Rivers of the World - UAE

Dubai 2012 & 2013
Khalid Mezaina’s playful illustrations are inspired by comic book art, music, fashion and the UAE’s ever-evolving landscape and community. He combines elements from both contemporary and traditional life in the Arab world to create unconventional portraits of life in the UAE that are often humourous, and always engaging.

A UAE-born graphic designer, illustrator and artist, Mezaina, graduated from the American University of Sharjah with a BS in Visual Communication. In 2010 he founded the interdisciplinary studio and brand krossbreed, which works to create contemporary, culturally-infused designs with unconventional flair.
Kross Breed blog by Khalid Mazaina

Since the beginning of the year, I've been leading a series of workshops along with my friend and freelance graphic designer Maie Atabani (http://cargocreative.com/maie), catered to students in government schools around the city. The workshops are part of a bigger project/exhibition happening later this year titled Rivers of the World.

Rivers of the World focuses on encouraging children to create art based on research about a river that exists in their country. It also promotes dialogue and exchange between international schools. I think it's a great initiative and am glad to be a part of it. Thank you British Council (http://www.britishcouncil.org/me-uae.htm) for inviting me to be a part of this project!

As Dubai is being represented this year with the Dubai Creek (which technically isn't a river but still works!), Maie and I have been to four schools so far, leading workshops and teaching students different techniques to create artworks based on assigned themes about the river.

So far, we've used techniques like drawing, painting, collage and inkblot printing! Once the students create their final pieces, Maie and I compile all the works digitally to create one final artwork per school. As long as each student's work is visually represented, we have free reign to decide how the final artwork looks.

It's been such a great experience so far. I feel that in some way, I am giving something back to the community, and hopefully inspiring a younger generation to express themselves through art. It's also been very exciting seeing the results the students come up with. They actually reminded me of how much I miss being young and a student, where I had so much fun experimenting with different mediums to create works.

After March, we have two more schools to work with. Once we've completed all six workshops, Maie and I start working on the six final pieces. Stay tuned for updates in the near future...
with march madness behind me, it's time to get back to working on the rivers of the world (http://www.riversoftheworld.org/) project. if you've seen my previous post (http://khalidmezaina.blogspot.com/2012/02/rivers-of-world-part-1.html), there were two more workshops left before heading on to the next phase of the project, which is creating the final artworks.

over the last few weeks, maie (http://cargocollective.com/maie) & i headed to the remaining two schools to complete all the workshops. at the schools, we offered workshops on painting with watercolour & creating graffiti pieces with stencils. i think the students really enjoyed it & results from the workshops were extremely good & creative.

now that the workshops are officially over, its time to start working on the final pieces. i'm really looking forward to working with maie on these & am excited about the final results. stay tuned, as always, for more updates on the project very soon...
they're finally here!!! after 6 school workshops, 2 blog posts, scanning hundreds of children's artworks, & 3 months of intensive collaborative work with maie atabani, i finally present the final artworks created for the rivers of the world project.

i'm really happy with the results & how each artwork is so different in character but still work as a set. i hope all the participants & organizers surrounding the project are pleased with the results as much as we are. i can't wait for the artworks to be displayed in my favorite city in the world, london, where dubai will be featured alongside other countries that have participated in this great project. i'm also quite curious to see how other submissions from around the world look. guess we'll find out in september!

a sentence or 2 on each of the individual artworks can be found below for those who would like to know more: river city: student-made collages representing dubai's historical development & growth around the creek, which has grown ever since in the last 4 decades.

river culture: simple illustrations made by students to represent the daily findings & activities found around the creek.

river of life: water-colour paintings of the diverse habitat found around the creek, including birds & insects, compiled to create a dense, jungle-like final piece.

polluted river: student's inkblot prints composed to create a monster-like creature from the seas, reflecting the disadvantage of development, i.e. pollution.

resourceful river: the 'monty python' inspired piece! student's surreal collages of quirky & monstrous vehicles representing the creek as a mode of transport.

