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Ithraeyat Magazine

Summer 2026

Issue **029**

Artist **Mohamed Banawy**

Welcome to **Ithraeyat**, a seasonal cultural magazine produced by The King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra). Created to **inspire** hearts and **enrich** minds, this Saudi-inspired platform with an expansive international outlook captures the art scene and the culture of art by bringing together a mosaic of stories collected from across the Kingdom, the region and beyond.

Behind the scenes:
Ithraeyat is the plural of Ithra (enrichment). Magazine has its origins in the Arabic word makhzan, a storehouse. And therefore, Ithraeyat Magazine is a storehouse of unique, enriching stories.

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A Tear of the Oyster,
A Wash of the Brush

What Would Your **Waterdrop Say?**

By **Rym Al-Ghazal**

Dear Readers,
A single grain of sand holds the memory of mountains. A single drop of water carries the stories of oceans, the tears of clouds, the sighs of rivers. In this special edition of Ithraeyat, we turn our gaze to that most humble yet powerful theme: Water. It is the lifeline connecting every story on this earth, from the ancient rivers to the morning dew on a desert leaf.

Water does not simply flow, it remembers. It shapes coastlines and cultures, nourishes faiths and famines, and in art, it finds its colorful voice. It is fitting, then, that we look back to the early early 16th century, when Albrecht Dürer—widely considered the first major artist to treat watercolor as a serious medium—picked up his brushes and meticulously brought life to art. Before this German painter, printmaker and theorist of the German Renaissance, watercolor was little more than a preparatory sketch. But in his hands, water and its colors became both a teacher and a tool, where a patch of moss, a slab of rock or a tuft of fur became luminous, breathtaking masterpieces.

'Girl with a Pearl Earring.'
Johannes Vermeer. c. 1665.

This is Vermeer's most famous painting. He was a master of light as captured by the softness of the girl's face, the glimmers of light on her lips, and the shining dominant pearl.

Credit: Mauritshuis, The Hague.

'The Young Hare.'
Albrecht Dürer. 1502.

Dürer is recognized as the first famous watercolor painter to treat this delicate medium seriously. Using very fine detail brushes where he carefully painted every single fur, whisker and hair, this artwork is famous for its photographic realism.

Credit: The Albertina Museum.

Like Dürer's strokes, our stories in this edition seek to capture what is fleeting yet eternal. From the songs of the seas by majestic whales to the subtle drops of rain on thirsty lands to the great adventures in storms outside and within, we honor all beings and things dependent and linked to our most precious resource, water.

And sometimes in these waters, when irritation becomes an invitation, a speck of sand, wrapped in layer after layer of nacre, transforms into a pearl. What begins as an intrusion ends as iridescence.

This is our poetic water's oldest magic: to take the rough and undefined and make it soft and shine. A moment of pause to enjoy one of the art world's most recognized pieces, Johannes Vermeer's Girl with a Pearl Earring (c. 1665). This iconic piece by this Dutch Golden Age painter mesmerizes as it embraces the subtle beauty of a girl and water's gift of a pearl, born of an oyster's slow, secret labor.

Inside these pages, explore that special alchemy of water that connects and divides; that creates, endures and adorns.

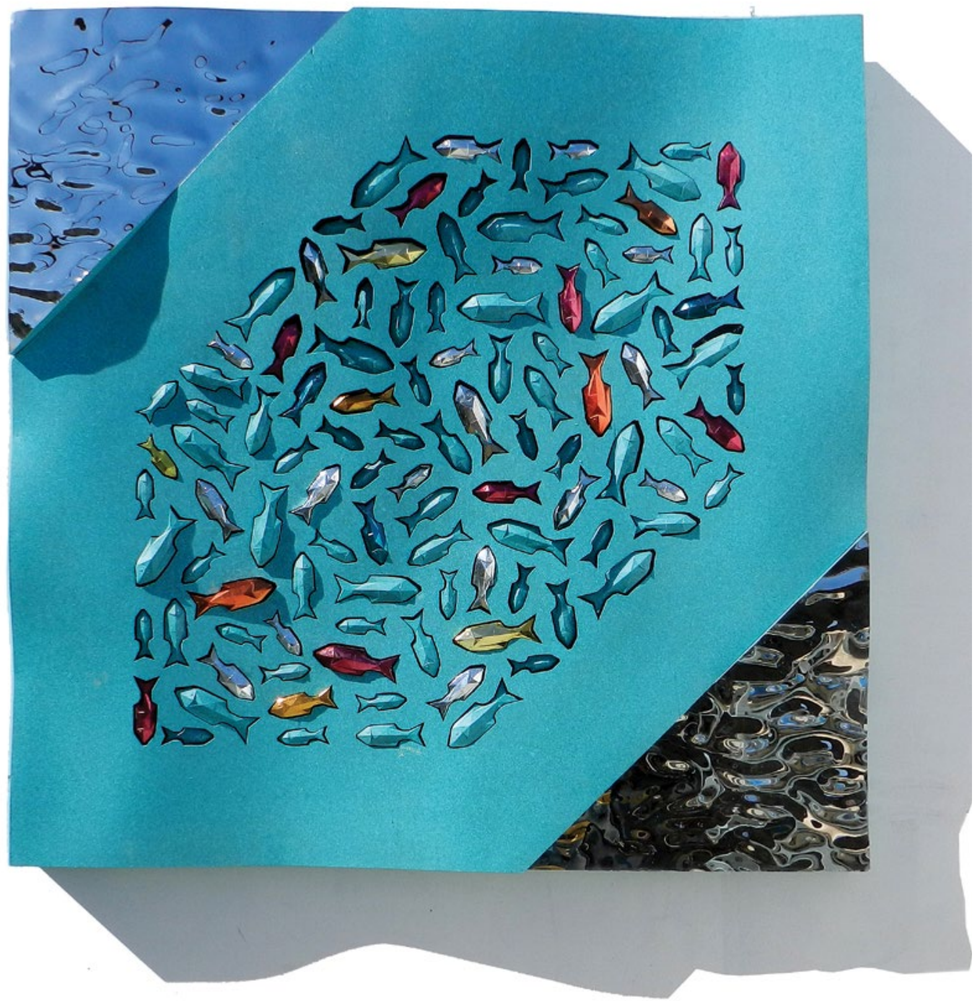
With Appreciation and Respect,

Rym Al-Ghazal
Editor-in-Chief

> Water always speaks. And if we listen closely, we just might hear the world's oldest tale.

Many Faces **of the Same Thing**

By **Rawan Talal**



'Unlived Fishing 29.'
Mohamed Banawy. 2026.
Fiberglass and wood, 140 x 140 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

The surface of the water is not as tranquil as it appears, but a delicate layer between the present and memory. A place where what we thought was lost, or what we can no longer name, can float.

Artist Mohamed Banawy

Mohamed Banawy.
Courtesy of the artist.

Water has always held diverse meanings and facets in human cultures. It is the origin of life, a means of purification in religious texts and ancient philosophies, a symbol of continuous transformation in physics and philosophy, and a raw material for contemplation and the reshaping of meaning in the arts.

The ever-changing nature of water is evident in Heraclitus' famous saying, 'You cannot step into the same river twice,' and in the works of the Egyptian artist Mohamed Banawy, where water appears not merely as a visual element, but as a state of constant flow between memory and imagination.

In this interview, we delve into the experience of the visual artist Mohamed Banawy, who holds a doctorate in philosophy and is ia professor of Fine Arts at Helwan University in Egypt, to discover his artistic world, his philosophy, and the significance of water within his works.

Q1.

What does art represent to you?

Art is nothing more than an attempt to distill the world; it is the alternative language we speak when words fail to describe and express, the bridge that transcends continents and cultures, granting every individual the right to craft their own narrative of the world.

Art moves between feeling, imagination and freedom. Sometimes it is a symphony, sometimes a painting, or even a flash of insight, but at its core, it remains an echo of our lives and a reflection of our feelings.
It is the safe haven we seek refuge in from the monotony and harshness of reality, a tool for confronting truth and understanding the depths of the human soul. It is a magic mirror that doesn't simply reflect our images, but allows us to see ourselves and the world from angles we could never have imagined.

Q2.

How would you describe your artistic style?

My artistic style is based on free experimentation and continuous shaping, where experimentation forms an essential part of my work, both in terms of form and technique. I work on deconstructing and reconstructing traditional relationships between materials, giving each piece a new character resulting from the interaction of the materials with the idea. For me, a work of art is not a final result, but rather an ongoing process of discovery and development.

'Unlived Fishing 14.'
Mohamed Banawy. 2026.

Fiberglass and wood, 130 x 150 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

'Detail 1 from Unlived Fishing 24.'
Mohamed Banawy.

Courtesy of the artist.

Q3.

Between mosaic and sculpture, how do you determine the appropriate medium for each idea?

And do you feel that one expresses you more than the other?

If the idea is based on deconstruction and reconstruction, time, or multiple perspectives, then mosaic becomes a powerful choice. This is because, by its very nature, it is built from small pieces that come together to form a larger meaning conveying a sense of accumulation, patience and sometimes even memory. However, if the idea demands a direct physical presence—mass, shadow and a relationship with space—then sculpture is more suitable. Sculpture imposes itself on the space, allowing the viewer to move around it and experience it from multiple angles. There is also an important sensory aspect: mosaic is closer to a surface work, even if it is slightly raised, and relies heavily on light and color. Sculpture depends on volume, weight, texture and the dialogue between mass and space. As for personal expression, I don't adhere to a single medium permanently.

But the most important question isn't "Which expresses me best?" as much as it is "Which serves this idea best at this moment?"

Sometimes the idea itself dictates its medium, and sometimes experimentation reveals the path.

When I consider choosing between mosaic and sculpture, I don't see them as entirely equal options, because I feel a deep attraction to mosaic. For me, it's not just a technique, but a way of seeing the world itself. Mosaic is closer to my artistic language because it's based on the idea that meaning doesn't arise from a single element, but from the combination of seemingly simple, yet juxtaposed pieces that create a deeper and more complex image. I don't simply place the pieces; I try to recapture this cosmic order, how differences coexist, and how contradiction creates harmony.

However, I don't see sculpture as a distant option. I resort to it when the vision demands a direct, tangible presence, or when an idea needs a mass to fill the space and engage in a living dialogue with the place and the viewer. In these moments, sculpture becomes a necessity, not just an alternative.

'Unlived Fishing 20.'
Mohamed Banawy. 2026.

Fiberglass and wood, 140 x 100 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

'Unlived Fishing 26.'
Mohamed Banawy. 2026.
Fiberglass and wood, 140 x 100 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Q4.

What does water mean to you?

And why does it feature so prominently in your recent artworks?

For me, water is not merely a natural element, but a state of feeling, an open-ended concept that combines change and continuity, purity and the unknown.

Its presence in my recent works is linked to its ability to express inner states and to unlock concepts such as dissolution, vanishing and rebirth, reflecting the idea of a shifting identity.

Visually, water imbues the work with a dynamic life, as if keeping the image in a state of constant flow. In short, water at this stage is not a subject, but a language. For me, water is not simply a natural element, but a surface for vision before it is a substance, an open space between memory and absence.

Q5.

In your exhibition (Fishing Trips I Never Lived), the title seems laden with a paradox between experience and imagination.

Tell us about this exhibition.

In my latest exhibition, the journey began on the water's surface, aboard a boat, in search of what we have lost, or perhaps to reconnect with the past through movement on the water. This surface is not static; rather, it transforms into a realm where memory and imagination intersect, as if every crossing is an attempt to grasp a distant, lost trace of an unlived dream.

On this surface, elements appear, inlaid like a geometric mosaic of abstract forms. Sometimes they take shape in a context and form reminiscent of Islamic mosaics, or like schools of fish, precious stones or fragments of gold, but they remain suspended between reality and suggestion, like signs of something unfolding, yet not being resolved.

In this sense, the water's surface in my work becomes not merely a visual object, but a structure for searching for absence, for what can float from memory into the light.
Water is present in my work as a space of absence as much as it is a presence.

In my latest exhibition, I returned to the sea not as a fisherman, but as a listener. My repeated attempts at fishing failed, and I never had enough time to experience it properly, so I remained on the sidelines, collecting stories.

The fishing trips I didn't participate in, I experienced through the accounts of family and friends details passed down, memories borrowed and images formed more in the mind than seen. In this sense, the sea wasn't a place, but a narrative composed of the voices of others.

My work attempts to capture this tension between experience and imagination, between what is lived and what is narrated. Water here is not merely a visual subject, but a medium for listening, a mirror to a memory that wasn't entirely mine, yet became a part of me.

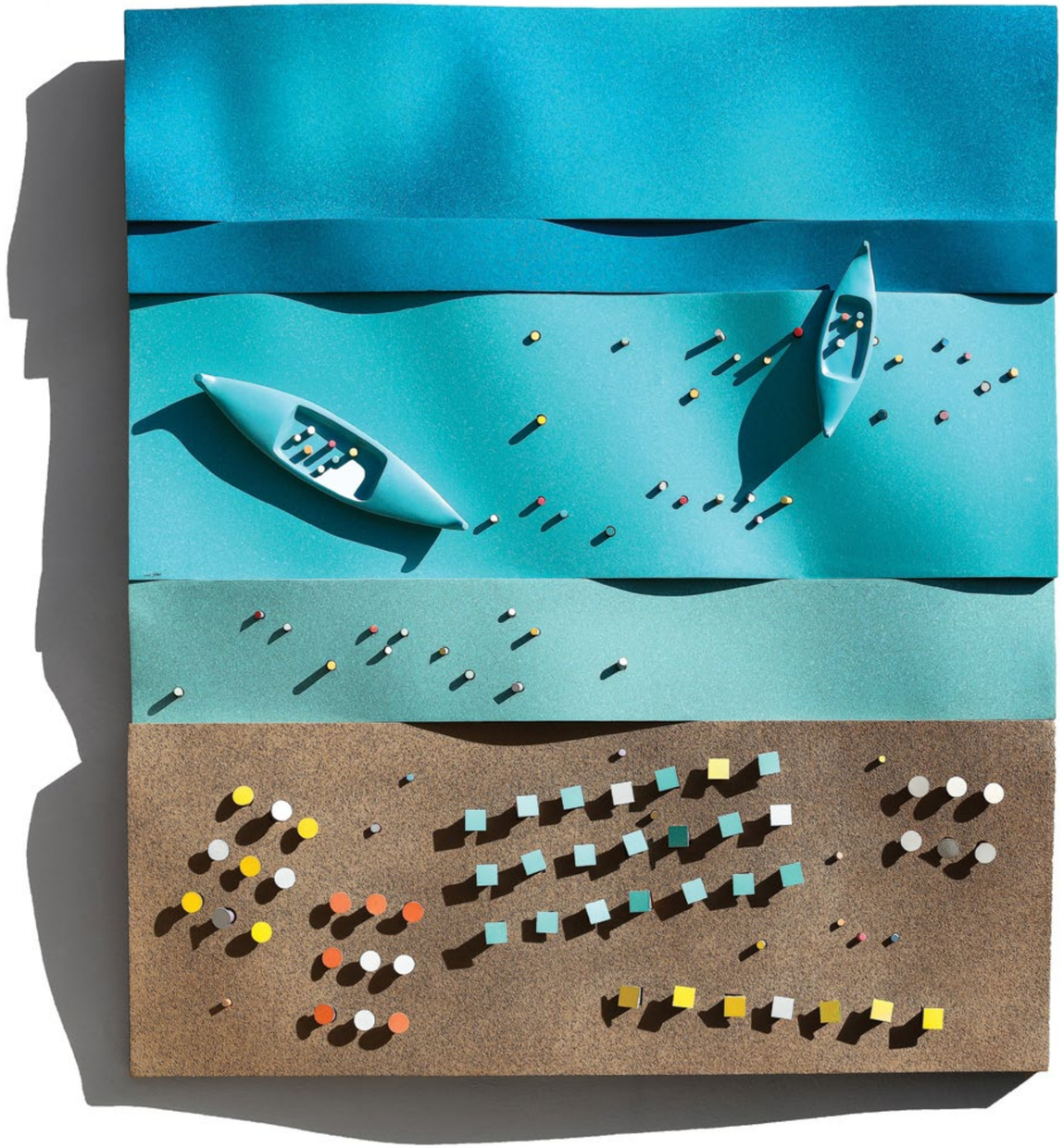
Q6.

