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Siddhartha Mitter on the Sharjah Biennial

By Siddhartha Mitter

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Carrie Mae Weems, *The In Between* (detail), 2022–23, mixed media. Installation view, Calligraphy Square, Sharjah, 2023. Photo: Haupt & Binder.

**AT THE DAWN OF THE CENTURY**, no special sign presaged Sharjah's rise to its present status as an artistic incubator and arguably today's most influential hub of research and creation focused on what is now called the Global South. Yes, its ruler, Sheikh Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, launched the Sharjah Biennial in 1993. But in its early editions, the exhibition was relatively staid, presenting neo-modernist art from Arab and Muslim countries on the national-pavilion model. Compared with glitzy Dubai, the city of Sharjah, capital of the eponymous emirate, was (and remains) low-rise and conservative despite the influx of wealth from oil and gas.

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Sondra Perry, *Double Quadruple Etcetera I & II*, 2013, two-channel HD video, color, silent, 9 minutes.

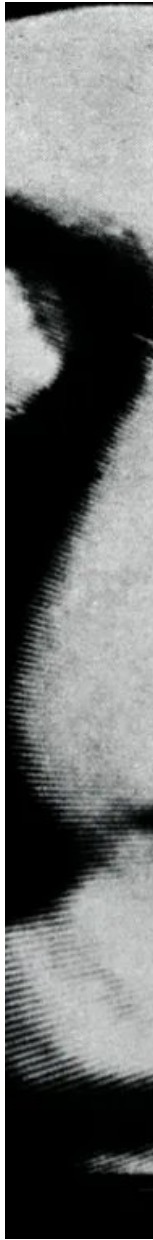
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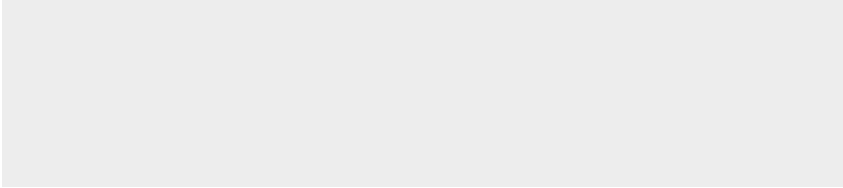
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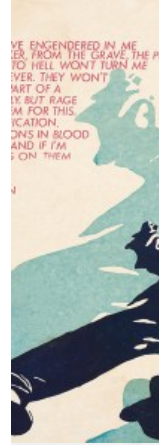
In 2002, Hoor Al Qasimi, the sheikh's youngest daughter, who studied at London's Slade School of Fine Art and Royal College of Art, visited Documenta 11 in Kassel, which Okwui Enwezor curated. That exhibition was decentralized, with earlier programs in Vienna, New Delhi, Saint Lucia, and Lagos all feeding into the main show. It embraced collectives and research-based practices. It afforded each artist space to articulate their vision rather than imposing a tightly sequenced curatorial narrative. And although it included white European and North American artists, its roster leaned hard toward what Enwezor called the "postcolonial constellation," with its diasporic tendrils.



A decade into its reign as the largest, best-

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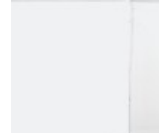
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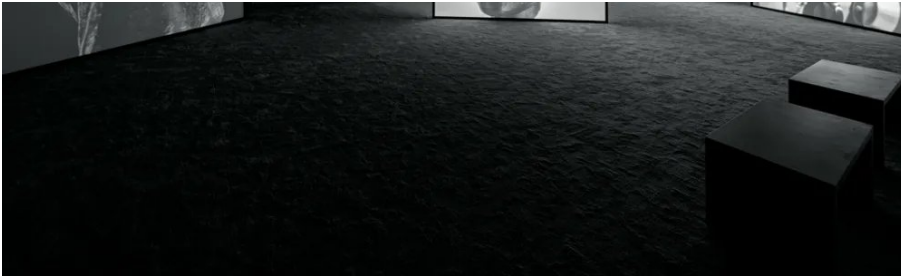


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Global South perspective, this edition reads as a  
stocktaking—of those orientations, the field,  
and the form.

