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# The quiet influence of Sultan Al Qassemi

Introducing Esquire Middle East's October cover star

BY NASRI ATALLAH PUBLISHED: OCT 3, 2022 [f](#) [x](#) [p](#)



*Sultan Al Qassemi has put together the world's most comprehensive collection of Arab Modern Art, but his most important contribution might be his ability to connect the region's next generation of luminaries*

The sun trickles through the branches of the bougainvillea tree outside as we settle into the air conditioned living room on a hot September afternoon in Dubai. There is art on every surface—paintings of every size on the walls, sculptures in the corner, souvenirs and knickknacks left by guests on one of the coffee tables. Across the sofa is Sultan Al Qassemi. He is wearing his distinctive grey kandoora with stylish trainers, his striking mop of grey hair swept across his forehead.

Al Qassemi is what some might call a 'thought leader'. He will also accept other monikers: columnist, art collector, educator, entrepreneur. The 44-year old Emirati is best known for the Barjeel Art Foundation and his community-building majlis-like dinners that bring together creative luminaries from the region and beyond.

He's the kind of person you see on all those lists—30 Under 30, then 40 Under 40, 100 Most Powerful Arabs. You name it. However, you get the sense he much prefers to be sitting in a living room with a handful of interesting people. He cuts an animated figure—whether in his own house or travelling across the world for half of the year.





Sweater, by Qasimi; Watch, Historiques 222 37mm in Yellow Gold, by Vacheron Constantin



“I do travel a lot,” he admits, “but only ever for a reason. I don’t travel for holidays. I don’t have the concept of a holiday. For me, travel has to be linked to being productive.” From January, he will be on the move again—living out of a room in Berlin for six months where he will be a fellow at the very German-sounding Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (Institute for Advanced Study).

He’s ostensibly there to do research. Which sounds like it would be enough of an endeavour, but he has also somehow found a way to add teaching a course at Bard College’s Berlin campus to his schedule. He adds the institution to the list of places he has taught—which reads like a ranking of the world’s best universities—Harvard, Yale, New York University, SciencesPo Paris.

“Teaching is something that’s a hobby more than a job for me. I teach because I love being with my students,” he says with characteristic humility.

To those who know him—and the tens of thousands who follow him and his work online—there is a pace to Al Qassemi’s life that can seem exhausting.

“It is a momentum I’ve kept with me from childhood into my adult life. I think the momentum is kind of slowing down, but I’m keeping it alive,” he says.





Kandoora, Sultan's own

"I'm in my forties, but I think that I can keep up with somebody that's half my age, easily." He's not lying. As my own encounter with my forties looms a couple of short calendar months on the horizon, I don't think I could live a week in Al Qassemi's shoes. But I wonder if it gets overwhelming—there are so many people in his life all the time. Students, house guests, collaborators, curators, artists.

In social circles, he is famous for the dinners he organises in the home we're in right now—in the coastal Jumeira district of Dubai.

In a way they are an evolution of the regional tradition of the majlis. "I never see myself as a curator, but I curate my dinners. It's definitely a perpetuation of the majlis. I used to have a majlis in the 1990s.

This is now more of an eclectic mix—Emiratis, Arabs, expatriates, men, women. It's sort of majlis 2.0."

"I've hosted 500 dinners in this house. Would you believe me if I told you I have a list of every single person who came to them?" The thing is, I would believe him. He's a cataloguer, a documenter and a collector. He clearly values his relationships as much—if not more than—any of his achievements.

“I think I’m good with time management, I’m good with resource management, I’m good with friends...,” he pauses.

“‘Friends management’ sounds awful. I’m good at keeping in touch with friends!” he corrects himself.

A relationship he values above all else is family. The name for the foundation, Barjeel is a wind tower found across the region.



Pea coat and sweater, both by Brunello Cucinelli; Trousers, by Brett Johnson; Sneakers, by Salvatore Ferragamo; Watch, Patrimony Moon Phase Retrograde Date 42.5 mm in White Gold, by Vacheron Constantin

Al Qassemi’s father first explained its significance to him.

“It’s a concept that unifies the region. It’s also a sign of welcoming guests.”

You get the sense Al Qassemi is happiest—or calmest—in his family’s garden in Sharjah. I’ve noticed his particular affection for the Ghaff tree—a drought-tolerant tree, which can remain green even in desert environments and is a national symbol of the United Arab Emirates. He shares a lot of his personal life on social media and in his writings—“I feel like I’m one of the Emiratis who has shared the most about their private family life. I’ve been very open,” he confirms.



In 2021 Al Qassemi launched the book *Building Sharjah*, co-edited with architect Todd Reisz and released by Swiss architecture publisher Birkhäuser. It was the result of five years of research and is an examination of the history of modernisation in the United Arab Emirates through architecture. Al Qassemi dedicates an entire chapter to his mother.

“There are images of my mum without the veil. It’s not easy—because she’s a veiled woman. So I had to get permission from her—a letter of consent. It’s my mum with her friends, who are teachers from this region. I published the story of my mum’s upbringing, her poverty,” he says. “A lot of people think I am over-sharing,” he continues—not as a worry, but as a badge of honour.

“It is part of opening up to the world. There are 10 times as many foreigners as there are Emiratis in the UAE. If Emiratis continue to be reserved about sharing their past, their histories, we will lose out. We will not have any presence whatsoever.”



Pea coat and sweater, both by Brunello Cucinelli; Trousers, by Brett Johnson; Sneakers, by Salvatore Ferragamo; Watch, Patrimony Moon Phase Retrograde Date 42.5 mm in White Gold, by Vacheron Constantin

It was important to him to share his mother’s story in a book on urbanism to precisely detail how women contributed to the urban landscape of the United Arab Emirates.