working river: stenciled imagery of dubai's labour force & other iconic imagery, representing the very crowded & busy creek as a centre for work & trade locally & internationally.
i worked on the this year's edition of rivers of the world, this time focusing on the river thames. i worked alongside a talented designer/artist, who is also my dear friend, layan attari (http://layanattari.tumblr.com/). together we offered 6 art workshops at 6 different schools based in dubai, introducing the children to art techniques & creating artworks based on assigned themes about the river thames.

it was great to be a part of the project. it was a great experience working with children from the community & seeing them unleash their creativity. this is definitely an experience i will never forget...
Dubai Creek
Dubai Creek or Khor Dubai is a natural inlet which cuts through the centre of Dubai. The Creek has been synonymous with the development of the emirate. From a narrow haven for fishermen and pearlers to the present bustling centre of a busy city, the Creek continues to make an important contribution to life in Dubai. Indeed, such is its attraction that it has on occasions been called "The Venice of the Middle East" - a description that is particularly apt when seen at night.

However, in recent years Dubai Creek has undergone a dramatic expansion from 14 km long to 26.2 km. This extension recognizes the high value placed on waterfront development. And, integral to the ambitious plan is a comprehensive marine transport network, giving commuters the option to use waterbuses, water taxis and ferries as an alternate mode of transport to beat the traffic on the roads. The estimated cost of Dubai creek extension is US$ 275 million. The road network along the bridges and the canal has also been upgraded with walkways and cycling tracks.
Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary is a wetland game reserve located, as the name in Arabic suggests - at the Cape of the Creek. The sanctuary supports more than 20,000 water birds of 67 species and acts as a critical staging ground for the wintering birds of the East African-West Asian Flyway. It is home to about 500 greater flamingo.

Ras Al Khor is among the few urban protected areas of the world and lies at the interface between the Arabian Gulf and the Al Awir Desert. The Wildlife Sanctuary represents an enclave of relative wilderness amidst swirling traffic and sprawling urban infrastructure and its flamingos have become a mascot for Dubai’s Wild Life protection program.
The waterfront provides major attraction for multibillion-dollar, mixed-use development projects. However, this has contributed to an increasing influx of organic matter, nutrients, heavy metals and petroleum hydrocarbon pollutants which are ultimately are settling in the creek’s bottom causing drastic water quality deterioration specially in the upper region of the creek where there is virtually no water flushing due to natural topography. A recent study found high concentrations of nutrients in the lagoon waters of Dubai Creek, sufficient to be detrimental to the health of human and marine life.

Dubai Municipality’s "Marasena" campaign, was aimed at raising awareness and educating the public on the importance of preserving the marine environment. It was targeted particularly at sailors and the workers and of shipping companies, fishermen as well as school students. As part of this campaign, volunteers, coastguards and police scuba divers collectubbish that has settled on the Creek bed and monitor water quality daily.
The traditional form of transport between the eastern and western sections of Dubai via the creek was by Abra, which continue to operate in Dubai. An abra is a traditional boat made of wood. Abras are a part of the traditional creekscape of Dubai, and are considered a part of the city's heritage. In January 2011, as a part of the Dubai Shopping Festival, an abra race is run on the creek with a 6,000-dirham first prize.

Abras used to be the primary means of transportation between the two sides of the creek before cars could cross it via the several bridges or the Al Shindagha Tunnel. It is now mostly used by tourists and workers. They still ferry up to 20 million passengers annually. It takes under 10 minutes to cross the creek. Minor collisions are common as the abras jostle for space.
Al Ebdua Model School was partnered with Barking Abbey School in LB Barking & Dagenham
Khalid Mezaina with Maie Atabani (2012)
River Culture

Inspired by the stories and culturally rich elements of the Creek, the students illustrated the theme "River culture" using only black ink by creating simple black and white depictions of Dubai’s cultural elements found on and around the creek. The elements were then combined to create typical and traditional scenarios of what life is like in that setting.

Khalid Mezaina with Layan Attari (2013)
Resourceful River

For many civilizations that settled along the Thames, the river provided resources used for the progression of communities. Using watercolours, students painted farm-related visuals, contributing to the growth of modern day London.
Al Khansa Girls School was partnered with Jo Richardson Community School in LB Barking & Dagenham
Khalid Mezaina with Maie Atabani (2012)
River City

The students worked on the theme "River City" which is centered on the developments that took place between old Dubai and the New Dubai over the past 40 years. Using the medium of cutouts and collage, the students were asked to build long strips of compositions of photography of Dubai's older culture elements and textures as well as the newer developments. The strips were then integrated to create one photographic fusion of the old and new Dubai.

