

*Frieze*

26 February 2026

## FRIEZE

### Dana Awartani Mends Ancestral Wounds

Ahead of her Venice Biennale presentation, the artist discusses how the fragile, deliberate rhythm of her handmade works resist Western canon

BY FAWZ KABRA AND DANA AWARTANI IN INTERVIEWS | 25 FEB 26

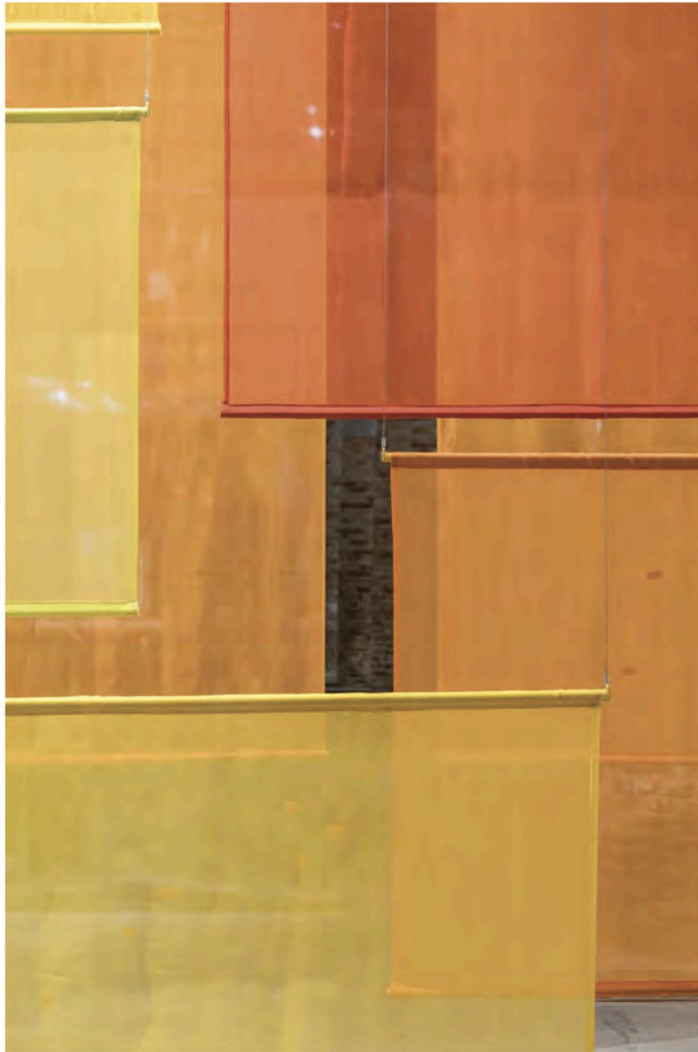


**Fawz Kabra** Your work often involves physical gestures, such as laying bricks or tearing and darning silk, which you've described as acts of mending and continuity – stitching ruptures, as it were. How do these embodied processes shape your understanding of repair, both artistically and ethically?

**Dana Awartani** If we turn to some of my textile works that use darning as a craft form, such as the series 'Come, let me heal your wounds. Let me mend your broken bones, as we stand here mourning' [2019–ongoing] and the series 'Let me mend your broken bones' [2023–ongoing], they are all about repair, but also ancestry. Looking back, for example, at our grandparents' generation: they used to repair their clothes. They wouldn't throw a shawl away: they would mend it.

Central to my practice are the ethics and history of craft, and the knowledge behind that – a knowledge that has nearly died out in the Global North and is struggling to survive in the Global South. This includes places like Syria and Palestine, where forced displacement and conflict have led to the extinction of crafts and craftspeople, as well as places where modernization and machinery have taken over.

I see reverting to the handmade as an act of resistance against contemporary Western canons, because making something by hand is such a slow process in an art industry that constantly wants more inventory at ever higher speeds. When I work with craftspeople, I don't say, 'Okay, let's make ten editions of this artwork.' It would be unethical to ask that of them because it would be creatively numbing. When you're working with craft, it requires your full attention and embodiment.



Dana Awartani, *Come, let me heal your wounds. Let me mend your broken bones* (detail), 2024, darning on medicinally dyed silk, 5 × 13 × 3 m, installation view, 'Foreigners Everywhere', La Biennale di Venezia, 2024. Courtesy: © Dana Awartani; photograph: Venice Documentation Project

**FK** It sounds like the slowness of making is a political gesture for you.

**DA** It's political, but also spiritual and meditative. After finishing my master's degree at the Prince's School of Traditional Arts in London, I went on to study with a master in manuscript illumination in Turkey. To practise that religious art form you must study for an *ijazah* [a licence that permits its holder to transmit a certain text or subject, particularly Islamic religious knowledge]. Like calligraphy, it's steeped in spirituality. Before we could use a new pot of gold, for instance, we would read 'Ayatul Kursi' [the Throne Verse from the Quran].

I now find craft spiritual in its repetitive act. Whether you're working with wood or ceramics, there's a specific methodology to how things are done, and that really disconnects you from the rest of the world. Geometry, and how it relates to the arts, formed a core part of the curriculum on my master's, and our professor used to tell us never to practise geometry if we were stressed or anxious, because it won't work. It requires a certain focus and state of mind.

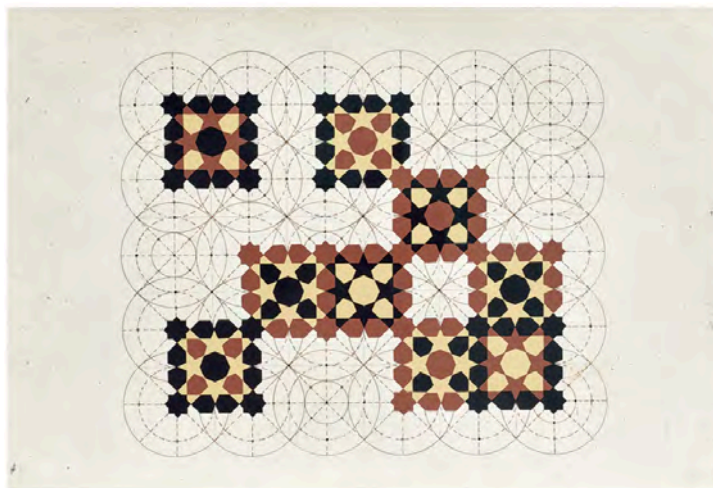


Dana Awartani, *Where the Dwellers Lay*, 2022, sandstone and oxidised steel, 3 × 3 × 2 m, installation view, 'Desert X AlUla', Saudi Arabia, 2022. Courtesy: © Dana Awartani; photograph: Lance Gerber

**FK** It's wonderful that you mention this, as I was hoping to discuss how you use geometry as a structuring intelligence in your work. I'm thinking about how you employ geometric patterning – evoking the tiled floors found in Islamic architecture, for example – as an extension of a particular tradition and a system.

**DA** Geometry flourished during the Islamic Golden Age, even though it's rooted in Greek philosophy. They took it and continued it, because as Muslims we don't believe in iconography.

But the thing I love about geometry is that it transcends borders and religions, which is something I really identify with. As somebody who is Palestinian and Syrian, with Jordanian nationality, born and raised in Saudi Arabia, my cultural identity isn't straightforward, so I was always asking myself, What is my culture? What is my identity?



Dana Awartani, *Study Drawing*, 2025, from the 'Standing by the Ruins III' series, gouache and walnut ink on handmade cotton paper, 35 × 45 cm. Courtesy: © Dana Awartani

**FK** The idea of repair is echoed in the way you think about buildings and ruins not just as physical forms, but as emotional and cultural vessels. In your work, you consider the built environment as a site of belonging and collective memory, such as in *Standing by the Ruins* [2019], an installation of compressed earth shaped into geometric tiles that recalls the destroyed architectural heritage of the Arab world. How do you approach translating these intangible histories in your work?

**DA** This goes back to my education, which frames a lot of what I'm doing today. First, I did a bachelor's degree in fine art at Central Saint Martins in London. I felt there that I was taught how to think critically, but I didn't learn much about how to make things. Medium and materiality were not seen as important at all. Then, when I went to the Prince's School, it was the opposite. They said: 'We don't care that you're a contemporary artist. We don't want to hear what you have to say.' As I've mentioned, a lot of crafts are rooted in sacred arts, so as a craftswoman, you're a transmitter of knowledge.

I found both of those approaches quite problematic because one is stuck in the past, and the other is rooted in a more Western, conceptual approach. Even in Saudi Arabia, where I grew up, we were never taught geometry, manuscript illumination or miniature painting. The first thing I learnt in high school was how to draw a still life, a bowl of fruit, which has nothing to do with Arab art history. All the things that are part of our history were simply not taught.

I've tried to fuse both experiences in my practice. How do you take these craft traditions and the intangible heritage that are part of our history and contemporize them so that craft isn't stagnant or stuck in time, but becomes a way to create an evolution from the traditional to the contemporary?

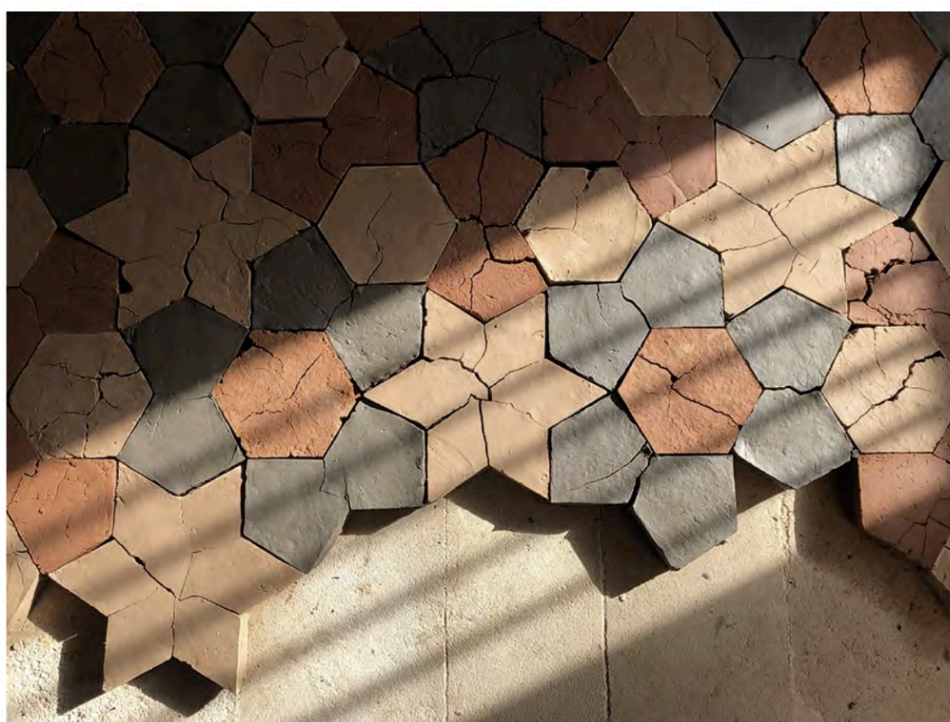


Dana Awartani, *Let Me Mend Your Broken Bones* (detail), 2024, medicinally-dyed and hand-embroidered silk, 3 × 3 m, installation view, commissioned by Manifesta 15 Barcelona Metropolitana. Courtesy: © Dana Awartani

**FK** I wanted to touch on how fragility becomes a language in your work. For example, in *Standing by the Ruins II* [2024] you leave the clay bricks unbound – their material is strong, yet they are fragile in their arrangement. What does this intentional usage of fragility allow you to communicate?

**DA** That series was inspired by the traditional adobe houses and mud structures found in Saudi and parts of Syria. People mix hay into the mud to solidify the structures, but I wanted to introduce intentional cracks, so there's this balance between the perfection inherent in a lot of craft practices and something that disrupts it as well.

The title references a whole genre of Arabic 'ruin' poetry called *Atfal*, which is something that we're unfortunately good at – ruins have been part of our history forever. The trope originated in the Mu'allaqat ['Suspended Odes'] poems of the 6th century, but many modern poets still reference it today. I like to incorporate poetry into my titles, and I write them in the first person because I look at the works as something that embodies a life beyond me and my practice – I'm just a transmitter.



Dana Awartani, *Standing by the Ruins* (detail), 2019, compressed earth, 5 × 11 m, installation view, Rabat Biennale, 2019. Courtesy: © Dana Awartani and Lisson Gallery

**FK** There's a dimension of resistance in your choice of materials, which carry histories of displacement and colonial entanglement. How do you think about material provenance as a political gesture in your work?

**DA** The materials I work with are rooted in where they originate. For the stone carving series, *When the dust of conflict settles* [2023], I chose stone because so much of Syrian architecture is built from it. One of the major challenges in restoring Syria after the fall of the Assad regime [in 2024] is that there are so few craftsmen left – they have left or been killed.

For that project, I collaborated with the World Monuments Fund, who train Syrian refugees in Jordan in stonemasonry. Rather than parachuting in Western experts, the focus is on empowering and teaching locals – it's about supporting crafts and thinking about ethical ways of producing, and funnelling money not to factories or production houses but to communities and people.

The same thinking underpins my textile works. India has long been a centre of textile production, and for those works I was particularly interested in how chemical dyes – among the major pollutants of India's rivers – represent an unsustainable and toxic mode of production.

At the same time, Ayurvedic medicine remains an active part of everyday life in India. Rooted in traditional knowledge systems, it has also given rise to natural dyes with medicinal properties. That history, and its continued presence, is what led me to work with these processes.



*When the Dust of Conflict Settles*, 2023, hand carving on griesa, jerashi, madaba, hoota and gassimi stone, various dimensions, installation view, 'Thinking Historically in the Present', Sharjah Biennale 15, 2023. Courtesy: © Dana Awartani and ATHR

**FK** There's a politics of care in your work on repair that can be seen even in your choice of materials. What distinguishes repair as a radical gesture for you?

**DA** If you look at the history of craft, it has often been used in political and social movements. For instance, the suffragettes in the UK used patchworking and stitching to create protest banners. In India, Mahatma Gandhi provides another powerful example. Before British colonization, India was the world's largest exporter of handmade natural textiles. During colonial rule, the British deliberately dismantled the handloom industry, appropriated that knowledge and established industrial textile mills in northern England. Gandhi argued that one way to resist British occupation was to stop buying British cloth; instead, people should spin their own yarn and weave their own fabrics. This act of making was about reclaiming cultural heritage and economic independence.

**The Middle East contains multiple histories and communities, and those layers of complexity are often deliberately effaced.**

DANA AWARTANI

If you look at places like Palestine, Syria and Iraq, whether it's the Arab Spring or the current genocide in Gaza, you can see how conflict often involves cultural cleansing. It is about eradicating the history of the people, which is deeply connected to heritage and monuments. Buildings – whether places of worship, citadels or other structures – tell the story of a region. One way of removing a people is by erasing their histories, or parts of them. This is also evident in actions such as ISIS destroying ancient sites and artefacts in Iraq and Syria. Ultimately, this process attempts to homogenize the narrative of a region that is, in reality, far more diverse. The Middle East contains multiple histories and communities within its landscapes, and those layers of complexity are often deliberately effaced.

**FK** Hearing you speak about your work is very different from encountering it in person. I feel like there's a stillness to your installations, even when they're referring to the destruction and erasure of peoples, communities and the spaces that hold them.

**DA** When I graduated, I moved back to Saudi for ten years, and I found that screaming into your audience's face wasn't an effective way to communicate. I began to feel that gentle gestures could sometimes have a much stronger impact. For instance, when I was making *I Went Away and Forgot You. A While Ago I Remembered. I Remembered I'd Forgotten You. I Was Dreaming* [2017] – in which I assembled a geometric floor design made with locally sourced and dyed sand, based on traditional Islamic tiles, and then filmed myself sweeping it away – I spent a lot of time thinking about how to dismantle the installation. I asked myself whether I wanted a violent gesture that would destroy it all at once. I eventually realized that the gesture of sweeping was a far more accurate reflection of what's happening to our cultural heritage.



Dana Awartani, *I Went Away and Forgot You. A While Ago I Remembered. I Remembered I'd Forgotten You. I Was Dreaming*, 2017, video still. Courtesy: © Dana Awartani

**FK** I wanted to end by asking about your selection as the artist who will represent Saudi Arabia at the upcoming Venice Biennale. Could you speak about what this opportunity means to you at this moment in your practice? What themes, questions or urgencies can we expect to see?

**DA** I obviously can't share too much at this early stage, but it's definitely a continuation of my practice and my research up to now, including the idea of repair.

I'm extremely honoured to represent the country I've called home and which gave my family political and financial stability. In Jeddah, where I'm from, we're so diverse. A lot of people have a Palestinian, Syrian or Yemeni background because it's the gateway to Makkah. I also don't think they've ever had an artist from Jeddah represent the country, so I'm proud to be the first.

*Dana Awartani will represent Saudi Arabia at the 2026 Venice Biennale, on view from 9 May to 22 November*

This article first appeared in *frieze* issue 257

*Main image: I Went Away and Forgot You. A While Ago I Remembered. I Remembered I'd Forgotten You. I Was Dreaming, 2017, video still. Courtesy: © Dana Awartani*



**FAWZ KABRA**

Fawz Kabra is a curator and writer. She is co-founder of Brief Histories, an art gallery and publishing platform in New York, US.



**DANA AWARTANI**

Dana Awartani is an artist. She will represent Saudi Arabia at the 2026 Venice Biennale.

## TAGS

[Issue 257](#), [Dana Awartani](#), [Interview](#), [Artist Interviews](#)

*ArtReview*  
13 February 2026

# ArtReview

## ArtReview Podcast | Episode 1: Dana Awartani

ArtReview Podcast 13 February 2026 artreview.com



Portrait of Dana Awartani, Photography by Anastasia Tikhonova, 2025.

**'How can I decolonise my own education and everything I learned in artmaking? How can I erase this Western superiority over Eastern culture and develop my own language based on my traditions and culture?'**

Introducing the *ArtReview Podcast*, where artists, thinkers and cultural figures are invited to choose three works as lenses through which to examine their practice and explore critical issues impacting the contemporary art world.

In our inaugural episode, artist Dana Awartani speaks to *ArtReview* editor-in-chief Mark Rappolt about craft, cultural destruction in the Middle East and representing Saudi Arabia at the 2026 Venice Biennale.

Listen now on [Spotify](#) and [YouTube](#). New episodes drop every fortnight. All of the works referenced in this podcast can be viewed below.



### About Dana Awartani

Dana Awartani is a Saudi-Palestinian artist living between New York and Jeddah whose practice addresses themes of colonial violence, the preservation of craft and the destruction of cultural heritage. She works in mediums including painting, installation, video and mosaic, and is known for incorporating traditional Islamic arts and crafts techniques into her practice. Her exhibition *Standing by the Ruins* recently showed at Towner gallery in Eastbourne, UK, following a run at the Arnolfini in Bristol. Come May, Awartani will represent Saudi Arabia at the [2026 Venice Biennale](#).

### Works mentioned, in order of reference

- Dana Awartani, *Standing by the Ruins III*, 2025



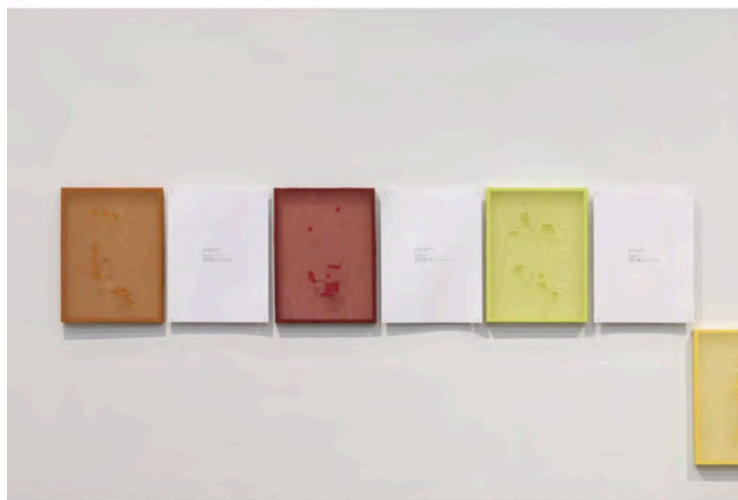
Dana Awartani, *Standing by the Ruins III*, 2025. Installation view at Arnolfini, Bristol. © Dana Awartani; Courtesy the artist and Arnolfini. Photography by Lisa Whiting.

- Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978
- Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010. Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, London



Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), Tate Modern. Photograph by Mike Peel / Wikimedia Commons

- *Let me mend your broken bones*, Dana Awartani, 2023. From the *Come let me heal your wounds* series



Installation view of Dana Awartani, *Let me mend your broken bones 16* (2023) at Towner Eastbourne. Photograph by Rob Harris

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*The Guardian*  
30 June 2025

**The  
Guardian**

## 'It's important to talk about these things': exhibition highlights destroyed Middle Eastern heritage sites

Dana Awartani says Bristol show inspired by 'dichotomy' of some Gulf countries booming while Palestine 'obliterated'



📷 Standing by the Ruins is Awartani's first solo public gallery show in Europe. Photograph: Adrian Sherratt/The Guardian

The exhibition is bright, beautiful and melancholy: an exploration of the loss of cultural and heritage sites in the Middle East destroyed by conflict and unsympathetic development.

Standing by the Ruins, a show by the Palestinian-Saudi artist Dana Awartani includes a recreation of an ancient bathhouse floor in [Gaza](#) believed to have been destroyed in Israeli attacks.

Another highlight of the exhibition, which has opened in [Bristol](#), is a room dominated by billowing sheets of colourful silk representing a map of the Middle East with cultural sites that have been lost pinpointed by rips in the fabric.

A third space at [the Arnolfini on Bristol's harbourside](#) features a recreation of another floor, this one appearing to be made of the sort of tiles typically found in the old quarter of Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. Actually, it is made out of sand, a reminder of the fragility of such features as the buildings they are housed in are knocked down or modernised.



📷 Tiles typically found in the old quarter of Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, recreated out of sand.  
Photograph: Adrian Sherratt/The Guardian

[Dana Awartani](#) has a diverse background. Her father is Palestinian while her mother is Palestinian and Syrian. Awartani was born and raised in Saudi Arabia and has Jordanian nationality.

She said the work in her exhibition, her first solo public gallery show in Europe, was inspired by the “strange dichotomy” of some countries in the Gulf booming while places such as Syria and Palestine were “obliterated”.

Awartani said: “The destruction of cultural heritage creates a sense of displacement in the local population. If you remember what happened with Notre Dame, it was devastating seeing it burned to the ground. It’s the same thing, but hundreds of Notre Dames.”

The first piece the visitor comes upon are recreations of the red, black and white floor of the Hamam al-Sammara in Gaza, one of the oldest bathhouses in the region but which is now believed to have been destroyed.



📷 Dana Awartani with Standing By the Ruins. The piece recreates an ancient bathhouse floor in Gaza believed to have been destroyed in Israeli attacks. Photograph: Adrian Sherratt/The Guardian

Awartani worked with a collective of adobe brickmakers - craftspeople of Syrian, Afghan and Pakistani origin - and deliberately omitted the final binding agent so the work, called *Standing by the Ruins III* (2025), is delicate.

The second large-scale piece, *Come, Let Me Heal Your Wounds. Let Me Mend Your Broken Bones* (2024), was created for the Venice Biennale last year. Sheets of handmade Indian silk are dyed with medicinal herbs and spices and represent maps of countries in the Middle East.

Awartani tore spots on the “maps” that matched sites where archaeological or cultural sites have been damaged. She then darned them. “It’s a cathartic, meditative experience where you’re mending something.” Sadly, since Venice, she has had to expand the work to take in new sites that have been wrecked.

It took two technicians six days to set up the third large piece at the Arnolfini. The work is called *I Went Away and Forgot You. A While Ago I Remembered. I Remembered I’d Forgotten You. I Was Dreaming* (2017) and is the recreation of a Jeddah floor made out of sand.

Asked how it felt to see the works displayed in Bristol, Awartani said: “It’s really touching and moving for me to have that space to talk about it, you know, a safe space to be able to talk about what’s happening.

“I live in New York, which is a very different landscape politically, especially now. There’s mass censorship happening, cancellations of artists. I don’t feel that in the UK so far. It’s important to talk about these things.”

● *The exhibition runs until 28 September 2025. For details*  
<https://arnolfini.org.uk/>

*The New Arab*  
03 July 2025



## 'It's the equivalent of Big Ben being destroyed': Artist Dana Awartani reflects on Middle Eastern heritage lost to war in latest Bristol exhibition

*Dana Awartani uses tile-making and textiles to tell stories of cultural loss in the Middle East. We spoke to her about her exhibition 'Standing by the Ruins'*



In her latest show, Palestinian-Saudi visual artist Dana Awartani explores the weight of cultural destruction across the Middle East as both a physical and emotional loss.

This grief, alongside urgent attention to preserving narratives, is conveyed through large-scale installations inspired by traditional Middle Eastern and Islamic art and culture — such as tile-making, illumination of texts, textile darning, sacred geometry, and the use of clay and sand.

Speaking to *The New Arab* about her exhibition at Arnolfini in Bristol, UK, Dana shares insights into her work, its cultural roots, and the collaborative processes behind it.

**Farah Abdessamad for *The New Arab*: Can you walk us through *Standing by the Ruins* and your latest work of the same name, which recreates the tiling floor of Gaza's ancient Hammam al-Sammara, destroyed by Israel in December 2023?**

*Dana Awartani*: It's about cultural destruction and loss in the Middle East and acts of mourning and remembrance. *Standing by the Ruins III* (2025) is a new commission and part of an ongoing series.

I've done a larger one before, specifically on the Great Mosque of Aleppo in Syria, which was destroyed in April 2013.

This one examines Hammam al-Sammara, the only existing hammam in Gaza, which dates back to before the 14th century. It was active under Mamluk and Ottoman rule before being destroyed in an Israeli airstrike.

*Standing by the Ruins III* is a replica of the hammam's tiling work. Cultural destruction is not just bricks and mortar. When something that is part of your cultural landscape is destroyed, it is traumatic. You also feel a sense of displacement and loss.

Hammam al-Sammara is not only a hammam but also a gathering place for the community. I was speaking to someone from Aleppo who remembered when the minaret of the Great Mosque was destroyed.

He told me, "When I woke up the next day and opened the window, this iconic part of our skyline was gone."

It's the equivalent of Big Ben being destroyed or Notre-Dame in Paris. And it's a shame because when Notre-Dame was destroyed, everyone came together. In the Middle East, it's hundreds of Notre-Dames.

The material is made of clay earth, referencing traditional adobe buildings — the mud structures that we find across the Middle East.

I collaborated with craftsmen based in Saudi Arabia, a group of them — Syrians, Afghans, Pakistanis — focusing on restoring ancient mud houses in Riyadh.

The traditional method includes hay as a binding agent, but I purposely left that out so that when the mud dries, the bricks crack.

The title of the work, *Standing by the Ruins*, nods to wuquf 'ala al-atlal, a pre-Islamic genre of ruin poetry that comes from our region.

**How did you come across these traditions?**

When I was in high school studying art in Saudi Arabia, I was only taught a Western canon and how to do a still-life drawing and a still-life painting with an easel and a board. I didn't think about it until much later in life, asking myself: "Why are we not learning about art from our region?"



*Dana Awartani is a Palestinian-Saudi artist born in Jeddah [Photography by Lisa Whiting]*

I didn't know about the history of art in the Middle East, modernist and contemporary artists, or even the types of art like calligraphy, tile-making, illumination — none of that was taught.

I attended Central Saint Martins in London for my bachelor's degree, and it was great because I learned to think critically, but less about making and using my hands.

I went on to the Prince's School of Traditional Arts in London. It is quite crazy that I had to come to the UK to learn about Islamic art. I fell in love with the rigour of craft traditions.

What I try to do is bring the modern and traditional together, using craft forms in every single piece I create.

My work is generally collaborative. I work with Syrian refugees with craftsmen in Morocco, India, and other places, which is a struggle because it is a slow process. It's not like you're mass producing, but it's a lot more rewarding.

**In your technique, you're not only channelling Middle Eastern art and narratives but also incorporating cross-cultural elements, such as traditional Indian dyes. To what extent can this form of collaborative art promote dialogue and connections?**

I work in this pan-Arab region because I am of mixed heritage. My father is a Palestinian from Qalqilya. My mother is half-Palestinian from Haifa and half-Syrian from Damascus.

I have Jordanian nationality, and I was born and raised in Saudi Arabia. I never felt one specific place as my identity, and I found my identity through Middle Eastern art.



*Dana Awartani, Standing by the Ruins, Arnolfini, June 2025. Lisa Whiting Photography for Arnolfini. All rights reserved*



*Dana Awartani, Standing by the Ruins, Arnolfini, June 2025. Lisa Whiting Photography for Arnolfini. All rights reserved*

Geometry does not belong to one civilisation; it's across the region and across religions as well. Historically, we weren't divided by borders — we were cities in a wider region — so this is, for me, a way of expressing my whole identity.

I work a lot with craftsmen from the Global South. India was my first experience and exposure to textiles. I fell in love with the rigour of textiles there because their craft tradition is still very much alive.

It's not a niche, and I think it's important to work with craftsmen because, historically, they were respected people in society.

For example, they received patronage from the royal courts. Unfortunately, in a capitalistic society where machines do most things, craftsmen have become less important.

You can see them making cheaper, worse-quality crafts to sell in souks for mass production and tourists.

We should elevate these back to their former status because it's also about empowering them.

I include craftsmen in the process of my work, and to see their work being shown in this context generates a sense of pride for both of us.

**These geographies and crafts you speak about don't obey the limitations we often impose on them.**

I also look at it as a kind of resistance. Historically, craft played a role in toppling regimes. Before British colonialism, India was the largest exporter of textiles in the world.

When the British came, they broke all the looms, destroyed the hand-loom industry, and then industrialised northern England.

India then became the largest importer of textiles. But Gandhi told everyone: "Spin your own yarn and weave your own cloth" to rebel against occupation. I see that power in craft.

**Susan Sontag wrote about the aestheticisation of war, of a 'seductiveness of war'. What do you think about that?**

The most important thing is the people and what's happening to the people. Unfortunately, for a certain audience, they are just numbers.

You switch on the TV and hear, "Oh, 15 killed today," "Oh, 800 killed today."

They just dissociate from people as human beings. Ironically, sometimes I do feel there is more empathy towards buildings than people, which is sad. I try to approach that from a different kind of perspective.

**Do you think about archives in your work?**

With *Come, let me heal your wounds. Let me mend your broken bones* (2019), and previous work after the Arab Spring and the rise of Daesh and other groups, I started to archive and document heritage sites destroyed.

I pinpointed all the different locations. After that, I transferred the dots onto the fabric, tore the fabric, and then darned it to repair it.

This was the only thing I could do as a person watching all of this happening and feeling really helpless. It is a kind of cathartic act of repair.

The actual textile itself — silk — was made in South India. I collaborated with a community of natural dyers based in Trivandrum, the birthplace of Ayurvedic medicine, which looks at nature as a way to heal.

They incorporated natural dye techniques with Ayurvedic medicine. They boiled in hundreds of different spices and herbs with medicinal value, creating healing textiles.

Our grandparents knew how to mend textile, and historically, when something is destroyed, you fix it — you don't throw it away. But now it's the total opposite. We're a wasteful, capitalistic society.

And I do believe, sometimes, looking back, we have answers for the future because the production technique is fully sustainable, and none of the dyes are toxic to the environment.

After mapping out all these different locations, I tried to find images of the buildings or sites post-destruction. I traced out the wounds in the images — the bullet holes, the bombs, the fire burns — and then darned them.

Unfortunately, it's an ongoing series. Now, with Palestine, I've done a bunch. In Lebanon as well, Israel destroyed a lot of stuff on the border, so it's an ongoing archive.

**There has been quite a lot of pressure on Palestinian artists and voices, including cases of censorship. How can art institutions do better?**

Arnolfini in Bristol is a good example. I don't feel I would be able to show this anywhere else. Institutions like Arnolfini — giving me this platform and space to create works talking about Gaza without having to censor myself — are very important, and I feel that shift is happening slowly.

I do not care if I am blacklisted by some museums. There are others. It's their loss. History is watching, and people will go back and remember.