For Al Qasimi, this experience was epiphanic. Taking the helm of the Sharjah Biennial in 2003, she restructured it to world standards, bringing in leading international curators for each edition and pursuing the exhibitional and intellectual possibilities that Enwezor's Documenta had indicated. In 2009, she established the Sharjah Art Foundation, which she still directs, to produce programs year-round across the emirate and to support projects worldwide with a generous commissioning and exhibition budget. In this way, and using mostly public funds, Sharjah has become a power in the geopolitics of cultural production. Its biennial and architecture triennial are supplemented by book, film, and performance platforms; the annual March Meetings of artists and scholars; and the Africa Institute. It is the headquarters of the International Biennial Association, of which Al Qasimi is president.

All this provides context and some indication of the stakes for the Fifteenth Sharjah Biennial, "Thinking Historically in the Present." A showcase of practices that attempt to do that, SB15 is the largest iteration to date of a biennial that is never compact, with 159 artists and collaboratives given room to go big. But it is also reflexive, an exhibition concerned with its own genealogy and with how it became what it is now—and therefore concerned, if less explicitly, with its future. The title is a *mot d'ordre* from Enwezor, whom Al Qasimi had originally asked to curate this edition, which was planned for 2021 but postponed because of the pandemic. After Enwezor's death in March 2019, Al Qasimi, rather than replace him with another curator or committee, assumed the duty herself. Thus, SB15 is the latest exhibition to receive the sobriquet "Okwui's last show," and an elegiac air hovers at points—in fact, an installation by Carrie Mae Weems, *The In Between*, 2022–23, is a shrine to the man, including an arrangement of wooden oars and other objects around a vacant wooden armchair and bound volumes of all his exhibition catalogues. But while Enwezor orients SB15, he didn't curate it; Al Qasimi did. In her hands, thirty years after the event's founding, twenty years after its reinvention, and a decade into its reign as the largest, best-funded, best-organized biennial to assert a Global South perspective, this edition reads as a stocktaking—of those orientations, the field, and the form.





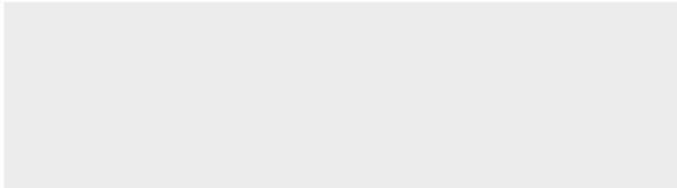
Isaac Julien, *Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)*, 2022, five-channel HD video (black-and-white, sound, 31 minutes 34 seconds), Richmond Barthé sculptures, Matthew Angelo Harrison sculptures, African objects from the Louvre Abu Dhabi collection. Installation view, Calligraphy Square, Sharjah, 2023. Photo: Motaz Mawid.

An exhibition this enormous is many things at once. Woven into SB15, certainly, is a kind of Enwezor reunion, a gathering of artists whom he championed and thought alongside, which is to say an all-star convention. The overlap between Enwezor's 2015 Venice Biennale and SB15 includes John Akomfrah, Sammy Baloji, Coco Fusco, Theaster Gates, Isaac Julien, Ibrahim Mahama, Kerry James Marshall, Steve McQueen, and Wangechi Mutu. In Al Hamriyah, a harbor town north of the city of Sharjah, Marshall has made a permanent outdoor installation riffing on archaeology and the history of imperial and commercial exchanges in the Gulf region. Having little taste for mega-exhibitions, he had not shown in a major biennial since that Venice edition; he told me he'd come to Sharjah for Enwezor's sake. Other "Okwui regulars" presenting old or new work in SB15 include Weems, Yinka Shonibare, and South African artist Berni Searle, who has reimagined a project she first realized in Enwezor's 1997 Johannesburg Biennale. Located in Al Hisn, the fort in Sharjah's center, it consists of a large ground sculpture in which the architectural footprint of Cape Town's colonial Castle of Good Hope is mapped in paprika and sand; Searle has updated the work by augmenting it with a five-channel video about the tent settlement that now surrounds the castle and the lives of the unhoused people who shelter there.

Every artist expresses a subject position within Enwezor's "postcolonial constellation," and if you miss white Euro-American perspectives, you are welcome to seek them elsewhere.