Between teaching art and practicing it, how does each affect the other?

And has the teaching experience changed your view of the role of the artist?

There is a reciprocal relationship between teaching and artistic practice, rather than two separate paths. Practice gives me questions, while teaching compels me to deconstruct these questions in simpler, clearer formulations, as if I'm returning to the essence of the idea each time from a different angle.

In the studio, I work intuitively and experimentally, but in the classroom, I have to explain what is unseen: Why does an idea take shape? How does it transform into an image? This creates a critical distance from the work and increases my awareness of the visual and intellectual decisions I make. In other words, I can say that the experience of teaching has changed my view of the artist's role; it is no longer limited to production but extends to opening new avenues of vision and thought.



'Detail 1 from On the Beach 19.'
Mohamed Banawy.
Courtesy of the artist.

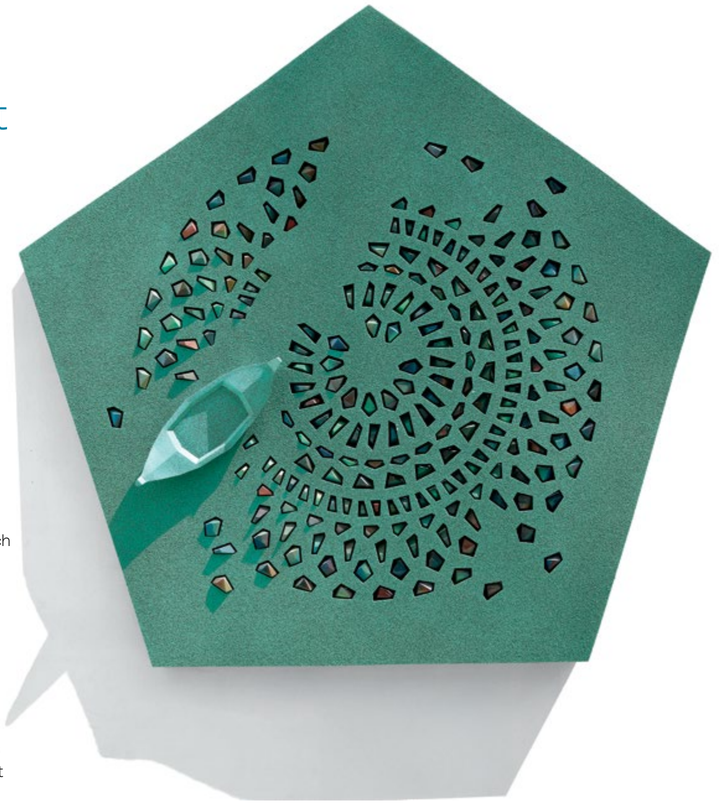
'Detail 1 from On the Beach 16.'
Mohamed Banawy.
Courtesy of the artist.

Q7.

We find that the Egyptian environment and culture are present in your works, so what did they add to you?

And how did they influence your experience?

The presence of the Egyptian environment and culture in my work is not an added element, but rather an integral part of the visual and intellectual framework within which I operate. We Egyptians are connected to multiple layers of history and culture, from ancient Egyptian civilization to the diversity of the contemporary environment, and this breadth is naturally reflected in our way of thinking and artistic expression.
In my work, this connection manifests as a kind of reinterpretation of symbols, not their reproduction, because I don't treat this heritage as a closed historical reference, but rather as an open space for interpretation and reconstruction. Here, ancient symbols blend with a contemporary visual sensibility to create a personal language that draws upon cultural depth without being bound by it.



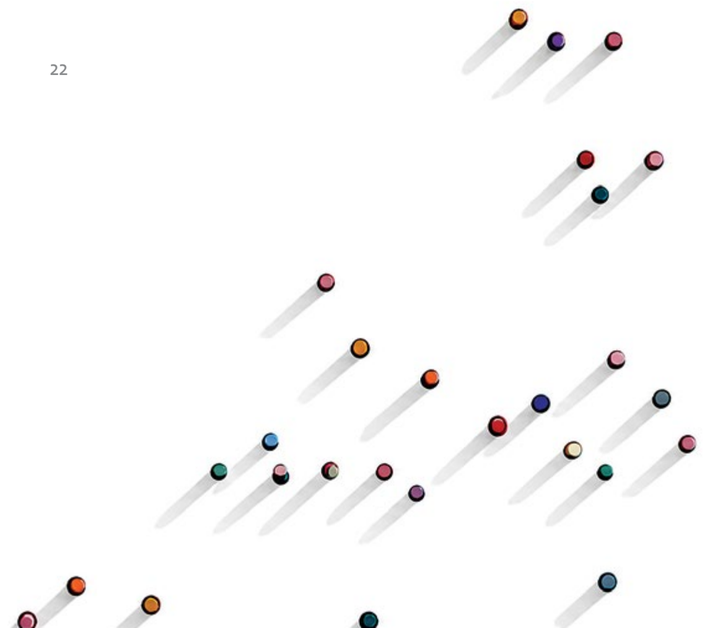
'Unlived Fishing 3.'
Mohamed Banawy. 2026.
Fiberglass and wood, 141 x 149 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Q8.
What is it that art cannot say, in your view?

Art is powerful in what it can hint at or leave open-ended, but it cannot state the truth directly or definitively. It doesn't offer a complete answer, but rather creates a state of approaching meaning without fully possessing it.

There are also things that art remains incapable of fully grasping, such as pure inner experience. It can attempt to translate it, to give it a visual or emotional form, but it cannot convey it as it is.

It is a space for ambiguity more than a space for declaration. It doesn't say everything, but leaves what cannot be said present indirectly, and this deliberate silence or incompleteness is an essential part of its power.



Q9.
What do you hope the audience will see or feel when watching your work?

I hope the audience doesn't approach the works merely as a seascape or a beautiful scene, but as an entry point into an inner quest, sensing that the surface of the water is not as tranquil as it appears, but a delicate layer between the present and memory.

A place where what we thought was lost, or what we can no longer name, can float. I want them to follow the feeling of "the journey" more than the idea of arrival; as if they were on a vessel moving over something unstable, yet simultaneously familiar.

I also hope that the elements that appear as a geometric mosaic, those shapes that oscillate between being fish, precious stones or treasures, evoke a kind of visual hesitation: Are they real objects or traces of memory? This hesitation is the essence of the experience for me.

Ultimately, what I aspire to is for the viewer to leave with the feeling that water is not only outside the painting, but also within it: as a state of thought, and as a potential space for recovering what cannot be recovered directly, but only through sensation.

Enjoy more of Mohamed Banawy's wonderful works below.

'Unlived Fishing 3.'
Mohamed Banawy. 2026.
Fiberglass and wood, 141 x 149 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

'Unlived Fishing 16.'
Mohamed Banawy. 2026.
Fiberglass and wood, 141 x 149 cm.

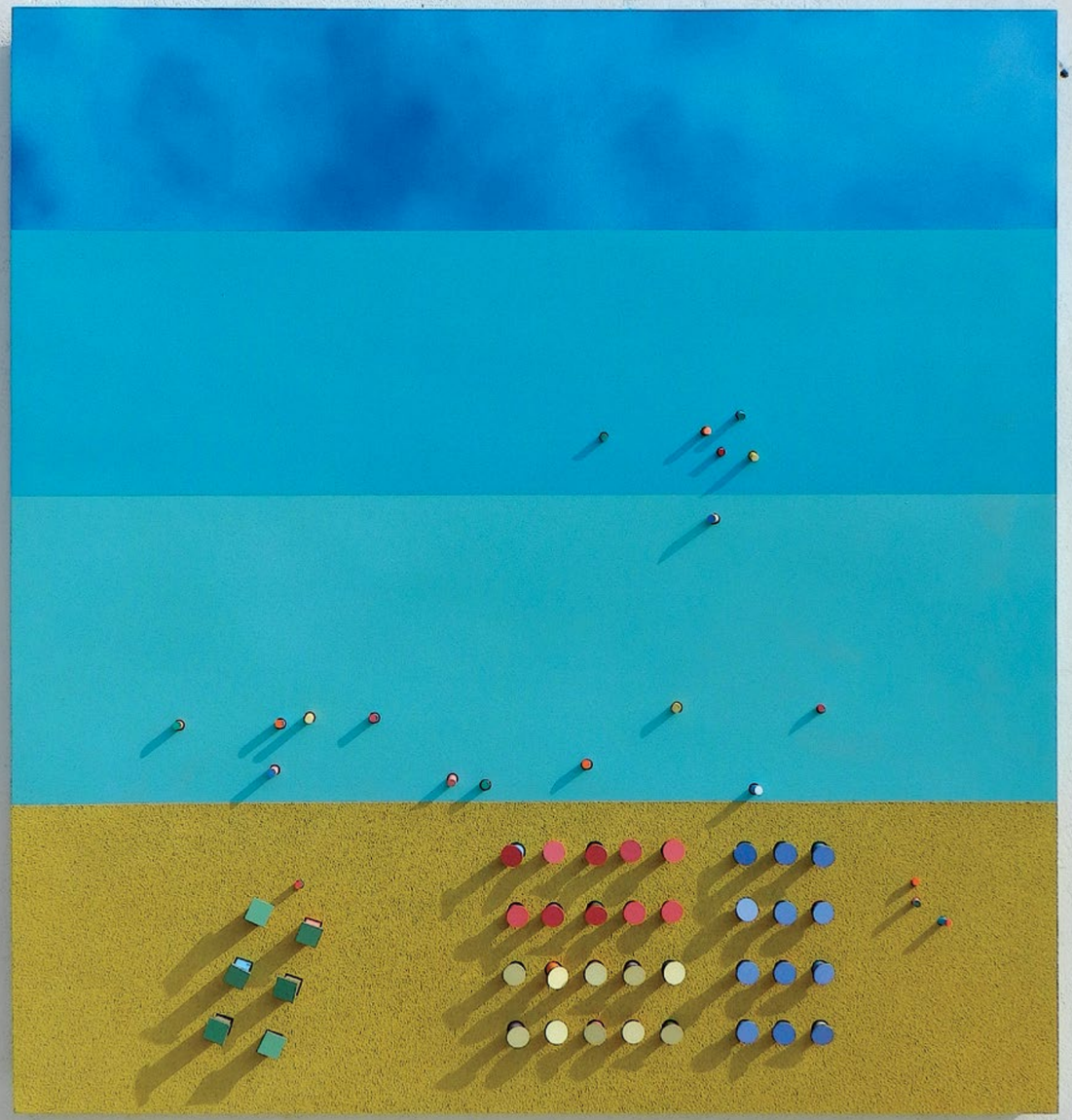
Courtesy of the artist.

'Unlived Fishing 17.'
Mohamed Banawy. 2026.
Fiberglass and wood, 141 x 149 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.

'Unlived Fishing 24.'
Mohamed Banawy. 2026.
Fiberglass and wood, 120 x 120 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.



'On the Beach 13.'
Mohamed Banawy. 2021.
Fiberglass and wood, 150 x 140 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.

Water: The Memory and The Myth

By **Laila Al-Motawa**

The sea swallowed me one day.
I set foot in its sands, and it seized me, pulling me into its depths and forcing its water into my mouth.

Fishermen eventually rescued me from drowning, but the water claimed me from that moment on. It took my voice to defend it, and for years made me follow it, as the people of my island do. We follow the water faithfully, and whenever it turns away, we follow it.

This obsession led me, while writing my second novel, "The Forgotten Between Two Waters," to explore the relationship between water and place. I delved into my earliest memories of my connection to it.

My grandmothers used to cook rabbitfish with sugared rice, taking me with them to the spring amidst the palm groves to make vows to it and its guardian.

Myths and tales bound me to water, for the people of this island begin their memories with two waters: the water of a fresh spring and the water of the sea. "Who reflected himself so you could see what is unseen? Who revealed to you who you are?" Wasn't it water in the myth of Narcissus, when man discovered his features and gazed with

Blue grotto, Capri Island, Italy.'
Photochrom prints Color.

Source: Library of Congress.

'Sea Monster.'
Dana Abu Khalil. Jordan. 2024.
Mixed media on canvas.

This artwork is from the Permanent Collection of Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts.

pride upon himself? And the water revealed his identity to him, so he understood who he was?

In seeking to understand water and its generosity, humans have given it a sense of spirit, both fearing it and revering it, while creating myths and rituals from their bond with it. Water has always reflected the lives of those who dwell near it, appearing in all religions and recurring throughout mythology because the collective consciousness shares in the symbolism of water.

The water that carried Moses to his destiny is the same water that carried Romulus and Remus in Rome. The Sumerians, along with Sargon of Akkad, were associated with the Euphrates River. In the inherited customs in China, mothers throw their illegitimate children into the surface of the river so that the husband will not kill them.

Here, water leads the destiny of man. Mothers across different civilizations used to hand their children over to the water. The man saw water as evil and feared it, and the mothers believed that it was the protector of the children, and that it would decide their fate.

Votive rituals are common in many cultures. In Bahrain, children throw a piece of "Al Hayya Biya" into the sea on the eve of Eid Al Adha. Women also communicate with the sea by rubbing their hair against it when it fails to bring back their loved ones. Every spring lake or body of water is believed to have its own spirit and guardian.

Women in all cultures have a special relationship with water: they are the sacrificial offering, the guardian spirit, the one who speaks to it, and the male figure to whom they call for help. As is common in some cultures of peoples and Greek myths, salt water symbolizes the male, and fresh water symbolizes the woman because she is a symbol of fertility and giving.

According to Sumerian mythology, this freshness originated from the saltiness of the sea. This is something I noticed during a visit to several regions of the Kingdom, organized by my literary partner. The stories and names of these springs are remarkably similar, all representing women who have been transformed into water.

The women who used to sing along the edges of the flood channels "al Saab," with the water following their voices into the fields during periods of drought this relationship is repeatedly reflected in different cultures.

In Greece, floods would engulf entire islands, and women would be seen dancing with the motif known as the "Greek key," turning it in their hands to warn island and coastal communities that the water was coming to reclaim its space.

A closer example to this can be found in Bahrain, where when the island's trees dry out, the water returns to reclaim the land, as has happened on several islands, most notably Al Mazrou'iyah and Fasht Al Jarim, which was once a complete island during the Dilmun period.

This relationship with water led people, who feared it, to appease it with offerings.

In Bahrain, our hope is that, when a flood comes, the water will recede, leaving us land to settle on. We will cut stones from it and build the foundations of our houses. When the tide returns, the sea will smell its scent in the stones, and then leave the land to us, defining new boundaries for itself. As for Sharjah, I stood before a canal that came from the sea. I didn't see any seagulls; the water itself had given them a memory of the place. I later discovered it was an artificial canal, and the sea wasn't there, just as the birds of Diriyah guided me to the valley and showed me its boundaries.

'Water women 1/5.'
Charlotta Sparre, Sweden. 2017. Photographic giclée prints.

This artwork is from the Permanent Collection of Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts.

In an attempt to understand water and its power to restore life, humankind created the myth of sacred water. Drinking from a specific spring was believed to grant immortality. Thus, Gilgamesh came to Dilmun in search of immortality, which was said to be a luminous flower in the sea. Anyone who sees the water of the "Jawajeb," the freshwater springs flowing from the depths of the salty sea, will see that this water glows when the moonlight falls upon it. The Arabs called it a "star," just as they called anything that shines a star. Gilgamesh came to find these freshwater springs, from which, if he drank, would grant him immortality. Later, the island of Bahrain was named after these two waters: fresh and salt.

