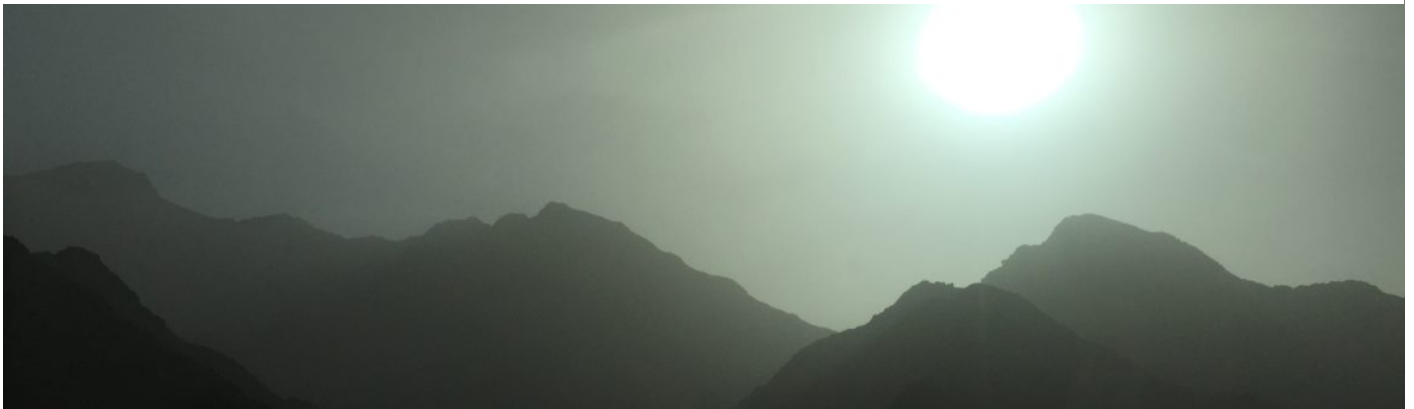


CULTURE / ASUNCIÓN MOLINOS GORDO

## Talking about the quietly fascinating 12th Sharjah Biennial



On the way to see Adrian Villar-Rojas' work

By

Jenifer Evans and Mai Elwakil

April 1, 2015

The 12th Sharjah Biennial, taking place from March 5 to June 5, is curated by Eungie Joo and titled *The Past, the Present and the Possible*. There are over 50 participating artists from around the world, as well as various workshops and lectures. Mada's Jenifer Evans and Mai Elwakil of [Medrar.TV](#) attended the opening, and on returning to Cairo had the following conversation about their impressions. Elwakil had also [attended](#) Sharjah Art Foundation's "[March Meeting](#)" last year, billed as a starting point for this year's biennial.

**Mai Elwakil:** The March Meeting was quite retrospective — it walked attendees through projects from previous editions of the biennial, and included presentations by artists taking part in this one. It felt like a teaser, as Eungie Joo only mentioned the title of the upcoming exhibition. She said it would be about the possibilities of contemporary art and that it was inspired by a conversation she had with Dutch-Vietnamese artist Danh Vo.

I kept searching for more information and a few months before the opening, I [read](#) that this biennial's theme was inspired by Henri Lefebvre's theory on people having a right to the city. I really looked forward to the opening week as I've been thinking about the residents' relationship to the biennial and city as a whole since my first visit to Sharjah.

**Jenifer Evans:** The artworks I found most interesting did relate to the city somehow. And one thing I liked was that we had to go on these trips around the city — and outside it — to try to find them, like going to see Asuncion Molinos-Gordo's [WAM \(World Agricultural Museum\)](#), which she originally made in Cairo in 2010, and Michael Joo's *Locale Inscribed (Walking in the desert with Eisa towards the sun,*

*looking down*), a piece that involved creating large cracks and using silver nitrate on the wall of an old warehouse.



Michael Joo's *Locale Inscribed (Walking in the desert with Eisa towards the sun, looking down)*. Photo: Jenifer Evans

Taking the little ferry to cross the creek and seeing those beautiful old blue boats that have been there for centuries and are still trading with Iran and Somalia and so on — that was very exciting for me.