This show-within-a-show of the Enwezor-shaped international canon of Black and brown artists has uneven moments. A reprise of McQueen's 2005 video and sound installation *Pursuit*, at the Africa Institute, feels cramped (deliberately) but also decontextualized; on view in Al Hamriyah, Shonibare's cavalcade of imperial statuary clad top-to-toe in the Dutch wax fabric common in West Africa feels, after many similar iterations, conceptually exhausted. Julien, however, is at the top of his game, presenting the lyrical black-and-white multichannel installation *Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)*, 2022, which premiered last year at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. The work explores the life of ethnographic

objects in Western collections; the dialogue between the collector Albert Barnes and the Harlem Renaissance philosopher Alain Locke; and the intellectual and romantic connection between Locke and the artist Richmond Barthé. Sculptures by the latter are installed adjoining the video projections, alongside pieces by the Detroit-based Matthew Angelo Harrison that encase African statues in polyurethane resin to disconcerting optical effect. Mutu, meanwhile, offers a new series of wood, soil, and gourd sculptures in the walkway of the elegant Bait Al Serkal building, keyed in the courtyard by a large matted form, partly tree shaded, that evokes a sepulchre or tumulus. The ensemble forms a new commission, *My Mother's Memories, a Mound of Buried Brides*, 2023, that expresses an elegant continuity with Mutu's current survey at New York's New Museum.



Had SB15 merely gathered existing work by big-name artists under Enwezor's posthumous auspices, it might have fallen short in the ways that hampered "Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America," a previous "Okwui's last show," this one presented in 2021, also at the New Museum. That exhibition, which included only a few younger or emerging artists, felt recapitulative rather than forward-looking, as if intended less to stimulate fresh ideas than to enter the art-historical record. In contrast, SB15 feels alive and open, its large and eclectic roster shaped by Al Qasimi's interests—for instance, in contemporary Indigenous expression from Australia, New Zealand, Hawai'i, and Greenland—and featuring many artists who have rarely if ever shown in a biennial.



View of Felix Shumba works, 2023, Old Al Dhaid Clinic, Sharjah. Floor: *Ruwa River*, 2022. Walls: *Nocturnal Body*, 2022. Photo: Sharjah Foundation.

In Al Dhaid, an inland oasis town, at a low-slung former health center repurposed as an exhibition space but with its consultation rooms and even its signs left intact, I met the Zimbabwean artist Felix Shumba. His large charcoal drawings of figures in gas masks address the Rhodesian regime's use of chemical weapons during Zimbabwe's liberation war. On the floor, wooden boxes, each equipped with a radio antenna and speaker and with sundry other items (a pasted sketch, a mound of sand) inside or attached to

it, extended the concept, visually and sonically, to other aspects of the war's material and psychological aftermath. In his teens, Shumba was an economic migrant in South Africa, where he experienced discrimination and deportation. He did not attend art school; now in his thirties, he lives back in Zimbabwe, in his hometown, Masvingo. Though he is not unknown—he is a protégé of the South African artist Kemang Wa Lehulere—Sharjah is his first biennial. Like several other artists I spoke with, he said Al Qasimi had contacted him out of the blue over Instagram.

To absorb this sprawling show requires visiting nineteen venues in the capital city and four other towns of the emirate, including the exclaves of Kalba and Khorfakkan, a two-hour drive away. Moreover, every artist's presentation is substantial. In some cases, an artist is represented by a single monumental work—for example, Doris Salcedo's *Uprooted*, 2020–22, an uninhabitable houselike structure made from 804 dead trees. Other projects are textured and site-specific: Thus, in the ruins of an old house in Al Mureijah, a historic area of central Sharjah that the foundation has turned into a maze of heritage and white-cube spaces, Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme have installed *Until we became fire and fire us*, 2023. Video, metal, fabric, text, and light combine with the site and its vegetation to evoke the transmitted memory of the dispossession of the Palestinian people in all its bitterness and melancholy, with a resonance that extends to other histories of expropriation and expulsion.





Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *Until we became fire and fire us*, 2023, audio, sublimation prints on steel panels and chiffon. Installation view, Al Mureijah Square, Sharjah. Photo: Shanavas Jamaluddin.