Japan is a country that doesn't believe in death. I stood before the spring gushing from the mountaintop at the Kiyomizu Temple, surrounded by autumn trees with their leaves illuminated by the sun. There was a kind of sanctity that the water bestowed upon the place. Before me were three spouts, and I had to take the large ladle and choose one: wealth, health or luck. Whoever coveted and drank from all three would be cursed, for water hates greed.

I tasted the sweet water of luck, then the largest torii caught my eye. The torii is the boundary between the world of humans and the world of the gods; when you cross it, you move between the two worlds with ease.

The enormous torii stood before the sea in a majestic display. Isn't water the path to destiny? Isn't it memory, the very thing that humanity has spent its life following? Wasn't humankind created from gushing water? Wasn't the first growth of this life in the amniotic fluid, and didn't its flow carry you to another world? Isn't it true that as a person approaches old age, water springs from their eyes, and they see only through it?

Laila Al-Motawa is a novelist and journalist.

> Drinking from a specific spring was believed to grant immortality.

The Fading Song of the Seas

By **Rym Al-Ghazal**

"There they blow, there they blow, hot wild white breath out of the sea!"

— from 'Whales Weep Not!' by D. H. Lawrence (1885 –1930)

Since the first time we contemplated the sea and marveled at its wonder and awe and mystery, the human race has always gone back into the water out of love, curiosity and most importantly necessity.

Communities have always lived on precious gifts from the sea: on its pearls for trade, on its fish for food, on its seaweed for medicine, and on its stones and corals as building blocks for homes. Even its empty shells were used as decorations, accessories or even as 'suckling shells' which mothers used as feeding bottles.

There is no limit to the gifts from our precious waters that also heal and revive the spirit. At the same, the ocean has been a place of mystery, inspiring myths of beautiful sirens, restless sea monsters and haunting 'ghost ships' that are believed to sail the eternal currents. Ancient mariners spoke of the 'selkies' or 'seal folk' 'of the North Atlantic—seal-like shapeshifting creatures who could shed their skins to walk on land—and the terrifying kraken feared by pirates that rose from the abyss to pull vessels down to their doom. These stories, passed down in the folklore of seafaring nations, attempted to explain the powerful, unseen world beneath the waves.

Yet, the most profound and mysterious being is one famous for its song: the whale. Its low, resonant hums, whistles, pulsed calls and clicks help them navigate through the dark. This symphony of the deep evolved over millions of years, allowing the ocean's giants to communicate across entire ocean basins. But today, a new, harsh noise is rising from the depths, a cacophony of human-led, industrial and destructive activities that are disrupting the music of the sea, and silencing the voices of the whales and other sea creatures; disrupting the ancient rhythms of life on Earth and its waters.

Unable to communicate properly causes these wonderful giants to get lost, symbolic of a world that has forgotten how to co-exist with nature and its many creatures, imposing itself on other species.

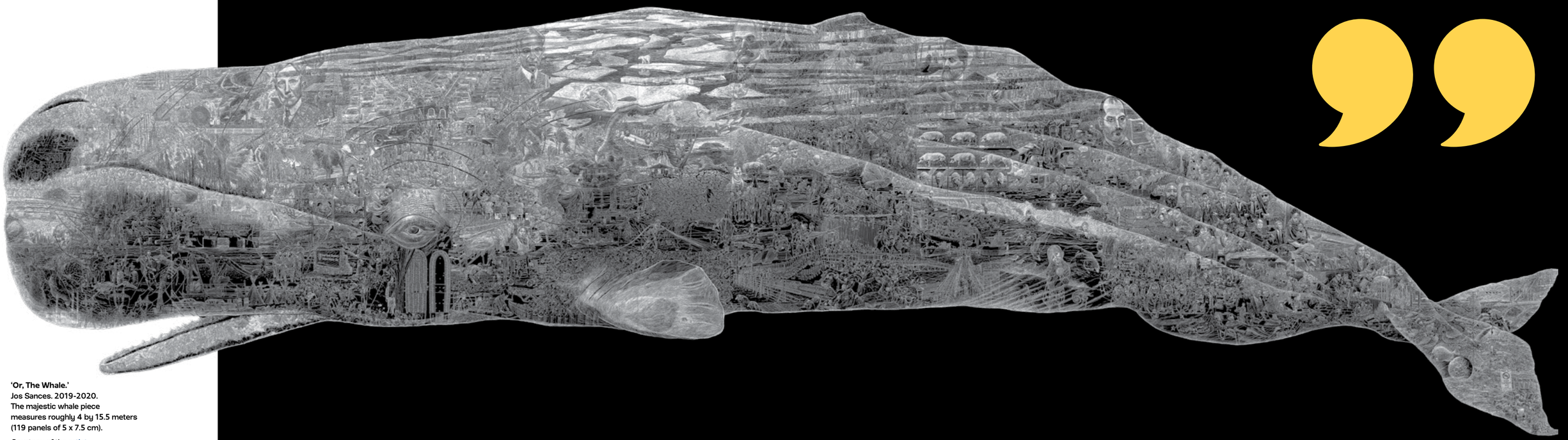
Pendant in the form of a mermaid, probably based on a design by Reinhold Vasters. Baroque pearl with enameled gold mounts set with diamonds and pendant pearls. Height of 12.4 cm. Circa 1870-1895.

Credit to The Jack and Belle Linksy Collection, 1982.

Honoring this beautiful gentle giant and all it represents is a profound panoramic scratchboard mural called 'Or, The Whale' by the renowned American artist Jos Sances. Born in 1952, he is famous for his printmaking and tile murals and public art for more than 45 years.

He has had many accomplishments, most notably in 1980 when he co-founded Mission Gráfica at San Francisco's Mission Cultural Center, and worked there until 1988, at which point he founded Alliance Graphics in Berkeley, California, a successful, union screen print shop. One of his prominent works, it alludes to the subtitle of Herman Melville's Moby-Dick (1851): 'Or, The Whale'. And yet, it distinguishes itself from Captain Ahab's infamous quarry by giving priority instead to the whale itself as a creature of nature. On this massive animal canvas, Sances inscribes a diversely populated visual counter-narrative that critiques Ahab's monomaniacal attempt at mastering nature.

“I choose the whale because it symbolizes the natural world in its pure form, without human intervention.”



'Or, The Whale.'
Jos Sances. 2019-2020.
The majestic whale piece measures roughly 4 by 15.5 meters (119 panels of 5 x 7.5 cm).

Courtesy of the artist.

"As the planet's largest mammals, they have existed here for 50 million years, much longer than humans. The Whale also symbolizes the imperiled body of the world as it currently stands, a world of exploited peoples and natural resources whose beauty and dignity persist in the face of oppression and ecological catastrophe," he said.

Whales throughout history have been and continue to be hunted down, even though they are endangered and critical to the very survival of the oceans.

They are the sea's gardeners and 'ecosystem engineers.'"Whales play a real, measurable role in keeping ocean ecosystems stable. Their movement helps circulate nutrients, which supports plankton growth—and plankton produces a huge portion of the oxygen we breathe," said Sances. "So when whale populations decline, it's not just a loss of wildlife; it weakens an entire system that human life depends on. Degrading the ocean is ultimately self-destructive for all life on the planet."

The origins of Or, The Whale are traceable to Sances's encounters with whales in the waters off Todos Santos in Baja California, a place Sances has visited regularly since 2014, often with family members and sometimes teaching tile mural workshops at Todos Artes and doing regional art commissions. Seeing whales up close, from the small pangas of local fishermen, proved a transformative experience, deepening Sances's connection with the natural world and informing a number of prints and ceramic works that celebrate sea life and the marine environment.

Their mighty role is also confirmed by research that shows when the ocean gets sick, the whales stop singing, and with that eerie silence, we lose a part of ourselves and our world.

"But all is not hopeless," insisted Sances. "There are success stories—whale populations like humpbacks have rebounded after protections were put in place. That shows intervention works when it's taken seriously."

As we take a moment to embrace silence, and enjoy the blessings of water in every form, with stories of it keeping memories of the last words uttered near it, if positive it stays clear, and if negative it darkens, we hope for a clear, silent water, one that welcomes back the healing songs of its many species.

'Or, The Whale.'
Jos Sances. 2019-2020.
This section features the end of the majestic whale piece that measures roughly 4 by 15.5 meters (119 panels of 5 x 7.5 cm).

Courtesy of the artist.

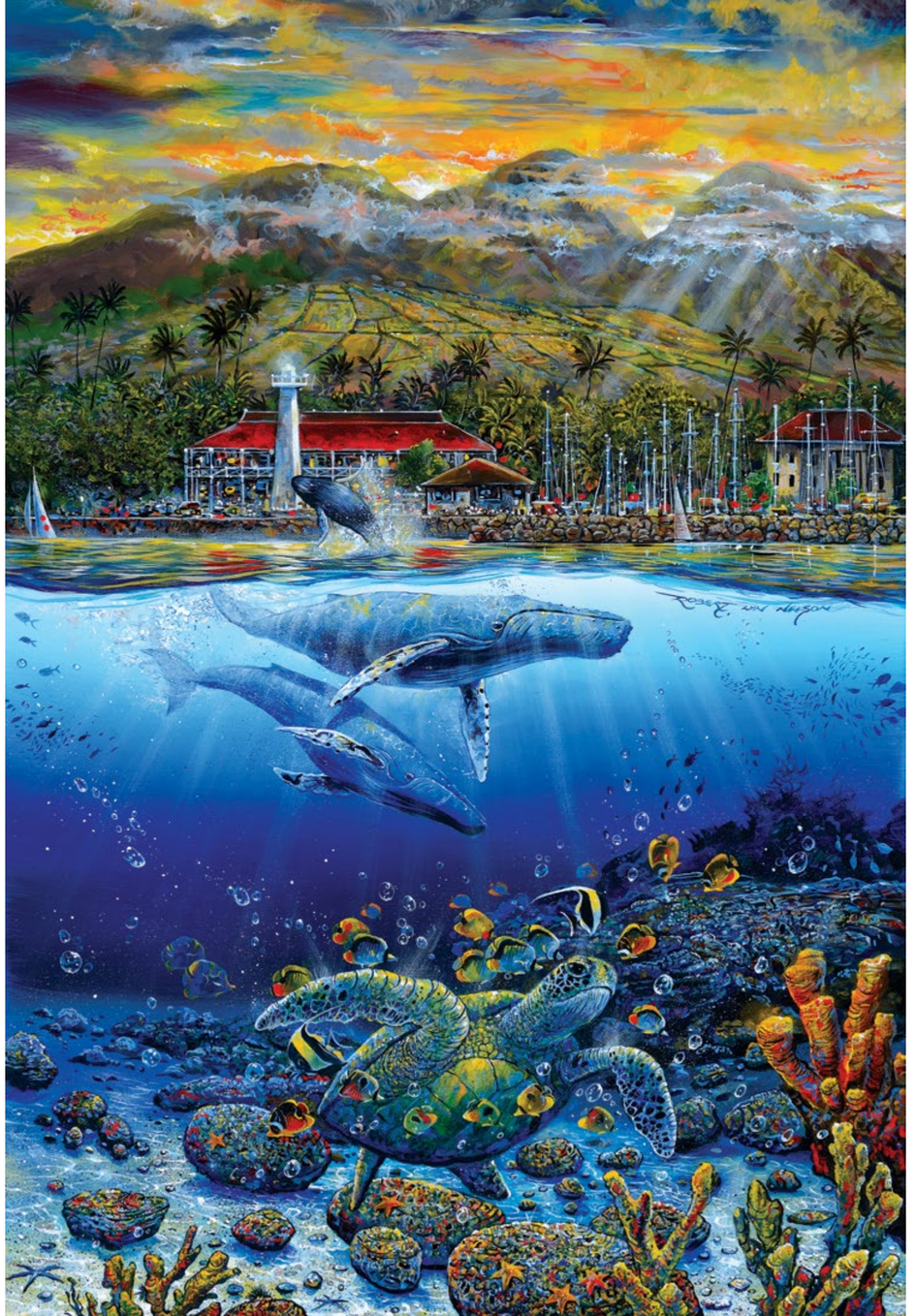
The renowned American artist Jos Sances.

Courtesy of the artist.

Two Worlds, **One** Water

By **Ahmad Dialdin**

Take a moment to deep dive into every piece here. There is magic in every art piece, where a delicate equilibrium between terrestrial and underwater ecosystems meet and take the viewer for a majestic dance of the senses.



'Maui Daybreak This Morning.'
Robert Lyn Nelson. Giclee on canvas, 91 x 61 cm. Lahaina Harbor at dawn, with mountains, palm trees and sailboats above the water; and a family of humpback whales, a sea turtle and schools of tropical fish below.

Courtesy of the artist.

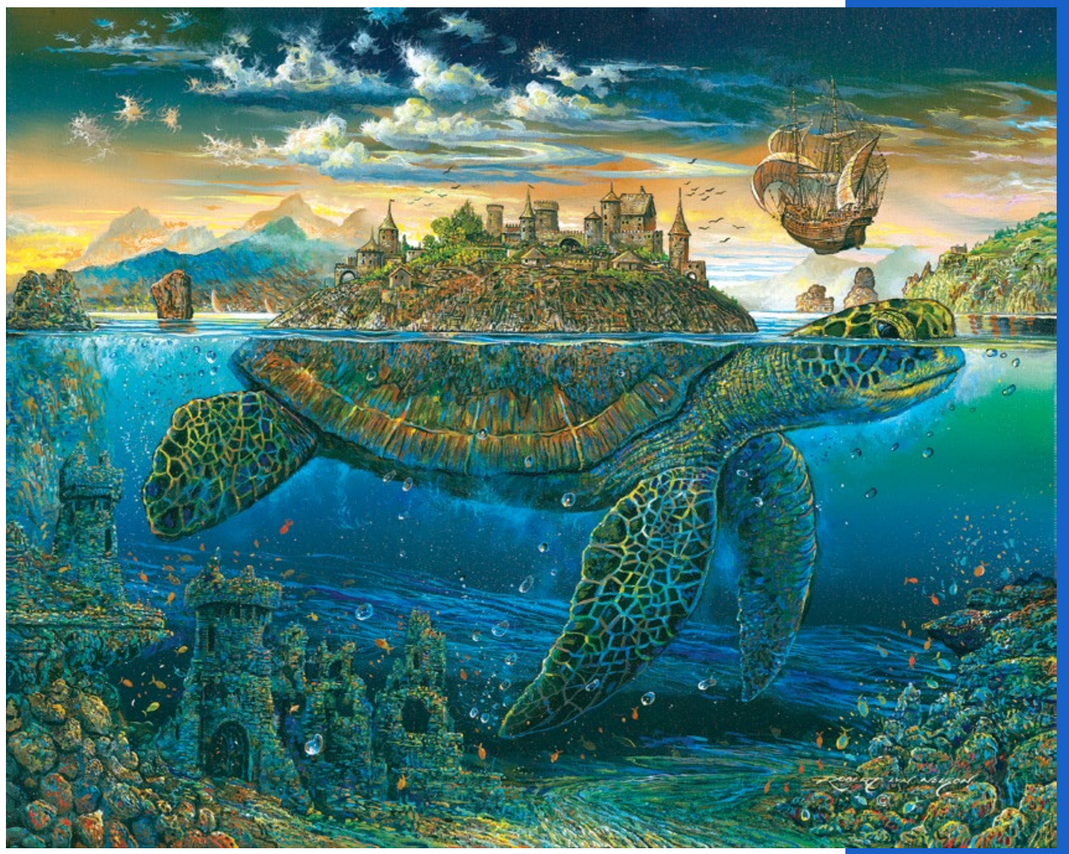
Few contemporary artists have done more to shape how we see the ocean than Robert Lyn Nelson. Born in 1955 in Southern California and based in Hawaii since 1973, Nelson has always used the medium of art to have a compelling and intimate conversation about water.

