

Leaving the Echo Chamber

[This review by Anna Seaman was commissioned and published by Hadara Magazine](#)

The 14th edition of the Sharjah Biennial came to a close in June 2019. For the first edition of Hadara Magazine, published in the same month, I took a look back at the event, which was headed by three curators for the first time. I also reflect on how far the biennial has come since Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi took over in 2003.



Kalba Ice Factory stands as an abandoned building on the shores of Kalba Creek. Its dilapidated state and pigeon inhabitants only adds to the artistic experience.

After a circuitous journey past copper sand dunes and through the rocky crags of the Hajar mountains, the sleepy coastal town of Kalba emerges. Home to the oldest mangrove forest in Arabia, the air is tinged with a salty bitterness and the landscape flattens out into tidal creeks. Incongruous, then, is the triangular peaked frame and tall, thin chimney of the abandoned Kalba Ice Factory. As one of the scores of venues in Sharjah Biennial 14, this roofless structure, inhabited by a colony of pigeons, became the surreal stage for the otherworldly narrative that played out inside.

Deeply unsettling acoustic sounds were emitted from several speakers and sunlight filtered through coloured acrylic panels, casting shadows that exaggerated the geometric lines of the factory's architecture. It was a collaborative artwork by Isabel Lewis, Matthew Lutz-Kinoy and a duo named Hacklander / Hatam.

Nikolaus Gansterer's *Sympoiesis Observatory* (2019), an installation of large-scale mobile mirrors or heliostats, also worked with the sunlight, transforming the space into a chamber of light and shadow. Although pigeon muck and fetid puddles littered the floor, this spectacle was so immersive that rather than be perturbed by the mess, it added to the experience, which felt like stepping out of reality and into another dimension. This feeling was only enhanced by Caecilia Tripp's work *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* (2019). Behind a black curtain in a darkened room, this five-channel film installation was projected upon screens in the shape of a pentagon surrounding a floor-based copper sculpture of the same shape.

Whispering voices spoke over eerie polyphonic chanting on the newly commissioned film. They quoted various academic writings, such as those of Cheikh Anta Diop, a Senegalese historian and scientist. Upon the screens

were performances by choreographer David Hamilton Thomson and former boxing champion Michael Olajide. Tripp described the work as “an asteroid crashing into an ice factory, crystallising fluidity into a fixed form.” The setting was so unusual that viewers wondered whether we, too, had flown in on that asteroid to experience an extra-terrestrial encounter.

It was a stroke of curatorial brilliance to create such symbiosis between place and presentation. Part of the charm of Sharjah Biennial is the variety of venues. In this case, Claire Tancons, one of three curators for this edition of the biennial, involved the location in her narrative as much as the artworks themselves. Tancons’ exhibition was titled *Look For Me All Around You*, a quotation from a manifesto by Marcus Garvey, a prominent Jamaican black-rights activist who emigrated to the US in the early 20th century.

Tancons’ curatorial practice focuses on the post-colonial politics of production, with a concentration on performance and the aesthetics of the African diaspora. For this exhibition, she also responded to the biennial’s wider theme: *Leaving the Echo Chamber*, which asked the viewer to look beyond normalised channels of information to see the bigger, more globalised picture.

At the Kalba Ice Factory, Tancons summarised her artist selection in a poetic statement, fixed to an exterior wall. She urged her viewer to “look up and slow down” and finally asked: “What agencies are rebirthed and unearthed by the rediscovery of primordial resources and sensations?” In presenting such a sensory experience, a viewer cannot help but ponder upon their place in the world and then, the title “Look For Me All Around You” is no longer a statement reclaiming the position of the black immigrant in America, but a plea to see all our fellow beings as part of the humanity to which we all belong.

Complementary to this was Zoe Butt’s curatorial presentation *Journey Beyond the Arrow*, within which she unpicked the notion of the echo chamber being a closed circuit through which knowledge is spread and encouraged her viewers to expand their horizons.

“There are not enough surfaces in the echo chamber from which the echoes can resound,” she said. “We are only paying attention to information coming from one perspective, and so a lot of the work in my journey engages histories that are not often circulated in our dominant memories and imaginations. Most of the work comes from what I call the globalising souths, from the people who were previously colonised and showcases a lot of ongoing dilemmas that they face.”

The commonality between Butt’s selection is that artists use history as a fundamental prism through which they critique the contemporary moment. Inside the Sharjah Calligraphy Museum stood a statue of Enrique de Malacca, a forgotten slave pirate from the Malay Peninsula. According to extensive research by Ahmad Fuad Osman, the artist behind this work, Malacca was very possibly the first man to circumnavigate the globe, even though that credit usually goes to his Portuguese master, Ferdinand Magellan. With this extensive and multi-pronged artwork, which was presented to look and feel like a historical museum exhibition, Osman questioned not only how history is written but also who determines the value of what it holds. This tension between official and unofficial histories also was seen in the projects of Antariksa and Phan Thao Nguyen, both of which discussed the Japanese occupation of Asia.

Omar Kholeif, whose exhibition was titled *Making New Time*, expertly wove together narratives of place and time as well as addressing colonial and post-colonial narratives. His selection was situated mostly in Sharjah’s historic city centre, where the Sharjah Art Museum was filled with works that broadly used the “body as a site of contingent history,” Kholeif said. From the protracted modernist portraits of Semiha Berksoy to Marwan Kassab-Bachi’s facial landscapes that reveal the topography of the human condition, many of the works are years, if not decades, old and gained new and contemporary significance through the biennial’s platform. Astrid Klein’s *Untitled (What are you fighting for)* (1988–1992) confronted guests upon their entrance to Bait Al Serkal. A white painting with the phrase “what are you fighting for” barely visible, was as relevant now as when it was first made. “In this age of fractured media, fake news and algorithmic culture, this catalytic call to action feels more urgent than ever,” explained Kholeif.

