Alia Farid
Press Package

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Entrancing sounds and melodies make their way across Alia Farid’s magical film *At the Time of the Ebb*, accompanying a parade of unique figures—dancers, musicians, animals—who take viewers into a transfixing journey where the real and the make-believe belong to one another.

A trance ritual on an island, a festival between desert and sea, fishermen in animal masks, a camel chewing trash, and a young man dancing to a love song. The sequences of Alia Farid’s mythopoetic meandering, *At the Time of the Ebb*, do little to elucidate the context of the film but much to delineate the essayistic aesthetics of an artist versed in the complexities of subjective self-determination from the margins of representation.

Claire Tancons: How much did your twin connection to the Caribbean and the Gulf impact your selection of Qeshm, a vast island in the Persian Gulf at the mouth of Iran, as the location of the film?

Alia Farid: I notice the same situation in the Caribbean and the Gulf, where the ties between adjacent communities that share cultures and whose histories are overlapped have been severed by dominant, modern politics. My interest in filming in Qeshm was motivated by an urge to move beyond the prescribed parameters of what it means to inhabit a place, to transcend national and ideological borders, and insist on a diversity of experiences of contemporary life.

I meet more Dominicans, Haitians, and other islanders in the US and Europe than in the Caribbean. Direct travel between the islands is restricted. Though geographically different, the situation in the Gulf vis-à-vis some of the Northern Arab states, Yemen, and Iran is the same. Qeshm is only an hour away from the easternmost tip of the Arabian Peninsula but getting there is not a streamlined process. I also chose Qeshm because I’m interested in how urbanization affects the aspiration of communities that are close enough to major cities to be influenced by them, but still far enough to continue living their own ways.

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CT: Yes, the derelictious effects of rapid urbanization in rural societies are translated in the arresting sequence of the camel eating the cardboard of what seems to be a cigarette box.

AF: Right, and in the introduction of a plastic mask amongst the fishermen's costumes, or—something I did not film—the contraband trade between Qeshm and Khasab [in Oman] in which goats are exchanged for certain technology that isn't available in the local market because of US sanctions on Iran.

But going back to nature and what you saw in the camel-eating-cardboard sequence, it's also like how *qat*—an endemic plant and stimulant that has been chewed by people in Yemen and Africa for centuries—is sold today in plastic bags that then get scattered everywhere. These pollutants are preceded by the misconception that progress is commensurate with processed and packaged goods.

CT: Now, did you also choose the period of Nowruz, the annual fishermen festival and new year celebration, following the same premise as that of the location of Qeshm? While the Caribbean is often associated with festivals, the Arab world isn't, unless they are religious, which isn't the case of Nowruz.

AF: The fishermen festival happens every year during the summer solstice. It involves members of the community dressing up and dancing in celebration of nature's bounty. It's called 'Nowruz,' but it's not the same 'Nowruz' that marks the start of the Iranian new year. *That* Nowruz happens in the third week of March, during the spring equinox. I think the fishermen also refer to their celebration as 'Nowruz' because the word simply means 'new day' and since it's held on the summer solstice, the day with the longest period of sunlight in the year, I suspect it's probably some absorbed form of Zoroastrianism. The fishermen's performance seems to be a confluence of ancient and more recent practices.

On this day, the fishermen stay on land and the whole village abstains from consuming anything from the sea. Instead of fishing, the fishermen praise the sea by dancing at its shores, performing what looks like a very antique ritual, creating silhouettes reminiscent of Sumerian or Elamite art. I find this resurgence of the past within the present invigorating, but at once I am saddened by its dwindling presence/visibility. In 1991, Qeshm was made a free trade zone with the introduction of foreign investment policies in Iran, and an eco-park was concurrently established on the island to encourage tourism. It was a wild idea, but I suppose the island is big enough to be both a petrochemical hub and an ecotourism destination. Anyway, efforts to boost tourism trivialized practices like the fishermen's performances. You see it in Caribbean carnival as well, how pretend bureaucracy and heavy-handed sponsorship are detrimental to the authenticity of such practices.

CT: "Look for Me All Around You," the platform I curated for Sharjah Biennial 14: *Leaving the Echo Chamber* and for which I commissioned what turned into *At the Time of the Ebb*, was very much premised on a connection between the Americas and Arabia, looking through the dual lenses of these seemingly remote and resolutely opposite locales. In a way, *At the Time of the Ebb* seems to exemplify how surprisingly related the Caribbean and the Gulf are—and not simply because of the insular factor.

AF: Right, they are both strategic locations. Qeshm is an Iranian island in the Strait of Hormuz, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. About a fifth of the world's oil shipments pass through here, making it an important location for international trade as well as a choke point. Interest in the Caribbean archipelagos, too, has to do with expanding trade and increasing military presence. In some of my work I try to undermine the conflicted relationship between neighboring territories, exacerbated by western involvement in these areas, by making visible the porosity between lands, identities, cultures, etc. Not in a nostalgic way, but rather in thinking about the vernacular and the past as a way forward.

The performance troupe consists of two dancers or *shushis* wearing tall, palm leaf hats, and carrying a frond in each hand. Like *vejigantes* in Puerto Rican folk, the *shushis* represent the ungovernable self. They move in a stylized way amongst the other characters and spectators, occasionally bursting into a chase with anyone staring too much and swatting them with the palm fronds. There is also a camel being led by a herder and his son, and the character wearing a tensed black fabric mask and carpet on its back is a horse. Another character is the lion, but in this performance it's been replaced by a plastic-mask tiger. The lion represents the sun. The symbols, sun and lion, have been used interchangeably in Iran since the 12th century when an emblem combining the two was created. It was replaced after the Islamic revolution with the name of Allah, which you see on the flag today. Then there is the white bird, presumably a crane or seagull, and another character called *shia-poosh*, which I wasn't able to decipher.

CT: You often speak of the importance of making images and recording memories that may not otherwise be perceived or even conceived. What ethics of looking do you bring to this endeavor? (How did you come to form the ethics of looking necessary for such an endeavor, one that at once highlights specificities without sensationalizing difference?)

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AF: I see art making as a way to expand knowledge. My work is driven by a desire to experience and excavate aspects of culture that I feel steered away from by a growing valorization of western logic coupled with religious fundamentalism. I feel a responsibility in making such practices visible, thus revealing attitudes against diversity and queerness.

CT: There is a horizon line that seems to provide a formal balance to almost all the aforementioned sequences in the film, whether in the half-pink room, or of course on the shore, or again at the foot of the mountains. What are some of the formal anchors onto which you relied to bring together your myriad material?

AF: Just as you mentioned, the horizon gives continuity to the sinuous material in the film. It was also a sort of understated way of pointing to the location of the film on the other side of the horizon, from where it premiered in Sharjah—that is, across the Strait of Hormuz.

CT: Your desire to draw direct attention to the entangled history between Iran and the Gulf within the space of the Biennial was made evident by the translation of this horizon line in the projection room where your film premiered.

AF: The use of the horizon was also an intuitive and natural way to communicate what I was trying to do in Qeshm. I don't speak Farsi and the people of Qeshm don't speak Arabic, with the exception of a couple of the elder fishermen. So placing the camera down in front of the sea where the fishermen convene was how I asked to film. I then did this repeatedly wherever I was taken.

CT: Including indoors? This horizon line repeats in the two indoor scenes in the film, the trance scene and the dance scene, also linking indoor and outdoor spaces.

AF: Indoors as well. I met Farzad buying a watermelon. He saw me struggling to count the money I had and figured I wasn't from the island. He asked what I was doing and I signaled that I was filming by holding up an invisible camera. He somehow managed to say his father spoke Arabic and offered to help. We exchanged phone numbers and later that night he sent me a video of him dancing in a room much like in *At the Time of the Ebb*. I thought it was a strange thing to send someone you just met and became unsure about working with him. The next morning, he showed up and tagged along all day and again in the days that followed. He knew Baba Gholam, the owner of the house with the pink room where I filmed the indoor scenes—everyone knew everyone—and at some point he got in front of the camera while we were all in the next room having tea and began shimmying. He'd been wanting to dance for the camera the whole time. I later understood that dancing for guests was a form of hospitality, and remembered it was also something practiced in the Gulf before the advent of oil and modernity. I didn't have a script or strict idea of what I was there to film. I was interested in learning and being shown, and with that, remembering.

Tang Clara,
“In Lieu of What Was, Alia Farid”,
asiaartpacific, issue 116,
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IN LIEU OF WHAT WAS
ALIA FARID

REVIEWS BY CLARA TANG FROM NOV/DEC 2019

ALSO AVAILABLE IN: 中文

Installation view of **ALIA FARID**'s “In Lieu of What Was,” at Portikus, Frankfurt, 2019. Photo by Diana Pfammatter. Courtesy the artist.

As teenage environmental activist Greta Thunberg sailed across the North Atlantic Ocean to the United Nations Climate Action summit on a zero-emissions yacht, and the burning Amazon forest dominated news headlines in August, the climate crisis loomed large in global political and social arenas. A small exhibition at Portikus, in Frankfurt, offered another glimpse into the dire environmental consequences of unchecked human activity in a different corner of the world. “In Lieu of What Was” showcased Alia Farid’s recent sculpture series, and marked the beginning of the artist’s research project, in cooperation with Portikus and Frankfurt’s Städelschule, on the exploitation of the remaining natural resources in the Arabian Gulf.

Installed in the middle of a sparse, lofty hall, the display comprised five giant fiberglass sculptures shaped like various water vessels. A vase-shaped *zamzamiya* (used for carrying holy water from the Zamzam well in Mecca), a generic plastic bottle, an amphora-like *jarrah*, a Kuwaiti water tower, and a *heb* (an evaporative cooling system used to desalinate water) towered over visitors in the space. Circling the voluminous objects, one discovered a small sink built into a side of each sculpture’s stained resin surface, revealing the original purpose of the molds. They are used for making large public drinking fountains in an assortment of architectural or vessel shapes in Kuwaiti cities—an aesthetic and functional update to the traditional village well. Called *sabil* (Arabic for “path”), the large fountains are often paid for by families to honor the deceased.

Water, or the lack of it, is one of Farid’s ongoing research subjects. In her native Kuwait, where the resource is limited, drinking water is mainly obtained through the extraction of groundwater and the desalination of seawater. In 1965, in order to modernize the country’s water supply system, a Swedish company was commissioned to build “mushroom” towers to store water. Their recognizable shape was then adopted for drinking fountains and subsequently one of Farid’s resin sculptures in the show. While the Kuwaiti fountains add dashes of color to the urban landscape—travelers might find bright green or blue-and-white-striped water containers along the road—Farid’s sand-colored iterations look like desolate remnants of a once lively water-distribution system. They seem to foreshadow an ill-fated future of drought that hangs over the Kuwaiti consciousness as the problems of unsustainable demand, limited supply, and the enormous environmental and financial costs of investing fossil fuels in water distillery become ever harder to ignore.

Hung outside the exhibition hall, above the staircase to the upper floor, was a poster of a water buffalo, which I dismissed at first glance as an advertisement for another event. The poster ostensibly depicts a step-by-step visual instruction on drawing a buffalo in black outlines, with each new body part marked in red. However, viewing from left to right—as visitors would instinctively do in contexts where the Latin alphabet is used—the order of images is reversed. Rather than the addition of body parts, one sees the buffalo lose one leg, then the body, and finally the face. This erasure is also apparent in online press materials, where these images form an animated gif of the disappearing animal. This work alludes to the dwindling population of water buffalos in southern Iraq, where their natural habitat has diminished tremendously in recent years due to drought and the systematic, large-scale draining of the area’s marshlands.

Farid’s exhibition was a bleak take on the significance of water monuments and mismanagement of the resource in regions off the map of current international reporting on the global environmental crisis. Unfortunately, from what I witnessed, few visitors stayed long enough to take in Farid’s examination of the massive water shortage in desert countries, precipitated by habitual overconsumption of natural assets. As I exited the building, thoughts on the distant issue were quickly drowned out by the strong burbling currents of the Main River passing around Portikus’s site in the center of Frankfurt, the city with the fifth-largest carbon footprint in Germany.