**ME:** I went several times to see these two works, and felt that the boat rides were the main occasions I really got to interact naturally with people living and working in Sharjah. That side of the creek is very vibrant, and fewer visitors would have gone there if it weren't for Molinos-Gordo and Joo's works.

**JE:** The two also went very well together, even though they're completely different. There's something connecting them, something post-apocalyptic.



Asuncion Molinos-Gordo's WAM (World Agricultural Museum). Photo: Medrar.TV

**ME:** They give the impression of being related to nature and the notion of sustaining human life. Michael Joo's felt as though an earthquake had started cracking the earth, and the way the changing sunlight reflected on it made it look different throughout the day. Also, because the warehouse was completely open from one side, it attracted sailors and people living on that side of the creek as they walked by. People kept coming back to see it and WAM.

**JE:** Both are quite dark, but also very appealing because of the attention to detail — the aged paint and empty frames on the museum's walls, and the meticulously constructed cracks in the ground. Both have a strong visual effect.

**ME:** I really liked that Molinos-Gordo designed the sections of the museum based on how easy it is for the public to find information about these topics on their own. Copyrights of companies producing genetically modified seeds, for instance, were very detailed, but the sections about health, environment and food safety were displayed with a single sign and a locked door. It's a work one really has to spend time with.



Asuncion Molinos-Gordo's *WAM (World Agricultural Museum)*. Photo: Medrar.TV

JE: Going to find Abraham Cruzvillegas' *Reconstrucción 2: Here we stand* at the bird and animal market was also brilliant. It was an awful market in a way because of all these animals kept in little shops, alongside a vet's clinic and several butchers. There are some falcons being sold in one of the pet shops, and Cruzvillegas thought the stands they were perched on were ridiculous, so he decided to make new stands for them. Did you see his work in the main part of the biennial, this wooden structure with work gloves and brooms?



Abraham Cruzvillegas (Photo: Jenifer Evans)

The stands looked like that also. Both works use local materials, and are all part of the same evolving series. It was really cool that you go into this place where you'd be unlikely to go to as a tourist, and you had to figure out what the art was, because there were so many weird things in the animal market anyway. We had to walk up and down the rows of shops looking in every window, which was a bit painful, to figure out where and what the work was specifically.

Another work I liked in relation to the city was Hassan Khan and Andeel's collaboration, the billboards — it was exciting that it really seemed to be reaching out to the local population, particularly because of the language, the use of Urdu as well as Arabic and English. It seemed political, a statement, although it was also humorous.



Andeel / Hassan Khan, *Is there No Respect?* Photo: Jenifer Evans

**ME:** It was a powerful gesture. The Flying Saucer building, on top of which the billboards were set, is almost a landmark because of its unique architecture and history as a chicken restaurant. Cab drivers immediately recognized it when I showed them an image, and it's at the intersection of two main roads with several schools nearby. So it does reach a different audience.

They designed the billboards to capture the attention of drivers in a few seconds. Khan also spoke of how they and the biennial advertisements may be among the few things Sharjah residents see in an unplanned way.



The Flying Saucer. Photo: Jenifer Evans.

**JE:** I liked that piece as well because you were saying that there didn't seem to be that much interest from the foundation in engaging the local migrant population, right? Everything's in English and Arabic, and outreach programs tend to be focused on university students.

**ME:** I asked the foundation's President Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi about the accessibility of the programs and the issue of language, and she explained that the standard languages they use are English and Arabic, but they expect people to engage with the programs in different ways, including on an aesthetic level.

Khan and Andeel took the step of including Urdu on the billboards to communicate with passersby, whereas the video inside the Flying Saucer stuck to the standard languages. The billboards also have a strong visual element that feels unsettling.

**JE:** The central figure has three heads and it seems like a way of putting the three broad types of population into one person. It makes you feel or suggests empathy between different groups of people speaking different languages.

I also loved the sound of that work that I missed — the funeral procession.

