

LET'S GET PHYSICAL

the body in art

In this section we explore the artistic potential of the human body and its physical properties, from the power of our hands to create and sculpt to the movement of our limbs in performance art. We also look at the social, political and symbolic aspects of the human form and its physicality, as expressed by artists in their quest to explain and understand what it means to be human.





MAITHA ABDALLA

Simultaneously confounding and absorbing, the figures created by Maitha Abdalla reflect both her heritage and her individual understanding of the power of body and form.

Words by Alexandra Chaves



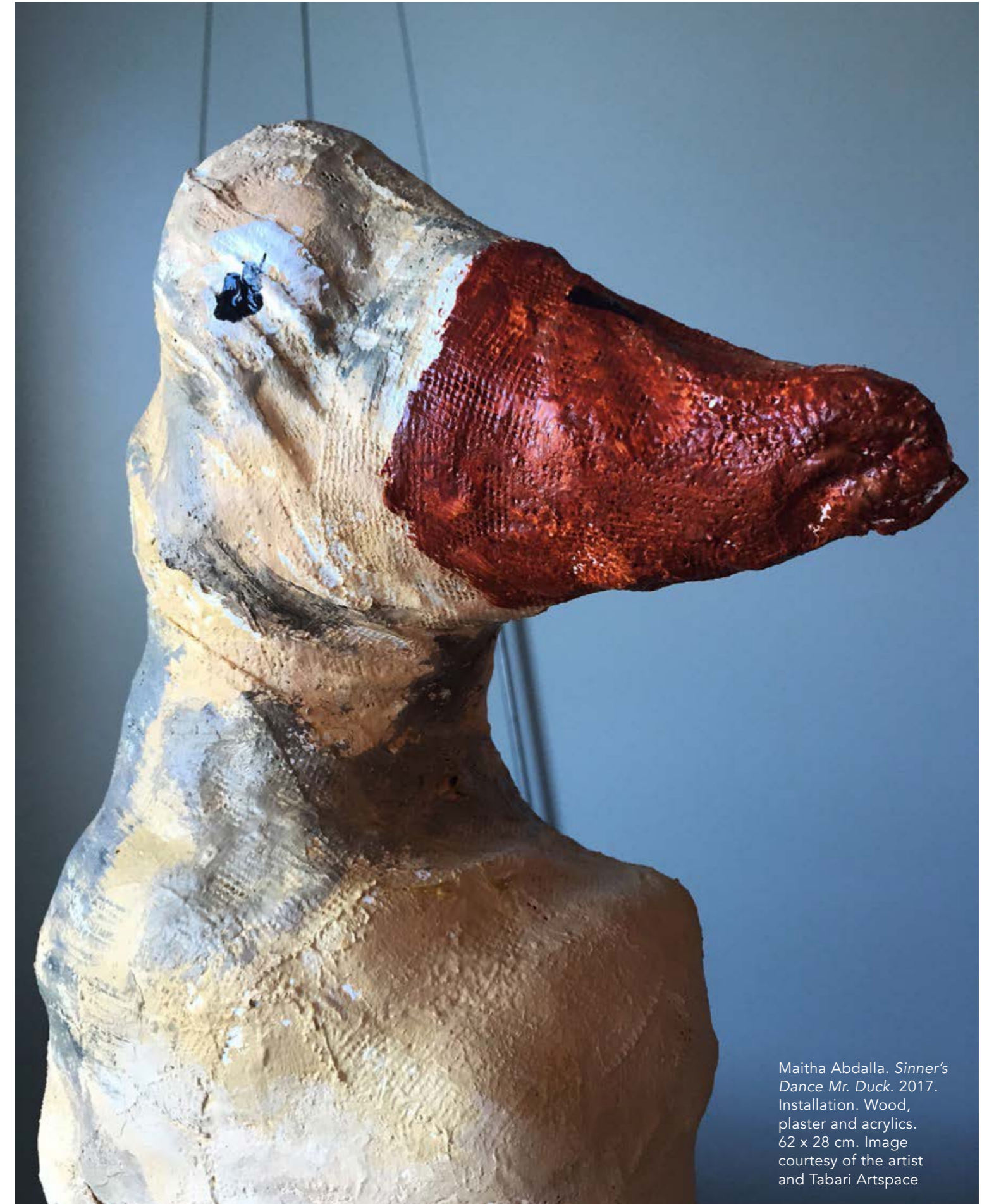
Maitha Abdalla. *Too Close to the Sun*. 2021. Installation view of *Beyond: Emerging Artists* at Abu Dhabi Art. Image courtesy of Abu Dhabi Art

There's nothing quite like Maitha Abdalla's characters – a human figure with a pig's head, roosters with male physiques wrestling each other, and different permutations of the two animals cast inside a narrative of the artist's making. They show up in Abdalla's multi-varied work, which spans painting, installation, performance and mixed media, including papier-mâché figures. The artist, fresh from a residency at London's An Effort Art, has slowly introduced new animals into her oeuvre, specifically the donkey and the cow. These choices have been deliberately plucked from the artist's childhood and her Emirati heritage.

