

SHARJAH BIENNIAL

DUBAI'S SOBER NEIGHBOUR CHOSE ECOLOGY AND CHANGE AS THEMES FOR ITS ARTS GATHERING, SB8. SHUMON BASAR WONDERS IF THE CHOICE WASN'T RATHER GREEN

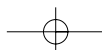
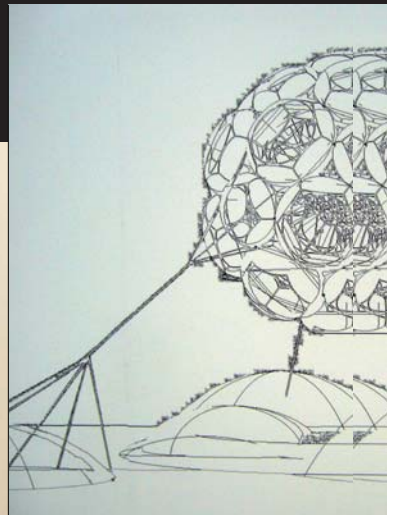
At least half the arrivals waiting to get past immigration in Dubai are of south-east Asian origin – Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis. They're here, most likely, to work on the countless construction sites that have made Dubai the biggest urban work-in-progress outside China. Less widely known is that many will be working in the building boom in Dubai's neighbouring emirate, Sharjah, which is experiencing a ripple effect from the hype next door. Much of Sharjah was put together in the Seventies and Eighties and, visually, can still seem caught in that era but it is being updated and upgraded with a frenzy, to absorb the bulk of Dubai's service-industry workers.

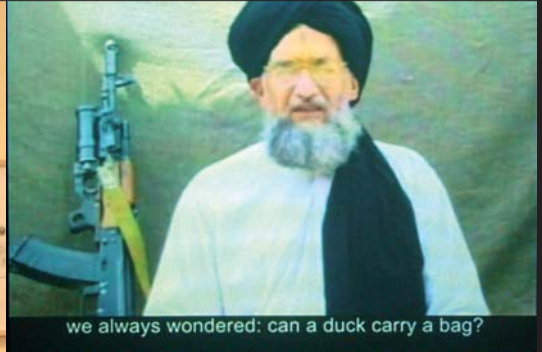
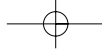
The reason we are here, however, is the eighth Sharjah Biennial (SB8), which has as its theme, Still Life: Art, Ecology and

the Politics of Change. The previous Biennial was well received, having benefited from a move in 2003 to restructure the curatorial team as a fusion of local and international know-how, and this year's show has been organised by a team that includes director Hoor al Qasimi, artistic director Jack Persekian, Ikon Gallery boss Jonathon Watkins, Dubai native Mohammed Kazem and Eva Scharrer from Basel. It has to prove itself in the overheated world of international art biennials, while dodging platitudes on global warming.

Time moves fast in this part of the Middle East. SB8 is happening in a significantly different cultural context from even just two years ago. Dubai has grabbed global attention over the past decade through its obsession with all

*Left to right:
Remake by Joe Scanlan,
featuring Donell
Woodford; Air-Port-City by
Tomas Saraceno; The
Yellow Cow Products by
Ahmad Mater; Guide to Al
Khan by Lara Almarcegui*



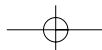
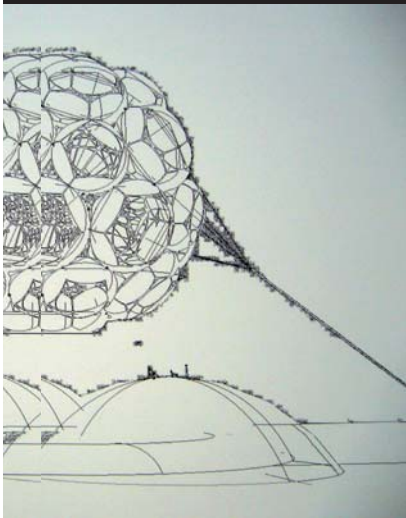


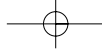
things record-breakingly tall, outrageous and visible from outer space, but until recently, it has shied away from anything remotely highbrow, that was Sharjah's territory. With more than 20 museums and, according to its tourist blurb, 'more than 5,000 years of settlement', Sharjah is known locally as the 'cultural emirate'. It has also set out to be less cosmopolitan than its neighbours. Alcohol consumption is categorically illegal. There are no notable beaches on which to brown yourself. And shopping has yet to reach mega-mall dimensions. Less oil-rich than Dubai and Abu Dhabi, Sharjah has never indulged in their extravagance or revelled in the same decadent luxury, and the Biennial, established in 1993, has become integral to this sober posture. But Sharjah's regional monopoly on cultural antics will soon end.

