

# ArtReview Asia



Charles Lim

Venice Biennale. Oh Buoy



## Sharjah Biennial 12

Various venues, Sharjah 5 March – 5 June

Titled *The Past, the Present, the Possible*, Sharjah Biennial 12 is curated by Eungie Joo, whose curatorial tactic is to investigate the artistic, cultural and social qualities of Sharjah and the region by placing them into history – seen as an on-going process – and to show the results, including some historical discoveries, experiment results and a few discussions, at a variety of venues.

Each of these displays has a unique architectural, aesthetic, cultural or historical character. For example, at the Sharjah Art Foundation's Art Spaces – new white cube-galleries that neighbour old Arabic residential buildings – a variety of sculptural objects and simplistic-looking paintings and drawings are on display while a few newly commissioned site-specific works are built up on the sites of the 'old' Arabic *bait*s. Close by, at the Calligraphy Square, and with an exquisite beauty, Rirkrit Tiravanija has built a rose garden and open kitchen that provides rosewater beverages and cookies. Titled *Untitled 2015 (Eau de Rose of Damascus)* it draws from the design for a fourteenth century rosewater distillery that is on show at the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization. Also in this area is Lee Kit's multimedia installation *Is it*

*always there?* (2015), showing his recent study in 'blackness' and 'heaviness'. Ahmad Ghossein's *The Fourth Stage* (2015) uses cinematic language to connect magic and public sculptures in South Lebanon (both featuring the theme of creation from nothing), in order to investigate the fictional, visionary character of the collective imaginary of a nation.

The multivenue design of the biennial affords every artist enough space to enable the viewer to get a sense of the completeness of their work, while works by some artists – Byron Kim, Rayyane Tabet, mixrice, Abdullah Al Saadi, Abraham Cruzvillegas and Beom Kim – are present at two or more venues, in a manner that helps gather the various sites into one organic map.

Joo has made a special effort to connect art from the past to the present, and to examine how art (especially in this region) has travelled from what is called the 'modern' to the 'contemporary'. Consequently, in the Sharjah Art Museum the curator has gathered a number of older artists: Lebanese Saloua Raouda Choucair's wood sculptures reference ancient Sufi poetry; the pioneer of contemporary art in Sharjah, Hassan Sharif shows two classic works,

*Wooden Column* and *Table* (both 1985), and two recent installations made of collected construction materials. Korean Beom Kim is a pleasant personal discovery in this biennial. His rich and varied output covers conceptual works-on-paper and canvas, installations and videoworks that examine the human condition with humour, wisdom and wit, examples of which are spread across three different venues.

Through the twists and turns of its last few editions, the Sharjah Biennial and its organiser Sharjah Art Foundation have developed their own methodology and character: here that is made manifest in the special support of performance and music projects, and film screenings, and the large number of ambitious commissioned works (over two-thirds of the artists in this year's edition are presenting new works or commissions), many of which are the result of an intense process of fieldwork.

Beyond the biennial exhibition the Sharjah Art Foundation also holds an annual March Meeting, at which the Foundation and the biennial curators begin each cycle of research, gather ideas and build up a social network. Consequently Sharjah Biennial 12 can also be seen as the result of March Meeting 2014.



Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled 2015 (Eau de Rose of Damascus)*, 2015, mixed-media. Photo: Jamal Shanavas. Courtesy the artist and Sharjah Art Foundation

Then, Beirut-based curators Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti presented research on the undocumented *International art exhibition for Palestine* (1978), a show organised by the Unified Information Office of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to mark international support for the Palestinian cause through art. That's why I don't find it 'strange' or 'irrelevant' (as other commentators do) when I see Abdul Hay Mosallam Zarara's works in the Sharjah Art Museum.

Born in 1933 in Palestine, Zarara was an active member of the PLO during the 1970s, and his art embodies his personal commitment to the Palestinian struggle for liberation. The exhibition of his work in this particular museum is a form of recognition by the biennial and the institutional mechanism that supports it, of this certain chapter in the Middle East's modern history, and that this has an impact on the art and cultural activities in the Islamic world.

The patriotic narrative constructed by the public sculptures in Lebanon (documented in the work of Ahmad Ghossein), the Palestinian desire for national independence (Zarara), and migrant workers' dreams (and lives) that are invested in and yet also consumed by the foreign economic entities they build, all contribute to a hidden theme of the biennial: the building of a nation. In Sharjah, a young modern nation run by leaders from ancient clans, people are actively

organising ideas about their histories, cultures and national identities in the context of contemporary art. Artists around the world are invited to conduct survey and research here.

Among them is Haegue Yang, whose vent installations (*An Opaque Wind*, 2015) on an old residential site have placed architectural and cultural 'styles' into a cityscape that features a contrast between the old and the modern. She also builds up a private interior space with local elements such as an *areesh* roof, newspapers, a soundwork on the theme of 'neighbour (as the closest stranger)', and a television playing a Korean Broadcasting System variety show. In doing this, she recalls Korean workers' contribution to the modernisation of the Gulf: in Korea, to Yang's generation, it also recalls the memory of the absent male figure (fathers and uncles) in the family.

The same theme of 'nation building' also lies in Abkhazia, located on the black sea in the Caucasus region, once a member of the former Soviet Union, now a disputed territory and partially recognised state, described by artist Eric Baudelaire as the world's youngest and *least* recognisable nation. During the opening week of the biennial Baudelaire's *An embassy of Abkhazia* (2012) was staffed by his friend, Maxim Gvinjia, the former foreign minister of the state, as part of the artist's *The Secession Sessions* (2014–15) alongside a showcase of 74 letters written from Baudelaire to Gvinjia, and daily screenings

of *Letters to Max* (2014), a film unfolding between the artist's sentimental, almost narcissist monologue and his former diplomat friend's practical and passionate narrative. Baudelaire's *Sharjah Sessions*, a discursive programme of public events with scholars and artists, is scheduled to take place in May as part of the March Meeting 2015. I have some reservations about biennial components that appear to end up as a kind of performance of 'discourse production' – is it true that today's biennial must rely on making scenes and performing in order to prove its cool?

And yet there's no denying that chief among the biennial's contributions to the global art scene is the provision of a meeting point and communication space for people (more than just artists) from different geographical, cultural and political backgrounds. Moreover, if we look at it in the long term, this continuous practice seeks to build up a new 'subject' out of what was formerly objectified as 'the oriental', 'the Middle Eastern' or 'the Asian'. But if, in the recent years, people in the artworld have become very skilled at demonstrating that the narratives of history are multiple – it's important to recognise that this is just the first step – the desire and capability to tell a unique perspective on history cannot replace a clear and definite overall historical view. And this view will only become evident when an adequate range of narratives collected and examined. *Aimee Lin*



Rayyane Tabet, *Cyprus*, 2015, wooden boat, steel anchor, pulleys, rope and hardware.  
Photo: Alfredo Rubio and Sharjah Art Foundation.  
Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut & Hamburg