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Selective memory in Sharjah and Dubai

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Rachel Spence

Artists grapple with remembering as western institutions are accused of forgetting ethics



'An Opaque Wind' (2015), by Haegue Yang at the Sharjah Biennial

Gabriel García Márquez once wrote: “The life of a person is not what happened. But what he remembers and how he remembers it.” Without memory, we are free of the anguish of loss but also denied the experiences that make us what we are.

In the United Arab Emirates last week, our rapport with history felt rich and vital yet also perilously embattled. Entitled *The Past, the Present, the Possible*, this year’s Sharjah Biennial, established in 1993 and now in its 12th iteration, has invited 51 artists to ponder the emirate’s “future history”.

The biennial’s events take place across the tiny state to sites in and around the city, and many artists’ meditations on time arrived from beyond Sharjah’s borders. Brooklyn-based Byron Kim offered small painted skies that served as surfaces for his scribbled diaries; some thoughts were profound, others rooted in youthful narcissism, yet all recalled T S Eliot’s lines in “Little Gidding”: “A people without history/Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern/ Of timeless moments.”

A video triptych by Maryam Kashani also confronted the infinite with the infinitesimally human. On one side, a young female Muslim arts graduate, Rasheeda, expressed the eternal truths of “He is With

You Wherever You Are”, an essay by 19th-century Sufi scholar and Algerian freedom fighter Amir Abd al-Kadr; on the other, she recited the magnificent exploration of otherness that is writer Annie Dillard’s encounter with a weasel in the woods. In the middle, footage of San Francisco Bay’s mosques, churches, cafés, gardens and highways unrolled in a silent, uncritical invitation to be, as Dillard puts it, “open to time and death painlessly, noticing everything, remembering nothing”.

Less peaceful was “The Incidental Insurgents”, which saw Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme weave an elegiac detective story around revolutionary spirits, including the Russian Marxist Victor Serge, and Abu Jilda, who fought against British power in 1930s Palestine. The artists picked up the baton of resistance. Wandering through the West Bank, they pause to gaze through paneless window frames, sensing the beauty of “spectral connections” yet forced to inhabit “a moment of full radical potential and disillusionment”.

That could be a metaphor for much contemporary art right now. Behind these artists’ particular limbo lie, or so they write, “the challenges of leveraging prior political gains in the face of current configurations of power and capital”.

The Emirates are at the centre of this storm. The seven-state federation has used its oil and mineral wealth to turn itself into a regional hub for finance, business and culture. Although far more liberal than, say, Saudi Arabia, their rapid growth, allied to limited civil rights, has seen them berated for the exploitation of migrant workers, many of them from south Asia.

That this has been a source of massive embarrassment to players in the art world way beyond the Gulf tells you that notions of “east and west” no longer hold. When western museums — the Louvre, the Guggenheim, the British Museum — chose to build or collaborate on outposts on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, they laid themselves open to vociferous criticism from human rights groups for their failure to guarantee their labourers’ rights.

Although Saadiyat’s developer, TDIC (Tourism Development and Investment Company), promises that its workers’ rights are now safeguarded, doubts continue. Earlier this month, Andrew Ross, a New York University professor who has written critically about Saadiyat, where a branch of NYU has also been built, was refused permission to enter the UAE for unspecified security reasons. Ross is a member of the activist group Gulf Labor, which includes artists such as Walid Raad. The group immediately wrote an open letter to the Guggenheim asking it to issue a statement condemning Ross’s situation. The Guggenheim has yet to respond.

Some of the Gulf Labor artists are still refusing to show work at Saadiyat unless labour conditions are seen to improve. Other artists are making labour their subject. In Sharjah this year, the Brazilian artist Cinthia Marcelle is paying construction workers to trample sand on the roof of a post-and-beam structure so that it floats through the ceiling as if through a mammoth hourglass.



