

الجناح الوطني السعودي | National Pavilion of Saudi Arabia

DANA AWARTANI

MAY YOUR TEARS NEVER DRY, YOU WHO WEEP OVER STONES

National Pavilion of Saudi Arabia
61st International Art Exhibition
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May your tears never dry, you who weep over stones

Composed of 29,221 clay earth bricks, this floor installation draws on mosaic motifs found in sites of social and cultural significance across the Arab world. With histories spanning three millennia, these sites are now under threat: damaged or destroyed through situations of conflict and war.

An exploration of craft's relationship with contemporary art, every aspect of *May your tears never dry, you who weep over stones* is created through an understanding of the care and repair made possible by "many hands."

The work is the result of a complex process that included deep research, detailed drawing and coding, and long-term collaborations with Saudi-based artisans; each brick was handmade using intricately shaped wooden molds and naturally hued clay earths, sourced from across the Kingdom and baked in the Riyadh sun.

Eschewing binding agents, the process allows the bricks to crack over time, underscoring the fragility of material heritage in today's world and the collective risk of cultural loss. Awartani and her artisan collaborators work against this precarity, raising awareness, taking time to mourn what is lost, and sustaining crucial knowledge through multigenerational coauthorship. Visitors to the pavilion enter and traverse the composite mosaic via earthen pathways – akin to an imagined archaeological site – pausing to view or to gather on the seating.

Just as tears are never just tears, stones are never neutral, especially when in ruins. This work, in title, creation, and exhibition, keeps the past alive in the present and is an urgent act of resistance against forgetting, against erasure. It is presented in solidarity with those who tend these intangible and tangible material heritages – living in familiarity and with care, as custodians, and through steadfast scholarship, preservation, and restoration.



On craft, care, and continuity: a conversation between artist and curators

Antonia Carver: Let's start with the process of making. Some 30,000 artisan/artist-hours have gone into this work – drawing, mapping, assigning codes to every brick, making the wooden molds, pressing in clay earth, drying and washing, shipping and reassembling in the Pavilion itself.

Hafsa Alkhudairi: It's been such a collaborative process of many hands – Dana working with and alongside thirty-two Saudi-based artisans, including woodworkers and brickmakers in Riyadh, plus draftspeople specialized in Islamic geometric design – resulting in 29,221 individual bricks and one unified floor work referencing sites of cultural significance, established and preserved throughout the ages by artisans, archaeologists, and guardians from the land.

Dana Awartani: We should start with the sites themselves. Those who know my work will recognize that the destruction of cultural heritage in the Arab world and West Asia is key for me. Of course, cultural heritage is universal – histories are never siloed – and these sites in particular are crossroads that contain layer upon layer of global, shared and overlapping histories, faiths, narratives…

AC: So many of the sites referenced are not places of tourism to be passively visited and observed: they are dynamic, societal, and familiar – where families gather, eat, play *tawla*… When subjected to assault, these sites are doubly mourned. Through your work, we can understand all the "-cides" as interwoven – culturecide, ecocide, scholasticide, domicide…

DA: I combed through historical sites that are or were home to stunning mosaics – all have been under threat in recent years. Most are in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine and encompass faith-based, secular, and domestic buildings, as well as archaeological sites and working, everyday places. Some are currently severely damaged or destroyed; others are starting to be

restored – thanks to local archaeologists, artisans, conservationists, and international bodies such as UNESCO, the Antiquities Coalition, World Monuments Fund, and ALIPH Foundation.

We mapped each mosaic in detail, and began to focus on particular sections or motifs, using methods I learned originally at the King's Foundation School of Traditional Arts – geometric techniques using a compass and a ruler, and no digital software. We then drew in detail every single brick, creating a comprehensive coded index, to produce molds, working with master woodworkers in Riyadh – their dedication and craftsmanship were so prized – one millimeter out, and the pieces wouldn't fit together.

We sourced clay earths from across Saudi Arabia, settling on four core, natural colors, which contrast according to environment and geography – from wadi, oasis, mountain, or desert farmland. The molds then went to the production site on a farm in the arid mountains outside Riyadh, where we worked with fourteen Saudi-based artisans to produce thousands of clay earth bricks. After intense months of work, we finished during Ramadan, breaking fast together, working at night to crate and ship the bricks to Venice, where the process of piecing it all back together began.

HA: I feel sure it's only in Riyadh that this work could be produced in this way – the sunny, dry winter climate, and the capacity for the clay earth bricks to bake in a day or two, without any chemical or artificial process.

