

NOVEMBER

AFAC PRESENTS PUBLIC ART COMMISSION

On 29 November the Arab Fund for Art and Culture unveiled five public art commissions at the Jalla Culture Centre for Children and Shindagha Heritage Village in Dubai. The initiative, which was spearheaded by The Jam Jar and Grey Noise's Hetal Pawani, explored the theme of invisibility through Vikram Divecha's Boulder Plot, Vartan Avakian's Collapsing Clouds Of Sand And Dust, Monira Al-Qadiri's Alien Technology Stand Here by Shaikha Al-Mazroui and Deer in The Headlights by Doa Ay. Corvus speaks with curator Amanda Abi Khalil about the ways in which these projects "bug out hidden foundations and bring focus to forgotten narratives".

HOW DID THE IDEA OF A PUBLIC ART COMMISSION COME ABOUT?

It coincided with the emergence of a form of public policy regarding public art in the Gulf, led by governments and private initiatives. Public art has to be relevant to the residents and users of the area where the works will be installed, addressing a non-specialised audience rather than the art world per se. Having said that, public art's aesthetics are inherently part of the curatorial discourse of Contemporary art.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACHIEVE IN PLACING ARTWORKS IN PUBLIC AREAS IN THE UAE?

When we talk about public art, we tend to include any form of art that is "outside the museum walls, which is very problematic. Art in public space has to go way beyond the decorative or beautification aspect. It has to be site-specific or at least contextual. Art projects for public spaces can foster socio-spatial inclusion. Many relevant public art projects remain invisible to the art world, but have a greater impact on local communities. The Sharjah Art Foundation has been leading exemplary public art projects for a while; it commissioned projects that focused on place-making in fostering interaction in public spaces.

HOW WERE THE IDEAS CONCEIVED, DEVELOPED AND EXECUTED?

We didn't want to commission artists to work on the commonly known aspects of Dubai, its architecture, scale or style of an excessive metropolis where almost nothing overreaches. We tried to go beyond these associations. Each artist challenged invisibility in a different way, concealing the visible and revealing the invisible within the cultural, historical and architectural context of Dubai.

WHAT INFORMED THE SELECTION OF THE PARTICIPATING ARTISTS?

I wanted to question some common aspects of public art, therefore I chose to work with artists who were familiar with working in public

Monira Al-Qadiri, Photography by
Ka-Monica Nguyen



spaces and others whose practice I felt was interesting to me. Monira Al-Qadiri had shared her desire of working on a project through a common dichotic colour. Doa Ay had never been in the context. I saw a very interesting research in Vartan Avakian's Short History Of Tall Men for the Absaji Prize. Shaikha Al-Mazroui picked because I was looking for an artist whose practice was formally oriented and who would react differently to the context. The theme she was familiar with. Lastly, I couldn't see a public art project in Dubai without Vikram Divecha's sculptural work, which is a key process of making of cities.

WHY THE SHINDAGHA AREA?

It's a beautiful area with a cornice by the water that is well used in its public life. It is a place that residents and tourists frequent for cafés, cultural heritage attractions or simply to breathe some fresh

ARE THE INSTALLATIONS PERMANENT?

The sculptures and interventions will remain in their locations until the end of March. AFAC is collaborating with several organisations in Dubai to make some of them semi-permanent. The process of getting permissions was very challenging; we didn't want to compromise the concepts of the works at any stage. It will take time to get the promoters and contractors on the potentials of public art in the area. Aesthetics, therefore this project can be considered as a pilot project in this sense. We received final confirmations on the installation a month before the unveiling! Now that the works are unveiled, they will acquire new life and status. The people who see them will (or will not) become the mediators of these common formal gestures.



Clockwise from top left: Vikram Divecha work, Doa Ay's sculpture, Shaikha Al-Mazroui's work, Vartan Avakian's work, Monira Al-Qadiri's work, Doa Ay's work, Vikram Divecha's work.

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