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Immersed in the Discrete Realities of the Sharjah Biennial

The 13th Sharjah Biennial, titled *Tamawuj*, immerses you in distinctly crafted and compelling realities through sound, video works, and maze-like installations.



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Raqs Media Collective, “The Necessity of Infinity” (2017) performance, part of Sharjah Biennial 13: *Tamawuj* and March Meeting, 2017 (image courtesy Sharjah Art

Foundation)

SHARJAH, UAE — “If the sky is full of stars, then somewhere there is another star, another sun, and around it, there must be other planets ... with ground to stand on, water to drink, a breeze, a moon, a decent sea, a sunset poised on the horizon, a sunrise waiting to happen.” So goes a passage from the text of the performance “The Necessity of Infinity” by [Raqs Media Collective](#), which was staged three times (in Arabic, English, and Urdu) during the 13th annual Sharjah Biennial. This lyrical description of the authors’ conjured worlds, complete in their potential to give rise to new days and vistas (and based on the mystical system of Sufism) is an ideal metaphor for the biennial itself. The exhibition of objects,

performances, and talks was curated by Christine Tohmé, who collaborated with Lara Khaldi, Kader Attia, and Zeynep Öz. According to the official press statement, the organizers sought to address “what conditions we are working within, and what conditions we are working against...conditions both elemental and cultural.”



Christine Tohmé, with collaborators Lara Khaldi, Kader Attia, and Zeynep Öz, speaking on the opening day of the biennial (all images by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

It isn't necessarily clear what is meant by "elemental" and "cultural." The biennial's title itself, Tamawuj, an Arabic word meaning a "rising and falling in waves, but also a flowing, swelling, surging, fluctuation or a wavy undulating appearance" is figurative rhetoric, and the stated themes of "water, crops, earth, and the culinary" seem often to have an abstract relation to the work displayed. During a conversation among the organizers that took place on opening day, Tohmé continued to use metaphor to articulate what the biennial sought to present and consider. She spoke of the necessity of small collectives that could act like ants in the arts ecosystem, burrowing into the ground to aerate the soil and make the ground fallow, in preparation

for a later renewal after larger animals (symbolizing sizable institutions) have gone extinct. She spoke of Sharjah as a factory, of canals being instigated here, which may nevertheless be blocked in the future; of dormant seeds waiting for the necessary conditions to sprout, of “hope in a collectivity that is dispersed.”

Tohmé became more concrete when referring (generally) to the current political conditions in Beirut, Palestine, Istanbul, and Cairo, clearly concerned that the restriction of cultural practitioners’ travel through these places means restricting the travel and mobility of *ideas*. That being said, many artists hailing from these countries were able to share their ideas here, where they found fertile ground to develop fully formed

worlds of meaning, and, in this respect, the biennial is a success.



The entrance to the Arts Square



A view of Calligraphy Square

The works are dispersed among



A view of the interior of the Arts Square

several sites around the Emirate of Sharjah: the Arts Square, Calligraphy Square, the Al Hamriyah studios, the planetarium, a structure called the Flying Saucer, and the main hub at Al Mureijah Square.

In most of these, the pieces are installed in their own rooms or containers, with doorways or heavy black curtains keeping the sounds and materials separate from other works.

There is very little painting. Rather, the emphasis is on sound and video works and

installations that again create hypnotically immersive sensations.



Jonathas de Andrade, still from “O Peixe (The fish)” (2016), 16mm transferred to 2k video (image courtesy Jonathas de Andrade)

For example, Jonathas de Andrade’s video piece (transferred from 16mm film) “O Peixe (The Fish)” (2016) takes the viewer into the northeast region of Brazil to intimately witness men fishing on the São Paulo Francisco River. De Andrade’s camera lingers on the bodies of the half-naked fishermen — there are several different men who

use distinct tools to hunt — as they make their catches. After the fish are caught, the men take them to their chests, massaging and caressing them as the fish spread their gills gasping for water and slowly expire. The work is oddly riveting, being clearly homoerotic in its slow, sensual, visual consideration of the men's bodies, while putting the viewer in the position of being the willing voyeur to what feels like a ritual one should not be permitted to see. This feeling lingers despite discovering that the ritual was staged by the artist.



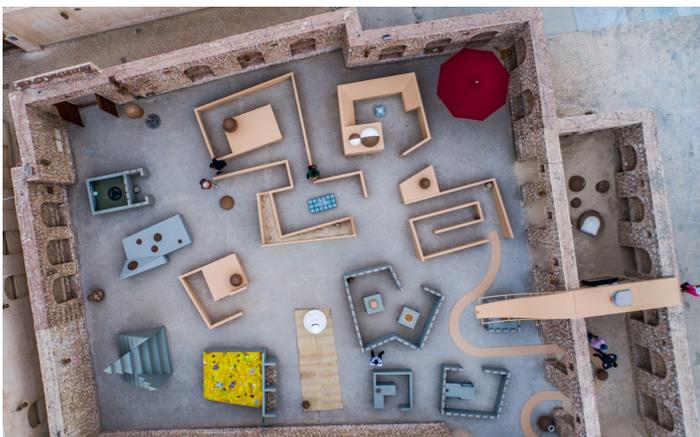
Khalil Rabah, “Palestine after Palestine: New sites for the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind Departments” (2017), mixed media installation, dimensions variable, commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation (image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation)



Khalil Rabah, “Palestine after Palestine: New sites for the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind Departments” (2017), mixed media installation, dimensions variable, commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation (image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation)

