

Art Interview

by Alexandra Mansilla

## Ali Cha'aban And Celine Azem On "The Fifth Wife" Exhibition

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On March 26th, Firetti Contemporary unveiled a captivating new exhibition titled "The Fifth Wife." The brains behind this exhibition are Celine Azem, a Syrian-Italian curator known for organising numerous exhibitions, and Ali Cha'aban, a "why not?" artist and the Creative Director of YKONE (you have likely seen him on our pages – [here](#) and [here](#)).

So, why is it named "The Fifth Wife"? Who are the featured artists, and what is the story behind it all? To find out, we turned directly to Ali and Celine themselves, and here is what they had to say.

**– Ali, Celine, how long have you known each other? When did you first meet? Can you recall your initial impressions of each other?**

**Both:** We have known each other for just over a year; however, time feels irrelevant, and honestly, for both of us, it feels as though we have known each other for a lifetime.

**Ali:** I met Celine sometime around Art Dubai. She was a fascinating character. She had such a strong charisma that I embarrassed myself when I met her for the first time. So I waited for our next encounter to make an impression, but luckily, she embarrassed herself. I felt we were even. Significantly, the word "Champ" rang a bell for Cece, and ever since, we have become the closest.

**Celine:** I guess, as Ali painted the picture, our first two encounters were embarrassing for both of us. However, we both found each other intriguing. I admired Ali's bold character, his wit and, of course, his intellect (very leo of him, haha). I feel like, in a short time, I have learned a lot from him, and he inspires me in many ways when it comes to art and life in general. I think we help each other view things from different perspectives, and I really appreciate that about our friendship.



**– How did the idea to collaborate on an exhibition come about? Who first proposed it?**

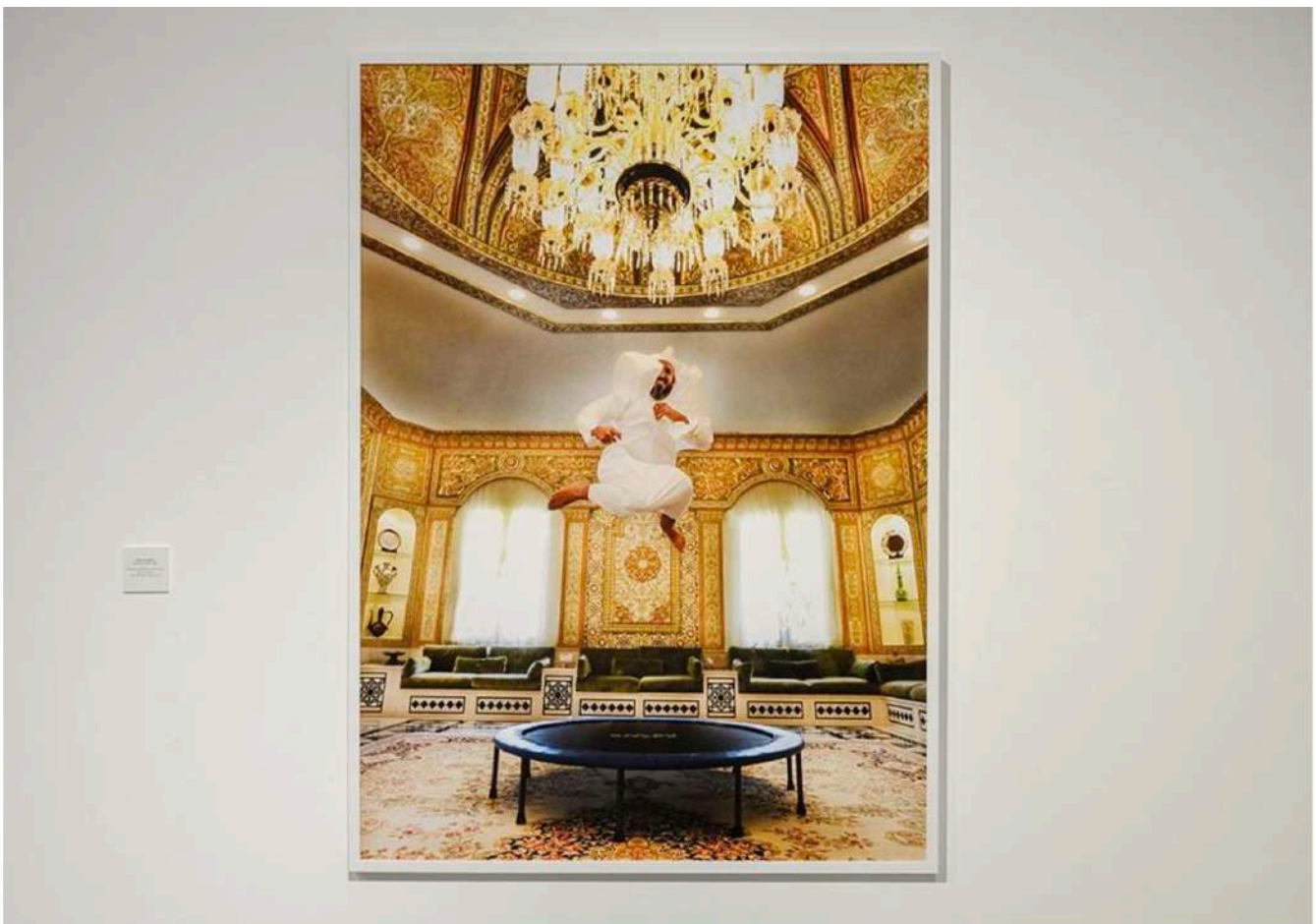
**Both:** The idea of collaborating on an exhibition came naturally to us. It was always something we discussed, and we finally decided to do it along with Mara Firetti, the Founder of Firetti Contemporary, who was very on board with the idea.

**Ali:** I think it was inevitable when it came to our friendship. All we spoke about was art, music, and food. This led to the creation of the idiom "CAAC," which Cece will explain herself. I knew Cece was the one to work with after she helped me curate my show "I Guess I'm Still Angry." Ever since she became my art confidant, she made hanging around a gallery space "cool" again.

**Céline:** To be completely honest, ever since I met Ali, I have been eagerly anticipating the opportunity to collaborate with him on an arts-related project because it felt so refreshing to speak to him about art. After numerous discussions, we decided to bring together artists we both deeply admire and curate an exhibition that reflects the unique themes of our region. I was thrilled with the artists Ali introduced me to, and it was truly an honour and a pleasure to work with them and exhibit their work at our gallery. Both Mara and I were over the moon about the outcome.

**– Who was responsible for selecting the artists for the exhibition, and why did you choose these particular artists? How did you reach out to them?**

**Céline:** When it came to selecting artists, it was truly a collective effort, but Ali's influence played a crucial role. His suggestions, including Jason Seife, Khalid Zahid, and Aidha Badr, perfectly aligned with the theme we envisioned. Also, artists like Sawzan Al Bahar and Salmah Almansori, with whom I have had the pleasure of working since the gallery's inception, were indispensable additions to the exhibition. Ali's push to incorporate functional art from ARE Studio, which explores the sensibilities of Syrian furniture, allowed viewers to experience conventional patterns and textures woven or transformed into imaginative pieces of art. This addition added another layer to the show, seamlessly complementing the exhibition as a whole and further embracing creativity in all its forms.



Khalid Zahid

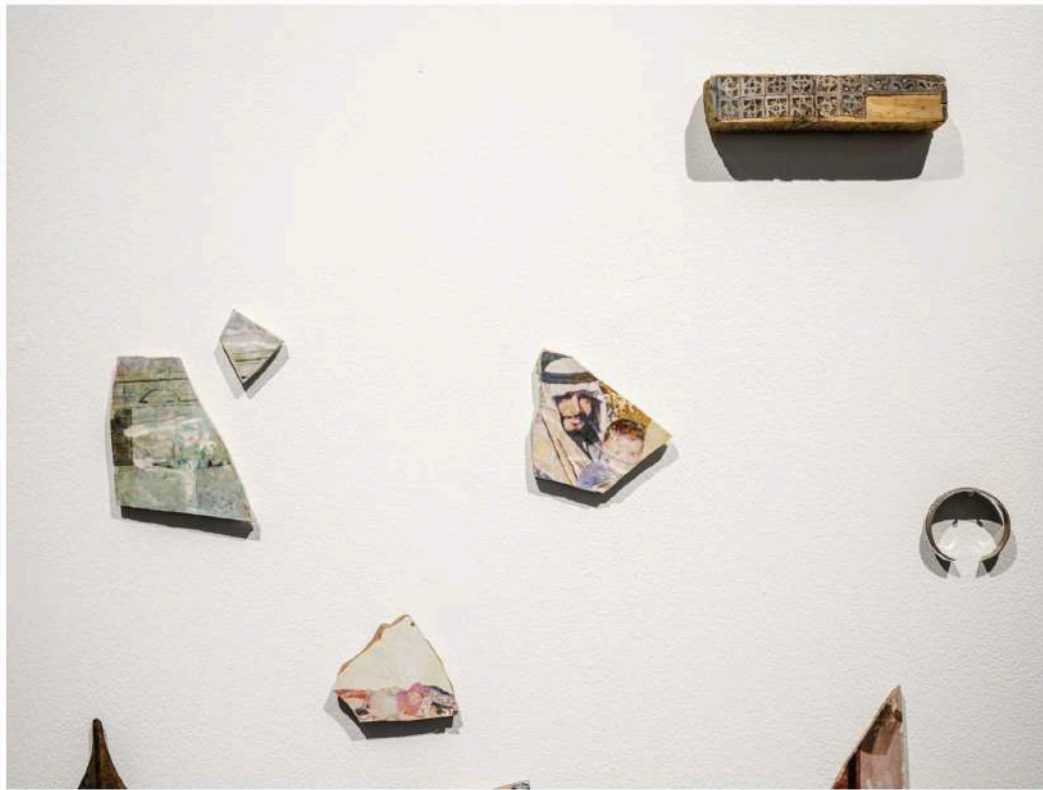
**– Do you remember [that Zoom meeting](#)? What is going on here?**

**Ali:** Hahaha. We had two meetings with different artists, I believe it was Khalid and Aidha. After we concluded the calls with them, I didn't feel like calling Céline on the phone, so I continued our conversation on Zoom. She was stressed, I absolutely wasn't.

**– Muslim men can have up to four wives. The exhibition's name is "The Fifth Wife." Why?**

**Both:** The choice of the title, "The Fifth Wife," for the exhibition originated from several brainstorming sessions. After settling on the theme of our show, which revolves around Arab folklore and oral traditions, we delved into the concept of "old wives' tales" stemming from English-speaking cultures. This phrase refers to traditional beliefs passed down orally through generations, often regarded as superstition or folklore rather than based on factual evidence. Infusing an Arab twist into this idea, we arrived at the title "The Fifth Wife", encapsulating the essence of traditional wisdom passed down through generations in Arab culture – with a touch of flair. After all, it is a title that definitely turns heads.





Salmah Almansoori

– While we can read about the exhibition on the gallery's website, we would love to hear your own description of it. How would you describe it?

**Both:** Coming from diverse backgrounds, both in terms of nationality and upbringing, Azem, with Italian and Syrian heritage, and Cha'aban, born as a third-culture kid in Kuwait and raised in Saudi Arabia, sought to consider the multicultural landscape of the region, reflecting the United Arab Emirates, where various ethnicities coexist. Thus, the notion of a melting pot came into existence.

**Celine:** This show resonated with us effortlessly. With this exhibition, we honour and celebrate Arab culture, folklore, and the rich traditions embodied by the majlis, reflecting the diverse and inclusive spirit of our community.

**Ali:** The idea that physical spaces can transcend so many metaphysical commonalities is baffling, and I love how everyone has their own take on space and time.



Aidha Badr



**– Is this exhibition personally significant for both of you?**

**Both:** This show is significant as it marks our first curated show together. We essentially proved to each other that we make a great team when it comes to planning and curating an exhibition, haha. We combined the artists we know and managed to create a show that is not only fun but also intriguing and emotionally resonant. The journey as a whole has been enjoyable (of course, there were some stressful moments and not everything went as planned, but it turned out even better than we imagined). They say combining friendship and work is not a good idea, but I think we pulled this off, and honestly, at no point did we argue or fall out over anything; I would say we handled all obstacles quite well (Long live CAAC! HAHA). The exhibition is significant because it also showcases all the artists we strongly believe in, and we wanted to share their talents with everyone.

**Céline:** I just want to express my gratitude for this exhibition, as it has allowed me to delve into the world of the majlis and Arab culture on a deeper level, thanks to both Ali and our artists. Despite being half-Arab, I grew up with my Italian mother, so exploring this aspect of my heritage was an opportunity to discover a side of myself that I'm not very familiar with. I have immense respect and admiration for all the artists we have chosen; listening to their stories and experiences and their relationship with oral culture and traditions has been truly inspiring. In simple terms, it has been a beautiful experience. What excites me the most is the prospect of continued learning through my interactions with these talented artists.

**– Ali, in the comments under Céline's post, you write: "So grateful for CAAC. So grateful for our friendship. So grateful for our WiFi. So grateful that art brought us on this same path. I love you Cece." Haha, why WiFi? Is there any story behind it?**

**Ali:** CAAC, amusingly enough, is not just a combination of our initials, which are CA (Céline Azem) and AC (Ali Cha'aban), but also a nod to our mutual adoration for ka'ak (ka'ak bread – yes, the food). I guess this highlights how we can't resist sneaking wordplay into everything we do.

When it comes to WiFi, we are always in sync, effortlessly knowing each other's thoughts without a word, just like a strong WiFi connection – another play on words here.

In terms of art bringing us together I guess it is one of the things that makes us both very happy.



Sawsan Al Bahar

**– What is the purpose of the exhibition? What impact does it aim to achieve?**

**Both:** With this exhibition, our aim was to introduce something fresh and captivating to the art scene, sparking curiosity and resonance among viewers. The show offers a diverse range of experiences, ensuring there is something for everyone. Through art, we sought to foster connection and create an inviting and enjoyable yet profound and impactful experience for our audience.

"The Fifth Wife" serves as an invitation to contemplate, appreciate, and introspect, much like the "majlis" itself, where stories and culture converge in a harmonious union.

Art is meant to be enjoyable and educational, and we aimed to ensure that the space was "non-intimidating" but rather inviting.

**– Is there a particular artwork in the collection that resonates with you on a personal level? Why?**

**Both:** All the artists in the show resonate deeply with us, as we have collaborated closely with each of them to bring this exhibition to life. Many created new works inspired by the theme, focusing on aspects of folklore and oral tradition. For instance, Sawsan Al Bahar explores the origins of her surname, Aidha examines mother-daughter relationships, Salmah investigates memory and identity, Khalid delves into religion, and Ghaleb reimagines the functional formats of the majlis, highlighting it as a haven where support becomes art. This space embodies centuries of communal bonding and storytelling. Jason Seife explores cultural heritage through Arab World tapestries, reflecting the tension between tradition and modern influences. ARE Studio, renowned for its exploration of Syrian furniture, offers imaginative pieces that blend conventional patterns with contemporary artistry, enriching the exhibition's narrative.



