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"Sharjah Biennial 10: Plot For A Biennial," Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

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Now, especially, the point seems so obvious that it's hardly worth stating. Still, in an era of political doublespeak and misread texts secular and divine, the *Sharjah Biennial 10: Plot for a Biennial*, curated by Suzanne Cotter, Rasha Salti, and Haig Aivazian, confirms that biennials and the sites that stage them *must* be historically engaged and spatially meaningful.



In both texture (an ordered clamor: gritty, raucous, exuberant) and tenor (oracular, statesmanlike), this exhibition represents the aesthetic equivalent of Cairo's Tahrir Square. Though each piece created by more than 80 artists from 36 countries may be based on each individual artist's creative personality and life experience, their convention in a particular place - Sharjah, cited by UNESCO in 1998 as the Arab world's cultural capital - at this particular time - who could have predicted that, the week prior, the United Arab Emirates, along with Saudi Arabia, would send troops to Bahrain? - shows that art and its infrastructure must do what politicians and statesmen can not: state an urgent truth in a language that everyone can understand.

Though the arrayed voices range from the strident to the humorous to the transcendent, it's how these voices are organized that confers significance to the exhibition. Despite the sheer quantity of artists and work, this Biennial feels like a series of one-person exhibitions, screenings, and concerts that, taken together, sound more like an interdenominational Kyrie of *let the people speak*.

Girded by a curatorial concept based on themes of treason, trade, and translation, each artist becomes a plot-maker, which gives the enterprise both cinematic and conspiratorial undertones. Housed in the Sharjah Art Museum proper or distributed among outlying buildings and public - some historic - spaces, including several created for the event, the exhibition includes visual art, film, choreography, music, and video, featuring over 65 Biennial-commissioned pieces.

Each piece, whether it's housed in the Arts Area or the Heritage Area, whether it's part of the art or the cinema program, whether it's that magnificent three-evening *Score for a Biennial*, shows a

response of artists to a world in which language belies purpose, in which disjunctions exist between the content, form, and purpose of texts, be they sacred and secular, political or militaristic, personal or societal.

Showing yet again that painting, drawing, etching, photography, sculpture, mixed media, installation, and site-specific work are mightier than the sword, this exhibition confers upon art the status of a pliable, articulate, and *universal* language. *And what better time than now?* The best pieces are those that expose this chicanery of empty words. Overall the ensemble effort proposes that *actions* (mark-making, as well as protests, denunciations, and documentation) are more important than *words*, that the collective efforts of individual artists can rise above sectarian, tit-for-tat violence and unrest and attract art world, if not world attention, if only but for the duration of eight weeks.

The Curators situate this Biennial on contrasting atmospheres in which things appear to be one thing but prove to be something else. It operates on a dynamic between the traditional, timeless, and sacred versus the engaged and called-upon-to-act. The tranquil settings belie the various operations intrinsic to each work.

These atmospheres can be played out in such a piece as Imran Qureshi's *Blessings upon the Land of My Love*. Though it looks at first like assassination blood splattered in a courtyard (whose doorways, windows, and arches resemble coffins and grave pits), upon closer examination it describes tendrils of roseate flowers.



Imran Qureshi, *Blessings Upon the Land of my Love* 2011 | Site-specific installation, emulsion and acrylic on brick

Or a piece like Hrair Sarkissian's *Execution Squares*, images shot at dawn of Aleppo, Lattakia, and Damascus, three seemingly innocuous Syrian cities that represent prior sites of public executions.



Hrair Sarkissian, Execution Squares 2008 | 12 Lamda prints mounted on aluminium

It can appear, as with Judith Barry's *Cairo Stories*, audio and video tales of the experiences of Cairene women, as if out of nowhere, in souks, at the heads of narrow stairwells, and on building walls. Once you encounter one of these women, pleasant if unexpected, they seem to be everywhere, a point not necessarily afforded their real existence.



