

Focus: Saudi II

In our second themed section on Saudi Arabia, we give you our rundown of the works showcased at Desert X AlUla, land art in heritage sites and what happens when a biennial travels from one desert to another. Equally acting local but thinking global is the 7th iteration of Jeddah's 21,39: *I Love You, Urgently*, curated by Maya El Khalil. In this earnest appeal, the emerging artists and designers of the Kingdom come together to reflect on environmental emergencies that transcend geography. Our final stop is back in Dubai, where we zoom in on the net, cat memes, tomatoes, dissonance and diaries with rising Saudi artist Sarah Abu Abdallah's solo exhibition at the Jameel Arts Centre.

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REVIEW

DESERT DREAMING

Desert X, a biennial of site-specific artworks, has its roots in southern California's Coachella Valley (though completely dissociated from the loudly popular music festival of the same name). After only its second edition, it has now joined forces with the Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) in the heritage site's first major site-responsive showcase of contemporary art. Commissioning 14 Saudi and international artists, Desert X AlUla (ended 7 March), not only put an ancient locale on the global art stage, it also ramped up the discourse on the nature of site-specificity.

Words by Nadine khalil



eL Seed. *Mirage*. Installation view at Desert X AlUla. Photography by Lance Gerber. Image courtesy of the artist and Desert X AlUla



Gisela Colon. *The Future is Now*. Installation view at Desert X AlUla. Photography by Lance Gerber. Image courtesy of the artist and Desert X AlUla

AlUla's landscape is invigorating – in an arresting, brutal way. There's a stark beauty to its relentless monumentality. As I found myself caught between the drama of sandstone canyons and sublime rock formations moulded by heat and air (that can morph into whatever you want them to be), it became clear how small we are in the grand scheme of things. Some of the artworks installed in this immense landscape as part of Desert X AlUla stand out for their boldness, like the strong lines and hues of Rashed Al Shashai's towering stepped pyramid (*A Concise Passage*). Made of (deep blue) plastic shipping containers, it is spliced into two to provide a clear (hot pink) path through, recalling AlUla's position at the crossroads of trade between the southern Arabian Peninsula and the Levant from the 1st century BCE. Other works melded into the scene, as in eL Seed's fittingly titled *Mirage*, an experiment in camouflage and disappearance. At dusk, when the sun cast a rosy blush glow, his intertwined calligraphic mass, paler than its burnt ochre environs, became almost otherworldly.

AlUla has been home to many civilisations, but it was the Nabataeans who really left their imprint. Here they built Mada'in Saleh, their second biggest city (exceeded only by Petra), today a World UNESCO Heritage site of vestigial rock inscriptions and monumental burial tombs. It is rather apt then, that in a place where the ancients made marks on land, mountain and stone, we're left to consider the implications of land art (a tradition which Desert X draws from) on our contemporary moment. At a time when it is considered enough to 'respond' to an extreme environment by installing works on or around it, it's worth remembering how land artists began in the late 1960s and 1970s, and how much more radical they were in the wake of Minimalism. When the grubby earth was more than a source of engagement, whether in terms of material (think Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, carved into the residues of the terminal Great Salt Lake) or context (Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* in the Great Basin Desert), and issues of ephemerality, mobility and repeatability were hotly debated, site-specific work needed to be permanent and unreproducible. The

space/place that art occupied then was actual, the meaning contextual, and the experience phenomenological.

Site-specific art initially emerged as a form of institutional critique, a comment on the commercialisation of the industry. It took art outside, beyond traditional spaces and intersected with other art movements – conceptualism, performance and installation art. Although site-specificity in art practices from the Gulf happened later (in the 1980s and 90s), if we concede that Hassan Sharif was a pioneer with a new generation of GCC artists like Shaikha Al Mazrou and Zahrah Al Ghamdi adding their own signatures more recently, the sense when it began was that this process-based art cannot be divorced from its context.

In her 2002 book, *One Place after Another*, Miwon Kwon writes about how, over the past few decades, "the operative definition of the site [in site-specific art] has been transformed from a physical location – grounded, fixed, actual – to a discursive vector – ungrounded, fluid, virtual." Although this might not be as apparent in as unique and enchanting a place as AlUla, it becomes evident when works travel or are re-installed. And more specifically still when they are staged in different contexts, in "a productive convergence between specificity and mobility, in which a project created under one set of circumstances might be redeployed in another without losing its impact – or, better, finding new meaning and gaining critical sharpness through re-contextualisations." While site-specific art once defied commodification by insisting on immobility in a critique of the "ahistorical autonomy of the art object", it is now seemingly part of this nomadic framework of endless reinterpretations. Kwon justifies this by citing Susan Hapgood: "the once-popular term 'site-specific,' has come to mean 'movable under the right circumstances.'"

