

MEET ME HALFWAY

Jyoti Dhar on the 2021 March Meeting

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“YOU FEEL GEOLOGIC TIME IN SHARJAH,” Eungie Joo said at the March Meeting 2021, the annual three-day convening of globe-trotting art professionals hosted by the Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF) in the United Arab Emirates. This year’s program, “Unravelling the Present,” was staged as a ten-day series of virtual roundtable discussions and solo presentations as part of a thirtieth-anniversary reflection on the Sharjah Biennial. In her presentation, Joo, who curated the biennial’s twelfth edition in 2015, spoke of seeing seashells in the desert during an on-site research trip in Sharjah and realizing that she was “standing in the sea of another time.” Her thoughts turned to archaeological findings of the emirate (such as those at Jebel Faya) which predate human migration out of Africa to 125,000 years ago. “Any of us could have bloodlines that intersect here.” Such talk of ancestral linkages, nomadic communities, and unearthed histories felt apt, as the MM 2021 also served as the inaugural event of Sharjah Biennial 15, slated to open in 2022 and titled “Thinking Historically in the Present.”

Organized by Hoor Al Qasimi, the framework for SB15 was initially conceptualized by Okwui Enwezor before he passed away in 2019. If Stuart Hall’s “aura was everywhere” at Enwezor’s Documenta 11 (2002), as John Akomfrah reminisced, then Enwezor’s presence suffused MM 2021; references to his intellectual and curatorial approach, from Johannesburg in 1997 to Venice in 2015, were quoted throughout the meeting by his peers and mentees. This nod to forebears was a crucial part of contextualizing artistic prehistories in the Global South. A foregrounding of artist-led initiatives in the region included Nada Shabout’s astute discussion of the first Arab Biennale in 1974 in Baghdad, an initiative reflecting a distinct moment of pan-Arab political unity that later saw iterations in Rabat and Tripoli. From the ’70s to the ’90s, Mohammed Kazem mapped out cultural movements in Sharjah, showing how local artists (for instance, Hassan Sharif and Mohammed Yusuf, who founded the Emirates Fine Arts Society in 1980) laid the groundwork for the first decade of Sharjah Biennials (1993–2003).

In her talk, Qasimi retraced her leadership of the foundation and state-sponsored biennial, which she took over at age twenty-two (her first edition, SB6, opened the same day as the Battle of Baghdad), a year after an epiphanic visit to Enwezor's Documenta. Guided by her, the exhibition transformed into a global phenomenon, adrenalizing the Gulf's art scene and, with the foresight of former director Jack Persekian, expanding its scope through a series of year-round programs. And yet if the March Meetings were set up in 2008 as a regional safe space for debate and critical conversation—an organizer of the 2010 event, where Enwezor was the keynote speaker, gestured to this with a T-shirt reading “Less Oil, More Courage”—MM 2021 seemed to lack this dissenting dynamic. This was perhaps owed in part to the paradox of Zoom, where, artist and curator Peter Lewis observed, participants were often “reluctant to say anything,” despite, or maybe because of, the larger audience (around 2,500 people attended this year). For example, while it was heartening to see Persekian brought back into the conversation after his dismissal from SAF in 2011 after a complaint about an artwork, it would have been enriching to discuss the implications of his removal for biennial curation.

Perhaps a meeting that took looking back on the past as its premise was always going to canonize and pay homage more than reveal or disrupt. Having said that, instances when speakers questioned ingrained ideas, and spoke to this current moment of uncertainty, were often the most engaging. While Tirdad Zolghadr critiqued the scale, velocity, and standardization of biennial culture, and Christina Tohme protested the “fly in, fly out” approach art professionals often took to such events, Sammy Baloji and Lucrezia Cippitelli argued that biennial fatigue is an occupational hazard of an elite few and spoke in favor of their local benefits. Reflecting on a year that tested the relevance of the biennial model like never before, the panelists discussed the environmental, epidemiological, and class implications of international art travel with refreshing frankness. A call for slower, more sustainable, and lighter formats included Tohme's suggestion that biennials may soon be held digitally. In her talk, Saadia Shirazi echoed this approach, describing her recent traveling project, “Exhibition Without Objects,” (EwO) which is stored on an eight-gigabyte hard drive. One couldn't help but wonder whether this might be at least one future of biennial-making.

So where does that leave an institution like the Sharjah Biennial and the behemoth of the SAF that it falls under? During the keynotes, the foundation's position as a powerhouse of decolonial discourse came across as its greatest strength and underlying impetus. Adrian Lahoud spoke of the sensitivity with which *Ngurra Canvas II*, 1997—an expansive painting by forty Indigenous Australian artists that helped provide proof of, and win legal rights to, their land—was brought, along with its makers and their families, to the SAF for the inaugural Sharjah Architecture Triennial in 2019. Chika Okeke-Agulu's timely talk brought to life shifting attitudes toward the restitution of art objects, as well as the heightened call for the decolonizing of European museums “fattened by the loot of empire.” Outlining plans for the loaning of cultural artifacts to the Edo Museum of West African Art in Nigeria, Okeke-Agulu reminded us that restitution isn't equivalent to decolonization, though it is a key aspect of it.

When used by Enwezor, decolonization seemed to embody the defining challenge of our era: the demand to imagine alternatives to power. But as Iftikhar Dadi remarked, the word is today in danger of becoming an “empty signifier” if not fleshed out with specifics. Elizabeth Giorgis problematized “broad usage” of the term (Ethiopia, for example, was briefly occupied but not colonized), and asked how the country's modernists may have nonetheless identified with decolonial aesthetics. Alex Dika Saggerman spoke about “constellational modernism” in the Egyptian context and wondered whether the histories of modernism and colonialism could ever be disentangled. This reframing of art history, which requires a “displacement or dethroning” to make space for counterhegemonic narratives, as Akomfrah said at the start of the meetings, was as in evidence in these academic papers as it was on the ground in SAF's current program, whose “Black Pocket” exhibition, by Zarina Bhimji, also complicates histories of Arab, African, and Asian migration and empire (especially when shown in the UAE, with its own unique relationship to British colonialism).

Also swept into the Sharjah Biennial and SAF's gravitational pull were generative conversations on Lubumbashi, Srinagar, and Biennale Jogja Equator—satellite biennials that offered examples of pedagogic, rhizomatic, and nomadic models, respectively. In the end, MM 2021 painted a picture of Sharjah as a much-needed meeting place for art communities across the Global South to gather, exchange ideas, and build solidarities outside of Western-centric agendas. A productive addition to “unraveling” the present would have been to engage more urgently and self-critically with the paradigm shifts of the past year. The question for now, as Suha Shoman posed it, is: “How do we reinvent ourselves?” One proposition, offered by Silke Schmickl on the last day of the meeting, is to give artists a role in imagining institutions for the time ahead. In some sense, this resonated with the histories of artist-led initiatives in the region that the meeting began by retelling. Perhaps this could be a way for the Sharjah Biennial to continue to, as Joo said, “rechart the past, as it recharts the future.”

— *Jyoti Dhar*