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Malek Caline,
"Sharjah Biennial,
Enriching the Gulf's
cultural discourse",
ARAB NEWS, June 13, 2019

Enriching the Gulf's cultural discourse

The Emirati event is cementing its position as a top-tier showcase for contemporary local and international art

Caline Malek Dubai

Sharjah's reputation as a regional art hub and capital of culture is founded on a lengthy list of institutions, museums and events.

One of the most prominent, the Sharjah Biennial, is considered a critical resource for artists and cultural organizations in the Gulf. After supporting local and international contemporary artists in their work for three consecutive months since March 7, Sharjah Biennial 14 came to a close this week.

"Nothing beats international art in a cultural location," Rowdha Alsayegh, an Emirati cultural conceptual photographer, told Arab News. "I built my passion for art in Sharjah, and I owe it my growth," she added as one of the biggest art events in the Arab world concluded in the emirate. "The biennial is a unique event that serves both the vision of Sharjah and the goals of emerging and international artists."

Alsayegh, who considers the UAE's culture a piece of art in itself, sees the country's art market as constantly growing. "I became an artist because my culture truly inspired me, and this love we carry for it will make art reach greater heights," she said. "But there's always room for improvement. With art, you can't just say you're the best version of yourself. You should always keep growing."

Alsayegh expects to see more growth in the Gulf. "It's very important for us to participate in such events, to be out there and see exhibits when international artists come to our doorstep, because it's an easy way for us to learn," she said. "As artists we learn daily, and when we grow we make art in the country grow. After all, what is an artist without art?"

Established in 1993 and handed over to the Sharjah Art Foundation in 2009, the Sharjah Biennial has grown into a reliable showcase for local, regional and international developments in contemporary art.

Above: "At the Time of the Ebb," by Kuwaiti artist Alia Farid. Supplied

Left: Latin American artist Adriana Bustos. Supplied

It is "one of the top tiers of biennials globally, and is the largest such platform in the Middle East and South Asia," said Omar Kholeif, who was a co-curator with Zoe Butt and Claire Tancons of Sharjah Biennial 14.

"The exhibition encompassed the work of many Middle Eastern artists, arguably offering a platform for the dissemination of, and critical engagement with, their work," he told Arab News.

"But it was also important for the artist and audience community within the region to encounter art from all around the world." Kholeif was recently appointed director of collections and senior curator of the Sharjah Art Foundation.

The biennial strives to be one of the most vibrant platforms for presenting contemporary art globally. Alia Farid, originally from Kuwait, is one of the many artists who took part in this year's biennial.

She believes the idea is to present works that challenge the expectations of art and encourage critical and aesthetic thinking.

"The Sharjah Biennial doesn't prioritize by ethnicity. For Arab artists just like the rest, it's a huge honor to be invited to exhibit based on merit and the quality of one's work," she said. "The (Sharjah Art) Foundation is truly an exceptional art institution in the region. It has an attentive and inspired team who do everything in their capacity to help participating artists achieve the desired outcomes."

Farid's work included a video shot in Qeshm, an Iranian island across the sea from the UAE and Oman, where the Gulf and Iran come closest.

Entitled "At the Time of the Ebb," the idea for the film came from a desire to lessen feelings of estrangement between the neighbors. "Qeshm is a very unique place, and a threshold between the Gulf countries and Persia. Its inhabitants wear the same garb as Arabs from the Gulf do, and there are many common musical elements," she said. "At the same time, they speak Farsi, the island belongs to Iran, and their economic situation is markedly different."

Beyond the music and performance art of Qeshm, "At the Time of the Ebb" also explores the contentious relationship between the Gulf countries and Iran.

The Sharjah Art Foundation "encourages cultural discourse in a region long known for little more than generating oil revenue," Farid said. "It recently began adding historical buildings to its core Al-Mureijah Square venue, in an effort to help tell the multiplicity of stories connected with the emirate and its neighbors. Artists are concerned with making work that transforms the perception of viewers. There's a lot of really good work coming from Egypt, Lebanon and parts of the Gulf. It's important for artists to have the support of patrons and institutions to be able to make substantial contributions. It would also be great to see more research and production grants being offered by Gulf patrons."

Sharjah Biennial 14 attracted artists from near and far.

One of them was Shiraz Bayjoo, a 40-year-old, UK-based artist originally from Mauritius. The subject of his film "Ile de France," shown at the biennial, was the dark history of the Indian Ocean island, with its ruins of European colonial settlements, and a population comprising descendants of Indian Muslims and people from Africa brought there as slaves or indentured laborers.

Kuwaiti artist Alia Farid. Supplied

"My film explores this environment that shifts, where they fit today in relation to their class and race, and how that kind of history still plays out in terms of our psyche and how we imagine ourselves," Bayjoo told Arab News. "Acts of conservation, regardless of the location, are important from the standpoint of understanding each other's past." Bayjoo sees the Sharjah Biennial as the most significant art event globally after Venice. "It's very important that we have this in the Middle East and on the African continent as well," he said.

"If we link these spaces together, it really shifts the center away from just being a Euro-centric conversation. The artists brought together this year as part of Zoe Butt's curation constitute a majority voice of Global South artists. For it to be represented in the Middle East, instead of in Europe or North America, is really significant."

Another participant from afar, Latin American artist Adriana Bustos, told Arab News that her presence in the biennial is an "extraordinary opportunity" to get acquainted with the Middle East's art scene.

"I see it as an incipient dialogue between the Middle East and Latin America that's beginning to exist," she said.

"Although there are some international art fairs that give visibility to artistic practices from one side of the planet and the other, biennials … offer a platform of great value to know regional discourses."

She described her interactions with other artists and their productions as her most valuable experience of Sharjah Biennial 14.

"I was able to see that my work is part of a much larger text than the production itself," she said. "I had the chance to see brilliant artworks by brilliant artists from the Middle East, and a very active, mature and growing art scene."

Her views are echoed by Kholeif, who says he was a fan and a regular visitor before he was made a co-curator of Sharjah Biennial 14.

"With a real focus on putting artists from the Global South into the conversation, it has been an exhilarating experience to watch the Sharjah Biennial grow year after year," he said.

"I see the event as continuing to be a site of discovery of Middle Eastern artists and their work … and a space to produce new ideas and knowledge for Middle Eastern artists. I see this happening through a process of commissioning that strongly aligns with the work of the biennial and the (Sharjah Art) Foundation."

FAST FACTS

- **The Sharjah Biennial was established in 1993.**
- **Sharjah is home to more than 20 museums.**
- **The emirate is known as a cultural hub in the Gulf.**
- **Sharjah was named UNESCO's Arab Capital of Culture in 1998.**
- **In 2019, UNESCO designated it the World Book Capital.**

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"Sharjah, caisse de resonance d'un Sud globalisé",
The Art Newspaper Édition française, numéro 7, April 2019

Biennale

Alia Farid, *At the Time of the Ebb*, vidéo, production XIVe Biennale de Sharjah, « Look for Me All Around You », 2019.
Courtesy de l'artiste

SHARJAH, CAISSE DE RÉSONANCE D'UN SUD GLOBALISÉ

Otobong Nkanga et Emeka Ogboh, *Aging Ruins Dreaming Only to Recall*

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"Sharjah, caisse de resonance d'un Sud globalisé",
The Art Newspaper Édition française, numéro 7, April 2019

Aux Émirats arabes unis, la Biennale de Sharjah offre la vision d'un monde complexe à travers les regards de trois commissaires.

SHARJAH. Des danseurs sur une plage, leurs visages grimés de blanc avec de hautes coiffes de paille, manipulent des palmes avec des mouvements gracieux ; un enfant enturbanné guide un chameau doté de jambes humaines ; un homme-oiseau tournoie devant les vagues. Le Nouvel An des pêcheurs de l'île de Qeshm, en Iran, est rapproché d'un intérieur traditionnel du Golfe pour évoquer des rites éternels liés au cycle des saisons. Il s'agit d'une vidéo d'Alia Farid, artiste koweïto-portoricaine née en 1985, l'une des œuvres les plus réussies de cette nouvelle édition de la Biennale de Sharjah, une manifestation où l'on découvre toujours des artistes peu vus ailleurs.

La nuit dense du désert occupe cette année une place particulière dans la Biennale, plusieurs œuvres n'étant visibles qu'au coucher du soleil.

Comme dans beaucoup de biennales aujourd'hui, il n'y a pas un mais plusieurs commissaires, pas un collectif, mais trois personnalités que Hoor al-Qasimi, fille de l'émir de Sharjah et initiatrice très engagée de cet événement depuis une dizaine d'années, a réunies pour l'occasion. Ils ont ensemble défini un thème qui résonne avec cette pluralité : « *Leaving the Echo Chamber* ». Puis ils ont chacun apporté leurs réponses distinctes à ce sujet, en résonance les unes avec les autres, à travers trois plateformes lisibles – on reconnaît facilement leurs goûts respectifs.

Le thème est à la fois assez précis pour suggérer différentes approches curatoriales et assez large pour offrir une vision d'un monde contemporain ouvert et multiple. Dans un bel accrochage au musée des beaux-arts, Omar Kholeif, commissaire international ayant occupé de nombreux postes, notamment à la Whitechapel Gallery de Londres et au Museum of Contemporary Art de Chicago, s'est d'abord penché sur les histoires enfouies d'un passé récent. Il montre dans une enfilade de salles des œuvres abstraites du peintre indien Anwar Jalal Shemza datant des années 1960, une série de tableaux de la même époque de l'artiste turque Semiha Berksoy, des toiles du Syrien Marwan et une microrétrospective de la Libanaise Huguette Caland – dont on voudrait beaucoup voir, en France aussi, le travail plein de liberté et d'humour. Entre abstraction et figuration, la peinture du Portugais Bruno Pacheco est comme un juste contrepoint contemporain à cet ensemble.

***Aging Ruins Dreaming Only to Recall the Hard Chisel from the Past*, 2019, installation lumineuse multi-écrans, sculpture, vue de l'installation, XIVe Biennale de Sharjah, production Sharjah Art Foundation.**
Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation

UNE IMAGE DU MONDE D'AUJOURD'HUI

Après ce socle historique, dans l'autre volet de son projet « Making New Time », Omar Kholeif donne une vision du monde contemporain un peu plus attendue, avec une installation du Syrien Hrair Sarkissian sur des oiseaux menacés d'extinction, un hommage du Chilien Alfredo Jaar à trente-trois femmes exceptionnelles, et encore une chanson de la pluie composée en plein air par les artistes nigérians Otobong Nkanga et Emeka Ogboh dans l'une des cours intérieures de la vieille ville reconstruite – Otobong Nkanga est d'ailleurs la lauréate du prix de la Biennale. Ce paysage sonore, où des bassins d'eau salée dessinent comme des cratères dans le sable, est un peu écrasé par la lumière du midi, et prend toute son ampleur dans celle du soir.

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Laster Paul,
"Jameel Arts Centre Spearheads a New Era of Critical-Mindedness for Dubai",
Galerie, November 16, 2018

Galerie

Jameel Arts Centre Spearheads a New Era of Critical-Mindedness for Dubai

The new arts space, the city's first free, non-governmental contemporary art institution, is worthy of international embrace

by PAUL LASTER
NOVEMBER 16, 2018

Already celebrated for its international art and design scene, Dubai now has yet another reason to be added to your culture map of meaningful destinations. With this week's launch of the Jameel Arts Centre, the city gained its first free, non-governmental contemporary art institution, which—both from a design perspective and new art context—is worthy of international embrace.

A 10,000-square-meter, three-story cluster of smartly designed rectangular structures, the center boasts ten galleries, seven desert gardens, a rooftop terrace, a waterfront sculpture park and the Gulf region's first open-access ar library, along with the customary café and bookstore. The opening programming is equally as impressive, with four solo shows, a group exhibition examining the impact of oil on the region and several site-specific installations and commissions.

