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Sharjah Biennial 15 Subverts and Contradicts, Generating Potent Reflections

By [Stephanie Bailey](#)

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Helina Metaferia, *The Willing* (2023). Produced by Sharjah Art Foundation. Performance view: Sharjah Biennial 15, Arts Square (7 February–11 June 2023). Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Shanavas Jamaluddin.

The 15th Sharjah Biennial is undoubtedly a subversive exhibition. Curated by Sharjah Art Foundation president and director Hoor Al Qasimi, there are moments across this generative curatorial—over 300 works by over 150 artists and collectives across 19 venues—that nudge open the Overton window in the U.A.E., which cannot go unnoticed.



FEATURES



Adam Khalil and Bayley Sweitzer with Oba, *Nosferasta: First Bite* (2021) (still). Commissioned and produced by Gasworks and Spike Island, as part of the European Cooperation project 4Cs, co-funded by Creative Europe and Royal College of Art, London. Courtesy the artists.

Take *Nosferasta: First Bite* (2021) by Adam Khalil and Bayley Sweitzer, a short film screened at Bank Street Building, starring artist and musician Oba. Framing the settler colonial project and the nation-state system it spawned as blood-sucking, the story begins on the shores of the so-called New World, where the vampire Christopher Columbus turns a shipwrecked African slave into his progeny.

Fast forward a few centuries, and this progeny has become a Rastafarian in New York trying to renew his U.S. green card. He talks about marijuana releasing him from the trauma of enslavement, amid a euphoric weed-smoking montage that feels eyebrow-raising in the context of the U.A.E., where the drug is illegal even if discovered in a person's system—like with Singapore and Korea—as is, in some cases, its depiction.



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In its showing in Sharjah, *Nosferasta* highlights the non-alignment of legality across global time and space, and the myriad factors that contribute to those divergences, not to mention their interpretation. New York decriminalised recreational marijuana in 2021, the year the U.A.E. marginally relaxed laws surrounding the discovery of certain THC-containing products at the border—landmark moves in both cases.

Such overlaps highlighting contextual differences, intersections, and developments occur throughout Sharjah Biennial 15 (SB15), which departs from the late Okwui Enwezor's thesis for an exhibition he was meant to curate, and whose words form the show's title: *Thinking Historically in the Present*.

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