In 1979, Nelson founded the Modern Marine Art Movement, pioneering a technique that renders the world above and below the waterline within a single canvas. That split-perspective approach, with sunlit harbors, mountain peaks and human settlements above; and whales, sea turtles, coral reefs and schools of fish moving below, has become his signature and a quiet act of advocacy. By showing both realms, Nelson refuses the convenient illusion that what happens on the surface is separate from what happens beneath it. We have to hold both worlds in mind at once.

Nelson's commitment to that idea extends well beyond the studio. He is a co-founder of the National Marine Sanctuaries Foundation (alongside Jean-Michel Cousteau, son of the famed ocean explorer Jacques Cousteau), has contributed artwork to the United Nations and to the Republic of Palau's Marine Life Protection commemorative coins, and was honored by Vice President Al Gore in 1997 with the Environmental Hero Award for his ocean conservation advocacy.

Nelson's works give us a rare gift in marine conservation: a visual vocabulary for thinking about our oceans as integrated, living systems, and a reminder that art can both be a celebration of our environment and a rallying call to preserve it.

Enjoy exploring Robert Lyn Nelson's magical artworks, each a gift to our eyes and soul.



'Wisdom.'
Robert Lyn Nelson. Giclee on canvas, 61 x 76 cm. Surrealist artwork that presents a split perspective, revealing a medieval castle perched atop an island under a sunset-kissed sky above, while simultaneously showcasing the vibrant underwater realm below the surface.
A colossal sea turtle gracefully navigates the deep, its shell echoing the colors of the island above.

Courtesy of the artist.

'Tahoe Passion.'
Robert Lyn Nelson. Acrylic on canvas, 21 x 122 cm. Inspired by Vincent Van Gogh, Nelson captures the mystical allure of Lake Tahoe beneath a twinkling night sky.

Courtesy of the artist.

'Two Worlds 2012.'
Robert Lyn Nelson. Giclee on canvas, 76 x 61 cm. Humpback whale breaches against the backdrop of a tranquil sunset over Lahaina town and distant volcanic peaks. Schools of fish dance in the sunlit depths, while a peaceful sea turtle navigates a vibrant coral reef.

Courtesy of the artist.

'Beyond the Blue.'
Robert Lyn Nelson.
Giclee on canvas, 76 x 102 cm.
Seamless blend of above and below-water perspectives, transporting the viewer to a vibrant Hawaiian coastline.

Courtesy of the artist.

Art as Water,

Shaped by Its Vessel

By **Mutaz Qutaniah**

Saudi artist Faisal Samra is one of the leading pioneers of conceptual art in the Gulf and Middle East region, and an influential artistic figure whose work transcends geographical and cultural boundaries.

Faisal Samra was born in Bahrain in 1955 and graduated from the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1980. Since then, his practice has diversified to include photography, painting, sculpture, video and performance art. His works are exhibited in prestigious museums and art collections worldwide.

Samra is known for his profound intellectual approach, which addresses issues of existence, memory and the human experience, with a particular focus on deconstructing elements of popular symbolism and propaganda, without resorting to directness.

'**Immortal Moment 2** (Post-Shock Faces).' Faisal Samra. 2024.
Courtesy of the artist.

In this interview, Samra takes us on an intellectual journey through his artistic and personal life, exploring the impact of his multicultural upbringing in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and France on shaping his identity. He talks about his concept of water as a substance that constantly changes shape, and about pivotal moments in his life, such as his early discovery of Michelangelo's works, and how these experiences influenced his vision of art. He reflects on his philosophy about the relationship between the body and covering (clothing), and the role of masks in revealing and concealing.

Samra says that the cultural diversity of his birth to a Saudi father and a Bahraini mother gave him a profound awareness of his own identity. This led him to refining his tools for travel. He explains, "Even on a practical level, my travel bag is always light; I only carry the essentials, without burdening it with anything unnecessary. This approach is also reflected in my artwork, where I use very minimalist tools that achieve the desired effect precisely." Samra points out that "water remains water, no matter what container it's in."

> “Even on a practical level, my travel bag is always light; I only carry the essentials, without burdening it with anything unnecessary. This approach is also reflected in my artwork, where I use very minimalist tools that achieve the desired effect precisely.”

'Immortal Moment 2 (Post-Shock Creatures).' Faisal Samra.

Courtesy of the artist.

'Immortal Moment 2 (Post-Shock Creatures).' Faisal Samra. 2023.

Courtesy of the artist.

He favors this expression, explaining that the essence remains true, while the forms it takes change, because appearances are inherently changeable. The basic concepts in life are constant, but their outward appearance changes across time and place.

"I have applied the same rule in my artwork from the beginning; the essence of the artwork is constant, and it simply revolves around man, his relationship with himself, with his surrounding environment, and his interaction with what is around him. This is the basic essence of my art."

He recalls a pivotal event in his life, which occurred in 1968, when he was 13 years old, after receiving a book about Michelangelo as a gift from someone returning from London. "It wasn't so much a shock in the literal sense as it was an opening to a different perspective on how to draw."

The book discussed Michelangelo's sketches and the concept of treating the paper as a space while creating the drawing, or the lines within that space. "Through drawing, I control and shape through shadow; my pen becomes the shadow within this mass of light to extract certain forms, or to draw the model."

This book was very important to his career, but it wasn't so much a shock as it was an enlightenment about something he hadn't been aware of, according to him.

> "I never fall into directness."

Then came the second shock that affected him when he boarded a plane for the first time, traveling from Bahrain to Saudi Arabia: "I was about six years old, and I saw the vast expanses of the desert from above. But the shocks that affect and leave a mark are the lived experiences, whether visual or psychological."

In the relationship between the body and clothing, Samra recalls a project about folds that he carried out in 1990, where he sees folds as essentially a measure of a certain temporal accumulation. The fold itself is an act, documenting the time of folding this paper or this fabric. This fold is what remains of the time of the act of folding.

Masks, however, have a different significance. Masks, or veils, featured prominently in the Distorted Reality project, conceal and reveal something else. "They reveal what's inside us, what we intend to do. The mask covers our faces, but it reveals that we're covering something, disguising ourselves. We wear masks all the time. I made a video that shows how, from wearing masks so much, we've forgotten our true faces, and the mask has become our true face."

He speaks about deconstruction in his artwork: "I deconstruct, but I deconstruct the subject I'm working on. If there's a particular subject, I try to deconstruct it, reformulate it, and reconstruct it according to my visual vision and my approach to the artwork, as has happened in most of my projects. Deconstruction makes things clearer and leads to identification and revelation. In my opinion, when we deconstruct things, they begin to reveal themselves more."

He emphasizes avoiding directness and its pitfalls: "I never fall into directness. On the contrary, through deconstruction and reformulation, I delve into different, deeper levels of treatment, encompassing several layers: from the initial visual level, then the intellectual level, the sensory level, and so on.

The Dot Desert x Al-Ula.'
Faisal Samra. 2024.
Courtesy of the artist.

For me, a work of art always allows for multiple levels, but it begins with the visual level. Initially, I don't reveal all the levels. I only give the starting point to the visual, formal level that imposes itself. Then, if we want to explore other levels—conceptual, intellectual, philosophical and so forth—they are present, and we can access them within the work."

Samra sees the desert as a "lifesaving emptiness," a place where he finds peace and serenity, far removed from the clamor of city life and the clutter of images. "In the desert, I can see things more clearly and listen to my inner voice without distortion. It's a space for contemplation and deep reflection, where simplicity and beauty are revealed in their most sublime forms. It's a spiritual haven that renews my energy and sharpens my artistic vision."

He tends to believe his works offer a rich aesthetic experience: "Let me compare it to a healthy, substantial meal—one that is tasteful, flavorful and wholesome—unlike those works that offer heavy, fast-food meals that are harmful to the eye." He adds, "I don't create my work for an elite audience; I create it for everyone, for those who want to enjoy art, for those who try to create space for reflection and ask themselves questions. Yes, I want to provoke the viewer to think about different things." Samra believes that there is no certainty in art, that it is a continuous process of questioning, experimentation and exploration.

He sees resistance as having many forms, and art as one of them: "I believe that art is like malleable material that can be shaped, and the artist is the one who determines its nature. Art can be a means of conveying specific propaganda ideas, or promoting a political ideology, like the art that was used in the Soviet Union to promote the regime at the time, or even in other ways, as in capitalism. Art is fluid and adaptable in many ways; it finds its way wherever it flows, like water. True, independent art is that which is not employed for any particular purpose, but rather belongs to the artist and to humanity in every place and time."

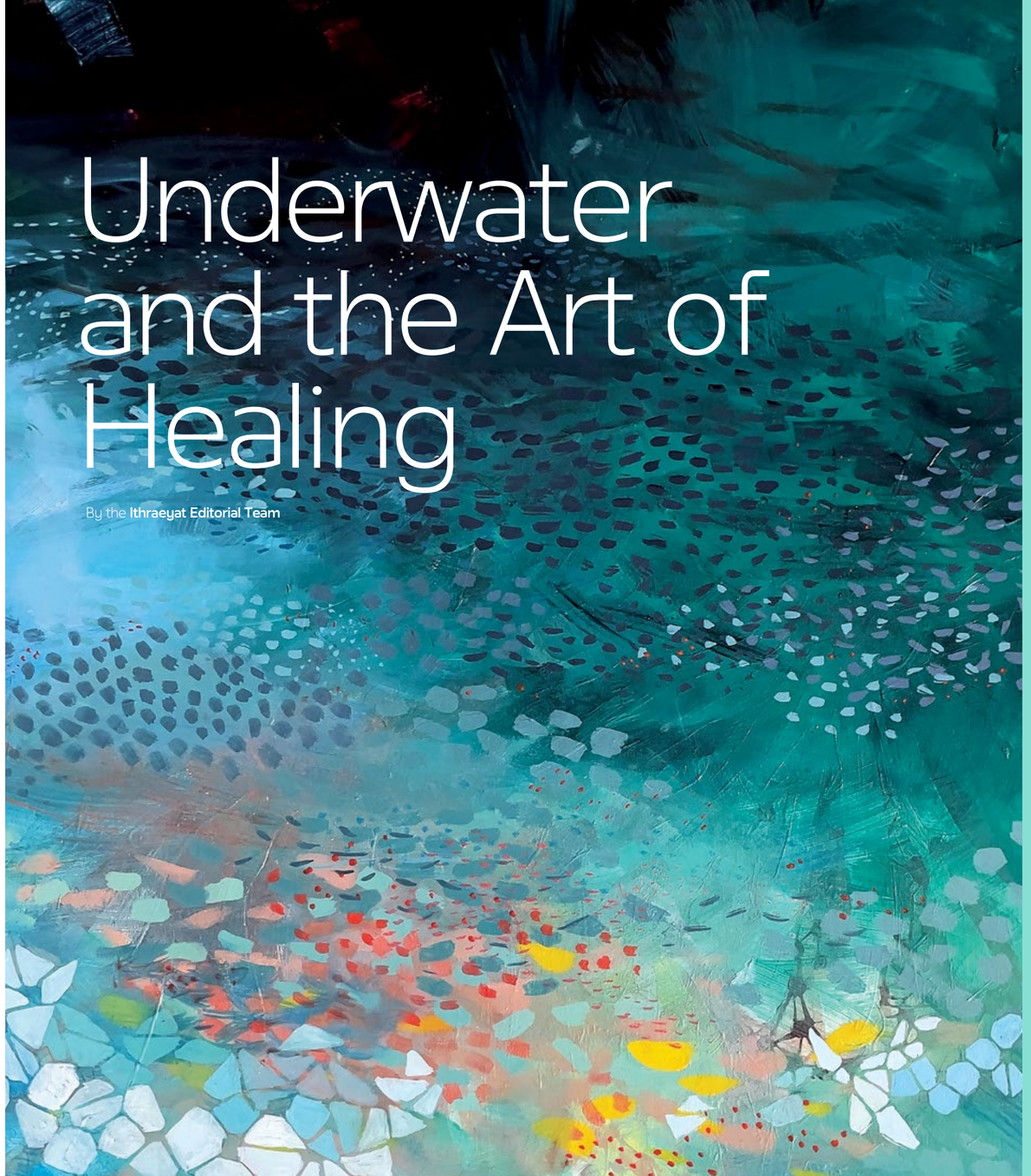
Upon returning from France in 1980, he didn't find the artistic milieu he desired—one that engaged with critical thinking, posed questions, and provoked thought. "I was almost alone back then. Now, I see this vast artistic community that thinks, asks questions, and tries to delve into different depths. This is the successful artist now, not just in the Kingdom, but globally. The artist is present in all art circles, museums and other venues."

"I am very attached to my reality. If we want to be honest in our artwork, we must be honest. We produce art because it is essential, not something secondary or for entertainment. As Kandinsky said, 'Art is an internal necessity."

Mutaz Qutaniah is a writer and consultant in culture and media.

Underwater and the Art of Healing

By the **Ithraeyat Editorial Team**



> I am holding my breath underwater and looking up with strategic optimism, fear, awe, reflection, determination, and a refusal to despair.

Artist Lisa Volta-Zalloum

'Nano Moments.'
Lisa Volta-Zalloum. 2021.
Oil on panel, 46 x 61 cm.
Courtesy of the artist

Water, in all its depth, its stillness and its power, is at the heart of Lisa Volta-Zalloum's latest collection.

Serenity in the sincerity of water is what inspired Lisa to create art that both inspires and invites to explore its depths for deeper meaning.

Lisa is a Syrian-American artist who specializes in painting, photography and mixed media, and whose work explores identity, ecological histories and the passage of time. She holds an MFA and serves as the Executive Director at Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture, a Philadelphia-based organization dedicated to Arab arts and cultural life. She also teaches art studio classes at Drexel University and the Community College of Philadelphia.

Throughout her career, Lisa received various grants, fellowships and awards to create new work and support long-term art residencies for Philadelphia students; and her art is regularly held in collections across the United States and internationally.

Through her work with Al-Bustan, Lisa curates exhibitions, performances and workshops featuring artists of Arab heritage, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of their contributions to the contemporary art landscape.

