

Art Dubai Journal

April 9, 2010

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EMERGE: WAYS OF WORLD MAKING

Laura Trelford



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Janet Bellotto and Karen Oremus accomplished a remarkable feat this summer: bringing a range of artwork by Zayed University current students, alumni and professors to Venice during the Biennale. Emerge: Ways of Worldmaking was made possible by collaborating with Sara Sist of 3D gallery, who sourced locations such as San Servolo Palazzina and Ristorante La Colomba in Piazza San Marco to ensure that a diverse audience of Venetians and Biennale visitors alike could see the work.

The result is a fresh, illuminating showcase of all that is positive about young female artists from the UAE – truly emerging talents. I asked the team behind the exhibition a few questions.

Janet Bellotto – Chair of the Art & Design Faculty, Zayed University and artist (JB)
Sara Sist – Director of 3D Gallery, Venice (SS)

Laura Trelford: Congratulations on the great achievement of bringing Emerge: Ways of Worldmaking to Venice. I am so pleased to see strong work from Zayed students sitting so comfortably with the rest of the Biennale. It is rare to see students' work here. Can you tell me a little about how the opportunity came about?

Janet Bellotto: We were in conversation in March with Safia Al Raqbani, from the ZU Office of Development, who was involved with the UAE pavilion, and requested that we produce a book of student artwork that could possibly be displayed at the biennial. With that opportunity I suggested that we could hold an exhibition in the city. There was a bit of disbelief that there would be any space available for us, but I was sure I could work with my gallery, Galleria 3D and the director Sara Sist, to realize something. By April Sara had found a couple of possibilities, and we were on our way to quickly organising this event. We were confident that we could achieve this as Venice is close to my second home, and Karen lived in Rome for many years, so our Italian skills helped a lot. Karen also involved the artist Mario Teleri Bionso who helped us throughout the trip with students and the performance the students performed in the Grand Canal.

Sara Sisi: Shortly after opening my first gallery in Venice in 2005, I organized an exhibition with Janet involving the Venetian commercial community around the Biennale Giardini. It was very successful and people (both locals and international Biennale visitors) still remember Janet's artwork. Since then I have moved to London. I invited Janet to exhibit and perform at the London Art Fair 2009, where we discussed the opportunity to work together again in Venice. The proposal came from her side and it blew my mind for several reasons: to exhibit works of students at la Biennale (!) and to organize everything in less than 2 months!!! I know how Janet makes the impossible a reality and I also know how professional she is, so I couldn't do anything else but trust her and jump into the realization of the almost impossible project. When I saw the works by the students I was completely satisfied and I had confirmation that my trust was well given: the quality of the works, the depth of the themes, the artistic research, the exclusive and different way of expression were all points that confirmed I had an exclusive artistic product ready to be shown at the most important artistic showcase in the world. They HAD to be represented! It would be interesting to take this project further!

LT: The title is so fitting in its response to Daniel Birnbaum's curated show and cunningly references the habit of the Emirates to create smaller worlds within its cities. This also connects to the arguably outmoded structure of the Venice Biennale's national pavilions, a theme assessed by Tirdad Zolghadr in the UAE Pavilion. How do you envisage people 'from other worlds' appreciating the work on display? Is it of an international or localized aesthetic in your opinion?

JB: I have to first credit NY curator Kóan Jeff-Baysa who was present during our initial conversation of developing the show. It seemed most appropriate to tie in our curatorial idea and present a platform that would show the audience in Venice what a selection of emerging artists are thinking about and creating.

LT: Explain the central precepts of the exhibition.

JB: We wanted to be able to show a variety of artwork created by students and graduates from Dubai and Abu Dhabi. We scouted out some of the works, but we had a submission call from students with the intention to see the best work presented to us. Our primary train of thought was to be able to show an audience the variety of ideas that these young women are working with from environmental issues, identity - how their own identity continues to evolve and emerge. We also looked at how these works may provide an insight into Emirati culture and history and possibly break down some stereotypes that some foreigners have of women in the Gulf region.

LT: I am delighted to watch your interest and involvement in the exhibition from the Venetian side Sara. How do you think the students work compares with what is currently being produced in Italy?