Khalid Mezaina with Layan Attari (2013)
River of Life

Students drew & assembled unique creatures based on existing marine-life found in and around the Thames, comprehending the endless possibilities of life that exist because of the river.
Al Saeedeya School

Al Saeedeya School was partnered with Erith School in LB Bexley
Khalid Mezaina with Maie Atabani (2012)
Working River

The theme "Working River" revolves around the role the Dubai Creek plays with trade, business & how busy the Creek is on a daily basis. The students were asked to stencil out elements that represented the busy creek and use spray paint to draw these elements on paper. The final graffiti was arranged to illustrate an army of workers and objects moving across the page in both directions to characterize the flow of dynamic energy around the creek and of the river.

Khalid Mezaina with Layan Attari (2013)
River City

Students were asked to illustrate iconic imagery associated with London onto different city maps. These icons collectively make up the City of London and its expansion throughout the years from the River Thames and beyond.
Nadd Al Hamar School was partnered with Carshalton High School for Girls in LB Sutton
Khalid Mezaina with Maie Atabani (2012)  
River of Life

The theme "River of Life" focuses on the biodiversity in the protected areas of Dubai. The students experimented with watercolor techniques and were asked to create colorful paintings from watercolor that reflected the vibrant and rich diversity of habitat in these areas. The final pieces were combined to form a dense jungle-like assemblage of tropical birds and insects.

Khalid Mezaina with Layan Attari (2013)  
Polluted River

A positive outlook about the prevention of pollution through recycling. Students illustrated plants on everyday discarded materials, symbolizing the positive effects of recycling on the environment.
Omar bin al Khattab Model School was partnered with Chestnut Grove School in Balham, LB Wandsworth
Khalid Mezaina with Maie Atabani (2012)
Resourceful River

The theme "Resourceful River" revolves around the idea of how the creek was used as a mode of transport. The students were asked to create an imaginary vehicle using an array of dynamic elements. The students used whatever images they felt could add to the construction of this vehicle to make it look more effective, dynamic and powerful. The individual vehicles were then combined to create one giant turbo machine that most creatively representing the theme of transportation.

Khalid Mezaina with Layan Attari (2013)
Working River

The students focused on the stories of sailors & the adventurous lives they lead. Loosely based on the aesthetics of sailor tattoos, students illustrated nautical imagery, communicating themes of a sailor's life.
Umm-Suqeim Preparatory School was partnered with The Green School in Isleworth, LB Hounslow
**Khalid Mezaina with Maie Atabani (2012) Polluted River**

The theme "Polluted River" is built mainly around the water pollution around the Dubai Creek that happened as a result of the developments that took place in Dubai over the past 40 years. The students were asked to use water in its cleanest form and ink, representing the dirt and pollution, to create a series of spontaneous inkblots to portray manifestations of the pollution in an abstract form that were reversed in color and assembled to create a giant pollution monster.

**Khalid Mezaina with Layan Attari (2013) River Culture**

Using the Victorian era as inspiration, students were asked to create a series of collaged skirts made out of images of various sailboats, representing the fashionable women who'd attend nautical activities at the Thames as a common past time.
Working River
Pearling

The lulu (locally called qarnaha) or pearl oyster provided a source of local wealth in the Emirates long before the discovery of oil. Pearl oysters occur naturally on relatively shallow banks (bara) in the Gulf.

The ancient pearl fishing industry provided the only real income for the people of what is now the UAE since the land was too barren to allow any farming. A few families would leave the romantic desert lifestyle and settle on the coast to fish. The barley system was their way of trading. Some of the fishermen probably found the occasional pearl when wading in the shallow waters, until there was an opportunity to sell it.

To gather enough oysters to make a living, however, required a huge communal effort, as well as people who were able to dive to depths of around 40 meters without equipment in order to access the offshore oyster beds.

