The formula

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Jack Peresekian, the Sharjah Biennial's artistic director. "We are talking the biennial," he says, "beyond an event." Tina Chang / The National

Sceptics insist the Gulf's new mega-museums will merely 'import culture' from abroad. But at this year's Sharjah Biennial, *Kaelen Wilson-Goldie*finds a vibrant laboratory for making art rooted in the region's past, present and future.

The golf course at the Hyatt Regency Dubai is lit up like a 1970s mafia wedding; 24 strands of round, retro light bulbs cascade over the green below like ribbons on an electrified maypole. The artist Khalil Rabah, who directs the Riwaq Biennial in Ramallah, is dancing in his sunglasses despite the darkness of the night. Around him gyrates a throng of artists, curators, friends and colleagues, most of whom are, at this point, barefoot. Rasha Salti, a curator from Beirut, is looping graceful semi-circles around the lawn. Tarek Abou el Fetouh, a curator from Cairo, is waving a scarf above his head and doing what can only be described as a disco dabkeh.

It's later than late, and the Sharjah Biennial after-party, thrown by the magazine *Bidoun* and Dubai's Third Line gallery, was scheduled to end more than an hour ago. Despite the fact that everyone here is exhausted – the past five days have seen the openings of the Bastakiya Art Fair, Art Dubai and the ninth edition of the Sharjah Biennial, as well as a punishing schedule of irreconcilable events for the March Meeting in Sharjah, the Art Park and Global Art Forum in Dubai and the morning art school lecture series in Bastakiya – no one seems in any way inclined to call it a night. Finally, Sunny Rahbar, one of the founders and directors of The Third Line, cuts the music and takes the mic.

After firmly announcing last call, she tells a little story about the venue. The Hyatt Regency is more than 25 years old: by local standards, it is a relic. Rahbar grew up in the UAE, and in her characteristically breathy voice, she tells the crowd about how she used to go ice-skating here, at the hotel's Galleria Ice Rink, when she was a kid. (A week later, The Third Line's Tarané Ali Khan, who was born in Sharjah, tells me she did the same. "Probably everyone who grew up here remembers going ice-skating there. Those were good times.")

Rahbar is one in a crucial generation of cultural figures who have literally and figuratively come of age in the UAE. They include Lisa Farjam, the founder and editor-in-chief of *Bidoun*; Murtaza Vali, a writer and art historian who describes Sharjah as evocatively as Luc Sante describes New York; Shehab Hamad, who seven years ago helped to establish the Dubai-based multimedia collective 9714 and likewise captures the city in colourful metaphors; Rami Farook, the owner of the design gallery Traffic; and Lamya Gargash, an artist whose gorgeous photographs of haunting Emirati interiors will represent the UAE in its first-ever national pavilion at the Venice Biennale in June. In many ways, these people are the core around which the local art scene coheres.

They are joined by medium- to long-term residents of the UAE, such as Tarek al Ghoussein, an artist who teaches at the American University of Sharjah and counts Gargash among his former students; Claudia Cellini, Rahbar's partner in The Third Line; Antonia Carver, who heads up *Bidoun's* special projects unit, and Jack Persekian, the brain behind the Sharjah Biennial for three editions and counting. From there, the circle extends out to include those who have contributed their time and talent to cultivating and theorising cultural production in the UAE, including Tirdad Zolghadr, who co-organised the 2005 Sharjah Biennial and is now the curator of the UAE's Venice pavilion, and Shumon Basar, a writer, editor and curator who last year published a book on urban tabula rasa called *Cities from Zero* and is currently at work on a novel about Dubai.

The collective work of this generation, which is more or less the age of the UAE itself, gives the place depth and imagination, and more trenchantly, a past and a future, both of which are usually absent from the standard-issue stories on art in the Gulf. Nothing exemplifies this better than the work of Lamya Gargash: her *Presence* series, which was exhibited a year ago in the labyrinthine Bastakiya district, is a catalogue of derelict domestic spaces in Sharjah, Dubai and Ajman, each image capturing a room either abandoned or soon to be so.

A still from Nokolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen's video installation Rendezvous, for which Larsen filmed labourers in the UAE, then their families at home, primarily in the Indian state of Kerala. Courtesy of the artist

Her approach may be directly informed by the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, who documented industrial structures on the verge of obsolescence. But Gargash's images also do something completely different: they register the past in a place that is presumed not to have one. They capture a world of intimate ruin, one that both beautifully and painfully contradicts the overbearing image of flash, futuristic Dubai. The dated decor, the discarded belongings, the remnants of family rituals and workday routines, all of these things mark the passage of time. In *Presence* and two other series of photographs – *Majlis* (currently on view in Sharjah) and Familial (an exploration of one-star hotels in the UAE that the artist is producing for Venice) – Gargash's strange, cluttered or emptied spaces hint at anonymous narratives, lived experiences and alternative histories.

