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- Linda Yablonsky around Tokyo
- Cathryn Drake at the fifth Art Dubai
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- Linda Yablonsky on Glenn Ligon at the Whitney Museum
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← INTIMACY AND SPECTACLE →

JUNE 16–26 PRAGUE

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Plot Point

SHARJAH 03.29.11



Left: Sharjah Art Foundation director Jack Persekian. (Except where noted, all photos: Nicolas Trembley) Right: His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, ruler of Sharjah, and H.E. Sheikha Hoor Bint Sultan Al Qasimi, president of the Sharjah Art Foundation. (Photo: Sharjah Art Foundation)

EXHAUSTED, I GOT OFF THE CATTLE TRUCK that is the new Paris-Dubai Airbus 380 at 3 AM on Tuesday, March 15. After an hour's wait at customs, the Bangladeshi driver who was to take me to the neighboring emirate of Sharjah asked if I wouldn't mind waiting for the second passenger, who hadn't arrived yet. After thirty-minutes, I asked who the second passenger was. Glenn Lowry, he told me. "Don't worry," I said. "I'm sure he'll find the way on his own. Let's go."

And so various members of the international art-world elite began trickling into the United Arab Emirates. During the press conference the next morning, Jack Persekian, the director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, dedicated the biennial's tenth edition to the spirit of change and to the youth of those Arab countries now battling—even giving their lives when necessary—for revolution. "Bravo! Bravo!" cried some journalists, their mouths already stuffed with petits fours. They were not raising champagne glasses, however: Alcohol, of course, is strictly forbidden in Sharjah.

Politics was constantly on the minds of attendees, many of whom wondered if the biennial had shifted gears at all to accommodate recent events in the Menasa region (the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia). Curator Suzanne Cotter insisted that none of the programming or artwork had been altered to address recent events. What took place in Tunisia and Egypt happened at the end of the year, she explained, when preparations were already well underway. But the remarks of co-curators

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Rasha Salti and Haig Aivazian made clear that some of the exhibited works did deal openly with conflict, and that many of the artists in the biennial were or had been personally involved with the present revolutions, either directly or via social networks.



Left: Artist Hans Haacke. Right: Artists Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac's Victoire de Pourtales.

Indeed, some of the artists present, such as the Iranian brothers Rokni and Ramin Haerizadeh, told me that they could not return to Iran and would now be residing in the UAE. And another artist, a member of the Slavs and Tatars art collective, asked me not to mention his name since that might get him in trouble back home.

After the press conference, Cotter and I made the rounds through the biennial's many venues. Sites included museums (there are more than fifteen in the emirate), abandoned traditional houses, and a cricket stadium. We met with a few artists, such as Trisha Donnelly, Hans Haacke, and Judith Barry. I wondered which among them was "The Traitor," "The Collaborator," or "The Experientialist," since the exhibition's title is "Plot for a Biennial," and each artist was assigned a role in a cast of characters that included these three labels.

At 5 PM, as I was getting into the bus to take us to the opening of Art Dubai, one of the Egyptians attending the March Meeting—a three-day symposium on artistic practices in the region—leapt aboard and explained that the army had shot some demonstrators in Manāma. "Ach, nein. Mein Gott!" cried out a German journalist. The Egyptian gentleman explained that we had to demonstrate during the biennial's official opening the next day; he would prepare signs with the names of those killed. More than a few asked: "Where exactly *is* Manāma?"

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Left: Imran Qureshi's installation. (Photo: Sharjah Art Foundation) Right: Sharjah Biennial co-curator Suzanne Cotter.

At the art fair in Dubai, the problems in Bahrain seemed far away. And at the afterparty, which was hosted by *Harper's Bazaar Arabia* and held at the Jumeirah Beach Hotel's 3600 bar (as well as a supposedly gay club whose name no one could pronounce), no one, it seemed, was talking about war.

Wednesday morning was the official inauguration of the biennial in the presence of (deep breath...) His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, a member of the Supreme Council of the United Arab Emirates and ruler of Sharjah, and his daughter H.E. Sheikha Hoor Bint Sultan Al Qasimi, president of the Sharjah Art Foundation (which made all of this possible). The man from the bus had wanted to demonstrate against sending troops to the Bahrain emirates, but security forces were able to prevent any protest attempts.

Everyone from the international contemporary art scene was at the biennial's gala that evening. It looked like the Venice Biennale (minus the collectors). I was at a table of powerful women including RoseLee Goldberg, Sarah Thornton, and Christie's Amy Cappellazzo. Needless to say we talked politics, not clothes. When the Sheik and his court, composed entirely of men, entered the enormous open-air courtyard of Bait Al Serkal and sat down at a very long table, we all rose (though we were not quite sure what to do). The biennial's opening coincided with the award ceremony of the Sharjah Biennial Prize. The jury, comprising MoMA PS1's Klaus Biesenbach, Ashkal Alwan's Christine Tohme, and critic Boris Groys, climbed on stage to hand out the five awards (a sum total of \$30,000). The Sheik himself gave Donnelly a chiseled plate for the sound installation she had created in a garden. The Pakistani artist Imran Qureshi also received a plate for a work that entailed transforming the inner courtyard of Bait Al Serkal by painting red flowers on the ground; at first glance, the flowers resembled small pools of blood. Rania Stephan and Rayyane Tabet won awards for their work as well, and Jalal Toufic received a special mention for his contributions as a "philosopher, artist, and thinker."



Left: Crowd at the Sharjah Art Prize announcements. (Photo: Sharjah Art Foundation) Right: Artist Hassan Sharif.

As the dinner was winding down, we were somewhat astonished to see all the employees rushing over to the Sheik's table to polish off the leftovers. We were herded into mini-buses to go the Sharjah Biennial afterparty, hosted by *Bidoun* and hip local gallery the Third Line, at the Dubai Creek Golf and Yacht Club. Everyone said that the party was going to be crazy, because people would drink all the alcohol they weren't allowed to drink at the gala dinner. On the bus, Richard Phillips showed dealer Elizabeth Dee and me everything he had bought at the souk that afternoon. The party wasn't all that great. In fact, it was rather difficult to get a drink because the line was so long.

Thursday morning a few of us visited the Barjeel collection, one of the only private contemporary art collections in the emirate, and the Kabakovs' *Ship of Tolerance*. Once the biennial's opening was over, many people from Sharjah rushed to leave to avoid the insane inter-emirate bottleneck. Curator Yuko Hasegawa and I hitched a taxi back to Dubai, where a bus was waiting to transport us to Abu Dhabi. There, Catherine David was attending the opening of the first large exhibition of UAE artist Hassan Sharif at the temporary seat of ADACH (Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage).

By Saturday, many had departed the region for other destinations. In the evening, we attended a concert of Mauritanian celebrity Dimi Mint Abba, who was accompanied by the musician Amino Belyamani. The concert wasn't for Western art lovers, but for the people of Sharjah, who danced in front of the stage. "Finally, something authentic," said writer Julie Boukobza, who was seated next to me. Visibly moved, she hesitated before leaving for the neighboring emirate of Ajman, where Cotter wanted to get a last drink (alcohol is not forbidden there) before we all took our flights home.

— *Nicolas Trembley*



Left: Yuko Hasegawa, chief curator of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa. Right: Dimi Mint Abba and Amino Belyamani.



Left: Performa founder RoseLee Goldberg. Right: Artist Josephine Meckseper.



Left: Artist Matt Saunders. Right: Artist Rayanne Tabet.



Left: Artist Nabil Nahas, Victoire de Pourtales, Ginevra Elkann, Tristan Hoare, and Julie Boukobza. Right: Artist Richard Phillips.

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