

THE MIRRORED HORIZON: ART PRACTICE AS COUNTER-RENDER IN CONTEMPORARY SAUDI ARABIA

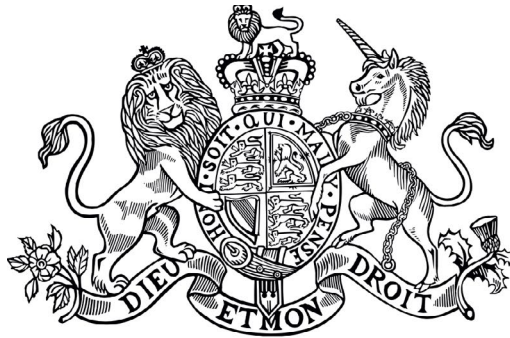
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THE MIRRORED HORIZON:



Figure 1. *Afaq Al-Mustaqbal (Horizons of the Future)*, TBA, Saudi Arabia

Note. This digital image depicts futuristic structures suspended between rugged mountains, with reflective, angular surfaces giving a metallic sheen. A bridge spans a canyon, connecting the spaces above, while expansive greenery below integrates nature with the built environment. Scattered figures provide scale, highlighting the monumental architecture. The work visualises a utopian, forward-looking urban environment. Generated from a descriptive prompt using Midjourney, 2025.

**ART PRACTICE AS COUNTER-RENDER IN
CONTEMPORARY SAUDI ARABIA**

-2 ABSTRACT

This practice-based PhD thesis examines the role of the render in contemporary Saudi Arabia, where large-scale development projects are increasingly communicated through speculative visualisations.¹ Yet what does the render do beyond representation, and how does it shape the ways in which futures are encountered before they exist? While renders are often framed within architectural discourse as tools for visualising unbuilt environments, this research argues that they operate as affective and performative devices that organise experience prior to material realisation. Rather than treating the render as a representational image, this thesis positions it as a condition through which the future is already lived.

The thesis argues that the render does not simply depict future environments but produces conditions in which the future is actively inhabited ahead of its realisation. It invites participation in futures that remain incomplete or deferred, blurring the boundary between representation and enactment. The present becomes a site of rehearsal, where the future is not only anticipated but continually performed.

At the core of this study is the concept of the re-enactment of the speculative self, which describes how individuals and communities begin to inhabit projected futures prior to their material realisation. Through this lens, the thesis asks what renders do beyond representation, how they organise belief and anticipation, and how they shape the ways in which futures are imagined before they exist.

The research adopts a practice-based methodology, positioning the author as both observer and participant within the cultural landscape under study. Artistic works, including *The Green Light*, *Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow*, and *The Mirrored Horizon*, alongside the artist-led collective *SINDBAD*, function as sites of inquiry. These projects engage performance, sound, and installation to examine how speculative images operate as forces that guide attention and orient experience, drawing bodies into alignment with futures that remain out of reach. Through this, the research establishes the render as a condition through which futures are actively lived, rather than simply forecast.

¹ Saudi Arabia, 'Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia', Vision 2030, n.d., accessed 27 April 2025, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/ar>.

-1 AKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thank you for seeing with me
not only what appears,
but what trembles beneath it.

Dr Effat Abdullah Fadag
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Professor Rut Blee Luxembourg & Professor Adrian Lahoud

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Note. This photograph depicts a person standing amidst expansive red sands and striking sandstone rock formations in the Hisma Desert, highlighting the scale and texture of the natural landscape. The NEOM Nature Reserve region is being designed to protect and restore biodiversity across 95% of NEOM. From Unsplash by Brandon Morgan, 2023, https://unsplash.com/photos/_TFgiFZyH6M. Free to use under the Unsplash License.

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Note. This image depicts the conceptual design of The Line, a planned linear city project within NEOM, Saudi Arabia, showcasing its mirrored exterior and integration with the surrounding desert landscape, as part of the Saudi Vision 2030 project aimed at economic diversification. Adapted from THE LINE: A revolution in urban living, by NEOM, n.d., <https://www.neom.com/en-us/regions/theline>. Copyright by NEOM.

01 INTRODUCTION

The render, with its hyperreal depictions of speculative developments, has taken on a central role in Saudi Arabia, directing how the nation imagines itself, and how it directs its future. Not confined to architectural blueprints or commercial promotion, these digital projections have permeated the fabric of everyday life. Under the transformative ambitions of Vision 2030¹, these images do not merely illustrate proposed developments; they set the terms for how the future is to be seen, desired, and lived.² Exploring how the render operates as a performative space where narratives of national transformation, cultural memory, and speculative futures converge. This thesis takes the render as both subject and lens.

It is approached as a space that structures perception and experience in advance of material change. It is encountered and navigated, shaping how individuals locate themselves within projected futures. In doing so, it becomes central not only to how the future is represented, but to how it is lived and understood in the present.

Within architectural discourse, the render is most commonly understood as a visual tool used to represent unbuilt environments, positioned between design and construction.³ With the rise of digital technologies, it has become central to architectural practice, often replacing the drawing as the primary medium through which projects are produced and presented.⁴ This shift has been examined within architectural theory and digital design discourse, particularly in the work of Mario Carpo, who identifies a transformation from drawing to computation in which the image becomes a primary site of architectural production.⁵ Similarly, Antoine Picon situates the render within a broader digital culture of architecture, where visualisation mediates the relationship between design, technology, and perception.⁶ Within this body of work, the render is understood as part of a wider shift toward image-based architectural production, where visual coherence, atmosphere, and realism become central to how projects are communicated and evaluated.

Within this framework, the render is frequently analysed in relation to simulation and photorealism, where its role is to construct a believable image of a future environment.⁷ It is also positioned as a persuasive device within development and financial contexts, where images are used to secure investment, approval,

1 Saudi Arabia, 'Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia', Vision 2030, n.d., accessed 27 April 2025, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/ar>.

2 Arabia, 'Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia'.

3 Mario Carpo, *The Second Digital Turn: Design beyond Intelligence*, Writing Architecture Series (The MIT Press, 2017).

4 Mario Carpo, *The Alphabet and the Algorithm: Form, Standards, and Authorship in Times of Variable Media*, with Cynthia Davidson, *Writing Architecture Ser* (MIT Press, 2011).

5 Carpo, *The Alphabet and the Algorithm*.

6 Antoine Picon, *The Materiality of Architecture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

7 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, *The Body, in Theory - Histories of Cultural Materialism* (Univ. of Michigan Press, 2019).

and public engagement.⁸ In this sense, the render operates within an economy of visualisation, where the future must first appear as an image in order to be legitimised.⁹ This condition is particularly evident in large-scale development practices, where presentations, visual decks, and rendered sequences function as instruments through which capital, policy, and imagination are aligned.

Alongside this, architectural history offers a longer trajectory of speculative image making that situates the render within traditions of radical and visionary practice.¹⁰ Projects such as Superstudio's *Continuous Monument* and Archizoom Associati's *No-Stop City*, as well as the work of Archigram and Peter Cook, demonstrate how architectural futures have long been developed through images that exceed the limits of construction.¹¹ These projects often operated through collage, drawing, and proto-rendered visualisations to propose continuous, mobile, or totalising urban systems. Within this lineage, the architectural image functions less as a plan for realisation and more as a conceptual and speculative device through which alternative spatial and social orders are explored.¹²

While these perspectives acknowledge the render's role in communication, persuasion, and speculation, they largely maintain its position as an image that represents or anticipates a future condition. Rather than approaching the render as a descriptive or anticipatory image, it is understood here as an active and operative form that participates in the production of the future at the level of perception and experience. In this research, the render is situated within a performative and experiential framework, where images are not only viewed but inhabited, shaping how futures are engaged before they materialise. The render is not only seen, but lived in advance of its realisation.

This shift becomes particularly pronounced within the context of contemporary Saudi Arabia, where renders circulate widely across exhibitions, digital platforms, and state-led communication.¹³ In this context, the render moves beyond its disciplinary role within architecture and enters a broader cultural and economic field, where it is encountered repeatedly and collectively. These images establish a shared sense of a future that is already present, shaping how it is imagined and engaged in everyday life. Through this, the render becomes a condition through which subjectivity is formed, giving rise to what is described in this thesis as the speculative self.

This research is grounded in a practice-based methodology, in which artistic production functions as both the subject and method of inquiry. The core body of work submitted for examination includes *The Green*

8 Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (Verso, 2014).

9 Guy Debord and Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Reprint (Black & Red [u.a.], 2010).

10 Peter Lang and William Menking, *Superstudio: Life without Objects* ; [Published to Coincide with the Exhibition 'Superstudio: Life Without Objects', Design Museum, London, 1 March - 8 June 2003, Pratt Manhattan Gallery, New York, 20 November - 31. December 2003], 1. ed, with Superstudio and Design Museum, *Exhibition Superstudio: Life without Objects* (Skira, 2003).

11 Anthony Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism*, *Writing Architecture* (MIT Press, 2008).

12 Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present*.

13 Arabia, 'Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia'.

Light (2022), Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow (2022), The Mirrored Horizon (2025), Moving Mountains, and a series of collective and participatory projects developed through SINDBAD, including a workshop-based project produced during the NEOM Artist-in-Residence programme. The NEOM workshop generated a set of rendered images created in collaboration with participants, each articulating a personal vision of the future through a shared visual language. These outcomes extend the investigation of the render beyond individual authorship, situating it within collective image-making and lived imagination.

Across these works, the practice spans installation, moving image, sound, performance, and participatory formats. While differing in form, they are connected through a shared inquiry into how speculative images are encountered, inhabited, and negotiated. Moving Mountains, for instance, constructs an environment in which industrial materials, symbolic forms, and staged gestures operate together, reflecting on the scale and choreography of transformation. The SINDBAD projects function as mobile and collective platforms that resist fixed exhibition structures, allowing the work to unfold across different sites and publics. Together, these works form the primary site through which the research is developed, positioning artistic practice as a mode of knowledge production through which the conditions of the render are tested, inhabited, and reworked.

Central to this inquiry lie three correlative research questions. How does the render function beyond its architectural or promotional intent, actively shaping lived experience, identity, and self-perception? In what ways do these speculative images, through their circulation, shape patterns of behaviour, influence desires, and construct modes of belonging within Saudi Arabia? What possibilities arise when artists, communities, and individuals engage with, disrupt, or re-author these projected visions? This research seeks to critically explore the render as more than a visual device but as a cultural mechanism that both mirrors and shapes socio-political conditions. The objective is to uncover how these images operate within a broader system of visibility, affect, and power, and to investigate their role in shaping a national imaginary under conditions of rapid transformation.

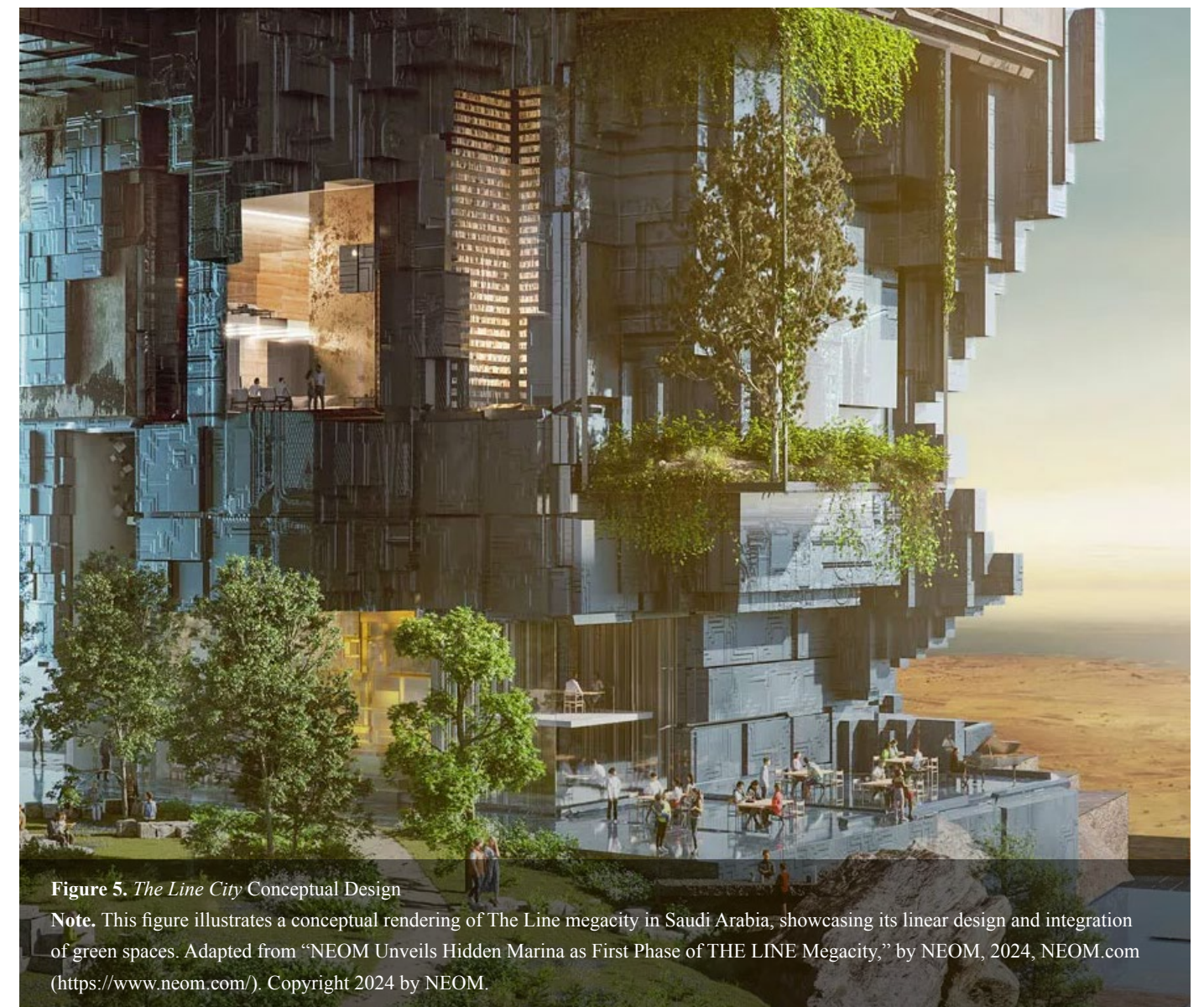
To answer these questions, this thesis draws primarily on qualitative methods. A series of in-depth interviews was conducted with artists, architects, and theorists, both within Saudi Arabia and internationally. These discussions provided important insights into how practitioners from various fields approach issues of authorship, agency, and futurity as well as speculative imagery and architectural representation. The interviews offered a nuanced understanding of how renders function as forces influencing desire, and sociopolitical imaginaries in addition to being visual artefacts. These qualitative findings are interwoven throughout the analysis, grounding the theoretical exploration in lived experience and professional practice.

These interviews do more than corroborate theory; they articulate how renders and counter-renders are inhabited at the level of design and social choreography. As Mohsin Ali notes, “*exhibitions are exercises in space-making. Curation is an exercise in space-making too,*” In parallel, Abdullah Alamoudi characterises Sindbad as “*a stepping stone*” and “*a safe space*” where process and in-betweenness legitimise becoming-an-artist against a climate of opportunity-driven visibility (see Appendix F). Taken together, these accounts position practice as a method that operationalizes counter-imaging: the render becomes a site to be used,

bent, and re-authored rather than merely viewed.

This thesis argues that the render in Saudi Arabia functions as an active participant in shaping contemporary cultural and social realities. Far from being a passive representation, the render invites a performative engagement that contributes to the formation of the speculative self, a subject continually enacted within and in response to projected images of futurity. The study contends that renders not only project visions of the future but invites their re-enactment in the present, giving rise to what I term the *re-enactment of the speculative self*, a subject continually performed within and in response to projected images of futurity.

Vision 2030, a national plan driving rapid transformation through giga-projects, globally curated narratives, and the reconfiguration of social and economic structures, provides the backdrop for this research. Emerging at a pivotal moment in Saudi Arabia’s socio-cultural landscape, the render becomes a key player in shaping perceptions of progress, identity, and belonging.¹⁴ It foregrounds urgent questions about visibility,



14 Middle East Briefing, ‘Saudi Arabia’s NEOM: Understanding the Visionary Project’, Middle East Briefing, 27 February 2025, <https://www.middleeastbriefing.com/news/neom-understanding-saudi-arabias-visionary-project/>.

who appears, whose voices are amplified or marginalised, and how collective futures are envisioned and contested in an era defined by state-driven spectacle. As Adrian Lahoud has argued in *The Rights of Future Generations*, speculation is not merely a design tool but a moral and political responsibility.¹⁵ To imagine futures is to also decide who has the right to inhabit them, and under what conditions. This framing grounds my own inquiry into Saudi Arabia's renders: not as neutral visualisations of progress, but as instruments that pre-emptively distribute visibility, value, and belonging.

The thesis unfolds across four chapters, each building upon the last to trace the relationship between authorship and agency. Examined in the first chapter is the renders historical development, visual language, and political function in Saudi Arabia. As the primary case study, SINDBAD¹⁶ collective is examined in the second chapter along with its history, methods, and role in challenging prevailing institutional structures in the context of cultural change. The third chapter positions my practice within a wider feminist genealogy, grounding my work as a female artist navigating and responding to the shifts in visibility, authorship, and autonomy under national transformation. The main points are brought together in the final chapter, which positions my practice-based approaches as a critique of and a counter to prevailing visions of speculative futures. The chapters, when read together, argue for speculation as a lived and embodied mode of engagement, rather than a static image of futurity.

The case study of SINDBAD, a collective that works with Saudi Arabia's changing cultural landscape through community-driven exhibitions, participatory methodologies, and site-specific interventions, is at the centre of this project. SINDBAD collective questions the way institutions work by creating ephemeral, mobile, and collaborative ways of working, focusing on regional stories and grassroots dialogue. Alongside this case study, three key artworks are examined as critical sites of analysis. *Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow* is a performative installation that draws on sound, light, embodied presence, and oral traditions to surface collective memory. *The Green Light* investigates power, control, and collective choreography through an immersive interplay of light and sound. Along with a collaborative workshop which was held in NEOM in November 2024, that brought together residents and employees to create visual alternatives to the megaproject's official approach, challenging the rigid style of giga-projects and opening up possible futures.

In this study, Abdelwahab Elmessiri's concept of "dual vision" serves as a key framework for examining the render as a symbol of hope and a means of erasure, as a creation that foreshadows futures while obscuring lived realities.¹⁷ Ibn 'Arabī's ideas of wujūd, kashf, and barzakh are used to show that speculation is not a set plan, but an unfolding between presence, unveiling, and the space in between.¹⁸ In addition to these

15 Rights of Future Generations: Sharjah Architecture Triennial 2019. Volume 1: Conditions / Adrian Lahoud (Editor), Andrea Bagnato (Coeditor), ed. Adrian Lahoud and Andrea Bagnato, Sharjah Architecture Triennial, Berlin (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2020).

16 'SINDBAD', accessed 5 May 2025, <https://sindbadart.com/>.

17 Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri, ed., *Bias: Epistemological Bias in the Physical and Social Sciences* (International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2006).

18 Ibn-al-'Arabī and William C. Chittick, *The Meccan Revelations. 1: The Meccan Revelations / in Collaboration with William C. Chittick*, Rev. ed., repr. (Pir Press, 2005).

theoretical viewpoints, the artistic endeavours of Ahmed Mater, especially *Desert of Pharan*,¹⁹ and the writings of Edward Said on representation ground the analysis in discussions concerning authorship, power, and image creation.²⁰ Ruba Al-Sweel's explanation of the "*Continental Vibe*" adds more context to how speculative atmospheres move through the Gulf as both promise and pressure.²¹

As such, practice-based and collective approaches are positioned as counter-rendering approaches that emphasise improvisation and vulnerability in situations where singularity and coherence are required. Rather than reproducing the speculative self scripted by the state, these practices reclaim re-enactment as an open-ended method, one that tests, unsettles, and reformulates identity in the present. The result is a perspective that views speculation as a contested and embodied process in which lived experience and collective authorship are crucial instruments for reimagining multiple and grounded futures.

When I first began my practice, I was drawn to the tension between state-driven images of the future and the everyday realities that surrounded me, between the polished renders of giga-projects and the lived textures of Saudi cities and neighbourhoods. These contradictions served as the foundation for my work and influenced the inquiries I pose in this study. By challenging the render's place in these dynamics, this thesis contributes to conversations in critical theory, visual culture, and contemporary art. Presenting the render as a cultural force that genuinely affects how futures are imagined and realised, the research also emphasises the potential of art as a site of negotiation and alternative world-making by placing artistic practice within this critical discourse. My engagement with the render is deeply informed by my own artistic interventions, community engagements, and personal experience within the Saudi cultural landscape.

In this thesis, I take a stance that is both part of and critical of the speculative visions that are prevalent in Saudi Arabia today. This dual perspective reflects my entanglement with these images, as subject, agent, and practitioner, situated within the very visual economies I seek to interrogate. Such a position emphasises a methodological dedication to reflexivity, recognising the interdependence of participation, creation, and critique in the study of modern visual culture. Actively seeking further insights, I also conducted interviews with select thinkers and practitioners, including writer and theorist Ahmad Makia and architect Johannes Hoffmann. These exchanges provided valuable viewpoints that challenged the creation and dissemination, of the speculative images produced by the country. This allows the research to critically examine the render and its impact on shared futures and agency. It looks at how speculative imagery influences not just the physical surroundings but also the conceptual frameworks that people and communities use to envision themselves in a world that is changing quickly.

19 Ahmed Mater, *Desert of Pharan: Unofficial Histories behind the Mass Expansion of Mecca*, ed. Catherine David (Lars Müller Publishers, 2016).

20 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 25. anniversary edition with a new preface by the author (Vintage Books Edition, 2014).

21 Ruba Al-Sweel, 'Babylonian Neo-Mustaqbal: Continental Vibe and the Metaverse', *TripleAmpersand Journal*, 30 July 2022, <https://tripleampersand.org/babylonian-neo-mustaqbal-continental-vibe-metaverse/>.



Figure 6. *The Vault* concept in NEOM's Trojena Development.

Note. This conceptual rendering depicts "The Vault," a proposed futuristic folded-vertical village within the Trojena region of NEOM, Saudi Arabia. It illustrates the innovative design and integration of advanced technology and nature envisioned for this unique mountain destination. NEOM.com (<https://www.neom.com/>). Copyright 2023 by NEOM.

02 THE RENDER

In Saudi Arabia, the render has become one of the most prominent visual tools shaping the national imagination. As the Kingdom undergoes rapid transformation under the directives of Vision 2030²² rendered images, hyperreal digital projections of cities yet to be built, have emerged not only as planning instruments but as powerful ideological devices.²³ These visualisations populate the urban landscape: from billboards on highways to screens in airports, to the hoardings surrounding construction sites. They are not confined to the realm of architecture or design; they have entered the social imaginary, becoming part of daily life.²⁴

But who are these renders for, and who creates them? Commissioned by state bodies and private developers, often in collaboration with international design firms such as Foster + Partners (*Coral Bloom, Red Sea Project*)²⁵, Ateliers Jean Nouvel (*Sharaan Resort, AIUla*)²⁶, and Morphosis Architects (*The Line, NEOM*)²⁷, the renderings are carefully calibrated visions meant to project modernity, sustainability, innovation, and global relevance²⁸. They serve as visual arguments, marketing an imaginary future that resonates with the Vision 2030 aspirations, a future of economic diversification, cultural renaissance, and technological advancement. These visions hit precise thematic target points: green areas, high-tech buildings, empowered citizens, integrated infrastructure, and global connectivity. Their aesthetic appeal is crucial, but so is their alignment with a broader national narrative.

This reliance on rendered imagery marks a significant shift in Saudi Arabia’s broader historical relationship with visual culture. Not long ago, public representations of the human form, especially images of bodies, were subject to strict regulation.²⁹ Images of women in public displays were commonly blurred or excised, and the spread of images generally was greeted with suspicion, commonly viewed as incompatible with cultural ideology.³⁰ During that time, there was a social preoccupation with modesty and restraint, where visibility was tightly controlled, and the image was more a source of possible moral harm than a vehicle of communication.³¹

22 Arabia, ‘Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’.
23 Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (Verso, 2014).
24 Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 1st MIT Press ed (MIT Press, 1987).
25 ‘Coral Bloom’, accessed 6 May 2025, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/explore/projects/coral-bloom>.
26 ‘Royal Commission For AIUla, SHARAAN RESORT’, accessed 6 May 2025, <https://classic.rcu.gov.sa/en/fact-sheets/sharaan-resort/>.
27 ‘THE LINE: A Revolution in Urban Living’, accessed 6 May 2025, <https://www.neom.com/en-us/regions/theline>.
28 Rowan Moore, ‘From a 100-Mile City to a Desert Ski Resort: Why Is Saudi Arabia Spending Billions on Architectural “Gigaprojects”?’’, *The Guardian*, 3 December 2023.
29 Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge Middle East Studies 43 (Cambridge University Press, 2013).
30 Jamal J. Elias, *Aisha’s Cushion: Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam* (Harvard University Press, 2012).
31 Pascal Ménoret, *Joyriding in Riyadh: Oil, Urbanism, and Road Revolt*, 3rd printing, Cambridge Middle East Studies 45 (Melbourne, 2016).

In this context, and long before the widespread presence of images, Saudi culture was, and remains deeply rooted in oral traditions.³² Oral histories were not a replacement for visual media; they were the norm. Poetry, storytelling, and recitation shaped how history was remembered, how values were transmitted, and how public life was experienced.³³ Poetry contests, tribal verse, and hymns to religion lay at the core of social life and mental culture, a vigorous and vibrant oral tradition passed on from generation to generation. Word was the agent of memory, protest, celebration, and identity.³⁴ In this context, the recent turn toward visual culture, where images dominate public space, policy, and perception, is not only a technological or aesthetic shift, but a profound reconfiguration of how narratives are shaped and shared in the Kingdom today.

Under Vision 2030, images perform a key role in the nation’s agenda, utilised within every sector from tourism and leisure to foreign investment and city planning. This shift is not just about aesthetics, but also about perception management.³⁵ The image is now a technology of persuasion, used to reshape internal narratives and challenge global stereotypes. Within the country, this visual turn is helping to reconfigure how Saudis see themselves and their place in the world and creating space for a new kind of national self-image. Internationally, it becomes a way to recast Saudi Arabia in the global imaginary: modern, open, dynamic.

The render, then, operates at this intersection of past and future, modesty and visibility, conservatism and spectacle. It is a site where historical anxieties around representation meet the ambitions of a projected future, and where image-making becomes a tool not only for planning but for transformation.

Yet beyond the glossy façade lies a more complex terrain. The render is an invitation but also a prescription; it tells us not only what the future will look like but how we should desire, behave, and belong within it.³⁶ What is omitted becomes just as significant as what is shown.³⁷ Who gets to be in the picture? What histories are erased in the smooth surfaces of imagined cities? And is the image itself, however seductive, enough to hold the weight of transformation?

This is where the critical potential of the render emerges, not just as a finished vision, but as a speculative site.³⁸ It allows us to ask: what lies beyond the frame? What happens when the imagined city meets the lived one? In the following text, we turn to the render not as a fixed representation but as a performative space,

32 Saad Abdullah Sowayan, *The Arabian oral historical narrative: an ethnographic and linguistic analysis*, *Semitica viva* 6 (Harrassowitz, 1992).
33 Saad Abdullah Sowayan, *Nabati Poetry: The Oral Poetry of Arabia = al-Shi’r al-Nabaṭī* (University of California Press, 1985).
34 Mai Yamani, *Changed Identities: The Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia*, 1. publ, with Royal Institute of International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs, Middle East Programme [u.a.], 2000).
35 Melissa Aronczyk, *Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity* (Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2013).
36 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, *The Body, in Theory - Histories of Cultural Materialism* (Univ. of Michigan Press, 2019).
37 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Duke University Press, 2011).
38 A. M. Simone and Edgar Pieterse, *New Urban Worlds: Inhabiting Dissonant Times* (Polity press, 2017).



Figure 7. *NEOM Worker Housing Developments*, Saudi Arabia

Note. This photograph shows several developments constructed to house NEOM workers, illustrating the scale, density, and planning of the residential areas supporting Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 mega-projects. Adapted from Several developments have been built to house NEOM workers by Dezeen, 2024, <https://www.dezeen.com/2024/02/08/aerial-photos-the-line-megacity/>. Copyright 2024 by Dezeen.

one that reflects, haunts, and reshapes us in return.

02.1 RE-ENACTMENT OF THE SPECULATIVE SELF

We³⁹ are looking at a render, something that does not yet exist, a ghost of potentiality. In this act, we are mirroring it, engaging in a speculative re-enactment of the self. As Derrida might suggest, we are haunted by a presence that is not present, navigating what he called hauntology, a temporality where the future and past collapse into the spectral now⁴⁰. Through this projection, We re-present ourselves, not as fixed identities but as fluid constructs, echoing Judith Butler’s idea of performativity, where the self is constituted through repeated acts.⁴¹ In engaging with the render, we do not passively consume it; we inhabit it, shaping and being shaped by its imaginary architecture. We win the guidelines that have been presented to us, not by following them blindly, but by bending them, re-authoring them. Like Haraway’s cyborg, we exist in the in-between, half-coded, half-imagined, always becoming.⁴²

This gesture of speculative becoming echoes with the work of Ibn Arabi, who wrote of the self as a mirror that reflects the divine, never still, always changing through states of presence (wujūd) and unveiling (kashf).⁴³ In this framework, the self is not a fixed ontology but a process, one that unfolds through vision, imagination, and revelation. The render becomes an act of Barzakh (البرزخ)⁴⁴, an in-between space that is

39 The use of “we” throughout this text refers not to a singular, fixed identity, but to a collective subject shaped by the render. It encapsulates all those who are situated within its gaze, those living on the ground and those encountering the image digitally, whether as citizens, residents, visitors, or virtual spectators. “We” refers to everyone projected upon by these speculative visualisations, everyone whose sense of place, identity, and future is influenced by the aesthetic, ideological, and affective power of the render. It is a shared condition of being addressed by a reality that does not yet exist, but nonetheless, its image shapes perception, aspiration, and belonging. In Arabic, the word “نحن” (nahnu) is traditionally understood as the plural form of “we,” used to represent a collective or group of people. However, its usage is much more fluid, particularly in literary, philosophical, or even poetic contexts. The concept of “نحن” can blur the boundaries between the individual and the collective, allowing it to function as both an expression of “I” and “us.” In certain contexts, “نحن” can serve as a symbol of solidarity, where the speaker might be invoking not only their own experience or perspective but also the collective or shared experience of a group, community, or nation. This duality is especially prominent in works that explore themes of identity and belonging, where the individual is intertwined with the collective, and the two are inseparable.

40 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (Taylor and Francis, 2012).

41 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 2006).

42 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge, 2013).

43 Ibn al-‘Arabī and R. W. J. Austin, *The Bezels of Wisdom, The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Paulist Press, 1980).

44 In Islamic metaphysical thought, Barzakh refers to the intermediary realm or state that exists between life and the afterlife, a space of separation where souls dwell after death but before the Day of Judgment. This concept of Barzakh embodies a liminal space, one that exists between two realities and is characterised by ambiguity, suspension, and transformation. When relating Barzakh to the notion of the render, it is possible to view the render as a kind of virtual Barzakh, a realm between the present reality and the speculative future. The render, much like Barzakh, is not fully tangible or realised; it exists in a state of suspension, offering an idealised vision of the future that is both present and absent. It is a space where the physical and the virtual intersect, where the future is proposed but not yet materialised. Just as the Barzakh is a passage awaiting the eventual revelation of what lies beyond, the render is a passage that offers us a glimpse into what might come, a speculative vision of what is possible, but ultimately existing in an ambiguous, provisional state.

neither real nor unreal, a site of transformation.⁴⁵ Similarly, Abdelwahab Elmessiri’s critique of modernity and his theory of dual vision invites us to see beyond the surface of the image, reminding us that to look at a ghost is also to be looked at by it, to negotiate both inherited structures and future imaginaries.⁴⁶ We do not render the self alone. We render through a collective grammar, ancestral, speculative, and futuristic. We re-enact fragments of Andalusian poetics,⁴⁷ Abbasid metaphysics,⁴⁸ and contemporary Gulf futurisms, assembling a vocabulary that refuses linear time.⁴⁹ The guidelines we inherit are not constraints, but scripts we can recompose. As Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri argued in his work on the Arab reason, the process of critique is not about destruction but reconstruction, about opening inherited forms to new life, new performance.⁵⁰

Ayman Yossri echoes this suspension-based philosophy when he says: “*I don’t want the things that I make to remain. And I don’t want them to die. I want them hanging in an eternal process between life and death. Do you see, is that dangerous?*” (see Appendix G). Ibn Arabi’s idea of the self as ever-changing is reflected in his rejection of permanence, and it resonates with the render as Barzakh: a threshold where forms are maintained between destruction and renewal.

In dealing with such layered genealogies of thought, the act of rendering is no longer merely visual or digital, but ontological, an unfolding of the self through inherited forms and speculative trajectories. This interplay of past and future, of structure and transformation, opens a space where the ghost, the spectral trace of what was and what might be, takes on new significance. It is through this grammar of becoming, informed by metaphysical, philosophical, and cultural lineages, that the ghost ceases to be an absence and emerges instead as an active interlocutor in the process of world-building.

So we mirror the ghost not to become it, but to move with it. To negotiate the space between what is and what could be. Between memory and imagination. Between the self and the render of the self. The ghost becomes our companion, not a remnant of loss, but a pulse that moves through timelines, a channel between knowing and dreaming. It is a presence that refuses to be fully present, a kind of haunting that is as much about the future as it is about the past.

This haunting, then, is not static; it shimmers, flickers, and circulates. It becomes atmospheric, embedded

45 William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (State University of New York Press, 1989).

46 Elmessiri, *Bias*.

47 Wessam Elmeligi, ed., *The Poetry of Arab Women from the Pre-Islamic Age to Andalusia*, First issued in paperback, Focus on Global Gender and Sexuality (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020).

48 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (State university of New York press, 2006).

49 Roberto Fabbri, *Urban Modernity in the Contemporary Gulf: Obsolescence and Opportunities*, ed. Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi (Taylor & Francis, 2022).

50 Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Ġābirī, *The Formation of Arab Reason: Text, Tradition and the Construction of Modernity in the Arab World*, First edition, Contemporary Arab Scholarship in the Social Sciences (I.B. Tauris, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755610617>.



Figure 8. NEOM Stadium Rendering for Saudi Arabia's 2034 FIFA World Cup Bid.

Note. From "The Saudi Arabia FIFA World Cup 2034 Bid Book" (p. 108), by Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF), 2024, FIFA. Copyright 2024 by Saudi Arabian Football Federation.



Figure 9. NEOM Stadium, interior rendering.

Note. From NEOM Stadium project overview, by NEOM Company, 2024 (<https://www.neom.com>). Copyright 2024 by NEOM Company.

not only in architecture and image but in mood, anticipation, and affect. The ghost does not only reside in what is built or rendered, but in what is felt before arrival, in the ungraspable energies that precede material form. In this sense, the ghost finds kinship with the affective and ambient registers described in Ruba Al-Sweel’s articulation of the “Continental Vibe,” a pre-material moodscape, a kind of collective dreaming that emerges before the tangible manifestations of futurity take shape.⁵¹ As Al-Sweel notes, the vibe is not simply decorative or passive, but a recursive system, one that anticipates, performs, and enacts the future in advance of its arrival (see Appendix E). Both the ghost and the vibe operate through a sensory logic, forming speculative infrastructures of feeling that trace the soft architecture of becoming.

The “Continental Vibe,” a term capturing the ephemeral aesthetics and moods preceding tangible futurisms in the Gulf, functions as a feedback loop. It is generated by us and simultaneously generates us, operating much like algorithmic platforms that shape desire through repetition and aesthetic cues. Al-Sweel describes it as an “ineffable node of incoherent forces” that coalesce under the experience economy to create value, subtly shifting the ‘vibe’ in imperceptible ways.⁵² The “Continental Vibe” is characterised by elements like yellow ambient light, steel-glass facades, and a strong sense of detachment from history, a persistent present that feels like a live digital render. This environment is similar to the speculative self-rendering that has been proposed, in which the self is constantly reconstructed through and within these artificial settings, influenced by participation in prevailing moods rather than by a fixed identity.

Additionally, the render is a conceptual stillbirth that captures the promise and disappointment of futuristic projects, the “Continental Vibe” that both lives and dies there.⁵³ However, as Al-Sweel notes, the fear of the vibe, its unnerving ability to alter reality, is what really indicates its strength. Similar to the ghost, it operates in loops, feedback, and echo chambers and is not constrained by time or tangible evidence. This idea is in line with the notion that the self is a speculative construct that is constantly changing and influenced by the environments it lives in.

In this context, the metaverse represents the pinnacle of the “Continental Vibe,” providing a setting in which speculative identities can be rended, inhabited, and reconstructed.⁵⁴ It makes us think about not only how convincing it looks, but also where deception happens, which leads to bigger questions about digital reality and how we form our identities. As Al-Sweel suggests, we are no longer operating within linear time; we are participating in a mode of speculation where desire, image, and identity circulate continuously. But while the Continental Vibe dissolves into its own flatness, the re-enactment of the speculative self pushes further. It does not stop at the render, it moves through it. We are not merely consuming the image, we are inhabiting it, reenacting it. And in doing so, we generate something else entirely: a performance of belief.

We⁵⁵ believe in the render so deeply that it becomes real. We mirror the dream until it materialises, until it

51 Al-Sweel, ‘Babylonian Neo-Mustaqbal: Continental Vibe and the Metaverse’.

52 Al-Sweel, ‘Babylonian Neo-Mustaqbal: Continental Vibe and the Metaverse’.

53 Al-Sweel, ‘Babylonian Neo-Mustaqbal: Continental Vibe and the Metaverse’.

54 Al-Sweel, ‘Babylonian Neo-Mustaqbal: Continental Vibe and the Metaverse’.

55 The use of “we” in this paragraph operates ambiguously, it can be read as an “I,” a singular voice navigating a shared

Figure 10. *Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow* (2022), Ahaad Alamoudi. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Note. This performative installation explores themes of communication, presence, and absence through two pigeon towers, integrated light and sound, and live Majes performers.



reshapes us. The image is enough, it is the dream, the vision, the mirage. But what lies beyond the screen or the print for us is not a reality in opposition to illusion; it is re-enactment, a process through which the speculative gains form, weight, and consequence. It is in the repetition, the embodiment, the staging of the unreal, that something new is made.⁵⁶

Where the Continental Vibe collapses into aesthetic residue, the re-enactment of the speculative self insists on continuity, on moving through the ghost-image and animating it. We are not only looking at the render; we are re-performing it into being. The re-enactment becomes a practice of world-making, a refusal to accept the render as a final destination. It is not just what we see, it is what we do with what we see that carries us beyond it.

02.2 A HAUNTING

This insistence on doing, on engaging the render through acts of embodied speculation, finds material and performative form in my work, *Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow*. If the re-enactment of the speculative self is a means of re-authoring the future, then the work becomes that gesture, where the imagined is given spatial and sonic presence. The render, once a detached projection, is now reconfigured as a living environment, felt, inhabited, and shaped through sensory participation. What emerges is a shift from viewing to inhabiting, from future-as-image to future-as-encounter. The ghost ceases to be a distant abstraction and becomes embedded in the architecture of now.

