

Arab Spring inspires regional artists

By Sylvia Smith

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Long before the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, an obscure art exhibition in the United Arab Emirates was already exploring themes of corruption and insurrection - works that have found new relevance amid the Arab political turmoil.

Walking around the various sites that make up the Sharjah Biennial, the classic line from the *The Third Man* springs to mind.

Orson Welles comments that 30 years of warfare, terror and bloodshed in medieval Italy produced the Renaissance; and 500 years of peace, democracy and brotherly love in Switzerland produced the cuckoo clock.

Although not all the works on display in the art-savvy emirate consciously embroil themselves with the social, military and political turmoil currently besetting the Arab world, those that do touch a raw nerve and are more relevant to the international, intellectual crowd who now attend the Sharjah Biennial.

'Shoots of hope'

Imran Qureshi's bloody Blessings Upon the Land of My Love - originally conceived as a result of slaughters in his homeland Pakistan - became more intense as the news of insurrection and overthrow of Arab tyrants gathered pace.

"I used more red paint," he explains. "And the scene of bloodshed grew more poignant."

It takes time to notice the intricate foliage almost lost among the splashes of crimson paint, which Qureshi refers to as shoots of hope.

Immediately outside the main museum a large missile projects provocatively into the sky.

According to Joanna Hadji Thomas, who created Lebanese Rocket Society: Elements for a Monument with her partner, Khalil Joreige, the first instinct is to interpret the piece as a weapon.

"Given the current situation people immediately connect it with war," she explains.

"It is ambiguous, but this is part of a series of works based on purely scientific experiments into space trajectory conducted by the Lebanese Rocket Society in the 1960s."

While many of the works benefit from being construed in light of current revolutions, it is uncanny that last year's call for entries specifically referred to the production of art as a subversive act and specified key words such as insurrection, corruption and disclosure.

'Compelling urgency'

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The scene of bloodshed grew more poignant

Imran Qureshi, Artist

Even more prescient was the funding of works by the Sharjah Art Foundation, which runs the Biennial, such as *Manual for Treason*, a box set of booklets - suggesting that the Biennial is far closer to the Arab street than the high-profile, hugely expensive museum projects for which the Gulf has been famed.

There was a surprising lack of politicised theatre at the biennial, the usual venue for comment.

But in the Calligraphy Museum, there is a genuinely chilling experimental video work.

Face Scripting: What did the Building See? traces the 2010 killing of a Hamas official in neighbouring Dubai to Mossad.

Based on CCTV footage released by the Dubai police which was viewed across the globe, the piece examines the use of algorithmic technology to identify individuals from the blankness of crowds.

YouTube played a part in Moroccan Zakaria Ramhani's layered portrait of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Showing at the art fair in neighbouring Dubai, which coincided with the opening days of the Sharjah Biennial, the piece portrays the iconic Mubarak poster being torn down by a YouTube protester, who was in turn being ripped to shreds.

"It shows that one revolutionary is removed by the next who doesn't agree with his ideas," Ramhani explains.

"It can also be a symbol of my work which eventually will be destroyed."

Tunisian artists produced fun as well as serious comment on the Jasmine Revolution.

The-revolution-virus installation by Tunisian artists **Rym Karoui** had a political dimension, but

avoided being didactic and raised a smile with its bright red, plastic bugs.

It may not always be true that revolutions produce the best art, but in this case the Sharjah Biennial has metamorphosed into a global event.

The current Arab revolutions have given the work of the artists on show, who no longer seem to look to the West for inspiration, a compelling urgency.

The Sharjah Biennial runs until 16 May 2011

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