

Wallpaper Art | 21 Mar 2019 | By Tom Seymour

Sharjah Biennial 14 is raising the emirate's cultural cachet

Themed 'Leaving the Echo Chamber', the 14th edition of the Sharjah Art Foundation-driven initiative presents over 60 major new commissions



Imperfect Isometry, 2019, by Suchitra Mattai, mixed media installation, vintage saris, rope net, merrygo-round, two-channel video, commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation. Courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation

The sun is high in the sky on the Gulf of Oman. We are more than an hour's drive from the street of Sharjah and the high-rise metropolis of Dubai, the windswept curves of sand dunes dotted by camels and cacti and the hulking, hazy Al Hajar Mountains in the distance. Our convoy arrives in the quiet seaside town of Kalba, and we're ushered towards an abandoned, beige-coloured building, its foundations built on sand. This, I'm told, was once a factory for ice cubes. Now, it's being 'reactivated' by a series of 'host occasions' — artist-led events incorporating visuals, sound art, site-specific installations, performance and dance.

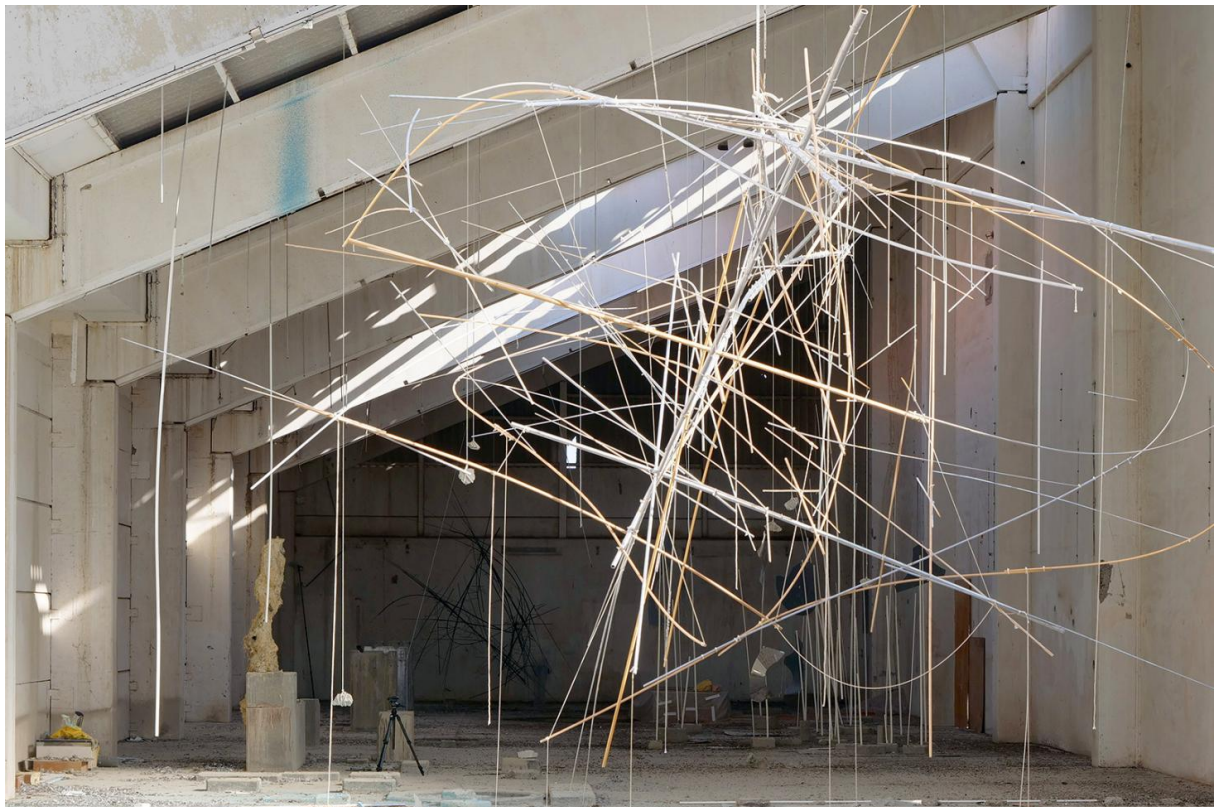
The edges of the Kalba Ice Factory are on a manmade peninsular. The first reactivation is here, performed by Torkwase Dyson and her collective Dark Adaptive, who have orientated six sculptures so their sight-lines point us toward the wetland ecosystems leading out towards the Indian Ocean. *I Belong to the Distance* explores our 'incessant desire to develop the land, tied to the global transformation of oceans into superhighways'. It's a pointed comment on the precarious existence of our world, and of our ultimate capability to disrupt this path through forms of activism and protest.