Still other artists use separate bodies of work in multiple media to address their theme. Carolina Caycedo, for instance, considers mineral extraction: the economic and ecological dimensions, but also the epistemic and spiritual ones. Across several rooms and a courtyard in Calligraphy Square, another venue in the historic center, she presents drawings from her series “Mineral Intensive,” 2022, which foregrounds the paradox whereby “clean energy” carries heavy mining requirements (for cobalt or lithium, for instance); an installation of 160 clay vessels inscribed with poetry that alludes to medieval alchemists; and a film that documents the *pagamento* (payment) of gold back into the waters of the Colombian highlands—a symbolic restitution following Indigenous moral principles. One grumble that I heard a few times during the opening week was that such large presentations prevent the creative tension that comes from placing works by different artists in closer quarters. But to encounter each practice in this fuller, fleshed-out way feels generous to both artists and viewers.

Besides, SB15 is not without structure. It functions partly through thematic or formal clusters that lend some gentle order and often chime with the history of the exhibition sites. At the Sharjah Art Museum, one ground-floor wing has been given over to photography; another, upstairs, is largely devoted to contemporary Indigenous art. At the Kalba Ice Factory, a former ice-storage facility at the edge of a mangrove forest, many works have an ecological bent. Salcedo’s *Uprooted* proved the showstopper, winning the Sharjah Biennial Prize. More subtle, in the same venue, is the collective Pak Khawateen Painting Club’s wry multimedia take on colonial hydrology and the channeling of the Indus River. A side building houses Greenland artist Inuuteq Storch’s photographs, videos, and compilations of archival records. A second venue in Kalba is a former kindergarten; here, one finds projects with connections to childhood. In Erkan Özgen’s short, devastating video *Wonderland*, 2016, a young hearing-impaired Syrian refugee expresses, nonverbally, what he witnessed during the Islamic State occupation. Afghan Canadian artist Hangama Amiri, who was six when the Taliban banned girls’ education in 1996, presents textile works inspired by school uniforms. In another video project, Gabriela Golder’s *ARRANCAR LOS OJOS [tear out the eyes]*, 2023, children read letters sent by prisoners and exiles during the Argentinean dictatorship.





Inuuteq Storch, *Porcelain Souls* (detail), 2018, ink-jet prints, various dimensions.

Back in central Sharjah, the Old Al Jubail Vegetable Market is a handsome curving structure whose vendors have moved to a new facility across the street. It now hosts SB15 projects to do with food, agriculture, and conviviality. In her commission *Sour Things*, 2022, Mirna Bamieh develops fermentation as a compelling metaphor for private and social life with a video that doubles as her introspective pandemic diary, complemented by installations of ceramics, text, and actual decaying fruit. Sparked in part by encounters with mango sellers in New York's Union Square, Joiri Minaya's video installations and annotated archival materials examine the Caribbean as both migration source and tourist destination, weaving together questions of labor, gender, memory, and taste. Elia Nurvista's sculpture, video, fabric, and found objects address palm-oil cultivation and deforestation in Indonesia. In the middle of the market, meanwhile, sits a table beautifully prepared for a fancy dinner party; each place setting includes a box that contains photocopied archival news clippings and Lebanese and foreign government reports. Hanging around the table are thickets of electrical wire. This is Tania El Houry's *The Search for Power*, 2018; taking a seat at the table, visitors can listen to an audio guide in which the artist and her partner, Ziad Abu-Rish, recount their investigation of the historical causes of Lebanon's chronic electricity-supply crisis, inviting guests to consult the documents they have found along the way. The work was inspired by their actual wedding dinner in Beirut, which was disrupted by a blackout. During the biennial's opening week, they restaged it as a participatory performance, complete with dancing.



Bouchra Khalili, *The Circle*, 2023, mixed media installation with wall paper, two-channel video projection (4K and 16 mm transferred to digital video, color and black-and-white, sound, 57 minutes), five-channel 16 mm transferred to digital video on cubic monitors (black-and-white, sound, 14 minutes). Installation view, Al Mureijah Art Spaces, Sharjah. Photo: Shanavas Jamaluddin.

