my work and invited me to come to Dubai. Once here, I took the same idea of embedding materials inside fabric but instead of using knitting, I used Tashkeel's heat press – I've never worked on such a large one before. One of the first pieces I made was with etched copper and brass that has been heat bonded between a layer of netting and cotton."

Using metal plates for embossing, McCaul created arabesque-like patterns, inspired by the local architecture and "especially the gridwork around buildings, which I see everywhere." Her gleaming fabrics, created in a gradient from silver to gold across the canvas, are then laser cut and mounted on board. "The experiments I've done back home have only been on solid surfaces, so I really wanted to work with transparency while here," she continues. The result is a perforated series of hanging pieces, which can become sliding doors or windows, and change colour depending on the light. "These are still in metallic foil and netting but, without being backed by cotton, they look more transparent," she adds. Lending a mashrabiya effect in metallic materials, rather than in wood, they are an interesting and imaginative twist on the regional vernacular.

During her explorations of heat bonding and pattern-making at Tashkeel, McCaul took traditional printing methods to another level, forming luxury contemporary textiles that give a shimmering 3D effect to a room. Meanwhile, her recently created standout piece was also on display at the *In Residence* final exhibit: *Curved Twist* (2017), a stunningly intricate wave-like room divider, devised in collaboration with Kia Utzon-Frank for Saatchi Gallery. A colour-changing screen with adjustable slats, which can be opened or closed to create different patterns of light and shadow, it marks a new departure in McCaul's practice – "I wanted to apply my work to something kinetic, so I knitted all these slats and embedded 22,000 individual rods into them."

At Tashkeel, Müller and McCaul were able to refine their own artistic trajectories as well as benefit the wider UAE art community by imparting their skills in workshops. It's a successful formula and one being followed by the three artists – Zohra Opoku, Jennifer Ipekel and José Lerma – taking part in Art Dubai's Residents 2018 programme hosted by Tashkeel, which started on 24 February and will last for several weeks. Whether the emphasis is on skill, production and pushing boundaries, or experimentation, critical thinking and re-thinking one's own practice, the emerging set of UAE residencies are a welcome sign of how the growing local art scene wants to engage with the art world at large by enriching and being enriched by it. 📍



Fay McCaul. *Grid Surface*. 2017. 120 x 150 cm. Felt, foam, wooden boards. Photography by Jalal Abuthina



Fay McCaul & Kia Utzon-Frank. *Curved Twist*. 2017. 250 x 200 x 100 cm. Knitted cotton, dichroic plastic, recycled yoghurt pots, plastic, aluminium. Image courtesy of the artist



Christine Müller screen printing a poster for *Weltformat DVB*. 2017. Photography by Jalal Abuthina



Fay McCaul. Photography by Dunja Opalko



Christine Müller. *Contemplating the Current (No.1-26)*. 2017. 90 x 150 cm each. Polyester fabric, screen printing ink. Photography by Jalal Abuthina