"Over the past 15 years Dubai has established itself as an international art market with galleries, fairs and auctions," Art Jameel director Antonia Carver told *Galerie* on opening day. "Now we're going into a new era when it will become known for critically minded, thought-provoking exhibitions and the market will be balanced by an interest in arts education and institution building."

Designed by the UK-based Serie Architects, the plan for the building was inspired by the traditional architectural forms of Emirati housing, where a series of rooms are built around a courtyard to create shade and comfort. It's divided into two wings—the first for galleries and the second for offices—and wrapped by a shaded colonnade that defines the site. Primarily constructed from concrete, the building is clad in vertical, white-painted aluminum panels, which delineate the surface and add visual volume to the overall structure. Meanwhile, landscape architect Anouk Vogel's enchanting desert gardens, visible from indoors and out, magically mixes the viewing of art with a look at the indigenous nature.

The Jaddaf Waterfront Sculpture Park, created by UAE-based architecture studio ibda design, provides another 5,000 square-meters of usable space, which features an amphitheater for programming and sites for a rotating display of public artworks. The art collective Slavs and Tatars' 2012 sculpture *Molla Nasreddin: The Antimodern*, which depicts the 13th Turkish philosopher riding backwards into the future on a donkey, is a one of the standout works in the initial presentation, while Daan Roosegaarde's immersive light installation, *Waterlicht*, kicked off the first performance in the bayside park on opening night.

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Installation view of *Contrary Life: A Botanical Light Garden Devoted to Trees* by Ali Farid and Aseel AlYaqoub
Photo: Courtesy of Jameel Arts Centre

Two of the commissions are also outdoors. Shaikha Al Mazrou's *Green House: Interior yet Exterior, Manmade yet Natural* (2018), consisting of a segmented glass greenhouse with an absence of actual vegetation, occupies the site of a desert garden. And on the roof terrace, Alia Farid and Aseel AlYaqoub's installation *Contrary Life: A Botanical Light Garden Devoted to Trees* (2018) employs plastic light-covered trees, which the artists designed as hybrids and had fabricated in China, to comment on the Gulf region's trend of replacing the real with the artificial and making nightlife more seductive with bright lights.

In the galleries, the first solos in the Artist's Room series include Mounira Al Solh's embroidered fabric collages documenting the stories of refugees in Lebanon and Europe and Chiharu Shiota's installation of an old wooden boat. Sourced from the nearby Jaddaf boatyard, the vessel is immersed in a web of blood-red yarn that metaphorically connects Japanese and Middle Eastern cultures across time and space.

Crude, the oil-themed group exhibition organized by independent curator Murtaza Vali, features work in a variety of media by 17 established and emerging artists, who explore oil as an agent of social, cultural and economic change. Manal AlDowayan's photos of pioneering Saudi Arabian oil company employee's archives documented in their home offices are shown alongside video interviews relating the poverty and racial discrimination that they had to overcome. Commenting on consumerism in the oil-rich countries, a seminal piece by Hassan Sharif offers a giant mound of petro-derivative, plastic flip-flops, which are cut, folded, and bound in copper wire, thus rendering them useless.

Monira Al Qadiri similarly uses appropriation in her work in the show. Enlarging industrially produced oil drill heads, she casts them in fiberglass and then spray paints them (both petroleum-based products) to poetically turn these destructive tools of the planet into colorful giant blooms. An artist with a growing following, Al Qadiri was also commissioned to provide works for the 2018 visual campaign of this week's Abu Dhabi Art, making her work even more visible throughout the Gulf region.

Along with the venerable Sharjah Art Foundation and Alserkal Avenue's newer Concrete space (it opened in 2017), which was designed by Rem Koolhaas' Office for Metropolitan Architecture, the Jameel Arts Centre has much to offer by way of contemporary art.

Carver strongly summed up the mission when she told visitors on opening day, "We are here because we want to have a maximum impact in a global city with a global public and to contribute to a local scene." With this initial round of shows, it's surely on its way.

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Brito Daniella,
“Alia Farid: Museums aren’t accurate”,
Contemporary &,
November 6, 2018

12th Gwangju Biennale

Alia Farid: Museums aren’t very accurate

Imagined Borders, the title of South Korea’s 2018 Gwangju Biennale, has enabled a diverse dialogue on the political, social, and cultural significance of borders to today’s globalized world, addressing questions of national identity, Western imperialism, and the politics of displacement and migration. Participating Kuwaiti-Puerto Rican artist Alia Farid, in her solo exhibition Between Dig and Display, presents a selection of documentation found in the storage basement of the never completed Kuwait National Museum. With C&’s Daniella Brito, Farid discusses historical memory and a nation-building project in relation to her own identity formation.

BY DANIELLA BRITO
Tuesday November 6th, 2018

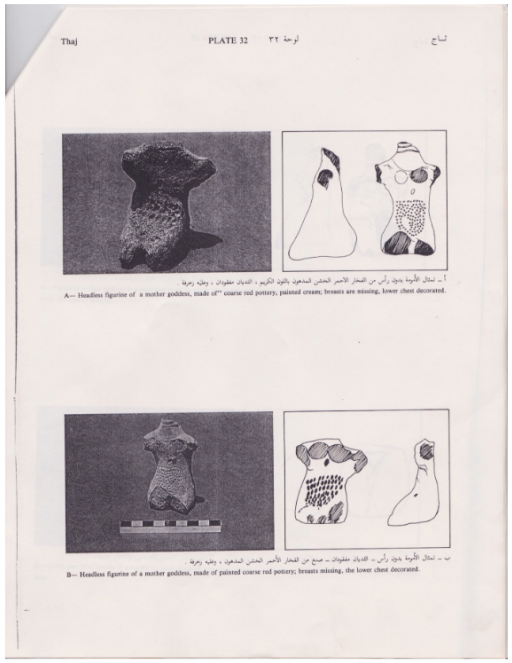
Alia Farid, Installation view “Between Dig and Display”, Gwangju Biennale 2018, Imagined Borders. Image Courtesy of Gwangju Biennale Foundation

Contemporary And: As an artist who splits her time between the Caribbean and the Middle East, how do the borders and geographies you traverse inform your art practice?

Alia Farid: My work is an effort to make visible how these ostensibly different parts of the world are actually not so dissimilar. So that instead of being identified as an artist who splits her time between the Caribbean and the Middle East, I’m an artist from the Global South whose work is interested in structures of power, in how power is represented in the urban milieu, and in achieving sovereignty.

C&: How do the documents you have chosen for *Between Dig and Display* present a state narrative? What narratives do you seek to tell through these documents?

AF: The documents I’ve chosen to present tell the history of Kuwait through the story of the Kuwait National Museum. Through the documentation around that project, the objective of which was to give a coherent picture of the landscape and its contents, we learn about its failure and how the museum never fulfilled the ambitions of either its builder or his clients. This stunted project is the nation-building example par excellence for showing how the short-lived modern era in Kuwait was purely symbolic.



Alia Farid, Between Dig and Display, 2017. Digital prints and pamphlet. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès, Paris

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Brito Daniella,
"Alia Farid: Museums aren't accurate",
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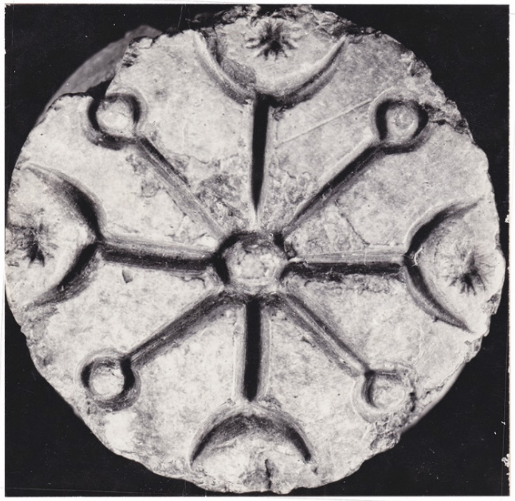
C&: How do you interpret the role of museums in preserving a country's national identity?

AF: I don't think they do this in a very accurate way. They tend to be top-down impositions of a national identity, often over-simplified and exclusionary. Kuwait has a very unique history in the sense that it went from being a mud city to a modern city in the span of twenty years with the discovery of oil in 1938. The first Kuwait National Museum was established in 1957 inside what used to be the Khazal Palace, but the second version, designed by Michel Écochard in the early 1960s, was a giant project intended to position Kuwait as a modern country in the eyes of the international media. It was more of a façade institution than anything else.

C&: Can you describe the process of assembling and archiving in *Between Dig and Display*? In your solo exhibition in Paris, you juxtapose autobiographical documents alongside national archives. What is the significance of this?

AF: I would consider my practice as not only interested in history but in the way history is written – so it is a historiographic investigation. I relate the history of the museum to my own upbringing and I mix or combine records from the storage basement of the museum with records or artifacts belonging to my own past, with the idea that at different scales we're all trying to achieve the same thing, which is self-representation. Just as the museum might amass a collection of objects in an attempt to articulate its own coming to being, I have a series of artifacts in my memory.



Alia Farid, Between Dig and Display, 2017. Digital prints and pamphlet. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès, Paris

I grew up in a modernist housing complex called Aisha Salem designed by the Greek architect George Candilis not far from the Kuwait National Museum. While I was in Paris, digging up the museum's architectural plans at la Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine/Centre d'archives d'architecture du XX^{e} siècle, I stumbled upon the records of George Candilis – he had an office in Paris, and so his archives were also in the space. I found it really interesting and serendipitous that when I was looking for material on the Kuwait National Museum I had come across Candilis' archives and found plans for the housing complex in which I grew up. So for that exhibition in Paris, for that iteration, I combined these two histories.

The 12th Gwangju Biennale Exhibition: Imagined Borders continues in Gwangju, South Korea through November 11, 2018.

***Alia Farid** (b. 1985) lives and works in Kuwait and Puerto Rico, countries she is both from and whose complex colonial histories she reveals through drawings, objects, spatial installations and film. She has a Bachelor of Fine Arts from la Escuela de Arts Plasticas de Puerto Rico (San Juan), a Master of Science in Visual Studies from the Visual Arts Program at MIT (Cambridge, MA), and a Master of Arts in Museum Studies and Critical Theory from the Programa d'Estudis Independents at MACBA (Barcelona).*

***Daniella Brito** is an interdisciplinary artist and writer based in New York City. She currently studies art history at Oberlin College.*

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Azimi Roxana,
“La mémoire du Koweït s’expose à Paris”,
Le Monde, August 28, 2017

M le style l’époque

M LE MAG › ACTU › REPORTAGES / ENQUÊTES PORTRAITS FOCUS CHRONIQUES EN IMAGE

La mémoire du Koweït s’expose à Paris

Partant d’archives, la plasticienne Alia Farid redonne vie, à la Galerie Imane Farès, au Musée national du Koweït qui fut bombardé et pillé en 1991.

M le magazine du Monde | 28.08.2017 à 14h49 |

Par Roxana Azimi

Le musée national du Koweït, construit en 1960, est une institution historique, le tout premier du genre dans le golfe Arabo-Persique. Un symbole de modernité, imaginé par l’architecte et urbaniste français Michel Écochard. L’artiste koweïtienne Alia Farid est née en 1985, six ans avant qu’il ne soit bombardé et pillé lors de l’invasion irakienne. Après la guerre, cet emblème national est entré dans un interminable processus de reconstruction. Exposée à la galerie Imane Farès, la plasticienne y présente un travail autour du musée, composé de photos d’archives conservées dans les sous-sols du bâtiment, de planches archéologiques, mais aussi d’œuvres personnelles.