The most salient success of “Thinking Historically in the Present” is the nimbleness with which it marshals the archive. The title rings didactic, but the work—enough of it to set the tone, at least—tends toward poetry. Far

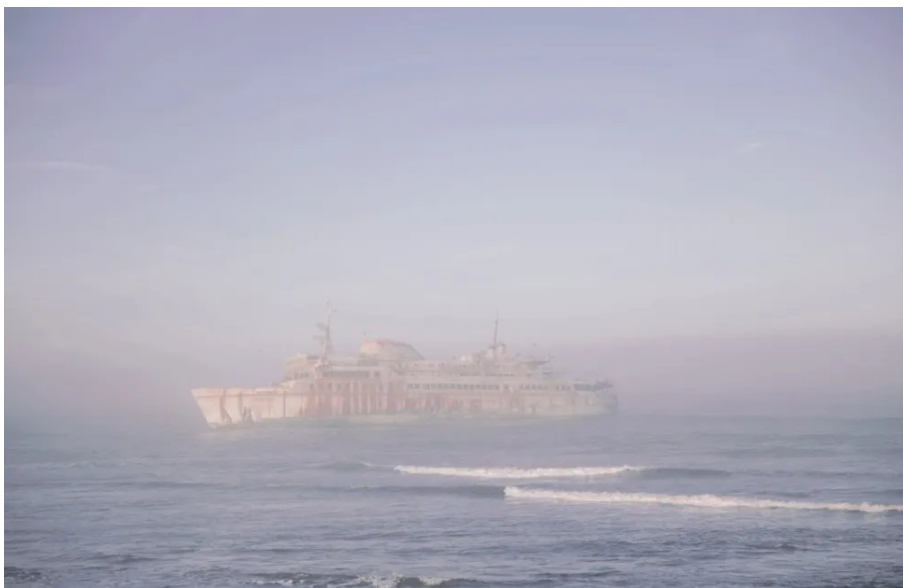


from “chart art” or endless documentary spelunking, many projects in SB15 evince a kind of liberated rigor, where social purpose meets formal elegance and imagination. This is evident in multimedia works like Bouchra Khalili’s *The Circle*, 2023, which revisits the history of North African immigrant workers’ activism in France in the 1970s, notably their little-remembered use of community theater; Khalili’s installation combines monitors that show video transfers of period 16-mm films, a time-line wall reproducing tracts and photography, and a two-channel video, screened in a comfortable tiered area, in which veterans and descendants of the movement consider its trace, together with current French–North African artists and thinkers. The same balance between the rigorous and the imaginative is apparent in wall-mounted works and at more intimate scale, as in Varunika Saraf’s *We, the People*, 2018–22. The series is highly systematic, comprising seventy-six seventeen-by-seventeen-inch squares of brown cotton marked with a red-outlined map of India; within this consistent frame, Saraf uses embroidery and other techniques to re-create news photographs of lesser-known incidents in the history of Indian social movements: for instance, protests against rising food prices in Delhi in 1976, against dowries in Mumbai in 1985, and against land grabs in West Bengal in 2006. Along the edge of each cotton square, Saraf has credited the source photo, quoted its caption, and added her own brief comment. A work of people’s history (and exemplary citational practice) that memorializes the actions of women, villagers, university lecturers, and so on, the project lends pointed context to India’s current illiberal convulsions under the Narendra Modi regime—thinking historically in the present, indeed. The final cotton square in the series is empty.



Elsewhere, the mood is interior, even oneiric. At the Flying Saucer, an

idiosyncratic '70s building, New Yorker Kambui Olujimi holds a maximalist celebration, transforming the central room into an Afrofuturist fantasia of blue-dyed sand, blue-and-gold-painted walls, boulders, and surreal busts, while the circular outer hallway features watercolor and cyanotype diptychs that celebrate Black figures who, for Olujimi, have forged paths to freedom through narrative glitches and scrambled identities—from the folk hero High John the Conqueror to the author Octavia Butler to the rapper Kool Keith. The conceptual photography of Imane Djamil, meanwhile, hovers between dream and documentation: Her “80 Miles to Atlantis,” 2020, at the Sharjah Art Museum, considers Tarfaya, a town in southern Morocco that faces climate change, high unemployment, and the pull of the Canary Islands, for which migrants set out in frail vessels. Djamil’s composite photographs render the human presence ghostly amid this landscape—or perhaps it’s the other way around, the setting fading away from the characters. Equally graceful is Naiza Khan’s video *Mapping Water*, 2023, at Bait Obaid Al Shamsi, a historic house once owned by a pearl merchant. A meditation on geographies (of London, Karachi, Sharjah), it finds the author in her studio, where she transposes colonial and other maps onto paper that she floods with watercolors. Narrated by the actress Nimra Bucha and set to Haider Rahman’s flute variation on a monsoon raga, the work touches on process itself—on the alchemy by which social inquiry dissolves into the fragile, contingent act of making.