Noor Riyadh commissioned *Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow* in 2022 as part of the festival’s goal to use public art and light to transform the city of Riyadh. One of the biggest yearly festivals of light in the world, Noor Riyadh was founded in 2021 and brings together Saudi and international artists to produce large installations throughout the capital’s public spaces.⁵⁷ The two-week-long festival seeks to not only bring life to Riyadh’s urban fabric but also establish the city as a global centre for contemporary light art by integrating artworks into everyday settings.⁵⁸ For me, the invitation to create this work in Wadi Hanifa, a site layered with ecological and historical significance, was an opportunity to engage with memory and transmission. I used two traditional mudbrick pigeon towers as the core of the installation. The work was activated through sound, light, and the presence of Majes⁵⁹ performers, drawing from local materials and oral traditions to create a space where messages could be echoed and reimagined. Through this piece, I wanted to explore how light could function not only as a visual element but as a mode of communication, illuminating what is often left unspoken, and giving form to what lingers in between.

condition, or as a collective subjectivity shaped by the image. This “we” mirrors what the render itself hopes to perform: a gathering of individuals into a unified perspective, an imagined consensus. It is not just descriptive, but speculative, offering a “we” that the image seeks to produce, persuade, and perform into being.

⁵⁶ Butler, Gender Trouble.

⁵⁷ ‘Noor Riyadh’, *Riyadh Art*, n.d., accessed 4 September 2025, <https://riyadhart.sa/en/noor-riyadh/>.

⁵⁸ David Norman Rodowick, *Noor Riyadh: A New Visual Culture* (Assouline, 2024).

⁵⁹ الأربعاء- جدة, ‘بهجة الأفراح.. وطرب الليالي الملاح «المجس»’, جريدة المدينة, 3 يراوناJ 8102 sptth, www.anidam-la.wwa/163555/elc/الأربعاء/بهجة-الأفراح-وطرب-الليالي-الملاحالمجس.

In *Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow*, the ghost is not a figure, but a condition. It is embedded in architecture, voice, sand, and light. The work stages a living dialogue with temporality: pigeons as carriers of memory and message; light as a revealer of the unseen; and Almajes⁶⁰ as an ephemeral technology of oral transmission. Within my practice, I have consistently returned to Majes as a medium through which to foreground the significance of oral histories within my community. Historically, Majes served as a vital mode of disseminating information, news, emotional reflections, and communal updates. This information would usually be sung around the city to get as much attention as possible.⁶¹ Much like contemporary digital platforms that rely on video and short-form content to capture attention, Majes operated as a tool for communication, but it did so in physical space, in real time. It demanded presence. It was heard, absorbed, and then echoed through families and across communities. Majes is positioned as both a traditional art form and a profound social technology because of its ability to combine the poetic with the political and the aesthetic with the informational. This ability continues to influence my approach to performative narratives.



Figure 11. *Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow* (2022), Ahaad Alamoudi – On-Site Render. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

⁶⁰ **Al majes** is a traditional form of popular singing that originates from the Hijaz and Tihama regions of Saudi Arabia, flourishing in cities such as Mecca, Medina, Jeddah, and Taif. It is considered a form of *mawwāl*, a style of Arabic vocal improvisation, and is distinguished by its nuanced transitions between musical *maqamat* (modes). A typical Majes performance begins in one mode, traverses others, and ultimately returns to the original, demanding from the performer a sophisticated command of musical theory, rhythm, and vocal modulation.

The performer, known as the **Jassīs**, traditionally dons regional attire, including a turban (‘*imma*), robe (*thawb*), vest (*sudai-ri*), shawl, and often carries a symbolic cane. Majes is commonly performed during social and religious celebrations such as weddings, community gatherings, and to welcome pilgrims. Etymologically, the term “Majes” is thought to derive from the Arabic verb *jassa* (جس), meaning “to touch” or “probe,” a reference to the performer’s ability to navigate and explore melodic possibilities with emotional and technical sensitivity. More than a musical form, Majes functions as a dynamic mode of oral storytelling and cultural preservation, embodying collective memory and communal expression.

⁶¹ مجلس مكّي حجازي للعريس إنشاد ملك المجسات السيد عبدالرحمن مؤذن بأحد مسلسلات التلفزيون ارشيف الباحث عصام جنيدي, Directed by موسيقى, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_jSb-Senuk, 02:06, 2019, العرب,



Figure 12. *Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow* (2022), Ahaad Alamoudi. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The work itself emerged from a process of tests. It became a site-specific installation once I learned that the work would be situated in Wadi Hanifa. Initially, the proposal envisioned stained-glass staircases, but the valley itself called for a different response, one that would feel rooted in its material and architectural histories. This led to the development of mudbrick pigeon towers, constructed with red sand from Al-Jalajil city, the only area in the kingdom where such red sand is found. The material’s deep hue resonated with the surrounding landscape and amplified the warm orange beams of light that animated the piece. Working closely with the architect Mohammed Salahi, the towers were adapted with larger circular openings so that Majes performers could sing from within and the lighting could flow through. Guided by the desire for the towers to appear as though they had always belonged to the valley, not as imported objects but as structures grown from place.

The towers were constructed by using traditional mudbrick techniques, and during the two-week festival, they were even inhabited by pigeons, blurring the line between artwork and living architecture. Each night, the event unfolded as a combination of planned sequences and unscripted encounters, moments when the wind lifted sand into the beams of light, or when the performers left the towers to speak directly with the audience.

Though the towers were demolished after the festival ended, their presence lingers as spectral forms, ghosts of the landscape themselves. The work’s ephemerality, its refusal to remain permanent, is inseparable from its meaning: a reminder that memory and community endure even when structures do not.

The terms “light” and “darkness” become metaphors for personal and collective perception. As in the chant “Ah Yammal,” which belongs to the world of pearl divers and holds polysemic meanings, light and darkness are not static symbols, but affective thresholds.⁶² “Ah Yammal” can mean anything; it is a space holder, a breath, a hope. Like the render, it is a speculative utterance. It maps the emotional topography of risk and survival. And just as the Nahham’s voice would lead others into synchrony, the Majes performers in *Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow* use voice to activate architecture and light⁶³. The installation is governed not by technology, but by breath, by presence. The structure lives only when the voice calls it into being. Each structure lights up only when its performer begins to sing.

The conceptual framework for the text was written by me, but the Qasidah itself was written by the poet Am Talal, who adapted the idea for the Majes performers. It needed to be composed in a way that allowed the Majes singers to embody it vocally, with a cadence and repetition that would sustain the call-and-response structure of the performance. The performers shifted throughout the course of the two-week installation, though the main voices were Faisal Labban and his brother Bassam Labban, both experienced Majes performers from the region.

The Qasidah stages a dialogue between light and darkness, each claiming power, each arguing for it’s

62 Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates: A Society in Transition* (Motive, 2005).

63 John Gordon Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, 'Omān, and Central Arabia* (Gregg, 19).

necessity. As the force that gives the universe life, light presents itself as brightness, vibrancy, and energy. In response, darkness asserts its serenity, profundity, and crucial function in equilibrium. Although it starts off as a dispute, the interaction ultimately turns out to be a negotiation in which both light and darkness acknowledge that they cannot live without one another.

The poem is not improvised; its rehearsed, but its delivery through the Majes Maqqam opens it to variation.⁶⁴ In performance, singers might elongate a line, adjust rhythm, or fold in popular songs to sustain the dialogue. Indeed, in several iterations, the performers shifted seamlessly from the main text into a well-known love songs, at which point light and darkness began singing together. There was a fluidity which blurred the distinctions between poetry, song, and improvisation. The result was a performance that was at once authored and collective: written by Am Talal, guided by my conceptual framing, but ultimately carried and transformed by Faisal, Bassam, and the other Majes singers whose voices animated the towers.

Figure 13. *Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow* (2022), Ahaad Alamoudi. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.



64 Peter Thoegersen, *Maqam Melodies: Pitches, Patterns, and Developments of Music in the Middle East and Other Micro-tonal Writings*, First edition (Jenny Stanford Publishing, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781003492856>.

LIGHT:

I am the Day, the spirit of life itself.
O Night, I steer the ship of joy.
I am the breath that sustains all beings,
the spirit and sweet fragrance
for every soul beneath the sky.
I am the dawn, the shimmer of existence.
When I exhale, the universe adorns itself.
My sun rises, pouring out soul and light,
a brilliance that crowns the world.

DARKNESS:

Hush, O Day. Leave behind your vanity.
You do not know the weight of my calm,
the stillness of my repose.
Within my darkness, the universe finds rest,
no clamour, only silence.
Ask my long nights.

LIGHT:

Do not silence me.
My presence shapes existence;
I am the helmsman of creation.
My virtues are countless, acknowledged by all life
ask humankind, ask the spirits.
O Night, you babble endlessly.
Do you not know your place in this universe?
Your gloomy hue is despised,
your words are nothing but falsehood and slander.

DARKNESS:

Boast if you will, yet all testify for me.
I am rest, in every state.
No noise, no chaos, no idle play.
Ask the stars, ask my galaxies.
One day you shall know what my darkness holds,
its gifts, its truths, its hidden tales.
I am silence.
All creation bears witness: the awe of the cosmos
flows in every direction of me.

يقول النهار

انا النهار انا روح الحياة انا
يا أيها الليل للأفراح ربان
انا المعاش لكل الكائنات انا
لكل من في الدنا روح و ريحان
أنا النهار أنا الاشرار من سمتي
اذا تنفست فالأكوان تزدان
شمسي تطل علي الاكوان تمنحها
روحا و ضوء السنا للكون عنوان

يقول الليل

صه يا نهار و دع عنك الغرور فما
تدري معاني هدوئي و استكانتاي
ففي سوادي هدوء الكون مجتمعا
من دوها صخب و اسأل لييلات

يقول النهار

لا تسكتني ففضلي في الوجود له
تأثيره و أنا في الكون ربان
و لي خصال حميدات تقر بها
كل الحياة و سل إنس و سل جان
يا ليل يا ليل أكثرت الهراء فهل
تدري بأنك في ذا الكون سبحان
فلونك المكفهر الكل يمقته
و كل ما قلته زور و بهتان

يقول الليل

مهما تفاخرت ان الكل يشهد لي
بأنني راحة في كل حالاتي
فليس بي صخب كلا و لا عبث
سل النجوم و سل عني مجراتي
يوما ستدري ظلامي ما فوائده
و سوف تدري بحق ما حكاياتي
انا السكوت و كل الكون يشهد لي
و هيبة الكون في كل اتجاهاتي

Figure 14. *Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow* (2022), Ahaad Alamoudi. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Positioned in Wadi Hanifa, a valley dense with historical, mythical, and environmental memory, the piece becomes inseparable from its site. The valley, once a defensive terrain and later a dumping ground, is now a landscape of restoration.⁶⁵ Like the towers, it too is a ghost of its former self, animated again through intervention and intention. And yet, this restoration coexists with displacement. The Saudi national narrative is increasingly future-facing, driven by vision and rendered in high fidelity.⁶⁶ Vision 2030, through the render, proposes a new image of the country, one that often overwrites the slower, more intimate textures of everyday life. In this sense, the render is a haunting of its own: a dream so convincing it becomes reality, collapsing the distinction between belief and being.

Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow resists this collapse by refusing to fix time. It stages re-enactment, not of the past alone, but of future mythologies. It asks what it means to communicate when both the sender and receiver are spectral. The towers speak to one another across a valley once used to watch, defend, and signal. But here, the signal is soft. It is carried in song, in silence, in the wind. There is a moment in each performance when the sand is lifted by air, and the light cuts more clearly through the dust. It is unscripted, uncured, difficult to photograph, and yet deeply felt. That is the moment where the ghost lives.

The structure is not an object, but a vessel: for memory, for dream, for encounter. It is both ancient and futuristic, a technology of transmission that uses tradition not as nostalgia, but as a mode of imagining otherwise. The 10th-century Arab philosopher Al-Farabi, in his writings on the imagination, describes the soul's ability to perceive images beyond the material, linking light to knowledge and presence.⁶⁷ In this piece, light becomes voice, darkness becomes memory, and architecture acts as the body. As the performers come down from the towers to talk to the audience, the performance changes from an installation to a conversation, from a chant to a love song, and from a show to shared time. The work no longer ends in performance. It extends into the social. The *Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow* are not banished. They are invited in and allowed to speak.

02.3 THE ... MAN

This unfolding foregrounds a mode of participation that is neither fixed nor didactic. Instead, it invites a relational reading, one where meaning is co-authored through presence, proximity, and repetition. The piece becomes a site of negotiation, not only between performer and audience, but also between memory and environment, tradition and improvisation. In this way, it reflects a broader shift in how public art and cultural expression in Saudi Arabia are responding to new forms of sociality and visibility.⁶⁸ Rather than operating

⁶⁵ Moriyama and Teshima Planners, Wadi Hanifa Restoration Project (Riyadh Development Authority, 2009).

⁶⁶ Steffen Hertog, 'State and Private Sector in the Saudi National Transformation Plan', *Journal of Arabian Studies* 6, no. 2 (2016): 249–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2016.1225816>.

⁶⁷ Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman, eds, *Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources* (Hackett Pub. Company, 2007).

⁶⁸ Rebecca Anne Proctor and Alia Al-Senussi, *Art in Saudi Arabia: A New Creative Economy?*, Hot Topics in the Art World (Lund Humphries in association with Sotheby's Institute of Art, 2023).

solely as symbolic representations, these gestures become living frameworks, spaces through which identities are rehearsed, shared, and made legible.

This dialogic approach echoes larger ideological structures taking shape across the Kingdom under the umbrella of Vision 2030.⁶⁹ While the performance engages with the immediacy of encounter, the national vision employs the image as projection: forward-facing, streamlined, and cohesive. Here, a tension is felt between the adaptive, fluid nature of situated cultural practice and state-futurity's aesthetic ambitions. This flux between intention and interpretation, between projection and lived encounter, marks a crucial intersection between contemporary cultural practice and the image-politics of the state. The performance's evolving nature, shaped by audience, time, light, and sound, mirrors the unpredictable life of the image once it enters the social field. Though originally conceived as a fixed projection of vision, the image, much like the performance, becomes plural in meaning, open to reinterpretation, shaped by context, and refracted through individual and collective efforts.



Figure 15. *The Green Light* (2022), Ahaad Alamoudi. Video installation, 4K video, sound, color, 00:05:40.

Note. The work uses light as both a medium and a conceptual tool, investigating perception and the ways in which environments can be activated and reshaped.

⁶⁹ Ministry of Culture, *Our Cultural Vision for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (Ministry of Culture, 2019), https://www.moc.gov.sa/-/media/Files/MOC_Cultural_Vision_EN_NEW.pdf.



Figure 16. *The Green Light* (2022), Ahaad Alamoudi. Video installation, 4K video, sound, color, 00:05:40.

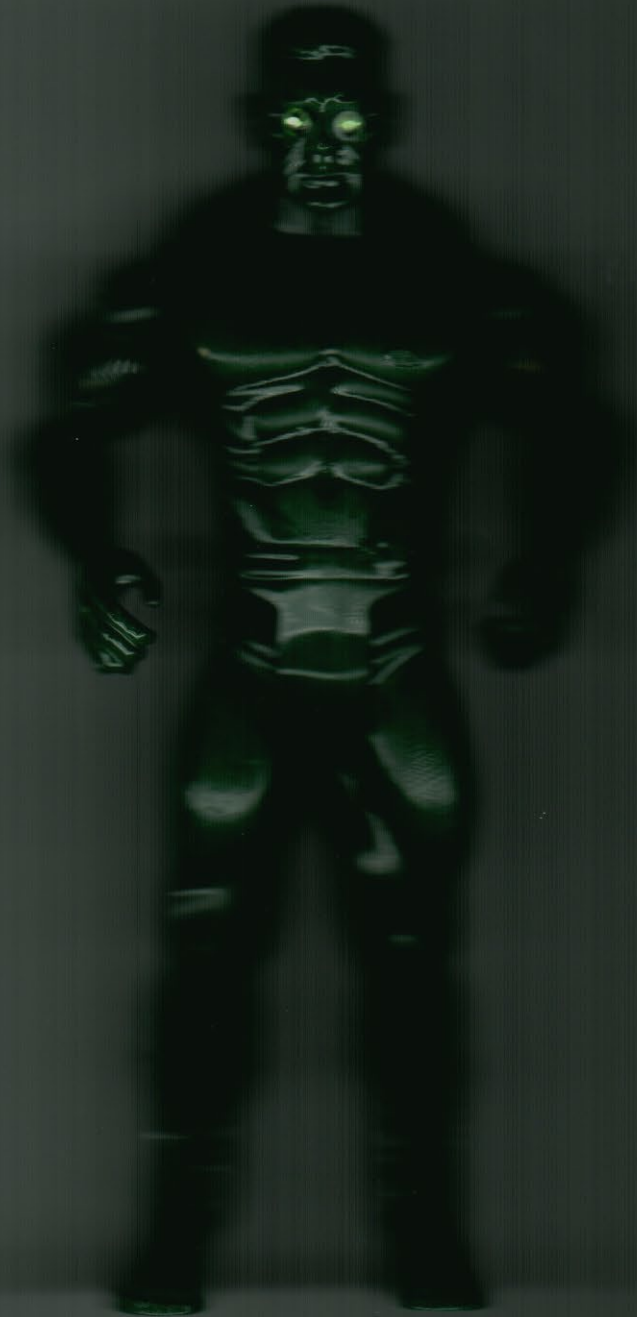
ORIGINAL SONG LYRICS: *Don't trouble the delicate one* - Mohammed Abu

No, no... don't trouble the delicate one, don't disturb him...
No, no... let him reap the fruits of his life in peace.
No, no... it's cruel to upset him after he's finally found contentment.
No, no... look into his eyes, his weeping has destroyed them.
No, no... I cherish him, even if the whole world sees no worth in him.
No, no... in the world of my love, he's the only meaning it ever had.
No, no... you don't understand love, you really don't.
No, no... it lives above your reach, God has shielded it from you.
No, no... and if I am already deprived, don't you deprive him too.
No, no... let Najd's gentle breeze scatter its poetry for him.
No, no... I come and go, guided by a single glance from his eyes.
No, no... and when my world darkens, his light overwhelms it.
No, no... the heart won't listen, even if you scold it.
No, no... the soul is captured by the gleam of his gaze.
No, no... this is my hope, please, don't take it away.
No, no... for him, even sweet sleep has abandoned my eyes

ADAPTED SONG LYRIC - Ahaad Alamoudi

No no don't leave us
We were always with you
No no don't leave us
Even if we were never with you

Figure 17. *The Green Light* (2022), Ahaad Alamoudi. Video installation, 4K video, sound, color, 00:05:40.



The deconstruction of the sound and its relationship to light is where the real power of the video installation, *The Green Light*, lies. The familiar melody, once defined, is fragmented and reconstructed, each shift in rhythm disrupting its origin and unsettling the viewer’s expectations. The rhythmic interplay of light and sound intensifies the themes of transformation and control, as the men chant a reinterpreted version of Mohammed Abdu’s iconic Arabic love song لا تضايقون الترف (Don’t Bother the Love)⁷⁰. The original lyrics, written by poet Almishtaq, ask listeners to leave lovers undisturbed. However, in *The Green Light*, these lyrics undergo a profound reimagining: “No, no, don’t leave us, we were always with you, no no don’t leave us, even if we were never with you.” This transformation, coupled with the removal of original instrumentation, preserves the song’s emotional essence while shifting its meaning to reflect new social contexts. Sometimes, the performers engage in melodic unity, drawing the audience into a moment of shared emotional resonance, only to disrupt this harmony with screams or laughter, challenging the passivity of the viewer. The disruption is itself an emblem of the uncertainty of meaning, since in the process of reinterpretation, the witness is forced to reassess what is being witnessed. The ever-changing character of light’s darkness and illumination is a mirror of the struggles of a society in transition, a society where visibility and silence, revelation and hiding are perpetually in transition. And so, *The Green Light* becomes a location in which the performance is enacted as well as critiqued, and left up to the spectator to wrestle with the uncertain nature of meaning and the continual flux of power.

The Green Light itself turns into an orchestrating force that determines who speaks and when, triggering presence and silencing it. In this sense, the piece reflects the tradition of Arabist visual rhetoric, where the image of the ideal Arab man was cast in symmetry, discipline, and strength, a figure staged repeatedly in nationalist iconography as the guardian of modernity and unity. That aesthetic, while powerful, also fixed the male subject in a singular role, one defined by visibility, voice, and control.

As Ahmad Makia explains, much of what remains of Arabism today exists less as a coherent political project and more as what he describes as a “spectral, fragmented presence ... remembered and reactivated primarily through aesthetic gestures” (Interview with Ahmad Makia, see Appendix B). For Makia, Arabism lingers as “an unresolved attempt to reconcile a fractured or silenced history ... something collective that was interrupted.” Rather than offering a living political framework, it survives “primarily as an aesthetic memory ... appropriated by state apparatuses and woven into new regional identities that emphasise science, entrepreneurship, and innovation.”

This re-appropriation is particularly visible in Gulf contexts. Makia notes that the region often “positions itself as a refuge from regional instability, while simultaneously branding itself as the future of the Arab world.” Yet this positioning relies on surfaces and atmospheres that are polished and globalised, producing what he elsewhere calls “a kind of worlding ... an attempt to construct one’s world visually and emotionally through design choices, materials, textures, and atmospheres that evoke familiarity and uniformity.” In this sense, *The Green Light* stages not just the remnants of Arabist iconography but also their mutation into the aestheticised futures of Vision 2030.

⁷⁰ Mohammed Abdu, (*La Tudaayqoun Al-Taraf / Don’t Bother the Love*), Rotana, 2005.

Importantly, Makia stresses that these afterlives of Arabism often appear “not as a ghost of a single entity but more like a glitch, an echo dispersed across digital networks, scattered and refracted into various fragments.” This idea of the glitch resonates with the unstable temporality of *The Green Light*, where the men’s voices emerge only when triggered, harmonising briefly before fragmenting again into silence. The installation mirrors what Makia describes as a contemporary condition: “images no longer simply represent the world, they participate in its flux ... even still images today feel like they’re in motion; they carry a sense of steeping, leaking, vibrating.”

This aestheticisation also shapes how solidarity is imagined and enacted. Makia argues that “the absence of real solidarity among Arab states is stark ... what we’re left with is rhetoric without praxis.” Yet he also observes that “what remains of that Arabist impulse, particularly around the Palestinian cause, has begun to globalise ... practices once rooted in pan-Arab solidarity are now being enacted by non-Arab communities across the world.” This displacement of solidarity from the region to global networks echoes the way *The Green Light* displaces the authoritative voice of Arabist masculinity into a fractured, contingent, and globally legible performance.

In this sense, the work confronts the remnants of past visual regimes rather than simply referencing them. It stages the persistent disciplining of presence, both human and national, as an aesthetic choreography still at work, no longer in service of collective Arab unity but in the performance of futurity. The men in the installation embody this paradox: disciplined, visible, orchestrated, yet unsettled. They stand as heirs not only to the legacy of nationalist image-making but also to its spectral, fractured, and glitch-like reappearance in the speculative image economies of today.

02.4 LANDSCAPES IN FLUX

What unfolds beyond the stage is not separate from it. The speculative render, once confined to screens and architectural proposals, has begun to materialise, shaping not only identity but geography itself.⁷¹ The future, visualised with such precision, begins to dictate the terms of the present. In this moment, the render is not just something we look at; it is something we move toward. Its aesthetics influence policy, determine value, and author landscapes.⁷² The striving toward the image, the dream, the projection, has consequences not only for the re-enactment of the speculative self, but for the very ground we stand on. We are witnessing a re-scripting of space, a recalibration of access. What does it mean to exist within a landscape in flux?

Saudi Arabia is perhaps the most visible stage for this transformation, currently one of the largest construction sites in the world.⁷³ Projects like NEOM, signal not only the scale of ambition but the

⁷¹ Gökçe Günel, *Spaceship in the Desert: Energy, Climate Change, and Urban Design in Abu Dhabi*, Experimental Futures (Duke University press, 2019).

⁷² Todd Reisz, *Showpiece City: How Architecture Made Dubai* (Stanford University Press, 2020).

⁷³ Oliver Wainwright, ‘Saudi Arabia’s Gigaprojects: Fantasy on an Epic Scale’, *The Guardian*, 3 December 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/dec/03/saudi-arabia-gigaprojects-mohammed-bin-salman-the-line>.

reordering of terrain itself.⁷⁴ Earth is carved, moved and flattened. Infrastructures are laid over memories. This is not unprecedented: we’ve seen similar phenomena across the Khaleej and in China, where rapid expansion has rewritten the rhythms of daily life.⁷⁵ But here, the pace is uniquely accelerated, and the symbolism runs deep. Access once denied to women, to stadiums, to decision-making tables, is now extended, but often within carefully choreographed frames.⁷⁶ The image promises change, and in some ways delivers it. But the cost of that promise is measured in more than cement and steel; it is also measured in erasure, in the unmaking of what once was.

Change is the only constant.
To destroy is to build.
To build is to destroy.
There must be a rise for there to be a fall.
A fall.
A fall. Falling into the future.
Constantly rising. Rising to fall.
Falling right into the future.
Where are we in this trajectory?
A looped existence.
Looped beings.
Falling and rising.
Rising and falling.
Falling in and falling out.
Falling out only to fall right back in.
If all we have is this rise, then we must also claim the fall.

This poem was written by me for Moving Mountains, my solo show at Hayy Jameel, Jeddah, in 2024. The exhibition examined cycles of transformation and resilience, utilising the metaphors of falling and rising as both individual and collective conditions.⁷⁷

To move mountains is a phrase often uttered with hope, imbued with faith in transformation, in the beauty of doing the impossible. But in this moment, the metaphor grows heavy. Saudi Arabia is quite literally moving mountains. Not just metaphorically, but also physically. Bulldozers carve into landscapes; cities are being redefined, restructured, and reimaged to accommodate a future that has already been rendered.⁷⁸

74 ‘NEOM: Made to Change’, accessed 28 April 2025, <https://www.neom.com/en-us>.
75 Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China’s Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (University of California Press, 2007).
76 Maha Akeel and Beata Polok, ‘Vision 2030 Has Done Wonders for Women. But There’s Still Room to Enhance Their Economic Roles in Saudi Arabia’, *Atlantic Council*, n.d., <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/vision-2030-women-economy-saudi-arabia/>.
77 ‘Ahaad Alamoudi: Moving Mountains’, *Hayy Jameel*, n.d., accessed 4 September 2025, <https://hayyjameel.org/whats-on/ahaad-alamoudi-moving-mountains/>.
78 Matthew Martin, ‘Saudi Arabia’s NEOM Futuristic City Will Cost \$500 Billion’, *Bloomberg*, 29 October 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-29/saudi-arabia-s-neom-futuristic-city-will-cost-500-billion>.

Neighbourhoods and mountains, previously thought to be fixed or divine, are now subject to evaluation. Their fate hinges on whether they serve a function in this new future. Those who do not are cleared. It is no longer memory or history that determines what remains, but utility.⁷⁹ The transformation is ongoing, often disorienting. Growing up amid perpetual construction teaches you to adapt to the temporary. It creates a visual and physical language of impermanence. Roadblocks command new directions. Maps expire. And in this climate of constant revision, the ability to preserve the past becomes more fragile.

Cultural events emerge alongside this destruction, massive festivals, state-sponsored celebrations, amplified moments of collective joy. MDLBEAST⁸⁰, The Red Sea Film Festival⁸¹, and The Saudi Cup⁸² are all instances where spectacle intersects with strategy. A new cultural identity is being formed in real-time, as beats and basslines rise against a backdrop of dust and demolition. These events act as both a distraction and a declaration, showing what the future could feel like, even as it is built upon a disappearing present.

Amidst the orchestrated spectacles of reform, there are acts of redevelopment that happen mostly offstage. The same rhythms that infuse festivals and celebrations veil further undercurrents of disruption. Spectacle, in this context, operates as a form of temporal smoothing: it accelerates the sense of progress, creates pockets of collective euphoria, and attempts to make rupture feel like a renaissance. Yet beneath the amplified joy lies a complicated terrain, where the costs of transformation are unevenly distributed. As new images of the future circulate in glossy campaigns and international showcases, the material erasure of existing communities proceeds with less fanfare. The very sites of cultural production, landscapes, neighbourhoods, and city squares often become contested ground for improvement. Jeddah, the kingdom’s main port on the Red Sea and gateway to Mecca, is home to more than four million people. Historically a cultural crossroads, its social fabric, architecture, and economy have long reflected the movement of people and ideas from around the world. Today, the city is undergoing one of the most ambitious redevelopment programs in Saudi Arabia: a \$20 billion initiative that exposes the frictions of rapid transformation. Evictions, sharply rising rents, and forced displacement reveal that not all change is equally experienced. For some, redevelopment brings opportunity. For others, it brings loss: families evicted with minimal notice, neighbourhoods flattened, communities dissolved. A mountain takes millions of years to rise. It can fall in an afternoon.

This is the backdrop against which my work *Moving Mountains* emerges. A living, breathing response to the rhythms of upheaval. The piece questions what it means to be part of this transformation. It asks viewers to consider their place within these cycles, of building and erasure, of visibility and silence.

The interactive installation is activated only through gestures of care. Children playing parachute games. Laughter echoes across a landscape in flux. These are the movements that initiate the work. Each group’s engagement becomes a new configuration, a new shape, endlessly forming and reforming the mountain.

79 ‘Saudi Third Expansion Project Increases Grand Mosque Capacity’, accessed 4 September 2025, <https://spa.gov.sa/>.
80 ‘MDLBEAST | Home of Soundstorm, XP & Music in the Middle East’, accessed 28 April 2025, <https://mdlbeast.com/>.
81 ‘Red Sea Film – Red Sea Film Festival’, accessed 28 April 2025, <https://redseafilmfest.com/en/>.
82 ‘Jockey Club of Saudi Arabia’, accessed 28 April 2025, <https://jcsa.sa/en/>.



Figure 18. *Moving Mountains* (2024), Ahaad Alamoudi. 4K video, sound, color, 00:14:45.

Note. This installation investigates collective power and transformation through participatory structures and performative interventions. The work engages audiences in rethinking spatial hierarchies and collaborative agency, exploring how shared actions can enact social change.



Figure 19. *Moving Mountains* (2024), Ahaad Alamoudi. 4K video, sound, color, 00:14:45.

In its gentle absurdity, *Moving Mountains* seeks to recapture something fleeting: joy, community, friction, presence. If all we are offered is the narrative of the rise, then let us also remember to honour the fall, not as failure, but as part of the cycle. A return. A reckoning. A claim to the ground beneath our feet.

This cycle of demolition and reconstruction, of curated futures layered over erased pasts, is not new, yet it is unfolding now at a scale that demands documentation, reflection, and critique. In *Desert of Pharan: Unofficial Histories Behind the Mass Expansion of Mecca*, artist and physician Ahmed Mater captures the transformation of Mecca, offering a visual and conceptual archive of a city undergoing relentless change⁸³. Through photography, essays, and collected artefacts, the work unpacks the logics of development that displace history under the guise of progress. Mater does not depict Mecca as a singular spiritual space, but as a hyperreal terrain of cranes, dust, and luxury towers. In doing so, he makes visible the violent contradictions embedded within expansion, between sacredness and spectacle, memory and market.

His work resonates with the questions underpinning *Moving Mountains*. What defines a city, a mountain, a landscape, when its historical and ecological meanings are stripped in favour of speculative futures? Who decides what is preserved, and what is cleared? Mater’s project reveals the temporality of infrastructure, the way it disrupts and dictates life cycles, faith rituals, and memory work⁸⁴. In these shifting terrains, the ground is no longer reliable. Skylines can be built to erase the horizon. The render becomes not only a blueprint for the future, but a mechanism of forgetting.

Within this shifting terrain, the re-enactment of the speculative self unfolds not only on the level of identity but also in spatial and communal rituals. In Mecca, where construction and demolition are occurring together, citizens are expressing their belonging and faith in ways that are harmonious with the city’s projected image.⁸⁵ The speculative self must now orient itself around the render, not just imagining the future, but living in response to its outlines. Pilgrims navigate scaffolding; workers build amidst holy dust; citizens adjust their lives to the logic of detours and redevelopment. This is not simply adaptation; it is a performance of futurity, where the everyday becomes an act of compliance or resistance to what has been visually promised. In this way, Mecca becomes a site where the speculative self is constantly rehearsed, between devotion and disruption, memory and displacement. The self, like the city, becomes an unfinished construction, always in flux, never quite arriving.

Mater’s emphasis on “unofficial histories” offers a powerful counterpoint to the glossy, top-down narratives of progress that often accompany national transformation. His work foregrounds the lived, fragile, and often displaced realities of those affected by Mecca’s mass expansion, realities that resist being absorbed into the state’s visual rhetoric. This intersects directly with my research around the re-enactment of the speculative self: a self that is not only formed through what is promised, but also through what is excluded, erased, or rendered obsolete. The speculative self does not emerge solely from the projected future; it emerges in negotiation with the absences embedded within that projection. Mater’s archive of fragments, ruins, and

83 Mater, *Desert of Pharan*.

84 Mater, *Desert of Pharan*.

85 Muhammad Kadhim, *Redevelopment of Informal Areas and the Urban Identity of the Holy City of Makkah*, n.d.

daily labour gestures toward an identity shaped not by visibility alone, but by the struggle to remain legible within a rapidly shifting symbolic order.⁸⁶



Through his photographic methodology, Mater constructs what might be called a visual ethnography of a city in flux. Like the render, his work is composed, framed, and staged, but it resists resolution. The city is not portrayed as a coherent whole, but as a layered document of memory, rubble, and speculative ambition. In this way, his work parallels my own interest in landscapes in flux, not simply as sites of development, but as contested terrains where meaning is continually constructed and deconstructed. Just as *The Green Light* stages control through illumination, Mater reveals how the urban environment becomes a stage upon which control and spiritual spectacle are performed together.

This critique of spectacle leads us to one of the most key aspects of Mater’s project: the transformation of the sacred into the spectacular. Mecca, once defined by a sense of spiritual intimacy and scale, is now surrounded by cranes and luxury developments.⁸⁷ Here, the render becomes invasive. Its logic invades the sacred and restructures it to fit the aesthetic conditions of global capital. This mirrors the questions I ask

86 Mater, *Desert of Pharan*.

87 ‘How Mecca Is the Lynchpin for Saudi Arabia’s Hospitality and Tourism Drive | AP News’, accessed 28 April 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/hajj-hospitality-mecca-construction-ce3c894d6f464aa70069be1a20f8ef5e>.

in my own practice: What happens when the speculative becomes real? What happens when we not only consume the render, but begin to live within it? In both cases, the image no longer serves as a reference; it becomes the terrain itself. And in that shift, memory, tradition, and presence risk being dissolved into simulation.



Figure 21. Individuals sitting on the clock face of The Clock Towers, Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

Note. Source and copyright information for this image could not be determined. The image is widely circulated online without clear attribution. This act blurs the lines between reality and the unreal: the tower, while monumental and previously only imaginable through images, has taken on a tangible presence as real people engage with it in ways no one imagined. The scene is playful, making the structure feel more attainable and accessible. In this moment, these individuals claimed the structure in their own way, bending the scale of monumental architecture.

02.5 SMILE

This transformation of the sacred into the spectacular is not isolated. It forms part of a broader regional condition, one where spectacle, affect, and the language of futurity converge to create a new kind of subject. Across a spectrum of platforms, corporate events, cultural programs, and visual campaigns, an ideology of curated optimism emerges, not as a spontaneous sentiment, but as a structured imperative. This curated optimism is not merely aesthetic; it is systemic. It moves through policy, marketing, architecture, and personal development seminars. The vocabulary of happiness, borrowed from Silicon Valley's start-up culture and infused with corporate self-help logic, has become the lingua franca of a region redefining itself through mega-projects and master plans.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Shumon Basar et al., *The Age of Earthquakes: A Guide to the Extreme Present*, 1. publ (Penguin Books, 2015).

But how does one manufacture a psychological infrastructure for an entire population? What are the implications of applying affective strategies, originally developed to regulate individual behaviour, to the bodies of millions? In the Gulf, the language of positivity is not just internalised; it is externalised, spatialised, rendered into glass, steel, and slogan. Skyscrapers rise with names like “Joy Tower” and “Hope City”.⁸⁹ Smart apps measure your steps, sleep, and smiles. In these spaces, sadness is inefficient. Doubt is unproductive. Pause is not permitted.

“An aspirational lifestyle has emerged in the Gulf in recent years, one based on tenets of positivity, efficiency and productivity, manifested in an aggressively optimistic mindset. Its proponents circulate on social media, TV and YouTube, while a Silicon Valley inspired start-up culture has infiltrated small businesses, governments and corporations. Positivity and productivity are now the markers of success and there are considerable top-down efforts to mold members of society into happy, efficient, productive subjects. But how do you instigate this cultural change for so many people? What are the implications of applying the same strategies meant for individual positivity and “improvement” to the mechanisms of a whole population? How is the notion of optimism reconciled with aspects of Arab culture that are traditionally rooted in an aesthetics of sadness? And to what degree has the belief in positivity become a popular phenomenon?”

Presented as part of my first solo exhibition, *Heat Burns* (2019), the text above was written by Amale Khalaf, who also curated the show.

Yet, the contradictions linger. As a society, we are always welcoming, communal, and accustomed to a cultural ethos of generosity and positivity. However, this surface of warmth often coexists with a deeper emotional terrain, one marked by melancholy. Arab aesthetics have long made room for longing, sorrow, and loss: from elegiac poetry and exile laments to the mournful modalities of traditional music and the silences of oral narrative⁹⁰. These cultural expressions are not contradictions of joy, but complements, and they argue that to feel deeply is in itself a state of presence. Today, the performative optimism that dominates much of the Gulf's public discourse overlays these deeper emotional histories with a veneer of uninterrupted progress. The result is a speculative state of emotional dissonance: a society encouraged to smile at the horizon, even as its past is buried and its present is calibrated for acceleration.

This tension is explored in the work of Sophia Al-Maria, whose concept of “Gulf Futurism” addresses the emotional, architectural, and spiritual consequences of accelerated progress in the Gulf.⁹¹ Al-Maria exposes the cracks beneath the mirror-glass surfaces, revealing how the future, as rendered in the Gulf, often comes at the expense of both memory and feeling.⁹² In her video works and texts, we encounter protagonists numbed by artificial light, overwhelmed by malls, suspended in spaces where identity is fractured by

⁸⁹ Basar et al., *The Age of Earthquakes*.

⁹⁰ Lara Harb, *Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁹¹ Sophia Al-Maria and Fatima Al Qadiri, ‘The Desert of the Unreal’, *Dazed Digital*, 2012, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/15040/1/the-desert-of-the-unreal>.

