

The background is a vibrant, abstract composition of thick, expressive brushstrokes in shades of magenta, deep blue, and forest green. Large, irregular white shapes are cut out from the composition, creating a layered, collage-like effect. The overall aesthetic is bold and contemporary.

art in ASIA

SEP·OCT 2015

FEATURE /

Jeonbuk Museum of Art's
ACAE 2015

ARTIST /

Ha Chong Hyun:
In Plain Sight

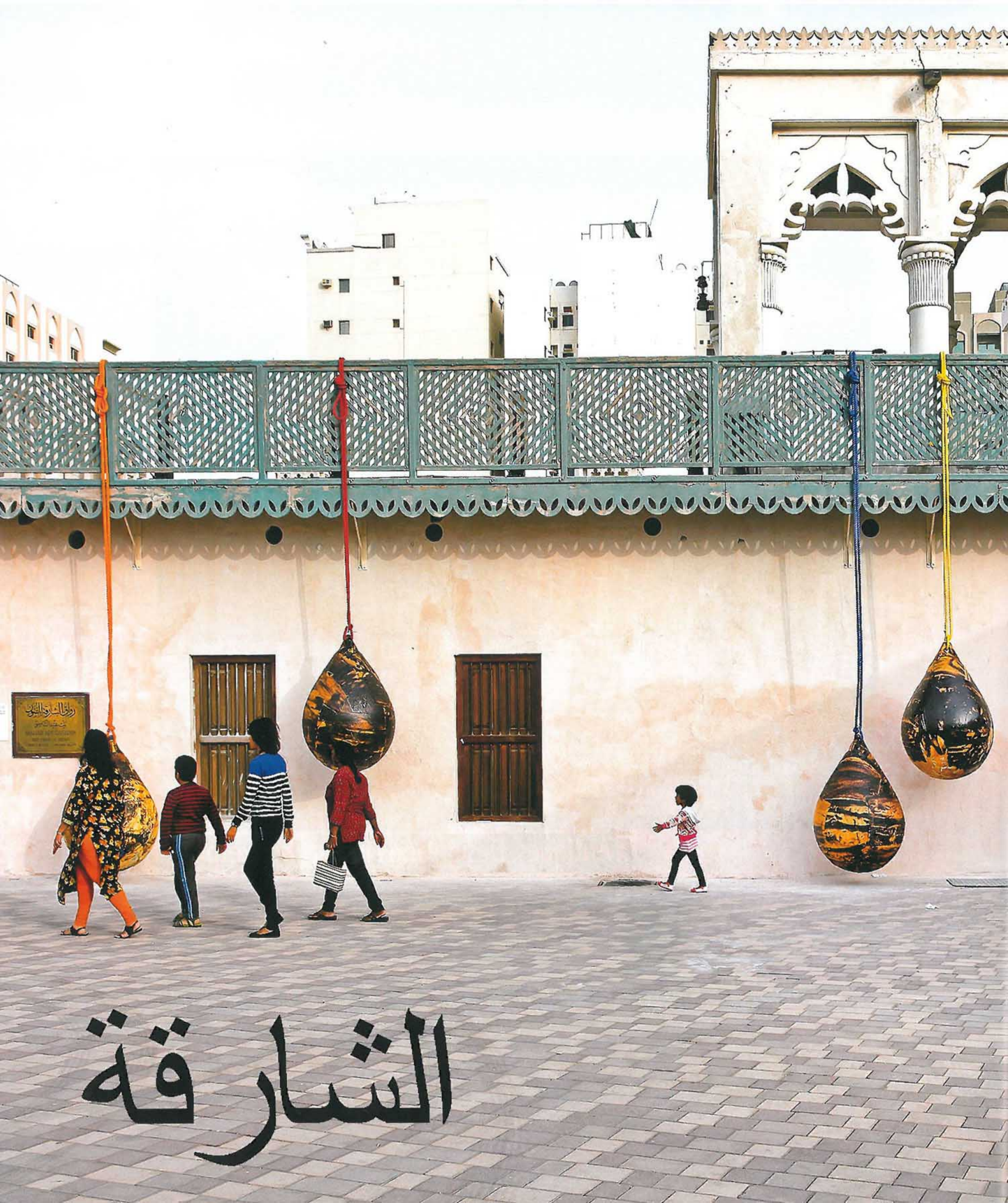
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12th Sharjah Biennial:
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الشارقة

