

art agenda, “Re:emerge, Towards a New Cultural Cartography,” Sharjah Biennial 11, Text/Antonila Alampi, March 14, 2013

art  
agenda

by ANTONIA ALAMPI

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## “Re:emerge, Towards a New Cultural Cartography,” Sharjah Biennial 11

SHARJAH BIENNIAL 11, Sharjah

March 13–May 13, 2013

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A Qawwali song in Urdu fills one of the narrow lanes of the new Sharjah Art Foundation spaces. It has been interpreted by a group of about thirty Pakistani musicians, sitting on the floor, while art professionals arrived en masse for the most anticipated event in the region. The music is a part of *Dictums 10:120* (2013), a new work by Wael Shawky, one of the many new commissions by the Sharjah Art Foundation, which deals with what we might call the *art-world* language, that strange sub-species of English which, despite its universal ambitions, often ends up acquiring a solipsistic tone. But that’s just one of the many idiosyncrasies of the contemporary art world that are here subtly evoked. The composition—in Urdu, the most commonly spoken local language, also intelligible to those who speak Hindi—is the result of a reflection, discussion, and reconstruction of the curatorial statement by the workers of the biennial itself.

Here, on the other side of exclusion, for once, the Pakistanis are the only ones to have linguistic access to the work, gaining “authority for a time,” as the artist himself affirms. The almost ghostly role and position of visibility and invisibility of the workers is also addressed in *Dilbar* (2013), a black-and-white cinematic and evanescent film by Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Chai Siri, whose subject is a construction worker who helped build the new spaces of the Sharjah Art Foundation. Here, too, sound assumes a dominant position, in which the amplified and rhythmical noise of the construction site marks the passage of time and the pace of work, signifying the abysmal difference between intellectual and physical labor.

These two important works are both winners, among others, of the eleventh Sharjah Biennial Art Prize—and they contain the seeds of some central aspects of the exhibition.

Curator Yuko Hasegawa’s attention is clearly directed towards the space of the Islamic courtyards, and Sharjah’s city center is certainly full of them. Many works are realized specifically for various courtyards that are part of the Sharjah Art Foundation exhibition spaces, while others address the courtyard metaphorically, as a zone in-between public and private, where the intimate meets the political, where the intimate can become the political. Effectively, this is the element that has been identified as the possible link among different cultures, traditions, religions: the courtyard, that is, as the new cartography of experience. Particularly evocative to this effect are the site-specific works *Taste of a Stone: Itiat Esa Ufok* (2013) by Otobong Nkanga, a garden of contemplation made up of images, poems, stones, and small trees; and *Courtyard Ornamentation with Four Sounding Dots and a Shade* (2013) by Cevdet Ereğ, which is “inhabited” by a minimal and repetitive vibration, some sort of sound pattern that invites you into a physical exploration of its architecture. Standing at its center, one feels the beating heart of encounter, of differing rhythms.

Indeed, sound is the predominant component of many works here,



1 Wael Shawky, *Dictums 10:120*, 2011–2013.



2 Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Chai Siri, *Dilbar*, 2013.



3 Otobong Nkanga, *Taste of a Stone: Itiat Esa Ufok*, 2013.



4 Cevdet Ereğ, *Courtyard Ornamentation with 4 Sounding Dots and a Shade*, 2013.



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seemingly chosen as the preferred instrument through which linguistic, cultural, and social barriers are to be overcome. Its rhythms are employed for their ability to gather and attract, to disseminate in a viral manner in Tarek Atoui's *Within* (2013), a collaborative performance involving ten drummers from all over the world. Performances take place at various spots throughout the city, but the finale will be a unique ensemble on the rooftops of the Foundation's exhibition spaces during the finissage.

Sound is a means of discovery and humorous exploration in *Session* (2013), a video installation by Nevin Aladağ, whose various animated percussion instruments move throughout Sharjah, encountering its winds, waters, sands, and roads; it is a tool for political criticism in Magdi Mostafa's work (winner of an award for a "practice showing promise"), where the recording of a sheik's sermon describing women as vessels to be used for procreation is associated with washing machines utilized as vessels to produce amplified rumors (read: an abstract evocation of Cairo's wash and pray Fridays); it is literal, when as litanies of social discrimination and violence in Amar Kanwar's *A Night of Prophecy* (2002); it evokes myth, nature, and poetry in *Vayu-Vata* (2013), a new work by Gabriel Lester, where Aeolian harps intone melodies through the wind in one of the courtyard's towers; it is playful and chaotically noisy in Carlos Amorales's *We'll See How All Reverberates* (2012), where Alexander Calder's mobiles are transformed into an installation of cymbals to be performed by the audience.

Strong links with tradition as holders of history and past, evidenced through artisan forms and techniques, are another thread emerging in various works. The frequent use of patterns, identifiable modules, and obsolete procedures are mixed and re-composed as a metaphor of contamination between different cultures. Though it's easy to read these works as postmodern re-appropriations of traditional formats, at times the methods are rather didactic and literal. Take, for instance, the flag series by Sarah Rahbar, where *kilim* carpets and oriental embroidery meld with pop, vintage patterns, or the American flag. Tradition is differently, while also uncritically, used because of its power to seduce as evoked by Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian (winner of the "Special Recognition Award for a Practice Sustained Over Many Decades"), in a series where pieces of mirrors and colored glass compose forms and decorative motifs that recall the history of Iranian mosaics and the principles of Islamic geometry. Farmanfarmaian's works seem to peculiarly relate to Gabriel Orozco's sand pyramid and its surrounding diagrams, which are attempts to graphically represent the theory of self-organizing criticality. Such formal similarities among the most varied contributions inevitably yield to reflections on repetition and recurrence, on the sources of images. Certain patterns, it seems, though found in different times, spaces, and geographies, inevitably send one back to the correspondences and affinities that in the end, unite all populations, no matter how disparate.

As for Hasegawa's thoughts on the origin of images and of our culture, and on the importance of preserving recollections of the past as a crucial path to grasping the present—history, with its load of destruction and war, is to be seen as a continuous process of recomposition and re-articulation. The video *Attempt 137 to Map the Drive* (2011) by Jalal Toufic and Graziella Rizkallah Toufic demonstrates this through a suspension between reality and fiction, as does the *Under-Writing Beirut - Mathaf* (2013) installation by Lamia Joreige. History necessitates an incessant re-reading, a continuous untying of the fluid knot between centuries and generations.

One leaves Sharjah, as always during biennials, with one thought and many thoughts. But probably the strongest one is that cultural or religious differences are constantly in the process of being surpassed and overcome; contaminations, after all, are historically rooted and certainly beyond any claims to national identities. Where strain remains, there is still the frightening immobility of social and political discrimination.

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LEAVE A COMMENT



5 Nevin Aladağ, *Session*, 2013.



6 Magdi Mostafa, *Sound Cells: Fridays*, 2010.



7 Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, *Shazdeh's Garden (03)*, 2010.



8 Gabriel Orozco, *Sand on Table as Model of "Self-Organising Criticality"*, 1992-2013.

