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Artists and Shows Navigate Cultural Boundaries in U.A.E.



Galeria Fortes Vilaça, São Paulo, and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, via Sharjah Art Foundation

The Sharjah Biennial will focus on the uncontroversial subject of courtyards in Islamic architecture, as in this work by Ernesto Neto.

By VINITA BHARADWAJ  
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DUBAI — The question of censorship looms large this month in the United Arab Emirates, a time when art and cultural events fill the calendar. In Dubai, early March was marked by a five-day literary festival, which will be followed mid-month by the annual art fair, Art Dubai. Next door, the Sharjah Biennial started on Wednesday.

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The U.A.E. aspires to be an art and cultural center. While the federation of Gulf sheikdoms is relatively open and tolerant, its ruling establishments are concerned about the political turmoil in other Arab countries and are also wary of art containing graphic images or anything else that might offend conservative Gulf sensibilities.

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“Every place comes with certain limitations,” said Ehsan ul Haq, 29, an artist from Lahore, Pakistan, whose installation piece “History Lessons” was commissioned by Art Dubai for this year’s edition.

“Do events self-censor? I don’t know,” he added: “But as an artist, if I have an idea, I will find a way to express it. There is no issue of self-censorship in my mind.”

His project features a series of 12 life-sized donkeys, inspired by the Qin dynasty’s terra cotta Chinese warriors. “It is a comment on the dynamics of followers, leaders, power play and also masculinity,” he said.

The last editions of both Art Dubai in 2012 and the Sharjah Biennial in 2011 saw works removed because of objections to their content.

In Sharjah, accusations of blasphemy leveled at a work by the Algerian artist Mustapha Benfodil resulted not only in the removal of the work, but also in the dismissal of the biennial’s director, Jack Persekian.

Mr. Benfodil’s installation, “It Has No Importance,” placed two teams of mannequins in soccer uniforms in a public courtyard, with sexually graphic comments scrawled in Arabic on their shirts.

In the words of the 2011 biennial’s curators, Rasha Salti and Haig Aivazian, the graffiti “borrowed the voice of the victims of rape at the hands of religious extremists in Algeria.”

Sheika Hoor al-Qasimi, the 33-year-old director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, who is overseeing this year’s biennial, said that the management team that had permitted the 2011 installation — and others deemed offensive — had erred. “It was an oversight by the entire team,” she said. “It was not censorship. It was illegal. The U.A.E.’s laws clearly forbid nudity and blasphemy and you cannot break the law.”

Arsalan Mohammad, editor of the Middle East edition of Harper’s Bazaar Art, commented: “In my experience here, what gets called censorship in an artistic context is explained as upholding public standards of decency, avoiding blasphemy and offense to the nation’s rulers. The two terms are interchangeable.”

This year the biennial, titled “Re:emerge Towards a Cultural Cartography,” will probably be more conservative, focusing on the uncontroversial subject of courtyards in Islamic architecture, including those in Sharjah.

But that does not mean that it, or Art Dubai, are necessarily more inclined to self-censorship, Mr. Mohammad said.

“By articulating its boundaries, the state has made it clear what is and is not acceptable,” he said. “Looking at the booths coming to Art Dubai, I think that perhaps there might be less work of a political nature than last year — which is interesting, given the ongoing situation in the Middle East.”

But that, he said, is not the same as self-censorship: “This is a pragmatic and practical decision on part of the organizers. There is plenty, plenty more subject matter available to artists and curators of the region than localized political commentary.”

This year’s Sharjah Biennial in particular has focused on engaging with and drawing in the local population.

Still, Ms. Qasimi, who is also the daughter of the ruler of Sharjah, said she recognized the impossibility of segregating politics from art, especially with the surrounding region in ferment.

“Politics is a part of our lives,” she said. “We turn on the television, go online, read the newspapers and it’s impossible to avoid politics. It is inevitable that some works will be political in nature, but then the idea is to

engage in a conversation that allows for a fair discussion.”

Political art, meanwhile, also created a ruckus at Art Dubai last year, when four works deemed provocative were removed.

Two of the works — “After Washing” by the Palestinian artist Shadi Alzaqouq and “You Were My Only Love” by the Moroccan artist Zakaria Ramhani — were about the Arab Spring political uprisings.

The other two works were a statue of a naked man by the Lebanese sculptor Nadim Karim and a painting by Khosrow Hassanzadeh of Iran containing references to Imam Ali, the founder of Shia Islam. The U.A.E. is 80 percent Sunni, according to the U.S. State Department.

People who think that the U.A.E. has a promising future as an art center say this sort of incident is part of a normal process. “I don’t think it’s very different to anywhere in the world,” said Antonia Carver, director of Art Dubai. “Government officials pass by just minutes prior to the sheik’s visit, as would be the case anywhere else prior to a top dignitary’s visit.”

“March 2012 in particular, one has to bear in mind, was a very difficult time in the region, and a very sensitive period,” she added, referring to the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolts.

“In the last 10 years, the U.A.E. has come a long way and opened up tremendously,” she said. “Internationally, I can understand it’s difficult to see Dubai within a context of time and geography, but it’s unfair not to.”

For Dubai, which has positioned itself as an important art hub — for collectors and artists — it is a constant challenge to balance Western ideals of freedom and expression with the region’s cultural sensitivities.

Neither the Sharjah Biennial nor Art Dubai is required to have its program or artworks approved by the government authorities or ministries beforehand, but self-censorship is clearly in the air.

“There are certain federal rules that are known and followed,” Ms. Carver said. “Organizations such as Art Dubai do not censor works, but do need to be aware of political changes in the region, as these boundaries can shift.

“Understanding and navigating the boundaries is part of the challenge of engaging with this new globalized art world. The major art centers are no longer limited to London, Paris and New York, and the landscape is fractured and shifting to cities such as Dubai, Delhi, Beijing.”

This year the Dubai show features a significant number of artists from Pakistan, adding to Dubai’s reputation as a forum for artists whose home countries give them little support.

“Previously, the city was a destination to discover the best art from Iran and Palestine,” Ms. Carver said. “We’re now seeing it become home to some seriously good work from Pakistan and Syria.”

The Indian writer Jeet Thayil, invited to this year’s Dubai literary festival despite a controversial reputation at home, said he found the emirate surprisingly tolerant. Mr. Thayil was one of four writers who read from Salman Rushdie’s “The Satanic Verses” at the 2012 Jaipur Literature Festival. Importing Mr. Rushdie’s book is banned in India.

“I was surprised, but after arriving here, I attribute the invitation to Dubai’s sophistication,” Mr. Thayil said in an interview. “There is a kind of understanding here that business, work, efficiency and money trump everything in the world. At the end of the day, if an artist has to worry about the next power cut, then how will he create?”

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