

SHARJAH  
SHARJAH ART MUSEUM & HERITAGE AREA  
**Sharjah Biennial 10**  
PLOT FOR A BIENNIAL



Bouquets of green balloons, courtesy of the artist collective Slavs and Tatars and featuring a Qajar-era Iranian woman and Bert from *Sesame Street*, were handed out in front of the Sharjah Art Museum, where they bobbed in the ever-changing breeze. This was an appropriate start to the tenth Sharjah Biennial, which, as Sharjah Art Foundation director Jack Persekian has explained, is dedicated “to the winds of change that are sweeping the region.” Indeed, change and transformation are at the very heart of this biennial, which is laden with political and ideological undertones.

The year 2011 marks two decades of the Sharjah Biennial, which occupies not only the Sharjah Art Museum and surrounding heritage areas but also the wider city, including locations such as the local cricket stadium. In the guidebook for the biennial, co-curators Suzanne Cotter and Rasha Salti, and associate curator Haig Aivazian, explain the event’s title, “Plot for a Biennial,” as “the idea of a treatment for film, replete with a plot and characters,” and that it is “scripted” around a constellation of key words and themes—treason, necessity, insurrection, affiliation, corruption, devotion, disclosure and translation. In turn, participants become a cast of players within the biennial, with the key roles identified as the traitor, the traducer, the collaborator and the experimentalist.

Biennials often suffer from being either too narrowly or too broadly themed, resulting in a jambalaya of work that lacks cohesion. “Plot for a Biennial” escapes this trap as its plethora of stated subthemes allows the curators and the 119 participating artists to present a wide variety of existing and newly commissioned work in a manner that remains coherent and engaging, with the various subthemes overlapping and resonating with each other.

It is interesting to note that while the Sharjah Biennial eschews Venice-style national pavilions, it also goes so far as to not mention the artists’ nationalities in texts and wall labels. Freeing the artists from ethnographic categorization—a problem that dogs artists from emerging art scenes outside the United States and Europe—is refreshing and places primacy on the artworks and the dialogues created among them.

One of the most captivating works was Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens’ *Supply and Demand for Immortality* (2011), an enormous red text pasted at two ends of the Sharjah Art Museum’s façade—one version in Arabic and the other in English. The work is a speculative computing tool in the form of a supply-and-demand graph, with the Y-axis representing “price of glory” and the X-axis corresponding to “quantity of power.” Within this graph, phrases that chart one’s rise or demise toward immortality range from “Doesn’t give a damn” and “Ceases to be active once livelihood is assured” in the bottom left to “More eloquent than most rock stars” and “Feels like they’ve always existed” in the top right. Astutely witty, Ibghy and Lemmens offer a tangible representation of the omnipotence that comes when one’s name and reputation outlasts one’s lifespan.

A true collaborator with the characters and narratives distinct to Sharjah, Rayyane Tabet thoughtfully delves into the city’s history of cricket with *Home on Neutral Ground: A Project in Three Parts* (2011), a multipart work teeming with irony. In 2010, the Afghan national cricket team was gifted the Sharjah Cricket Stadium, built in 1981 by an Emirati entrepreneur who had become cricket-obsessed while living in Pakistan. *Home on Neutral Ground* is comprised of a Google Maps aerial photograph of vacant land in Afghanistan printed to scale on a cricket-pitch cover and installed at the Sharjah Cricket Stadium on March 18. Meanwhile, one day of uninterrupted video footage of the stadium from 2010 is projected onto two screens in a narrow gallery within one of the heritage buildings, which also contains a floor drawing of a cricket pitch. Lastly, the artist distributed 740 portfolios of original drawings on Sharjah Cricket Stadium stationery. Tabet says that he used “the city as a set” and that his project “operates as a metaphor for political exchange and neutrality,” directly addressing the dynamic between migrants and their adopted homelands. This is especially pertinent in the United Arab Emirates, whose population is overwhelmingly comprised of nonnatives whom, under current law, are barred from receiving UAE nationality.

