Wednesday, March 27, 2019 • 05:00Z

Financial Times (web site) • 1226 words

Sharjah Biennial: where hidden stories become public displays

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Outside an abandoned ice factory in Kalba, on the sandy Gulf of Oman, African men in wide-brimmed black hats wield oars beside a beached dhow, in a riveting ritual of remembrance. Joined by women with chain-like anklets, and a trio on oud, darbuka drum and violin, they form a choreographed procession along the shore, heaving chests, clambering over a rusting wreck, and passing through a Zanzibari double door - a metaphorical threshold between freedom and bondage.

The couple on a four-poster bed - alluding to miscegenation between Arab and Bantu during Indian Ocean trade in spices and slaves - might seem surprisingly suggestive on a public beach in Sharjah, a more conservative Gulf emirate than neighbouring Dubai. Yet Mohau Modisakeng's site-specific performance, "Land of Zanj", was a highlight of the opening weekend of the Sharjah Biennial (founded in 1993), where the boundaries of the permissible are pushed.

The Soweto-born artist worked with South African performers and UAE-based Africans. In the Gulf, he tells me, he saw parallels with "how Johannesburg started as a mining town with mass cheap labour, when men were disconnected from their families in hostels." The echoes are inescapable in a work that draws on the difficult history between Arabia and Africa's Swahili coast. Modisakeng, for whom ritual is catharsis, says, "Actions the body performs connect you directly to that memory, and to modern and indentured labour."

His is one of many compelling works in the 14th biennial, entitled *Leaving the Echo Chamber* , that trace hidden histories in the global south. "Geographically, we're in an indefinable region," Hoor Al Qasimi, director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, tells me. The Slade-trained artist and curator, daughter of Sharjah's ruler, took over the biennial 16 years ago, with Documenta in Kassel as a model. "I never look at us as an Arab country. Half the people are south Asian; a huge number are Sudanese" - though few, if any, can aspire to citizenship or, even after decades, the minimum salary stipulated for bringing families over. In economies reliant on remittances, children grow up knowing these parents largely through internet calls.

Inviting artists to respond to this context and think outside the "echo chamber", three excellent curators, Vietnam-based Zoe Butt, Egyptian-born Omar Kholeif and Guadeloupean Claire Tancons, have distinct platforms with rich cross-currents. Work by some 80 artists, with 60 new commissions, ranges from Kholeif's historical display at the Sharjah Art Museum, showing innovative painters from Marwan to Lubaina Himid, to a work by the New Orleans Airlift collective and local residents in a disused airfield. In "The Trans-National" - part of Tancons' performance strand - satin drapes transform a flat-tyred Soviet airliner into an emblematic portal of hope and disillusionment. With a Filipina DJ, the nocturnal piece culminates in Freek, a UAE-born Somali rapper, singing in Arabic of unbelonging.

In Butt's exhibition at Al Hamriyah Studios half an hour's drive from Sharjah city, the implicit theme of transported labour is traced through colonial histories. Shiraz Bayjoo's unpeopled film "Ile de France" (2015) evokes fugitive memories of Mauritius through ruined mansions, squalid workers' quarters, snatches of BBC news, whispers in French and Hindi, and graves beside the ocean. Also striking is Jompet Kuswidananto's sculptural installation "Keronkong Concordia", whose chandelier centrepiece surrounded by shattered glass resembles a crashed bird amid the haunting strains of Indonesian fado. Tuan Andrew Nguyen's four-channel, open-air video installation in the medina-like Al Mureijah heritage area, "The Specter of Ancestors Becoming", is another standout work, recovering memories of Senegalese *tirailleurs* who fought for the French in Indochina, and the Vietnamese women who left with them for west Africa.

A black-and-white photograph by Munem Wasif foregrounds the human cost of dispensable labour, with a Bangladeshi man's jute burden engulfing him like flowing flaxen hair. In Meschac Gaba's witty procession through the souk in "Perruques Architectures EAU", performers in towering wigs shaped like iconic Emirati buildings pay tribute to both Beninois

braiders and construction workers. Its humour, says Gaba, was "to play the game that a museum can be everywhere". South Asian shopkeepers enjoying the joke filmed the solemn retinue on smartphones.

"What stance can be taken in an era of fake news?" Kholeif asks. For Lawrence Abu Hamdan, art is a "process of truth production", rather than a playful game with multiple truths. His audiovisual installation "Once Removed", which I mistook as fictitious, is the true story of a Druze who, believing himself to be a reincarnated teenage militiaman from the Lebanese civil war, amasses weapons and memorabilia from fighters who treat him as a fallen comrade. In the absence of an agreed narrative, Abu Hamdan tells me, this physical archive is a way to "access the material reality of the war which has been erased".

"The Ballad of Special Ops Cody" (2017), a stop-motion animation film by the Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz, takes another route into disputed war memory. In a brilliant conceit, an imagined dialogue between a toy US soldier and looted Iraqi antiquities in a museum is voiced by a US army medic. The veteran's words are her own, in what Kholeif sees as an "act of reconciliation".

A strong thread questions the role of education in enforcing authority and control. The Afghan miniature painter Khadim Ali fled to Pakistan as a refugee. His gouache paintings and embroidered cloths in "Flowers of Evil" juxtapose weapons on Afghan scenes, intimating how violence is learned and normalised. His Hazara ethnic group were demonised by the Taliban; the rebellious horned demons in Ali's mural in Arts Square are his riposte. Mohamed Bourouissa's "Blida-Joinville" installation in a former kindergarten, its walls painted with the help of children, hints at parallels between the conformity induced by schooling and a psychiatric hospital in colonial Algeria; in a video, a gardener-inmate relates being tortured with electric shocks.

Jack Persekian's curatorship in 2011 ended abruptly over images some thought blasphemous. Al Qasimi claims the biennial has few constraints, "so long as we're not provocatively sexual; I don't want to lose my audience. You want to engage with the country and create a generation of thinkers."

Yet sex and religion are not the only sensitivities. Wael Shawky's storyboard-like drawings for "The Gulf Project Camp" chart 400 years of Arabian history, from crusader galleons to oil tankers. But his zoomorphic figures soften the critique. "It's not written history, so anybody can make it - like art," the Egyptian artist tells me. "Using innocent animals means they're not good or evil; it keeps us from judging."

Yet the limits of what is allowable can shift unpredictably like sand dunes. More direct than Shawky is Alfredo Jaar's "33 Women" (2014-19), which shines actual spotlights on photographs of "champions for freedom of expression and human rights". There is a file on each woman in a reading area; some are detained in Arab countries (though none are from the UAE). Visitors initially reported that Emirati attendants were banning photography and requiring those taking the booklet to leave their names. There were remonstrations. When I looked in, the man stationed at the reading table volunteered the booklet.

Art, with its questioning, can open the way to critical thinking. For Tancons, biennials are like carnivals, inverting social norms in a "safety valve of release". The question remains what happens when the carnival is over.

Biennial to June 10, sharjahart.org