SS: What I can see is that the UAE students have a clearly defined conviction: no compromises. It is a distinct artistic expression: you can like it or not, but the artwork is well presented. Sometimes in our students it is evident that they would just like to impress or shock, often without a deep concept or thought. The fact that I have this impression of UAE students can also be explained by the fact that it is a completely different culture, which I am not entirely familiar with. The curator/teacher has to understand first what the student wants to express, the second step is to do it clearly...it's like a dialogue between two professionals speaking different languages: the dialogue has to be clear, the words have to be perfectly chosen, the concepts have to be very well defined, no insecurity is accepted. On the other hand our students have a much bigger cultural background and artistic knowledge. Which is probably also what stops a lot of them to define their own way...

LT: Do you have any future exchanges planned between Italy and UAE based students?

SS: Depending on funding or sponsors for the students, there are some ideas. Art fairs and dedicated exhibitions involving the UAE community in London would be a way of gaining further international exposure and opportunities for the students. On the other hand, within Venice, further projects include using Murano glass.



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LT: Can you see your gallery 3D signing up any of these young Emirati artists? I know Janet shows with you, so you are familiar with the her work and that of the students.

SS: Absolutely yes. It's very challenging, I didn't realize what it means to work with completely new art: the clientele is different; the approach to the market is different. It opens up new opportunities and closes others...interesting and very challenging. I am curious.

LT: What has been the reaction at the other sites where work is being displayed, such as the restaurant La Colomba near St Marks square?

JB: The students are quite honored to have this platform for showing some of the artworks. It is a great location for people to visit and great to include this work in a place that has always invested in art.

SS: A lot of our friends were impressed by the choice and got the seeds of curiosity to know more about the UAE, thanks to its art and its artists. The visitors are impressed about the quality of the works.

Many of the works in the exhibition are responses to workshops given to students by visiting professionals. Tell me why you see these international influences as being important for the students.

JB: In one sense it gives them a chance to be connected to other parts of the world and see how their ideas are interlinked and how they can express themselves to other audiences. I think it follows the very important idea: "Think globally, work locally". While in Venice they were also involved in two workshops. They experienced glassmaking at the Abate Zanetti School, which was a very new experience for them. They also worked at the Tintoretto printmaking studio and learned some new techniques.

LT: I know this is not the first time Zayed girls' work has been shown internationally, and students have travelled abroad together before. Is there something extra special about Venice? What is that?

JB: One of the most unique elements of this trip to Venice is that students were intrinsically involved in the installation of the artwork. They have usually just gone to an exhibition and seen their work on display, this time, even if it just was not their own work. They worked long hours framing and installing the work, and discussing various issues. Also, it gave them the opportunity to see the artworld in Venice and meet a lot of people and talk about their art and culture. By the end, they realized how much work is involved behind the scenes of mounting an exhibition.

LT (Question addressed to exhibitor, Moaza Mattar): You participated in the Art Dubai Deyaar Internship scheme earlier this year. I know this was your first time to Venice. What have you learnt during your stay that will be useful for you in your future career?

Moaza Matter: I have been on several different educational trips abroad, but what makes the Venice experience so different is that we were involved in the process of the exhibition planning right from the beginning; we as students had the chance not only to exhibit our artworks, but also to be responsible of making this exhibition successful. We were involved in this particular exhibition from installing the artworks and organizing the space to the big opening of the exhibition, and I think this was a valuable experience. This experience of course will help my future career as a designer and a visual artist in many ways. This trip made me live for a short time in the real world of art, in terms of exhibitions, workshops, curating and meeting deadlines.

LT (Question addressed to exhibitor, Maitha Huraiz): You have worked with us as an intern at Art Dubai for two years now. It is a delight to see you developing as an artist, and for your work to be shown in Venice. It was a shame you were not there for the opening of the exhibition. To you, still in Dubai, what did it mean to be selected to show in Venice? Your twin sister Meera is also in the show and her work was selected for the invitation card. Do you see the two of you traveling to see the exhibition?

Maitha Huraiz: Thanks Laura for including me in this interview. Yes, it was a shame I wasn't there, and I do not think Meera and I will be able to go during the summer. That said, I still am glad that my peers went. At least there was someone to document the event and witness people's reactions. They came back with a lot of good feedback, which I am grateful for. Also, to be selected for this exhibition is alone a great opportunity. I hope it gave us a great exposure and I hope to do it again.

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