In February 2007, Abu Dhabi announced plans for its own \$27bn (£14m) arts-led development, Saddiyat Island. A one-stop shop of hyper-cultural confectionary, Saddiyat Island signed up Frank Gehry to provide the world's biggest Guggenheim museum; Zaha Hadid to design an immense performing arts centre, and Jean Nouvel to build the first Louvre museum outside of France. The last caused outrage from French arts purists, who protested 'Our museums are not for sale.' But it was too late. Then, in March, Dubai hosted the first Gulf Art Fair, with a roll-call of international galleries flogging their weird wares to an unsuspecting and still largely unformed market. Critic Matt Collings expressed it thus in The Daily Telegraph: 'Art is the next thing people buy when they already own everything else.'

Last August's 'green' issue of Art Review wanted to know if art can save the planet. 'If politicians and environmentalists have failed to save the planet, perhaps the fashion lobby will,' writes SB8 curator Eva Scharrer, satirically, in the catalogue. The subject matter – consumption, environment and apocalypse – is riddled with middle-class fetishism and guilt; the poor can't afford to care and the rich don't need to. At the press conference for SB8, western journalists waste no time in accusing the organisers of indefensible hypocrisy and contradiction. How can there be a theme on ecology and politics of change here, in the UAE, where oil money precipitates wanton, polluting construction? How many trees were felled to create the paper for the Biennial catalogues? How many flights were made >

Above left to right: Demolitions, Wastelands, Empty Lots, by Lara Almaraz; Oxygen by Abdunasser Gharem; The Desalination Plant Waste Garden, by Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger; The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist, by Michael Rakowitz; video work featuring Ayman al-Zawahiri





by the curators and the artists to make today happen? The curators' immediate responses seem disingenuous. Or maybe they're just tired of the moral opprobrium thrust upon them. In an essay, Jonathon Watkins confesses that 'it's not a little ironic to be flying around', but also states that 'it would be wrong to expect that SB8 will be a model of good ecological practice.' I tend to agree. Environmentalism can turn good intentions into moralising. Sheer desperation, impotence and shame can make us do weird things.

SB8 takes place mainly in two buildings, and a series of outdoor spaces in Sharjah. We start out at the Sharjah Art Museum, a long, thin, and processional building classically laid out with small rooms. There's one, blazing in yellow, stocked exclusively with 'Yellow Cow Products', including milk, ice cream, yoghurt. Ahmed Mater's mono-branded 'ecology' of consumables makes me queasy

with artificial delight. In total contrast, Lara Almarcegui's project frames local forgetfulness. She has documented a Sharjah village called Al Khan. It's emptied out, derelict, yet surrounded by accelerated urban growth, a testament to what was and what will be.

Michael Rakowitz has two projects in the biennial concerning the relationship between material artefacts and symbolic capital. At the art museum he is showing *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* (2007), which deals with the 7,000 archaeological artefacts pillaged from Iraq's National Museum in April 2003. Rakowitz has remade about 70 of these, using historical documentation, and 17 are on show here. Assembled from local cardboard boxes and newsprint, they are anything but ancient. They're temporary stand-ins for what is still missing.

