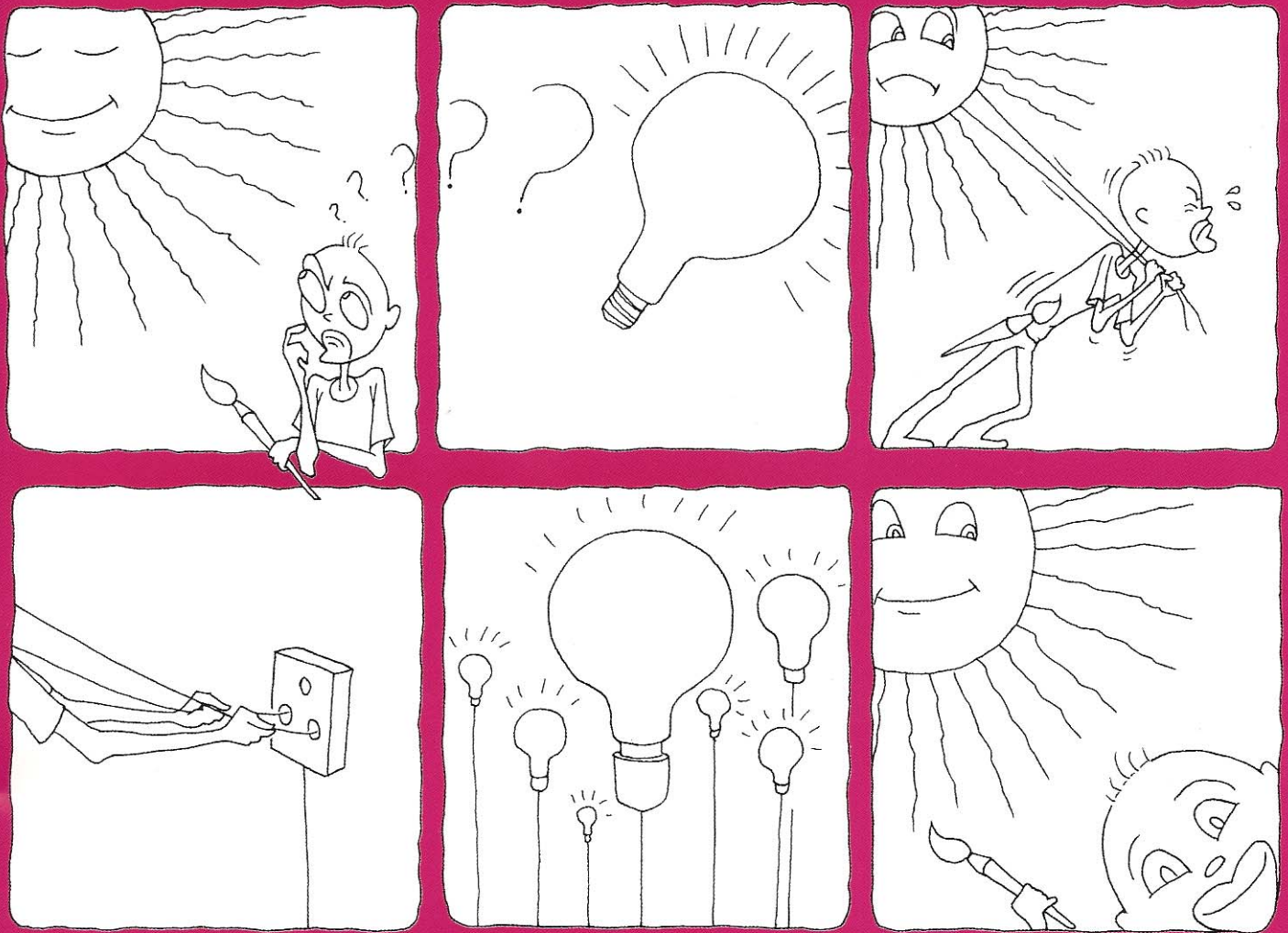


wknd.

September 18, 2009

CAN ART SAVE THE WORLD?



