

REVIEWS RIYADH, SAUDI ARABIA

# Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale 2026

Various Venues

By Pablo Larios 🇪🇸



View of the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale 2026. Photo: Alessandro Brasile.

These days, it's not in Berlin, New York, Paris, or Rome that I see the best large-scale group shows of contemporary artists. Go to Budapest, Warsaw, Istanbul, or Riyadh—cities where people have something to demonstrate, something to say beyond decrying gentrification and the cost of housing—and the mega-show suddenly feels vital again. If the biennial—loose, baggy, and necessarily uneven—is also the exhibition format par excellence of

globalization, then it also makes a kind of sense that you have to venture to a place like Diriyah to remember why biennials were ever relevant to begin with.

The most impressive aspect of “In Interludes and Transitions,” the third edition of Saudi Arabia’s flagship contemporary art show, was the case it made for itineracy, hyphenation, and complexity as normative aspects of artists’ biographies. The show’s artists tell a story of dispersal: An artist born in Cairo, Baghdad, El Salvador, or Jeddah is likely to live today in Los Angeles, Abu Dhabi, Brooklyn, or Hackney. Take London-based Pio Abad, whose works are a second-generation lament for the cultural erasures suffered by his ethnic group, the Ivatan people, who live in the Batanes islands of the northern Philippines. The huge letters of his installation *Vanwa, 2023/2026*, spilled out onto the floor like the contents of an overturned children’s toy box. The mud-brick typographical units spelled out a phrase from a poem in Ivatan that reads, “Bury me under your fingernails, that I may be eaten along with every food you eat”—a moving, almost Miltonian image of constancy through loss.

Modularity and flexibility emerged as the artistic values shared among this coterie of artists—unsurprising, given that so many were forced (due to various circumstances) into lives of deracination or dispossession. Some, such as Pacita Abad, Pio’s aunt, make rootlessness a condition of their art. Paintings in her series “Asian Abstractions,” 1983–92, have the extempore quality of Korean ink painting but are garish and geometrical, like sunrays filtering out of a prism. Others, such as Samia Halaby, whose abstract oils hung beside her early kinetic computer-made paintings, reconciled an impulse toward craft and the handmade with the mediation offered by technology. I was impressed by Jeddah-based Mohammad Al-Ghamdi’s untitled semiabstract reliefs (made from the 2000s to 2018), where the industrial underbelly of urban life explodes in front of you—think package labels, spare tools, and circuit boards embedded in floorboards. You could almost smell the diesel and WD-40.

The Biennale's artistic directors, Nora Razian and Sabih Ahmed, have a lot to say about songs and ceremonies, migration routes, and the celebratory lament of procession rituals, but, I'd argue, you need very little of that curatorial superstructure at all—which is a strength. Each work manifests individual invention in the face of numerous constraints: geographic, economic, colonial, political. Gala Porras-Kim's *1 Vitrine C.122.A side B with 41 Treatment of the Dead objects at Pitt Rivers Museum, 2025*, from her series of colored-pencil drawings, uses an old tradition—the naturalistic depiction of a museum's collection—to portray artifacts that don't really belong together, and never did, in an ethnological display. This could be heavy-handed—except the drawings' point is not to comment on colonial-era looting, but to function as an exercise in slow care and tender depiction at odds with the violence the work faces head-on. This resolution of pain through the patience of form is a factor in much of the exhibition's best work, such as Théo Mercier's imposing sand installation *House of Eternity, 2026*.

In a short black-and-white video by Saudi artist Abdelkarim Qassem, *The Final Scene, 2017*, we track from behind a car's journey into a desert. The power lines form a trail rising up as we follow what might well be an army caravan. There is no sound, no context, just an endless drive into the sandy void. Qassem is an army psychiatrist, and this work was, he told me, inspired by his experiences treating Saudi soldiers who suffer from PTSD. Of course, in the mere weeks since this Biennale opened, Trump's latest interventionist folly has tipped us into a new maelstrom of war and economic uncertainty. Across the world, artists bemoan, legitimately enough, high costs of living, the besieged state of public-art institutions, and the class dynamics undergirding contemporary art—yet the works here revealed another *raison d'être*: to keep working amid the violence, insecurity, and transition that are, by now, a shared state.