

Saudi Arabia's First Biennale
Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale Opens to the Public

11 December 2021 – 11 March 2022

“Feeling the Stones”

Curated by Philip Tinari

Diriyah, Saudi Arabia, 11 December 2021: Diriyah Biennale Foundation (DBF) presents Saudi Arabia's first contemporary art biennale, **Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale**, opening to the public on **11 December 2021** in the JAX district of Diriyah. Featuring more than 60 acclaimed artists from Saudi Arabia and around the world, the Biennale showcases work in a wide variety of mediums, from site-specific commissions to celebrated pieces by leading contemporary artists. Serving as a platform for global dialogue and exchange, the Biennale cultivates an interactive art experience by bringing together Saudi and international artists in a celebration of contemporary culture, and an accessible and engaging platform for all.

The inaugural edition of the Biennale is curated under the leadership of Philip Tinari (Director and Chief Executive of UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, China), and supported by a team of international curators; Wejdan Reda (Founder of Sahaba Art Consultancy in Jeddah), Shixuan Luan (Curator at UCCA) and Neil Zhang (Assistant Curator at UCCA).

The Biennale takes its title from the concept of “Crossing the River by Feeling the Stones,” a slogan that emerged during the 1980s as a metaphor for action at a time of social and economic transformation. The Biennale unfolds in six sections: *Crossing the River*, *Experimental Preservation*, *Peripheral Thinking*, *Going Public*, *Brave New Worlds*, and *Concerning the Spiritual*. At every turn, the exhibition creates dialogues between the rapidly evolving artistic context of Saudi Arabia and the wider world, putting work by the 27 participating Saudi artists into conversation with their international counterparts.

Aya Al-Bakree, CEO of the Diriyah Biennale Foundation, said: “We are thrilled to finally bring the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale to life and to welcome all audiences eager to explore visual culture from Saudi Arabia and beyond. Our hope is that this Biennale will generate international dialogue and provide opportunities for discovery and connection to Saudi Arabia's burgeoning cultural scene and creative communities. Twenty-seven featured artists from Saudi Arabia represent over 40 percent of work on display, presented alongside works by leading artists from different parts of the world with works ranging across media, from painting to installation to performance. We are delighted to present a Saudi biennale that is rooted in its context.”

Curator **Philip Tinari, Director and Chief Executive of UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, China**, added: “The Biennale's aims are twofold: to bring Saudi contemporary art into the global conversation, and to bring Saudi audiences into the world of contemporary art. We are grateful to have been in extended dialogue with the participating artists, and are excited to support and show 29 newly commissioned works. We look forward to welcoming hundreds of thousands of visitors to discover the Biennale for themselves, and hope that it will catalyze an even deeper engagement with global contemporary art in Saudi Arabia.”

The Biennale unfolds across the following six sections, occupying nearly 12,000 square meters across six interconnected warehouse buildings:

Crossing the River

While Saudi Arabia's contemporary art scene has blossomed in recent years, its roots lie in earlier practitioners of the 1990s and 2000s, such as those shown here, including in a selection of works from the collection of the Al-Mansouria Foundation by **Abdullah Hammas, Fahad Al Hejailan, Faisal Samra, Jowhara AlSaud, Mahdi Al Jeraibi and Munira Mosli**. The section draws a parallel with an earlier moment in China, when a program of "Reform and Opening" began in late 1978, quickly followed by a cultural flowering, driven partly by artists searching for modes of expression beyond the realist painting that had been the standard during the previous three decades. Experiments, including those by **Huang Rui** represented here, created a new context for artistic creation that pushed boundaries and remains influential today.

Other ideas that feature later in the Biennale are hinted at in this section, including the global contemporary, first raised in the late 1980s when **Richard Long** made his *Red Earth Circle* (1989) for a show in Paris that presented itself as the first global contemporary art exhibition. **Geof Oppenheimer's** "People in Reverse" presents archetypes of modern living, the Businessman, the Flag Bearer, and the Observer (2019-20), cast in bronze and aluminum, situated in a maze-like space. **William Kentridge's** *More Sweetly Play the Dance* (2015), an eight-channel projection that surrounds the viewer, suggests multiple histories through imagery of a funeral procession on a blasted landscape. Jeddah-based architecture studio **Bricklab** base their spatial installation *Through the Looking-Glass* (2021) on the architecture of the Diriyah Biennale building, which they have recently refurbished.

