

ARTFORUM

SLANT

ON THE GROUND: DUBAI

Rahel Aima on the ground in Dubai

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The Burj Khalifa under construction in Dubai, 2008. Photo: Imre Solt.

DO YOU REMEMBER THE DIALUP HANDSHAKE? Numbers being punched, assorted squeal-y gurgling, a series of high and low tones, and then the extended white noise? Dubai's past decade of overtures towards the international art world felt a lot like this. The initial plaintive trilling gave way to a charging, moneyed insistence familiar to anyone on the global art circuit. We've finally logged on, and now it's time to turn inward for phase two.

In the mid-2000s, I would drive past a massive billboard hugging the side of the highway. It depicted a rendering of a new downtown development with scooped-out waterways, luxury mixed-use complexes, and the world's tallest tower, a cutout of which rose several feet above a dubiously tumultuous sky. Behind it, the actual Burj Khalifa slowly loomed, notching its own growth like a child being measured up against a wall. Emblazoned in one corner of the display was the tagline: History Rising. In June, Cardi B's summer banger "Bodak Yellow" dropped. The video suggests luxury-as-usual, opening with an aerial shot of that fantastical cityscape made gleaming reality. Burnished sand dunes, camels, a sulky-looking cheetah, Cardi in a green niqab, men in dishdashas, a rain of Benjamin Franklins, and so on. This is Dubai as it works hard to be seen, even if, like the Sharjah Biennial, that image never quite touches the ground it purports to represent.

The funny thing about Dubai is that it's a place where history comes after the future. History is the ad copy that sinters a rendering to reality and as such, it needs to be malleable and responsive enough to the needs of the market as well as the national project. This year saw a spate of retrospective shows, a relatively new phenomenon in a city whose myths are predicated on zero-to-hundred accelerated development. Remember the faintly ludicrous title of the UAE's 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale participation "Lest We Forget"? It's a phrase that has since become a running joke around here. The pavilion gestured towards that exhibition's remit to examine architecture's progress over the past hundred years, but focused on the 1970s and 80s; such is the tenuousness of historical memory. Lest we forget the eighties —! Of note this year was an exhibition of Syrian portraiture that inaugurated Concrete's OMA-designed flagship space on Alserkal Avenue, Lawrence Abu Hamdan's chilling audioscape of a Syrian prison and Mochu's kaleidoscopic paeon to Goan techno-spiritualism at the thirteenth Sharjah Biennial, Fouad Elkoury's Cairene travelogues at The Third Line, an Art Jameel lecture performance from Ho Rui An, and Lala Rukh's hushed seascapes at Grey Noise in what would come to feel like an elegy when the artist died this summer. At the same time, I would hesitate to place any of these in my personal top five for 2017, and it remains hard to shake that ever-persistent, insidious question of whether these shows were truly great, or just great for the UAE.

Unequivocally stunning, however was the Picasso and Giacometti exhibition at Doha's Fire Station, and the Bin Jelmoed House slavery museum in the same city. Focusing on the trans-Indian Ocean slave trade in particular, with an emphasis on Qatar's own complicity, its rigor felt all the more remarkable because slavery was only formally abolished in the Gulf in the 1960s and remains a touchy subject, to say nothing of its present-day analogs in Libya and ISIS territories.

And even when recent historical shows have fallen flat curatorially, as the majority of them have, it's difficult to ignore their educational value: most of the artists included have never shown in the region. On that note the Jean-Paul Najar Foundation, which hit its stride this year with a remarkable Christian Bonnefoi presentation this winter, also took a look in the spring at artist-run spaces in 1970s downtown New York. The JPNF show found a sequel this fall with NYU Abu Dhabi's hosting of its NYC counterpart's "Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952–1965." A fortuitous if very close coincidence, I was assured, yet in a country with so few institutions to begin with, it seems to telegraph a much wider desire for new conditions of possibility, new modes of art-making. The local scene has undoubtedly developed over time but it's a brittle, uncertain maturity: what comes up seemingly overnight can disappear just as quickly. It's also worth emphasizing the astonishing levels of support available to artists here, which ranges from free or heavily subsidized studio and exhibition spaces to fully funded MFAs abroad. Unfortunately the cost of living and generalized precarity of status (one that depends on your place of birth over your passport) leave few artists able to avail themselves of these opportunities.