*The exhibition Standing by the Ruins is on display at Arnolfini in Bristol, UK, until 28 September 2025*

*[Cover photo: Photography by Lisa Whiting]*

*Berlin Art Link*  
28 November 2025

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## Craft As Resistance: An Interview with Dana Awartani

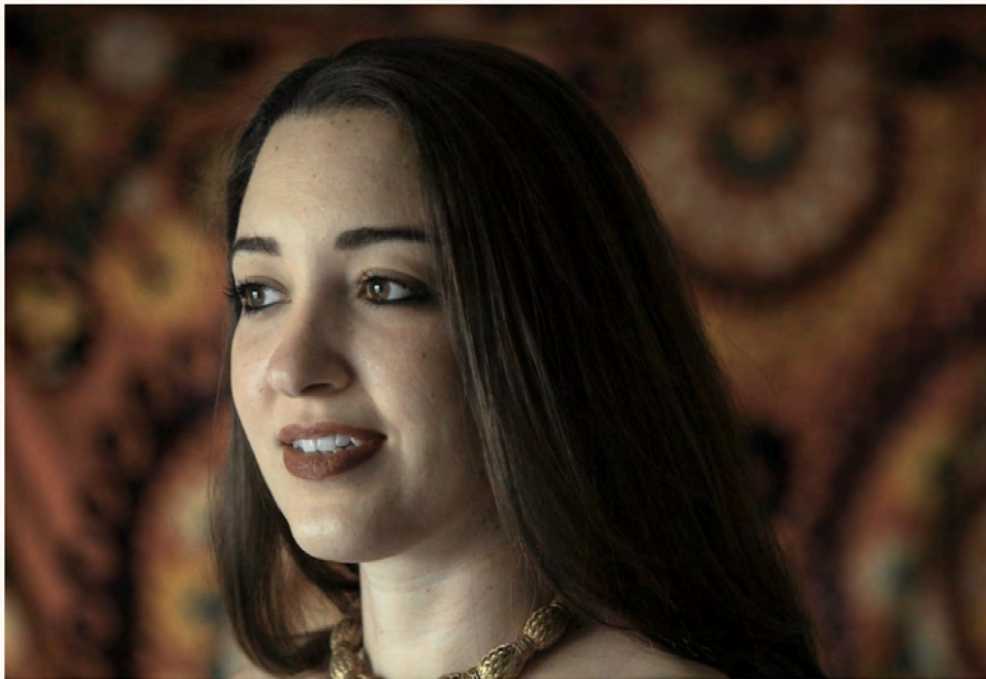
by Eve Rogers // Nov. 28, 2025

On a cold November morning in Berlin, artist Dana Awartani's voice comes through as a warm and welcome antidote to the early winter gloom. Speaking from her home in Saudi Arabia, her measured cadence carries the contemplative quality that defines her practice, which is rooted in the meticulous discipline of traditional craftsmanship and the emotional charge of cultural memory. Born in Jeddah to a Palestinian-Saudi family and trained at Central Saint Martins and the Prince's School of Traditional Arts, Awartani has shaped a visual language that blends geometric precision with a sensitivity to the fragility of inherited knowledge.

At the Goodwood Art Foundation's ongoing exhibition titled 'Erasure' she presents 'I Went Away and Forgot You. A While Ago I Remembered. I Remembered I'd Forgotten You. I Was Dreaming,' a work whose title is drawn from a verse by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, a meditation on exile and the fading essence of home into a mere and distant recollection. The phrase aptly reflects the atmosphere of her work, which considers how tangible cultural histories slowly slip

from everyday life until they survive only as impressions. The installation, composed of sand tinted with natural pigments and arranged in carefully measured geometric tile formations, conjures an ephemeral beauty that feels both enduring and vulnerable.

Awartani's practice is sustained by close collaborations with craftspeople whose techniques risk disappearing under the pressures of industrialization, displacement and conflict. Through these relationships and her own long immersion in traditional methods she constructs a contemporary vocabulary that honors devotion, materiality and the role of craft as a quiet form of resistance against cultural erasure.



Dana Awartani, portrait // Courtesy of the artist and Ali Alsumaïn

**Eve Rogers: I'd like to begin by touching on the theme of erasure. Your work has often engaged with ideas of destruction—could you speak about that and how your piece relates to the exhibition's theme?**

**Dana Awartani:** I think it's one of the first pieces I did that looks at cultural erasure and destruction. It's inspired by the old town in Jeddah, Al-Balad, the historic center with traditional, beautiful homes. Since the introduction of cement, people disconnected from vernacular architecture and built modern homes that made no sense to the local history. Al-Balad was neglected with houses destroyed or falling apart.

I wanted to create an installation that looks like tiles but is visually Middle Eastern, using sand dyed with natural pigments. I wanted to destroy it methodically, purposefully, meditatively, slowly—reflecting what they were doing there. When I showed it, people asked, "Why are you destroying the sand? It's so beautiful." This is how I felt about our historic buildings.

**ER: I'm curious about the careful, meditative approach behind the destructive element of the work. Do you see spirituality playing a significant role in your practice and how do repetition and devotion shape the way you work?**

**DA:** I think it is intrinsically part of the work. When I went to the Prince's School for my Master's, it was very different from Central Saint Martins. The focus was on craftmaking and tradition making, not on expressing myself as an individual. It was about humbling yourself and fully immersing in crafts that have existed for thousands of years. This immersion is meditative.

In Islamic craft traditions the work is repetitive. Some people see craft as a form of prayer. In the Sufi tradition it is called dhikr, remembrance of the divine through making. I once worked with craftsmen in Morocco who made hundreds of tagine pots every day. For them, this was their sacred practice. Sacred geometry too is rooted in nature and transcends religion and borders. Much of my work begins with geometric drawings that I do by hand with a compass and a ruler. My geometry professor used to say that if you are stressed or anxious, you cannot do geometry because it requires complete immersion, which is true. This focus is something that applies across many craft traditions.



Dana Awartani: 'I Went Away and Forgot You' // Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery

**ER: How has embracing ancient geometries and traditional craft practices influenced your work and how do you see them fitting into a contemporary art context rather than a purely historical or religious one?**

**DA:** At Saint Martins you're given your studio space and left to your own devices. How you make what you make, the materiality or medium is not important. It's about critical thinking and developing a concept, which is important to me. At the Prince's School I was the only artist on the course. They said we do not care about your voice or message; you're here as a craftswoman. For the first few years after graduating I had to un-brainwash myself, spending years perfecting my craft, studying with a master in Turkey and immersing myself in traditions. I eventually

brought the two together, using traditional aesthetics and crafts in a contemporary way. I also felt a disconnect from my art education in Saudi Arabia, which focused on Western canons, and wanted to create a contemporary language rooted in Middle Eastern traditions rather than being stagnant in the past.

**ER: You mentioned working closely with craftspeople. Beyond the practical necessity is your collaboration with them also a way to honor and revive potentially endangered techniques? Do you see this as a form of cultural resistance?**

**DA:** For sure. Some places, especially in the Global South, craft is still very predominant in daily life. In India, for example, cotton industries allow craftsmen to make a livelihood. But globally, support and appreciation for craft have reduced. Machines can do things faster, cheaper but it's never the same. So much craft knowledge is passed down orally or intergenerationally. One of the craftsmen I work with does darning on silk. He learned from his father and grandfather but his children now do not want to continue because it doesn't pay as much.

In the Middle East, conflict and displacement force craftsmen to leave their homes and so they cannot continue their traditions. In Syria, before the civil war, over 20 workshops did traditional mother-of-pearl inlay in Damascus; now only one remains. When they move to Europe they must take any job for survival and then the heritage is lost. I support craftsmen by hiring them full-time or commissioning work, like with Syrian refugees in Jordan. Nothing is mass-produced and I don't make duplicates. It's slow, challenging but ethically sustaining craft and its traditions is deeply rewarding.



Dana Awartani: 'I Went Away and Forgot You' // Courtesy of Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, photo by Ron Amstutz

**ER:** Your mention of silk darning reminds me of your work in Venice, which was like both a testimony to destruction and a way of honoring the tradition of repair. I know you mentioned earlier that you use natural pigments and materials. Is there traditional or cultural relevance to the materials and pigments that you choose?

**DA:** Yes, there's a lot of importance to materiality. For that specific work I was thinking about natural dyes in India where the main pollutant of rivers is chemical dyes from the textile industry. All the leftover chemical dyes are thrown into rivers and are toxic, whereas natural dyes, which were originally used, are not harmful whatsoever. The people I worked with in Trivandrum, South India, forage locally for medicinal herbs and spices to create healing dyes. Leftover dyes are used as biofuel or returned to the forest and it's completely safe.

Even in Gaza, people are building traditional clay ovens and mud adobe structures to survive winter, using whatever resources they have. This ancient knowledge is a form of survival and a way of resisting dependence on machines and capitalism. Historically, craft has been a form of resistance, such as suffragettes making patchworks and banners or Gandhi advocating spinning and weaving cloth in response to British industrial domination. Handmade work becomes a political and ethical gesture connecting survival, tradition and resistance.

### Exhibition Info

#### **Goodword Art Foundation**

Group Show: 'Erasure'

Exhibition: Nov. 22, 2025-Apr. 12, 2026

[goodwordartfoundation.org](http://goodwordartfoundation.org)

New Barn Hill, Chichester PO18 0QP, UK, [click here for map](#)

*Hyperallergic*  
13 August 2025

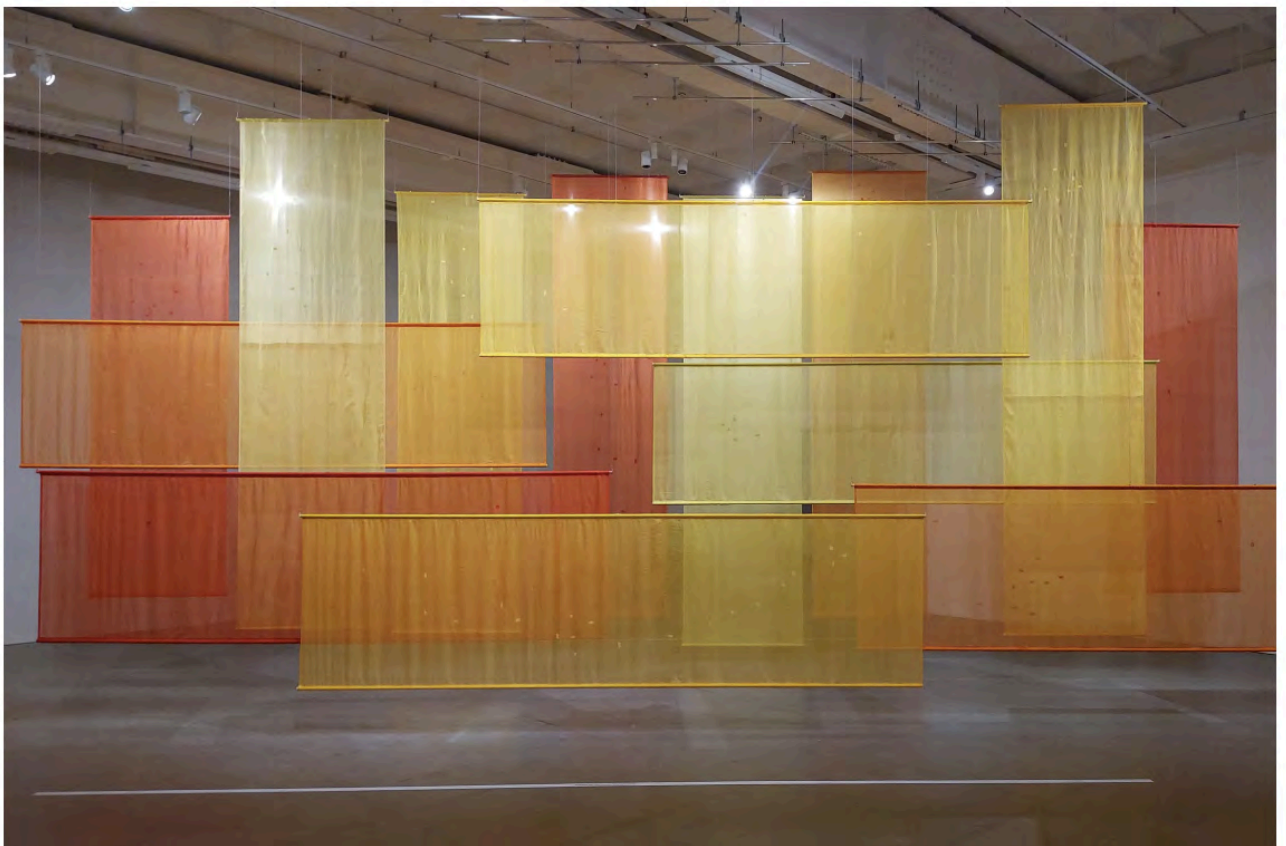
# HYPERALLERGIC

## Dana Awartani's Gentle Reparation of Gaza

This beautiful and understated show provides a moving foil to the horror of Israel's war in Palestine.



Anna Souter August 13, 2025



Dana Awartani, "Let me mend your broken bones" (2023), darnings on medically dyed silk and paper (all photos Anna Souter/*Hyperallergic*)

BRISTOL, England — Last year, Bristol's Arnolfini cancelled two Bristol Palestine Film Festival events, leading to controversy and a boycott. After mediation with local groups such as Bristol Artists for Palestine, Arnolfini issued a [statement](#) apologizing for the decision and committing to upholding Palestinian freedom of expression in the future. Their current exhibition, *Standing by the Ruins* by Palestinian-Saudi artist Dana Awartani, appears (albeit obliquely) to represent that commitment bearing fruit.

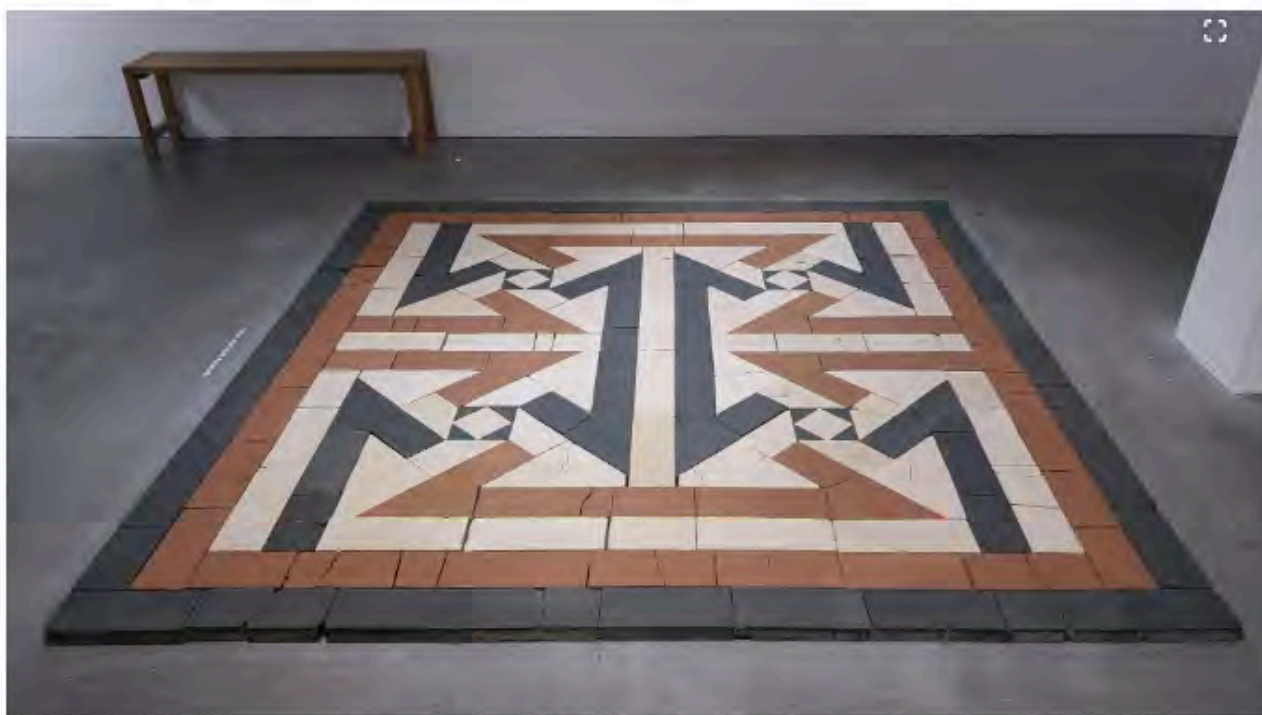
It is a beautiful and understated show, providing a moving foil to the horrifying images currently coming out of Israel's war in Gaza. Awartani's practice is concerned with the physical loss of cultural heritage across the region, through acts of war and cultural censorship. Her work records sites of destruction through gentle reparation. For instance, to create her large suspended fabric work "Come, let me heal your wounds. Let me mend your broken bones" (2024), Awartani maps sites of architectural damage and destruction onto translucent textiles. She roughly tears holes in the fabric to correspond to these places, before carefully stitching them back together with color-matched thread. The resulting work contains a web of half-concealed cartography, a peaceful and meticulous record of years of violent erasure.



Dana Awartani, "I Went Away and Forgot You. A While Ago I Remembered. I Remembered I'd Forgotten You. I Was Dreaming." (2019), mixed media installation with sand and natural pigment, single-channel video, with no sound

In "I Went Away and Forgot You..." (2017), Awartani uses a similar process in reverse, this time carefully crafting something before destroying it herself. She recreated a traditional Islamic geometric tiled floor with colored sand in a compelling act of meditative craftsmanship. In the accompanying video work, she laid out a similar sand design on the floor of a house in Jeddah's old quarter, built in the mid-20th century in a Western architectural style — a comment on the colonial overtones of architectural modernization. The film shows her quietly and methodically sweeping the Islamic-style floor away, an effective reminder of how heritage can be destroyed through slow cultural change as much as by the sudden ravages of war.

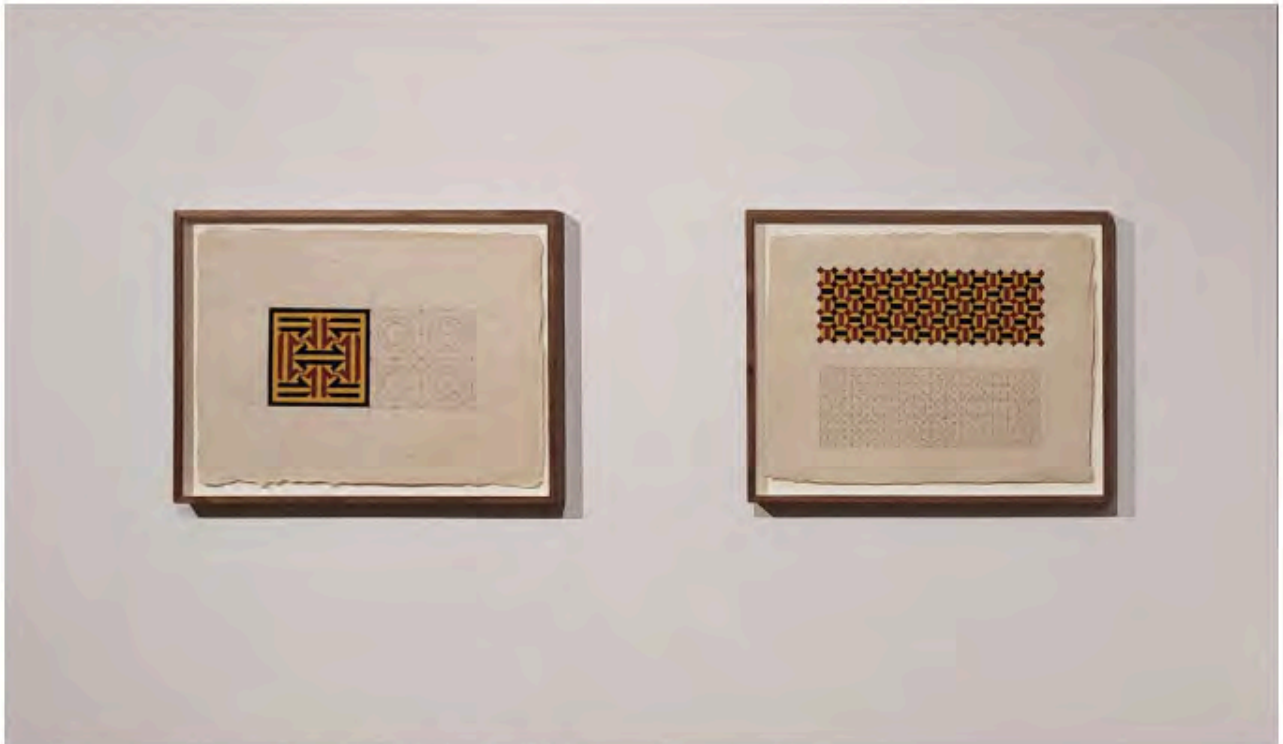
For this exhibition, Awartani also produced “Standing by the Ruins” (2025), a new commission recreating the intricately patterned floors of the Hamam al-Sammara in Gaza, one of the oldest bath houses in the region and now believed to have been destroyed by Israeli bombs. Like much of her other work, the installation forms a meaningful act of remembrance and care — but it also shows the frustration and futility of being forced to “stand by” and watch from afar as Gaza and its people fall to ruins.



Dana Awartani, “Standing by the Ruins” (2025), compressed earth



Installation view of works by Dana Awartani



Installation view of works by Dana Awartani



Installation view of works by Dana Awartani

Dana Awartani: Standing by the Ruins continues at Arnolfini (16 Narrow Quay, Bristol, United Kingdom) through September 28. The exhibition was curated by Gemma Brace in collaboration with the artist.

*Al-Monitor*  
10 July 2025

## AL-MONITOR

### Art, ruins & revival: Dana Awartani's journey from Riyadh to Bristol

Misk's summer show, a fictional beach in Jax and where to eat in Abha.

Welcome to **Al-Monitor Riyadh**.

This week, we spotlight Saudi-Palestinian artist **Dana Awartani's solo exhibition in Bristol, England, Misk Art Institute's summer art exhibition, a new art consultancy with a focus on the Middle East, a multimedia show in the Jax District of Riyadh and a traditional restaurant in Abha**, the capital of the much cooler Asir province in southern Saudi Arabia.

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Happy reading,

Rebecca

#### 1. Leading the week: Dana Awartani's "Standing by the Ruins"



*"Come, let me heal your wounds. Let me mend your broken bones." 2024, by Dana Awartani. (Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery, photographer Samuele Cherubini)*

Saudi-Palestinian artist **Dana Awartani** is staging "**Standing by the Ruins,**" marking her first institutional European solo show at **Arnolfini in Bristol, England**. The exhibition offers an evocative exploration of what Awartani calls "**love and loss, destruction and the passage of time.**"

The exhibition, named after one of the artist's series of ongoing floor installations and paintings, reflects on the **physical loss of cultural heritage** through what Awartani calls in a press release "the lens of abandoned, destroyed and vanishing places." The show comprises **paintings, installations, textiles, performances and film works** that address the destruction that numerous conflicts have left on the landscape of the Arab world.

Awartani's works on show continue her signature manner of **honoring traditional craft techniques** while collaborating with skilled artisans and using locally sourced materials. The resulting works are thus laden with references from Islamic and Arab art-making traditions.

On view are key works such as "**Come, let me heal your wounds. Let me mend your broken bones**" (2024), which was commissioned for the **2024 Venice Biennale**, alongside Awartani's latest commission, "**Standing by the Ruins III**" (2025). The latter was made along with a collective of craftsmen from Riyadh who work with adobe earth restoration, and rebuilds the intricate Ottoman-influenced floor design of Gaza's Hamam al-Sammara. Once one of the region's oldest bathhouses, it is now believed to have been destroyed by the ongoing bombardment of Gaza by the Israeli military.

**Dates:** Through Sept. 28

**Location:** Arnolfini, 16 Narrow Quay, Bristol, England

Find more information [here](#).

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*Artforum*

11 November 2025

# ARTFORUM

NEWS

## DANA AWARTANI TO REPRESENT SAUDI ARABIA AT 2026 VENICE BIENNALE

By News Desk

November 11, 2025 3:00 pm

SHARE



Dana Awartani, 2025. Photo: Anastasia Tikhonova / Ministry of Culture of Saudi Arabia.

Palestinian-Saudi artist [Dana Awartani](#), known for refiguring historical forms, themes, and tropes of Middle Eastern cultures, has been chosen to represent Saudi Arabia at the [Sixty-First Venice Biennale](#), to take place May 9–November 22, 2026. [Antonia Carver](#), director of the Dubai- and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia–based Art Jameel, will curate the exhibition alongside assistant curator Hafsa Alkhudairi. The theme of the Biennale, established by the late Koyo Kouoh, is “In Minor Keys” and will be realized by a larger curatorial team in the wake of Kouoh’s May 2025 death.

Awartani, born in Jeddah 1987 to a Saudi mother and a Palestinian father, draws on Islamic and Arab artmaking traditions in a practice that spans painting, video, sculpture, performance, and installation. Her work examines themes including gender, healing, cultural destruction, and sustainability through the lens of politics. Among her best-known works are the mixed-media installation *I went away and forgot you. A while ago I remembered. I remembered I’d forgotten you. I was dreaming*, 2017, which features a video of the artist sweeping up a hand-dyed sand intricately patterned to resemble a traditional tiled floor. Her series “Come, let me heal your wounds. Let me mend your broken bones,” 2019–24, features medicinally dyed silks that have been draped or stretched across frames and punctured or ripped, then darned by the artist, the locations of their wounds corresponding with those of buildings or sites that have been harmed or destroyed through conflict, colonialism, or acts of terror.

Awartani in a statement thanked the Saudi Visual Arts Commission and Ministry of Culture: “My practice is rooted in foregrounding Middle Eastern cultural histories through the revival of craft practices and the preservation of the region’s globally important material heritage; working with my curatorial colleagues, I am thrilled to have the chance to develop a major new work for the Saudi Pavilion, in line with this theme and endeavor, and to be part of ‘In Minor Keys.’”

*Al-Monitor*  
10 July 2025

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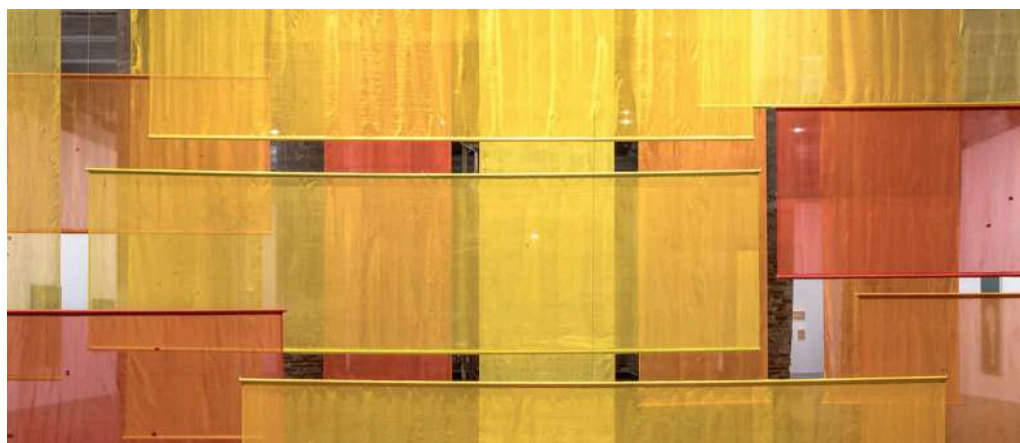
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*Frieze*  
18 April 2024

## FRIEZE

### Arsenale Review: 'Foreigners Everywhere' Treads Familiar Ground

A textile- and painting-heavy edition of the Venice Biennale follows a tried and tested method of curation



How else could artistic director Adriano Pedrosa have kicked off his edition of the Venice Biennale than with the work that inspired its title? Presented in the first room of the Arsenale alongside Yinka Shonibare's *Refugee Astronaut VIII* (2024) – a life-sized figure wearing Dutch wax-printed textiles and carrying a net filled with suitcases – Claire Fontaine's suspended neon *Foreigners Everywhere (Self-Portrait)* (2004–ongoing) might be a predictable opener, but it does make the Brazilian curator's intentions clear from the outset. His is an exhibition which – unlike the right-wing government of the country it is staged in – celebrates migration, recognizing it not just within the clichéd framework of individuals from the Global South searching for a 'better life' in the more prosperous West, but as a vital way in which ideas, cultures and traditions have crisscrossed the globe for centuries.

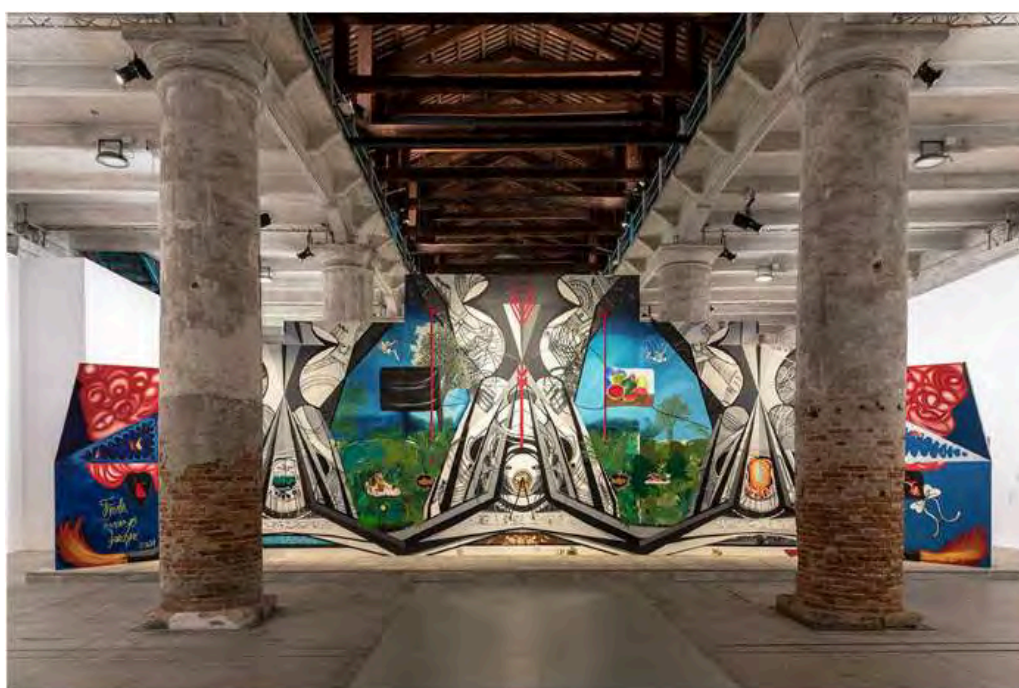
It's not the first time Pedrosa has made such a statement: when invited to curate the 2009 edition of *Panorama da Arte Brasileira*, the Latin American curator chose to include only non-Brazilians, arguing that foreigners could also make work on Brazilian themes. Recognizing the difference in scope between *Panorama da Arte Brasileira* and the Venice Biennale, Pedrosa has wisely opted to widen the focus to include queer, Indigenous and outsider artists whose works seamlessly intermingle throughout the cavernous spaces of the Arsenale and the more modest rooms of the Giardini's central pavilion. Worries about the number of artists and collectives – 331 in total – are largely unfounded, with no real sense of overcrowding.

Pre-opening, there was also concern that, as the first Venice Biennale to showcase more works by dead artists than living ones, contemporary art was being sidelined. Yet, these historical pieces are largely contained within three rooms under the subheading 'Historical Nucleus'. At the Arsenale, this section is entirely dedicated to Italian emigrants, whose works are shown on glass easels originally made for the São Paulo Museum of Art by architect Lina Bo Bardi. There is a neatness to this choice, which places artists such as Waldemar Cordeiro – who migrated to Brazil in 1946 and became a key proponent of the concrete art movement in São Paulo – within a system created by Bo Bardi, herself an Italian immigrant to Brazil. No matter how stunning the install, however, it feels like a less successful repeat of the gesture that curator Cecilia Alemani already made. At the Venice Biennale in 2022, she presented historical works by overlooked artists in 'capsules' that linked artworks from the past with those of the present.



