

ARTFORUM

DIARY

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, ZAYED!

Gökcan Demirkazik on Art Jameel and Abu Dhabi Art

November 25, 2018 • Dubai and Abu Dhabi



Artist Hajra Waheed, Mohammed Khalid, curator Murtaza Vali, and Jameel Art Centre curator Nora Razian.

THE SAME DAY Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan aggressively implicated the Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, his royal highness was busy headlining the second annual Future Investment Initiative—dubbed “Davos in the Desert,” for its congregation of mega-executives and heads of state—at the Riyadh Ritz-Carlton. Despite cautious last-minute cancellations from many, the prince appeared ebullient and pithily announced the success of the conference: “More people, more money.”

The inverse—“more money, more people”—is true of the Saudi Kingdom’s unflinching ally and neighbor, the United Arab Emirates, and especially resonates with the orchestration of Dubai’s meteoric rise as a global capital in the past few decades. Studded with free-trade zones, Dubai continues to boast a healthy appetite for ambitious, large-scale undertakings (such as Expo 2020) and glitzy, vaguely extraterrestrial architecture (such as the Museum of the Future), attracting visitors to partake in its vertiginous capitalist optimism. Though the largest Emirati city rarely disappoints and tends to live up to its clichés, it is perhaps also attempting to shed skin thanks to an increasing number of thoughtful, homegrown arts initiatives. Yet even these carry a hearty dose of Khaleeji contradiction.

The city’s latest cultural institution, the Jameel Arts Centre, financed by the Saudi Jameel family, is located by the Dubai Creek in Al Jaddaf, a neighborhood now home to a handful of hotels, luxury condos, and a \$270 million library in the shape of an open book. Yet despite the waterfront pomp and its visual rhythm of white cuboid structures forming stately clusters—à la Louvre Abu Dhabi—the complex is remarkable for its near absence of self-indulgent spectacle. (“Everybody says it’s very un-Dubai,” said the Jameel architect, Christopher Lee.) The proportions are perfect: Both the institution as a whole and its exhibition spaces are soberly scaled and intuitively connected, allowing for moments of respite from what Lee called “exhibition fatigue,” with views of the center’s courtyard gardens and waterfront.

A sensitivity to human scale seemed present not only in the architecture but also in the framing and programming of the institution—the signs were everywhere. Among the statistics Art Jameel’s director Antonia Carver gave at the press conference on the preview day was the fact that it took “1,455,160 man and woman hours” to build the center, and she amiably reiterated every once in a while that the Jameel Arts Centre was the first “noncommercial, nongovernmental art institution with a purely civic mandate” in the Gulf. (I realized later in the afternoon that on a glass wall behind us the names of builders were listed alongside the curatorial team and sponsors.) Much to my surprise, there were no ambitious canon-building narratives either; collection displays were scaled down to four cozy monographic “Artist’s Rooms,” predominantly (but not exclusively) culled from the Art Jameel collection. Mounira Al Solh, who also currently has a solo exhibition at the embargo-stricken Qatar’s Mathaf, and the late Lala Rukh had particularly tight—albeit predictable—displays with works from different periods, both demonstrating a keen interest in systems of signification and their malleability.

151; an adaptation of her crowd-pleasing 2015 Japanese Pavilion in Venice, this time sans keys and with an abra boat, characteristic of Dubai, stuck in a maze of red yarn—felt misplaced and flat. The wall text informed that her commission was “part of a thread in Art Jameel’s programming that encourages exchange between Japanese and Gulf-based artists.” I puzzled over the odd specificity of this “thread” (pun intended), until I learned that the Jameel family had built their fortune on the Middle East’s largest Toyota dealership. The other notable instance of retinal indulgence was more directly tied to the whim of money politics. Al Jaddaf’s principal developer Dubai Holding brought Daan Roosegaarde’s immersive light installation WATERLICHT, 2018, to the sculpture garden outside the Jameel Arts Centre for a four-night engagement: After a few minutes of oohs and aahs from the opening-night crowd, the sight of blue undulating waves overhead devolved into a dispensable nuisance, just like the intense oud-burning in the reception hall.

Earlier that day, following the shah-worthy lunch across the creek at Enigma—Palazzo Versace’s Orientalist fantasy of a Persian restaurant—I had asked Carver if the Jameels had had any specific prompt for her, and she spoke of their desire “to appeal to the broadest possible public” with “great integrity [and] deeply researched, investigative shows.” She seemed convinced that those two qualities did not have to be on competing teams, and at least on the account of the opening’s headliner group show, “Crude,” she was right.