Following the passing last fall of Hassan Sharif, the past few years' furious documenting of the early years of the local art scene came to the fore. Very "Emirati Art History Rising,_" with a side of hagiography, as if to make up for the decades in which these artists struggled in obscurity before supporting the arts became economically expedient. It's worth remembering that even Sharif, arguably the country's most illustrious artist, was relatively unknown just ten years ago. Perhaps Dubai didn't need to go questing for international contemporary art after all. Like the last feel-good moments before a movie's credits roll, maybe it actually was there all along, or so the new narrative goes.

Two major institutional shows in neighboring emirates anchored this impulse, along with a handful of smaller shows in Dubai, which mined the same well-trod territory. The mammoth Hassan Sharif retrospective “I Am The Single Work Artist,” which opened in November at the Sharjah Art Foundation, brought together over 300 works and impressed in its scale even as it suggested the kind of obituary drafted years in advance. At NYUAD this spring was “But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988–2008,” encompassing the group of Emirati artists known as “The Five”—Sharif, Mohammed Kazem, Hussein Sharif, Abdullah Al Saadi, and Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, in addition to Ebtisam Abdulaziz—a rare woman in the years before female artists came to outnumber male ones—and, unusually, Jos Clevers and Vivek Vilasini, who were Dutch and Indian respectively. Also unexpected were two of the local artists included in the UAE pavilion for this year’s Venice Biennale, Vikram Divecha and Lantian Xie, residents-but-not-citizens as the Gulf litany goes, a move that feels radical in face of the country’s racialized hierarchy.



View of “Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist,” 2017.

There's a quote from German anarchist Gustav Landauer that I think about a lot. He says, "The State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another ... We are the State and we shall continue to be the State until we have created the institutions that form a real community." When working in the arts here it's hard to escape being the state or an extension of it, and to not be conscripted into a mythmaking that you, like the original Big Five artists, might not have necessarily signed up for.

And while it's unlikely that anyone in the upper echelons of government is consulting Landauer, there has certainly been a concerted effort to dig in, build sustainable arts infrastructure, and most of all, to build institutions. Especially important are Alserkal Avenue's pilot residency program, and the piñata of the new Abu Dhabi Louvre, which opened just a few weeks ago to much fanfare followed by a general slump in energy. Above all, the entrance of Saudi-funded Art Jameel, who have announced a generous commission cycle and opened a project space in anticipation of a 10,000 square-foot center currently being built on the old city's arterial creek, presages a broader shift away from Dubai's scene being primarily market driven—and perhaps a geographical shift too, away from the city's purpose-built arts districts. No one's really selling anyway—one dealer quipped that even commercial spaces here essentially function as nonprofits—and galleries are responding by staging fewer, longer-running shows and doing more international fairs to cater to their primarily foreign collector bases. Following last year's deregulation of fuel prices, January 2018's introduction of a 5% VAT promises to make the city even more unaffordable, further worrying dealers and denizens alike.

But the thing about that History Rising billboard? The sky never looks like that here. We don't even get inclement weather unless clouds have been seeded or ionized into producing rain. Outside the UAE's borders a proxy war in Yemen rages on, along with an open siege of economic attrition with Qatar, to say nothing of a global climate that feels like a sentient @Horse_ebooks tweet. Then there's the US's modified Muslim ban that continues to make interfacing with American fairs and institutions a difficult proposition, in addition to who knows what's happening in Lebanon.

Even the Sharjah Biennial, which was distributed across five countries this year, seemed to be hedging its bets. We're largely insulated from that volatility here—this is very much the shelf stable city—yet like the sand and ants that inevitably find their way into the most sealed of interiors, it's hard to keep the outside world out forever.