

Quiet Power

Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi steers the Sharjah Art Foundation with a sure and savvy hand. by Carol Kino

Think of art in the Persian Gulf, and one's mind leaps to Richard Serra's towering columns in the Qatari desert and the Abu Dhabi museums to come. But for a decade now, curators have been quietly seeking out the next big thing at the Sharjah Biennial, held in the modest emirate of Sharjah, about an hour's drive east from the glittering galleries of Dubai.

Run since 2003 by Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi—the youngest daughter of Sharjah's ruler, His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi—the 22-year-old biennial is known as the place to find talent like Iran's Farhad Moshiri, who showed there long before his crystal-encrusted paintings became auction stars. Imran Quereshi's 2011 *Blessings Upon the Land of My Love*, which filled a courtyard with painted crimson flowers that echoed the Arab Spring's bloodstains, led to the Pakistani artist's 2013 roof garden installation at New York's Metropolitan Museum. And Egypt's Wael Shawky, whose *Cabaret Crusades* film trilogy recently gripped audiences at MoMA PS1, has been working on projects with Sharjah for years, often collaborating with local workers, culminating in a major 2014 solo show. "We often delve deep into an artist's work," Al Qasimi says. "And we usually focus on a monograph. I try not to rush things, because a book stays longer than an exhibition."

Al Qasimi, 33, brings solid artistic and curatorial chops to her role. She had just finished a painting degree at London's Slade School of Fine Art when she saw Documenta 11, her first European biennial. After a chance comment to her father—"Why isn't our biennial more like this? More political?"—she was suddenly put in charge. Overnight, she transformed it from a staid affair into a cutting-edge showcase. Next came the March Meeting, an annual discussion series addressing art in the Arab world, and regular artists' commissions.

Although the biennial has had other directors—and each edition is organized by an independent curator (in 2017 it will be Christine Tohmé, founding director of the Beirut nonprofit Ashkal Alwan)—Al Qasimi, now president of the Sharjah Art Foundation, has run it since 2009 and curates more shows through the year. A retrospective of Iranian artist Farideh Lashai is planned for March, and a show of Yayoi Kusama's early work for 2016. This year, she became the first Emirati national to curate the Venice Biennale's UAE pavilion.

Since 2011, when a controversial project was removed, the fear has

Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi at the 2015 MoMA PS1 Benefit Gala at MoMA in New York City.



been that art in Sharjah has strict limitations. But a walk through the last biennial, curated by Eungie Joo, revealed plenty of politically minded work, like Ahmad Ghossein's film *The Fourth Stage*, about the odd disappearance of a Lebanese magician as the social climate changed, and the final installment of Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme's *The Incidental Insurgents* trilogy, 2012–2015. (Part 3 was a commission.) Several works, like IM Heungsoon's haunting film *Reincarnation*, now in another version at PS1, traced the fate of Koreans who moved to the Middle East to find work.

Because the pieces of artwork are seeded throughout the city, you don't

only encounter them sealed away in the usual air-conditioned spaces. Two projects, by Asunción Gordo and Michael Joo, could only be reached by a boat ride and a walk along a working port, and another, by Egyptian cartoonist Hassan Khan, critiqued overdevelopment with a billboard mounted downtown on a former fast food restaurant.

"Sometimes the West assumes political art has to feed into their own political views of the region," Al Qasimi says. "But actually there are a lot of local concerns going on here, too. Sometimes I think, If they showed this on TV, why can't we show it in a museum? That's the way I judge things." **ABMB**