Imane Djamil, *80 Miles to Atlantis* (detail), 2020, wallpaper and ink-jet prints, dimensions variable.

Far from solipsistic, work like Khan’s touches on the heart of the matter, the mysterious, unknowable part of the cycle, where art—even when underpinned by clear social or ethical commitments—transcends documenting things as they are or proposing new civic possibilities. This reminder of indeterminacy is crucial in an exhibition like the Sharjah Biennial that operates so strongly in the mode of assertion. Indeed, SB15 has no patience for biennial fatigue: It’s enormous by intention, following Enwezor’s contention that mega-exhibitions, if done well, can do work that museums cannot or will not, never mind the gripes of opening-week parachute visitors hurrying to the next destination on the circuit. It is also nonwhite, for lack of a better term, without apology. Every artist expresses a

subject position within Enwezor’s “postcolonial constellation,” and if you miss white Euro-American perspectives, you are welcome to seek them elsewhere. These remain important grounds to stake out given the persistent power dynamics of the art world. They distinguish Sharjah from other Global South art hubs (including those in the Gulf region) where the choices made by governments, institutions, and collectors still betray a desire for Western validation—despite today’s accelerating geopolitical fracturing.



Naiza Khan, *Mapping Water*, 2023, 4K video, color, sound, 20 minutes. Installation view, Bait Obaid Al Shamsi, Sharjah. Photo: Motaz Mawid.

The work touches on process itself—on the alchemy by which social inquiry dissolves into the fragile, contingent act of making.

Comments on successive Sharjah Biennials tend to split along two lines, and SB15 is no exception. Critics highlight the restrictive conditions that prevail in the United Arab Emirates—autocracy, threadbare workers’ rights, conservative social mores, the prohibition of homosexuality—and the way these limit the show. Others are full of praise for precisely how the biennial, and Al Qasimi in particular, navigates these shoals, pushing the envelope on various fronts through indirection. Neither outlook is wrong. The political and social conditions are known, though far from unique to the UAE. The 2011 ouster of Jack Persekian, the biennial’s director at the time, following the ill-advised installation near a mosque of a work by Mustapha Benfodil featuring mannequins wearing sexual and anti-religious slogans, is a matter of record. Even this year, I heard about a video work from which a section involving bare breasts had been trimmed. (Asked to comment, the biennial press office said: “Videos were edited prior to presentation in the Biennial, but given the number of works involved, we can’t confirm what specific edits were made.”) Yet SB15 is replete with serious art with critical political themes, including feminist work and projects by queer artists. In a time of mounting illiberalism infecting cultural policy worldwide, Sharjah is neither the antidote nor the worst offender.



Prajakta Potnis, *Free Fall*, 2023, LED light box. Installation view, Bait Al Serkal, Sharjah, 2023. From *Cracks in the Master's House*, 2021–22. Photo: Motaz Mawid.

One of the hardest contradictions to bridge, in my view, is between, on the one hand, the humanistic approach advocated by the biennial (and the foundation's projects in general) and, on the other, the UAE's nationality laws, which put citizenship nearly out of reach for the people of non-Emirati origin who compose the vast bulk of the population, making their status contingent on their labor. Perhaps this context lends an extra edge to the showing of works such as Prajakta Potnis's multimedia *Cracks in the Master's House*, 2021–22, which includes recordings of domestic workers in India expressing the toll of their labor and describing their dreams. At the same time, local non-Emiratis have agency in SB15, whether in the project team or through collaborations: For example, Bahar Behbahani's *Garden of Desire*, 2023, includes a miniature garden and irrigation system that Behbahani developed together with local botanists and an Emirati agricultural engineer and maintained by South Asian gardeners with whom she connected while installing the work. As elsewhere, local laws and politics inform and inflect the Sharjah Biennial. But its influence in a multipolar cultural landscape and its value as a partner to serious institutions and artists across the "postcolonial constellation" are beyond doubt.

*The Sharjah Biennial is on view through June 11.*

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