Waldemar Cordeiro, *Untitled*, 1963, oil on canvas, 75 × 74.5 cm, exhibition view, 'Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere', 2024. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia; photograph: Marco Zorzanello

Passing through the rooms on opening day induces a creeping sense of curatorial familiarity: outsider and Indigenous artists are front and centre, with just enough young, emerging artists included to show that the organizers are paying attention to current trends in contemporary art. By now a tried and tested approach to mounting large-scale exhibitions – from the 2023 Sharjah Biennial to Documenta 14 – it can be a hugely successful tactic. Here, I loved the pairing of Mexican-German artist Frieda Toranzo Jaeger's huge, multi-panel painting featuring embroidered sections depicting women fucking (*Rage Is a Machine in Times of Senselessness*, 2024) with an untitled large-scale embroidered canvas (shown opposite) made by Las Bordadoras de Isla Negra, a group of self-taught women working from 1967 to 1980, whose imagery tells the story of their daily lives in a Chilean village. This is the first time both collective and artist have been presented at the Venice Biennale.



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, *Rage Is a Machine in Times of Senselessness*, 2024, oil and embroidery on canvas 15 x 4.8 m, installation view, 'Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere', 2024. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia; photograph: Marco Zorzanello

Textiles have featured prominently in at least the last three biennials, but fabric – whether dyed, sewn or woven – is the dominant medium here. Many of these works are stunning in their complexity. Mataaho Collective's *Takapau* (2022), for instance, is a room-sized installation of polyester hi-vis tie-downs that intersect to create an angular roof whose shadows cascade down the walls. Susanne Wenger's batik canvases utilize a technique rarely seen in contemporary art to create detailed scenes inspired – so the wall text informs us – by Yoruba cosmology and Jungian primordial archetypes. An Austrian who moved to Nigeria in the 1950s and became a Yoruba priestess, Wenger typifies Pedrosa's concept of the foreigner *par excellence*.



Mataaho Collective, *Takapau*, 2022, polyester hi-vis tie-downs, stainless steel buckles and j-hooks, dimensions variable, installation view, 'Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere', 2024. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia; photograph: Marco Zorzanello

Another fabric-based highlight is Palestinian-Saudi artist Dana Awartani's *Come, Let Me Heal Your Wounds. Let Me Mend Your Broken Bones* (2024). Created with medicinally dyed silk, which the artist has torn up in places and sewn back together, the work represents, according to the wall panel, 'the destruction of historical and cultural sites in the Arab world during wars and acts of terror [...] this edition adds testimony to the devastation in Gaza and sites that have been flattened indiscriminately through bombings and bulldozers'. With the artists in the national pavilions mostly keeping mum about the Israel-Gaza war, Awartani's work – along with the hand-scrawled message on Jaeger's canvas, 'Viva! Viva! Palestina!' – is one of the few direct references to the conflict in Venice beyond pro-Palestine demonstrators in the Giardini protesting outside the shuttered Israeli pavilion during the press preview.

This focus on textiles and paintings throws into sharp relief the smaller selection of videos on display. A whole room is given to the multi-screen installation *The Mapping Journey Project* (2008–11) by Bouchra Khalili, in which migrants mark the journey from their homeland to their current place of residence on a world map. I also enjoyed Karimah Ashadu's slick and sexy *Machine Boys* (2024), which follows a group of *okada* riders illegally transporting people via motorbike in Lagos. After what feels like a decade of curators boasting about the length of their film programmes, I was pleasantly surprised that everything I saw had a runtime of under 15 minutes. I hope this signifies a positive new trend for biennials in which it actually becomes possible to see all the work on show within one or two days.



Dana Awartani, *Come, let me heal your wounds. Let me mend your broken bones*, 2024, darning on medicinally dyed silk, 5.2 × 12.5 × 2.9 m, installation view, 'Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere', 2024. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia; photograph: Marco Zorzanello



Bouchra Khalili, *The Mapping Journey Project*, 2008-11, video installation, 8 single-channel videos, colour, sound, dimensions variable, 'Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere', 2024. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia; photograph: Marco Zorzanello

In a recent *New York Times* profile of Pedrosa, art historian Claire Bishop notes that ‘gripping about biennials is one of the art world’s favourite hobbies: not enough young artists, too many young artists; not enough local artists, too many local artists. You can’t please everyone all the time.’ While I am sympathetic to this viewpoint, especially when it comes to regional focus – it is hardly surprising, for instance, that the Venice Biennale’s first Latin American curator should highlight artists from Latin America – I do still feel that the exhibition has one glaring omission: the internet, which has been a vital way for migrant, Indigenous and queer voices to find community and be heard. Here, however, the only piece that speaks to emergent media technologies is WangShui’s pulsating multichannel simulation *Lipid Muse* (2024). While the desire to address the widespread historic neglect of textile practices is both comprehensible and justifiable, should we ignore the present day in order to do so? And what of the future?



Claire Fontaine, *Foreigners Everywhere / Stranieri Ovunque*, 2004-24, sixty suspended, wall or window mounted neons, framework, transformers, cables and fittings, dimensions and colours variable, installation view, 'Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere', 2024. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia; photograph: Marco Zorzanello

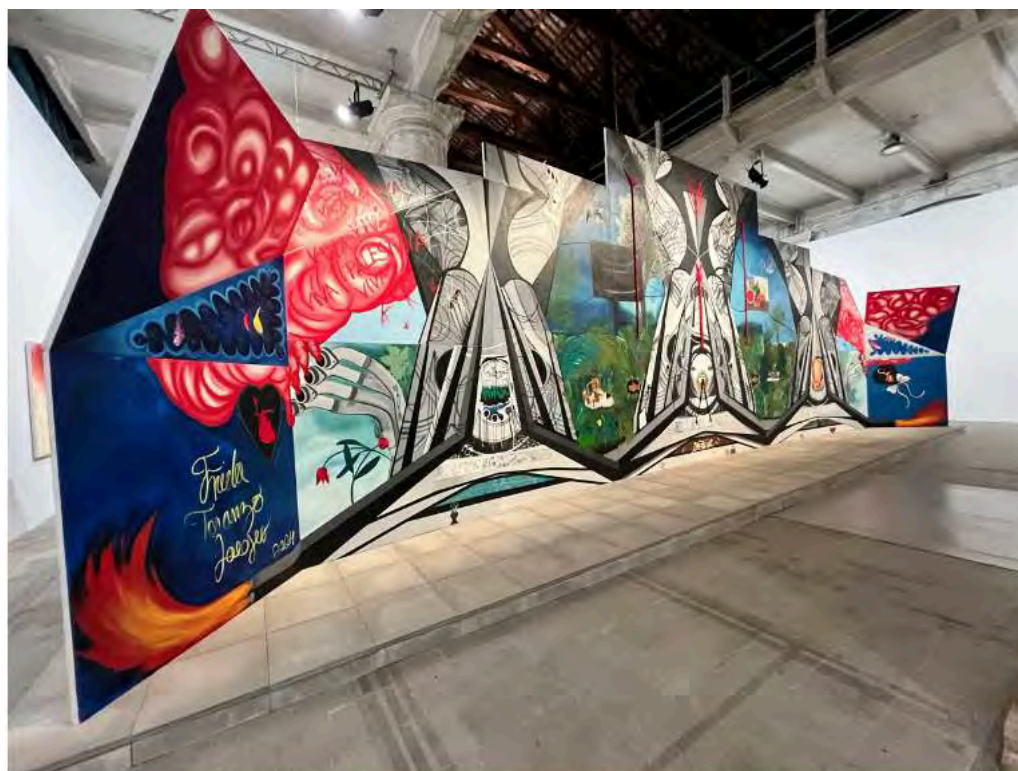
In circular fashion, Pedrosa’s exhibition closes with more of Claire Fontaine’s suspended neons. The installation *Foreigners Everywhere* (60th International Art Exhibition) (2024) includes 60 iterations of the titular phrase, each in one of the languages spoken in the countries where members of the collective were born. Given that, as Pedrosa pointed out in an interview with this magazine, the Venice Biennale took more than a century to appoint its first non-Euro-American curator, Okwui Enwezor, the presence of these multiple voices is significant. Yet, how great can their impact truly be if they are all saying the same thing? With ‘Foreigners Everywhere’ unquestionably the most diverse biennial to date, I remain hopeful that, two years from now, we’ll get an exhibition that includes all these nationalities under a theme that doesn’t reduce them to the languages they speak and the places they were born or moved to.

# ARTnews

## At the Venice Biennale's Contemporary Showcase, Living Artists Examine Queer and Indigenous Legacies



BY MAXIMILIANO DURÓN April 17, 2024 4:52pm



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, *Rage Is a Machine in Times of Senseless*, 2024.  
PHOTO MAXIMILIANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

As the international art world has descended on La Serenissima this week, the 2024 Venice Biennale began the first of its preview days on Tuesday morning, with visitors heading to either (or both) of its main venues: the Arsenale and the Giardini. Curated this year by Adriano Pedrosa, the closely watched artistic director of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, the exhibition, titled “Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere,” focuses on Indigenous artists and artist from the Global South, highlighting the vastness of art that is out in the world today and, with the historical section, throughout the 20th century.

The first several rooms of the Arsenale are the strongest section of this exhibition—triumphant and elegant in their presentations of monumental works that have presence and touch on the legacies of colonialism and its aftereffects and current realities today, queerness in an expanded form, the cacophony of modernity, and much more. While the Giardini is not as near pitch-perfect, there are standout works there too.

More than half of this Biennale’s participant list consists of deceased artists, the majority of whom are represented by a single work in the historical section (“Nucleo Storico”). The “Nucleo Contemporaneo,” on the other hand, focuses on contemporary art (though a few deceased artists appear here, too). Here, I’ll focus on living artists included in the “Nucleo Contemporaneo”; below a look at the highlights.

## 5 Dana Awartani (Arsenale)



Dana Awartani, 'Come, Let Me Heal Your Wounds. Let Me Mend Your Broken Bones' (2024).

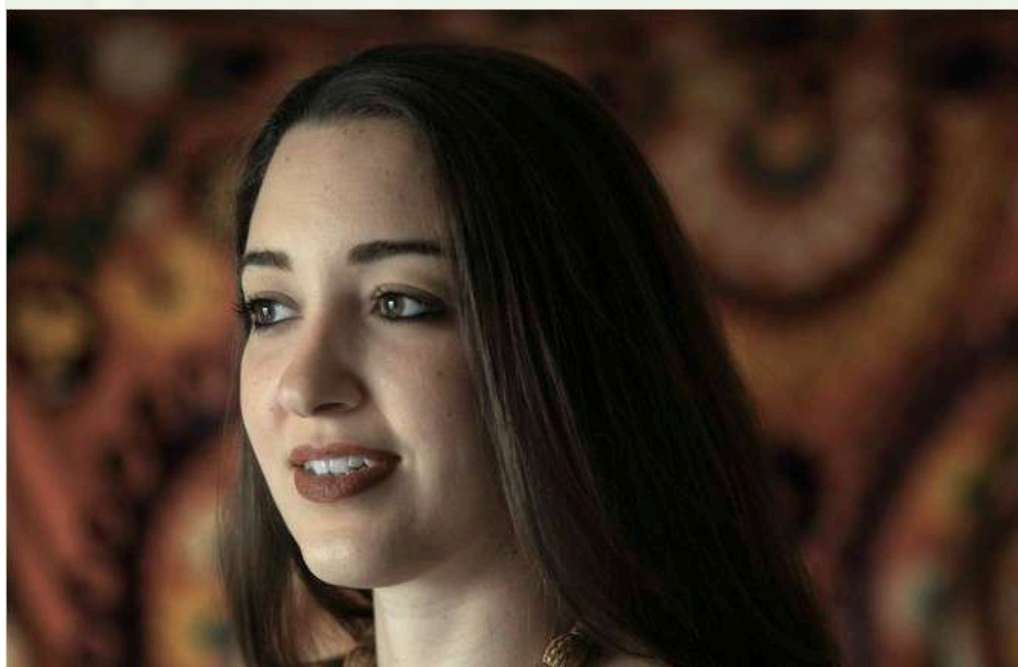
Photo : Maximiliano Durón/ARTnews

I gained a further appreciation for Whitehorse’s palette when I encountered the work of Dana Awartani, a Saudi artist of Palestinian lineage, further along in the exhibition, which also consists of hues of reds, yellows, and oranges pieces of fabrics hang, suspended from the ceiling, overlapping. If you look closely, you’ll notice that the swaths of fabric have imperfections, irregularly shaped square patches that point to a previous tear or rip. Awartani has darned these works, a technique that brings together the existing threads of a tattered cloth rather than introducing a new, or foreign, piece of fabric. Each tear, and by extension repair, represents “historical and cultural sites that have been destroyed in the Arab world during war and by acts of terror,” per the wall text; it is updated and expanded for each presentation, with this new one reflecting the destruction in Gaza amid Israel’s ongoing war that has claimed thousands of lives and leveled all its universities. The work’s title, *Come, Let Me Heal Your Wounds. Let Me Mend Your Broken Bones* (2024), speaks to this practice, as does the dyes Awartani has used, mixtures of herbs and spices that all carry medicinal properties. The work is quite literally a salve when we need it the most.

Arab News  
29 March 2024

# ARAB NEWS

Jeddah-born artist Dana Awartani on making contemporary work that honors the past



Dana Awartani is of Palestinian heritage. (Supplied)

'Traditional arts are dying out,' says Dana Awartani

Updated 29 March 2024

REBECCA ANNE PROCTOR

March 29, 2024 10:09

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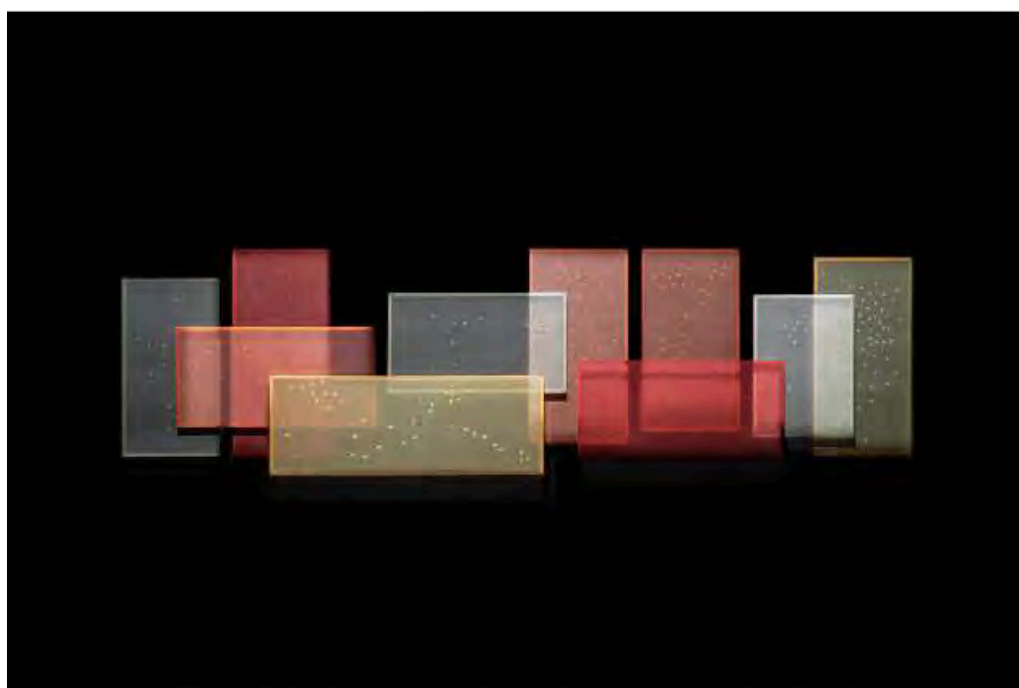


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DUBAI: At the Diriyah Art Biennale, Saudi-born artist Dana Awartani, who is of Palestinian heritage, has created a dreamy, otherworldly series of 10 silk fabrics in earthy hues of ochre, reds and greens placed on wooden frames and mounted on the wall as overlapping, semitransparent panels.

The installation — “Come, Let Me Heal Your Wounds” — was derived from research into Ayurvedic dyeing, which is used to create clothing with alleged healing properties. To create the work, Awartani collaborated with artisans in Kerala, India.

The artist also identified 355 cultural sites that have been destroyed because of conflict and violence since 2010 in Syria, Tunisia, Libya, Iraq, Egypt, and Yemen. She marked each location with a tear in the silk, creating her own intuitive map of loss. Together with local craftspeople, Awartani then repaired the fabric, mending each hole by hand.



Dana Awartani, "Come, Let Me Heal Your Wounds" (2020), as presented at the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale 2024. (Supplied)

The work hints at the fragility of cultural sites throughout the Middle East and North Africa region, and serves as a plea to safeguard ancient monuments and Arab culture and tradition in general.

“You have this erasure of history that’s happening in the Levant, in Gaza now, and I felt it was critical to use my traditional arts training and aesthetic language to talk about issues that are relevant to the region,” Awartani tells Arab News.

Awartani’s work, which covers a variety of mediums — including drawing, painting, textiles, multimedia installations, and film — is inspired by the rich heritage of Islamic art, particularly ‘sacred geometry’; abstraction; and traditional crafts. She combines these influences with contemporary styles to render works imbued with both alluring aesthetic qualities and philosophical depth. Much of her work uses locally sourced materials, as well as vernacular and ancient design styles to present a dialogue between the past and present of Arab culture.



(Supplied)

“The memories and experiences of the people I collaborate with also become part of the work,” she says, adding that traditional arts “are dying out, people don’t use sacred geometry anymore; people don’t work with their hands anymore.”

Geometry is at the center of her animated film “Listen to my Words” – also on view in “After Rain.” In it, a gray background is gradually filled by a delicately rendered geometric pattern inspired by jali and mashrabiya – latticed screens used in traditional architecture to regulate light, airflow, and heat. Jalis were also used to shield women from the male gaze.

The film, Awartani explains, was inspired by the story of Nur Jahan, the wife of a Mughal emperor, who reportedly played a leading role in government in the 17th century from behind a jali, whispering commands to her husband. It is soundtracked by contemporary recitals of Arabic poetry written by women centuries ago – giving them a platform, and resonance, in the present.

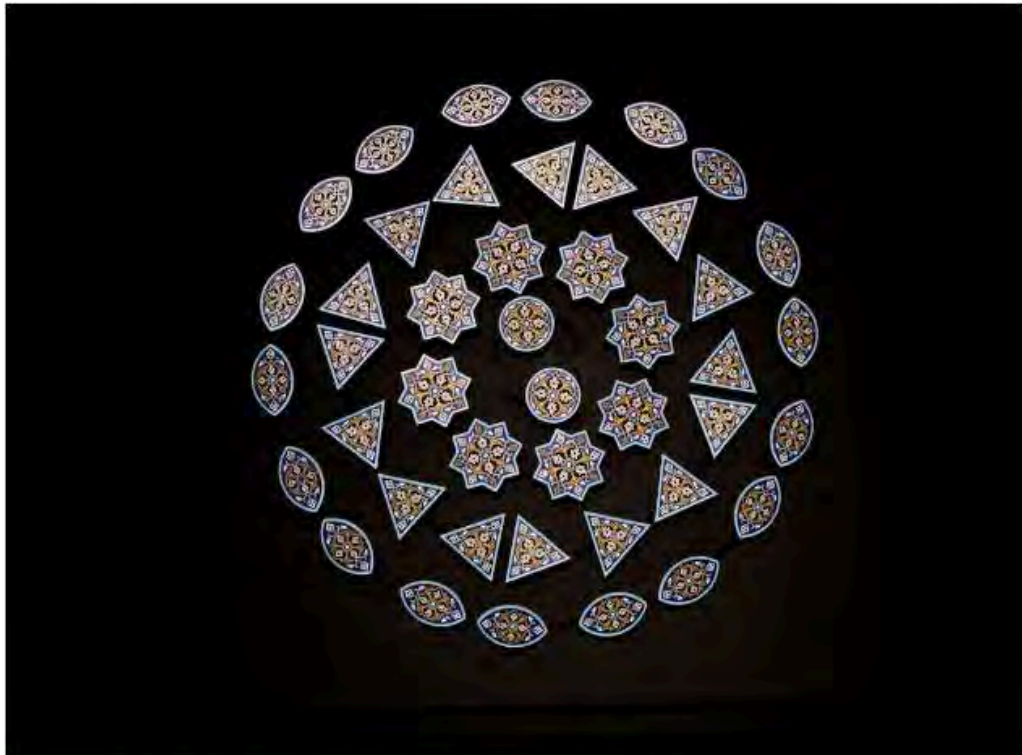


Awartani's 2023 work 'When the Dust of Conflict Settles,' for which she collaborated with stonemasons from Syria. (Supplied)

The incorporation of traditional practices into contemporary artistic discourse is central to Awartani's art – she is currently pursuing an Ijazah certificate in Islamic illumination. The work she created after earning her master's degree from The Prince's Foundation School of Traditional Arts in London focused heavily on sacred geometry; something that is still a major influence (as evidenced by "Listen to my Words"), but less so than it was – a shift she attributes to "recent events in the Middle East, with the ways the current wars have destroyed the heritage and culture of the region. This has really shifted my perspective."

Of her earlier work, she says: "When I graduated from the Prince's School, it was hard to snap out of the training because you're continuing an art form that has been around for centuries, and there's a certain level of responsibility that comes with that."

"There are many people who take something old, like traditional crafts, and innovate without understanding it. Sometimes I find that problematic. For the longest time, I was still trying to hone my skills and learn as much as I could about traditional arts while still using it in a contemporary way through concepts relating to Islamic geometric patterns."



All Heavenly Bodies Swim Along, Each in Its Orbit, Dana Awartani, 2016. (Supplied)

Awartani first became interested in sacred geometry, she says, as a way to “understand the world from a different perspective by seeing harmony in nature and the cosmos through the lens of geometry and numbers.” Sacred geometry is also a way to connect with her heritage.

“As Arabs, we’re raised around this fine art, we’re surrounded by it in every corner, but we’re not aware of it,” she told Arab News in a 2014 interview. “You can see geometry all around you, like in mosques for example. I was looking for a track to follow — deep down inside I felt a yearning for it. There is an inner and outer beauty telling a story behind every structured piece; there is no randomness when it comes to creating such pieces.”

It is not only the theoretical side of Awartani’s work that has shifted — the way she creates it has also changed in recent years.

“It’s a lot more collaborative now, involving different craft communities,” she explains. “Whereas, before, I used to predominantly do paintings and works on paper, now I incorporate the work of traditional craftsmen in my work.”

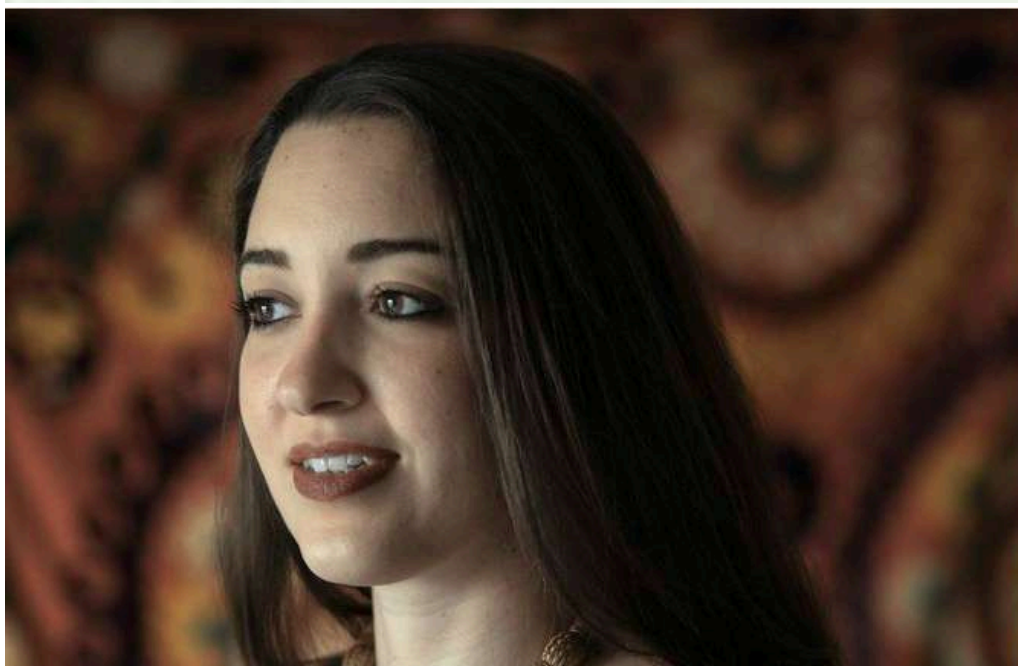
In last year’s “When The Dust of Conflict Settles,” for example, she worked with apprentice stonemasons from Syria who have been displaced by the war in their homeland and are living in Jordan.

“It’s this coming together of various craftspeople to foster an exchange of knowledge that I am really passionate about now,” she says. “This exchange of knowledge and exchange of culture.”

*Arab News*  
5 March 2024

## ARAB NEWS

### From Saudi Arabia to Venice, artist Dana Awartani to present work at Biennale Arte



Dana Awartani is a Saudi artist of Palestinian heritage. (Supplied)

Updated 05 March 2024

**REBECCA ANNE PROCTOR**

March 05, 2024 16:35

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DUBAI: Dana Awartani, a Saudi artist of Palestinian heritage, has been selected to show a newly commissioned work in the central pavilion at the upcoming Venice Biennale Arte 2024, which runs from April 20 to Nov. 24.

Awartani is known for drawing inspiration from Islamic art and its intricate language of geometric abstraction to make works that are philosophically deep and rich reflections of Arab culture.

The production of the new work, which will be revealed during the biennale's opening week, has been fully funded by Saudi Arabia's Diriyah Biennale Foundation as part of its mission to provide a platform for local artists to engage in a global conversation.

To achieve these aims, the DBF works to commission artworks and foster connections between Saudi Arabia's art scene and institutions, artists and various international audiences.

"I am extremely honored to be invited to participate in the Venice Biennale, and I have been working on my newly commissioned artwork for the biennale over the past nine months," Awartani told Arab News on Tuesday. "I am also very grateful that the Diriyah Biennale Foundation are supporting my participation, which as a result, has given me the opportunity to focus on creating a highly ambitious new project."

Awartani, who exhibited her work at the inaugural edition of the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale in 2021, was subsequently included in the 16th Lyon Contemporary Art Biennale in 2022, and the Sharjah Biennial 15 in 2023.

Her work "Come, Let Me Heal Your Wounds" and her film "Listen To My Words" were also included in the second edition of the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale titled "After Rain," which was curated by Ute Meta Bauer and opened on Feb. 20, 2024.

Aya Al Bakree, CEO of the Diriyah Biennale Foundation, commented on the announcement, saying: "Supporting artists is central to our ambition at the Diriyah Biennale Foundation. Dana contributed with one of the most rigorous and compelling works in our past biennales and we are incredibly proud to have supported Dana in achieving deserved international recognition, this time at the central exhibition of the Venice Biennale. We look forward to continue supporting our country's artists and help them contribute creatively to global artistic practice at this scale."

Awartani's works include drawings of geometric patterns as well as rich textile works and multi-media installations – all of which reflect on Arab culture, craftsmanship and history.

Titled "Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere," the 60th Venice Biennale Arte is being curated by Adriano Pedrosa. The DBF commission is separate from Saudi Arabia's national pavilion at the event, which will showcase a solo exhibition by artist Manal Al-Dowayan.

ARTS hub  
4 March 2024



## Exhibition review: Dana Awartani, Samstag Museum of Art, Adelaide

An undoubted highlight of the Adelaide Festival visual arts program, this exhibition explores creation and erasure.

4 Mar 2024

**Gina Fairley**



VISUAL ARTS

Dana Awartani, performance-based installation, 'I Went Away and Forgot You...' (2017), showing at Samstag Museum of Art. Image: Supplied.

SHARE

After a year of closures due to water damage, Samstag Museum of Art has opened its **Partnati season** with an elegant reimagining of Dana Awartani's 2017 performance-based installation, *I Went Away and Forgot You. A While Ago I Remembered. I Remembered I'd Forgotten You. I Was Dreaming.*

From a viewing perspective, it is minimal, elegant and discreet. Visitors watch a video from the Gallery's upper level. In it, the artist sweeps up a carpet of sand in a deserted mid-century building. At the simplest level, it is an homage to a past architectural and cultural tradition – the handmade floor tiles that were a signature of these buildings and an homage to local artisans.

Awartani's installation takes two parts – a film and a geometric floor-based sand sculpture – which pair an action of creation and an act of destruction.

The floor work recreates designs in sand, in a mandala-like process of dyeing the sand and then methodically creating its geometric design, square by square, stencil by stencil.

Where this gets interesting is that Awartani was unable to travel to Adelaide for this installation, but rather worked with local artist-installers to recreate the piece. Part of that journey of making is the imparting of cultural knowledge – as if to enliven and ensure the continuation of those traditions.



*Dana Awartani, 'I Went Away and Forgot You...,' installation detail Samstag Museum of Art, Adelaide. Photo: ArtsHub.*

The "carpet" sits in the lower gallery below – static and stately. It is a stunning piece upon which to meditate. Above it hovers a video of the "carpet" being swept up, as if erased – like so many of these buildings that are being razed by developers.

The installation is presented alongside an exhibition of Bruce Nuske's porcelain teapots and vessels, which have been set against a highly patterned backdrop designed by the late **Khari Liew**. There is a wonderful synergy between these two artists, unabashedly celebrating a beauty and narrative. Together they put "traditional crafts" into the contemporary and conceptual context.

In a separate room, there is a further work by Awartani – the single-channel video, *Listen to My Words*. It takes its foundation from the screening that is used in Islamic architecture – often used as a divide, and more explicitly a gender divide or barrier. The poetic soundtrack that accompanies this piece is compiled from writings by women.

As with her sand work, erasure is a key point of discussion. In tandem, they capture the expanse of Awartani's poetic and smart practice, which is highly codified and sensitive to past and present. It is a sure highlight of the Adelaide Festival visual arts program.

**Dana Awartani**  
**Samstag Museum of Art, Adelaide**  
**1 March — Friday 10 May 2024**  
**Free.**

*This exhibition is part of 2024 Adelaide Festival programming. The writer travelled to Adelaide as a guest of the Festival.*

# ARTnews

## The 2024 Venice Biennale By the Numbers: A Massive Artist List with a Focus on the Global South



BY **MAXIMILIANO DURÓN** February 1, 2024 5:00am



Dana Awartani, *Come, let me heal your wounds. Let me mend your broken bones, as we stand here mourning*, 2019.  
PHOTO ANNA SHTRAUS/©DANA AWARTANI/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ATHR GALLERY

On Wednesday during a press conference, **Adriano Pedrosa** announced the exceptionally large artist list for the upcoming Venice Biennale, for which he serves as curator.

Taking the theme of “Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere,” Pedrosa, who is also artistic director of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo and the first Latin American to organize the Biennale’s main exhibition, said the 2024 edition speaks to “a world rife with multifarious crises concerning the movement and existence of people across countries, nations, territories, and borders, which reflect, in turn, the perils and pitfalls of language, translation, nationality, expressing differences and disparities conditioned by race, identity, nationality, gender, sexuality, freedom, and wealth.”

## Related Articles



**Russia Won't Have a Venice Biennale Pavilion for the Second Edition in a Row**

**Venice Biennale Names 331 Artists for 2024 Edition, Titled 'Foreigners Everywhere'**

*ARTnews* crunched some of the numbers of the artist list for the **2024 Venice Biennale**, which opens in April.

**331.** The official number of participating artists in the 2024 Venice Biennale. However, included in this count are a number of collectives, so the total participant number is likely well over 400.

**112.** That's how many artists will be included in the "Nucleo Storico" portion of the Biennale, which focuses on modernisms from the Global South and will include work produced between 1905 and 1990. Per Pedrosa, each artist will be represented by one work here.

**39.** The number of artists and collectives participating in a special section within the main exhibition dedicated to the Disobedience Archive, a video project founded by Milan-based curator Marco Scotini in 2005. (The Biennale did not provide official birth dates and geographical location for these artists, as such they are not tabulated within the following data.)

