

Provisions for the Future: The 9th Sharjah Biennial 2009

By Reem Fekri

Since its inauguration in 1993, the Sharjah Biennial continues to be ranked amongst one of the most established cultural events within the Middle East, which continuously serves to connect the art world and its institutions in order to create artistic discourse and exchange on a regional and international level. The project is overseen by the Director H.H Sheika Hoor Al Qasimi and curators Isabel Carlos and Tarek Abou El Fetouh and is led by its Artistic Director, Jack Persekian.

As an Emirati growing up in Dubai, I have memories of going to the Sharjah Expo Center and the Sharjah Art Museum where the biennial was confined to bland and limited spaces. This year through its progression and expansion, audiences were taken throughout the city, working through and with its infrastructure rather than within restricted walls of an institution. In relationship to its counterparts across the world, the Sharjah Biennial is modest by nearly all counts. Its size, glamour, geography and hype are all dwarfed by the international giants we've grown to love, hate and slightly fear. However, its ambitions are continuously growing and possibly rival even that of the most well established art events.

The exhibition, which ran until May this year, worked with the title 'Provisions for the Future' and also included was a new film and performance programme, 'Past of the Coming Days'. While these titles remain cleverly and annoyingly ambiguous, the artist application process was based on artists willing to take up the challenge rather proceeding through the means of a traditional wish list that targeted further eminent artists. Perhaps Persekian wanted to eschew the conventional format of a biennial by calling for proposals equally from artists and non-artists.

Persekian asserted that the Biennial was about process rather than product, and thus the open invitation for artists to propose ideas that would eventually be realized, rather than using an existing body of work. Through this method of creativity and discourse, the Biennial already becomes unique in its ever-expanding field, where by works are effectuated by providing a platform for experimentation.

This 'laboratory' approach meant that artists had the entire city for context-specific work, allowing regional and international artists to explore the city from artistic perspective. With the proliferation of biennials it is becoming increasingly difficult to make any distinctions between them, however, through this concept of experimentation, the Sharjah Biennial is proving to become more prominent and distinguished within the art world. Indeed the featured artists digress from the "trendy dogmata" that other blockbuster shows are compelled to address, and without this pressure, SB9 instead presented a well-balanced, international mix of established and emerging artists with a distinctive regional flair.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing pieces is by Reem Al-Gaith, an Emirati artist that considers the rapid development of the region. Her work titled 'Dubai: What's left of her Land?' deals with the notion that she lives in a fantasy-land, within a desert known for artifice surrounded by artificial cities and islands shaped like trees. The piece itself can be considered a hybrid of installation and sculpture. A surreal juxtaposition of silhouetted workers, a small scale building site, building material, randomly placed miniature lights and pulleys are placed on a wall almost as a canvas would, yet drawing the viewer in to the underworld of Dubai's flashy developments.

Alternatively, through his Airmail Paintings, Chilean-born Eugenio Dittborn produces large pieces of fabric adorned with photographic reproductions, painting and drawing of surreal figures wrought in unnatural positions. He then folds the fabric, thus creating an irreversible grid on the artwork, inserts it into a courier envelope and sends it to its host institution. This method positions the host institution as the irrefutable curatorial body that must receive the package as a letter – charged with connotations of privacy – unfold the artwork and act as a mediator that transfers the piece into the public sphere. Dittborn's Airmail Paintings also speak to the nomadism of the art world, in this case identifying Sharjah-as-site as the destination for an artistic pilgrimage. In keeping with the suggested theme of the biennial, these works trace the notion of a journey: private to public, from one corner of the world to another, from the isolation of an artist's studio to the ephemeral community fabricated by events like SB9.

Hala Elkoussy's sensory-consuming installation, 'On red nails, palm trees and other icons – Al Archief (Take 2)', pays homage to the constant state of flux that propels her hometown of Cairo. Situated in a room that transports viewers away from the long, weaving, stale corridors of the Sharjah Museum, Elkoussy's installation spans from ceiling to floor, jamming the space with images, relics and videos from her own personal archive. The end result is mesmerizing with a tone reminiscent of The Atlas Group's fictive archives. It is difficult to ascertain what is real and what has become fictionalized through the saturation of narrative, though the beauty of a personal archive is that it can function as both simultaneously.

