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*Black Friday* is co-curated and co-presented with the Images Festival, 12 – 20 April 2018, and presented in partnership with Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival.



**Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art**  
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Cover image: Sophia Al Maria, still from *Black Friday*, 2016. Digital video, colour, sound, 16 min.  
Courtesy the artist and The Third Line, Dubai.



## BIOGRAPHIES

**Sophia Al Maria** received her BA from the American University in Cairo and her MFA from Goldsmiths College, London. Recent solo exhibitions have been held at The Third Line, Dubai (2017); Whitney Museum, New York (2016) and Cornerhouse, Manchester (2014). She has participated in numerous group exhibitions in museums, galleries and biennials across the US, Europe and the Middle East, including Kunsthall Stavanger (2017); Biennale of Moving Images, Miami (2017); CCS Bard, New York (2017); Villa Empain Boghassian Foundation, Brussels (2017); Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2017); Surssock Museum, Beirut (2016); Villa Stück, Munich (2016); the New Museum Triennial, New York (2015); Serpentine Gallery, London (2014); ICA London (2014); and the 9th Gwanju Biennale (2012), among others. Al Maria is the author of *The Last Rose of Summer* (2015), *Virgin With A Memory* (2014) and *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* (2012). She has guest edited the *Happy Hypocrite – Fresh Hell, Issue 8* and contributed to various journals including *Bloomsbury Qatar* and *Bidoun*. Her work is represented by The Third Line, Dubai.

**Nabila Abdel Nabi** is a Toronto-based curator and art historian and is currently the Assistant Curator at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery. Previously, she was Gallery Manager at The Third Line in Dubai and, most recently the Art Editor for The Point Magazine in Chicago. She has interned with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Abu Dhabi Project, Hauser & Wirth, ARTnews and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. She holds an M.A. in Art History from The Courtauld Institute of Art and a B.A. from the University of Chicago. Lately, her art historical research has centered on post-colonialism, transnationalism, and museological practices in the Global South.



Sophia Al Maria, still from *The Future Was Desert, Part II*, 2016. Digital video, colour, sound, 5 min.  
Courtesy the artist and The Third Line, Dubai.

## PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

**fORUM:** **Nasrin Himada**  
Wednesday 23 May, 7PM

**Nasrin Himada** is a Palestinian writer, editor and curator based in Tio'tia:ke (Montréal), in Kanien'kehá:ka territory. Her writing on contemporary art has appeared in Canadian Art, C Magazine, Critical Signals, The Funambulist, Fuse Magazine and MICE Magazine, among others. She is the co-editor of *contemporary.org*.

fORUM is an ongoing series of talks, lectures, interviews, screenings and performances at Mercer Union. Free as always. Please check the Mercer Union website for details about our upcoming fORUM events.

**SESSION:** **Rouzbeh Akhbari, Faraz Anoushahpour, Parastoo Anoushahpour and Ryan Ferko**  
Sunday 3 June, 12-3PM

Mercer Union is delighted to launch Session, a project modeling itself after an incubator that invites cultural practitioners to engage with questions that emerge out of a given exhibition. Taking the form of workshops, conversations or teach-ins, Session is interested in developing a dialogue between peers based on shared commitments and engagements. Each Session is led by artists, writers, educators and other cultural practitioners who might engage with the ambiguous, contentious or problematic aspect of a project, based on their own thinking and practice.

