



Deep Float installation (2017)

oil and art

Words by **Roxanne Goldberg**
Photos courtesy of **Monira Al Qadiri**

In 2013, *Men's Journal* rated Azerbaijan's Naftalan 'oil spa' as one of the year's 'Best Summer Adventures'. Bolstering the indulgence with anecdotes of gorging on sturgeon caviar, the author remarked how bathing in crude oil inspires sentiment of the great oligarchs of yesteryear.

It is therefore fitting that images of steely men neck-deep in baths of petroleum are creative catalysts for Monira Al Qadiri. A current artist-in-residence at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, Monira confronts a world where the exalted dominance of petroleum is slowly evaporating.

Monira attempts to answer the question "what's next?" with an imperial-style, claw-footed roll-top bathtub filled with a substance the consistency and color of coagulated oil. Two black hands reach upwards in a gesture that could be interpreted as a humorous "Look Ma, No Hands" or a desperate SOS. For Monira, who earned her PhD from Tokyo University in 2010, the range of possible interpretations makes the artwork a success.

Entitled *Deep Float*, the installation, which earlier this year exhibited at Stroom Den Haag in The Hague and ACUD MACHT NEU in

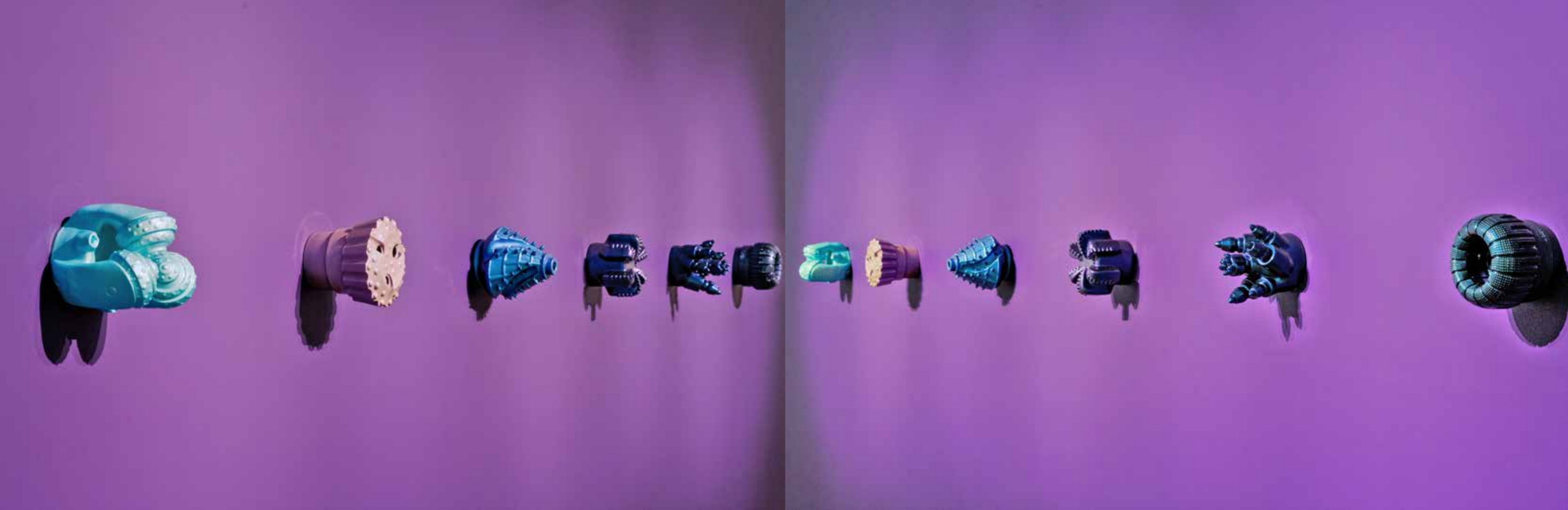
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Berlin, elicits concern about the environment and climate change while simultaneously confronting deeply personal questions about what it means to become irrelevant. As Monira explains, "[Oil is] part of my being in the world and it's not going to last so what's going to happen when it dies? It's this existential thing."

Monira describes her oeuvre, which less than a decade in the making is impressively profuse as it is materially diverse, as a self-portrait.

Born in 1983, Monira was seven years old during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Her memories of the violent occupation are a blur of loud noises and creative activity encouraged by her artist mother and music-loving father.

