Cultural Capitals in Conversation: Avid Learning Champions Creativity Between Mumbai and Dubai at Art Dubai 2025

In a world where cultural narratives are increasingly global, Mumbai and Dubai stand as vibrant crossroads—connected not just by history and migration but by a shared commitment to creativity, innovation, and dialogue.

For over a decade, Avid Learning has shared a deep and evolving relationship with Dubai and the United Arab Emirates, marked by a shared belief in the transformative power of culture and creativity. This collaboration began in 2012 with a partnership at **Art Dubai** and has since flourished into a dynamic cross-cultural dialogue. From the earliest days of engagement, Dubai's position as a global epicenter for artistic innovation made it a natural partner in Avid Learning's mission to curate meaningful, multidisciplinary conversations that connect people, ideas, and places.

Over the years, this alliance has taken many significant forms, from supporting **The Junction,** Dubai's only black box theatre, as knowledge partners at the **Quoz Arts Fest 2025 (**Alserkal Avenue**)** to expanding the global reach of the Sustainability Now series with two thought-provoking programs at **COP28 UAE**, held at Expo City, Dubai. Avid Learning also continued its partnership with **Dubai Opera** with **Umrao Jaan Ada: The Musical**—a captivating adaptation of Mirza Hadi Ruswa's classic novel. More recently, Avid Learning brought Indian art and its global resonance to the forefront at the **Indiaspora Forum For Good 2025** through a stirring panel discussion that explored art's role in shaping identity, belonging, and global citizenship.

These milestones culminated in the official launch of **Avid Learning Middle East** in 2024—an initiative that cements our long-standing creative exchange with the UAE into a dedicated platform for cultural programming across the region. It will continue to strengthen ties between India and the UAE while enabling new artistic encounters.

As a continuation of this rich legacy, Avid Learning is proud to present **Cultural Gateways: Mumbai & Dubai as Creative Capitals** at **Art Dubai 2025.** This timely panel discussion will explore how Mumbai and Dubai are redefining the global narrative of South Asian and Middle Eastern art. Bound by diasporic connections, parallel trajectories of urban transformation, and a shared appetite for innovation, these cities are hubs where tradition and modernity intersect to create fertile ground for artistic experimentation and cultural enterprise.

This panel will bring together influential voices from India and the UAE, including artists, curators, and cultural leaders including *Contemporary Multimedia Artist* **Owais Husain**, *Creative Director, Nilaya Anthology* **Pavitra Rajaram**, *Director, Alserkal Arts Foundation* **Nada Raza,** and F*ounder & Chairperson, Avid Learning* **Mrs. Madhu Ruia** They will explore how the exchange between these cities fuels creative ecosystems, economic opportunities, and artistic innovation. The discussion will be moderated by *SVP, Essar Group, CEO, Avid Learning and Curator, Royal Opera House, Mumbai* **Asad Lalljee.**

When: Thursday, 17th April 2025 | 6:00 pm - 7:00 pm (GST)
Where: Art Dubai, Auditorium, Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai, UAE

About Avid Learning Middle East
Avid Learning Middle East is an extension of Avid Learning's decade-long creative collaboration with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a global hub for cultural exchange and innovation. Since its first partnership with Art Dubai in 2012, Avid Learning has curated a vibrant exchange of ideas by presenting multidisciplinary programs that celebrate heritage, encourage dialogue, and empower communities. Officially launched in 2024, Avid Learning Middle East curates panel discussions, skill-building workshops,

performances, and immersive experiences at leading cultural forums, including COP28, Dubai Opera, Quoz Arts Fest, the Sikka Art & Design Festival, and Indiaspora Forum For Good 2025 to name a few. By bridging artistic traditions with contemporary discourse, we remain committed to shaping meaningful conversations and inspiring creative engagement across the region.