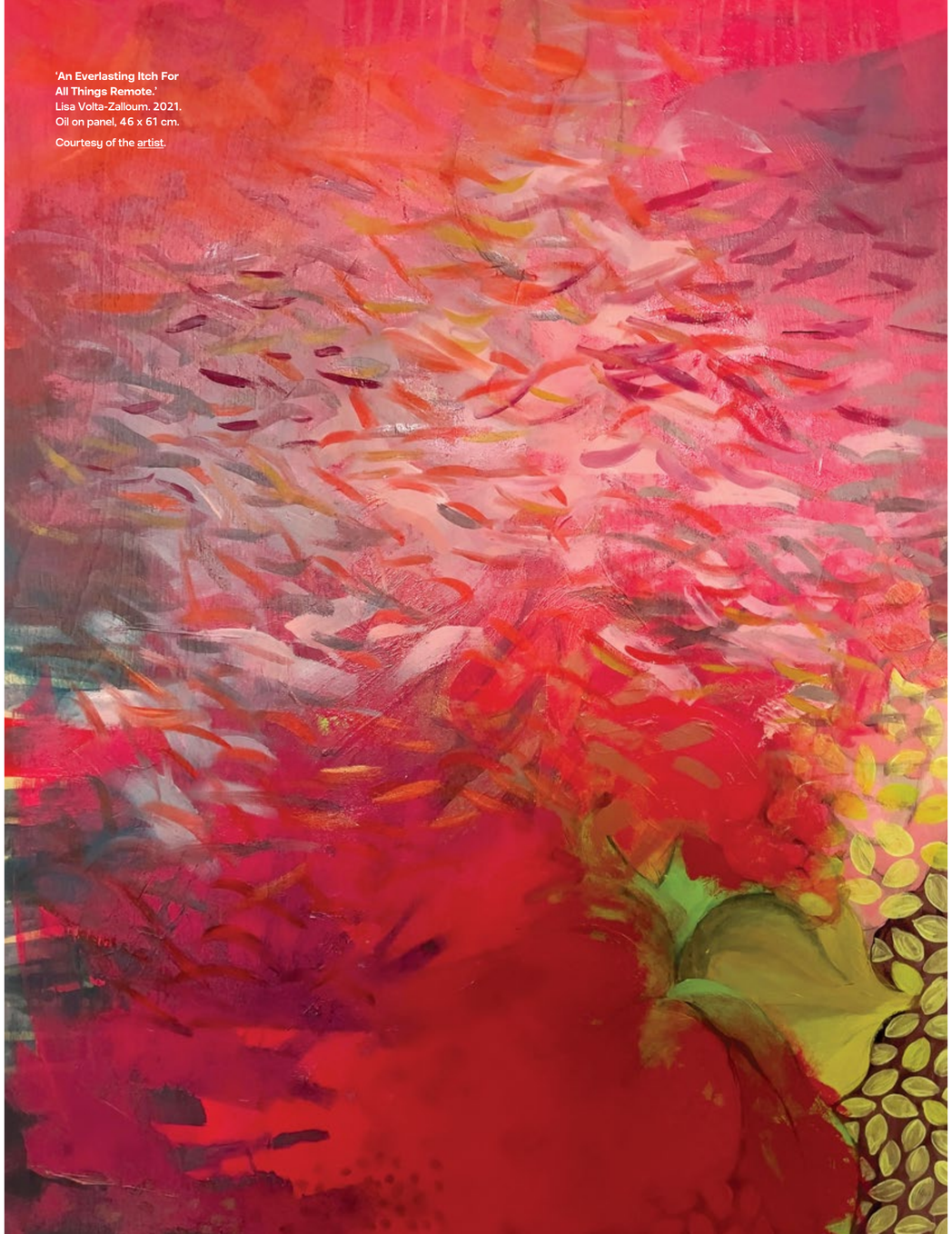
We had the pleasure of sitting down with Lisa to discuss her relationship to water, art and the spaces between, and ask about her beautifully fluid collection.

Q1.
What does art mean to you?

I believe that art is a way of being—encompassing creativity, curiosity, problem-solving, expression, emotional connection and communication. Every aspect of life can be art if you choose to see it that way.

I teach at two local universities in Philadelphia and am always excited when non-art majors join my classes. I believe that all fields of study should incorporate a serious art class. We need emerging thinkers and leaders who can envision solutions to problems that don't yet have logical pathways.

Art helps us grapple with difficult questions, opens gates to understanding and prompts reflection on the world we live in.



'An Everlasting Itch For All Things Remote.'
Lisa Volta-Zalloum. 2021.
Oil on panel, 46 x 61 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Q2.
Tell us the story behind this collection and why you chose the theme of water.

These paintings are part of a collection entitled Holding My Breath Underwater (named for one of the paintings). The story is that many of the paintings were inspired by a last-minute, first-time trip to Nantucket, Massachusetts.

It was the end of summer 2021, and my husband, daughter and I decided to go there on a whim. On the ferry, I realized I had never been so far "out to sea," and the island's flatness made me feel like the ocean could swallow us up at any moment. We got an authentic "Gray Lady" experience with stormy skies one minute and bright sunshine the next, biking on misty trails to fish and farmer's markets, collecting shells on the sound, and jumping and diving through the roughest of ocean waves.

The story behind the story is that humanity is underwater. Between global systemic injustices, violence, genocide, millions displaced and starving, unending wars, environmental disasters and a climate in crisis, we are sinking, looking down, watching the show on the flatness of our screens. And like [that time in] Nantucket, it feels like one giant wave could take us out.

I am holding my breath underwater and looking up with strategic optimism, fear, awe, reflection, determination and a refusal to despair.

Q3.
If you could add or remove anything from a nearby body of water, what would it be and why?

Philadelphia is on the east coast of the US, and is flanked by two rivers, the Schuylkill and the Delaware, and the Atlantic Ocean is about an hour's drive away.

Add: appreciation, respect and stewardship.
Remove: disregard, entitlement, indifference and pollution.

Q4.
What favorite poem or story do you remember from your childhood, or that you like to tell your children?

Before my daughter was born, I bought her Naomi Shihab Nye's book 'Sitti's Secrets." As she has grown, we love reading Naomi's poems and sharing our favorites in the moment. We both met Naomi through my work with Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture and adore her dearly.

[Naomi's poem Famous] is a recent favorite that I read to my grandmother while she was in hospice and again at her memorial dinner.

'Riptide.'
Lisa Volta-Zalloum. 2021.
Oil on panel, 51 x 51 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Famous

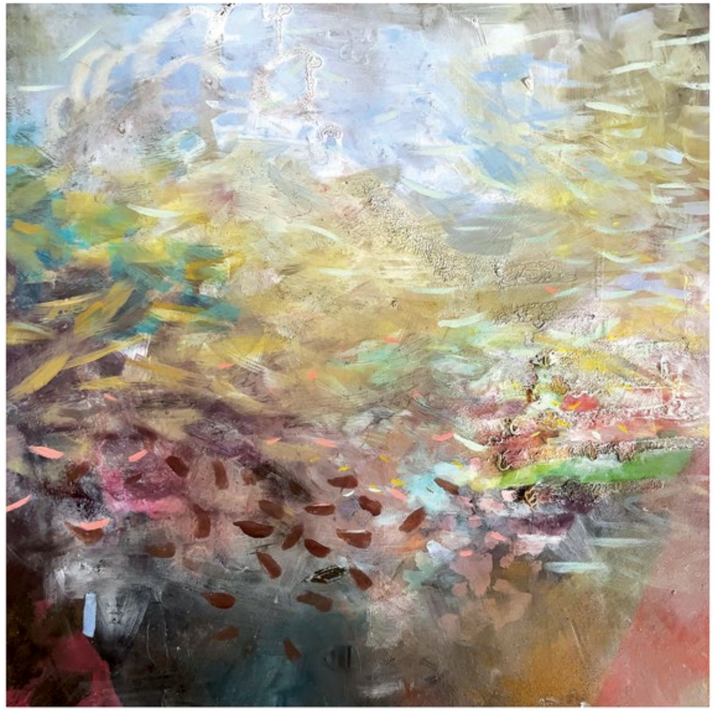
By Naomi Shihab Nye

The river is famous to the fish.
The loud voice is famous to silence,
which knew it would inherit the earth
before anybody said so.
The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the birds
watching him from the birdhouse.
The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.
The idea you carry close to your bosom
is famous to your bosom.
The boot is famous to the earth,
more famous than the dress shoe,
which is famous only to floors.
The bent photograph
is famous to the one who carries it
and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.
I want to be famous to shuffling men
who smile while crossing streets,
sticky children in grocery lines,
famous as the one who smiled back.
I want to be famous
in the way a pulley is famous,
or a buttonhole,
not because it did anything spectacular,
but because it never forgot what it could do.

Q5.
Any favorite aspects of marine life?

I love jellyfish! They are beautiful and dangerous, and half of them glow in the dark. Bioluminescence is one of my favorite natural wonders. Although I've never seen a bioluminescent sea, it's on my list, and my camera is ready.

A selection of her other works in the collection:



'Holding My Breath Underwater.'
Lisa Volta-Zalloum. 2021.
Oil on panel, 51 x 51 cm.
Courtesy of the artist

You can learn more about Lisa and her art on her website, and definitely check out Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture to see their incredible work enriching and educating about Arab arts and culture.

'Trace.'
Lisa Volta-Zalloum. 2021.
Oil on panel, 51 x 51 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

'The Bloop.'
Lisa Volta-Zalloum. 2021.
Oil on panel, 46 x 61 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

'Syzygy.'
Lisa Volta-Zalloum. 2021.
Oil on panel, 51 x 76 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

A/C Ecologies: Cooling, Control and the Unintended Life of Water

By **Gaida Almogren**

In an era defined by accelerating climate uncertainty, artistic practices increasingly turn toward instability as a condition to be examined, inhabited and understood.

Here we are looking at two contemporary art installations: **Gamhawi's Technical Malfunction and Shono's A Forgotten Place.**

'Technical Malfunction.' Saeed Gamhawi. 2024.
Photographed by Aria Alnomay and images courtesy of the artist.

01

Water, Ice and Malfunction: The Poetics of Instability in Gamhawi's Technical Malfunction

Across both installations, air-conditioning, the most defining technological apparatus of contemporary life in arid regions, shifts from background utility to conceptual protagonist.

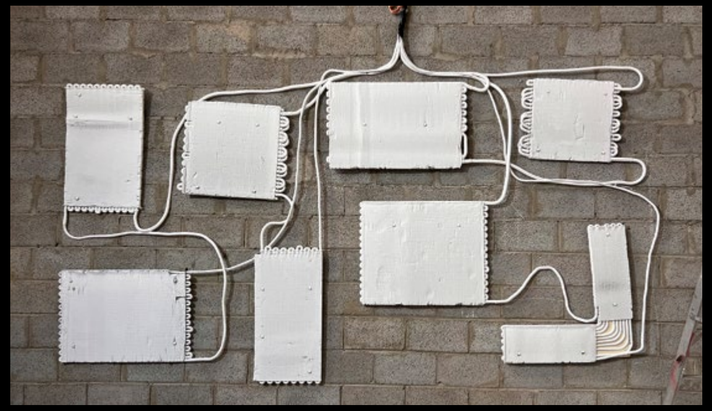
In these works, the A/C is no longer a neutral system of comfort but a generator of unintended environmental narratives. Whether through malfunction or byproduct, water emerges as the central agent: freezing into unstable ice in one instance and sustaining fragile plant life in another.

Together, these practices articulate what Shono calls "A/C ecologies," where the residues of cooling technologies become sites for rethinking human relationships with climate, infrastructure and non-human life. Both artists engage not with grand environmental spectacles, but with subtle, often overlooked processes: the drip, the freeze, the leak. In doing so, they reposition environmental art as an inquiry into systems already in operation, revealing how ecological meaning can be extracted from the margins of everyday technological function.

Saeed Gamhawi's Technical Malfunction operates at the intersection of environmental inquiry, sensory experience, and artistic practice, positioning water as a conceptual axis through which questions of memory, scarcity, and ecological urgency are explored. Situated within the broader discourse of environmental art, the work engages water as both presence and absence, an element that shapes landscapes, bodies and histories.

Constructed from aluminum cooling radiator panels and industrial tubing mounted on a steel frame, the installation simulates the freezing effect of a malfunctioning air-conditioning system. Beneath this technical façade lies a layered meditation on climate disruption, human intervention and the fragile cycles governing natural systems.

At the core of the work is a deliberate contradiction: a machine designed to regulate temperature instead produces ice in an unstable and unnatural manner. As Gamhawi notes, "The malfunction becomes a metaphor for environmental imbalance."



'Technical Malfunction.'
Saeed Gamhawi. 2024.

Photographed by Aria Alnomay and images courtesy of the artist.

He draws a parallel between technological failure and environmental imbalance, suggesting that just as a faulty system disrupts its intended function, global climate systems, strained by pollution and overconsumption, have entered a state of unpredictability. The melting of polar ice caps, rising sea levels and extreme weather patterns are reframed as symptoms of a broader systemic breakdown, a planetary malfunction driven by human activity. Water within the installation exists in a continuous state of transformation. It freezes, melts, drips and refreezes, producing a cyclical process that unfolds over time. These shifts highlight water's resistance to control. Despite the rigid industrial framework attempting to contain it, water escapes fixed form, asserting autonomy through movement and change. This tension between containment and fluidity reflects contemporary environmental dilemmas, where technological systems seek to manage natural resources yet often intensify their depletion and distortion.

The work extends beyond visual form into sound, where the subtle rhythm of dripping water punctuates an otherwise quiet space. This acoustic element transforms the installation into a temporal experience. The steady dripping becomes an environmental pulse, marking time while evoking scarcity, fragility and loss. Gamhawi's engagement with water is also personal and historical. The work draws inspiration from his daughter's fascination with snow, an image that, in the context of Saudi Arabia, carries both wonder and dissonance. Snow, once rare in the region, has become more visible due to shifting climate patterns, prompting reflection on

'Technical Malfunction.'
Saeed Gamhawi. 2024.

Photographed by Aria Alnomay and images courtesy of the artist.

'Technical Malfunction.'
Saeed Gamhawi. **2024.**

Photographed by Aria Alnomay and images courtesy of the artist.

environmental change and its implications for future generations. This inquiry is further grounded in the historical memory of the Arabian Peninsula as a once-green landscape, supported by ecological and archaeological evidence. As Gamhawi reflects, "Water is both loss and continuity, what once existed and what may still be possible."

Informed by environmental reports, documentaries and global climate discourse, the work carries a critical awareness of contemporary ecological concerns. Yet rather than offering solutions, Technical Malfunction remains deliberately open-ended. It creates space for reflection and inquiry, inviting viewers to consider their relationship to natural systems and the consequences of human intervention.

The installation also resonates with the lived histories of the region, where survival and mobility were historically tied to the search for water. Gamhawi's familial narratives of movement across landscapes in pursuit of this vital resource anchor the work in a collective memory predating modern infrastructure. In doing so, the installation bridges past and present, linking ancestral knowledge with contemporary environmental crises.

As part of an ongoing series, Technical Malfunction reflects Gamhawi's sustained engagement with water as both subject and process. Each iteration becomes a variation on instability, an exploration of how material, environment and concept intersect in a world increasingly defined by uncertainty.

Saeed Gamhawi
A Saudi contemporary artist whose work spans installation, painting and conceptual practices; he is a co-founder of the Tasami Center for Visual Art in Jeddah and the founder of Raseef Studio in Riyadh and has exhibited widely both locally and internationally, representing Saudi Arabia across Europe and the Middle East as well as at major platforms such as the Louvre Museum, Noor Riyadh and Misk Art Week.

02

Water, Waste and a Feral Commons: Reclaiming Value in A Forgotten Place

Muhannad Shono's A Forgotten Place (2024), commissioned for GCDN x Alserkal as part of the Global Co-Commission, operates through subtle observation and attentiveness to the overlooked.

The work begins with a humble yet continuous phenomenon: the drip of condensate water from air-conditioning units. In a region defined by water scarcity, this byproduct is typically dismissed as waste.

Shono reframes it as a resource, an approach that resonates with what Tairone Bastien, curator of A Feral Commons, describes when he notes that "these artists are re-imagining the terms of public art in the face of climate change by making site-specific works that are not only aesthetically compelling, but that are also functional and generative."

The installation consists of a network of tubes suspended within a steel structure, channeling condensate into patches of reclaimed soil. These plots host wild plants, species that grow without cultivation, often in the margins of urban environments. Rather than constructing a garden, Shono reveals and supports an ecological process already in motion, reflecting his own interest in what he calls "rebellious manifestations of the imagination."

This approach aligns with the concept of "A/C ecologies," referring to unintended environmental systems generated by cooling technologies that Shono describes as "representing nature's resiliency and adaptation to anthropocentric climate change." Emerging in overlooked spaces, along sidewalks, beneath buildings and within infrastructural gaps, these ecologies challenge dominant urban design principles that prioritize control, uniformity and aesthetic regulation.

The plants sustained by condensate resist such logics. Growing unpredictably in conditions that are neither fully natural nor artificial, they form a "postnatural" ecosystem shaped by human activity yet not fully controlled by it. The work reflects broader environmental realities, where distinctions between natural and artificial systems are increasingly blurred.

