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VENICE BIENNALE: FOUR VIEWS

3-D CINEMA

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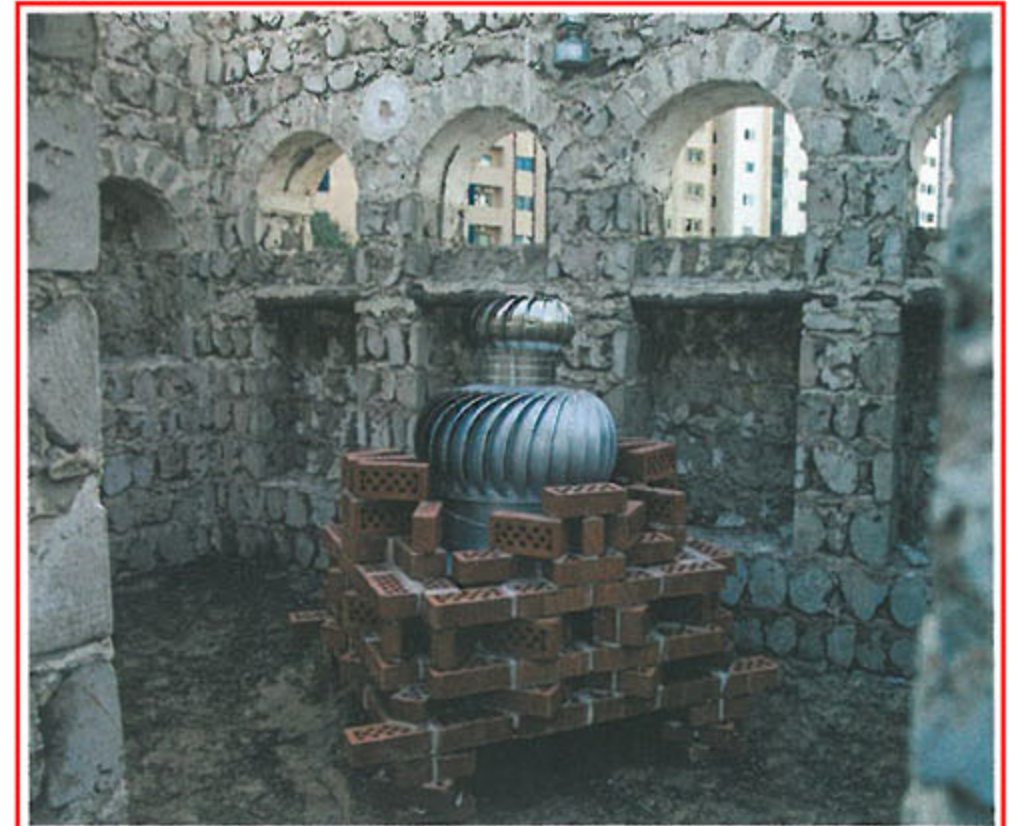
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From left: Taro Shinoda, *Karesansui (Dry Landscape)*, 2015, wood, sand, stone, fabric, holding tank. Installation view, Sharjah Art Museum. Photo: Deema Shahin. Chung Chang-Sup, *Return 77-N*, 1977, mixed media on canvas, 51 1/2 x 51 1/2". Haegue Yang, *An Opaque Wind*, 2015, mixed media. Installation view, Bait Al Boudi. Photo: Deema Shahin.



## Sharjah Biennial 12

VARIOUS VENUES

Yasmine El Rashidi

**THERE'S A HOT SOUTHERN WIND** that blows across North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula each year, carrying particles of fine sand that, in a passing moment, coat everything. The horizon clouds into a haze, and as the sands settle, cities change by varying gradations of color. Perspective is altered. In towering, futuristic, neon-flashing emirates such as Dubai, the change feels extreme. But in low-lying Sharjah, the transmutations are of a more subtle kind. Like the positions of the sun, or the light sensitivity of a particular generation of Flemish painters, these slight variations in palette can be transformative.

In ways large and small, curator Eungie Joo's Sharjah Biennial 12, "The past, the present, the possible," was an experience of this kind. Nature and the supernatural, myth and magic, minute details of life overlooked in the present or buried in the past, all came together in an elegant, quietly transformative show that offered reflections on histories, continuity, and language.

