

canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

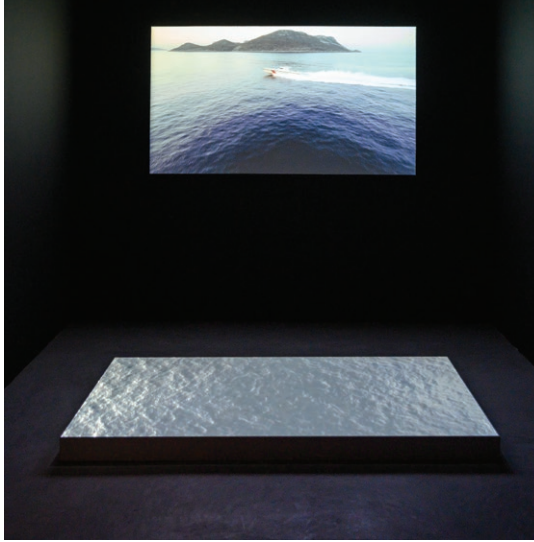


WHOSE EAST IS IT ANYWAY?

Art Basel-Hong Kong • Sharjah Biennial 14 • Ishara Art Foundation •
Jameel Arts Centre • Osage Art Foundation

Almagul Menlibayeva • Kamrooz Aram • Nikhil Chopra • Soundwalk Collective •
Umber Majeed • Augustine Paredes • Seher Shah •
Soraya Sharghi • Tuan Andrew Nguyen • Vivek Vilasini

Saira Ansari • Yaminay Chaudhri • Shumon Basar • Deepak Unnikrishnan



Clockwise from top left: Yasiin Bey. *Negus*. 2019. Image courtesy of The Third Line; Hrair Sarkissian. *Disappearance at Sea—Mare Nostrum*. 2017. Two-channel video. 6' 58". Mixed media. Installation view: Bait Habib Al Yousef, Al Mureijah Square. Part of Sharjah Biennial 14: *Leaving the Echo Chamber* 2019. Partially commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation. Image courtesy of the artist and Sharjah Art Foundation; Ulrik López. *Pataki 1921*. 2019. MDF chessboard, MDF chess pieces, iraca palm weave and performance. 1200 x 1200 cm. Dimensions variable. 50 minutes. Installation view: Bait Obaid Al Shamsi, Sharjah. Part of Sharjah Biennial 14: *Leaving the Echo Chamber* 2019. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation. Image courtesy of the artist and Sharjah Art Foundation; Laure Prouvost. *Ideally You Would Look Here Not There*. 2019. Oil and varnish on wooden panel. 30 x 40 cm. Image courtesy of Lisson Gallery



This issue verges on the existential. *Whose East is it Anyway?* came about through a rethinking of our place in the world. We have always been aware that, as Middle Easterners, we are connected to parts of Asia and Africa via shared colonial histories, trading links and migration. As Arabs we are connected to an even wider suite of countries by language and heritage, but a crude collation of these geographic blocs can suppress, or even erase, important cultural specificities.

The radically emerging presence of South and Southeast Asian voices in our cultural landscape, as evidenced by the rise of new institutions (Ishara Art Foundation) and partnerships (Alserkal Avenue x Dhaka Art Summit), as well as the wildly ambitious programming that connects the Gulf to Africa, the Caribbean and South and Southeast Asia (Sharjah Biennial) made us stop and think. Just as the 'Middle East' fails to address the complexity of a region that includes West Asian states like Iran and Turkey, and North African countries like Egypt, so too the term 'Global South', which arises in counterpoint to the 'North', or West, can be found wanting. It glosses over the fact that every region or frame of reference has its own North-South divide, its East and its West.

Such markers function as compasses but are always relative to where you are standing. So, we set out in this issue to look at different drafts on the idea of the East. We go back to 19th century Orientalism, with the Soundwalk collective's musical interpretation at the Louvre Abu Dhabi and Kamrooz Aram's deconstructive take on the arabesque motif at Green Art Gallery. Soraya Sharghi's anime-like paintings at Leila Heller Gallery remind us meanwhile of the wider cultural roots of the

Persian miniature, while rapper Yasiin Bey's unique collaboration with The Third Line at Art Basel Hong Kong sheds light on connections to the South, and to Africa.

While the UAE is always our point of departure, with institutions like Jameel Arts Centre and local galleries doing their part in contributing to this dialogue, we always keep our eyes on the horizon. Stephanie Bailey's conversation-starter on China's cultural repositioning provides much food for thought, as she recalls the Non-Aligned movement and shifting geopolitical currents. We explore the less visible transcultural histories in exclusive interviews with artists from India, Vietnam, Singapore and the Philippines, who are at the forefront of these shifts.

This reductiveness of national and regional narratives reminds me of a stunning work I saw at the Sharjah Biennial, in which Hrair Sarkissian looked at one of the rarest birds in the world, the Northern Bald Ibis. The fate of this tiny migratory bird in Syria, once declared extinct but then rediscovered only to have now vanished again, mirrors the political turmoil of its homeland. In his drone footage of the shortest migration route by sea between Turkey and Greece, the Syrian-Armenian artist reveals how what links us is also what separates us. Art articulates the erasures of histories, and provides a space for their re-emergence.

We see artists as being on the cusp of change in society, creative documentarians of the world's conflicts and triumphs. Here, we break down regionalisms to gain perspective and expand our scope. We posit another cartographic arrangement, where the Global South takes an expanded view, dismantling the notion of singular identities – Asian or Middle Eastern – as we hold our ground.



Nadine Khalil
Deputy Editor