

ARTnews

Saudi Arabia's Diriyah Biennale Looks to the Future amid an Imperiled Present

By Tessa Solomon
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"After Rain", Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale 2024, installation view, Marjetica Potrč, 'Acre Palafita with Infrastructure' (2024). PHOTO MARCO CAPPELLETTI, COURTESY DIRIYAH BIENNALE FOUNDATION

When rain hits dry soil or rock, petrichor, an enticing, earthy scent, is emitted. Humans have an uncanny capacity to perceive petrichor; some studies say we can detect it faster than sharks do blood in water. The "why" of that is a mystery, but it could be our unconscious recognizing of the necessity of rain.

The second edition of Saudi Arabia's Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale—titled "After Rain" and on view through May—proposes petrichor as a metaphor for renewal, a cleansing by water of our battered earth and spoiled morality. The inaugural edition of the event, curated by Philip Tinari in 2021, was also water-themed, taking its title from a saying about a river crossed by Chinese revolutionaries in the 1980s. The fixation on water could seem ironic, given the arid setting, but it's a logical idea for the **Diriyah Biennale**, the first international showcase of its kind in Saudi Arabia, to circle; it's inextricable from the existence of the event.

An urgent sense of reinvention suffuses the Gulf nation, which already underwent an immense transformation via the oil industry in the late 20th century. Like post-revolutionary China, Saudi Arabia gained the capital to dream itself in a new direction. That dream, formalized in writing by Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud as “Vision 2033,” has seen billions of dollars poured into the literal and symbolic overhaul of its landscape: its craggy northwest is now scattered with cultural attractions, and high-quality creative complexes, like Hayy Jameel, are giving local artists chances to build international connections.

The 2024 Diriyah Biennale—which boasts wire weavings by El Anatsui, a soaring mural by Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, and a cacophonous four-channel video installation by Joan Jonas—is another product of this ambition.

The curatorial team, led by Ute Meta Bauer, has assembled 177 artworks in JAX, the former warehouse district of Diriyah on the northern edge of Riyadh. (And that’s not counting the 19 artists commissioned to do research projects for the show; their work is presented here in a worthwhile section unto itself.) Credit to the curators for the overwhelming representation of artists from the Gulf and South Asia, who are historically underrepresented in institutional settings. The art, however, varies noticeably in strength; with exceptions, biennale veterans outperform the lot. Also, the exhibition probably needs more time to get acquainted with its newly refurbished venue, given the few odd installation choices. There are kinks to press at Diriyah before it can match commensurate regional showcases like the last ingenious Sharjah Biennial.

The best of that bunch includes Nguyen Trinh Thi, who is showing her film *How to Improve the World / Cai tien The gioi* (2021), a 46-minute examination of the significance of the gong in Jarai culture. The story is told through Ksor Sep, a Jarai shaman who prioritizes listening, and her teenage daughter, An Nguyen Maxtone-Graham, who prefers photography and film. There’s love shared between them, but there’s also dissociation and exasperation. Without the participation of youth, how do Indigenous cultures endure? Underpinning the familial tension is the hierarchy Western art history imposes on genres of expression.



Dala Nasser, *Mineral Lick* (2019).

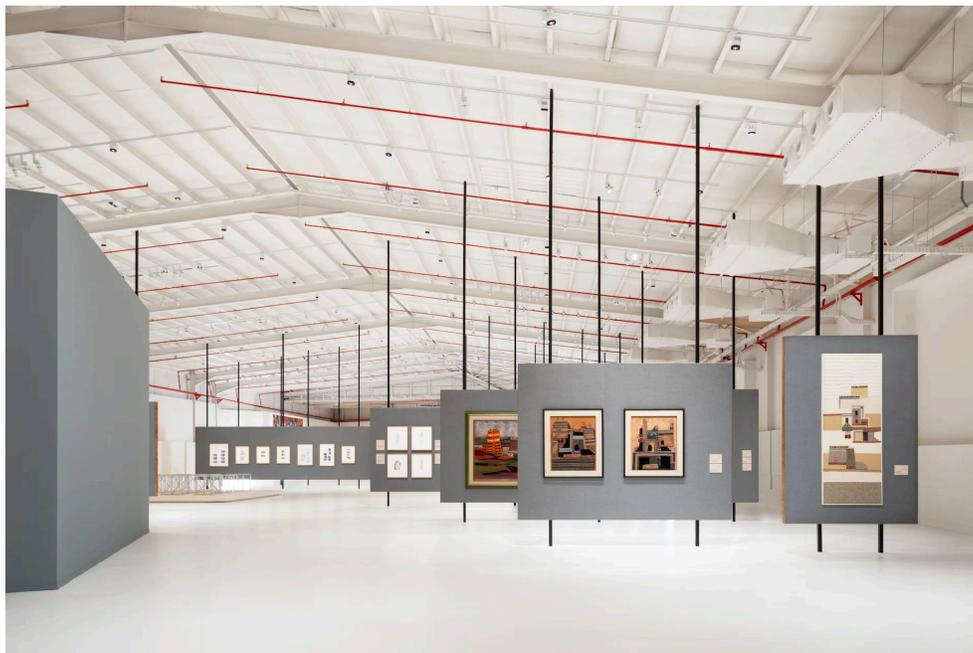
In a section of the biennale called "Water and Habitats," the Lebanese artist Dala Nasser laments the crisis of water toxicity in her hometown of Beirut through the installation *Mineral Lick* (2019). Nasser submerged pieces of fabric in a mixture of dye, water from all 60 sectors of Beirut, and rock salt to create what she calls an "abstract hydromap." Suspended under a spotlight in a dim hall, with its tail dragging like a bridal train, the fabric has a sick sort of grace, like a country blessed with natural beauty but cursed with incompetent caretakers.