**4.67.** That's how many times larger this year's Venice Biennale is than this year's Whitney Biennial, which opens the month before and includes 69 artists and 2 collectives. While international biennials have been known to have a crossover of artists, these two share just **1** artist, Chilean artist Seba Calfuqueo, who features in the Biennale's Disobedience Archive.

**8** and **12.** The number of collectives or artist duos in the main exhibition and the Disobedience Archive section, respectively. In the former group, those include MAHKU, Superflex, Mataaho Collective, and Claire Fontaine, while the latter group has Black Audio-Film Collective, Critical Art Ensemble, Pilot TV Collective, and Queerocracy.



Rosa Elena Curruchich, *Van a escoger capitana del nuevo año*, ca. 1980.  
PHOTO MARGO PORRES/COURTESY PROYECTOS ULTRAVIOLETA, GUATEMALA CITY

**1924.** That's the year the oldest living participant, Montevideo-based Italian artist **Linda Kohen**, was born, meaning she is set to turn 100 this year. Six other deceased artists were born in 1924: Inji Efflatoun, Ram Kumar, Bertina Lopes, Francis Newton Souza, Armodio Tamayo, and Horacio Torres.

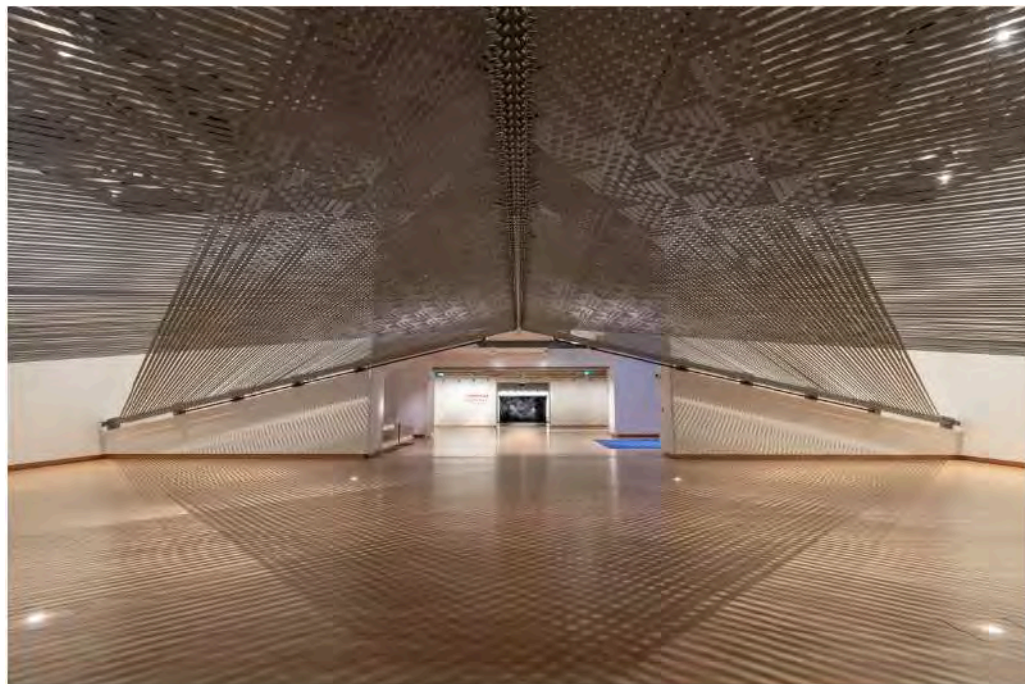
Speaking of elder living artists, this edition includes **24** artists born before the end of World War II, meaning they would be in their 80s and above. Among these are Zilia Sánchez (b. 1926), Ahmed Morsi (1930), Claudia Andujar (1931), Olga De Amaral (1932), Kay WalkingStick (1935), Abel Rodríguez Cahuinari (1941), and Simone Forti (1935), as well as both winners of this year's Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement, Nil Yalter (1938) and Anna Maria Maiolino (1942). (Forti was the winner of the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement from the Venice Dance Biennale in 2023.)

**181.** The number of deceased artists (as of January 31, 2024), which is around 55 percent of the official artist list. Of those deceased artists, **47** were born in the 19th century, with Eliseu Visconti, who was born in Italy in **1866** and died in Brazil in 1944, being the oldest. (Two artists, Juana Elena Diz and Ester Pilon, have unknown death dates.)

**28.** While many of the deceased artists lived long lives, including Saloua Raouda Choucair who died six months before her 101st birthday, Hungarian-Indian painter Amrita Sher-Gil was only 28 when she died in 1941 of an unknown illness just before the opening of her first major solo show in Lahore.

**1998** is the birth year for the Biennale's youngest participant, Beirut-born, Montreal-based Joyce Joumaa, who will turn 26 this year and is included via the Biennale College Arte initiative. The youngest artists participating not via the Biennale College Arte initiative are Nour Jaouda and River Claire, both born in 1997. Together, these **3** artists are the only Gen Z participants, **per the Pew Research Center**, which starts the generation at **1997**.

On the other hand, millennials, born between 1981 and 1996 per Pew, have a robust showing in the Biennale, with **40** artists set to show their work. Among those in the cohort are Salman Toor (b. 1983), Leilah Babirye (1985), WangShui (1986) Bárbara Sánchez-Kane (1987), Lauren Halsey (1987), Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo aka Puppies Puppies (1989), Rindon Johnson (1990), Ana Segovia (1991), Lydia Ourahmane (1992), and Louis Fratino (1993).



Mataaho Collective, *Takapau*, 2022, installation view.  
PHOTO MAARTEN HOLL/COURTESY TE PAPA

Geographically, the exhibiting artists have ties to at least **69** countries. With the Biennale's focus on "Foreigners Everywhere," determining a given artist's nationality can be tricky business given that numerous artists were born in one country and died or are currently based in another. (That also doesn't take into account whether or not they spent significant time in a country not currently listed on their CVs.)

With its focus on artists born or working in the Global South, this breaks down into **12** countries from East Asia, South Asia, and Oceania, like China, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and New Zealand; **11** countries from North Africa and the Middle East, including Egypt, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia; **9** countries from Sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, Angola, and South Africa; **2** territories, Hong Kong and Puerto Rico; and **17** countries from Europe, including the UK, Italy, France, and the former Czechoslovakia.

Looking specifically at Latin America, as Pedrosa is the first Biennale curator to come from this region, the exhibition includes artists with ties to **16** countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, such as Mexico, Guatemala, Argentina, Uruguay, Cuba, and Haiti. Within that region, **57** deceased artists and **28** living artists have ties to Latin American or Caribbean countries.

**30** artists have ties specifically to Brazil, Pedrosa's home country. Of those **7** are living artists and **1** collective, MAHKU, founded in 2013 by Indigenous Huni Kuin artists; **2** additional Indigenous Brazilian artists, Joseca Mokahezi Yanomami and André Taniki Yanomami, are also included. Of the deceased artists, **9** were born abroad.

Similarly, Pedrosa's list features **3** US-based Latinx artists, including Beatriz Cortez, Pablo Delano, and Fanny Sanín, as well as **2** who are recently deceased, Carmen Herrera and Freddy Rodríguez. On the historical side are **4** artists who would today likely be considered Latinx: Alfredo Ramos Martínez (1871–1946), Rosa Rolanda (1896–1970), Oswaldo Guayasamín (1919–1999), and Kazuya Sakai (1927–2001); Martínez, Guayasamín, and Sakai were born in Mexico, Ecuador, and Argentina, respectively, and died in the US. Rolanda was born in the US and died in Mexico. (These four artists were also included in the above figures for Latin America.)

**19** artists in this edition are currently based in the United States, while **9** artists died in the US (all of whom were born in different countries). Additionally, **2** artists, Rindon Johnson and Dean Sameshima, were both born in California but are now based in Berlin. Among the living artists are **2** Native American artists, Kay WalkingStick and Emmi Whitehorse.

# ArtReview

## Artists announced for the 60th Venice Biennale

ArtReview News 31 January 2024 artreview.com



Photo: Mauricio Jorge

Adriano Pedrosa, curator of the [60th Venice Biennale](#), today announced at a press conference in Venice the list of artists participating in the biennale. Titled *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, the international exhibition will feature 333 artists and collectives. Pedrosa described that as a guiding principle, the 2024 edition has favoured artists who have never participated in the International Exhibition, though a number of them may have presented as part of a national pavilion and a few were part of collateral events and previous international exhibitions. The Exhibition will take place in the Central Pavilion in the Giardini and in the Arsenale, and it will present two sections: the Nucleo Contemporaneo and the Nucleo Storico, where the latter is dedicated to global modernisms and modernisms in the Global South. Special attention is being given to outdoor projects, both in the Arsenale and in the Giardini, and to a performance programme for the preview and closing weekend of the exhibition.

The 60th Venice Biennale will open to the public from 20 April to 24 November 2024, with the preview on 17–19 April. The full list of artists is:

**Dana Awartani**

Palestinian, born in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, 1987. Lives in Jeddah

*The Art Newspaper*  
31 July 2023



## THE ART NEWSPAPER

### New museum in Saudi Arabia bolsters collection after inking partnership deal with Centre Pompidou

The contemporary art institution is one of 15 “cultural assets” in development in the Arabian state’s AlUla heritage region



Dana Awartani’s *Where the Dwellers Lay* (2022), which was part of Desert X AlUla 2022, the biennial organised in collaboration with the Royal Commission for AlUla

Photo: Lance Gerber

**Gareth Harris**

31 July 2023

Share



A new contemporary museum planned for the vast AlUla heritage region of Saudi Arabia has signed a partnership deal with The Centre Pompidou that will see the French institution loan works to the Middle Eastern kingdom.

The museum is also quickly acquiring a permanent collection of works that so far includes pieces by artists such as [Yayoi Kusama](#), [Carmen Herrera](#), [Manal AlDowayan](#), [Etel Adnan](#) and [Ibrahim El Salahi](#), according to the UK curator Iwona Blazwick.

Blazwick, the former director of the Whitechapel Gallery in London and now an employee of the governing Saudi kingdom, also hopes to host a show of works at the new AlUla venue which are drawn from the Centre Pompidou's collection and selected by Saudi artists. "We are negotiating an agreement that the Pompidou can borrow from our collection and that we can borrow from theirs," she said in an interview with *The Art Newspaper*.

"It's all about reciprocity. We want our collection to be active in lending works, particularly for artists who are planning survey shows; our ethos is artist led."

The Centre Pompidou, which is due to close from 2025 to 2030 for major refurbishments, will be one of numerous partners involved in the Arabian kingdom's latest contemporary art museum project. "I'm keen to develop a network that really focuses on what's happening in the Global South," says Blazwick, whose official title is Curatorial Lead, Contemporary Art Museum, AlUla. Blazwick also hopes to collaborate with organisations like [Art Jameel](#) in Dubai and the [Kiran Nadar Museum of Art](#) in Delhi, she said. A completion date for the new museum is not confirmed.

The Pompidou arrangement also provides training opportunities for Saudi curators. "We hope that the Pompidou will host and mentor colleagues from Saudi in either Paris or at one of their many satellites," Blazwick says.

The financial terms of the deal between the Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU)—the Saudi government cultural body, led by the country's *de facto* ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—and the Centre Pompidou remain confidential, although the French newspaper *Le Monde* reported that the partnership would be worth around €2m annually to the institution. A source close to the Centre Pompidou, however, says: "This quote was apparently only mentioned in preliminary discussions as an estimate regarding the expertise Pompidou could bring before the opening of a gallery there". The Centre Pompidou declined a request to comment.

The contemporary art space, announced in May along with another new institution, a museum dedicated to the Incense Road, will be designed by the Paris-based architect [Lina Ghotmeh](#), who has overseen the [Serpentine Pavilion](#) in London this year; the Incense Road Museum will be designed by the prominent London-based architect [Asif Khan](#).

[Khaled Azzam](#), the architect of [AlUla's Journey Through Time](#) arts masterplan, says the two museums are the first of "15 cultural assets" in development as part of a 15-year initiative designed to turn the 2,000-year-old site into a tourist destination. All 15 "assets" were disclosed to *The Art Newspaper*. They include the [Dadan Interpretive Centre](#), the [Hegra Museum](#) and the [Kingdoms Institute](#).

According to Blazwick, the contemporary art museum will house four collections. The first, “Three Seas: the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea and the eastern Mediterranean”, is an echo of the ancient civilisations in AlUla during the Nabataean period, from around 400BC to AD100. The second collection, “Continents”, comprises a series of immersive environments by artists from six continents. The “Desert Collection” will feature artists who are creating permanent works for the ancient valley of Wadi AlFann while the “Botanics Collection” comprises permanent gardens by ten artists from around the world.

The Pompidou partnership is the latest France-driven arts initiative to be launched in Saudi Arabia. The initial agreement between the gallery and the RCU was finalised on 12 March. It reflects how embedded the French government is within the country; the French government even has an agency, known as Afalula [\[1\]](#), which is specifically tasked with developing ties with AlUla. The agency is the result of an intergovernmental agreement signed by France and Saudi Arabia in 2018.

The day after Turkish officials announced that the US-residing Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi had been murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018, France’s president, Emmanuel Macron, issued a decree officially confirming the cultural development of AlUla province. The budget for the joint project is believed to be at least \$20bn.

#### **Human rights concern**

Ever since, Afalula has quietly launched a range of artist-led programmes in AlUla. The Afalula initiative underpins the drive by the Saudi government to rebrand the conservative state that has a concerning human rights record. Between 2015 and 2022, an average of 129 executions were carried out each year in the kingdom.

A French critic, who chose to remain anonymous, told us earlier this year: “The French/Saudi partnership is part of a drive to promote the cultural credentials of Saudi Arabia, helping to diversify and deliver a more ‘open’ image of the country.”

The suite of museum assets come off the back of a launch initiative which was also developed in collaboration with the RCU—the Desert X AlUla biennial exhibition, launched in 2020. An offshoot of Desert X in Coachella, US, the Saudi edition features site-specific works dotted around the AlUla region.

Charges of “artwashing”—using art to gloss over thorny issues such as human rights abuses—are misplaced, says the journalist Rebecca Proctor, author of the forthcoming publication *Art in Saudi Arabia: A New Creative Economy?* [\[2\]](#) (Lund Humphries/Sotheby’s Institute of Art), which was written with support from arts patron and academic Alia Al-Senussi.

“Saudi artists, curators, gallerists and supporters reject the term,” Proctor says. “Saudi artists will tell you that the Saudi art scene is not a place for propaganda. While the massive cultural transformation in Saudi Arabia is taking place via a top-down approach from the government, Saudi artists will affirm that, for no exhibition or event sponsored by the government, are they told what to create or what message their work should convey.”

But the Saudi state is directly and heavily involved in the promotion and expansion of each creative field. As such, it is becoming more and more challenging to find independently run spaces between the state and the artists, Proctor adds, saying: "Those working in government cultural sectors attest that their goal is to encourage the growth of the private creative sector."

*National Geographic*  
11 July 2023



## Desert X AlUla: The art of the Desert

AlUla's oasis has inspired artists for millennia: Recently, Desert X AlUla has brought a fresh artistic resurgence to this striking desert landscape.

July 11, 2023



In the searing heat of the desert, a sculptured pool of stainless-steel shimmers as it reflects the bright sunlight, the image constantly changing with the time of day and angle at which it is viewed. It stands as an artistic representation of a mirage—or at least it stood. Because this work of art, like a mirage and the shifting sands of the desert, is transient, and now that the art exhibition has closed, it leaves behind no trace. It was one of the monumental installations of Desert X AlUla, a temporary art exhibition staged on a spectacular scale in the striking sandstone landscape of Saudi Arabia's AlUla oasis.

Desert X has its roots in the Coachella Valley of California where, since 2017, exhibitions have brought the desert to life through artistic installations modeled on and within the landscape. The works by acclaimed international artists aim to amplify the beauty of the desert while expressing profound ecological, cultural, and spiritual themes shared by indigenous peoples and the wider global community. For Desert X, art is a medium for cultural exchange, and this was reflected in the choice of AlUla as its first location for a Desert X exhibition beyond the U.S.

For millennia, AlUla has been a vibrant center of cultural exchange due to its unique position as an oasis in the vast Arabian desert. The life-sustaining waters of AlUla ensured that it become a vital stop for ancient traders carrying spices, aromatics, and more across the grueling desert from southern Arabia to the Mediterranean. Later, with the spread of Islam,

thousands of pilgrims from across the world passed through AlUla's oasis each year as they traveled the pilgrimage routes to the holy cities of Makkah (Mecca) and Medina. Such international exposure made AlUla a meeting point of cultures, influencing the area's long and artistic traditions.



Dana Awartani's "Where the Dwellers Lay" is one of the spectacular art installations at Desert X AlUla that seeks to reflect the region's history, culture, and geology.

PHOTOGRAPH SUPPLIED BY ROYAL COMMISSION FOR ALULA

Some of AlUla's earliest art is carved into the desert landscape itself. Thousands of years ago, Neolithic, Bronze, and Iron Age artists scrambled up rock-strewn slopes to etch images into the sandstone with primitive tools. These early artworks often drew inspiration from nature, depicting animals that the artists saw, hunted, or even feared—from lions and ibex to ostriches and Arabian leopards. Spirituality also emerges in carvings of abstract human figures carrying what are interpreted to be ritual offerings, while AlUla's prehistoric tombs show artistic qualities with their distinctive stone walls forming "tails" and other elegant shapes in the landscape.

Around 500 B.C., AlUla may even have had its own sculpture school, with the people of Dadan crafting exquisite art that may have reflected wealth, or may have been used in religious practices. Among the most impressive works are the life-size and even larger statues found at the temple of Dhu Ghabat: All look alike—men with strong limbs, defined stomachs, and broad shoulders, standing with hands clenched, left foot forward, and stern

gazes. Stylistically these figures closely resemble statues found in ancient Egypt and Greece, but with Arabian additions such as headbands and bracelets—the artistic exchange given a local twist.



Thousands of years ago, ancient artists drew inspiration from the landscape around them in AlUla, carving enduring images of long-lost native wildlife into the soft sandstone rock.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHIEU PALEY

Around 500 B.C., AlUla may even have had its own sculpture school, with the people of Dadan crafting exquisite art that may have reflected wealth, or may have been used in religious practices. Among the most impressive works are the life-size and even larger statues found at the temple of Dhu Ghabat: All look alike—men with strong limbs, defined stomachs, and broad shoulders, standing with hands clenched, left foot forward, and stern gazes. Stylistically these figures closely resemble statues found in ancient Egypt and Greece, but with Arabian additions such as headbands and bracelets—the artistic exchange given a local twist.

AlUla's monumental art took on its most sublime form in the colossal tomb facades of Hegra, and here, too, we see far-flung cultural influences engraved into the desert. The highly skilled masons who carved these enormous and intricate facades into the desert cliffs drew inspiration from across the ancient world: a tomb might include Greco-Roman columns supporting a triangular pediment and stepped crenellations from

Mesopotamia, while guarding the entrance might be sphinxes, eagles, and griffins—all powerful symbols from Egypt and Persia. And yet, Hegra's artists didn't adopt any single style, but instead blended all these influences into their own unique style.



| The monumental architecture of the tombs at Hegra combines artistic influences from across the ancient world, including Rome, Greece, Egypt, Persia, and Mesopotamia.

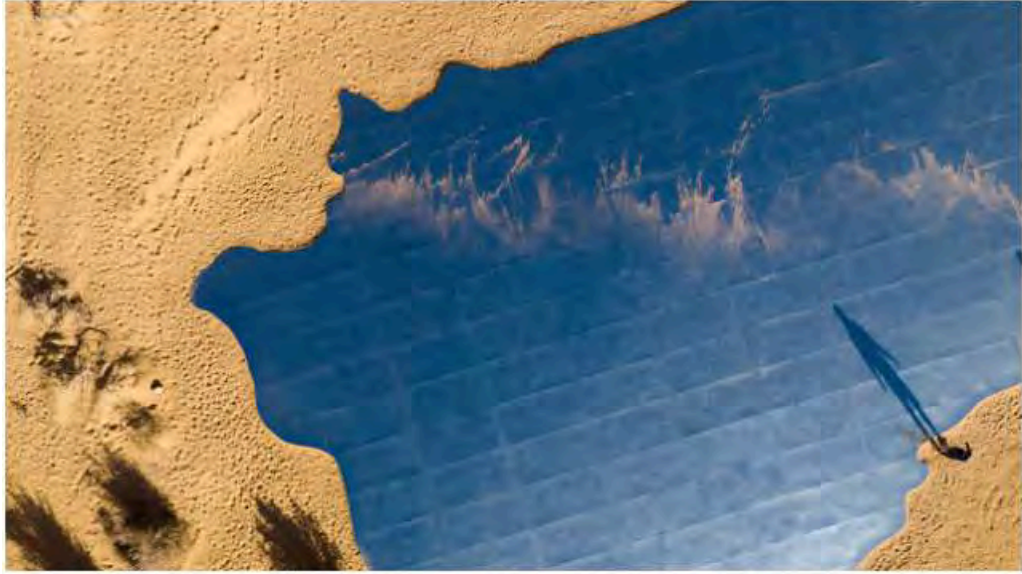
PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHIEU PALEY

And art wasn't only for AlUla's wealthy patrons: Many houses in AlUla Old Town were colorfully decorated with pictures painted onto their lime-washed walls. Natural pigments, from red iron oxide to a synthetic blue indigo, were used to create images of local plants and animals, household objects, as well as geometric patterns and abstract symbols, including some inspired by Islamic art. This artistic tradition continued through the centuries with more recent paintings showing cars and buses as artists again drew inspiration from the world around them.

And then there's the desert itself: the majestic sweeping landscapes of rolling sand dunes and rugged sandstone cliffs, the vast sense of openness and quiet in which rusty colors contrast with bright-blue skies and eruptions of lush, green vegetation. With its varied and constantly changing pallet and ever-shifting shapes, AlUla's desert has captivated and inspired for millennia.

Onto this landscape, international artists came together to establish Desert X AlUla, first in 2020 and again in 2022, in different canyon locations. Featuring the theme *Sarab*, meaning "mirage," the most recent exhibition explored ideas of mirage and oasis that are so intrinsic to desert culture. The 15 newly commissioned artworks included ideas reflecting upon dreams, camouflage, fiction, appearance and disappearance, extraction, illusion, and myth. Wandering through the canyons, where they experienced art interacting with nature on a monumental scale, visitors explored a series of spectacular works.

Down the rock face of one canyon poured a meticulously crafted tapestry woven of yellow jugs known in Ghana as Kufuor gallons, these distinctive plastic containers are commonly repurposed there and used for storing water. For artist Serge Attukwei Clottey, his "Gold Falls" addressed the experience of globalization, migration, and water equity. Claudia Comte's "Dark Suns, Bright Waves" mimicked the movement of desert dunes with a striking progression of black-and-white walls depicting a section of algorithmic pattern based on geological and natural shapes. A concave geometric structure against a timeless sandstone backdrop, Dana Awartani's "Where the Dwellers Lay" pays homage to Nabataean tombs while reflecting the contours of AlUla's mountains, gorges, caverns, and rock formations.



“Geography of Hope” by Abdullah AlOthman is one of the monumental works of art that debuted at Desert X AlUla, a temporary exhibition by international artists featuring the theme Sarab, meaning “mirage.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY KRYSTLE WRIGHT

A few of these works remain in situ, others have moved to new locations, and some, like a desert mirage, are gone. But looking to the future, the ambition is to build upon these successes to create an unprecedented experience of permanent art in direct dialogue with the landscape. Within a larger context, Wadi AlFann, which means “Valley of the Arts,” plans to bring together artists from around the world to create era-defining works set within the monumental landscape of AlUla. The canvas is prepared and awaits the artists’ touches to bring it to life: Like AlUla’s rock carvings, statues, and tomb facades, this awe-inspiring art will stand the test of time—the art of the desert.

Journey through time to discover the rich history of AlUla [here](#).

ART REVIEW

### Power Struggle: Lisson Gallery Review

Vamika Sinha

13 June 2023 | 3 Min Read



Feifei Zhou. *Flowing Toxins*. 2020. Digitally printed wallpaper. 168 × 300.6 cm © Feifei Zhou. Image courtesy Lisson Gallery

Staged across **Lisson Gallery's** duo of London locations – on Bell Street and Lisson Street – *Matter as Actor* is an elegant and contained exploration of the relationships between humans and material.

Curated by Greg Hilty, this is an exhibition invested in exposing and reflecting linkages between people and objects at multiple levels. It rises like an aria to comment on *how* these connections are tipped towards humankind's age-old colonial impulses – to discover, plough, extract, distort, destruct, rename, erase. The show's very title is the quietest smirk, at *us* – what happens when we stop seeing ourselves as the drivers of the plot, and succumb to centring what has always preceded us – land, matter itself?

Hilty, both in person and in his curatorial statement, professes anthropology as a key influence, particularly citing anthropologist Tim Ingold: "The properties of materials...are not attributes, but histories." Even when inverting the balance between human and matter, questioning where agency is really located between the two, the exhibition's approach is steadfast in not just presenting a series of curated artworks-as-objects, but in largely insisting upon the story and context behind them.

Any audience can feel the insistence of the wide geographical span of artists. Twelve of them, comprising individuals and duos – Allora & Calzadilla, Dana Awartani, Revital Cohen & Tuur Van Balen, D Harding, Irmel Kamp, Syowia Kyambi, Richard Long, Otobong Nkanga, Yelena Popova, Lucy Raven, Zhan Wang, Feifei Zhou – represent widely disparate cultural backgrounds, from Saudi Arabia and China to Puerto Rico and the USA, Kenya, UK, Germany, Belgium and Australia.



Otobong Nkanga. *Solid Maneuvers*. 2015. Various metals, Forex, acrylic, tar, sale, make-up, vermiculite and performance. Dimensions Variable

© Otobong Nkanga. Image courtesy Lisson Gallery

Anthropology as a discipline is rooted in colonial history, beginning as the systematic discovering and chronicling of foreign objects and people. And while the deliberate choices of this varied line-up might initially appear like a detached ethnographic exercise, with each artist becoming a token representative of their roots, the careful, considered way in which they are exhibited renders that assumption mostly unfair.

Sometimes, there's the minor excision of context. Kyambi's *Entity Costume*, her worn outfit from her 2011 *Fracture* performance series, is presented on its own as a kind of "sculptural object", Hilty explains. It is made with tea- and coffee-stained fabric, cowrie shells, beads, paint, clothes hangers, and sisal constructed using the Kamba weaving method, typically used to make local handwoven bags or *kiondos*.

Kyambi's artful creation alludes to a "juxtaposition" between the local knowledges carried within Kenyan handicraft traditions and British colonial history in Kenya, which created immense dispossession and the disenfranchisement of the Kenyan people and what they make and produce on their own.

Where curatorial strategy really soars is with certain works by artists who are from, based in, or commenting on the human impact on non-Western lands. In D Harding's case the suggestion is that some 'Western' lands were only *made* Western through the erasure of their indigenous people and the consequent splicing of their histories. The particular shine of such works ends up foregrounding, albeit subtly, the link between Western modernity and human destruction, leaving ghastly results for poorer or weaker countries. It also tolls a bell for the global climate crisis, helping to give the show that necessary climate-focused bent that any narrative on material today must confront.



Dana Awartani. *Let me mend your broken bones 4*. 2023. Darning on medicinally dyed silk and paper. 8 parts, each: 27 × 36 cm. Overall: 74 × 198.4 × 2.5 cm.

© Dana Awartani. Image courtesy Lisson Gallery

Meanwhile, Zhou's sprawling, drawn and digitally printed wallpaper work *Flowing Toxins* (2020) maps and manipulates the cartography of Jakarta, demonstrating how industrial infrastructures for water supply, sewage, property and the mussels industry produce massive urban inequalities while polluting and disrupting local ecologies.

Every work is ultimately imbued with a palimpsest of commentaries, making *Matter as Actor* a show to approach with the patience of meditation almost, in addition to diligent inquiry. Nowhere is this most salient than in Dana Awartani's *Come, let me heal your wounds. Let me mend your broken bones, as we stand here mourning* (2019). The work is as pastoral as its lengthy title, yet equally rigorous. Handmade, naturally dyed silk fabrics from Kerala are infused with herbs and spices used for medicinal healing in both South Asian and Arab cultures. Yet the fabrics contain tears and punctures, representing various violent incidents enacted by Islamic fundamentalists, each powerfully named next to each textile. Awartani takes the layers further, darning and embroidering over these fissures to the fabric, as a literal and metaphorical repair act. It's a work that reminds you that yes, we have hurt so much – the land and each other – but we can always, also, *act differently*, to heal and redress the ruptures.

*Matter as Actor* runs until 24 June

Christie's  
28 April 2023

# CHRISTIE'S

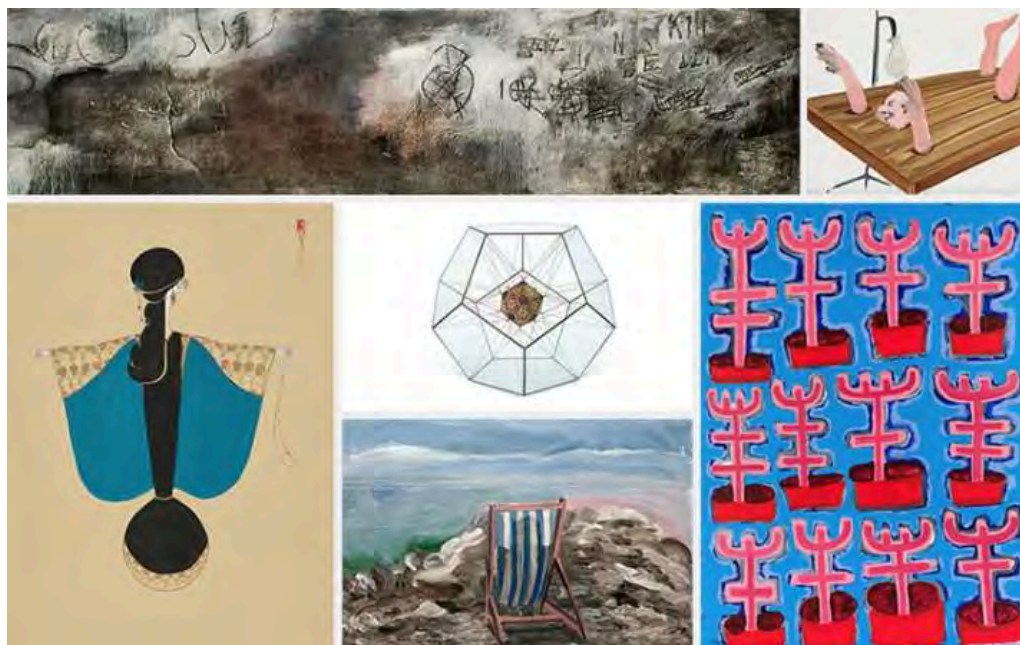
## Eight contemporary Middle Eastern and North African artists to know in 2023

Ahead of our online Modern and Contemporary Middle Eastern Art sale in May, specialists Suzy Sikorski and Marie-Claire Thijsen reveal why these are the artists to have on your radar right now

Artist & Makers

Global Art

28 APRIL 2023



### Dana Awartani, Saudi Arabia, b. 1987

'Dana Awartani is a Palestinian-Saudi artist who is part of a movement that fuses traditional Islamic principles with contemporary practice to explore her own identity,' says Suzy Sikorski, a specialist in [Modern and Contemporary Middle Eastern Art](#) at Christie's in Dubai.

'*Icosahedron within a Dodecahedron* belongs to a series of abstract sculptures she made between 2016 and 2018, which look at how certain geometries are considered sacred in the Islamic art tradition. The series, including this work, appeared in the Marrakech Biennale 6, *Not New Now/Quoi de neuf là*, in 2016.'

Awartani, who was born in Jeddah, studied in London, first at Central Saint Martins, then at The Prince's Foundation School of Traditional Arts. At the latter she learnt to paint miniatures and glass, as well as the ancient skill of gilding. The intricate patterns found in her works are often created using these centuries-old techniques, alongside others such as marquetry and mosaic, employing traditional Middle Eastern materials such as clay, silk and sand.