The biennial steered away from the familiar names that adorn many a Middle Eastern show. It also steered mostly clear of works that we have seen and seen again, works that over time have come to form part of the staple art-political discourse of the region. Although the list of artists was no surprise to anyone who has followed her career, Joo challenged what one has generally come to

expect of and from and *in* the "Middle East." To shake off such tropes and expectations was a feat in itself: "The past, the present, the possible" was much more about "art" than about the sloganeering and activist agendas typically advanced at such group exhibitions. Joo made perhaps her most political statement by taking artists "of" the region out of their bracketing as "Middle East artists" and recontextualizing them in a broader discourse about, simply, art. She also cut down the number of artists (fifty-five instead of the hundred-plus counts of previous iterations), making space—consciously, one presumes—for invention.

Time, in both its actual and historic senses, played a role in the biennial's most powerful works. In Taro Shinoda's *Karesansui (Dry Landscape)*, 2015, a garden of sand filters itself, grain by grain, through two evenly placed pinholes at its structural foundation. Hours, possibly days, later, two craters form. Around them, the sands shift like dunes. Inspired by traditional Japanese Zen rock gardens, detailed drawings of which Shinoda offered at the Sharjah Art Museum, *Karesansui* captured and evoked the tenor of the biennial: With its Taoist underpinnings, this minimalist, somewhat painterly structure was loaded with both meaning and ritual. Entering the space, it was difficult, even impossible, to notice any change as the grains filtered from the garden through the pinholes into the unseen structure beneath. But in this observation of the unobservable one could sense a faith in transformation, a belief in this object and its own hidden cycle of life. This fundamental, if fraught, trust in some broader ecosystem of existence seemed to preoccupy many of the artists in the biennial. It spoke, as well, to their processes of making.

The poeticism and varied layers of Shinoda's garden extended in different ways through the works of Chung Chang-Sup, Iman Issa, Michael Joo, Byron Kim, Julie Mehretu, and Haegue Yang. Each of these artists appeared

to have invented a language for themselves, an alphabet of symbols both visible and invisible, subtly transfixing. The privileging of delicate form, even abstraction, in a context that generally emphasizes the referential, didactic, and political, was perhaps the show's real achievement and differentiation.

Issa's commission for the biennial, "Heritage Studies," 2015–, expands a series of objects she has been working on for several years. Borrowing from museum objects and artworks already in existence, Issa deconstructs and reformulates a set of simple, Platonic shapes, a typology that questions both value and relevance through a reimagining of familiar historical forms—for instance, a golden crescent placed in a white wooden slipcase, or rods painted the colors of the Palestinian flag. Her objects are both elegant and intriguing; a reduction of forms that subverts historical and political references, making space for something new.

*An Opaque Wind*, 2015, Yang's meticulous outdoor installation in the courtyard of Bait Al Aboudi, included wind towers, a reading room, and viewing platform; it spoke to the show's titular "past" and "possible" in much the same way as Issa's work. Yang meticulously created and curated a space—historically rooted in the influx of Korean laborers to the Gulf in pursuit of imagined other lives—made entirely of found materials and objects from construction sites. Each detail was considered; to move around the courtyard was to navigate an ambiguous entity as if inside a fable in which it was difficult to tell what was accessible and what was not, what was part of the natural environment and what was manipulated. Industrial vents acted like wind towers, their activation coming only from directional breezes. The precision of the artist's choices gently prodded you to second-guess the nature of the space. Was an alcove of corals installed, or originally there? What about the tree trunk?

Questions of what is real and what is constructed, historically and in the present, came up again and again.





From left: Adrián Villar Rojas, *Planetarium*, 2015, compost, dead animals, pigments, concrete, plants, vegetables, stones, coral stones, animal bones, found glass, used shoes, cement, gypsum, seeds, metal, columns. Installation view, Kalba, United Arab Emirates. Photo: Jörg Baumann. Fahrelnissa Zeid, *Break the Atom and Vegetal Life*, 1962, oil on canvas, 6' 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 17' 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Rayyane Tabet, *Steel Rings*, 2013, rolled engraved steel, each 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 4". Installation view, Sharjah Art Museum, 2015. Photo: Deema Shahin.



