

Nation Building

Ras Al Khaimah Fine Arts Festival is a unique platform, enabling creatives like photographer Eddie Ryan to contribute to the UAE's burgeoning art narrative

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The ochre-hued hamlet of Al Jazirah Al Hamra has long been a silent guardian, observing the nation's march toward modernity. For decades, this northern emirate coastal town had settled into its fate as a deserted heritage treasure; its assortment of 16th century coral stone abodes delighting avid historians.

Until recently, that is, when Ras Al Khaimah Fine Arts Festival (RAKFAF) breathed new life into the town by making it an apt home for its seventh edition.

From its outset, the intention of the festival has been to showcase local and international artists, musicians, and filmmakers.

Those who commit their interpretations, experiences and memories of the UAE to a lasting artform are embraced by the festival, which "Champions the local talent who represent our community and enrich our understanding of the world we live in", enthuses Suqrat bun Bisher, the Director of RAKFAF. "Art transcends generations, connecting our past and our present."

One of the enticing aspects of RAKFAF is the diversity of its contributors, and among the 70 participating artists is Irish photographer Eddie Ryan, whose piercing photography studies of classic and contemporary UAE architecture are visual signposts of just how the nation has bridged its past with the future.

When he first arrived here six years ago, Ryan was living in Ras Al Khaimah, and wanted to get to know the emirate and its neighbours. "I started off by just driving around, as that's how I like to work, by getting out into a landscape," he explains of his desire to dig deeper. "The glitz of the Burj Al Arab and the roar of supercars are a wonderful side to the country, but there are many other layers to peel away."

RAKFAF was instrumental to his photography deep dive. In 2014, Ryan submitted one of his early photographs, taken on Ras Al Khaimah's corniche – and was duly awarded with the prize for the best photograph that year.

Buoyed by the honour, Ryan spent the resulting years building an arresting portfolio that depicts a broad spectrum of UAE scenes: historic places of worship and craggy gateways that frame mountain vistas, right through to sleek, soaring skyscrapers. Even to the most adventurous explorer, his more obscure Instagram uploads can evoke an incredulous "That scene is in the UAE?!"

During the week, Ryan runs the Graphic Design programme at Middlesex University in Knowledge Park, while on Fridays he becomes the avid shutterbug, going wherever his camera's curiosity leads. Within the country's photography rules, he has found a foothold in which to creatively flourish.

"My style came about by studying the laws governing photography in the UAE – which of course are there to be followed," he defers. "As a creative person, I developed an aesthetic that is respectful of the culture and the laws, yet is still distinctive."

Well, both the law, and the light. A pivotal moment for Ryan was finding that late afternoon, when the sunlight is less intense with its glare, provides the perfect framing for his captures.

"On Friday I tend to go walking through parts of Dubai, for those two or three hours in the afternoon when things are peaceful and quiet," the weekend wanderer explains, "And one afternoon I saw a particular minaret in Karama, where the sun framed the minaret's unusual surfaces in just the right amount of light sensitivity, highlighting its Brutalist, minimalistic design," he recalls.

Once Ryan had processed that stark first image, he felt compelled to seek out other minarets at that time of day, "In order to capture the correlation between the softness of the light and the peace of the city during those hours". It blossomed into the *Before Asr* series, which is emblematic of his signature black and white concept.

So effective were the snaps that it became Ryan's 'magic hour'; a prime time to document other architecture.



AIR

Opening pages: Zayed Grand Mosque, in Abu Dhabi
 Above: The spiralled Jumeirah 2 'Tomorrow' Bridge is a walkway located along the Dubai Water Canal route.
 All images courtesy Eddie Ryan / @ryaner99

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“I’ll often walk the streets of Al Satwa,” he explains, “Because there’s a lot of interesting urban development happening there, and that light source is ideal for capturing images of the skyscrapers – where the sun does not bounce so fiercely off the buildings.”

The striking *Before Asr* photography pieces find themselves among the myriad artworks at RAKFAF 2019, which Shaikh Saud Bin Saqr Al Qasimi (UAE Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Ras Al Khaimah), describes as “Highlighting our past and present, bringing our traditions, successes and visions to centre stage”.