Just as poignant and fully realized is Khalil Rabah's "Palestine after Palestine: New Sites for the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind Departments" (2017). The work is shown in one of the galleries in Al Mureijah Square, and consists of various objects that all point to an as-yet only imagined museum for a state that struggles to fully assert its being — though there is a museum that opened in the West Bank last year, but remains empty of actual exhibitions because of internal organizational disagreements. In Rabah's installation there is a garden of golden spools of barbed wire meant to represent the "Botanical Garden, Area C, Fields of Gold"; the wooden "skeleton" of a pretend lion with its patchwork skin

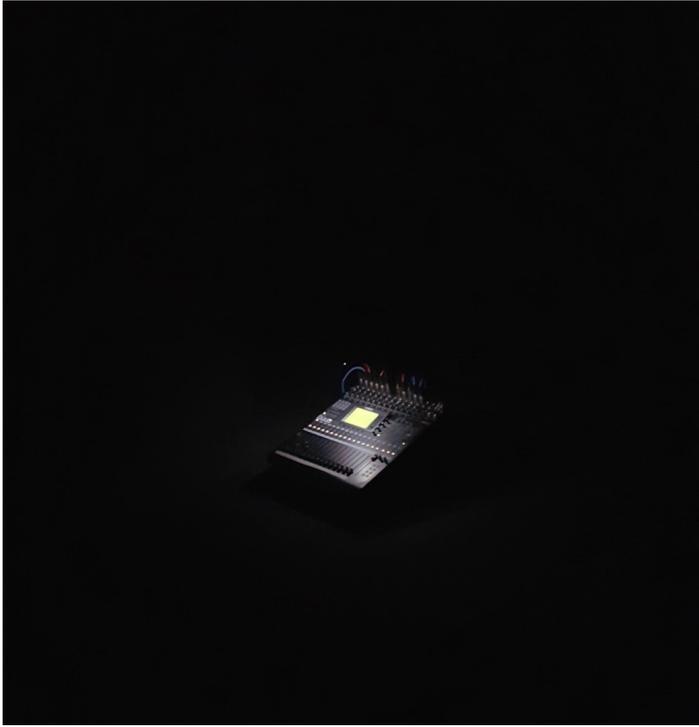
displayed on the opposite wall; boards with nails operating as maps, and signs as museological devices, conveying a serious institutional formality. It is largely a work of speculative fiction, with elaborate museum displays that, like the state the work represents, do exist in the world — but not completely. Nevertheless, Rabah has elaborated his vision for this institution for more than a decade — an act of unyielding imagination in the face of political hopelessness.



Donghee Koo, “Way of Replay II (off peak)” (2017), wood, sand, Styrofoam, concrete, glass, umbrella, kinetic sand, video, audio, miscellaneous objects,

dimensions variable, commissioned by
Sharjah Art Foundation (image courtesy
Sharjah Art Foundation)

In “Way of Replay II (Off Peak)”
(2017), Donghee Koo
reinterprets the
meandering paths and complex
architecture of the area where
she was given space to make
and install her work, Al
Mureijah Square. Koo’s work is,
for me, the most playfully
mischievous work in the entire
biennial, featuring a maze
peopled with quaint objects
such as large balls, mirrored
walls, geometric concrete
blocks, miniature tableaus,
staircases that lead only to air,
sand-covered “snow men,” and
a serene pool of water. It is an
exhibit that continued to be
fascinating each time I returned
to it.



Lawrence Abu Hamdan “Saydnaya (the missing 19db)” (2017), sound, mixing deck, light box, dimensions variable

Other memorable works convey difficult, harrowing stories.

Standouts in this vein include Lawrence Abu Hamdan’s acoustic installation “Saydnaya (the missing 19db)” (2017), which invites viewers into a room that is almost completely dark to hear the accounts of those who were condemned to torture in the infamous Syrian prison. The stories told by the

voices describe the captives' own immersion in constant darkness, their adaptations to the brutality of the prison — learning how to whisper so the guards could not hear them, or how to tell when their fellow prisoners had been taken away and executed. It is a deeply intimate and harrowing experience that creates an entire world to inhabit for the 12 minutes that it runs.



Takashi Ishida, “Burning Chair” (2013),
video installation, 5 minutes 8 seconds

Takashi Ishida’s “Burning Chair” (2013) visually evokes for me a similar sentiment of isolation and slow destruction — only by animating drawings of a single brown, wooden stool. The resulting five-minute video focuses on the presence of the stool to the point where it refracts into shadows, becomes enveloped by flame, and finally drowns in darkness.



The Al Hamriyah Studios (image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation)

Rather than undulant waves or water or earth, the theme of the biennial, for me, is the

immersion into distinctly crafted and compelling realities. Indeed, when I took a detour to the Sharjah Art Museum, I found myself less attracted to the paintings, which asked me to go from canvas to canvas, to look into each one as though from the vantage point of a window. After spending a few days among the works in the biennial, it felt underwhelming to use only my visual attention to navigate the art I encountered. Again, as Raqs Media Collective suggested, there are captivating spaces to sensorially enter, ones with “a sunset poised on the horizon, a sunrise waiting to happen.”

The Sharjah Biennial 13, [Tamawuj](#), continues through October 2017. Featuring over 50 international artists, the biennial encompasses exhibitions and a public program in Sharjah

and Beirut; a year-long education program in Sharjah; projects in Dakar, Ramallah, Istanbul, and Beirut; and an online publishing platform.