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FASHION TRAVEL

27th April 2011
Sharjah
Biennial
Update
Culture
shock
Review by
James Brewer



Even before the extraordinary wave of unrest began to

seethe through the Arab world, organisers of the Sharjah Biennial 2011 arts festival realised that their event would embrace a political dimension. The Biennial was brave enough in its commissioning of 65 works a year ago to recognise that artists were being moved by the great issues of the day, although it has more recently had cold feet in at least one instance, and to such an extent that it has meant the departure of the director of the organising body, the Sharjah Art Foundation.

The Tenth Biennial started by taking the unusual curatorial narrative of a film treatment – with artists, film makers and performers constituting the cast – around a constellation of key words and themes. Those words included Treason, Necessity, Insurrection, Affiliation, Corruption, Devotion, Disclosure, and Translation. It was an attempt to interplay with the rhythms of the city of Sharjah itself and its activities, but it seems to have outreached those bounds.

Jack Persekian, director of the foundation, had dedicated the event to the spirit of change and to Arab youth. Now, to the dismay of his colleagues, on April 6 he was dismissed, after complaints that a selected work by Algerian artist Mustapha Benfodil was obscene and blasphemous. The mixed media piece, entitled *It Has No Importance*, depicted 23 headless mannequins wearing T-shirts bearing references to the rape of women by extremists during the Algerian civil war. The offending work, which had been located in a square in the Heritage Area, has been removed.

The row has cast a shadow over the impressive display of works by contemporary artists from more than 30 countries in sites throughout the emirate, which has over the years been praised for its progressive support of the arts scene, notwithstanding the conservative nature of much of Sharjah society.

Responding to a fiercely critical online petition, the foundation's founder and president, Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, defended the decision to remove the work, which "paired language that was sexually explicit with religious references in an overt and provocative manner." She said that it was "wholly unsuitable" to be displayed in the spot chosen, "a public courtyard where children play, families

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wander and people pass on their way to prayers at a mosque.” She said that Mr Persekian was dismissed because of the "public outcry" over the work.

Two of the curators, Rasha Salti of Beirut and Haig Aivazian of Chicago, said that it was they who selected the work, which was specific to the Algerian context, and in no way meant as an attack on religion or Islam at large. They said: “We see now that we misjudged the limits of the tone with which to address sensitive topics, and that perhaps the work in question should have been more clearly contextualised.”

So what is still on display? Plenty, and it is not at all tame stuff. For instance, *Videograms of a Revolution*, by Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, comprises 106 minutes of television and home video footage of the Romanian revolution, recorded at the end of 1989, from the uprisings to the collapse of the regime and the execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu.

Four artists – Jane and Louise Wilson, Shumon Basar and Eyal Weizman – tell of the assassination of the Hamas official Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, in Dubai last year. Another piece, the Biennial prize-winning *Blessings upon the Land of My Love*, by Imran Qureshi of Lahore, at first sight shocks with what seems to be blood from a massacre scattered across the floor of a courtyard, but the red turns out to be a floral pattern, perhaps a symbol of hope. The contrast is the violence of the current era with the traditional tranquillity of the courtyard.

Hrair Sarkissian presented *Execution Squares*, images at dawn in Aleppo, Lattakia, and Damascus, that represent earlier sites of public executions; could he have imagined that this work would be the precursor of the grim events of recent weeks in Syria?

In Judith Barry's *Cairo Stories*, Egyptian women relate their experiences. Joana Jadithomas and Khalil Joreige contributed *Lebanese Rocket Society: Elements for a Monument*, which documents the country's rocket research programme in the early 1960s.

So in this Middle East event there has been a good deal more political art than we are accustomed to seeing at many Western arts extravaganzas. It will be intriguing to see how bold in this respect will be a season of events being organised by the Mayor of London in summer 2011 celebrating contemporary Arab culture, in partnership with museums, galleries and arts organisations in the city and the region.

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

**16th November
2010**

**Sharjah
Biennial
March 2011
The quiet
Emirate
reaches out
to the art
world
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Intensive preparations are under way for one of the most important arts events in the Arab world, and the build-up is mercifully free from hullabaloo and hype. Nor will there be an ultra-modern, glittering architectural setting of the type fashionable for art sales extravaganzas in the Gulf.

Although its public relations campaigning is, as ever, measured rather than megaphone, the Sharjah Biennial is hardly a secret any more on the international arts scene.

From March 16 to May 16, 2011, the tenth Biennial will, in this quiet emirate of 900,000 people, present new and commissioned works by contemporary artists, filmmakers, writers and performers from across the region and the world.

Since the first Biennial in 1993 the emirate has gone on extending its cultural support and patronage in the Gulf and wider Middle East, and the recently formed Sharjah Art Foundation has sharpened the focus still further.

