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Monira Al Qadiri at KUB, 2022
Photo: Miro Kuzmanovic, Kunsthau Bregenz

MONIRA AL QADIRI

by Olivia Sand

There is no doubt Monira Al Qadiri's work will get increasing exposure in the near future: not only does her practice address one of the most current topics for debate – oil – but she also finds a way, be this in sculpture, installation or video, to present issues that concern her in a meaningful and aesthetic way. Her current solo exhibition at the Kunsthau Bregenz captures her *savoir faire*, highlighting all the questions linked to the oil industry that brought wealth to her native Kuwait. Having grown up during the Iraq War, Monira Al Qadiri (b 1983 in Senegal) has witnessed an important milestone of the country's history that continues to impact her work. Beyond energy and the environment, she embraces gender issues, and is eager to promote personal stories that are part of her country's heritage. Below, she recounts the key moments and stages in her life that led her to become the artist she is today.

Asian Art Newspaper: You moved several times since going to Japan, at the age of 16, to study. After Kuwait, Lebanon, the Netherlands, is Berlin finally your home?
Monira Al Qadiri: I do not know, but for now it is. Berlin is a city for artists where beyond studio spaces, there is a great community of artists, collaborators, and studio assistants.

It is a very lively place with a lot of museums and galleries. That is probably the reason why so many people live in Berlin now. I am very happy here, keeping my studio that I have had for the past five years. Lately, however, there has been less availability in studio spaces, with artists slowly being replaced by the tech industry. Despite these recent changes, Berlin still remains a much better place than other big cities.

AAN: You have been infatuated with Japan and Japanese *animé* since you were a child. Did moving to Tokyo meet your expectations?

MAQ: As a child, I was literally obsessed with Japan, and I started teaching myself Japanese. I felt that going there was my mission. Back then, I had a fantasy about the country: it was very foreign to me and I was imagining I could become a cartoon, because I was obsessed with that particular part of culture. Of course, the moment I got there, all this 'exoticness' disintegrated, as I was confronted with reality. This was not the environment I had imagined, where I could escape from all the issues I was facing. Japan is a very conservative society. It is not as free and liberated as one would think and it is different from the kind of image

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NEWS IN BRIEF

of that initiative by opening new, permanent galleries for Art of the Islamic Worlds in March 2023. These new galleries have been endowed by collector Hossein Afshar, and present for the first time the full extent of MFAH holdings in Islamic art in the context of an extensive selection of Iranian masterworks on long-term loan from the Afshar Collection.

Assembled over the past 50 years, the Afshar Collection conveys the rich artistic traditions of Iranian civilisation from the 7th to 19th century, in several hundred exquisite paintings, significant ceramics, precious inlaid metal ware, and finely woven silk fabrics and carpets. The museum has devoted permanent gallery space to Islamic art for more than a decade, and the new Afshar galleries nearly double previous display space for Islamic art. Hundreds of objects, including paintings, manuscripts, ceramics, carpets, and metalwork spanning more than 1,000 year to reflect the breadth of historic Islamic lands, including present-day Morocco, Spain, Tunisia, Egypt, Türkiye, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.

V&A PARASOL FOUND PRIZE FOR WOMEN IN PHOTOGRAPHY, LONDON

The V&A has announced the five winners of the inaugural V&A Parasol Foundation Prize for Women in Photography. The prize

is a three-year commitment by the museum and is dedicated to identifying, supporting, and championing innovative women artists working in the field of contemporary photography. The prize attracted nearly 1,400 submissions from artists all over the world, representing a broad visual and conceptual interpretation of the theme 'Agents of Change', which celebrates photography's role in affecting and documenting transformation, revolution and innovation.

The winners include Van-Nhi Nguyen is a Vietnamese photographer and designer based in Hanoi, Vietnam. Her work is concerned with the reconstruction of collective memory – be it that of her own identity or of the larger community – and its relationship to contemporary society. Her ongoing project, *As You Grow Older*, takes the familiar shape of a family photo album and features portraits in which each individual is presented in their own space.