DA: There's a reason adobe brick structures were so common in this area of Saudi Arabia. Coastal, humid areas had very different architecture – stone, coral, wood – producing the work there would've been a different story.

AC: This concept of "many hands" is so key to the way you work...

DA: The process mirrors the concerns of the finished work: the craftspeople I collaborate with carry deep, intergenerational













knowledge and skills, despite often being displaced from home and family. This intangible, human heritage is as important as the sites themselves. We make art, express devotion, and elevate beauty, poetry, criticality, and thought. This is what gives life meaning, what defines humanity.

HA: And there's a hands-on, collective engagement with histories – that's unusual in today's art world?

DA: We are one team, across the extremities of lifestyle, experience, language, and location – producing a single work by relying on each other. Wholly handmade in every aspect, the work relies on the honed skills of today's generation of artisans and on centuries of knowledge embedded in the historical sites. Craft, and the repetitive process of repair, remaking, reimagining material heritage, becomes devotional – a form of remembrance that is healing, deliberate, and cathartic.

AC: There is often a perceived division between the generous work of craft and the typically singular, hero-driven character of contemporary art; your practice cuts through this. The material and the work embrace fragility, but there's resilience within the monumental…

DA: The accelerated consumer societies we live in tend to alienate the handmade. There is resistance in the resilience of craft, passed down through generations – resistance against forgetting, against familial displacement, against disrupted lines of generational knowledge and, ultimately, against the destructive forces that enable such trauma.

AC: So craft for you is not decorative but fundamental – and intertwined with contemporary art and our own histories of the hand and handmade?

DA: While, over the years, we've honed how to work with clay earth, enhancing the hues, shapes, and nature of the bricks, this is the first time I've made a work of this size, complexity, and depth of concept. The under-threat sites are referenced through

a patchwork of highly detailed mosaics covering the entire floor of the Pavilion, including (in a first for me) flora and fauna.

We've talked a lot about the nature of archaeological sites and this work as a critique of the perspectival conventions of archaeology as a practice – the bird's-eye view, the claim to neutrality that obscures certain power dynamics. In another first in my practice, the visitor enters and walks within the work via earthen pathways – whether we are makers, practitioners, or visitors experiencing a work, we are all complicit and have agency in how we think about cultural heritage, its destruction, and preservation.

AC: Indeed, this is highlighted in the (tragically) cyclical nature of the archaeological sites included in our study: these sites of preservation retain memory and ensure historical connection to place – that is exactly why they are (cynically) targeted amid conflict.

DA: We must note that in these situations, the loss of each human life is unfathomable and devastating; this profound loss is compounded when future generations are denied their history. The mosaics and the sites in our study span some three millennia – as an art form, they are crucial to how humans express themselves.

HA: Dana, you've also spoken about how uneven the world is in its recognition of the significance of cultural sites, how it prioritizes mourning, care, and repair by geography or familiarity.

DA: I remember how the destructive fire at Notre-Dame in Paris was immediately met with shock – yet we have many monuments, many "Notre-Dames," in the Arab world, and beyond, deserving of such collective outrage and action.

HA: We should turn to the title of the work – *May your tears never dry, you who weep over stones*.

DA: It references the debate among ruin poets and others around them, about those who mourn buildings, relying on nostalgia rather than action. The title is a plea – stones are not merely stones – they are (or sometimes were) vessels that hold the

stories of the people who built them. They form a timeline of cultural influence that roots us in history. What appear to be ruins often carefully and against all odds cradle history and connection to land and place.