Tout commence en 2014. La jeune femme, architecte de formation, est chargée par le Conseil national pour les arts et les lettres d’assurer le commissariat de la participation koweïtienne à la Biennale de Venise d’architecture. Plutôt que d’encenser les constructions nouvelles de la pétromonarchie, elle décide d’appeler à valoriser ce musée, qu’elle n’a jamais vu ouvert et dont la rénovation altère l’héritage moderniste. Esclandres en interne. *« On m’a dit : “Vous nous avez fait mauvaise presse.” Pas parce que j’étais critique, mais parce que le projet que je proposais à Venise n’était pas assez clinquant »*, se souvient-elle.

« Un bazar total »

Le scandale vénitien passé, elle poursuit ses investigations à Paris, et consulte les archives d’Écochard à la Cité de l’architecture. Et de s’interroger : quel sens ce musée revêt-il dans un contexte où la représentation humaine est bannie par les sociétés musulmanes, ou tout bonnement détruite par l’État islamique ? En 2016, elle obtient des autorités koweïtiennes l’autorisation de pénétrer dans le chantier et de fouiller ses sous-sols poussiéreux. *« C’était un bazar total, pas du tout archivé, rempli de choses hétéroclites qui n’ont pas été triées, sans lumière ni ventilation. »*

Lire aussi : Sélection galeries : Alia Farid et Eva Nielsen à Paris

Au début, on ne lui accorde que trois jours de recherche, sous la surveillance rapprochée d’un gardien du musée. Elle en obtient finalement sept pour débroussailler la masse d’œuvres et d’images. *« Et encore, ce n’était pas suffisant. Je n’ai même pas réussi à scanner un tiers de ce qu’il y a là-bas »*, soupire-t-elle. Après avoir montré une partie des archives à la galerie, elle dit vouloir clore ce chapitre. Jusqu’à nouvel ordre.

« Between Dig and Display. Alia Farid », Galerie Imane Farès, 41, rue Mazarine, Paris 6e. Tél. : 01-46-33-13-13. Jusqu’au 18 septembre. www.imanefares.com

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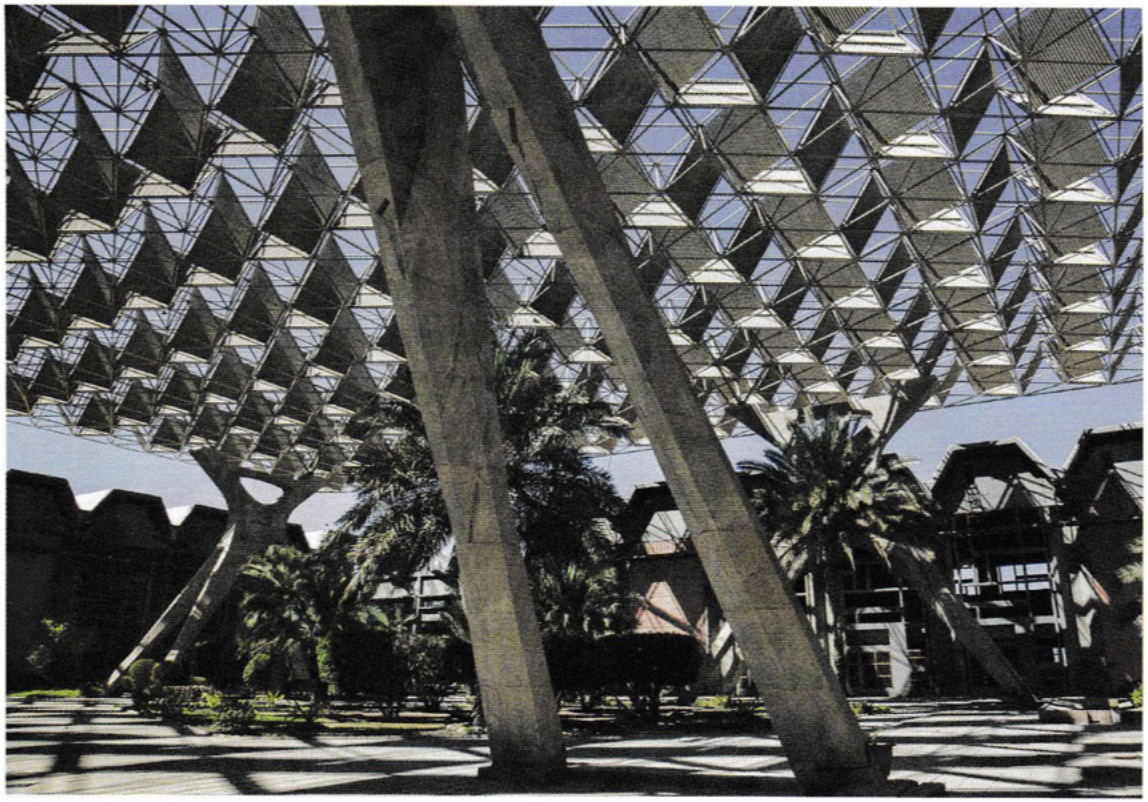
Trétiack Philippe,
“On achève bien les musées”,
Beaux Arts Magazine,
Architecture, p. 24

Architecture

PAR PHILIPPE TRÉTIACK



A la galerie Imane Farès, Alia Farid [à droite] ressuscite à sa façon les fantômes du musée national du Koweït, dont on voit ici l'atrium. Il fut construit par le Français Michel Écochard au début des années 1960.

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ON ACHÈVE BIEN LES MUSÉES

Du Koweït au Soudan, en passant par le Kurdistan irakien, une frénésie muséale s'est emparée du monde au XXIe siècle. À Paris et à Genève, deux expositions interrogent cette course aux projets architecturaux, dont certains n'ont jamais vu le jour.

Le musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Genève expose une sélection remarquable de 16 musées du XXIe siècle. En cours de réalisation dans certaines parties du monde hier encore extérieures à la scène artistique, tels que le Soudan, le Kurdistan irakien ou la Tasmanie, ils permettent de mesurer l'étendue de la palette formelle dont usent aujourd'hui les concepteurs. Dans le même temps, à Paris cette fois, la plasticienne Alia Farid se penche sur le musée national du Koweït, qui fut construit par le Français Michel Écochard au début des années 1960 dans la capitale de l'État pétrolier. Institution à l'ambition contrariée, il demeura clos. La première guerre du Golfe, en 1991, les bombardements, les pillages eurent raison de ses collections et d'une partie de ses murs. Des travaux de restauration achevèrent d'en dénaturer le style.

Alia Farid, née d'un père koweïtien et d'une mère portoricaine, et familière à ce titre de va-et-vient entre le désert et les îles, expose aujourd'hui les éléments que ce musée aurait pu exhiber si l'histoire n'en avait décidé autrement. En questionnant ainsi ce qui ne fut jamais, elle met en lumière l'un des ressorts fondamentaux de l'architecture : l'imaginaire qui accompagne tout projet, fût-il ou non concrétisé.

CE QUI CACHE ET CE QUI DOIT ÊTRE MONTRÉ

L'architecte Antoine Grumbach a résumé cela en une belle formule : « Entre la somme des espoirs placés par un concepteur dans un dessin et sa réalisation, la perte de sens est immense, mais que le bâtiment redevienne ruines et toutes les espérances premières reprendront vie. » Alia Farid le prouve. Elle va plus loin, puisqu'elle interroge aussi le rôle politique de l'architecture. « En osant édifier un musée d'art moderne, dit-elle, sans doute le Koweït avait-il anticipé une hypothétique démocratisation que l'évolution régionale ne pouvait accepter. » Restent alors les cartons enfouis dans les caves de ce musée avorté, les pièces accumulées par les archéologues, débris et chefs-d'œuvre qu'Alia Farid fait renaître sous forme d'artefacts : faux jerricans servant à transporter autant du pétrole que de l'eau bénite de La Mecque, voile féminin placé sous verre comme dans une mise en abyme de ce qui cache et doit être montré, photographies constructivistes de bâtiments érigés à Koweït City par le Français Georges Candilis, où l'artiste résida enfant… Aux cimaises de la galerie, l'architecture apparaît comme symptôme et stigmate de la société qui la produit. Elle résiste et accuse. Des musées exposés à Genève, combien connaîtront un sort identique ?

À VOIR

« Musées du XXIe siècle – Visions, ambitions, défis »
jusqu'au 20 août · musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Genève
2, rue Charles Galland · www.ville-geneve.ch

« Alia Farid – Between Dig and Display » jusqu'au 18 septembre · galerie Imane Farès · 41, rue Mazarine 75006 Paris · 01 46 33 13 13 · www.imanefares.com

Quilty Jim,
"Niemeyer's Tripoli remains return",
The Daily Star, October 1, 2016

AGENDA

LEBANON

PERFORMANCE

Turn Off the Light
STATION rooftop, Sin al-Fil
Oct. 1, 8:30 p.m.
Reservations: artistique.beyrouth@if-liban.com
Presented by La Folle journee street art, French crew Turn Off the Light will present a show with elements of DJ, dance and light calligraphy. Tickets LL15,000.

FILM

'Despair'
Metropolis Empire, Sofil
Oct. 1, 10 p.m.
www.metropoliscinema.net
As Nazism rises in 1930s Germany, Russian emigre and chocolate magnate Hermann Hermann goes slowly mad. It begins by sitting himself in a chair to watch himself making love to his wife, who is also sleeping with her cousin. When he meets Felix, a laborer whom he believes looks exactly like himself, he hatches a plot to free himself of his worries. Part of the Fassbinder mini-retrospective.

THEATER
'Cages'
Metro al-Madina, Hamra St.
Sunday and Monday evenings through Oct. 31, 9:30 p.m.
Reservations: 01-217-606
Directed and adapted for the stage by Lina Abyad, "Qafas" is based on Joumana Haddad's play-like novel which satirizes the female condition in Lebanon and the Arab world through five types of women. In Arabic.

PHOTOGRAPHY

'Clashing Realities'
Galerie Tanit
Through Nov. 5
01-562-812
Asking women to wear military uniforms for this portrait series, Lamia Maria Abillama has attempted to show the extent to which Lebanon's civil society has been affected by decades of brutal conflict.

TALK

'Making Movies Against the Odds'
Conf. A, Bldg. 37 (behind the Old Lee Observatory), AUB
Oct. 3, 5 p.m.

REVIEW

Niemeyer's Tripoli remains return

Farid's 'Maarad Trablous' debuts at the 32nd Sao Paulo Biennial

By Jim Quilty
The Daily Star


© Alia Farid

From "Maarad Trablous," 2016.

From "Maarad Trablous," 2016.

BEIRUT: Are there casual conversations about modernist architecture? As they take their daily constitutional on Ain al-Mreisseh's seaside Corniche, do Beirutis lament how the minimalist simplicity of the structure housing Artisanat du Liban came to be swathed in neo-orientalist kitsch?

What does kitsch-swathed modernism mean?

"Maarad Trablous," the understated new work by Kuwaiti-Puerto Rican artist Alia Farid, can easily be read as a conversation with modernism, albeit without dialogue.

Commissioned by the Fundacao Bienal de Sao Paulo, the piece is currently on show at the 32nd Sao Paulo Biennial, entitled "Live Uncertainty."

A few traces of Lebanon's brush with modernism still dot its landscape. The best-known agglomeration is Trablous' Permanent International Exhibition Center – later renamed the Rashid Karame International Fair, Maarad Trablous.

Wedged into the urban fabric like a booby trap, this largely disused, 10,000-hectare precis of Brazilian modernist architecture was designed in 1966 by Oscar Niemeyer, a true icon in the field, while he was in self-imposed exile from Brazil's 1964-85 military junta.

The Maarad's principal construction was mostly completed by 1974, but Lebanon's Civil War pre-empted its opening.

By the time the war ended 15 years later, the project's political impetus had been pulverized, along with any sense of public service.

If the Maarad is an artifact of a past vision of urban development conditioned by the public good, it was abandoned, unfinished.

Since then, the sheer incongruity of the space has tempted artists to create or exhibit contemporary art there. In this, it's not unlike Beirut's City Center Cinema, a giant concrete corn kernel elevated on a boxy plinth, one of the few modernist traces to survive Downtown's postwar reconstruction. Like the cinema, the Maarad often beggars the art it is meant to house – or which presumes to incorporate it.

