

ARTnews

World View: How Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi Transformed Sharjah Into an International Art Capital

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Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi.
MASATO ONODA

The following is one of several extended looks into figures and institutions selected for “The Deciders,” a list of art-world figures pointing the way forward developed by ARTnews and special guest editor Kasseem “Swizz Beatz” Dean. See the full list in the Winter 2020 issue of the magazine and online [here](#).

Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi grew up in Sharjah in the 1980s and '90s, steeped in culture. Her father, a dedicated art lover and the ruler of the emirate north of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, had the means to inaugurate a biennial art exhibition in 1993. As for Qasimi herself, she loved music; she played guitar (blues licks were a favorite pastime) and piano. She wanted to be a chef, then a furniture designer, then an architect.

Despite attending the local Choueifat—a Lebanese school known for its rote pedagogy and disinclination toward certain kinds of creativity—she also took up art. As a teenager, she taught drawing classes at the Sharjah Art Center, in a renovated hospital. With encouragement from one of her teachers, she continued to study art at prestigious institutions in London, first the Slade School of Fine Art and then the Royal Academy of Arts.

In 2002, in her early twenties, Qasimi went to Berlin to explore the burgeoning art scene there. Documenta, an important international exhibition that takes place every five years, was on view in nearby Kassel, Germany, and a curator at the Hamburger Bahnhof museum urged her to pay a visit.

It was the 11th edition of Documenta, which began in 1955, and it was unlike any that had come before. Okwui Enwezor, the Nigerian-born curator and the festival's first non-European director, had made the then radical move of emphasizing artists from outside Europe and the United States. After the rise of neoliberalism in the '90s had globalized the art market, Enwezor globalized art history and produced the festival's first truly postcolonial edition.

For Qasimi, Documenta was a revelation: it made her begin to think differently about Sharjah. “All this wealth of knowledge right in front of me ...,” she recalled of the kinds of art she wanted to make accessible to all.

In the years since, Qasimi has done exactly that. After taking over as director at the age of 22, she transformed her father's **Sharjah Biennial** into one of the most important stops on the art-world calendar and a destination nearly on par with Documenta. And she founded the **Sharjah Art Foundation** in 2009, through whose many activities she has helped turn the emirate's art scene into a powerful nexus and incubator of ideas.

This past October, Qasimi was in New York to celebrate the reopening of the Museum of Modern Art after its ambitious renovation; she was also there to accept a "Game Changer" award from the Asia Society, honoring her for "transforming the arts across the Middle East and beyond." Much of Qasimi's life is spent away from home. Fluent in Arabic, English, Mandarin, and Japanese, and conversational in French, German, Polish, Tagalog, and Russian, she sits on the boards of a planet-spanning array of institutions, among them MoMA PS1, Berlin's KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Beirut's Ashkal Alwan, and the International Biennial Association (of which she is president), along with several other advisory boards.

She agreed to an interview in the wake of a family tragedy—the death in July of her twin brother, Sheikh Khalid. "I haven't had time to grieve yet," she told me over tea in MoMA's restaurant. "I don't know when I will." Khalid left behind a fashion label, Qasimi, which she has recently taken on as creative director. She couldn't *not* do it, she said, "he worked so hard for it. . . . It was his legacy." It was a new direction for Qasimi, who, aside from glamorous openings, can often be seen at biennials and art venues around the world dressed in a decidedly low-key, hyper-casual fashion.

(Khalid was also in charge of the new Sharjah Architecture Triennial, which launched in November, and Qasimi took over that, too.)



Khadim Ali with Bamyán Art Space's mural *Standing Flames*, 2019, in the 14th Sharjah Biennial. COURTESY SHARJAH ART FOUNDATION

Qasimi comes from a tight-knit family in which discussion is encouraged. In 2002, when she returned to Sharjah after seeing Documenta, she approached her father about the prospect of becoming involved in the biennial. “ ‘Dad, can I see what happens?’ ” she remembered asking. “ ‘I won’t interfere. I just want to see.’ ”

Sheikh Sultan III had inaugurated the Sharjah Biennial a decade earlier as part of a concerted program to build cultural institutions, including nearly 20 museums for art, history, and cultural heritage. It was a passion project for a man who had intended to devote his life to scholarship—until 1972,

when his brother (also named Khalid) was killed and he suddenly and unexpectedly became Sharjah's ruler.

