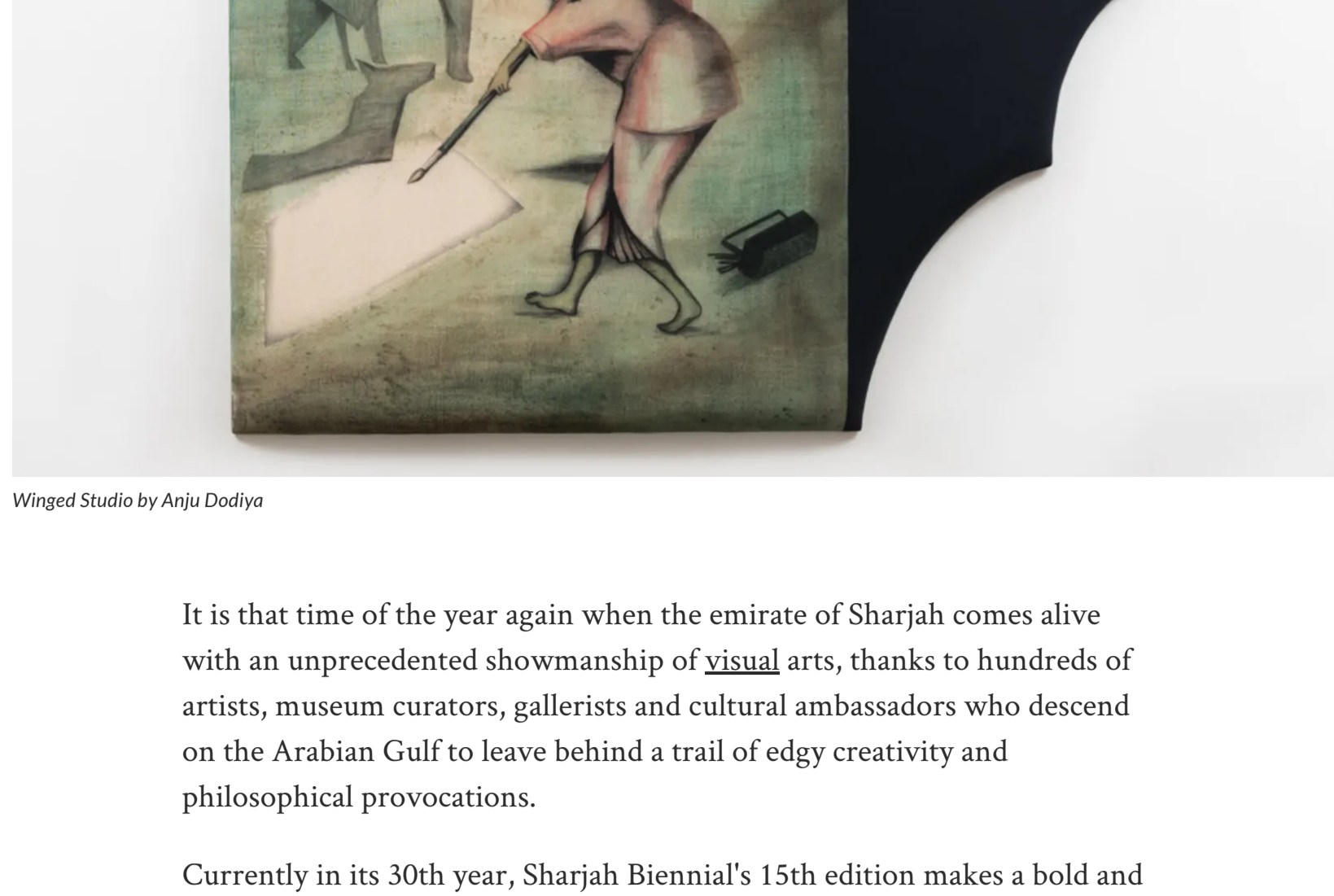


CULTURE

Sharjah Biennial 15 reflects on complex histories through a contemporary lens

Artistically ambitious, the 15th edition of the Sharjah Biennial proves itself as a beacon of postcolonial practices in the Global South.