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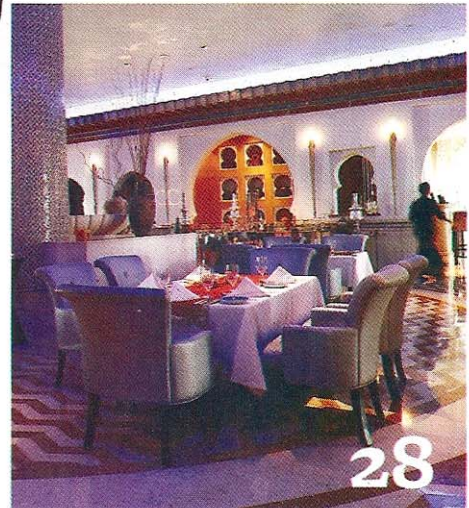
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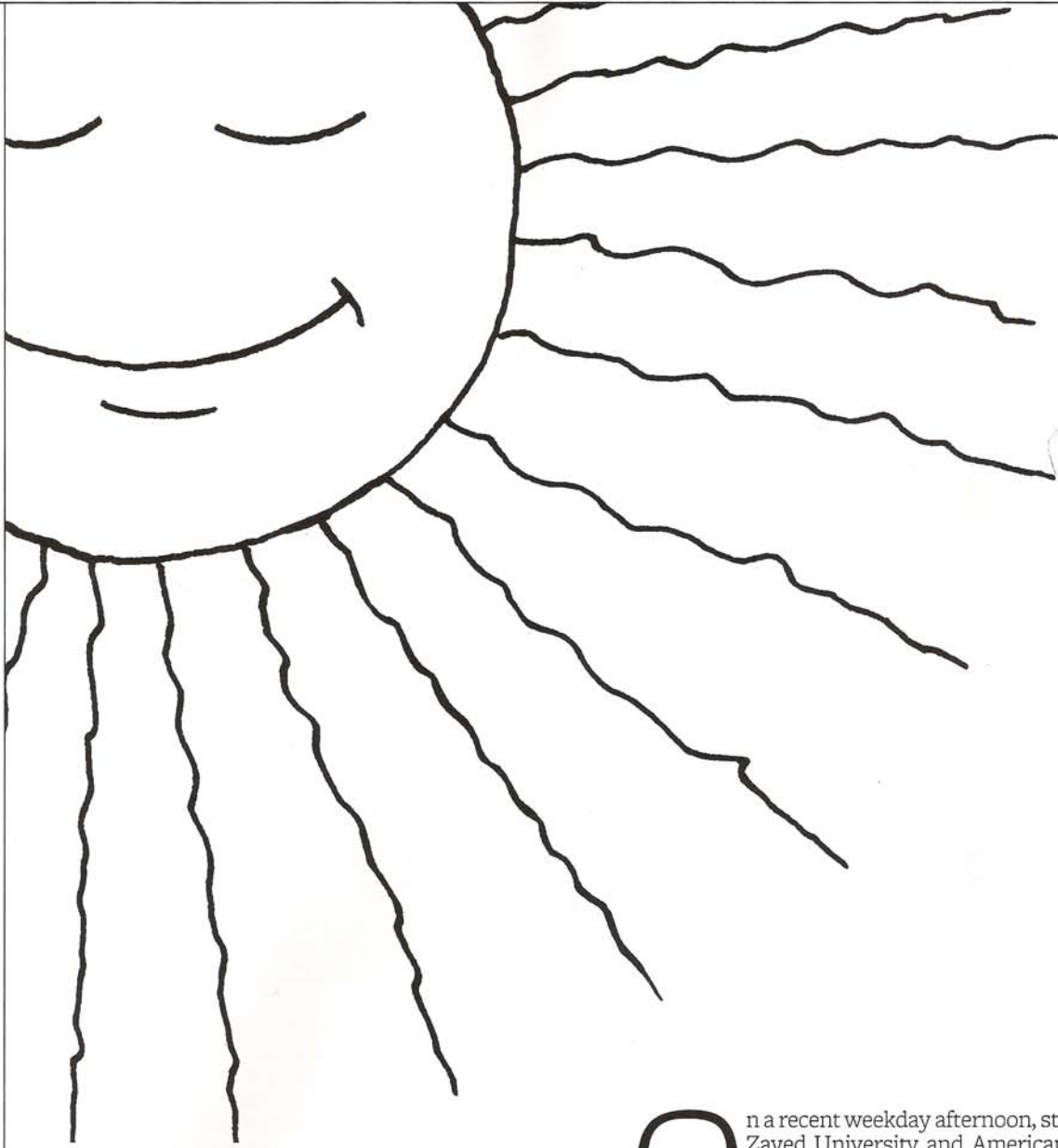
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Khaleej Times