For Dominican Republic-born and Berlin-based dancer Isabel Lewis' *Untitled* (juice, inwardness, natures), we then witness a violinist and flutist improvise alongside digital recordings captured at Kalba Nature Reserve, while the mineral heat of the sun filters through coloured acrylic panels. A dancer writhes, her waist-long dreadlocks flying around her, before cars disturb the ensemble by churning sand in aggressive circles around her body.



Study for Kalba, 2019, by Matthew Lutz-Kinoy, Isabel Lewis and Hacklander / Hatam, digital collage, from the series Untitled (inwardness, juice, natures), commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation. Courtesy of the artists

Next up is Sympoiesis Observatory by the Austrian artist Nikolaus Gansterer. We're in a room full of shards of mirror waving in the wind and casting shimmered reflections. Birds have used this space to roost, so Gansterer's sculptures are littered with feathers, excrement and the natural ephemera of nest building and insect activity. Charcoal drawings sprawl across the floor. A sound installation of processed field recordings shudder through the space. In a performance that resembles something of a hypnotic trance, Gansterer completes the charcoal drawings, adding words and further curlicues to his creation, as if he's giving us a map to a place only he can access.



Sympoiesis Observatory, 2019, by Nikolaus Gansterer, commission in progress at Sharjah Biennial 14

Finally, and most triumphantly, we play witness to Land of Zanj, a site-specific installation by a South African performance collective including Thembekile Komani and Aphiwe Mpahleni, directed by the Johannesburg-based conceptual artist Mohau Modisakeng. The latter was raised during the most violent years of apartheid, and, as a child, experienced the murder of his older brother. His work, he says, 'uses the body as a bearer of collective memory', invoking 'historical mechanisms of violence' and 'grappling with the tensions and contradictions of inequality, exploitation, slavery and race'. The title of the piece refers to the island of Zanzibar or Azania, an ancient term used to describe various parts of southeastern Africa. Using the modern ephemera that litter the Kalba coast of today – the modern boats, fishing nets and surviving mangrove trees – Modisakeng's performers set out on an obstacle-strewn journey that allows us to experience the migration of slaves during the historical confluence between the Arabian Peninsula and the Swahili Coast. It's an audacious usage of found space by one of Africa's leading young artists.

The reactivation of Kalba is the high-point of the 14th edition of the Sharjah Biennial, organised by Sharjah Art Foundation and curated by Claire Tancons, Omar Kholeif, and Zoe Butt. It runs until 10 June, making use of bespoke and repurposed sites across the emirate of Sharjah and indeed the whole of the United Arab Emirates, and showing the works of more 80 participating contemporary artists from around the globe.

In comparison to its noisy, illustrious neighbour, not many have heard of Sharjah. The tiny emirate lies to the north of Dubai. It's a more down-at-heel area – used as a home for the many migrant workers that keep Dubai's endless hotels and malls and restaurants operational. It's also more conservative than Dubai (which has recently opened a Caesar's Place casino, a bit like the one in Las Vegas) with requirements made of how women dress and how visitors behave. For fans of Duty-Free, it's also worth nothing that consuming, selling or even possessing alcohol in Sharjah is illegal.

Yet Sharjah has much to offer for any Western traveller, dry or not. Unlike Dubai, with its huge highways, it's more than possible to walk through the heart of Sharjah, which is dotted with fascinating contemporary galleries and historical museums built in Western and Middle Eastern architectural traditions. Those skeptical of such a claim need only glance at the names associated with Sharjah's latest initiatives (which earned it a Best City nomination in the 2019 Wallpaper* Design Awards). The Sharjah Art Foundation recently brought art group Random International's immersive installation, Rain Room, to the city's Al Majarra area as a permanent fixture, while collective Superflex is creating an as-yet unfinished 'intervention' in a nearby park. Foster + Partners is currently in the process of redeveloping a land-fill site for waste management company Bee'ah (Sharjah has pledged to achieve zero waste-to-landfill by 2020) while Zaha Hadid Architects is building Bee'ah's new HQ.

