luxurious qualities in the works of each of the artists – the endless potential of creating something that is only itself, each decision somehow creating a sensually and intellectually world.

The largest work in the exhibition is Black's 'Persuader Face', 2011, a rectangular floor piece made primarily with finishing plaster dust which, in a light correspondence with the works of Beasley and Barclay respectively, runs across a long seam or crack in the floor and is a delicate shade of peach. Among cracked chalky bath bombs in shades of pink and turquoise, one traces the artist’s fingerprints and movements as though it were a landscape – perhaps the remnants of a seaside game. While formally beautiful in colour and texture, a gorgeous wreckage of dusty forms coming together (in the bath bombs) and breaking apart, it also enacts a formal kind of persuasion, being both grand in scale and material, but also just fragile enough to seem as though it could vanish in seconds. It has permitted itself – just – the luxury of existing. Nearby, Black's 'Unusual To', 2007, comprises two forms made of sugar paper, one a green suspended piece, which has been crumpled so that it almost resembles an opening flower, a hole to peer inside, the other pink with an opulent iridescent finish (made with hair gel and nail varnish) that seems, in contrast, tightly closed.

In a sculptural show of female artists, exhibiting in the Yorkshire landscape, one catches Barbara Hepworth's shadow falling occasionally. If there’s a connection here, it is perhaps an emphasis on heightened formalism – the work here is at once incredibly stripped back, and at the same time gloriously excessive, intellectually. Different sparks ignite the three – it might be a location or a craft for Barclay, a text or process for Beasley and a raw moment of creative experimentation for Black, but each artist creates something which cannot be said with language alone, and that can only be said with art. Here, then, are clusters of waiting lights that the viewer can so easily switch on themselves, one by one, creating that unmatchable feeling of looking at art and letting it do rather luxurious things with your mind.]

Sharjah Biennial 10: Plot for A Biennial
various venues 16 March to 16 May

'Plot for A Biennial’ is the title given to the tenth iteration of this international exhibition in Sharjah. The curators – Suzanne Cotter, Rasha Salti and Haig Aivazian – formulated the exhibition in the guise of a film plot. In a post 9/11 world, 'plot' also conjures notions of a nefarious plan. Set in the context of a region that has a strict policy on public behaviour and decorum, the Biennial presents challenging works that at times seem to contradict the charming setting of this Gulf town.

Sharjah, a UNESCO heritage city once colonised by the British, is more conservative than its neighbours in Dubai or Abu Dhabi, yet it sets the context for the most provocative art in the region. ArtDubai, with its commercial emphasis on more polite work, pales in comparison. And while a retrospective of Emirati artist Hassan Sharif curated by Catherine David opened in Abu Dhabi, the only longstanding exhibition in that city is a promotional affair about the development of the new Saadiyat Island at the Emirates Palace Hotel. The Biennial in Sharjah confronts more topical issues, with politically engaged artists that are often seen in such exhibitions, including Wafid Raad, Emily Jacir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Alfredo Jaar, Harun Farocki, Artur Zmijewski and Hans Haacke. These established artists are presented alongside a wider range of practitioners (over 80 in total), including some less familiar to a western audience.

The Biennial is spread throughout the heart of Sharjah, near its functioning harbour and historic buildings. A large portion of the exhibition is presented in the Sharjah Art Museum (dubbed Scene I by the curators), which is located prominently on a main public square. Adorning the facade of the museum is the text piece Supply and Demand for Immortality, 2011, by Richard Tghogy & Marilou Lemmens. Based in Quebec, the artists’ collaborative practice explores both a pared down formal approach and a play with language. This piece, a flow chart that documents a range of human personality quirks such as 'involved in grand deception' and 'is known as A’s husband', could be describing well-known figures in the art world.

In the main square, a large white rocket (a sculpture by Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, whose work is also found in ArtDubai) stands in front of the museum. The rocket, while most recently evoking notions of military might and satellite warfare, was also a symbol of hope and progress in the 1960s. Hadjithomas & Joreige recreated a Lebanese rocket, the Cedar IV, that had been a cause for national celebration upon its launching. The story, in large part omitted from Lebanese history because of the strife that followed, is made evident here – a reminder of the former great accomplishments of Lebanon.

Inside the museum, the ground floor and much of the higher levels are given over to the Biennial. While at times it was confusing to determine which pieces were actually part of the Biennial (a slight yellow frame around the information placards indicated Biennial works), the presentation overall was quite strong. The standout works were too numerous to mention, although Hala Al-Ani’s photographs of recent Emirati domestic architecture were particularly redolent. A Typology of Houses, 2010, presents colour photographs, each shot in exactly the same format, of mansion houses that are grouped by style, for
example mock Neoclassical, Tudor and Italianate. Presented with a deadpan tone, the work of this young Iraqi artist references both the structure of Bernd & Hilla Becher's photographs as well as the humorous cultural observations of Dan Graham's *Homes for America*, 1966. Indeed, architecture, and the changing landscape of the Gulf, was a theme that resonated throughout the Biennial. This is a region where temporary buildings are erected on the occasion of an exhibition (for example, the Mathaf in Doha or the Cultural Centre in Abu Dhabi) and many artists commented on the breakneck speed of construction. For example, Lebanese artist Ziad Antar's commissioned photographs of the region, from fishing boats to distressed black and white silver prints of Burj Khalifa, now the tallest building in the world, document the rapid and at times uneasy transformation of the UAE.

Hrair Sarkissian's *Exciton Squares*, 2008, also reveals the paradox between the built environment and the social realities that are hidden underneath. This photographic series was inspired by an event from the artist's youth in Damascus, where he happened upon the public hanging of three prisoners in a crowded square. The palm trees, lush foliage, military statues and unremarkable architecture in this series occlude the more disturbing history of the public display of capital punishment, the ultimate final humiliation. The historical and social contexts of architecture are present in other pieces, including Rosalind Nashashibi's traditional palm shelter, which provided surprisingly cool refuge from the heat. In addition, *Face Scripting: What did the Building See?*, 2011, a film by Shumon Basar, Eyal Weizman and Jane & Louise Wilson, poetically explores, through the architecture of absence, the media coverage of the Dubai 2010 assassination of a Hamas operative.

One of the strengths of the Biennial was its use of open-air public spaces. Trisha Donnelly, Slavs & Tartars, Walid Sadek and Mustafa Benfodil used sites that benefited from their proximity to mosques, souks and other traditional infrastructure of an Arabic city. Judith Barry's *Cairo Stories*, 2010-11, large-scale video projections which tell stories of individual women's experiences, were spread throughout the various sites. One would encounter these women, often disembodied talking heads, while walking through the souk or visiting one of the Biennial outpost buildings. Barry's work may be considered as metonymic for the exhibition as a whole: one happens upon the pieces, in many cases comprising voices of dissent, in the most unlikely places. Sharjah, with its more progressive Gulf neighbours, may seem an unusual context for the presentation of such demanding work; however, it is quietly creating a name for itself as one of the most important events on the international Biennial calendar, a plot not so nefarious after all.

This review was filed before news of the dismissal of the Sharjah Art Foundation director Jack Persekian (Artnews p13).

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