

Lifestyle



In this photograph visitors stand near a colour mixing plate approved by US forces for Ahmed Rabbani, a Pakistani recently freed from Guantanamo Bay prison, during an exhibition of his work, in Karachi. — AFP photos



Visitors look at the paintings made by Ahmed Rabbani.



Ahmed Rabbani, a Pakistani recently freed from Guantanamo Bay prison, gestures to a painting while speaking to AFP during an exhibition of his work, in Karachi.

FREEDOM TO PAINT: PAKISTANI GITMO PRISONER FINDS RELEASE IN ART

When Ahmed Rabbani ran out of paint to satisfy his artistic yearnings during 20 years of incarceration at Guantanamo Bay, he turned to whatever came to hand -- dirt, coffee grinds and even spices such as turmeric from the prison canteen.

“Through painting, I would feel myself outside Guantanamo,” the was a notorious militant known as Hassan Ghul, but Rabbani always insisted it was a case of mistaken identity. He was also accused of recruiting his older brother Muhammed into extremist circles. Both were never charged or faced trial during two decades in detention, and they were only released in February this year.

-- only to be released back to Pakistan for ‘cooperating’. “While Ghul went back to his terrorist ways and was killed in a drone strike in 2012, Ahmed got a one-way trip to Guantanamo Bay.”

Drawing from coffee, turmeric
Born in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, where his parents worked, Rabbani moved back to Karachi as a teen and was a taxi driver at the time of his detention. Fluent in Arabic, he specialised in guiding visitors from the Middle East -- a factor which contributed to him being misidentified. While imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay, painting became an obsession for Rabbani, although years spent on hunger strike meant he was often too frail to even hold a brush.

If he ran out of materials, he would improvise. “I would find and turn a piece of discarded or torn clothes into canvas,” he said. “Sometimes I drew from coffee, sometimes from turmeric.” In “The Unforgotten Moon: Liberating Art from Guantanamo Bay”, around two dozen pieces Rabbani was allowed to take from prison are on display -- alongside works by local artists who have “re-imagined” paintings that were confiscated.

“He is someone who has lost so much of his life, so to produce the images of this quality is a miracle... it’s remarkable,” said Natasha Malik, curator and organiser of the exhibition. “Displayed alongside Ahmed’s uncensored artwork, the artists amplify his



Ahmed Rabbani (left), a Pakistani recently freed from Guantanamo Bay prison, stands along with his lawyer Clive Stafford Smith during an exhibition of his work, in Karachi.



A visitor looks at a painting made by Ahmed Rabbani.



Ahmed Rabbani (center), a Pakistani recently freed from Guantanamo Bay prison, addresses the media during an exhibition of his work, in Karachi.

53-year-old Pakistani said this week at an exhibition of his work in the port city of Karachi. “Painting was everything for me there.” Rabbani was detained by Pakistan authorities in September 2002 and handed over to the US Central Intelligence Agency for a bounty of \$5,000. He was “sold” on the basis he

“The US had paid good money and did not want to have been taken for a ride,” Rabbani’s lawyer, Clive Stafford Smith, wrote in the exhibition catalogue. “Something neither he nor I knew until the US Senate published its Rendition Report in 2014 was that Ghul was captured and brought to the same prison

protest and creative expression, by recreating the work that the public was never meant to see.” Sporting a salt-and-pepper beard and wearing a traditional shalwar kameez and waistcoat, Rabbani was the centre of attention at the exhibition opening.

With a smile and twinkle in his eye, he outlined grand plans for the years ahead. First up is the publication of a cookery book -- he rekindled a passion for the kitchen while at Guantanamo.

“It will have his memoirs in it -- but in the setting of a cookbook,” Stafford Smith told AFP. Then he wants to open a restaurant based on recipes he learnt while in prison -- hopefully using funds

raised from sales of his art. Depicting his hopes and despair, his artwork is astonishingly accomplished for someone who did just a smattering of art at school.

Some pieces are obvious expressions of yearnings for freedom -- nature seen through narrow openings, birds flying and endless oceans. Another shows a cage containing bright orange fish -- the colour of overalls Guantanamo prisoners were forced to wear. “I spent many years in orange,” he said. “I never accepted their laws. I would always break their laws.” — AFP



Writers on the picket line on the fourth day of the strike by the Writers Guild of America march past Netflix in Hollywood, California — AFP photos



Writer Eric Heisserer holds his sign on the picket line on the fourth day of the strike by the Writers Guild of America in front of Netflix in Hollywood, California.

Hollywood strikes inflamed by claim AI could do writers’ jobs

The Hollywood writers’ strike broke out this week over pay, but the refusal of studios like Netflix and Disney to rule out artificial intelligence replacing human scribes in the future has only fueled anger and fear on the picket lines.

With their rapidly advancing ability to eerily mimic human conversation, AI programs like ChatGPT have spooked many industries recently. The White House this week summoned Big Tech to discuss the potential risks.

As part of the weeks-long talks with studios and streamers that collapsed Monday, the Writers Guild of America asked for binding agreements to regulate the use of AI.

