

# frieze

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## Secrets and Codes

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# Sharjah Biennial 9

Anthropological in its approach, the exhibition essentially re-examines the who's who of the 'Pictures' lineage. The earliest works in the exhibition are examples of Bloom's 'advertisements' of windows for modernist homes, 'Crittall Metal Windows' (1972), which the curator, Douglas Ecklund, writes were a manifestation of Bloom's interest in producing an artwork 'so certain that it would disappear'. While maybe not the imperative at the time, the exhibition reveals that indeed this phenomenon has happened to a number of the key works, such as Longo's 'Men in the Cities' (1979-82) and Sherman's 'Untitled Film Stills', which are now so familiar that they have become almost invisible as art works and symbols of our visual culture.

Although framed as an historical survey and anthropological in its approach, the exhibition is more of a manifestation of current curatorial interests, mining the past in search of overlooked or undiscovered 'truths'. Whereas artists sought to level the horror, banality or exoticism of pictures, the show levels out the historical hierarchies between works, giving ephemera as well as greater and lesser-known pieces equal prominence. While at the time this generation was prone to individualism, now their diversity has accumulated into the representation of a moment; where Crimp directly related 'Pictures' to a new kind of production, now it's not the art, but the artists and their negotiation with society that is under consideration. As a result there is an openness and conviviality to the show that indicates how this generation were precursors to the 'what if?' style of Relational Aesthetics in the 1990s, and the research-oriented practices of today. What it sacrifices is evidence of the artists' passionate outspokenness, which perhaps is the legacy that we're most needing to inject back into our culture now.

Kate Fowle



Louise Lawler  
*Pollock and Tureen*  
1984  
C-type print  
71x99 cm



Lara Favaretto  
*Amamiya and Sasayama;*  
*Bobby and Laura;*  
*Harold and Maude; Kelly*  
*and Griff; Maria and*  
*Felix; Shirley and Cyril;*  
*Stephanie and Sabrina*  
2009  
Mixed media  
Installation view

## Various venues, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

One of the trickier things about evaluating biennials is that there is no consensus on the function they should fulfil, the type of experience they should offer, or the audience they should serve. For some biennials, the curators seek to put international contemporary art in dialogue with a specific (often beleaguered) local social context; in others, the location serves as the backdrop for a clamour of imported perspectives and agendas. In 2007, the Sharjah Biennial took an ecological theme, one that is particularly pertinent to a country that is currently pouring resources pell-mell into construction with little regard for the long-term environmental effects. This year, however, artistic director Jack Persekian's key achievement was not initiating a topical debate, but instead transforming the Biennial's agenda by directing his budget towards commissioning new work, in large part through an open submission process. Commendably over half of the included artists were women. Concurrent to the exhibition, talks and performance programmes shared equal billing, aiming to foster a climate of productivity and exchange in what is the region's most significant professional cultural hub.

As a result, the Biennial as a whole felt, at times, a little hard to pin down. While curator Isabel Carlos' title for her exhibition, 'Provisions for the Future', did chime with that of Tarek Abu El Fetouh's performance and film programme, 'Past of the Coming Days', the temporal thematic affinity did not develop much further. If indeed there was a theme, it might be said to be Sharjah itself; many works, such as Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly's film *Smile You're in Sharjah* (2009), were flat-footedly illustrative of the city, or else, like Eugenio Dittborn's 'Air Mail Paintings'

(1984-ongoing), allusive of geographical drift and dislocation - reflecting the experiences of much of Sharjah's predominantly immigrant population.

The performance and film programme shared this latter approach; El Fetouh writes (in a bravura display of evasiveness) that "'Past of the Coming Days'" is a programme that positions itself as an interface between the ideologies, conditions and various cultural frameworks that constitute the distinct arts and culture landscape of Sharjah'. His selected films and performances sat in relation to Sharjah, even if they refrained from addressing it directly. Works such as CAMP's research-based dockside project *Wharfage* (2009) or Rimini Protokol's extraordinary *Call Cutta in a Box* (2009) - a one-on-one telephone conversation with a worker in an Indian call centre, who could control devices in the hotel room in which the participant sat - both drew attention to the complicated lines of manipulation that spider out from, and into, the city.

