

ARTnews

Isaac Julien: "The 15th Sharjah Biennial Does Better At Excavating The Past Than Pushing The Present"

By Emily Watlington

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Asma Belhamar: *Monuments of Alfreej*, 2023, site-specific installation. PHOTO: EMILY WATLINGTON.

In a remote, repurposed kindergarten on the Gulf of Oman, 18 motorized mannequin heads are affixed to tables, slowly bobbing back and forth. Are they nodding mindlessly as some unseen instructor drones on, or are they banging their heads on their desks? Perhaps a bit of both. Titled *Fermentation of the Brain* (2015), the installation, by Heri Dono, critiques the education he received under Indonesia's Suharto dictatorship (1967–98)—one of many times in history when propaganda bled into pedagogy.

The work is a lodestar for the 15th Sharjah Biennial, curated by Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi. The theme of this biennial, "Thinking Historically in the Present," was proposed by the influential curator Okwui Enwezor before his untimely death in 2019. Enwezor's 2002 Documenta and 2015 Venice Biennale

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opened up important pathways for artists from the Global South, and started conversations about decolonizing canons and museums.

The artists in this show draw attention to stories from and perspectives on history that remain obscured (in some cases) or overlooked (in others), in works that range from essay films to figurative paintings to monumental sculptures. Spread across 16 sites in the Emirate of Sharjah, the biennial's greatest strength is that it is emphatically pluralistic and multicultural, but it also demonstrates the side effect of such an approach: namely, the pitfalls of placing artists in the awkward role of cultural ambassadors asked to contextualize references they can't reasonably expect a "global" audience to get.



Isaac Julien: *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)*, 2022, 5-channel video installation, 30 minutes. PHOTO: EMILY WATLINGTON

The strongest pieces involve artists consciously grappling with their ambassadorial position. The result is a kind of institutional critique taking up the inequities that come with making work for international audiences, skewed toward people with the means (and passports) to jet around the world. In a standout video by Zimbabwean artist mandla, the artist tells stories about having

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changed their name more than once—in one case, because “how colonized do you have to be to see a baby in Africa and call it Bridgit?” and then again because, after moving to the UK, they grew tired of having to teach Anglophones to pronounce the “nk” syllable. Expressing a twinned desire for opacity and legibility, the story exemplifies the catch-22 that international art festivals ask most participating artists to navigate.

The conundrum is not the artists’ fault, but some solutions are better than others. Some works fell victim to a kind of didacticism in the forms of explanatory voiceovers, wordy works, and lengthy handouts. Sammy Baloji’s installation *Shinkolobwe’s Abstraction* (2022) responds to a fascinating story set in the Belgian Congo in the 1940s, where the Soviet Union and the United States compete for access to uranium. But it’s too easy to get lost trying to navigate the gulf between the abstractions he shows on the wall—red and yellow geometric gradients laid over grayscale clouds—and the vitrines filled with pertinent archival documents in several languages.

Hangama Amiri tells a story more impactfully in *Threshold* (2022): displayed next to *Fermentation of the Brain*, it also comprises a grid of desks. Amiri sewed uniforms worn by Afghani schoolgirls, then hung them in a large black rectangle that approximates a chalkboard. In 1996, when Amiri was six, the Taliban took over her native Kabul and banned the education of girls and women; in 2021, the Taliban did this again. A recent Yale MFA graduate, the artist displayed her new uniforms with torn and frayed hems that connect one garment to another. The gesture is both mournful and defiant.



Hangama Amiri: *Threshold*, 2023, installation. PHOTO EMILY WATLINGTON.

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Other strong examples address the complexities of cultural exchange and cross-cultural solidarity, like Isaac Julien's enchanting 2022 video installation *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)*. The 30-minute, 5-channel work traces the impact that Albert Barnes's collection of African art—among the first comprehensive examples in the US—had on the art and thought of the Harlem Renaissance. There's also the sound installation *Hum II* (2023) by Hajra Waheed, a deserving winner of the Sharjah Biennial Prize. The artist recorded people humming various songs associated with popular uprisings around the world—Kurdish folk songs, K-pop hits—then played the audio in a cone-shaped space. The simple structure effects a kind of amplification that is surprisingly stunning: when a singer draws a breath, it feels almost immersive.

In the UAE, where just over 10 percent of residents are citizens, cross-cultural exchanges constantly occur. As a major economic hub in the Global South, it is home to a significant population of migrants who come to find work, and is notorious for inequality. The royal-run biennial doesn't entirely shy away from addressing these conditions. At the Sheikh Khalid bin Mohammed Palace (now an art space in the desert town of Al Dhaid), Dubai-based artist Asma Belhamar replaced dilapidated decorative segments of the building's surrounding wall with warped versions. The eye-catching interventions draw the gaze upward, toward the rooftop railing: the artist seeks to highlight the balustrade's South Asian origins, and honor the impact that migrant labor has had on Emirati culture. Implicitly, the work asks what it means to celebrate a culture while mistreating its people, and chafes at the distinction between tolerance and equity.



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None of this is particularly new. One of the few threads in the show that did feel new involves artists finding traces of human history in nature. The effect humans are having on the environment is not presented as a subject or as news, but as a precondition affecting everything artists explore. In his new film *Arcadia* (2023), John Akomfrah outdoes National Geographic with sublime landscape shots spanning five channels. A meandering meditation juxtaposing natural scenes with industrial ones, the film shows a sinuous river, a vast panorama of hundreds of airplanes parked in a grid, and a stunning pyramid. Meanwhile, Palestinian duo Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme present a striking installation, *Until we became fire and fire us* (2023), that dwells on Palestinian histories that have been literally buried. Beaches that used to be villages and parking lots that used to be graveyards figure in a poem that is repeated and fractured across videos, sounds, and images tucked into various crevices throughout overgrown ruins in Sharjah's Al Mureijah square. The work's fragmented nature is meant to evoke the discontinuous relationship between Palestinians and their land.

That Sharjah's 15th edition honored Okwui Enwezor's legacy—a goal expressly set out by Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi—was both a blessing and a curse. Enwezor's influence is keenly felt in the world of curating, and deserves to be honored, but revisiting his concerns makes the show feel overly familiar in its argument and artist list. The exhibition even recapitulates the underrepresentation of Latin American artists seemingly endemic to decolonial biennials. By contrast, last year's Documenta and Carnegie International both built on Enwezor's legacy to radically rethink the global exhibition format, expose the frictions inherent in importing art from the Global South into Western frameworks like biennials. They asked questions that left the art world wondering, where do we go from here? On these heels, "Thinking Historically in the Present" feels more like a recap of the important work of institution building and canon expansion that Enwezor and Al Qasimi have done in the last few decades than it does a way forward. But while we figure out what's next, the show reminds us that we have plenty of world history to catch up on.

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