VOX POPULI

Meet Christopher Joshua Benton: the artist who is crossing physical and emotional barriers to give a voice to the UAE's working class

words **DEVINDER BAINS**

previous page, **CHRISTOPHER JOSHUA BENTON.** *LLC FZ CO.* 2018. Installation view. Courtesy of Fikra Graphic Design Biennial
below, **CHRISTOPHER JOSHUA BENTON.** Photo by Ron John
facing page, **CHRISTOPHER JOSHUA BENTON.** *The People Who Tint Nissan Patrols.* 2018. Disused wheel barrow from a construction site. Photo by Walter Willems

Remember that kid in school: the popular one who cracked the funniest jokes, the one that had the coolest clothes, loved messing around in class but still got the top marks at the end of every semester? I have a feeling that Abu Dhabi artist Christopher Joshua Benton might have been that kid. On paper, he's a literature and journalism graduate who is an alumnus of both University of Georgia and the prestigious Keble College at University of Oxford, he's a former commercial creative director for Huawei, an artist in residence with the Abu Dhabi Cultural Foundation and the first American to receive a scholarship from the Salama Bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation (SEAF) in Abu Dhabi.

In real life (which, of course, means Zoom) he's a funny, cheeky student with an infectious laugh, someone who talks with as much ease, passion and pride about his single-parent upbringing, as he does about his outlandish, Satwa-tailored Burning Man outfits.

Christopher, who describes his work as "interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary" works across sculpture, photography, textile and film to produce and 'find' thought-provoking pieces that reflect the working class of the UAE. When I call, he's sat in an apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a space that's home to not much more than a few suitcases, an airbed, a desk and the chair the artist is sat on. He landed in the US from Abu Dhabi just a few days before our chat, enrolling in a two-year MS in Art, Culture and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, courtesy of the SEAF scholarship.

"The goal for SEAF with this Emerging Artists programme is to build a sustainable art ecosystem in the UAE," he explains. "Part of that involves finding people like me to go abroad and come back and teach artists who can't travel abroad to elite universities for one reason or another."

Christopher, who originally grew up in Norfolk, Virginia before moving to New York to work as a stylist and music writer, first arrived in Abu Dhabi around ten years ago to visit his mother Candace, who had moved to the emirate a few months earlier to work as an English teacher. "I came to visit her and I fell in love with the lifestyle," remembers Christopher. "She kind of had this Machiavellian idea that I would visit her and I would stay, and it's kind of what happened." The vacation turned into a three-month stay, which included some freelance work with an advertising start-up, which would then offer Christopher a full-time role a year after he'd returned to New York.

above, **CHRISTOPHER JOSHUA BENTON.** *Bedspace or Bad Space?* 2019

above, **CHRISTOPHER JOSHUA BENTON.** *If I Could Buy Every Single Home Here, I Would Make For All Nationalities.* 2019


ROAD
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So at the age of 24, he packed his bags and moved to the UAE to become a copywriter, and by the age of 30, Christopher was creative director at a Chinese telecommunications company, producing full-scale advertising campaigns. But something was missing. "I didn't love the job, it felt too corporate for me," he recalls. "But of course, I needed the money, so I started making art in my spare time. It gave me an avenue to create something altogether different and I was doing it to add prestige to my career."

Christopher's early artwork centred around the expat workers from the South Asian, Filipino and African communities, and still largely does today, telling the stories of the working class in innovative ways that include making videos that observe their cultural habits with found objects from the areas they live in. Interest quickly grew from fellow artists and the establishment alike, and Christopher was invited to exhibit as part of group exhibitions at The Cave and Satellite Galleries in Dubai, SIKKA Art Fair, the Fikra Graphic Design Biennial in Sharjah and even at art spaces in Tokyo, Japan. Commissions followed from Warehouse421 in Abu Dhabi, Jameel Arts Centre in Dubai, Dubai Design Week and most recently, Abu Dhabi Art. He was accepted on the Emerging Artist Fellowship from SEAF in 2019, gaining technical and artistic training and culminating in the course in Massachusetts.