Gargash's images are emblematic of the ways in which the real energy of the Emirati art scene is currently being generated from within – not by the fabulousness of art world celebs who occasionally parachute in, nor from the boundless ambitions of architectural plans that won't be realised for years, but rather by the serious and surprisingly poignant work that is quietly being done on the ground.

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Art Dubai and the Sharjah Biennial, which coincided for the first time this year, have distinctly different identities: Art Dubai, established in 2007 as the Gulf Art Fair, is the art-world equivalent of a trade expo, where the real business is the buying and selling of product, and everything else is window-dressing. The Sharjah Biennial, founded in 1993, is a resolutely non-commercial endeavour, committed to the exhibition of artworks without regard for their market value. The success of Art Dubai ultimately depends on the sales made during (and after) the event. Success for the biennial is more difficult to gauge, though the implications are potentially much greater – establishing foundations for the making and exhibiting of art in a country whose future

plans for art institutions play an outsize role. Shumon Basar, writing in the magazine *Blueprint* after the last edition, credited the biennial for "its genuine attention to art as discourse – and not as theme park lookalike or celebrity flytrap. In a place where alternative social or political outlooks are difficult to find (or create), the Sharjah Biennial is an opportunity to smuggle in – under the aegis of art – unstable, contentious thinking."

Scheduling the two events side-by-side made for some obvious atmospheric contrasts, but it also created a fine social swirl. There were plenty of art-world aristocrats: Glenn Lowry, the director of the Museum of Modern Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art's chief curator Richard Flood, the Tate's director, Nicholas Serota, Daniel Birnbaum of the Venice Biennale and the ubiquitous Hans Ulrich Obrist, of the Serpentine Gallery. There were super-collectors, power dealers and armies of staffers from major arts institutions whose business cards alone raised hopeful eyebrows. And there were significantly more artists – and independent curators, and academic researchers, and directors of small little-engines-that-could art spaces – than would have been the case at the fair alone. Both Art Dubai and the Sharjah Biennial substantially bolstered their parallel programmes this year, such that everyone without an assistant was tearing back and forth between the two cities, clutching tattered schedules in hand, trying to make it to all the lectures, debates, presentations, artists' talks, performances, concerts, video screenings and parties.
The first event this year was the opening of the Bastakiya Art Fair, a rusticated fringe event that lends edge and a certain architectural authenticity to the glitz and glamour of Art Dubai, celebrating an ethic of openness against the steep hierarchies of access that continue to characterise the more mainstream fair. The opening had the feel of an eclectic class reunion. This was primarily due to the second iteration of the March Meeting, an initiative that Jack Persekian launched last year to nurture collaboration and the exchange of ideas among arts organisations in the Middle East. The list of participants in this year's March Meeting was a veritable who's who of culture brokers in the region, however elastically it may be defined.

To bring all of these people together was to materialise a network that has been in place for nearly a decade. And in that sense it really was a reunion, gathering in one place the entire cast of characters who have helped to build the independent art scenes in cities such as Tangier (Yto Barrada of the Cinémathèque de Tanger), Cairo (William Wells of the Townhouse Gallery), Beirut (Christine Tohme of Ashkal Alwan, Lamia Joreige of the Beirut Art Center, Rasha Salti of Arte East, Zeina Arida of the Arab Image Foundation) and Amman (Suha Shoman and Ala' Younis of Darat al Funun). These organisations – hyper-flexible and adaptive – may be unseen or illegible to anyone looking for the kind of cultural infrastructures that have been established in cities such as London or New York, or anticipating the massive museum projects being planned for Abu Dhabi or Doha. But they are of critical importance in terms of creating alternative models for the production and presentation of new work, pushing contemporary art into new areas of experimentation and innovation, and supporting artists and audiences alike.

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Still, to speak of the contemporary art scene in the Middle East as if it were one, or as if the region itself were a monolith, has become increasingly problematic and untenable of late, particularly as outside interest in the field has so markedly increased, and even more so in the UAE, where it is possible to imagine more complex exchanges among artists of Arab, Iranian, African and South Asian origin. Some, such as Christine Tohme, prefer to speak of contemporary art itself as the territory, the terrain, in which one lives and works. Others prefer to map out the art scene as a constellation of cities rather than nation states, or as a dense tissue in which many different cultural nodes are lodged.