Shot on the grounds of the Maarad in 2016, "Maarad Trablous" combines elements of performance and documentary film.

As it commences, the camera scrutinizes the site's "gateway arch," panning right to left, up and down its length. The fixed camera finds an unnamed young woman (Nowar Yusuf) standing alongside the structure, hands clasped and raised above her head as if to underline how the curve of the arch emulates the feminine form.

As the work proceeds, this feminine figure sometimes wanders into landscape shots of the Maarad.

Situated beneath an eye-shaped slit opening one of the site's elevated concrete surfaces, the camera (DP Mark Khalife) finds Yusuf's form skirting the edge of the opening.

The feminine form reappears at the top of the site's circular helicopter pad, where she walks in circles. Later still, while the camera gazes at the domed roof of Niemeyer's experimental theater, the female figure again appears, descending to walk a circuit around the dome.

At times it is her own form that is the subject. Laying facedown on one of the Maarad's prefabricated stones, she idly slaps its surface to ward off a bug scurrying across it. Rolling over on her back, she gazes up at the sun, closing one eye then the other like a child.

In counterpoint to her perambulations are the piece's documentary-style interludes. Nadim Mishlawi's electronic score falls away and the camera observes the Maarad's mundane daytime goings-on.

Clusters of women gesture in conversation as they walk brisk laps around the grounds. A laborer navigates his riding mower over a patch of grass, whose well-maintained manicure contrasts with some of the structures' scuffed concrete and drained reflecting pools.

Resplendent in a freshly laundered tracksuit, a senior citizen moves purposefully through the seating of the site's outdoor theater, the stiff soles of his running shoes sounding the beat of his progress.

As if to accentuate the contrast with these rituals of light exercise, Farid has her heroine repeat certain gestures – walking across the site, returning to the top of the theater's domed roof, again skirting the concrete concourse's eye-shaped gash – creating the impression of a phantom haunting the forms.

In her notes to "Maarad Trablous," Farid has said that the work sets out to create a dialogue between two spaces. One is the physically resilient, yet derelict, Trablous fairground, whose structures echo several of Niemeyer's formal gestures. The other is Ibirapuera, which hosts the Sao Paulo Biennial, the bustling urban park whose public art includes Niemeyer pieces.

The notes suggest that the female protagonist's "condition as a hollow vessel is both a symbol of hope and defeat. Past and present dissolve, leaving views and subject alike stranded, waiting for the future."

Such characterization acquires considerable resonance if members of the public are aware that Yusuf, the actor portraying the heroine, studied theater in Damascus – setting the modernist project against the ongoing Syrian conflict and refugee crisis. The absence of such knowledge, however, does nothing to undermine the work.

Having established her formal affinity to the Maarad's architecture, the narrative she enacts – wandering about Niemeyer's modernist forms as if in search of something or someone – is one of listlessness.

Inhabiting a derelict, formally modern space, she is a universal figure awaiting a canceled appointment.

The **Sao Paulo Biennial** continues at Ibirapuera Park through Dec. 11. For more, see www.biennialfoundation.org/biennials/sao-paolo-biennialy/.

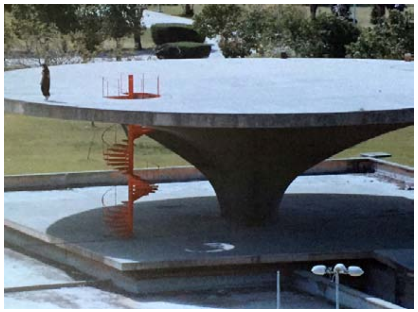
Azimi Roxana,
“La Biennale de São Paulo en prise avec les soubresauts du monde”,
Le Quotidien de l’Art, n° 1127, September 9, 2016

INCERTEZA VIVA – Pavilhão da Biennal, São Paulo
Jusqu’au 11 décembre

La Biennale de São Paulo en prise avec les soubresauts du monde

Tournée autour des inquiétudes qui secouent notre monde, la 32e édition de la Biennale de São Paulo, organisée jusqu’au 11 décembre, offre des pistes de réflexion et d’actions pour remettre notre planète d’équerre._*Par Roxana Azimi*

Jonathas de Andrade, *O Peixe*, 2016, film 16 millimètres.



Alia Farid, *Ma’arad Trabouls*, 2016. Courtesy Galerie Imane Farès, Paris.

— En ces temps troublés, les biennales ne peuvent plus se contenter de dresser l’état des lieux de l’art. Elles doivent se faire le miroir du monde. La 32e édition de la Biennale de São Paulo ne déroge pas à cette tâche en prenant un thème éloquent : « Vivre l’incertitude ». Qui sommes-nous, où allons-nous ? Quel sort réservons-nous à la planète ? Quel tour mutant donnons-nous à l’humanité ? Autant de questions qui agitent cette édition confiée au curateur allemand Jochen Volz. En vérité, agiter n’est pas le mot *ad hoc*. Car cette biennale crantée sur les questions anthropocènes se dérobe à l’agit-prop comme au pessimisme le plus bruyant. Ici, pas de roulements de tambour, pas de figure marxiste convoquée à la rescousse, nul slogan coup de massue. L’actualité brésilienne s’est certes invitée dans l’exposition, à travers les panneaux « Fora Temer » (dégage Temer), injonction adressée au président Michel Temer, successeur jugé illégitime de Dilma Rousseff. Pour autant, la Biennale ne succombe pas au danger de l’actualité à chaud ni aux bons sentiments. Les artistes conviés savent, pour la plupart, donner forme à leurs questionnements. Lauréate du Prix de la Fondation Prince Pierre de Monaco, Rosa Barba s’est attachée à tisser la polyphonie qui anime la ville de São Paulo en partant d’un principe salutaire : « *L’art n’existe que lorsque les gens le pratiquent* ». Autrement dit, lorsqu’il est ancré dans la vie, qu’il a le doigt sur le pouls du monde. Qu’il en dissèque le présent, sans ignorer le passé. Qu’il sait tisser des liens secrets, comme cette vidéo d’Alia Farid, qui dresse des parallèles tacites entre les ruines d’Oscar Niemeyer à Tripoli, au Liban, et celles de l’architecte brésilien qui parsème le grand parc d’Ibirapuera qui abrite le bâtiment de la Biennale. L’inventaire est l’une des formes de narration les plus prisées des artistes. On oubliera l’installation platement ethnographique de bâtons du Portoricain Michael Linares. Plus intéressante est la proposition de /...

ROSA BARBA S’EST ATTACHÉE À TISSER LA POLYPHONIE QUI ANIME LA VILLE DE SÃO PAULO EN PARTANT D’UN PRINCIPE SALUTAIRE : « *L’ART N’EXISTE QUE LORSQUE LES GENS LE PRATIQUENT* »

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“La Biennale de São Paulo en prise avec les soubresauts du monde”,
Le Quotidien de l’Art, n° 1127, September 9, 2016

LA BIENNALE DE SÃO PAULO EN PRISE AVEC LES SOUBRESAUTS DU MONDE

SUITE DE LA PAGE 05 la Britannique Ruth Ewan, qui, en se calant sur l’ancien calendrier révolutionnaire français, rappelle un temps où l’homme était en adéquation avec les saisons et les moissons, où la pastèque se mangeait en août et le potiron en septembre. C’était bien avant le grand chambardement instauré par une consommation vorace. Un big-bang dévastateur dont l’artiste

Pierre Huyghe, *De-Extinction*, 2016. Courtesy Galerie Marian Goodman (New York, Paris, Londres) et Galerie Esther Schipper (Berlin).

Rosa Barba, *Disseminate and hold*, 2016. Commande de la Fondation Prince Pierre de Monaco, XLVI[e] Prix international d’art contemporain.

allemande Rikke Luther a démonté les ressorts à travers sa longue fresque en céramique montrant, sur le mode de la bande dessinée, comment les nations ont détruit leur bien commun, à savoir la haute mer, l’Antarctique, l’atmosphère et le cosmos.

En réponse à une humanité qui a exploité la planète en défiant les autres espèces, Jonathas de Andrade propose d’imaginer de nouveaux rituels. Ainsi a-t-il proposé à des pêcheurs de l’État d’Alagoas, au Nordeste du Brésil, de serrer dans leurs bras les poissons qu’ils capturent, à la manière d’un être cher dont ils accompagneraient les derniers souffles par des caresses. Si certains toisent visiblement la caméra, d’autres ont pris ce nouveau rituel très à cœur, collant leur oreille pour saisir les dernières pulsations de leurs proies. Un moment de grâce et d’émotion comme on rêverait que l’art nous en réserve davantage. Justement, la Biennale en a plein sa musette. Parmi les points d’acmé de cette édition aussi fluide que structurée, le tout dernier film de Pierre Huyghe, *De-Extinction*, exploration d’un instant encapsulé dans un morceau d’ambre vieux de plusieurs millions d’années où se trouvent figés de drôles d’amants : un couple d’insecte saisi en pleine fornication, une histoire d’amour et de mort. De reproduction et de survie aussi, puisque l’artiste a laissé les descendants de cette espèce de mouches prospérer dans un espace vitré qu’ils ont colonisé au sein de la Biennale. La tension sexuelle est à l’œuvre sur un mode plus ironique que poétique dans le film *Bombom’s dream* de la danseuse argentine Cecilia Bengolea et de l’artiste britannique Jeremy Deller. Cette vidéo foutraque et syncopée aborde les questions de genres et de minorités, à travers des danses urbaines très érotisées. Le tout sous le regard impavide d’un iguane vert, tour à tour dindon de la farce et chœur de la tragédie.

Cecilia Bengolea & Jeremy Deller, *Bombom’s dream* (2016), vidéo. Commande de la Fondation de la Biennale de São Paulo et de la Hayward Gallery, Londres.

INCERTEZA VIVA, 32[e] ÉDITION DE LA BIENNALE DE SÃO PAULO, jusqu’au 11 décembre, Pavilhão da Biennal, Avenida Pedro Alvares Cabral, Parque Ibirapuera, Portão 3, São Paulo, Brésil, www.32bienal.org.br

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Marti Silas
"Four artists to see at the Sao Paulo biennial"
The Art Newspaper, International Edition, September 8, 2016

INTERNATIONAL EDITION
THE ART NEWSPAPER

Four artists to see at the São Paulo biennial

As the country faces political chaos, the long-running exhibition finds a patch of order with a garden theme

by SILAS MARTÍ | 8 September 2016

Alia Farid

Reminiscent of Rachel Rose's fusion with the surrounding environment, the Kuwaiti artist's film shows a woman wandering around Oscar Niemeyer's International Fair in Tripoli, Lebanon's northernmost city on the border with Syria. Those Modernist ruins, now caught in the tangles of yet another war, are brought back to São Paulo's Ibirapuera park, designed with a strikingly similar plan.

Alia Farid, Apoio/Support: Shrook Al Ghanim; Rana Sadik & Samer Younis; Galerie Imane Farès; marra.tein; Amer Huneidi; Mohammed Hafiz; Ziad Mikati

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Marti Silas,
“Deserto de Niemeyer”
Folha de S.Paulo, June 15, 2016

FOLHA DE S.PAULO
QUARTA-FEIRA, 15 DE JUNHO DE 2016 C1
ilustrada

Cena do filme de Alia Farid e, abaixo, vista da obra de Niemeyer

DESERTO DE NIEMEYER

Parque em ruínas construído pelo arquiteto no Líbano é cenário de filme sci-fi da artista Alia Farid, que vem à Bienal

SILAS MARTÍ
DE SÃO PAULO

Fotos Divulgação

Nenhuma babá, criança, jardineiro ou skatista ali ainda se espanta com os buracos de bala ao longo das paredes, nem com os vergalhões retorcidos que pendem do teto de um dos prédios, como nervos que se movem numa fratura exposta. Do outro lado do mundo, uma espécie de Ibirapuera encontrou sua ruína antes mesmo de ser inaugurado.