In case any visitors might have attributed the mild critical seasoning of such work to the fact that the ruler of Sharjah is also the father of the Biennial's director, a work by Turkish artist Hailil Altindere at the entrance to the show featured the Sheikh's portrait only partially concealing a wall-mounted safe. Such political provocation, however, is so obvious as to be toothless; the reality of life in the United Arab Emirates is far more complex and intriguing than stereotypes suggest.

The most successful works in the Biennial were in fact the most elusive; they refused to defend their contextual relevance, but →

# Glenn Brown

nevertheless seemed appropriate in ways that were hard to identify. Lara Favaretto installed uneven pairs of coloured car-wash rollers along the wall of a courtyard; as they intermittently whirled, centrifugal force made their nylon strands touch, then flop apart again as they slowed. Even without the work's title (*Amamiya and Sasayama; Bobby and Laura; Harold and Maude; Kelly and Griff; Maria and Felix; Shirley and Cyril; Stephanie and Sabrina*, 2009) it made me think of couples. Beyond that, the work was like a hallucination in a city in which the brand new sits alongside, and tentatively touches, the decrepit.

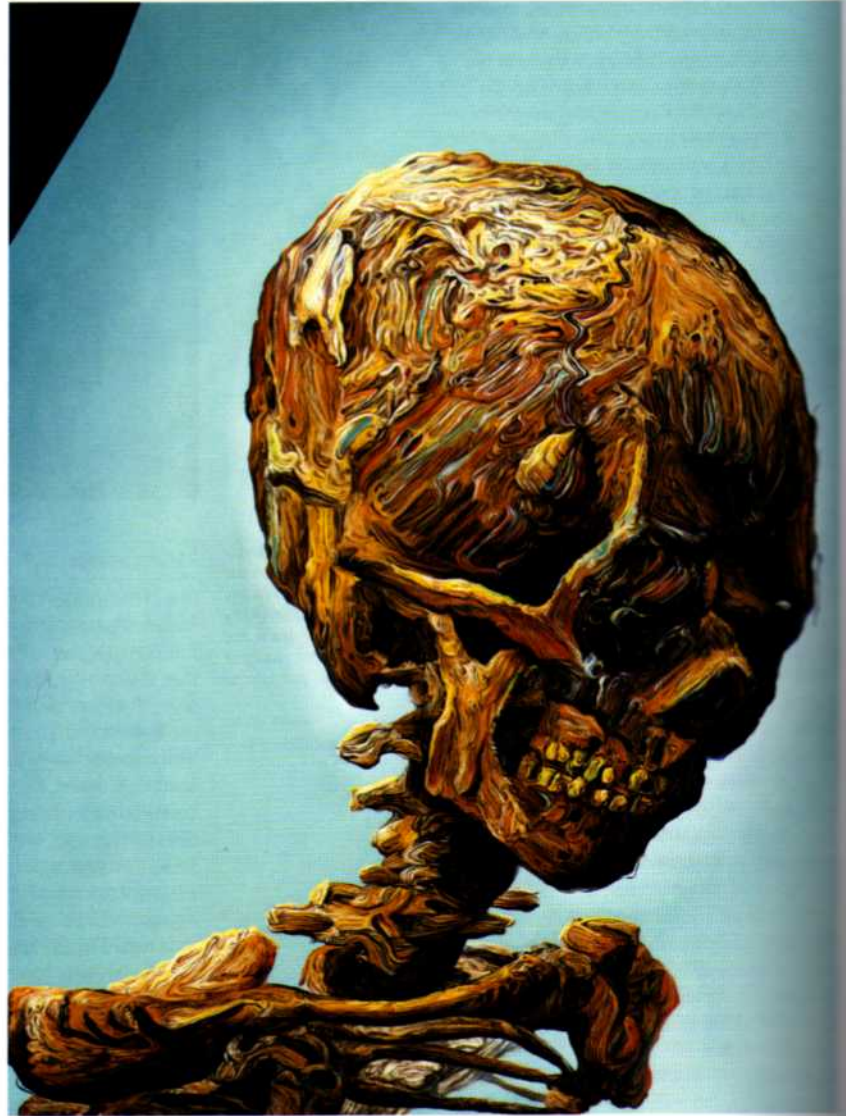
While it was nowhere acknowledged as a curatorial concern, some of the best works made subtle use of sound, or its implied absence. Around another courtyard, Brazilian artist Valeska Soares collaborated with O Grivo on (*Shushhhhhh.....*) *prelude* (2009), a ripple of recorded shushes from hidden speakers that initiated hesitant silences in gathering crowds, and disturbed the peace when one was alone. Lili Djourie's clay fragments and iron-wire wall drawings are strange and timeless, and here also seemed to call for quiet. A significant retrospective display by the artist Robert MacPherson used Australian slang in text works, paintings and sculptures that were variously humorous, ebullient and austere tight-lipped. Two outstanding installations by Sheela Gowda employed sound: in *Some Place* (2005) voices whisper from the ends of a network of pipes; in *Drip Field* (2009) the sound of a dripping hose is transmitted into the museum from a picturesque flooded roadway beneath the window. Accompanied by a Johann Sebastian Bach cello prelude, Haris Epaminonda's bewitching projection *Zebra* (2006) was worth the seven hour plane trip alone.