Featured artists: **Geof Oppenheimer, William Kentridge, Mohamed Melehi, Ahmed Mater, Ayman Yossri Dayban, Maha Malluh, Ibrahim El Dessouki, Superstudio, Bricklab and Mamafotogramma, Mohammed Al Salem, Shadia Alem, Huang Rui, Wang Luyan, Zhang Peili, Zheng Yuan, Richard Long, Abdullah Hammas, Fahad Al Hejailan, Faisal Samra, Jowhara AlSaud, Mahdi Al Jeraibi and Munira Mosli**

Experimental Preservation

The artist and architect Jorge Otero-Pailos has put forward the notion of "experimental preservation" to complicate debates in the world of heritage and conservation around how to best retain historically significant spaces and structures. In this framing, preservation is not a straightforward process of embalming the past, but an open field for material and conceptual interventions that accentuate, distort, and even destroy. Some of the artists in this section use reclaimed materials in new ways— such as **Xu Bing** reconstructing classical paintings from trash in his *Background Story: Streams and Mountains Without End* (2014), or Saudi artist **Zahrah Alghamdi's** *Birth of a Place* (2021) which conjures uncanny landscapes from Bedouin tent canvas. **Sarah Morris' film** *Sakura* (2018) collapses encounters with tradition and the country's hypermodern industry and culture as it explores Japan's original mercantile and cultural capital, Osaka. **Dana Awartani's** *Standing by the Ruins of Aleppo* (2021), a Biennale commission, is a large-scale replica of the courtyard of the Grand Mosque of Aleppo, made from adobe bricks with clay earth sourced from different parts of Saudi Arabia.

Featured artists: **Dana Awartani, Rashed AlShashai, Daniah Al Saleh, Filwa Nazer, Zahrah Alghamdi, Lei Lei & Chai Mi, Wang Sishun, Wang Yuping, Xu Bing, Morris Foit, Osama Esid, Peter Mulindwa**

Peripheral Thinking

Throughout the art world, collections and institutions are being reshaped to encompass multiple narratives and overlooked perspectives. Yet we often fall back on older ideas of artistic innovation as something that happens in metropolitan centers before diffusing to remote peripheries. The artist William Kentridge has written of “peripheral thinking” as a way to imagine the unlikely and powerful connections that emerge when the metaphor of center and periphery, and a related sense of time lag between them, is discarded. Working in relation to established lineages such as geometric abstraction, figurative portraiture, sculptural assemblage, and mixed-media collage, the artists in this section propose new solutions, and raise new questions. Meanwhile, Singaporean artist **Zou Zhao**’s participatory performance and installation *Plain Sights* (2021) enlists visitors in a surrealist forum in which the action of the performance is negotiated.

Featured artists: **Yukinori Yanagi, Sarah Morris, Zou Zhao, Miguel Angel Payano Jr, Sarah Abu Abdallah, Birdhead, Nabuqi**

Going Public

Art possesses a unique ability to convene communities and envision new forms of solidarity. The works here show how artists spark reflection, format experience, convey knowledge, and ultimately bring people together. As societies change and new possibilities emerge, artists can serve as guides, mentors, and activists, bringing a special kind of vision and acumen to projects of poignancy and originality. Some of the works in this section center on notions of family, such as **Manal AIDowayan**’s project to trace the maternal lineage of Saudi women in a process echoing the oral storytelling traditions through which Saudi women keep cultural heritage and collective legacy alive across generations, or Koki Tanaka’s *Abstracted/Family* (2020), an extended performance in which Japanese-speaking outsiders go about the rhythms of daily domestic life. Others convene temporary collectives, like **Marwah AlMugait**’s *The Sea is Mine*, featuring a dance troupe of women that enacts a choreography centered on a trio of multiethnic chants. **Tavares Strachan**’s *Eighteen Ninety* (2020), a year in which Black inventors in the US filed patents at a rate nearly quadruple what it had been the decade prior, asks the visitor to confront how much creativity, technology, and capital was lost due to American racial discrimination.