Oscar Niemeyer, morto aos 104, há quatro anos, construiu entre os anos 1960 e 1970 na cidade de Trípoli, no norte do Líbano, um conjunto arquitetônico que lembra o parque paulistano, além de outras estruturas que ecoam os contornos de Brasília, como as arcadas do Itamaraty.

Mas a guerra que explodiu ali em 1975 abortou o sonho de modernidade e acabou condenando os espaços fantásticos do arquiteto ao esquecimento —em vez de centro de convenções ou espaço para o que seria uma feira internacional, esse Ibirapuera libanês chegou a funcionar como uma base militar ao longo do conflito.

Em raros tempos de paz, virou um cenário para caminhadas, pista de skate e até arena para shows de rock. É essa vida entre ruínas modernas que inspirou um filme da artista kuwaitiana Alia Farid.

Ela passou meses no Líbano rodando uma espécie de ficção científica entre as curvas de Niemeyer no deserto. Quando estrear na próxima Bienal de São Paulo, em setembro, sua obra será uma espécie de espelho distorcido do Ibirapuera de verdade, onde acontece a mostra.

“Minha ideia é confundir os dois lugares”, diz Farid. “Há muitos elementos repetidos nos dois, além do fato de serem parques urbanos com inclinações culturais e lembrarem momentos dos nossos países em que se buscou uma certa modernidade.”

Esse “irmão árabe” do parque paulistano, nas palavras do curador da Bienal, Jochen Volz, também tem um pavilhão que serpenteia entre jardins, como a marquise do Ibirapuera, além de uma grande cúpula redonda, que lembra a Oca e serviu de caserna durante a guerra civil.

Há ainda um pórtico e estruturas mais esculturais que remetem ao Memorial da América Latina, outra obra de Niemeyer em São Paulo. É como se no Oriente Médio o arquiteto se sentisse à vontade para experimentar os elementos de seu vocabulário.

“Nenhuma de suas estruturas é fechada ou isolada do entorno, e é isso que eu acho interessante na obra dele, que é sempre espetacular e sensual”, diz Farid. “Não penso nele como um futurista. Ele é um vanguardista mais interessado no progresso que parte de um equilíbrio e da harmonia com esse terreno.”

AVESSO DA UTOPIA

No fundo, a artista retrata o avesso da utopia. Quando Niemeyer foi escalado pelo governo libanês para construir o parque de exposições, ele havia acabado de terminar as obras de Brasília. Sua arquitetura modernista, de formas curvilíneas e agarradas à natureza, seria uma chave potente para o futuro.

Mas essa ideia, tanto no Brasil quanto no Líbano, acabou se revelando um tanto frágil. Enquanto o golpe militar de 1964 levou ao exílio do arquiteto, a guerra civil no país árabe sepultou toda e qualquer promessa de vanguarda.

Niemeyer, no caso, é aqui um elo entre vontades distantes mas não distintas de um futuro calcado na ordem geométrica e no progresso mais que perfeito —e por isso mesmo um tanto impossível— vislumbrado pelo modernismo.

“É chocante ver a obra de um arquiteto como esses nesse estado de devastação”, diz Farid. “Mesmo assim, essa não é uma ruína total. A arquitetura se deteriorou com o tempo, mas existe uma vida que se mantém ali. Os jardins vêm sendo cuidados, e as pessoas não deixam de visitar esse lugar. Ele faz parte da vida.”

Tanto que seu filme contrapõe a presença fantasmagórica de uma bela mulher solitária, dando corpo à ideia de arquitetura, a pessoas que passeiam pelo parque, de jardineiros podando arbustos entre prédios arruinados a velhinhos em suas caminhadas.

Nesse sentido, a paralisia estranha dessas formas, como uma arquitetura congelada no tempo e flutuando sobre espelhos d’água sempre estorricados, parece desafiada pelo movimento de uma população já indiferente aos vestígios de brutalidade que se acumulam ali —das cadeiras empilhadas e em estado de putrefação nas salas vazias do centro de convenções às marcas dos fuzilamentos.

Mais impressionante dos espaços do filme, um anfiteatro com uma arquibancada de cadeiras brancas parece inverter o jogo na obra de Farid. Em vez de acomodar o público de algo a ser contemplado, elas mesmas viram objeto plástico, um elemento perturbador que está no centro de um espetáculo da destruição —são as sentinelas do que poderia ter sido e não foi.

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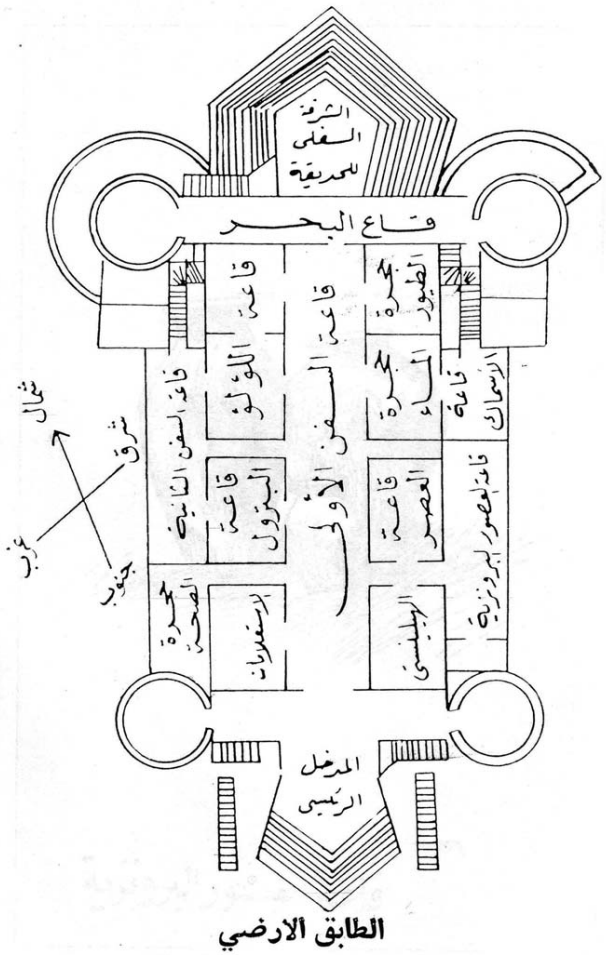
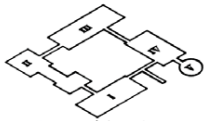
Farid Alia,
Curator's Statement:
Acquiring Modernity
Acquiring Meaning
2014



Ground-floor plan of the Kuwait National Museum, established in 1957 by Sheikh Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah in the former Diwan of Sheikh Khaz'al. Courtesy of NCCAL Archives.

Curator's Statement:
Acquiring Modernity, *Acquiring Meaning*

In response to the overarching theme of the 14th International Architecture Exhibition, *Absorbing Modernity,* the 2014 Kuwait Pavilion has been working under the reciprocal headline, *Acquiring Modernity*, with the objective of investigating the repercussions of commissioning architectural works towards the formation of the State. To help articulate the nation's history of modernization, our team has chosen to focus it's participation on the establishment of the Kuwait National Museum in 1957;[1] and through the envisaged program of its second, more modern iteration of 1960/1983[2] address a series of projects that were commissioned to function primarily as symbols of progress. The information gathered and compiled since the start of this project – presented through our website and in this publication – has been arranged in connection with the themes proposed for each of the buildings of the latter Museum compound:



Ambiguous in what they are meant to convey, the themes are testament that any attempt to establish order without the involvement of the communities being served can only ever succeed as a folly. The reclamation of the themes is an effort to generate meaning and restore a sense of ownership and feelings of responsibility over Kuwait's built environment. It is about questioning direction from those positioned above us – not out of rebellion, but in conversations halfway towards the production of healthy, functioning spaces.

Kuwait's 2014 participation at la Biennale di Venezia is artist-curated and researcher-informed. Comprised of various elements beyond the physical exhibition space, it includes a joint installation with the Nordic Pavilion and a film being produced inside of the Kuwait Pavilion, the Biennale, and in different locations around Kuwait and Venice throughout the duration of the show. It is an exercise at creating connections and exchanging representation. Convened to inform the project from multiple perspectives, our researchers hail from a range of disciplines including architecture, visual and performing arts, history, literature, theology, and filmmaking. The project is obsessively local and utterly informal despite its appearance at la Biennale; its highest aspiration is to influence authorities so that when the project returns from Venice, it will have found a place inside of the Kuwait National Museum as a sort of 'Special Projects' program, or research and documentation center.

At the inauguration of *Acquiring Modernity*, the 2014 Kuwait Pavilion team will restage the celebratory opening of the Kuwait National Museum. During the rest of the six-month exhibition, the team will continue developing their investigations concerning the role of the institution towards a more meaningful definition of its program(s), preferably in unison with the renovation efforts that began in April 2014 between the NCCAL and Pace[3] to resuscitate the currently underused building. Encouraging an expanded understanding of architectural heritage that is inclusive of modernist structures is also an important objective of this project. We ask ourselves, what is the future of heritage in Kuwait?

Acquiring Modernity is, on the one hand, an examination of the devastating side of affluence: it is a critical commentary on how, with the advent of oil, sensitivity and all sense of urgency was lost. On the other hand, it suggests a learning curve: "acquiring modernity" as in, acquiring an *understanding.* Kuwait's participation in Venice is only one moment of visibility in what is a larger project that aims to help restore rigorous cultural involvement in the country. Since its inception in the Fall of 2013, the project has grown to encompass 21 individuals engaged in diverse areas of research, fabrication and image-making: Aisha Alsager, Dana Aljouder, Sara Saragoça Soares, Hassan Hayat, Nesef Al Nesef, Noora Al Musallam, Amara Abdal Figueroa, Gráinne Hebeler, Abdullah AlHarmi, Samer

1. The first Kuwait National Museum was established in 1957 by Sheikh Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah in what used to be the Diwan of Sheikh Khaz'al, the former ruler of Muhammerah (now Iran), and a friend of Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah. In 2008, the Diwan and its sister building, the Palace, were acquired by the State of Kuwait in ruinous form after they were listed under the Kuwait Heritage Building Registrar as two of the nations most outstanding monuments. Leading their restoration up until March 2014 – when the project was handed over to the Amiri Diwan – was architect Evangelia Simos Ali. The plan is to turn the spaces into a cultural center, although what that actually entails is yet to be discovered.

2. In 1960, Kuwait launched an architectural competition for the design of its second National Museum. In 1961, French architect Michel Ecochard won, but his design was never completed until 1983. The design, though is internationally recognized as his masterpiece, is however, locally stigmatized and perceived as faulty. According to former Museum Director Dr. Fahad Al-Wohaibi, there were too many disputes as to what the role of the museum should be. Unresolved to this day, the Country has plans to build seven new museums and cultural centers in the coming years. Meanwhile, the Kuwait National Museum remains largely vacant and untended.

3. Pace is an architecture, engineering, design, and planning practice co-founded in Kuwait City in 1968 by Hamid Abdulsalam Shuaib and Sabah Al Rayes. Its portfolio includes over a thousand commercial, governmental, residential, recreational, and educational projects across the world and in collaboration with architects of international standing including TAC and Rifaat Chadirji.

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Alia Farid. *Princess Diana's anticipated visit to the Kuwait National Museum* (2014). Courtesy of the artist.

Mohammed, Nima Algooneh, Liane Al-Ghusain, Adel Al-Qattan, Wafa'a Al Fraheen, Dalal Al Sane, Noura Alsager, Maysaa Almumin, Ghazi Al-Mulaifi, Cherihan Nasr, Fatema Alqabandi, and Alaa Alawadhi.

The pavilion also features collaborations with filmmakers Shakir Abal and Oscar Boyson, graphic design duo Dexter Sinister, and artist Abdullah Al-Awadhi. It has welcomed visits and guest critiques by artists Azra Aksamija, Antoni Muntadas, and Gedeminas Urbonas, as well as students from the college of Architecture in Kuwait University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Harvard University, and continues to engage with local and international communities regarding the polemicized subjects of representation, and critical and aesthetic thought and expression in our part of the world.