**ME:** Yes, [Papy Ebotani's](#) *Fanfare funérailles* (Funeral Brass) — it was very festive, very out there. The participants included a comedian (Gaylor Yogolelo), a rapper (Shaggy Angiy), a sapeur (Lesasa Jocker), and local musicians. They avoided the corniche and marched through the side streets, where the local shops and coffee shops are. At times, they blocked the streets completely. They'd stop every couple of meters, make a circle to perform and dance a bit, then continue walking. People followed them through

the streets, and shop owners came out to watch and film it on their cellphones. I'm not sure if passersby got to learn what it was exactly, or about the artists' backgrounds. But it had a very strong energy that made people follow them, naturally turning into a procession.

**JE:** It sounded very fun — also the way they were posing, catwalk-style, and showing off the labels in their clothes as they walked. And people were saying that it was quite thrilling and radical to have a big group of people moving down the street together, and that sort of thing doesn't usually happen.

### Highlights from Sharjah Biennial 12 open week - من بينالي الشارقة الـ ١٢



This video is produced by [Medrar.TV](#) and is featured in partnership with Mada Masr.

Then there was going out of the city to the other side of Sharjah to see the work of Adrian Villar-Rojas at an old ice factory in a mangrove swamp. We got to see the whole country, the changing landscapes — again not something you'd usually do as a visitor.

**ME:** I actually asked about that — the locations — because I wasn't sure in the beginning if Kalba was part of Sharjah, but it is. The Sharjah Art Foundation has been negotiating with investors, owners and the state to find abandoned places that have a bit of history, and use them for programming. And this is the first time they have used the Flying Saucer and the ice factory. When I spoke to Villar-

Rojas he talked about selecting that site because it's so far from the city it has a totally different audience, and he likes in general to work on the periphery.





Adrian Villar-Rojas' *Planetarium*. Photo: Medrar.TV

For *Planetarium*, he worked with his team for two months onsite, and used the marks left by the machinery on the floors to build his towers, basing the design on the space. He's interested in what he describes as the end of civilization, the future of humanity where you go back to more natural environments and see what comes out of it or what that might look like. That's why he works a lot with natural materials.

**JE:** It also connects thematically to Molinos-Gordo's piece, and Michael Joo's.

**ME:** He's actually not sure what will happen to his pieces — some have plants growing in them, some have decomposing banana peels and attract flies, insects have created a home there, and lizards. He constructed the pieces from materials they collected from all around the Emirates, and is going to see what will happen to them over the three months of the exhibition.



**Adrian Villar-Rojas' *Planetarium*. Photo: Medrar.TV**

**JE:** What we're zooming in on are the artists who are responding to the local context. That's interesting in terms of the biennial's title, because it's so broad — "the past, the present and the possible." When an artist is going to do research into a locality in order to try and figure out how to make work there, they have to take those things into account — in a way the title describes that research process. Discovering what the place is like now, what its history is, and what it's possible to do there.

**ME:** You get the feeling that these artists invested in learning about the context.

**JE:** Right, and it seems like they've been given the opportunity to do that. That's one of the strong elements of this biennial — the fact that the curator didn't impose, just let artists work on their stuff.

So Hassan Khan's show looked like something that he would have done anyways, but at the same time it's very much embedded in the context because of the weird location and and the outward-looking aspect of it. Also, I think it was my favorite show I've seen of his. It was relaxed and very colorful.



Hassan Khan's *BUTTSHAKERS*. Photo: Jenifer Evans

**ME:** I actually told him that — I really liked that it was so much fun. When people got in there, they were exploring the artworks. Even if they didn't get all the specifics he had in mind, about human relations and anxiety and fear, or why those specific designs were made, they interacted with the exhibition. I went back again and again, and gradually took in the layers of the work.

**JE:** With the humorous video piece (*The Slapper and the Cap of Invisibility*) and the colored filters he put on the windows, the show felt unexpectedly generous and deliberately engaging.

**ME:** The exhibition reflects similar interests as some previous works, but it felt like he was turning everything upside down, at the aesthetic level, with the colored filters, the flower-shaped glass sculpture (*BUTTSHAKERS*) and the little glass tower (*DRYSCRAPERS*). He's constantly experimenting. We interviewed him for Medrar.TV three days before he went to Sharjah to install the work, and he was still preparing different designs for the sculpture pieces.