By Shaikh Ayaz
3 March 2023



Winged Studio by Anju Dodiya

It is that time of the year again when the emirate of Sharjah comes alive with an unprecedented showmanship of [visual](#) arts, thanks to hundreds of artists, museum curators, gallerists and cultural ambassadors who descend on the Arabian Gulf to leave behind a trail of edgy creativity and philosophical provocations.

Currently in its 30th year, Sharjah Biennial's 15th edition makes a bold and authentic statement about the postcolonial [future](#) in the global South. Curated by Hoor Al Qasimi, this year's biennial is titled "Thinking Historically in the Present", and it's an ode to the inclusive vision of veteran Nigerian curator and critic Okwui Enwezor who passed away in 2019. Built to encourage reflections on what Al Qasimi calls the "transnational relationships and conversations" and Sharjah's role as a hub for "a spectral and multinodal experience," the bi-annual mega-event once again manages to be global in spirit and scope, yet local in its mission and context.

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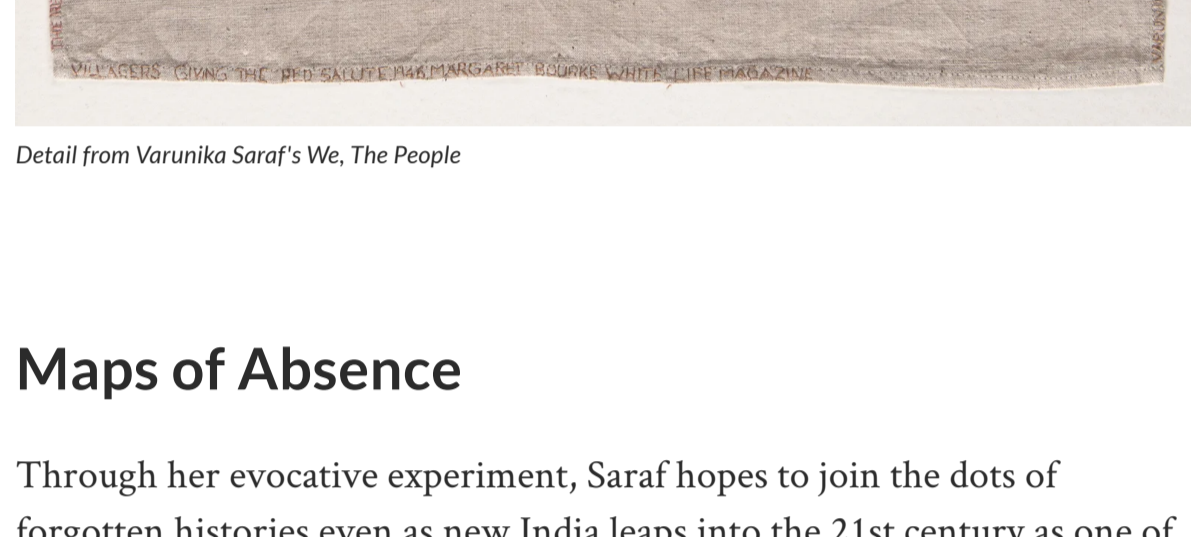
Hoor Al Qasimi Sebastian Boettcher

Spread across 19 venues in five cities and towns of Sharjah, the biennial captures the creative expressions of more than 150 artists and collectives from over 70 countries. In an 'India proud' moment, several homegrown artists are presenting their striking works this year. The list is long and illustrious: Nilima Sheikh, Anju Dodiya, Vivan Sundaram, Varunika Saraf, Reena Saini Kallat, Prajakta Potnis, Vivan Sundaram, Pablo and Richard Bartholomew, Lavanya Mani, Amar Kanwar, Nelly Sethna and Archana Hande.

India Power

"It was important for me to invite interesting and dynamic Indian artists because we have a huge [South Asian](#) community and our engagement with them is stronger than ever," asserts Al Qasimi, who's also the founder of Sharjah Art Foundation. Nestled in the heritage neighbourhood of the Sharjah city, the Sharjah Art Museum is one of the central venues for the biennial. Here, you will find younger artists like Varunika Saraf and Archana Hande in the relatively seasoned company of Nilima Sheikh and Pablo and Richard Bartholomew.

