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## At the Sharjah Biennial, Getting to Know the Intimate Side of Rebellion

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Imran Qureshi's installation "Blessings Upon the Land of my Love"

Photo by Daniel Kunitz

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By Daniel Kunitz

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Photo by Elizabeth Rappaport

The opening procession of the 2011 Sharjah biennial

SHARJAH— In "Plot for a Biennial," the title of the 10th edition of the **Sharjah Biennial** in the United Arab Emirates, the word plot can be understood in at least three senses: a space, a narrative, and a conspiracy. The show, for example, comprises several spaces, sprawling across a number of sites in the historic center of Sharjah, where modern high-rises mingle with century-old buildings constructed from coral. Oddly enough, spreading the event out produces an especially intimate experience, as one strolls from one area to another, asking directions from locals, engaging with the city in a way that would be impossible in neighboring Dubai and improbable in tourist-infested Venice. The sandy streets of Sharjah radiate calm as well as heat, although the works on view fairly shiver with the pent-up energy of the Middle East at a revolutionary moment.

This feeling of intimacy, particularly intense during the opening (which was attended by nearly all the participating artists), infuses the other two senses of plot with a special urgency. A narrative and a conspiracy are both types of stories: the former of what has happened — or what one imagines to have occurred

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— the latter of what a group of people intends to happen. Here's what did happen. At the press conference, **Sharjah Art Foundation** director **Jack Persekian** dedicated this Biennial to "the spirit of change" sweeping the region and to the young people inspiring and leading the revolutions in the Middle East. That same day the UAE, along with Saudi Arabia, sent troops into Bahrain to quell the increasingly violent uprisings in that state, where seven protesters were killed.

The following day, at the formal opening of the Biennial by Sharjah's ruler, **Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qasimi**, a group of artists and curators performed a brief action to highlight what had occurred in Bahrain: They passed out sheets of paper printed with the names of the dead and, for an instant, held those names in front of press cameras. This in no way disrupted the opening. Nor, unfortunately, did the detention of the artist **Ibrahim Quraishi**, one of the few nonwhite participants. Quraishi was taken to a police station, where he claims he was interrogated for some five hours, but he was ultimately released unharmed. The tension between the freedom of art and the need for order, whether in the form of prevailing mores or political calm, pervades the exhibition.

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Conceived as what Persekian called a "platform for experimentation" — a sort of grand conspiracy to stage artworks — this Biennial would feel political even if it weren't occurring shortly after the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and during upheavals in Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. But the current context focuses the content like a lens. The inclusion, for instance, of **Harun Faroucki** and **Andrei Ujica's** 1993 "Videograms of a Revolution," a chronological assemblage of video footage from the 1989 overthrow of Romanian dictator **Nicolae Ceausescu**, seems more pointed and more vividly pertinent now than it must have back when the curators chose it.

Meanwhile, the Pakistani artist **Imran Qureshi**, who teaches miniature painting and contributed an engaging suite of micro-scaled works, also splashed red emulsion over the square courtyard of one of the exhibition buildings to create "Blessings Upon the Land of my Love," an extraordinary site-specific installation that when seen, say, from one of the structure's upper floors looks like a pool of dried blood, and when viewed up close resolves into an agglomeration of red flower paintings. Needless to say, given the unrest in the region, the sanguinary dominates over the floral.

Qureshi's piece resonates with another in the same building, the Damascene artist **Hrair Sarkissian's** "Execution Squares," 2008, a series of 12 photographs of execution sites in three Syrian cities. The artist took the pictures early in the morning, when executions usually occur but also when the squares are empty. Six months ago these images might have appeared as mournful rebukes; today they spark and crackle like a lit fuse.

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