

Press Release

Farah Al Qasimi

Blue Desert Online

2024. 06. 12 - 08. 11

Barakat Contemporary presents *Blue Desert Online*, the first Korean solo exhibition by New York- and UAE-based photographer Farah Al Qasimi. The exhibition, opening June 12 - August 11, 2024, features Al Qasimi's representative body of work from the past five years (2018 - 2023), characterized by her multifaceted observation of cultural hybridity. It consists of 19 still and moving images that portray themes of reality, escapism, illusion, and anxiety as experienced in our digitalized world. Through her photography, video, and performance projects, Al Qasimi has conducted a social critique of post-colonial power structures, gender (norms), and preferences in Arab Gulf states. Fluidly navigating personal and public spaces, she has explored unspoken social norms and values instilled in places, moments, and objects.

Letters for Occasions, showcased at the 2023 Gwangju Biennale, is a collage of still and moving images on a large wallpaper, which demonstrates Al Qasimi's unique approach. She zooms in on the meaning of personal archives and family records in an old family album style while reflecting on her life in diverse cultural spheres. Characterized by detail-oriented elements like flashing frames, reflective surfaces, and broken perspectives, Al Qasimi's photographic images serve as a new medium to portray our complex and chaotic reality.

Al Qasimi often focuses on underrated places and objects in everyday life. In *LED Lamps*, ordinary objects like lamps emanating pastel-colored light highlight the photographer's ability to capture the subject in a casual manner. The artist photographs public indoor spaces like bridal boutiques and barbershops and private spaces like bathrooms and bedrooms. This approach underscores Al Qasimi's ongoing and overarching interest in the patterns of intersection of familiar yet foreign cultures, novel styles of Arab culture, and documentation and creation of alternative narratives. Demonstrating her interest in "social customs as seen through objects" and "an anthropological sense of unseen boundaries,"¹ Al Qasimi's photography is likely a commentary on our values in the world. Al Qasimi presents objects that "absorbing our psychic energy in some way."² In addition, if the act of display involves concealment, in essence, Al Qasimi discovers our desire in her anticipation for photography as a medium to mirror our concealed reality.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/11/arts/farah-al-qasimi-art-basel.html> (accessed May 25, 2024)

² <https://flash---art.com/article/farah-al-qasimi/> (accessed May 25, 2024)

Farah Al Qasimi's artistic journey is rooted in the exploration of how to depict the intangible and convey the complexity of a place without relying on words. This quest is evident in her works that delve into the Arab world, her place of birth and upbringing, as well as in her public art project, *Back and Forth Disco*, in her new home of New York. This project, a departure from traditional exhibition settings, utilizes a public bus stop as a canvas to portray cityscapes, audiovisual urban noises, and themes of confusion and anonymity. The result is a splendid and harmonious chaos that combines the "individual style and cultural traditions that break through the chaos and anonymity of the city."³ Most of Al Qasimi's photos were taken in the United Arab Emirates, where she captures the exotic landscape in a sensuous manner. Her photos address complex relationships and intersecting generations in post-colonial UAE, her home country, and the materialized and globalized world.

In *Wrestling with Spectres* and *Selfie with Toy Gun* figures are seen masked, gazing downwards or turning away. Details are hidden under hijabs or blankets with ornate Arabic patterns. In a detached manner, Al Qasimi's portraits depict her self-perceived position as a woman in a Gulf State in the new era and her gendered role in the social and historical context. She also seeks out the invisible boundaries and unspoken consciousness in Emirati culture and expresses her interest in ways to present the intersection of our lives in different spaces, places, and times.

As in *Dragon Mart Light Display*, there is sometimes an exaggerated view of images between the meanings of what is said and not said or what is seen and not seen. Described as a still life of the global liberal market, this image appears to be a mixture of futurism and kitsch, combining technology with commercialization in the context of the Gulf's changing economy and culture. The camouflage-style installation with a display of elements like an aluminum frame, flat monitors, and smartphones against a large wallpaper exemplifies Al Qasimi's distinctive approach, which evokes associations with an advertising algorithm. Expressing how such elements permeate our culture, her method reflects the collision and despair inherent in our efforts to find grounded identity and affection in a constantly shifting world. *Anood Playing Sims* and *Gia Wearing Contact Lenses* pose questions about our desire to escape from reality and remain in the realm of exploration, games, and fantasy, much like millennials gazing at different screens or gamers fixated on tertiary spaces.