Water functions here as a connective medium. Its slow, rhythmic dripping contrasts with large-scale interventions like desalination and cloud seeding that dominate water management in the Gulf.

By focusing on small flows and gradual accumulation, Shono proposes an alternative way of thinking about sustainability, one grounded in attentiveness to micro-scale processes.

The notion of a "feral commons" extends this perspective. Traditionally understood as shared human resources, the commons are reimagined to include non-human actors, plants, microorganisms and ecological systems that participate in urban life.

A Forgotten Place.'
by Muhannad Shono, 2024.
Courtesy of Alserkal Advisory.

A Forgotten Place.'
by Muhannad Shono, 2024.
Courtesy of Alserkal Advisory.

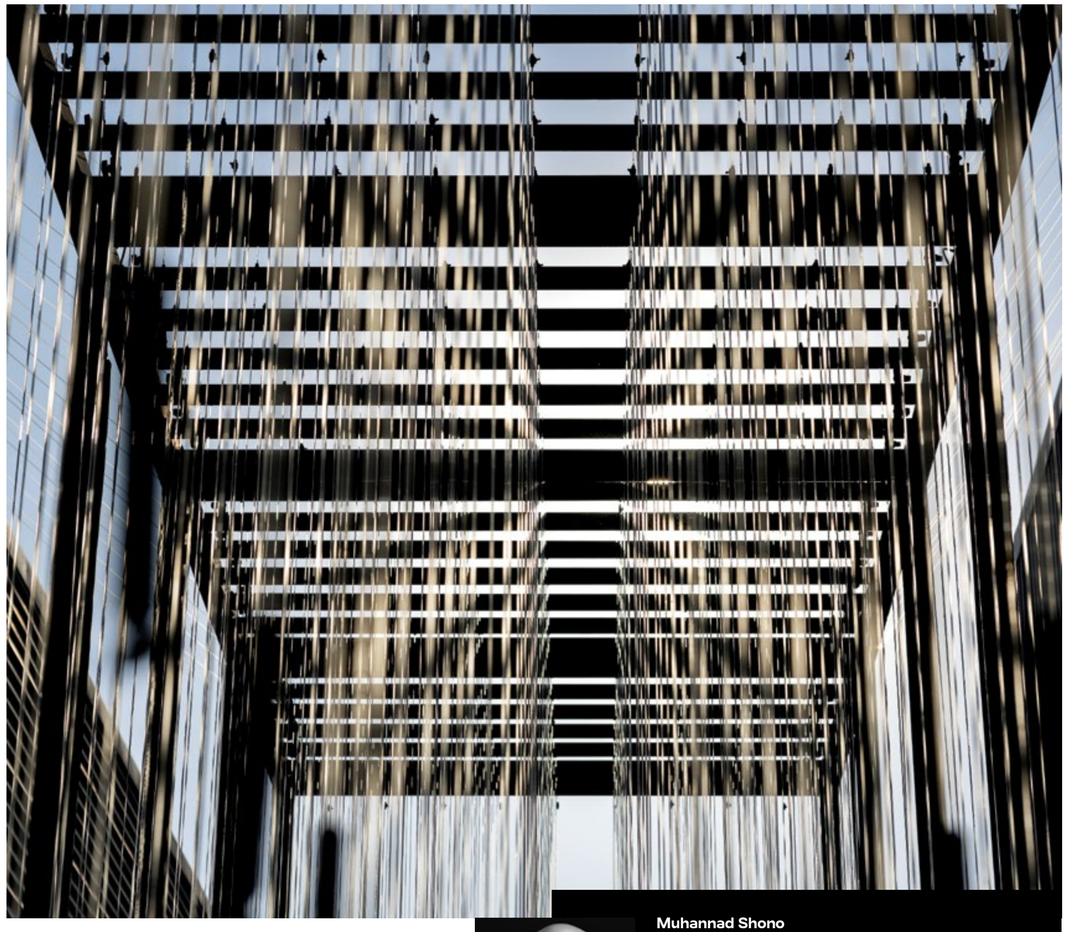
The installation becomes a site of co-existence, where infrastructure inadvertently sustains other forms of life. This challenges the idea that nature must be curated and controlled. In highly managed urban environments, plants are typically selected and maintained according to strict visual and ecological standards. The feral growth in A Forgotten Place disrupts this logic, foregrounding resilience, adaptation and interdependence as alternative values. Shono's work proposes an ethic of redistribution rather than extraction. By harvesting what is already produced, however unintentionally, he points to the potential of working alongside existing systems rather than against them.

There is also a psychogeographic dimension to the installation. As visitors move through it, they become attuned to processes that usually remain invisible: the movement of water from machine to soil, the gradual emergence of plant life, and the subtle cooling effect of moisture in an arid environment.

The city is reimagined as a porous, dynamic network of relationships between human and non-human actors. The plants nurtured here, often dismissed as weeds, challenge hierarchies that determine which forms of life are valued. By foregrounding them, Shono suggests that resilience and adaptability may be more meaningful measures of ecological worth than aesthetic perfection. A Forgotten Place expands the definition of sustainability. It moves beyond efficiency and conservation to include perception, care and coexistence. By working with what already exists, Shono transforms waste into possibility, revealing how even the smallest byproducts of urban life can sustain meaningful ecological relationships.

Gaida Almogren is an artistic Independent curator.

A Forgotten Place.'
Muhannad Shono. **2024.**
Courtesy of Alserkal Advisory.



A Forgotten Place.'
Muhannad Shono. **2024.**
Courtesy of Alserkal Advisory.

Muhannad Shono
Saudi contemporary artist whose interdisciplinary practice spans drawing, sculpture and large-scale installation. His work often explores themes of transformation, memory and the relationship between humans and their environments. He has represented Saudi Arabia at major international exhibitions, including the 2022 Venice Biennale where he represented his country with the installation The Teaching Tree, and has participated in global platforms such as Noor Riyadh, and international biennials and institutional shows.

From Still Waters to Raging Seas:

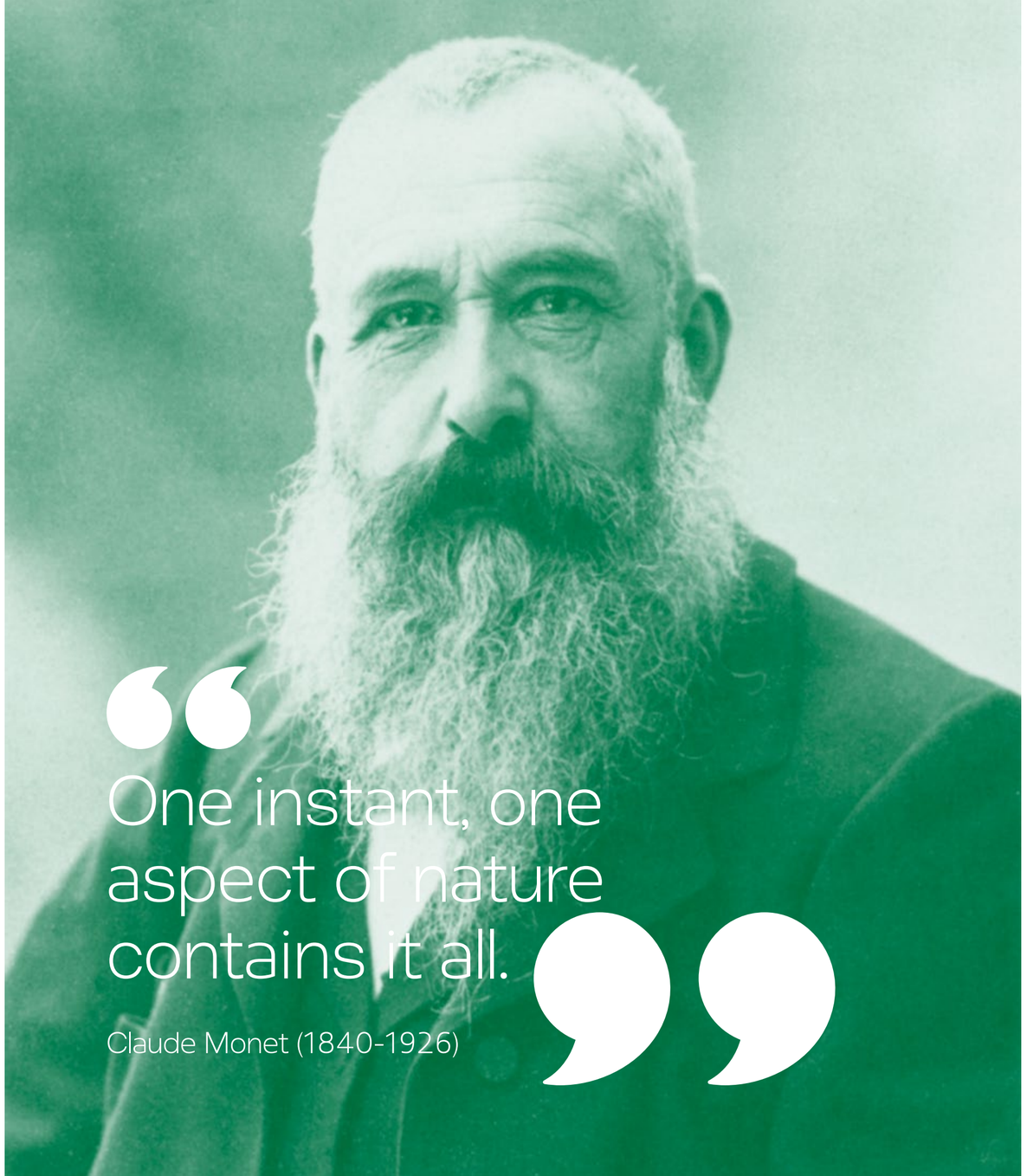
The Many Faces of

Water in Art

By **Sabah Deebi**

Rivers, seas, springs, lakes, rain and snow... it is fascinating to explore the significance of water within the compositions and philosophical structures of world-renowned paintings.

In many works of art, the presence of water transcends mere visual representation and becomes a tool for generating meaning. Throughout its history in art, water transforms into a narrative space within which stories unfold, and through which the relationship between time and image, between the body and absence, and between nature and human experience is redefined. This presence can be approached as a flexible structure, transforming the scene into an open horizon for multiple interpretations.

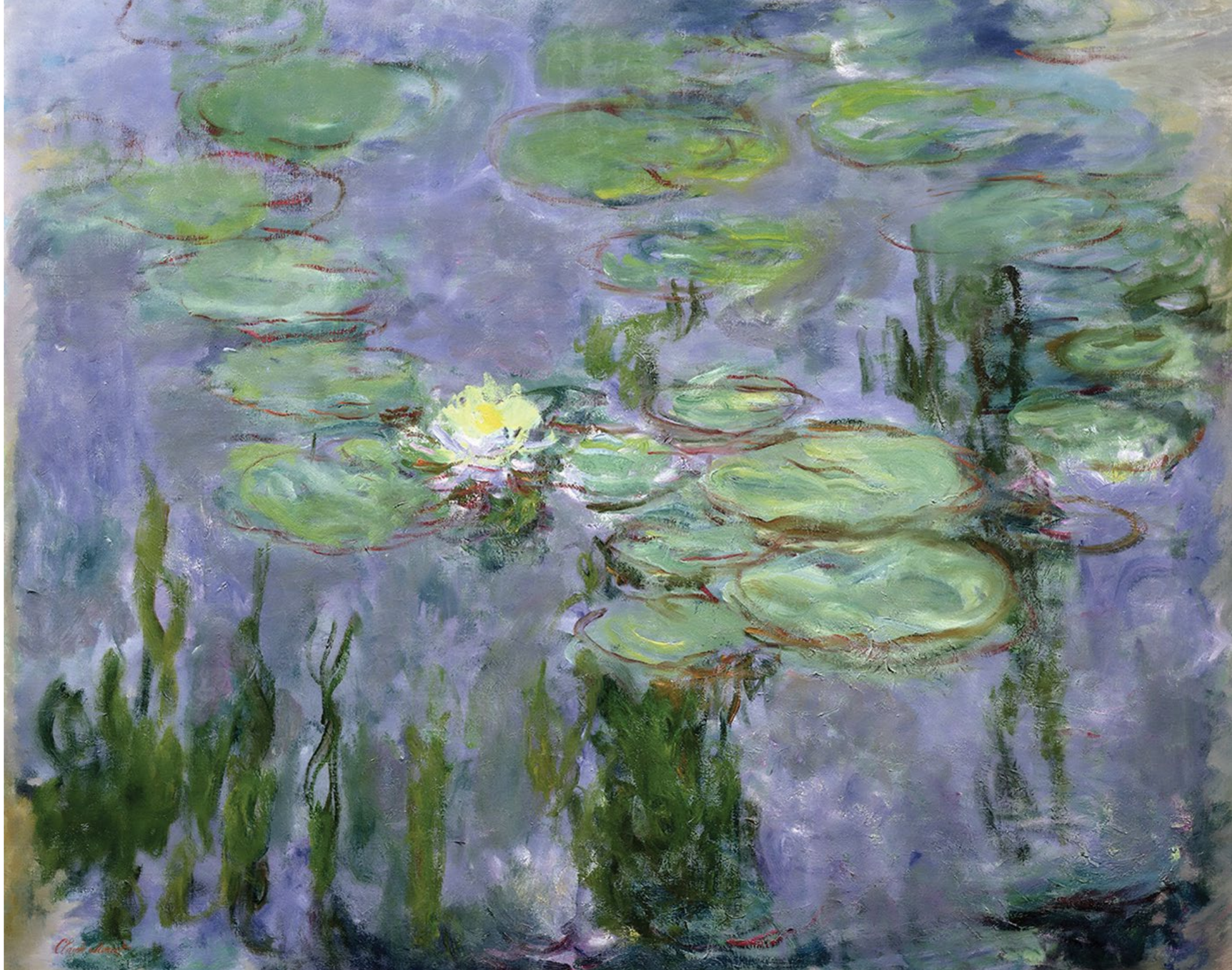


Water Lilies, Claude Monet

Referring to his later works in which he drew inspiration from the waterscapes of a garden in Giverny, Monet said: "One instant, one aspect of nature contains it all."
These works were built upon various contemporary themes of paintings he created in the 1870s and 1890s, forming an important theme for him: "Water Lilies." It is a painting in a series that reflected the artist's favorite flower garden, which included a pond with a Japanese pedestrian bridge.

Monet depicted the pond's environment, with its plants, bridge and trees, meticulously divided by a fixed horizon. Over time, the artist became less concerned with traditional pictorial space. In his painting "Water Lilies," he cultivated spatial ambiguity, dispensing with the horizon line and focusing his gaze solely on the pond's surface. A collection of plants floats amidst the reflections of the sky and trees, merging a horizontal surface with a vertical one, and transforming the water, at that moment, into an open temporal space. Here, the water becomes what might be called "the memory of light." Water does not retain the form of objects, but rather the trace of their passage. It does not present a static image of the world, but a series of momentary transformations that redefine the relationship between time and perception, so that the painting becomes a record of the experience of perception, not a representation of an external subject.

> Water does not retain the form of objects, but rather the trace of their passage.



'Water Lilies.'
Claude Monet. 1915.
Source: Musée Marmottan Monet.

Ophelia, Sir John Everett Millais
John Everett Millais crafted the painting "Ophelia" in two separate stages, first by depicting the landscape, and then returning later to add the figure of Ophelia.
After choosing a suitable location to paint, he spent a long time on the banks of the River Hogsmill, where he worked for about eleven hours a day, six days a week, for five months in 1851. In this painting, water separates two worlds. The figure Ophelia is derived from William Shakespeare's play Hamlet, but who has gone mad with grief at the death of her father. She climbs a willow tree whose branches hang over a stream of water.
The branch breaks under her feet and she falls to drown in it.