Growing up, Abdalla and her sisters would often stay in Khor Fakkan at the house of their grandmother, who kept animals such as roosters, chickens and ducks, and would regale her grandchildren with stories about them that were influenced by

local folklore. "There's the rooster, which sees angels, and the donkey, which sees the devil. The story goes that, if you hear a donkey, there are devils around," Abdalla explains. She recalls believing these stories when she was young, and years later, returned to them as she developed her artistic practice.

Born in 1989, Abdalla recalls an early attraction to creativity. "I was introduced to art at a young age," she says. "I remember writing and art were two main things when I was younger, but they were two separate things. I had never combined them until I was working on my senior project at university." She studied visual arts at Zayed University, and the project opened up a new way of working with her paintings, adding narrative to them in ways related to theatre and cinema. "I decided to combine material that I'd written with memories and folktales, and weave



Maitha Abdalla. *Sinner's Dance Mr. Duck*. 2017. Installation. Wood, plaster and acrylics. 62 x 28 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tabari Artspace

Inside Maitha Abdalla's studio as part of her An Effort Residency. Image courtesy of An Effort Residency. Photography by Phoebe Wingrove





Maitha Abdalla. *The Beguiled Space*. 2020. Photography. 80 x 74.48 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tabari Artspace

these characters into my work. At that age, I was introduced to art films, and it changed the way I saw things and described my stories. I would watch a film and fall in love with it, then I would go back home and research the script, reading the details of how the characters were being developed," she explains.

For a time, she had worked with four other artists in a repurposed villa turned artist studio called Bait 15. The space has now closed, with the artists moving on to their individual practices, but Abdalla's studio has often been filled with her sculptured Surrealist creatures, masks made out of papier-mâché, bodies dressed in human clothes, stuffed to life with foam. She calls them her "studio friends". Some are discarded, and a few make it into her paintings, videos and other works. When it comes to constructing these characters, she begins by giving them dimension. "I do like to start with sculptures first. But I like to put them in 3D form, whether in masks or actually built, and have them live in my studio for a bit. It's more of a process where I'd like to think that these characters are leaving my studio to perform in an exhibition," she explains.

Abdalla has shown more widely in the last three years. An alumni of the Salama Bint Hamdan Emerging Artists Fellowship programme (2016/17), she has presented solo shows at Tabari Artspace in Dubai and Warehouse421, Abu Dhabi. In 2021 she was part of the *Beyond: Emerging Artists* section at Abu Dhabi Art, where her installation *Too Close to the Sun* featured a room installation aglow in pink, with one wall made up of pink bathroom tiles that recalled Abdalla's childhood home. Parts of the work have since travelled to Cromwell Place in London and the Palazzo Franchetta in Venice, where it was shown to coincide with opening of this year's Venice Biennale.

Beyond the influence of folklore, at their core Abdalla's characters are manifestations of the artist's own personal experiences and her own reflections on morality. "I always think of myself as the subject, in terms of the character and the body," she says. Building her own allegory into the cast of creatures, Abdalla wields their anthropomorphic bodies as physical testaments of purity, sin and inner struggle. Sin lives



Maitha Abdalla. *Hidden in a Darker Box*. 2020. Oil on canvas. 156 x 210 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tabari Artspace

in the body and transforms it. "In the process of doing the work, I like to think that I can manipulate the borders of the body and use the characters that I've built as metaphors," she says. "So, sin has manipulated the body and deformed the body into different shapes and different characters." Hence the darkness and surrealism in her imagery, evinced in many ways by her palette of dark greens, reds and browns. Whether in her paintings or videos, the characters often appear ruminative or lonely. Her 2020 painting *Late Night Dance* shows three masked characters rendered in more free, swivelling brushstrokes that give movement and blurriness to the piece. The scene looks ritualistic, as does *Hidden in a Darker Box* (2020), where a rooster with a human body stands tall, as if in an act of protection, between pig and person, curled up in fear.

Abdalla's more recent works have brought in distinctly immersive elements. *Too Close to the Sun* at Abu Dhabi Art, for example, was like stepping into the artist's mind. There

was an eeriness to the room, with a human-like bird made of papier-mâché that seemed to crawl on the floor and a video work in which the artist roamed a forest as though she were performing a ritual. She marks a ring around herself on the ground, then breaks out of it – a representation of crossing boundaries, the artist explains.

"I always think to myself, if I were to describe the state I'm in, what would I look like, in form? A lot of my work is about that. It's about self-journey, rethinking things that are personal to me. Sometimes it's very hard to put intimate things in a straightforward way," she says, adding that she does not want to restrict her characters purely to examinations of her own life, but rather wants to give them life to be able to continue their narratives in alternative realities. "I might decide to build these characters, but once they're formed, they take their own shape, and they take their own character," she affirms. "I feel it's important for the process of my work to allow them to have their own story and shape." ■