Curated by Murtaza Vali, “Crude” intelligently zooms in on oil as a complex—and, at times, relatable—driving force behind the region’s modernity, rather than simply writing it off as the villain behind—what else?—the Anthropocene. A beautiful suite of handpicked black-and-white photographs by Latif Al Ani (who learned the medium as an employee of the state-owned oil company in Iraq) celebrate the geometry of “progress” in midcentury Iraq through car tires, a pipeline construction, and modern architecture, while Iranian Houshang Pezeshknia’s paintings depict the roughness of oil fields in Iran and the plight of Anglo-Persian Oil Company workers with heavyhearted de-skilling. From a younger generation, Hajra Waheed and Michael John Whelan transformed the “stuff” of history—be it classified Aramco documents or sand from oil excavation sites in Abu Dhabi—into exquisite, fragile-looking objects full of affect and ambivalence. Vali told me that “oil breeds exuberance and dread.” And so it does, with Hassan Sharif’s small, colorful mountain of plastic flip-flops, all tied together with copper wire (*Slippers and Wire*, 2009), and Monira Al Qadiri’s menacing plant-drill hybrids, bestowed with the attractive iridescent sheen of oil emulsions (*Flower Drill* and *OR-BIT 1*, both 2016).



Installation view of “Crude” with Raja’a Khalid’s *uberNEON II*, 2017, and Hassan Sharif’s *Slippers and Wire*, 2009.

AFTER A BRIEF SHARJAH DETOUR to see the Sharjah Art Foundation's autumn shows (solid as usual) and the First Fikra Graphic Design Biennial, housed in the quirky premises of the former Bank of Sharjah building (refreshingly playful), I finally made my way to the largest, wealthiest emirate for the Tenth Abu Dhabi Art Fair. Naturally, there was more of exuberance and dread in Abu Dhabi. The gravitas of the capital made itself felt immediately: Champagne was replaced by glistening clear turquoise mocktails at the entrance of Manarat Al Saadiyat, the state-organized fair's home on Saadiyat Island since 2011. "Have you seen the purses?!" exclaimed a joyously wild-eyed Al Qadiri, who had lent her lustrous creatures and electrifying purple-green palette to the visual identity of the fair. (I squealed when I learned that the fair catalogue came in cotton purses with her work on them for the VIP cardholders, and that I, too, could have one.)

A few steps into the building, I had just begun to read the hair-raising sentences running through Jenny Holzer's STATEMENT – Truisms +, 2015, when a thawb-clad man gently pushed me toward the Boucheron selfie wall, muttering something I did not understand. Finally, I managed to hear the word "VIP" and lifted my head to encounter the sight of other men in thawb ceremoniously proceeding in a triangular formation toward the exit. Ostentation was not in short supply elsewhere in the booths: It was fun trying to guess which galleries would have works with palm trees in them and which would have a mix of gilded and mirrored objects. A South Korean gallery had filled half of its booth with Swarovski-studded ceramic donuts. At the sight of this obscenity, a Dubai-based publisher shrugged his shoulders and said, "They bring those every year . . . And they sell out."

Apparently, quite a few galleries preferred to bring their best-selling "classics" to Abu Dhabi, but to the fair's credit, the Omar Kholeif–curated "Focus: Icons" section had compelling presentations—from Gypsum Gallery's mini-survey of Egyptian surrealist Ahmed Morsi to Huguette Caland's much-coveted "Bribes de corps" series at Beirut's Janine Rubeiz, the smaller booths here delivered. Pi Artworks' booth in this section featured a single vitrine from Michael Rakowitz's "The invisible enemy should not exist" series, 2018, which was just a few steps away from a personal favorite: Emirati Mohammed Kazem's black-and-white photographs of himself licking various objects (Tongue, 1994) at Dubai's Isabelle van den Eynde.

The "Year of Zayed"—the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of the UAE's founding father—was in full swing in Abu Dhabi, so a trip to his birthplace two hours away was in order. At Al Ain, the fair presented its site-specific "Beyond" commissions in the city's late nineteenth-century forts and famous date-farming oases.

Imran Qureshi's delicate brushwork looked meek and anecdotal on the watering aflaj of the date palm trees, though I wish I hadn't heard the artist's explanation ("It symbolizes love and the earth"). Lunch was served at the family home of the Palestinian-born minister of state, Zaki Nusseibeh, who also happens to be the father of fair director Dyala Nusseibeh. He graciously implored his guests—in multiple European languages—to explore every single corner of his art-packed house. Not a single inch of empty wall space was spared from his eclectic salon-hung collection, which spans from Sliman Mansour to the Haerizadeh brothers to Hesam Rahmanian.

During my last hours in Abu Dhabi the next day, I made the trek to Warehouse 421 on Mina Island to catch the premiere of Al Qadiri's new work DIVER, 2018, included in Tarek Abou El Fatouh's traditionally stellar performance program "Durub Al Tawaya." Coproduced by Abu Dhabi Art, Warehouse 421, and the Asia-Pacific Triennial, the short video is unexpectedly meditative. As four swimmers in holographic body suits perform a lyrical choreography in water to the beats of a pearl divers' song, I let waves of my own exhibition fatigue wash over me, and felt happy that I would soon have my head above water.

— Gökcan Demirkazik