The Desert X conversation is one of connectivity across desert communities and much less about the engagement with a particular landscape. Richard Serra's statement, "to remove the work is to destroy the work" (in reference to *Tilted Arc*), could never hold here. In the argument posed by Kwon,

Lita Albuquerque. *NAJMA (She Placed One Thousand Suns Over The Transparent Overlays Of Space)*. Installation view at Desert X AlUla. Photography by Lance Gerber. Image courtesy of the artist and Desert X AlUla





This page: above: Manal Al Dowayan. *Now You See Me, Now You Don't*. Installation view at Desert X AlUla. Photography by Lance Gerber. Image courtesy of the artist, IVDE and Desert X AlUla
Left: Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim. *Falling Stones Garden*. Installation view at Desert X AlUla. Photography by Lance Gerber. Image courtesy of the artist, Lawrie Shabibi and Desert X AlUla

Opposite page: Superflex. *One Two Three Swing!* Installation view at Desert X AlUla. Photography by Lance Gerber. Image courtesy of the artist and Desert X AlUla



site-specificity becomes the complex manifestation of a precarious relationship between location and identity in an era of late capitalism. She argues that even process-driven artists are making site-specific works about social and political conditions – rather than location – in new forms of public art and identity politics.

Although political critique is much more subtle in a Saudi Arabian context, it was definitely an ambitious endeavour to pull off Desert X at this time, especially when the move led to three board members resigning (including artist Ed Ruscha) in protest over what they saw as human rights violations in the Kingdom. The project legitimately called for cultural encounters in spite of political barriers – in the kind of action espoused by Desert X’s artistic director, Neville Wakefield, who said before the opening: “Now the walls are as much cultural as they are physical, but the imperative for art to break down barriers is still there.”

“What distinguishes site-specific programmes from those of white-wall spaces or institutions is that they are an inexact science,” Wakefield continued. “Understanding different conditions, adapting to them and allowing them to evolve accordingly is a significant part of the process. Unlike their often over-determined museum counterparts, the outcome is uncertain.” This uncertainty, of not knowing what will result, often takes shape as the ‘collapsing’ between artwork and site, in what Kwon calls “an anxious cultural desire to assuage the sense of loss and

vacancy that pervades both sides of this equation.” The discourse of site-specificity then becomes a form of melancholia, a means of dealing with the disappearance of the ‘site’, continued with the deterritorialization inherent to our nomadism, where multiplicity translates to differential cultural positioning and identifications. “Indeed,” she continues, “the deterritorialization of the site has produced liberating effects, displacing the strictures of place-bound identities with the fluidity of a migratory model, introducing the possibilities for the production of multiple identities, allegiances, and meanings, based not on normative conformities but on the nonrational convergences forged by chance encounters and circumstances. The fluidity of subjectivity, identity, and spatiality as described by Deleuze and Guattari in their rhizomatic nomadism, for example, is a powerful theoretical tool for the dismantling of traditional orthodoxies that would suppress differences, sometimes violently.”

And in the case of Desert X converging between different deserts, the two sites map distinct institutional affiliations and bodies that move between them and are imbued with meaning and information, overlapping sub-text and image. “Which is to say the site is now structured (inter)textually rather than spatially, and its model is not a map but an itinerary, a fragmentary sequence of events and actions through spaces, that is, a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist. Corresponding to the model of movement in electronic spaces of the Internet and cyberspace, which are likewise structured to be transitive experiences, one thing after another, and not as synchronic



Zahrah Al Ghamdi. *Glimpses of the Past*. Installation view at Desert X AlUla. Photography by Lance Gerber. Image courtesy of the artist, Athr Gallery and Desert X AlUla



Above: Muhammad Shono. *The Lost Path*. Installation view at Desert X AlUla. Photography by Lance Gerber. Image courtesy of the artist, Athr Gallery and Desert X AlUla



Right: Nasser Al Salem. *Amma Qabel*. Installation view at Desert X AlUla. Photography by Ashwin Gohil. © Canvas



simultaneity, this transformation of the site textualizes spaces and spatializes discourses,” Kwon surmises, unpacking the concept of nomadism within site-specificity.

In AIUla, one witnessed a usurping of art by location, because the environment was the spectacle, and a work in its own right – magnified as if through a prism. As Wakefield had noted, “In many ways it is the place – in all its physical, psychological, historical, and environmental aspects – that is in effect the curator.”

The fact that there was no predetermined path to or through the works, no ‘map’ per se, was a curatorial gesture allowing bipedals

to navigate intuitively. This was best represented by all the possible directions one could take with Saudi artist Muhannad Shono’s *The Lost Path*, empty cylinders of 65,000 black tubes that spilled and snaked over the tough terrain like rivulets. Another direct reference to the conveyance of oil in the fuel-rich Kingdom was Rayane Tabet’s *Steel Rings*, a work seemingly ubiquitous in the last few years, and recently seen at Parasol unit and previously Jameel Arts Centre. In a kind of tunnel vision, it recalls the 1946 Trans-Arabian Pipeline Company through measures of distance, recreating the last 40km of the pipeline that ran through Saudi Arabia.