The narrator's voice in *Signs of Life*, which resonates through the basement gallery, tells us that we had been asleep for a while, asks us if we found it comfortable, and then tells us to find a river. Sleeping in this context appears to be a hint at the sense of separation that plagues people trapped in tertiary spaces that simulate experiences of the outer world. In other words, the author's message is that we need to reestablish our connection to the natural world in order to wake up in earnest. "The natural world is in danger of skewing toward the digital representation of nature," Al Qasimi says in an explanation of a sentiment at the center of this exhibition. The lucid synthetic representation resembling the natural world conjures an image of accelerating ecological collapse.

³ "Farah Al Qasimi: Back and Forth Disco" (<https://www.publicartfund.org/exhibitions/view/backandforthdisco/>)

⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Korean trans. Jaewon Lee (Ihu, 2005), 166.

Due to the confusion and anxiety prevalent around us, we might feel the need to find a haven and shelter from the digital realm.

In a friendly yet unfamiliar manner, Farah Al Qasimi's work and its surreal textures get us involved with the life between reality and image while alienating us simultaneously. "A picture is a secret about a secret, the more it tells you the less you know," famously said Diane Arbus.⁴ Farah Al Qasimi's photographs, like a mirror reflecting our complex world, invite us to reexamine the public and private realms in the socio-techno era. These tranquil, alluring, and troubling images provoke endless questions about the nature of the world we inhabit, the extent to which we exploit and tolerate our desires, and the places where we can find solace. The enigmatic world we encounter in Al Qasimi's images may be a place within our own hearts—one that confronts and imagines the familiar, the uncertain, and the possible.

Date

-2024.06.12 – 08.11

-10:00 – 18:00 | Tuesday - Sunday

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1. About the Artist

Farah Al Qasimi



Based in New York and the United Arab Emirates, Farah Al Qasimi (b. 1991) has taken part in solo exhibitions organized by the Delfina Foundation (2023), Art Gallery of Western Australia (2023), C/O Berlin (2023), the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (2021), and the MIT List Visual Arts Center (2019), along with international biennial events such as the Gwangju Biennale, Sharjah Biennial, Yokohama Triennale, and Lahore Biennale, Biennial of Contemporary Arab Photography, Paris. Her work has also been presented internationally through group exhibitions at the Guggenheim (New York), the Tate Modern (London), Pera Museum (Istanbul), the Bard College Hessel Museum of Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto. Her book *Hello Future*, published by Capricious in 2021, was shortlisted that year for the Aperture Foundation Photobook Prize.

Al Qasimi's work has been included in the collections of the Guggenheim (New York and Abu Dhabi), the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Centre Pompidou, the Tate Modern, and the Jameel Arts Center (Dubai).

2. Selected Works / Installation Views



Installation View of *Farah Al Qasimi: Blue Desert Online*, Barakat Contemporary, 2024
Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary



Installation View of *Farah Al Qasimi: Blue Desert Online*, Barakat Contemporary, 2024
Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary



Farah Al Qasimi, *Bahia Palm Tree*, 2019, Archival Inkjet Print, 63.50 x 45.72 cm
Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary



Farah Al Qasimi, *Wrestling with Spectres*, 2019, Archival Inkjet Print, 74 x 102 cm
Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary



Installation View of *Farah Al Qasimi: Blue Desert Online*, Barakat Contemporary, 2024
Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary



Farah Al Qasimi, *Dragon Mart Light Display*, 2018, Archival Inkjet Print, 175 x 127 cm
Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary



Farah Al Qasimi, *Dolphin Fountain*, 2023, Archival Inkjet Print, 76 x 101 cm
Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary



Installation View of *Farah Al Qasimi: Blue Desert Online*, Barakat Contemporary, 2024
Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary



Installation View of *Farah Al Qasimi: Blue Desert Online*, Barakat Contemporary, 2024
Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary



Farah Al Qasimi, *Signs of Life*, 2023, Video, Stereo sound, 6min 18sec
Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary