

It's Friday night in Dubai and I'm at thejamjar gallery in Al Quoz, doing something a little different. All around me are happy people, smiling, chatting, and enjoying the exhibition that has drawn us all together on this slightly sticky evening. There are giant samosas being served, and animated conversations taking place between artists and admirers of their work. So what makes it different? The artists in question are more commonly found constructing the magnificent city which I inhabit, or sitting alongside me in traffic on Sheikh Zayed Road - them in the white bus, me in the car pumping AC and the stereo - than having their paintings and drawings on show to the public.

This was Restart The Art, which saw 43 construction workers team up with 43 local artists to create works of art that would then adorn two of their buses. The pairs would meet every Friday and try to combine both of their visions into one image that represented them both, together.

I had caught glimpses of the project sneaking onto my social media feeds, but hadn't quite grasped what exactly was involved, until I headed down there to see for myself the wheels in motion, so to speak. Restart The Art is the year-in-the-making initiative of Dubai-based vehicle for social change, The Sameness Project. Founded by Lina Nahhas in March 2012, as the name suggests it aims to break down social barriers and encourages us all to see just how similar we all are, instead of focusing on surface differences such as circumstance or appearance. "The message is always the same," Lina says, when I grab her to have a chat by the aforementioned samosas. "Whoever we're dealing with, whatever background or social class or age group, whatever the profile, we make sure any project is going two ways, back and forth. With Restart The Art, it's not just us doing something and then the construction workers being passive. They had to be active and instrumental in this process."



DHAN RAJ AND KHALDA: THE ARTIST BUDDIES



ART ON WHEELS: ONE OF THE BUSES



"REMEMBER THAT TIME YOU..." LORA AND SIRAJ GET ALL NOSTALGIC

The Sameness Project is not a charity, and that's something that Lina wants to be made very clear. "I don't want to even put that word next to our name, it comes with a lot of negativity and challenges," she says. "It's very essential for us that what we do is

"I DON'T WANT TO EVEN PUT THE WORD CHARITY NEXT TO OUR NAME, IT COMES WITH A LOT OF NEGATIVITY AND CHALLENGES"

equal on both levels so that it's not seen as 'oh we're helping someone underprivileged'." So what do they do? "We share our pains, our joys, our dreams," she says. "The stories may come in different shapes but the core message is the same. Anyone who has experienced one can relate to someone who has

experienced the other."

There's no denying it feels unusual to be spending my weekend hanging out with the guys I normally look the other way from, because I feel so bad about the unfair parallels of our lives. But that is exactly why I should be

here. Sameness is not about sticking a big money-shaped plaster on a social problem - although funding is desperately needed and crucial in order for this work to continue - it's about acknowledging our humanness, together. Laughing at the same things, crying at the same things and ultimately uniting over that.

From construction taking place on my doorstep, to right beside my office - I'm surrounded by these workers on a daily basis. How bizarre is it, then, that I'd never spoken to one - until today.

I spy one of the construction workers taking part, Dhan Raj, originally from Nepal, standing sheepishly near his work of art in the main exhibition room. Finding a translator, I ask him what prompted his involvement in the project, and if he'd ever been artistic before. "I always had an idea in my mind as to what I'd want to draw," he says. "It would be my village and house. I'd always picture them in my heart and my mind but this [project] gave me a chance to sort of put it on paper." He continues: "I have no choice in being here. I came for work. I miss my family and I miss my home. I miss those things on a daily basis, but doing

this project has helped to take away some of that pain and bitterness." For someone who works six days a week, removed to an extent from the glossy life that he builds each day, what does Dubai mean to Dhan Raj, on a personal level? "To me, Dubai means safety from things at home, and the knowledge that I can bring money back," he says, matter-of-factly. Other

workers I speak to, such as 32-year-old Sayen and 23-year-old Rafaqat, mirror this sentiment. "I feel safe here," says Sayen. "I like it."

I'm introduced to Dhan Raj's artist partner, 24-year-old Khalda Eljack, who moved to Dubai from Sudan seven years ago. "Oh it was very eye opening," she says, when I ask how she found the whole process. "I'm sure it was an experience for him as well. There was a bit of a language barrier, so we drew things out to explain things to each other. He's a bit shy and I'm a bit awkward sometimes so it was just breaking that ice in the beginning, but we definitely bonded, because we got to learn each other's personal stories." Despite the aims of the project, I still wanted to know, did it feel like charity? "There are so

many ways that people try to help out, and there are a lot of organisations where people just donate money and there's no physical contact. You have no idea where your money is going. But this idea of mutual respect, not handouts, it's important - it's a basic human need. With a collaboration like this or an experience like this it's different, because you get to know your partner and you're creating a difference in both of your lives, which I feel is really important."

