



*Right: Walid Siti, False Flag, 2017, installation view detail
Below and right : Abdulla Al Saadi, The Purl and Silk Journey and Phantom Land, 2015, installation view*



Walid Siti, False Flag, 2017, installation view



Abbas Akhavan, *Envelope*, 2017, installation view

Undulating Waves at the Sharjah Biennale in the United Arab Emirates

by Janet Bellotto

The Sharjah Biennale has been an anchor of contemporary art exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Gulf. The emirate of Sharjah is home to a plethora of museums, the Sharjah Art Foundation having made great investments with its art commission program. Although the biennale has made of point over the years of inviting A-list participants of world-wide biennales, in recent years there has been a stronger focus of artists from the region. While coinciding with *March Art Madness*, the biennale's *March Meetings* allowed for artists, museum administrators, curators, and educators to come together, listen to presentations, discuss relevant topics and discover projects and programs being developed internationally. Each biennale has generally come with extensions or locations, bringing the work of contemporary artists into new communities.

This year, Sharjah Biennial 13 (March 10 – June 12), or *tamawuj*, was curated by Christine Tohme. *Tamawuj* in

Arabic may refer to the undulating rise and fall of waves. In all, the biennial's six locations hosted 75 artists and their work. Al Mureijah, Calligraphy and Arts Square, The Flying Saucer, Old Sharjah Planetarium and a 40-minute drive to Al Hamriyah Studios. Off-site projects were in Dakar, Beirut, Ramallah and Istanbul.

Walid Siti was the highlight at Al Hamriyah Studios, one of four winners of the biennale art prize. My visit to the location occurred during a rain storm – timely in view of its thematic reference, the works coming across as ever more powerful. Siti's commissioned installation *False Flag* (2017) consisted of anti-bird netting painted white with plastic army figurines. The colorless space bonds the figures in struggle, they suggest the collective but also to issues that arise of iconic identity emblems such as a flag might represent. On the ground was *Phantom Land* (2017), an island referencing relationships of borders and migration compared to the lived experience.

There was a variety of time-based media throughout Al Hamriyah, and one ends at the entrance looking at Jon Rafman's sculpture *Rhino/Bear* which barely made ripples, although it was a beautifully constructed sculpture using a CNC router. The rhinoceros was half way through eating a bear – something unheard of in the food chain – makes some suggestion between reality and illusion in life. Other sculptures from the series were installed at the other locations.

More impactful was the outdoor installation *Collectivism* (2016) by Rain Wu and Eric Chen, constructed out of bulletproof shields enclosing a garden of plants indigenous to the Emirates. The stakes are high today to protect environments particularly when we look at the places where unnecessary lives are being lost and not protected.

At Al Mureijah some work could be seen from the rooftop including Abbas Akhavan's *Envelope* (2017, a decommissioned air balloon that occasionally inflates, suggesting the chronic rise and fall of civilizations. *Dubai Gardens* by Hind Mezaina consisted of 110 cyanotype prints and text by Todd Reisz. It's a reflection on the rapid developing growth of Dubai



through the various man-made and natural “green” locations and used a form of photo archaeology to reflect on these places.

Nature as a theme continued in the work of Abdulla Al Saadi with *The Purl and Silk Journey* (2015) that explored locations near to Al Saadi’s UAE home documented in a display of text and drawings on a scroll-like format. In *The Purl* Al Saadi took a five-day journey exploring traditional food staples of coffee, tea and flatbread while overlooking a mountainous terrain. *Silk Journey* is a reference to a 10-day bicycle ride through the surrounding region captured in his drawings.

Inci Eviner, another biennale prize winner, was commissioned for the video *Beuys Underground* (2017) which can be previewed on vimeo and reflects on life and politics. She presented an alternative world that connoted words such as justice, laughter, woman, and headscarf.

Metaphors that may be shaped from *tamawuj* framed the biennial and its selection of exhibiting artists. If the waves that were made – whether visible or not – weren’t of seismic proportions, few were indeed undulating.



Jon Rafman, *L'Avalée des avalés (The Swallower Swallowed) Rhino/Bear*, 2016, installation view