

# How resistance has emerged as a trend in the UAE art scene

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On show as part of *Active Forms*, which took shape both as an exhibition and as the programme for Sharjah Art Foundation's annual March Meetings talks and performances: Halil Altindere's *Homeland* (2016, HD video)

Last month, New York University Abu Dhabi opened two shows around refugees: an exhibition in collaboration with refugees in Djibouti, and a large-scale retrospective, *Permanent Temporariness*, about the political and emotional conditions engendered by Palestinian refugee camps.

Last week, Abu Dhabi Art hosted *And Here I Am*, a one-person, true-story play about a young man in the Jenin refugee camp who was jailed by Israel for three years, and, upon leaving, had a glimmer of luck and traded armed conflict for the theatre.

And this weekend, the Sharjah Art Foundation opened *Active Forms*, a show and series of discursive events themed around political and social resistance, again often specifically in regards to the Palestinian conflict.

It's the job of journalists to coax trends out of disparate events, so it's hard not to remark upon the recent attention in the UAE art world to politics, and particularly Palestine. But the idea that major art institutions have suddenly turned political is a red herring: these exhibitions and events reveal a global anxiety among artists and cultural producers that is long-simmering – the desperate desire of art to speak both on its own aesthetic terms and to address the political and social crises that rage around it.

Reem Shadid, deputy director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, says she was “thinking of the role of art and culture in relation to the discussions that are going on outside of the art world” in putting together *Active Forms*, which took shape both as an exhibition and as the programme for the foundation's annual March Meetings talks and performances. “Otherwise we're really in this art bubble speaking to each other. We need to think about what our role is in the discussion on resistance and what it is that we do in our daily lives.”

## Talks on the 'militant image' and more

Indeed, it may well be that the need for politics now feels more acute, as was demonstrated in this strong programme. In the talks, which were spread out over three days, *Active Forms* included discussions around historical examples of art's engagement with revolution and conflict. Reem Shilleh, for instance, spoke about the archive of Palestinian revolutionary film that she has been putting together. It was made for the

organisation Subversive Film; she spoke about the idea of the “militant image” in conversation with John Akomfrah, a UK filmmaker who was part of the activist Black Audio Film Collective in the 1980s and who has gone on to agitate for the inclusion of narratives of people of colour.

And it also hosted discussions of projects in which politics has been a set of decisions taken over the course of a life. The Malian filmmaker Manthia Diawara, who charmed his audience, discussed his career-long project of creating an African cinema that returned Europe’s critical gaze. Dale Harding, similarly, spoke about his work to bring aboriginal audiences into contemporary art galleries – spaces from which they had felt utterly excluded.

Shadid selected work that reflected on conflict and its effects: such as Simone Fattal’s paintings and sculptures abstracting the theme of war; the Turkish artist Halil Altindere’s strident videos on the current situation of migrants in Germany; and the folk-art-like works of the self-taught Palestinian artist and PLO member Abdul Hay Mosallam Zarara. The show is drawn from the foundation’s collection, underlining the importance of politics to its work more generally. *Active Forms* also included the first ever UAE display of Akomfrah’s *Vertigo Sea*, his magisterial video installation on the sea and the violence it hides – slave ships, the whaling trade, environmental decline – which premiered at the 2015 Venice Biennale.

As the March Meetings attendees scurried to dinner on Sunday evening, I spied Sharjah Art Foundation president Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi in the shadows of the courtyard where *Vertigo* was installed, watching the images of water as the evening grew dark.

It was a rare moment of calm: the foundation had a full plate this week. *Active Forms* also included performances of Wael Shawky’s epic reorientation of the *Chanson de Roland* – the oldest surviving work of French literature, here told from an Arabic perspective (titled *The Song of Roland: The Arabic Version*) – and performances by composer and musician Neo Muyanga.