In the art world, the early '90s was the dawn of an age that *New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl later dubbed "festivalism," and a biennial in the Emirates was a sensible outgrowth. Founded in 1971, the United Arab Emirates demonstrated a post-Western-ness driven more by the market than by ideology. Sharjah was to some extent swept up in the wave of uprisings that raced across the Global South in the early decades of its national liberation—there were two officially acknowledged failed coups, in 1972 and 1987—but it doesn't exist in opposition to or even in conversation with any colonial power. In some ways, that makes it the ideal setting for an international biennial. In art parlance, it could be called something of a white cube.

But the biennial that Qasimi's father started in 1993 was a regional affair run by the Sharjah Department of Culture and Innovation. Its first five editions were organized into pavilions featuring artists from nearby Gulf countries like Qatar, with a scant handful of others from locations farther afield like China and Poland. Artists included Emirati stalwarts such as Hassan Sharif, Mohammed Abdullah Bulhiah, and Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, and the biennial was held at the Expo center, the usual site for trade conventions.

Qasimi having asked to "see what happens," the event's organizing committee appointed her director in 2003. If they imagined the seeming sinecure would make her happy and keep her out of the way, they were quickly proven wrong. "When Hoor took over, she already had a plan for the biennial, the foundation, and the city of Sharjah as a whole vis-à-vis its relationship to public space, heritage, and culture," said curator Christine

Tohmé. “Her vision has transformed [the biennial] into a model for public cultural agencies in the region and worldwide.”



Laurent Grasso’s neon sculpture *The Wider the Vision, the Narrower the Statement*, 2009, in the 9th Sharjah Biennial. COURTESY SHARJAH ART FOUNDATION

Qasimi’s first move was to abolish the national pavilions in favor of themes and commissioned works—offering an early glimmer of the Enwezor-style transnationalism that would later come to characterize the event. She brought in artists from 25 countries, with an emphasis on new media art, a form rarely seen in the region at the time.

“Why country representation? Nobody’s from one country!” Qasimi said of her decision to move away from the pavilion model. International

amorphousness is especially prominent in the UAE, where only around 11 percent of the population are citizens. But not everyone on the Sharjah Biennial's staff was thrilled. Several members of the old guard quit, and Qasimi was left to co-curate the 2003 biennial—the sixth edition, and her first—by herself, with help from artist Peter Lewis, a skeletal staff, and friends, including Hisham Al Madhloum, a veteran from her father's days who stuck around. Qasimi handled the press herself. She hung artworks. She scrubbed floors. Her mantra was: “If we don't have resources, let's create them.”

The biennial's new international perspective introduced challenges in its conservative local context. That first year for Qasimi, questions regarding nudity had to be negotiated: the work of Chinese artist Chen Lingyang, which included an image of her menstruating vagina, was displayed in a locked case. Even years later, in 2011, local residents objected to a controversial work by Algerian artist Mustapha Benfodil that included headless mannequins and slogans expressing anti-police, anti-government, and anti-Islamic sentiment.

“She embarked on rebooting the Biennial in such a radical way,” said Antonia Carver, director of Art Jameel in Dubai. “She turned it over the years from an old-school, dusty regional showcase into an event of absolute regional and global significance.”

In preparation for directing future biennials, Qasimi enrolled in the M.F.A. curating program at London's Royal College of Art, and the next few editions were organized by external curators whose shows were generally well received. In 2005, critic Sabine Vogel wrote in *Artforum* that “Sharjah, for better or worse, now belongs on the world stage alongside the most high-profile contemporary art biennials.”

While walking through MoMA's newly installed galleries this fall, Qasimi pointed out artists she has championed, and brought to international attention. One of them, showing in a gallery alongside Philip Guston and Adrian Piper, was Ibrahim El Salahi, a Sudanese artist and pioneer of Arab modernism, and a founder of the Khartoum School. In 1976 he spent six months as a political prisoner in the notoriously brutal Kober prison, followed by a period of house arrest, during which he filled slim notebooks with drawings, poetry, and accounts of the deprivation he endured. The Sudanese curator and Cornell University art historian Salah Hassan had tried for more than a decade to get an institution to exhibit the work of the artist, now 89. Only after the Sharjah Art Museum, at Qasimi's urging, took on the retrospective in 2012—which then traveled to Tate Modern in London—did El Salahi finally get recognition outside the region.



Bait Obaid Al Shamsi, a restored building complex in Sharjah with workshops, galleries, and artist studios

COURTESY SHARJAH ART FOUNDATION

While Qasimi was progressing with her biennial, much more attention—at least that of the art market—was going to another Gulf state. In 2010, the remarkable Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art opened in Doha, Qatar, and the museum’s dynamic chairperson, Sheikha Al Mayassa, was buying up European masters like Cézanne and Gauguin for record-shattering prices. (She bought the latter’s 1892 painting *When Will You Marry?* in 2011, for \$300 million—the highest price ever paid for a painting at that time.)