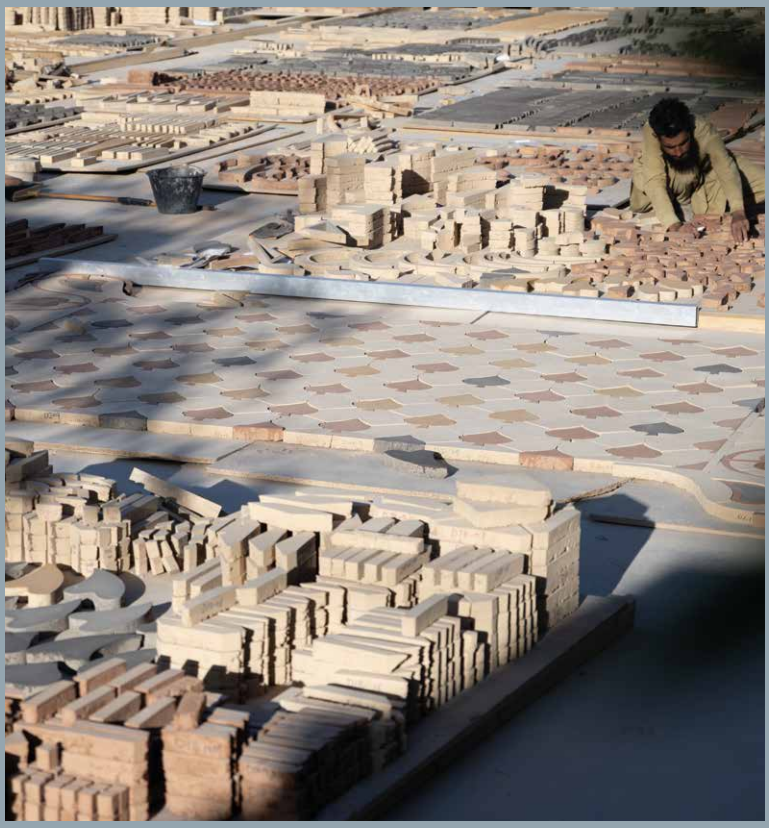
HA: I want to ask about hope. We reference the revival of craft practices, the work being done to recognize the significance of material heritage, and to preserve it. In the Arab world, Saudi Arabia is taking a regional leadership role, collaborating with and hosting international bodies such as ALIPH Foundation. But how do we locate hope in this context, when cultural sites are being utterly devastated, even while we have this conversation?

DA: There's muscle memory in artisanship. However much we think of ourselves as digitally and industrially technological beings, craft is an embodied technology carried across generations. The collaborative spirit we see in communities – also within multinational organizations that recognize the value in shared custodianship, who document and take action, working alongside communities on the ground – gives us some scope for hope. At least in terms of preservation and cultural continuity.

AC: And the ways in which even the most beleaguered, even those displaced or going through seismic generational change, continue to foreground and practice material heritage in their every day is inspiring in its resilience.

This conversation took place over several months: in Dana's studio in Jeddah; at the farm in Ammariyah, outside Riyadh, where we molded and baked the bricks; and in the Saudi Pavilion in Venice.


D3-27
D3-13
D3-12 mix





May your tears never dry, you who weep over stones draws on mosaic motifs from places of deep historical significance – some continuously inhabited across centuries, others now archaeological sites. Today, many are recognized as under threat by bodies including UNESCO and ALIPH Foundation.

All the sites have complex and layered histories – and their names are equally so. Listed here from north to south, the way each is cited reflects our ongoing research discussions:

. Syriac church, Manbij, Aleppo
. Church of Saint Simeon Stylites, Dayr Sim'an, Aleppo
. Mar Zakka Monastery, Raqqa
. Raqqa Museum, Raqqa
. Ma'arat AlNuman Museum, Murad Pasha Caravansary, Idlib
. Apamea Synagogue, Qal'at AlMudiq, Hama
. Apamea Citadel, Qal'at AlMudiq, Hama
. Church of the Holy Martyrs, Taybat AlImam, Hama
. Rastan archaeological site, Homs
. Emir Bashir II Palace, Beiteddine
. AlBass Necropolis, Tyre
. Synagogue of Severus, Hamat Tiberias
. Bosra Citadel, Bosra AlSham, Dar'a
. Church of Gethsemane (Church of All Nations), Jerusalem
. Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem
. Monastery of the Cross, Jerusalem
. Mar Saba Monastery, Bethlehem
. Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem
. Khirbet Midras archaeological site, Jerusalem
. Bayt Jibrin archaeological site, Hebron
. Ibrahimi Mosque, Hebron
. Saint Hilarion Monastery, Nuseirat, Gaza
. Bureij mosaic, Gaza

Dana Awartani is an artist based between Jeddah and New York, of Saudi-Palestinian descent. Her practice spans painting, sculpture, performance, and installation. Committed to historically situated and locally sourced materials and techniques, she addresses the complexities of continuity of cultural heritage, craft, and artisanship.

Curator **Antonia Carver** is the director of Art Jameel. She has written extensively on art and film, and curated and advised on exhibitions, commissions, and cultural strategies across West Asia.

Curator, writer, and researcher **Hafsa Alkhudairi** is based in AlUla. Her independent practice explores intergenerational identity through memory, storytelling, and pop culture.

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