



● UAEism is art born in this nation as part of this wider global village, explains Wasel of the art movement he pioneered.





# There's art in cooking

*Architect turned artist Wasel Safwan, pioneer of an art movement called UAEism, tells SHIVA KUMAR THEKKEPAT that there is art in cooking but that he has not really mastered it. Photos by CHRISTOPHER LIST*

He begins the conversation with a warning: "I don't eat much." A disclaimer that may not be out of place considering Wasel Safwan is an artist, and I have not met many artists who are finicky about food. Luckily, our lunch is at the Fish Market, the seafood restaurant at the Radisson SAS Hotel that overlooks the Dubai Creek across Deira, which allows Wasel to choose exactly the portions he prefers.

The restaurant decor tries to approximate the feel of the market place with seafood laid out in stalls complete with little placards proclaiming the prices.

When it's time to place your order, the hostess guides you around 'the market', allowing you to choose the fish you like and even suggest the way you would like it prepared.

Wasel's choice of a meal is succinct: Australian shrimps sauteed in lemon butter garlic sauce for starters; charcoal grilled Red Snapper for main course with a side order of Arabic salad. I choose Oman tiger prawns stir-fried in Thai red chilli sauce for starters, and request for

charcoal-grilled barracuda for my main course.

When he tastes his shrimp starters, his eyes widen in appreciation as he says, "This is really very good." I have to agree. The shrimps are succulent, the seasoning just right. Mild and flavoursome.

The dish before me (tiger prawns in chilli sauce) on the other hand looks red and fearsome, but tastes delicious nevertheless, the chillies' sharp notes dancing on my tongue. "I don't usually like very spicy food," confesses Wasel, but digs in gamely.

As the lunch progresses I realise that Wasel was not making a polite disclaimer. He speaks to the point, no flourishes, no extravagance. Like his art. This architect-turned-artist from Al Ain is the pioneer of the art movement called UAEism. Ask him what it is about and he says simply: "Multi-culturalism." Quiz him further and he explains, "You know that the UAE has around 240 nationalities living together. UAEism is art born in this nation as part of this wider global village. It is a modern art that connects the respect of the past with the future and reflects the

remarkable maturation of the UAE in mere 40 years."

Wasel may be succinct in his speech but he is definitely not taciturn. There is something of the wonderment of a child in him. His eyes are alive, darting around, taking in the activity around him, no doubt storing it in his memory bank for use on a future canvas. His ready smile gets him close to his subjects in no time.

Initially, when he semi-formally presents me his book of his paintings at the table, I think this is going to be a formal lunch. But as soon as the formalities are out of the way, Wasel reveals his artist's curiosity. He wants to know where I come from, how long I've been here ... He isn't reticent about himself either.

For an artist who paints abstract art, Wasel is very earthy. He talks about growing up in the Al Muajei district in Al Ain, the eldest of a family of four girls and three boys.

The love for his family and his land is evident in his eyes when he speaks about them. How then did his art turn abstract?

"It may be due to the fact that I

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am an architect,” he grins. The clear sharp lines that populate his paintings bear testimony.

Geometry is predominant among the broken lines and a swathe of colours merge to form an astonishingly alive work.

His art is inspired by the various people he encounters every day. “We are all different, we speak different languages, we are of different colours,” he says. “Yet there is a cohesiveness that binds us together. I believe that essentially we all are the same. It’s only the social status that comes between us.”

He doesn’t use figures in his art because “in Islam we don’t use figures. So, [I use] geometry and try to do something modern. It’s not the geometry of Islamic art, but something new that I want to essay on canvas.”

Wasel doesn’t think through his paintings; he ‘feels’. “You don’t see my thoughts on my canvases,” he stresses. “I put my feelings there.”

And if his canvases are anything to go by, his feelings are really huge. An average one measures 230X330 feet. Because he paints on such large canvases he always paints outdoors. “I get inspired when I am outdoors,” he explains. “In the shade, under the tree in my father’s villa, in natural light ... [When in] nature anything seems possible.”

The desert inspires him with its vastness, and the scale of his canvas reflects that. Which probably is the reason he’s not very moved by the sight of the dhows in the creek overlooking our table. “Ah yes, it’s a pretty sight,” he sighs, taking in the tangy sea breeze. “But at heart I am a man of the desert. This humidity gets to me after some time, and I long to get back to the sand.”

But seafood he obviously relishes as he digs into his grilled snapper. He seasons it with lemon and delicately



● *You don't see my thoughts on my canvases. I put my feelings there, says Wasel.*

takes in the aroma of the dish before raising the fork to his mouth.

“There is art in cooking too,” he says. But that is one art he hasn’t perfected yet.

Our main course arrives and I find the barracuda is grilled just right, the smoky aroma tingling the palate. The ambience of the restaurant encourages long leisurely meals, so we don’t feel guilty about the time we take over so little.

Wasel’s most recent triumph, exhibiting at the First French Art Festival held recently in different venues in the emirates, has opened his eyes to the way artists of other nationalities work.

“It was a great honour,” he says. “it was wonderful seeing their work and getting to know them.” Since his first exhibition in 2002 Wasel has been exhibiting fairly regularly, most frequently at the DUCTAC, Mall of the Emirates.

“You know how a career in art is,” he explains. “It was difficult at first,

everybody asked me what I was up to when I quit my government job. I managed to convince my family, and now the situation is also better financially.

“The only thing to do is to keep exhibiting.” Which is why Wasel doesn’t insist on solo exhibitions. Even as we speak, three of his works are on show at the DUCTAC, along with other artists.

When the dessert tray arrives, we both choose the Thai-style Berry Creme Brulee. “Delicious,” Wasel murmurs. I concur.

As we reach the end of our meal, I see why Wasel chooses to eat light. The different tastes we experienced still linger on the tongue.

There is a certain sumptuousness that comes from not gorging on too much ... just like the different strands of colours that fuse to form a Wasel painting. There is nothing in excess, yet each shade seems to stand on its own revealing its range and depth. ●

Shiva Kumar Thekkepat is feature writer, Friday.