"I just kept getting really positive feedback," says Christopher. "Then I did this show last December which was really successful and got a lot of press and I started thinking about making a full-time thing of being an artist. There were a lot of really positive signals, and probably no negative ones."

Christopher finally decided to leave the corporate world behind at the start of this year when he received a residency with the Cultural Foundation in Abu Dhabi.

"It was an easy decision once I got the grant and somewhere to stay for six months, I didn't have to think any more about: how much is enough money to leave this job that I don't really like?" laughs Christopher, who took to work as a full-time artist with ease. "It was great being in a residency every day. I was able to really focus on my practice," he explains. "And I guess the big switch was, and this sounds silly but, when people ask you what you do, which is a normal daily question, well the only answer I had was artist. I was no longer a creative director who sometimes makes art on the side, or a hobby artist or a passion artist or maybe a vanity artist, but I was actually for sure doing it. A full-time artist."

Christopher might be away from the UAE at the moment, but as our conversation progressed it was clear that the UAE is where he feels most at home, where he's part of a wealth of subcultures and local communities. He fondly recalls playing cricket with South Asian construction workers and then cooking giant pots of dhal with them in their bedsits, about making bean pies and hosting dinners to listen to the stories of African-American Muslims and laughs about heading to "Little Manila" in Dubai's Satwa to sing karaoke with the locals. His work centres around these communities, and he's often scavenging through the buildings of businesses that have closed down, scaling up towers marked for demolition in the non-tourist areas of the emirates, searching for objects that tell the personal stories and testimonies of voices rarely heard.

How to Be at Rest is a collection of "bricolage chairs" that Christopher found in the industrial, working-class neighbourhoods of Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah. The chairs, most of which probably started life in offices and shops, had been modified by South Asian and African expats to make them more comfortable and more decorative. Each unique seat tells the story of the designer through the materials and adornment he or she had at hand in their day-to-day life, be that foam, road signs, decorative cushions or intricate beading. The chairs took two years to collect and were then photographed against clashing geometric backdrops and shown at a number of exhibitions, including the one last December which was the final push to become a full-time artist.

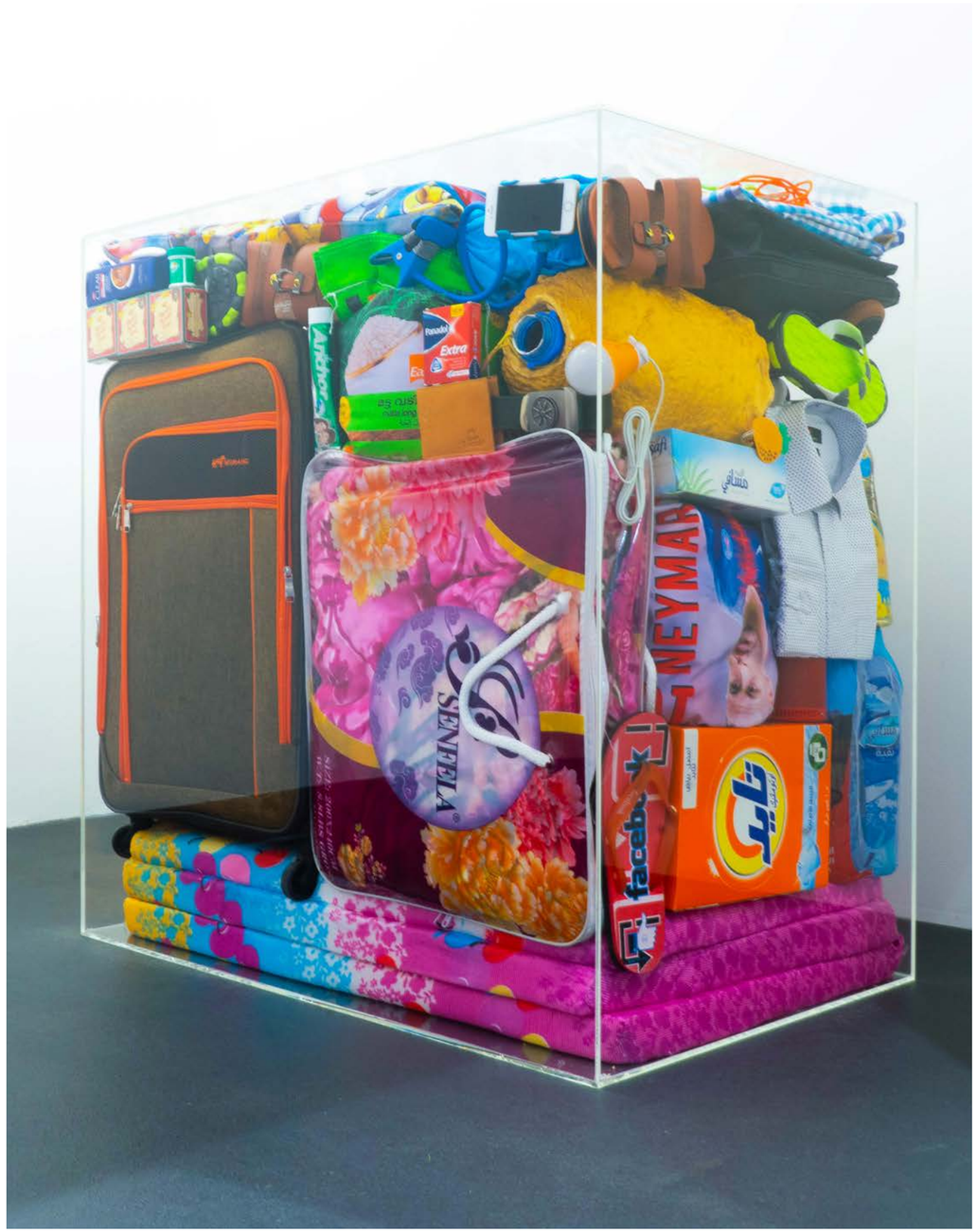
"The collection asks: 'how do these people who have little means deal with the economic pressures, the pressures of visibility and the pressures of lack of space through the materials that they have around them?'" explains Christopher. "It's a story of creating wildly, sometimes ambitious, but definitely innovative pieces of culture, or in this case, chairs."