On a recent weekday afternoon, students from Zayed University and American University of Dubai gathered at The JamJar gallery for the opening of the exhibition *Hot Spots: What comes after oil?*

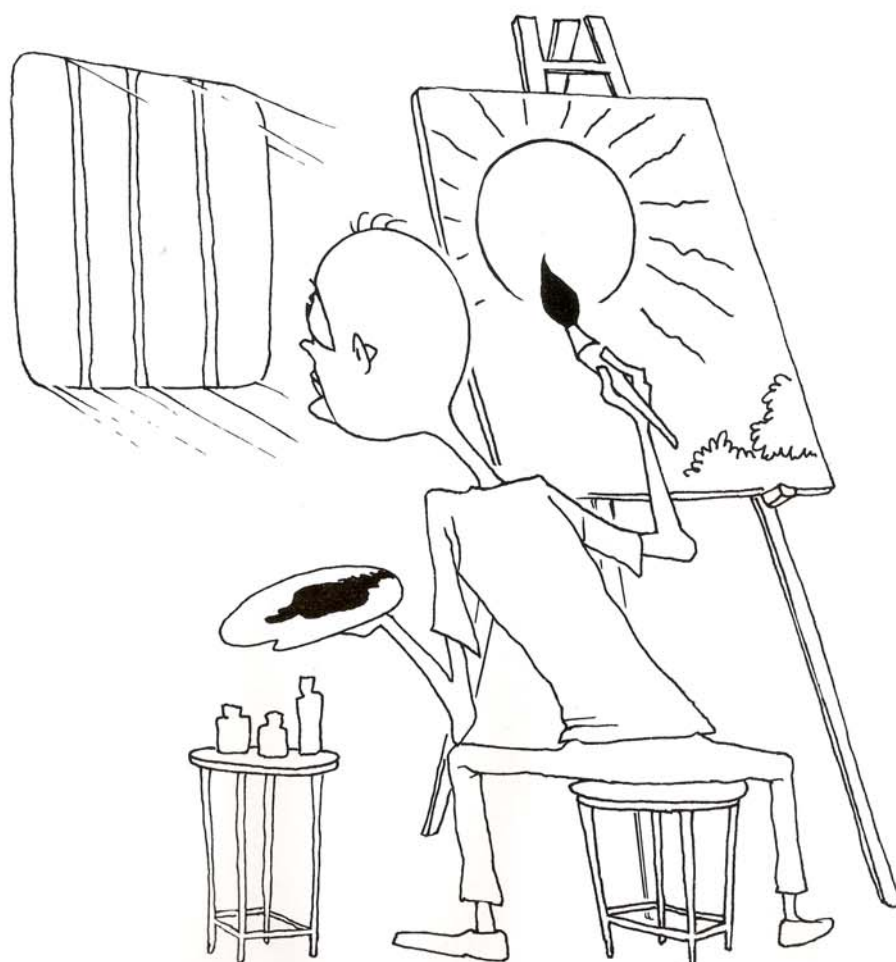
The images included everything from expected black and white images of conflict and chaos, to surprising paintings of ancient advanced civilizations, asking what they had used for energy, to locally focused posters. One, a quote from Shaikh Rashid, predicted that his grandson will ride a camel like his ancestors after the UAE has exhausted its resources.

The posters were part of the educational element of *Hot Spots*, a collaboration between graphic design professor and Dubai-based artist Elizabeth Monoian and counterparts in Pittsburgh and Munich.

The discussion at *Hot Spots* is a reflection of exhibits and movements throughout the world with similar aims. The United Nations Environment Programme funds artists and exhibitions all over the globe through its Art for

Can art save the world?

