

The Eternal Return of the Same

MANAL ALDOWAYAN

5 October - 23 December, 2021



O Sister, 2021, Natural Silk, acrylic paint and natural hemp, 160 x 195 x 55 cm

cluster of distinct floor-bound appendages of body parts question how women are renegotiating their bodies and the spaces they inhabit. As they are increasingly joining the Saudi public sphere, away from the ‘counterpublic,’ exclusively female enclaves of empowerment, women are forced to (re)claim a stake in the patriarchal arena. More than an innocent celebration of ‘our time has come,’ the repeated single, imperfectly cast bodily eruptions in *The Emerging* suggest that the movement from one space to another, while forceful, is still tenuous: women in the Kingdom must reprocess not only positions, but their bodies and voices within them.

The leg recurs in *The Recline* (2020), a large tapestry in which the limb morphs and mirrors itself, conjuring a reclining female form, poised above a cascade of loose, unravelled (or not yet woven) linen threads. The work exemplifies not only the notion of repetition—the leg emerging over and over in diverse media—but also the artist’s challenge to the traditional craft of weaving. *The Recline*, like the other works in the exhibition, exudes at once a political vitality and a sensual poetics of materiality.

Just as *The Emerging* frames an exuberant individuality against a crushing societal sameness, two soft sculptures, *Ephemeral Witness* (2019) and *O Sister* (2021) confront the blanket ‘instruction manual’ mentality of religious injunctions with an individualist feminine energy. Modelled on the desert rose—hardened, petal-like crystalline formations occurring in deserts where sand meets salt—the forms evoke some oversized bodily cavity, all multi-layered biological complexity and beckoning openness. Resistant yet refined, the natural silk of the sculptures is printed with instructions penned by religious men determining women’s ‘use’ of their bodies. The inky texts blur on the ridged fabric surface, their legibility confounded by strokes of charcoal. While *Ephemeral Witness* hangs, inviting the viewer to scrutinize its cleft opening and poised verticality, *O Sister* (2021) spreads its soft, collapsible, darkly burnished flaps in an ironic embrace. Part of a generation deeply impacted by conservative laws against women in Saudi Arabia, Aldowayan teases out a new tension in these works, raising questions about physical emancipation at the very moment the Kingdom ostensibly moves towards greater social freedoms.

Similarly, *Just Paper* (2019) interrogates the textual manifestations of patriarchal power structures by taking aim at archival memory. Upending the longevity of the printed, archival form of written texts, Al Dowayan renders religious and linguistic texts in delicate rolls of fragile porcelain. Easily crushed, the porcelain rolls bear not only prescriptive religious

Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde is pleased to present our first solo show of work by Saudi artist Manal Aldowayan entitled *The Eternal Return of the Same*. These works not only deepen Aldowayan’s nuanced interrogation of women’s shifting status within a metamorphosing Saudi society, but also intensify her exploration of new material. A nod to Nietzsche’s concept of eternal recurrence, the title *The Eternal Return of the Same* captures gestures of repetition and iteration undergirding the works. While the exhibition may provide a moment of reflection on the need for reckoning, it also bears Aldowayan’s hallmark critical assessment of a world rife with inequity and uncertainty.

Aldowayan slyly employs materials that almost contradict the object depicted. *The Emerging* (2021) is a series of thirty jesmonite casts. Unevenly textured, pocked with finger marks and smoothed over by hand, the

texts like those on the two soft sculptures, but also definitions taken from a millennium-old book on the jurisprudence of the Arabic language. Here we find the extended family of words used to transcribe varying intensities of sadness, entrapment, fever, anger, tightness, insanity... Replicated and cast across a table, the vulnerable porcelain scrolls are emblematic of AlDowayan's artistic output: strikingly beautiful works in appearance, harbouring challenging elements within.

Like many artists, AlDowayan has viewed recent life through the prism of the singular, inescapable space of her London home. Her awareness of the day-in-day-out repetition of actions and gestures intensified. *The Eternal Return of the Same* conflates this recurrence of the mundane, the growing opacity of time through ritualisation, an uneasy sense of settled uncertainty, with the process of reckoning Saudi women of her generation must undertake, given the seismic changes in the Kingdom. Yet repetition, the exhibition implies, in its gentle shifting and distortion of the familiar, can become a site of newness.

Artist Biography

Few artists understand metamorphosis as keenly as Saudi artist Manal AlDowayan. Long invested in interrogating the gender-biased customs that impact the condition of women in Saudi Arabia, AlDowayan is a sensitive yet critical witness to the cultural transformations engulfing the Kingdom. Her practice, formally speaking, regularly shifts and evolves—from the assertive black and white photographic portraits of highly skilled working women in her early *I Am* series (2005), to the research-driven *Crash* (2014), documenting media silence on fatal road accidents involving commuting female schoolteachers. Equally recognized for her work in sound, neon, and sculpture, AlDowayan is perhaps best known for the participatory installations *Suspended Together* (2011) and *Esmi - My Name* (2012), the result of workshops offering channels for thousands of women in the Kingdom to address unjust social customs, and more recently, *Now You See Me, Now You Don't* (2020), land art for Desert X AlUla.

AlDowayan's practice navigates a territory where the personal and the political overlap. Her works spring from lived experiences—these intimate encounters with social injustice, the pangs of memory and forgetting. Yet her pieces are consistently galvanizing, sparking identification and engagement, particularly among women around the world. Her voice is strong, and it resonates.

Unsurprisingly, the artist's gaze unravels the expected tensions running through the fiber of Saudi society—public vs private, traditional vs modern, community vs world. But as the Kingdom races towards further change, AlDowayan's artistic engagement with this new metamorphosis promises to be bolder and more incisive than ever.

In 2021, AlDowayan participates in the Northern Alps Festival, Omachi, Japan and the upcoming first contemporary Art Biennale in Saudi Arabia, the Ad-Diriyah Biennale. She has exhibited extensively, including *Reflections: Contemporary Art of the Middle East and North Africa* at the British Museum (2021), at 21,39 Jeddah Arts (2020 and 2017), Boghossian Foundation, Brussels (2018), The Aga Khan Museum (2018), *Crude*, the inaugural exhibition of Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai (2019), Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk (2016). Her works are held in the collections of The British Museum, London; King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, Dhahran; Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH).

She holds a master's degree in Systems Analysis and Design and an MA in Contemporary Art Practice in Public Spheres from the Royal College of Art, London. Born in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia in 1973, AlDowayan currently lives and works between London, Dhahran and Dubai.