

ALIA ZAAL

In Plain Sight

4 June - 15 September 2026

Alia Zaal's solo exhibition, *In Plain Sight*, consists of paintings on canvas, paper, and ceramic tiles that depict intimate fragments and extracts of landscapes beloved by the artist. Highlighting details of familiar plants, trees, and flora from the scrublands of Khawaneej, a suburb in Dubai, and the mangroves and mudflats of Abu Dhabi's coastline, the works present a mediation on site-specificity and lived experience rather than romantic scenes of territory. Zaal's paintings depart from traditional landscape portraiture, which is usually marked by elements such as a sweeping horizon line, a majestic sky, or a tree or shrub rendered in its entirety. Works such as *Ghaf Memory in Biarritz* (2026) and *Al Shelaylah Light* (2026) foreground and approximate a subjective, enigmatic reading of the landscape.

For the artist, these fragments of the landscape serve a broader commentary on vision and memory. Hailing an Islamic understanding of vision and optics, the artist, like the foundational *Kitab al-Manazir (The Book of Optics)* by Ibn al-Haytham, proposes that human vision is not a passive, objective reflection of the world but a human-centered creation and transmission. When Ibn al-Haytham broke away from ancient theories of sight in the 11th century, he argued that it is light — an unstable, external entity — that reflects the image into the eye, and that the human mind infers and decodes these images based on the atmospheric and environmental conditions. Prior to his contribution, Greek scholarship popular at the time, conceived vision as an extromission, meaning that our eyes emitted rays of light to 'scan' the world around us. Al Haytham proposed 'intromission', wherein sight is an active image-making process based on the subject's past memories, environmental context, and pattern recognition.

Zaal activates this ancient theory through her process of creating these paintings, which derive from smartphone photos. By using the virtual screen and the digital form as an initial canvas, the imagery is subjected to intentional computer-generated modifications: contrast shifts, deliberate zooming, and localized pinching. These digital interventions, which act as the backdrop of these paintings, reinforce the idea that the landscape and human vision are not static or objective; their form, color, and clarity mutate constantly based on the angling of the sun, the moods and tribulations of the subject, and the quality of the surrounding ambiance and light.

There is also an anecdotal, familiar interest in exploring human vision of the landscape: the artist's father has some difficulty distinguishing between colors. Rather than stigmatising this quality, the artist foregrounds her father's sight as a point of empathy and connection to broader theories of sight as shaded rather than total. The Gulf's landscape, usually depicted as an external backdrop or a scenic, detached space where a human stands outside of and observes, comes undone.

Visualised through digital crops, extracts, and dense close-ups of trees and plant life, *In Plain Sight* explores the Gulf's landscape outside, straddling science, digital preservation, familial memory, and painterly physical presence to bring the viewer into a space of empathic seeing and to experience an intimate record of a changing eye.

Text by: Ahmad Makia

Additionally, the works evoke a parallel understanding of the landscape as narrated and conceived in historic Arab oral traditions, especially of the *'naseeb'*. In these narrative styles, the *'naseeb'*, is a prelude of the *qasida*, the poem, and usually zooms on an isolated fragment from a landscape which is familiar and connected to the poet, such as an overgrown bush or a blackened hearthstone. Focusing intensely on this fragment and tiny detail, the poet begins to describe a universe of memories and textures. Serving as the contemplative vessel, the *'naseeb'* is the familiar, coordinate object from which the poet initiates their *rahil*, the adventurous journey across the landscapes of the Gulf and Peninsula region. In this exhibition, audiences encounter the paintings as a constellation of *'naseeb's'*, signposting the artist's ongoing practice and absorption of their immediate spaces.

Artist's Bio

Alia Zaal (b. 1989) is a visual artist based in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, her work explores memory, perception, and the emotional resonance of images. Her practice moves fluidly between painting and photography, often beginning with photographs sourced from archives or personal collections. These images are transformed through layers of distortion, repetition, and reworking, becoming fragmented reflections of lived experience rather than fixed representations. Working across multiple media, Alia Zaal investigates how images carry emotional weight and how they shift through memory, translation, and time. Influenced by visual culture and cinematic language, her work engages with themes of memory and perception. Through recurring gestures, layered surfaces, and a sensitivity to light and atmosphere, she creates spaces where images appear suspended between recognition and transformation. Her work draws from both personal and collective memory, questioning the reliability of visual information while exploring the psychological dimensions of seeing. Rooted in experimentation and material exploration, Alia Zaal's practice reflects an ongoing dialogue between image and interpretation, where painting becomes a way of translating what photography cannot fully contain. Her work is shaped by an interest in how images circulate and persist, as well as by the tension between visibility and obscurity. Across her practice, she approaches image-making as an act of reconstruction, where memory, sensation, and perception continuously overlap and evolve.