Gohar Dashti is an Iranian American photographer and video artist lives and works in Tehran. Her native country is a dominant feature in her work, with particular focus on its topography, socio-geography, and history of violence. In *Home* series, Dashti documents the places 'left behind' in Iran; evidence of those displaced by years of conflict.

Priyadarshini Ravichandran is an Indian photographer whose work is connected with lived experience, including stories of women, their

lives and the land. *Surge* (2019) is a poetic and personal exploration revealing the complexity of familial relationships.

ROXBURGH HOUSE KOLKATA

To restore this 230-year-old building, Roxburgh International Trust (RIT), a charitable organisation, is driving the new initiative to restore the building. Consultant firms Simpson and Alleya and Associates of Calcutta are partnering the project. A memorandum of understanding has been signed with the Botanical Survey of India, which owns the garden in Shibpur and its historic buildings, for the restoration and adaptive reuse of Roxburgh House and other important structures in the compound. The project has been named as 'Roxburgh International Hub Project.' The project aims at restoring and rehabilitating the heritage buildings as the core of a reinvigorated public engagement programme. The project also proposes to start a ferry service across the river Hooghly to link the Botanical Garden with Calcutta. Roxburgh House is situated on the western bank of the river. Visitor and leisure facilities will be added to the rehabilitated heritage buildings and pavilions created where seminars and study will be held on issues like climate change. The funds are being raised as partnerships with World Monument Fund and Commonwealth Heritage Forum.

NEW FAIR FOR JAPAN

Tokyo Gendai Fair, organised by The Art Assembly, is launching a new contemporary art fair in Yokohama from 7 to 9 July. Though the fair has Tokyo in its name, it will technically be staged in Yokohama at the Pacifico convention center, which is about a 30-minute train ride from downtown Tokyo and is part of the greater Tokyo Bay region.

ASIAN AMERICAN ART INITIATIVE, CALIFORNIA

Stanford University has announced the promotion of Aleesa Pitchamam Alexander to the position of Robert M and Ruth L Halperin Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, and the appointment of Kathryn Cua as the Curatorial Assistant for the Cantor's Asian American Art Initiative (AAAI), a cross-disciplinary, institutional commitment at Stanford University dedicated to the study of artists and makers of Asian descent. AAAI was launched in January 2021 to encompass a range of activities, including: collecting and exhibiting works of Asian American and Asian diaspora artists; preserving archival materials; fostering undergraduate and graduate education; and cultivating community collaboration and dialogue through public programmes and aims to establish Stanford as a leading academic and curatorial center for the study of Asian American and Asian diaspora artists.



Choreography of Alien Technology, Shell (2023), Kunsthaus Bregenz, Courtesy of the artist and König Galerie Photo: Markus Tretter



Choreography of Alien Technology, Alien Technology (Diamond), 2023, Kunsthaus Bregenz, courtesy of the artist and König Galerie Photo: Markus Tretter



Choreography of Alien Technology, Miner (2023), Kunsthaus Bregenz, courtesy of the artist and König Galerie Photo: Markus Tretter

that is projected to the world. I ended up being disappointed in many ways, but I had made the decision that I was going to move and go to school there. Studying art in Japan was fantastic and very informative for my practice. As a result, I am still influenced by the knowledge, skills, and ideas I absorbed there. But at the same time, I am a very different person since I have this Arabic background, which gives me a distinct cultural influence. In Japan, for example, the country is hyper-visual. Everything has little animations and patterns, it is all very colourful and visualised. This is probably based on the fact that nature in Japan is very visual, whereas in the Arab world, and especially where I am from, the desert is monotone and the same, constantly with the same colours. To me, our culture is very literal, being based on literature, storytelling, and poetry. This is the main art form that has existed for thousands of years. My practice mixes and brings these two things – the storytelling and the hyper-visual aspect – together in one work. It is unique in that way, yet also very strange, which makes it sometimes difficult for people to understand.