“The Biennial does not see itself as cornered in this region,” says Sharjah Art Foundation director Jack Persekian. Jerusalem born, he is founder and director of Anadiel Gallery of Palestinian art and the Al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art, and has curated exhibitions in the Middle East and Europe. Involved with Sharjah since 2004, he now considers the place his second home.



As the Biennial reaches out, artists for next March will be of some 40 nationalities, and there will be translations for visitors of key information into Urdu, Hindi and English. Since 2003, when the event switched from being a representative to a curated show, it has gone beyond the

concept of national pavilions.

London's arts scene was recently briefed at the Whitechapel Gallery on the ambitious project when Jack Persekian joined newly appointed curator of Sharjah Biennial 10 Suzanne Cotter (curator, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi Project) for a panel discussion moderated by writer Shumon Basar. A similar presentation has just taken place at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Where is Sharjah? And does it have any history? Opening the discussion at the Whitechapel, Shumon Basar was scornful of perceptions that this highly sophisticated part of the world might lack a significant past. You need only go to the tourist website, he said, and they tell you about the 5,000 years of civilisation.

Sharjah is the third in size of the seven members of the United Arab Emirates, after Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Sharjah City lies on the shores of the Arabian Gulf, and the emirate is a 15 minute drive from Dubai International Airport. Is it any more than a desert destination, or a “hot and desolate spot” as it was described in a British newsreel during World War Two? It has sandy beaches and red sand

dunes, but also green oases, and on its Gulf of Oman side, a mountain-backed rocky coastline. During the 17th century the Qawasim tribe, ancestors of the present ruling family, used a mighty fleet of 60 large ships to impose tolls on passing merchant ships. Resenting the challenges to their trade with India, and citing raids on shipping, the British in the early 19th century dubbed the area The Pirate Coast. Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, the current Ruler of Sharjah, takes another view, having written a book entitled *The Myth of Arab Piracy in the Gulf*.

Wielding the piracy accusation, the British sent naval and land forces to destroy the Qawasim fleet and burn its base at Ras al-Khaimah, forcing the Qawasim to relocate to Sharjah City.

Oil was discovered in the 1960s, bringing new development and construction, but Sheikh Sultan maintained his educational agenda and created more cultural institutions. The emirate boasted the first universities in the Gulf and the first museums including the Museum of



Contemporary Art fronting Sharjah Creek. Importantly for the Biennial, the initiatives included partial reconstruction of what is known as the Heritage Area.

In 2005 the Biennial moved from the Expo Centre, a venue for trade fairs, to the Heritage Area. Although there was good footfall at the Expo Centre, the organisers wanted to bring the Biennial benefits closer to the daily life of people as they shopped or just wandered around the souk. Now the older buildings complement the exhibition space. For 2011, in sites across the cultural quarter, the city will function as a matrix through which the Biennial storyline unfolds, breathing the rhythms of the city, and inviting a response from visitors and residents.

Sharjah attracts Arabs from other countries to live and work: commuters from Dubai drive along the congested highway between the two emirates that has been described as "like LA [Los Angeles] in the Gulf." They prefer Sharjah for its lower living expenses, and because it has a family friendly atmosphere. The University of Sharjah, whose founder and president is the Ruler, has more than 9,500 students, and the independent American University of Sharjah has 5,500, so students have been encouraged to work with the Biennial in setting up projects, and at the same time they form a "captive audience" for events.

Despite their praiseworthy record on the arts, the authorities have resisted pressure to bang the drum too loud. They are happy that the Biennial and the museums are winning more attention, and resist the flashy presentation of commercial art shows in neighbouring territories. "We will concentrate on what we know best, working personally with the artists, rather than via sub-contractors," insists Jack Persekian. What differentiates the Sharjah Biennial is that it has always been part of the educational programme of the government, from which it receives a budget of around \$5m. Hundreds of school children and students arrive in buses to see the main show and follow-up exhibitions, for this

is more than a once-every-two-years project. The aim is to provide a continuing experience, and for artists, the possibility of jobs in the arts which expand the choice beyond commercial companies or architectural practices.

Suzanne Cotter, who is co-curator with Beirut-based Rasha Salti (creative director, ArteEast) and associate curator Haig Aivazian, says that the critical mass of interest around the Biennial has grown exponentially. "It has a relevant and productive dynamic," she says.

www.sharjahart.org

Images used:

Hala Elkoussy

On red nails, palm trees and other icons, Al Archief (take 2)

Mixed media

Installation view

Commissioned & produced by Sharjah Biennial 2009

Sharjah City Buildings, 2008

Sharjah Heritage area

Photos by Alfredo Rubio.

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