Dana Awartani (b. 1987), *Icosahedron within a Dodecahedron* (from *The Platonic Solid Duals*), 2016. Wood, copper and glass. 46 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 48 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 48 $\frac{7}{8}$  in (117 x 124 x 124 cm). This work is variation number two from an edition of three. Sold for \$35,280 on 16 May 2023 at Christie's Online

In 2022, Awartani's monumental sandstone-and-steel sculpture *Where the Dwellers Lay*, inspired by the shapes of local Nabataean tombs, became a focal point of Saudi Arabia's most ambitious curatorial project to date, **Desert X AlUla**. This huge art exhibition in the desert is part of a wider effort to transform the ancient UNESCO World Heritage Site into a cultural destination.

Forbes  
28 April 2023

# Forbes

## Seven Top London Art Exhibitions For Spring 2023

Joanne Shurvell Contributor @  
*I write about travel, food, culture and fashion.*

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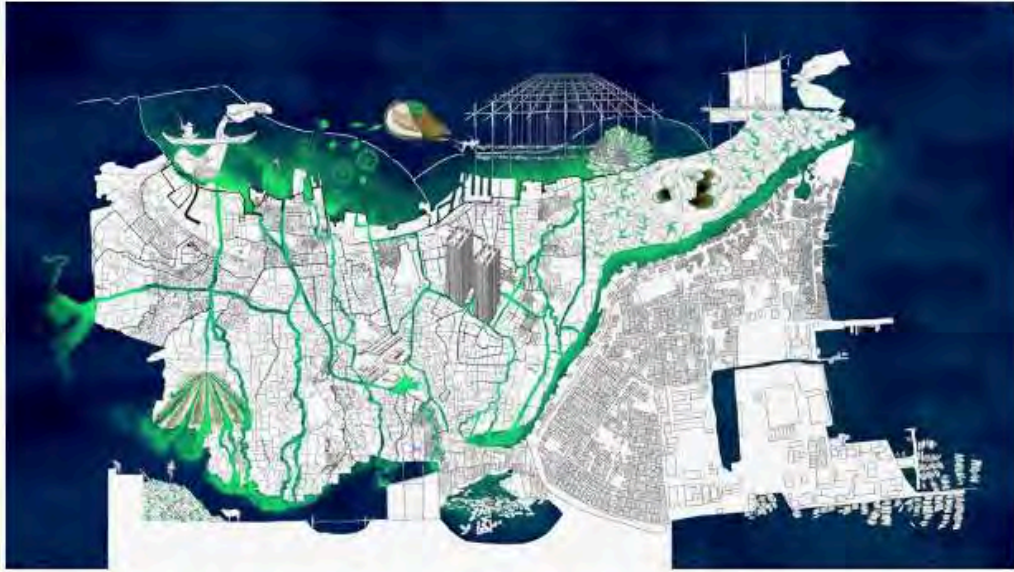
Apr 28, 2023, 06:51am EDT



National Gallery, London, England. GETTY

The National Gallery, the two Tates, the Hayward and Royal Academy are just a few of the UK capital's 857 public art galleries, most of which offer free admission. And that figure doesn't even include the commercial galleries. If you went to an art gallery in London every day for two years you still wouldn't have visited them all. Here is a small selection of some of the top shows in the capital right now.

## 7. Matter as Actor, [Lisson gallery](#), 3 May – 24 June



Feifei Zhou, *Flowing Toxins*, 2020 Digitally printed wallpaper at Lisson Gallery LISSON GALLERY

Allora & Calzadilla | Dana Awartani | Revital Cohen & Tuur Van Balen | D  
Harding | Irmel Kamp | Syowia Kyambi | Richard Long | Otobong Nkanga |  
Yelena Popova | Lucy Raven | Zhan Wang | Feifei Zhou

This group exhibition brings together works by 13 international artists who present mutable forms of matter – whether embodied as clay, rock, pigment, metal or organic substances – as active agents in the complex entanglements of humans and the more-than-human world. Richard Long has created a new temporary mural for the courtyard, Syowia Kyambi shows a sisal costume from a performance work, *Fracture (i)* (2011–16), woven using a traditional Kenyan method while Lucy Raven presents a series of silver-gelatin shadowgrams, recording the elemental pressures of air and raw materials from a number of explosive events.

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*Selections*  
29 March 2023

## SELECTIONS

ARTIST STYLE / CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND BEYOND

FEATURED FROM PRINT — MARCH 29, 2023

## DANA AWARTANI

by SELECTIONS MAGAZINE



### DANA AWARTANI

Saudi-Palestinian Dana Awartani was born in 1987 in Jeddah, where she lives and works. Ranging from painting and sculpture to performance and multimedia installation, Awartani's artistic practice imbues forms, techniques, concepts, and spatial constructs that define Arab culture with contemporary awareness. Her work spans a variety of materials and techniques and often revolves around the highly codified and symbolically laden language of geometry in reference to notions of universal interconnectedness and spiritual harmony. The timeless relevance of forms and the wisdom embedded in traditional crafts are harnessed to tackle issues of gender, healing, cultural destruction, and sustainability in a constant effort to straddle continuity and innovation, aesthetic experimentation and social relevance.



When the Dust of Conflict Settles 2023, Hand carving on griesa, jerashi, madaba, hoota and qassimi stone, Various dimensions. Image courtesy of the Artist and Athr Gallery

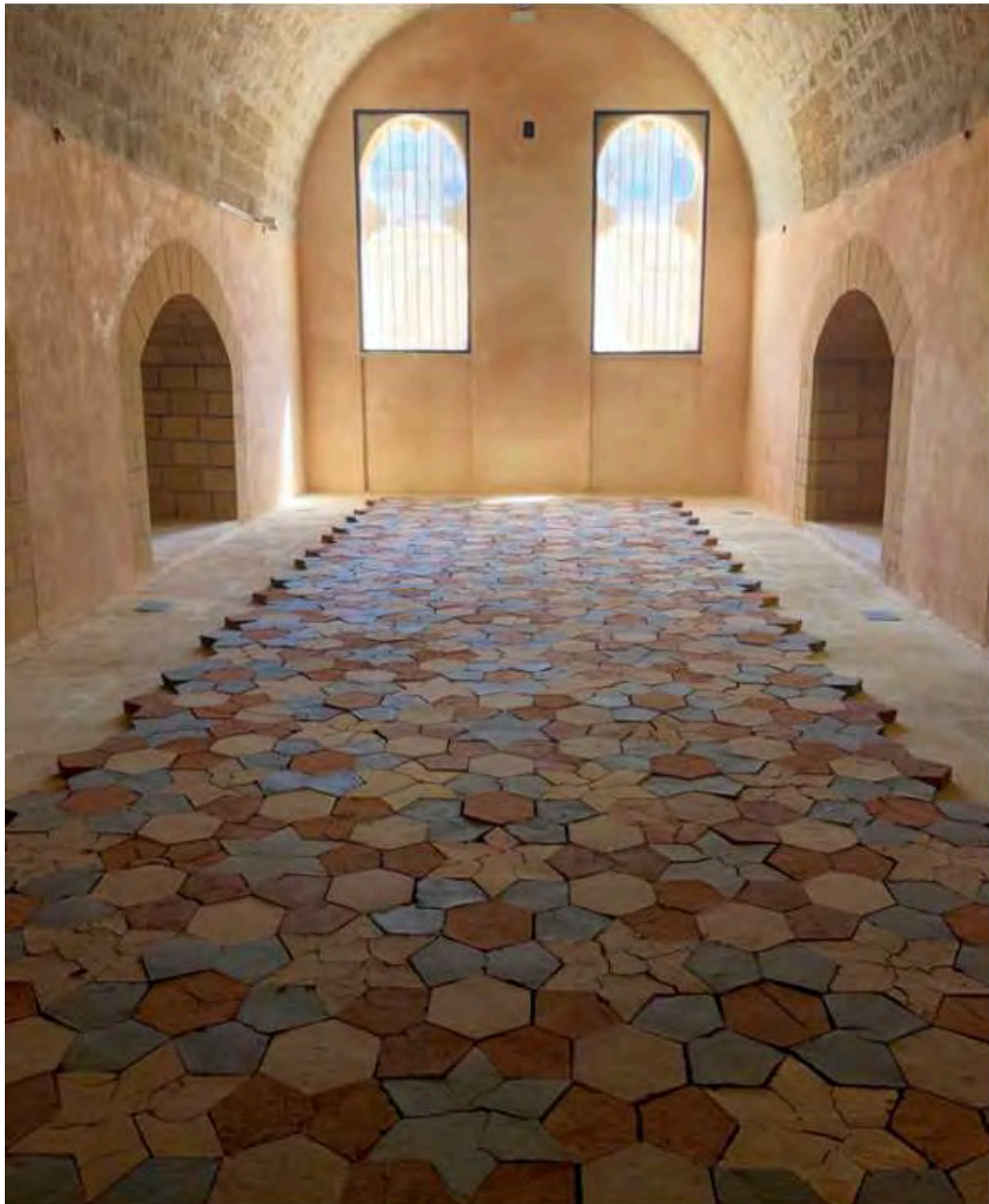
Traditionally trained at the Prince's School of Traditional Arts in London, she received her master's after her BA and Foundation degrees at Central Saint Martins. She is currently furthering her practice and commitment to preservation of Islamic illumination skills through the completion of an 'Ijaza' certificate.



Standing by the Ruins of Aleppo, 2021, Clay Earth, 2277 cm x 1300 cm. Images courtesy of the Dariyah Biennale Foundation and Canvas. Image courtesy of the Artist and Athr Gallery

Awartani has had solo exhibitions in Sharjah, Detroit and Jeddah, and has participated in numerous group exhibitions in Spain, Singapore, the United States, Turkey, Australia, and the United Kingdom, as well as participating in biennales in Lyon, Riyadh, Rabat, Sao Paolo, Jakarta, Marrakech, Yinchuan, and India. Her work is in the collections of the Sheikh Zayed National Museum, Jameel Arts Centre, Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, the British Museum, the Hirshhorn Museum, and the Guggenheim Museum, among others.

Inspired by the ancient method of 'Adobe' Building, a method of architecture that uses earth and organic materials, and found around the world, the artist has produced the work mindfully skipping the crucial steps that temper and solidify the earth tiles. Instead, the work is allowed to crack, deteriorate and eventually crumble over the course of the exhibition, reflecting on the destruction of the Middle East built heritage.



Standing by the Ruins of Aleppo, 2021, Clay Earth, 2277 cm x 1300 cm. Images courtesy of the Dariyah Biennale Foundation and Canvas. Image courtesy of the Artist and Athr Gallery

*Art in America*  
16 March 2023

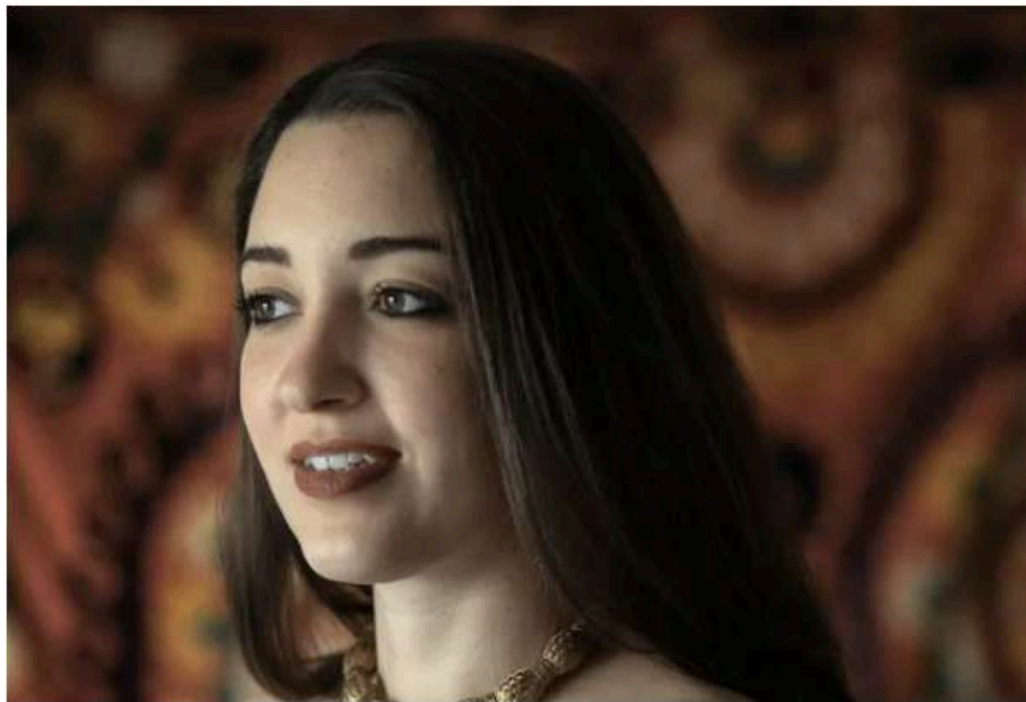


## THE ART NEWSPAPER

Artist interview // Feature

### Dana Awartani on using craft—which is 'seen as a bad word'—in her art

We meet the artist nominated for the Richard Mille Art Prize



Dana Awartani  
Courtesy of the artist and Ali Sumayin

**Lee Cheshire**

16 March 2023

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*Ten artists from across the Gulf have been nominated for the second Richard Mille Art Prize. The full list can be found [here](#).*

*Works by the artists is on show at [Louvre Abu Dhabi](#) until 19 March and the winner will be announced 20 March.*

Dana Awartani, born in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in 1987, creates work fused traditional crafts with a contemporary context. Her BA at London's Central Saint Martins taught her to research and develop a concept but the "thinking was more important than the end result or the making." She went on to The Prince's Foundation School of Traditional Arts in Shoreditch, "which was the total opposite. They told me: 'You are not an artist, you are a craftswoman.' It's a way of learning. You really need to master the fundamentals in order to innovate."

Now Awartani tries to merge these disparate traditions. "How can craft be used in contemporary art? Craft is seen as a bad word, just a decorative thing. But the history of craft is not just decorative."



Dana Awartani's *Standing by the Ruins* 2022 on show at the Louvre Abu Dhabi  
Photo: Augustine Paredes - Seeing Things. Courtesy Department of Culture and Tourism, Abu Dhabi.  
Artwork © the artist

Her artwork for the Richard Mille Art Prize, *Standing by the Ruins*, recreates the geometric patterns found in Islamic architecture across the region. However, instead of sitting neatly, the tiles are cracked - Awartani made them by hand from mud but purposely left out the binding agent, hay, which meant they disintegrated as they dried. "It's a work that looks at the cultural destruction that's happened across the Middle East in recent years through violence and conflict." Another version of the work uses a pattern from the Great Mosque of Aleppo, which has been severely damaged during the ongoing war in Syria.

Awartani was born in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Her work has been collected and shown all over the world, including at the British Museum and the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. But in the last ten years she has seen a boom in her home city, where she still lives and works. “When I moved back from London, there was no art scene, but now that’s shifting. I’m grateful because it creates an international dialogue where you have more people coming to Saudi Arabia - a great way to understand the country or the culture is through the arts.”

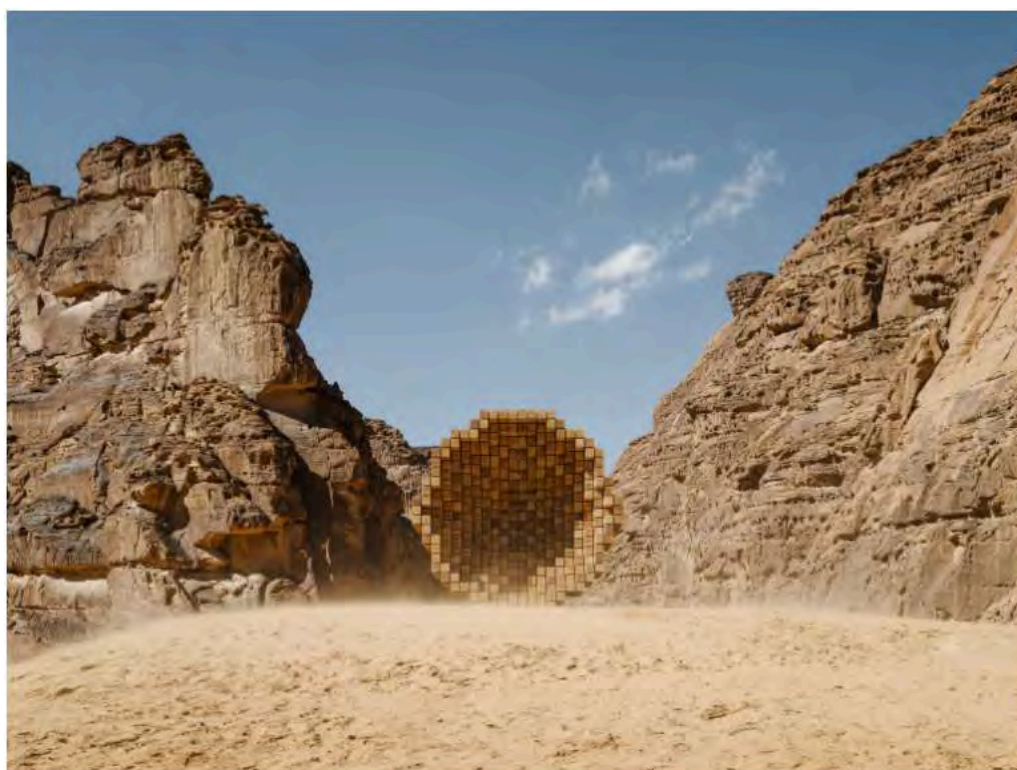
Awartani is studying Islamic illumination to help preserve those skills. “Craft is something passed down. In Syria, before the war, more than 20 workshops did mother-of-pearl inlay, but since everyone was forced to flee, there’s only one left. That craft dies out with them. There’s a lot of symbolism, a lot of meaning behind the craft which has gone.”

*ArtReview*  
26 May 2022

# ArtReview

## Magic and Artifice: Desert X AlUla 2022

Rahel Aima Features 26 May 2022 ArtReview



Dana Awartani, 'Where the Dwellers Lay', 2022. Photo: Lance Gerber. Courtesy Desert X AlUla

### **Rahel Aima unearths ancient scripts and thermodynamic sea creatures in one of the Arabian Peninsula's oldest cities**

The most exciting thing that I saw in AlUla, a remote town in north-western Saudi Arabia, were some dustbins. They come in pairs of green and brown, the former for recycling and the latter for mixed trash, and are placed at intervals up and down the arterial street of the Old Town, a heritage site dating back to the twelfth century. But that's not why they were exciting. Things weren't that bad. Written on them is the slogan *Keep AlUla clean*. In Arabic and the Nabatean script. The latter hasn't been used for some 1,600 years.

Nearby, a language institute offers courses in Chinese, French and Nabatean. Ancient history is being revitalised everywhere you look, with a tourist infrastructure that sutures the Iron Age to Saudi Arabia's masterplan of Vision 2030 (a strategic framework that aims to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil by developing the cultural, educational, health, tourism and recreation sectors). All around AlUla, magnificent rock formations running the gamut from ochre-red to basalt-grey rise out of the desert, now shot with palm and citrus groves as part of an aggressive oasis-regeneration programme. It's as utterly magical as it is artificial.

"We are not opening a resort, we are opening a city and a country," said the manager of Habitas, a new eco-luxe resort built in the same valley in which the inaugural Desert X AlUla, the Saudi edition – one of many soft-power handshakes – of the Coachella Valley-based Land-art exhibition, was held in 2020. In California, Desert X operates with an ethos of *leave no trace* and works are dismantled after each run. Not here: private chalets look out onto works by Nadim Karam, Manal AlDowayan and SUPERFLEX, and an IKB Lita Albuquerque work – erroneously trumpeted as the first female figurative sculpture in Saudi in a millennium – can be seen from the infinity pool. It's worth noting that as much as it hopes to attract wealthy visitors from overseas, AlUla seems to function primarily to introduce Saudis to themselves, to their pre-Islamic past and a new national narrative of civilisational greatness.



Shaikha Al Mazrou, *Measuring the Physicality of Void*, 2022. Photo: Lance Gerber. Courtesy Desert X AlUla

One wonders what lies in store for this year's location, situated a 30-minute drive from the first, darker and more atmospheric than its predecessor, with remnants of petrolyphic rock art. Whereas the first edition suggested paintings hung in a circuit around the perimeter of a large hall, Desert X 2022 is installed around a series of canyons that puts each work more directly in conversation with both its setting and the piece(s) visible next to it. And contra the bombasticism of 2020, this time the 15 Saudi and international artists involved mostly didn't attempt to compete with the majesty of the landscape. The exhibition is all the better for it.

Curators Reem Fadda, Raneem Farsi and Neville Wakefield chose the theme of *Sarab*, or mirage, gesturing towards a tension between the manmade and the natural, and man's attempts to control nature. (In Riyadh, Misk Art Institute subsequently announced the same theme for this year's grants, with no apparent irony.) Fadda added, "The [participating] artists spoke to the rocks, they spoke to the sand, they spoke to the bushes and the trees". But the rocks, sand, bushes and trees don't seem to have been listening. More successful, rather, were the works that looked beyond the immediate site to the broader AlUla region.

Rusted steel rods splay out of the ground like gargantuan reeds in Monika Sosnowska's installation, which references AlUla's position at the confluence of the incense and spice roads. But the metal is distressingly taken from the historic Hejaz railway: some heritages are clearly more worthy of preservation than others. Nearby, Shezad Dawood's gnarly coral forms – one pleasingly installed high up on a cliffside – speak to a geological timescale when the valley would have been underwater. They are painted with thermodynamic paint and, unlike their curiously resilient brethren in the Red Sea, will slowly bleach to white over time.



Sultan bin Fahad, *Desert Kite*, 2022. Photo: Lance Gerber. Courtesy Desert X AlUla



Shezad Dawood, *Coral Alchemy I (Dipsastrea Speciosa)*, 2022. Photo: Lance Gerber. Courtesy Desert X AlUla

AlUla's primary draw might be the Nabatean necropolis of Madain Saleh, or Hegra, which features stunning rock-cut tombs and inscriptions, dating from the first century and similar to those found in its sister city of Petra. The relief staircases on their facades, along with Islamic geometry from farther afield, inspire Dana Awartani's pixelated sandstone throne, blending beautifully into its surrounds. At the centre of Sultan bin Fahad's earthen desert kite – ancient claustrophobia-inducing animal herding structures that converge on a killing floor – is a funny, globby sculpture topped with a spadix that features animal motifs found on Hegra tombs, except here they're trapped in the fibreglass; the work would have been quite stunning without it.

Mada'in Saleh has long been believed to be cursed and forbidden for Muslims – a Quranic verse details how lightning and earthquakes decimated its idolatrous residents – and although Saudi authorities are doing their best to rehabilitate this image, the paranormal still suffuses the air. Soldiers tell tales of a wizened crone seen creeping around the sleeping town late at night, a man went mad after spotting a Slenderman figure on the road and locals believe that jinn protect the town from raiders who come seeking rumoured stashes of buried Ottoman gold, or from dark forces as yet unknown. The unstoppable behemoth of development, perhaps: much of the area is being transformed in partnership with the French Agency for AlUla Development, an alliance that was confirmed, some would say not without coincidence, at the same time as a defence contract between the Republic and the Gulf state. Outside of Desert X, cultural initiatives include a robust public-art programme, an arthouse cinema, two artist residencies and a bellwether outpost of Jeddah's Athr gallery, which seems to gesture towards AlUla's framing as a destination for the monied.

What lies beneath? A rich loam of as-yet-unearthed history: whereas much of the surrounding region was plundered by Europeans in the last century, the recently resumed archaeological excavations in AlUla, a vast region of intra-civilisational connective tissue, have reportedly barely scratched the surface. Ground so fertile that it is said if you simply toss a date seed, a tree will grow, with a burgeoning wellness-influencer industry to match. A month later I returned to AlUla on a roadtrip and, away from the lubrication of a biennial opening, found a very different town. In the old-but-not-historic town where the people who service the tourist industry live I notice a hand-painted advertisement for land-investment opportunities, outside a laundromat wallpapered with idyllic tropical beaches. Gone was the easy, improvisational enchantment, replaced by a frictive apparatus of ticketing and entry, a slick, hypercommercialised veneer overlaying an ambiently grim, gold-rush-feeling town.

Forbes  
26 February 2022

# Forbes

## Desert X AlUla; The International Art Exhibition Is Back And Exploring Ideas Of Mirage And Oasis

Shelby Knick Contributor

*Traveling the world capturing all things beautiful, unique, and fast!*

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Feb 26, 2022, 01:04pm EST



Jim Denevan - Angle of Repose - Desert X AlUla 2022 COURTESY OF JIM DENEVAN, DESERT X ALULA AND LANCE GERBER

Nestled amidst the poetic landscape of the Saudi Arabia desert, the contemporary art exhibition, Desert X AlUla, returns for its second edition highlighting the work of 15 Saudi and international artists. The magnificent exhibition will run from February 11th to March 30th, and it's free and open to the public.

Desert X AlUla is a collaboration between Desert X and the Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) and is curated by Reem Fadda, Raneem Farsi, and Neville Wakefield. The site-responsive exhibition is the first of its kind in Saudi Arabia, building on the legacy of Desert X in California's Coachella Valley. The project brings together artists, curators, and the community to create a space where art can be experienced on a monumental scale in harmony with nature. Anchored under driving forces of the desert - mirage and oasis - the artists' works showcase the elusiveness of nature, man's desire to control it, and, as the art demonstrates, man's inability to command it. Artists were invited to consider the theme of Sarab, which means mirage in Arabic.



Alicja Kwade - In Blur - Desert X AlUla 2022 COURTESY OF ALICJA KWADE, DESERT X AIULA, LANCE GERBER

Artists had full freedom of expression to create a series of intrinsic works that touch upon dreams and myth, camouflage and appearance, illusion and fiction - all under the polarity of man and nature. One of the most distinctive elements behind the exhibition is the rich cultural significance of the desert itself, which creates a living canvas where history, art, and nature come together.

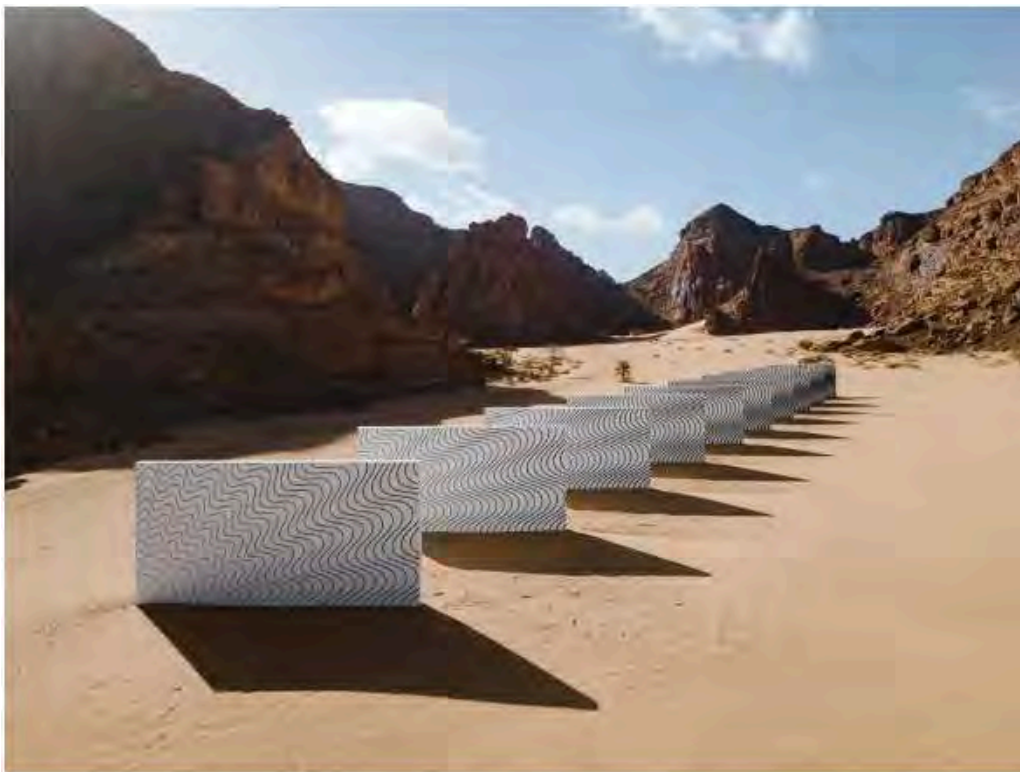


Shezad Dawood - Coral Alchemy I (Dipsastrea Speciosa) -Desert X AlUla 2022 COURTESY OF SHEZAD DAWOOD, DESERT X ALULA, AND LANCE GERBER

The striking location in North-West Saudi Arabia covers 22,561km<sup>2</sup> and plays host to a lush oasis valley, towering sandstone mountains, and ancient cultural heritage sites dating back thousands of years, such as the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Hegra. This 52-hectare ancient city was once the principal southern city to the Nabataean Kingdom and served as an outpost to the Roman Empire. Now, the city serves as a wonder and inspiration to historians, artists, and the curious. The exploration of the exhibition in the middle of the desert adds to the experience. Visitors can wander freely through the juxtaposition of art and nature, oftentimes having to look closely to find where nature ends and art begins, such as artist Dana Awartani's sculpture.



Dana Awartani - Where The Dwellers Lay - Desert X AlUla 2022 COURTESY OF DANA AWARTANI, DESERT X ALULA, AND LANCE GERBER



Claudia Comte - Dark Suns, Bright Waves - Desert X AlUla 2022 COURTESY OF CLAUDIA COMTE, DESERT X ALULA, AND LANCE GERBER

Dana's large, geometric sculpture sits between two rock formations, playfully mimicking the shapes of its surroundings while calling on its initial inspiration, the Nabataean tombs. The interactive work invites viewers into its heart by creating a sort of tomb where guests can appreciate the art from within while taking in the beauty of the encompassing desert.

Take, as another example, artist Claudia Comte's imposing progression walls. Set against the natural order of desert canyons, the striking clean cuts of the murals playfully transmit the wavelengths of the desert's sound and surface while standing boldly in its uniqueness.



Zeinab Alashemi - Camouflage 2.0 - Desert X AlUla 2022 COURTESY OF ZEINAB ALASHEMI, DESERT X ALULA, AND LANCE GERBER

Artists such as Zeinab Alhashemi used elements more closely related to the environment where this work would live. Zeinab's piece, *Camouflage*, mimics the rock formations of the desert using discarded camel skins. The abstract piece defends its individuality with its geometric base while playfully merging into the mountains.



Khalil Rabah - Grounding - Desert X AlUla 2022 COURTESY OF KHALIL RABAH, DESERT X AIULA, AND LANCE GERBER

One major player at the base of the artists' works is the cultural and historical significance of the region such as the piece, *Grounding*, created by artist Khalil Rabah. Set upon the striking contrast of sand, Khalil's orchard of olive trees – which are not native to the region – stands as a living representation of displacement and the longing to be home.



Abdullah AlOthman - Geography of Hope - Desert X AlUla 2022 COURTESY OF ABDULLAH ALOTHMAN, DESERT X AIULA AND LANCE GERBER

Desert X AlUla forms part of the AlUla Arts Festival, part of the region's efforts to reinvigorate its vibrant cultural economy. In addition to Desert X, the festival will include family events, art training programs, outdoor cinema, workshops, live performances, and networking activities. AlUla's 'Journey Through Time' master plan aims to see 15 new landmark destinations by 2035 that will play host to a plethora of cultural, creative, and heritage-inspired events.

For now, the voices of the 2022 Desert X AlUla artists have merged with the quiet solitude of the desert, harmoniously interacting with the thousands of year-old rock formations and intimately inviting guests to do the same.

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LISSON GALLERY

*Harper's Bazaar*  
8 December 2021

ARABIA <sup>Harper's</sup> BAZAAR



## *Dana Awartani On Preserving Cultural Identity, Tradition and Championing Female Empowerment Through Art*

BY Ayesha S. Shehmir / [October 18, 2021](#)

*A multicultural woman of the world, the Arab artist is resuscitating the teachings of her ancestry while tirelessly fighting to keep ancient crafts alive – leading a wave of female pioneers who will make history in Saudi Arabia*

“Saudi is thriving,” beams artist [Dana Awartani](#), who, whilst born and raised in [Jeddah](#), has found a home in many places. With Islamic, Indian, Palestinian, Jordanian and even Andalusian influences in her art, Dana’s identity is graced by several cultures. Her geometric work is rooted in her Arab heritage, taking form through parquetry, manuscript illumination, ceramics and embroidery. “I see a lot of artists who are from the [Middle East](#) and they go and study abroad,” she says. “Their work is very Eurocentric, it’s very focused on an American or European aesthetic – but I’m trying to find my own language.”

