



IBRAAZ

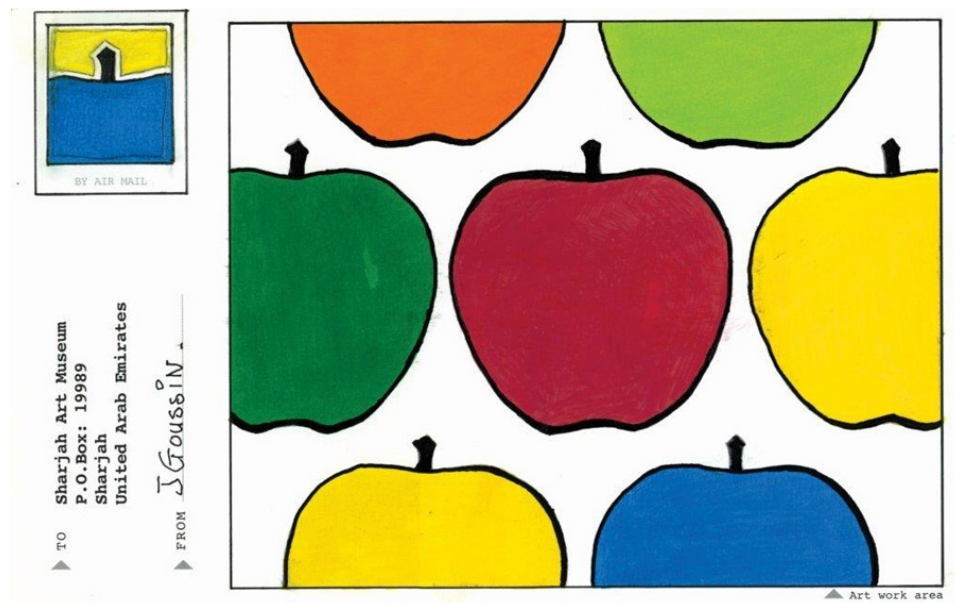
Platform 007

## INTERVIEWS

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### Time over Development

Hisham Al-Madhloum in conversation with Stephanie Bailey



Hisham Al-Madhloum's Art Card Project. Submitted by J. Goussin.  
Courtesy of Department of Culture and Information in Sharjah.

In 1985, Hisham Al-Madhloum started working in the Department of Culture in Sharjah and then became the Assistant Manager of Culture and Art Programming. At that time, as he recalls, there were less than 25 people in the department, from the chairman to the office boy. 'We were always working on things: the Sharjah International Book Fair, Children's festivals, art exhibitions,

lectures, theatre productions. We worked step by step,' Al-Madhloum explains. Gradually, he began to focus on fine art from the end of the 1980s, and from 1995, when new directories opened in the Department of Culture, he became the Directorate of Fine Art. In this interview, Al-Madhloum discusses his experience of building culture in Sharjah, while explaining how the aim now, as it was in the past, is to establish for society a forum of fine arts that works to produce cultural exhibitions and group shows while focusing on social work.

**Stephanie Bailey:** You have said that your experience in the arts has more to do with event management than theory, which is relevant to Platform 007 in that managing events is really about working with and for an audience. It's not just about communicating ideas, but producing a cultural moment. So I wondered if you could talk a little bit about how event management has fed into your approach in Sharjah as the Directorate of Art.

**Hisham Al-Madhloum:** The culture of working must be that you work with a group, you cannot work by yourself – you must work socially in the group and between people. At the same time, you must have a personal connection to the work that you do, in this case, culture and the arts. My approach to my work comes from my culture – from our land. I think Sharjah is a different to any other city in the Gulf, even Abu Dhabi. We are coming from our land and we are working from our people and we are moving step by step; we are not taking a project from the outside to the inside and we are working from the ground up. In the 1980s for instance, we started a programme called Children's Cultural Centres, and from that programme we established the centre and the administration around it. So our approach comes from the programming: we do not build an administration and then fill it; we start by programming events and building communities.

**SB:** Is this how the biennial grew as well?

**HAM:** The biennial started in the 1980s, when we were still in the Department of Culture. We had an art exhibition and theatre exhibition called the National Art Festival. This was a general festival, part art, part theatre, part book fair and part international art exhibition, which then became the biennial.

**SB:** So all of the different events hosted at Sharjah, the book fair for instance, the Islamic Art Festival, all came out of this National Art Festival?

**HAM:** Yes, the Department of Culture in my directories has continued for 16 years and the Islamic Art Festival and the biennial came from it.

**SB:** As you said, cultural activity in Sharjah maintains a sense of public responsibility with a social perspective. I wanted to ask about how, since the 1980s, culture has had to respond to the cultural, and the local and to the needs of the people. In thinking about how culture responds to local needs, not just local but regional, how have cultural institutions in Sharjah evolved to meet the changing cultural space of Sharjah and its demographic?

**HAM:** Sometimes I am fighting with myself. If you want to build culture it should come from your earth – you should not bring the project from outside. Culture should come from the perspective of society. We might produce something different, but that is OK. Recently, we have been given approval to conduct workshops in the mosques, things like calligraphy workshops, which are then made accessible to the local population.



Islamic Arts Festival, Sharjah.  
Courtesy of Department of Culture and Information in Sharjah.