About Avid Learning:
Avid Learning is Essar's cultural philanthropy arm and India's leading arts and cultural programming platform. Founded in 2009, under the esteemed leadership of Mrs. Madhu Ruia as Founder & Chairperson, Avid Learning has presented more than 1800 multiverse and hybrid programs, domestically and internationally. Together with its online platform – AVID Online launched in 2020 – Avid Learning has reached more than 2 million interested learners, globally.
Our thoughtfully curated and diverse events embrace the spirit of collaboration to bring together the best of Indian and international writers, artists, intellectuals, cultural experts, policymakers, and industry leaders across Visual Art, Literature, Culture and Heritage, Education, Design & Technology and the Performing Arts through engaging and dynamic formats like panel discussions, workshops & master classes, roundtables, lecture demonstrations, festival platforms, symposiums & conferences, multidisciplinary performances, and walkthroughs. We have also made our mark internationally, with events and collaborations in Dubai and New York. We regularly collaborate and partner with institutions, organizations, and initiatives like the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), (CSMVS) Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), one of the apex bodies that impact cultural policy, and the creative sector as a whole. We have been at the helm of programming at the Royal Opera House, Mumbai India's only surviving Opera House since its reopening in 2016. We believe in the importance of arts for social change and we regularly offer our support and platforms for Social Advocacy. In April 2020, we launched AVID Online, an online further learning campaign on our social media platforms for our followers to engage with a range of varied topics across the breadth of the arts. Our eclectic faculty of experts, thought leaders, practitioners, and innovators continue to share their learnings, expertise, and knowledge on our social media platforms with tailored content featured weekly for AVID's online community and beyond. In collaboration with long-term and new partners, we have since dimensionalized the campaign by re-introducing our existing offline formats and IPs and enhancing them for digital engagement. We have taken our content live with engaging masterclasses and virtua**l** panel discussions and also built robust tangential campaigns and series in support of worthy causes and highlighting topical issues.

AVID continues to give truth to its belief that **#LearningNeverStops!**
Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/avidlearning/
YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLYt7Q44R5xkd4dRefvV3nFloOHEePgLAZ
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/avidlearning/
LinkdIn : @avidlearning.

About Speakers:

Owais Husain's work explores identity, iconography, and urban mythology and its evolution from one generation to the next, illustrating his relationship with and abstraction of a more traditional Indian aesthetic. Whimsical references can be seen in his series To Speak is to Disappear, 2009, a set of delicate ink drawings on handmade Khadi paper of figures trying to communicate and connect to each other to no avail. In the painting, Sympathy vs. Empathy, 2014, a young boy and a Bengal tiger confront each other face to face, the boy appropriates the identity of the tiger with a mask while the tiger's own face is hidden from the viewer. More complex and abstract are Husain's Heart of Silence, 2015, a multi-media installation comprised of video, large suspended paper houses, light and reflection, and My Body, A Fleet of Ships, 2014, in which acrylic panels densely layered with photographic images and paintings surround fragments of terracotta figures. Both installations also incorporate poetry into the mixture of visual elements. Using

film, photography, painting, sculpture, installation and poetry - in various combinations or on their own - Husain creates visually textured works that both reference his roots in a traditional Indian figurative style and embody his constant pursuit to evolve and contemporize that iconography.

Instagram : @owaisstudio
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Pavitra Rajaram: Creative Director at Nilaya Anthology

Few understand the workings of craftsmanship better than Pavitra Rajaram, who has been immersed in the Indian crafts space for almost three decades now. As the design director of Nilaya Anthology, Rajaram knows that beauty is never static and weaves itself from the threads of human connection across time. She brings to bear this knowledge to curate and create a world-class collection of everything a storied home might ever need—from furnishings, to collectible craft, to antiques, and modern and contemporary design. Rajaram is emphatic that India has always been, and continues to be, both a producer and a consumer of world-class design, and it is for such evolved aesthetes that she brings together a collection of vibrant narratives, electric with the possibility of reinterpretation and reinvention.

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Nada Raza is a curator and researcher with a particular interest in South and West Asia and Indian Ocean trade histories. She is currently the director of Alserkal Arts Foundation, where she oversees a residency programme, research grants, public programmes and public art projects with a commitment to interregional dialogue and artistic exchange. Having begun curating in Dubai in 2005, Nada moved to London and worked at Green Cardamom, Iniva and Tate, where she brought South Asian art into the collection and displays, co-curating Bhupen Khakhar in 2016. She returned to the UAE in 2018 to set up the Ishara Art Foundation. Nada holds an MA from the Chelsea College of Art and Design and is a doctoral candidate at the Courtauld Institute of Art.