While the Baroda-based Sheikh's 16-panelled *Terrain: Carrying Across, Leaving Behind* (2016-17) is like a magical-realist time portal traversing womanhood, mythology, migration, exile, the landscapes of the septuagenarian artist's childhood and her love for poetry, nearby lies a room full of [Indian](#) maps. Step in and you are swept into a fevered reverie of 76 hand-embroidered Indian maps, perhaps symbolic of the 76th year of the country's independence. Titled *We, The People*, Varunika Saraf's India maps attempt to demystify Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano's advice to "search for the keys in the past history to explain our time."

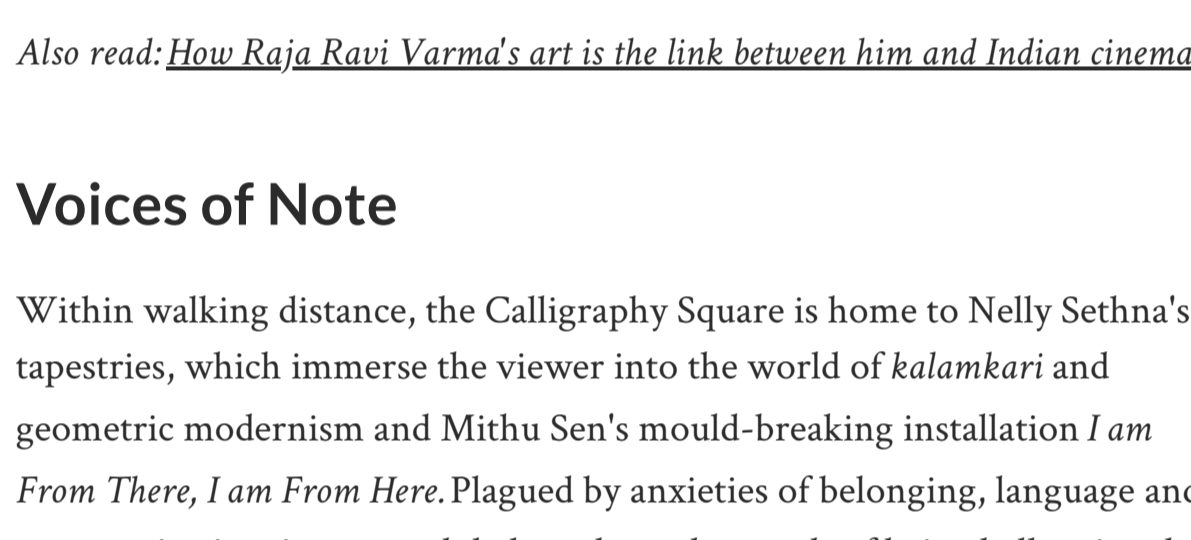


Detail from Varunika Saraf's We, The People

Maps of Absence

Through her evocative experiment, Saraf hopes to join the dots of forgotten histories even as new India leaps into the 21st century as one of the economic powers of the world. Speaking to [AD India](#), the Hyderabad-based artist explains, "I have chronicled certain aspects/incidents from our past that haven't been sufficiently examined, which are raw nerves that continue to structure our present."

Intriguingly, one map is left deliberately empty to signify that "thinking about overlooked and erased histories that upset the narrative of progress is an incomplete project. This map becomes a space to record events, for reimagining the future through the past has to be a collective activity to heal as a society." In adjoining rooms, [photographer](#) Pablo Bartholomew has joined forces with his late father Richard (1926-1985) to give us a collaborative peek into their intimately individual journeys. One series aptly titled *Affinities* stages an intergenerational dialogue between the father and son. Pablo, who drew upon the family archives for this selection, says, "My father was a seminal influence on my learning of photography." Both Richard and Pablo famously documented the Indian art scene and though separated by decades, Richard's *Artists' Portraits* series and Pablo's *Indian Emigré* series can be seen as complementary forces. In their own unique ways, they capture the doyens of Indian art in perfectly candid moments. Among Richard's black-and-white images, one gem particularly stands out—Ram Kumar flanked by M.F. Husain, both impossibly youthful and full of dreams. The rest, as they say, is history.



