

# A Moveable Feast

Iranian artists Rokni Haerizadeh, Ramin Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian have transformed an ordinary Dubai villa into a collaborative wonderland

'We call it the belly of the whale, or the rabbit hole,' says Rokni Haerizadeh, describing the villa he shares with his brother Ramin and longtime friend Hesam Rahmanian. The exterior of the Iranian artists' house looks deceptively ordinary. It's just one of many earth-toned, low-rise villas that neatly line the residential streets of Al Barsha – a relatively low-key neighbourhood of Dubai.

Inside the villa, however, it's a different story. Within their leased walls, the three artists have fashioned a domestic space that's sure to mesmerise any first-time visitor: a carnival of artworks, hand-painted murals, pets, fruit, found objects and more.

Campbell's Soup cans serve as candleholders, a pink rhino head watches over the living room and Mozaffar, a dog whose 'moustache' earned him the name of a Qajar king, meanders through a glorious mess of old tables and stools, topped with sculptures, books, flora and fauna and photographs. 'When you design your house, you design your soul,' says Rokni, 'you design a way of being and a kind of practice' – 'a discipline,' Ramin interjects.

It's precisely this 'discipline' that underlies the artists' every waking moment. The trio's home, art and relationship

are intrinsically intermingled, creating a tight discipline that can be seen throughout their work – whether they are transplanting their home studios into an exhibition space, as they did this spring at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, or dedicating their Robert Rauschenberg residency on Captiva Island, Florida, to just 'being together'.

Discipline, for them, also means routine. Almost every day begins at 4.30am, with a coffee and a chat. 'The chat,' Hesam insists, 'is very important.' They discuss the news or the film they watched last night, before Rokni and Ramin head to the gym, while Hesam swims or walks the dog. After breakfast, and a little more conversation, they work steadily from 8am until sunset – breaking briefly for lunch and a short siesta. The day always ends the same: with their beloved film night, screened on a projector in their living room. 'As artists we need cinema,' Ramin says, 'it changes our eyes. We need the moving image. It gives us so many ideas, too. When we sit down to watch a movie we aim to learn something.'

Days often roll by without any of them leaving the house, save for a short trip to the gym or supermarket. The villa, in some ways, has become the fourth member of the collective.







The artists have lived in the villa-filled and thinly populated Al Barsha neighbourhood for nearly six years

‘We didn’t want this egotistical architecture that forces you to eat here, sleep here, work here,’ explains Ramin, who says they looked at 42 houses before settling on the current one. ‘Our house has a local touch. There’s no superego telling us how to live in it.’

The villa, the artists explain, blurs the boundaries between valued artwork and ordinary object, artist and layman, home and gallery, art practice and chore. ‘It’s like writing our biography,’ says Rokni, ‘or putting together a hidden code for people to decipher,’ continues Ramin.

Walls, corners and tables are decorated with work by the diversity of artists they admire, from a mountainous shoe sculpture by Emirati master Hassan Sharif to the poster art of American feminist collective Guerrilla Girls. Major artworks sit alongside banal household objects, which sit on top of hand-painted floor murals by Rokni. Housekeepers are free to rearrange things as they see fit, or even to contribute items to the mélange if they feel inspired to.

They point out an inconspicuous side table topped with photos and pottery, sitting in a corner by their dining table. ‘It was actually a project,’ says Ramin, explaining that the framed photos, which on closer inspection are revealed to be images of animal-human hybrids, are by the Chapman Brothers.



† A kitsch mega-mall on the outskirts of Dubai, Dragon Mart often attracts the city’s arty crowd with its Chinese-themed stores and bargain buys

‡ Founded in honour of the late American pop artist, the Robert Rauschenberg residency takes place at the artist’s former 20-acre estate on the atmospheric Captiva Island

‘The pictures looked like the kind of thing you might find at a grandmother’s house, so we tried to create that setting – buying a crochet tablecloth from Dragon Mart† and adding this squirrel toy we stole from a wedding, along with antiques that aren’t really antiques from the Sharjah market, originally made in Afghanistan for tourists,’ elaborates Hesam.

It’s with this same spirit of openness and questioning that the three have approached the notion of constituting a collective. ‘We don’t want to be the Backstreet Boys,’ says Rokni, laughing. ‘That’s why we didn’t give ourselves a name. It’s confusing for collectors, but we’re trying to challenge routine definitions. We’re more interested in collaborating with people – it doesn’t matter who they are, what they do or what we make together – instead of making ourselves into a commodity.’

‘Sometimes good things happen when you’re not serious,’ he continues. ‘Sometimes banal and ordinary moments are significant. Take Isaac Newton – an apple fell on his head, then things just clicked.’

For the Robert Rauschenberg residency at Captiva Island,‡ the artists went equipped with only ‘a poem and our discipline,’ says Ramin. ‘If you think first,’ elaborates Rokni, ‘you make a box for yourself, and that’s the trap.’

Away from home, the trio fell back on elements of their Dubai routine. Waking every day at 4am, they worked as the sun rose, discussing and filming a response to their chosen poem – the Persian text ‘Ay Adamha,’ translated as



## Sometimes good things happen when you’re not serious

ROKNI HAERIZADEH















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‘O, You People’, in which people enjoy a picnic on the shore while, unbeknownst to them, someone drowns at sea. ‘Captiva was the perfect place to think about this poem,’ Rokni reflects, ‘because we were in this paradise and it was good to remind ourselves of something bitter. We would put on these piggy masks, sit on the porch all day and interact with the water,’ says Hesam, ‘thinking about all of the elements that can be hiding from view when people are enjoying themselves.’

‘Categories trap you,’ adds Rokni. ‘There are so many different subjectivities out there, so many different meanings for a piece. We have to make room for the minds of others. We can’t fetishise ourselves as artists.’

It’s this attitude that inspired them to recreate the ambience of their shared life for recent exhibition ‘The Exquisite Corpse Shall Drink The New Wine’ at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde. Everything, from their furniture to the fruit that tops it, was moved to the gallery and placed alongside new work, allowing their home, practice and influences to merge into one large artwork.

They describe ‘The Exquisite Corpse...’ show as a comedy. The installation functions as a means of breaking the

ice between artist and audience, a moveable feast that coaxes the visitor into interacting with the transformed commercial space – once a white cube, now as bright as their Barsha home. ‘The floor was hand-painted,’ explains Ramin. ‘When the spectator comes in and walks on a painting, something happens. He’s now inside the artwork, not separated from it.’

Art is demystified, taken off its pedestal and transformed into a shared experience. ‘It’s about equality,’ says Hesam, recalling the gallery’s driver who, inspired by watching the artists install their exhibition, contributed a toy horse, which they painted and displayed alongside their work.

Today in Dubai, their shared practice continues to result in natural, spontaneous collaborations. They’re currently circulating ‘Her Majesty’, a book of photographs of Queen Elizabeth II, which Ramin found in a local bookstore. Each page is hand-painted by one of the trio. It’s a ‘book of queen’, they laugh, as opposed to the Persian ‘Book of Kings’. ‘It’s like a letter to each other,’ says Rokni. ‘It’s just like when we rearrange the house, but this time we’re making a book. We improvise. It’s the essence of our collaboration.’