

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

Harpers Bazaar  
The View From Sharjah  
Laura Egerton  
May 2014

BAZAAR

### The View From Sharjah



Image: 'Homeostasis' by Holly Hendry, 2014.  
Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation

Just before Art Dubai got into full swing, Laura Egerton camped out at the Sharjah's March Meeting (March 13-16) – the Gulf 's leading forum of art and ideas – and returned with a report from the podium.

I want people to keep coming back!' said Sheikha Hoor Al-Qasimi, President of the Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF) at this year's March Meeting. Prescient words, we say,

because there's fresh energy at play in the creative output of the esteemed foundation – spurred on, no doubt, by this more than capable individual. Al-Qasimi, together with Jack Persekian, was behind the formation of the March Meeting back in 2008 and this research- focused forum continues to attract leading artworld professionals to Sharjah every year.

Familiar faces from the region took to the podium at this year's forum. Resilience and humour came from Christine Tohme, the founder of Ashkal Alwan and Home Works in Lebanon (a similarly forward-thinking art forum established in 1994); one-liners from sparky Sarah Rifky co-founder of Beirut, a non-profit space in Cairo under the premise of 'institution building as a curatorial act' (read our report on Beirut on page 85). 'I like being on panel discussions because people tell me what I am and what I do,' said Rifky. 'I don't know myself.' Rasha Salti and Kristine Khouri presented their joint research on a nearly forgotten exhibition that took place in Beirut in 1978, In Solidarity with Palestine, the archives of which will form an exhibition next year at the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art.

Such regional heavyweights were juxtaposed with curatorial voices from across the globe. Noteworthy amongst these was Doryun Chong, recently appointed chief curator at the M+ in Hong Kong, a new museum-in-the-making that will be of a similar footprint to New York's MOMA. Rodrigo Moura, deputy director of art and cultural programmes at Insituto Inhotim, presented the institute's innovative agenda for commissioning site-specific work around its sprawling botanical gardens in southeast Brazil.

Evidently, the artists that presented during the March Meeting will be producing work for Sharjah Biennial 12, which returns to the Emirate in March next year. Prevalent themes included responses to place and language (Hassan Khan, Iman Issa); the character of the artist, or 'artist as bandit' (Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme); artist as actor (Nikhail Chopra) and a discussion of how the artist's studio becomes theatre in its own right (Adrian Villar Rojas).

Insightful additions came from artist Julie Mehretu talking about the act of drawing everyday, the studio as a place of retreat and mark-making as an act of resistance. Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri spoke on art as a reflection of work and the pressured urgency of producing an object that will sell – a rare mention of the market at the Meeting this year, but relevant given that the majority of artists we heard from would be selling at Art Dubai a few days later.

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

Harpers Bazaar  
The View From Sharjah  
Laura Egerton  
May 2014

This, however, identifies the character of Sharjah. As Dr Samia Rab declared in an illuminating session on architectural conservation: 'Sharjah used education to delve into the desert'. Today, with no commercial galleries but twenty museums, Sharjah asserts itself as a necessary space for investigation, debate and art production in the region.

Each morning during the March Meeting, we arrived on site to find workmen busy assembling pipes and pillows in a courtyard space close to the talks. By the final day we realised it was one of seven March Projects, commissioned to coincide with the Meeting, coming to life – 'Homeostatis' by Holly Hendry, a graduate of the Slade School of Fine Art, London where Al-Qasimi had previously studied. With a view of the Iranian mosque behind it, snaking its way between old wind towers and new concrete walls, the sculpture brought synergy to its surrounding environment.

To coincide with this year's meeting, Al-Qasimi also curated six solo exhibitions around the city, which continue until June 13. The largest of these is in Bait Al Serkal, featuring 200 works by Susan Hefuna situated within the interior of this historically significant building (Sharjah's first hospital). The show spans Hefuna's career and her preoccupations with heritage, surveillance and the female.

Two of the solos feel like new discoveries: a long-overdue investigation into the work of Pakistan-born British artist Rasheed Araeen and the late Dagestani artist Eduard Puterbrot. Al-Qasimi spoke warmly of her time with Emirati Abdullah Al Saadi in Khorfakkan, whose deeply personal works have been in progress for years ahead of his current solo show in Sharjah. To co-incide with the opening of his exhibition in Sharjah, Wael Shawky presented a breathtaking re-examination of his project Dictums, commissioned in 2011 and a highlight of the 2013 Sharjah Biennial, in which 32 performers of Pakistan's devotional Qawwali music turned excerpts from the Biennial press release into songs. These exhibitions demonstrate SAF's commitment to long-term dialogues with artists and how it is encouraging these artists to have sustained engagements with the city.

Similarly, these shows are indicative of the overriding themes that ran throughout activities in Sharjah this March – a review of the city's past successes, reflecting on decisions to re-show, re-curate and re-evaluate. This was, perhaps, all for the benefit of Eungie Joo, the curator of next year's Sharjah Biennial, as she warms up on the region. 'I'm an outsider, I don't know what this place is,' said Joo.

'It is an important time to think about new art world centres,' she said. 'How do you position your locality in a world that is getting smaller and smaller?'