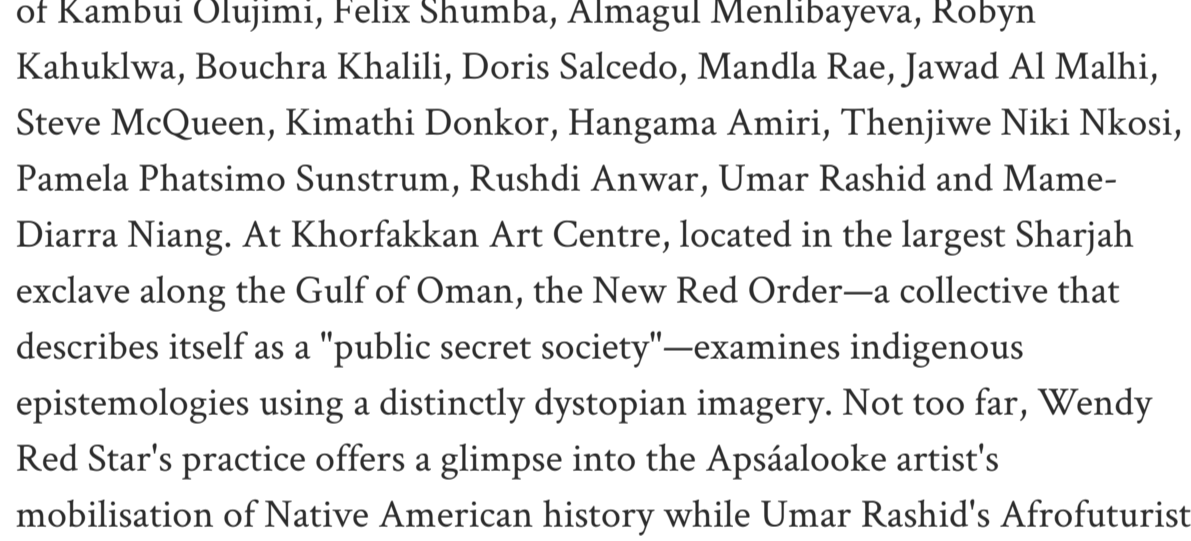
Richard and Pablo Bartholomew's Affinities at Sharjah Biennial

[Also read: How Raja Ravi Varma's art is the link between him and Indian cinema](#)

Voices of Note

Within walking distance, the Calligraphy Square is home to Nelly Sethna's tapestries, which immerse the viewer into the world of *kalamkari* and geometric modernism and Mithu Sen's mould-breaking installation *I am From There, I am From Here*. Plagued by anxieties of belonging, language and communication, it recasts alphabets through strands of hair, challenging the seemingly limitless powers of speech.

The title, Sen tells us, is inspired by a Mahmoud Darwishi poem whereas the work itself shows "solidarity with women resisting moral, social and political control over their bodily agency." Equally sublime, Anju Dodiya's dream-like suite of 'mattress paintings' at the historic Al Murejiah Square plumbs the depths of psychological turmoil. Alternately playful and brooding, Dodiya's works pivot between "a celebration and critique of the [history](#) of women in the domestic sphere," goes the wall text. Exploring the different venues throws up one visual wonder after another.