As India became increasingly prosperous in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, demand for pearls grew. Merchants would provide the capital to provide and equip a boat for the diving season, in return for a major share of the profit accumulated from the sale of the pearls. The rest of the profit was distributed between the captain (nakhut) and the crew.

Pearling offered the possibility of comparative riches if one was lucky enough to be on a boat that discovered a top quality pearl or two. There is evidence of a single pearl being sold for fifteen thousand pounds (stunning) during the 1920s - equivalent to more than three hundred and fifty thousand pounds today. In response to the increased demand for pearls, many more families settled permanently in the coastal villages, which began to grow in importance and influence, particularly Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Others would live on the coast during the four months of the main pearl diving season, from May to September, and return to the desert in the winter.

In the early 1930s, the worldwide economic depression and the Japanese discovery of the cultured pearl (a pearl created by placing a small bead inside an oyster manually) dealt a serious blow to the Gulf's pearling industry. Dubai, thanks to its free trade port, was not as badly affected as the rest of the region. Nevertheless, it was a serious blow to the local economy one from which it would not fully recover until the discovery of oil in the 1960s.

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Working River
Game

Hidden words:

- workers
- burqua
- pelican
- sea gull
- lulu
- oil
- village
- industries
- india

Al Saeedaya School for Boys with Maha Alkobi and Khalid Mazana in Dubai, UAE.

The artwork interprets Dubai Creek's role in trade and business, and how busy the creek is on a daily basis. Students can match elements like the ships, birds, and sea gull to the hidden words on the page to complete the sentence and identify key points in the creek's historical significance. The page also explores the flow of dynamic energy throughout the creek.
Rivers of the World Exhibition
13th December 2012, Dubai

His Highness Sheikh Majid Bin Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Chairman of Dubai Culture and Arts Authority has officially opened the river inspired artwork exhibition created by students from across the world called “Rivers of the World”. It is being held at the Heritage House in Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood, for the first time in Dubai, UAE from 13th December 2012 to 31st January 2013.

The artworks are produced by pupils from the UAE, UK, Argentina, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Korea and Ireland for Rivers of the World, an art and education initiative. The project involves more than 2,000 young people around the world each year and aims to promote a greater understanding and appreciation of the world’s rivers.

Rivers of the World is a Thames Festival project led by the Thames Festival Trust in England and delivered in partnership with the British Council’s Connecting Classrooms and with support from the HSBC Global Education Programme. HSBC Bank Middle East, Dubai Culture & Arts Authority (Dubai Culture), Alserkal Cultural Foundation and Sharjah Art Foundation are working hand in hand with British Council to bring this exhibition to UAE.

Each year the project links young people from around the world to develop art work based on the study and appreciation of their rivers. This year, students from six government schools in Dubai along with students from Argentina, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Korea and Ireland have been linked with schools in London.

The six schools that were nominated by the Ministry of Education in UAE to participate in Rivers of the World are: Al Saeedeya School for Boys, Omer bin Al Khattab Model School for Boys, Umm Suqaim School for Girls, Al Khansa School for Girls, Al Ebdaa Model School for Girls and Nad Al Hamar School for Girls.

They have spent the last year studying the history, culture and environment of their local river – in UAE, this means the Dubai Creek, and with the help of professional artists Mr Khalid Mezaina and Ms Maie Atabani they have produced huge art works inspired by what they have learnt.
Over 60 artworks are now on public display at the Heritage House (House no 13) in the Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood (previously called Al Bastakiya) and have also been reproduced for exhibitions in riverside venues in London and other participating countries.

Ms Eman Yassin Daffar, English teacher and International Coordinator at Al Ebdaa Model School, Dubai partnered with Barking Abbey School in London, United Kingdom, said: “It has been a real privilege for our staff and students to be involved in such a prestigious global project. The project has given the students the amazing opportunity to bridge the gap between cultures considering the common theme of rivers. The British Council offered me an opportunity to visit the Thames Festival in the UK in September and see the art works firsthand. I am proud to see my students’ art works displayed at such a prestigious location and event.

Richard Cotton, Director, British Council, UAE said: “These striking artworks show how international partnerships between schools can play such an important role in building young people’s understanding of different cultures, societies and environments. Rivers of the World is a great example of how education and the arts can combine successfully to give the chance to young people in different countries to share, explore and learn together.”

