



CULTURE

Christopher Joshua Benton Presents a Lightbox Installation at the New Adidas Originals Store

The artist was joined by a handful of other creatives who were commissioned by the brand to infuse the flagship with authenticity and cultural perspectives.

BY CHARLIE-GEORGE BERGER July 20, 2022



This week, Adidas Originals unveiled its first-ever flagship store in The Dubai Mall. Featuring an open-plan retail space, the store is set out to be the go-to destination for exclusive Adidas Originals products and collabs in this region.

To lend a sense of authenticity to the space, Adidas has engaged and commissioned several creative talents. Known as “Curated by”, the brand will be collaborating with Dubai-based stylists to reimagine the store’s mannequins with inclusivity in mind. Lebanese photographer Sophia Khalifeh and Iraqi stylist Zainab Hasoon have kicked off the initiative.

Elsewhere in the store, four more artists have lent their cultural perspectives: Emirati sculptor Latifa Saaed, henna artist Dr Azra Khamissa, Hessa Archives, and artist Christopher Joshua Benton.

Dubai-based American artist Christopher Joshua Benton works across a variety of mediums and has most recently exhibited at Abu Dhabi Art and Venice Biennale. On this occasion, he presented a series of lightbox installations that reference the gentrification of old Dubai neighbourhoods such as Satwa, Karama, and Deira. GQ caught up with the artist to find out more about the installation and his experience in these districts.

The City Behind My Door hangs above artist Christopher Joshua Benton in the new Adidas Originals flagship store in The Dubai Mall.

How did this art intervention come about?

Adidas contacted me directly on Instagram for this commission. For me, it is such a full-circle moment. My first-ever job was at the mall. The first-ever sneaker I spent my own money on was a pair of Adidas. The first place I ever visited in Dubai was The Dubai Mall. And this installation is based on the first solo artwork that I had ever exhibited. This project also connects my past and present selves: I used to be a creative director and now I'm a full-time artist.

In essence, the artwork has been inspired by the gentrification of old Dubai neighbourhoods like Satwa and Karama.

What has been your experience of these neighbourhoods and your observations of the impact gentrification has had on them?

Satwa, Karama, Deira, Bur Dubai. These places house the working-class people who build the city. But these older neighbourhoods are incompatible with the glamorous, neo-liberal bespoke lifestyle that Dubai presents to the middle-class and wealthy expatriates who the city is designed to accommodate.

I lived in Satwa for three years. During that time, I saw many friends and local businesses displaced by the ever-expanding cityscape. Economically speaking, bed spaces that can house someone for AED300 are being replaced with small off-plan apartments that cost AED300,000. Where do those people go once pushed out?

Places like The Dubai Mall play a part here, too. These mega malls offer a sleek promise of a maximised self who can have everything all of the time – that is, if you can afford it. While Dubai Mall is honestly one of my favourite places on Earth, I also recognise that its scale and spectacle threaten the kind of small businesses that give the city character – while also endangering the livelihoods and relationships those businesses support.

My installation consolidates these stories of labour and place into the kind of lightbox retail hoardings that you see on Satwa Road. It's the aesthetic of a place for a limited time. Here in the UAE, things change so fast, that sometimes you catch yourself being nostalgic for the present. For this project, I was especially inspired by the Adidas shops in old Dubai which might not even be selling the real thing. I'm grateful to Adidas to be willing to share such an important story.

How long is it going to be on display at the store?

The City Behind My Door is a permanent installation for the regional Adidas Originals flagship store. The Dubai Mall is one of the most visited places on the planet, so it's very possible that this installation – whether people recognise it as art or not – may well become the most-seen thing I'll ever make.

The World Was My Garden, Medjoul date palm, metal chain link, hooks. (Abu Dhabi Art 2022)
Courtesy of the artist

Where else can we view your works now or in the near future?

I am currently in graduate school at MIT, so I'm holding off on showing work and focusing more on just thinking and making. Earlier this summer, I presented film and installation at the Venice Biennale and I have some photo work up now at Makers' Yard for the Frome Photo Festival. I am also currently in a group show at Aicon Contemporary in New York City. I'm slow-working on some gallery shows in the US and UAE for late 2023 but that's so long from now.

Head down to Dubai Mall to check out the new Adidas Originals flagship. Follow Christopher Joshua Benton on Instagram.

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