In this painting, Ophelia is not merely presented as a drowned body, but as a self suspended in a moment of transition between life and death. The river becomes an existential passage (a liminal space), and the surrounding nature becomes an extension of the event, not its setting; the water is the event itself, not simply its location.

> In this painting, water separates two worlds.

'Ophelia.'
John Everett Millais. 1851.
Source: Tate Gallery.

The Great Wave off Kanagawa, Katsushika Hokusai

Katsushika Hokusai's painting, "The Great Wave off Kanagawa," depicts three fishing boats tossed about by raging waves, a powerful surge threatening to engulf them, while in the distance, the sacred peak of Mount Athos looms serene and isolated.

Water, in its narrative presence, emerges as an independent dramatic force. The wave does not function as a mere marine backdrop, but as a visual agent threatening to reshape the entire scene, as the power of nature clashes with the fragility of human existence. The painted moment becomes a suspended time preceding the catastrophe, as if the painting preserves the tension before the explosion, not the explosion itself. This imbues the water here with a predetermined dimension that transcends mere representation.

'The Great Wave off Kanagawa.'
Hokusai Katsushika, from the series "Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji." 1832. Ukiyo-e woodblock print.

Source: Sumida Hokusai Museum.

Narcissus, Caravaggio

Greek mythology tells the story of Narcissus, a young man who saw his reflection in a pool of water. So captivated was he by his own image that he lost his balance and fell in. The story goes that the pool later dried up, and a flower known as "the Narcissus" grew in its place.

In this painting, water takes on a completely different function; it becomes a reflective surface that closes in on the self, reflecting not so much the world as the confinement of identity within its own image. Thus, it becomes a circular, internal space, based on repetition and circling around the ego, transforming from a natural element into an existential mirror that reveals the fragility and limitations of self-awareness.

“In this painting, water takes on a completely different function; it becomes a reflective surface that closes in on the self, reflecting not so much the world as the confinement of identity within its own image.”

'Narcissus.'
Caravaggio. 1597.
Source: National Barberini Corsini Gallery.

'Fishermen at Sea.'
J. M. W. Turner 1796.
Source: Tate Gallery.

Fishermen at Sea, William Turner

William Turner's painting "Fishermen at Sea" seems like a visual embodiment of the sea's cry as expressed in Ernest Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea," but here it is not articulated in words, but rather manifested through the tension of light and shadow, and the trembling of color across the canvas.
In this turbulent space, nothing remains constant; clouds thicken, and the sea erupts in uncontrollable fury, its waves rising like a perpetual declaration of nature's rebellion, while the small boat wobbles like a fragile creature cast into an unknown fate within this chaos.

Turner places humanity in an unequal confrontation with the universe: a small lamp glowing inside the vessel faces the light of a moon shrouded in thick black fog, as if reflecting hidden forces lurking in the darkness. The conflict transcends nature, becoming a confrontation between a transient human existence and an immense cosmic power that can only be countered by a faint glimmer of light.

The boat, in all its fragility, remains suspended between two contradictory possibilities: that a wave will lift it towards salvation, or that another will swallow it to a bottom from which there is no return, where everything ends in the absolute silence of the sea.

All of this tells us that water in art is not a fixed, objective element, but rather a fluid narrative structure that provides contemplation, reflection and power. In this sense, water transforms the painting from a mere representation of the world into a space for experiencing time, meaning and existence.

Sabah Deebi is a critic and writer.

The Cycle of Fertility and Drought:

The Human Experience of the Arabian Peninsula

By **Zahran Alqasmi**

People have lived in this arid desert expanse for centuries, clinging to it despite its harshness. It's a barren place year-round, with summer temperatures sometimes exceeding fifty degrees Celsius.
Yet, humankind has adapted to these conditions and even found ways to utilize them to its advantage.

The quiet shout of the sustainable dhows to the spreading brick and mortar cities, as a dhow waits for repair in Muharraq's dhow graveyard.

Photo by Hesham Al-Ammal. Courtesy of the artist.

Looking from above at this desert landscape, one might imagine that no life exists in this vast expanse of golden sand or hard, black mountain ranges. But upon closer inspection, this perception changes, revealing that even in the harshest places on Earth, creatures thrive and have adapted to their environment.

What if

the spring were to dry up? What would happen to the people living around it? How would their lives be? What would become of the plants, trees, insects and other creatures that depend on that spring?

What if the spring were to dry up? What would happen to the people living around it? How would their lives be? What would become of the plants, trees, insects and other creatures that depend on that spring? All these questions resurface during years of severe drought, yet the people there continue to resist fiercely, hoping for the return of rain and the flow of springs.

The large-scale migrations that have historically occurred from arid to fertile regions also carried with them the culture of the people and their connection to the places they once inhabited. We find that they name the new places where they settle after those original places, villages and pastures, yearning for the memories that shaped their lives since ancient times. Even though they may never return, those memories remain alive in those names.

Humanity was able to search for springs in the barren land with what they had learned over the years. They dug many wells, water channels and irrigation canals and established villages around them..

They would search for underground water reservoirs, using their rudimentary knowledge of the topography and layers of the earth, until they harnessed it to their advantage. Where the water flowed, creatures drank and poets sang, remembering their beloved under the moonlight.

Bahrain was blessed at low tide with shallow wetlands rich with sealife, as well as fresh-water springs.

Photo by Hesham Al-Ammal. Courtesy of the artist.

Water is not merely a source of sustenance, but also a social and cultural system intertwined with their customs, behaviors, aspirations, dreams, way of life and the very fabric of their society. Water is the essence of place and time; it determines the conditions of the people, their celebrations, their prosperity and their hardships. It is linked to their rituals and their sorrows, a fundamental element that defines and enriches the land.

In his novel "The Endings," Abdul Rahman Munif explores the psychology of the Bedouin, deeply connected to his herd, and how his behavior shifts between times of plenty and times of drought. During times of plenty, he is hospitable, generous and self-sufficient, selling nothing from his herd except at a price he himself dictates.

His herd is abundant, and the signs of prosperity and physical well-being are evident. He spends lavishly whenever he goes to the market. But as circumstances change, his condition drastically shifts, and he becomes anxious, miserly and needy. He sells his herd at any price to prevent it from dying of thirst and lack of grazing land.

When we apply Munif's observations to the cultural concept of the Bedouin, we observe historically that intellectual and cognitive schools have always been closely linked to years of prosperity and abundance. During these times, experiences and schools flourish, and awareness among the people increases. Conversely, in years of hardship, superstitions abound, ignorance spreads and people tend to resign themselves to death. Migrations increase, and places, along with their former knowledge, perish.

Through anthropological studies of the people who lived in this region and who formed great civilizations that have long since collapsed, we find that after living a life of prosperity, humans were able to overcome a life of hardship and drought as well, because they carry in their genes the ways in which they can transform and adapt.

Although these transformations take with them many, many people and what they produced as well, the remaining few can start anew so that life continues, and humanity awaits on the margins of that barren life for the downpour that will fill the earth again with the water of life. And so the cycle continues.

Land reclamation projects create vast empty plots of land, while destroying fragile ecologies and sea creatures.

Photo by Hesham Al-Ammal. Courtesy of the artist.

The contrast between modernity and the wood of a dying dhow gracefully returning to the sea.

Photo by Hesham Al-Ammal. Courtesy of the artist.

Special thanks to the Bahraini photographer Hesham Al-Ammal, whose work explores social, environmental and cultural change through experimental analog and historical processes. His projects examine authenticity, modernity, resilience and the relationship between community and ecology in the Arabian Gulf.

Zahran Alqasmi is a poet and novelist.

The Village that Wove the Threads of Imagination

By **the Ithraeyat Editorial Team**

In 1951, Ramses Wissa Wassef arrived in the village of Harrania, near the Giza pyramids, carrying a big dream and the idea of an artistic project that he built with love, passion and faith that everything that can be imagined can become a reality.

There, he founded the Ramses Wissa Wassef Center for Arts, believing that creativity was not an exceptional talent belonging to a select few, but rather a latent energy that could be uncovered and refined.

Children were the focus of his experience, where the first group of about 15 kids were all under 12 years old. The selection criteria were not only talent, but also perseverance and interest. With this first generation, the weaving journey began.

Ramses established some fundamental rules: no pre-drawn sketches, no ready-made designs, no external influences through imitated models, and no criticism that would stifle the children's imagination. The children sat before large looms without plans, relying solely on the threads, their imaginations, and experimentation.

Gradually, scenes began to emerge on the carpets: villages, birds, fish, ducks, palm trees and scenes from daily life. These weren't works of art in the academic sense, but they were vibrant, reflecting the child's initial wonder at the world.

'The Lotus and Papyrus Pond.'
Weaver Thuraya Hassan. 2025.
Piece no. 140. 165 x 180 cm.

Photo by Ikram Noushi.
Courtesy of Suzan Wissa Wassef Studio, Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center.

Over time, these works were no longer confined to a small village. Beginning in 1954, they toured the world and traveled to exhibitions.

Weaving is not only about threads, imagination and looms, but also color. This led Ramses to research natural dyes extracted from plants, drawing on the history of ancient Egyptians and their use of natural pigments. In 1956, he began cultivating these plants within the center. Since then, once a year the weavers go to the center's garden to prepare the main dye that will be used throughout the year.

After Ramses' death in 1974, his wife Sophie and daughters Suzan and Joanna continued the work. The second generation began in 1973, and this is the same generation working there today!

The center currently employs around 27 artists, both men and women, who work in wool and cotton weaving, as well as practice batik (wax painting on fabric).

Their work continues to tour more exhibitions, and are held in the collections of more than 26 museums worldwide, including those in Europe, Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The center's experience is unique, not only for its art but also for its impact on people's lives. It has been a source of livelihood for families, opening its doors to women and children and offering them a new way to understand themselves and the world around them; making art an integral part of their daily lives.

Today, more than 70 years after its founding, the looms still operate in Harrania, the threads still yearn to be harnessed by the weaver's imagination, and the center remains home to a unique and unparalleled experience in the art of hand weaving, so don't miss the opportunity to visit it! You may also visit their art exhibition, on display in Sweden until December 2026: Harrania — Where Weaving Remembers.

Enjoy more amazing pieces of art!

> Weaving is not only about threads, imagination and looms, but also color.

'Palm Trees on the Canal.'
weaver Nawara Radwan. 2025.
Piece no. 98. 125 x 190 cm.

Photo by Ikram Noushi.
Courtesy of Suzan Wissa Wassef Studio, Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center.

'The Cactus.'
Weaver Sayed Mahmoud. 2026.
Piece no. 121. 188 x 100 cm.
Photo by Ikram Noushi.

Courtesy of Suzan Wissa Wassef Studio,
Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center.

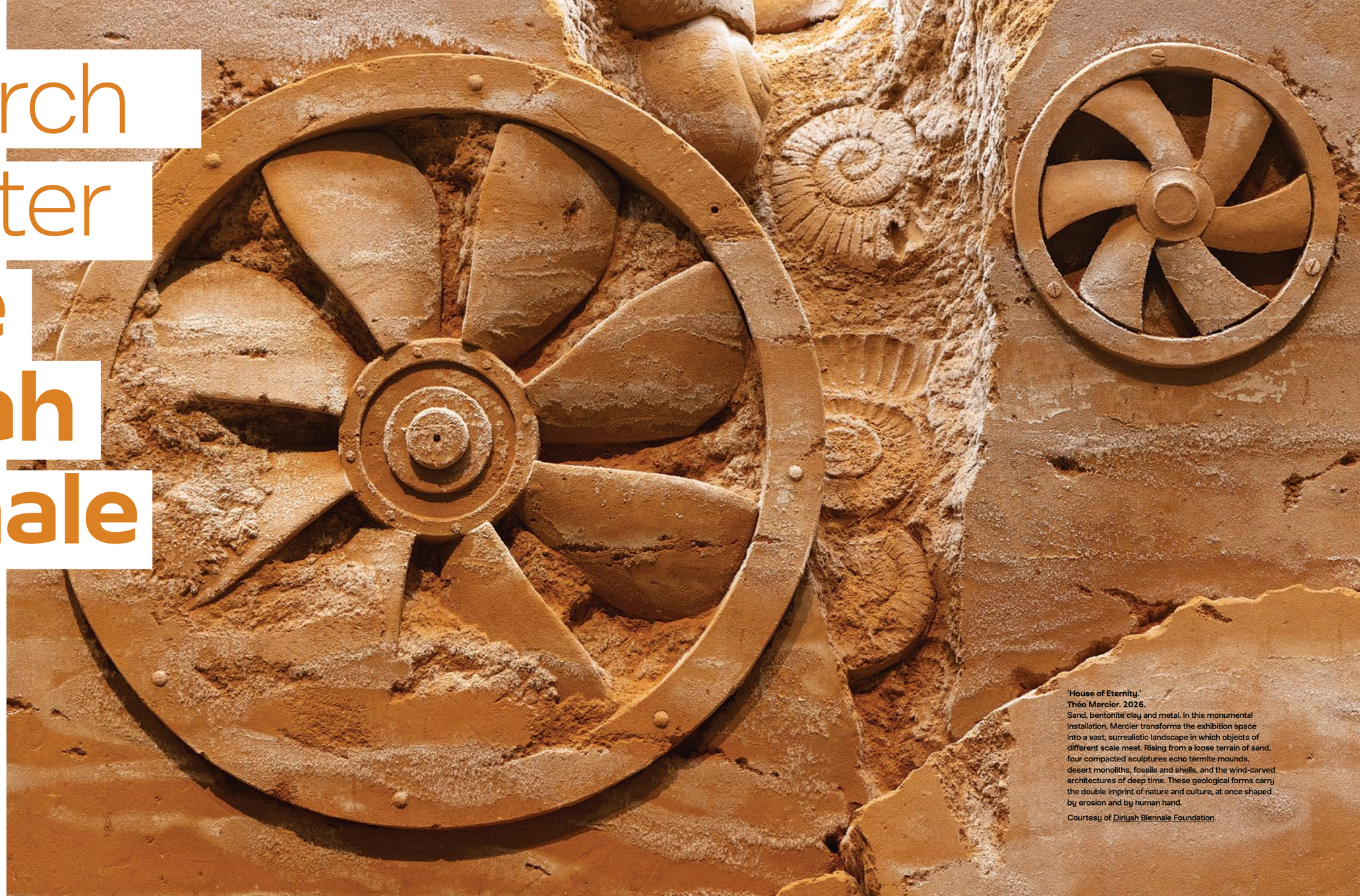
'The Cactus.'
Weaver Sayed Mahmoud. 2026.
Piece no. 121. 188 x 100 cm.
Photo by Ikram Noushi.

Courtesy of Suzan Wissa Wassef Studio,
Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center.

In Search of Water at the Diriyah Biennale

By **Gaida Almogren**

Moving, searching, finding and then moving again.



'House of Eternity.'
Théo Mercier. 2026.
Sand, bentonite clay and metal. In this monumental installation, Mercier transforms the exhibition space into a vast, surrealistic landscape in which objects of different scale meet. Rising from a loose terrain of sand, four compacted sculptures echo termite mounds, desert monoliths, fossils and shells, and the wind-carved architectures of deep time. These geological forms carry the double imprint of nature and culture, at once shaped by erosion and by human hand.

Courtesy of Diriyah Biennale Foundation.

Taking place in 2026, the third edition of the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale is an exhibition of an unfolding journey, one that traces movement not as a linear trajectory, but as a series of pauses, returns and transformations. Titled In Interludes and Transitions, and shaped by the vision of artistic directors Nora Razian and Sabih Ahmed, the Biennale draws from the deep histories of migration across the Arab world. It recalls the knowledge systems of nomadic and Bedouin communities, for whom survival depended on reading winds, stars, and, most crucially, the hidden geographies of water. Water, in this context, is a destination, a memory, and a force that compels human movement. Across deserts and continents, the search for water has shaped routes of trade, pilgrimage and migration. It has defined where communities gather and where they must leave behind. The Biennale's conceptual framing of "processions" echoes this enduring reality: humanity is always in motion, often guided by the promise or absence of water. Water is both a material necessity and a narrative current, one that carries stories across time.