Vivid and immediately eye-catching, Imran Qureshi’s site-specific painting, *Blessings Upon the Land of My Love* (2011) covers the floor of a courtyard in a historic building. At first glance, it appears to be, literally, a bloody mess; the kind one can imagine following a suicide attack. This is Qureshi’s intent, a comment on the “suicide deaths and unrest in the Middle East”—a reflection on “how landscape changes the illusion about life and death.” Amid the morbidly beautiful bloodiness, intricate foliage grows out of the pool of red drippings, which references stylistically

**Left**

SLAVS AND TATARS  
*Friendship of Nations*  
2011  
Mixed-media installation,  
dimensions variable,  
Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.

**Right**

IMRAN QURESHI  
*Blessings Upon the Land of My Love*  
2011  
Site-specific installation with emulsion and acrylic on brick, dimensions variable.  
Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.

**Below**

HRAIR SARKISSIAN  
*“Execution Squares”*  
2008  
From a set of 12 Lamda prints mounted on aluminum, 125 x 175 cm each.  
Collection of Sharjah Art Foundation.  
Courtesy Kalfayan Galleries, Athens/Thessaloniki.

Qureshi’s training in miniature painting. The sense of distance that comes with viewing this fictitious site of trauma from the top of the three-story building is akin to the sterile detachment that one feels when watching television coverage of the recurring suicide bombings that plague countries just a few hours’ flight from Sharjah.

Hrair Sarkissian explores similarly troubled terrain. His “Execution Squares” series of photographs (2008) shows public squares in the Syrian cities of Aleppo, Damascus and Lattakia, where public executions have taken place. These serene settings, taken early in the morning, are eerily quiet, devoid of people and betraying nothing of the violent acts that have occurred there.

Further afield, another courtyard and a modest, one-story hut offers a change of mood. There, Slavs and Tatars present a jovial installation as part of *Friendship of Nations* (2011). Addressing the themes of translation and treason via the creolization of Polish and Iranian/Shi’ite folklore and vernacular traditions, *Friendship of Nations* is the culmination of two years of research into the connections between the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and Poland’s Solidarność trade union federation of the 1980s. A tent-like structure similar to teahouses in Iran and the Caucasus, the installation combines textiles and texts, some of which are Solidarność-era slogans that were translated into Farsi and gifted to Iran, reading, for example, “Only solidarity and patience will secure our victory.” Other phrases are of the collective’s own invention, such as *Lahestan, nesfeh jahan* (“Poland, half the world”), which in Farsi is a play on the famous Iranian proverb *Esfahan nesfeh jahan* (“Esfahan, half the world”). This saying refers to Esfahan’s glorious architecture at a time when the city was not only the Persian capital but also one of the world’s largest cities. Slavs and Tatars explain that by substituting



*Esfahan with Lahestan* they are paying tribute to a lesser-known period of Esfahan’s history during World War II, when the city served “as a sanctuary for Polish refugees from Siberia. It was known then as the City of Polish Children.” True experimentalists who have created an interdisciplinary practice linking history, political science and cultural studies, Slavs and Tatars bring to our attention obscure but profound connections between two apparently unrelated countries.

Video works and films abound throughout the biennial, often reconsidering and reviewing faded histories and bygone political movements. Naem Mohaiemen presents *The Young Man Was No Longer A . . . Part 1: United Red Army* (2011), which is part of a larger research project that focuses on the fall of radical and often violent ultraleft movements of the 1970s. The feature-length film covers the Japanese Red Army’s hijacking of Japan Airlines flight 472 in 1977, which landed in Dhaka. The video is in part narrated by Mohaiemen, who adopts a matter-of-fact tone even when tying the narrative to his childhood recollections of the event. He also allows much of the story to tell itself by presenting a taped dialogue between one of the hijackers and the Dhaka-based negotiator (in English but with subtitles due to the thick accents of the speakers). With this film, Mohaiemen creates an opportunity to ponder what drives radical insurrection and life-threatening devotion to extremist movements that promise a more ideal world.

Exposing our assumptions about history, sense of self and collective identity, “Plot for a Biennial” attests to the resilience of humanity and energy of political, historical and personal transformation. This approach is a timely echo of the transformation that is sweeping this region and the world, allowing for fresh visions and realities—a new plot that is taking shape at this very moment.  
ISABELLA ELLAHEH HUGHES