Dana was magnetically drawn to geometry without even knowing it, and her passion was in its infancy in the midst of a contemporary art degree at London’s prestigious [Central Saint Martins](#). “I look back at my work then and it was inspired by geometry to an extent, but once I started my master’s degree, I completely fell in love with it,” she admits, reminiscing about a research travel trip to Alhambra in [Spain](#). “This, for me, was one of the first monuments that I really looked at and appreciated. I love geometry in architecture and I think maybe just growing up in the Middle East, I was accustomed to seeing geometry and aware of it subconsciously.”



*Snowflake small Earrings in yellow gold with diamonds, POA; Snowflake Bracelet in yellow gold with diamonds, POA; Sylvie Ballerina Clip in white and yellow gold with sapphires, spessartite garnet and diamonds, POA, all Van Cleef & Arpels High Jewellery. Dress, POA, Beige Label*

Long before Saudi saw a sudden surge in its art scene, there was only a handful of galleries, and a very small, grassroots community of art lovers that would gather for artistic exchange. Jeddah's Saudi Art Council, led by Her Royal Highness Princess Jawaher bint Majed bin Abdulaziz, was one of the few not-for-profit entities commissioning Saudi artists and flowering cross-cultural dialogue with collectors abroad, as well as inviting curators to participate in Saudi. "That was all we had, and it was very hard," Dana remembers.

Preserving the legacy of her matrilineal lineage, Dana made it her mission to rescue tradition. “In Saudi Arabia, there was no documented history of art, there was no Renaissance art, or modern art before the sixties, none of that. So my work is about developing a language of contemporary Middle Eastern art.”

But what does this mean? What are the traditional artistic forms, cultures and identities that can be revived and championed in a contemporary way? These questions lie at the heart of Dana’s art. In modern society – one that is so fast-paced, capitalistic and dominated by technology, a world where machines are replacing humans – the survival, and protection, of slow crafts became her life’s ambition. Every artwork is unique and a celebration of traditional craft communities. “Everything is made with love,” smiles Dana. “The process of making my artwork sometimes is more important than the end result. It’s my journey of making it.”



*Snowflake small Earrings in yellow gold with diamonds, POA; Snowflake Necklace in yellow gold with diamonds, POA, both Van Cleef & Arpels High Jewellery. Dress, POA, Basil Soda*

Today, Dana is installing an artwork in Riyadh for the forthcoming Diriyah Biennale in December; an installation which explores her mixed roots and female ancestry, paying homage to her Syrian grandmother and Syrian-Saudi mother. “As you know, I’m not just Saudi. I come from a really diverse background. I’m Palestinian, Syrian, Jordanian, too, so I’m really a very multicultural Arab. In this work, I’m looking at one of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Aleppo that has been heavily damaged and destroyed during the Civil War.” Specifically, the Great Mosque of Aleppo;

Dana is reimagining the courtyard of this historic site by using locally sourced materials such as clay to make mud bricks, reflecting the architecture of Riyadh's oldest houses. "What's interesting to me is that this mosque is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and so is Diriyah, so they're in conversation with one another."



*Zip Antique Facettes Necklace transformable into a bracelet in rose gold with aquamarines, tanzanites and diamonds, POA, Van Cleef & Arpels High Jewellery.  
Dress, POA, Rami Al Ali*

Dana doesn't just see herself as an artist, but importantly, a craftswoman, too. "When I was doing my master's degree in traditional arts, they were training me as a craftswoman," she recalls, explaining that it wasn't about what she had to say as a contemporary artist; it was more about rigorously learning the techniques. "I fell in love with the discipline of the traditional arts because it's not something you learn overnight or from a one-week course, it takes years of training and I was just really drawn to the way of learning the arts - the process. It's humbly training under a master and it's also about keeping that tradition alive that, sometimes, a family would do for generations."

Seeing a group of Sufis make over 300 tagine pots a day in their pottery workshop during a trip to Morocco, Dana quickly learned that for a lot of Arab craftspeople, their work is a form of meditation. "The reason why it's seen as a form of meditation is because it's so repetitive," she enthuses. "You're doing the same thing over and over using your hands. It requires the focus of your mind and your body at the same time and nothing else can interfere." A Rumi poem springs to her mind: "Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground."

This is exactly why Dana's work endeavours to uplift traditional craft communities, who have sadly suffered a major decline globally. "Before, craftsmen used to be supported, they had patronage. The royal courts would support them and that's how they made a living." Now, regrettably, a lot of craft communities - which Dana witnessed first-hand in Morocco and India - are losing their knowledge. "This is because there is no more money being appreciated in their skills and so they choose to work in other industries that provide better pay instead. No one pays anymore for beautiful handmade craft objects. That knowledge is dying, and I think it's really important to preserve it. It's part of our cultural identity."

Injecting this history into her surroundings has proven an integral part of Dana's purpose as an artist. Her mission, since making art in the Kingdom for a decade, has been to educate local communities about the value of studying and deeply understanding Saudi's identity. "Why did I have to go to London to do a master's in traditional Islamic arts?" she challenges; a question often lurking in her mind. "Why is that not something that we have here? In fact, why is art education about geometry and Islamic design not something we have in a lot of Arab countries?"



*Ludo Secret Watch in yellow gold with blue and pink sapphires, lapis lazuli, white mother-of-pearl and diamonds, POA, Van Cleef & Arpels High Jewellery. Blazer, POA, Nemer Saadé*

That being said, with more and more progressive reforms under way, she remains optimistic about the country's future. "There's definitely been a shift in terms of having the Ministry of Culture and different initiatives that are commissioning and supporting artists. I know in Riyadh there's a lot more focus on supporting the artistic community by having warehouses that they're renting out for artists to work from studios. I feel there's a huge shift and appreciation for the artists which wasn't there before. Telling society that 'I am an artist' was not generally understood -

what does it mean to be an artist? Can you really make a livelihood from being an artist? It wasn't really respected but I feel now that's changing," she laughs. "The changes in the country have been quite a culture shock for me, but in a good way. Saudi has so much potential, if we just look at the tourism industry for example, places like AlUla have been here since I was growing up but I didn't even know! There's so many natural wonders in Saudi, there's a lot that the country has to offer and I'm glad that they're tapping into it now and opening it up to the world."



*Palmyre Necklace in white gold with diamonds, POA; Palmyre Earrings in white gold with diamonds, POA; Palmyre Bracelette in white gold with diamonds, POA, all Van Cleef & Arpels High Jewellery. Dress, POA, Givenchy*

Saudi is in the midst of another major movement alongside these changes: the increasing rights of women, evidenced by lifting the ban on female drivers, ending male guardianship and encouraging women in the workforce. "Seeing the support for women is huge and very close to my heart," emphasises Dana, noticeably a breath of relief for her. "In Saudi, women are very hardworking, very intelligent. And they should be given opportunities. I think there's only positive growth that will happen. What I want for Saudi is to continue the way it is - opening up to the rest of the world, making it more accessible, more international. I want Saudi to hold on to the identity of what it is - the culture and the values of the country, while also opening up, because I think having a more international community will bring more opportunities and more growth."



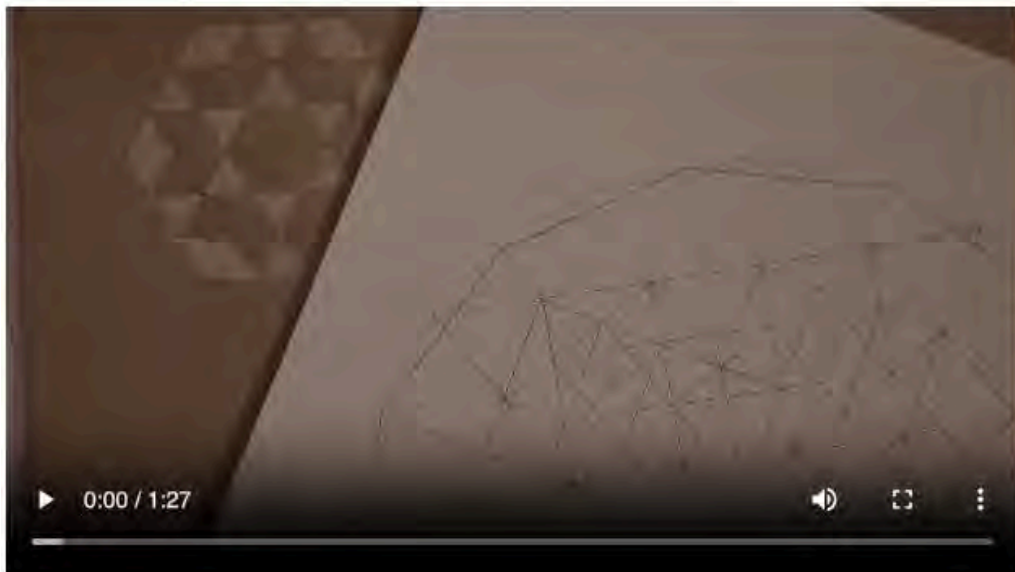
Dana's 2020 work *Listen to my words*, an intimate marriage of poetry and geometric symbolism, is a testament to the fact that despite being underrepresented for centuries, powerful women did actually exist in history. The voices of poetesses up to the 12<sup>th</sup> century are unleashed once again as they are recited by modern-day Saudi women.

"In every aspect of life, there was a 'place' for a woman. I always found that uncomfortable because my family is not like that - we are a heavily female-dominated family." Thirteen female cousins, to be precise. "We're all very strong, independent women who are well educated - my parents, uncles and aunts believed in the value of educating women. A lot of my work does look at Arab poetry and the majority of poets I come across are male - the obvious famous ones being Rumi and Hafez. I just felt

there wasn't a strong tradition of female poets." That was until she stumbled upon a book by serendipity, *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*, opening up her eyes to literary traditions that are still virtually unknown to the West. "I was blown away," she expresses in awe. "I could not believe women from this area of the world would speak like that so openly. So I thought it was important to give them awareness, and show society that this is how women were."

It's clear that for a woman to have her voice heard through art is Dana's dream come true. "Being an artist does give you power because people listen to what you're saying. I feel art is a form of empowerment for a lot of women here, and I also feel there's a responsibility for them. The artistic practice of women here is very varied; some of them look at architecture, some talk about social issues. I talk more about the cultural side. I think art is a way for the international Western society to understand Saudi Arabia more through the lens of an artist."

It's true, one of the most meaningful ways to appreciate a country's cultural identity is through its artists. Saudi is thriving, and, in Dana's eyes? "It's only up from here."



**Photography:** Vladimir Marti. **Styling:** Nour Bou Ezz. **Editor in Chief:** Olivia Phillips. **Arabic Editor:** Khulood Ahmed. **Art Director:** Oscar Yáñez. **Fashion Director:** Anna Castan. **Hair:** Salma Mohammed. **Make-Up:** Tia Khalid. **Producer:** Jesse Vora. **Stylist's Assistant:** Nusaybah Almhawes. **Photographer's Assistant:** Abdul Rahman Jo. With special thanks to HH Art Studio.

*From Harper's Bazaar Saudi Winter 2021 Issue*

*Harper's Bazaar Arabia*  
1 July 2020

## ARABIA <sup>Harper's</sup>BAZAAR



ART

*Saudi-Palestinian Artist Dana Awartani Discusses Cultural Deconstruction And Mending Through Ancient Craft*

BY Nour Hassan / July 1, 2020

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Saudi-Palestinian Artist Dana Awartani Discusses Cultural Deconstruction And Mending Through Ancient Craft

*A conversation with the artist reveals the liminal lines between identity, destruction and revival*

“Growing up in a multicultural society allows you access to a plethora of tastes, cultures and mentalities. It gives you a superpower – to be able to feel empathy for what is other and what is foreign,” comments Saudi-Palestinian artist Dana Awartani, on growing up amidst a melting pot of cultures in Saudi Arabia.

I spoke to the artist over Zoom for this feature as we are still in the midst of the global coronavirus pandemic – I'm based in Cairo and she's based in Jeddah – the city where I grew up. Jeddah is a city we both call home. The conversation was expansive, touching on topics that looked at her artistic practice, her research on cultural destruction, her work with healing materials and how the art world can strive to make space for sustainability and the preservation of identity in a moment where we are all grappling to find our way back 'home'.



*Dana Awartani in her studio*

“Living in Jeddah and attending an international school – I feel I had no connection to the larger community of Saudi Arabia except through extended family. Otherwise we grew up in this bubble, which was great as it allowed for exposure to so many other things,” notes Dana on her upbringing in Jeddah.

Middle Eastern art is more than the sum of its parts – there is a misconception that art coming from our region, specifically from female artists, tackles topics of either suppression or exile, exclusively. Dana’s art breaks free from these constructs of suppressed identity and adopts a transformative style that feels almost liberating. “If you’re a Palestinian, you must be a refugee and therefore your art must talk about topics of suppression; these are narratives I didn’t really relate to,” admits Dana.

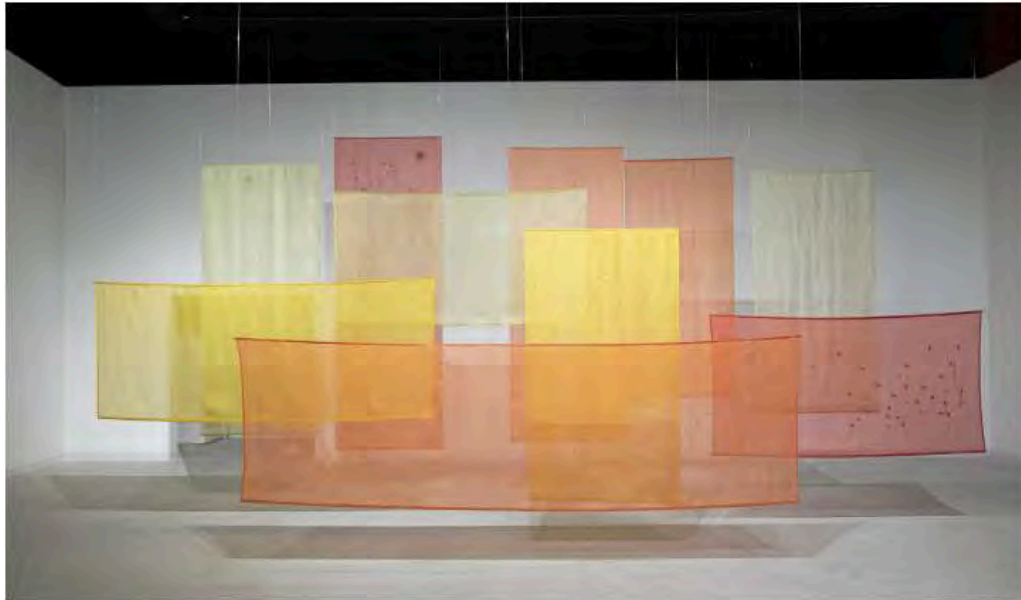
After a university trip abroad and encountering Persian architecture, Dana fell in love with Middle Eastern craftsmanship and the idea that we can change our narrative through showcasing, preserving and emulating our heritage through the transcendence of craft.



*Dana Awartani. A detail of Come Let Me Heal Your Wounds, Let Me Mend Your Broken Bones, As We Stand Here Mourning. 2019. Darning on medicinally dyed silk. 630x720x300cm*

She began studying and looking at geometry from traditional housing in Asir and Abha in Saudi Arabia, which were adorned with decorative craft implemented and pioneered by women in the Asiri area. After reading *Orientalism* by Edward Said, the reasons for people fetishizing the East and putting the West on a cultural pedestal made more sense to the artist. As a pushback on these constructs, Dana began a search to find her own artistic style – a style that would come to act as an arch or a cultural bridge between the East and West, as well as both heritage and contemporary aesthetics.

“The first day at the Prince’s School of Traditional Arts, they told me that I was here not just as a contemporary artist but as a craftswoman – so I had to switch off the critical thinking skills I had acquired at Central Saint Martins and rather just embrace the process of simply making,” says Dana, of diving into a Master’s degree rooted in traditional craft.

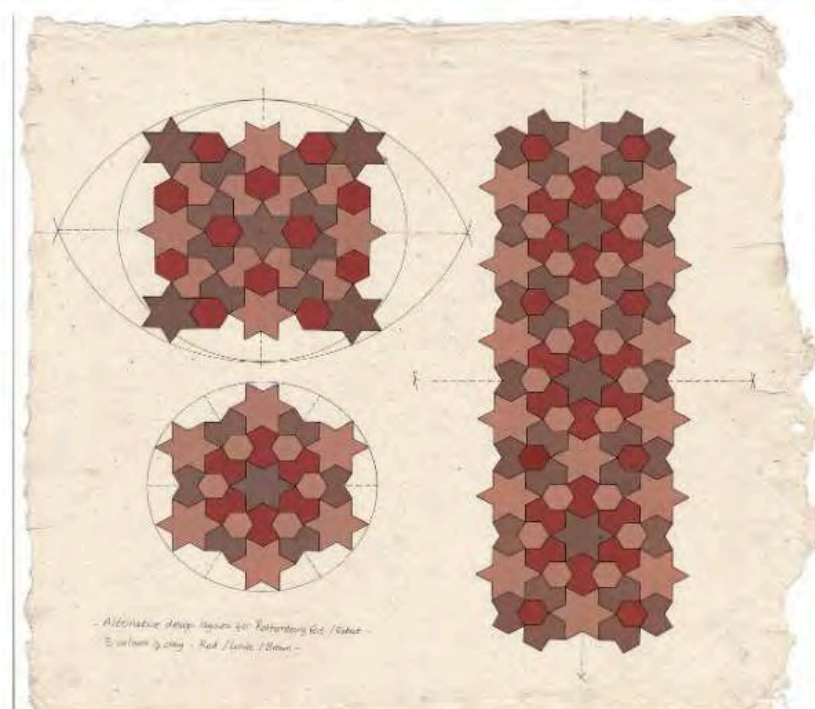


*Dana Awartani. Come Let Me Heal Your Wounds, Let Me Mend Your Broken Bones, As We Stand Here Mourning. 2019. Darning on medicinally dyed silk. 630x720x300cm*

“Why didn’t we study Arab or Middle Eastern art in school?” I asked her, as our conversation deviated towards the crux of Dana’s work, which is a pushback on the tragedy that is cultural destruction across our region. “As a region we have a notion of self-colonisation almost, where we act as though Western culture is to be aspired to and that our own culture is lesser than or not enough. We almost believe that Western culture is better than our culture; you can see this in architecture.

My 2017 video installation *I Was Dreaming* touches on this topic of adopting foreign aesthetics and tossing away our own – it specifically talks about cultural destruction, pertaining to architecture when wealthy Saudis in Al Balad left the Hegazi buildings behind in lieu of more modern structures with Italian shutters and French balconies,” explains Dana.

“The contemporary world kind of frowns upon craft, they see it as something decorative and so I wanted to merge both. Try to elevate craft in a contemporary way, because part of our collective identity is craftsmanship,” she says of her quest to become more immersed in craft.



*An initial sketch of Standing by the Ruins artwork by Dana Awartani*

One specific question I asked Dana was, “How have you cultivated the patience and humility required to be able to learn and acquire these intricate craftsmanship skills?”

“So there’s this quote that says ‘Craft is made by man for God, so it’s always a form of worship. Contemporary art is made by man for man’s ego.’ I love the discipline and rigour of craft - I wanted to become accredited to be a master in manuscript illumination,” explained Dana. “Similar to an ijaza, a certificate to be a Master in a craft, after which you are able to hand down this knowledge. I was really drawn to that way of learning - you approach a master and if they say yes then you work closely with them in their home even. It’s a long process that requires a lot of humility as no one else can teach you these skills.”

Cultural destruction is a prominent theme throughout Dana’s work - she moved on in recent years to using Islamic arts, crafts and aesthetics as a medium to express these concepts of deterioration. Dana’s work acts as a form of cultural preservation and innovation - helping traditional craft grow and making it part of a relevant contemporary aesthetic. Inspirations from regional and historical art, culture, philosophy, mathematics can all be seen in her body of work - such as the poem of Abjad Hawaz - those pieces used a mathematical mystical Sufi idea where every letter of the alphabet has a numerical value.



*Standing by the Ruins artwork in progress*

One of Dana's most recent works entitled *Standing by the Ruins* (2019) at the Rottembourg Fort at the very edge of Rabat touches on notions of deterioration. A work on modern day cultural destruction, Dana became immersed in the events of the Arab Spring and the side effects of the demolition that resulted in the sweeping away of our culture. Aside from the catastrophic loss of human life and the refugee crisis, the region's rich culture was demolished. The artist meditated on what this means and the effects it has on us as collective people.

In order to create this site-specific installation, Dana discovered that gathering earth from different countries in the region was not legal; as a result she used naturally coloured earth from different parts of Morocco, a place that proved to be a perfect source of raw material for this piece. Dana visited a Zawya in Morocco – not a mosque but a family that look at the art of clay-making as a form of religious practice – and sourced the clay from them.

The clay-makers take part in a repetitive, meditative, almost religious process that connects the humans with the earth. For this piece Dana purposely chose not to turn the earth into clay, omitting steps such as filtration and pounding and leaving the earth to eventually crumble and the piece to fall apart. As part of the methodology for this piece Dana looked into Adobe building – missing all the other steps to make it a solid structural built mound.

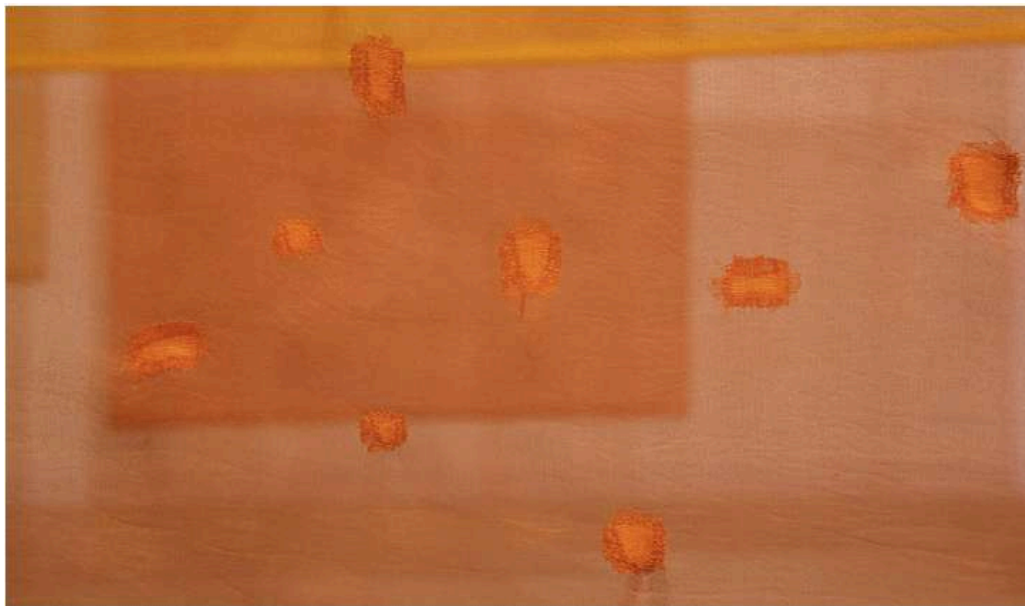


*Dana Awartani. I Went Away and Forgot You. A While Ago I Remembered. I Remembered I'd Forgotten You. I Was Dreaming. 2017. Single-channel video. 24 minutes and 48 seconds*

“We created hundreds of tiles and the piece spanned almost ten metres in length. It took two to three weeks working in the sun everyday. The process was long and grueling, it was created with a lot of love and labour. I had 150 moulds and a few thousand tiles had to be made. This process echoed the craft tradition of dedication. Similar to the buildings that were created in our region and now destroyed, they were made by craftsmen over years and years, not just construction companies that build compounds in a few weeks,” says Dana of honouring the true process of creating through craft. The work is site-specific and it is not for sale.

*Come, let me heal your wounds. Let me mend your broken bones, as we stand here Mourning*, another 2019 piece by Dana, which was showcased at the Al Burda Endowment at Abu Dhabi Art Fair in November of 2019 acts as a continuation of the work done in Rabat.

“The piece looks at continuation and sustainability. History, tradition, craft and the contemporary. I created an archive of all the monuments that were destroyed, during the Arab Spring and onwards, a database, of how they were destroyed, and by whom. I mapped out each city in seven countries that have faced purposeful cultural destruction. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Tunisia,” says Dana of her in-depth research on cultural destruction in our region.



*Dana Awartani. A detail of Come Let Me Heal Your Wounds, Let Me Mend Your Broken Bones, As We Stand Here Mourning. 2019. Darning on medicinally dyed silk. 630x720x300cm*

She then used naturally dyed silk fabrics infused with healing properties from herb-dyeing techniques to represent each affected country; the fabrics were hung in relativity to one another on a vertical plane, each piece of fabric overlapping the other slightly. The maps were transferred by Dana onto the fabric, and at each spot of destruction on the map she created a tear or a rip. Each tear was then mended using an ancient traditional technique called Retta or Rafugari in Hindi.

Rafugari is a forgotten invisible craft – a common form of mending clothing in Lebanon, Saudi, Egypt and other countries in the region. “In a global and contemporary sense our relationship with textiles has changed completely, in India if you tear a pashmina shawl that took two years to make you don’t buy a new one or throw it away, you mend it using Rafugari,” says Dana of this whimsical technique. Dana used silk textile to represent each country’s landscape, but mended the tears in cotton – so you could truly see the attempts for repair and revival of the fabric as a viewer.

“This is how I can come to terms with what’s happening: it’s not a solution, just a meditative way of attempting to heal something that has been tarnished,” says Dana. “Retta, if done right, is a form of mending that the viewers should not be able to see. It’s as if the garment is brand new again – erasing and perfectly concealing all signs of destruction through the intricacy of craft. A cathartic technique used to preserve what we deem to be sacred.” [danaawartani.com](http://danaawartani.com)

*All Images courtesy of the artist*

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*From the summer 2020 issue of Harper’s Bazaar Art*

*Islamic Arts*  
29 December 2018

**islamicarts**

SHARJAH ISLAMIC ARTS FESTIVAL (SIAF) 2018-2019

## **The Silence Between Us: Poetry and Light in the work of Dana Awartani**

Dec 29, 2018 EVENT, Art Festival

by Islamic Arts Magazine

**The first institutional solo presentation of Dana Awartani's work in the Middle East**

Under the patronage of HH Sheikh Dr. Sultan Al Qasimi, Supreme Council Member, Ruler of Sharjah, the Cultural Affairs Department at the Sharjah Department of Culture has organized the 21st edition of the Sharjah Islamic Arts Festival (SIAF). The exhibition 'The Silence Between Us' is the second collaboration between the Maraya Art Centre and the Sharjah Islamic Arts Festival, and the first institutional solo presentation of Dana Awartani's work in the Middle East.

The exhibition opened as part of the Festival's 21st edition, in the presence of Mohammed Al Qaseer, Head of Cultural Affairs and General Coordinator at the Department of Culture and Marwan Al Sarkal, Executive Chairman, Sharjah Invest and Development Authority (SHUROOQ), the respected guests, the artists and the media.



Dana Awartani with the respected guests at the opening of the exhibition / Photo © Islamic Arts Magazine



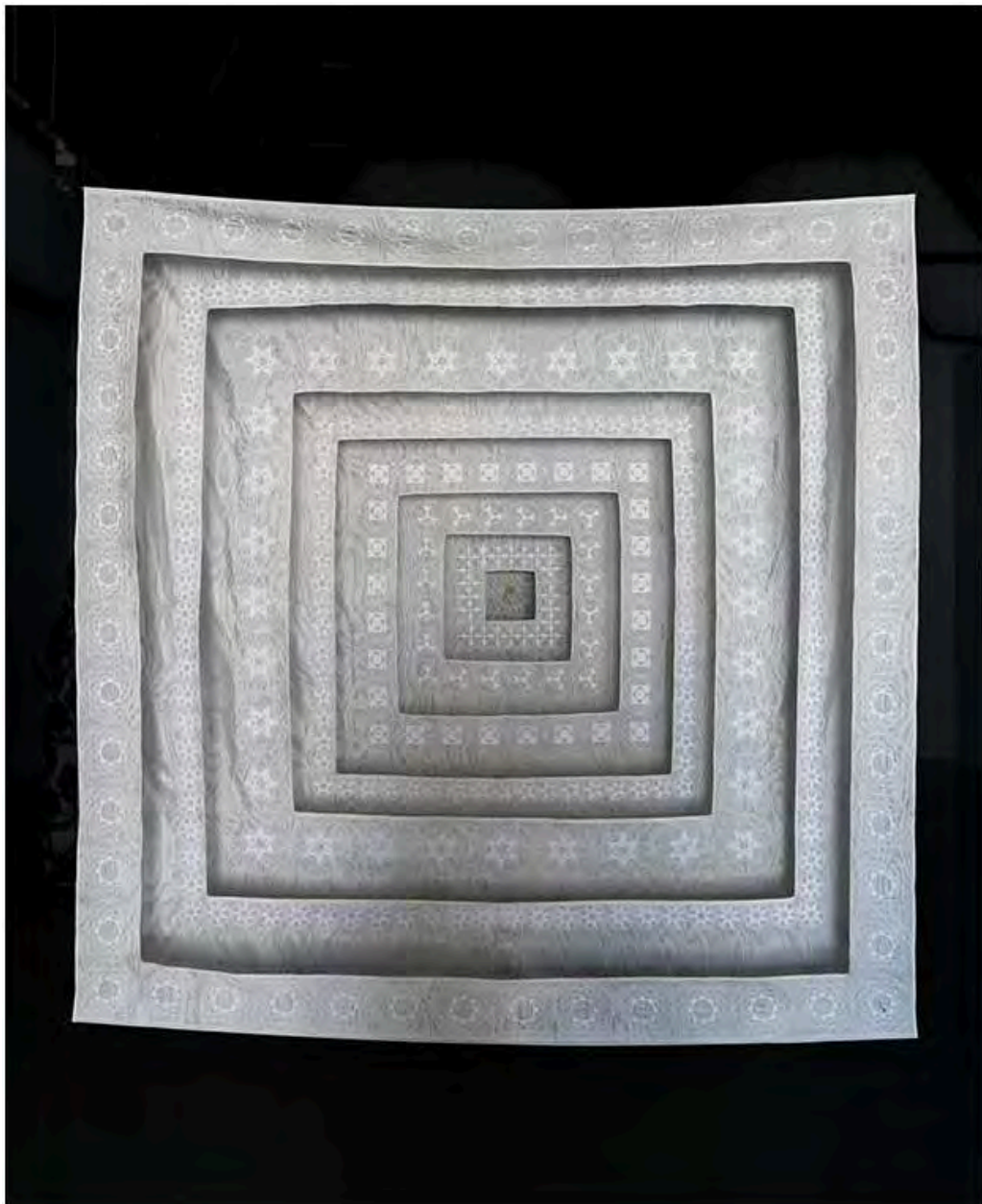
Dana Awartani presents her work to Mohammed Al Qaseer, Head of Cultural Affairs and General Coordinator at the Department of Culture; Marwan Al Sarkal, Executive Chairman, Sharjah Invest and Development Authority (SHUROOQ); Farah Qassim Mohammed, Islamic Arts Festival Executive and the respected guests at the opening of the exhibition / Photo © Islamic Arts Magazine

'The Silence Between Us', curated by Laura Metzler, brings together pieces from the artist's practice through her use of layering and the evocation of time through different materials to open channels for new interpretations and experiences of her practice. Poetry and light become key tools to both figuratively and (at times) literally reading her work, holding central roles in her exploration of the civilizational legacies that inspire her.