“My mum has definitely influenced me greatly. She was a teacher. My aunt was a teacher. Their

friends were teachers. I grew up in an environment where my father was an entrepreneur and my mother was a teacher, and I feel I took influences from both sides.” But how did he end up becoming an art collector?

“My exposure to art in the UAE in the early 1990s was limited to a few works that were very famous. We were studying the Second World War and Picasso’s Guernica. But then I went to Paris and got a membership to a lot of museums. Musée D’Orsay and Institut du Monde Arab specifically. I used to go there a lot. They left an impact on me,” he says.

When he moved back to the UAE in the late 1990s, he wanted to continue his exposure to art and did so with his family, visiting art galleries with his parents.

“We used to go to places like the Green Art Gallery founded by Mayla Atassi. And Majlis Gallery. One day I was walking with my mum and dad in 2001 on the Creek, and in the Chamber of Commerce there was an exhibition of Ismail Shammout and Tamam Al-Akhal, the leading Palestinian modernists.”

As his father pointed out the various leaders and landmarks in the works, it struck Al Qassemi that this was how we could get to experience our recent history as Arabs.



Blazer and trousers, both by Brett Johnson; Shirt by Brunello Cucinelli; Watch, Traditionnelle Complete Calendar 41 mm in Pink Gold.



“It’s what really sparked my interest in art as a way of storytelling in the Arab world. A few months later I bought my first artwork.”

It is one thing to buy a few paintings for your home—quite another to amass and display the foremost collection of modern art from the region. The collection started exhibiting in Al Qasba in Sharjah, in a small space provided by the government—the first exhibition taking place in early 2010. By 2018, the Barjeel Art Foundation moved to the Sharjah Art Museum where they had five times the space to display the collection, which now counts around 1,200 pieces.

The transition from a private collection to a foundation that loans out its paintings to the world’s most famous museums came from an unlikely place.

“I’d like to thank BlackBerry messenger!” he says with a laugh. “Around 2009, I would take pictures of art pieces and send them to friends. And they’d ask if I was planning on showing them anywhere. That planted the seed.”



Trousers, by Brunello Cucinelli; Shoes, by Salvatore Ferragamo; Watch, Overseas Perpetual Calendar Ultra-thin Skeleton 41.5 mm in Pink Gold, by Vacheron Constantin

The mission of Barjeel is to collect, display and share Modern Art from the Arab World. The mission to preserve art from this period of Arab art is accelerated by the region’s events. “The number of works that we have lost to damage, war, conflict, emigration. This is a collective loss to Arab culture, Middle Eastern, East Asian, North African identity,” Al Qassemi continues.

“In the beginning the collection was tilted towards contemporary art and was male-dominated. But over the past six, seven years I’ve shifted almost completely to modern works. And I’m very proud to say it has become a gender-balanced collection.” In a world where even major global museums only hold work by female artists in the single digits percentage-wise, achieving an even split on the Barjeel collection is simply trailblazing.

Despite his focus on modern art, a lot of the guests that find their way into Al Qassemi's dinners are contemporary artists. I have spoken to some of them and they see Al Qassemi as an invaluable figure in their own growth.



“When I meet with younger artists I tell them it’s important for you to read the manifesto of the Baghdad Modern Art Group or you need to know how artists in Algeria use the awsham—the traditional tattoo—or you need to know how artists from Morocco created abstraction using Amazigh culture, or how women took a leading role in coming up with theories that were ahead of the West—like Madiha Umar and her theory of Lettrism.”

Al Qassemi rattles off more examples and I struggle to jot them down, I realise this is how it must feel for these young artists receiving this knowledge. This fascination of receiving an education in their own history.

Al Qassemi is known for how he exits his own dinner parties. People will be sat, chatting away and he’ll suddenly stand up and shout out “goodbye” as he runs to his car and leaves Dubai for Sharjah for the night. It’s the precise moment his social stamina runs out. I wonder what the personality split is between who he is in Dubai and Sharjah. “In Sharjah, I’m alone. I only interact with my mum. I have





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He brings a kind of academic rigour and intellectual curiosity to the kind of question that might make someone else—someone like me for example—panic.

I am struck that he must rarely be truly alone.

By this point, I have met Al Qassemi a dozen times between Dubai and London. I realise this is the first time there is no one else in the room.

Literary salons, artist collectives—they hold sway in our shared imagination. They are responsible for creating scenes, giving artists the connections they need to survive and work and the myths they need to live on forever. Scenes don’t just happen, they need to be orchestrated by someone with the stamina to keep them going. Someone who provides connective tissue.

Al Qassemi understands the responsibility.

“Gertrude Stein, how did she bring the who’s who of Paris to her house? How would the intelligentsia of that era in Paris meet if not through her? Even today it’s hard to meet, with the Metro and Uber! You have to know there’s this place you can all meet. These nodes are important.”

But where does the driving force to keep being a node come from? “I think it is my interest in life. I think life is beautiful. I realise that this interest can ebb and flow. For me it has always flowed. So long as this interest is maintained I think that’s the driving force.”

Maybe Al Qassemi is less afraid of being alone than he is of losing interest in life. “Maybe – there’s so many interesting people to meet and things to do, and you only have this one life.”

The last two decades of Al Qassemi’s life have been defined by compiling a collection of works that helps preserve the Arab world’s artistic past. However, maybe it is actually his role as a connector—with an honest and inquisitive mind—that will be his legacy and will inspire future generations

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**Read our full Sultan Al Qassemi cover story in the October issue of Esquire Middle East, on newsstands now**

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