"It's a big responsibility to carry out the dreams of someone else and create a new piece and at the same time preserve the story of the other person," says 34-year-old Desislava Daze, another artist 'buddy' that I speak to. "But this awareness is vital. In order to address an issue, or make something better, you need to first recognise it."



GUESTS ENJOY THE VARIED ART ON OFFER



THE WORKERS STAND IN FRONT OF THEIR NEW BUS

"IN ORDER TO MAKE SOMETHING BETTER, YOU NEED TO FIRST RECOGNISE IT"

As mentioned by Lina, one of the key aspects to the success of The Sameness Project is funding, which is where people like Samar Habibi come in. Samar, 32, works for Pepsi Co. and was the person responsible for getting

7Up on board to sponsor Restart The Art. Half Palestinian, half American, she was born and raised in Lebanon before moving here in 1992 with her father's work. "It's actually where I learned the beauty of diversity and the

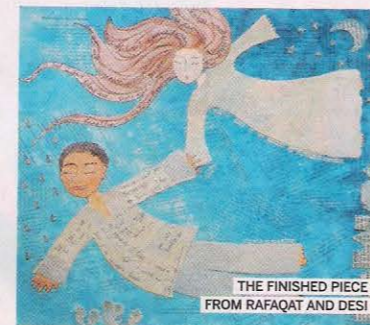
sameness of it all at the same time," she says of the UAE. "What I love about Dubai is that it's not a melting pot. Everyone comes with their own stories and their own heritage and their own culture, and there is a level of respect for that - and that has been a humbling experience for me."

Towards the end of the night, there are speeches and thanks to all the people involved, such as Samar, for their hard work and encouragement. All the workers are called to stand up at the front of the room, and Lina makes a speech. "I hope you know by now, that you're not invisible. We see you. On every single bus of Dubai, we see you," she says. "After this, I hope you'll remember each time you're on that bus and you're seeing us - that we have the same stories. We are your family here. We are here for your support, you're not alone." And for the first time, I did see them, very clearly, and I didn't look away.

You can get involved by visiting thesamenessproject.com

THE WORKS OF ART

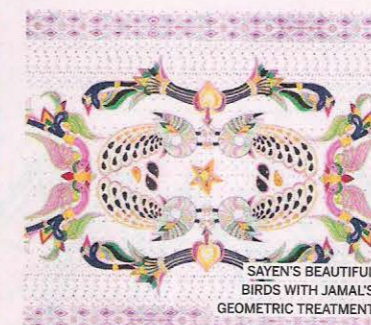
Here are just three of the results of this extraordinary collaboration - to see them all visit restarttheart.com



THE FINISHED PIECE FROM RAFAQAT AND DESI

RAFAQAT & DESI

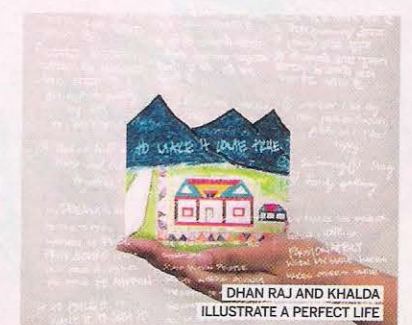
Bangladesh Rafaqat, 23, says his greatest joy is his parents, and his greatest pain is "to have no family here". His dream is "to have my own house". His buddy, Desi, lists some of her greatest joys as "nature, being in the wild, dancing, and gestures of kindness". While her dreams include "peace in the world".



SAYEN'S BEAUTIFUL BIRDS WITH JAMAL'S GEOMETRIC TREATMENT

SAYEN & JAMAL

Sayen, 32, also from Bangladesh, says his greatest joy is "people appreciating my work" and his greatest pain was "not having had the opportunity to be involved in art". His partner Jamal says her greatest pain is "what is happening to humanity, the future does not look good".



DHAN RAJ AND KHALDA ILLUSTRATE A PERFECT LIFE

DHAN RAJ & KHALDA

Dhan Raj's greatest joys are "watching a new movie, looking through new photos, swimming, singing and family time". His dream is to "help my son qualify as a doctor and to build a nice house to live with my family". Khalda's greatest joys include "my family, my friends, loving passionately and making others smile".