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EXHIBITION

The prints of darkness

The Xposure International Photography Festival has been shining a light on the impacts of climate change by going to the ends of the earth – and beyond

In a world where frivolous sound and video can encroach on many aspects of our lives, it's important to be reminded about the raw power of an image which can still stop people in their tracks.

Many such captivating pictures have been on show at the Xposure International Photography Festival being held at Expo Centre Sharjah which ends today – February 15. A renowned global platform for the industry, it provides a stage for

photographers and independent film-makers to showcase their work and share ideas.

The state of our planet is often explored at Xposure and this year was no different. Esther Horvath is a multiple award-winning photographer and veteran of 15 scientific voyages to the Arctic and Antarctic. She presented images from her time on the MOSAIC Expedition, one of the most important explorations of the Arctic in recent times.

The largest polar expedition in history, it involved hundreds of experts from 20 countries. The German research icebreaker vessel Polarstern set sail from Tromsø, Norway, in 2019 to spend a year drifting through the Arctic Ocean.

The purpose was to take the closest look ever at the Arctic as the epicentre of global warming and gain a better understanding of climate change.

The Hungarian-born photographer lived for three months in 24-hour darkness aboard the Polarstern. And if the brutal environment wasn't challenging enough, imagine being a photographer missing the most important component you require.

"Light – what we actually need for photography – does not even exist here," she declares. "During the polar nights, the only light we had came from our ship and the headlamps of the participants, and on a clear day from the moonlight. I was fascinated by this darkness: it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever experienced."

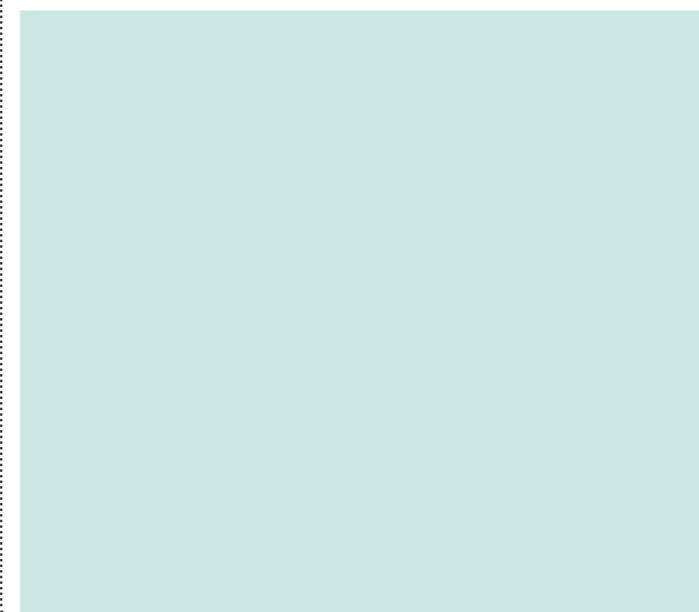
Horvath was commissioned to take pictures of the Polarstern head on: "I didn't realise this would be one of the most challenging pictures to take, because I couldn't even get there!"

Eventually, the sea ice froze over and, using her tripods to test whether the ice was solid enough to walk on, she managed to get far enough away to capture the shot of the vessel.

As much as her photography is about capturing the moment and the beauty of the Arctic, she feels it's also vital for her work to highlight the trip's scientific significance. "This is why this expedition was so important, to understand the processes of the Arctic Ocean and to be able to have better data for future climate prognoses," she says.



LIGHT - WHAT WE NEED FOR PHOTOGRAPHY - DOES NOT EVEN EXIST HERE



ESTHER HORVATH THAT IS APOLLO 14, ANDY SAUNDERS

Out of this world Esther Horvath's photograph of the Polarstern; Conservation Summit at Xposure; Andy Saunders' digitally restored image from the Apollo moon programme

The exhibitions at Xposure are not limited to images shot in this world alone.

British author and science writer Andy Saunders is also one of the world's foremost experts of Nasa digital restoration.

His digital enhancement techniques of the original Nasa Apollo moon mission images reveal detail that was previously not visible. At Xposure, he presents an exhibition of remastered images from the Apollo moon programme that were shot more than half a century ago. Saunders says he wants "people to feel like this is as close as they can get to walking on the moon themselves".

Visitors also have the opportunity to explore work from Carlton Ward Jr who uses photography to highlight the plight of the panther in his home state of Florida. Driven to extinction elsewhere in the US, it is the last surviving big cat east of the Mississippi River.

Ward Jr and his team manage a network of photography and video camera traps throughout the critical habitat of the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Their purpose is to inspire a public and political movement to conserve the region.

This is just a snapshot of the multiple exhibitions at Xposure. The event continues to build on earlier editions and attract critically acclaimed artists from across the globe.

Opening the 7th edition, Tariq Saeed Allay, director general of the festival's organising body, the Sharjah Government Media Bureau, says: "Since its inception, this festival has served as a reminder that beauty exists amid chaos, and what makes our journey sustainable is Sharjah's unwavering vision and commitment."

Parminder Bahra



ART AS A BALANCING ACT

"I'm always on a quest," declares Shaikha Al Mazrou, a Sharjah-born artist whose work is sought after across the globe.

These quests are not always solo adventures. A regular visitor to Sharjah's industrial sector, Al Mazrou works with local metal workers to create her art.

"She engages with workers who are making metal sheets for skyscrapers and she's like, 'I want you to make a sculpture,' and they're like, 'What? How are we to do this?!'," says Asmaa Al Shabibi, co-founder and director of art gallery Lawrie Shabibi, which represents Al Mazrou.