Awartani lives and works in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and has developed a practice by blending her conceptual training at Central Saint Martins with her traditional craft study at the Prince's School of Traditional Art, thus creating a dialogue between the past and the present. She does this through a combination of textile, woodwork, and glass production methods that are particularly still active in India, as well as her manuscript illuminations. Through these mediums, light activates, distorts or reveals at different turns throughout the gallery space as the viewer encounters each piece.

Laid out as a cycle in and of itself, the exhibition opens and closes with Awartani's recent installation, "Listen to My Words" (2018), which consists of seven screens of hand embroidered silk panels inspired by the 'Jali' screen, an architectural form allowing airflow in buildings but also preventing unwanted views into them. Each screen is associated with a line of poetry from female poets of the Arab world throughout history. Other pieces include "Love is my Law, Love is my Faith" (2016) and a progressive drawing from her Caliphates series that shows the evolution of the tradition of illumination throughout the history of the art.

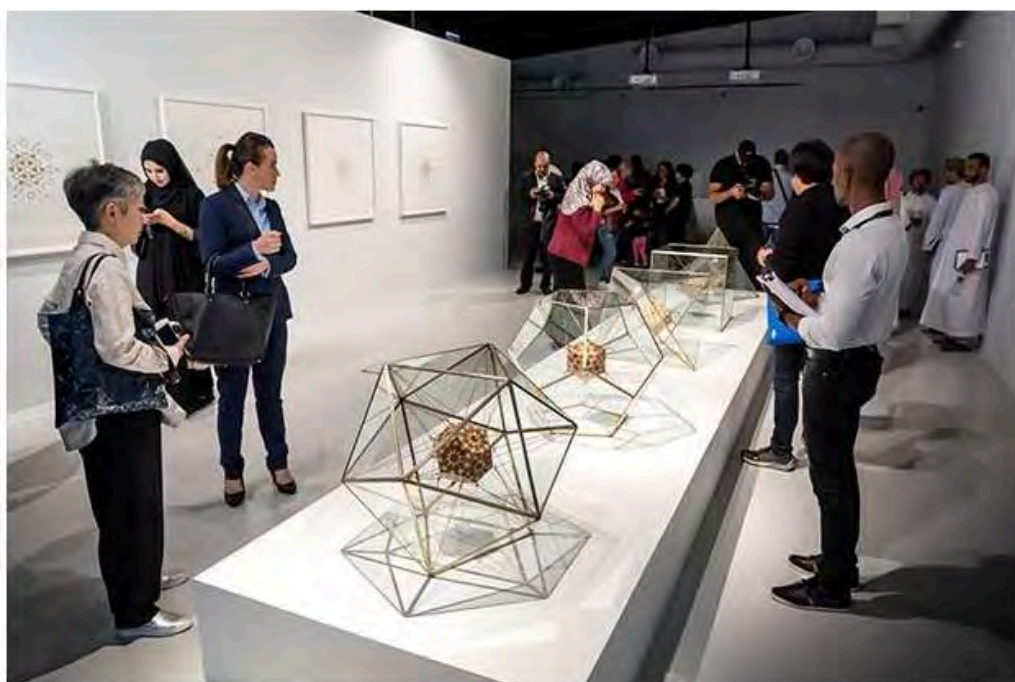
In addition to these works, new pieces have been developed in collaboration with craftsmen in India over four months leading up to the show. These include a new hanging installation in glass, "To See and Not Be Seen" (2018) and an embroidered-textile piece that continues her interest in the history of female poets in the Arab world.



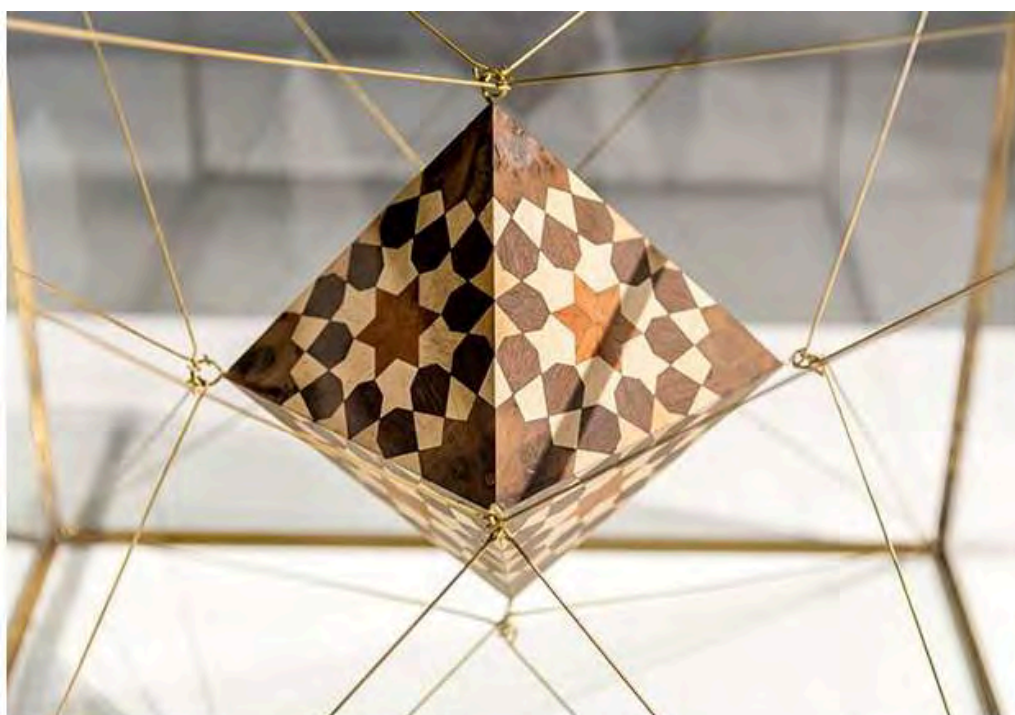
Dana Awartani, Listen to My Words, 2018 / Photo © Islamic Arts Magazine



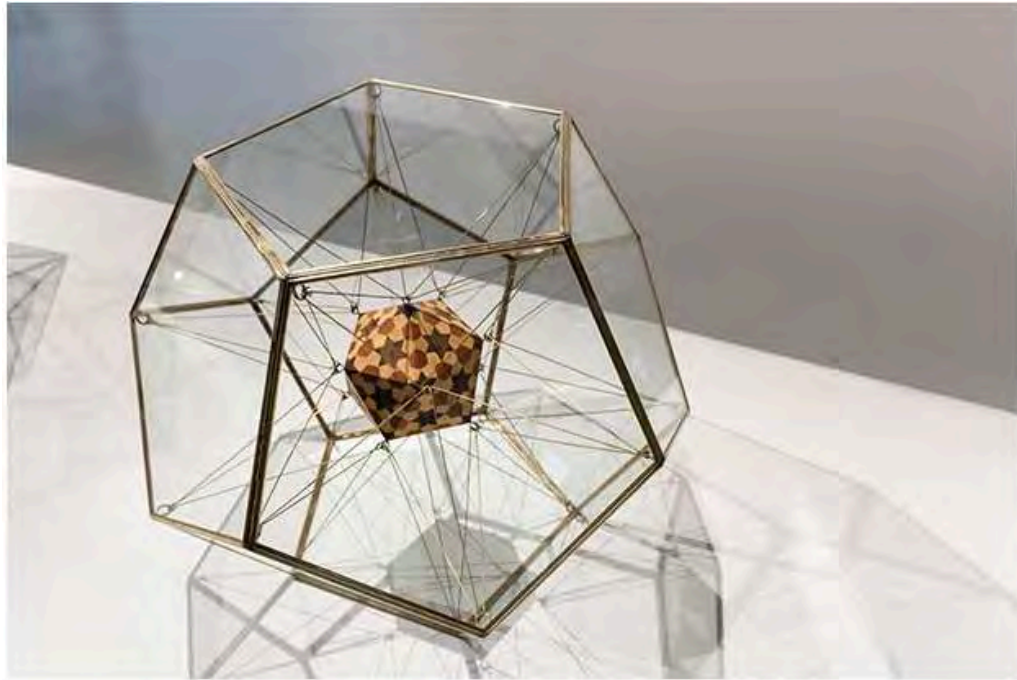
Dana Awartani, Listen to My Words, 2018 / Photo © Islamic Arts Magazine



From the opening of the exhibition / Photo © Islamic Arts Magazine



Dana Awartani, Platonic Solid Sculptures series, 2018, wood, brass and glass; detail / Photo © Islamic Arts Magazine



Dana Awartani, Platonic Solid Sculptures series, 2018, wood, brass and glass / Photo © Islamic Arts Magazine



Dana Awartani, Platonic Solid Works On paper series, 2017, shell gold, gouache and ink on paper / Photo © Islamic Arts Magazine



Visitors at the opening of the exhibition / Photo © Islamic Arts Magazine



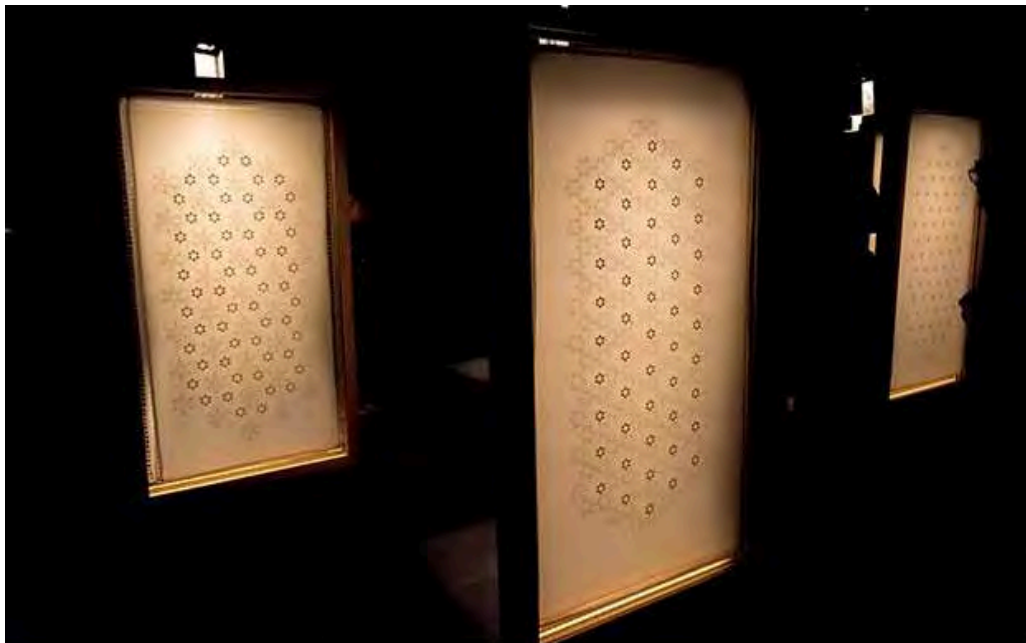
Dana Awartani, To See but Not Be Seen, 2018, Hand blown glass / Photo © Islamic Arts Magazine



From the opening of the exhibition / Photo © Islamic Arts Magazine



Dana Awartani, Diwans of the Unknown, 2018 / Photo © Islamic Arts Magazine



Dana Awartani, Listen to My Words, 2018 / Photo © Islamic Arts Magazine

The exhibition at Maraya Art Centre also extends to the main festival presentation at the Sharjah Art Museum with Awartani's "All [heavenly bodies] swim along, each in its orbit" (2016). This piece was inspired by a Quranic verse which gives the work its title, and is one of only two palindromes in the Holy book. Pulling from the intellectual tradition of the science of letters ('ilm al-huruf) that has spanned generations of Sufi scholars, Awartani seeks a new method of expressing the power of this linguistic arrangement and property of Arabic Alphabet by applying her Abjad Hawaz system (alphabetical order and numerical value) to create a symbolic form.

The exhibition 'The Silence Between Us' will run until February 18, 2019.

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ArtNews  
15 May 2017

# ARTnews

## 'There's Really No Platform in New York': The Institute of Arab and Islamic Art's Director, Mohammed Rashid Al-Thani, on Its Ambitious Plans



BY ALEX GREENBERGER May 15, 2017 4:50pm



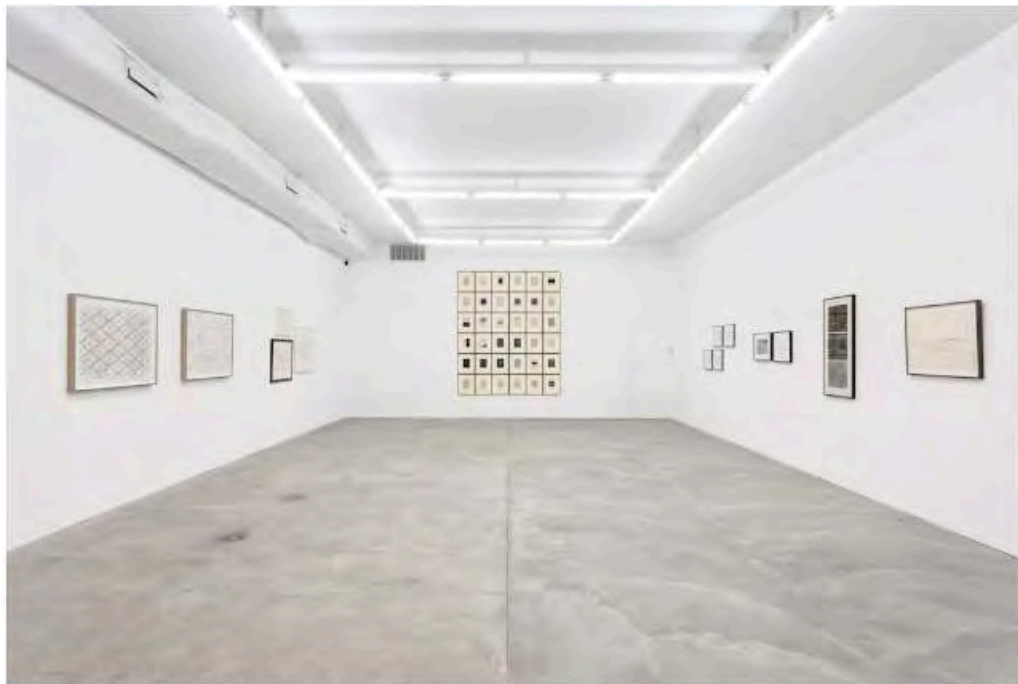
The **Institute of Arab and Islamic Art** in Manhattan.

Until the Institute of Arab and Islamic Art opened in New York earlier this month, with a four-woman show of work by **Dana Awartani**, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, **Zarina**, and **Nasreen Mohamedi**, the city did not have an institution devoted to modern and contemporary art in that field. For now, it is occupying a temporary location on sunny Howard Street in Nolita, but its staffers eventually plan to find a permanent home in New York. Ahead of the opening of **its first exhibition**, the IAIA's founding director and chief curator, **Mohammed Rashid Al-Thani**, and I met at its current home to discuss his goals and his inaugural show. This conversation has been edited and condensed.

**ARTnews: The name of the Institute of Arab and Islamic Art is interesting because it does not include two words some might expect to be a part of it: “Middle East.” Why did you select that title?**

Mohammed Rashid Al-Thani: The reason we chose the title the Institute of Arab and Islamic Art is that many people have the misconception that all Arabs are Muslims or that all Muslims are Arabs. In reality, not all Arabs are Muslims. You have Arab Jews, Arab Christians, and Arab Muslims. Then we don't say Muslim because not all Muslims are Arabs. Muslims can also come from Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan.

I personally reject the term “Middle East.” It's a concept that was developed through the British India Office in the late 19th century, and then was coined in the early 20th century. It's not reflective, really, of Middle Eastern culture. Islam has touched people beyond the Muslim world. If we look at it historically, the largest Jewish quarter in the world was in the south of Spain, in Seville. It was predominantly Muslim at the time. If you look at Islamic art as a term, you will see that historically, Christians and Jews created art for Muslims, and that was considered Islamic art. Muslims created art for Christians and Jews, and that was considered Islamic art, too. Our term is more for geographical representation that we think is fair and relevant.



Installation view of “Exhibition 1.”

©CHARLES BENTON

**How long had you been planning this space?**

Since 2014.

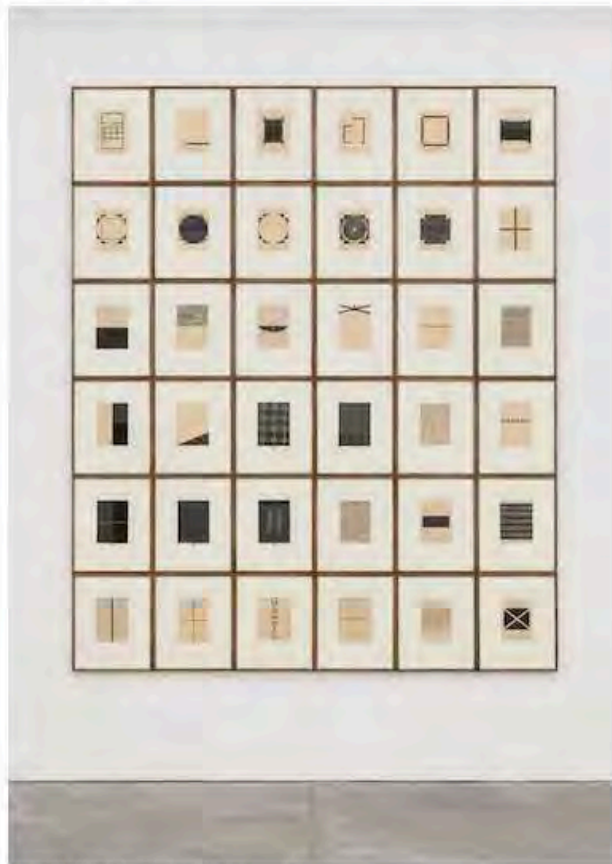
**A lot has really happened since then. To open this now, in this political climate, must be so different.**

Even if we had Hillary as president, we didn't know how people were going to react to this space. It's all timing. Our main purpose is to make sure that artists, writers, and curators have a voice here, that there are exhibitions and talks

happening consistently, and that there are engaging publications. I think that's really the main focus. Obviously, from a sociopolitical perspective, it's impossible not to look at how Arabs are stereotyped and misconceived. We cannot ignore it. But we hope this is a space for the community to engage, either through the exhibitions or the public programming, with the cultures of the region.

**When the news came out about the IAIA, what surprised me most was that something like it didn't already exist.**

The question I hate most is, "What has inspired you to do this?" There's really no platform [in New York]!



Works by Zarina in "Exhibition 1."

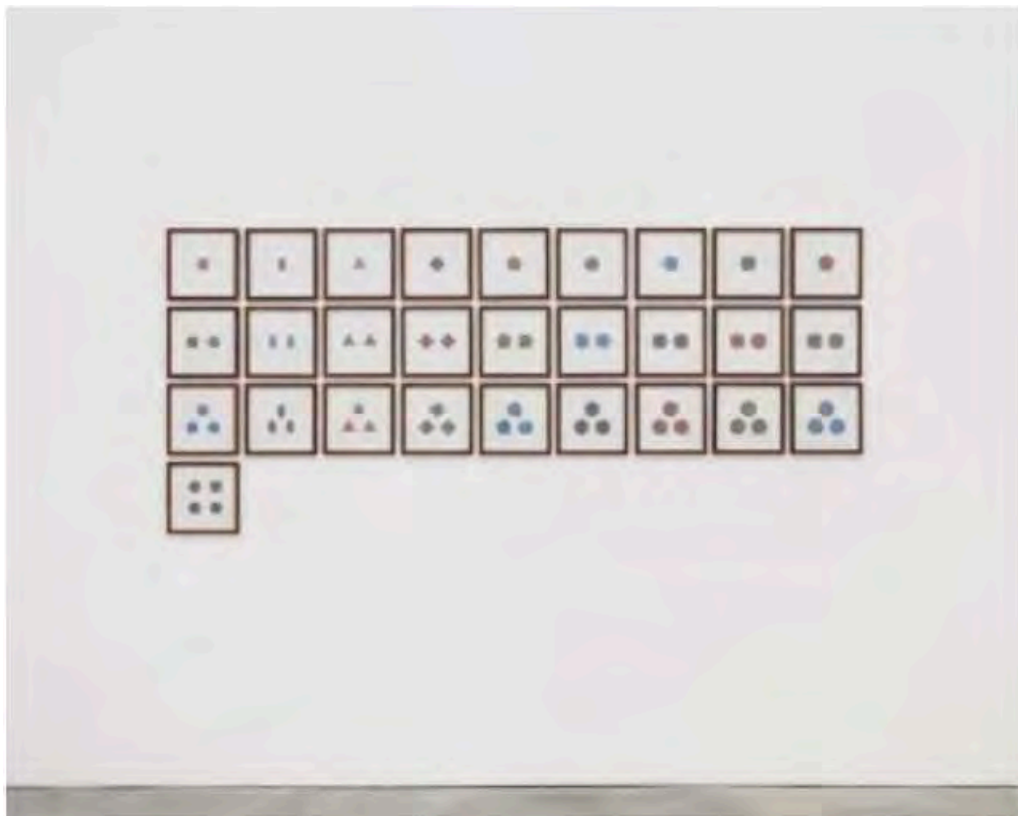
©CHARLES BENTON

**The first show brings together works on paper by Dana Awartani, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarman, Nasreen Mohamedi, and Zarina. New Yorkers may know these four artists, but usually they're not shown together. Tell me about the show's concept.**

I've been exposed to Dana's work at the Marrakech Biennial last year. Simultaneously, I was reading *Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarman: Works on Paper* by Hans Ulrich Obrist. At the same time, I met Zarina through Luhring Augustine, and then the Met Breuer had an exhibition of Nasreen Mohamedi. I was really intrigued by how Islamic architecture had found its way into their work, and [how] a lot of those artists have lived abroad and have always had this relationship to their region through their memories. Monir, for a very long time,

was in exile here in New York City. Dana, who's Palestinian, lives in Saudi Arabia. Zarina is now obviously here in New York. When Nasreen was very, very young, her family moved from Pakistan to India. So, it was very, very incredible to see how architecture and geometry feed into their work, and what they produce in return.

What strikes me the most is how much presence one's own heritage has in a place [like New York] that's universal, that's global—a place where you strip yourself of your identity and your society, to live in something that's more of a celebrated, universal environment. But still, there's the need to go back—the need to reflect always finds its way into [the work] of those artists. Dana's nostalgia for the great monuments of Islam throughout the south of Spain to the north of India still finds a way. In Arabic culture, the alphabet is equivalent to Abjad, which make up the numbers of the Arabic alphabet. Before Islam, Arabs used to communicate a lot through numbers. When Islam came, it reinforced the importance of language and the alphabet. With Dana, she's developed a coding of those numbers through geometrical patterns that she's developed. A lot of the patterns [were] developed through her experience in Alhambra, Granada, and a lot of the monuments and mosques in Seville.



Works by Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian in "Exhibition 1."

©CHARLES BENTON

**Some of the pairings are a bit unusual. For example, bringing together Mohamedi and Zarina's work is a bit unlikely in most people's minds.**

They're very different, and that's what I think is the exciting part of it. Zarina said, "Oh, I have so much respect for Nasreen that I don't want to be seen in the same space." I said, "Zarina, we're going to acknowledge how different your work is, that we can't escape the fact that you've shared those experiences, and you can see it in the work."

**And you'll continue these sort of unusual pairings?**

Oh, yes! Our idea is not to listen to limit exhibitions only to artists from the region, but to see how we can bring the U.S., Europe, or Asia in conversation with artists from the region. I can't say a lot, but there are a lot of artists we're looking at right now, and we can see parallels with their contemporaries from the rest of the world. We want to bring them into the conversation.

**What are you most excited to do with this space?**

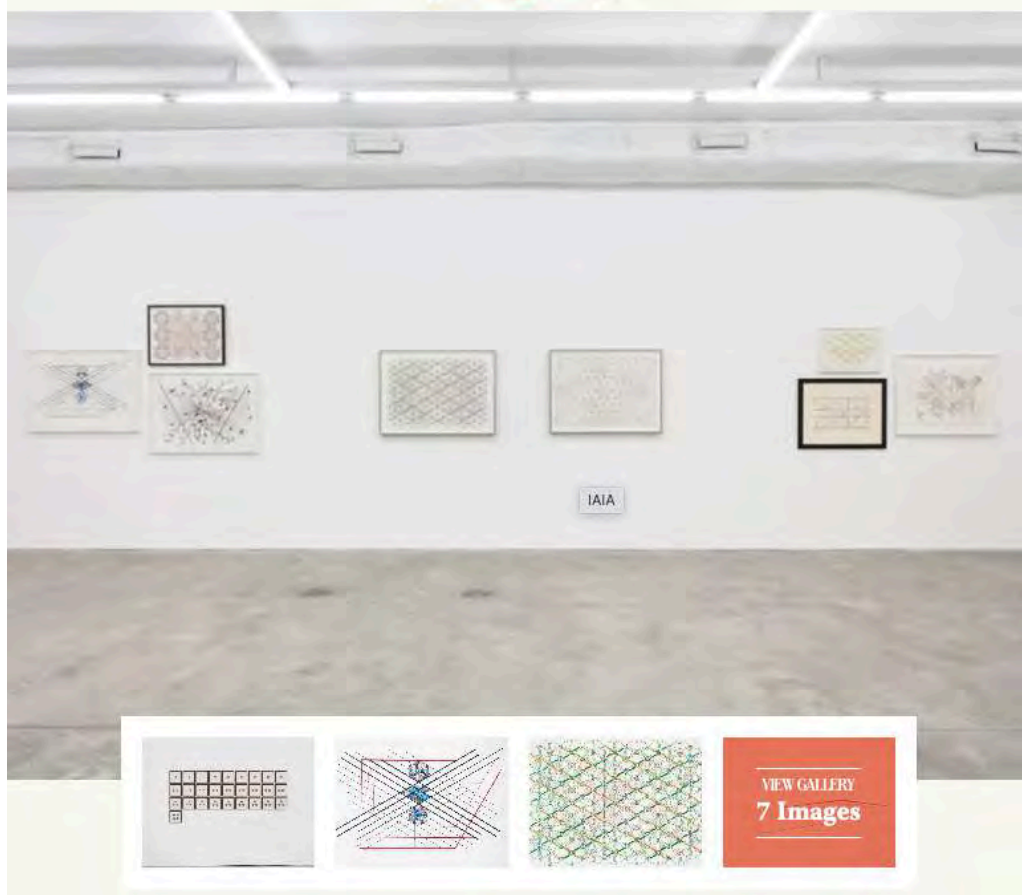
My main objective is to see how artists from the region are going to engage with people here, to see how we're going to engage the community. That's what excites me—to have people here, engaging with the art.

Art in America  
9 May 2017

## Art in America

### Exchange Program: The New Institute of Arab and Islamic Art

By Eleanor Heartney May 9, 2017 12:49pm



In the West, **geometric art** is often associated with an aesthetic of reduction and simplicity. Movements like Minimalism, Constructivism and Neo-Concretism (exemplified in the Met Breuer's current exhibition of the work of Brazilian artist **Lygia Pape**) look back to the notion of essential Platonic forms underlying the chaos of visual experience. The works in the opening show at the new **Institute of Arab and Islamic Art (IAIA)**, generically titled "**Exhibition 1**," and in most cases borrowed from the artists or their galleries, owe a debt to the very different approach to **geometry** in the Islamic world. The four women artists represented in the show hail from different Muslim majority countries and represent different generations. Each has spent significant time in the West and studied Western as well as **Islamic art**. Their work combines an awareness of traditions of Western abstraction with the complex geometry derived from the intricate patterning and mathematical underpinnings of Islamic architecture and design.

Three of the four have been the subject of recent monographic museum shows. The fourth is younger and just beginning to make an appearance on the international stage. **Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian** is probably the best known of the group. A 2015 exhibition at the Guggenheim was the first US museum show for the 93-year-old Iranian artist, but hardly her first exposure in New York. Farmanfarmaian came to the city in 1944 to study art and plunged into the scene, rubbing shoulders with Warhol, Pollock, de Kooning, and others while working as a freelance fashion illustrator. In 1957 she returned to Iran, and began to explore geometry in line drawings and complex faceted mirror sculptures and reliefs. Following the 1979 Iranian revolution, during which many of her works were confiscated, she was stranded in New York, and remained there until 2004, when she moved back to Iran. The work at IAIA includes several drawings from the mid-1970s characterized by straight lines that traverse the paper, changing colors and shifting course in abruptly angled turns. The more recent works, all created within the last five years, are much more complex, incorporating glitter, shards of mirror that create fractured reflections, explosions of radiating lines, and, in some, present intricate interlocking patterns that seem derived from traditional Islamic decoration. The austerity of the early works gives way to an explosion of energy and freedom, suggesting that this nonagenarian artist is currently operating at the height of her powers.

Indian artist **Zarina Hashmi**, who goes by her first name, is thirteen years younger than Farmanfarmaian and is also the product of transnational influences and political upheavals. After experiencing the violent partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 as a child, she became a nomad, living in Paris and Germany before settling in New York in the mid-1970s. She has also been enjoying late life recognition. After representing India at the 2011 Venice Biennale, she was the subject of a traveling exhibition organized by the Hammer Museum in 2012. She has cited **Eva Hesse** as an influence, and one can detect a kinship between the two in her irregular grids. At the same time, childhood memories, the experience of Partition, and her subsequent displacement have also marked her work. One sees this in her contribution to the IAIA show. The thirty-six identically sized woodcuts in her series “Home Is a Foreign Place” (1999) each reflect an abstracted memory of her childhood home. Some references are obvious—a diagram of the house’s layout, rectangular forms suggesting windows or doors—while the crosses and bisected rectangles in others seem to belong to the minimalist lexicon. There are also a number of variations on the intersection of a circle and a square that seem derived from Islamic patterns. Each is inscribed with the graceful calligraphy of an Urdu word that adds content to the image. (For instance, an image of horizontal lines is inscribed “rain.”) Together, they suggest a personalized geometry that combines memory, culture, and formal restraint.

**Nasreen Mohamedi**’s work was featured as one of the opening **exhibitions** at the Met Breuer in 2016. Born the same year as Zarina, Mohamedi also experienced the upheaval of Partition, but her life was shadowed by a larger personal misfortune. Afflicted with Huntington’s disease, a degenerative neuromuscular disorder, she struggled in her later years with failing motor skills before dying at age fifty-three in 1990. Like Zarina and Farmanfarmaian, she led a cosmopolitan life, studying and working in Paris and London before returning to live in Mumbai while traveling throughout the Near East. Despite her physical difficulties, she produced meticulously crafted work. Her drawings present intersecting parallel lines and carefully delineated planes that seem to float on the white page. They play with the principles of perspective and illusion and suggest Constructivist antecedents. Here some of these drawings are paired with her highly abstracted photographs, which suggest the sources of the drawings and offer glimpses into Mohamedi’s vision of the world. The black-and-white photographs trace shapes created by shadows, bits of tape, or painted lines. Often their sources are mysterious, as in an untitled photograph from the 1970s that appears to present white boards placed over a wet street. These float over the reflective surface below like disconnected bars of light converging towards a distant vanishing point. Such works provide an intriguing counterpoint to the drawings.

The final artist here is **Dana Awartani**, who, at age thirty, represents a generation in which the kind of transcultural lives and influences that characterize the other artists are no longer an anomaly. Born in Saudi Arabia, Awartani studied in London, first focusing on contemporary Western art at Central Saint Martins, and then enrolling in London’s Prince’s School, which is devoted to the preservation of traditional non-Western art. More overtly than the other artists

here, she has taken **Islam**'s sacred geometry as her subject. For this exhibition she presents a set of twenty-eight gouache and ink drawings titled "Abjad Hawad"—a reference to the system by which the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic language are assigned numerical value. Awartani has translated this concept into a dazzling grid of images that grow in complexity as one reads from top left to bottom. Intricate patterns are enclosed within a lexicon of geometric shapes, beginning with the single-sided circle and ending with a nonagon. These are presented singly in the top row and doubled and then tripled below; the series ends with the twenty-eighth figure that quadruples the initial circle. These rigorously structured, spectacularly colorful images allude to the arithmetical basis of Islamic ornament.

