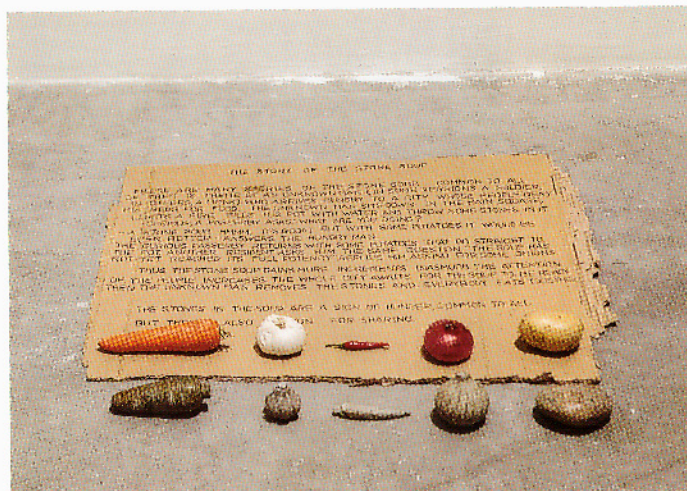


1497

Chinese-born artist Lantian Xie, who grew up in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates and now splits his time between the latter and New York, is no stranger to creating compelling narratives that interrogate globalization and dislocation. His keen sensitivity toward the alienation created by global modernity was evident in his masterful curation of “1497”—a group exhibition recently held at Dubai’s Green Art Gallery. The gallery promotes local and regional artists and curators, focusing on criticality and engagement with current global issues, through research-based exhibitions and a publishing program. This multivalent approach, therefore, was the perfect stage on which to mount “1497,” for which Xie curated a synthesis of visual and written artworks by an international roster of artists engaged in critical inquiries of global existence and resistance.

Xie chose “1497” as the exhibition’s title for its several potential meanings, all relating in some way to a setting—a hotel room number, a house address or the historic year in which European navigators arrived on new lands in both the Eastern and Western hemispheres. The latter connotation was especially relevant for representing a period that kicked off the multi-century process of globalization, which in turn made possible the showing of “1497” to an international audience of expatriates, tourists and the local community. This was an exhibition that was perfectly situated in Dubai, a permanent city of impermanent people, with a palpable thesis about lives lived, lost and rediscovered within places in flux.

The selected artworks were a meditation on memory, community and loss. Arranged without wall text, but with an accompanying handout, each piece was best approached as a sort of “artifact,” requiring deeper investigation and engagement from viewers. There was a discursive tension between the works, each in discreet conversation with the others while also standing its own ground. Hera Büyükaşçıyan’s untethered wrought-iron sculpture *Main Balcony* (2014), reminiscent of a ship-less anchor, was placed in the gallery’s center, like discarded architectural detritus from a changing landscape, referencing the controversial forced repatriation of Istanbul’s Greek community in 1923. Also on view was Mumbai-based Shilpa Gupta’s delicate thread “drawings” of trees woven into paper (“Tree Drawings,” 2013). The length of thread used in these pieces is in ratio to lengths of fences at various disputed or hostile national borders, such as those between Palestine and Israel, and India and Pakistan. The ghostly outline of threads evokes a sense of melancholic irony, as each tree is emblematic of its respective place, yet the issue of (cultural) roots can be both problematic and politicized in such contested spaces.



Elsewhere was Brazilian artist Matheus Rocha Pitta’s installation *Stone Soup* (2012), consisting of a piece of cardboard written with text, accompanied by rocks delicately carved into the shapes of vegetables. The text evokes the tale of a soldier who returns home from war, starved and ignored by his community. He then asks his neighbors to help make a delicacy called “stone soup,” successfully maneuvering them to contribute vegetables to a pot that began with just water and a stone. The installation speaks to the need for comfort, care and nourishment that is often lost in today’s individualistic and narcissistic societies.

The inscribed word is also prevalent in Vietnamese-Danish artist Danh Võ’s *2.2.1861* (2009)—a copy of an 1861 letter that French Catholic missionary Jean-Théophane Vénard wrote to his father before the former’s execution in Vietnam, handwritten by Võ’s own father—which can be read as a reflection on the post-colonial and globalized world of porous borders and multifaceted identities. Another text-based piece was Abu Dhabi-based writer Deepak Unnikrishnan’s *i come to your county, name me* (2015), which is a gorgeous visual and written composition on various lives lived between the UAE, India and the United States that gallery visitors were invited to take home in the form of a booklet.

The works in “1497” lent an archival and documentary element to the exhibition that required internalization and reflection. As a whole, the show was a powerful witness to the universal issues of global dislocation and the longing for an ever-elusive “home.”

LESLEY ANN GRAY