

# SHARJAH BIENNIAL 12

THE PAST, THE PRESENT, THE POSSIBLE

Curator Eungie Joo's Sharjah Biennial 12, "The Past, the Present, the Possible," was conscientiously an anti-behemoth of a biennial. Joo chose just 51 artists and groups—half the number of the previous version—and mercifully did not try to offer the latest "everywhere, right-now" vision of global or regional art practices. Nor was hers a polemically driven show, with artists' works servicing some lapsed critical ideology or trite geographical realignments. Instead, it was an artist-forward exhibition, with Joo showcasing individual practices and facilitating the realization of ambitious site-specific projects.

That said, Sharjah Biennial 12 was hardly apolitical. The charged topics of labor, colonialism, agriculture, the self-determination of peoples, collective memory and national ideologies were all addressed through artists' lived experiences and formal experimentation. This approach—the blending of the topical and the experiential—was epitomized by Cinthia Marcelle's *At the Risk of the Real* (2015), a post-and-beam structure supporting a ceiling of wooden sieves, inside a coral-walled courtyard. Mimicking the process used to produce plaster, construction workers above created fine showers of sand that covered visitors' tracks in a delicate, shifting sand-scape below—suggesting how the utopian fantasies that accompany real-estate development in the United Arab Emirates, as elsewhere, rely upon basic human labor.

Joo's curatorial success was to reveal artists in new, expanded depths. In some cases she achieved this through the pairings of otherwise disparate practices. Kim Beom's five-meter-tall, black-and-white depiction of a maze, *Untitled (Intimate Suffering #13)* (2014), an absurdist yet emotive take on abstract painting, together with Iman Issa's human-sized, abstract-sculpture-derived objects from Sharjah museums, drew out in each an uncomfortable relationship between art-object and the body. Most memorably, Joo juxtaposed the works of Rayyane Tabet and Byron Kim, which, despite all other dissimilarities, are embedded with poignant family stories. Dramatically suspended from the ceiling was Tabet's *Cyprus* (2015), a 850-kilogram wooden ship with its rusted, human-sized anchor on the floor. It recalls the ship his father had rented 29 years ago, envisioning it would carry the family from war-torn Lebanon to Cyprus before realizing he could not pilot it safely, averting a near-certain tragedy at sea. In the adjacent gallery was a yearlong selection of Bryon Kim's modest, self-effacing "Sunday Paintings" (2001–), each a record of the sky's color on that day, with chronicles of his artistic and familial life handwritten on the surface.

Another hallmark of Joo's biennial was the unique solo presentations of older figures newly recognized internationally, such as Korean late



modernist painter Chung Chang-sup (1927–2011), Lebanese sculptor Saloua Raouda Choucair, and Turkish painter (and later, Jordanian princess) Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901–1991). Joo's preface aptly describes one of her interests as "an ahistorical wealth of abstraction," particularly by women artists, including Etel Adnan; Lala Rukh, who makes calligraphic-inspired paintings; Jac Leirner, whose sculptures are arrangements of old paper currency or plastic rulers; and Julie Mehretu's massive, black-on-gray canvases. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's portraits of black subjects were a counterpoint to the abstraction. Classical in style and grouped by her subjects' gender, they collectively formed the biennial's humanist core.

In eliding "the future" for "the possible" in her title, Joo suggested both a faith in human agency and deep uncertainty for the future. Fortitude was embodied in Jawshing Arthur Liou's massive film projection, depicting the artist's 2,300-kilometer pilgrimage to the Himalayan peak of Kailash after his daughter's death, and in Abdullah al-Saadi's video and drawings that resulted from his voyage through the Emirates's hills, while carting his provisions in a camera-rigged wheelbarrow. Elsewhere, apprehension about humanity's future riddled Michael Joo's archaeological-like site in an abandoned warehouse—a network of channels carved into the concrete floor, with a pit excavated in front of its far wall, covered in mirrored paint—and Hassan Khan's dark-humored project centered around a video starring two "idiot" characters engaged in a Beckett-meets-Machiavelli dialogue. Working in what she describes as a "particularly disharmonious and decadent moment in human history," Joo nonetheless created a polyphonic biennial that eschewed both artistic spectacle and curatorial grandiosity—reasons enough to feel better about the future.

**HG MASTERS**