⁹² Sophia Al-Maria, *The Girl Who Fell to Earth: A Memoir* (Harper Perennial, 2012).

both excess and erasure.⁹³ For Al-Maria, the relentless drive toward optimism is not empowerment; it is alienation.⁹⁴

Her practice insists that we pay attention to what is repressed in these future-making rituals: the ghosts of discontent, the buried landscapes, the silenced emotions. In this sense, the speculative self she envisions is not aspirational; it is exhausted. It reenacts the future because it has no space left to dwell in the present. The constant push toward the “next” becomes a form of entrapment. And yet, within her work, there is also a form of resistance: the act of pausing, mourning, remembering.⁹⁵



Figure 22. *The Future Was Desert (Part I & II)* (2016), Sophia Al-Maria. Single-channel HD video (5 min 17 sec); edition of 3 + 1 AP. Copyright, Sophia Al-Maria.

This becomes especially pronounced in her video installation *The Future Was Desert (Part I & II)*.⁹⁶ Set against a sprawling montage of desert landscapes, archival footage, and sci-fi ephemera, the work visualises a future in which the mirage of Gulf futurity has evaporated, leaving behind an arid, post-human terrain.⁹⁷ Drawing on J.G. Ballard’s notion of the desert as a site free from time, Al-Maria imagines a world after the fall of oil, after the spectacle has run its course⁹⁸. The lavish architecture, relentless construction, and curatorial optimism that once defined the region are gone, replaced by a speculative aftermath that is neither utopia nor dystopia, but something stranger: a world where the speculative self is no longer rehearsing a future, but wandering through its ruins. In this work, Al-Maria dissects the aesthetics of acceleration and

93 Sophia Al-Maria, *Black Friday*, 2016.

94 Al-Maria, *Black Friday*.

95 Sophia Al-Maria, *Sad Sack: Collected Writing*, Second edition, 2024, with Tiffany Malakooti (Book Works, 2024).

96 Sophia Al-Maria, *The Future Was Desert (Part I & II)*, 2016.

97 Al-Maria, *The Future Was Desert (Part I & II)*.

98 J. G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (Fourth Estate, 2014).

exposes their endpoint, a landscape stripped of illusion, where silence, solitude, and reflection return.⁹⁹ It is here, in the quiet wreckage of progress, that the speculative self begins to sense time again, not as a trajectory, but as a haunting. The render dissolves, and something closer to presence begins to emerge.

Yet this vision of the desert as a site “free from time”, as J.G. Ballard framed it in works like *The Atrocity Exhibition*, invites continuation¹⁰⁰. Ballard’s theory of the desert as a post-civilisational space, unbound by the linear rhythms of historical time, resonates with the ways in which the desert has long served as a space of imagination and rupture.¹⁰¹ But the desert is not only a place where time is suspended, but it is also where all time converges. It is both a threshold and a repository. As Sophia Al-Maria gestures toward the desert, it holds memory not as a monument but as residue: grains of sand are fragments of history, fossilised time compressed into a shifting terrain.¹⁰² The desert contains ancient routes, buried cities, lost oases, and mythic stories passed on through generations. In this way, the desert becomes a zone of layered temporalities, at once futuristic and ancient, haunted and generative. Rather than opposing Ballard’s vision, artists like Al-Maria expand it, re-inscribing the desert with cultural density and historical presence, while maintaining its enigmatic openness to what lies ahead.¹⁰³

This temporal richness sets the stage for NEOM, a city that claims to rise from the desert like a rendered prophecy.¹⁰⁴ The transition from desert-as-archive to desert-as-construction site marks a radical transformation of spatial and temporal thinking: from sedimented pasts to pre-visualised futures. The desert no longer merely holds time; it is scripted by it.

NEOM, the planned cross-border city in the northwestern region of Saudi Arabia, presents perhaps the most ambitious and visually saturated example of the render-as-reality paradigm¹⁰⁵. Along the Red Sea coast, bordered by Egypt and Jordan, NEOM’s location is not an accident; it is the place where regional commerce, mythos, and geo-futuristic aspiration meet. The renders that dominate NEOM’s promotional materials are not merely sketches; they are immersive visions of a changing future.¹⁰⁶ The entire project operates through the logic of the render: aspirational images precede infrastructure, shaping public perception before the ground is even broken.¹⁰⁷ This temporal inversion reflects what Jean Baudrillard described as a simulation:

99 Al-Maria, *The Future Was Desert (Part I & II)*.

100 J. G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (Fourth Estate, 2023).

101 Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*.

102 ‘Sophia Al-Maria, The Future Was Desert I and II - Events’, E-Flux, accessed 4 May 2025, <https://www.e-flux.com/events/228187/sophia-al-maria-nbsp-the-future-was-desert-i-and-ii/>.

103 Al-Maria, *The Future Was Desert (Part I & II)*.

104 ‘About NEOM: Pioneering the Future of Livability and Business’, accessed 4 May 2025, <https://www.neom.com/en-us/about>.

105 ‘See Inside The Line in Saudi Arabia | Architectural Digest | Architectural Digest’, accessed 4 May 2025, <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/saudi-arabia-unveils-the-worlds-most-futuristic-city-plan>.

106 Beatrice Nolan, ‘Take a Closer Look at the Plans for the Main Regions of Neom, Saudi’s Epic Megacity Project’, Business Insider, accessed 4 May 2025, <https://www.businessinsider.com/neom-saudi-arabia-desert-megacity-plans-look-pictures-2024-4>.

107 Nolan, ‘Take a Closer Look at the Plans for the Main Regions of Neom, Saudi’s Epic Megacity Project’.

Figure 23. Render created during the workshop *What Does the Future Look Like for You?* (2024), NEOM, Saudi Arabia.
Image generated by Tamara Kalo.



A borderless world where people are free to move around, where life is sacred both human and more-than-human, a beautiful scenic landscape by the sea with mountains in the background, a mix of modern buildings and ancient structures, plants thriving, animals in the sea and land, people walking around, sitting and swimming, birds flying, the sun is shining, clouds are passing.

- Written by Tamara Kalo for the workshop at NEOM

not a copy of the real, but a reality that comes to exist because of the image.¹⁰⁸ In this way, the render becomes generative. It does not wait to be built; it builds.

Yet on the ground, where construction is just beginning, the contrast is surreal. I experienced this first-hand during my time at the inaugural NEOM Artist Residency (2024), when I stood amid a desert of red earth and silence, surrounded by engineers and specialists all speaking about structures that did not yet exist. Sustainability, vertical cities, mirrored facades, flying taxis, each idea more utopian than the last.¹⁰⁹ And yet, what existed at the time was not a city, but a massive excavation, and an exposed foundation waiting to be filled. The pressure was palpable: something monumental had to rise from this void by 2030. With Saudi Arabia having been awarded the 2034 FIFA World Cup, and the planned 40,000-seat stadium at Trojena under NEOM as a focal point of that goal, the rendering had become mandatory.¹¹⁰ The timeline was no longer speculative; it was scheduled.

It was this in-betweenness, in its moments of becoming, that felt most alive. NEOM was not a city; it was a mood board, a prompt, a shared hallucination. And that made it fertile ground for speculation, not the kind sold in brochures, but the kind that emerges in the quiet before something becomes something else. If the structures had already existed, it would have been far less interesting. What made NEOM compelling was precisely its emptiness, its capacity to become whatever the people on site imagined it to be. In response, I developed a workshop titled *What Does the Future Look Like for You?*, that invited people working in NEOM to write and think about their own visions of the future. Many of the people who came were workers or contributors to the project’s development. Their texts, poems, and thoughts were then entered into MidJourney through a prompt I designed to mirror the visual language of NEOM’s official renders. The result was a book of collective dreams, a counter-render authored by those building the city. In this act of imagining otherwise, NEOM was momentarily reactivated, not as a fixed utopia, but as a speculative proposition anchored in the present. As Rut Blees Luxemburg reminds us, utopia need not be a distant horizon; it can emerge in acts of perception, in art that gathers, interrupts, and illuminates what is overlooked.¹¹¹ The discarded, the informal, and the unplanned, often present on construction sites and at the margins, can become unexpected conduits to new visions of community and place.

For many, it was the first time they had been asked to articulate their vision. The renders they had been working toward were not theirs; they were national, institutional, imagined elsewhere. This workshop was not about challenging those renders directly; it was about entering them differently. Bringing the future closer, not as a fixed horizon, but as a porous possibility. In this sense, NEOM became more than a project; it became a mirror, a test site, a field of re-enactments. Everyone was working toward an image, but the image, as always, was also working on them. However, it is in the interaction between official spectacle and overlooked residue that new, situated visions of the future can be found. As Luxemburg suggests, images

108 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.
109 ‘About NEOM: Pioneering the Future of Livability and Business’.
110 ‘Saudi Arabia FIFA World Cup 2034™’, accessed 4 May 2025, <https://saudi2034.com.sa/>.
111 Les Rencontres d’Arles, ‘Rut Blees Luxemburg’, accessed 5 September 2025, <http://www.rencontres-arles.com/en/expositions/view/659/rut-blees-luxemburg>.

can be inhabited not only through what they show, but through what they withhold. Presence can be implied, not declared. Utopia, then, might not lie in completion, but in the traces, delays, and interruptions that allow other imaginaries to take root.

“Hyper-realistic CGI textures with HDR quality, intricate details, and subtle color grading. Rendered using Unreal Engine 5, LuxCoreRender, ProRender, RenderMan, OctaneRender, and Corona Render for maximum depth and realism, with MSAA 4x and RTX ray tracing for sharpness. White background contrasts the natural setting, 8K resolution, hyper-realistic and richly detailed with a high-end cinematic atmosphere. Hyper-realistic CGI textures with HDR quality, intricate details, and subtle color grading. Rendered using Unreal Engine 5, LuxCoreRender, ProRender, RenderMan, OctaneRender, and Corona Render for maximum depth and realism, with MSAA 4x and RTX ray tracing for sharpness. White background contrasts the natural setting, 8K resolution, hyper-realistic and richly detailed with a high-end cinematic atmosphere.”

Prompt that I created and that was entered with each text into MidJourney to create the selected images.

This tension, between image and infrastructure, between speculation and materiality, is eloquently captured in Douglas Murphy’s *The Architecture of Failure*.¹¹² Murphy writes about how grand architectural visions come to be not out of need, but out of a desire to project stability, ambition, and control. These visions, he argues, are frequently doomed by their detachment from lived experience, becoming monuments to their own aspirations. NEOM, in this light, risks becoming what Murphy calls a “symbol of redemption through design”, a space where utopian renderings promise to solve deeply systemic problems, but instead manifest as spectacle.¹¹³

In Murphy’s terms, the architectural render becomes a substitute for engagement. The future is not debated, it is visualised. It is not experienced, it is previewed.¹¹⁴ In this context, my experience in NEOM felt suspended between participation and performance. The artists, designers, and planners were not just imagining a city; they were rehearsing its image. The gap between the render and the concrete became the very condition of the work. And yet, within that gap, something else emerged: possibility. Not the possibility promised in brochures, but the possibility of asking different questions. Of re-rendering the future from the ground up.

As Edward Said reminds us, the idea of “emptiness” is often a colonial fiction: a justification for occupation or erasure.¹¹⁵ The desert in this light is not barren, but overdetermined, a place where all time exists at once. In *Desert of Pharan*, Ahmed Mater similarly positions the desert, and Mecca in particular, as a site where modernity collides with spiritual and historical sediment.¹¹⁶ These landscapes are not silent; they are overwhelmed by intersecting temporalities, vibrating with the contradictions between tradition and

112 Douglas Murphy, *The Architecture of Failure* (zero books, 2012).
113 Murphy, *The Architecture of Failure*.
114 Murphy, *The Architecture of Failure*.
115 Said, *Orientalism*.
116 Mater, *Desert of Pharan*.



Figure 24. *Khour Al Nour (Harbour of Light)*. TBA, Saudi Arabia (2024)

Note. This digital image depicts a futuristic urban waterfront where a large geometric overhang dominates a wide turquoise canal lined with greenery and structures. The brutalist architecture, featuring a modular, grid-like ceiling, casts angular shadows across the space, while the canal hosts a mix of luxury yachts and small watercraft, emphasizing leisure and affluence. Lush gardens and trees frame both sides of the water, creating a balance between nature and concrete design. Figures along the water's edge animate the scene, suggesting a vibrant, forward-looking vision of sustainable and luxurious urban living. Generated from a descriptive prompt using Midjourney, 2025.

acceleration. The desert is thus not so much where time is stilled, but where it folds.

It is in this layered landscape that the render, too, takes on new meaning. Like a mirage that appears to shimmer with hope but vanishes when one extends a hand to touch it, the render creates an illusion of presence without presence. It prophesies something that is not yet there, yet dominates the present with power. As Timothy Morton suggests in *Hyperobjects*, some things are so vast in scale and temporality that they escape immediate perception, but still shape our reality.¹¹⁷ The render behaves in a similar fashion: omnipresent but not fully tangible, seductive yet hollow. It replaces the horizon with an image of arrival, promising that the future has already been secured.

The mirage and the render operate through similar logics. Both are visual events that suspend disbelief. Both function as tools of orientation and disorientation. In the Gulf, the render is not simply a planning device; it becomes effective infrastructure, shaping what is desired and who one becomes. But as the future grows increasingly mediated by these visual instruments, the question remains: what is lost in this shift? What forms of memory, resistance, or imagination are flattened beneath its surface? Al-Maria's desert, stripped of its mirage, invites us to stand within the ruins of such illusions and re-engage the world on different terms.¹¹⁸ To feel time differently. To dwell, if only briefly, within the heat shimmer of what remains.

As part of my research and response during the NEOM residency, I created a video piece, titled *The Mirrored Horizon*, featuring a lone mime. His face painted white, his body clothed in white, performing silently in front of an expansive, hyperreal render that echoed NEOM's visual language. The mime, a figure of wordless expression, becomes a speculative self, lost in the aesthetic fiction of the future. The performance unfolds without a script. His gestures begin low to the ground, evoking the crawling and slowness of earthly creatures. He morphs from a camel's burdened pace to the slow elegance of a turtle, and finally into a bird, flapping into flight. Just as he reaches his height, soaring, he collides with an invisible mirrored surface. The impact is jarring. What he mistook for open desert is, in fact, a wall; what seemed like an infinite horizon turns out to be a mirrored limit.

This moment collapses the logic of the render with that of the mirage. Both seduce the viewer with promises of proximity and potential, only to vanish, or fracture, upon arrival. The mime's collision is not simply physical; it is ontological. The render, like the mirage, disorients by offering a future that feels already present, while withholding its material substance. His body enacts the moment of realisation: that what was taken as landscape was actually an image. That the future, so vividly rendered, may have always been an illusion. The landscape, it turns out, was a projection.

In this transformation, the work explores what it might mean for a landscape to witness itself for the first time. For centuries, the desert has been watched, photographed, mapped, and planned, but rarely has it seen itself. What happens when a landscape confronts its own image? Birds, long symbols of flight and foresight,

¹¹⁷ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Posthumanities 27 (University of Minnesota press, 2013).

¹¹⁸ Al-Maria, *The Future Was Desert (Part I & II)*.



Figure 25. *The Mirrored Horizon (2025)*, video still.

Note. Work featuring Saudi performer and artist Bilal Allaf, who embodied the role of a mime for this piece, was staged in front of a hyperreal render created by me, echoing NEOM's visual language. The performance was developed collaboratively: I devised the initial narrative framework, while Allaf created and refined the gestures and choreography that gave it physical form. Filmed in a single continuous take with no edits, the work underscores the fragility and resilience of the body when placed against the polished render.

Link to video: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1aVNT18kkGRqzhCJXx_gwfHH4coj9gj63?usp=sharing

are disoriented by reflective facades, often mistaking them for sky and crashing mid-flight.¹¹⁹ Like the mime, they find themselves betrayed by the image. The render, then, becomes not a portal but a veil, one that both reveals and concludes.

This entry into futurity is also an entry into a contested field of visibility. The mime’s performance, of becoming one with the mirrored wall, offers a metaphor not only for individual transformation but for the landscape’s own speculative awakening. It asks: what does it mean for land to be seen not for what it is, but for what it might become? This is the logic that underpins NEOM and other large-scale render-driven developments.¹²⁰ The desert, long regarded as a space of spiritual mystery and ecological depth, is re-scripted as a surface to be mirrored, branded, and monetised. Yet in this act of reflection, something else occurs: the land begins to witness itself. The image is no longer just for an external gaze, it loops back, creating a recursive spectacle where even non-human actors, like birds, are disoriented by what they once knew. The moment of collision is not merely one of failure; it is one of potential. The speculative self, like the mime, does not vanish upon impact. It learns to move differently, to adapt, to reflect the mirror.

This oscillation between disorientation and adaptation parallels the larger cultural atmosphere in which Gulf futurism operates.¹²¹ The collective drive toward idealised visions of tomorrow often bypasses the messy, iterative work of social negotiation¹²². Yet within these dominant architectures of affect, moments of rupture emerge¹²³. Performance becomes a tactic for thinking otherwise: to mirror, distort, and momentarily interrupt the smooth surface of optimism.¹²⁴ It is within these fractures that artistic practice intervenes, not to reject the future, but to expand its representational possibilities. The mime’s collision, like the speculative artworks surrounding NEOM, stages a moment of hesitation, an embodied question mark, that lingers before the next projection is rendered.

02.6 BLUEPRINTS OF BELIEF

This act of hesitation stands in stark contrast to the unrelenting certainty of the render. It enacts a visual claim over the yet-to-exist, projecting carefully curated images that circulate widely and assert themselves as inevitabilities rather than propositions. The shift, from oral to visual policy, marks a profound transformation

in the role of images within state-led narratives of progress and national ambition.¹²⁵ The render no longer proposes; it instructs. It no longer speculates; it asserts. In doing so, it transforms imagination into directive, softening the uncertainty of transformation by framing it as pre-ordained.¹²⁶

The history of the render is not merely a technical lineage, but a broader story of images learning to speak louder than the structures they were once designed to support. Originating as silent companions to architectural plans, early architectural images belonged to a tradition of drawing that made space visible before it was built. Renaissance perspective drawings offered disciplined views into imagined worlds, constructed for patrons and builders alike, but remained anchored in the mechanics of construction, craftsmanship, and feasibility. The image served the building; it illustrated, clarified and obeyed.¹²⁷

Over the course of the twentieth century, the architectural image began to detach itself from its earlier subservience to built form. As capitalism’s appetite for spectacle expanded, so too did the demand for images capable of captivating, persuading, and promising. In their seminal essay “*Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism*”, Sarah Whiting and Robert Somol argue that contemporary architecture has shifted from the disciplinary frameworks of form and function to a more affective register, privileging atmosphere, sensation, and mood over tectonic precision.¹²⁸ This shift marks a broader transformation in architectural representation: the render evolved from a tool of measured depiction into a speculative medium, what might be called a kind of “mood-board urbanism”, designed to arouse desire and market futures before they could be challenged by reality.

The emergence of digital rendering software in the 1980s and 1990s accelerated this transformation. Programs such as AutoCAD, Rhino, and V-Ray gave rise to hyperreal images that hovered somewhere between the speculational and its reality.¹²⁹ These tools did not simply enhance visualisation; they embedded the image more deeply into speculative economies. As Reinhold Martin observes in *The Organizational Complex*, architecture became enmeshed within systems of corporate branding and media production, where buildings and their images functioned as nodes in a global network of desire.¹³⁰ The render no longer followed construction; it preceded and often replaced it. It became an asset in itself, circulated in boardrooms and media campaigns long before any material foundation was laid.

This shift is amplified in speculative design practices that embrace fiction not as falsehood, but as a framework for engaging with possible futures. As James Auger argues in “*Why Robot?*”, speculative design

119 Beatrice Nolan Thompson Polly, ‘Saudi Says The Line Will Be the World’s First “eco-City.” Construction and Design Specialists Aren’t so Sure.’, Business Insider, accessed 4 May 2025, <https://www.businessinsider.com/saudi-ne-om-first-eco-city-experts-design-architecture-2024-7>.
120 ‘The World’s Largest Building, Costing \$50 Billion, Breaks Ground in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia | AD Middle East’, accessed 4 May 2025, <https://www.admiddleeast.com/story/the-worlds-largest-building-costing-dollar50-billion-futuristic-giga-project-starts-construction-in-riyadh-saudi-arabia/>
121 ‘Sophia Al-Maria’s “EVERYTHING MUST GO” - Criticism’, E-Flux, accessed 4 May 2025, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/239962/sophia-al-maria-s-everything-must-go>.
122 ‘Back to the Futurist’, accessed 4 May 2025, <https://whitney.org/essays/sophia-al-maria>.
123 Ahmed Elbenni, ‘Who Believes in Gulf Futurism?’, *E-International Relations*, 29 April 2025, <https://www.e-ir.info/2025/04/29/who-believes-in-gulf-futurism/>.
124 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, digital print (Routledge, 2006).

125 Lina Khatib, *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle* (I.B. Tauris, 2013).
126 Jacques Rancière and Gabriel Rockhill, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Bloomsbury Revelations edition, Bloomsbury Revelations (Zed Books, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350284913>.
127 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema* (Rakennustieto, 2001).
128 Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, ‘Notes around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism’, *Perspecta* 33 (2002): 72, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1567298>.
129 Carl Lostritto, *Impossible and Hyper-Real Elements of Architecture: Exercises, Provocations, and Theories of Digital Representation*, First edition, with Viola Ago et al. (Applied Research and Design Publishing, 2023).
130 Reinhold Martin, *The Organizational Complex: Architecture, Media, and Corporate Space*, 1st paperback ed (MIT Press, 2005).

enables the creation of fictional products and systems that serve as thought experiments, tools to critique, question, or explore the social, cultural, and political implications of technological futures.¹³¹ While Auger’s focus is on design objects, his framework offers a useful lens through which to read the architectural render as a similar device: a propositional fiction that gains traction not because it is real, but because it is believable. Like the speculative robot, the render acts not as a placeholder for reality but as a provocateur of belief, orchestrating affective responses that shape both public perception and policy direction. This capacity to project a seemingly coherent future, regardless of feasibility, makes the render not only persuasive but prescriptive, blurring the line between imagination and mandate.

Nowhere was this logic more vividly performed than in the post-oil landscapes of the Gulf. The spectacular urbanism of cities like Dubai, Doha, and Abu Dhabi transformed the render into a sovereign image, a herald of ambition and power.¹³² In his book *The Expediency of Culture*, George Yúdice makes the case that culture and its representations increasingly function as resources mobilised for political and economic ends.¹³³ This dynamic is particularly evident in these cities, where the image itself became infrastructure, not only reflecting ambition but also constituting it. This is consistent with Harvey Molotch’s “growth machine” theory, which explains how power coalitions vying for attention and capital drive urban development more so than local needs.¹³⁴ This argument is further developed by Samia Henni, who shows how architecture and its visual apparatus serve as tools for spatial control and political narrative.¹³⁵ Even when the buildings themselves remained unbuilt, the renders endured, circulating as proxies for the real, shaping desires, and controlling perceptions on a global stage.

The render, then, is not a passive depiction but an active agent, It choreographs attention, marshals investment, and rehearses belief. It is this long arc, from obedient drawing to speculative spectacle, that situates the contemporary render as more than a visual forecast. The render today is a visual mandate: a claim staked on the yet-to-exist, a promise so rehearsed that it begins to feel inevitable.

With the launch of Vision 2030 and the rise of giga-projects such as NEOM¹³⁶, The Line¹³⁷, Qiddiya¹³⁸, Diriyah Gate¹³⁹, and the Red Sea Project¹⁴⁰, the render became a sovereign image. However historically,

131 James Auger, ‘Speculative Design: Crafting the Speculation’, *Digital Creativity* 24, no. 1 (2013): 11–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14626268.2013.767276>.
132 Hassan Radoine, *Architecture in Context: Designing in the Middle East*, First edition (John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2017).
133 George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Duke University Press, 2003).
134 Harvey Molotch, ‘The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place’, *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 2 (1976): 309–32.
135 Samia Henni, ed., *Deserts Are Not Empty*, Columbia Books on Architecture and the City (Graduate School of Architecture, 2022).
136 ‘NEOM: Made to Change’.
137 ‘THE LINE: A Revolution in Urban Living’.
138 ‘Qiddiya Investment Company’, Qiddiya Investment Company, accessed 28 July 2025, <https://qiddiya.com/>.
139 ‘Diriyah Gate Development Authority | ءةسسلءلل ءءفصلل’, accessed 28 July 2025, <https://www.dgda.gov.sa/en>.
140 ‘Red Sea Global - Official Site’, accessed 28 July 2025, <https://www.redseaglobal.com/en/>.



Figure 26. Aerial view of the construction of *The Line* project in NEOM, Saudi Arabia.
Note. This image shows extensive groundwork and the beginnings of infrastructure development stretching across the desert landscape.
Note. From NEOM, n.d. *The Line: A Revolution in Urban Living*. Retrieved from <https://www.neom.com/en-us/regions/theline>. Copyright 2024 by NEOM Company.

the architectural render in Saudi Arabia served a conventional role, visualising governmental plans, infrastructural projects, or real estate ventures, often tied to specific audiences and discreet purposes. However, it is no longer an auxiliary to development but central to it, a visual form that not only reflects state ambition but actively constitutes its rhetorical and aesthetic apparatus. The render, in this context, is a performative act: a speech in visual terms that declares not only intent but also its inevitability.

The renders produced for these mega projects exhibit a striking visual and conceptual consistency that demands attention. Despite varying in scale, location, and thematic premise, they adhere to a tightly controlled aesthetic language. Vast, unblemished landscapes meet futuristic infrastructures; glass-clad buildings rise amidst pristine natural surroundings; human figures appear as sanitised silhouettes of multicultural harmony. These images eschew specificity in favour of a globalised visual lexicon, one that aligns Saudi Arabia with a universalised ideal of modernity, technological advancement, and ecological sensitivity. Yet, this apparent universality masks a homogenising impulse, where difference is subdued in favour of seamlessness, and complexity is flattened into a digestible futurist narrative.

The illusion of realism crafted within these renders serves both persuasive and pacifying functions. Hyperreal in their detail yet detached from the plausible contingencies of real-world construction, these images simulate a controlled, frictionless environment. They present not the messy realities of urbanisation, labour, or social negotiation but an impossibly orderly future, one devoid of dissent, decay, or unpredictability.¹⁴¹ This illusion of control is central to the render's function within the giga-project ecosystem; it reassures by crafting a visual field where progress appears seamless and universally desirable. The rendered image thus becomes a means of emotional governance, offering comfort in the face of rapid societal shifts by projecting a vision of transformation that is pre-emptively resolved.

What emerges across the corpus of renders is a tightly woven grammar of the future, where visual consistencies operate as semiotic devices. The repeated use of beige desert palettes, soft ambient lighting, azure skies, and minimalist forms collectively signifies a future that is at once modern, clean, and rooted in the region's natural landscape, even in parts abstracted to the point of detachment. Transparency, both literal and metaphorical, becomes a recurring motif: in architecture, it signals openness and progress; in governance, it suggests accountability and forward-thinking. Yet this aesthetic of transparency often masks its opposite, a controlled visibility that conceals more than it reveals. Drawing on Édouard Glissant's theory of opacity, we might consider how the insistence on legibility and clarity in these renders flattens complexity and difference into consumable forms.¹⁴² Glissant defends opacity as a right, a resistance to total exposure and a refusal of reductive translation. As Glissant writes, "*We demand the right to opacity for everyone,*" a refusal of reductive translation and a reminder that not all realities should be rendered fully visible.

In contrast, the render's smooth transparency denies such resistance, scripting a future that leaves little room for ambiguity. This tension, between the image's claim to openness and its actual function as a tool of

narrative control, underscores the need to reintroduce opacity as a space of potential within visual culture, where meaning is not overdetermined but remains contingent, plural, and resistant to full capture. In this sense, embracing opacity becomes a counter-method to the hegemony of the render, one that aligns with the broader argument of this thesis: that alternate futures must allow for spaces that are not fully visible or fully resolved.

This loop is maintained through the relentless circulation of the render across different platforms, government announcements, social media, and international exhibitions, where it functions as a spectacle unto itself.¹⁴³ Removed from its original architectural context, the render enters a regime of perpetual visibility, sustaining a narrative of futurity that remains inaccessible to temporal or material constraints. In this state of continuous motion, the render becomes not a precursor to reality but its stand-in, a visual performance of transformation that demands belief and, before it demands any critical analysis.

While these images claim a universal modernity, they also traffic in subtle stereotypes designed to appease both local sensibilities and global investors. The carefully balanced representation of tradition and cosmopolitanism, women in abayas alongside men in Western attire, scenes of leisure within controlled natural environments, produces a sanitised vision of cultural harmony. This strategic staging glosses over the complexities of Saudi society, a narrative of controlled modernisation instead. The render, in this sense, performs a dual function: it asserts a sanitised global future for external consumption while simultaneously crafting a vision of national progress that aligns with internal narratives of controlled reform.

The semiotics of the render in the Saudi context adhere to a tightly controlled visual language, marked by a distinct and consistent aesthetic. Predominantly composed of beige, white, and muted earth tones, these images avoid graphic or saturated colours, favouring a palette that evokes clarity, purity, and control. Even in nocturnal scenes, the use of silver, soft blues, and faint purples maintains a clean, subdued atmosphere. This chromatic restraint, repeated across numerous state-produced renders, constructs an aesthetic of calm sophistication and timeless modernity. Minimalist architectural forms reinforce themes of efficiency, order, and global refinement. Together, these elements generate a visual vocabulary in which the future is rendered not only with aesthetic appeal but as a moral and aspirational directive.

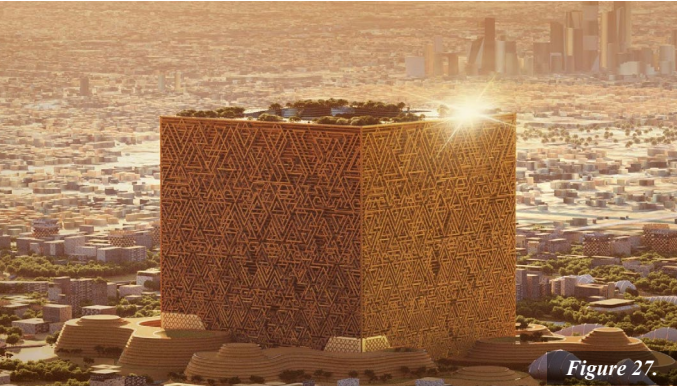
This visual consistency raises important questions about its origins and intentions. Is it the result of external design firms imposing a limited, often Western-centric understanding of what the Saudi landscape should look like, flattening its visual diversity into a generic desert minimalism? Or is it a deliberate strategy: the construction of a visual narrative that is easily legible, palatable, and marketable to global audiences?

141 Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, 2nd English language ed (Verso, 2008).

142 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, Nachdr. (University of Michigan Press, 2009).

143 'Art Monthly : Article : Looping the Loop – Brian Hatton Proposes a Theory of the Loop That Predates Its Popular Usage in Film and Video Art Theory', accessed 28 July 2025, <https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/looping-the-loop-by-brian-hatton-may-2017>.

ORANGE: RENDER COMPARISON



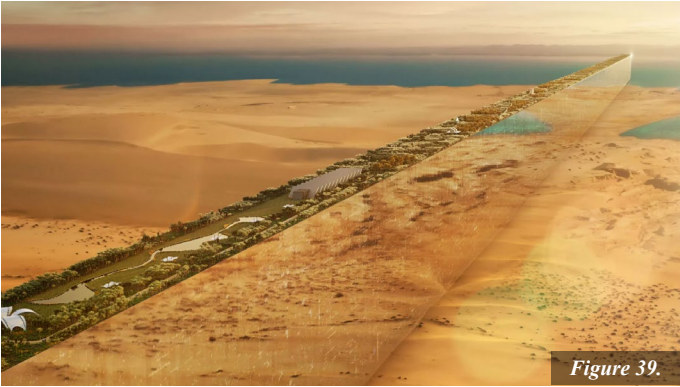
The Mukaab, a monumental cube-shaped skyscraper under construction in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, as a central feature of the larger Murabba development. Designed by **AtkinsRéalis**. Annouced 2023



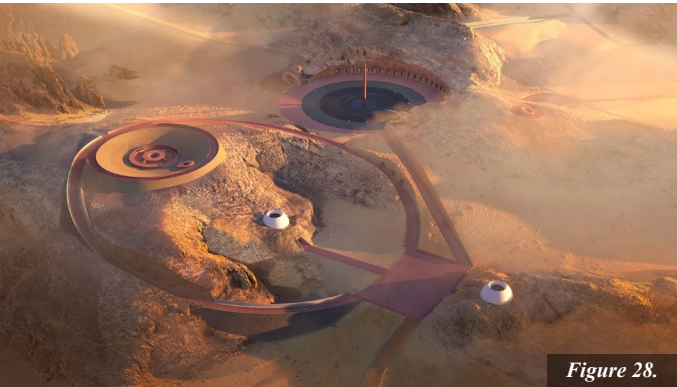
Jeddah Tower (also known as Kingdom Tower), which is currently under construction in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. **Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill Architecture (AS+GG)**, Announced 2011



Discovery Tower, a crystalline skyscraper designed by **Zaha Hadid Architects** as part of the Trojena ski resort at NEOM in Saudi Arabia. Announced 2023



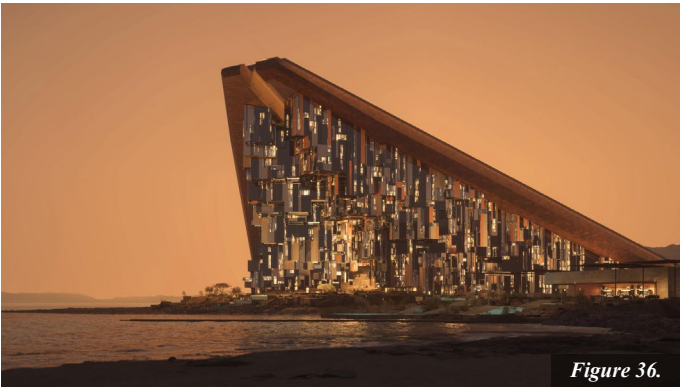
The Line, a planned smart linear city being built as part of the larger NEOM megaproject in Tabuk Province, Saudi Arabia. Designed by **Morphosis Architects**. Announced 2021



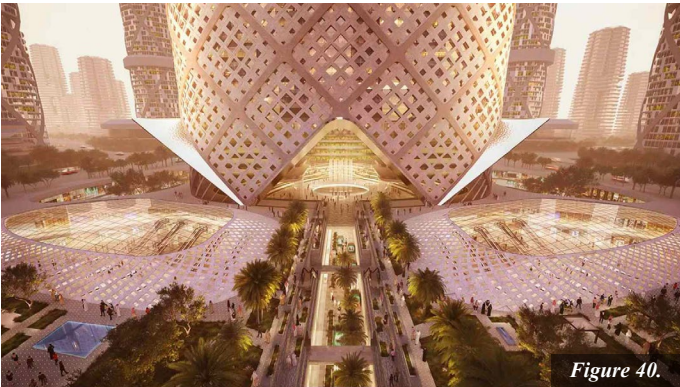
James Turrell's land art installation being developed for **Wadi AlFann**, a new cultural destination located in the desert landscape of AlUla, Saudi Arabia. Announced 2025



Royal Diriyah Opera House in Diriyah, Saudi Arabia. Designed by **Snohetta and Syn Architects**. Announced 2023



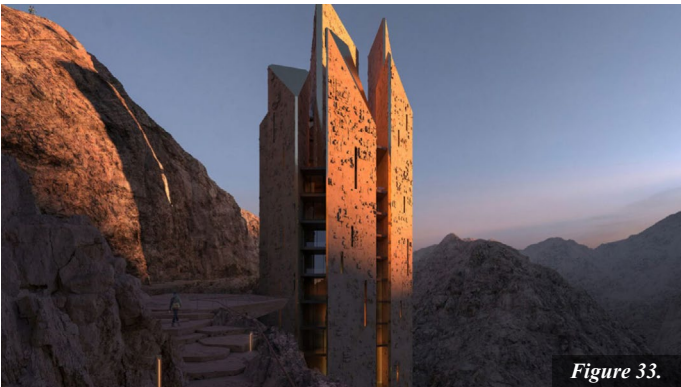
Monolith, an exclusive residential golf community and luxury destination within NEOM, Saudi Arabia. Aedas Middle East, with **Ignacio Gomez** serving as the Global Design Principal for the project. Announced 2024



Rise Tower, a skyscraper project planned for the North Pole district in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Designed by Foster + Partners. Announced 2023



Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka, Japan. Designed by **Foster + Partners**. 2025



Wellness hotel within **Leyja**, a new sustainable tourism destination in NEOM, Saudi Arabia. Designed by **Killa Design**. Announced 2025



Epicon, a futuristic luxury destination under development within NEOM in northwest Saudi Arabia. Designed by **10 Design**. Announced 2023



The Line, Neom, Tabuk Province, Saudi Arabia. Designed by **Delugan Meissl Associated Architects (DMAA)**. Announced 2022



Asaan, Misk Heritage Museum in Diriyah, Saudi Arabia. Designed by **Zaha Hadid Architects**. 2025



Eco-luxury resort, **Azulik AlUla Resort** in AlUla, Saudi Arabia, designed by **Roth Architecture**. Announced 2023



AlMuatadil Equestrian Village in AlUla, Saudi Arabia. Designed by **AECOM**. Announced 2023

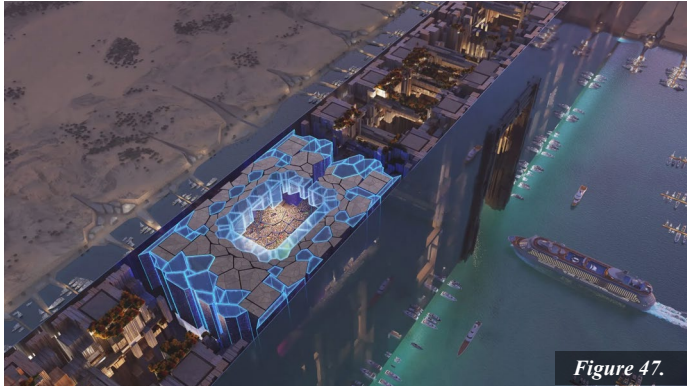


King Salman International Stadium in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Designed by **Populous**. Announced 2024

PURPLE: RENDER COMPARISON



The Lake at Trojena, a key feature of the NEOM mountain destination in Saudi Arabia. Designed by **LAVA architects**. Announced 2022



NEOM Stadium, a futuristic multi-purpose stadium set to be a key venue for the 2034 FIFA World Cup in Saudi Arabia. Designed by **Bjarke Ingels Group** (BIG). Announced 2024



Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Stadium (Qiddiya Stadium), a futuristic multi-purpose stadium, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Designed by **Populous**. Announced 2024.



Qiddiya Speed Park Track, a futuristic motorsport circuit within Qiddiya City, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Design by **Hermann Tilke** in collaboration with former F1 driver Alex Wurz. Announced 2024.