There were a few obvious duds by artists whose work was so out of step with the rest that it undermined one's faith in the cohesiveness of the whole enterprise. However, as Persekián stated, the Biennial prioritized process over product. In a country that seems to be interested only in the short-term future and the immediate past, a slower, more long-sighted approach is perhaps not just prudent but vitally necessary.

Jonathan Griffin



Haris Epaminonda  
*Zebra*  
(detail)  
2006  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable



Glenn Brown  
*Suffer Well*  
2007  
Oil on panel  
157x120 cm

Tate Liverpool, UK

Mark Twain once suggested that we ought to start out dead and live our lives in the fore-knowledge of extinction. If anyone's art was born dead, managed to die still further, and came to self-conscious and enhanced life later, it is Glenn Brown's. Back in the early 1990s, as we're reminded by this 60-work retrospective's almost throwaway anteroom devoted to his earliest canvases, the British painter's art was a virtuosic, frigid product of debates about painting's demise. Those screen-like *trompe l'oeil* versions of Frank Auerbach's painterly valleys and Karel Appel's tube-fresh impasto blurs were strutting demonstration pieces: the eschatological combustions of a young man, not quite as smart as he imagines, apparently thrilled both by his own prodigious skill and to be witnessing, at first hand, the end times.

He did it, he did it again, he did it too long. Want to see the brick wall? Here's Brown, in 1999, with *Oscillate Wildly* (After 'Autumnal Cannibalism' 1936 by Salvador Dalí), a stretched-on-the-horizontal, black and white redraft of the Catalan's canvas that reminds us, again, that Brown was painting in the age of reproductions, revelling in (and asserting fragile ownership through) flaws of transmission. It is knowing self-cannibalism at best, millennial atavism's equivalent of the dry heaves. The associable relativism Brown was rehearsing with his indie-music-touchstone titles and blow-ups of sci-fi book covers, meanwhile, and conflation of their epic mode with that of artists such as John Martin, also feels faintly rote by this stage, even as the paintings (a quartet of which flashily opens the show) retain an irreducible dorky grandeur. End of act one, with the stone closing over the cave.

Presumably around the century's turn, however, Brown began composing at one remove, fiddling creatively with his sources in