Local artists hope large scale projects can inspire the move to cleaner energy and sustainability. **Emily Meredith** finds out more





GRAND DESIGNS: Elizabeth Monoian and Robert Ferry at work

the Environment initiative, an effort it says it hopes will “generate environmental awareness using the universal language of art as a catalyst.” *Hot Spots* is not alone: the *Art Oasis* exhibit this past summer saw several works addressing issues of sustainability, using piles of tires, toy cars and sand set in resin.

But what can artists really do? The price of sustainable technologies, such as the photovoltaic cells used to create solar energy has dropped, making them more accessible. Economists and businessmen trade carbon credits, creating financial incentives for businesses to reduce their emissions. Recent legislation in the United States offered monetary incentives for people turning in their old vehicles to buy more fuel-efficient ones, although whether or not that programme is necessarily sustainable is a separate issue.

Monoian’s second sustainability project, a collaboration with her husband Robert Ferry, an architect, seems to be an expression of her frustration at the idea that discussion through art alone can do any-

thing. Through the Land Art Generator Initiative (LAGI), Monoian and Ferry have put out a call for artists to create structures that will both serve as large works of public art and clean energy generators.

‘It is too often the case that design competitions are more about outlandish ideas rather than actionable ones,’ says Dubai-based architect Robert Ferry

Their plan is to work with the local electricity and water authority to ensure that the structure can be fitted to the existing electricity grid.

“We’ve experienced a lot of critical conversation on sustainability and whatever the topic might be.

Honestly, *Hot Spots* is an example of that and what I’m about to critique,” Monoian starts. “*Hot Spots* is a conversation, but doesn’t necessarily activate change. Sure, hopefully it does on some level because people are thinking. That is crucial—”

Monoian pauses and Ferry interjects, “but the art world’s been doing that for 25 years now and nothing’s really changed.”

Monoian nods, and begins again. “We believe artists have a tremendous opportunity—”

“And a responsibility,” Ferry says. “To make change.”

Ferry and Monoian are running the LAGI as a design competition. In order to give artists an idea of the range of possibilities, the pair designed a few possible structures.

The first, a pavilion measuring 50 by 20 metres, is designed as an open structure. Light filters through the roof and is concentrated into vertical beams, which then shoot through in a large room of evenly spaced beams, creating an ‘orchard’ of light that is projected onto a wall in another room. The beams are fo-



LIGHT SHOW: Below, a rendering for the park pavilion that would generate energy

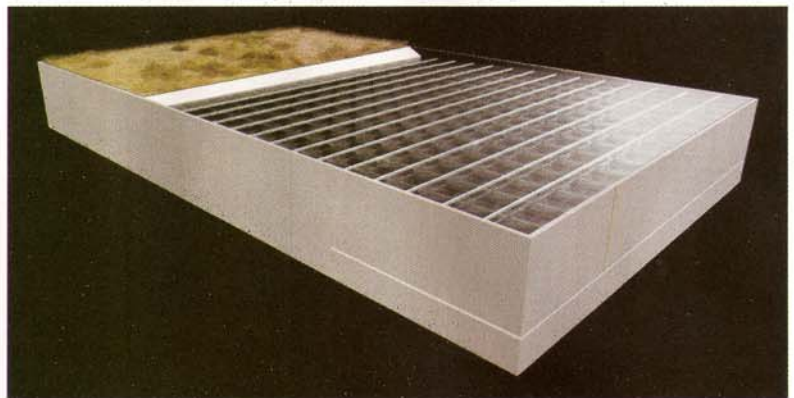
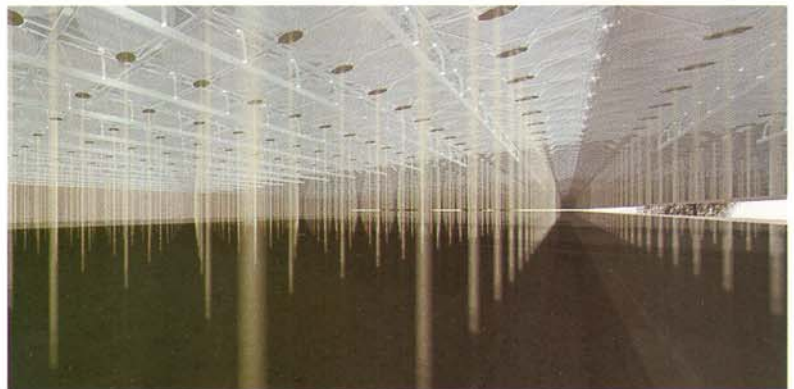
cused on photovoltaic panels.