Trojena Ski Resort, NEOM, Saudi Arabia. Designed by **LAVA Architects**. Announced 2022



Qiddiya City Esports Arena in Saudi Arabia, Riyadh. Designed to be a centerpiece of the world's first mixed-use gaming and esports district within Qiddiya. Design by **Populous**. Announced 2023



Trojena Ski Resort, NEOM, Saudi Arabia. Designed by **LAVA architects**. Announced 2022



The Chedi Trojena, a luxurious hotel located within the upcoming Trojena mountain resort in NEOM, Saudi Arabia. Design firm not publicly announced. Project announced 2023



The Line, a planned smart linear city being built as part of the larger NEOM megaproject in Tabuk Province, Saudi Arabia. Urban design lead firm is **Delugan Meissl Associated Architects** (DMAA), Announced 2022



ROSHN Stadium in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, a venue planned for the FIFA World Cup 2034. Design firm not publicly announced. Project announced 2024



The Coves, resort development, which is part of The Red Sea Project in Saudi Arabia. Designed by **Faena**. Announced 2022



Trojena, NEOM, Saudi Arabia. Designed by **LAVA Architects**. Announced 2022.



82 The King Salman International Stadium in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Designed by **Populous**. Announced 2024



Rise Tower within the proposed North Pole district in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Designed by **Foster + Partners**. Announced 2023



Qiddiya City, a planned entertainment and sports, mega-project under development near Riyadh, Saudi Arabia Designed by **Bjarke Ingels Group** (BIG). Announced 2019



The Line, Neom, Tabuk Province, Saudi Arabia. Designed by **Morphosis Architects**. Announced 2022

Many of the Kingdom’s giga-projects are explicitly geared toward tourism, investment, and international visibility.¹⁴⁴ As such, the renders function as a kind of universal visual shorthand, beige becomes the stand-in for desert, clean whites for modernity, and silver blues for futuristic calm. This aesthetic language does not merely risk reducing the complexity of place; it actively does so, streamlining diverse cultural, ecological, and historical textures into a set of simplified symbols designed for external consumption rather than internal reflection.

It is also important to recognise that many of these future-driven visuals borrow heavily from the aesthetic codes of science fiction and cyberpunk, genres long preoccupied with the speculative and the sublime. From the sleek sterility of techno-utopias to the glowing edges of *Dune*¹⁴⁵ and *Blade Runner*-esque¹⁴⁶ skylines, these visual languages have seeded themselves into the collective imagination of futurity. While these references carry a certain cultural charge, they often come untethered from their original contexts of critique or subversion, reabsorbed into corporate branding and state ambition. In the Gulf context, particularly within Saudi Arabia’s projects, these motifs are repurposed not to question the future but to affirm it, to render aspiration glossy, and conflate technological spectacle with progress. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s personal interest in gaming culture and cinematic futurism is one factor contributing to this futurist aesthetic, which Johannes Hoffmann explains is strategic rather than accidental. Hoffmann notes, “*It’s very well known that MBS is a gamer... he wants to create something never seen before,*” underscoring how personal and political desires converge in these rendered visions (see Appendix D). The result is a highly curated futurity that draws on AI aesthetics, sci-fi tropes, and moodboard-driven world-building to craft a national imaginary where progress is inseparable from spectacle. The image becomes not only a visual proposition but a geopolitical one, where sci-fi iconography is instrumentalised to attract investment, citizenship, and cultural capital. The result is a visual economy that privileges surface over substance, and appearance over engagement, folding the radical potential of sci-fi imaginaries into a consumable, hyper-legible design language.

Occupying a position of both critique and complicity, my work as an artist and researcher is deeply engaged in the critical analysis of these visual economies. My practice is inevitably entangled with the very visual regimes it seeks to interrogate. While I question the hegemonic narratives propagated through these renders, and the implications they carry for cultural identity, I also acknowledge the magnetic pull they exert: the desire they fulfil for coherence, order, and a sense of belonging within an imagined global future. My work aims to expose the fissures within these seamless images, drawing attention to the absences and unspoken anxieties they conceal. In projects such as *The Green Light* and *Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow*, I attempt to resist the passive consumption of rendered futures by foregrounding the tensions between presence and absence, reality and projection, certainty and doubt. Similarly, in a mime performance staged in NEOM, set deliberately against a backdrop that mirrored the architectural render almost exactly, I sought to subvert through mimicry, inhabiting the visual language of the speculative image so fully that its contradictions and

144 ‘Giga-Projects’, accessed 28 July 2025, <https://www.pif.gov.sa/en/our-investments/giga-projects/>.

145 Frank Herbert and Brian Herbert, *Dune*, Ace premium edition, The Dune Chronicles (Ace, 2010).

146 *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott (Warner Bros., 1982).

excesses became visible.¹⁴⁷ The gestures, rehearsed and artificial, echoed the artificiality of the scene itself. Here, performance became a form of critique, where embodiment challenged illusion, and parody opened space for rupture within the seamless spectacle.

Yet positioning myself within this reflexive engagement also means reckoning with the uneasy proximity between critique and complicity. Working with, and sometimes within, the visual language of the render places my practice on a precarious edge, where imitation risks collapsing into affirmation. At times, my engagement has consciously mirrored the aesthetic codes of the speculative image, adopting its polished surfaces, its seductive framings, its persuasive clarity, not as a surrender, but as a strategy to inhabit its visual grammar from within. The intention was to create a mimicry sharp enough to carry a critical voice, to slip commentary beneath the facade of seamlessness. This closeness occasionally worked as planned: viewers were able to see the slippage, experience the uneasiness, and identify the minor disturbances that suggested a critique of the same structures the render uses. However, there were other times when the mimicry was too accurate, too true to the visual codes I was trying to challenge, and the piece blended in with the images it was meant to disturb. In those instances, the critique dissolved into the surface, mistaken for the spectacle it attempted to disrupt.

02.7 MADE TO CHANGE

Continuing from the critical role that the render plays in Saudi Arabia’s visual economy, a close look at two promotional videos, *Saudi Arabia Plans Futuristic City, NEOM Full Promotional Video* (2019)¹⁴⁸ and *NEOM: Made to Change* (2022)¹⁴⁹, shows a clear change in the state’s visual strategy. Both advertisements serve as extensions of the render, using cinematic language, scripted narration, and carefully chosen images to support a story of change. But they also show small changes in tone, aesthetic focus, and narrative style that highlights how Saudi Arabia’s speculative project for the future is also constantly shifting.

Both videos follow the same visual and rhetorical pattern: sweeping aerial shots, smooth animations, footage from around the world, and a strong voiceover that lays out a bold and positive, vision for the future of “humanity”. Both scripts use words like “change,” “future,” “humanity,” “hope,” and “opportunity” over and over. These words don’t describe things; they trigger feelings that are meant to get people to believe in and care about a vision that goes beyond national borders. They portray Saudi Arabia not merely as a site of transformation but as a global epicenter of human advancement.

“*You can look at these ancient hills and see nothing, or you can see nothing to hold you back, no set ways of thinking, no restrictions, no divisions, no excuses, just endless potential. This is the blank page you need to write humanity’s next chapter; Neom. Over 25,000 square kilometers of inspiration with room for your biggest ideas, a part of the world set aside for those who want to change the world, a land created to free*

147 Claude Kipnis and Neil Kleinman, *The Mime Book*, 2nd ed (Meriwether Pub, 1988).

148 *Saudi Arabia Plans Futuristic City, Neom Full Promotional Video*, directed by Vladan Kozuch, 2020, 02:01, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVclH5bsIho>.

149 ‘NEOM: Made to Change’.

people from stress, a place where pioneers and thinkers and doers can exchange ideas and get things done, a startup the size of a country that will change the way we live and work forever; healthier, happier; with more time for the things that really matter; a truly global culture from every place and background you can imagine that can show the rest of the planet how it's done. With energy that flows from the sun and wind, neighborhoods that can feed and clean themselves, technologies that make life everything it can be. This is where we can prepare together for the next era of human progress. Some will look at these ancient hills and see nothing but the rest of the world will know that this is where a new way of Living began. Discover Neom."

Transcript from; Saudi Arabia Plans Futuristic City, NEOM Full Promotional Video (2019).

This tension reveals a central paradox within image-making today, especially when working in a field saturated with hyperreal renders. How thin is the line between mimicking a language to expose its construction and merely reproducing it? How easily can critique be absorbed into the very aesthetic order it resists? In navigating this threshold, I confront the risk that the critical gesture itself may be misread, or worse, may reinforce the hegemonic narratives it interrogates. Yet it is precisely within this fragile space that the potential for disruption remains alive: in occupying the codes of power so fully that their excesses, contradictions, or absences begin to show. Finding methods to break up the render's smoothness and introduce moments of failure, or friction that encourages introspection rather than passive consumption, is the challenge. It is a practice of infiltration, sometimes successful, sometimes not, but always conscious that the image's power is best challenged from within its visual economy.

When I initially saw the NEOM promotional video, this ambivalence became especially noticeable. I can still clearly recall the exact dissonance I experienced, a sense of both access and alienation. This future supposedly belongs to "us", but the video felt far in every way, both in terms of its visual language and its imagined audience. I found myself asking: Who is this video speaking to? Who is it speaking for? And more urgently, how close is this imagined future to me, to my life, and my reality right now? The question was not merely rhetorical. It struck at something deeper: the unsettling realisation that the image of the future being circulated for me, might have little or nothing to do with me that belonging, identity, and participation within this vision were as constructed and conditional as the render itself.

The awarding of Saudi citizenship to Sophia, an AI robot created by Hanson Robotics, exacerbated this feeling of displacement.¹⁵⁰ The symbolism was jarring. I saw a non-human being, a technological spectacle created for the consumption of media worldwide, be granted a legal status that is still uncertain and unavailable to many. My concerns about identity, location, and access were heightened by the contrast between this gesture and the gleaming future that the NEOM video promised. Whose futures are depicted, or made visible by these pictures, and whose are left out of this frame?

Giving citizenship to a non-human entity brought to light a significant conflict: giving rights and recognition

150 'Saudi Arabia Becomes First Country to Make a Robot into a Citizen', The Independent, 27 October 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/saudi-arabia-robot-sophia-citizenship-android-riyadh-citizen-passport-future-a8021601.html>.

to a being that neither needs nor is able to participate in the obligations and social contracts that come with such a status. This gesture demonstrates the act's symbolic meaning as a spectacle and a performative gesture that heralds a state of technological advancement and the future. But this incident also highlighted the unequal distribution of value and visibility. The image of Sophia, like the render, operates not within the messy realities of legal systems or lived environments, but within a curated world of projection and performance.



Figure 59. *Safiyah Safiyah* (2016), Ahaad Alamoudi. Two channel, video, color, 00:00:33.
Note. This work reflects on the tensions between technological spectacle and social accessibility, exploring whose futures are rendered visible and whose remain outside the frame.

“...My name is Safiya, and the kohl in my eyes is by the ounce, deep and weighty. Put the dowry in my sleeve, so I may go and consult my mother.” - Safiyah

انا اسمي صفيه والكحل في عيني وقية
حط المهر في كمي واطلع اشاور امي - صفيه

In this way, the image begins to claim the land. As citizenship, once a marker of rights and rootedness, is extended to a speculative being, so too does the rendered image take on the power to define and occupy space. It asserts a vision of the future that is disembodied, frictionless, and unburdened by history or necessity. Everything that applies to a human, recognition, belonging, and legal framing, is increasingly being transferred to non-human entities and visual constructs that do not need these systems, nor can they currently fully operate within them. The render becomes more than representation; it becomes a stand-in for reality, acquiring legitimacy in place of people. This shift reveals a new logic of power, one in which images, not citizens, author the future.¹⁵¹

151 'History/Theory - Peter Eisenman et al. - The End of Theory? A Conversation', E-Flux, accessed 29 July 2025, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/history-theory/159231/the-end-of-theory-a-conversation>.

Figure 60. Stills from *Saudi Arabia Plans Futuristic City, NEOM Full Promotional Video* (2019), video. These frames consist entirely of stock footage, assembled to create the impression of a vast, futuristic landscape while revealing almost nothing about NEOM itself. The video emphasises a utopian narrative of limitless potential, sustainability, and innovation, yet it remains deliberately vague, abstracting the material realities of the project, including labour infrastructure, and environmental constraints. It functions primarily as a promotional spectacle, using generic visuals to convey ambition.

Note. Video retrieved from YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVclH5bsIho>. Copyright 2019 by NEOM.

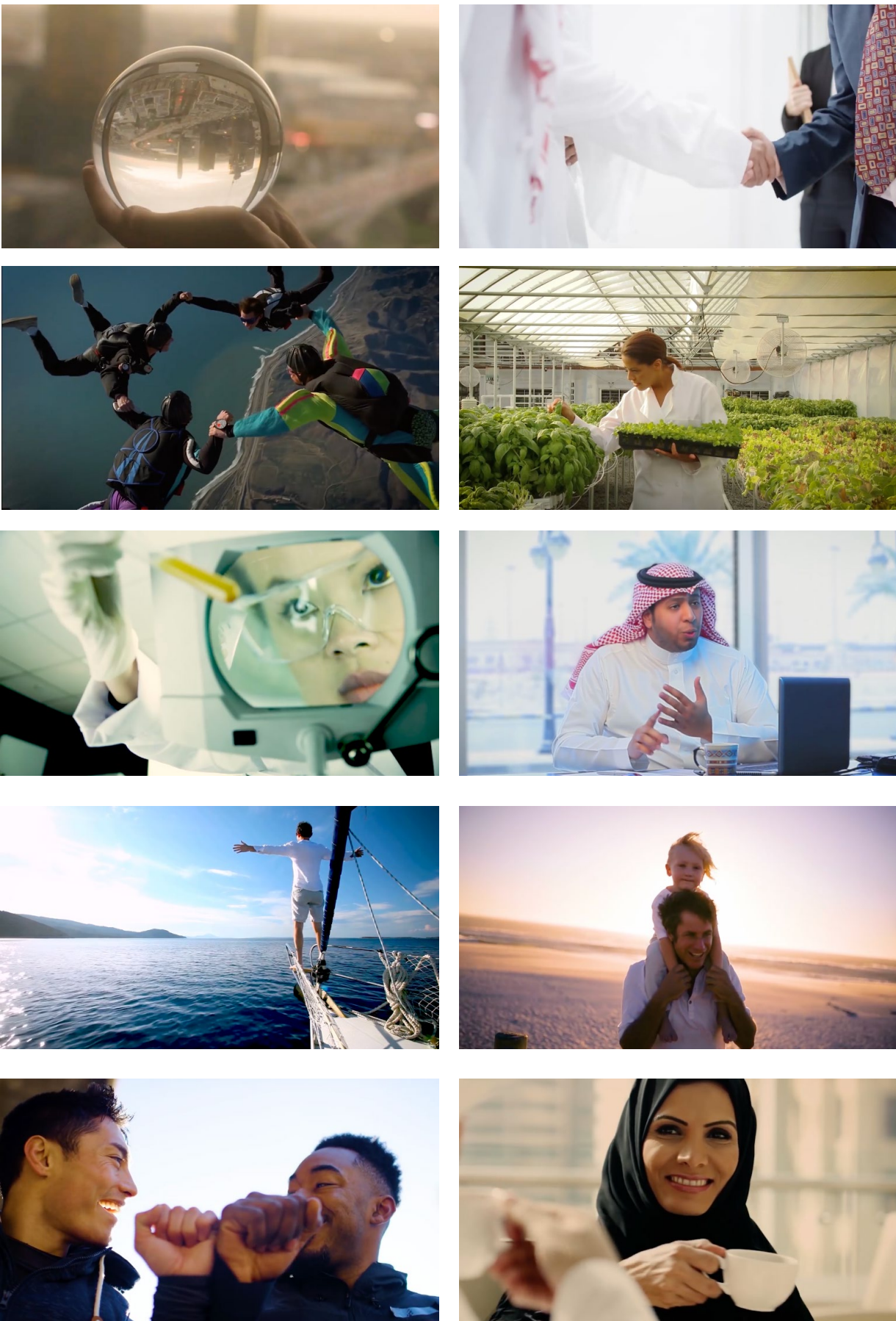
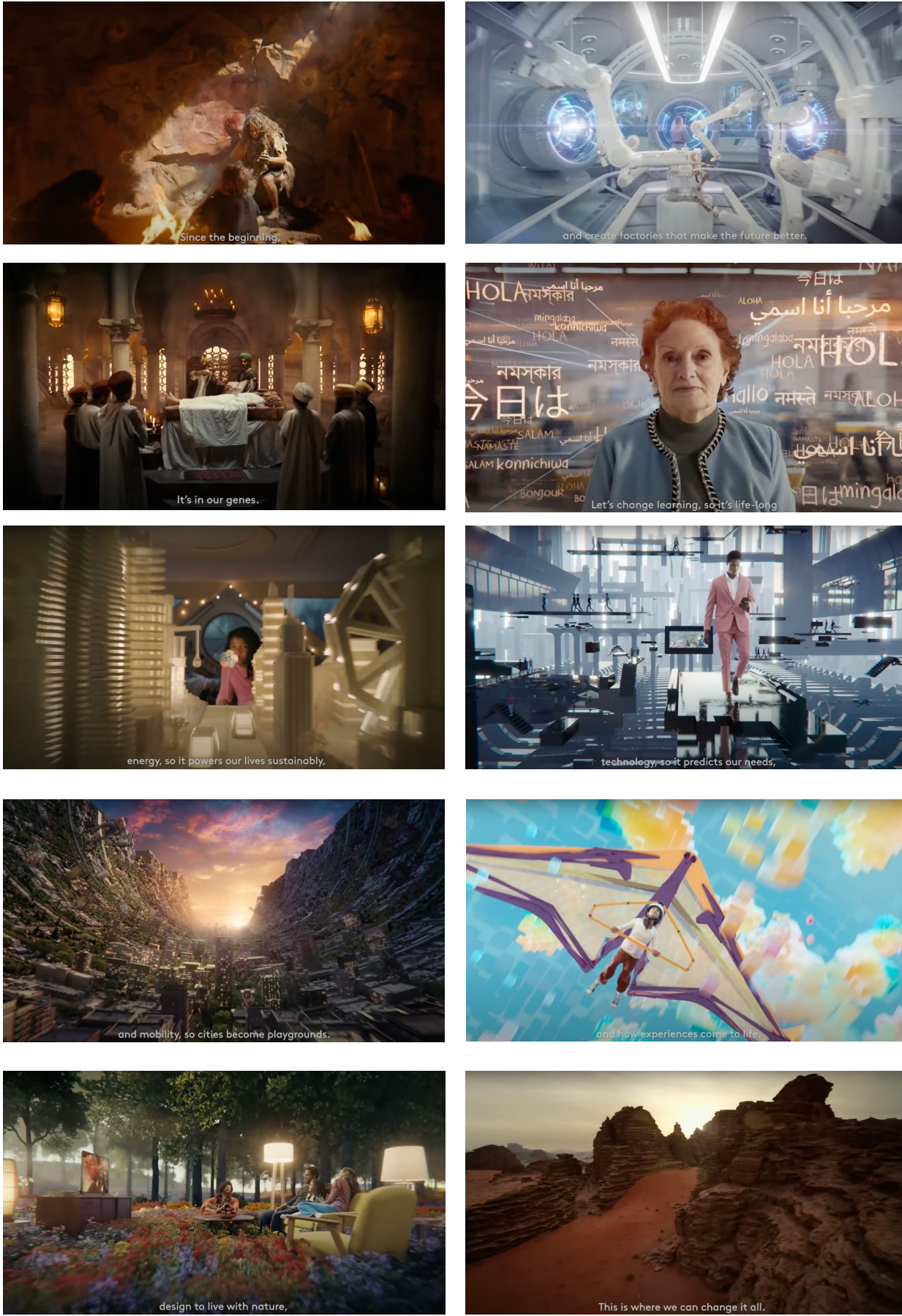


Figure 61. Stills from *NEOM: Made to Change* (2022), video. These frames depict a narrative journey from early human history to a speculative vision of NEOM. The footage appears custom-designed for the narrative rather than assembled from stock imagery. No identifiable individuals, locations, or cultural markers are present, creating a universal, abstracted vision of human progress and innovation. The video emphasises the potential to “change everything,” positioning NEOM as both a product and a projection of collective ambition.

Note. Video retrieved from YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P69QsZmnMDM>. Copyright 2022 by NEOM.



These moments made starkly visible the ways in which the speculative render is not just a projection of urban space or architecture but a projection of social belonging, a visual policy that delineates who is seen, who is spoken for, and who is rendered invisible. My first encounter with the NEOM video became a confrontation with the ambivalences of identity and access in the age of the speculative state. In this way, the render did more than merely depict a future city; it depicted a future society where belonging was still carefully chosen while inclusivity manifested as stylised diversity. This insight still guides my work and critical interaction with Saudi Arabia’s image-making politics, which is based on challenging proximity rather than rejection: How near am I to this picture? How close can I get to this picture? What occurs when the picture gets closer to me than my actual reality?

Futuristic City, NEOM Full Promotional Video (2019) and *NEOM: Made to Change* (2022), significant differences emerge in both their visual strategy and narrative confidence. Despite its shine, the 2019 video makes extensive use of generic stock footage, including cityscapes, landscapes, and human figures that have no particular connection to Saudi Arabia. As a result, Saudi Arabia’s future is visually anonymised and aligned with a universalised, placeless global future. This decision is in line with NEOM’s original positioning as a project that transcends geography and is presented as an open platform for innovation. The near absence of the Saudi people, landscape, or cultural allusions supports NEOM’s claim to be a borderless, post-national experiment.

In contrast, *NEOM: Made to Change* (2022) marks a shift toward greater specificity. Its imagery is more rooted in the Saudi context, even though it still uses generic architectural renders and cosmopolitan figures. The film places NEOM within a civilizational continuum rather than a placeless utopia by following a broad narrative from prehistory through the present and into the future. Although no clear Saudi figures or identifiable locations are foregrounded, the desert landscape and the invocation of time itself begin to locate the project in relation to Saudi territory. Here, Saudi Arabia is not merely hosting the future; it is authoring it. The project moves from being a neutral site of innovation to a central actor in the global conversation on sustainability, urbanism, and human progress.

The use of voiceover reflects a similar shift. In the 2019 video, the voice adopts a universal “we,” addressing humanity at large and positioning NEOM as a shared, borderless dream. While still speaking to humanity as a whole, the 2022 video adopts a more assertive tone and speaks with an assurance that conveys inevitable outcomes. Declarative statements like “It is here,” “It is happening,” and “The revolution begins now” take the place of the speculative words “imagine” and “could be” in the previous video. This linguistic shift from possibility to certainty mirrors the render’s evolution from proposal to mandate, reinforcing the image’s hegemonic function as a declaration rather than a suggestion.

Visuals also reflect a refinement in the semiotic economy of the render. The 2019 video leans heavily on metaphorical imagery, scientists, dancers, technological devices, and sprawling natural vistas. Even though it is still stylised, the 2022 ad has a more structured narrative, going from Stone Age scenes to the futuristic city of NEOM in chronological order. Without giving up its utopian registers, it aims to resolve the abstraction of the previous narrative into a more readable plot of human destiny.

What remains consistent across both videos is the language of hopefulness, control, and seamless transformation. Both construct a visual world without conflict or resistance. The sanitised aesthetics, the carefully balanced representation of multicultural figures, and the always-present blue skies are all visual elements that support the render’s role as a sovereign image, one that portrays both comfort and power.

The most telling aspect of both advertisements is the ongoing conflict between universality and specificity, between the global fantasy of the future and the particularities of the current transition. Without compromising its universal appeal, *NEOM: Made to Change* (2022) seeks to historicize and localise the post-national, placeless future that the 2019 video envisioned. This shift suggests a growing confidence in Saudi Arabia’s new narrative: a movement from inviting the world to imagine the future with Saudi Arabia, to positioning Saudi Arabia as the inevitable site of that future.

Yet, in both cases, the reliance on cinematic techniques, scripted affect, and high-production values underscores the fundamental function of these videos as moving renders. They do not keep records of what is real or give clear information about how a project is going. Instead, they create belief by working in the same speculative economy as static renders, but with motion, a voice, and soundtracks that enhance their strength.¹⁵² In their seamlessness and affective pull, they echo the critical questions raised by the render: whose future is being imagined, who is being reassured, and what realities are being omitted in the name of possibility?

In this way, the examination of these videos does more than validate the crucial points made before regarding the render. They serve as further evidence of the render’s ability to shape belief and simplify complexity through the allure of a carefully crafted visual future, circulated again and again. The render gets its power from what it shows, like the curated and the polished. But it also gets its power from what it leaves out. It’s not possible to fit everything into one picture, so decisions have to be made about what to show and what to leave out. What is left out of the render often means just as much as what is included. To reflect critically on the render, then, is to remain attentive not only to the images presented but also to the spaces left unseen, recognising that both contribute to how these visions of the future are understood and received.

02.8 THE IMAGE IN THE FLESH

Expanding upon the critical characterisation of the render as both mandate and spectacle, it becomes imperative to analyse instances in which the performative power of the render is successful and those in which it fails. The render creates belief and stimulates desire by existing in a transitional state between projection and realisation. Its power isn’t absolute, though. The Sheybarah Resort in the Red Sea Project¹⁵³ and Sindalah Island at NEOM¹⁵⁴ are two examples of how the promises of the render are contended in reality. This shows both the image’s strengths and weaknesses. As Johannes Hoffmann of

152 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Pearson Always Learning, Penguin Books, 1979.

153 ‘Sheybarah Island - Red Sea Global’, accessed 1 August 2025, <https://www.redseaglobal.com/en/our-destinations/the-red-sea/sheybarah-island>.

154 ‘Sindalah | A Luxury Island in the Red Sea’, accessed 29 July 2025, <https://www.neom.com/en-us/regions/sindalah>.

Zaha Hadid Architects noted that while renders are crucial for “selling the vision,” their power lies in affective persuasion rather than empirical accuracy (see Appendix D). The render becomes more than just representational in places like Saudi Arabia; it becomes aspirational infrastructure that is supposed to carry the weight of the national transformation.

Sindalah was among the first NEOM-linked luxury tourism projects to be announced, heavily promoted through highly polished renders showcasing clear waters, futuristic marinas, and a curated vision of exclusivity. When Sindalah’s launch unfolded in late 2023 and early 2024, the gap between render and reality became glaring. The visual language of the Sindalah’s renders adhered closely to the established NEOM aesthetic: seamless integration of architecture and environment with its global luxury cues. The hurriedly constructed physical environment, which included obvious infrastructure concessions, did not live up to the smooth, flawless world depicted in the promotional photos. It became evident that Sindalah was not a glimpse of the future, but a resort firmly anchored in the present. Reports of underwhelming amenities, incomplete structures, and a lack of the ecological harmony portrayed in the visuals began circulating across media platforms, casting doubt on NEOM’s ability to translate its rendered visions into lived experience.¹⁵⁵

This dissonance between image and reality exposed a critical fault line in the power of the render. The Sindalah renders’ failure to live up to expectations’, showing how quickly an image can lose its hold once it becomes real. As Jean Baudrillard’s theory of the hyperreal suggests, when simulation replaces or precedes reality, the collapse of the simulation’s illusion can provoke a deeper crisis of credibility, not simply of the project but of the narrative system that sustains it.¹⁵⁶ In my interview with Hoffmann, he indirectly addresses this risk, contrasting the Saudi emphasis on spectacular vision with European scepticism, where renders are often minimised due to their perceived manipulation of perception. In the case of Sindalah, the overpromise embedded in the visuals was no longer sustainable; belief unravelled as the speculative faltered in the face of the built.

On the other hand, the Red Sea Project’s Sheybarah Island Resort is a striking illustration of the render’s potential when combined with material execution. The first renderings of Sheybarah, which showed futuristic orb-shaped villas made of stainless steel floating over a turquoise lagoon, went viral and represented a daring combination of innovative architecture and environmental obligations. Hoffmann speaks to the challenge of designing for futures “*on the verge of invention*,” a task that requires architects to push against the limits of what’s currently feasible while still delivering something tangible. In Sheybarah’s case, this ambition materialised successfully; the render functioned not only as a marketing tool but as a roadmap for execution. The alignment between vision and materialisation lent credibility not just to the project, but to the broader narrative of Saudi Arabia’s giga-project future.

In this instance, when Sheybarah’s first phase opened in 2024, the built reality closely matched, and arguably

155 Samer Al-Atrush, ‘Failed Beach Party Left Boss of Saudi Neom Project High and Dry’, accessed 4 September 2025, <https://www.thetimes.com/business-money/companies/article/failed-beach-party-left-boss-of-saudi-neom-project-high-and-dry-zhqt9sct>.

156 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

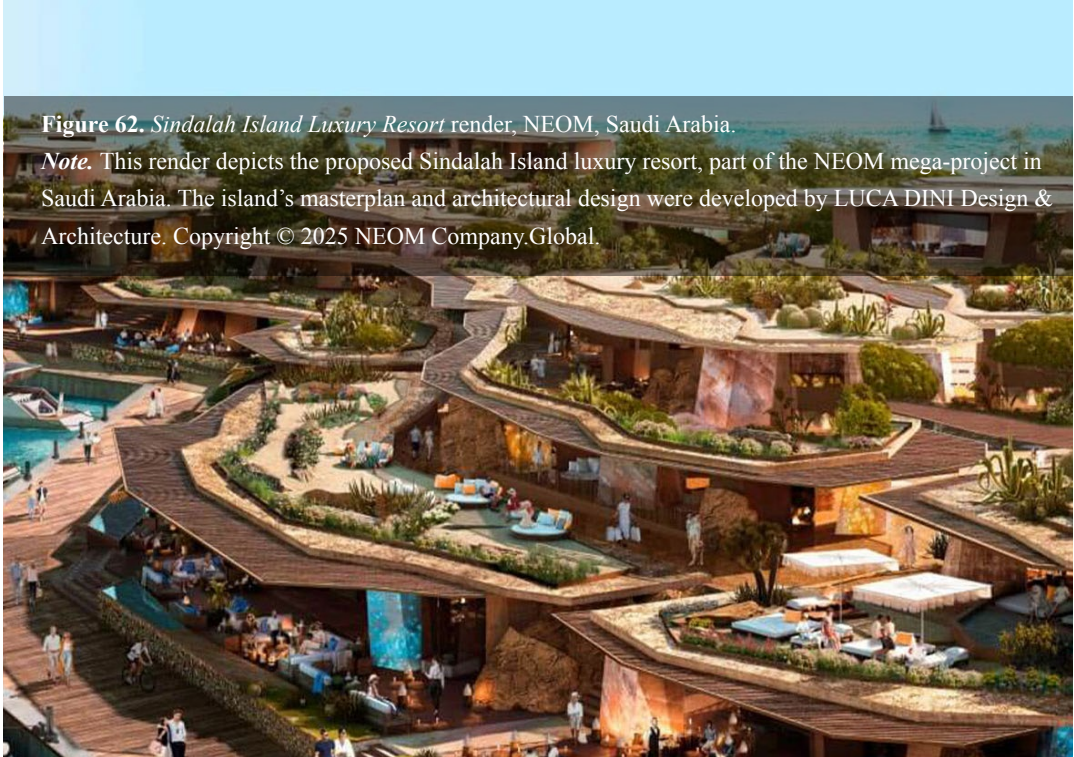


Figure 62. Sindalah Island Luxury Resort render, NEOM, Saudi Arabia.

Note. This render depicts the proposed Sindalah Island luxury resort, part of the NEOM mega-project in Saudi Arabia. The island’s masterplan and architectural design were developed by LUCA DINI Design & Architecture. Copyright © 2025 NEOM Company.Global.



Figure 63. Sindalah Island Luxury Resort, NEOM, Saudi Arabia.

Note. Images of the Sindalah Island resort showcase the completed architecture and landscape. From NEOM – Sindalah, by ResortX, 2 June 2025, <https://www.resortx.com/neom---sindalah/>. Copyright 2025 by ResortX.



Figure 64. Sindalah Island Luxury Resort render, NEOM, Saudi Arabia.

Copyright © 2025 NEOM Company.Global.

Figure 65. *Overwater Villa at Sheybarah Resort, The Red Sea, Saudi Arabia.*

Note. From Sheybarah Resort: A Red Sea Global Luxury Hotel Brand, by Red Sea Global, n.d., Red Sea Global (<https://www.redseaglobal.com/en/our-destinations/the-red-sea/sheybarah-island/>). Copyright n.d. by Red Sea Global.



amplified, the visual language of the original renders. The distinctive orbs, manufactured with advanced materials and assembled with minimal ecological disruption, became both a design and media success. The render-to-reality continuum was regularly mentioned in the international press, which commonly used before-and-after comparisons to emphasise how precisely the vision had been achieved. In this case, the render served as a framework of desire that effectively directed the project's architectural and environmental results, rather than just coming before reality.¹⁵⁷

The success of Sheybarah shows that the render can be more than just a show; it can be a helpful guide and a shared creative standard for investors, designers, builders, and the general public. The image, in this case, was not purely speculative; it became performative in the Butlerian sense, repeatedly cited and reiterated until it shaped the processes that brought it into being. As Hoffmann explained, “good ideas are never old”, the future is always under revision, shaped as much by belief as by buildability. The Sheybarah example thus reinforces the idea that renders are not neutral; they actively script what futures should look like and how they should feel.¹⁵⁸

The divergence between Sindalah and Sheybarah, therefore, highlights a critical theoretical insight into the status of the render in Saudi Arabia's giga-project era. The render holds power not because it depicts reality, but because it commands belief.¹⁵⁹ Yet belief is precarious, sustained by the careful orchestration of image, narrative, and experience. Where Sindalah demonstrates the fragility of the hyperreal when undermined by empirical discrepancy, Sheybarah affirms the render's potential to operate as a hegemonic device when it successfully crosses the threshold into the real.

Artists like Felicity Hammond have thought critically about the aesthetics of the render, bringing back the debris, construction, and infrastructure that are often left out of speculative images. Her works show how CGI images hide the messiness of work, demolition, and decay to make smooth urban dreams.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, Rut Blees Luxemburg's *London Dust* (2012)¹⁶¹ sought to demystify the promises of CGI architecture by confronting the glossy surfaces of speculative developments with their own fragility. In her large-scale photographic installation, Luxemburg layered images of sandbags, scaffolding, and unfinished construction sites against the seductive clarity of digital renders, foregrounding the instability and incompleteness that such images attempt to conceal.

The render, in this light, is as much a performance as it is a projection. It acts out hope, inevitability, and progress, even if these things aren't true. The render's success depends on its capacity to grab people's attention, get them thinking, and get them to invest, basically, to be a catalyst for possibilities. But it fails when reality catches up, and the difference between what people see and what they actually experience

¹⁵⁷ ““Living Rocks” off Saudi Arabia's Sheybarah Island Offer Glimpse of How Life on Earth Began”, *Arab News Japan*, n.d., accessed 4 September 2025, https://www.arabnews.jp/en/saudi-arabia/article_123748/.

¹⁵⁸ Auger, ‘Speculative Design’.

¹⁵⁹ Pallasmaa, *The Architecture of Image*.

¹⁶⁰ ‘One To Watch: Felicity Hammond’, accessed 4 September 2025, <https://www.sleek-mag.com/article/felicity-hammond/>.

¹⁶¹ Rut Blees Luxemburg, *London Dust*, n.d., Photograph.

Figure 66. Rendering of the overwater villas at *Sheybarah Resort*, Red Sea Project, Saudi Arabia.
Note. The design by Killa Design reflects the surrounding marine environment and sky through its reflective stainless steel orb-like structures. Copyright 2024 by Killa Design.



Figure 67. *Sheybarah Resort Villa* construction, Red Sea Project, Saudi Arabia.
Note. This image shows the villa under construction before being transported to its final overwater location. Image sourced from Red Sea Global's Twitter account. Copyright by Killa Design, 2024.



Figure 68. Overwater villa at *Sheybarah Resort*, The Red Sea, Saudi Arabia.
Note. From Sheybarah Resort: A Red Sea Global Luxury Hotel Brand, by Red Sea Global, n.d., Red Sea Global (<https://www.redseaglobal.com/en/our-destinations/the-red-sea/sheybarah-island/>). Copyright n.d. by Red Sea Global.

becomes too clear and too hard to ignore.

Ultimately, the render is somewhere between projection and performance, between wanting to do something and actually doing it. Its power comes not just from whether it keeps its promises, but also from how it writes desire, shapes vision, and brings about a future. The power of the render is not contingent on architectural completion, but on its circulation and affective force, its ability to mobilise belief, choreograph optimism, and impose coherence onto uncertainty. In this sense, the render should not be judged merely on the binary of success or failure. Instead, it must be understood as part of a wider performative apparatus, at once visionary and fallible, aspirational and incomplete, that continually negotiates between what is imagined and what is lived.

02.9 THE COLLECTIVE

In response to this dominant performative machinery, collectives have emerged as vital spaces of critical resistance and satirical intervention. Rather than directly opposing the optimism, these groups often mirror its aesthetics, exaggerate its logic, and co-opt its language to expose the absurdities embedded within it. Satire becomes a generative strategy, not to dismiss the future, but to unmask its exclusions and its contradictions. In this context, collectives operate not simply as critics from the margins, but as actors within the speculative field, capable of performing counter-narratives and reframing the politics of visibility, participation, and desire.

For example, the GCC collective offers a satirical yet incisive critique of these affective economies.¹⁶² Operating under the guise of a Gulf Cooperation Council-like entity, GCC mirrors the language, aesthetics, and posturing of regional power.¹⁶³ Their exhibitions often mimic the formats of trade expos, diplomatic summits, and luxury lifestyle promotions, complete with photo ops, slick signage, and choreographed smiles.¹⁶⁴ But beneath the glossy surfaces lies a critical edge: the recognition that positivity has become a state performance, and that emotion itself has been annexed by the machinery of branding.¹⁶⁵

What gives GCC its unique critical force is not just its aesthetic strategy, but its very structure as a collective.¹⁶⁶ In a region where individual voices are often isolated, the collective form becomes a powerful medium for subversion.¹⁶⁷ Historically, artist collectives in Western art have often functioned as sites of resistance, emerging in response to political upheaval, institutional dominance, or social exclusion.¹⁶⁸ In



Figure 69. *Royal Mirage* (2014), GCC. Digital print on wallpaper, oil on canvas, aluminum frames; dimensions variable.

Note. This installation transforms Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler's booth into a space evoking a Gulf luxury hotel, photographing a palatial interior on location at a multi-billion-dollar Gulf hotel. The work includes eight original oil paintings executed by a Thai painter in Kuwait, depicting the artists in traditional dress, seated sheikh-style against a lobby backdrop. GCC interrogates patriarchal presentations of regional monarchy, projecting a classless, gender-inclusive vision while exploring regal expression and the aesthetics of power in public interiors.

¹⁶² 'GCC - Artists - Mitchell-Innes & Nash', accessed 4 May 2025, <https://www.miandn.com/artists/gcc>.

¹⁶³ 'GCC, *Royal Mirage*, 2014', Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, accessed 4 May 2025, <https://www.k-t-z.com/artists/42-gcc/works/387-gcc-royal-mirage-2014/>.

¹⁶⁴ 'GCC: Achievements in Retrospective | MoMA', The Museum of Modern Art, accessed 4 May 2025, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3728>.

¹⁶⁵ Adam Gibbons and Eva Wilson, eds, *Quotation Mark Series #4: GCC Internal Affairs 2013-2018* (Nero Editions, 2018).

¹⁶⁶ Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁶⁷ Kester, *The One and the Many*.