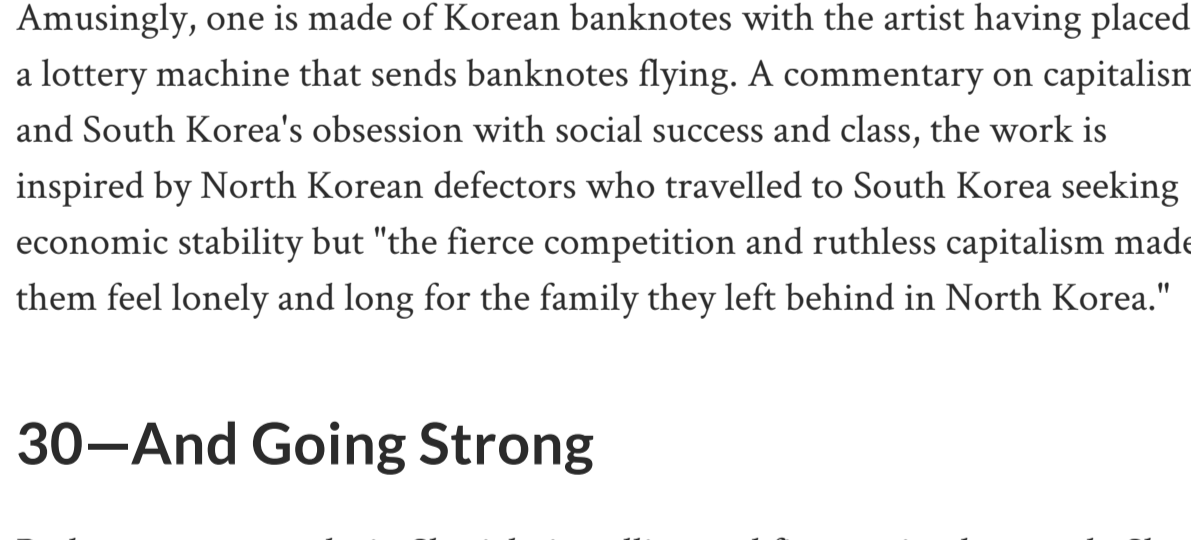
I am From There, I am From Here by Mithu Sen

This year, the proliferating voices of black and indigenous artists is a timely reminder of the persistence of violence and prejudice still used against them by mainstream society. It's hard to look away from the powerful themes of colonialism, race, class, gay rights, apartheid, censorship, xenophobia, inequality, social justice, police brutality, displacement, ethnic erasure and migration, addressed through the works of Kambui Olujimi, Felix Shumba, Almagul Menlibayeva, Robyn Kahukwa, Bouchra Khalili, Doris Salcedo, Mandla Rae, Jawad Al Malhi, Steve McQueen, Kimathi Donkor, Hangama Amiri, Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, Rushdi Anwar, Umar Rashid and Mame-Diarra Niang. At Khorfakkan Art Centre, located in the largest Sharjah exclave along the Gulf of Oman, the New Red Order—a collective that describes itself as a "public secret society"—examines indigenous epistemologies using a distinctly dystopian imagery. Not too far, Wendy Red Star's practice offers a glimpse into the Apsálookee artist's mobilisation of Native American history while Umar Rashid's Afrofuturist tapestries contemplate the [legacy](#) of imperialism.

Of Money and Migration

Designed by Khatib & Alami, Khalid Bin Mohammed School houses The Africa Institute. To watch art in this humble abode can feel a bit like being back in the classroom. With its airy central courtyard, a visitor can effortlessly flit in and out of the disparate worlds of artists like Mandla Rae, Steve McQueen and Ayoung Kim. Mandla Rae is a queer Zimbabwean provocateur whose experimental video *As British as a Watermelon* is a darkly funny cautionary tale against the racism she experienced in the UK while seeking asylum.

The South Korean artist Ayoung Kim is also showing her multimedia video *Proximity Valley 2: Tricksters' Plot* (2019). In 2018, 562 Yemini nationals were met with hostility when they sneaked into South Korea through Jeju Island. "It was uneasy to see this anti-Muslim sentiment and such strong xenophobia, fake news and civil protests against them," says Kim (44), who takes a sci-fi approach to the refugee crisis. She wanted to capture human suffering through what she calls "speculative fiction." The K-wave continues with Hyesoo Park, whose [art](#) forces viewers to confront the perils of capitalism. Installed at the Bank Street Building (the ground floor space is taken up by our very own Reena Saini Kallat who is presenting her series of sound sculpture *Chorus*, Park's *What's Missing* (2009) and *A Man Without A Country* (2023) are filled with postmodern irony.