Argentinean-born and New York-based Liliana Porter's miniature figurine installations are absurd, amusing and heartbreaking at the same time. These little figures, no taller than a finger, are often seen in the midst of disproportionately enormous tasks. One female figurine works to shovel up a large mound of sand that is approximately 10 times her size while elsewhere a tiny male is seen defacing a wall with massive scrawl drawn with a miniscule pencil. One cannot help but to impose personified values onto the figurines and feel a mixture of sympathy and hilarity. Porter states these works are indicative to the human condition, which makes the viewer question his own passive, voyeuristically ambivalent reaction to the scene.

The one public testament to the luxury of process is the biennial's catalogue, Provisions. This rainbow tome is the highlight of the entire event, and as the lasting legacy of the exhibition, it does more justice to the biennial's proclaimed mission than the biennial itself. The book adopts the aesthetic



Amir H. Fallah, *Watch Tower*, 2009
Site-specific installation of sculpture and paintings
Image courtesy of the Artist

Reem Al Ghaith, *Dubai: What's Left of Her Land*, 2008
Paper, plexiglas, corrugated board, balsa wood and greenery
Installation view from School of Architecture and Design,
Graduate show, American University of Sharjah
Image courtesy of the Artist



of a work in progress, with its exposed binding revealing the craft required to make a publication. Each artist is represented through a biography; images of their work in progress and a questionnaire that seeks to understand the artists' ethos. The freedom afforded to participants by this questionnaire makes the book an artist-driven publication, and the end result is a delightful variation of the generally humdrum diatribe of impersonal artists' statements found in most catalogues. The responses range from typed, serious answers to the hand written and personal to the especially creative pages that approach the questionnaire as a space onto which the artist's practice can extend.

Amir Fallah, for example, uses a playful range of collage and illustration which transforms the page into a 2-dimensional extension of his playful assemblage pieces while Nika Sinnokrot's simple photographs of a Made in India teacup use the space as a site for commentary.

While SB9 was a fascinating revelation of artists, the physical composition of the exhibition lacked coherence, though the disparate branding campaign of the biennial suggests this may have been intentional. Void of a visual or conceptual linearity, SB9's branding ranged from charming photographs of Sharjah's bustling port to the throwback website that recalls IntelVision's archaic programming to the now-notorious street flags oddly reminiscent of a TGI Fridays marquee. Could it be, that as a collection of "marginal processes of thoughts, relations and acts", the heterogeneous surplus was intended to call attention to the autonomy of each artist's individual practice?

This engagement upholds the strong emphasis SB9 places on process on some levels. As the artists work towards completing their commissioned piece, thus perpetually looking to and almost relying on the future, it is the journey to the future that the biennial claims to investigate.

Although some critics have doubted its success, and UAE bashing is not uncommon feature, the biennial plays a vital role within the already burgeoning art scene, and will spearhead future movements within the region, helping its sustainability and progression towards greater non-for-profit art movements. Key issues are brought up within the context of sustainability such as the long or short term affects that biennials have on hosting cities. The Sharjah Biennial has been in action for a long time with some great outcomes. Or perhaps there is something tongue-in-cheek about this theme that calls attention to Sharjah as a site. Whilst Sharjah's glitzy neighbors, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, race like hyperactive hares to the future's imperceptible finish line, Sharjah acts as the

drowsy tortoise ambling forward on its own terms.

1 Sharjah Biennial 9 Production Application

2 Reem Al Gaith <http://reemalgaith.blogspot.com/>
In discussion with Stephanie Sykes, Art Dubai

3 ibid

4 Wilson-Goldie, Kaelen, Bidoun Magazine, Summer 2009



Amir H. Fallah
Paintings from the Make It Believe Series, 2009
Images courtesy of the Artist