His experimental documentary piece *Say No To Bachelors Thronging Residential Neighbourhoods* is another example of how Christopher showcases the intricacies of a community. The 12-minute reel combines cinéma vérité-style filming, architectural renders, TikTok videos, karaoke, and a week's worth of handheld camera footage taken by Chirag, an Indian master tailor at the heart of the community. The film observes and celebrates the people, places and bedspaces of Satwa in Dubai, giving a face and life to the groups of South Asian men that gather in groups in the area.

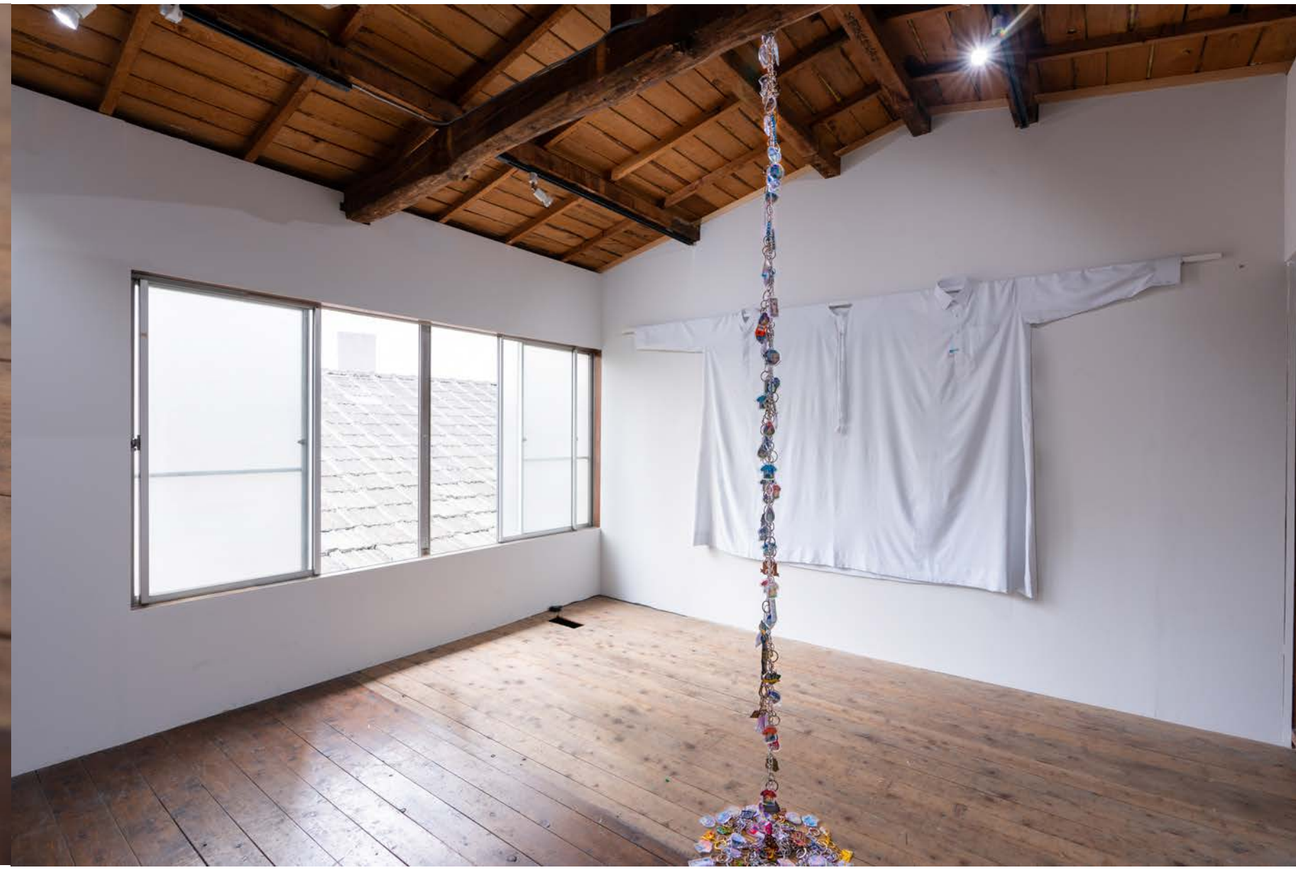
A follow-up to the documentary is his piece *Chirag's Things*, inspired by a part of the film that shows 18 men living in a two-bedroom space. The piece is in its basic form, a 1m x 1m x 1m box that contains everyday items needed to survive, but what it depicts is the tiny space each one of these men has to live in accordance with the United Nations liveable-housing formula, which is calculated by dividing the bedroom size per square metre by the number of people in a room.

Christopher doesn't point the finger at anyone, but what becomes apparent about his work is that often his ability to

previous page, **CHRISTOPHER JOSHUA BENTON.** *How To Be At Rest.* 2020
below, **CHRISTOPHER JOSHUA BENTON.** *Chirag's Things.* 2019. Mixed media. 100x100x100cm
next page, **CHRISTOPHER JOSHUA BENTON.** *Incendiary Traces.* 2021. Discarded majlis swatches.100x100cm.
Courtesy of the Department of Culture and Tourism



above, **CHRISTOPHER JOSHUA BENTON.** The Opportunity Pavilion (detail). 2021. Tourist key charms, binder hooks and metal chain. Photo by Naoki Takehisa



above, **CHRISTOPHER JOSHUA BENTON.** Installation view of *East-East Vol.4: The Curio Shop* exhibition in Tokyo. 2021, featuring artworks (from back to front) *GCC Best Friends Kandura.* 2018. Japanese kandora fabric; The Opportunity Pavilion. 2021. Tourist key charms, binder hooks and metal chain. Photo by Naoki Takehisa

above, **CHRISTOPHER JOSHUA BENTON.** The Opportunity Pavilion, from the *Worked (So and So and On and On and So On and So On)* exhibition at Art Space in Al Ain. 2021. Photo by Walter Willems

find and show is enough to make a political statement. The audience is left to make their own decisions about what these objects and videos represent about the lives of the working class. Has he mastered the art of staying neutral while depicting controversial subjects?

