

Exclusive to The Middle East Online. . . SHARJAH BIENNIAL 2015

Hope and Smile by Palestinian artist Abdul Hay Mosallam Zarara

Words by Sylvia Smith

Photographs by Richard Duebel

As a group of Congolese “sapeurs” or sharp dressers makes their way through the crowded streets of Sharjah (below) accompanied by a local, traditional band, the art crowd who are attending the Sharjah biennial picks up its pace and starts to move to the rhythm of the music. The much admired Fanfare Funerailles, a parody of a modern funeral ritual in the Democratic Republic of Congo, is one of the outstanding performances in a packed schedule of dance, film, conferences, educational and public talks. The quality of some of the commissioned art works on display and associated programme effectively distinguish this prestigious Gulf event from the more than two hundred biennials taking place all over the world each year.

“The Sharjah biennial is always good,” say Director of Qatar’s Matarf, Abdellah Kerroum and one of the many visitors at the opening. “It is always worthwhile to come here and see what is going on.”

Although this is the 12th Biennial (SB12), this is the seventh time that Sharjah has provided venues for the expression of international contemporary art in its myriad manifestations. Showing the commissions throughout the Emirate brings visitors to different parts of the country and allows those who live outside the city to see art from around the world.

Along with paintings – a few interesting examples by British-Ghanaian artist, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye are shown in a refurbished traditional dwelling – sculptures of all sizes, video screening rooms and mixed media installations are all given space to breathe.

Curated by Korean-American curator Eungie Joo, there are a quite a number of Korean artists taking part. Works by Beom Kim, video artist Im Heung-Soon, the late Chung Chang-sup, Yang Hae-Gue, mizxrice and Korean-American minimalist Byron Kim show the broad range of works that the Sharjah Biennial, has embraced this year.

By Argentina's Eduardo Navarro

Steering the direction the biennial has taken since 2003 Sheikha Hoor Al Qassimi, the youngest daughter of Sharjah's ruler has prompted foreign artists to create a work of art inspired by the Emirate. "I like the way each artist has brought their own particular view of the country to their work," she says. " There is a huge variety and each brings a fresh idea."

From the peaceful landscaped desert garden of Japanese Taro Shinoda to the sensory Eau de Rose de Damascus by Rirkrit Tiaravanija, artists commissioned to create a piece for "The past, the present, the possible" have taken aspects of Emirati culture and turned out some original and stimulating re-interpretations.

Part of a series of art works made from chicken bones set in glass
by the late Turkish artist Fahrelnissa Zeid

"The rose-flavoured yoghurts and small cakes are delicious" says British journalist Paul Clinton in appreciation of the food and drink provided by a pop-up food outlet in the calligraphy area "It is exactly what's needed – refreshing and with a local twist."

As well as creating a small distillery and cafe surrounded by a manicured rose garden which is in turn surrounded by calligraphy studios, artist Rirkrit Tiaravanija, captures Arab generosity and hospitality by ensuring a regular supply of freshly-baked free biscuits and rose water for all visitors.

A precise copy of a 14th century Syrian distillery in the Sharjah museum of Islamic Civilisation inspired the artist to bring to life the many facets of the rose in a very small area. He creates a living rose garden, dries rose petals, then distills the water from them and in an adjoining room investigates the rose as metaphor. An Arabic love poem is written in large calligraphic letters around the walls. A reminder of the rose's universal emotional appeal but from an Arab perspective.

Also in the heritage area Japanese Taro Shinoda creates a quiet place for contemplation using the subtle principles of dry landscape gardening but transformed by using local materials. "You're wearing the blue plastic slip-overs," Taro Shinoda laughs as a photographer walks by still wearing the shoe protectors issued to those entering the space. Open to the elements "Karesansui", the harmonious use of materials such as sand, gravel and rocks, adheres to the Japanese approach.

It has a raised pavilion or "engawa" at one end a place to stop and observe the soft dips in the sand as they imperceptibly grow and evolve. "This is one of my favourite pieces, whispers Lisa Reinisch, a German visitor. "It's hard to believe that you are in a noisy modern city when you are here. The sense of peace is amazing."

According to the catalogue Taro Shinoda produced a hundred and eight landscape drawings in as many days to study the true essence of the garden. These landscapes can be seen in the Sharjah Art Museum. This large building is also currently home to Lebanese artist Rayyane Tabet's steel rings – a series of identical rolled engraved rings each equidistant from one another differing only in the numbers etched into each indicating how far it is from the source of the pipe.

Steel Rings by Lebanese artist Rayyane Tabet

Steel Rings, evokes a pipeline through which oil flowed from Saudi Arabia via Jordan and Syria to Lebanon from 1950 onwards. When construction, started in 1947, was completed The Trans Arabian Pipeline was the world's largest pipeline system and was originally intended to terminate in Haifa, then the British Mandate of Palestine. But political and social upheaval put paid to the long-term plan and now this important project lies buried beneath the earth as little able to transport oil as the series of rings in the museum.

Upstairs in the Sharjah Art Museum the fluid, sensuous shapes of Lebanese modernist Saloua Raouda Choucair's wooden sculptures belie the rational organisation that interweaves the series of shapes.

Born in 1916 Choucair, along with early modern Arab artists Etel Adnan, a significant Lebanese writer, poet and playwright and Abdul Hay Mosallam Zarara, a Palestinian political activist whose work records an endangered tradition and culture are enjoying a revival. All three show work from the middle part of the last century that demonstrate their close involvement with cultural and political movements.

Large scale paintings and a series of chicken bones set in different hued glass (below) by Fahrelnissa Zeid the late Turkish artist, are shown in the heritage area. The artist who was born during the Ottoman era connects two Islamic art periods that span the 1900s. The works are on loan from the collection of her son Prince Ra'ad and drew comments from many of the young visitors to the SB12.



The monumental abstract paintings resonate art with young Arab and Western art lovers who identify with the. “I am really fascinated to see this sort of work,” says Ahdiya Timur, an Afghan student from neighbouring Ajman. “I really want to learn more about these early influential Arab artists.”

According to Sheikha Hoor, curator of the United Arab Emirates pavilion at the Venice Biennale in May, it will be these early Arab artists who will be the focus of the show. “I’ve had 16 researchers working with me on the project,” she explains. “It is a fascinating process.”

No doubt there will be plenty of revelations and a great deal of good art in Venice just as there is at the Sharjah biennial.”

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