¹⁶⁸ Art Fervour, 'Rebels with a Cause: How Art Collectives Are Reshaping Resistance', *Art Fervour*, 21 February 2025,

the context of the Gulf, GCC uses its collective authorship to destabilise notions of singular authority, gravitating instead towards a practice mode replicating the very bureaucratic mechanisms to which it opposes itself.¹⁶⁹ The collective’s anonymity and institutional mimicry act as camouflage, allowing them to infiltrate and expose systems from within.¹⁷⁰ Their performative gestures, however absurd, illuminate the seriousness of their inquiry: how cultural identity, emotional affect, and institutional aesthetics are co-opted by state and market forces. In this way, GCC extends the tradition of collective art practice into a new terrain, one where the critique is not just about content, but about form. It is not just what is said, but how and who says it.¹⁷¹ The collective becomes a counter-render: a reassembly of voices that resist legibility within the existing image architecture.

Through their work, GCC asks: what does it mean to be a citizen of a future-oriented state where feelings are metrics, and architecture is mood?¹⁷² How is wellness instrumentalised?¹⁷³ How are cities designed to produce not just infrastructure, but attitude? By appropriating the forms of power and exaggerating them to the point of absurdity, the collective opens a space to question the ideology beneath the render: the belief that to be modern is to be happy, and to be happy is to perform endlessly for the gaze of the world.

Together, the works of Al-Maria and the GCC collective do not reject the future, but they ask us to look at who is exhausted by it, who is excluded from it, and what emotions are no longer deemed acceptable within its frame. They insist that we account for the affective debris of accelerated optimism.¹⁷⁴ That we ask not only what futures are possible, but at what cost they are made plausible.

Beneath this affective regime lies a deeper cultural desire: the pursuit of newness as a marker of transformation and progress. In the Saudi context, this has often meant constructing a future that breaks visibly from the past, a move from desert to skyline.¹⁷⁵ The post-oil moment has been framed not only as an economic shift, but as a civilisational rebirth, one that promises innovation while quietly managing the remnants of what came before.¹⁷⁶ In this drive toward the new, the speculative self risks being flattened into a role it did not author. The render does not merely depict change; it demands it. And in this demand, the past is often re-edited or erased to accommodate a more palatable future.¹⁷⁷ What emerges is not a stable identity,

<https://artfervour.com/rebels-with-a-cause-how-art-collectives-are-reshaping-resistance/>.

169 The Museum of Modern Art, ‘GCC’.

170 Mostafa Heddaya, ‘Delusions of Grandeur: GCC at MoMA PS1 and the New Museum’, Hyperallergic, 26 September 2014, <http://hyperallergic.com/147061/delusions-of-grandeur-gcc-at-moma-ps1-and-the-new-museum/>.

171 Merve Tabur, *Settling the Desert, Unsettling the Mirage: Urban Ecologies of Arab and Gulf Futurisms in Ahmed Naji’s Using Life*, n.d., 187-208.

172 Rancière and Rockhill, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

173 Fariha Róisín, *Who Is Wellness for? An Examination of Wellness Culture and Who It Leaves Behind*, First edition (Harper Wave, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2022).

174 Heddaya, ‘Delusions of Grandeur’.

175 Saudi Arabia, ‘Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Vision 2030 Overview’, Riyadh: Council of Economic and Development Affairs, 2016, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/overview>.

176 Proctor and Al-Senussi, *Art in Saudi Arabia*.

177 PricewaterhouseCoopers, ‘Preserving the Past, Building the Future: Saudi Arabia’s Cultural Heritage and Business Synergy’, PwC, accessed 5 May 2025, <https://www.pwc.com/m1/en/media-centre/articles/preserving-the-past-building-the-future-sau>

but a looped rehearsal of one: hyper-visible, emotionally calibrated, and constantly updated. The works of Al-Maria and GCC point us toward the consequences of this cycle, not to halt the momentum, but to invite pause. To ask: can we imagine a future that does not require forgetting? Can cultural memory exist not as a curated echo, but as a field of multiplicities, unfinished, and alive?



Figure 70. My Vision (2017), GCC. Digital video; installation view of Commercial Break presented by Public Art Fund at Barclays Center’s “Oculus,” New York. Photo by Jason Wyche.

03 SINDBAD: A CASE STUDY

Accordingly, SINDBAD¹⁷⁸ is a collective that seeks to embrace impermanence and plurality, offering alternative images and stories of Saudi life. As the render necessitated the performance of a speculative self designed from above, the collective responded by cultivating a different kind of re-enactment: a bottom-up, communal process of misaligning and reauthoring identities together. Collectivity here becomes not only a method of working but also a strategy of resistance, making it possible to challenge what is projected onto us more effectively by producing counter-images and counter-narratives.

Conceived as an open, mobile platform for artistic and curatorial experimentation, SINDBAD is intentionally accessible and collaborative. Its members include Dr Effat Fadag, Abdullah Alamoudi, Damon Owen, Yasser Al Zahrani, Taha Baageel, Manar Eissa, Natalie Alssaraj, Mohsin Ali, and me. The name SINDBAD itself embodies this sense of movement: a community journeying from city to city, uncovering and sharing knowledge, fostering connections, and providing a platform for diverse voices.

Its members, Abdullah Alamoudi and Mohsin Ali, are also the founders of Thirdspace Studio,¹⁷⁹ an architectural practice in Jeddah. Their viewpoints as artists and architects demonstrate how SINDBAD navigates space and collective agency. “Exhibitions are exercises in space-making; curation is also a space-making exercise.” Mohsin Ali said during our conversation (see Appendix F). Consequently, SINDBAD exhibitions execute a distinct type of rendering, one that is unstable and contingent. The collective creates transient architectures that are permeable and accessible. Another perspective is added by Abdullah, who describes the collective’s function as “a stepping stone, a safe space” where artists can test, experiment, and display their work-in-progress. In his words, SINDBAD allows artists to present “something they wouldn’t have showcased, or were too afraid to showcase,” thereby countering competitive models of visibility with infrastructures of care and inclusion.

Both Abdullah and Mohsin also stressed the importance of the collective’s digital presence. Social media serves as what SINDBAD referred to as an “extension of the space,” a means of disseminating and preserving the works outside of their immediate contexts. Mohsin underlined that social media platforms are crucial for getting prompt feedback from communities, while Abdullah pointed out that “there’s a whole culture around how exhibitions are announced.” Instagram and other digital platforms serve as parallel exhibition spaces in this regard, maintaining visibility and conversation that add layers to the actual installations.

In parallel, the wider landscape of cultural production in Saudi Arabia was undergoing rapid transformation.

178 ‘SINDBAD Collective | Arab News’, accessed 5 May 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/tags/sindbad-collective>.

179 ‘Team — THIRD SPACE* Studio’, accessed 4 September 2025, <https://thirdspacestudio.org/Team>.

For many years, initiatives such as 2I,39 by The Saudi Arts Council were sustained largely by individuals, with minimal governmental involvement.¹⁸⁰ With the establishment of the Ministry of Culture¹⁸¹ (2018) and the rise of programs such as the Misk Art Institute,¹⁸² the Diriyah Biennale Foundation,¹⁸³ and Noor Riyadh,¹⁸⁴ support for the arts expanded dramatically. The new initiatives brought more attention to the arts, but they also brought fundamental changes to how culture was both defined and supported. The central role of visual culture in Vision 2030 led to an extraordinary market need for exhibition spaces and artist commissions.

Due to the increased demands this accelerated pace placed on established practitioners, some names, including mine, were repeated in local exhibitions. When faced with demanding deadlines, curators and producers looked to artists who had a track record of producing good work under pressure. Although this model worked well in the short term, it was unsustainable because it depleted artists and limited the scene. New and young artists were suddenly propelled into major platforms such as the Diriyah Biennale, sometimes after only a handful of exhibitions. This process was not accidental: mega-events generate pressure on underground practices, pushing them to adapt and grow further. In many ways, this pressure catalysed new energy within independent initiatives. Yet education has not kept pace with these demands. Formal arts education remains scarce, offered in only a handful of universities, and without greater investment in training and mentorship, the ecosystem risks becoming lopsided, rich in opportunities but lacking in pedagogical grounding.

SINDBAD, some of these gaps can be addressed by providing safe spaces, where artists could experiment and make mistakes. SINDBAD resisted institutional pressures in this way, enabling the gradual development of creative voices. Like the render, SINDBAD employs strategies of saturation and repetition. The current visual economy relies on a bombardment of polished images designed to persuade audiences of an inevitable future; SINDBAD, by contrast, produces a bombardment of voices, experiences, and realities that reflect the region’s multiplicity. The effect works on a different register, even though we might not have the same financial resources or technological tools as the render. Influencing communities on a small scale, instead of projecting speculative images outward, we circulate realities inward. This is how SINDBAD echoes the render’s emphasis on visibility while refocusing it on inclusivity, creating a collection of viewpoints that reject singularity and uphold the value of plurality.

The genealogy of this practice lies in earlier models of resistance and reinvention. The Shatta collective,¹⁸⁵ established in the early 2000s in Abha by artists such as Ahmed Mater and Abdunasser Al Garem, pioneered localised, collaborative, and experimental approaches to art-making at a time when institutional frameworks

180 ‘SAC’, accessed 4 September 2025, <https://sac.art/>.

181 Ministry of Culture, *Our Cultural Vision for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*.

182 ‘Home | Misk Art Institute’, accessed 4 September 2025, <https://miskartinstitute.org/en>.

183 ‘Diriyah Biennale Foundation - Home’, DIRIYAH BIENNALE FOUNDATION, accessed 4 September 2025, <https://biennale.org.sa/en>.

184 ‘Noor Riyadh’.

185 ‘Shatta | Exhibitions’, Ahmed Mater, accessed 4 June 2025, <https://www.ahmedmater.com/exhibitions/shatta>.

for the arts scarcely existed in Saudi Arabia. Originating in the Asir region, Shatta challenged preconceived notions about what Saudi art could be by embracing the outskirts both geographically and philosophically. Dialogic practice that prioritised lived experience and critical involvement with social and political transformation was made possible by it.

A decade later, Al-Hangar collective¹⁸⁶ reasserted the relevance of artist-led initiatives by occupying industrial warehouses in Jeddah between 2015 and 2017. At the time, Saudi Arabia had no formal arts institutions, no structured arts education, and no governmental support for art or design. Beyond the exhibitions that were taking place, there were few formal platforms for artistic development. Much of the international attention came instead through initiatives such as Edge of Arabia,¹⁸⁷ which brought Saudi art to international audiences and amplified the scene abroad.

Being part of Al-Hangar during this period was formative for me. I was still young in the art scene with limited experience; the group was largely composed of young artists, though some, such as Nasser Al Salem¹⁸⁸ and Ahmed Angawi¹⁸⁹, were already more established. This created an environment where levels of experience varied but where learning and exchange were constant. Al-Hangar became a space for me to experiment and get support from people, figuring out where they fit in the art industry. The event made clear how crucial it is to build networks and frameworks for collective authorship that are not reliant on conventional institutional support. Additionally, it emphasised that rather than waiting for official approval, artists themselves must create spaces that express cultural and political concerns. The basis for viewing communal practice as a constantly negotiated process, rather than a fixed system, was present in Al-Hangar’s collaborative culture and responsiveness to location. This sensibility is passed down to SINDBAD, but redirected towards new contexts and urgencies, shaped by the pressures of the present moment.

SINDBAD can also be situated within a wider genealogy of artist-led movements that mobilised collectivity as a means of resistance in times of political and social change. Laboratoire Agit’Art, established in Dakar in the 1970s by Issa Samb, El Hadji Sy, and Djibril Diop Mambéty, is a prime example of this.¹⁹⁰ The collective opposed fixed identities and preset aesthetics and valued performance, improvisation, and the use of found materials. Their work took place outside of traditional galleries on public streets, occupied places, and courtyards, where art became a direct encounter.

The activity of Agit’Art was both artistic and political; they established open, dialogic, and socially rooted spaces for art by tearing down established authorship and hierarchies. The artistic movement *SOS Culture*

186 Myrna Ayad, ‘With Al Hangar, 15 Young Artists Are Changing the Face of the Saudi Art Scene’, Artsy, 29 February 2016, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-15-young-artists-are-changing-the-face-of-the-saudi-art-scene>.

187 Stephen Stapleton, ed., *Edge of Arabia: Contemporary Art from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, 1. publ, Contemporary Art from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Booth-Clibborn Ed, 2012).

188 ‘Where I Work: Nasser Al Salem’, ArtAsiaPacific, 25 June 2025, <https://www.artasiapacific.com/issue/where-i-work-nasser-al-salem/>.

189 ‘AAS’, AAS, accessed 4 September 2025, <https://angawistudio.com/>.

190 Pierre-Antoine Lalande, *Inspiration #1: Laboratoire Agit’Art, El Hadji Sy & Aisha Dème • AFIELD*, 24 May 2024, <https://afield.org/inspiration-1-laboratoire-agitart-el-hadji-sy-aisha-deme/>.

(1995), along with other works, challenged Eurocentric views about Africa through their creative approach to cultural representation.¹⁹¹ The artistic movement Agit’Art promoted adaptation through its emphasis on collectivity and its rejection of permanence, which altered the artistic expectations for individual artists. The ethos of Shattah and Al-Hangar, who both arose in reaction to particular socio-political forces, is in line with their legacy. For SINDBAD, engaging with this heritage is not imitation but recognition of a shared impulse: to create spaces of openness and play in contexts where systems cannot encompass the full range of voices.

03.1 THE JOURNEY

SINDBAD has presented its exhibitions through different formats since its establishment. Earlier activated temporary sites often experimented with site-specific installations, open calls, and collaborative programming. These exhibitions were intentionally fluid.

SINDBAD: A Dream Like State of Mind (2021) was the first exhibition we staged. It began informally, almost impulsively, held in my studio at home and shaped by a spirit of openness and immediacy. The exhibition brought together a close-knit community of friends and artists who shared their ideas and works that were in progress. It was less about finality and more about process; anything anyone wanted to share, they could. The show was conceptually an invitation to enter the transitional state between consciousness and sleep. By accepting ambiguity and using the subconscious and the surreal as counterpoints to the hyper-rationality of institutional frameworks, the works resisted fixed narratives. Artists experimented with illusion, repetition, and shifting spatial cues, creating an atmosphere that was both tender and destabilising. Despite its modest beginnings, the demand was overwhelming; nearly 500 people came through the space over the course of the exhibition. The title *A Dream Like State of Mind* was not merely metaphorical; it was an insistence on fluidity over coherence, and affect over didacticism. At the time, we didn’t imagine it would become a recurring, yearly project.

During this period, Jeddah was undergoing visible upheaval as neighbourhoods such as Al Ruwais were demolished to make way for new developments across the city.¹⁹² Displacement and uncertainty intensified: rents rose sharply, and many residents were forced to leave Jeddah for more affordable nearby towns.¹⁹³ Communities reacted by recording the demolitions and gathering in their neighbourhoods to remember and celebrate the time they had together before relocating. In our conversation, Anhar Salem stated: “*We began documenting the erasure and loss of districts in Jeddah.*” (Appendix H). Everything about this moment felt fragile, communities in transition, and the exhibition became entangled with this wider atmosphere of precarity, resonance, and collective reckoning.

191 ‘Rethinking Performance As Archive Through The Practice of El Hadji Sy and Issa Samb’, SUNU JOURNAL, accessed 5 September 2025, <https://www.sunujournal.com/essays/rethinking-performance-as-archive-through-the-practice-of-elnsphad-jinbspsynbspandbnbpissanbbspsamb-wrjds>.

192 ‘Dr. Ehsan Bayat - What You Need to Know about the New \$20 Billion Jeddah Central Project’.

193 Edinburgh University Press, ‘The Demolition of Jeddah and the Relocation of a Neighbourhood in Turkey’, *Edinburgh University Press Blog*, 18 April 2024, <https://eupublishingblog.com/2024/04/18/the-demolition-of-jeddah/>.

At the heart of the exhibition space, we constructed a makeshift boxing ring, a stage where performances and musicians unfolded over the course of the show. The ring served as a site of confrontation and vulnerability, of energy and exposure, both literally and figuratively. It amplified the idea that openness can coexist with force, and that collective space can hold both tenderness and confrontation side by side.

SINDBAD: I Can See Land (2023/4) responded to the changing cultural and political environment of the time. Thresholds and the expectation of arrival were examined in this exhibition. The metaphor of “land” became a place of projection: a goal, a limit, and a promise. While some artists tackled the concept of arrival more abstractly, using cycles and tides, others dealt directly with themes of migration and exile. The exhibition expanded into areas that blended public and private space.

SINDBAD: I Can See Land unfolded in the shadow of the regional upheavals of October 7th 2023, and the devastating aftermath. This collective trauma intensified the atmosphere in which the exhibition was received. The uncertain nature of arrival and the fatigue of waiting presented new urgencies in the light of the growing violence and widespread displacement.¹⁹⁴ It showed how fragile the idea of “land” can be, both as a promise and as a site of safety. In this context, the exhibition’s examination of thresholds and borders became intertwined with a state of uncertainty, positioning its local discussions within a collective environment of instability and conflict.

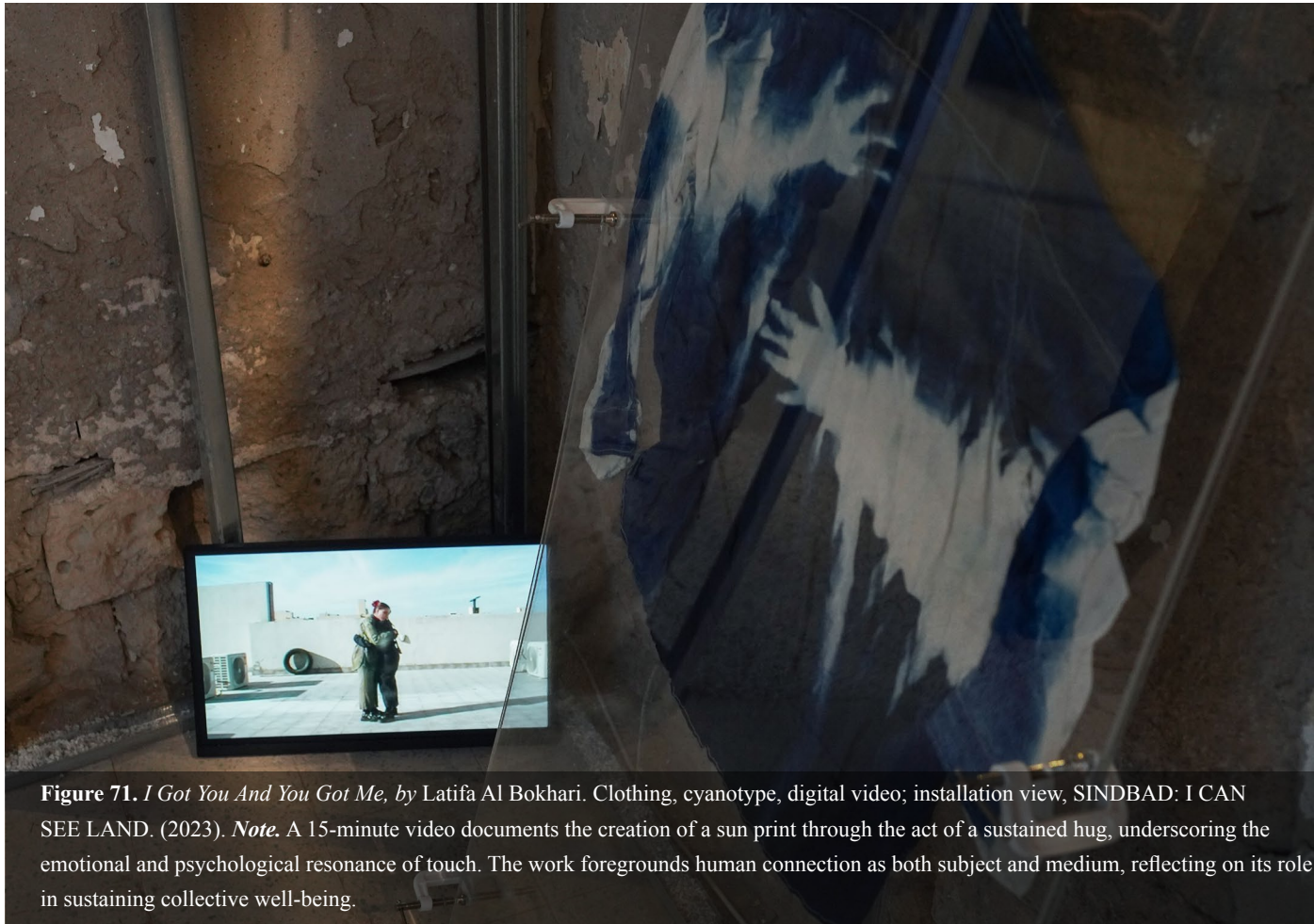


Figure 71. *I Got You And You Got Me*, by Latifa Al Bokhari. Clothing, cyanotype, digital video; installation view, SINDBAD: I CAN SEE LAND. (2023). **Note.** A 15-minute video documents the creation of a sun print through the act of a sustained hug, underscoring the emotional and psychological resonance of touch. The work foregrounds human connection as both subject and medium, reflecting on its role in sustaining collective well-being.

194 Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonial Conquest and Resistance* (Profile Books, 2020).

This was also the first time SINDBAD received funding from the Ministry of Culture to realise the exhibition, marking a significant shift in both resources and expectations. As part of Balad Al Fann, *I Can See Land* was no longer a short, improvised intervention but a three-month program embedded in the annex of Sharbatly House in Al Balad.¹⁹⁵ With this support, we constructed pavilions across the site, shipped artwork from overseas, and planned a number of public events, performances, and discussions.

At the same time, institutional support brought pressures that were unfamiliar to our earlier iterations. For this show, we were asked to quantify our impact through visitor numbers and to align with curatorial frameworks shaped to the festival as a whole. The balance was delicate, negotiating between SINDBAD’s ethos of impermanence and openness, and the accountability demanded by governmental patronage. However, this negotiation also produced something new: the exhibition became a venue for institutional exposure and grassroots collaboration, where the communities that had long supported Jeddah’s cultural fabric were acknowledged and provided with support. In giving back through programming, access, and presence, SINDBAD was able to extend its commitment to collective authorship while testing how independent initiatives can operate within and alongside infrastructures of the Vision 2030.



Figure 72. A section of *The Observatory Pavilion*, SINDBAD: I Can See Land (2023/4). **Note.** Documentation of the pavilion’s architectural structure, highlighting its role as both a viewing point and a gathering place. In their interview, Thirdspace described the Observatory as a site for “looking outward and inward simultaneously,” a structure that frames the horizon while inviting reflection on presence, community, and future imaginaries. In this image, the pavilion is activated through *Balanced Words*, a live dialogue where participants respond to one another in poetry.

195 ‘Balad Al-Fann Shines Spotlight on Rich Culture, Arts of Jeddah’, Arab News, 13 January 2024, <https://arab.news/9ag63>.

Figure 73. Opening Event at *The Observatory Pavilion*, *SINDBAD: I Can See Land* (2023/4).

Note. Documentation of the pavilion's opening event, featuring live performances including a Mizmar ensemble, Alyoung & Rander rap performance, and DJ Sobia. The event activated the pavilion as a social and performative space within the exhibition.



Figure 74. Opening Event at *The Observatory Pavilion, SINDBAD: I Can See Land* (2023/4).
Note. Mizmar performance, a traditional Hijazi folk dance accompanied by drums and Mizmar pipes, is often staged collectively in a circle. As part of the opening event, the Mizmar activated the pavilion as a social and performative space, weaving regional heritage into the exhibition's framework.



Figure 75. Opening Event at *The Observatory Pavilion, SINDBAD: I Can See Land* (2023/4).
Note. Alyoung & Rander's performance.

In 2025, this commitment materialised in *SINDBAD: On the Road*, a mobile exhibition that marked a key development of the collective’s vision. We created a custom-built vehicle to move between Jeddah, Riyadh, Khobar and Bahrain, transforming public and liminal spaces into sites of artistic exchange. Because of its mobility, the project was able to respond to a variety of local geographies, activating each stop with community engagement and specially designed programming. The inclusion of Bahrain was intentional, not only as a logistical endpoint, but as a symbolic crossing of borders. This was the first time we had exhibited abroad. With its own grassroots initiatives and independent contemporary art scene, Bahrain, a neighbouring Gulf country, offered a great setting for cross-cultural dialogue. This regional extension underscored the collective’s broader aim: to rethink cultural infrastructure from the ground up, embracing circulation, decentralisation, and translocal solidarity as core principles of its practice.

SINDBAD here positioned itself into a broader trans-Gulf ecology, where shared histories, migratory movements, and parallel trajectories were brought into conversation. By entering Bahrain, the collective embraced the complexities of regional solidarity, opening itself to new audiences, new contexts, and the frictions and affinities that emerge when “local” is no longer tied to a singular place.

This ethos of mobility and openness was reflected in the exhibition’s very architecture. Designed to challenge the traditional boundaries of art spaces, *On the Road* removed limitations on the number of participating artists or artworks that could be displayed. Its collapsible three-panel system was practical, able to reconfigure, cross borders, and collapse as needed. The exhibitions not only showcase art but also cultivate spaces for exchange. The project included collaborations with local partners such as Wasl Art Space in Jeddah, Lamaat in Riyadh’s JAX District, and Bohemia in Khobar, as well as institutions such as Riwaq Art Space in Bahrain. Each collaboration became an invitation to experiment with new models of presenting art and connecting with communities, whether through car meetups, spontaneous location stops, or open mics in informal venues. These interventions weren’t staged performances, but lived gestures.

At one car meetup, for example, a man approached us with curiosity, asking what was taking place. After we explained the exhibition and showed him the mobile unit mounted on the car, he examined the works closely before pausing to tell us that his daughter was an artist. He asked if he could bring one of her works. We encouraged him, and though we were preparing to close by 11:00 AM, he returned minutes later with a drawing his daughter had made. Handing it to us gently, he asked if it could be included in the show. It was a small drawing of Hello Kitty and Kuromi.

These moments reflect what SINDBAD sought to explore: what happens when art is not only seen but also shared, not only curated but also carried, passed hand to hand across cities, streets, and stories. The collective’s approach made space for unpredictability, for interruption, for co-authorship, resisting the polished logic of static shows and embracing the ephemeral and the generous.

The experience of *SINDBAD: On the Road* provided invaluable insights into the generative power of mobile exhibitions. By foregrounding the value of the encounter, the project embraced the instability that comes with movement: works changed location, new contributions were added spontaneously, and public

interactions altered the exhibition’s form and meaning over time. This openness challenged the conventional hierarchies between artist, audience, and curator, enabling a more dynamic and inclusive model of curating.

This fluidity enabled the structure to remain relevant and responsive to the communities it engaged. Through co-designed workshops, open mic nights, and impromptu installations, a sense of shared authorship developed, in which the act of creation was no longer confined to the artist but extended to anyone who wanted to engage and respond to what we were doing. Throughout the tour, as the exhibition moved from one city to the next, its contents were continually rearranged and reshaped in response to each new environment. The exhibition was never fixed. Conversations around belonging and access surfaced organically. On the road, people welcomed us into their homes and studio spaces, not merely as venues, but as gestures of hospitality and support. In every city, we were invited to dinners, welcomed into private spaces, and offered help in ways we hadn’t anticipated.

This atmosphere of generosity was at the heart of this journey. We never knew who would show up, when they would come, or what they would bring. We were risking the unknown together. People from different backgrounds, artists, poets, mechanics, children, and students came together to create and to listen.

These lessons align with a philosophy that views art as a social tool, not merely an aesthetic object, but a process of building relationships, igniting dialogue, and reimagining shared space.¹⁹⁶ This approach has affinities with the thinking of Nicolas Bourriaud, whose concept of Relational Aesthetics posits that the artwork is a “social interstice”, a space where human relations are both the medium and the material.¹⁹⁷ Similarly, SINDBAD echoes the ethos of initiatives like the International Roaming Biennial of Tehran, which used mobility and informality to critique rigid institutional structures.¹⁹⁸

As the collective looks to the future, it remains strongly committed to expanding the idea of a mobile, participatory art space, one that aims to foster inclusive environments. Instead of following a specific aesthetic or curatorial path, SINDBAD changes with each interaction and situation. In doing so, it reframes its interaction with the speculative self as an ongoing negotiation process. This is not to say the speculative self disappears; rather, it is redirected. Re-enactment here becomes a method: a way of rehearsing alternative futures, building ephemeral communities, and co-producing the conditions for expression.

If the reader asks us to perform a fixed vision of the future, SINDBAD counters by staging futures in flux, where art is not simply shown but shared. Its modular structure, open mic events, and guerrilla-style installations prioritise collaboration over conclusion and dialogue over display. The collective thus operates not outside the system, but alongside and in tension with it. What SINDBAD produces is a speculative site where the desire for newness is not a trap, but a portal, an opening for art to remain porous and alive. SINDBAD’s practice approaches re-enactment not as repetition but as disalignment. Where the state render

196 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, New edition (Verso, 2022).

197 Nicolas Bourriaud et al., *Relational Aesthetics*, Documents Sur l’art (les Presses du réel, 2002).

198 ‘Urban Jealousy | the 1st International Roaming Biennial of Tehran’, accessed 5 September 2025, <http://www.bienni-altehran.com/>.

Figure 76. Events and workshops at *The Observatory Pavilion, SINDBAD: I Can See Land* (2023/4).

Note. The pavilion functioned as a central gathering and observation point within the exhibition, framing spatial and conceptual thresholds while offering audiences a site for reflection and participation. It hosted workshops and events, including the SINDBAD skateboarding competition, a writing workshop with Sara Taibah, and a children's robotics workshop, encouraging interactive and community-driven engagement.



Figure 77. Events and workshops at *The Observatory Pavilion, SINDBAD: I Can See Land* (2023/4).



Figure 78. *SINDBAD: On the Road* (2025), Lammat x Beast House, Riyadh.

Note. Documentation of the mobile exhibition *SINDBAD: On the Road*, which reimagined the exhibition as a collapsible, mobile architecture moving across cities and sites. Collaboration, improvisation, and situational adaptation shaped the presentation, with each location's environment and logistical constraints influencing how installations unfolded and were experienced. The flat-pack wooden structure transformed into walls, seating, and plinths, merging architecture with exhibition language and emphasising impermanence, collective engagement, and site-specific encounter.



Figure 79. *SINDBAD: On the Road* (2025), Lammat x Beast House, Riyadh.

Figure 80. *SINDBAD: On the Road* (2025), Lammat x Beast House, Riyadh.



Figure 81. *SINDBAD: On the Road* (2025), Wasl Art Space, Jeddah.



Figure 82. *SINDBAD: On the Road* (2025), Wasl Art Space, Jeddah.



invites a confirming performance, SINDBAD uses re-enactment as a method of mis-reading and re-writing the script. In practical terms, the collective multiplies points of entry (open calls, mobile architectures, porous authorship). Re-enactment here is a rehearsal understood literally: a trying-out in public, a provisional self becoming legible alongside others, a shared experiment in which error, hesitation, and the unpolished are not defects but conditions of knowledge. The speculative self is therefore not performed as a completed identity, but as a situated process, iterative, and revisable.

This is also a question of space. Building on Bhabha’s Third Space¹⁹⁹, SINDBAD creates zones where identities are not authenticated by resemblance to a master image, but translated through encounter. The mobile exhibition, appearing in streets, car parks, and homes, acts as a moving interstice that fights the render’s fixed coordinates of visibility. Hybridity is the operating condition, and “the social” is the infrastructural precondition for counter-images to emerge and circulate.

If the render aspires to seamless, the collective strategically introduces friction, glitches, delays, overlapping authorship and competing narratives. These frictions are not simply oppositional; they are diagnostic. They surface the gap between lived time and projected time, between place and its marketing, between memory and master plan.

SINDBAD practices counter-rendering through collective re-enactment. The shift is subtle but decisive. The speculative self stops being a direct assignment and becomes a shared space to imagine and to try. What results is not the negation of futurity but its grounding, futures that remain accountable to place, to memory, and to the fragile infrastructures of relation that make any future livable.

Figure 83. *SINDBAD: On the Road* (2025), Khobar, Bahrain, and Jeddah stops.
Note. Documentation of the exhibition at its third stop in Khobar (Bohemia), fourth stop in Bahrain (Ruwaiq Art Space), and final stop in Jeddah (Naqsh Art Studio). Each location transformed the mobile exhibition, incorporating new works, interactions, and site-specific adaptations. The journey across cities and borders reflected the accumulation of experiences, gestures, and contributions, creating a layered record of mobility, encounter, and the traces of stories collected along the route.



199 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed (Taylor and Francis, 2012).

04 THE HAUNTING

Beyond the glossy futurist renderings of a “new” Saudi Arabia lies a more complex terrain of identity.²⁰⁰ Vernacular architecture, oral traditions, and folklore in the Arabian Peninsula form a cultural bedrock that contemporary artists are excavating and reimagining.²⁰¹ Rather than discarding the past in pursuit of sleek modernity, these artists weave old narratives into new visions, ensuring that national transformation does not equate to cultural amnesia.²⁰² In doing so, they provide a deeper regional context for the “speculative self,” grounding futuristic aspirations in the lived heritage of place and community. This tension between past and future creates a more nuanced and grounded vision of Saudi identity, challenging the omission of local memory in official narratives and asking, as one research question posits, “what lies beyond the frame” of the imagined city.



Figure 84. *Al Zabun* (1969), Safeya Binzagr.

Note. One of the first unveiled female portraits in Saudi art, this painting is part of Binzagr’s broader effort to document pre-oil social life in the Kingdom, preserving everyday scenes, dress, and customs rapidly changing amid modernization.

200 Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

201 Ileana Popa Baird and Hülya Yağcıoğlu, eds, *All Things Arabia: Arabian Identity and Material Culture*, Arts and Archaeology of the Islamic World, volume 16 (Brill, 2021).

202 ‘How Saudi Artists Are Embracing Cultural Heritage through Craftsmanship’, Arab News, 24 September 2023, <https://arab.news/956pb>.

Safeya Binzagr (1940–2023), also known as the “Mother of Saudi Art”.²⁰³ Devoted her working life to documenting the everyday life of Saudi Arabia in the pre-oil boom era, with special focus on women’s lives. Working as a painter in an era when images of females were religiously sensitive, she navigated these boundaries by adopting a semi-abstract style for figures while still vividly depicting cultural details.²⁰⁴ Her canvases became a visual archive of vanishing traditions: wedding caravans and Hajj processions, domestic rituals, local games and costumes.²⁰⁵ For instance, one celebrated painting portrays the Mahmal (the ceremonial palanquin for the Holy Ka’ba) being carried through old Jeddah’s streets before Hajj, while another shows a woman sitting on the floor combing her hair as a helper holds up a mirror. Yet another scene captures boys absorbed in a game of Al-Kubush, flicking small bones from goat joints as makeshift marbles.

By the time Binzagr returned to Jeddah in the 1960s after studying abroad, she found that the storied city of her childhood “was no longer there”, its coral-stone houses and courtyard life swiftly overtaken by “imported modernity” in the wake of oil. This cultural disjunction precipitated what she described as an existential crisis of identity, fueling her instinct to preserve what was being erased.²⁰⁶ Lacking even photographs of the old ways, Binzagr relied on oral histories, the tales and memories recounted by her sister and elders, to reconstruct scenes of Hijazi life on canvas. In doing so, she created what one critic called a “reservoir of images” that safeguarded vernacular memory against the tide of change.

Crucially, Binzagr placed Saudi women front and centre in these works, asserting their visibility in the national story at a time when women’s faces were often literally veiled in public and in art. Her famous 1969 portrait *Al Zabun*, depicting a Saudi woman in vibrant traditional dress, painted with an unveiled face, was a bold act of self-representation, so unprecedented that Binzagr sought her family’s approval before exhibiting it.²⁰⁷ By 1970, she became the first Saudi woman to hold a solo art exhibition in the Kingdom, and later established Darat Safeya Binzagr, Saudi Arabia’s first art museum (2000), to house her work and her growing archive of images, traditional costumes and jewellery. Through five decades of painting, Binzagr’s love for her homeland’s cultures produced “counter-images” that challenged reductive Western notions of Saudi identity as only an oil-wealth spectacle or an empty desert. Instead, her art insists that the nation’s future must emerge from a dialogue with its past, the trees, buildings, and stories that once defined everyday life.²⁰⁸ In Binzagr’s work, memory becomes an act of resistance against cultural erasure, keeping alive a richly textured heritage that can inform and ground the futures to come.²⁰⁹

203 ‘Safeya Binzagr, Pioneer of Saudi Art, 1940–2024’, accessed 5 May 2025, <https://artreview.com/safeya-binzagr-pioneer-of-saudi-art-1940-2024/>

204 Safeya Binzagr, *Saudi Arabia: An Artist’s View of the Past*, with Arabian Resource Management (Three Continents Publishers with the collaboration of Arabian Resource Management, Geneva, 1979).

205 Safeya Binzagr, *Darzah: 200 Years of Sartorial Heritage in Saudi Arabia*, First edition, ed. Rosa Maria Falvo, trans. Maria K. Alem (Mondadori Libri, 2024).

206 ‘An Ode to Safeya Binzagr - Dazed MENA’, accessed 5 September 2025, <https://www.dazed.me/art-photography/an-ode-to-safeya-binzagr>.

207 ‘An Ode to Safeya Binzagr - Dazed MENA’.

208 Binzagr, *Saudi Arabia*.

209 Binzagr, *Darzah*.

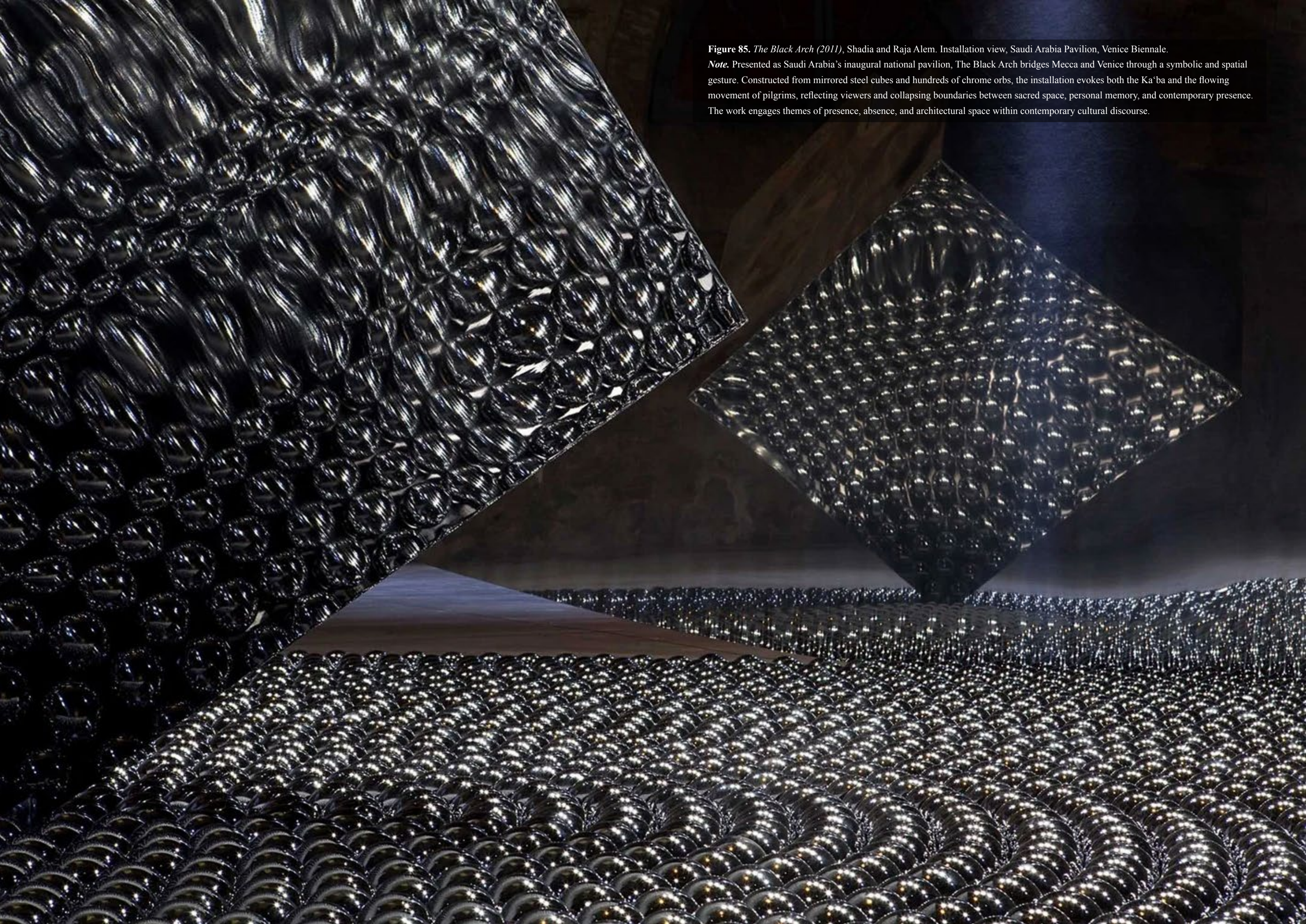


Figure 85. *The Black Arch* (2011), Shadia and Raja Alem. Installation view, Saudi Arabia Pavilion, Venice Biennale.