This page: Wael Shawky. *Dictums: Manqia II*. Installation view at Desert X AIUla. Photography by Lance Gerber. Image courtesy of the artist, RCU and Desert X AIUla

Opposite page: Rashed Al Shashai. *A Concise Passage*. Installation view at Desert X AIUla. Photography by Lance Gerber. Image courtesy of the artist, Hafez Gallery and Desert X AIUla



One Two Three Swing! by Danish collective Superflex, originally installed at Tate Modern in 2017, also assumed another iteration in AIUla, in a shared sense of momentum and play. Neatly integrated into gnarly, exposed rock face, the multi-user swing saw power in threes and coordinated movement. Nadim Karam’s fantastical creatures (*On Parade*) had a similar déjà-vu feel, expanding on the idea of games. The environment strikingly brought them into perspective though, in a trail that staked out different lines of sight depending on which way you looked.

Meanwhile, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim’s bold *Falling Stones Garden* saw 320 colourful sculptural ‘balls’, inspired by the colours and directionality of natural rockfall, akin to what a giant might make with Play-Doh. Manal Al Dowayan’s trampolines, *Now You See Me, Now You Don’t* (which transformed into seductive, glowing pools at night), raised the exuberance up a notch, as participants disappeared inside the landscape when they jumped on them. Zahrah Al Ghamdi’s shimmering *Glimpses of the Past* also referenced the flow of water and its scarcity, recalling an old aquifer and comprising 6,000 tin date containers in a checkered, gleaming 80-metre path of part-mirrors and part-sand. A work to spend time with, it embraced an agricultural, geological interpretation of place.

As far as luminosity goes, Gisela Colon’s monolith, *The Future is Now*, was perhaps the most seductive – and retro-futuristic. This phallic structure of carbon-fibre material boasted an iridescent spectrum of colour in a cross between primeval artefact and space-age relic. But while all the works prompted a stop-and-look-up moment – notably Sherin Guirguis’s *Kholkhal Aliaa* installation drawing from her mother’s Bedouin anklet, scaled up and inscribed by a female Bedouin poet, which looked like the top of a spaceship lodged into a crevice – Nasser Al Salem created the only work in which you could actually pause. Inside his cylindrical tunnel was a sense of calm and muting of the surroundings. *Amma Qabl* in Arabic references what came before – derived from the more specific idiom *amma baad*, or ‘henceforth’, without which *amma qabl* has no meaning. In this deferred moment of transition between past and future, the work slices through the landscape like an open shelter.



This page: Sherin Guirguis. *Kholkhal Aliaa*. Installation view at Desert X AIUla. Photography by Lance Gerber. Image courtesy of the artist and Desert X AIUla

Opposite page: Rayyane Tabet. *Steel Rings*. From the series, *The Shortest Distance Between Two Points*. Installation view at Desert X AIUla. Photography by Lance Gerber. Image courtesy of the artist, Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg and Desert X AIUla



As night fell, Wael Shawky's projection regaled us with negatives of prize black camels and Lita Albuquerque's indigo-blue cloaked statue watched over us from a hilltop, surveying her field: a map of craters in the exact positions the stars would take the next day (January 31, 2020). Based on the artist's fictional story of a 25th-century female astronaut named 'star' in Arabic, *NAJMA (She Placed One Thousand Suns Over The Transparent Overlays Of Space)*, this iconic work commented on the cosmological underpinnings of place and celestial traditions. It strongly epitomized how site-specific art practices have transformed, where the location has become the content-generator and the work, no longer inextricable from place of installation, can be re-situated.

AIUla is more than a place. It's a discursive space operating within plural historical and cultural definitions and its 'sites' for artistic investigation are the ideas that can coexist in between locales.

At this juncture of "a semantic slippage between content and site", between ideas/discourse and location/intervention, Desert X AIUla can best be articulated through a lens of critical regionalism, as espoused by Kenneth Frampton (probably the most relevant takeaway from Kwon's research). "It is predicated on the belief that a particular site/place exists with its identity-giving or identifying properties always and already *prior* to what new cultural forms might be introduced to it or emerge from it. In such a pre- (or post) post-structuralist conception, all site-specific gestures would have to be understood as reactive, 'cultivating' what is presumed to be there already rather than generative of new identities and histories... However, despite the proliferation of discursive sites and "fictional" selves, the phantom of a site as an actual place remains." AIUla has such an aura about it, a sense of the majestic, joined with a particularity that not only overcomes but also positions, and brings into being, the art.