A second one calls for a 'necklace' in the shallow waters near the shore in Khorfakhan, in Sharjah. More than 800 wave energy collection devices would be strung together in the water so their above water components would resemble a necklace.

"We're not land artists," Ferry says. "We want to get artists who have been doing land art for the last 20 years." Land art is a genre that does not easily fit into many people's conceptualisation of artwork. The movement gained momentum, mostly in the United States, in the 1960s when artists began examining how to interact with their surroundings on a large scale.

Two artists, Christo and Jeanne-Claude erected a giant white fabric barrier between Sonoma and Marin Counties in the US state of California in the 1970s. One of the most notable installations is Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field*, a vast expanse of land with deliberately spaced poles attracting lightning.

Recently, Ferry submitted a design for the Tall Emblem Structure,





a competition to create a structure to promote the 'new face of Dubai.'

In his renderings, the eight legs of a tower, vaguely reminiscent of the observation towers built for the 1964 Worlds Fair in New York, stand at the top of a shallow grassy hill in Za'abeel Park. The legs support a large ring of solar panels, generating enough energy for the tower and the rest of the park.

With the UAE pushing sustainable innovation in a variety of ways — green roofs, green buildings, an entire development devoted to it in Abu Dhabi's Masdar City and educational programming urging children to save water and electricity — Ferry's green design may have seemed a natural fit. In the end, though, more fantastical structures, including two designed to 'frame' the city, ranked higher.

That experience seems to inform how Ferry and Monoian plan on carrying out the LAGI competition. "It is too often the case that design competitions are more about outlandish ideas rather than actionable ones," Ferry says. A panel of artists, architects, designers, eco-

artists and sustainable developers will judge the LAGI competition.

Even some of the students exhibiting at *Hot Spots* seem acutely aware of the tension between discussion and action. Mohamed

The structure will not be as efficient as if the same amount of space were used to maximize electricity generation. That's not the point though

Kotait, a third year design student deviated from the 'what comes after oil' theme in designing his posters, a series of three that depicted a breakdown in human to human interaction.

"In most of the exhibition, they're

thinking about 'well, what are we going to use after oil?'" Kotait says. "But people are getting carried away from themselves, from their self development. I was basically trying to say 'forget about oil for now', while we're worried about oil, these issues are still happening."

Kotait says he had always been interested in environmental issues, but grew tired of hearing about them. When it came time to design his poster, he decided to ignore the prompt.

"I've had people with humongous amounts of handouts just given away and thrown on the floor and they're saying 'oh you should recycle' and they walk away with a huge mess of white paper that's never going to be used again."

Lama Odeh, a fourth year student who grew up in Dubai, answered the question with another question: What did they use? Her poster showed paintings of structures built by the ancient Egyptians and the Mayans. An avid reader of archeological books, Odeh says she thought people do not look to the past when thinking about future

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designs. While Monoian and Ferry both want LAGI to move beyond discussion, Ferry underscores the importance of the aesthetic in the project.

"It's first and foremost art. Its first priority is to be art, public art. In our ideal version, large scale public art, or land art, would be a tourist attraction," he says. "A tourist destination for international visitors from the world of art and laypeople to come and visit this beautiful object, and at the same time educate the public about clean energy."

Ferry admits that the structure will not be as efficient as a work of art as it could be if the same amount of space were used simply to maximize electricity generation. That's not the point though.

"As equal to the importance of

being art, clearly our objective is it is art that generates clean energy. It functions on many levels at once, because the objective is that it will function as a tourist attraction," Monoian says. While their idea right now is to build the structure in Dubai, Monoian and Ferry both say that a similar piece of land art could be integrated into Masdar or be built in any other place in the world with the setting to provide clean energy.

"It could be a series of shops, some of them residential units, we have thought about this, it would be an amazing site for one of these works," Monoian says.

"There will be art that's just human nature," Ferry says. "We want people to go to these LAGI sites and say 'I'm gonna put solar panels on my house.'"

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