Note. Presented as Saudi Arabia's inaugural national pavilion, *The Black Arch* bridges Mecca and Venice through a symbolic and spatial gesture. Constructed from mirrored steel cubes and hundreds of chrome orbs, the installation evokes both the Ka'ba and the flowing movement of pilgrims, reflecting viewers and collapsing boundaries between sacred space, personal memory, and contemporary presence. The work engages themes of presence, absence, and architectural space within contemporary cultural discourse.

From then on, generations of Saudi artists have continued this weaving of memory and futurity. Shadia Alem, for one, frames her contemporary installations in direct dialogue with folklore, literature, and even the physical landscapes of pre-oil Arabia. Her acclaimed work “The Black Arch”, which represented Saudi Arabia in its first national pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale, exemplifies this approach. Co-created with her sister, novelist Raja Alem, The Black Arch was conceived as a symbolic bridge between two worlds: the holy city of Mecca (the Alem sisters’ birthplace) and the cosmopolitan realm of Venice.²¹⁰ The installation featured a large oval structure of polished steel, half-enshrined in a black veil-like panel and flanked by suspended reflective cubes. Hundreds of smooth chrome spheres swirled out in concentric patterns on the floor, evoking both the orbiting movement of pilgrims around the Ka’ba and the maritime traffic of Venice’s canals.²¹¹ Critically, the piece drew on a tale told by the artists’ own grandmother, a cautionary folklore about a king’s bride who is forbidden to open a mysterious black door, and who, upon defying the order, steps into an unknown realm. By titling the work The Black Arch, Shadia Alem explicitly links this childhood fable to the experience of crossing thresholds into the unseen. The viewer, like the curious girl in the story, is invited to “reach the unknown” beyond the black door.

In Venice, this translated into a metaphor for cultural exchange and revelation: the Black Arch installation became a kind of portal between East and West, past and future, the personal and the universal²¹². Its mirrored surfaces quite literally turned spectators into participants, “the work disappears, and the audience appears in it,” as Shadia noted, describing the space as a theatre where the viewer’s own reflection completes the art²¹³. This gesture speaks to self-representation and the “re-enactment of selfhood” in a profound way: the individual is made conscious of their image amidst a field of cultural symbols, prompting a meditation on how one’s identity is both reflected in heritage and refracted in modernity. Alem’s other works reinforce this interplay. In My I Cloud Heritage (2014), for instance, she uses the metaphor of digital cloud storage to “backup” Arab cultural memory, revealing in a video installation “glimpses of storage... revolving around our artsy and literary heritage before Islam and after”.²¹⁴ Classical Arabic poems (the pre-Islamic Mu‘allaqāt odes) echo alongside Quranic calligraphy and the golden embroidery of the Ka’ba’s kiswa cloth in this piece.²¹⁵ By preserving ancient poetry and sacred art in a virtual cloud, Shadia suggests that even our most futuristic imaginings remain tethered to ancestral voices.

Likewise, her 2022 desert installation I Have Seen Thousands of Stars and One Fell in AIUla adopts origami-like geometric forms to reference “the Arabian desert’s literature, mathematics and mythology”,

embedding the myths of caravans and starry nights into a contemporary land-art aesthetic²¹⁶. In Shadia Alem’s vision, memory is not a static archive but an active catalyst, a palette of symbols and stories that can be folded into new shapes. By drawing on folklore and Hejazi family narratives, she keeps those older cultural forms visible within the avant-garde, ensuring that the march toward the future does not trample the “playful spirits” of place and history. Her works ultimately invite a dual perspective, much like the dual bright-and-veiled structure of The Black Arch, where one is encouraged to see both the modern self and the ancestral “ghost” in the mirror, coexisting.

Another leading voice, Manal AlDowayan, expands this conversation of memory and prospect, specifically addressing women’s subjectivity in the rapidly transforming Saudi Arabian landscape. AlDowayan’s multimedia art, spanning photography, installation, and participatory projects, explicitly grapples with collective memory, gender, and the negotiation of visibility.²¹⁷ In a society hurtling through socio-economic transformation, she often asks: What (and who) is remembered, and what is left out, in the story of progress? One powerful example is her ongoing project “If I Forget You, Don’t Forget Me” (2012), which gathered personal artefacts and oral histories from the first generation of Saudi men and women who came of age during the oil boom.²¹⁸ Through intimate interviews and still-life photographs, AlDowayan unearthed poignant family stories that straddle the pre-oil and oil eras.

In one narrative from this series, an elderly man recalls his childhood as a Bedouin shepherd enduring a deadly drought, surviving on nothing but dates and a skin water pouch during a desperate desert trek, only to later find himself working as a Western-educated chemical engineer during the petroleum boom. “Saud’s story is a reminder of how young Saudi Arabia is as a country,” AlDowayan notes pointedly.²¹⁹ The implication is clear: within a single lifetime, an entire way of life (tribal, agrarian, oral) gave way to a radically different modern existence. By memorialising these lived transitions, often through the humble objects that carry memory (a preserved camera and old photos of a lost homeland, a commemorative oil-company trinket, a high school diploma denied to a top-ranking girl because of her gender), AlDowayan intervenes in the national narrative.²²⁰ She ensures that the “unnamed and forgotten” contributors to society are not lost in the shadow of gleaming skyscrapers.

Her work Tree of Guardians (2014) is emblematic: a large-scale sculptural installation crafted as an apricot tree whose hundreds of metallic leaves each bear the name of a Saudi woman and an encapsulated memory or oral story contributed by that woman’s family.²²¹ The piece honoursthe generations of mothers,

210 ‘The Black Arch by Shadia and Raja Alem – 2011 Venice Biennale’, *National Pavilion of Saudi Arabia | Biennale Di Venezia*, n.d., accessed 5 September 2025, <https://saudipavilion.org/art/2011-2/>.
211 Shadia Alem and Raja Alem, *The Black Arch*, 2011, Installation (Stainless steel, cast iron, fabric, stone, projected photographs, and sound), 3.5 × 7.0 × 3.5 meters, Saudi Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy.
212 Biennale de Venise, ed., *Al-Falak al-Aswad: Al-Mamlaka’ al- ‘Arabiyya’ al-Sa’ ūdiyya’, Bīnālī al-Bunduqiyya’* (Wizāra’ al-ṭaqafā, 2011).
213 ‘Venice Biennale 2011: Saudi Arabia’s The Black Arch | Dazed’, accessed 5 May 2025, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/10554/1/venice-biennale-2011-saudi-arabias-the-black-arch?>
214 Shadia Alem, *My I Cloud Heritage*, n.d., Video, <https://www.shadiaalem.com/my-cloud-heritage-by-shadia-alem>.
215 Alem, *My I Cloud Heritage*.

216 Shadia Alem, *I Have Seen Thousands of Stars and One Fell in AIUla*, 2022, Mirrored lacquered stainless steel, 350 cm × 350 cm × 350 cm, Desert X AIUla 2022, AIUla Desert, Saudi Arabia, <https://www.shadiaalem.com/i-have-seen-thousands-of-stars-and-one-fell-in-alula>.
217 ./ra/moc.nayawodlanam.www//:sptth ,5202 enuJ 21 dessecca ,منال الضويان , منال الضويان
218 Manal AlDowayan, *If I Forget You, Don’t Forget Me*, 2012, Photography, Variable, <https://www.manaldowayan.com/viewing-room/14-if-i-forget-you-dont-forget-me-collection/>.
219 ‘If I Forget You, Don’t Forget Me | AramcoWorld’, accessed 5 May 2025, <https://www.aramcoworld.com/articles/2015/if-i-forget-you-dont-forget-me>
220 ‘If I Forget You, Don’t Forget Me | AramcoWorld’.
221 Manal Al Dowayan, *Tree of Guardians*, 2014, Brass leaves, ink, fish wire, art paper with ink drawings, and sound record-

grandmothers, aunts and teachers who, as she explains, were the true “repositories and transmitters of traditional culture... often in an oral fashion”. Through lullabies, folktales, and poems, these women carried forward the identity of a people, even as the country underwent tumultuous change.

Tree of Guardians not only commemorates their role but also projects their legacy into the future, quite literally, as the artwork is meant to grow with added stories and participants. “The future is built out of fragments of the past,” reads a quote by curator Hans Ulrich Obrist that AlDowayan prominently features in this installation.²²² True to that idea, she situates the artwork as a time-bridge: “drawing from the past, celebrating a current generation of women, and projecting their cultural identities far into the future.” At the inaugural Diriyah Biennale in Riyadh (2021), AlDowayan re-staged Tree of Guardians with a new interactive feature: a microphone where visitors were invited to “Tell me a story about your mother,” thereby contributing live oral histories to the piece, a powerful testament to how art can facilitate the re-enactment of selfhood at a collective scale.²²³ In these participatory acts, Saudi women and men became not just spectators of a futuristic vision, but authors of their own narrative, speaking into the architecture of an artwork that symbolically shelters their voices.

AlDowayan’s broader practice similarly tackles issues of gender and visibility: from her earlier photo series “I Am”²²⁴, which challenged stereotypical roles assigned to women, to installations like “Suspended Together”²²⁵, where hundreds of white doves, each printed with a real travel permission slip required for Saudi women by male guardians, hang frozen in mid-flight. The beauty and tension in that piece encapsulate the experience of a generation of women: poised for freedom yet tethered by bureaucracy. Throughout, AlDowayan uses art to ask who gets to appear in the picture of the nation. By foregrounding the memories of those often marginalised (women, Bedouin, emigrants, the “invisible” workers of a petro-state), she counters the erasures that can occur in the rush toward a singular, approved future.

In bringing these artists together, there is a thread that is consistent: pre-oil cultural forms continue to inform contemporary artistic responses to speculative futures, acting as a crucial counterpoint to the slick hyper-visualisation of change. These futuristic visions function as both an invitation and a prescription, shaping how people should desire, behave, and belong in the new nation, implicitly smoothing over the complexities of history in favour of a shiny consensus. In these utopian digital vistas, what is omitted becomes just as significant as what is shown. The question of who gets to be visible in the national imagination, and which histories are erased in the process, looms large. Artists like Binzagr, Alem, and AlDowayan are actively filling in those blanks. They anchor contemporary artistic practice in a dialogue with history, ensuring that

ings of oral histories, Site-specific installation with 2,000 leaves and 58 family tree drawings, Saudi Arts Council, 21,39 Exhibition, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, <https://www.manaldowayan.com/viewing-room/17-tree-of-guardians/>.

222 Al Dowayan, *Tree of Guardians*.

223 Al Dowayan, *Tree of Guardians*.

224 Manal AlDowayan, *I Am*, 2015, Silver Gelatin Print, 40 x 50 cm, <https://www.manaldowayan.com/artworks/12-i-am-collection/>.

225 Manal AlDowayan, *Suspended Together*, 2011, Porcelain standing and pecking doves; large installation made of 200 fiberglass bird sculptures (flying, standing, and pecking), Variable size.

the image of tomorrow is haunted, effectively by, the voices of yesterday.

Through the integration of pre-oil heritage into cutting-edge artistic expression, Saudi artists provide a critical consciousness to the nation’s transformation. They remind us that transformation is not a linear tale of replacement (old versus new), but a palingenesis, a rebirth, where past and future continuously inform each other. The speculative self that emerges in their work is, therefore, deeply rooted even as it evolves: it carries the pearls of oral poetry, the footprints of mud-brick architecture, the echoes of grandmother’s lore as it steps into the new. This enriched vision of identity resists cultural erasure by asserting that what might seem outdated or invisible (a folktale, a traditional dress, a demolished neighbourhood) still holds generative power. In the grand theatre of Gulf futurism, these artists serve as both archivists and futurists: they render the future with the full spectrum of memory, ensuring that the self, individual and collective, can see itself in the mirror of change, and not be lost in the glare. Their works stand as living bridges between eras, suggesting that a truly sustainable national metamorphosis must engage with its own depths. Such a conversation makes the future not a break from the past, but a creative continuation of it, a future with a palpable past, visible and celebrated within its shining surfaces. This is the deeper, more grounded speculative vision they offer: one where memory and imagination collaborate to shape transformation.

Safeya Binzagr, Shadia Alem, and Manal AlDowayan are some of the artists who have built the foundation that values the connection between creative imagination and cultural memory. By putting women’s tales at the centre of creative study, their works fight against the loss of oral traditions and local knowledge systems. Building on this trajectory, a growing body of contemporary practice has begun to explicitly interrogate the render as both form and function, not only as a visual tool but as a mode of being that encourages the enactment of highly curated, futuristic selves.

WHAT IS THIS?! (2019), a brief video in which two falcons appear as unintentional observers of change, is one example of how this interrogation manifests itself in my own practice. The birds, which are performed by Khalid Fadag, are shown as reactive symbols trapped in an endless cycle of changes, responding, expressing emotion, and struggling to adjust to changes taking place all around them. Their endless exchange across screens suggests a state of flux that mirrors the pressures placed on the Saudi subject under conditions of accelerated change. In the Arabian Peninsula, falcons have a strong cultural connection and have been linked for thousands of years to status and masculine identity. The work disturbs their symbolic role by removing them from this conventional setting and putting them in a digital framework, turning them into witnesses to instability and agents of disorientation. In doing so, the falcons become mirrors of the speculative self itself: compelled to perform, adapt, and rehearse identity in a landscape where change is both constant and compulsory.

Recent critical art practices in Saudi Arabia have thus turned toward the concept of the speculative self, a subjectivity shaped by its proximity to, and entanglement with, national image-making and digital futurism. These endeavours, which draw inspiration from theories of affect, media archaeology, and architectural semiotics, present identity as constantly enacted in response to the needs of visibility rather than as fixed or preset. In such a context, the body becomes a place of both political and aesthetic negotiation. In this

environment, reenacting oneself becomes an essential tactic for disruption.

My work *Land of Dreams* (2018) stages the female figure within the expanse of the desert, a space so often treated as void, or awaiting transformation.²²⁶ Rather than instrumentalize this landscape as a blank slate for futurity, the work reclaims it as a site of resonance. The installation consisted of twenty-four large-scale billboard prints of the iconic Arab pop singer Ahlam, distributed across a deserted, undeveloped plot of land in northern Jeddah. The day prior to the installation, coordinates were posted on Instagram, accompanied by a cryptic caption inviting the viewer to visit the “Land of Dreams.” Upon arriving, the audience encountered an open field scattered with images of Ahlam. The scene was at once absurd and surreal: a pop-cultural constellation strewn across the desert.

Ahlam, whose name translates to “dreams” in Arabic, holds a highly visible, almost mythic status in regional media. Her image is saturated with signification, not only as a singer but as a symbol of spectacle and excess. By deploying her figure across a disused site, the work plays on the multiple meanings of “dream” in both personal and collective registers. What is this dream we are promised? What futures are we running toward?



Figure 86. *Land of Dreams* (2018), Ahaad Alamoudi. Installation, 25 pieces, 200 × 200 × 50 cm.

226 ‘Land of Dreams - Ahaad Alamoudi’, accessed 12 June 2025, <https://ahaad-alamoudi.com/Land-of-Dreams-1>.

Land of Dreams thus becomes a form of speculative disruption. While it invites viewers to project their own expectations onto the phrase and the site, it denies them the satisfaction of a singular interpretation or coherent narrative. Instead, it activates the tensions between promise and absurdity, glamour and decay, visibility and fragmentation. The performative gesture does not present the female figure, whether the artist or Ahlam, as symbolic or tokenistic; rather, it enacts a refusal. The image does not sell a future. It questions the cost of its manufacture. It interrogates the labour of representation and the mechanisms of aspiration that structure how dreams are visualised and capitalised.

The work draws upon the legacy of earlier feminist visual practices, while simultaneously extending the conversation into new speculative territories. If Binzagr’s *Al Zabun* can be read as a proto-representational act of feminist visibility, one that insisted on placing the Saudi woman at the center of a historical and visual narrative, then *Land of Dreams* situates that same insistence within the logic of contemporary image production, where representation is no longer simply about being seen, but about navigating how, where, and by whom the self is rendered. It is a shift from the politics of appearance to the politics of simulation. In this sense, *Land of Dreams* also participates in a broader critique of Gulf visual culture, where celebrity, spectacle, and futurity converge in an aesthetic economy that demands constant production of optimism. By scattering the images of Ahlam, an archetype of stardom, across a paused development site, the work exposes the fragility of those constructs. The “dream” is rendered unstable, not through negation, but through excess. The images, too many to absorb, too contextless to anchor, resist resolution. They do not offer transcendence; they overwhelm. This saturation becomes a method of critical interruption, a way of both confronting and undoing the myth of the streamlined, post-oil future.

A central aspect of my video-based work is the deliberate configuration of representation and authorship. In many of these works, I position male bodies in front of the camera while locating myself behind the lens and in the editing stage. This structure offers a reversal of the traditional dynamics outlined by Laura Mulvey in her text on the male gaze.²²⁷ While the visual economy of cinema has historically positioned women as objects to be looked at, I employ men in my videos not to objectify them, but to reclaim the mechanisms of visual authority. In this reversal, my agency is embedded in the apparatus itself: in the camera movement, in the editing rhythm, and in the narrative construction. Even when the male body is foregrounded, it is rendered through a distinctly female authorship that is both directive and interpretive. This strategy allows me to comment on dominant narratives from within, asserting an editorial sovereignty that remains politically and affectively feminine.

This approach resonates with Sara Ahmed’s theorisation of embodied feminist practice, where the female body becomes both a site of political inscription and a means of resistance.²²⁸ My body in these works is not a stand-in or symbolic token, it is a tool of authorship, an instrument of speculation. It bears the contradictions of my context and asserts the right to occupy visual space on my own terms. In doing so, I am

227 Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.

228 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Second edition (Routledge, 2015).

not seeking to simplify or sanitise the presence of the female body, but rather to foreground its complexity and its capacity to disrupt the conventions of both local and global visibility.

Thus, in both modes, working with male figures while directing from behind the camera, and embodying the female figure myself in front of the camera, my video practice navigates and disrupts representational codes. It creates space for a feminist authorship that is conscious of its position, accountable to its politics, and invested in constructing alternative visual grammars. My lens is not passive. It is a tool of reformulation. The subjects I frame, whether male or female, are never isolated from the politics of gaze, authorship, or narrative control. They exist within a system I am actively reshaping.

This act of reclaiming authorship, whether through framing others or embodying the gaze, speaks directly to broader questions of agency and authorship that animate this thesis. The personal becomes political, and the image becomes a site of negotiation. Just as my video practice interrogates the politics of representation, the wider study confronts how speculative images, particularly renders, also inscribe authority over space, identity, and time. In this way, intervention operates not in isolation, but within the same speculative architectures that shape national narratives.



Figure 87. Mounira Al Mously with her artwork (1954–2019), pioneering Gulf and Middle Eastern artist.

Note. Al Mously's work contributed significantly to the region's contemporary art scene. This image situates Mounira Al Mously within the historical and cultural narratives of Gulf contemporary art, highlighting her impact and legacy.

05 CONCLUSION

WE WILL BE THERE, YOU AND I

Today, Saudi Arabia stands on a unique historical threshold, a liminal space between hypothetical predictions and unrealised realities. The dissonance between what is promised and what is experienced, between the weight of the present and the horizon of the future, defines this era of transformation. This research is framed around a central question: What possibilities emerge when artists, communities, and individuals engage with, disrupt, or re-author the speculative visions that seek to shape their futures? This research has explored the render as a speculative device that functions both as a visual tool and as a mechanism of projection, shaping perception, identity, and socio-political imagination in contemporary Saudi Arabia. This conclusion offers a critical reflection on the findings, synthesising key arguments while identifying areas for continued exploration.

Rather than accepting simplified narratives of progress and innovation, we must consider the broader conditions that shape speculative images and the cultural imaginaries they uphold or obscure. At the heart of the render is a tension that is intensified by juxtaposition: these pictures appear in environments of unpredictability and instability. Their circulation creates a dual economy of vision and emotion, one driven by ambition and optimism, the other by fragility and urgency. Because of this, interacting with them requires a more nuanced approach that takes into account the different forces that are shaping perception and desire across the region.

To inhabit such a rapidly shifting terrain is to live within a paradox, where dissolution and emergence are entangled, and instability becomes a source of generative potential. These unmet realities are more than just unmet promises; they offer tense environments for creativity and the re-articulation of identity. Fluidity becomes a site for intervention, a space free from fixed forms, where artists, architects, and cultural practitioners can rethink place and the politics of visibility by imagining other futures.²²⁹ Yet this speculative promise can also cast a long shadow, producing a dissonance between hyper-ambitious national narratives and the lived urgencies of the present. Navigating this conflict requires a critical understanding of how these changing environments influence both personal agency and collective experiences, realising that the unmaterialized is a highly contested space.

The landscapes of the Kingdom are increasingly marked by cranes, scaffolding, and emerging structures,

229 Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*.

which are signs of speculative visions beginning to take material form.²³⁰ Despite the rollout of the giga-project narratives, the anticipated urban fabric often remains aspirational, suspended between vision and realisation. Even as much remains incomplete or constantly shifting, these outward manifestations of change highlight the fluidity discussed and depict a world in which the built environment both anticipates and defies finality. In this moment of apprehension, the render appears as a framework influencing how futures are envisioned and implemented. It functions as a common but fragmented vision that mediates between official narratives and the many perspectives of people who encounter them.

Within this condition, these images circulate as projections of what is to come, not as distant propositions, but as present conditions, continuously encountered and absorbed. They move quickly, repeated across different contexts, shaping a collective atmosphere in which the future feels both imminent and already underway. To write within this condition is to write from inside it, without the distance of hindsight, within a field of images that are still unfolding and still in motion.

What once appeared as an expansive field of projection has begun to shift. The sense of openness that characterised these images is now more measured, increasingly shaped by adjustment and recalibration. Some projects have moved forward and taken form. Shebara²³¹ has emerged as a realised environment, while others have not become what their images once promised. Sindalah²³², in particular, has diverged from its initial projections, while The Line remains suspended between ambition and revision. These trajectories do not resolve into simple categories of success or failure. Instead, they mark a tightening, where possibility encounters constraint, and the image is brought into negotiation with its material reality.

And yet, before this negotiation was settled, there was a moment in which the future existed differently. A moment in which it was still held within the image. In that state, it remained elastic and shared. The render did not belong to a single outcome. It allowed for multiple projections to coexist, shaped by those who encountered it. What the future looked like was never singular. It shifted across perspectives. In this sense, the render created a condition in which many futures could be lived at once, without the need for resolution.

The argument of this thesis is not dependent on the successful realisation of these projects, but on the conditions they have already produced. Its relevance is established in the present, not deferred to the future. The render operates before construction. It shapes how the future is approached and understood in advance of material form. The futures it projects have already been lived, not as architecture, but as ways of orienting oneself toward what was coming. In this sense, the absence of realisation does not diminish the render's impact. It makes visible where that impact has already taken place.

The encounter with the render cannot be reproduced through construction. The image generates a field of possibility that exceeds any final outcome. What is eventually realised settles into one version of the future,

230 'Port of NEOM Strengthens Role in Global Supply Chain Connectivity', accessed 29 July 2025, <https://www.neom.com/en-us/newsroom/port-of-neom-strengthens-role-in-global-supply-chain-connectivity>.

231 'Shebara Resort | Eco-Luxury Haven on the Red Sea', accessed 31 March 2026, <https://www.shebara.sa/en/>.

232 'Sindalah | A Luxury Island in the Red Sea', accessed 29 July 2025, <https://www.neom.com/en-us/regions/sindalah>.

but it cannot contain the many that were already lived through the image. The distance between the rendered and the built is not something to be closed. It is the condition through which the future is experienced in advance.

For this reason, this research is situated within a particular moment, one that exists between becoming and unbecoming. It is a moment in which the future is still in motion, not yet fixed, not yet decided. There is something essential in remaining within this state. It allows for continuation, for imagining otherwise, for holding onto forms of possibility that have not yet been resolved. Even when certain futures fall away, others take their place. The future does not disappear. It continues to be negotiated in the present, shifting in response to changing conditions.

What remains necessary is not certainty, but attention. To ask who these futures are for, and who they exclude. To recognise that they are never as distant as they appear, but are already shaping the conditions of the present. In this sense, the value of the render is not only in what it promises, but in what it keeps open. It sustains a space in which imagining can continue, and within that space, we remain alive.

Therefore, the value of the render does not lie in whether it becomes real, but in what it has already made possible. Its afterlife is not dependent on construction, but on the experiences it has generated and the subjectivities it has formed. Whether realised, transformed, or left behind, the render continues to persist as part of a longer temporal condition, one in which the future is not only awaited, but has already been lived.

The render, in this study, has been positioned as a paradoxical object: a symbol of collective aspiration and a mechanism for shaping influence, governance, and spatial narrative. Yet it is imperative to interrogate who crafts these images, whose visions they privilege, and which futures they foreclose.²³³ The authorship of the render often reflects the interests of the state and global market aesthetics. This demands a critical reading of the consistencies and slippages within speculative imagery, whether in the deployment of aesthetic vocabularies or the silences that erase alternate imaginaries. Only through such scrutiny can we begin to understand the deeper consequences of the rendered future, and the contested terrain it continues to occupy.

Echoing this logic, the aesthetic of the render, with its polished surfaces and hyperreal projections, offers the illusion of proximity while continually receding upon approach. The closer one moves toward the promised future, the more it shifts and mutates. This mirage sustains a state of permanent anticipation in Saudi Arabia, where the future is always arriving but never quite here. In times of rapid transition, these visual strategies are especially powerful: they captivate, misdirect, and reframe public expectations. The image persists by sustaining a moving horizon of desire, shaping how societies orient themselves toward elusive futures.

This tension creates a liminal space in which reality and representation overlap in uneasy cohabitation.²³⁴ Yet it is precisely within this gap that the richest possibilities for critical and creative engagement emerge. It is

233 Said, *Orientalism*.

234 Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*.

the unknown that urges us to imagine differently. It is through these uncertainties that new ways of thinking emerge. The transitional spaces between idea and realisation offer more possibilities than the finished forms.

In this situation, waiting turns into a structural state that is filled with expectation and suspended agency. According to theorists like Ghassan Hage, waiting is a type of “existential choreography,” in which time itself is negotiated and influenced by hope, power, and deferred fulfilment.²³⁵ In the case of the render, waiting is not merely a gap between image and materialisation; it is the mechanism through which belief is sustained, and futures are performed. This condition produces a temporal bind in which the future is endlessly rehearsed. The subject of the render becomes a subject of waiting: poised and caught within a loop of promises yet to be delivered.²³⁶ The render has an emotional effect in this extended temporal condition, influencing how individuals view and interact with hypothetical futures.

Yet, this experience of suspension unfolds within a landscape of relentless acceleration.²³⁷ The render is a moving target, as opposed to a static projection waiting to be realised. The image is animated by this constant motion, which is maintained by constant recalibration of want and expectation. Speed is essential to this process of speculation. Within this temporal dissonance of waiting in motion, the render places its audiences in a state of constant flux, where futures are never fixed but perpetually renegotiated, driven by engagement, investment, and reinterpretation. As Shumon Basar noted in our interview, “*Time’s passing is a kind of anxiety, especially when the future feels like it’s about to implode and simply not exist anymore*” (see Appendix A). This articulation captures the psychological disorientation that speculative acceleration induces, a condition in which the present is haunted not only by futures deferred, but by futures feared lost entirely.



Figure 88. *Waiting Room* (2021), Ahaad Alamoudi. Video, sound, color, 00:09:05. Performed by Ahaad Alamoudi.

Note. The work explores the poetics and politics of suspension in a waiting room, reflecting on waiting as both a physical and psychological state. Through gesture, rhythm, and repetition, the piece interrogates institutional time and the architectures of delay.

235 Ghassan Hage, *Waiting* (Melbourne University Publishing, 2009).

236 Martin Heidegger et al., *Being and Time* (Blackwell publ, 2007).

237 See *The Run* (2025), a single-channel video in which the performer moves through the landscape toward projected images positioned within it, foregrounding the render as a condition that is approached but never fully reached.

In this state, it becomes more difficult to distinguish between image and reality. The render encourages belief and aspiration by closely resembling what is already considered possible. This mimicry enhances the render’s power to manipulate perception and control desire. Here, the traditional divisions between representation and experience are blurred by the convergence of marketing and governance, changing how reality is constructed and how we operate within it.²³⁸ Reality is no longer grounded in material forms alone but emerges through the continual re-enactment of speculative imagery. In this feedback cycle, the performance of the speculative self becomes apparent, as a subject that is both influenced by and actively influencing the narratives ingrained in the projected futures.

This unstable terrain is not without friction. The discrepancies between render and reality, when the projected fails to materialise as promised, create openings for adaptation and reinterpretation. These moments of failure are not voids but productive gaps that allow for alternative readings and grassroots interventions. In such a context, traditional urban theory proves insufficient. What is needed are new analytical frameworks that account for the overlapping scales of visual culture, economic policy, and lived experience. As this thesis argues, the render is not a static artefact but an active agent within these intersecting territories. Its power lies not in fixity but in motion, in its ability to shift and provoke desire. Should the render ever become static, stripped of its speculative flexibility and disengaged from the evolving socio-political field, it risks devolving into irrelevance.

The value of the render lies not only in what it envisions but also in what it catalyses. The tangible shifts it has helped bring about in Saudi Arabia, such as expanded employment, new cultural institutions, changing roles for women, major infrastructural projects, and broader socio-economic reform, prove its embeddedness within state strategy and its power within an image-based economy. The render is not separate from reality; it is woven into it, actively shaping public life and national identity.

This thesis argues that the render exists through cycles of repetition, reinterpretation, failure, and renewal. It survives through its malleability, reshaped by audience reception, political urgency, and material contingencies. Just as Benjamin’s concept of afterlife signals the continual reinterpretation of a text across time and space, for Benjamin, the afterlife of a work is not about permanence but about transformation, its ability to be continuously retranslated, recontextualised, and reborn through each cycle.²³⁹ The render operates in a similar way: it is not fixed in meaning or form, but continually reshaped by shifting agendas and economic pressures. The power of the render, as a result, is not found in its faithfulness to reality but rather in its ability to persist through cycles of failure, renewal, and reinterpretation, representing an afterlife that is as malleable as the futures it endeavours to represent. It is precisely because of this afterlife that the render must be understood not as a static endpoint, but as a dynamic participant in cultural production.

A central contribution of this research is the articulation of the “*re-enactment of the speculative self*.” This is a theoretical framework that looks at how people and groups build and navigate their identities in relation

238 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Experimental Futures. Technological Lives, Scientific Arts, Anthropological Voices (Duke University Press, 2016).

239 Walter Benjamin, *The Translator’s Task* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

to the projected futures. The speculative self is not a passive receiver of state-driven stories; it is a character that acts and reacts between aspiration and criticism. This self comes to life at the crossroads of visual overload it emerges as a kind of aesthetic subject that is both drawn into the render's promise and critically distanced from its prescriptions. Here, the re-enactment takes on multiple modalities, sometimes aligning with the render's vision, and at times subverting it entirely.

Situated within this, my own artistic practice has developed a methodology of counter-rendering: using methods such as humour and mimicry. These strategies allow me to interact with the surface of the render while also exploring its layers and creating spaces to add my own. The use of oral histories and regionally embedded traditions anchors this critique, countering the way global spectacle smooths over difference and reduces complex local realities to a uniform surface. It also gives me a base for my work, grounding it in narratives that keep local specificity but also making room for other ways of thinking and imagining. In my performative interventions, *The Mirrored Horizon* was staged against NEOM's rendered landscape, I tried to subvert the render by becoming it: miming its gestures, using its language, and then disturbing it from the inside. By mimicking its form, I rendered the aesthetic strange, allowing its absurdity and forcing its logic to fall apart.

At the same time, the render is not only about shaping desire but also about regulating belonging. It defines the limits of who is included and who is not in the national imaginary. This dynamic produces contested forms of belonging: on one side, participation in the glossy futures that render promises; on the other, the experience of marginalisation. Where Lahoud positions architecture and design as sites of responsibility toward the unborn, my research has traced how artists and communities in Saudi Arabia re-author these speculative terrains from below.²⁴⁰ If renders and giga-projects claim to build for 'future generations,' then these artistic practices insist on the present as the ground on which futures are negotiated, not through monumental form, but through grassroots collectivity. Yet it is within these gaps that alternative attachments can take shape. SINDBAD collective demonstrate how localised forms of visibility and shared authorship can reinvent belonging by rejecting the glossy exterior of speculative imaging. In this way, the render's exclusions do not mark an endpoint but become openings for rehearsing more situated and pluralised identities.

This thesis therefore makes three key contributions: first, it theorises the render as an active cultural agent that shapes identity, desire, and belonging; second, it develops the concept of the speculative self and its re-enactments as a framework for understanding how individuals and collectives engage with speculative imagery; and third, it positions practice-based and collective strategies as forms of counter-rendering that propose more plural and situated futures. In order to ground its theoretical inquiries in lived experience and professional practice, this research relied heavily on interviews with artists, architects, and theorists. Their observations not only influenced the examination of the render's capabilities but also demonstrated the ways in which speculative images are reimagined or negotiated in everyday cultural production.

By tracing the lifecycle of these images from their creation, circulation, reception, to their afterlife, this thesis demonstrates that renders function not only as visual tools but also as affective economies and mechanisms of futurity. As Saudi Arabia and the Gulf undergo rapid transformation, the stakes for visual speculation will only get higher. The render will continue to exist, its audiences and roles changing over time. Yet, its centrality to the negotiations of identity will remain. Maintaining discussions about the renders necessitates acknowledging their ideological impact while also creating room for different future-imagining approaches. Although Saudi Arabia was the study's primary focus, its conclusions apply to other spaces where the future is discussed and negotiated. Further exploration could expand this inquiry by comparative case studies of the Gulf or by tracing how renders are remembered, or resisted over time.

Even within this unsettled space of in-betweenness, where imagined futures are consistently colliding with lived realities, the impulse to reimagine remains. The render is not simply a reflection of possibilities, but a catalyst for alternative potentials. Through acts of reimagining and intervention, we are reminded that the future remains open. It is a process that is living and permeable, driven by the profound yet basic realisation that ultimately, we will always continue to dream.

240 *Rights of Future Generations.*



Figure 89. Rendering of *The Mukaab* (left) and satellite image of its excavation site (right) within the New Murabba project, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. *Note.* The architectural rendering was released by the New Murabba Development Company (2023, Copyright © 2023 by New Murabba Development Company), while the satellite image shows construction progress (Leaders MENA, 2025, Copyright © 2025 by Leaders MENA). The Mukaab is a central component of Saudi Vision 2030, envisioned as a sustainable and innovative urban centre.

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07 APPENDIX: INTERVIEWS

APPENDIX A: Shumon Basar

This interview was conducted by myself as part of the research for this thesis. The questions reflect my broader investigation into the relationship between speculative selfhood and the performativity of the render in contemporary Saudi cultural production, particularly within the framework of Vision 2030. I chose to interview Shumon Basar because of his critical contributions to thinking about identity, acceleration, and spectacle in the digital age.

Shumon Basar is a writer, cultural critic, and curator whose work often examines the intersections of art, technology, and geopolitics. He is co-author, The idea of the “extreme self” is developed in The Age of Earthquakes: A Guide to the Extreme Present (2015) with Douglas Coupland and Hans Ulrich Obrist. This idea provides a critical framework for comprehending how identity is becoming unstable in a time of hyperconnectedness, visual overload, and the need for continuous self-performance.

I aimed to place my own research within a larger discussion on digital culture and speculative identity by interviewing Basar. His description of the “extreme self” aligns with my interpretation of the render as a psychological and cultural tool that forces people to reenact and fragment their own selves in addition to being a visual representation of the future. The following interview reflects this dialogue, positioning my questions as part of an effort to connect regional cultural transformations with global theoretical frameworks.

Interview:

You describe our era as the “extreme present.” How do you think temporality intersects with identity today, especially when futures are rendered before they are lived?

If time is felt at a smaller and smaller unit, then, experience is also atomised into these tiny parcels. It means yesterday feels like last week. Last week is last month. Etc. Human brains aren’t wired for this much information and disinformation and hot takes and comments and hosing and horror. Time’s passing is a kind of anxiety, especially when the future feels like it’s about to implode and simply not exist anymore. I don’t know if identity even exists anymore, although what passport you hold, the colour of your skin, your name, all mark you in indelible ways and define your privilege. In terms of identity formation in young people: we used to look to music to define our tribes. That’s no longer the case. The feed offers you 100 possible versions of you every swipe. It’s the freedom of choice as tyranny of self.

What are the psychological or affective consequences of existing in a state of constant projection,

where one’s image or future is always already circulating before the self can catch up?

There’s ‘Change Vertigo’ where you’re always unstable because of how much change there is. And there’s ‘Reality Lag’ where reality is always ahead of one’s ability to understand or even name it. Again, these things produce anxiety and precarity. It was said programming was a safe career option. Then new AI models appeared and programming can be done by other programs. 100s of 1000s of programmers are about to lose their jobs. ‘The Age of Earthquakes’ is this sensation when seismic events that reorganise your brain and the world order are the New New Normal.

How do you see the concept of the extreme self evolving in the current age of hyper-rendered environments, where individuals and entire nations are reimagining themselves through speculative imagery?