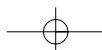
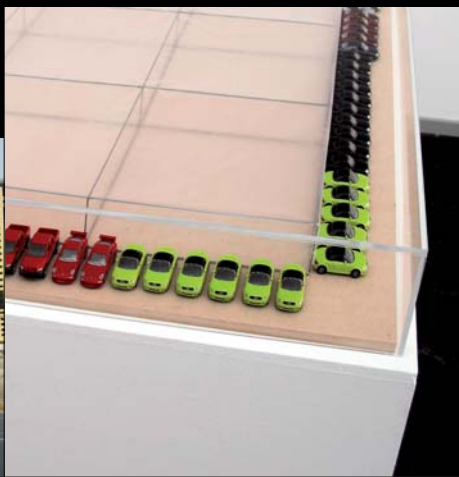
Zineb Sedira's pictures invoke Algiers' seafront as an epic, symbolic edge condition

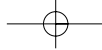
Clockwise from top left: Al Shifa' Bint Al Hareth School; Desalination Device with Solar Panel Canopy, by Marjetica Potrč; Tomas Saraceno's Air-Port-City; Storm #2, by Taysir Batniji; Justice for the Mother by Lara Baladi; Project Stockholm by Gustav Metzger; an advertisement strikes an ironic note in Sharjah

between the colonial past and an uncertain future. Photography and film feature heavily in other rooms. Much of it is in the now familiar dispassionate documentary style. This is a genre that is here to stay.

Gustav Metzger's Stockholm, June 1972/2007 project was originally conceived in 1972, and has never been actualised until SB8. Some 120 (mainly white) cars are set around a massive, clear container, with all the exhaust pipes feeding into it. Once the cars' ignition is switched on, the emissions from each of them slowly fills the container until it turns ominously and fatally black. Metzger, famous for employing destruction in his art practice since the Sixties, helps us visualise what we know but never see, in an act of deathly ballet. It's one of the most impressive gestures in the biennial, and it has taken Sharjah to make it finally happen.

The Finnish artist Tea Mäkipää followed her own 10 Commandments for >>





the 21st Century – the first of which is: ‘Do not fly’. It took her 21 days to get from Weimar to Sharjah, but she made it entirely via land transport. Could this be the new time-distance relationship the world will have collectively to face?

One of the biennials I’ve enjoyed most was Istanbul in 2005. In expected and unexpected ways, it forced one to meander through the city. With its impressive array of off-site projects, Sharjah has begun to do this too, and I hope that this will continue – though Sharjah lacks the pedestrian usability of Istanbul. Sharjah’s relative lack of spectacle and historical preciousness means that it can’t rely on its backdrop to guarantee biennial success. The ‘wow’ isn’t inbuilt into the site. Such paradoxes as this could be exploited even more, as has been done with the various interventions connected to schools.

My mind drifts forward five or 10 years from now. If Abu Dhabi’s dream of Saddiyat

Island fully manifests, with its ‘best-ever’ Guggenheim and exclusive Louvre outlet, and Dubai concocts a commercial art scene to join the hyperbolic global market, should Sharjah Biennial change its course to compete in the realm of deafening art culture? Or should it remain serious and tactically quiet? Art biennials will quickly have to rethink ways to be inimitable, or they run the risk of becoming more globalised art world excess. Smooth, homogenised, dislocated termini for the moneyed traveller: is that what art fairs are for? When, a few months before the opening, I asked artistic director Jack Persekian what gives Sharjah Biennial’s inimitability, his answer was: ‘Education; the ability to act as a producer of new works, and being committed to the realities of the region’. It’s a smart yet modest trinity of ambitions. Adhering to it should keep Sharjah’s biennial increasingly urgent amid the almost viral proliferation

of art carnivals across the world. This event’s uniqueness is its genuine attention to art as discourse – and not as theme park lookalike or celebrity flytrap. In a place where alternative social or political outlooks are difficult to find (or create), the Sharjah Biennial is an opportunity to smuggle in – under the aegis of art – unstable, contentious thinking. I don’t want to over-romanticise quietude or seriousness, but I doubt that the thinking behind Saddiyat Island envisages troubling or problematic content amid the glitz. When the press release has surreptitiously become a form of ready-made art criticism, rhetoric is cheaper than oil in the USA.

SB8 may not save the world after it’s finished. But it contributes, intelligently, though with important flaws, to our individual and collective fate; we are destined to make things worse while we are figuring out how to make them better ■

Clockwise from top left: Underneath by Mounir Fatme; Remake by Joe Scanlan; Hot Spot by Mona Hartoum; Mirage 07 by Susan Hefuna; Florilegium by Jacques Nimki; Sharjah at dusk

