



REVIEW - 13 APR 2018

Around Town: Sharjah March Meetings

For the three-day event in the UAE, the best works and talks were ones in which geographical and cultural hybridity shone through

BY PABLO LARIOS

It's early evening in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. I'm one of 100-odd people sitting in an outdoor square, flanked by the cubic buildings of the city's old town. Before us glows a cartoonish diorama of a Mediterranean city: red-roofed houses, a pink river, city walls and crumbling towers. On stage, around 20 men begin to tap the lulling baritone of jahlahs, clay pot drums, and sing *fidjeri*, the songs sung by pearl divers in the Gulf. For Wael Shawky's *Song of Roland: The Arabic Version* (2018), the foundational epic of Old French is transposed to classical Arabic and traditional song. While the original *chanson de geste* glorifies the defeat of Carolingian armies during a Basque-Qasawi Muslim ambush in the Pyrenees in CE 778, Shawky's reversal of its Eurocentrism is biting and topical in an age of renewed fault lines between East and West, religion and secularism: 'for wrong is with the Muslims, but with the Christians right'.

'Active Forms', this year's March Meeting (the tenth edition to be held at the Sharjah Art Foundation), was an impassioned three-day tangle of performances, five exhibitions and numerous discussions, mostly hinging on our globalized present in which periphery and centre are knotted. The presenters were refreshingly global, hailing from Australia, Bangladesh, the Gulf, Palestine, Lebanon, Japan, Iraq and elsewhere; from Kazakhstan, Almagul Menlibayeva spoke about her photography documenting climate change in the Aral Sea, which has all but disappeared after the Soviet diversion of its source rivers.

The best works and talks were ones in which geographical and cultural hybridity shone through in all its messiness. Mona Saudi's exhibition 'Poetry and Form' assembled the artist's delightfully weird, formalistic abstract stone sculptures and drawings influenced by her personal correspondence with Arab-language poets Adonis and Mahmood Darwaesh. In the 'Active Forms' exhibition, Mana Maamoun's video *Dear Animal* (2006) sees a drug dealer turn into a goat-like animal (from a story by Egyptian writer Haytham El-Wardany): a compelling articulation of the ways myth converge with personal experience. At the heritage house of Bait Al Serkal, Cairo-based artist Anna Boghiguian presented an impressive retrospective of her life's work (which has travelled from Castello di Rivoli, Turin), seemingly set in a future-present in which the world's bees have become extinct and the boats in which salt was once traded are beached (*The Salt Traders*, 2015). Besides wafting sails, artist books, collages and paintings (such as the 90-piece drawing suite, *Unfinished Symphony* (2017), there's a life-sized representation of her Cairo studio, and a hidden room in which dead bees drip from a giant wax ear (*Tunnel of Life*, 2012), like a surreal ode to history's unreal turns.

Speakers pointed to our need, in the arts and elsewhere, of modes of cultural intersectionality: welcoming differences of geography, context and intention. Artists Dale Harding, Naeem Mohaiemen and Zineb Sedira showed how terms such as 'Global South' and 'Third World' are themselves conflictual: the now-derided nomenclature 'Third World' was once associated with theorist Homi K. Bhabha's positive notion of a 'Third Space'. Mohaiemen spoke of networks of radical Southeast Asian publishing in New York city in the run-up to 9/11; Harding, of museums as sites of tension and exclusion for his partly-indigenous Australian family.

Reversing the dominant 'gaze' emerged as a common concern, for example in filmmakers John Akomfrah and Reem Shilleh's presentation about the 'militant image'; or, in the Kuwait-born artist Mounira Al-Solh's presentation, partly about her decade spent in Japan. Malian writer, filmmaker and theorist Manthia Diawara offered some insight into how to connect disparate lands and political activism, relating *négritude*, 1960s pan-Africanism and pan-Arab movements. Diawara followed cultural theorist and poet Édouard Glissant (who died in 2011) on a cross-Atlantic trip that ended in Glissant's native Martinique: 'I accept my opacity,' Glissant says: 'everyone likes broccoli, but I hate it. But do I know why?'

Unsurprisingly it was that the older participants who had the most to say. Reading a new text, 'Art and Resistance' (2018), Rasheed Araeen spoke of the expectation he met in the UK, when he moved from Pakistan in 1964, that he make art representative of his identity: 'my experience of being defined by this continued imperialism was so shattering that I could not ignore it'. He penned manifestos and founded journals such as Black Phoenix and Third Text to bring these issues to the fore. 'My point', Araeen stated, 'is that imperialism has not ended and is still here, and it influences the production of art and its legitimisation', adding: 'without resisting and confronting it we cannot produce anything worthwhile.'

That no common language of resistance emerged in 'Active Forms', seemed apt. The best artists here demonstrated that the way forward lies in encouraging hybridities and syncretism – the very 'creolization' spoken of by Glissant. If we don't embrace the strange unwieldiness of the pluralities of our time, we'll fall back into the dichotomous medievalism of *The Song of Roland*, which presaged: 'ye are likely to fight such a battle as was never fought before.'

The 10th March Meeting, 'Active Forms', 2018, ran at Sharjah Art Foundation from 17–19 March.