AAN: You chose 'the aesthetics of sadness in the Middle-East' as the topic for your PhD while in Tokyo. How did that specific topic come about?
MAQ: I had been living in Japan for a long time and I had started to miss my own culture. I had become alienated to it. Then, I began reflecting about what it was that I really missed? I started listening to music and poetry, and I realised that they were all very sad, yet we still love and indulge in them. In modern society, and this is true in many places in the world, sadness is considered as a negative emotion and is not something that should be celebrated. It is almost seen as a disease that should be fixed, whereas in the Arab world, it is viewed as a noble emotion, something that is actually highlighted and somehow enjoyed. I felt that was a more interesting nuanced way of



Choreography of Alien Technology, Alien Technology (Tower), 2023, Kunsthaus Bregenz, Courtesy of the artist and König Galerie Photo: Markus Tretter

going about the emotional spectrum of life. So I started researching this temperament and wrote my thesis based not only on visual arts, but also on history, religious practices, and all other kinds of different influences. I believe my work also carries this element, being very colourful and fun on the surface, but always hiding a tragic character. I still find this aspect fascinating. In European culture, for example, this idea can be traced back to Greek tragedy. Although it is not new, I feel that in modern times, people have somehow disregarded this part of human experience, which in my opinion, is beautiful – there is something very indulgent about it.

AAN: A large part of your work is based on, or refers to, Kuwait. Considering that it is a very young country, created in 1961, it has had an unusual history in such a short period of time, from war to the discovery of oil that created enormous wealth, and now there is climate change to consider. There are many subjects for

you to address. Do you agree?
MAQ: Indeed, there is a lot to draw from mainly because the country has had such a turbulent history in such a short time. There is always this existential crisis related to being from that part of the world. If it is not a war, or the stock market crashing, will it be the oil market collapse leading to the whole country falling apart? There are so many different ways to highlight the fragility of a place, and this is a recurring question I ask myself: what is my future? My work is very biographical. I think of it as a giant self-portrait and I like to mix past, present and future. Growing up in Kuwait, I lived through the war which was a very important part of my life story. I still cannot grasp it somehow, because I was a child and it is still not logical to me. The experience continues to be interesting and strange and I cannot face this part of my life in a normal way. Also, growing up in the 1980s, there was this period of Americana in Kuwait (as it was elsewhere, too). It was a strange time in many places in the world with a spirit of decadence, wealth, and madness, living without thinking about the consequences of what was happening. Then, after the war in Kuwait in the 1990s, it felt like everything was paralysed: people second-guessed themselves and started imagining that the war was a divine punishment because they were too decadent. As a result, they became very conservative.

AAN: You started out as an artist while still living in Japan. What was your experience like trying to break into the art world?
MAQ: Breaking into the art world in Japan proved to be very difficult. Of course, I was a foreigner and regardless how well I spoke Japanese and was integrated into the culture, I could never be treated like a local. In Japan, the art infrastructure is very much geared towards established artists. It is a fact that Japanese people do not like to take risks and, therefore, they do not like to gamble

on younger artists. That even applies to Japanese artists who are young and very talented, as they do not get any opportunities to show anywhere. It was very difficult to break that mould. Then, I realised I did not have to go through this and that I could simply go back to Kuwait and try my luck there. So I went back, but I only stayed in Kuwait for a few months before moving to Beirut, which has a much more advanced and interesting art scene. Here, I learned the ropes of navigating myself as an artist from Kuwait in the greater world. Artists there have so much tenacity, discover how to navigate this strange world that the art world is and how to apply for funding from Europe or the US for their projects. I truly learned how to be an Arab artist in the world and it was a very formative time in my life. In addition, living in Lebanon was the complete opposite to the experience in Japan. We tend to say that art is ubiquitous, practiced in the same way all over the world, but actually, it is very different. Wherever you go, there is a distinct dominant discourse as to the way art is practised. As a result, my practice is continually evolving, depending on where I am going and how I absorb different ideas or skills.