Wael Shawky, *The Song of Roland: The Arabic Version*, 2018. Performance, 60 minutes. Part of Sharjah Art Foundation’s March Meeting 2018. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation

#### **Four retrospectives**

It was also complemented by the opening of four retrospectives, each of which could have anchored a cultural season on its own: of Lebanese sculptor Mona Saudi, the Egyptian artist Anna Boghiguan, the Iraqi photographer Latif Al Ani, the French-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira, and the Emirati artist Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim.



Emirati artist Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim's work has echoes of the 1990 art movement

These exhibitions were the result of long-term research and reflect the foundation's broad programming, although taken together they suffered somewhat from their diversity, with the variety of tone, medium and time period slowing discussions from emerging among them.



Emirati artist Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim's work has echoes of the 1990 art movement

Al Ani showed work from a photography practice that began in 1953, when he joined the Iraq Petrol Company as an intern and developed photography as a hobby on the side. (He was a quick study: by 1954, he was the first to professionally photograph King Faisal II.)

The images portray an era both stylish and surprisingly distant, with tourists posing at well-preserved ruins, women in uniformed caps at a date factory, and Yazidis and Kurds in traditional dress.



Lebanese sculptor Mona Saudi's 'Moods of Earth and Humans'  
Sharjah Art Foundation Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation

Mona Saudi, who is based in Beirut, exhibited the classical, beautiful sculptures that she has made since the 1960s in the clean, organic lineage of Brancusi, Moore and Hepworth. Installed in the Sharjah Art Museum, the works respond to the stone they are carved from, as if elements not only of Saudi's practice but produced in some way by the earth themselves. This connection to the earth and aesthetic focus on forms resonated with the thoroughly joyful sculptures and paintings of Ibrahim in an opportunity to see the work of the Emirati artist – which has often been considered largely in relation to Hassan Sharif and the 1990s art movement more generally – on its own.



French-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira specialises in travel-oriented work, tracing journey

Working in a more contemporary idiom, Zineb Sedira addresses the way that things of all orders – languages, people, images, commodities – travel. She takes a step back, as it were, to show the full panoply and effects of a century of displacement: from the sea on which migrants travel to the trade routes of sugar. In a new commission for this show, *Air Affairs* (2018), she retraced the first route of British Airways – then named British Imperial Airways – from London’s Croydon Airport to Pakistan, in the year 1932, when Sharjah opened its first airport: the first in the Arabian Gulf and a stopover on the Croydon-Karachi route. The resulting travelogue reveals political shifts between the 1930s and the present: some of the countries the route covered are now practically inaccessible – such as Baghdad and Basra – while others, such as Galilee in Palestine, are no longer sovereign territories.



Anna Boghiguan during the opening of her spring exhibition at the Bait Al Serkal in Al Mareija area in Sharjah. Pawan Singh / The National

The foundation also opened a major retrospective of the work of the Egyptian artist Boghiguan, curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and originating at Turin’s Castello di Rivoli, which Christov-Bakargiev directs. Ambitious, wide-ranging, defiantly eclectic, excessively well-read, Boghiguan’s work attempts nothing less than a story of a world in which colonialism, occupation, decadence and resistance have always been constants: from Egypt’s defeat by the Roman Empire, which she accesses via the Greek poet Kavafy, to India under the British Empire, a time pictured in drawings and installations based on Rabindranath Tagore’s 1912 play *The Post Office*.





Boghiguiian's work on display at Sharjah's Bait Al Serkal, a historic house built in the 19th century Photos Pawan Singh / The National

“What is there to say?” she responded, when she was asked to provide commentary on her work. “We are now going to see what there is to see.” This season, the Sharjah Art Foundation faces squarely up to the world outside.

Active Forms: Works from the Sharjah Art Foundation Collection, Latif Al Ani: Through the Lens 1953–79, Anna Boghiguiian, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim: Elements and Zineb Sedira: Air Affairs and Maritime NonSense are all at the Sharjah Art Foundation until June 16. Mona Saudi: Poetry and Form is on until June 7.