It’s all ‘procelerating’ which is the acceleration of acceleration. As the horrors enacted in Gaza have shown us, often live on our screens, every day is the worst day. It leads to what I call ‘Endcore’ when it feels like the world is ending but at the same time that end never actually arrives. The Extreme Self gets more Extreme, more deranged, less decent, alternating between Main Character and Non Player Character, which are just new terms for old class delineator terms. I think we live inside the catastrophe, and we either adapt, or, we check out. Again, this is what I mean by the New New Normal.

APPENDIX B: Ahmad Makia

This interview was conducted by me as part of the research for this thesis. The questions are shaped by my investigation into how speculative selfhood, visual rendering, and national transformation intersect in contemporary Saudi cultural production. I chose to interview Ahmad Makia because of his critical writing on Arabism, architecture, media, and affect, which provides a vital historical and conceptual grounding for understanding current practices of national self-styling and visual sovereignty.

Ahmad Makia is a writer and researcher whose work examines the afterlives of Arabism, particularly in relation to architecture, visual culture, and political imagination in the Gulf. His essays trace the transition from the monumental, broadcast-era aesthetics of Arab modernity to the immersive, hyper-designed environments of contemporary Gulf cities, showing how the residue of Arabism continues to haunt today's digital render cultures. Importantly, his work also engages with the role of Palestinian solidarity within these shifting imaginaries, situating it not as a peripheral concern but as a constitutive element of Arab identity and its visual articulations.

By engaging Makia in conversation, I sought to position my research on the render within this wider intellectual and historical frame. His observations shed light on how the ghost of Arabism continues to linger as a living legacy in contemporary visual economies, influencing regional conceptions of national identity and the future. This conversation is reflected in the interview that follows, which places my inquiries within an effort to connect Saudi Arabia's speculative economies to more general Arab discourses on memory, solidarity, and image-making.

Interview:

In The Arabist, you explore how Arabism functioned as both a political and aesthetic project. Do you see echoes of this legacy in the visual strategies deployed by “Arab” countries today?

Yes, I see a great deal happening across media, education, literature, curatorial work, and exhibition-making today. There remains a kind of lingering ghost, an unresolved attempt to reconcile a fractured or silenced history. It's as though there was once a potential for something greater, something collective, that was interrupted. Many continue to approach that history, but they often do so through modes of affinity and belonging rather than through political or territorial structures.

Today, these gestures are mostly aesthetic or textual. Politically and territorially, I don't believe that sense of collective Arab identity exists in any substantive way. If we think about the degree of control even between Arab countries, over borders, over movement, it becomes clear how fragmented the region is. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) occupies a different positionality within this landscape, but even within the GCC, this fragmentation persists.

Visa restrictions have become more intense, and competition over resources and shipping lanes has only

sharpened in recent years. The vision of a unified Arab project, so central to mid-20th-century modernist discourse, was deeply tied to territoriality, to building and locating identity within nation-states. What we're left with now is something far more de-territorialised. Arabism today survives more as a spectral presence, invoked, referenced, lingering, but not actively lived or practised in political terms.

Recent events have made this painfully clear. Take the genocide in Palestine, for example. The absence of real solidarity among Arab states is stark. Official statements and performative gestures aside, there has been little in the way of coordinated political or material support. The rhetoric exists, but the praxis is absent. Interestingly, what remains of that Arabist impulse, particularly around the Palestinian cause, has begun to globalise. It is no longer held solely by Arab populations. Practices once rooted in pan-Arab solidarity are now being enacted by non-Arab communities across the world. For example, boycotts of brands like McDonald's have become part of a wider global movement, with actions emerging from the U.S. and Europe. In this sense, we are seeing a de-territorialization of political engagement certain gestures live on, but within a global rather than regional framework.

So what we're left with, in much of the Arab world, particularly the Gulf, is primarily an aesthetic memory of Arabism. It's been appropriated by state apparatuses and woven into new regional identities, ones that emphasise science, entrepreneurship, and innovation. In the UAE, for instance, there is a strong narrative of being a regional hub: a place of safety, education, and creative possibility. It positions itself as a refuge from regional instability, while simultaneously branding itself as the future of the Arab world.

This aestheticisation also appears in cultural practices, particularly in curatorial strategies and institutional programming. Many revisit the history of Arabism or work with its legacy, though often abstracted from its original political content. In Gulf contemporary art, this may be less pronounced, since Arabism wasn't necessarily experienced as a shared historical moment in the same way. But in places like Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon, there remains a palpable sense of lost opportunity, of a collective project that never fully came into being.

So to answer your question: yes, echoes of Arabism persist today, but largely as aesthetic or symbolic gestures. The political coherence and territorial imagination that once defined it have eroded. What remains is a spectral, fragmented presence, one that is remembered, referenced, and occasionally reactivated, but rarely embodied in any substantive way.

How might we theorise the afterlife of Arabism in today's digital render culture? Is it a ghost, a residue, or a foundation for something else entirely?

To be honest, I think we're seeing multiple representations of it today. Sometimes, I look around and notice expressions that feel quite stuck or static, almost frozen in time, but these aren't dominant. They feel more like residues, traces that persist within a larger, overlapping field of contemporary cultural forms. We're not dealing with one coherent expression anymore; instead, we're looking at something much more multipolar.

This idea of Arabism as a residue, or as a ghost, as we’ve discussed, seems to be undergoing a kind of metamorphosis. It’s shifting into something that aligns, and particularly in the way that you’re talking about, with what we might call the “render subject.” In the past, it may have appeared more monumental, tied to nation-building or large-scale political projects. But now, in its deterritorialised form, it’s often expressed through digital culture. You see it in nostalgic images being circulated online, Baghdad in the 1960s, Iran before and after the revolution, and increasingly, I think we’ll begin to see this kind of visual discourse around Saudi Arabia as well: “before MBS” and “after MBS.”

These images communicate a sense of dissonance between what was, what is, and what might have been. That dissonance, I think, reflects a broader global condition, one shaped by political fragmentation, social fatigue, and aesthetic overstimulation. In the early 2000s, particularly around the invasion of Iraq, this kind of dissonance felt especially acute. But since then, Arab centrism has shifted. The region’s geopolitical centrality has been absorbed into a broader Islamic or post-Islamic world framework, especially when viewed through the lens of migration, diaspora, and the experience of Arab and Muslim communities in the West.

So politically, I think the Arabist project has largely failed, or at least fractured. And in today’s hyper-globalised, interconnected world, it has become increasingly difficult to sustain the idea of Arabism as a singular or unifying framework. Instead, what we’re left with feels less like a ghost of a single entity and more like a glitch, an echo that’s dispersed across digital networks, scattered and refracted into various fragments. It’s not haunting us from a fixed place, but flickering through timelines and image feeds. And maybe that’s where it survives: not as a foundation, but as a distributed, unstable presence, one that’s both residual and reshaped by the infrastructures of digital life.

Arabism often constructed a masculine and modernist ideal. Do you see similar aesthetic tropes reappearing in contemporary renderings of “Arab” futurity, and if so, how are they adapted or masked?

That’s a difficult one to answer definitively, but I’d say this: I don’t think the core dynamics have changed all that much. The modes of operation, the structures of power, those remain largely intact. What we do see today is perhaps more visibility of women and other marginalised identities within the imagery and discourse surrounding Arab futurity. But the frameworks housing these representations, the institutions, the political logics, the methodologies, have not fundamentally shifted.

It’s important to acknowledge that even within the Arab modernist project, particularly in its pan-Arabist and socialist iterations, there was already an attempt to represent women as agents, working, active participants in society. The idea of equality between urban and rural populations, and between men and women, was part of that vision for the future. However, as I argue in my piece, that vision often operated through homogenization: a universal subject that, while appearing inclusive, still excluded many others, particularly minority identities and alternative positionalities.

Today, representation has diversified. We see more non-male and occasionally non-Arab subjects in visual and cultural discourse. But this doesn’t indicate structural transformation. These gestures occur within the same patriarchal and autocratic architectures that defined the earlier period. And of course, this is not unique to the Arab world; it reflects a global persistence of patriarchal systems.

What might be slightly different now is the emergence of representation through specifically Muslim female imagery. That comes with its own set of contradictions. In global liberal discourse, visibility and liberty are often tied to the exposure of the body ...whereas within these new representations, we see women asserting different definitions of freedom ...freedom to cover, to express autonomy on their own terms.

This form of speaking back to dominant Western notions of liberation feels significant. It wasn’t necessarily part of the earlier future-making frameworks, and it introduces new subjectivities into the conversation.

That said, I’ve also been researching women’s authorship in the Arab world, and what becomes clear is that feminist and women-centred histories here have followed very different trajectories from those in the West. There are alternative models of emancipation and agency that don’t fit into imported paradigms. I think we’ll see more of those narratives come forward in the coming years.

As for Arab futurism specifically, I don’t hold a great deal of optimism at this point. Representation has shifted, but the foundational structures, governance, institutional logic and power, have not. So while the aesthetic tropes may adapt, what underpins them often remains unchanged. And without structural change, it’s difficult to imagine these new forms of futurity as truly transformative.

These contemporary renderings often rely on hyper-polished surfaces, digital symmetry, and utopian affect. How do you see affect and emotion being deployed, or suppressed, through these visual languages?

I mean, I don’t know if you feel the same way, but I’ve noticed something that’s gotten quite extreme, especially when it comes to surfaces and visual tools, and that’s the saturation of platforms like Pinterest in shaping interior spaces. The other day, I was in Fujairah. I don’t know if you’re familiar with it, but it’s a small Emirate, and even there, in the coffee shops and gyms, you see this particular aesthetic and palette repeated. It really blurs the distinction between what we consider an “urban centre” and more peripheral places.

What I think is happening is a kind of “worlding”, an attempt to construct one’s world visually and emotionally through design choices, materials, textures, and atmospheres that evoke familiarity and uniformity. These same visual cues now appear across very different places globally. What’s interesting is how these images and aesthetics seem to dissolve the old binaries, Global North/Global South, developed/developing. Instead, what we’re seeing is a global adoption of certain software, tools, and visual languages that flatten differences and encourage a culture of imitation. I think imitation itself has now become a kind of cultural practice, something we do deliberately, almost aspirationally.

Personally, I’ve been paying close attention to this, particularly in the Gulf. There’s a recurring palette I keep encountering, pistachio, beige, ochre, a very specific aesthetic that’s becoming ubiquitous. At the same time, I’ve also been documenting what I call the “copy shop aesthetic”, the small printing and signage centers that produce everyday visual material: toilet signs, storefront graphics, things made using WordArt, drop shadows, or simple vector shapes. These kinds of vernacular visuals feel increasingly suppressed or excluded from the dominant design narrative.

These aesthetic languages, messy, layered, unpolished, aren’t seen as aspirational. When they’re used in art or design, they’re often treated as kitsch or ironic rather than serious visual languages in their own right. And that really bothers me, because I think they reflect a very real and rich design culture, one that’s already here, already part of how people in this region express and build their worlds.

Yet, in much of the art and design world, we continue to aspire toward a hyper-polished, high-design standard. We uphold this invisible hierarchy between “high” and “low” design, and anything that falls outside the polished aesthetic is often dismissed. Even when artists do engage with these vernacular forms, they’re usually read as humorous, not intentional or profound. That’s a problem for me. Why is that the case? Why do we keep aspiring to this refined, globalized polish? What’s driving that impulse? Honestly, I don’t have the answer yet, but it’s a question I keep returning to in my work.

Do you see any possibilities for artists or citizens to reclaim or subvert these image-based strategies? Either through reuse, parody, or embodied performance?

I think reclaiming or subverting dominant image-based strategies requires a certain bravery, particularly the kind that involves self-interrogation. Just because we live in the Arab world, a region historically shaped by colonisation and extensive Western influence, doesn’t mean we can continually attribute all hierarchies and aesthetic values to the West alone. It’s equally important to examine the dynamics within our own context. This is the same issue that applies to Arabism, we can’t simply claim it as a redemptive framework or assume it provides a fixed alternative. We also need to deconstruct the internal narratives and tools we’ve been handed, those that are often presented as alternatives but may still operate within limiting structures.

Recognising that the canon is not solely Western or Eurocentric is crucial; we have to understand that it also exists within our own Arab paradigms. As mentioned earlier, there are imperial histories and hierarchies embedded within the region itself, ones that extend beyond Western dominance. What concerns me is this recurring tendency to frame issues in simplistic binaries: positive versus negative, coloniser versus colonised. These frameworks risk flattening nuance and complexity.

When I refer to the “positive and negative,” I’m speaking about the limitations of binary thinking. We often fall into the trap of saying, “Eurocentrism is bad, so localism must be good,” or assuming that simply working with something ‘rooted’ or ‘authentic’ automatically makes it valuable. What we need, instead, is a more spectral approach, one that moves beyond dichotomies like East versus West or tradition versus modernity. We need to acknowledge that these categories are already interwoven and historically entangled.

I recently had a conversation with Eduardo about modernism. He suggested that modernism is entirely a Western project. But I pushed back, saying that modernism, even if Eurocentric in origin, was shaped through its exclusions, by defining what it wasn’t. So while modern histories may not have acknowledged the Middle East, South Asia, or the Global South directly, they were certainly constructed in opposition to them. That, too, is a form of representation, albeit a negative one. It reveals how we’ve often been defined by absence rather than presence.

This same logic applies to other intellectual movements, like the Renaissance or the Enlightenment. These periods are often narrated through a narrow Eurocentric lens, but we can’t ignore the global exchanges and cross-cultural contributions that fed into them. What we need is a wider, more dynamic reading of history, one that doesn’t cling to a single, linear narrative.

Another important shift is thinking about time and identity through a geological, rather than purely political or social, framework. It’s limiting to think of a place like Saudi Arabia as beginning in 1932. What happens if we extend our temporal lens to include the deep histories of the land, prehistoric life, shifting ecologies, and ancient trade routes? This kind of thinking helps move us away from human-centred and nation-state-centric timelines and toward more expansive conceptions of time and space.

This also helps destabilise simplistic narratives about things like oil. Everyone talks about how the Gulf changed with oil, as though it were unique to this region. But the reality is that oil restructured life globally. The way people drive, park, and build homes has all shifted, whether in the West or here. So this wasn’t a Gulf-specific transformation, but a planetary one.

Thinking in these ways, beyond binaries, beyond singular timelines, beyond region-specific exceptionalism, offers useful methods for subverting dominant image regimes. It allows us to open up the visual field and challenge the epistemic assumptions that continue to shape how we see, represent, and define ourselves.

What role does geography, both real and imagined, play in these projects? Are we witnessing a deterritorialization of Arab identity, or a new cartography being drawn through the image?

Yes, absolutely. Geography, both real and imagined, plays a central role. It’s interesting because I recently attended a presentation that challenged the idea of “real” geography altogether. The question posed was whether geography is ever truly objective, or if it is always imagined to some degree, since our perception of the environment is shaped not by what the land is doing, but by how we sense and interpret it. We don’t experience the world directly; we process it through the filters of our human senses and cognitive frameworks.

This debate is central to the discipline of geography itself, which is traditionally divided into “natural geography” and “human geography.” Natural geography seeks to understand the physical world, rivers, mountains, and ecosystems, on their own terms, as if they exist outside of human influence. Human geography, on the other hand, studies how humans inhabit, alter, and inscribe meaning onto those spaces.

But even within the discipline, there is a growing critique of this binary. The very categories of “natural” and “human” are themselves human constructs. Every framework we use to understand “nature” is shaped by human perception, language, and values.

Some more radical thinkers have pushed this idea further, questioning the exceptionalism often granted to humans. If we consider ourselves to be a form of natural matter, just like any other species or substance, then our sense of mastery over geography becomes destabilised. . Perhaps it is not us who shape the land, but the land that uses us in its own slow processes of transformation, even decomposition. This shift in perspective invites us to reconsider our agency within broader ecological and temporal systems.

So when thinking about whether geography is real or imagined, I find it helpful to land somewhere in between. Geography, nature, and architecture shape our identities in far more profound ways than we often acknowledge. In fact, I would argue that they influence us more than abstract ideologies or political structures. The spaces we occupy, whether natural landscapes or constructed architectures, mediate the ways we perform identity.

There is also a performative element tied to spatial context. Our behaviours, affect, and relationships change depending on the environments we inhabit. This has been well-documented in extreme contexts like prisons, where the architecture and spatial restrictions give rise to entirely different forms of intimacy, power, and performance. But even in more mundane environments, we adopt different personas depending on the spatial cues around us. In that sense, identity is not fixed but fluid, shaped continuously by our interactions with space.

This duality between the real and the imagined is essential. We may go out into nature and feel that we can finally “breathe,” or contemplate life differently when looking at the sea. But those sensations are also part of a constructed narrative, a fiction that we’ve built around certain types of landscapes. We associate natural spaces with clarity, freedom, or even transcendence, but those associations are culturally produced.

Ultimately, the real and imagined work hand-in-hand. Geography is not just a backdrop for human action; it’s an active participant in shaping subjectivity. In the context of Arab identity, this means we are not simply witnessing a deterritorialization or a disappearance of fixed place-based identities. Rather, we are participating in the drawing of a new cartography, one shaped as much by digital imaginaries and affective geographies as by physical borders. This new mapping allows for more spectral, contingent ways of being, ways that reflect the complexities of contemporary experience across a fragmented yet interconnected region.

How do you think the act of creating or encountering images shifts when one is embedded within a landscape in flux, where transformation is not only visual but lived? Can the image become a way of orienting oneself amid instability, or does it risk disorienting further?

You know, I don’t necessarily find that images on their own are enough to orient me, or at least, not in any

complete way. In my experience, they’re rarely central to how I navigate or make sense of the world. They need to be accompanied by other modes of thinking or seeing, things I might already be grappling with or intuiting. There’s that idea, too, that when you’re fixated on something, you start seeing it everywhere; it becomes more present, more perceptible. I think the same thing happens with images.

And now, especially with today’s technologies, there’s this strange immediacy; algorithms seem to pick up on what you’re thinking or saying, and suddenly you’re shown content that mirrors it back to you. That can feel incredibly disorienting. It’s like the image is no longer external or stable; it’s enmeshed in our own cognitive and affective processes.

Historically, image-making was often seen as something separate from life, something that froze a moment, distanced from the real. But that’s been ruptured. Now we ourselves are moving images, we document, we stream, we edit, we curate. Images don’t sit still anymore. Even still images today feel like they’re in motion; they carry a sense of steeping, leaking, vibrating.

So for me, this shift ties back to what we spoke about earlier: deterritorialization, or the chaos-feel of the present moment. Images are part of that. They no longer simply represent the world; they participate in its flux. Previously, image-making may have belonged to a discipline; now it feels like a habit, a cultural reflex. Images have become part of how we live, how we process the everyday.

What I was questioning, especially in relation to your writing, is whether these kinds of representational ideologies, which often surface in periods of upheaval, are part of a larger pattern. Arabism, for instance, arose during a time of fragmentation and the need for unity. Now, within the context of Saudi and the render, we’re being pushed into new forms of cohesion or forward momentum.

Do you think these ideological visual formations, these images, emerge precisely because of these shifts? Are they not just coincidental but instrumental to the transformation?

Yeah, I hadn’t thought about it quite in that way before, but now that you bring it up, I really do think so. It does seem that moments of rupture or transition generate, or at least popularise, specific kinds of image-making. You definitely see that happening now in Saudi and across the Gulf more broadly. There’s something about the landscape being in motion, socially, economically, politically, that necessitates or invites a visual narrative to accompany it.

Even if you think about what’s happening now in Gaza or Israel, there’s a clear circulation of specific kinds of images within each camp or perspective. The conflict produces a visual field, and those images reinforce or reshape public perception during this moment of upheaval. So yes, I agree, big transitional moments tend to produce not just new visuals, but new visual logics. And in the context of the render, that’s definitely part of what’s happening.

APPENDIX C: Muhannad Shono

This interview was conducted by me as part of the research for this thesis. The questions arise from my investigation into how artists in Saudi Arabia negotiate institutional power, visibility, and cultural expectation through speculative and performative practices. I chose to interview Muhannad Shono because of the way his practice conjures presence through absence and treats silence as a form of resistance, offering a counterpoint to more monumental or overtly didactic forms of cultural production.

Muhannad Shono is a Saudi artist whose work spans drawing, sculpture, video, and installation. In order to create spaces for ambiguity, Shono’s projects often foreground fragility and impermanence.

By interviewing Shono, I wanted to learn more about how his use of absence and narrative accumulation reacts to the demands of visibility in the Saudi cultural sphere as well as the pressures of national transformation. His work offers a necessary site of inquiry within this thesis: not through direct confrontation, but through modes of resistance that are subtle, metaphysical, and durational. The following interview situates these concerns within a wider discussion of how artistic practice might navigate and reimagine conditions of institutional expectation and speculative futurity.

Interview:

Do you feel artists today in Saudi are performing themselves in ways shaped by external expectations, either from the state, the market, or international audiences? How do you respond to that pressure?

Yes, I definitely see a lot of that happening. We’ve been in a kind of bubble over the past few years. Budgets were unusually generous, so generous that, if you had an idea, even if you didn’t yet have the skills or the technical capacity to realise it, you could pay someone to help make it happen. That model allowed for experimentation and bold gestures, but I think it’s starting to come to an end. Budgets are normalising now; they’re becoming more in line with international market standards. And because of that, I think we’re going to see a filtering process. A lot of artists who haven’t invested deeply in their ideas, their hands, or their methods of making may find it difficult to sustain their practice.

For me, 2018 marked a significant shift. I remember being in Berlin and reaching out to the robotics department at a university. After many emails, I finally got a meeting with a professor. I came in with no funding, just a modest idea I wanted to explore. He was intrigued and said, “Let’s start small. We’ll give you an actuator, maybe teach you a bit of programming, and you can start testing things out.” I went back to the studio that day, and then the gallery called me saying, “We just had a meeting with Ithra, they’re looking to fund Saudi artists working with robotics.” Suddenly, I had access to serious funding. I emailed the professor immediately and said, “The situation has changed, we have support.” And everything shifted from there. That moment was a real turning point for me: from working modestly on my own to being well-resourced and able to build something ambitious.

That moment in 2018 was the beginning of something. But now, in 2024 and 2025, I feel like the bubble is deflating. It’s painful in a way, but also promising. What’s coming next will be more robust, more grounded. There’s going to be a shift; not everyone will be able to sustain the pace or the scale we’ve gotten used to. But I think that’s a good thing. What emerges out of this next phase will be sharper, more inventive. It will reflect artists who’ve had to work through constraint, which I think is really important for the health and depth of the scene.

In moments where your work is used to represent ‘change’ or ‘progress’ on behalf of a nation, how do you reflect on what is being changed, and who defines that progress? Within your practice.

I think, for me, it’s about addressing cycles, about breaking down the “mono.” The monolithic narrative, the singular form, the icon. I’m interested in how buildings, especially iconic ones, become vessels for dominant visions. They emerge from particular narratives, visions of modernity, of nationhood, of belief. Not long ago, we had a very different narrative that gave shape to the mosque, to institutions, to systems. These buildings are like books. They carry stories. But they’re not meant to be negotiated with. You can’t rewrite the architecture of certain things; they’re designed to be permanent, unchanging. They demand to live forever.

But what I’m trying to suggest is that buildings, like stories, must die. That the narratives they embody, these heavy, locked-in forms, can and should break down. Concepts, visions, and meanings need to return to the grain of sand.

And what’s particularly interesting here, on this land, is that our sand resists monumentality. The grain of sand in this region is too fine, too smooth, too rounded. It’s shaped by wind, not by water. It doesn’t interlock. It can’t bind. That’s why we import sand from places like Australia or Spain to make concrete. Our own earth refuses to hold the weight of permanence.

So in a way, the land is already telling us something. It rejects these immortal forms. It wants to collapse. It wants to be buried in itself. It wants to return to possibility, to the infinite potential of the grain.

That’s the kind of progress I think about, not in terms of building upward or outward, but in allowing things to decay, to return, to be reimaged. It’s about unbuilding as a form of care. Progress, for me, is not always about addition; it’s often about letting go.

Has the increased institutional support in recent years opened space for more experimentation, or has it introduced new forms of making and existing? What type of shift or effect has it had in the types of art that are being produced?

To be candid, I grew up here resenting the experience. I didn’t relate to the place. It was shaped by a single-minded, monolithic doctrine that didn’t leave much room for complexity. But I’ve always been interested in layers, ambiguity, transition, things in flux. That’s what my work tries to capture: states of change. Nothing is meant to last forever. There’s an ephemerality to my practice; things break down, shift, fragment. That’s

not just aesthetic, it's central to how I understand the world. The mono-narrative hasn't disappeared; it sits latent, dormant. It's always waiting, to be re-read, reconfigured, consolidated again into the rigid structures it desires: walls, orders, doctrines that resist negotiation. That's what I'm working against.

Lately, I've been trying to shift into more research-based approaches, pulling from personal lenses, and exploring architectures that embody ideas, not just function. And in that process, I've come to understand something about my relationship to material. This may not directly answer your question, but it matters. I used to envy artists who came from places with deep material histories, villages with craft, with inherited techniques. They could repurpose that heritage authentically. I didn't feel I had that. I didn't feel any deep loyalty to something "natural" or "authentic." The idea of what is natural has always felt unstable to me.

I realised that many of the materials I gravitate toward come from natural sources but have been processed, altered, and industrialised. And that hybridity speaks to me. I use it to interrupt the "natural," to disrupt the presumed clarity of the national story. I see redaction, censorship, voids, not as empty spaces, but as sites of tension, of resistance. I'm not just engaging with material; I'm engaging with narrative, with national identity and the experience of being shaped by it.

And that's why I often struggle to show my work outside Saudi. When I exhibit in Paris, for example, what am I disrupting? What am I resisting or responding to there? The story of Saudi isn't legible in that context. So much of my work depends on that friction. Without it, the work risks becoming inert.

So yes, institutional support has opened space for making, more funding, more visibility, but it's also complicated things. It's introduced new expectations, new modes of performance. The challenge now is to stay close to what feels urgent and necessary, to resist the pressure to polish or universalise in ways that dilute that urgency.

Your work often deals with fragility, repetition, and the quiet power of the handmade. How do you see slowness functioning in your work in contrast to the speed of national transformation?

Slowness in my work, if it's there, is deliberate. It comes through in the repetition of a single form. For me, that form begins with a line. A single line that cuts. It severs, it redacts, it ends. It's the line across the neck. It stops whatever you're trying to begin. It's a tool of restriction, of censorship, of finality.

But when that line is repurposed, when it's repeated, drawn again and again, it starts to shift. It no longer functions as an end. It becomes something generative. It becomes mark-making. And those marks, over time, unfold into worlds, into landscapes that ask to be read. The line transforms from an act of erasure into a form of narration.

A singular line in isolation might be dismissed; it only goes as far as its own edge. But through repetition, it becomes something else entirely. It becomes a terrain. A rhythm. A way of seeing. A way of feeling. It becomes undeniable. And in that process, the line moves from silence into speech.

This is what repetition does: it fragments the singular into the eyes of the collective. The act of drawing the same line again and again is not mechanical; it's bodily. It's slow. But it's also deeply political. Because in the context of national transformation, where speed is synonymous with progress, slowness becomes resistance. It becomes care. It becomes a refusal to be rushed into clarity, into closure, into fixed meaning. It insists on staying with the mark, on letting it speak more than once.

There's often a tension between presence and absence in your installations. Do you see your work as holding space for what's missing, or as conjuring what might still come?

Great. I mean, it goes back again to redaction. That moment of picking up a book, a comic, a novel, and coming across a black mark slashed across the page, a word or an image, this was something that fascinated me as a child. It was an unexpected collaboration between the original creator and the censor. Between imagination and restriction. And what resulted was something exceptional.

That black void wasn't nothing. It wasn't absence. It was everything. It became a highlight. A rupture. A space of heightened attention. Paradoxically, it didn't suppress the imagination; it ignited it. I would sit there and imagine and imagine and imagine, what was there? What had been removed? What was being withheld? It trained my mind to fill in the gaps. To conjure. To see possibility in erasure.

So, when I work with the black void in my installations, it's not about being dark or obscure. It's about that same spark, that same imaginative engine. The void becomes a pool, a source. It's where meaning begins to move again. Absent Sky, for example, was not about absence; it was about disruption. The disruption of the expected. That flash in the mind when you're confronted with something you can't quite name or see.

The black mark, to me, is a tool. A device that punctures the surface of narrative. It doesn't erase, it activates. It makes space not only for what's missing, but for what might still come. It interrupts linearity. It asks something of the viewer. It holds the unknown and invites you to look again.

How has your early experience with illustration and storytelling shaped the way you construct narrative in your installations? Do you still think in sequences, even when the frame disappears?

Narrative and illustration, for me, were initially a form of escape, a way to reshape and reformulate a different kind of reality through imagination. I remember those early moments being watched or questioned: What are you thinking? What are you making? There was a kind of control imposed, even then. The message was clear: You're not allowed to create. You must stick to the script. You can't imagine an alternative ending for these characters, these stories, this world. The boundaries were already drawn, and I was expected to stay within them.

But I didn't. I'm always trying to honour that younger version of myself, the one who didn't know much, but knew enough to keep going. The one who had enough faith in the imagination to trust it. I was told I'd

go to hell for creating. That creation belonged only to God. But somehow, even then, I didn't feel guilt. I just kept making.

Now I understand more deeply the power of that impulse. The imagination, if you hold onto it long enough, can seep out of your mind and begin to alter the world around you. That's something I carry with me into every piece of work I make.

So yes, the frame might disappear, the page might be gone, but I still think in sequences, narrative is always there, unfolding, sometimes quietly, sometimes defiantly. It's the engine that drives the work, not as a fixed script, but as an invitation to reimagine everything.

APPENDIX D: Johannes Hoffmann - Zaha Hadid Architects

This interview was conducted by me as part of the research for this thesis. The questions reflect my concern with how architecture, and especially its visual apparatus, operates within the speculative economies of Saudi Arabia's giga-projects. I chose to interview Johannes Hoffmann because of his position as Director at Zaha Hadid Architects, one of the firms most actively shaping the architectural and visual language of these developments.

Johannes Hoffmann has overseen major projects in Saudi Arabia, where international architecture practices are commissioned to design not only buildings but also the renders and narratives that accompany them. His point of view illuminates the challenges that architects have in these settings, such as the necessity of striking a balance between idealistic vision and pragmatic realities, the politics of representation, and the requirements of speed, scale, and spectacle. Considering his role at the intersection of design and cultural diplomacy, Hoffmann's viewpoint is essential for understanding how the render functions as both an architectural declaration and a political tool.

My goal in interviewing Hoffmann was to learn more about how architects think about and use renders in architectural practice, as well as how they interpret the difference between the projected image and its possible realisation. His thoughts provide insight into the convergences of style, the part international companies play in Saudi Arabia's cultural change, and the more general issue of whether the render's authority comes from its circulation or from its materialisation. The following interview situates these themes within the broader arguments of this thesis, which positions the render not only as a visual artefact but as a performative apparatus shaping futures.

Interview:

AA

How do you navigate the tension between architectural innovation and the state's expectations around national identity, symbolism, and global spectacle?

JH

It's not an easy question to answer because we specialise in high-profile projects of national importance. We just do. It's our bread and butter. So every project is unique and bespoke. The special interest or challenge we have in Saudi Arabia is to understand the tension, to understand the visual expectations, and to develop our designs so that it's still genuinely Zaha Hadid Architects. If you look at the designs that have been chosen, they often reference landscapes or some kind of mega forms, so that seems to be the prevailing direction.

AA

There's been a noticeable consistency in the colour palette and stylistic choices across many of the renders emerging from Saudi Arabia's major developments: beige tones, soft lighting, and hyper-minimalist

landscapes. How do you interpret this shared aesthetic language? Is it being driven by regional directives, global architectural trends, or a combination of both? And how does Zaha Hadid Architects choose to align with or depart from this visual paradigm in its work in the Kingdom?

JH

One thing is clear: we live in the age of AI and science fiction movies, and I think it's well known now. I mean, it's very well known that MBS is a gamer, right? And he has a vision for the country that aims to be something never seen before. So we get this a lot, but from different places in the world, but not to that extent. This is really something extraordinary that he wants to create. I think he wants to, you know... Saudi Arabia is a young country. I think the population yearns to strengthen national identity, to have pride in the country, and it's also a country that wants to attract not just visitors but new citizens, I think. For that, it needs to stand out. What else is there in Saudi Arabia, besides oil and desert? So, I think that's what's behind this. When you look at the architecture being selected, it's very much in line with this extraordinary vision.

I suppose these are movie scenes, yeah? They could be a movie poster, right? You could star in the movie. I've been to Qiddiya, and I think that's where that's coming from.

AA

Yeah, I think also, when I was working in NEOM for a little bit during my residency, we were given this book with mood boards. A lot of the mood boards given when NEOM was founded were very punk, very futuristic. It is because they're trying to make a statement, an attraction, you know, a statement in the landscape of Saudi Arabia as a whole. But also, it's interesting to see where a lot of these references were derived from. So, there's a lot of similarities in colour tones: a sunset feel, the purpley sci-fi night feel, and then this lush, green jungle. So, yeah, it's interesting to be exposed to and witness.

JH

I would say this is a bit unusual. It looks like an orchard.

AA

Yes, it's a park. I forgot the name, but it's a park designed in Riyadh.

JH

That's going to be amazing. The water management will be key. You do get more rain these days.

AA

Exactly.

JH

I think it's a combination of a number of things. And on top of these things I've mentioned, the AI, the movie thing, and what people think they know about MBS, this style of uber-futuristic rendering is very popular at the moment in certain parts of the world. You get the opposite in Europe. In Europe, everything

is about sustainability and low carbon. You get low-tech buildings with minimal energy consumption, using timber or hybrid construction, and construction that is easily demountable or prefabricated. As a result, it has a certain naivety and clunkiness to it. Even if it doesn't have it, it's expected to look a certain way because it's meant to perform a certain way. In contrast, in a country that looks to the future, futuristic drones, I don't know what's next, Hyperloop, and so on, it needs to look like that. It needs blue neon lights somewhere because without it, it doesn't show the future.

AA

With your work on projects like NEOM, where speculative urbanism plays a central role, how does the firm approach designing for futures that are not yet materialised? Do you consider reality when it comes to designing?

JH

There's a great push in Saudi Arabia to incorporate ideas that are on the verge of invention. Yes, exactly, things we believe are on the verge of invention. Of course, nobody can know when something will be commercially viable or realistically achievable.

If we're tasked with a project that needs to be built in three years, we can't do that. We have to work with what is already invented. But the future is not just technology; it's also about how societies work, how there's always space for innovation. And I think we are at the forefront of this in architecture. You can see this in practically every project we do; we find something new that's not been done before, something that's not been experienced in this way before. Or we find ways to tailor space in ways that give something else back. I think we're very good at that.

So, yeah, the future, in that sense, is not different from the old future. We always try to push for more.

AA

I agree with that statement. I think you see, especially when you think about the context within which you're working, there are a lot of older future technologies that need to be implemented more.

JH

Good ideas are never old. Architecture is about interpretation and how people enjoy and use space. It's also about locality, identity, history, and lastly, about construction. You put it all together, and that's the art of architecture, taking all of this and tying it up in a bow to make something new that hasn't been seen before.

AA

From your perspective, how important is the role of the render?

JH

Renders are almost everything. There are two components in the project: what we call the diagram, which is the plans and sections and how the space works and flows, and the render, which is the vision. I don't think

we sell many projects with a diagram alone. It has to work, and there has to be an idea in it. Our projects do that, but the render is where you sell. That's what convinces people.

AA

I write a lot about the performativity of the render, specifically within the region. For example, there was a project that I worked on where they were 3D printing images. They were printing a mountain scape, and the structure was meant to move with the mountain. They were basing the colour of the mountain on the image. So when they printed the landscape, the structure they built wasn't the same colour tonally, so it didn't seamlessly blend as the render did. They had to figure out other ways to make it work. A lot of what's happening is based around these images being presented. It's interesting to see how they're adapted and brought to reality.

JH

Again, I think it's interesting to see the difference in Europe, particularly in Germany. There, the drive is to reduce renders as much as possible because they're perceived as selling an exaggeration, like a sleight of hand. It's sunny in the render, when you know it often rains, or it's not quite as rosy as it appears. Producing renders is also an expensive process, so German competitions try to reduce them, focusing more on the technical aspects of the diagram. They're looking for substance, and they feel that too much vision dilutes their judgment on substance. Whether that's true or not, that's their perception. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is looking for a vision. They want substance, but the vision stands out.

AA

So could you speak a bit more about the King Abdullah Financial District Metro or the Arts Futures Hub? What were the design ambitions for some of these projects? How do you respond to the local context when designing?

JH

Which one?

AA

I have the King Abdullah Financial District Metro, the Arts Futures Hub, and NEOM. We can talk about Diriyah as well.

JH

Is the Arts Futures Hub the MISK Institute?

AA

No, it's not the MISK Institute.

JH

That's not ours.

AA

Sorry.

JH

It's all right. I've seen it.

JH

Let's talk about the metro. I don't have the dates in my head, but when we were commissioned... it was finished a long time ago, but they were waiting for the other metro stations to catch up because it was just a single one. I think we started in 2014 or 2015, so it's been a long process, and it's a very elaborate design. The KFD district has a chevron design across the master plan, and we've taken this idea and expanded it in a bigger form in the design. It's like a mushroom shape in front. I think the fact that it is ornamental, but at the same time, it hints at something smaller inside. It's not just one big thing. It's articulated. A lot of our designs are not one-to-one replicas. There's a mix of ideas that we merge to create something reminiscent but not identical. That's what we did here.

AA

What role do you think architects play in shaping not just cities, but imaginaries of the future, particularly in a place like Saudi Arabia?

JH

When I studied architecture in the '90s, it was rare for architects to design entire cities. But since then, new cities in places like Saudi Arabia, China, and parts of Southeast Asia have sprung up, and architects have had to design them. The role of master planners has evolved dramatically in a short time. Architects now have a huge impact on cities, especially in developing countries, though the final design depends on the clients and how they choose to commission it.

AA

What challenges do you face in places like Saudi Arabia, where there's more open space compared to established cities?

JH

In places like Qiddiya, where there's little existing infrastructure, the challenge is creating a coherent plan from nothing. Architecture is about order, and this is essential to make sure the space works in a hierarchical way. This need for structure is the essence of architecture, whether in ancient Greece or modern Saudi Arabia.

AA

As an artist, I find it interesting how projected images of the future have become part of the country's landscape. It's remarkable to see how both professionals and the wider population have embraced these images as part of their vision for the future.

JH

These mega-projects have already fulfilled a major need; they’ve put the country on the map. You can criticise them in the West for many things, and some of them may never materialise because the ambition may have been too high and the reality different. But they’ve definitely put the country on the map. They’ve met the most important criteria. That’s why we rarely say no to these projects, even though they are visionary. We don’t know which visions will succeed, but we treat them as though they will. Obviously, we hope they come to fruition, but there’s no way of knowing.

APPENDIX E: Ruba Al-Sweel

This interview was conducted by me as part of the research for this thesis. The questions reflect my interest in how speculative aesthetics, particularly the render, perform and circulate identity within the rapidly transforming sociopolitical landscape of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. I chose to interview Ruba Al-Sweel because of her articulation of the “Continental Vibe,” which offers a critical framework for understanding how mood, affect, and atmosphere themselves become infrastructures of futurity.

