

# Non-aggressive socio-political art at the 2019 Sharjah Biennial

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Contemporary artwork at the Sharjah Biennial, UAE [Sharjah Art Foundation]

It is not usual to find a politically and religiously conservative country going hand in hand with being one of the most culturally active. An exception is Sharjah, a unicorn in the United Arab Emirates.

Thinking of contemporary art and the Middle East, one might associate Sharjah's investment in the sector with that of Dubai or Abu Dhabi, whose state-sponsored cultural projects are quite recent. However, it has been engaged for decades and the sovereign ruler of the Emirate, Sheikh Dr Sultan Bin Mohammed Al-Qasimi — a published historian and author of works of literature and for the theatre himself — has constantly supported the development of the local cultural landscape.

That's how we got to today's Sharjah, a country both deeply Islamic, with strict blasphemy and decency laws, but also one of the most active platforms for art in the region. It is also where in the past month the contemporary art world has flocked for the Sharjah Biennial.

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Since its beginnings in 1993, the Biennial has always juggled freedom and control, socio-political denunciation and care not to cross red lines. It didn't always manage to maintain this balance. For example, during the 2011 event, Sheikh Sultan fired the programme's curator Jack Persekian for the "public outrage" caused by an art installation by Mustapha Benfodil.

Benfodil's work was called "Maportaliche/Ecritures sauvages (It Has No Importance/Wild Writings, 2011)" and consisted of headless mannequins seemingly belonging to football teams. Their T-shirts had phrases with sexual innuendos and references to Islam on them. The criticism which led to the removal of the work has to be viewed in context, though, for the work was displayed in a public square where children came to play and was also close to a mosque.



People gather at the Sharjah Biennial for contemporary art in the UAE [Sharjah Art Foundation]

This leads us to a common question concerning such programmes in conservative countries: who is the intended audience? Is it, in this case, the UAE locals, or the expatriates and art tourists hopping from one event to another around the world? Most of the time, it's the latter.

In Sharjah, too, it seems that the artist's practice and art can only be fully understood by the expats and tourists. Most of the local population appear uninterested, confused and, at times, offended. As in other countries with a similar socio-religious makeup, in Sharjah there is a disconnection between the

conservative religious communities and the liberal “avant-gardist” cultural practitioners and invited artists. While art by definition is the contrary of “people-pleasing”, it’s the job of curators to find a middle way to connect with the local context. Without that connection, dialogue can’t even start to take place.

So how have the Sharjah Biennial curators Zoe Butt, Omar Kholeif and Claire Tancons tackled this conundrum this year, with the programme running from 7 March to 10 June? For the main Biennial show entitled “Leaving the Echo Chamber” the curators decided to play smart, selecting artists who didn’t aim to shock but rather acted in a mental and perceptive space. This is more complex and much deeper than straightforward provocation.



Sharjah Biennial curators Omar Kholeif (L), Claire Tancons (C) and Zoe Butt [Sharjah Art Foundation]

The Biennial seeks to show how materialistic culture can be re-imagined through the lenses of artists. In popular culture, the “echo chamber” (after which this Biennial is named), refers to news media and their never-ending feeds. The emphasis is on the reinforcement of some news items rather than others by a closed network, controlled by private sources, governments and corporations.

The artists worked on how these sources dictate access, production and distribution of wealth. Their works deconstruct all the images, languages, histories and geographies with which we are familiar. They show how this have all been produced by the same old Western narratives.

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Despite the title, artists don't propose to actually abandon the current context. They don't suggest to escape the "chamber" and go living in a cave in the desert, which for most of us is impossible. Instead, each artwork tries to reconstruct a history lost or unknown; they acknowledge what has been hidden or removed. Many art pieces interact with the landscape of Sharjah, capturing the attention of viewers. The intention is to encourage them to consider their complicity in the shaping of today's conflicts.

In this sense, we can look at this fourteenth edition of Sharjah Biennial as one of the most political. Its non-aggressive mode encourages locals, expats and tourists to look at their responsibility in contributing to keeping the Echo Chamber alive. It is precisely in these times that demanding alternative images to the ones which are spoon-fed to us is a truly political act.

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