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Notes from a Biennial - Day One Part 1

[Sharjah Biennial 10](#)

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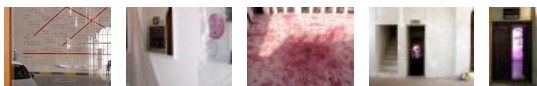
by **Guy Mannes-Abbott**



Richard Igbay & Marilou Lemmens Supply and Demand for Immortality [2011] [Ph. GM-A]

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I'm here early enough to see things coming together and watch minds at work. I explore the modest grandeur of the Sharjah Art Museum itself and wander the downtown area close to the water front where a series of inter-linking traditional courtyard buildings -Baits al Shamsi, al Serkal, etc.- stretch westwards, staging a significant amount and range of visual art.

There is activity everywhere, a healthy making going on as things and people arrive, not always as scheduled, some special box structures are built, a glass-walled dance floor appears in one previously semi- derelict Bait. Another has new recently painted walls, now being repainted to refine an installation. More creation than chaos, the atmosphere is surprisingly charmed.

My privilege is to wander armed only my familiarity with some of the artists and their work as a guide; no names or titles, adrift in the 'purely' visual. It's as if one other sense were mislaid. It's a good way to discover relationships with the visual, especially visual art, which makes such overt claims on or presumptions of our attention. Here it's perversely naked; under polythene wraps, behind a mobile scaffold tower, splayed across the floor, being hand-stencilled or thwacked at as I pass. Not yet consumable as art as such.

Very few pieces I saw today are completely installed. Aisha Khalid has installed 4 new paintings from a series called 'Pattern to Follow' which I admire bottomlessly. Elsewhere, hung vertically in the entrance foyer of the Museum is a black Kashmiri shawl whose classic so-called Paisley design is made up from the heads of gold plated pins on the 'front' side. There are tens of thousands of them, each plated by hand, she tells me. All are revealed in their potency on the other side of the piece where the gold is presently darkened behind a polythene 'curtain'. It's a complexly stunning piece of work which I'll return to in a sustained interview.

Another complete piece is by Khalid's husband Imran Qureshi. In the wide courtyard of Bait al Serkal he's installed the most powerful single piece of his work that I've seen in the last 10 years; 'Blessings Upon the Land of My Love'. Years in which he's painstakingly broken down and remade the miniature form in works like the 'Moderate Enlightenment' series also on show here.

The entire floor of Bait al Serkal's internal courtyard has become a painting of a massacre, or a massacre of a painting. It's the site of trauma and beauty; the entire floor covered with signature floral patterns and a bloody intervening flood. A drain is blackly insistent in the centre of the courtyard in the shadows of early afternoon. As a token of systemic malaise, Qureshi doesn't indulge it with nomination.

Elsewhere smaller surprises, glimpses of things not quite readied; a room with a relief model on the wall behind polythene and thick masking tape, a table with more along with an eraser and installers white gloves. In the same Bait, is a very nicely installed projection of short clips of women talking intimately, confidingly, briefly, in the tightly turned stairwell. Later I find a variation of the series at the bottom of stairs in the basement of the Museum and realise that they must be the work of Judith Barry whose 'Cairo Stories' are installed across the Biennial site.

To be continued...

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