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Mrs Madhu Ruia (Opening and Closing Remarks)

Wife of Mr. Ravi Ruia, the Vice Chairman of the Essar Group, **Mrs. Madhu Ruia** has always believed in continuous learning programs. She founded Avid Learning in 2009 as a platform that creates opportunities for curious lifelong learners to cross their existing boundaries and interact with experienced masters in arts, culture, and new-age topics like NFTs and cryptocurrency.

Her interest in Hindu religious thought led her to complete online and offline courses at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. She was subsequently invited to join their board and now holds an honorary position at the prestigious institution. As a board member of The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (OCHS)—an academy dedicated to the study of Hindu cultures, societies, philosophies, religions, and languages—she continues to support its mission of academic excellence. A firm believer in lifelong learning, she pursued several courses at the New School in New York City, culminating in the establishment of the Avid Learning platform.

An accomplished sitar exponent, she showcased her musical talent on the program titled *Ubharte Swar* on Lucknow TV. Additionally, she is a self-taught artist and sculptor, winning an award from the Lalit Kala Academy.

Mrs. Madhu Ruia is also a founding member of the Sahachari Foundation and Sahachari Foundation Events, which organize cultural initiatives and the prestigious Design One exhibitions in Mumbai and Delhi. Held 4-5 times a year, these events empower emerging talent and raise funds for deserving NGOs, while providing a platform for creative designers to connect with consumers in a growing market.

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Asad Lalljee (Moderator)

Asad Lalljee is SVP, Essar Group, CEO of Avid Learning, a public programming initiative and creative platform under the Essar Group, and Curator, Royal Opera House, Mumbai. Asad brings several years of advertising, publishing, marketing, and business development experience, both in international and domestic markets. Prior to relocating to India, Asad worked for 14 years as one of the ‘Mad Men’ advertising executives on New York's Madison Avenue. He was with McCann-Erickson, and earlier with Hill Holiday, a subsidiary of advertising giant IPG.

Under Asad’s leadership, Avid Learning has distinguished itself with a wide variety of arts and cultural programming and is currently India’s leading cultural hub. AVID has grown its curatorial practice by leveraging international cultural collaborations through the diplomatic core and partnering with the existing ecosystem by creating opportunities at some of the country’s largest cultural platforms including Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF), The Serendipity Arts Festival and The Kala Ghoda Arts Festival. In 2022, Asad was co-opted as a member of the Kala Ghoda Association’s Executive Committee. He has been appointed as a member of the advisory board of the Mumbai Urban Art Festival for the year 2022-2023.

In 2016, Asad was appointed curator of the newly restored Royal Opera House, Mumbai for which he has successfully designed an avant-garde series of programs. With Asad’s guidance, the Royal Opera House, Mumbai has re-established itself as a performance space of international quality, a cultural venue par excellence, and a prime example of restored and renewed city heritage.

In 2018, Asad was inducted into the prestigious FICCI Art and Culture Committee as a distinguished member. FICCI is the largest and oldest apex business organization in Indian business with a glorious history of nine decades. Asad has co-convened foray conferences for FICCI’s Smart Cities, Art Cities IP in Mumbai, and Bengaluru.

In April 2020, he launched AVID ONLINE as a response to the pandemic and successfully presented 240 programs by March 2021. His curatorial choices demonstrate his passion for technology and new media. After introducing the Mumbai audience to the world of NFTs, Asad took Avid Learning to New York, where he kicked off Engendered, New York's three-week-long exhibition by moderating a panel discussion on 'State of the Contemporary: NFTs and the Global South.' It was followed by moderating the opening session of Jaipur Literature Festival's, New York edition: 'Digital Entrepreneurship, Innovation, and the Cyber Future.' Asad's creative strategy has led to AVID developing a robust social media presence transforming it into an integral channel for learning

Asad holds a B.A. in Economics from St. Xavier's College (Mumbai) and an M.A. in Global Marketing Communications from Emerson College (Boston).

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