Art Forum in Desert

The Sharjah Biennial which was founded in 1993 and celebrated its twelfth year in 2015 was held from March 5 to June 5 all over the city including the SAF Art Spaces. *art in ASIA* received an official invitation from the Sharjah Art Foundation and attended the Biennial during the opening period. Notably, Eungie Joo was the curator of the Biennial, which presented works by 51 artist groups from 25 countries this year under the theme “The Past, the Present, the Possible.” Seven of those groups were comprised of Korean or Korean-American artists, who helped showcase Korean art. On the other hand, the Sharjah Art Foundation President Sheikha Hoor Al Quasimi drew public attention by becoming the curator of the UAE pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale 2015. Along with Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Ras al-Khaimah, Ajman, Umm al-Quwain, and Fujairah, Sharjah is one of the seven emirates that comprise the UAE. As the Middle East soars in the international art world, Dubai has an art fair and Abu Dhabi has art museums, while Sharjah has a biennial. Which of the emirates shall hold the throne of art in the UAE?
/ Kyoung-yun Ho, Editor-in-Chief

Mark Bradford, *Untitled (Buoy)*, mixed media installation, 2014.



Since I started working as a journalist, most of my trips have revolved around large-scale international art fairs and biennials. The crowds tend to flock to Asia in the even-numbered years, and to Europe, in the odd-numbered ones. Given the flow of traffic, artists and curators probably share the same tendencies. Last March, prior to the Venice Biennale, I attended the Sharjah Biennial, which opened its 2015 season. It was my first visit to the Middle East. If it wasn't for the Biennial, I may not have ever visited there. The Middle East may be most familiar to Koreans who worked in construction or manufacturing industries in the 70s. The economic and political influence of the Middle East has been growing since. The same is true for the art scene. They do not stop with merely recruiting star artists or curators, or acquiring a few masterpieces; they bring in an entire museum like the Louvre or the Guggenheim. The Venice Biennale, which can be considered a microcosm of the international art world, has welcomed the new additions of national pavilions for Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Lebanon in recent years. Since 2009 the UAE has participated in the Venice Biennale with a national pavilion exhibition.

The Meteoric Rise of the Middle East

This year, with the rapidly increasing global interest in Middle Eastern art, the UAE national pavilion organized an exhibition that offers at a glance an overview of its development. It provided a retrospective on contemporary art exhibitions held in the UAE in the past forty years under the title, *1980 to Present: the Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates* in an archival format. Along with exhibition books, interviews, and other materials, over 100 pieces by fifteen leading UAE artists, including Abdullah Al Saadi, Mohammed Kazem, and Hassan Sharif, were collected in one place.



Under the commissionership of Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation, the UAE pavilion selected Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi of the Sharjah Art Foundation as the exhibition curator this year. Since its founding in 2009, the Sharjah Art Foundation has been the organizer of the Sharjah Biennale, and Hoor Al Qasimi, who is the founder and the first president of the foundation, is a princess of Sharjah. Her father H.H. Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, who has ruled Sharjah since 1972, is an intellectual, a historian who also holds a doctorate in philosophy. He has focused on economic growth and culture and tourism industry. After oil fields were discovered in 1971 and crude oil started being exported in 1984, the Sheikh has promoted development and transformation for national economic revival, while maintaining the traditions of Sharjah. In 1998 UNESCO declared Sharjah the Arab Capital of Culture. They are pursuing projects to reorganize the Sharjah Heritage Area, home to the Biennial's main exhibition halls, and the downtown area known as the "Heart of Sharjah" through 2025. Unlike Dubai, which hosts an international art fair, or Abu Dhabi, which has built a mega museum complex, Sharjah has sought sustained development rather than a lavish money fest.

The distinct nature of Sharjah comes through also in the architecture of the Biennial's exhibition halls. The SAF Art Spaces, which has served as the main exhibition hall every year since 2009, is not a relatively huge space at 1895 sq. meters. One could describe it as being on a more "human scale." Moreover, Sharjah did not adopt the common strategy of leading museums to create a landmark by hiring superstars; instead, local architects were hired to showcase the cultural identity of the Middle East. The resulting landscape is one that resembles a village in an old capital city, with one- or two-story buildings that reflect existing traditional houses. The halls are set up so that as the visitor moves from one space to another, he has to move through a courtyard and alleys. The exhibition halls are filled with windows throughout so that natural light floods the space for a better viewing experience. Such architecture greatly contributes to the distinctly natural and comfortable first impression given by the Sharjah Biennial.