Hassan Khan's *DRYSCRAPERS*. Photo: Jenifer Evans

**JE:** Then there were all those works we haven't talked about in the main area — the art museum and the new art spaces. These were different because they often felt more like solo shows of work just selected

and shown by the curator.

**ME:** Some works were new, actually. One that came to mind when we were talking about Villar-Rojas' work and local materials was Taro Shinoda's Japanese garden (*Karesansui*). He's been designing these gardens for a long time, and when Eungie Joo invited him, he adapted the concept and materials to fit this very specific location.

Nearby was also Damian Ortega's *Talking Wall*, three mud structures that are very similar to materials people used in building in North Africa. Apparently these materials were also used in Sharjah in the past, although because they are biodegradable very few remain — just like in the desert in Egypt, which has also been inhabited for ages but with very little trace.

**SB12: Adrian Villar Rojas' Planetarium - بينالي الشارقة الـ ١٢ : القبة لأدريان فيلار روخاس**



Sharjah's Hosn fortress still exists because it was built from fossilized corals. But mud structures can allow in air and sound from the outside, which Ortega played on in the piece. He built these huge S-shaped walls, and in the middle there were little holes for ventilation. It's a very interesting work although viewers have to do a bit of research on their own to learn about the context. The texts in the catalogue didn't provide enough information.

**JE:** They seem a bit out of date — written too early on, perhaps, and they seem to play down any politics or strong gestures on the part of the artist.

**ME:** Yes, but with many of the works people can go online and figure it out, and talk to the artists and people living in the city. You can learn a lot through the works about interesting sides of Sharjah that you would never have discovered otherwise.

**JE:** Exactly. That's partly why it was so exciting to see all those old boats. When people talk about the Emirates they don't talk so much about these trade routes and the history, they talk about what's happening right now.



Photo: Medrar.TV

**ME:** There's usually a lot of talk about Asian immigrants and their status in the Gulf, and for some reason from what's published in the news you feel like it's a recent phenomena, that they only came when the construction industry started kicking off, the boom in Dubai and so on, but actually there are relations between what has become the UAE and that part of the world for hundreds and hundreds of years — basically trade.

The Indian collective [CAMP](#) were working on that for previous editions of the biennial — they collected footage from the sailors and made a [documentary](#). It shows that the relationship is much deeper and more interesting.