The team expresses deep gratitude to Ali Al-Youha, Shehab Shehab, Evangelia Simos Ali, Aruna Sultan, Sulayman Al-Bassam, Tareq and Ziad Rajab, and Tarek Shuaib for their unbridled support and faith in its endeavors.

Alia Farid

Introduction:
Kuwait's Modern Era Between Memory and Forgetting

The three decades between the advent of oil in 1946 and Kuwait's *Souq Al-Manakh* stock market crash in 1982 are commonly referred to in popular discourse as Kuwait's "Golden Era" (*al-'asr al-thahaby*); government publications from the period also referred to it as Kuwait's "modern era" (*al-'asr al-hadeeth*). Within the first decade of oil urbanization (which officially began in 1950) the former port town once encircled by a mudbrick wall became a sprawling metropolis with modern suburbs, while new state-controlled social services like education, healthcare, and housing were among the best in the Middle East. The buzzwords of the time among state and society alike were *nahda* (awakening), *taqaddum* (progress), and *almustaqbal* (the future). In 1961, the ruler, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem, terminated the Anglo-Kuwaiti Agreement that had bound Kuwait as a protectorate of Great Britain since 1899. With constantly increasing oil revenues at its disposal, Kuwait was ready to prove to the world that it was capable of doing it on its own. Within a year of independence Kuwait had a Constitution, and in 1963, elections were held for the country's new National Assembly. In 1965 the government made a commitment to weed out corruption, maladministration, and the lack of productivity in state institutions after the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development found these hindrances to development to be widespread within the country's fledgling bureaucracy and planning apparatus.[1] The first rounds of young Kuwaiti men and women graduating from universities in the United States and United Kingdom on government scholarships were coming back to the country to work as pioneer doctors, lawyers, engineers, artists, and university professors – all new professions for Kuwaitis. Culturally the country was at its artistic apex: its burgeoning theater industry was renowned in the Arab world, the Sultan Gallery opened in 1969 as one of the region's first modern art spaces promoting the work of young Arab artists alongside famous international ones like Andy Warhol, and 1972 saw the production of Kuwait's first feature film, *Bas Ya Bahar (The Cruel Sea)*.

The built environment that a society produces at particular moments in history, especially at times of major upheaval, often reflects in spatial form the social and cultural experiences it is going through. This was certainly true of Kuwait's Golden Era, as the excitement of the period was vividly captured in the country's dramatically changing urban landscape. In 1952, the state commissioned a master plan to replace the old mudbrick port town of the pre-oil era with a new city to serve as the ultimate symbol of Kuwait's newfound prosperity. Throughout the next three decades Kuwaitis demonstrated what one contemporary observer at the time described as, "an unquenchable zeal for development."[2] As the architect Huda Al-Bahar wrote in 1985: "Kuwaitis began to experience a sense of freedom from the constraints of the traditional way of life and a sense of affluence toward a modern living environment."[3] This was reflected in the way they designed their new spatial surroundings. Villas, apartment complexes, offices, and government buildings were designed borrowing international architectural influences as diverse as California space-age Googie, Art Deco, Brutalism, and Bauhaus modernism, and mixing these with stylistic features like the colonial verandah and Arab *mashrabiyya*. Such eclectic architectural experimentation reveals the excitement and flux of a country rapidly transforming and eagerly searching.

To make way for this new modern cityscape, the vast majority of the pre-oil urban landscape was demolished throughout the fifties and sixties. Though something that is widely regretted today, this process of "out with the old and in with the new" was common to universal experiences of modernity around the world; as Andreas Huyssen argues: "The price paid for progress was the destruction of past ways of living and being in the world … And the destruction of the past brought forgetting."[4] When Zahra Freeth, a British woman who grew up in Kuwait in the 1930s, told a group of Kuwaiti women in 1956 that she had been taking photographs of some of the older houses in the town, the women grew "… impatient at my interest in the Kuwait of the past, and asked why I wasted time on the old and outmoded when there was so much in Kuwait that was new and fine." When Freeth mentioned that many of the old buildings were due to be demolished one young woman exclaimed: "Let them be demolished! Who wants them now? It is the new Kuwait and not the old which is worthy of admiration."[5] The mass demolition of the pre-oil landscape was not simply a means of clearing space for something new; it was a conscious act of erasure, of deliberately shedding Kuwait's past while dreaming of a better future.

In his analysis of cities in modernity, Richard Dennis convincingly argues that even such a determination to replace the old with the new in modern cities reveals a constant dialogue between past and present in this process. On the one hand,

1. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, "The Economic Development of Kuwait" (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).

2. Saba George Shiber, *The Kuwait Urbanization: Being an Urbanistic Case-Study of a Developing Country – Documentation, Analysis, Critique* (Kuwait: 1964), 152.

3. Huda Al-Bahar, "Contemporary Kuwaiti Houses," *MIMAR* 15 (January/March 1985), 63.

4. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 2.

5. Zahra Freeth, *Kuwait Was My Home* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1956), 83.

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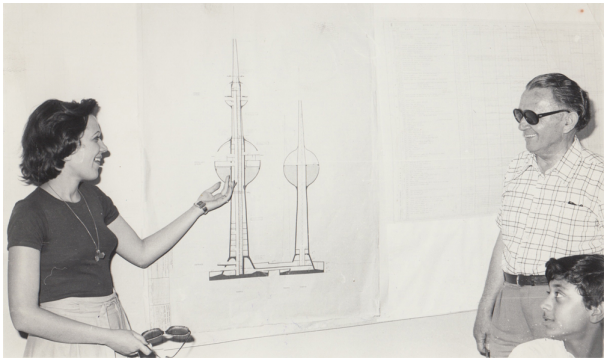
Gonzalez Desi,
“Acquiring Modernity:
Kuwait at the 14th
International Architecture
Exhibition”, Art Papers,
Nov/Dec 2014

ACQUIRING MODERNITY: KUWAIT AT THE 14TH INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION

Text / Desi Gonzalez

A national pavilion curated by a group of young creatives takes Kuwait City to the Venice Biennale, but the project doesn't end there. The Pavilion of Kuwait is an ever-growing, multi-disciplinary entity for research, experiment, and practice that transcends the limits and duration of its installation—and sets an international example for the potential of collaboration.



Unveiling a drawing of the Kuwait Towers designed by Swedish architect Malene Bjørn

The Kuwait National Museum is a site many Kuwaitis know about but few visit. Described as "a shadow of its former self" on Lonely Planet's online travel guide, the museum—a cluster of buildings united by a central courtyard that features camel saddle-inspired columns and a gridded canopy—is underused and overlooked. Only one exhibition remains: an antiquated diorama display of life before the discovery of oil that catapulted the tiny country into modernity in the years after World War II.

Within the museum complex, however, are reminders of a larger Kuwaiti history. The aforementioned exhibition recounts the pre-oil life of Kuwait's pearl divers and desert nomads. A quick walk across the museum's courtyard fast-forwards visitors 70 years into the future: once home to the renowned Al-Sabah collection of Islamic art, this building has been empty since the Iraqi invasion of 1990, its floors covered in debris, dust, and pigeon excrement. The Michel Écochard-designed complex hints at the midcentury utopianism that followed the discovery of oil, in the wake of which Kuwait hoped to compete on a global scale, borrowing the architectural visions of Europe and North America. This particular vision of Kuwaiti modernity has since been forgotten, however. As artist-curator Alia Farid explained in conversation, "Among different architectural communities, the Kuwait National Museum is regarded as Écochard's masterpiece, and yet in the local architectural scene he's practically unheard of."

Last year, 29-year-old Farid was selected to curate the Kuwaiti pavilion for the 14th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale. She assembled a scrappy team of 23 researchers, architects, artists, filmmakers, and writers to design Acquiring Modernity, which opened in Venice in June and runs through November 23, 2014. The exhibition's title refers to the overarching theme

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Gonzalez Desi, “Acquiring Modernity: Kuwait at the 14th International Architecture Exhibition”, Art Papers, Nov/Dec 2014

prescribed by the 2014 Biennale director, Rem Koolhaas: "Absorbing Modernity," an ostensible call for participating nations to consider how they have been shaped by the last century of modernization.

In March, a trip to Kuwait City organized by the Art, Culture, and Technology program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—Farid's alma mater—put me in the care of Farid and the Biennale team. There, I not only experienced the buildings, public spaces, and structures that the pavilion takes as its subject, but also had the opportunity to witness the team at work and at play. For a country just starting to dip its toes into the international art and architecture scenes (this is only the third time Kuwait has been represented at Venice, having participated in the 2012 architecture and 2013 art exhibitions), this year's Biennale team marks a defining moment in the development of a creative community in Kuwait, both through its collaborative philosophy and in the quality of its execution.

The Kuwait National Museum under construction, 1979 [courtesy of Al Qabas Newspaper Archive]

Perched at the north end of the Arabian Gulf, Kuwait City—historically a gateway between East and West—served as an important regional trading port in the late 19th century. Its seaside settlers also found economic prosperity in pearl diving; farther inland, Bedouin nomads inhabited the desert. With the invention of cultured pearls in Japan, and as the Great Depression's impact spread around the world, Kuwait declined in economic importance in the late 1920s, leaving most of its inhabitants impoverished.

The 1930s brought renewed hope. On the eve of World War II, drilling revealed that the harsh desert climate of Kuwait—which has a small area, equal to that of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined—was home to some of the largest oil fields in the world. The period between 1946 and 1982—from the end of World War II, when Kuwait was finally able to capitalize on its oil reserves, to the major Souk al-Manakh stock market crash in the 1980s—has been dubbed by some the Golden Era of Kuwait. In 1961 the nation declared independence from Great Britain, under which Kuwait had become a protectorate in 1899. A particularly telling symbol of the country's newfound wealth was the sheer volume of new construction—and with it, destruction—Kuwait underwent during this period. A master plan to revamp the old Kuwait City went into effect in 1952. To implement this design, Kuwaitis were moved from the city center and given a plot of land on which to build houses in the new suburbs, effectively and permanently decentralizing the nation. An eagerness to shed the traditional mud-brick building of their Bedouin heritage resulted in the removal of the city walls, which were turned into roads for the automobiles that would soon come to dominate the country's infrastructure.

As the old city was torn down, skyscrapers and monuments designed by European and North American architects came to take its place. This is where the exhibition title, Acquiring Modernity, becomes resonant: Kuwait became modern by importing Western buildings. Erected in 1965, Sune Lindstršm's army of blue-and-white striped mushroom water towers was a physical manifestation of Kuwait's dominance over seawater, which could finally be purified and supplied to its residents. The following decade, in 1977, the country inaugurated the Malene Bjorn-designed Kuwait Towers—giant spindles punctuated by mosaic-covered spheres. Kuwaitis affectionately compare these structures to ones in *The Jetsons*, a testament to the futuristic fervor of the nation's Golden Era.

"Why work when we're rich," magazine clipping portraying the Kuwait Central Bank, designed by Arne Jacobsen, found in the Al Qabas Newspaper Archive [images courtesy of Al Qabas Newspaper Archive]

When I entered an apartment in Al-Sawaber, a Kuwait City condominium complex built in the mid-1970s, I encountered fragments of former lives: Polaroid photographs, empty water bottles, fake flowers, unraveled spools of ribbon, and overturned potted plants were strewn across the floor. From the outside, the buildings were regal, even mythical in appearance, their tiered structure reminiscent of stepped pyramids. Inside, they looked as if they had been looted. During my visit, our guide, Dana Aljouder—a member of the Biennale team—told me about a friend who used to live there. He had to move out after years of flooding and disrepair that went un-tended. As we left the complex, a pair of women driving their SUV out of the parking garage told me about the building's fate: residents have been evacuated over the last few years, in preparation for its imminent demolition.

