

How resistance has emerged as a trend in the UAE art scene

The UAE art world has been paying attention to politics of late, and Sharjah Art Foundation has picked up the mantle



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On show as part of *Active Forms*, which took shape both as an exhibition and as the programme for Sharjah Art Foundation's annual March Meetings talks and performances: Halil Altindere's *Homeland* (2016, HD video)

Last month, New York University Abu Dhabi opened two shows around refugees: an exhibition in collaboration with refugees in Djibouti, and a large-scale retrospective, *Permanent Temporariness*, about the political and emotional conditions engendered by Palestinian refugee camps.

Last week, Abu Dhabi Art hosted *And Here I Am*, a one-person, true-story play about a young man in the Jenin refugee camp who was jailed by Israel for three years, and, upon leaving, had a glimmer of luck and traded armed conflict for the theatre.

And this weekend, the Sharjah Art Foundation opened *Active Forms*, a show and series of discursive events themed around political and social resistance, again often specifically in regards to the Palestinian conflict.

It's the job of journalists to coax trends out of disparate events, so it's hard not to remark upon the recent attention in the UAE art world to politics, and particularly Palestine. But the idea that major art institutions have suddenly turned political is a red herring: these exhibitions and events reveal a global anxiety among artists and cultural producers that is long-simmering – the desperate desire of art to speak both on its own aesthetic terms and to address the political and social crises that rage around it.

Reem Shadid, deputy director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, says she was “thinking of the role of art and culture in relation to the discussions that are going on outside of the art world” in putting together *Active Forms*, which took shape both as an exhibition and as the programme for the foundation's annual March Meetings talks and performances. “Otherwise we're really in this art bubble speaking to each other. We need to think about what our role is in the discussion on resistance and what it is that we do in our daily lives.”

Talks on the 'militant image' and more

Indeed, it may well be that the need for politics now feels more acute, as was demonstrated in this strong programme. In the talks, which were spread out over three days, *Active Forms* included discussions around historical examples of art's engagement with revolution and conflict. Reem Shilleh, for instance, spoke about the archive of Palestinian revolutionary film that she has been putting together. It was made for the organisation Subversive Film; she spoke about the idea of the "militant image" in conversation with John Akomfrah, a UK filmmaker who was part of the activist Black Audio Film Collective in the 1980s and who has gone on to agitate for the inclusion of narratives of people of colour.

And it also hosted discussions of projects in which politics has been a set of decisions taken over the course of a life. The Malian filmmaker Manthia Diawara, who charmed his audience, discussed his career-long project of creating an African cinema that returned Europe's critical gaze. Dale Harding, similarly, spoke about his work to bring aboriginal audiences into contemporary art galleries – spaces from which they had felt utterly excluded.

Shadid selected work that reflected on conflict and its effects: such as Simone Fattal's paintings and sculptures abstracting the theme of war; the Turkish artist Halil Altindere's strident videos on the current situation of migrants in Germany; and the folk-art-like works of the self-taught Palestinian artist and PLO member Abdul Hay Mosallam Zarara. The show is drawn from the foundation's collection, underlining the importance of politics to its work more generally. *Active Forms* also included the first ever UAE display of Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*, his magisterial video installation on the sea and the violence it hides – slave ships, the whaling trade, environmental decline – which premiered at the 2015 Venice Biennale.

Four retrospectives

It was also complemented by the opening of four retrospectives, each of which could have anchored a cultural season on its own: of Lebanese sculptor Mona Saudi, the Egyptian artist Anna Boghiguian, the Iraqi photographer Latif Al Ani, the French-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira, and the Emirati artist Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim.



French-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira specialises in travel-oriented work, tracing journeys

Working in a more contemporary idiom, Zineb Sedira addresses the way that things of all orders – languages, people, images, commodities – travel. She takes a step back, as it were, to show the full panoply and effects of a century of displacement: from the sea on which migrants travel to the trade routes of sugar. In a new commission for this show, *Air Affairs* (2018), she retraced the first route of British Airways – then named British Imperial Airways – from London's Croydon Airport to Pakistan, in the year 1932, when Sharjah opened its first airport: the first in the Arabian Gulf and a stopover on the Croydon-Karachi route. The resulting travelogue reveals political shifts between the 1930s and the present: some of the countries the route covered are now practically inaccessible – such as Baghdad and Basra – while others, such as Galilee in Palestine, are no longer sovereign territories.