



THE ART NEWSPAPER™

The United Arab Emirates

“Libertate, libertate!”

The Sharjah Biennial is sensitive to the winds of change in the Arab world

SHARJAH. Artists are more sensitive to the Zeitgeist than the rest of us, we are told, but in the case of the 10th Sharjah Biennial (until 16 May), the curators have also been remarkably farsighted. They were bashful, however, about drawing attention to it at the press conference. When asked whether any of the works were about the revolution that has been taking place across the Arab world since January, they said, not really, because everything had been chosen or commissioned a year ago.

And yet the key words that curators Suzanne Cotter (English, of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi), Rasha Salti (Lebanese, living in New York) and Haig Aivazian (Lebanese, currently based in Chicago) have chosen to guide their biennial include insurrection, affirmation, treason, traducer.

Go to the furthest corner of what little remains of old Sharjah in front of the museum, where the courtyard houses have been filled with art, and you see documentary film by and of revolutionaries in the streets, snipers shooting, the old guard resisting and finally toppling, flags flying and joyous crowds chanting “Libertate, libertate [freedom]”. It is Bucharest 1989, not Cairo 2011, but the spirit is the same.

Or there is the more artistically mediated work by the Indian film-maker, Amar Kanwar, about the private campaign by the Burmese bookseller who tore out the first pages of all his books because they were obliged to carry the flatulent precepts of the generals, and paid for it with a prison sentence. There are filmed close-ups by Los Angeles-based Julia Meltzer and David Thorne of the brilliant Syrian actor Rami Farah reacting to prompts about how Syria might change: his facial expression in reaction to



Ignoring the rising tide of revolution: detail from a still of *Ride the Caspian*, a video by Almagul Menlibayeva and Bahar Behbahani

“democracy”, for example, passes by stages from childlike hope to a knowing scepticism. The Polish-Iranian duo who prefer to be known as Slavs and Tatars reflect on the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the Polish revolution in the 1980s, starting with the odd claim by 17th-century Polish noblemen to be Sarmatians, of ancient Persian lineage.

This is not the only surprising fact you learn from this biennial:

“What you see has nothing to do with the goods for sale at the Dubai art fair”

I learnt that Sharjah’s cricket ground has been donated to the Afghan national team; that Lebanon in the early 1960s had its own rocket-launching programme, with a rocket called Cedar 4; that Lydda, now Ben Gurion airport, used to be the

biggest in the Middle East, a staging post on the way to imperial India; that at the height of the Cold War the US Navy gave a ceremonial religious burial at sea to six Soviet submariners who had died in their craft; that the FBI challenged the use of torture by the CIA due to the inadmissibility of the evidence it produced. There is a lot of history in this biennial, but is it art?

This question was asked about Okwui Enwezor’s 2002 Documenta, which was also full of films, reflecting the political strains and tragedy of post 9/11. Certainly what you see in Sharjah has nothing to do with the goods for sale at the Dubai art fair, held at the same time last month (see p70), but in the preponderance of film, very good film, it is in tune with the YouTube world, the search power of Google to winkle out obscure material, and the millions of miles of accumulating CCTV footage.

In fact, one of the best works is the film from the security cameras of the Al-Bustan Rotana

hotel in Dubai, showing Israeli secret service assassins arriving to kill a member of Hamas on 19 January 2010 (what a lot of people they need to do it, one thinks). Shumon Basar and Eyal Weizman, with Jane and Louise Wilson, have accompanied this with “those thresholds of bland transition”, as they say, long shots of the atrium, of the carpet in Room 230 where the murder took place, of the bedside telephone.

There are many works in this biennial that are not film, but its highly political nature is expressed most forcefully in that medium. It was accompanied by a four-day conference that attracted art practitioners from all over Menasa and beyond, with its opening session in the neighbouring state of Qatar, where Mathaf, the museum of Arab art has recently opened, and it was followed by Art Dubai. Yet again, it is less rich and famous Sharjah that has shown it has most bottom when it comes to the emerging Middle Eastern art scene. ■

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