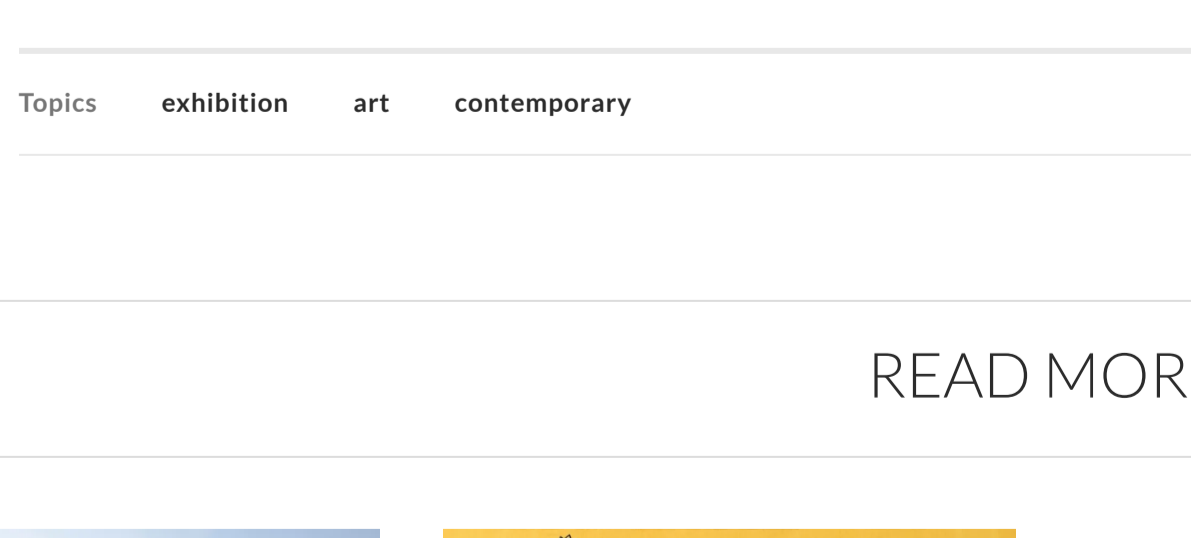
Ayoung Kim's Proximity Valley 2 - Tricksters' Plot

Amusingly, one is made of Korean banknotes with the artist having placed a lottery machine that sends banknotes flying. A commentary on capitalism and South Korea's obsession with social success and class, the work is inspired by North Korean defectors who travelled to South Korea seeking economic stability but "the fierce competition and ruthless capitalism made them feel lonely and long for the family they left behind in North Korea."

30—And Going Strong

Park spent two weeks in Sharjah, installing and fine-tuning her work. She enjoyed the diversity the biennial offers. "There was harmony in the way it was curated," she contends. Established in 1993, Sharjah Biennial has inevitably become a cultural fixture in the UAE through the decades. Looking back, Hoor Al Qasimi reflects, "I don't think about success because it's an ongoing process." In her curatorial note, she recalls being so impressed with documenta 11 in 2002 (curated by Okwui Enwezor) that she decided to eschew the traditional biennial and art fair model to reimagine Sharjah Biennial in the new millennium as a platform for more cross-regional solidarities. "I wanted to create a creative space where artists cutting across regions and geographies could work together to illuminate our shared histories and struggles and find a common space to reflect, think and perhaps, express hope," she tells [AD India](#).

Despite its global ambitions, Sharjah Biennial has always kept local needs and opportunities in mind even as it amassed an enviable network of influence in the rapidly proliferating world of biennales. Describing the biennial as her "labour of love", Al Qasimi, who also happens to be president of the International Biennial Association, says, "It's nice that there are always visitors but those are not your year-round audiences. The biennial has a bigger responsibility which is to keep it running and engaged year after year. That's why we became a foundation. We realized Sharjah Biennial is not about one event. It's about community-building."



