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The burj and the bridges

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<http://tns.thenews.com.pk/burj-bridges/#.XKIA1OszZXg>



In most part of Dubai, the common view is of Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world. The other frequent site is that of bridges and flyovers: structures that link separate terrains of the city. In its essence, Dubai is the biggest bridge in the world where nations, countries and communities get together. These are people who are unable to meet others from another city, a neighbouring country, sometimes an enemy state.

When two areas are connected through a bridge or a road, the idea of hierarchy disappears. Likewise, at Art Dubai, a major curator communicates with a young critic, a seasoned collector interacts with a new practitioner, a reputed gallery contracts a recent graduate; conversations which take place elsewhere too, but Art Dubai is unique in providing extraordinary opportunities — of going beyond one's national, territorial, formal or commercial limitations. Thus, I could meet Indian critics, exchange notes with a writer from Argentina, know the art scene of Egypt through a journalist based in Cairo and do much else.

This year, the 13th edition of Art Dubai, held from March 20-23, 2019 with Pablo del Val as the Artistic Director, featured "59 galleries from 34 countries spread across its two gallery halls". An unusual thing was the introduction of special sections, like 'Residents', and 'Bawwaba'. The former presented works of 12 artists from Latin America, who "were invited to UAE for a 4-8-week residency", and the latter consists of "ten solo representations" by separate galleries. Bawwaba held a special significance for Pakistani art, since three leading artists were exhibiting at different booths: Hamra Abbas at Canvas Gallery, Adeela Suleman at Aicon Gallery and Shezad Dawood at Jhaveri Contemporary.

The meticulously manufactured pieces of Abbas reconstructed the past for the present. Drawing references from pietra dura on the historic buildings of Lahore, Abbas reinterprets the concept of heaven and its rivers, and the garden of paradise, in the technique of inlay using marble and lapis lazuli. In her work, Abbas flips the tradition, crosses its limits, and extends its meanings by creating a vocabulary that depends heavily on heritage and is yet contemporary in nature. Streams of waterfalls were transformed from traditional zigzag patterns to indicate a cushion, a bowtie, a paper bag, a piece of drapery; illustrating how a familiar icon can suggest something different. The remarkable blend of blue, yellow, green, and other colours signify certain sections of paradise, particularly in her floor piece 'Gardens of Paradise I'.

The shift between the known and new, usual and strange, was viewed in the art of Suleman too. Her large-scale screens, weaved with metallic dead birds both in gold and silver hues, reflected the current wave of terrorism and torment. The small birds represent the defenceless targets of militancy. Her work, executed in the language of popular offered a new understanding of the world around us. In addition, she displayed meat cleavers, covered with beautifully painted scenes of a calm landscape, suggesting a contradiction that lies in the core of Pakistani society. A similar view was visible in her house-shaped paintings: interiors of demolished buildings, with glimpses of ideal sceneries behind the gaps in broken walls.

In a sense, these two artists had something to share: the urge to convert familiar — historic or popular — imagery into an idiom of 'now'.

Similar concerns were observed in the acrylic & mixed media paintings of Shezad Dawood. One could spot aesthetics of Abstract Expressionism, traces of 1960s' popular culture (embedded in domestic environment, for example the floor treatments, chips, in upper middle class houses), and the residue of American influences in his highly tactile and 'painterly' surfaces.

Artists, especially from the Middle East and South Asia, investigated the format of carpet and treated it as a stimulus to examine the complexity — rather roughness of the world. Picking carpet as the main source to denote the turbulent relationship between an exclusive past and a shared present (or vice versa?), Ramazan Can ('I am a Stranger of This Place', at Anna Laudel), and Anahita Razmi ('Reign Coat #1' at Carbon 12) invoked the questions of identity through tradition. Like Sudarshan Shetty, who worked with the past to make it a post to relay a message for the present. In his sculpture at Leila Heller Gallery, a carpet with intricate details, seemingly warped but actually constructed in a hard recycled Teak wood, comments upon the place and pressure of the past in a society. This idea was revisited in his other works, a hybrid between Chinese porcelain pots and wooden portions, at Krinzinger Gallery.

Tradition was tackled in a number of ways at Art Dubai 2019, and not just the tradition of far off lands with distant and deep histories, but the tradition of the new, what in other words can be called the convention of abstract. Both Rasheed Araeen and Muhammad Ali Talpur explored the system of geometry, but each for different reasons and results, at the Grosvenor Gallery. In Araeen's acrylics on wood, one was able to enjoy the variation on simple line, shapes and colours. Talpur in his black and white large paintings opted for a visual experience which disorients the viewers while in front of them. Somehow, corresponding to Waqas Khan's work on paper at Krinzinger Gallery, in which the artist invited a pictorial sojourn (not devoid of pleasure) amid the division of dots and dashes to convey something deeper within ourselves.

Anish Kapoor's 'Split' at Galleria Continua, a disk that mirrors a person and slices the image into two, offered a similar sensibility and sensation. The work can be described as 'speaking' to audience, since it created a bond among the viewer and the viewed object. In Shilpa Gupta's mixed media '24:00:01' (Galleria Continua) one feels the vastness of universe, which is not different from the idea of infinity we associate with time. The work "comprises of over one thousand needles depicting time, both real and imaginary. On close inspection it seems as if needles have been wilfully discarded or appended".

The difference between the actual and virtual, physical and illusion was evident in the works of Shaikha Al Mazrou as well. In her metallic sculptures at Lawrie Shabibi, division of colours and dents in these elementary geometric shapes produced impact of cubes placed on top of each other, or circular shapes overlapped.

In a sense, art is about illusion or is an illusion; or is a suspended bridge between fact and fantasy. In her mixed media on paper ('Sialkot to Jammu', 'Kartarpur Footbridge', and 'Jabel Ali to Gwadar') at Aicon Contemporary, Saba Qizilbash has constructed proposals for bridges to join different parts of South Asia and the Middle East. Through these, Qizilbash imagines scenarios in which connections can be established beyond the restraints of geography — as happening now through roads, flyovers, bridges, and international art events like Art Dubai 2019, which bring together strangers, break barriers, and soften boundaries; and link the art world.

The venue for this international venture, Art Dubai, being a small Gulf state, reminds one of Tolstoy: "Look carefully at your village and you'll be universal".