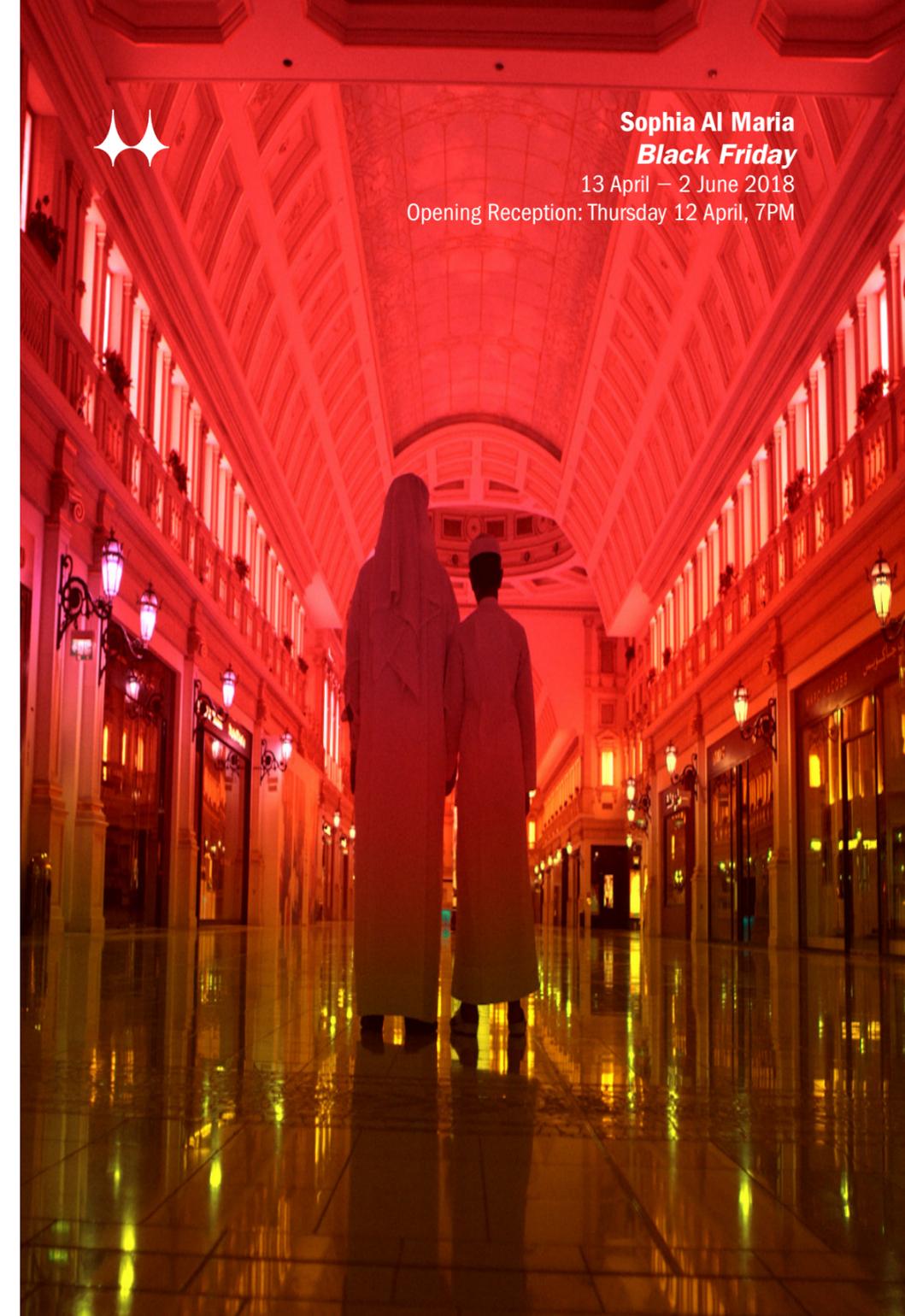
Our inaugural Session looks at Gulf imaginaries foreseen throughout the region in history and in myth. It is an attempt to shift discourse on the Middle East away from dystopia and, instead, consider the absurdist realities of the Gulf region and its peripheries in relation to survival, amnesia, catharsis, belonging and fictional geographies.

This session is hosted by Rouzbeh Akhbari, Faraz Anoushahpour, Parastoo Anoushahpour and Ryan Ferko and moderated by Mahshid Rafiei.

Space is limited. Please RSVP to [office@mercunion.org](mailto:office@mercunion.org) or 416.536.1519

Admission to our public programming is free and all are welcome.

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**Sophia Al Maria**  
**Black Friday**

13 April – 2 June 2018

Opening Reception: Thursday 12 April, 7PM

## Desert of the Unreal

Deserts possess a particular magic, since they have exhausted their own futures, and are thus free of time. Anything erected there, a city, a pyramid, a motel, stands outside time. It's no coincidence that religious leaders emerge from the desert. Modern shopping malls have much the same function.