Another nearby section, "Environments and Ecologies," crisscrosses the globe, counting crimes against biodiversity. A scale replica of a South American *fita* ("stilt house") by Slovenian artist and architect Marjetica Potrč got most of the buzz on opening day, but I preferred *Tuban* (2019) by Ade Darmawan,

cofounder of the Indonesian artist collective ruangrupa, which in 2022 curated Documenta 15. *Tuban* takes its name from an Indonesian port town that thrived as a hub for Islamic culture between the 13th and early 16th centuries; it's also the backdrop of the book *Arus Balik*, by the Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer, who details how the natural resources of the archipelago were plundered by Dutch colonialism, or "extractivist greed," as Darmawan describes it. In Diriyah, Darmawan set beakers to drip distilled spices and leaves, like cinnamon and sandalwood, onto open books about the local policies that abetted this plunder. The message is elegant and indicting: 'Here is what we lost, and how it was taken.'

There's a disconnect between *Tuban*—and the show's other standouts—and the relentless drive of "Vision 2023." Incisive art looks, without hesitation, back as well as forward to understand how systems of power fail people and places. That's not a topic easily broached in Saudi Arabia, whose government operates in extremes: Its unparalleled investment in creative infrastructure will benefit generations of regional youth, and likely expand Western notions of Arabic-speaking lands. Meanwhile, its leaders have been accused of igniting a humanitarian disaster and disposing of dissidents, among other human rights controversies. Herein lies the trouble with a biennale as metaphor for renewal: it opens its benefactor to scrutiny, and art isn't a cleansing agent; it's a tool for self-examination.

Notably, the most poignant offerings by Saudi artists are in "Modern Legacies and Geopolitics," a showcase of the previous generation of South Asian and Gulf artists. Many of these artists built a framework to study and share art under fraught local and geopolitical conditions, like the initial regional modernization during the 1950s and '60s, or the 1990–91 Gulf War. Several artists, hobbled early in their careers by conflict or inadequate infrastructure, are being exhibited for the first time in Diriyah. It's a stellar display that deserves the full museum treatment.



"After Rain", Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale 2024, installation view, Nabila Al Bassam, multiple works, front; multiple works by Rasheed Araeen, Hassan Sharif, Safeya Binzagr in background. PHOTO BY MARCO CAPPELLETTI, COURTESY OF DIRIYAH BIENNALE FOUNDATION.

Key figures are present in this section, like Siah Armajani, an Iranian American maverick calligrapher and irreverent architect, and Hassan Sharif, a major purveyor of conceptual art in the United Arab Emirates, but it's the women who shine brightest. Nabila Al Bassam, born in India and based in Al Khobar, Saudi Arabia, spent years traveling across the Kingdom to conduct interviews with craftswomen versed in textile arts. The works on view depict the scenery as it felt rather than as it was; vibrant and varied textured panels of fabrics stacked into the semblance of homes, adorned with beads, and tucked between cascading knolls. In her kaleidoscopic fabric collage *The Lighthouse of Saudi* (1999), female figures are faintly visible.

Safeya Binzagr, an artist and educator from Jeddah, is similarly anthropological in her intentions. Born in 1940, she left Saudi Arabia to study in Cairo and, later, London, finally returning home in the late '60s. On view is *Turathuna (Our Tradition)*, 1997-99, a series of 39 photogravures, which involve transferring a negative to a copper plate. At the center of each small white panel is a woman wearing traditional Saudi garb. Every detail of the outfit—the dyed fabric, the gold silk thread, the jewelry, the straw hat—has been meticulously researched.

If you tour "After Rain" chronologically, as I did, this will be about the halfway point. I paused here and savored the deceptive simplicity of Al Bassam's little women. *Turathuna* shares a spirit with *How to See the World*, the Nguyen Trinh Thi film about Jarai culture. Both celebrate their respective cultures, yet have also prepared, in the way of their art, preemptive eulogies for folkloric heritage, which is so easily cannibalized by globalization and mass production, as the exhibition catalog itself notes.

Bauer, writing elsewhere in the catalog, mentions cultural preservation, "grounding" the biennale in a "local context." Bookmark that quote and check back in a few editions of this show to find what of the past remains.