Such monumental architectural creations are designed to be used as cultural meeting places; in addition to the Biennial, Sharjah hosted its first graphic design biennial last November, while the inaugural architecture triennial will also take place later this year. This is powered by Sharjah's emir – Sheikh Sultan III – who is known for his love and knowledge of art, and his daughter Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, who founded Sharjah Art Foundation in 2009 after learning her craft in London. Al Qasimi holds an MA in curating contemporary art from the Royal College of Art in London, a diploma in painting from the Royal Academy of Arts in London, and a BFA from the Slade School of Fine Art in London. She now serves as the Foundation's president and director.

The premise of this year's edition of Sharjah Biennial is 'Leaving the Echo Chamber'. It's a bold title, but is backed up the fact that more than 75 per cent of the works on show in the biennial are new commissions made especially for this event. Many are large in scope and immersive to experience, making full use of the spaces provided. A good example of this comes in form of the winner of this year's Biennial Prize, Nigerian artists Otobong Nkanga and Emeka Ogboh. Located in the Bait Al Aboudi outdoor courtyard, the artists' installation, Aging Ruins Dreaming Only to Recall the Hard Chisel from the Past, is based around the premise of an enclosed, gated microclimate.



One emerging from a point of view, 2019, by Wu Tsang, installation view at Sharjah Biennial 14, co-commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation and Onassis Fast Forward Festival 6. Courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation

At first glance, this ecosystem doesn't appear to be doing all that well. A dead palm listlessly lulls in the sun, while cratered pools of water collected from the sea sit stagnantly. Yet concealed speakers convey the lovely sounds of local children singing a traditional 'rain song', while the artists recite poetry animating the perspective of the trees, water, and earth found in the courtyard. As darkness falls, screens around the courtyard light up, with gleaming text reflected in the water. In such a manmade environment, in which the wilds of nature is uncommon at best, the artists seem to be using the space to create a modern, harmonised form of prayer, spellcasting or ritualised wishmaking. Nearby, the latest film from the American artist and 2018 MacArthur fellow Wu Tsang. Her film *One emerging from a Point of View* explores a seaside community of Lesbos, Greece, which has been transformed by the presence of over half a million refugees who have used the island to enter Europe since 2011.

Hanging in the Sharjah Art Museum, the Pakistani multimedia artist Khadim Ali – now based between Sydney and Kabul – exhibits tapestries that explore the violent recent history of his country via carefully hand-embroidered tableaux. The artist was once one of the persecuted Hazara people of Afghanistan, and his exquisite tapestries balance flowers and mythological creatures with sinister portraits of US soldiers. Ali's larger series was again commissioned by the Sharjah Art Foundation. At the Emirates Fine Art Society, the artist has created a wall mural and a sound installation using the spiked, ominous metal horns that broadcast religious extremist verses in Kabul districts occupied by Taliban forces.



Flowers of Evil, 2019, by Khadim Ali, installation view at Sharjah Art Museum. Courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation

At the very end of one of Sharjah Art Museum's long halls is British artist Shezad Dawood's virtual reality exploration of the relations between the US and Pakistan since Pakistan's partition from India in 1947. The mirrored installations are 'virtual reality' sets animated by video screens, tapestries and sculptures. The work, titled *Encroachment*, Dawood writes is a 'meditation on the idea of sovereignty, private property and the politics of space in the two largest cities in Pakistan – Lahore and Karachi'. We view a colonial bookshop in Lahore, the former US embassy in Karachi, and an old-school *Space Invaders* gaming arcade. Dawood was recognised by the Biennial for the work at the gala dinner. In January 2020, it will go on show at the New Art Exchange in Nottingham.

The Sharjah Biennial is a triumphant celebration of contemporary creations from across the world, a true dialogue between East and West, and a carefully curated confluence of the many issues we all uniformly face in the world, and can maybe only really understand through the shared experience of art. As a cultural destination, Sharjah is firmly on the map.

Sharjah Biennial 14 runs until 10 June at various locations.
For more information, visit the Sharjah Art Foundation
<http://sharjahart.org/biennial-14>