— J.G. Ballard<sup>1</sup>

Sophia Al Maria's work swells time. The artist, born to a Bedouin father and an American mother, grew up shuttling between Qatar and Washington State, as described in her fiction memoir *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* (2012). She witnessed first-hand the warp-speed transformation of the Gulf, as oil-wealth catapulted the region into the future and onto the global stage with greater political, economic power than before. This rapid urban development meant that “one of the most ancient ways of living came head on with extreme wealth and capitalism – glass and steel against wool and camels.”<sup>2</sup> Al Maria, along with colleague Fatima Al Qadiri, coined the term “Gulf Futurism” to describe the complex results of rapid urban development across the region, including the alienating effects of technology on the individual, environmental collapse, the deleterious effects of consumerism and industry, and historical amnesia. Gulf Futurism considers the Gulf as a projection of our global future, of which desertification is an important part, as the region is predicted to become uninhabitable by 2100 due to rising temperatures.<sup>3</sup>

The exhibition at Mercer Union brings together two works: the digital video projection, *Black Friday* (2016) and the two-part video, *The Future was Desert* (2016). The show's eponymous work *Black Friday* was inspired by the theory of the Gruen Transfer. Victor Gruen, an Austrian émigré to America best known as the ‘father of the modern shopping mall,’ designed the American mall in response to the dearth in areas of collective gathering within the Cartesian grid that defined urban planning in North American suburbia. Furthermore, Gruen wanted to give suburbs in America a new public space, other than home or the workplace, where visitors could experience a climate-controlled zone for dwelling and a sense of community. According to the Gruen Transfer, the dazzling and disorienting effects of the labyrinthine architecture within shopping malls render customers susceptible to the seductive effects of consumption – a sort of “happy imprisonment”, in which one has “infinite choice, but seemingly no way out.”<sup>4</sup> As Victor Gruen described it, “shoppers will be so dazzled by a store's surroundings that they will be drawn—unconsciously, continually—to shop.”<sup>5</sup> And yet, as the mall seems to tend towards obsolescence in America, with increasing numbers falling into disuse and disrepair, replaced by lifestyle centres and the digital avenues of online shopping, mall-ification has picked up in the Gulf at hyper speed since the 1990s. Viewing these common ecosystems of excess across the US and the Gulf, Al Maria describes the mall as a “weirdly neutral shared zone between cultures that are otherwise engaged in a sort of war of information and image.”<sup>6</sup>

The title of the work is a nod to both the post-Thanksgiving holiday in America – known for signaling frenzied shopping – and to Fridays in general, which are the day off for prayer and rest in the Muslim world. Fridays in the Gulf are also the days when most people typically set off to the mall for hours at a time. Al Maria takes us on a trippy ride through these secular temples of capitalism in her video, first shown at the Whitney in 2016. Within cities like Dubai or Doha, malls become the stage for the seismic shifts taking place in the Gulf, along with the screen of the cell phone and the dark corners of the *innerwebs*. On the weekends, these indoor urban spaces become places of pilgrimage, where whole families travel to spend the day and where Sophia tells us, “to consume is to absolve yourself.”<sup>7</sup>



The video is presented in the form of a single vertical projection occupying a darkened room: is this the monolith from *2001: Space Odyssey* or an altar to late-capitalism? The first shot in the video confronts us with two elongated escalators, seemingly leading nowhere while recalling the Twin Towers. Following this, a disembodied narrator (Sam Neill provided the voice-over) beckons us to join him in the “miraculous present.” Over the course of this nightmare sermon we are taken on a vertiginous ride, through nightmarish sets of sickly green and fuchsia fluorescent lighting, indoor canals, and the marbled arches of Italianate architecture. All warp and contract as though the simulation we've been strapped into were glitching out as we move towards the edge of history. While it seems as though increasingly more urban developments in the Gulf are lacking spatial, historical and social energies, the space of the mall demonstrates this lack of character.<sup>8</sup> As the artist explains, “The mall is a sort of non-place that exists outside national boundaries and cultural mores.”<sup>9</sup>

