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IN LIEU OF WHAT WAS ALIA FARID

[REVIEWS](#) BY CLARA TANG FROM NOV/DEC 2019

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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



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

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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