

## Nomad Invasion

The Danes have wandered into Sharjah, Chris Lord finds out how they hope to change the city forever

Paint the Desert

'I imagine that city planning was like a sheikh walking with his falcon and letting it go. Where it found a rabbit, a new structure was built there.' Having just fumed through endless traffic to get to the Sharjah Art Museum, the irony of Dorte Dahlin's comment doesn't escape me. But, as she continues, the ideas of the project she's working on at the museum become more inspiring, 'There's a way of positioning structures, creating movement, that's different to the grid system that we see in the West. It's a new way of handling space.'

The Nomad Academy is a collection of Danish artists that have discovered a fount of inspiration in Sharjah. They've been planning this huge exposé of their creative output relating to the region since 2001, and have finally 'gone public' with it at the museum.

The exhibition is comprised of proposals by 17 artists for works to be installed into the public space of Sharjah. Dahlin, herself an artist, decided to develop the project after taking part in the Sharjah Biennial in 1991. Her wild hair shakes and she points to it, remarking, cosmically, 'I had this Arabian ray come into my head' – which she describes as a spark of inspiration that drew her back to the region after the biennial. She's dedicated the years since to getting the collective together and building up a significant body of work to exhibit in Sharjah.

The museum is lined with alcoves, each one relating to a different project within the collective. We pass a set of opposing recesses that glow

### As Nomad Academy sees it, the desert is the last space to resist globalisation

with the lights from two neon signs. One side reads 'Paint the desert', while across the corridor is the same, written in a humming, green flourish of Arabic. The piece has been designed by Danish artist Stig Broegger and he has lined the walls with poems in English and Arabic that, as Dahlin explains, relate to the Nomad Academy's central belief that the desert is the last space to resist globalisation. As they see it, the desert is the 'empty space', analogous to a white canvas.

Continuing through the show, we pass a teetering orange cylinder that seems to be breathing in a corner. A close look reveals it's inflatable. Dahlin explains that the project is the work of Danish and African engineer-artists, who collaborated to create a simple, portable biogas unit that can be inflated and deflated easily.

Dahlin stops in front of a grey panel with digitised snowflakes falling across it. The panel, Dahlin's own work, is connected to a computer that randomly fires out these incongruous snowy shapes, interspersed with photographs that

Dahlin took in the desert on her first trip to Sharjah. A dune floats past amid shivering bubbles. The panel is designed to obscure and intermittently reveal the alcove beyond, which has been recreated into an Arabic bridal chamber. This idea can be used on skyscrapers and buildings, she tells *Time Out*. 'It's a way of exploring the space between the public and the private.'

The centrepiece proposal is the Moonlight Oasis; models and designs for a contemporary reinvention of the ancient desert structure that once figured highly in Muslim ritual.

Bringing together an archaeologist, an architect, a sculptor and an astrologer, the proposed plans are impressive. The project takes shape around a sculpted barchan dune, a specific sand formation that creates a packed ridge much like a crescent moon. Artist Mogens Møller intends to recreate this shape from concrete which will then be tiled and the ridge in the crescent have water continually cascade over it.

Møller is in awe of the project. 'One of these gardens has been discovered on the banks of

the river near the Taj Mahal,' he tells us breathlessly. 'They were spiritual meeting points, a place to recite poems, to hear music. These gardens used only the light of the moon for illumination.'

If the project, as they hope, is realised in the desert around Sharjah, Møller wants the water and the tiles on the dune to reflect the moon's rays into a columned gazebo at the dune's base. This will, in turn, project an image of the moon onto the ceiling, creating an ethereal public space, much in the spirit of the original moonlight gardens.

As Dahlin talks, she keeps returning to this notion that the Nomad Academy is a feat of collaboration. But a glance over the catalogue reveals significantly more Danish than Arab names. The works do, however, feel directly charged by the local environment. From the proposal to drape intricately designed light formations across the Sharjah skyline through to Møller's concrete dune, there's a refreshing excitement among the collective about what's happening in the region. So perhaps the collaboration really comes down to how each artist has responded to the visual and cultural landscape in the city. It's a dialogue that offers us Sharjah from excited, outsider eyes.

*Nomad Academy Goes Public. Sharjah Art Museum (06 567 1116), Al Shuweien Area, behind Emirates Post in the Rolla area, Sharjah*