Intertwined with the narrator's booming voice is the soundtrack; vacillating somewhere between the blaring of a synthed-out car-horn and the tingling track of a B-horror movie – all embodying the insidious sensory bombardment of the Gruen Transfer. The film is apocalyptic, peopled only by a man and boy ambling through the deserted set at a zombie-like pace, a woman in an *abaya* striding across the screen in circles, and bodies in *abayas* splayed across MC Escher-esque stairs, seemingly, “encased in a frameless frame of forever.”<sup>10</sup> In the second half of the film, we have been spit out from hell into heaven and are plunged into the sky, where the painted clouds on the ceiling in the first half – it is hard not to recall the infamous scene from *The Truman Show* – give way to another celestial simulacrum, enveloping a half-constructed or half-abandoned world. Growing up in the Gulf during the 1990s, Al Maria describes occupying a world of television shows and video games, as the scorching heat and strict social mores limited movement, and the horrors of the Gulf War unfurled across the region and across her screen in games like *Desert Strike*. In our postmodern media-driven world, Baudillard proposed that we are experiencing the “death of the real.” Rather, living in a state of hyperreality, we increasingly connect more with simulated worlds of movies and television, Disneyland or video-games. Maybe we are all becoming imprisoned in echo chambers of our own making. But, like Truman, who becomes aware that his life is a purely simulated experience, maybe we can also liberate ourselves.

“What if to enter the desert was to exit time?”<sup>11</sup> In the second part of the exhibition, the two-part work *The Future was Desert* projects us into a post-human future, when the environmental effects of rampant capitalism have resulted in planetary suicide. We are suspended over an aerial view of the earth, exposing its curvature, in the back an expansive view of beyond. *The Future was Desert* begins much in the same way as Al Maria's previous work, *A Whale is A Whale is A Whale* (2015) produced just one year earlier. We're set up to feel small. And small we should feel, for we're about to be taken on a journey through time, jump-cut from the deep past to the deep future, among which, “for a brief flurry in the incomprehensible abyss of geological time, we were here.”<sup>12</sup> Before its geological connotation, the word ‘desert’ referred solely to a landscape in which the defining feature was the absence of life; a prospect the artist wants to argue we are facing imminently. Al Maria's work is deeply researched, and for the last few years she has been engaged with questions of environmental collapse, particularly as shaped by the fossil fuel driven states in the Gulf. Her previous work, *A Whale is A Whale is a Whale* grappled with the Arabian Humpback Whale's extinction due to the continued whaling industry and destruction of their natural habitat. Here, in a technique she has used repeatedly throughout her practice, Al Maria splices and sutures the digital debris of the internet into a visual cacophony representing the various ways in which we've managed to hurl ourselves into the Anthropocene after so little time on earth – “give or take a million.”<sup>13</sup> At different moments, a cursor hovers over flickering images of celebrities so distorted they seem to be melting and a finger swipes over a map of the desert like a great god surveying the damage done by mankind.



Al Maria describes the inspiration for the film, beginning with a trip to the Cederberg Mountains, where she encountered her first rock art spanning forty thousand years. A writer as well as a filmmaker, Al Maria writes the narration for all of her films. In the first chapter of the film, the line “when all of this was a single continent, falling apart” resonates, swelling our sense of time and highlighting the absurdity of our contemporary geopolitics against the span of earth's lifetime.

— Nabila Abdel Nabi

<sup>1</sup> J.G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Karen Orton, “The Desert of the Unreal,” *Dazed Digital* (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Kabat, “Sand Begets Glass,” *Frieze* (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> M. Jeffrey Hardwick, *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Lew, “Back To The Futurist”, Whitney Museum of American Art (2016).

<sup>7</sup> Sophia Al Maria, email correspondence with the author, March 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Stefan Wippel, *Under Construction: Logics of Urbanism in the Gulf Region*, (Routledge, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Laurence Lowe, “Sophia Al Maria's Art Explores the Mall-ification of the Middle East,” *Condé Nast Traveler* (2016).

<sup>10</sup> Sophia Al Maria, *Black Friday*, 2016. Digital video, colour, sound, 16 min.

<sup>11-13</sup> Sophia Al Maria, *The Future was Desert*, 2016. Digital video, colour, sound, 5 min.