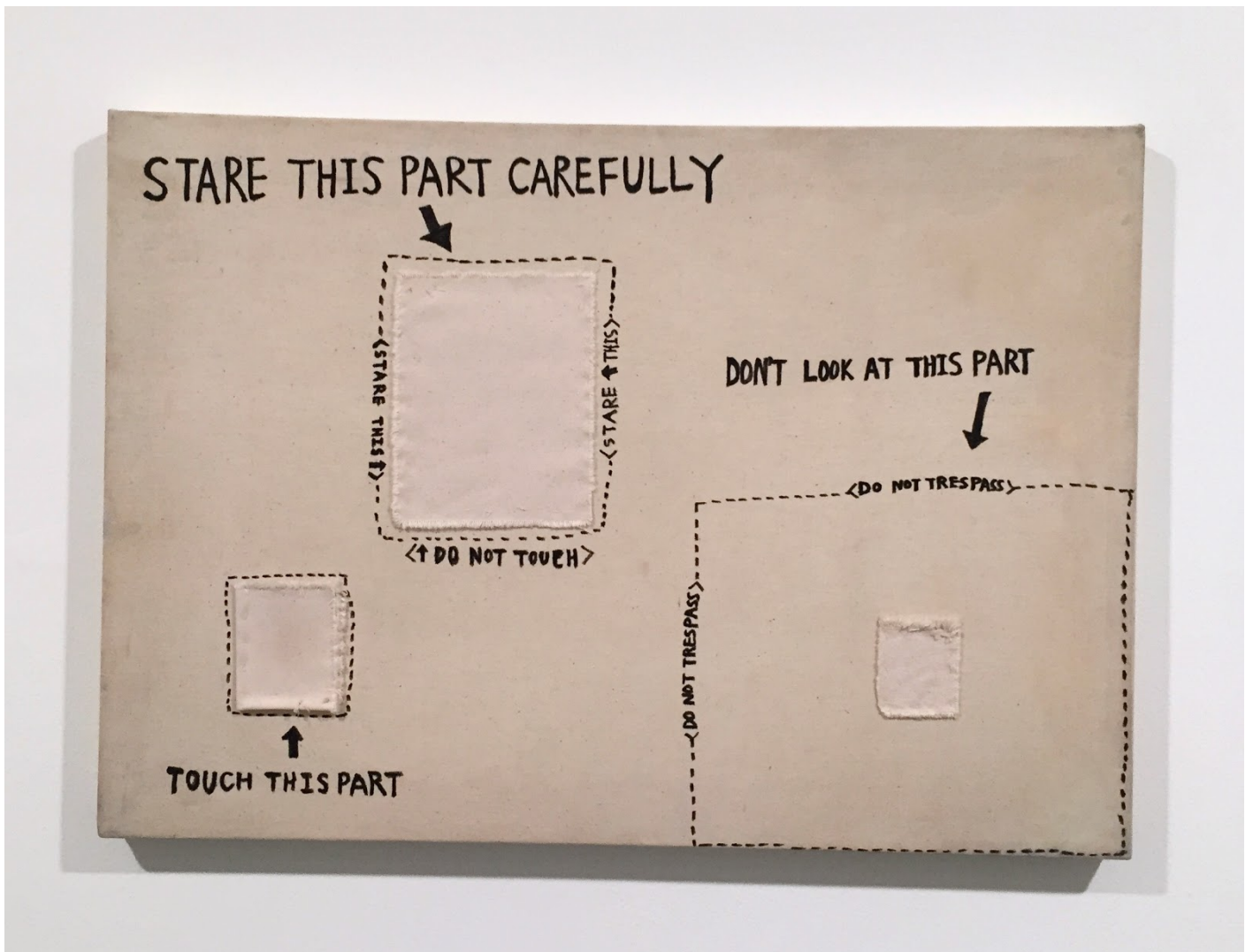
Participating artist Nikhal Chopra also told me that he lived in Dubai as a child. Then he went back to India and studied in the US, and now it's his first time to come back. So there are different relationships that are not really obvious to a lot of people on the outside. It's interesting that there are projects coming out of the biennial touching on that — even if subtly.

**JE:** Right. It's important that the biennial brings people to a place they don't really visit as tourists. With the other emirates — apart from Dubai, which is somehow a totally different case — not many outsiders know much about them, not many visit apart from on business. The biennial in Sharjah puts it on the map and gives people a reason to find out about it.

To finish off, were there any artists who were discoveries for you in the biennial?

**ME:** I liked Julie Mehretu's paintings. You really have to spend time with them, there are so many details, and, in some, particular movements were happening. It's very subjective, how you relate to them, but you could spend time with them and probably each time you look you could see something different, depending on how your brain's working at that point.

**JE:** One artist I didn't know about before was Beom Kim. Many of his works were funny, thoughtful takes on the act of looking. I liked his paintings a lot. Some had statements written on them and you look at the canvas and have to imagine stuff on them.



A Beom Kim painting. Photo: Jenifer Evans

It was also a good chance for me to see Iman Issa's work in real life, as I had only seen it online. She showed a new series called Heritage Studies, that were very precise, mysterious objects referring to diverse historical objects. I spent a lot of time walking back and forth between the labels on the wall, which contain historical info, and the scattered sculptures.



Iman Issa's *Heritage Studies #1*. Painting in the background by Beom Kim. Photo: Jenifer Evans

**ME:** I also thought it was great that the biennial has a few artists from a much older generation, like Fahrelnissa Zeid, Etel Adnan and Raouda Choucair. It adds context and history.





Fahrelnissa Zeid. Photo: Jenifer Evans

**JE:** Right. Overall, the exhibition felt less spectacular than I expected, which I liked. It was modest, even though there were works that were very ambitious, as well as the overall scope of it and how spread out it was around the emirate. And you were free to draw parallels between works, but it didn't feel imposed, which really freed us up to explore, make discoveries and follow our own trains of thought.

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