"It definitely isn't easy, and I'm always trying to figure out how to do it in a way that's subversive but not gratuitously bad-mouthing a place," he admits. "I think the first thing is, I'm incredibly grateful to the Emirates for my mother's career and her happiness and my career, so I think I'm already starting from a place of appreciation. The work I do starts with the people, so emotion is central to the lens that I'm focalising. I think that provides a very human lens where you are aware of the broader socio-economic and cultural context but you also have this person, that allows you to have that criticality, but it's not necessarily about the place or about the person."

He also attributes the confidence in his work to Abu Dhabi itself. "Abu Dhabi is flooded with people who have crazy levels of education. The Emiratis who are in charge of the various levers of cultural institutions have completed graduate studies in top programmes all around the world, so they have an understanding of where artists are coming from," he explains. "Also, as a former creative director, I'm used to an approval process. There's this idea that artists have to have everything exactly how they want it but I know when to fight for something and I also know when to think about the bigger picture. Sometimes completeness doesn't come from complete criticality, sometimes a subversive stance is even better because more people are open to it. It's not just the government level you have to think about, it's the audience too, and the audience is super protective of their country, as they should be."

Christopher rarely looks beyond the UAE for inspiration but for his work *Who Gets Paid For Digital Labour?* he studied another narrative close to his heart: the exploitation of Black people and Black culture. The digital commission looks at the origin of some of the most famous memes in circulation and traces them back to 'Black pain' – often Black people on news reports talking about horrific events such as building fires and attacks. He studies how these memes have gone on to be monetised but not to the benefit of the person who said the original words. The end piece is a dual video that simultaneously shows the original content alongside the memes, also showing them printed on T-shirts and turned into a Fortnite dance.

"My first loyalty is to the audience and then my second is the subject, or maybe simultaneously those two, and because I make work for the audience in the Emirates, I'm talking about people living in the country, so I saw this as an opportunity to talk about something that was maybe a little bit more about my background," explains Christopher. "It was things that I immediately could relate to and didn't necessarily have to research a lot, and that was pretty exciting. My work is about working-class people and how they fight neoliberal and corporate forces through creating culture. This work is about how it is commodified, while intersecting with ideas of identity, and how people of colour create spaces online, how they express themselves and how does that expression get filtered through the greater cultural apparatus and become a trend, viral content and eventually even clothing."

Does he feel like his work ever comes close to exploiting its subjects, with pieces like *Chirag's Things* and *Say No To Bachelors Thronging Residential Neighbourhoods*, ultimately using the narratives of others for his own gain?

"There's always the question of who tells the story? What is their angle? Who has agency? Who has control in the ethics of telling someone else's story? This is important. And there's 100 per cent a level of exploitation that I'm doing, just by virtue of telling someone else's story," Christopher admits. "They're not getting compensated as much as I am, even though I always pay my collaborators and attribute the work to them. There's always that imbalance and I think it is intrinsic to basically working in a capitalist field. I'm always navigating how I can do this in a way where I feel ethical."

Christopher's current exhibition *Worked (So and So and On and On and So On and So On)* is again an example of paid collaboration with artisans and locals across the UAE on found pieces that have been customised and are being shown in the very public setting of Al Jimi Mall in Al Ain.

"Over the years, I've developed relationships with all sorts of artisans like master tailors, carpenters, locksmiths, upholsterers and glass cutters – these people, their skills and their creativity give life to each piece," he explains. "With some of the works, the craftsman has a tight brief, and with others the maker has complete creative control." He goes on to talk about the materials. "What things are made of is really important in this show and found objects are the centrepiece. Found materials always come with their own rich histories, so I tried to really let those narratives do all of the talking," he says. "The idea of gentrification hangs over these works, as most of them tell the story of places that no longer exist. For example, most of the fabrics are majlis swatches that I found inside a closed-down carpet shop in Mina Zayed. Another sculpture uses a display-door handle excavated out of a building that had been knocked down."

The exhibition will run until the end of October, but Christopher is already busy working on new commissions alongside his studies. He has been chosen as one of three UAE-based artists for Abu Dhabi Art's Beyond: Emerging Artists programme. He's a little hush about exactly what we can expect, but it will no doubt be equal measures emotional, thought-provoking and a nod to the Abu Dhabi communities he so admires. ■

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