Featured artists: **Koki Tanaka, Colin Chinnery, Abdullah Al Othman, Manal AIDowayan, Marwah AlMugait, Tavares Strachan**

Brave New Worlds

As we emerge from a global event that has altered the very systems out of which it has grown, we begin to imagine new realities. The projects here share a concern for the world that we have created and a hope for the one that might now take shape. For years, artists have been contemplating the Anthropocene and proposing new possibilities in the face of untenable patterns of consumption, acceleration, and climate change. In **Ayman Zedani**’s *Between Desert Seas* (2021), a quiet sanctuary is created, centered on a salt flat, where the sounds of endangered Arabian humpback whales ring out. Some works propose speculative futures, both utopian and dystopian, as in **Lawrence Lek**’s *Nøtel (Red Sea Edition)* (2021/2018), a proposal for a hotel for global nomads explored with video game controllers. **John Gerrard**’s simulation *Leaf Work (Derrigimlagh)* 2021, installed on an LED façade of a mirrored pavilion, shows an oak-leaf-covered character performing a lament for the effects of accelerating human advances on the non-human world. In Saudi artist **Muhannad Shono**’s *On Losing Meaning* (2021), a programmable robot spontaneously

moving across the floor, randomly marking the wooden panels with pigment and freely creating its own marks in an enclosed space.

Featured artists: Ayman Zedani, John Gerrard, Lawrence Lek, Monira Al Qadiri, Muhannad Shono, Simon Denny, Timur Si-Qin, Sarah Brahim

Concerning the Spiritual

*In a nation of sacred places, art's special relationship to the deeper, lingering questions of human existence resurfaces in new and powerful ways. This final section looks at how artists, particularly in times of upheaval and transition, have attempted to make sense of their worlds and the beliefs that structure them and how contemporary art can serve as a space for open dialogue and ecumenical inspiration. Works in this section include contemporary explorations of Islamic themes, as in **Lulwah Al Homoud's** installation *The Alphabet* (2021) that turns the sacred geometries of Arabic calligraphy into an immersive environment of light, while other works look at how traditions have influenced and shaped each other, as in **Han Mengyun's** *The Pavilion of Three Mirrors* pavilion that recalls a Persian narrative comparing ancient Chinese and Greek aesthetics.*

Featured artists: Lulwah Al Homoud, Omar Abduljawad, Sultan bin Fahad, Han Mengyun, Shao Fan, Larry Bell, Wolfgang Laib, Andro Wekua

In addition to the six themed sections, the **Ithra Art Prize** is held in collaboration with the Diriyah Biennale Foundation this year. The winning submission by artist Nadia Kaabi-Linke is being shown at the Biennale, the first time the winner is revealed in Saudi Arabia. Kaabi-Linke's *E Pluribus Unum – A Modern Fossil* takes a reflective look at one of the effects of the pandemic, which continues to impact commercial air travel and highlights questions about how humanity measures progress.

The Diriyah Biennale Foundation wishes to thank the exceptional contributions of all its partners: **Lexus, Diriyah Gate Development Authority, Zain, Saudi Research and Media Group, Saudia Airlines, Muvi/Telfaz11, Saudi Tourism Authority, Altaaqa (Zahid Energy Group).** .

To celebrate the opening of the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale, the Foundation launches a series of public programs led by AR Art Advisory. The programs are designed to invite both local communities and international cultural consumers to an inclusive experience over the course of three months.

The Biennale's opening week programs will create ongoing cross-cultural dialogue that transcends borders featuring a variety of talks and panels. Unique conversations will be held between participating artists such as Dr. Zahrah Al Ghamdi and Sir Richard Long, Lulwah Al-Homoud and Han Mengyun, Ayman Zedani, Timur Si-Qin, among others. Artists including Manal AlDowayan, Simon Denny, and Geof Oppenheimer will share insights into their artistic practice, while curators Philip Tinari, Shixuan Luan, Wejdan Reda, and Neil Zhang, and the principal architect, Kulapat Yantrasast, of the Biennale scenographers WHY, will also contribute through their specialized perspectives.

