

Sharjah Biennial: Art of Utopia

Dhanusha Gokulan/Staff Reporter / 1 March 2015

For curator Eungie Joo, Sharjah Biennial offers an opportunity to contemplate how artists help us consider new possibilities for social organisation and ways to transcend cultural and political confinement.



One of the installations. — Images courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation

The Sharjah Biennial (SB12) would be one of the most important events in Sharjah's annual calendar of artistic events. The Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF) announced the appointment of Eungie Joo as Curator of SB12, which opens in March.

Joo was formally director of Art and Cultural Programmes at Instituto Inhotim in Brumadinho, Brazil, and previously served as director and curator of education and public programmes at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York.

Joo's proposal for the SB12 builds upon the SAF's commitment to artistic production and the unique contribution of the annual March Meeting to organisational and artistic development in the region. "Sharjah is a very special place that calls you back again and again. I am truly excited to work with Shaikha Hoor (bint Sultan Al Qasimi, Director of the SAF) and the SAF to develop a meaningful conversation with artists, cultural practitioners, and Sharjah through both the March Meeting and the Biennial."

Khaleej Times caught up with Joo for a chat.

Can you expand on the Biennial theme 'The past, the present, the possible'? Why have you chosen this particular theme for this year's Biennial?

The ideas that frame 'The past, the present, the possible' come from a conversation with the artist Danh Vo about our engagements with contemporary art — why it is valuable and why we are engaged with it. I think it is important that as cultural practitioners, we reflect upon what we do and why, and try to convey to the public the larger stakes of contemporary art. 'The past, the present, the possible' is very much about admitting a Utopian position that values abstraction, formalism, and content with a strong presence of experiential and meditative works. We are living in an extremely perverse and decadent moment of human history and I hope this slightly Utopian approach to the present helps us imagine possibilities together.

A recurring idea in the Biennial announcement was to transcend cultural and political confinement. Could you expand on this? Will the works have connotations of the current political scenario in the Mena/GCC region?

This idea is a paraphrasing of something Danh said in our discussion about how artists' ways of thinking could provide ways to get beyond social and political confinement. In terms of works that might reflect ways of thinking that only artists offer us, one has to look not only at the resulting works, but also the process of arriving at them. For Rheim Alkadhi's *Communications From the Field of Contact* (Each Hair is a Tongue), 2015, the artist went around Sharjah Creek sharing tea and snacks with local dockworkers to meet and share stories with them while collecting eyelashes from these men. Her project subverts barriers between language, culture, gender and class in favour of their shared love of the sea. Gary Simmons's *Across the Chalkline* is a youth-size cricket oval designed for neighbourhood children to play in, but the boundary line of the field is marked with CLR James's text "What do they know of cricket, who only cricket know?" — a complex question that invokes the colonial history of sport and nation, minoritisation and global economies. In Babak Afrassiabi and Nasrin Tabatabai's *Plate it with Silver* (2015), the artists travelled around the Gulf studying the trajectories of the winds, which connect the surrounding lands and people. The winds manifest through spiritual ritual, black market smuggling, and the movement of bodies — all inextricably linked to the through time.



Eungie Joo

While selecting the artists for the Biennial, did you have any specific repertoires in mind? Was there any region/country that you've featured more artists from? How did you narrow down the final list of artists?

A curatorial practice is continuous, with research and conversations continuing all the time, sometimes directed towards a project and sometimes anticipating a project not yet imagined. For SB12, I had just over one year to organise the Biennial, so I invited many artists I had worked with in the past or had been speaking to already for March Meeting 2014 to start a public conversation and group thinking through the symposium and group site visits last March. I was also travelling a bit then, seeing artists and exhibitions. I saw some remarkable artists works in Amman through Suha Shoman at Darat Al Funun, Jordan. I travelled to several other cities to see work and visit exhibitions, studios and estates of artists whose work I had been thinking about for many years but had not had the opportunity to work with previously. Based on these experiences, I refined my ideas about other artists and works to invite to this particular "conversation".



There will be several approaches to the use of art spaces during the Sharjah Biennial.

How do you plan on using the SAF Art Spaces and the Biennial venues? Is the placement organised in a thematic way, to connect certain artists and artworks? Or is the placement of artworks completely independent of each other?

There are several different approaches to spaces. There is no thematic organisation to the Biennial, but juxtapositions of certain works or artists are very intentional. In the Sharjah Art Museum, for example, it is intended that you view the exhibition from the first floor and see the work of Hassan Sharif created at Al Mareijah Art Atelier in 1985, and by viewing his work, you cross a threshold into contemporary art in Sharjah, which sets the context for the rest of the Biennial. In many cases, small buildings are used for one artist or one project, but with an understanding of how the public might move from space to space.

Many artists who visited Sharjah had strong feelings about particular spaces in the SAF Art Spaces, Sharjah Art Museum and Calligraphy Square, and these spaces led to the development of the works themselves. Offsite venues were made available to me and if appropriate, I proposed these spaces to particular artists — Adrián Villar Rojas at Kalba Ice Factory, Michael Joo at the warehouses near Port Khalid and Hassan Khan at The Flying Saucer.

How many Middle Eastern artists or of Middle Eastern descent are participating in the Biennial (including Iran and Turkey)?

There are 21 participating artists from the Middle East including those living outside the region.

Do you have any experience working with Emirati artists? If yes, what is your take on their work? Or the present art scene in UAE?

SB 12 includes the work of Hassan Sharif, Mohammed Kazem, and Abdullah Al Saadi from (the) UAE, and I have had the chance to visit Abdullah and Hassan in their studios multiple times. In addition, I have had the fortune to speak with Hassan Sharif about the history of art in the UAE, and in December, the SAF hosted an SB12 Monthly Talk with Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, Mohammed Kazem, Abdul-Raheem Sharif, Hassan Sharif, and Dr. Yousef Aidabi that was fascinating recap of the recent history of Emirati art in Sharjah. These experiences have taught me a great deal, but my research in the UAE and the region is still at an early stage. -dhanusha@khaleejtimes.com