All the Lands from Sunrise to Sunset (2019), a piece by Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck, engaged both physically and metaphorically with the architectural vernacular of the same building. The heritage house was once the residence of Issa bin Abdul Latif Al Serkal, who worked for the British during the mandate era. In one of the house’s many rooms, Balteo-Yazbeck built a temporary wall over the permanent wall, leaving only the original wall niches to appear. Upon this wall, he posted the visual language of the modern age. Glossy images, colour-filled pages that could have sprung from any generic magazine or advertisement and collaged text catapulted us

into the arena of information dissemination. In the adjacent room, vitrines filled with maps and other publications stood, pointing us to question the context. Real news or fake news? History or fiction? Reality became elusive as this work took the viewer through time and space from the domination of colonial empires, through tangled and layered stories of migration and into the post-truth world of the present day.

One of the real triumphs of this year's biennial was the dialogue and synergy resulting from the three distinct yet interdependent curatorial perspectives. It was a first for this biennial to invite multiple curators and just one example of how the event consistently pushes at its own boundaries thanks to the leadership of Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, founder of Sharjah Art Foundation.

"The Sharjah Biennial has continued to innovate for each edition," says Sheikha Hoor. "We have worked with curators from around the world, and each one brings a new perspective about what is important in the art world and which artists are doing significant work. Critically important for us, however, is that the biennial is grounded in Sharjah and its culture."

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The careful contextualisation within each specific location as well as the wider geography is a leitmotif underlining all three presentations across the disparate venues. "Having a sense of place is vital to the process of curating any biennial," Sheikha Hoor says. "Biennials should be about the location and the people who live there—this concept is critically important to us. When selecting the curator or curators, we look for individuals who can bring something interesting or relevant to Sharjah. And, of course, many of the artists create new works. These works are proposed after an artist has visited Sharjah and has had the chance to learn about the history and culture of the emirate."

The multimedia installation in the untended garden of Bait Al Aboudi was among several pieces fusing personal, regional and geographical narratives alongside the rhythms of the natural world. Artists Otobong Nkanga and Emeka Ogboh received the Sharjah Biennial Prize for their collaborative project *Aging Ruins Dreaming Only to Recall the Hard Chisel from the Past* (2019), a piece inspired by a dead palm tree, which Nkanga imagines has succumbed to an addiction to salt water. Like so many pieces across the biennial, this work was placed sensitively in its surroundings and integrated aspects of Emirati culture alongside the fictional story.

"Discovering the emirate of Sharjah is an integral part of the biennial experience and helps viewers understand the ways in which the artists created new site-specific commissions," Sheikha Hoor says. Nkanga's and Ogboh's piece was also a favourite with the public, thanks to its conceptual accessibility.

"A number of the works in this biennial have been dependent on interactions and involvement with the local community, both in their realisation and the ongoing activation of the works," Sheikha Hoor says. "I wanted the biennial to be accessible to all of Sharjah and its residents, and I wanted to connect all of the emirate's various regions."

This has been central to Sheikha Hoor's philosophy since she took over the reins of the biennial in 2003. Then just 22, and the only woman on the biennial committee, she made drastic changes to the event, which had previously been a collection of presentations based on country's representation. With the help and co-curation of London-based Peter Lewis—who was on board for her first edition—she renovated the biennial model based largely on the inspiration she gained visiting the contemporary art exhibition documenta 11, organised by the late Okwui Enwezor.

"I was impressed by [documenta 11] not only because it challenged the existing art world status quo, but also because it was not constrained by the classic biennial model of 'country representation.' As the first non-European artistic director of documenta, Okwui created an exhibition that was truly global and post-colonial in approach.

"After seeing this approach, I felt it was my responsibility to bring this kind of biennial model back to Sharjah because our region is so diverse and multicultural. Identity is not necessarily defined by nationality or the place of one's birth. Artists should have the freedom to express themselves and their work on their own terms. As Sharjah has long been the region's cultural hub, it is important that the Sharjah Biennial continue to be a platform for experimentation and innovation."

This kind of international outlook, combined with a connection to the local community and neighbourhoods in which it operates, is what defines the biennial and continues to draw professionals from all major institutions to visit each edition. As the biennial developed in size and scope, Sheikha Hoor founded the Sharjah Art Foundation in 2009 and, in 2013, inaugurated the remarkable art spaces in the city's Al Mureijah area. They are sleek, contemporary white cubes that seamlessly integrate into the architecture of one of the oldest areas in Sharjah so that neither aesthetic is compromised. The opening of these spaces is something Sheikha Hoor highlighted as one of her standout moments of the past 15 years. "It was a very important development," she says, "not only for the Sharjah Biennial but also for Sharjah Art Foundation as a whole."

As she moves forward with a robust schedule of exhibitions for the new season and plans for the 2021 edition of the biennial, Sheikha Hoor also uses her role as president of the International Biennial Association (IBA) to work with institutions globally on collaborative projects.

"I have been able to build strong relationships with institutions and art professionals around the world," says Sheikha Hoor. "These types of relationships, as well as those that I have established as president of the IBA, allow me to help ensure that the art and culture of our region is better understood and represented internationally."

Sharjah Biennial 14, various venues across the emirate of Sharjah, hosted by the Sharjah Art Foundation ran from March 7 – June 10, 2019.

Anna Seaman, September 20, 2019