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# Abu Dhabi human trafficking victims use art as a healing tool

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Artwork, created by the residents of Ewa'a, a shelter for trafficked women, stands on display, ready for the shelter's annual exhibition, Silent Voices. Silvia Razgova / The National

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Jen Simon is fussing with some crocheted hair on a giant, rounded mermaid, stuffing wire into each strand so it curls.

The Dubai artist is standing in the middle of 10 giant bowling pins, or skittles, as she calls them, each one decorated with an embroidered face, paint and an assortment of other adornments. There is one massive, gold bowling ball with the word "Life" painted on it in Arabic.

She is in the arts room at [Ewa's Shelters for Victims of Human Trafficking](#), which protects and houses victims of human trafficking who fled their captors, in the capital. All around Simon on this recent Thursday is a flurry of activity, as organisers measure and arrange the various items to be included in the upcoming Silent Voices IV exhibition.

“The idea is that whatever comes bowling at you, you stand up and face it again,” says Simon, a local artist who dreamed up the idea two years ago and had the pins custom-made in Dubai. “The girls that are here are strong. They’re amazing, really.”

In its fourth edition, Silent Voices has exploded in size, scope and – say those closest to it – quality. “These people are not supposed to have artistic talent,” Simon says.

There are double the number of pieces, 82, this year, with new items including decoupage plates and traditional canvases, as well as brightly painted tables and chairs. Simon, who coached all the victims and oversaw their work, is hoping one big spender bids on the skittles as a set, besting last year’s total of funds raised, Dh48,345.

Twenty-four women between the ages of 13 and 35 were involved in producing the pieces for the exhibition. The work is, for them, a mixture of art therapy and rehabilitation.

The exhibition, which opens next Sunday, and runs until Thursday, May 14, moves this year from The Space at twofour54 to the well-trod Pearl Court at Yas Mall, further boosting awareness of the work Ewa’s does.

Marwa Ali Al Hosani, Ewa’s media coordinator, has seen big changes since last year.

“This year is totally different,” she says. “This time it seems more like artists than victims. I saw the victims when they were here working, they were really enjoying it. They were laughing and smiling and listening to music.”

Every year, amazing stories come out of the exhibition: a woman from Asia who participated last year (when her crocheted faces graced the cover of an edition of Arts&Life) also created the faces for the bowling pins.

Back in her home country, she was struggling to make it through her fifth year of medical school, with two children to raise alone after her husband died. She took a job in Abu Dhabi to raise cash to finish, ending up at the shelter when “the job” turned out to be for sex work.

She created only one painting for last year’s exhibition, bought by a 28-year-old Emirati woman who stumbled upon it. Organisers had to explain that the artists were victims of human trafficking, which the woman found hard to believe was happening in her home city.

“The woman said, ‘Why so many thorns and little flowers?’ and I told her she was in her fifth year of studying and her husband had died and she has two children. She said ‘OK, I’ll buy this’,” says Yosra Kaddoura, a supervisor at the shelter.

The buyer not only paid double for the painting, but when she returned to pick it up, she handed over Dh11,000 needed for the medical student to finish school. She also included a note.

“She wrote, ‘Don’t be disappointed in life as you meet bad people, there are also good people’,” Kaddoura says.

The woman is now in her home country, eight months away from becoming a doctor. Simon, pleased that she is back on track, also hopes she keeps up her craftwork. “No one else has had that skill,” she says. “We made sure before she left she did all those faces, a year ago.”

The stories behind each woman at the shelter, which also has locations in Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah, and a facility for men and boys in Abu Dhabi, are so heartbreaking that it’s sometimes hard to believe they produced the exhibition’s bright, happy images of sunshine, flowers and playing children.

The women who created the work for Silent Voices are gone now, but on each painting, a message remains. On the biggest canvas for sale this year, a 120x90-centimetre work featuring an exuberant dancer facing the sun, the 19-year-old artist from Asia wrote: “I am moving toward the future.”

Back to the blue-haired mermaid, which Kaddoura says was created by a victim from a country by the sea.

“She says she feels as if she was a mermaid ... she came up to the surface when she came to Ewa’a,” Kaddoura says. “She wants to start a new life, she thinks with that experience they did not deal with her as a human being, she was half a human being. She thinks now, everything will be OK.”

**• The Silent Voices art auction and exhibition is presented under the patronage of Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak, by Abu Dhabi Music & Arts Foundation in association with the Ewa’a Shelters for Victims of Human Trafficking. The exhibition opens in Yas Mall’s Pearl Court on Sunday, May 10, from 7-10pm, then runs daily until May 14 from 10am to 10pm. Payment by cash or cheque. Visit [www.shwc.ae](http://www.shwc.ae) or [www.admaf.org](http://www.admaf.org) for more information**

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