AAN: Your work also addresses gender issues, which is a sensitive topic in certain parts of the world. How did you go about it?
MAQ: This is very much related to my upbringing as I grew up in a very conservative and patriarchal society. There are things I do not know when or how they happened, but I traced them back to the time of the war in Kuwait where I was stuck at home with my mother and my sisters the whole time, while my father, my uncles, and my cousins were outside doing heroic things. I was a seven-year-old with no understanding of what exactly they were doing. I only knew they were doing something heroic outside while we were at home and not allowed to leave because it was too dangerous. At the time, I had this preconception that men were so fascinating and very heroic. I wanted to become like them and, as a result, when I was very young, I started to cut my hair short and was cross-dressing. Actually, my earliest artworks were a collaboration with my sister, Fatima Al Qadiri, who would take photos of me posing at home or putting a fake moustache. I adored this masculine figure which was actually my dream, but once I left Kuwait, I stopped since it did not mean anything anymore, as I was outside of that strange sphere. Nevertheless, I was still fascinated by that moment in my life and I continue to be inspired by it in my work. These ideas about gender are not just about sexual preference, but also about power and of course, access to this power. If a child sees a man as being so powerful, then you would want to mimic that. Logically, I came to think that in order to become a powerful person in this place, I could not be a woman. I have to say, it is a strange misconception. It is not a good thing that I felt this way, but it happened and that is certainly why there is a lot in my work that has to do with these masculine characters, masculine forms, and masculine topics, because I have this strange relationship with gender performance. It is not really about gender identities, it is about performing gender, power, and a little bit of narcissism. I feel this masculine figure is a very narcissistic figure.

AAN: Do you feel your work is helping to

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These works
were always
seen as being
very
controversial
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move the discourse forward in Kuwait, or did you face restrictions?
MAQ: I have been making these works for a long time and they were always seen as being very controversial. But, somehow, probably because I was cross-dressing in my video works, people thought it was funny. They believed it was like a comedy and because it was a comedy (basically a joke), it was fine and they would accept it. At some point, I started relying on this strategy quite actively, because I felt the comedic aspect allowed for acceptance of all these taboo subjects that one usually is not allowed to talk about. Therefore, I began using humour as a weapon. All the subjects that I want to talk about that are not usually easily discussed, are very easily translated through comedy.

AAN: Your mother, Thuraya Al Baqsami (b 1952), is also an artist. Beyond her being a pioneer as a female artist in Kuwait, how do you see her and what does she represent for you?
MAQ: My mother's story is very unusual, especially because there are very few female artists who have been so active for more than 50 years. It is quite admirable. Of course, she faced a lot of setbacks while working and showing her work, since many people did not take her seriously. She was very brave and persevered in this time and place. In my opinion, she has been a champion of women's rights since the 1960s. Growing up in this household, I felt very lucky that my parents were so liberal and progressive, although to me it was normal at the time. Other people thought my family was crazy, that they were outlaws, and one should at all costs avoid becoming like them. Already back then, growing up in that environment, I thought of myself as an alien, different from anybody else. Then, as I grew older, I started to appreciate what my mother did in her life. A lot of artists pretend they came out of nothing, that this sudden genius came out of the blue. As for me, I like to trace this genealogy of artists: if my mother had not done what she has done and practised as she has practised, I would never have been an artist. In a way, it is a cultural inheritance from her to me, even though our work is completely different.

