



On Conflict: Selections from the Sharjah Art Foundation Collection

Julianne Schmidt, Department of the History of Art, Program in International Studies

Mentors: Dr. Julia Rose, Curator, JHU Museums; Professor Molly Warnock, Department of the History of Art

Background and Abstract

This project takes the form of an exhibition plan that unites artworks across the Sharjah Art Foundation collection. Diaspora and local artists have come to meditate on the history of conflict in the Middle East through traditional and non-traditional mediums, from painting and sculpture to video installations and stop-motion animation. By uniting these works, this exhibition presents the imprint of conflict on the cultural landscape, highlighting how artists have come to understand their role in documenting the effects of destruction and violence. Through this individual, artist-centric lens, this exhibition seeks to counter the frequent broader brushstroke approach of history and conflict studies.

Methodology

- ~Visual analysis of collection highlights within the Sharjah Art Foundation
- ~Workshop the writing of artist biographies and curatorial texts with museum curators
- ~Exposure to the practice of exhibition planning, writing wall-text and opening essays



© Hrair Sarkissian; Sharjah Art Foundation

Results



© Michael Rakowitz; Sharjah Art Foundation

The central work of focus within this exhibition plan is Michael Rakowitz's *Ballad of Special Ops Cody* (2017). Throughout this film, Special Ops Cody, an action figure sold on US military bases in Iraq and Kuwait, comes face to face with objects housed in the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute whose counterparts in Iraq have been looted and destroyed amidst moments of conflict. Cody's attempts to free the museum objects are denied, reflective of the incompatibility of conflict with the protection of these cultural objects. The action figure himself, meant to be a surrogate for children whose parents are deployed overseas, connects to an underlying element of the exhibition as a whole, as the artworks similarly serve as visual stand-ins for each artist's grappling with the real impact of conflict on their homes and lives.

Interpretation & Conclusions

Rakowitz's film and the additional works included in this exhibition plan provide a stark contrast to western media's portrayal of the Middle East. Each artist confronts the history of conflict through their chosen medium. In drawing together this group of works, I argue for the importance of art as alternative documentation in understanding the impact of conflict on the human condition.

Future Goals

This framework serves as a proposal for creating a permanent dedicated exhibition space at institutions across the globe for artists grappling with the legacy of conflict and its impact on their lives. This would allow a platform for individuals to showcase their work when confronted with potential censorship and barriers to display in conflict zones. Such a program would help to reshape art museums as productive spaces, rather than static environments.



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Sources and Acknowledgements

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Image credits (left to right):

Hrair Sarkissian, *Execution Squares*, 2008, archival inkjet print, 125 x 175 cm, Sharjah, Sharjah Art Foundation. © Hrair Sarkissian.

Michael Rakowitz, *The Ballad of Special Ops Cody*, 2017, video, 14 min. 42 sec., installation view: Sharjah Biennial 14. © Michael Rakowitz.

Marwan Rechmaoui, *A Monument for the Living*, 2001, casted cement, 230 x 60 x 40 cm, Sharjah, Sharjah Art Foundation. © Marwan Rechmaoui. Detail.