Under the proposals, nothing written by AI can be considered “literary” or “source” material -- industry terms that decide who gets royalties -- and scripts written by WGA members cannot “be used to train AI.” But according to the WGA, studios “rejected our proposal,” and countered with an offer merely to meet once a year to “discuss advancements in technology.”

“It’s nice for them to offer to have a

meeting about how they’re exploiting it against us!” joked WGA negotiating committee member Eric Heisserer, who wrote Netflix hit film “Bird Box.”

“Art cannot be created by a machine. You lose the heart and soul of the story... I mean, the first word is ‘artificial,’” he told AFP on the picket line outside the streaming giant’s Hollywood HQ Friday. While writers already know this, the danger is that “we have to watch tech companies destroy the business in an attempt to find out for themselves,” he said.

‘Not just scripts’

While few television and film writers who spoke to AFP on the picket lines believe their work could be done by computers, the apparent conviction of studios and streamers that it can has been an extra slap in the face.



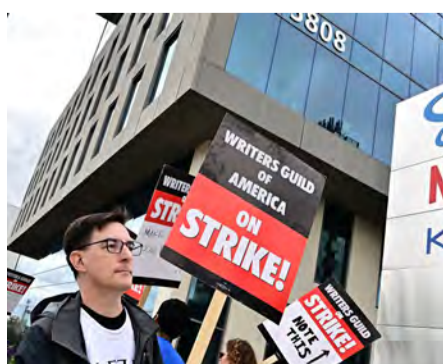
Writer Ilana Pena holds her sign on the picket line on the fourth day of the strike by the Writers Guild of America in front of Netflix in Hollywood, California

They fear that belt-tightening executives in Hollywood, where Silicon Valley companies have upended many traditional practices such as long-term contracts for writers, may seek to cut costs further by getting computers to write their next hit shows. Comments by top Hollywood executives at this week’s Milken Institute Global Conference in Beverly Hills will have done nothing to quell writers’ concerns.

“In the next three years, you’re going to see a movie that was written by AI made... a good one,” said movie producer Todd Lieberman.

“Not just scripts. Editing, all of it... storyboarding a movie, anything,” added Fox entertainment CEO Rob Wade.

“AI in the future, maybe not next year or the year after, but if we’re talking 10 years? AI is going to be able to do absolutely all of these things.”



Writer Eric Heisserer holds his sign on the picket line on the fourth day of the strike by the Writers Guild of America in front of Netflix in Hollywood.

The studios’ own account of the breakdown in WGA talks offered a more nuanced take. In a briefing note shared with AFP, they said writers do not in fact want to outlaw AI, and appear happy to use it “as part of their creative process” -- so long as it does not affect their pay. That scenario “requires a lot more discussion, which we’ve committed to doing,” the studios said.

‘Guardrails’

For Leila Cohan, a 39-year-old writer on Netflix smash hit “Bridgerton,” the only usefulness of AI for writers is limited to “busy work” such as coming up with names for characters. But she predicted that studios “could start making incredibly bad first drafts with AI and then hiring writers to do a rewrite.”

“I think that’s certainly a very scary possibility... it’s very smart that we’re addressing this now,” she said.

Indeed, the last Hollywood strike in 2007-08 won writers the right to be paid for online viewing of their shows or films -- highly prescient, at a time when streaming was in its infancy. Back then, Netflix had barely started online viewing, and the likes of Disney+ and Apple TV+ were more than a decade away.

Even for sci-fi writer Ben Ripley, who believes there is no role whatsoever for AI in writing, introducing legislation now “to put guardrails up” is “very necessary.” Writers “have to be original,” he said. “Artificial intelligence is the antithesis of originality.” — AFP

US director Damien Chazelle to head Venice Film Festival

US director Damien Chazelle, best known for the Oscar-winning “La La Land”, will lead the jury of the upcoming Venice Film Festival, organisers announced Friday. The 80th edition of the prestigious festival will take place from August 30 through September 9 on the swanky, beach-lined Lido island.

“For ten days each year this city of the arts, of Tintoretto and Titian and Veronese, becomes a city of cinema, and I am humbled and delighted to be invited to lead this year’s jury,” said Chazelle, 38, whose most recent film is “Babylon”. Chazelle’s musical about making it in Hollywood, “La La Land,” opened the Venice festival in 2016, and went on to win six Academy Awards, including for its director, the youngest ever to win the prize.



US director Damien Chazelle

Heading the jury for Venice’s parallel competition, Orizzonti, will be Italy’s Jonas Carpignano, director of a trilogy (“Mediterranea”, “A Ciambra”, “A Chiara”) based in the Calabrian port city of Gioia Tauro.

Last year, the festival’s top Golden Lion prize went to US director Laura Poitras for “All the Beauty and the Bloodshed.” The documentary traced the campaign by photographer and activist Nan Goldin to hold the rich Sackler family accountable for the US opioid crisis. US actress Julianne Moore headed last year’s jury, with Spanish director Isabel Coixet at the helm of Orizzonti. — AFP