AAN: All over the world, institutions are presently trying to identify female artists whose work has been overlooked. Your mother is certainly one of them. Do you feel your mother could benefit not only from this increasing interest in female artists, but also in artists from the Middle East?
MAQ: Yes, this is my dream. I try to help as much as possible. I curated her retrospective of 50 years at the Sharjah Museum in 2017. We also made a book together with a film and since then, her work has been shown at MoMA PS1, in New York, as well as other places. Actually, we are presently in a show together in Germany, where I am responding to one of her works with a video piece. Slowly, but surely,

people are starting to pay attention, because it is difficult in our part of the world to be an artist even though by being so prolific, my mother has all of this history and achievements. In Kuwait, art is seen as a hobby. We do not even have a Minister of Culture and culture is not taken seriously. In any European country, an artist like my mother would meet the president and have retrospectives all over the world. As it turns out, just because she is from Kuwait, it is not possible. We need to have these individual efforts and I am trying my best to bring more attention to her work. In my opinion, it is important, historical, and as a female artist from the time, despite everything that happened, it is most admirable. Women everywhere should hear the story because we always have stereotypes about women in the Arab world behind the curtain. They need to know that there are people that are active and working.

AAN: Coming back to your practice, what do you think prompted the global interest in your work?
MAQ: I currently have the biggest show of my life at the Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria, filling all four floors of the museum which is quite intimidating. I am showing entirely new work for this exhibition. The reason why I am being so ambitious with the work is because my practice is very much about oil. I grew up in Kuwait, and oil has shaped my life and although many people do not want to admit that, it is a reality. I have been trying to make works about that subject for the past 10 years. Initially, people did not understand the work, were not interested or thought it was not an important topic. There was a very big distance between them and oil. Now, it is suddenly topical and everybody is interested and it is a subject people have constantly on their minds. Everything that I was discussing 10 years ago has now become most relevant. In a way, this is symptomatic of the art world: sometimes, people do not pay attention to you for years and then they find out this is suddenly very important. Previously, people simply did not care and when it came to the fossil fuel industry, petroleum, or petrochemicals, they always saw it as an invisible thing in the background that no one wanted to confront. But now, suddenly, it is in our daily life, in your face, and in your bills. It is also about waste, climate change, and plastic. They are the basis of modern life: our lifestyles have been revolutionised by these substances, which is both a miracle, yet also a curse. They are destroying us. Ultimately, how do we reconcile the two? This is the dilemma with which my work is dealing. In addition, as a Kuwaiti, there is also an existential topic about being from the place



Benzene Float, Propane, Para-Benzene (2023), Kunsthaus Bregenz, produced with the help of ICD Brookfield Place, courtesy of the artist and König Galerie. Photo: Markus Tretter

which is supplying the world with this substance, but at the same time, completely destroying itself with that same substance that will not last. It is a reality that there will be an alternative in the future, oil will fall out of fashion like its partner coal. If the human race wants to survive, we need to move away from this strange and alien substance. For me, as a Kuwaiti, it is a big leap to say this and can be considered as a suicidal statement.

AAN: Beyond getting both worlds to coexist, are you contemplating providing alternatives?
MAQ: My work is very much about emotions. I am not an activist, a theorist, or a scientist. I am relaying these strange circumstances we find ourselves in as people from the modern world. Our way of life is a mutant life: we cannot live without this substance and it is almost as if we were possessed by it, even though it is absolutely possible to live without it. One hundred years ago, people did it. So, what happened in these 100 years? How do we get away from it in a sustainable, humane, way? In the early 20th century, there were attempts to make plastic out of hemp and biodegradable materials and some of these experiments succeeded. But then, when the petrochemical industry came into play, it took over this whole space. It simply made it impossible to make plastic in any more sustainable way. It was too expensive whereas it was so cheap to make things out of oil. There are ways to think about moving away from our current situation, as there are so many ways to make energy now. I am not a scientist, but I am convinced it will

happen. It has to, otherwise, there will be a climate apocalypse. How can they reconcile these things? It is really a dilemma. That is precisely the subject of my work. It is not an answer to anything, it is just a portrait of the strange circumstance in which we find ourselves.