The IAIA is the brainchild of Mohammed Rashid Al-Thani, a member of the Qatari royal family who lives in New York. It opens its doors at a fraught moment in relations between the Islamic world and the United States, and its avowed mission is to use art to counter the misconceptions surrounding Arab and Muslim culture. In their willingness to engage diverse aesthetic and cultural traditions, the artists in this opening show embody the rewards of cultural exchange. "Exhibition 1" suggests that the IAIA will be a welcome addition to the New York art scene.

*Harpers Bazaar Arabia*  
4 April 2017

## ARABIA <sup>Harpers</sup>BAZAAR



Towards A Sublime Art

### *Towards A Sublime Art*

BY Rebecca Anne Proctor / *April 2017*

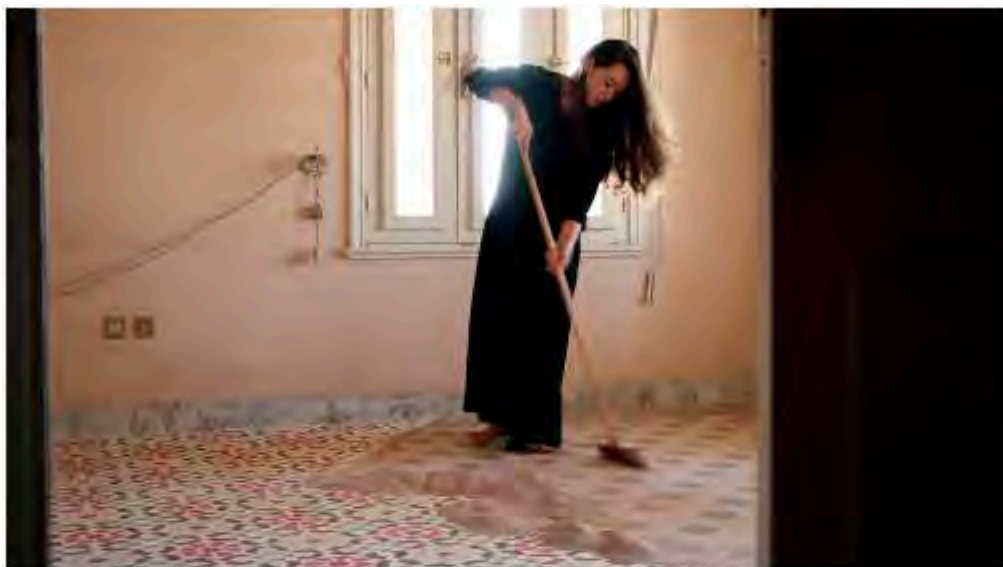
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*Saudi-Palestinian artist Dana Awartani speaks with Rebecca Anne Proctor about the universality inherent in her sacred geometric forms*

The gently swaying forms of a set of eight white embroidered cloth panels come into sight at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale's David Hall in Kerala. They move ever so softly in tune with the South Indian breeze. Entitled Love is My Law, Love is My Faith by Jeddah-based Saudi-Palestinian artist Dana Awartani, the work is inspired by the verses of 12th Century Sufi poet Ibn

Arabi about his experience in the holy city of Mecca; the white refers also to colour white worn during the hajj pilgrimage. Arranged in a square-like formation in order of decreasing size, the piece is intended as a spiritual journey.

“Every number has a meaning,” says Dana. “A common belief in Islamic art is that the eight-point star is a representation of the eight angels that will bear the throne of God on the Day of Judgment.” The artist, who did her thesis on the number eight, says you see the number everywhere but don’t know what it means. “What I found the most interesting is that it has the same meaning in many religions. It’s the idea of unity within multiplicity. It’s also the symbol of rebirth on a higher level. Christians are baptized on an octagonal drum.” Even the Dome of the Rock (an ancient shrine in Jerusalem) was built on an eight-figure base. “Also, Buddhists believe in the eightfold path towards in Enlightenment,” she adds. “And the Sufis believe in the eightfold path towards the embodiment of various qualities by different prophets.” Like Dana’s art, such sacred geometric patterning encompasses a religious universality.

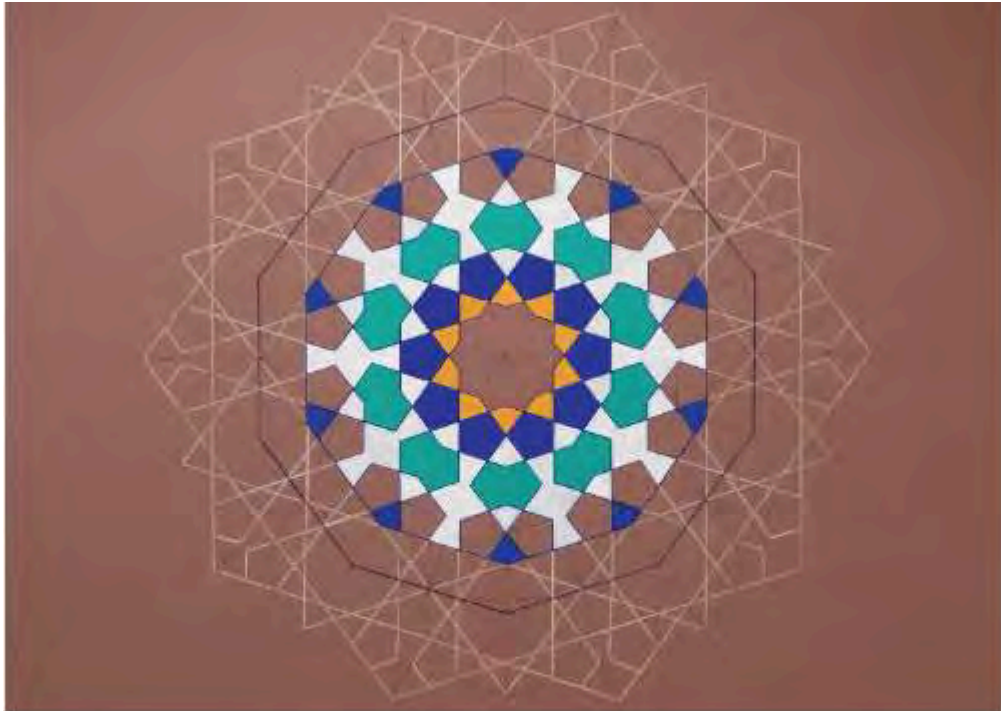


*I went away and forgot you. A while ago I remembered. I remembered I'd forgotten you. I was dreaming. 2017.*

*Video installation, 24 minutes and 47 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Athr Gallery*

Dana's work has been exhibited at major regional and international exhibitions and art fairs, positioned alongside that of Yoko Ono and Anish Kapoor. Her art is unique in that it seeks to incorporate the traditional methods of Islamic art into a contemporary world. Rich in geometric patterning and the most intricate of details, Dana's work in Islamic art uses geometric patterns to symbolise devotion. Hers is a method that emerged over 1,000 years ago as a substitute for the forbidden depiction of divine figures. It is still being practiced, although less and less, today, by specialists such as Dana. "Everything has a symbolic meaning—even geometry means something," says Dana. "In Islamic art what we focus on is symbolism. Islamic craftsmen humbly tried to depict an element of the divine on earth."

As a child, Dana dreamed of studying in London. When she was ready for college she enrolled in Central Saint Martin's. However, studying there had its downfalls. "I learned to study art from a purely conceptual level but not much in terms of making art," she says. "I was the only Arab there. The aesthetic that was being practiced was very different from what I knew. My teachers also had this Orientalist view of me as well which I didn't like. They used to tell me to research Mona Hatoum and Shirin Neshat—artists who speak regularly about exile and suppression—things that are quite negative in our culture which I didn't want to focus on and I haven't experienced." This is when Dana became more interested in geometric art, an interest that led her to study at The Prince's School of Traditional Arts for her Master's—one of the only schools in the world to teach traditional art. "When I first started, they told me to forget everything I had learned in terms of contemporary art," says Dana. "Traditional art and contemporary art are two entirely different things they told me. Also, at St. Martin's there wasn't an appreciation for craft and beauty that could be made by one's hands."



*Dodecahedron from the Platonic Solids series. 2016. Pencil and natural pigments on paper. 81 x 81 cm*

At the Prince's School she learned how to make stained glass, miniature painting, gilding—various traditional techniques from cultures all over the world. However, she couldn't gain a degree in illumination there. For this Dana needed to study further a field. "I found a master in Turkey to help me become a master in illumination," she says. "It's like the master and the apprentice and it is a tradition and way of learning that has been preserved for thousands of years and this was something that I loved. It's only in Turkey and Iran that you can find such specialists." In just one or two more visits Dana will be a master in illuminations herself.

Dana's art is intensely spiritual. She often spends 15-hour days in her studio creating her geometric works. "It's my happy place," says Dana referring to her time in the studio, which can be regularly every day of the week up to around midnight. "My

professor used to tell me to never do geometry when you are mentally in a bad place or agitated," she adds. "It doesn't work. You can completely ruin the work." This way of work, explains Dana, teaches you how to be in the present and in the now.

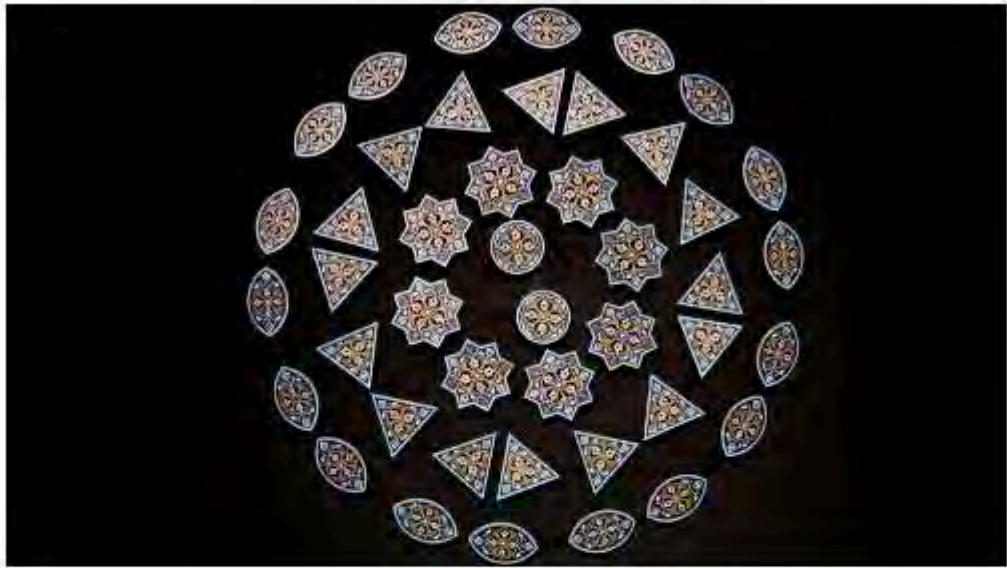


*Dodecahedron within an Icosahedron from The Platonic Solids  
Duals. 2016. Wood, copper and glass. 91 x 91 x 91 cm*

"Everything has symbolic meaning—even the numbers in geometry—it's a sort of visual language," says Dana. "In Christian art, what they mastered was icon painting and representative of the human body, but as you know in Islamic art that's one of the lowest things we do in miniature painting. What we focus on is symbolism, geometry and calligraphy. In essence, what they are is really a form of embodying the divine creation on earth." The ancient masters of illuminations would create their works as forms of prayer or dhikr, which means remembrance. For them, the idea of creating art was entirely stripped of ego.

"[The art] puts you in a meditative state—that is you are creating something beautiful that is inspired by the divine," says Dana, who emphasises how the process for her is often more important to the end result. "I really enjoy being fully involved in the process of my work, and when I do get my work produced, I do it with craftsmen," she says. Works that were made by craftsmen include the work at the Kochi-Murziris Biennale and the last Marrakech Biennale where she created three sculptures one of which featured a dodecahedron within a glass icosahedron.

In Jeddah earlier this year, Dana covered the floor with patterns using local coloured sands. An exquisite piece recalling the decorative motifs found on traditional Islamic tiles, it was also accompanied by a video seen of Dana sweeping away the artwork that had taken her days and days to recreate. The action was akin to Tibetan monks destroying their precious sand mandalas that also portray a divine geometry. No matter how long it took to produce the mandala, the monks pray after it has been completed and then sweep it away, just like Dana, in an offering to the sublime possibility and the idea that nothing is permanent.



*All [heavenly bodies] swim along, each in its orbit. 2016. Mixed media. 150 x 150 cm*

*For more information visit [danaawartani.com](http://danaawartani.com)*

*Financial Times*  
24 February 2017

## FINANCIAL TIMES

### Beyond the veil: Saudi women making their presence felt in the arts

A new scheme is helping female curators put together exhibitions



Still from a film showing Dana Awartani sweeping away an earlier installation

Late last year, a group of young, sparky women from Saudi Arabia stood on the top floor of a car park in Peckham, took in the London skyline, and pondered how curators put together exhibitions. They had travelled to the UK as part of a British Council initiative called Contemporary Collective, an intensive programme for fledgling cultural leaders. Over the course of six days, the group visited a raft of galleries and events, from Tate to the Liverpool Biennial to that Peckham car park — the home of non-profit commissioning organisation Bold Tendencies.

The budding curators savoured the practical advice and insights offered. “It was a real eureka moment, seeing them listen to [Bold Tendencies founder] Hannah Barry,” says Matilda Pye, the British Council programme leader. Also valuable was the chance to come face to face with works they had previously only seen via a smartphone. “Discussing the intricate drawings of Mohammed Qasim Ashfaq [an artist represented by Barry], who draws on Islamic and western traditions, and looking at works by different generations of British artists from Shirazeh Houshiary to Eva Rothschild in the British Council collection was revelatory,” Pye says.

The scheme will bear fruit this autumn in the form of an exhibition at Jeddah's Athr Gallery. Entitled *You Are Not Alone* and drawn from the British Council collection, it will focus on the "commonalities and meeting points" across the cultures of both countries; on show will be works by both Saudi artists and UK-based artists such as Ryan Gander and Marcus Coates.

But Saudi women are already making their presence felt in the country's arts scene this year. They are well represented, for example, in the fourth edition of 21,39, an annual arts event in Jeddah that opened this month. Of the 16 new commissions by emerging Saudi artists on view at The Mall space in the Al-Shate'a district, seven are by women.

Jeddah-born Dana Awartani has covered the floor with patterns using locally sourced coloured sands. The exquisite piece recalls the decorative motifs on traditional Islamic tiles. Zahra Al-Ghamdi's "The Labyrinth and Time" (2017) is a large-scale, site-specific sculptural work moulded from sand, cotton and water that mimics the forms of historic houses found in Al-Balad, Jeddah's historical downtown district. From July, Awartani and Al-Ghamdi's work will find a still wider audience, when their work appears in the first UK exhibition dedicated to Saudi women artists at London's Mosaic Rooms.



Dana Awartani's sand piece at 21,39

Meanwhile two Contemporary Collective alumna have shows on at the moment. Maryam Bilal, artist liaison representative at Athr, has co-organised the gallery's current exhibition *And Along Came Polyester* (until April 4), which features works by five women from the Gulf. Raneen Bukhari, who runs an organisation for young artists called Loud Art, is co-curator, with artist Arwa Al Neami of *Live Demo* at Ahmed Mater's Pharan Studios, which features artist talks as well as work in all media.

Both women found it productive to venture beyond Saudi Arabia's borders. "This type of exposure may not be the academic conventional route, but it is invaluable for those of us living here," Bilal says. "How do you measure the success of your work, when really there aren't any peers in your field?"



The programme, which also featured symposia in Riyadh and Jeddah led by curators from the Hepworth Wakefield and the Artes Mundi prize, was set in motion by arts consultant Fiona Fox. Intended to help remedy a lack of formal support for curatorial work, it struck a chord across the Saudi arts community. "We were really fortunate to have support across the sector from the Saudi Art Council — an

independent body of collectors and patrons based in Jeddah — and major artists such as Ahmed Mater, to influential figures in the government, which was hugely encouraging," Fox says.

Pye stresses that the initiative is designed to support the burgeoning arts and culture scene in Saudi Arabia, in line with the country's Vision 2030 strategy for diversifying the economy. Vision 2030 also aims to increase the proportion of women in the labour market, from 13 per cent of the roles held by Saudi nationals to 28 per cent by 2030.

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“

**Saudi artists are trying to contextualise their work outside of the usual western points of view: war, religion**

That may prove an uphill struggle.

Women in Saudi Arabia live under one of the most oppressive regimes in the world. The guardianship system prevents women from carrying out everyday tasks without the permission of a male relative — opening a bank account, for example, is

impossible unless a man is on hand to sanction the process. Under strict Islamic law, women must wear an *abaya* (long robe) and headscarf.

Manal Al-Dowayan's multimedia installation "Crash" offers a stark reminder of women's status. The piece, which has caused a stir at 21,39, focuses on female teachers who have died as passengers in car crashes across Saudi Arabia, where women are banned from driving. The media never mention the victims' names, says Al-Dowayan, who has included a news report and photographs in her piece. "These [press] images are an erasure and dismissal of the last remaining traces of a teacher, a woman, a human," she says.



Zahra Al-Ghamdi's 'The Labyrinth and Time' (2017) at the 21,39 art fair in Jeddah © Majid Angawi

Yet Al-Dowayan's charged work also points to a degree of freedom. "Women in the arts have always been more socially and culturally accepted than their counterparts [in other professions]," Bilal says, recalling that the first 21,39 initiative in 2014 was organised by two women, Aya Alireza and Raneem Farsi. One of this year's organisers, independent curator Till Fellrath, adds that the less institutionalised nature of the Saudi arts scene may make it easier for women artists to operate freely — though he also bemoans the country's gender segregation. "How could it be possible to enable change in a society, when only addressing one half of it?" he asks.



#### Interiors

Dubai Design Week: the women taking a creative path to equality

Some observers caution against seeing a complex arts scene through the lens of gender. Aaron Cezar, the director of the non-profit Delfina Foundation in London, has attended the last three editions of 21,39. "It has provided an excellent platform for Saudi female artists, but one must be careful about reducing it to this single dimension," he says.

"Contemporary Saudi artists and curators are trying to contextualise their work outside of the usual western points of view of war, women and religion."

It's a sensible caveat. But if programmes such as Contemporary Collective enable more people to join in the conversation, that can only be a good thing. For all the constraints upon them, the kingdom's women artists and curators are increasingly making themselves heard.

[britishcouncil.sa](http://britishcouncil.sa), [21-39.com](http://21-39.com)

*Photograph: Majid Angawi*

CNN Style  
19 December 2016



## Dana Awartani and the universal language of sacred geometry

Kieron Monks, CNN

© 4 minute read · Updated 1:43 PM EST, Mon December 19, 2016



The universal language of sacred geometry

JonRstudio

1 of 10

**Orientalism** — Dana Awartani is a rising star of the fledgling Saudi art scene, known for her use of "sacred geometry" -- the use of geometric patterns to symbolize devotion.



The artist sees sacred geometry as a universal language that connects all faiths and cultures. In this installation "Orientalism," the viewer is drawn into a room that appears completely dark from a distance but is spectacularly colorful inside, symbolizing the need to engage closely with other cultures.

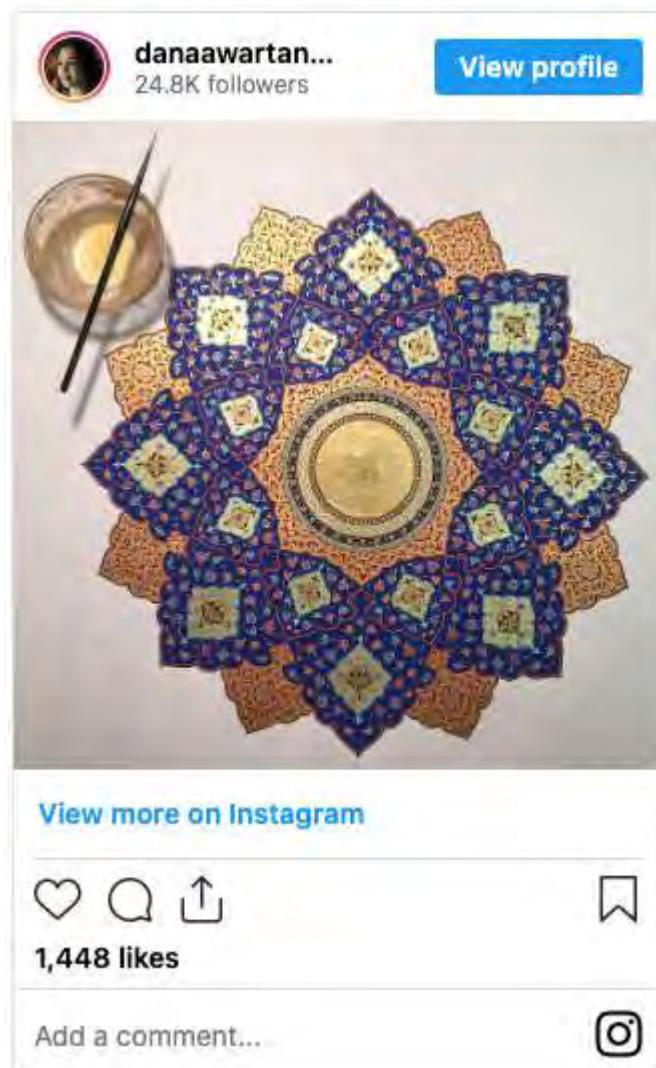
**(CNN)** — As Venus orbits the Earth it traces the shape of a five-pointed star. Slice a cucumber, and you will see perfect triangles within.

"You can see geometry throughout nature at every level from the macro to microcosmic," says Saudi Arabian artist Dana Awartani.

Geometric patterns also form the basis of Awartani's work, and her hypnotic, intricate pieces have made her a rising star of the Kingdom's fledgling art scene.

Aged 29, she has already exhibited at prestigious shows and biennales around the world alongside celebrated artists such as Indian sculptor Anish Kapoor and Japanese multimedia artist Yoko Ono.

There is a buzz around Awartani, and it is likely to get louder.



## Universal language

Awartani discovered her niche in London, where she studied for three degrees.

The artist was unmoved by popular European art forms such as life drawing. Instead, she embraced the classical Islamic style of “sacred geometry,” which uses geometric patterns to symbolize devotion and emerged over 1,000 years ago as a substitute for the forbidden depiction of divine figures.

But the style reaches far beyond her own faith, says the artist.

“The philosophy of sacred geometry is universal,” says Awartani. “There is a lot of sacred geometry in Jewish art, in the Kabala. Christians as well with icons and architecture ... It is something that all cultures and religions are inspired by.”

Awartani recounts bonding experiences with Buddhists and atheists over geometry. She sees her art as an opportunity to bridge divides and promote interfaith understanding.

One recent piece exhibited at the Jewish Museum in New York recreated tiles from the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem – a shared Jewish and Muslim holy site – which incorporated the six-point Star of David into Islamic geometric patterns.

Another work titled “Orientalism” takes on suspicion of Islam in the Western world, through an installation of a PVC-taped room that appears black from the outside, but opens to reveal stunning colors arrayed in Islamic patterns.

The piece signified that people in the West must get closer to Islamic culture to appreciate it.

## Fresh twist

The artist spends much of her time in splendid isolation in her studio in Jeddah, often working painstaking 15-hour days to produce pieces that can take weeks to complete. The process, she says, is deeply spiritual.

“When I’m painting, I don’t think,” she tells CNN. “Time flies when you’re painting.”

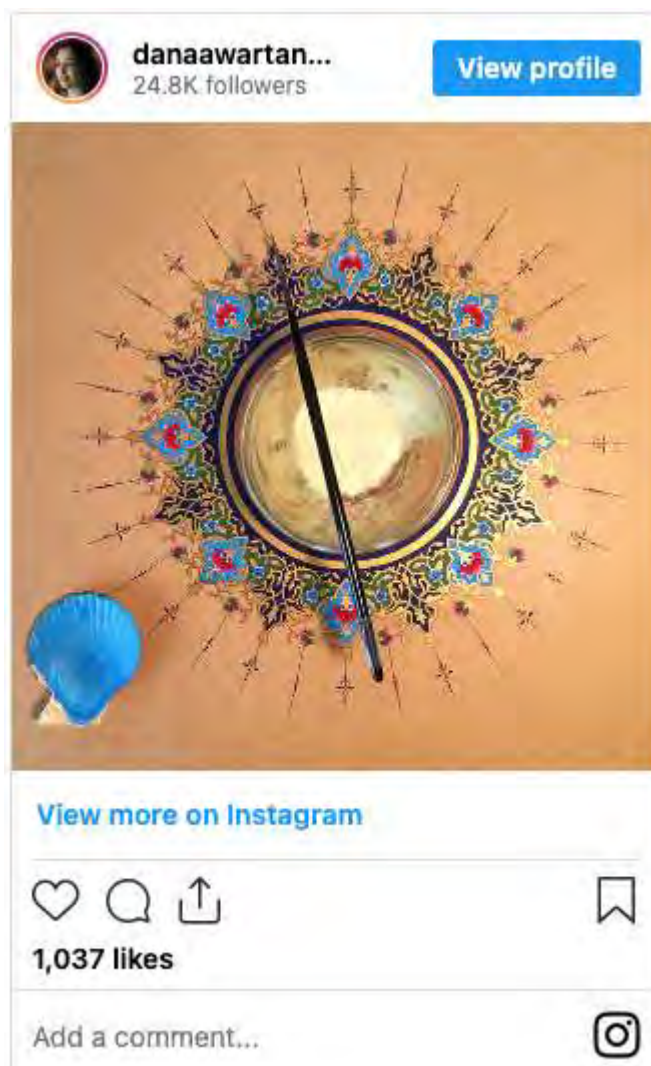
“There are so many things that can be seen as a form of prayer and meditation. I feel that my art does that. The process of creating is just as important as the end result.”

For inspiration, Awartani draws on Islamic geometry in ancient art and architecture, such as the Koutoubia Mosque, in Marrakesh, and the Alhambra Palace, in Spain.

She also admires modern variations, such as the form-twisting work of Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian.

Awartani aims to marry tradition with innovation, experimenting with forms such as sculpture, installation, and – for an upcoming show in India – textiles.

“There is a lot of contemporary art out there that is like ‘what is art anymore?’” she says. “With the traditional art, sometimes it falls into a trap of being very decorative ... I’m trying to reinvent traditional art in a way that makes it applicable to now.”



## Breaking barriers

The Jeddah art scene does not rival the one in London, Awartani concedes – in the English capital, after all, talks and exhibitions are being held seven days a week. But she is confident that art is finding a foothold in her homeland.

“The art scene here is still really young, but within the past few years they have developed so much,” says Awartani, pointing to emerging forces in the field such as the Saudi Arts Council and the Arthr Gallery.

Still, there are still barriers to overcome.

“I do think education needs to be improved,” she continues. “The way that art is viewed; it’s not really seen as a profession here. It’s not seen as a necessity to study. There are a lot of girls I know here that are unbelievably creative and talented, but they just don’t really study art.”

Awartani offers herself as a mentor for aspiring artists, but her future is unlikely to be confined to one country. She plans to set up a studio in London, and put on shows across the United States and Europe.

The artist has a burning desire to showcase the beautiful side of Islamic culture across the world, and has total confidence in the power of art to build bridges.

“Art is the most important thing for representing a society,” she says. “Civilizations are not remembered for their bankers!”

*Arab News*  
25 March 2014

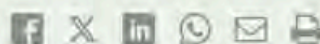
## ARAB NEWS

### Dana Awartani: Decoding Islamic art



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Islamic geometric artwork, tile work, parquetry and illumination are considered a very rare form of art nowadays. It's considered an old art haven used during the peak age of the Islamic Empire centuries ago when they studied the beauty of things and have since did all they could to study and perfect their handwork. Architects and artists alike studied math and geometry and explored that world and have thus created masterpieces found all over the Islamic world. The Caliphates have always been keen to educate pupils and help elaborate on the beauty of the Islamic religion, leading to creating masterpieces in mosques, palaces, gardens and others.

Dana Awartani is a Saudi-Palestinian artist keen to revive this sacred old art and has found that right mix to reintroduce it into the modern world we live in today. It was a difficult road but she has persevered and pushed and introduced it into a new light that is finding wide acceptance in both Saudi and international societies.

Arab News met with Dana and found out what she had to say about her fixation on her art and the reasons why she does what she does today.

It's my understanding that it takes a lot to do what you do, concentration, balance and mastering plenty of patience when creating one of your pieces whether it be with tiles or your pencil and paint brush. Tell us how you did you find that balance and patience? Did it take a lot out of you just to get to that level?

My training in art was very schizophrenic, even the way I practice my art as well. I first started with conventional training at Central Saint Martin's in London, training in fine arts, learning about the mental thinking of art, how to create a piece and how to critique it as an example. After graduating, I found that I craved to create art using my hands. I knew how to paint and draw since a young age but I wanted to do more after graduating. Having enrolled into The Prince's School I found that I was learning things completely opposite of what I learned before. I was learning about the craft and handwork in high end art, I learned a craft every week and my interest grew and that helped me to teach myself other crafts such as Moroccan ceramic technique. Geometry was the core of the whole course and I thought I'd struggle because I'm really horrendous with math, but realized that geometry is more visual than numbers. I absolutely loved it. Yet I still found something missing, so I combined by previous intellectual education with the handwork type of education I was studying at the time and found that balance, that wanting to create something that can be hung and appreciated and that required perfection with the help of balance and patience combined.

How difficult is the process of creating your art?

I think the process is more important than the end result. The way you create your art, whether it be geometry or illumination, I can't be in a bad mood or not centered. You need to be focused 100 percent and spiritually centered. It's so time consuming that there is a term when producing the art as a form of "dhekir" and every brush stroke is a form of dhekir and the things I'm creating, sacred geometry and illuminations, are all a reflection of Allah's creations. There's a quote from Rumi which is my favorite that says "There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground, there are a thousand ways to go home again," this is another element that speaks to me personally, it's my connection. That's the beauty of it.

Why have you chosen geometric Islamic art specifically?

As Arabs we're raised around this fine art, we're surrounded by it in every corner but we're not aware of it. You can see geometry all around you like in mosques for example. I was looking for a track to follow and looking deep down inside I felt a yearning for it until I've discovered it. There is an inner and outer beauty behind it telling a story behind every structured piece, there is no randomness when it comes to creating such pieces.

Being as young as you are and getting to where you are now, how hard was it to get there?

I've had to fight a lot of inner battles. The Prince's School was an amazing experience for me but they make you abandon all types of contemporary thinking of art and when graduating I had a tunnel vision and created extremely traditional art pieces and illuminations. I then thought to myself that I didn't want to be just another traditional artist. I tried my best to elevate that to another level and it took me a very long time to get to where I am. I slowly had to go exploring for new methods of expression through the Islamic arts. Having been in Al Athr Gallery has also helped inspire me by getting me back into that contemporary art.

Did you have a mentor guiding you through the process?

No, not really, I had much support from my teachers in my old work but the artists that are there with me in the gallery are somewhat my support system, they nurture my inspiration and give me that extra push with respect to my limits knowing that my art is different from them.

What is your take on Islamic art, how would you define it?

You need to understand that Islamic art now and Islamic art in history are very different, that was the only form known to them at the time. They were conscious about what they were doing, in geometry to be specific there is a lot of symbolism like the use of the number eight for example. It's directly with regard to an important Islamic figure. All shapes and numbers were used with the highest regard. Islamic art was more sacred and was practiced with spiritual rituals and preparedness

Tell us about your campaign to revive the traditional Islamic art in our society?

I'm incredibly surprised to see so many people interested in it. When viewing my pieces at an exhibit they are very positive especially the younger generation, they are craving to know more about what this art technique is. I found that the teachings of the technique is mainly from books and using a canvas to draw something connected to Islam or something, and this is not the real form of teaching of the trait, it's more complex than that. I found that the West cares more for it than our own society and I want to help change that.

Seeing how intricate and delicate your work is, are you a perfectionist?

Yes I am a perfectionist. I work very hard to create my pieces and not many see Islamic art as high end because they think it's too traditional and that is simply not true. I find satisfaction doing what I do and I prefer to create a piece that one can buy, hang up, appreciate its details, it's what I worked hard for.

Dana's art work is currently on display at Jeddah Arts 21,39 and were displayed at the Dubai Art Fair. You can also view her work at the Athr Gallery in Jeddah.

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