Ruba Al-Sweel is a Saudi writer and researcher whose work examines the intersections of media, aesthetics, and politics in the contemporary Gulf. Her essay “Babylonian Neo-Mustaqbal: Continental Vibe Metaverse” explores the “Continental Vibe” as an ambient condition, an affective architecture that produces and prefigures spatial, digital, and political realities. By theorising the vibe not as passive reception but as a speculative, recursive force, Al-Sweel highlights how atmospheres of anticipation, aspiration, and acceleration shape subjectivity and belonging.

By engaging Al-Sweel in dialogue, I aimed to connect her insights on the Continental Vibe with my own analysis of the render as both a visual apparatus and social technology. Her writing expands my inquiry by foregrounding the emotional labour of being within and performing state-aligned aesthetics, showing how national branding and futurity operate as mood-first infrastructures. The following interview situates these concerns within a shared effort to trace how affect, atmosphere, and image intertwine to produce contemporary speculative realities.

Interview:

AA

Your articulation of “the vibe” as an ambient infrastructure opens up new ways for me to think through national branding, futurity, and the emotional labour of being within and performing state-aligned aesthetics. By framing the vibe not as a passive reception, but as a speculative, even recursive, force, your work expands by inquiring into how both subjects and spaces are rendered mood-first, within a visual economy of transformation.

What I’m trying to say here is that even in my analysis of “the render” within my research, it’s about the tools and the power that the image holds in persuading or changing landscapes, people, and spaces. That’s where I’m entering, and that’s how I’m framing many of the questions I’m about to ask.

Okay, so the first question is: In your framing, does the continental vibe precede architecture, or does architecture produce the vibe? Or is it better understood as a recursive loop, where both are continually reinforcing one another?

RA

Interesting. I think it’s definitely the latter, what you explained, where we are creating what, in turn, is also

creating us. So it's this ouroboros relationship. We are imagining things, and those things are also evolving as our imaginations evolve.

I don't know how to say this exactly, but the images are participating in creating reality for us as well. It's not just that we are creating the images; the images are actively participating in shaping and pushing what is possible. The image becomes a tool that is highly hyperstitious; it predicts what could be done, and it expands possibilities.

AA

You describe the continental vibe as ambient and ineffable, less a designed product and more a soft infrastructure of becoming. Could we think of it as a form of speculative infrastructure? A mood-based system that organises feelings and desires in advance of the built environment?

And I think you just touched on that slightly when you were talking about how we're informing the image and the image is informing us. Could we just speak about it more in terms of desire or mood-based systems? I'm not sure if this fully fits into what...?

RA

Yeah, no, totally. It's interesting how you mentioned national bonds. We're moving more and more away from tangible forms of heritage, things that traditionally bound us together, toward more abstract kinds of axes.

If you think about it, recently there have been a lot of efforts to name Saudi years by theme, like the Year of Coffee or the Year of Crafts. There's always this sort of random theme. Or even more specifically, I think there's a Saudi effort to create something like an "Olive Factory Index", an attempt to index what Saudi smells like, or what it sounds like.

So, there are these invisible axes that work to create identity. And I think the vibe is exactly that, it's ineffable. It's ineffable in the sense that it can't be contained in a single image or a single product.

AA

I never really thought about the years being indexed like that. But also, we're witnessing this shift firsthand. For years, Saudi had pushed away, or at least chosen not to use, the image as a medium to express itself. And now that it's embraced the image and is using it as a tool for navigation, or whatever purpose it's serving, it's also reinforcing these... I want to say stereotypical narratives, or stereotypical images of the space, and project them back onto the space itself.

So: the Year of Coffee, the Year of Camels, I think it's quite interesting.

RA

I just wanted to add something to your first question. The way I think the vibe operates is actually similar

to how the machine operates. The machine operates on vibes, mostly; that's how platforms are created. It senses the user, and then it projects back what the user needs. So we're both sensing each other.

To put it in less abstract terms: take platforms like Instagram or TikTok. They learn about our user behaviour and then create algorithms that, in turn, shape us. And then we're just stuck in this loop.

I think that's what the vibe is. It's constantly changing, constantly being shaped as it shapes us. It's about sensing our way through change. It's a sensibility.

AA

Yeah, I think just following on this aspect of the vibe operating like a machine, and technology in general, you've spoken a lot about the virtual and metaversal spaces. So I'm wondering: how do you see the continental vibe functioning in those contexts?

In spaces where architectural rendering is continuous, performative, and often detached from material constraint, does the vibe become more powerful in those environments, or does this affective force become diluted?

RA

It's nothing else but vibe. If you're not able to vibe with it, you're actually not able to imagine it or participate in it. That's the thing about it.

AA

I think that's the thing, participation is an essential aspect of the vibe. It is a choice.

And this might not be part of the original question, but I just want to know a bit about the fear of the vibe or the inclusivity of the vibe itself. Can you speak about people who are viewing the vibe but don't feel connected to it, or are trying to vibe with it? Just how people respond, or can respond, to the vibe in general.

RA

But what would you mean by fear?

AA

I'm thinking about it more generationally. The vibe, in the way I'm reading it, and this is also my reading of your writing and approach, is almost like a projection onto the space. The vibe is projected onto us; it's around us, it surrounds us, and we're affected by it. It is affected by us.

There's that kind of intersection and connection that happens.

But I'm also thinking about it generationally, where the vibe might not be natural and is really enforced into certain spaces. Some people fear it, fear the rendered image, or fear this new thing being introduced to them.

So, are you interested in this relationality? Or are you more focused on defining what the vibe is and simply stating that it exists?

RA
No, I'm actually primarily interested in the fear, because fear is very indicative of how real the vibe can be.

If you think about it, people who fear images and those who prohibit images are the ones who know how strong images are.

For example, if we think about Islam, and don't quote me on this, I'm just speaking generally, Islam is a very iconoclastic religion. It's very anti-image. You need to break all the statues; no icons are permitted. The reason is because Islam understands the power of images; it understands how much they can create reality.

So, I think the fear of the vibe is very legitimate. It only speaks to the potency of the vibe that the vibe can actually participate in the creation of a reality that's beautiful.

AA
You write that the vibe is neither future nor past, a simultaneous temporal collapse. I really love that section. Might this positioning suggest a form of cultural amnesia, or does it instead act as a container for speculative memory?

I'm not sure if you want me to go further into that question.

RA
Yes, please do, but I don't think I fully understand it.

AA
I think what I'm trying to ask is: what's the role of memory in all of this? When images are produced, they're created in response to what's happening around us, so they belong to a specific time. But images can also position themselves within time.

That's what I'm trying to get at. Is there a role for memory in the vibe, or is it more like something alive, something that just keeps going? Because you say it's not in the future and not in the past. So that's what I'm exploring.

RA
It's not driven by time in the way we operate in physical space. It's actually driven by something much closer to how platforms perform today.

We're moving away from chronological, linear time, both on the internet and, I would argue, in the vibe. If you think of something tangible, like a timeline, we used to have chronological timelines. But now, it's more

about what you've liked, how that feeds into your algorithm, how it creates bubbles and small communities, and how it places you in an echo chamber.

Again, it's that loop of feedback between the user and the platform. I think that's where the vibe is situated. It's determined. It operates in a nonlinear way.

AA
How does repetition and reenactment, whether through music, fashion, or visual motifs, contribute to sustaining the continental vibe? Are these loops generative, or do they risk flattening cultural differences?

You mentioned how, in the worlds we're existing in and the feeds we're feeding into, linearity has been removed. It's feeding us as much as we're feeding it. So, are we risking flattening it?

RA
I'm just trying to understand if flattening is actually happening, and whether that's even a bad thing. I think the opposite might be happening. We're creating more texture. We're adding layers to these virtual spaces.

I've never really thought about this in depth, but it's interesting how you can have a lived experience through something like fandom. For example, there are groups who are fanatics about a certain medieval trend, and that reality becomes very real for them. The ability to operate within the vibe creates a more textured reality, one that's deeply engaging and made with tools that make it feel very alive.

So, I don't think it's flattened at all. It's actually more potent. It becomes a kind of node, a hyperactive node, and there are just different nodes orbiting around the vibe.

AA
You suggest that Arabness has become ambient, travelling as a mode more than a political identity.

RA
I take it back! No, I'm just kidding. I'm trying to remember where I said that.

AA
I wrote this down from your writing on the continental vibe. I actually wrote it at the beginning of my research, so I'm also returning to some of these ideas. I discuss Arabness a lot in my writing. But let me finish the question, and then we can go back and define that more clearly.

So, in that sense, is the continental vibe a platform for subversion? Or is its proximity to branding and spectacle too entangled with systems of control and consumption to allow for any real rupture?

RA
Yeah, this is a really interesting question. Someone in the audience actually asked me something similar

during the talk. You can find my answer at the end of the video. I delivered it as part of a lecture. It's funny, because I took a very non-committal stance on the plurality of the question. I don't think it's utopian, where the vibe is going to subvert and upend all these structures. But I also don't think it's evil. Like we mentioned earlier, there's fear around it.

Unfortunately, like a lot of things, it has been subsumed into market dynamics. It has become a tool for monetisation, branding, commerce, and promotion.

AA
Yes. I do think sometimes I want it to be utopian. I want the vibe to be subversive, to use the language that's being used on us and flip it. I want it to become something new. I think I'm hopeful in that sense.

But it's wise to see it as a double-edged sword. It can be scary, but at the same time, that fear is also what informs the utopia. Utopian feeds on that fear, too. There's a loop between the two.

RA
I actually wrote something about this once. Someone commissioned me to write about the non-commercial image, which I found absurd. There is no such thing as a non-commercial image. There are only images made with a clear awareness of how technical mastery feeds into the market.

There are images created with clarity, clarity about who benefits from them, how they were produced, and the mechanics behind them. And then there are images that don't have that self-awareness. I think that's the only real difference.

AA
How do you distinguish between lived experience and the vibe, particularly when the vibe is more aspirational than grounded? Where does dissonance surface, if at all?

RA
It surfaces when you choose to clip out of that reality. There's this thing called the Paris Syndrome. It's a psychological condition where tourists are overwhelmed or disappointed when they visit Paris because their expectations were so inflated by the media and fantasy.

I think we're in a permanent state of Paris Syndrome. We're constantly living in that disillusionment.

To stay within the vibe, you have to choose not to clip out of the simulation. You need a vested interest in remaining part of it. You have to keep participating, like you said earlier.

AA
This current moment, where the structures don't actually exist yet, but the renders of them do, that's the

most magical time to be in.

Because once the structure is real, it becomes the formula for reality. And it might actually be less imaginative. The dream starts to die. A new dream might begin. The render, for me, holds a different energy than the final image or the built reality.

So yes, this Paris Syndrome, this disillusionment, is a huge part of what's coming, or even what already exists.



Figure 91. *Pangeos*, a conceptual floating city, Saudi Arabia.

Note. This image depicts *Pangeos*, a proposed turtle-shaped floating city designed to accommodate 60,000 residents, combining residential, leisure, and marine infrastructure into a single megastructure. The concept emphasizes futuristic design, and large-scale ambition. Image courtesy of *Lazzarini Design Studio*. Copyright 2025 by Lazzarini Design Studio.

APPENDIX F: SINDBAD x ThirdSpace

This conversation was conducted by me as part of the methodological framework for this thesis. The questions were designed to reflect my interest in how artist collectives in Saudi Arabia experiment with site-specificity, adaptability, and resourcefulness, particularly within contexts where space, heritage, and futurity remain in constant negotiation.

For this purpose, I chose to engage with ThirdSpace, represented by Abdullah Alamoudi and Mohsin Ali. Both are designers of structures as well as active members of the SINDBAD collective. Their practice offers valuable insights into how spatial frameworks, material choices, and curatorial values intersect in collaborative, grassroots approaches to constructing exhibitions.

ThirdSpace is a design and architecture collective based in Saudi Arabia whose work critically engages with the challenges of inhabiting and reimagining spaces undergoing transformation. Their projects often take shape in heritage sites and mobile infrastructures, requiring inventive responses to questions of preservation, accessibility, and public encounter. Within their collaborations with SINDBAD, they have developed adaptable exhibition structures from pavilions situated within UNESCO heritage sites to mobile platforms such as the SINDBAD truck that emphasise process, dialogue, and impermanence over fixed form.

The discussion that follows situates these insights within a broader collective endeavour, exploring how design and group practice can influence, reshape, and expand the cultural landscapes currently emerging in Saudi Arabia.

Interview:

AA

From your perspective as members of SINDBAD, what distinguishes the collective from other collectives in the region? How do you see its role in shaping alternative cultural narratives in Saudi Arabia today?

Abdullah A

From a Saudi perspective, my starting point was a desire to build a sense of community while also celebrating art. That, to me, is at the core of SINDBAD: people from different disciplines, generations, and practices coming together to share and celebrate their work. Unlike the more formal or rigid side of the art industry in Saudi Arabia, SINDBAD values experimentation and process. It highlights works-in-progress and the act of making art as much as the final outcome.

This has allowed the collective to become a natural platform for artists to show things they might not otherwise reveal, works they may feel uncertain or hesitant to present in conventional exhibitions. That openness sets SINDBAD apart. Many find this approach refreshing, and it often generates a sense of momentum: people want to join in, to contribute, and to be part of the journey.

SINDBAD also operates as a bridge or stepping stone. It opens up a space where participants can see themselves not only as artists, but also as designers, thinkers, and researchers. In Saudi Arabia, pathways into art can still feel limited, commonly framed as either pursuing study abroad or facing uncertainty about what kind of career art can lead to. SINDBAD widens that frame. It provides a gathering place to engage in these questions collectively, and to recognise that pursuing art here is possible.

AA

As both designers of the structures and active members of the SINDBAD collective, you occupy a dual role: shaping the physical frameworks while also contributing to the collective’s curatorial and artistic ethos. How does being inside the collective change the way you design? And conversely, how does your design practice shape the way you participate as members within the collective itself?

MA

I can take this one and share some thoughts. Perhaps it helps to think in terms of the physical framework versus the thematic framework. The design ideology that Abdullah and I work with aligns closely with SINDBAD’s ethos; there are clear parallels, especially in the way both practices engage with movement and elemental forces, which have long been central to SINDBAD’s concerns. Many of the structures we have designed for the collective reflect this connection.

Both ThirdSpace and SINDBAD are attentive to local ecologies and frameworks, though in different ways. ThirdSpace is particularly rooted in Jeddah, while SINDBAD, though it began in Jeddah, has extended its reach toward Riyadh and into international contexts. In this sense, physical space directly informs thematic or curatorial space; the two cannot be separated. Exhibitions, in the simplest sense, are exercises in space-making. Curating itself is a spatial practice: arranging works in relation to one another, generating meaning through their connections. Those who orchestrate and facilitate that space inevitably hold a form of agency in the process.

Our design practice as a whole, meanwhile, exists at the intersection of many different kinds of spaces. This in-betweenness is central to how Abdullah and I think about intersectionality. It encompasses formal exhibition venues where artworks are encountered, but also more informal infrastructures: pavilions, communal gathering points, and spaces of meeting. These environments create an interstitial zone, an in-between, where different practices, disciplines, and possibilities come together.

AA

Your Practice is informed by Homi Bhabha’s idea of third space, a site of hybridity and negotiation. How did you translate the theoretical lens into the physical forms of the installations that you’re doing?

MA

Abdullah and I have been thinking a lot about local landscapes and motifs, particularly in Jeddah, but always in relation to broader global geographies. Our interest lies in how the local is never isolated, it is constantly

shaped by global migrations and exchanges. In that sense, what is considered “local” expands when placed within a wider framework of globality.

Much of our thinking also returns to the 20th century, which for Jeddah was a period that condensed centuries of movement and transfer. Processes such as the establishment of a global economy and the formation of nation-states all became embedded in the local fabric of the city. Through this lens, we can begin to see how a global system of living, or a global system of being, has always existed within and alongside the local context.

Abdullah A

Much of our methodology is both object- and idea-driven. We are particularly interested in how ideas and objects move across countries and spaces, and how the influences they gather along the way merge into something entirely new. These processes of transfer and transformation become the foundation from which we design, think, and conduct research.

Another way to describe this is as a return to origins, tracing the roots of objects and ideas, examining where they come from, and observing how they evolve over time. Space is always part of this conversation: how it is managed, how it shapes what we create, and how it holds and reframes these shifting ideas.

MA

I think that’s a very useful way of framing it, Abdullah, because it is something we have not yet fully articulated. Much of our recent thinking has centered on language, the language of objects, of space, of architecture. Viewed through a postcolonial lens, particularly drawing on Homi Bhabha, we can understand how new identities are continually formed through language. By this, I do not mean only the spoken or written word, but also spatial and artistic forms, where divergences, evolutions, and colloquialisms are constantly appropriated, reshaped, and reinterpreted.

AA

In what ways did you imagine the social and spatial in-betweenness of these pavilions and structures or stages that you’ve kind of been creating? You guys both spoke a little bit about the methodologies that you think about, like rootedness, but I want to shift it a bit and talk about the role of the viewer or the participant in relation to the objects that you guys are creating. So, the role of the social, the role of the in between, and how does that affect the collective identities in general? I know there was a lot in that question, but whatever you can pick up on and just respond to.

Abdullah A

I can begin with the idea of the public realm, because I think ThirdSpace naturally positions itself there. A “third space” is often understood as a place where people gather, whether a park, a square, or any environment where negotiation and interaction occur in public. That provides a useful point of departure, since it is precisely the ground we seek to build upon.

The public realm is shaped by what you introduce into it: design draws people in, and the way it is conceived determines who engages with it. There is always a negotiation between control and openness, a need to understand the specific context of the space, the communities surrounding it, and the intentions of what you are trying to communicate. In that sense, it becomes a dialogue, hand in hand, between the public realm and the designer.

AA

What does it mean to be creating in collaboration for you? Why is that necessary? Is it necessary?

MA

That’s such a great question, and also a hard one to answer, because it’s quite emotional. For me, it comes down to the different skill sets people bring. Working as part of a team allows for those skills to intersect, and I don’t think SINDBAD or ThirdSpace could exist as singular projects; they need multiple partners to bring different aspects to life.

There’s a beauty in that act of collective creation: making something together and then giving it to others. With both SINDBAD and ThirdSpace, what we create is for the collective, and that strengthens our relationship to any audience we engage with. We are, in many ways, as collective as the communities we are trying to speak to.

Of course, with SINDBAD, the team is large, and at times it can feel like too many hands in the pot. But that’s also what makes it democratic; it reflects the diversity of the people involved. We have members from different backgrounds, social classes, and regions of Saudi Arabia, all contributing their perspectives. ThirdSpace operates in a similar way. Abdullah and I come from different countries and contexts, and that difference directly informs the projects we produce together.

AA

How did the concept of the observatory pavilion emerge in relationship to, I can see land, what were you hoping the structure would enable, spatially and socially?

MA

The project emerged through a consideration of historical and global connections to navigation, which was also central to I Can See Land. It drew upon acts of navigation as well as local architectural forms associated with wayfinding. The observatory, for instance, was inspired by traditional Islamic wayfinding structures found across the Middle East and the wider Islamic diaspora, structures that have long been tied to practices of witnessing and journeying.

The forms we selected carried layered and diverse histories. Some were influenced by China, others by Turkey, India, and the Middle East. Situating them within a pavilion in Al Balad ,the historic centre intimately tied to Islamic migration, created a dialogue between these global references and the specific local context.

From the outset, our thinking revolved around how the collective might use the space, so we sought to design the stage as open and flexible as possible. The final outcome was not a single pavilion but rather a constellation of interconnected structures. By nature, it was multifunctional, hosting performances, skating, and a range of other activities. Around it, smaller structures supported different functions.

What proved most special, and something Abdullah and I always remark upon, was how people engaged with the space in ways we had never anticipated. Children transformed parts of it into seesaws, adults gathered on the benches, and performers adapted areas we had not imagined for performance. At one point, a DJ even set up on top of the staircase, which subsequently shifted between being a platform for performance and seating for the audience. In this sense, the project offered only the basic tools, while the community itself animated the structures, giving them life through unplanned, emergent forms of use.

AA
SINDBAD: I Can See Land unfolded during a period of rapid socio-political change, both locally and globally. How did these shifts and conditions influence your approach to site, presence, and temporality?

Abdullah A
I Can See Land came together at a time of rapid change in Saudi Arabia. The exhibition was possible because of that moment and the opportunity created by the festival. For us in ThirdSpace and SINDBAD, resourcefulness was essential. The building had some restrictions based on its UNESCO heritage requirements, which meant we had to approach the project differently. There was a lot of trial and error, and collective problem-solving was key to making it work. The result was something pavilion-like, a space that felt both indoor and outdoor. It carried the qualities of a “third space,” somewhere between a conventional exhibition and something else entirely.

AA
One of the biggest challenges we faced was figuring out how to occupy a space that almost refused to be occupied. In many ways, the site felt as if it were rejecting our presence, and we had to find different ways to navigate that resistance.

As you mentioned, Abdullah, the outcome was that the space itself began to feel as though it was breathing. Everything we created left room for air and openness; the windows were never closed. Because it was a UNESCO heritage site, rules of preservation had to be followed, but within those limits, the space became surprisingly accessible. People were able to enter areas they had not accessed before. Through the structures you designed, they could experience the site from new perspectives.

Abdullah A
For the truck, our process began with a simple problem-and-solutions approach. The idea was straightforward: place an exhibition inside a truck and move it from city to city, across the country, from west to east and back again. The challenge was figuring out how to make that possible within the physical limits of a truck.

Initially, we imagined it as a fixed structure that would remain the same as it travelled. Over time, however, our thinking shifted toward adaptability and resourcefulness. The exhibition did not need to be static; it could move and also change form as it travelled. We began to see it less as an object being transported and more as something fluid, able to shift according to context. Through experimentation with folding paper, testing forms, and exploring possibilities, we gradually arrived at the final design.

MA
I wrote about this in the publication, reflecting on why it marked such a significant cultural moment, but also a turning point for ThirdSpace, shaping both our methodology and our practice. I have come to think about it in several ways. The first concerns how we understand mobility as an architectural practice, a kind of spatial matrix. Movement itself can be read as an architectural system, which is crucial when we acknowledge that environments are also in constant motion and transformation. In Saudi Arabia, where change is rapid, mobility becomes both a metaphor and a lived condition. Alongside this sits the literal dimension of mobility: the truck itself, traversing space in a logistical sense.

When methods of mobility are applied to unconventional contexts, such as the back of a truck, new possibilities open up. Bringing functional design practices into spaces not typically designated for them allows other forms of practice to take root. This is where SINDBAD’s current focus lies: uncovering latent potentials, producing spaces within gaps and in-betweens. It is a practice attuned to social flux, creating opportunities for encounters in unexpected places, and drawing out what might otherwise remain invisible. In many ways, it is a methodology that depends on unconventionality and a sensitivity to change.

Ahaad A
SINDBAD often extends beyond physical exhibitions into digital spaces through technology and social media. How do you think these tools shape the collective’s reach, visibility and ability to create counter images that challenge dominant narratives?

MA
I think that’s really interesting, and actually, Ahaad, you’re probably better suited to answer this than us. But speaking as a non-Saudi, I’d say this is something very specific to the Saudi ecology: the way local knowledge is disseminated through online platforms. From my experience working here, that’s been hugely significant, people have learned about things, accessed information, and connected to communities primarily through digital means.

What’s striking is how unique and radical this feels in the Saudi context. It’s not just about access, but about creating attraction, and in many ways, supply and demand. The culture of announcing exhibitions, for instance, has become part of the experience. And the durational nature of many of these events, often lasting only one night, sometimes just a single instance, heightens that urgency. These short-lived formats rely on quick circulation of information online, and equally quick responses from audiences. It’s a very particular rhythm of cultural production and participation here.

AA

If you look at the history of social media in the region, especially within the art scene, it first emerged as one of the only platforms where people could share. There weren't many other spaces, so communities gathered there, and dialogue happened around the images being shared online. For SINDBAD, we've continued to use these mediums. We've been creating videos with Khalid and Willie, building new narratives alongside, and sometimes against, the narratives that already exist within the exhibitions. In my view, this is actually our most rigid form of representation as a collective. It's very set, very clear. Whereas most of what we present is open-ended, social media requires a certain fixedness that can feel challenging.

We've struggled with it with documenting what we're doing, and with translating between English and Arabic, with how words shift and change on the platform. That rigidity often creates friction with the more fluid approach we take in SINDBAD. But at the same time, we've also been playful with it. In the early editions, for example, we documented shows through 3D scans, so people can still access them online. The work lives on beyond the exhibition itself, which, as you said, only lasts a day. In that sense, what we're adding are stories of the present, ways of capturing and sharing this shifting landscape as it unfolds right now.

MA

Structurally, SINDBAD is unusual because it is entirely not-for-profit and genuinely grassroots, which already sets it apart in the Saudi context. There are initiatives that resemble grassroots projects, such as Estiraha, but they are not fully grassroots, and they operate on a for-profit basis. Within SINDBAD, the organisational model is also distinct.. It is non-linear: there is no fixed curator, manager, assistant curator, or social media coordinator. Instead, roles shift between members depending on the project. This fluidity is central to what makes the collective different.

On a thematic level, what we produce also distinguishes us. We operate as a democratic platform where our open calls are genuinely open, and everything is accepted. This is rare in the Saudi art scene. By contrast, Estiraha, while comparable as a smaller initiative, selects participants and follows a profit-driven structure. SINDBAD, on the other hand, creates alternative exhibition spaces where inclusivity is the primary goal.

One of the aspects I am most proud of is the way SINDBAD bridges what is often framed as "high" and "low" art. In our most recent edition, we presented first-time exhibitors, including children, alongside established artists represented by major regional galleries. It is rare to see the work of figures like Lulua Alyahya or Ayman Yossri displayed next to those who are completely new and unknown, but we make that possible. We also welcome forms that are not conventionally categorised as "art," such as books, pottery, and other creative practices. At its core, inclusivity is our mission. If it had to be defined in a single line, it would be this: to provide a platform for all, in as many forms as possible.

APPENDIX G: Moving Mountains Closing Conversations Ayman Yossri + Dr. Effat Fadag

This appendix contains selected sections from a public conversation between me, artist Ayman Yossri, and curator Dr Effat Fadag, held as part of the closing discussion for the Moving Mountains exhibition. The talk took place in Arabic and has been translated into English with the assistance of AI. Link to the conversation here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gChrdWwZHJo&t=3142s>

The conversation explored how language, symbolism, and identity operate in contemporary Saudi art. Yossri reflected on his desire for his works to remain in a state of suspension, "neither alive nor dead," while also discussing identity as an axis around which artistic practice and life are built. Effat directed the discussion toward the themes of time, symbolism, and the role of language as both a medium and a metaphor in artistic practice.

My own contributions, as the exhibiting artist, connected these ideas to the conceptual and material processes behind Moving Mountains, particularly the way time, symbolism, and narrative shape the construction of collective images. In doing so, the talk highlighted broader concerns central to this thesis: the negotiation of identity, temporality, and belonging within a rapidly shifting cultural landscape.

Talk:

EF

What does identity mean to you? How do you define it? And what is the relationship between identity and your artistic concepts?

AA

Identity is very important in my work. When I started, my paintings always revolved around the question of identity. Even now, although I try to move away from identity and think of broader, more open questions, I realise that I am Ahd, from Jeddah. This is my place, the space I know, the space I live in and was born into. It's the only thing I can truly offer to the idea. My identity is inseparable from my work: it appears in what I make, in the people I collaborate with, and in the spaces I inhabit. It surfaces again and again, becoming a fundamental element of my practice.

AY

For me, identity is a fundamental subject for every person. It's tied to our search for self in life, our awareness of existence and the stance we take toward the world. To move forward, one must ask oneself: Who am I? What do I want? What will I do? This becomes the axis around which all stories, movements, and actions revolve. Identity is complex and ever-changing, generating new questions without definitive answers.

For me, this has even been an existential crisis at certain stages of life, shaping how I belong intellectually

and socially, both locally and globally. That’s why I’ve chosen an artistic language of “indeterminacy”, never giving absolute or fixed answers, but instead generating questions that produce multiple, varied responses. This open-endedness enriches the work and keeps it alive. Re-asking the question of identity in different forms is itself what allows us to continue living and exploring new dimensions of experience.

EF

You both touched on something important: the link between thought and lived experience across past, present, and future. How does the idea of time connect to your work?

AA

Time is central in my practice. In some works I try to escape time; in others I emphasise it. My main concern is our relationship to the moment, how the present vibrates between past and future. I ask: What do we carry with us from the past into the future, and what do we leave behind? My works attempt to embody that tension.

AY

For me, time is something I try to eliminate from my work. Time ties art to its era, but through poetry and language, I create mental images that transcend time and space. That’s why poetry endures across ages. I liken time to preservatives in frozen meat: you can prolong it, but it eventually decays. But if you write “frozen meat” on paper and freeze it, the words never spoil, the idea remains timeless. Likewise, art that escapes time and place remains alive across generations, because ideas survive.

EF

So time becomes a symbol in your work. And both of you use symbolism heavily, sometimes in contrasting ways. How do you select your symbols?

AA

Symbols are crucial in my work. Often, they come to me rather than me choosing them. Everyday elements like the pomegranate, the falcon, or the palm tree, things I see around me, become symbols I live with. They enter into dialogue with me and carry layered cultural meanings, to which I add my own story.

AY

For me, it’s not about choosing symbols but about choosing a state of being. The state itself attracts the right symbols. Art should not dictate personal opinions, but instead generate thought and ambiguity. In my practice, the void itself becomes a symbol, an essential condition that produces questions. I strive to make art that resists fixed systems, creates new states, and sparks unexpected thought.

EF

You pointed to two important things: dialogue and storytelling. As a narrator, artist, writer, and lover of language and Ahad, also in your exhibition, the relationship of language and dialogue in telling the story, or the representative idea, and the interaction with the audience. How do you, as artists, connect yourselves as

storytellers, bringing the audience into other worlds they did not expect they could enter?

AA

The mountain in my work never fully reaches representation or truth. That frustrated me at first. But when we took it outside, its relation to real mountains revealed its smallness, and that became the point. The invented mountain took on a life of its own, changing with time, just as real mountains do.

AY

My work was set in the volcanic fields of AlUla, among prehistoric tombs and mysterious stone formations. I transformed it into a full-sized football field, an “arena” that interacts with nature but is unplayable, neutralised from function. It revealed how simple lines and boundaries define our perspectives: inside or outside, spectator or player. During the opening, people hesitated at the boundary, unsure if they could cross it. That moment highlighted the power of lines and borders in shaping perception and social roles... My explanation of the work is that it erases time and place, fixes the idea in the mind, connects to life and death, and revives dead places. These points lead to the future, to building an ideal way of life, to a utopia, to imagining the future. The work is also directed north toward NEOM, toward the Winter Games in the desert. Toward the challenge of making life possible in harsh conditions. Toward the future.

EF

Finally, let’s return to the themes of positive/negative, light/dark, and reality/fiction. How do these dualities play out in your work?

AA

In Moving Mountains and in my Noor Riyadh work Ghost of Today and Tomorrow, I try to give voice to multiple presences, mountains, light, and darkness, so that the work becomes a collective image rather than a single answer. Utopia is unreachable, but through layering voices and perspectives, I get closer to an answer.

AY

I embrace voids and gaps in my work. I don’t fear the incomplete image; in fact, finality stops thought. For me, emptiness itself is real and productive; it generates uncertainty and new perceptions. This is what art does: it allows us to escape the harshness of reality and imagine alternative, even utopian, futures.

APPENDIX H: Saudi Ethnic Diary

Lina Barnawi + Asaad Badawi + Anhar Salem

This talk forms part of the thesis appendices and explores how artists use documentation amid rapid urban change in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. I invited Lina Barnawi, Asaad Badawi, and Anhar Salem to speak about their collaborative project, Saudi Ethnic Diary, an Instagram-based archive that records everyday spaces, practices, and voices at risk of erasure in Jeddah’s districts. The talk and accompanying presentation have been edited and reduced for clarity and length.

Anhar Salem, an artist and practitioner; Asaad Badawi, a medical student and artist; and Lina Barnawi, a doctor with a passion for social anthropology, all saw documentation as both self-reflexive and local. Their approach addresses the current issues of gentrification, displacement, and demolition while placing Jeddah within the historical geography of the Hijaz.

Drawing on ethnographic cinema and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s idea of “speaking nearby,” they frame Saudi Ethnic Diary as a form of collective subjectivity: de-contextualising sequences, privileging contributions from within, and using social media’s non-linear, dialogic space to keep memory alive. In this way, their work becomes more than evidence; it is an ethical method of witnessing and care, offering counter-narratives and preserving fragile traces in a rapidly changing city.

Talk:

LB

We began the diary in 2017. Mass demolitions in Jeddah came later; Medina had already seen removals tied to mosque expansion. Documentation felt urgent but sensitive. We wanted a practice diary to track change and our methods.

AB

We were inspired by ethnographic cinema (Vertov, Rouch): filming can function like field notes. But representation is fraught; bias, “Othering,” and exoticisation are risks. Our answer: collective subjectivity, letting images and testimonies come from within neighbourhoods.

AS

Collective subjectivity accepts bias but disperses it. We receive community contributions without strict selection rules; we also de-contextualise sequencing so images aren’t over-authored by us. Representation remains open-ended.

AS

With phones and the internet, documentation is a part of daily life. Residents post multiple times a day, showing what’s gone or going. Self-representation matters: people present their own spaces and identities. Our role is to hold that collective space.

AB

Unlike linear films, Instagram is fragmentary and associative, closer to how reality is encountered. Viewers form their own connections; comments and DMs become part of the record and shape meaning.

AS

People DM asking where demolished markets (e.g., Souk Al-Khiema) moved, or invite us to farewell gatherings. Documentation becomes immediate and participatory.

AA

Many families were notified only weeks before demolition and had to move quickly. Saudi Ethnic Diary amplified their voices, giving them a place to deposit memories. Some neighbourhoods organised goodbye ceremonies, hugs, awards, shared stories, and forms of collective healing.

AB

I also record soundscapes; they’re disappearing too. Community walks differ by who accompanies us (former residents, current locals, or solo), changing what we see and how we’re received. That’s why collective documentation is vital: multiple angles, multiple truths.

AB & LB

Archiving should retain context images alongside comments and reactions. Saudi lacks documentation infrastructures; books, exhibitions, or archives that carry plural voices are needed.

08 PRACTICE REPOSITORY

The following works constitute the practice component of this PhD and are submitted for examination. Full digital files are available via the RCA Research Repository: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Xmwz9sNNRzgeWgibN4fxYyEOTifchPFN?usp=sharing>. Page references indicate where each work is discussed in the thesis.

Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow

Year: 2022

Medium: Installation, light, sound, performance

Duration: Variable

Discussed in: pp. 36–44

Description:

Ghosts of Today and Tomorrow is a performative installation composed of two sculptural pigeon towers, activated through light, sound, and live performance. Drawing from traditional architectural forms associated with communication and message transmission, the work explores presence, absence, and temporal overlap. Through Majes, the performers activate the structures, as sound and light together produce shifting conditions of visibility and concealment. The installation attends to voices, tracing how they linger, echo, and withdraw. It reflects on what it means to exist in states of exposure and obscurity, moving between light and darkness, and giving form to both as conditions of experience. In doing so, the work considers how messages travel across time. It contributes to the research by examining how environments are activated and inhabited through sensory and performative means.

The Green Light

Year: 2022

Medium: 4K video, sound, colour

Duration: 5 minutes 40 seconds

Discussed in: pp. 44–51

Description:

The work features a group of men gathered under an immersive green light, chanting in unison. The green light functions not as a symbol, but as a condition that regulates presence and participation. Through this controlled environment, the work reflects on how authority and permission are produced and experienced. The piece forms part of a wider investigation into how sensory conditions shape anticipation and alignment, and how individuals come to inhabit systems.

Moving Mountains

Year: 2024 (adjust if needed)

Medium: Installation

Duration: 14 minutes 45 seconds

Discussed in: pp. 52–60

Description:

Moving Mountains is a participatory installation in which a group of children play a parachute game using a large fabric printed with images of mountains that both exist and no longer exist. Through collective movement, the children lift, suspend, and release the surface, causing the mountains to rise, collapse, and disappear in continuous cycles. The work reflects on the collective capacity to shape and dismantle forms, drawing attention to the instability of landscapes under transformation. It considers how environments are both constructed and erased, and how acts of building are inseparable from acts of removal. Through this, the work foregrounds the tension between appearance and disappearance, and the role of collective action in bringing forms into presence and also allowing them to fall.

NEOM Residency Workshop: What Does the Future Look Like for You?

Year: 2024

Medium: Participatory workshop, digital renders

Discussed in: pp. 61–72

Description:

This body of work consists of a series of rendered images produced through a participatory workshop conducted during the NEOM Artist-in-Residence programme. Participants were invited to generate visual representations of their own imagined futures using a shared rendering framework. Each image was accompanied by a single word, chosen from “NEAR,” “FAR,” or “HOME,” positioning the work within a personal and spatial orientation. The outputs extend the research beyond individual authorship, exploring how speculative images are collectively produced and inhabited. The project contributes to the thesis by examining how rendering operates as a shared language through which futures are imagined and articulated.

The Mirrored Horizon

Year: 2025

Medium: 4K video, sound, colour

Duration: 12 minutes 42 seconds

Discussed in: pp. 69–72

Description:

The Mirrored Horizon explores the relationship between the body and speculative space. Developed during a residency in NEOM, the work follows a performer navigating a constructed landscape shaped by anticipation and projection. The piece draws on the logic of mimicry, where the body performs as if responding to structures that are not materially present, echoing the gesture of the mime who gives form to what is not there. Through this, the work reflects the condition of inhabiting projected futures, where the body moves in relation to spaces that are anticipated but not yet realised. The performer navigates through gestures that suggest friction and assimilation. The work contributes to the research by examining how speculative futures are engaged at the level of bodily experience, positioning the render as a spatial condition that is encountered and negotiated rather than simply viewed.

THE RUN

Year: 2025

Medium: 4K video, sound, colour

Duration: 22 minutes 15 seconds

Discussed in: pp. 136

Description:

The Run is a single-channel video work shot during the NEOM Artist Residency. The work follows a performer moving through a desert environment in which large-scale images of the landscape are installed directly within the landscape.

As the performer moves through the space, the landscape becomes both setting and participant, witnessing the presence of these images while remaining materially unchanged. The work stages an encounter between the physical environment and its projected counterpart, where the image is both present and out of reach. The act of running becomes a continuous attempt to approach something that cannot be fully entered or resolved.

Through this, The Run examines the render as a condition that is not only seen but pursued, foregrounding the tension between movement and arrival, and between lived space and its projected future. The work contributes to the research by exploring how speculative images are encountered bodily, positioning the render as a spatial condition that is approached but never fully attained.



Figure 92. Construction Progress of *The Line*, NEOM, Saudi Arabia

Note. Aerial view depicting the groundworks and early construction phases of *The Line*. The image highlights the scale of the ongoing development, including excavation efforts and the establishment of foundational infrastructure in the desert. Source: Giles Pendleton, 2024, Copyright © 2024 by Giles Pendleton.