Running from December 11 to 15, the opening week talks will also bring together local, regional, and international voices including: Principal Architect at waiwai design, Wael Al Awar; art historians, Dr. Maha Al-Senan and Dr. Nada Shabout; key contributors to the development of the Saudi Art Scene,

Abdulrahman Al Soliman, Her Highness Princess Adwa bint Yazid Al-Saud, Hamza Serafi, and Qaswra Hafez; founders of artReoriented and Directors of the Hamburger Bahnhof and Neue Nationalgalerie, Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath; Director of Art Jameel, Antonia Carver; Curator and Executive Director at Swiss Institute Contemporary Art New York, Simon Castets; founding Director of Delfina Foundation, Aaron Cezar; Curator and Director of the Berlin Biennale, Gabriele Horn; filmmaker Khalil Joreige; artistic director of Haus der Kunst, Andrea Lissoni; Curator and Director of the Centre for Contemporary Art in Singapore, Ute Meta Bauer; art and archaeology historian and Aga Khan fellow, Dr. Ridha Moumni; Director of the Biennial Foundation, Dr. Rafal Niemojewski; and curator of Islamic and Contemporary Middle East Art at the British Museum, Dr. Venetia Porter.

The full list of speakers and activities on offer as part of the Biennale’s program will be announced in due course.

For the latest updates on the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale, visit biennale.org.sa. To join our conversation, follow Diriyah Biennale Foundation on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) @biennale_sa. #DiriyahContemporaryArtBiennale #DiriyahBiennale #DiriyahBiennaleFoundation

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Notes to Editors:

ABOUT DIRIYAH BIENNALE FOUNDATION

Inspired by the changes taking place in Saudi Arabia and the heritage site of Diriyah, the Diriyah Biennale Foundation assumes a critical role in nurturing creative expression and instilling an appreciation for culture, the arts, and their transformative potential. The Foundation aspires to be a catalyst for lifelong learning and serves Saudi Arabia’s communities by offering opportunities to engage with the burgeoning local art scene. At this historical moment of evolution and growth in Saudi Arabia, these Biennales will showcase some of the world’s leading artists, drive cultural exchange between the Kingdom and international communities, promote dialogue and understanding, and further establish Saudi Arabia as an important cultural center.

Established in 2020 by the Saudi Ministry of Culture, the Diriyah Biennale Foundation will organize Saudi Arabia’s first-ever art biennale, the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale, held from December 2021 to March 2022 in the JAX district of Diriyah; and a second biennale in 2022 will be focused on Islamic arts. The Contemporary Art Biennale will be one of Saudi Arabia’s largest and most significant international displays of contemporary art to date, providing a platform for discovery and connection to Saudi Arabia’s burgeoning cultural scene and creative communities.

ABOUT THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE, KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

The Ministry of Culture is leading a cultural transformation to develop a rich ecosystem that nurtures creativity, unlocks the economic potential of the sector, and unleashes new and inspiring forms of expression. As part of these efforts, the Ministry of Culture is seeking to bolster the presence of Saudi heritage and culture at events across the Kingdom and abroad, enabling participants to engage with the Kingdom's rich and diverse history and preserve Saudi heritage for generations to come.

ABOUT UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, China

UCCA Center for Contemporary Art is China's leading contemporary art institution. Committed to the belief that art can deepen lives and transcend boundaries, UCCA presents a wide range of exhibitions, public programs, and research initiatives to a public of more than one million visitors each year. UCCA Beijing sits at the heart of the 798 Art District, occupying 10,000 square meters of factory chambers built in 1957 and regenerated in 2019 by OMA. UCCA Dune, designed by Open Architecture, lies beneath the sand in the seaside enclave of Aranya in Beidaihe. UCCA Edge, designed by architecture firm SO – IL, opened in Shanghai in May 2021. Formally accredited as a museum by the Beijing Cultural Bureau in 2018, UCCA also operates non-profit foundations licensed by the Beijing Bureau of Civil Affairs and the Hong Kong government. UCCA's commercial ventures include the retail platform UCCA Store, the children's education initiative UCCA Kids, and collaborations and projects under the rubric UCCA Lab. Opened in 2007 and revived by a committed group of Chinese and international patrons in 2017, UCCA works to bring China into global dialogue through contemporary art.

ABOUT JAX

JAX is a refurbished estate comprising of over 100 warehouses in the area of Diriyah, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The Ministry of Culture of Saudi Arabia has initiated the regeneration of JAX for it to become the new reference arts and culture district for the country, with lineups of exhibition spaces, artist studios, art galleries, facilities and platforms.

JAX hosts local and international institutions, businesses, programs, and galleries that can promote cultural exchanges and help artists produce works that can be showcased throughout the spaces.