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Flash Art International, May-June 05, Vol. XXXVIII, # 242, Milan, Italy, pp 71 & 90

Sharjah Biennial - Art, Anxiety and Autocracy in the Gulf

The seventh edition of the Sharjah Biennial opened in an Expo Center the size of an airplane hangar with Emily Jacir's poignant sculpture of a circular baggage claims conveyor belt and closed at the end of a ramp-like museum corridor with Zoe Leonard's equally evocative installation of 42 vintage suitcases arranged in a long line like lost luggage. This graceful, understated curatorial gesture bracketed an exhibition that offered numerous possibilities for plotting narrative points between these two pieces.

The Biennial's official, overarching theme was "Belonging". But it could just as easily have been held under such banners as displacement, dislocation, discomfort, disjuncture, zones of passage, or anxieties of place, all terms that came up over the course of a tandem two-day symposium called Biennialicity.

Presenting works by 74 artists from 36 countries, curators Jack Persekian, Ken Lum, and Tirdad Zolghadr interpreted the belonging theme broadly, loosely, and each in their own particular way (Persekian as a curator working in the conflicted context of Palestine, Ken Lum as an artist sensitively subverting the power of curators, and Zolghadr as a kind of art-world provocateur). They did agree, however, that belonging is more vexing than you might think. It is not always an inclusion or a warm embrace. On the contrary, it is quite often a trap, a cage, a sensation of being stuck. Jack Persekian took over after Sharjah's first curatorial team was dismissed. He had only six months to prepare. He brought Lum and Zolghadr on board and they scrambled to pull everything together on time. With the exception of a delay in publishing the catalogue, they succeeded.

The Biennial opened on April 6 with strong works that resonated well with one another. In addition to Persekian's sweet touch at the beginning and the end, the Biennial offered an accumulation of well-paced moments in between, such as Ingrid Mwangi's sound and sculptural installation of hanging hair; Marwan Rechmaoui's stately rubber floor piece, Beirut Caoutchouc; and Yu Hong's Memory Dress, composed of 48 garment bags printed with diary-like paintings of her own life on one side and images tracing China's grand historical narrative on the other. There was very little painting on view across the Biennial's two locations (the Sharjah Expo Center and the Sharjah Art Museum). But photography made an exceptionally strong showing with series by Fouad Elkoury, Mark Pilkington, Tarek al-Ghoussein and Maja Bajevic, whose soulful images of Christmas lights decorating a bleak Bosnian landscape perfectly captured the quiet desperation of aping normalcy in the aftermath of war.

The jury, comprised of Walid Sadek, Okwui Enwezor, and Rina Carvajal, selected Bajevic's work for one of the Biennial's three prizes, which were awarded equally instead of in a ranking

of first, second and third.

The other winners were Mario Rizzi's six-screen video installation *Out of Place -Images Déracinées-* and Moataz Nasr's two-screen video installation *The Echo*. Rizzi's explores the lives of first and second generation immigrants in Paris. There is a deeply intimate and performative element to this work, as his subjects literally act our lives on screen. Not coincidentally, Rizzi used to deejay and his ability to edit 45 days of filming into trenchant 3-minute bits reveals a strong talent for mixing material. Nasr's work is also expertly constructed, pairing a scene from Youssef Chahine's film *Al-Ard* (*The Earth*) with a re-enactment of the same scene by Egyptian storyteller Chirine al-Ansary in a Cairo coffee shop. The juxtaposition amplifies the work's meaning and raises numerous questions about masculinity, femininity, political passivity and more.

Rizzi's and Nasr's works both evince a striking structural and aesthetic sensibility. But many other video works on display at Sharjah simply splashed around in the medium's excesses < too long, too dull and too lo-fi to make much of an impact. Most were just benignly bad or boring. Solmaz Shahbazi's glorification of the Biennial's curators was a disastrous waste of time, space and resources. Her piece was symptomatic of a larger problem.

Zolghadr intended the Biennialicity symposium to address the Biennial format in general. Instead of problematizing it, he made a mockery of it. Despite the serious participation of attending curators, the symposium came off as smug, immature and overly sarcastic; only artist Hassan Khan's biting intervention of dazzling wordplay achieved a real critical breakthrough. Art-world infighting aside, the most crucial and enduring contribution this event has made to the region's mechanisms of cultural production comes from the fact that the Biennial commissioned no fewer than 20 artworks, in many cases inviting local, regional and international artists to spend time in Sharjah producing new projects. In the absence of a viable public, the Sharjah Biennial may end up evolving into a kind of independent laboratory for artistic and intellectual inquiry. If it does, Sharjah will be the first of its kind.