He added: “The artworks on display have previously been exhibited at the Thames Festival in London this summer. The Festival formed part of UK's Cultural Olympiad, focusing on the power of arts to connect and inspire during the 2012 London Olympics and it is with great pride that we bring them here to Dubai. I would like thank our partners in the UAE, HSBC Bank Middle East, Dubai Culture & Arts Authority, Al Serkal Cultural Foundation and Sharjah Art Foundation, without whose support this exhibition would not have been possible.”

Speaking of their partnership with the British Council on the UAE exhibition, Ammar Shams, Regional Head of Corporate Sustainability said, “HSBC Bank Middle East is proud to be supporting this initiative which aligns with our goals to enhance the experience of students in different aspects of their education process. This exhibition opens doors for young students to display their thoughts and ideas to the world through the language of art whilst encouraging learning from different cultures”.

Mr Salem Belyouha, Director of Projects and Events in the PR, said: “Much like Dubai, the ‘Rivers of the World’ exhibition highlights the global collaboration and ambition, expressed creatively through the arts in the city. The exhibition further underlines the city's position as the cultural and artistic destination of the region. We are delighted to partner with the British Council to stimulate intercultural dialogue through the medium of art.”

Artist Khalid Mezaina, the Emirati artist who worked with the UAE students said: “Rivers of the World is an incredibly exciting project which is constantly increasing in value. It is a wonderful opportunity to work with young people on the themes that we have developed over the lifetime of the project. The students are encouraged to explore the culture, history and environmental consequences of rivers, using a diverse visual language which produces incredibly imaginative pieces of work. It is an amazing opportunity for them to have the work exhibited globally and to reach such an international audience.”

During the exhibition, from December to January, special art workshops will be taking place for children aged 8 to 14 years at Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood.

In December, participants will receive the opportunity to develop recognition and understanding of the self and the world. They will be able to actively participate in a creative process and interpret the concepts to form a personalized work of art. In January, four workshops closely related to the six themes presented by ROTW will help students learn and develop knowledge about the Dubai Creek.

To engage the public and visitors of Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood, Rivers of the world in collaboration with Sharjah Art Foundation will host “Mapping Dubai Creek”, a cartography exercise for residents to creatively map Dubai Creek and its surrounding areas. The result will be an interactive map that highlights unique spaces of personal interest and importance to people as members of the community.
Using art to channel understanding and appreciation of rivers

Mai El Shoush, The National
December 16, 2012

At the Heritage House in Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood, Dubai, Sheikh Majid bin Mohammed Al Maktoum, the chairman of Dubai Culture and Arts Authority, quietly browsed through the Rivers of the World exhibition.

He was studying artwork created by students from around the world, taking part in England’s Thames Festival Trust project, which encourages the study and appreciation of rivers through art. Each year, more than 2,000 students participate in the art and education initiative.

In Dubai, six schools created 60 works, telling the story of the Dubai Creek for the exhibition. It also includes works from Argentina, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Korea, Ireland and London to be displayed until the end of January.

The latest phase of the project began in London in September in collaboration with the British Council’s Connecting Classrooms initiative, Dubai Culture and Arts Foundation, Al Serkal Cultural Foundation, Sharjah Art Foundation and HSBC.

The students spent the last year studying the history, culture and environment of their local rivers and took part in workshops led by the local artists Khalid Mezaina and Maie Atabani.

Ahmad Bin Eisa Alserkal, the managing director of Al Serkal Cultural Foundation, said the presence of Sheikh Majid bin Mohammed Al Maktoum was instrumental in promoting and encouraging art in the community, particularly for beginners who wish to seek art as a career path.

When the exhibition opened in London, a small number of the artworks were chosen to be placed by the Thames to attract passersby to the main exhibit.

The idea of art as just a hobby is changing, says the Emirati artist Mezaina. “People are starting to see art as more than just a casual pastime, it is now seen more as a career path. Working with the students was great because when you are that age, you’re really creative and they were able to branch out,” says Mezaina. “The UAE’s exhibit is very strong and has a good combination of art mediums."

• The Rivers of the World exhibition runs until January 31 at the Heritage House in Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood (Al Bastakiya).