Many have not heard of the Sharjah Biennial or mistakenly know it as a new biennial, but it was in fact founded in 1993. That's two years earlier than the Gwangju Biennale. The Sharjah Biennial

Sheika Hoor Al Qasimi at the UAE pavilion for the 56th Venice Biennale(3rd from the left). Opposite page: Clockwise from top, Michael Joo, *Locale Inscribed*, intervention in existing site and silver nitrate, 20x27m, 2014-15; Haegue Yang, *An Opaque Wind*, 2015. Mixed media installation; Danh Vo, *Come to Where the Flavors Are*, copper, gold leaf on cardboard, dimensions variable, 2015.





gradually started becoming discussed among art circles beginning in 2002 when Hoor Al Qasimi joined the Biennial team. At the time, she was a 22-year-old recent college graduate. Nonetheless, thanks to the years she had studied in England, she was able to rapidly develop a sense of contemporary art. Recently, critics have commented that she has made suitable choices in selecting artists and curators and laying down the larger framework for the Biennial. For its twelfth year, the Sharjah Biennial chose the theme “The Past, the Present, the Possible.” Selected by the art director Eungie Joo, this theme, which comes from Henri Lefebvre’s *The Right to the City* (1967), also suggests a connection with the title of the 2015 Venice Biennale, “All the World’s Futures.” Joo has stated, “To me, art and artistic discourse seem to be the one place where there is a slight glimmer of freedom, a place where the mind can be free, if not the body, or a place where people can discuss possibilities that are actually not really possible.” She said they hoped to offer possibilities for the future through art, as the past and the present cannot be separated according to Lefebvre.

Artist-Specific Exhibitions

Generally, at biennial exhibitions, each artist presents one work in one space. Since it is difficult to guide the many artists at once, organizers usually review the pieces in advance and assign them to a space; then the participating artists have to rush to complete the installation of their works in the last few days. Visitors have no choice but to rush from one artist’s work to another’s, as if they were clearing missions in a video game, since they have to view the mega exhibitions in a limited time span. Thus, after viewing just one work by an artist, they mistakenly believe they understand his or her world of art. However, at the Sharjah Biennale, visitors often have a chance to view another piece by an artist whose work they have seen elsewhere. By inviting fewer artists to participate, they allow each artist to speak—express oneself fully. Beom Kim is a good example. His drawings and canvases from early- to mid-1990s were shown at the Sharjah Art Museum. Displaying dozens of his works, the scale of this section alone was large enough to resemble a private exhibition. Having viewed his work mostly as magazine reproductions, I was delighted to see most of the pieces for the first

Abdul Hay Mosallam Zarara, *Bride’s Henna*, acrylic, sawdust, panel, 81×109cm, 1995–2000.

Page on the left: From top to bottom, Damián Ortega, *Talking Wall*, mixed media installation, dimensions variable, 2015; Rayyane Tabet, *Steel Rings*, rolled engraved steel, 80×10×0.6cm each, 2013.

time in person. The Lebanese artist Rayyane Tabet hung upside down from the high ceilings of the SAF Art Spaces old boats from his memories of escaping by boat during the civil war; Tabet lined the long corridors of the Sharjah Art Museum’s classical structure with pipes that had been used in Saudi Arabia.

If you drive over three hours east from downtown Sharjah, you reach Kalba, where you can view inside a 2400 square-meter ice factory a structure that Adrián Villar Rojas built from plants (including seeds from the Korean DMZ), shells, and bone fragments, mixed with construction materials, to resemble the earth’s strata. His installation titled *Planetarium* encompasses not only these structures but also the gentle waves of the Gulf of Oman stretching in front of the factory, as well as the desert and stony mountains beyond. To view Michael Joo’s work, one has to cross the water by boat from Corniche Street.

There were several other installations set up in the courtyards of various traditional houses. Damián Ortega built a spiral wall from mud, while Danh Vo created a partial reproduction of the Statue of Liberty in copper and let it rely precariously on scaffolding. The Japanese artist Taro Shinoda, on the other hand, created a Japanese-style garden out of desert sand, while Cinthia Marcelle set up wooden columns on a construction site so that sand falls from ceiling resting.

For Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *untitled 2015*, a rose garden was created and refreshing beverages were served. Inside the building, a lounge was set up with Arabic writing on the walls and a persian rug on the floor to serve as a rest area. Hoor Al Qasimi has said “all artists leave behind traces” to explain that they provide generous funding for travel and research to participating artists so that they can create works that have to do with life in Sharjah.