On that note, Ryan admits that despite submitting photographs to the festival for years, it still feels slightly surreal to be featured on the platform, contributing images that help weave an artistic tale that charts UAE history.

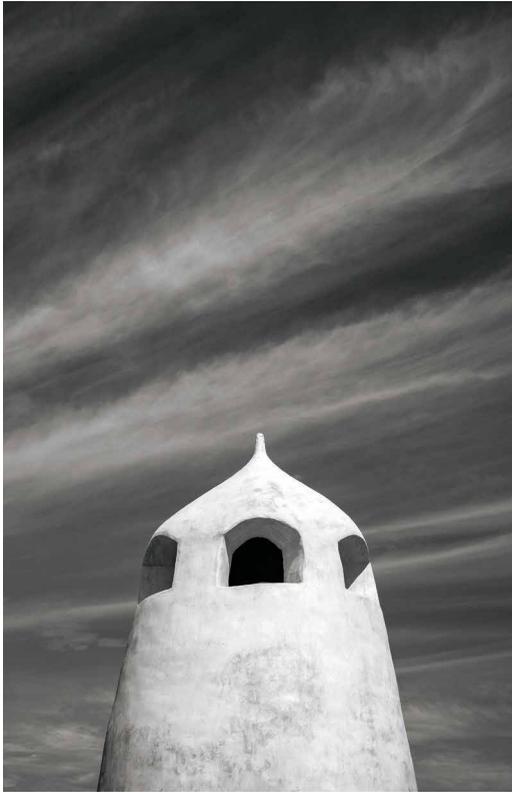
“In the course of conversation with some who grew up here, they’ve commented that particular images bring back cherished childhood memories,” he says, by way of mission (partly) accomplished.

Ryan’s hope is that in an ever-changing cityscape, the photos will exist as a testament to how some of the less-visited areas once looked. In an overarching sense, his works attempt

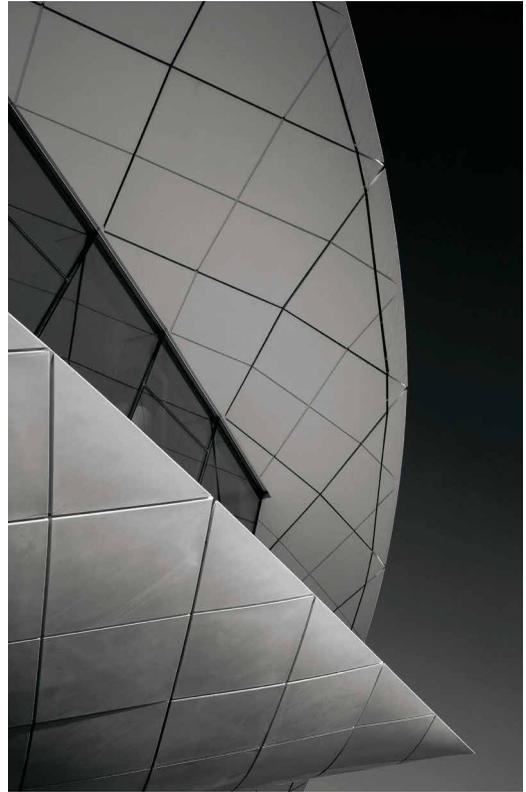
to capture the ordinary, everyday sense of Dubai, which can be overlooked by being preoccupied with life.

“I didn’t just come here for the sunshine; I have a genuine interest in the culture and traditions of the Middle East,” he reflects. “It’s an honour to have my art included in that mix of international and local perspectives because, after all, that diversity is what the country itself is built upon.”

Eddie Ryan is among the array of local and international artists whose work is being showcased at Ras Al Khaimah Fine Arts Festival 2019. The event’s outdoor exhibition shows through April



Al Jazirat Al Hamra minaret, in Ras Al Khamiah, is a structure that dates back to the 14th century



The contemporary design of Etihad Museum, which opened to the public in 2017, on Dubai's Jumeirah St.



Photograph of a minaret, taken "In the stillness of a Friday afternoon", as part of Eddie Ryan's *Before Asr* series



Al Yaqoub Tower and surrounding skyscrapers, which flank Sheikh Zayed Road in Dubai – opposite Satwa