AAN: The pieces you presented at the Venice Biennale in 2022 were oil drills. How did they come into your practice?
MAQ: For the Venice Biennale, we had little time to make the work. There were 150 artists in that show which was monumental. I was very honoured to be part of it, and I felt it was important at that time and at that moment to push that topic, which is something I wanted to do for so long. These works are like a totem of my practice and my ideas, not just with regards to oil, but also with these strange phallic shapes that are very masculine, dealing with gender. Then, in addition, there is also my family history that has to do with pearl diving and the iridescent colour of pearls and oil. Basically, I wanted to play with all of these things together in one place. The show was about metamorphosis which is an important part of my work either from woman to men, person to drill, pearls to oil and oil to something else in the future. I wanted to make the most elaborate drill forms I have ever completed, looking like a crown or some kind of ritualistic artefact: one would not dream this is a drill that goes into the earth and gets oil. You would just think it is a kind of pyramid, or a tower for architecture models. So people don't quite know what they are looking at and, of course, I am playing with that fact.

AAN: The show in Bregenz is entirely based on new works you created specifically for the show. Can you elaborate?
MAQ: Initially, I wanted to integrate many different sides of my practice since, after all, it is so far my biggest show. Then, when I went to see the place, I realised that the building in itself, completed by Peter Zumthor, was a piece of art, a sculpture in itself which is overwhelmingly beautiful. In one of the floors, I did not want to block out the light in order to create a dark room and show video. I thought it was an antithesis to the space, and I also wanted the space to shine with my work. It did not make sense for me to 'kill' the space. The entire show, on all four floors, is sculpture and I wish I had another floor to fill! It was

subject he is imagining. Although it can end up being quite comical, it is something we have to get by. My mother has an amusing story about censorship. In the 1980s, one of her paintings was censored because a woman in the painting looked too revealing. They came up with a creative way of censoring the work by temporarily putting chocolate on her body. Then, in order not to hurt the painting, they suggested to simply peel it off after the show for the painting to return to the original. Censorship is a horrible thing, but sometimes, it is also very creative!

AAN: As an artist, how are you seen and considered in Kuwait?
MAQ: I am a little bit controversial. The main topics ranging from sex to religion are taboo, but in a strange way, the topic of oil is also quite taboo. Nobody is willing to talk about it, because, as I said, it somehow causes an existential crisis. I nevertheless fight very hard to get my work shown in Dubai, for example. When I go back home, or to Saudi Arabia or Qatar, young artists are telling me that they look up to my work, which makes it absolutely worthwhile. An artist is not like a musician who actually sees people appreciating his work. In this respect, an artist is somehow always working in the dark: you put your work in a museum or a gallery, and people experience it in different ways without you having a direct connection with them. The most important thing is that my work is being seen and that people are talking about it.

AAN: Would you ever imagine moving towards feature film, perhaps with a more surreal approach?
MAQ: You are reading my mind! I would love to work on a feature film, but I do not know if I want to make it as an art film or a surreal film. I would like it to be a drama, a regular cinematic film about my great grandmother, Monira, after whom I am named. She had this dramatic and tragic story, which has inspired me most of my life, and I would like to turn it into a film. It is about a woman in the early 20th century, who moved from Saudi Arabia to Kuwait on a caravan and got lost in the desert. It is a very dramatic story, and such stories are not being told since our history or poetry is all written by men. Therefore, there are hardly any accounts of what normal people – not royalty – normal women had to go through at the time which is unimaginable for us today. In my opinion, it is important to tell these stories from a very banal day-to-day perspective, providing an account of what happened. These things represent an important part of history, all the more so, as they take place somewhere that was undemocratic, so it is very difficult to access certain parts of history. There is an official narrative, and then, there is the unofficial narrative where everybody is guessing what happened. From an outsider's perspective, this is such a strange place to find yourself in. People tend to say we do not have any history, that after oil, we started building the cities which, of course, is complete fabrication. But at the same time, I do not blame people for having this understanding, because a lot of this history has been erased. Dealing with history is very controversial. Regardless of the difficulties, making a movie based on my grandmother's story is very much on my mind.

• Monira Al-Qadiri: Mutant Passage is on view at Kunsthaus Bregenz until 2 July, 2023, kunsthaus-bregenz.at