While Monira is much more than her formative years, her experiences during the First Gulf War make her acutely aware of the invisible force oil exerts on everyday life, not just on Gulf residents, but on people worldwide. As Monira sees it, bathing in oil is the future post-petrol. It's a world where oil has not disappeared, but has instead lost its value. Its use as a therapeutic treatment is no longer a luxury reserved for magnates, but rather a 'summer adventure' for Western tourists.



Above, photos by Tony Elieh:
Spectrum 1 (2016), series of six
wall-mounted sculptures
Below: *Deep Float* (2017) installation





Monira's perspective offers a fresh alternative to the cult of happiness. Instead of celebrating smiles and condemning tears, Monira finds beauty in tragedy.

*All photos on spread by Tony Elieh:
Spectrum 1 (2016), series of six wall-mounted sculptures, 20x20cm each*

to separate sadness from joy in infatuations, as in all other aspects of life. As she says with affable laughter, "When you feel sorry for yourself, at some point it feels ridiculous."

Monira's perspective offers a fresh alternative to the cult of happiness. Instead of celebrating smiles and condemning tears, Monira finds beauty in tragedy. She seeks to make the entire emotional spectrum available in her artworks by making a clear idea "foamy". Her artworks, like her PhD thesis, explore the aesthetics of sadness in the Middle East. While she doesn't seek to create humorous artworks, she is satisfied when viewers do experience humour upon viewing them as their laughter opens up the pieces for more serious discussion of sometimes sombre topics.



Monira compares the historic trajectory of oil to that of coal, which U.S. President Trump has vowed to save despite the industry's irredeemable decline. While Trump metaphorically puts coal on a pedestal, Monira literally memorializes today's fuel *de jour* as a statue. In 2014, she erected *Alien Technology*, a massive public sculpture in the form of a glowing iridescent oil drill, in Dubai's heritage district.

Like *Deep Float*, *Alien Technology* embodies the dichotomous passions of loving and loathing. The first fuels tension between the salubrious and the cancerous, while the second elicits both wonder

and oppression. Such attempts to incarnate an all-consuming fixation is Monira's primary motivation. When discussing her quest to "become the art", Monira refers to the highly influential author, poet and film director Yukio Mishima, who romanticized kamikaze suicide missions and samurai principles in many of his prolific writings. In 1970, he "became his own obsession" by committing ritual suicide in the mode of the samurai known as harakiri. While his final expression was extreme, Monira acknowledges the nobility in Mishima's desire to become the object of his obsession. She further points to the inability



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Deep Float and *Alien Technology* are good examples of this reaction, as is *DIVER*, a proposed, but not yet realized artwork, in which synchronized swimmers perform a choreographed routine in a pool appeared to be filled with oil. Despite the Martian slickness of oil and the polished surfaces of her sculptural works, Monira's aesthetic retains an analogue quality that reflects her interest in the hand-drawn video games and Arabic-dubbed Japanese cartoons that consumed her 1980s childhood. *Spectrum 1 & 2*, for example, are wall-mounted sculptures inspired by oil drill heads. Though made with a 3D printer, the works appear as two-dimensional anime pushing through a technicolour screen.

The human touch in these alien objects is more subtle than in Monira's earlier video works, in which simple props and amateur make-up forged a direct relationship between the work and the viewer. Monira's practice has since evolved with a finesse that lends the pieces not so much a glossy sheen, as a reflective patina. Her more recent works remain part of her ongoing autobiography. However, instead of turning inward, they look outward to investigate the past and contemplate the future. In doing so, the works

become increasingly accessible and evermore public. They begin to stand as reminders of a shared legacy.

On the heels of exhibitions in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Germany, the Netherlands and, most recently, a performance as part of *Kunstenfestivaldesarts* in Brussels, 2017 is slated to be busy for Monira. She has been chosen alongside such blue chip names as Ai Weiwei, Monica Bonvicini and Alicja Kwade to collaborate with Murano glassblowers for *Glasstress*, a collateral event of the 57th Venice Biennale. Her solo show at Gasworks in London, opening on July 13th, uses alien abductions, grand diplomatic rituals and other cultural tropes of the 1980s to investigate the collapse of the imperial United States and the rise of political populism.

Whether in the form of glass or sound, Monira's upcoming works will ask the international art goer to consider her a part of a shared legacy of veiled structures as they are intertwined with global economies and shifting cultural identities. These works are part of, but not limited to, Monira's ever-growing self-portrait. They also narrate the historical consequences we've all inherited and envision one of many possible futures we will eventually live. Δ