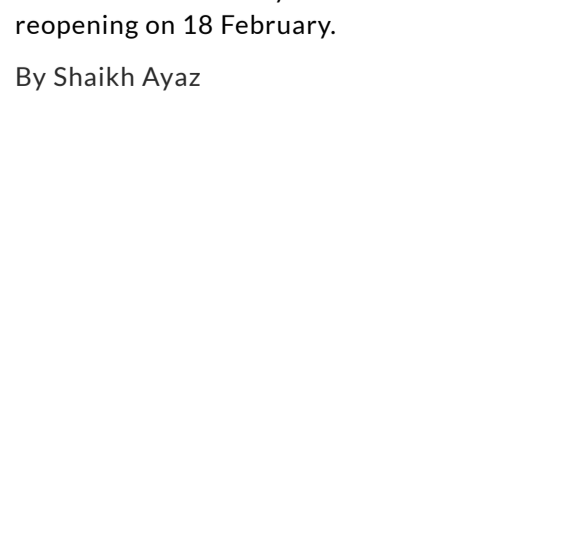
Abdulrahim Saleem's The Unknown Sailor performance view

Sharjah Biennial 15 is on view across the emirate of Sharjah (UAE) until 11 June.

[Also read: Waswo X. Waswo's solo exhibition at the India Art Fair transcends art and time itself](#)

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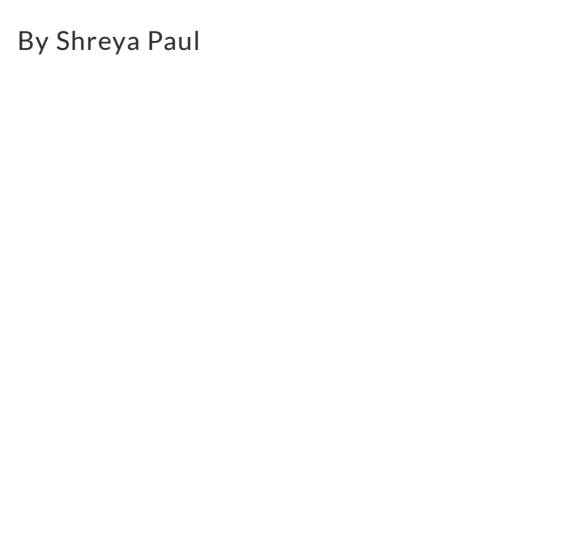
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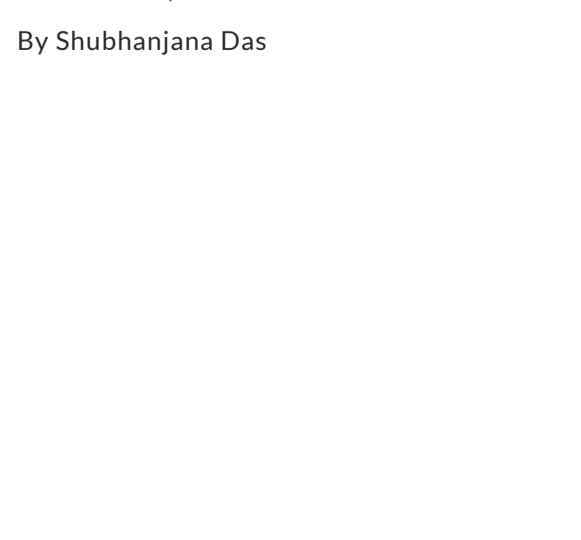
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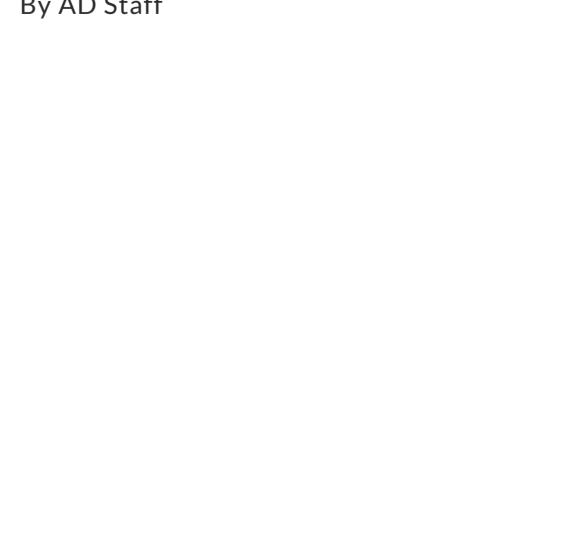
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