**SB:** In one interview, you said that it's important to have intercultural exchanges.

**HAM:** But in thinking about these kinds of exchanges, both within society and across cultures, I will tell you a story. When I started as Director I was thinking about what I wanted to achieve, and I thought I would like to connect to another culture – I would like to say 'Hi, I'm here'. I established this idea called the 'art-card', which was like a postcard, about 15 years ago. I printed 100,000 and sent them to artists all over the world, asking them to return these cards with ideas they had for projects or collaborations. I got 100,000 artists addresses in the

world and sent them all by post, not email! Then, one artist from Italy got my card, but was kidnapped by a gang. When the police went to his apartment and found this card, they called Interpol and then they called the police in Sharjah and then they found my name and called me!

**SB:** Which sort of relates to the confusions that can arise from mediating the local global context somehow?! How do you deal with differences within this spectrum?

**HAM:** Let me give an example. In Japan, they are working internationally but they keep their identity. Iran after the revolution in the 1970s began growing their identity from the inside. They have something different-looking. I will tell you one thing: 25 years ago when we went shopping in Europe with family, Germany was different from Vienna, Vienna was different from London, but now everything you get from all of Europe is the same. There is no difference. But when you see what they are doing for publishing, art and design in Iran, it is totally different. They are coming from their identity, from their own land. It is totally different thinking. Is it good? We are open to other cultures of course, but where is our thinking within our own culture?

**SB:** So how do you construct a kind of cultural history with this in mind?

**HAM:** Time is also very important. 30 to 35 years is nothing for the development of a country. We need time, and whether you have a big budget or a small budget, time is very important. And it's very important to note that we cannot work alone. In terms of the work I do at the Directorate of Fine Art, we have two other very important ministries to work with: the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Affairs. Without these two, we cannot work with our people. For the last ten years, we have worked together to establish the College of Fine Arts in Sharjah, as there was no connection between high school and university levels given that they work under separate ministries.

**SB:** So there is a gap there.

**HAM:** Yes there is a gap. If we are working together in Sharjah we not only need the Fine Arts Society and exhibitions but we also need education.

**SB:** So this is the next step in terms of producing the infrastructural networks that unite a cultural sphere.

**HAM:** At least in terms of modernising art education. But also, it is important to note that we are a small city in this region but we still have around 25 to 30 centres or social and governmental services for art. Between the directorates of art, art museum, calligraphy museum, fine art society, fine arts college, we have more than 25 institutions. In a report published in 2013, it said we held 1,890 events and 166 exhibitions in the year, and that's only between our directors. What about the others? We are working towards making a difference between at all levels.

Of course, when it comes to events such as the biennial and the March Meeting, these are also very important because I think we are making something new and they are of course global. But we also need to encourage our people to engage, even though sometimes they might not know how to. So the question is, how do we do this? We need public projects that touch them. This brings us back to the history of education. If you go to Europe, there are queues of people that are waiting to go into museums because they have a background education in arts, as do their families. That is not the case here.

**SB:** So it's about building audiences, really?

**HAM:** Yes.



Sharjah Calligraphy Biennial.  
Courtesy of Department of Culture and Information in Sharjah.

**SB:** What is your view on the biennial in terms of how it is building audiences? The last biennial, Sharjah Biennial 11, curated by Yuko Hasegawa, did feel like a slowing down, or a step back in some ways, after what happened with the previous biennial...

**HAM:** For us it has been good to look at something new, and it has also been good for our people. With the 2003 biennial, which is when we changed the direction and approach to the exhibition, I was worried that we were changing what we were doing, the traditional art and crafts, and worried about the people in the Arab world who work in those traditions, since when we started in the 1980s we tried to push artists and all forms of art from the Arab world. The biennial is important, and how it functions in Sharjah is important. At the same time we don't want to close traditional art from the people, so we try to catch them from another side, through other projects, like the calligraphy workshops and so on.

**SB:** How do you think culture functions in society, from your experience of it being so embedded in the administrative system of governance?

**HAM:** This is very important. The culture in Sharjah is not coming from the government. It's coming from the social aspect: pure culture coming from the soil, from below, from the artists. This is the basis.

**SB:** But through events like the Sharjah Biennial and the March Meeting, ideas are also being transported out of Sharjah, too, no?

**HAM:** Yes. It is an exchange. We are thinking together, we are not coming from the media way. I will tell you a small story. Every year, we have an international exchange program from Sharjah to Europe or Asia. We have five major exhibitions: contemporary art, calligraphy, heritage, his highness' collection of maps, and workshops of calligraphy and music. From these exchanges, the best story for me has been this one: in the last 50 years, everything from televisions to computers to cars has been made in Japan and Korea has been transported here. 10 years ago, we had around 15 ladies from Korea and Japan studying in the Arab Calligraphy Centre: the best one in the Arab world. When we produced an exhibition in Japan and staged a workshop there, these ladies were the ones who managed it. This is what happened.

**SB:** So it's about making connections across all levels?

**HAM:** Yes, this is very important, to make connections with other cultures but to keep a balance. We try to take care about this. When we are staging cultural events and workshops in the mosque, for instance, we are talking to another language, not only religion. When we talked about this idea of working inside the mosques the Islamic department and they loved it because they are trying to open to other people, too.

**SB:** So that there's something for everyone.

**HAM:** Yes, there is programming running here for that to happen.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

### **Stephanie Bailey**

Stephanie Bailey is Managing Editor of Ibraaz. She has an MA in Contemporary Art Theory from Goldsmiths College, a BA in Classical Civilization with English Literature from King's College (both University of London), and a Foundation Diploma in Art and Design from Camberwell College of Art (University of the Arts London). Currently on the editorial committee for Naked Punch, her writing has appeared in publications including *ART PAPERS*, *ARTnews*, *Artforum*, *LEAP*, *Modern Painters*, *Notes on Metamodernism*, *Ocula.com*, *Whitewall* and *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*.