

'I found myself in a stunning site': Sharjah takes its turn in the cinema spotlight

Akram Zaatari's 'The Landing' also pays tribute to the late Emirati artist Hassan Sharif



A recreation of Hassan Sharif's 'Swing' in 'The Landing', which was shot in Sharjah. Courtesy Akram Zaatari

When movies shoot in the UAE, we tend to expect to see the shimmering glass towers of Dubai or Abu Dhabi, as showcased by the likes of *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol* or *Fast and Furious 7* at one end of the spectrum, and the desolate desert landscapes of Liwa, as in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* or *Deliver Us From Evil*, at the other.

For *The Landing*, a Sharjah Art Foundation-funded piece that screened at last month's Berlin Film Festival, Lebanese artist and filmmaker Akram Zaatari headed to the less high-profile filmmaking hub of Sharjah. For his latest project, he brought the urban and the desert together at Shaabiyat Al-Ghurayfah, a public housing project built for members of the local Al Kutby tribe in Al Madam in the early 1980s. By 1994, the homes

had been abandoned and the residents moved on to newer housing projects, and the desert's shifting sands had been left to reclaim the area.

The contrast makes for an eerie landscape – half human, half nature – and Zaatari explores this dichotomy in his feature-length piece. Interestingly for an artist most associated with his visual work, both in the fields of photography and film, he chooses sound as the major tool for communication in this film, which originally premiered at last year's Sharjah Biennial prior to its successful Berlin run. The director insists we shouldn't be too surprised by this apparent sonic change of direction.

“I have explored so many different ways of studying or reflecting on existing photography, existing locations and objects in my previous work,” he says. “This time, I found myself in a stunning site. I found myself on the border between nature and a man-made urban environment. This tension exists in every urban environment, but at Shaabiyat Al-Ghurayfah, this confrontation is in your face. The moment you land on that site, you're confronted with the force of nature, moving sand that has taken over a modern yet deserted housing project. It is such a powerful confrontation, you could - neither dub it nor mute it. That is why I thought: ‘OK, let's transform these modern - spaces into instruments to produce sound with, and let's look for and listen to the sound of that place.’”

The Landing's Sharjah location is truly the star of Zaatari's film, and he clearly feels that he had to let the site speak for itself, rather than try and tame it and use it as a simple geographic space in which narrative action took place. “It is a modern housing project, made obsolete in fewer than 15 years, and looks like an archaeology site in fewer than 40 years,” he says. “My work could have been shot in Beirut or anywhere else, but it's this site that captured me. I insist that I do not use the space as a stage set for a parachuted script; on the contrary, I use it fully conscious of its history and of the people who lived there.”



Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari. Alamy Live News

The Sharjah location isn't the film's only UAE link. When the director shot the film, he admits he was heavily influenced by late Emirati artist Hassan Sharif. Although the Dubai artist was not one of the people who lived in Shaabiyat Al-Ghurayfah, his performance pieces frequently took place in similar sites, away from the UAE's major urban hubs, and the director admits he was informed by Sharif's work on the set of *The Landing*, even going so far as to recreate one of the artist's pieces in the film.

"[Sharif's] work accompanied me while in Sharjah," he explains. "He has a very playful relationship with the natural environment. His documented performances in the desert are playful and funny. I staged a re-enactment of one of his performances named *Swing*, where he is on a swing, and a microphone hangs on another swing, while he says one word. We have only seen photographs of these performances, but

never seen them or heard how they sounded. In *The Landing*, you see the main actor doing the same with a radio. I see Sharif as an artist whose sense of aesthetics was ahead of his times in the Arab world.”

One thing that Zaatari has in common with Sharif, is that he is probably better-known as an artist than a filmmaker. Just as Sharif’s works were mostly set in isolated desert locations rather than galleries, Zaatari’s work, including film, is more frequently shown in galleries than cinemas, often with installations around the screen to further emphasise elements of the work – including a car that was brought to *The Landing*’s first public showing in Sharjah. I ask the director how he found screening his film to a more traditional cinema audience in Berlin.

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Akram Zaatari

“A filmmaker never refuses to show his work in a theatre,” Zaatari asserts. “On the contrary, I believe that theatre is a natural place for any film.

In Berlin, we could not ship the car or intervene in a cinema space, but the film was so well presented.”

Unfortunately, with the coronavirus pandemic currently forcing the cancellation of festivals and gatherings around the world and playing havoc with cinema and event schedules, *The Landing*’s next public screening is still unconfirmed, but Zaatari isn’t downhearted at the hopefully temporary curtailing of the film’s journey around the world.

The director says that next on his “to-do” list is a more traditional narrative feature that can perhaps see him redress the balance for Arab cinema after a slow year so far,

which saw no regional films feature in Berlin Film Festival's main competitions, and very likely none, or any other films for that matter, at Cannes in May, since the festival's future hangs in the balance due to the virus.

Zaatari admits that he doesn't know why things appear to have slowed down after a run of two successive Arabic-language films being nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar (Nadine Labaki's *Capernaum* last year, and Ziad Doueiri's *The Insult* in 2018), but perhaps he can use this unexpected time off from the festival circuit to work on adding his own name to that list when 2021's awards season comes around?

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