What might last into the future? How might we find and revive what has been forgotten? Adrián Villar Rojas's *Planetarium*, 2015, was the most complete examination of this line of inquiry and, in many ways, the biennial's pinnacle. In an abandoned ice factory in Kalba, on the outskirts of the emirate, Rojas used unfinished concrete pillars to build objects of the future from elements of the past. His layered structures, whose banded colors reflect on planetary rings, were filled with excavated found materials collected from across Sharjah over several months (sand, rocks, fossils, seeds, sprouts, greens, bones, shells, plastic,

### Like great literature, the biennial left you slightly altered—without a real understanding of how or why.

wires). The result was both beautiful and haunting, a place that seemed to represent what might be left after all else is gone, or perhaps what was present before we came into being. Rojas's objects will themselves evolve and disintegrate into other forms. With no artificial lighting, the space grew dark as the sun set: Enter the sublime. Yet the question of art's responsibility to audience also arose. This year's biennial brought work into more corners of the city; but all the same, Kalba remained exceptionally isolated, inaccessible during the week to anyone without a private car and time to spare for the hours of travel.

In another off-site space across Sharjah Creek, the vast, painting-like silver-nitrate installation of Michael Joo, with its accompanying *falaj*, or water channels, dug into the concrete floor, echoed Rojas's work. It also highlighted the painterly feel of the biennial. Eungie Joo gave more space to the medium than any contemporary art biennial in the region has before. Painting also found its way into works on rocks and into the calendar paintings

of Byron Kim, in which depictions of the sky accompany each day's written entry. There were favorites on display, such as work by the now-everywhere Etel Adnan, but Joo also brought in the underrecognized and unknown: an extensive and compelling series of drawings and paintings that comprise worlds by Korean artist Beom Kim; the imaginary portraits of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye; and the work of a young Indian painter, Unnikrishnan C., who paints terra-cotta bricks, one a day, like pages of a diary.

Two exceptional artists who were well ahead of their time were at last given real regional attention: the ninety-nine-year-old Lebanese modernist Saloua Raouda Choucair, whose twisted, interlocking sculptural morphologies and geometric paintings were on display, and the Turkish artist Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901–91), to whom Joo dedicated an entire room—an exhibition in itself. Her paintings, which vary in style from immense, detailed psychedelic abstractions to portraits with surreal or exaggerated Qajar-like features, have been long overlooked, and her works that embed chicken bones into resin suggest scrappy talismans, a kind of pictorial relic. It's eye-opening to consider that these pieces were being made in unknown studio spaces in the Middle East and Europe; they evince an alternate, international feminism within the abstraction of the period.

Although Chang-Sup's monochromatic works on paper (he kneaded *tak* fibers from the mulberry tree with sap and ink) were in fact a rejection of a formal painting education in postwar Korea, they presented themselves as mesmerizing, textured abstractions—a significant contribution to the possibilities and politics of painting.

Filling one of the larger exhibition spaces, Mehretu's work for the biennial—five large-scale paintings—were almost overpowering in their visceral upheaval, visually spilling over from the gallery into an open courtyard beyond. The works' gestural expressions, equally explosive and tender, invoke myth and a magical realism that to a writer like me immediately recalls the tenor of a

particular Cold War generation of Latin American and Middle Eastern novelists who experienced the darkness of imprisonment and subsequent upheavals of coups and revolution, and whose lives and works were and are metaphorically permeated by it.

At a time when to be apolitical is perhaps indefensible, it would be easy to dismiss Joo's biennial as treading too carefully in a region rife with politics and censorship—the firing of Sharjah Art Foundation director Jack Persekian in 2011 remains a sensitive spot. Cinthia Marcelle's installation of sand sifted by workers from atop a sieved roof was the most overtly political statement given the abhorrent work conditions of laborers in the Gulf. Another was the very raw, workshop-like project room and videos of Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, which mine insurgency. Yet there were political undertones to even the subtlest works, such as Hassan Khan's new installation in the Flying Saucer building and Rayyane Tabet's *Steel Rings*, 2013–, to which Joo devoted an entire wing of the Sharjah Art Museum (the pipeline was laid out across more than 250 feet, with empty exhibition spaces accompanying it). Tabet's piece, which replicated the exact dimensions of the defunct 1946 Trans-Arabian Pipeline, directly referenced that object's hidden sociopolitical path across four countries in the Middle East.

Subtle shows walk a fine line: Some works may slip into the banal. In this space created for invention, there were moments when you wondered if several pieces were shown prematurely. Yet, like great literature, the biennial left you slightly altered—without a real understanding of how or why. The effect of change, so subtle you can't quite place it, is also the knowledge and understanding that only come with time. Was it too utopian an experience? Or, against the backdrop of curating today, is that attenuated gesture art's most political act? □

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