A pattern was beginning to emerge in the Gulf’s engagement with visual arts. Qatar was commissioning public sculptures by blue-chip artists like Richard Serra, Damien Hirst, and Jenny Holzer and—echoing Sheikh Sultan III’s plans for Sharjah two decades prior—fast-tracking the building of museums. Abu Dhabi aimed to become a home to big-ticket cultural tourism via the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which opened in 2016 (and was for a time rumored to be the destination of *Salvator Mundi*, the \$450 million Leonardo da Vinci painting that sold at Christie’s New York the next year). Dubai became a commercial art center with a critical mass of galleries clustered in the Alserkal Avenue cultural district. Meanwhile, through Qasimi’s efforts, Sharjah became the intellectual and critical heart of art in the Emirates—a place for edgy ideas uninflected by market motivations.

By 2009, Qasimi was outgrowing the biennial format. She didn’t want to give it up, but she wanted to do more than mount an exhibition every two years. She wanted annual programming and conferences. She wanted momentum.

With that in mind, she founded the Sharjah Art Foundation and hired as inaugural director Jack Persekian, a Palestinian curator who had organized two editions of the Jerusalem Show in Israel. Qasimi also moved the biennial from the Expo Center to the heritage area that plays home to

Sharjah's other cultural institutions. That area has come to be known as the Heart of Sharjah—a cultural center and, increasingly, a tourist attraction. It now boasts a luxury hotel where, bedouin tradition notwithstanding, visitors are invited to “live the 5-star lifestyle of a bygone era.”

The local community in Sharjah is paramount to Qasimi. Children living in apartments nearby are growing up with the foundation, and cats who wander there have become de facto mascots. When I asked after my personal favorite cat, an impossibly soft orange tabby named Fanta, Qasimi whipped out her phone to show snapshots of her own favorite, a white scrap she named Bowie for his heterochromatic eyes.

“Hoor has an unwavering commitment to her local context above all others,” said curator Tohmé. “The Sharjah Art Foundation may have established itself in the international arena, but it remains deeply rooted in and committed to the people of Sharjah.”

Beyond home, recent Sharjah Biennials have tapped into the area's tradition of aspiring toward solidarity outside its borders. The edition Tohmé curated in 2017 extended the exhibition to venues in Dakar, Istanbul, Ramallah, and Beirut. Such moves owe in part to Qasimi's “courage and vision,” Tohmé said. “It's not every day, nor in any biennial structure, that one could encounter such open-ended engagement that allows for critically questioning existing structures while being forthcoming in scope and effect.”

In 2018, along with Salah Hassan, Qasimi also set up the Africa Institute, a think tank for African studies housed in a new David Adjaye–designed building adjacent to the Africa Hall, a venue built in Sharjah in the 1970s as a home for Afro-Arab exchange and cultural programming for the city's

sizable African population (primarily from East Africa). Though Qasimi is director, the Institute is an independent entity distinct from her foundation, and in addition to art, its interests concern patterns of global migration, legacies of slavery and colonialism, water rights, and civic studies.



Ceramics by Salem Jawhar on view in the Sharjah Art Foundation's Flying Saucer building. COURTESY SHARJAH ART FOUNDATION

Over the years, Qasimi maintained a close relationship with Okwui Enwezor, whose vision for Documenta was so influential for her. With his mammoth 2016 exhibition, “Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965,” at the Haus der Kunst in Germany, Enwezor charted an alternate course for art of the 20th century that expanded the remit of Western art-historical categories to include artists from some 65 countries, and Enwezor was working on a follow-up exhibition to be titled “Postcolonial.” When he died last March, at age 55, after a prolonged

illness, Qasimi had been speaking with him for almost two years about staging a 15th edition of the Sharjah Biennial reflecting on those of the past under the evocative title “Thinking Historically in the Present.”

Despite Enwezor’s passing, Qasimi announced in November that the show will open in March 2021, and it will premiere a posthumous incarnation of “Postcolonial.” Enwezor’s vision will be carried out by a team of his close collaborators, including curators Tarek Abou El Fetouh and Ute Meta Bauer, and art historians Chika Okeke-Agulu and Salah Hassan. Qasimi will co-curate, with assistance from an advisory committee comprising David Adjaye, artist John Akomfrah, and Christine Tohmé.

The coming Sharjah Biennial brings Qasimi full circle, it seems, back to her early formative experience with Enwezor, even as it offers her a way forward. When she spoke about the projects to come with the *New York Times* this past fall, she shared something she learned from Enwezor: “You can’t really look at the future without looking at the past and the present.”