‘Use LikeWater’ (2015), by Nikhil Chopra

Marcelle’s work was inspired by an abandoned Sharjah fishing village undergoing redevelopment. As a clock, it was useless: human footsteps are uneven; men knock off for breaks. (At least these men do, according to the Biennial’s organisers, who also assured me they were properly paid.) But as a

metaphor for Sharjah's past and present, its dusty, awkward beauty — part man-made, part natural — it was spot on.

If the market is the enemy of memory, then an art fair won't join the dots. In the neighbouring emirate at Art Dubai, the annual fair now in its ninth edition, there is no better vitrine on the present than its booths. In both modern and contemporary sections, a clutch of galleries and artists from India and Pakistan reflected the fact that, as well as supplying impoverished labourers, south Asia also provides Dubai with collectors eager to purchase the art.

This art fair is certainly more than a moneymaking machine. In a region where neither freedom of expression nor artistic infrastructure are generous, it has become a catalyst for both. This year, its respected talks programme, the Global Art Forum, took the impact of technology on art as its theme. What could be more forward-looking than discussions around selling art online and the creation of smart cities? Yet for Forum co-organiser Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi technology's greatest virtue is its ability to safeguard our past. "I am interested in the internet as a tool for documentation and archiving," he says.

Born in Sharjah, al-Qassemi has made a career as a web security specialist yet he is also an incisive writer on current affairs and a passionate art collector. As an example of digital archiving, he mentions an acquaintance who is recording children's lullabies in Afghanistan. "Lullabies are an important source of accents, myths and storytelling," he says, exploding the misconception that the internet imperils memory.

Such contradictions encapsulate a place where the tension between tradition and modernity is often uncomfortable but never predictable. Within the fair, censorious stickers were placed over nude photographs taken by Iranian photojournalist Kāveh Golestān. But elsewhere in the city the Satellite space on Alserkal Avenue, Dubai's expanded enclave of galleries, hosted as radical an expression of feminist art as I have seen: long white scrolls imprinted with frail, sanguineous swatches that were unmistakably left by a woman's menstruating vulva.

Part of CuneiForm, an exhibition by Dubai-based Saudi artist Ghada Da that explored the cultural history of women's bodies, the work plays on what the artist believes to be the word's origins. The most ancient form of writing, the word cuneiform is distantly derived, she claims, from the Sumerian "kunta", meaning woman; the writing system was used by priestesses to keep the books in their temples.



'The Sea Calms Down When . . .' (2015) by Ghada Da

In a week in which people were murdered for visiting a museum, how could I not be grateful for such painstakingly excavated morsels of history? "Remember that the first thing the Taliban went for was the national archives," al-Qassemi murmured as we discussed the horror in Tunisia. He believes one of the reasons why Isis is so keen to destroy cultural heritage is because it sustains people's sense of national identity. "It's how you differentiate Syria from Jordan, Tunis from Algeria. The terrorists are trying to push a certain, Pan-Islamic identity."

There can never be any justification for denying people their past, or destroying a nation's monuments.

Such reflections inevitably lead us to quarrel too with the reasons given by western museums for holding so many artefacts far from their natural homes.

Of course, some of those institutions are taking the heat off themselves by moving their treasures east. Most revealing at Art Dubai last week was the ceremony that saw Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak al Nahyan, the UAE's minister of culture, made a commander of arts and letters, the highest cultural award in France, by Jack Lang, director of the Institut du Monde Arabe.

Lang lauded Sheikh Nahyan, under whose watch Saadiyat is being developed, for his open-mindedness. The sheikh in turn denounced the Charlie Hebdo murders.

Such a pretty piece of realpolitik fails to compensate for the UAE's refusal to let Ross across their border. Right now, museums are at risk not just from terrorists but also from nation-builders — western and eastern — who undermine their institutions' ethical authority by denying human rights in the interest of profit. Cultural memory matters. We must think very carefully about how we guard the guardians.

The Sharjah Biennial runs until June 5 sharjahart.org ; artdubai.ae

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