

The Desert Has No Shadow
curated by Ute Meta Bauer, Wejdan Reda

Opening: September 5 – 7, 2025
Duration: September 6 – October 4, 2025
Opening hours: Tue-Fri 12-6pm, Sat 12-4pm

The desert has long been imagined as silence, absence, and void. Yet this exhibition insists on a different understanding: the desert as a lived and long-cultured landscape, a place dense with memory, ecology, and the entanglements of human and non-human life. Bringing together artists from across the Arabian Peninsula and its surrounding geographies, *The Desert Has No Shadow* foregrounds the desert as a paradoxical space—at once barren and fertile, timeless and immediate. Working together on the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale Bauer and Reda draw from the various travels across Gulf countries and ongoing collaborations with the featured artists.

Nasser AlSalem's *Bedouins of Mars* (2020) connects the traditions of nomadic travel with speculative futures of space exploration. Born into a family of tentmakers, the artist parallels the adaptability of Bedouins and astronauts, underscoring mobility and survival as central to life in dialogue with nature. In Kuwait, Aseel AlYaqoub, Yousef Awaad Hussein, and Saphiya Abu Al-Maati's *It Was Like a Carpet* (2024) -an iteration of *Space Wars: An Investigation into Kuwait's Hinterland*, Kuwait Pavilion at the 17th Venice Architecture Biennale, (2021)- and the accompanying film *The Desert Was Beautiful* (2021) recast the desert as contested terrain, mapping its shifting roles—military, extractive, resistant—while tracing its symbolic weight in shaping national identity.

Abdulrahman Al-Soliman's ink drawings *Palm, Bow & Fragments* (1990-92), created during the Gulf War, respond to skies darkened by oil fires and missiles. Here, palms emerge as resilient metaphors of endurance, grounding viewers in the strength and shelter of Al Ahsa's oasis. From Jordan, Hind Nasser's *Untitled* (1978), *Petra I*, *Petra II* (1987), draws on the rocky terrain of Petra and the desert's vast horizons, rendering abstracted forms and luminous color fields that oscillate between interior and exterior worlds. Her canvases transform the desert into a place of both contemplation and vitality.

The archaeological dimensions of the desert are explored in *Surface Finds* (2024) by bahraini—danish. Focusing on archaeologists' discarded piles of pottery, the collective classifies fragments by color, texture, and composition, linking Dilmun potters, Danish excavators, and present-day artists. In parallel, Camille Zakharia's photographic series *A'ali Burial Mounds* (2018) reflects on Bahrain's ancient funerary sites, while his project *The Mountain My Neighbor* (2024)—captured in a six-meter-long book—documents Riyadh's urban expansion into rocky terrain, suggesting how the ancient and the modern intertwine within shifting cityscapes.

Other artists turn to embodied practices. Sara Abdu's installation *Now That I've Lost You In My Dreams, Where Do We Meet?* (2021), inspired by dreams of absent loved ones, transforms longing into a meditative space of reconciliation. Soap bars infused with sidr and camphor—echoing Islamic burial rites—invoke memory through scent, repetition, and healing.

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Saudi-American artist Sarah Brahim's *The Forgotten Ceremony* (2024), stages the gestures of a mother and her children moving between oasis and desert. Through breath, sound, and touch, Brahim reveals intimate connections between landscape and body, presence and disappearance.

Ecology and non-human habitats emerge in works by Mohammed AlFaraj and Ayman Zedani. For AlFaraj, *Fossils of Time II* (2024), palm trees, soil, and local materials form a garden of memory and myth, where fantastical creatures inhabit layered, living histories. Zedani's *The Desert's Keepers* (2022), in turn, highlights fragile systems sustaining life in arid conditions, offering speculative futures rooted in ecological entanglement.

Together, these practices illuminate the desert as a landscape of multiplicities: a space of survival and ritual, of resilience and transformation. To say the desert has no shadow is to resist singular narratives. Instead, the exhibition insists on its presence—as a terrain where bodies, histories, and ecologies are inscribed into shifting ground, and where meaning continually emerges from silence.

The exhibition is curated by Ute Meta Bauer & Wejdan Reda at Krinzinger Gallery Schottenfeld, Vienna as part of international art festival Curated By.

Acknowledgments:

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