But the standard line on arts projects in the Gulf – repeated in countless stories that have been published and broadcast in the last five years – is that culture is being imported from elsewhere or starting from scratch. Always, these stories assert that a hundred years ago, the cities of the Gulf were mere villages, sleepy hamlets or quiet ports. Always, the implication is that these are blank slates, drained of a history and devoid of a past, on which fantasies of a dreamtime future are being projected. But this particular narrative is as much an artificial construction as any urban skyline.
The UAE does not have the tumultuous history of Beirut, Cairo, Tehran, Mumbai, Lahore or Dhaka – but it does have a history, and with it material and experience, aesthetic sensibilities, architectural typologies and myriad frictions of a political, social, and economic nature. In other words, it has an assortment of creative sparks. It also functions as a site of intersecting trade routes, and in terms of contemporary art, as a gathering point for dramatically divergent points of view. True, several enormous art projects are slowly coming into being in the Gulf – new museums and cultural authorities being established in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Doha, for example – but too often the conversation concentrates on what will be instead of what is and what has been.

"These cities are new," says Shehab Hamad, who was born and raised in Dubai. "So the blank slate idea captures a certain truth. Dubai and the Gulf have been a blank slate. It's time to start wearing that term as a badge of honour. But Dubai's role in all of this is what it has always been. A trading port. A hub. An exchange. The explosion of commercial art spaces couldn't have happened anywhere else in the region. But Dubai couldn't have happened without the less-commercial groundwork that has been put in place in Tehran, Beirut and Cairo, or in the absence of Doha's and Abu Dhabi's massive macro-cultural strategies, or, more fundamentally, had the credit and oil-price boom not happened. Dubai is a participative city. It belongs at any given time to those actively engaged with it."

A question frequently aired – most prominently in a discussion at this year's Global Arts Forum, Art Dubai's beachside, tent-bound think tank – is the relationship between the Gulf's ambitious new arts initiatives and the region's existing network of alternative

infrastructures. Are the new mega-projects drawing on the expertise already present elsewhere in the region? And are they learning from the pioneering work already done by smaller organisations rooted in the Middle East? These are important, open-ended questions whose answers will give shape to the museums soon to rise on Saadiyat Island. But here it is instructive to turn to the biennial experience in Sharjah, which has brilliantly incorporated the vitality of the region and planted it deeply on Gulf shores – and in the process, in its current incarnation, finally come into its own.

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“More than 80 per cent of the works were created for the exhibition. That’s why you see works here that you’ve never seen before.” Isabel Carlos, the Portuguese curator responsible for *Provisions for the Future*, the main component of Sharjah Biennial 9, is speaking to journalists on the first floor of the Sharjah Art Museum. Today is the day of the press preview. Carlos assumes her audience is international, and populated by some of those sad weathered souls who drag themselves around the world attending a barrage of different biennials only to end up seeing the same art everywhere.

Funding the production of a remarkably high number of new commissions has become the Sharjah Biennial’s key point of distinction in an over-crowded and ever-expanding field of far-flung global art events.

Before the Christie’s auctions of modern and contemporary Arab and Iranian art in Emirates Towers, before the creation of Art Dubai, before the announcements about the Louvre and the Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi, Sharjah was the undisputed champion of culture in the UAE. When *Bidoun* did its Emirates Now issue in 2005, Sharjah had six museums where the rest had one or none. The ruler of Sharjah, Dr Sheikh Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, is renowned for his commitment to the arts, and he is said to be a playwright, too. The artist Hassan Sharif, widely known as the godfather of the Emirati art scene and the homespun hero of performance art, founded the Emirates Fine Art Society in Sharjah in 1980. The Sharjah Biennial was established in 1993.

The Sharjah Art Museum opened in 1995, and it is now adjoined by the Sharjah Contemporary Arab Art Museum (together they have terribly cute acronyms: SAM and SCAAM). In 1998, Unesco named Sharjah the cultural capital of the Arab world.
Four years after that, however, Dr Sheikh Sultan’s daughter, Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, returned home from art school in London and sharply criticised the traditional orientation of the Sharjah Biennial. As the story goes, her father told her to do something about it, and so she took over as the director of the event. The sixth edition, organised by Sheikha Hoor and the British curator Peter Lewis in 2003, was dramatically different from the previous five. With 117 artists from all over the world, including Christo and William Kentridge (who won the biennial’s top prize), it was notably more critical and cutting-edge. With serious organisational glitches and eleventh-hour censorship of political and sexual material, Sharjah 6 was far from perfect. But it marked the opening of a door that has not been closed since.

Jack Persekian, a Palestinian curator of Armenian descent whose roots in Jerusalem reach back for centuries and who founded the Anadiel Gallery and the Mamal Foundation for Contemporary Art, joined the Sharjah Biennial for its seventh edition, in 2005, after an earlier curatorial team was dismissed. He had only six months to prepare. He brought Tirdad Zolghadr and the artist Ken Lum on board and together they curated a remarkably tidy biennial, ordered around the theme of *Belonging*.

The exhibition opened in the Sharjah Expo Center, a structure the size of an aeroplane hanger, with Emily Jacir’s poignant sculpture of a circular baggage claims conveyor belt, and closed at the end of a ramp-like corridor in the Sharjah Art Museum with Zoe Leonard’s equally evocative installation of 42 vintage suitcases arranged in a long line like lost luggage. Those two works enclosed the show in a kind of echo chamber that allowed a succession of graceful, poetic works to resonate. Accompanied by a tough-minded symposium organised by Zolghadr, for which some of the more probing thinkers in the art world came together to interrogate the format of the boilerplate biennial, Sharjah 7 was the epitome of a well-made exhibition. For that edition, the biennial also commissioned no less than 20 new works, in many cases inviting local, regional and international artists to come and spend time in Sharjah to research and produce their projects. At the time, the biennial seemed on the brink of transforming itself into a laboratory or think tank for artistic and intellectual inquiry, offering artists the two things they crave most: funding and time.

To a certain extent, Sharjah 8 continued in this direction and commissioned an even higher number of new works. It also made good on a promise left unfulfilled by the previous edition, installing numerous projects in public spaces in and around the city. But at the same time, it suffered from serious curatorial strain. With Persekian upgraded to artistic director, a team of curators awkwardly jammed 79 artists and artists’ collectives into an event entitled *Still Life: Art, Ecology and the Politics of Change*. It was informally dubbed the “green” biennial, but not ironically enough. The event gave rise to several specifically memorable works, including the collective e-Xplo’s sound installation *I Love to You: Workers’ Voices in the UAE*, which consisted of field recordings that sensitively documented the precarious predicament of migrant workers in the region. But in general, the biennial was messy and overburdened by a theme too contradictory to contain.

After Sharjah 8, Persekian announced a major change in tack for Sharjah 9. Instead of the usual curatorial process – devising a theme, creating a wish-list of artists sensitive to the theme and then selecting existing works or soliciting new works addressing the theme – the biennial would put out an open invitation for artists and non-artists alike to propose ideas for new projects unfettered by any theme. At the time, Persekian said, in effect, that the biennial had already established itself as a platform for contemporary art in the Arab world (so it no longer needed a geographical focus), and that after two editions in Sharjah, along with countless other curatorial endeavours, he had also completely exhausted his contacts (and was running the risk of putting on

a biennial that recycled the same names). It was time for something new, and time to cast a wider net, and so the Sharjah Biennial's production programme was born.

Some observers thought the idea was a disaster, and that it would lead to a populist, mediocre biennial chock-a-block with boring Sunday painters. Others thought it a revolutionary shakedown of the biennial format that would produce an unprecedented, radically democratic platform for contemporary art. Most assumed that it was in any case a curatorial experiment that would be conducted without curators in the conventional sense. In early 2008, the biennial issued the open call and staggered four deadlines throughout the year.

Back at the press conference for the preview, where virtually no one asks any questions after the curators have their say, Persekian admits that the production programme was a harrowingly bumpy ride. "At a certain point, we had to stop it because we realised the production programme needs an entire infrastructure of its own. We became totally overwhelmed. So now we will have a series of internal discussions to see if the production programme can be set up to run independently. This is not a work with a beginning or an end. It is a work that needs to be fine-tuned. Mechanisms and systems need to be put in place to support it."

From a pool of about 500 submissions, the biennial selected 30, and then added on to build the exhibition and a performance programme from there. *Provisions for the Future*, curated by Carlos, features the work of some 60 artists based in nearly as many cities, from Boston to Bangalore, Caracas to Cairo, Düsseldorf to Dubai. Past of the Coming Days, curated by Tarek Abou el Fetou, which ran March 16-25, included nearly 30 equally international performances, film and video screenings, lectures, sound experiments and an elaborate courtyard luncheon doubling as a live installation. This time around, the biennial ditched the idea of locating itself only in the Sharjah Expo Center and the Sharjah Art Museum and instead transformed the arts and heritage areas – and the old Sharjah port between them – into a kind of living, breathing exhibition space, such that the biennial is now entirely fluid with the urban fabric of the city itself. One project, by Maider López, consists of a football field and a fountain for potable water, both of which are being used by area residents; another, by a group of Mumbai-based artists and thinkers known as CAMP, created a nightly radio broadcast from the Sharjah port. Combined with a book on dhow trade between India, the UAE and the semi-state entities that currently constitute Somalia, it was the smartest, and sweetest, contemporary art project I've encountered in years. It also deservedly won the biennial's grand prize. All things considered, this is both the strongest and the most intimate edition of the Sharjah Biennial to date.

"We are taking the biennial beyond being an event," says Persekian. "It's not only an exhibition but a place, an organisation, an entity that is part and parcel of the development of society. We are not really concerned with the product. We are concerned with the process. This is about making art. It's not about the showcase.
"The beauty of the production programme is that we produce the works but we do not own them. They belong to the artists. The whole point of supporting artists is not to take the works back from them." And therein lies the model – the alternative infrastructure for the production and presentation of new work – that the Sharjah Biennial is offering for anyone who might find it instructive. It hasn't been bought or borrowed from somewhere else but developed in the UAE's own backyard. The biennial has firmly established itself as a laboratory, and it has also positioned itself as an incubator, a place where contemporary art practice can be tested out and developed and, most critically, supported without market pressure. In 2005, it looked as though Sharjah's laboratory would be located in a vacuum. This year, it seems more truly knitted into the city and tied to its context. It also seems like a valuable platform for an art scene that could use an element of consistency in the here and now. If the production programme becomes an independent entity, local practitioners stand to benefit as much, and perhaps even more so, than their counterparts elsewhere in the world. When asked about the Emirati art scene in relation to other cities in the region, during a talk with journalists on the UAE's Venice pavilion, curator Tirdad Zolghadr said: "What's different here is that there is very little infrastructure. Artists need production grants. They need schools. They need places to hang out." The Sharjah Biennial, if it becomes the place, entity and organisation that Jack Persekian wants it to be, may actually meet those needs.

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Like Lamya Gargash's photographic work, the real charm of Sharjah 9 lies in its tender treatment of time and place. It is no accident that the titles of both the exhibition and the performance programme engage more than ever before with the tactile realities of living and working in Sharjah now. Like the UAE's young generation of cultural figures, the biennial looks to the past for the sake of the future rather than bulldozing ahead from the false premise of a blank slate.

The curator Tarek Abou el Fetouh's programme for Past of the Coming Days*, for example, made excellent use of the art spaces that have been operating in Sharjah for years and even decades. "When I came here for the first time to start my research," he says, "I walked around the arts area and I was super impressed by the number of organisations. There are 20 theatre groups in the Emirates, and most of them are in Sharjah. There are many arts and cultural practices that already exist here. The programme wouldn't have happened without using as a starting point the cultural landscape that already exists here."*

Adding to that is the biennial's residency programme, which this year hosted the sound artist Tarek Atoui. Back in 2005, the Danish artist Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen was one of Sharjah's first artists in residence. "I lived in the city's downtown area," he says, "and when I walked around in the evenings, I noticed how nearly everyone in the streets was young South Asian men. I

started imagining towns in India where only women, children and elderly people lived." At the time, Larsen made a series of portraits on Super 8 and 16-millimetre film. Those works anticipated a beautiful two-screen, 24-minute video work, entitled Rendezvous, which is now on view on the ground floor of the Serkal House in the arts area across from the Sharjah Art Museum.

After the residency, Larsen embarked on a long-term project that involves recording video footage of immigrant workers he meets in the UAE, and travelling to their homes, primarily in the Indian state of Kerala, to record video footage of their wives, mothers and children. For the presentation of the work, the two screens are installed opposite own another, like video portraits or hi-tech letters that symbolically reunite the families while simultaneously making the distance that separates them palpable.
Next door to Larsen's work, the Palestinian artist Sharif Waked is showing one of the biennial's most hypnotic and strangely seductive works. Upending the phenomena of suicide bombers making video testimonies and militant groups producing propagandistic video games, the artist films a young man in fatigues, his elbows propped up on a desk with a Kalashnikov before him and a generic Hamas-like flag in the background. When he begins to speak, however, it becomes clear that he's not reading a statement in support of violence or a political cause but rather the stories of the Thousand and One Nights. Rather than hastening his own death, he is, like Shahrazhad, forestalling it, using the art of storytelling to defy time. As the camera zooms in on his face, the young man recites Shahrazhad's instructions to her sister Dunyazhad: "Then you must say: 'Tell me, my sister, some tale of marvel to beguile the night.' Then I will tell you a tale, which, if God wills, shall be the means of our deliverance." The title of the work, appropriately enough for this and the much wider discussion on the art scene in the UAE, is To Be Continued.

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie is a staff writer at The Review.

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