Designed by Canadian architect Arthur Erickson, the Al-Sawaber project was conceived as a way to bring Kuwaitis back into the city center and revitalize the downtown area. Now, Al-Sawaber is just one example of Golden Era projects that have been abandoned or demolished—not so much as a result of a rejection of modernist architecture and the ideals that came with it, but as a consistent favoring of the new and the shiny.

The Biennale team credits many factors for this phenomenon: among them are misunderstandings between the Kuwaitis commissioning the buildings and the Western architects designing them; the sluggish bureaucracy of a government supported entirely by oil; and a general, deeper lack of concern for heritage—a feature of consumerism the world over, perhaps. Today, Kuwait's oil industry is nationalized like those of most countries in the Gulf. Government jobs are widely available to citizens; ones working in the private sector receive a government stipend in addition to their salary, though none of these benefits extend to noncitizen residents, who make up 64% of the country's population, according to a 2011 census. Still, among the nations of the Arabian Peninsula, Kuwait is also widely considered the most democratic—a sentiment shared by the Biennale team—its government a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system.

Samer Mohammed, a member of the Biennale team, told me that he likes to describe contemporary Kuwaiti life as driven by what he calls the two Rs: "restaurants and real estate." The former corresponds to the popular social gathering model that replaces bars and nightlife in a country where it is illegal to dr ink alcohol. As for the latter—apart from oil, real estate and property development is the most prominent business. The use of the term "real estate," as opposed to "architecture," reflects the building culture in a country characterized by its highways, shopping malls, and particularly in the last decade—with the death of Saddam Hussein symbolically assuring Kuwaitis that they've moved past the Iraqi invasion—rapid development. Opened in 2011, the Skidmore, Owings and Merrill-designed Al Hamra tower and other skyscrapers in Kuwait City aspire to the glitz of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha. In a climate driven by profits and consumerism, what pervades is a sense that it is easier to demolish and rebuild than it is to preserve or renovate.

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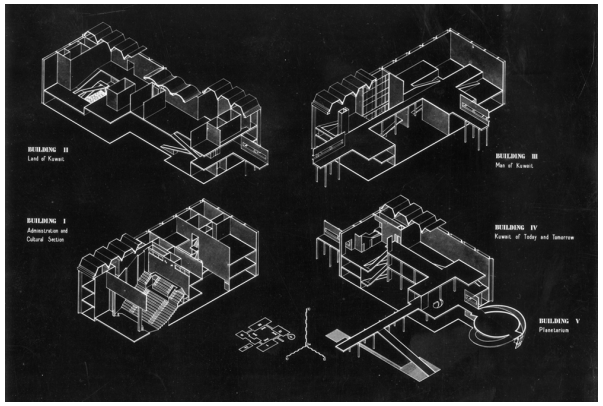


Michel Écochard, Kuwait National Museum, axonometric drawings
[courtesy of Aga Khan Foundation]

When Farid was approached by the Kuwaiti National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters about curating the 2014 pavilion, she decided to take an unconventional approach. Farid, of Kuwaiti and Puerto Rican heritage, eschewed a one-or-two-curator, singular-vision model and instead assembled a team. This strategy was one she picked up during her time living and working as an artist in Puerto Rico, and through her involvement with the San Juan nonprofit organization Beta-Local. In that environment, she explained, collaboration was key; spontaneous communities would quickly form around creative projects.

Farid's recruitment tactics for the Kuwait pavilion were also grass-roots. She called on artists she had known for much of her life and reached out to individuals she found via word of mouth. The result was a crew of scholars, architects, writers, filmmakers, designers, and artists, divided into three subsections: research, fabrication, and a final team dedicated to writing and producing a film that would continue the legacy of their work after the close of the Biennale.

The team consists primarily of Kuwaitis, with a few transplants, such as expats involved in architectural practices and scholarly research in Kuwait. As Farid explained, a lot of the members are "Kuwaiti-and-something-else"—Kuwaiti-Puerto Rican, Kuwaiti-Iranian, Kuwaiti-Palestinian,—many of whom attended university in the US, UK, Canada, or Australia, and brought back with them an understanding of the global art and architecture worlds, as well as a critical distance. The team convened every Saturday for a year. In her essay for the catalogue published to accompany the exhibition, artist Dana Al Jouder describes the tracking down of lost archives as "forensic"—an obsessive research process, through which came realizations of personal growth. Aisha Alsager, a Kuwaiti who did her graduate work in architecture at Columbia University, confessed to me that she never knew Kuwait was so rich in architectural history until she began working with the Biennale.

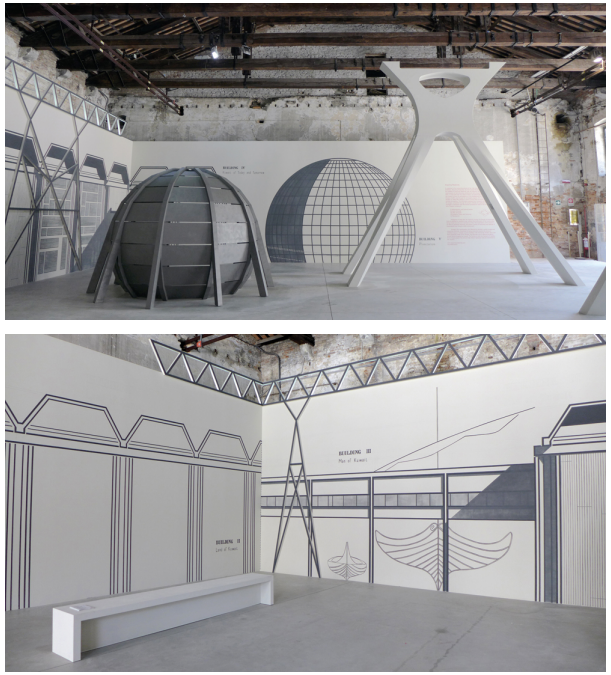
There were, of course, growing pains: according to Farid, the collaborative model was something that had to be learned, and attracting administrative support from the National Council, getting bills paid on time, or securing a place to meet was, according to other team members, like "pulling teeth." Although the Kuwaiti administration recognized the international prestige in participating in the Venice Biennale, it is unclear whether its members knew precisely why that was so.

Initially, the team worked out of an abandoned theater; they enjoyed the creative energy of the space, which mirrored the theatricality of the Venice Biennale—an event described by Farid as "staging one's country in another country." When I visited the team's headquarters, it had been moved to an empty office complex. In a multipurpose room of sorts, boards were set on sawhorses for tables, and maquettes of their planned installation dotted these surfaces, while photos, diagrams, and a cardboard version of the National Museum's faade were taped to the walls.

Écochard's museum had come to symbolize their cause. The institution's five buildings served as the framework around which the (beautifully written) catalogue would be structured. The individual structures' ambiguous names—Administration and Cultural Section, Man of Kuwait, Land of Kuwait, Kuwait of Today and Tomorrow, and the Planetarium—became the titles for the catalogue's essays, each paralleling a particular theme that emerged from their research: the maladministration affecting everything from Kuwait's architectural projects to governmental action, the country's relationship to and dependency on water, its transformation from a pre-oil society to a post-oil society, and its capital city's series of failed master plans. More generally, the concept of the museum itself, as an institutional model, became central to the team's message. Just as a museum acquires works to build its collection, Kuwait acquired modernity by commissioning buildings and structures from Western architects, contributing to a new cultural legacy. Adding to the museum metaphor is the idea that the minute you "museify" something, you distance yourself from it. The National Museum's heritage exhibition put the inhabitants of the mud-brick city of yore—the bead-maker, the date seller, the bride on her wedding night—into static diorama boxes, sending a clear message: "We do not live like this anymore."

In her contribution to the exhibition catalogue, Farah Al-Nakib, assistant professor of history at the American University of Kuwait, reflects upon the effects of this historical passage:

Truly remembering what and where Kuwait was then and what it was working towards forces us to face up to the shortcomings of our experimentation with democracy, to address the fact that we have become much less culturally open and accepting than we were in the early oil years, to deal with the reality that our city is collapsing under its own weight due to the fact that no master plan since the 1960s has ever been implemented, and to acknowledge that corruption, maladministration, and a lack of productivity still exist within state institutions .... To return to the built environment, only making room among the new [21st-century] skyscrapers for pre-oil heritage [sites, creates] a direct link between then and now while eliminating everything that happened in between, evoking a straightforward image of progress. If we forget how progressive and optimistic Kuwait was back then, and if instead of comparing ourselves to where we were fifty years ago we continue to contrast our present with the pre-oil past as we did in the sixties, then things would not look as bad as they do now.



Pavilion of Kuwait installation at the
14th International Architecture Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia [courtesy of Alia Farid]

Four months after my visit to Kuwait City, the idiosyncratic camel-saddle columns of the National Museum were re-created in the maritime buildings of the Venice Arsenale, courtesy of Kuwait's

fabrication team. To walk into the Kuwaiti pavilion is to enter a refuge from the busy, high-tech experiences of the neighboring exhibits of Malaysia and Estonia. On the white walls of the room, the facades of the museum buildings are rendered in grayscale, through unerased pencil markings exposing the installation's own design process. Stenciled letters indicate the names of each building, echoing text on Écochard's original drawings. The exhibition also includes a replica of the museum's planetarium and a soundtrack recorded in Kuwait. Taped onto an inconspicuous corner of a wall is a faded color photograph of Écochard's courtyard, taken around the time of the museum's opening. Creases on the picture's surface expose its age.

Kuwait's exhibition has a bigger footprint than its neighbors', but it is not ostentatious—especially compared to the high-polish pavilions of the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, the other Gulf nations on view. This aesthetic is a result of the DIY attitude of the Biennale team—and a reflection, perhaps, of evolving and distinct relationships to contemporary art and architecture in the region: recognizing the cultural capital that comes with the art world, leaders in the UAE are importing large, name-brand museums such as the Louvre and Guggenheim, whereas Kuwait's National Museum remains empty.

The Biennale team infiltrated the Giardini—the old public gardens and the most prestigious area of the Biennale—in a poetic nod to the influence of Scandinavian architecture on Kuwait. Swedish architect's Lindström's water towers are Kuwait City icons: their blue-and-white stripes have made their way onto plastic water bottle labels, and their mushroom shape can even be seen in the designs of private homes. Most noticeably, they serve as models for water fountains placed around the capital, allowing passersby to drink or to wash their hands before mosque. The Biennale team installed one of these sabils—ordering the fountain straight from a Kuwaiti manufacturer—in front of the Nordic pavilion. (Farid collaborated with the curators of the Nordic pavilion in this endeavor, and told me that they were initially skeptical of the kitschy, manufactured fountains.) Replicated as a functional miniature, Lindström's design persists as a unifying national symbol, and a success story of Kuwaiti midcentury modernism.

Muneera, 2014, production still [courtesy of Oscar Boyson]

After the grand opening of the Biennale in June, the Kuwaiti pavilion served as a set for Farid's film crew. Based on and named after "Muneera" (1929), a short story written by Khalid Al Faraj and the first thing of its kind ever published in Kuwait, the film is indicative of the reciprocal philosophy of the curatorial team: its members, in addition to bringing the Kuwait National Museum to an international audience, have created a product to bring home with them, too.

The film is only part of the continuation of efforts to have sprung from the Biennale, and Farid intends to push forward with the team's research and goals. In April 2014, NCCAL and the Pan-Arab Consulting Engineers (Pace)—an architecture, planning, and engineering concern based in Kuwait City—announced plans to revive the National Museum. And Pace, in turn, has reached out to Farid and her colleagues to put their work for Venice back into the institution that inspired it. From their repurposed office space, the Biennale team conjured a vision for a far greater project than a finite exhibition destined for Venice. The pavilion, the catalogue, and even the film are the by-products of a wide-reaching body of work—that of a new, committed creative community, with its own credo.

Desi Gonzalez is a graduate student in Comparative Media Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She previously worked in museum education at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

A repository for the Kuwait Biennale team research can be found at: www.acquiringmodernity.com