Judith Barry, *Cairo Stories*, 2010-11 | Multi-site video installation

The message can be in your face and unrealized, as with Hans Haacke's *Calligraphie*, Here. In a call to art to commemorate the bicentennial of France's Assemblée Nationale, he proposed a piece that would script the Republic's motto, "Freedom, Equality, Fraternity" in Arabic, a wry, blunt comment on their treatment of its Moslem population. Though the proposal wasn't accepted - duh - the gesture and thought behind it are what matter. The rejection, in fact, was the project's confirmation of the message.



Hans Haacke, *Calligraphie*, 1989/2011 | Photos, text

Same with Joana Jadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *Lebanese Rocket Society: Elements for a Monument*, which documents the country's effort to develop a rocket program in the early '60s. Though intended solely for research purposes, the project ended in 1967. The various documents inside and the installation outside the front of the Museum of a Cedar 4 rocket suggest the excitement for progress and the idealism of apolitical science, as well as the potential for the more sinister applications of said technology.



Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Lebanese Rocket Society: Elements for a Monument* 2011

It can be inclusive but sly, as with Shoreh Mehran's *School Girls*. Though she depicts a trio of school girls with Durer-esque exactitude, you look at them from behind, suggesting the best place for a culture to to hide something, someone, is in plain sight.



Shohreh Mehran, *School Girls* 2009-2010 | Series, oil on canvas

As with Aisha Khalid's *Kashmiri Shawl*. On one side it pins inserted through two shawls, resulting in lovely if labor intensive floral designs. On the back side, however, it the prickly tips of the pins, suggesting the effort that went into its creation as well as the more spiritual ideas of either a crown of thorns or a hair shirt.



Aisha Khalid, Kashmiri Shawl, 2011 | Site-specific installation, pashmina scarf and gold plated steel pins

It can be exclusive but sly, as with Tom Molloy's *Subplot*. A serpentine that runs along the gallery's wall, it includes 235 drawings that only includes the bits of George Orwell's *1984*, that refer to a romance secondary to the plot between one Winston and Julia. The piece suggests an exaggerated sense of reading between the lines and alludes to wily, misappropriated, perhaps harmful mis-readings of literature for other purposes.



Tom Molloy, Subplot 2008 I 117 framed drawings, pencil on paper

More than anything else, this magisterial exhibition represents a political act, a declaration of artistic independence (and identity: *I create, therefore I am*), a line drawn in the desert sand; the opposite of which would be to do nothing: no art, no biennial. To do nothing would be the greatest shame of all.

The exhibition runs until May 16. For more information visit www.sharjahart.org.

ARTISTS

Jumana Emil Abboud
 Youssef Abdelké
 Ebtisam Abdulaziz
 Adel Abidin
 Atfal Ahdath
 Hala Al-Ani
 Abdullah Al Saadi
 Ziad Antar
 Doug Ashford
 Vartan Avakian
 Yto Barrada
 Judith Barry
 Shumon Basar, Eyal Weizman, Jane and Louise Wilson
 Bahar Behbahani
 Mustapha Benfodil
 Alexis Bhagat and Lize Mogel
 Anna Boghiguan
 Ammar Bouras
 Dan Brault

CAMP (Shaina Anandand Ashok Sukumaran)

Guillaume Cassar

Marie-Hélène Cauvin

Jem Cohen with Luc Sante

Ziad Dalloul

Raffie Davtian

Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency

Trisha Donnelly

Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică

Simone Fattal

Mariam Ghani

Ahmed Ghossein

Hans Haacke

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige

Ramin Haerizadeh

Rokni Haerizadeh

Gilbert Hage

Khalid Hourani

Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens

Hatem Imam

Alfredo Jaar

Emily Jacir

Amar Kanwar

Aisha Khalid

Bouchra Khalili

Mark Lombardi

Newsreel Archives of Soviet Television

Josephine Meckseper

Shohreh Mehran

Julia Meltzer and David Thorne

Almagul Menlibayeva

Naeem Mohaiemen

Bahman Mohassess

Tom Molloy

Houman Mortazavi

Fateh Moudarres

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Rosalind Nashashibi

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Imran Qureshi

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Khalil Rabah

Walid Sadek

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