The artist likes to grapple with materials such as steel and glass, bending, tearing, slicing and sometimes exhausting each other to the point of submission. "We defeat one another in the most playful way," she says.

Last year, Al Mazrou exhibited one of her largest works to date, *Red Stack* (above), at the international art event, *Frieze Sculpture 2022*. Set in London's

Regent's Park, the work consists of giant bright red pillows nestled atop one another. They look soft and inviting but this belies the rigid folded steel from which they are created.

This gets to the heart of Al Mazrou's work: "I'm interested in the dichotomy of meaning, I imagine the metaphor of a string pulled in opposite directions, that moment of tension. It's a dialogue between the forces of repulsion and attraction: this creates two states, tension or letting loose."

Al Mazrou is yet to create an artwork for a public space in Sharjah, but says it is "fertile ground". One place that has caught the artist's eye is the Kalba Ice Factory on the eastern coast of the emirate. Back in 2015, the Sharjah Art Foundation began converting the former ice factory into a space for exhibiting art installations.

"Sharjah has played an instrumental role in shaping the art and cultural scene in the Arab world. The emirate represents a leading role as a patron of arts while preserving its own history and heritage," she says. **PB**

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BIENNIAL

THE ARAB WORLD'S CREATIVE CURATOR

A visit to an exhibition aged 22 was life-changing for Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi. Since then, the daughter of Sharjah's ruler has transformed the emirate into an international capital of the art world fusing contemporary with traditional



Valued voice Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi curates 2023's biennial

Sharjah's status as an internationally respected hub of creativity is being reinforced as works by more than 150 artists go on display at the emirate's contemporary art biennial.

Running until June 11, more than 30 major new commissions are among exhibits at multiple locations, ranging from a vegetable market to a disused power station.

The 15th edition of Sharjah Biennial marks a significant new step in the career of Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, daughter of the emirate's ruler, and regarded as one of the most significant voices in Arab art.

She is curating the event having taken the place of one of her mentors,

Okwui Enwezor, who died in the early stages of planning.

A passionate art-lover from childhood, Sheikha Hoor drew lasting inspiration from a visit as a 22-year-old, newly graduated from London's Slade School of Fine Art, to the Documenta 11 exhibition in Germany in 2002.

Enwezor, an acclaimed Nigerian-American contemporary artist, was its artistic director and says the experience was "life-changing", encouraging her to devise ways of displaying art in her own country so people did not have to travel to the West to see it.

Sheikha Hoor became director of the biennial 20 years ago and began work on turning her vision into reality.

The 30th anniversary edition is entitled *Thinking Historically in the Present*. With artists from more than 70 countries taking part, it is regarded as the Arab world's most influential art festival.

After Enwezor's death from cancer in 2019, Sheikha Hoor took over as curator, incorporating many of his ideas in preparing the event.

Taking place in 19 venues across five cities and towns in the emirate, the biennial is a strong statement about notions of power and the formation of identity.

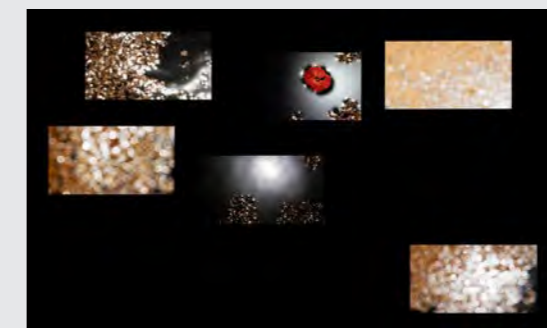
In the east coast enclave of Kalba, visitors are getting a glimpse inside the gaping inner belly of the newly refurbished Ice Factory. At its centre, a monumental sculpture evokes the makeshift structures of Jamaican fishing villages but which, without reference, feels like a portal to another dimension.

The work, *Nu Colossus*, by Nari Ward, constructed of roughly cut, long wooden panels, entices the viewer to get closer and to ask questions around issues of contemporary culture as well as lost traditions.

Sharjah Art Museum, a venue in the capital, houses a thoughtfully curated selection of works that shine a light



SHARJAH BIENNIAL IS REGARDED AS THE ARAB WORLD'S MOST INFLUENTIAL ARTS FESTIVAL



The big picture From above: *Burden of Proof* by Barbara Walker; Okwui Enwezor; Amar Kanwar's multimedia artwork *Peacock's Graveyard*

on ongoing, sometimes forgotten and painful human struggles surrounding race, migration, displacement and exploitation. Kimathi Donkor's paintings of the Brixton riots in the 1980s still feel poignant today and Robyn Kahukiwa's works summarise the Maori experience in New Zealand.

Sheikha Hoor says the wide variety of venues reflects both her "reputation for saving old buildings from demolition" and a determination to spread out the event from Sharjah City to other areas of the emirate.

"Okwui saw Sharjah Biennial's 30-year anniversary as an opportunity to reflect on the role biennials serve in the ecosystem of contemporary art, particularly the Sharjah Biennial itself and the broader Foundation that grew from it," she says.

Amar Kanwar, an Indian multimedia artist, is presenting *Peacock's Graveyard*, a seven-channel video intended to "interweave poetic fables of death and life".

He warmly praises both Sheikha Hoor and Enwezor, who was only 55 when he died. "The Sharjah Biennial is interesting and inspiring in quite a few ways," he says. "But it is also a homage to Okwui."

Colin Randall