'The Source.'
Agustina Woodgate. 2026.
Courtesy of Diriyah Biennale Foundation.

Among the works that crystallize this theme, Agustina Woodgate's The Source stands out as a quietly radical intervention. Installed as a series of functional drinking fountains, the work exposes the hidden infrastructures that govern access to water. Pipes, tanks and irrigation routes, usually buried or obscured, are laid bare, transforming a simple act of drinking into an encounter with systems of control and distribution.

Drawing from research in Al Ahsa's ancient irrigation networks, Woodgate connects contemporary water politics to a two-thousand-year-old tradition of communal resource management. Here, water is consumed, negotiated, shared and historically contested. The work reminds us that access to water has always been a matter of collective ethics as much as engineering.

If Woodgate addresses infrastructure, Karan Shrestha approaches water as a cosmological and sensory experience. His installation, structured around a pentagonal well, invites viewers into a contemplative space where geometry, sound and motion converge.

Water flows continuously, disrupted intermittently by a kinetic sculpture of falling brass bells. The resulting rhythm, part music, part interruption, evokes the fragile balance between abundance and scarcity. Drawing from the concept of the mandala, Shrestha positions water as a boundary and a connective force, shaping spiritual and physical worlds alike. Oral histories, myths and environmental knowledge circulate through the work, suggesting that water is also a carrier of cultural memory, one that speaks as much as it sustains.

'The State of Absence, Voices from Outside.'
2020 - ongoing.

Courtesy of Diriyah Biennale Foundation.

A more ecological and mythopoetic dimension emerges in the work of Trương Công Tùng. His installation transforms gourds, traditional vessels for water, into a living system of circulation. Tubes connect the objects in a delicate network, through which water flows, overflows and evaporates. Referencing both irrigation practices and flood mythologies, the work oscillates between nourishment and catastrophe. Water here becomes an agent of both life and rupture, echoing the precarious balance faced by communities whose livelihoods depend on increasingly unstable climates. The sensory environment, smell of moist sand trickling sounds and shifting textures, draws the viewer into an ecosystem that is constantly changing, never fixed.

Other works across the Biennale extend this meditation on water in more fragmentary but equally resonant ways. Rand Abdul Jabbar revisits the ancient flood narrative of the Epic of Gilgamesh (circa 2100 BCE) — the world's earliest surviving narrative poem, which was composed in ancient Mesopotamia — reflecting on cycles of destruction and renewal. Dineo Seshee Bopape channels the sonic and ritual dimensions of water through recordings and gestures tied to earth and rain. Alana Hunt interrogates the violence embedded in dam infrastructures; Karan Shrestha's installation expands on the idea of water as connector and transmitter; and Shadia Alem reimagines lost rivers and mythic feminine spirits as forces of potential return.

Taken together, these works suggest that water is not simply a resource but a relational field, binding humans to earth, to each other, and to histories that refuse to settle.

'The State of Absence, Voices from Outside.'
Trương Công Tùng. 2020 - ongoing.

Courtesy of Diriyah Biennale Foundation.

More artworks to enjoy.

'A Tale Before the Deluge.'
Rand Abdul Jabbar. 2026.
Installation of wooden molds, clay and charcoal on canvas.

Courtesy of Diriyah Biennale Foundation.

'Jinniyat Lar.'
Shadia Alem. 2000/2026.
12 prints on paper, 61 x 61 cm each.

Courtesy of Diriyah Biennale Foundation.

'Jinniyat Lar.'
Shadia Alem. 2000/2026.
12 prints on paper, 61 x 61 cm each.

Courtesy of Diriyah Biennale Foundation.

'Faith in a Pile of Stones.'
Alana Hunt. 2018.
Digital print of 35 mm film photograph, wooden structure, 240 x 360 cm.

Courtesy of Diriyah Biennale Foundation.

'Matrices: thelletjang:
Sedibeng, it comes with the rain.'
Dineo Seshee Bopape (Raisibe). 2016-2026.

Courtesy of Diriyah Biennale Foundation.

'Sweet water rising,'
Karan Shrestha. 2026.
Wood, plywood, ink on paper, metal parts, brass bells, motors, 65 x 256 x 256 cm. Shrestha's installation expands on the idea of water as a connector and transmitter. The shape of a wooden pentagon, carved on all five sides, echoes a well, inviting visitors to sit around the water. Disrupting the flow of water, a kinetic sculpture (a cloud of brass bells) falls into the well, only to rise again periodically, tinkling and jingling and dripping. A hollowed ring, referencing a serpent and other mythical creatures, keeps water flowing within.

Courtesy of Diriyah Biennale Foundation.

Al-Sultanah

A Historic Sea Voyage from Muscat to Manhattan

By **Hassan Albather**

"Since last Thursday, a perfect wonder to us Americans, in the shape of an Arabian ship has arrived... She lays at the foot of Rector Street... thronged, and the pier crowded with people, anxious and pushing to get a peep at the Arabian sailors and the Arabian horses on board... So great has been the crowd that police officers are required to keep things in order."

New York Morning Herald, May 5, 1840.

Portrait of Ahmad bin Na'aman.
Edward Ludlow Mooney.
Oil on canvas. 1840.
Courtesy of Peabody Essex Museum.

On April 30, 1840, New Yorkers gathered along their harbor to witness that "perfect wonder": an unfamiliar vessel bearing Arab colors. The Omani ship Al-Sultanah had been expected, but anticipation gave way to spectacle. Curiosity drew crowds to the docks, close enough that some pressed aboard, eager to see the sailors, their clothing, and their unfamiliar presence.

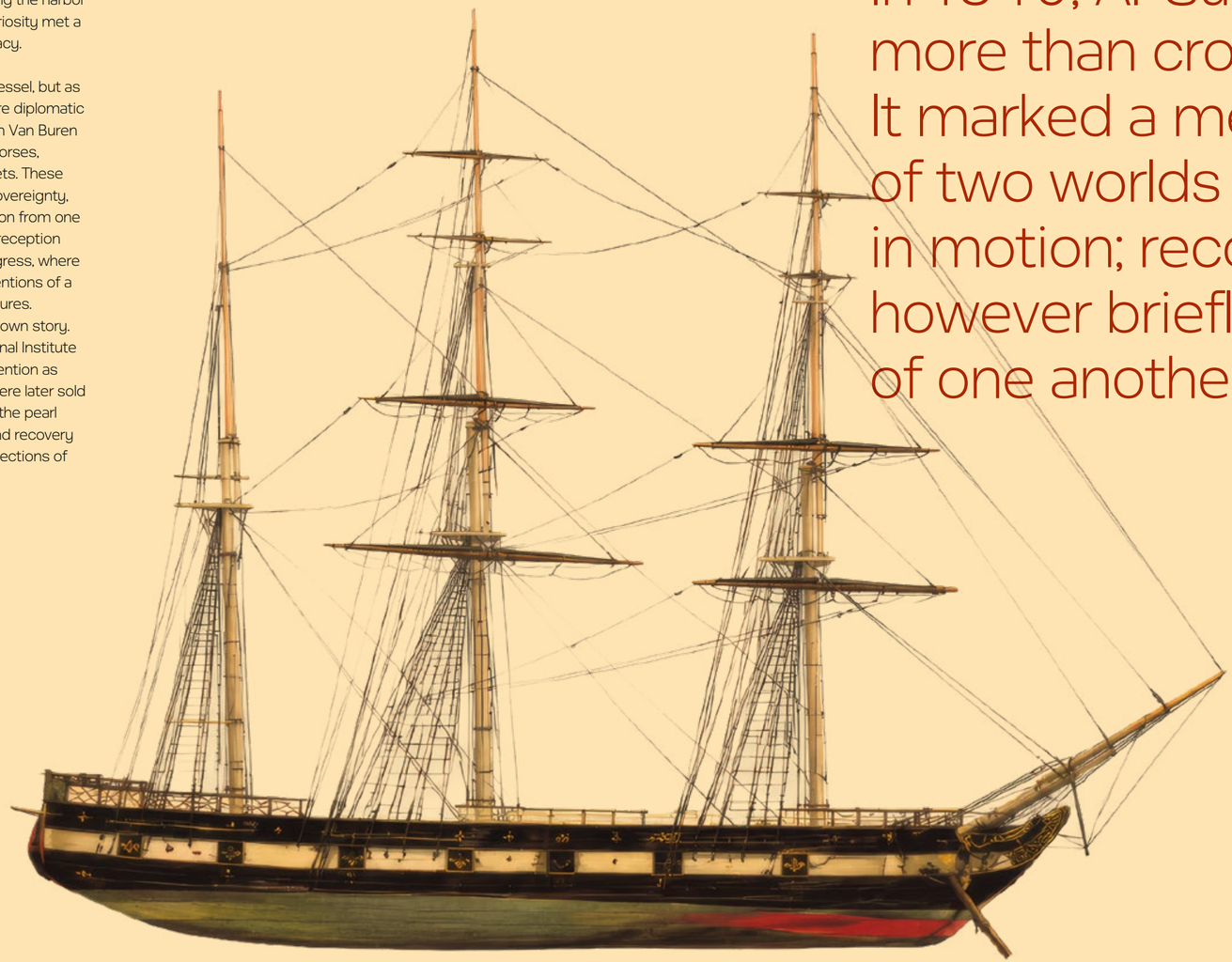
The ship carried Ahmad bin Na'aman Al Kaabi (1784 – 1869), the trusted envoy of Sayyid Said bin Sultan al-Busaidi (1791 – 1856), Sultan of Muscat and Oman and Zanzibar. Ahmad bin Na'aman was a figure of composed authority, described by contemporaries as compact in stature, with piercing eyes, dressed in a bright turban and a dark caftan trimmed in gold. Upon arrival, he asserted command of the vessel and declared, in English, that this was an official diplomatic mission from Oman to the United States.

His mission was to strengthen ties with the young republic following the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between the United States and Oman (1833), one of the earliest agreements between the United States and an Arab state. Yet the relationship had begun earlier, at sea, when Omani forces aided an American vessel in regional waters, opening the way for goodwill and exchange.

The agreement that followed granted American merchants access to the lowest prevailing customs duties across Omani ports, extending from the Arabian coast to East Africa and the western Indian Ocean.

The voyage of Al-Sultanah was neither accidental nor improvised. As a three-masted vessel carrying a delegation of more than 50 men, it departed Muscat in late 1839 after refitting in Bombay. It stopped at Zanzibar to take on additional cargo before setting out across the open ocean. Its hold reflected a vast maritime network: Zanzibari cloves, East African ivory, Omani dates, Yemeni coffee and Persian textiles. With the Suez Canal opening (1869) still decades away, the ship rounded the Cape of Good Hope, calling only at Saint Helena, and arrived in New York after an 87-day passage. Its arrival stirred the city. Newspaper reports of its cargo and company drew growing crowds, transforming the harbor into a site of encounter, where curiosity met a disciplined and deliberate diplomacy.

Al-Sultanah arrived not only as a vessel, but as a statement. Among its cargo were diplomatic gifts intended for President Martin Van Buren (1782 – 1862), including Arabian horses, Gulf pearls and finely woven carpets. These objects conveyed prestige and sovereignty, functioning as a courtly introduction from one maritime power to another. Their reception prompted debate in the U.S. Congress, where such exchanges tested the conventions of a republic wary of monarchical gestures.
The afterlife of these gifts tells its own story. Many were displayed at the National Institute in Washington, drawing public attention as tokens of a distant court. Some were later sold at auction, while others (including the pearl necklace) passed through theft and recovery before eventually entering the collections of the Smithsonian Institution.



> In 1840, Al-Sultanah did more than cross oceans. It marked a meeting of two worlds already in motion; recognizing, however briefly, the reach of one another.

Even in preservation, they retained the imprint of their journey. American officials received the envoy with full honors, and the ship, worn from its passage, was repaired before its return. Gifts were sent back in kind to Sultan Said, completing a circuit of exchange across oceans.

The story later faded, but it reminds us that the 19th century was not solely shaped by European expansion, but also by enduring Arab maritime presence. There once existed networks that linked Muscat to Zanzibar, India to Africa, and, for a moment, Arabia to New York.

In 1840, Al-Sultanah did more than cross oceans. It marked a meeting of two worlds already in motion; recognizing, however briefly, the reach of one another.

The Fluid Forms of Water in Poetry

By **Abeer Al Deeb**

Water emerges as a recurring theme across various branches of literature and the arts. Beyond being an essential element of nature, without which life cannot exist, it is a symbol rich in meaning and dimensions across diverse cultures and civilizations.

While it symbolizes fertility and growth, it has also been used in many instances as a symbol of destruction and drowning. It has been depicted in its various physical forms: river, sea, cloud, rain, snow, ice, and many more.

Throw in all the various forms it can come in (be it sea, river, cloud, rain, snow or ice), these profound and multifaceted symbolic dimensions of water have made it an inexhaustible source of inspiration for poets, as seen by the myriad examples and references in both Arabic and world poetry.

Untitled.
Mohammed Naghi, Egypt.
Oil on canvas.

This artwork is from the permanent collection of Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts.

'Man with horse standing near the Dead Sea.'

Courtesy of Library of Congress.

The Presence of Water in Arabic Poetry

Arabs have always been connected to water, especially considering the harsh conditions of the desert. Rain (and the clouds that carry it) are considered icons of water in their culture and poetry, to the point that it's used as a supplication in times of sorrow and joy. For example, Al-Nabigha Al-Dhubyani says:

May the rain water a grave between Busra and Jasim
with showers of the spring rains, drizzle and downpour alike.

And may it forever be covered with Basil, musk and amber
with steady rain, followed by abundant falling showers.

Thirst was also used to describe intense longing for a beloved, including verses attributed to Qays ibn al Mulawwah describing his thirst for his beloved:

As if on the morning of parting I were a dead man in a well
A brother of thirst, for whom the watering places were blocked.

He escaped from the dregs of water, a mere trickle
But neither drinking nor quenching his thirst could satisfy him.

There is hardly a poem in the pre-Islamic era or in the early days of Islam that does not use water as a multi-purpose symbol, which comes according to what the poet wants it to be.

Water vs Fire

As time progressed and linguistic meanings evolved, water remained at the forefront of usage in love poems, as with the poet Ahmed Al-Kiwani in his sweet poem *By that which intoxicates from the sweetness of the lips*, describing his beloved's hand as water that extinguishes the flames of longing:

Place your right hand on my chest
for water is best suited to extinguishing flames

Then Adonais says, in another context of the contrast between water and fire in a poem entitled *The Colour of Water:*

Your colour is the colour of water, O body of speech,
when water becomes leaven, or a lightning strike, or fire.
And the water blazes becoming a thunderbolt,
becoming... leaven and fire.

'Nile.'
Ahmed Saber, Egypt. 2014.
Watercolor on paper.

This artwork is from the permanent collection of Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts.

The Expression of water in modern Arabic poetry

In modern and contemporary Arabic poetry, water transcends its status as a natural element, transforming into a complex tapestry and a mirror reflecting the depths of the human soul. Poets imbue it with rich existential, psychological, and even patriotic connotations, presenting through it an inner state in which they express the sorrow, longing, pain and loss that stir within their hearts, as exemplified by Badr Shakir al Sayyab's words in his poem *The Rain Song:*

Do you know which sadness the rain sends?
How the gutters sob when it falls?
How it fills the solitary with loss?

As for Mahmoud Darwish, in his poem *A River Dies of Thirst*, he evokes the suffering of people, exhausted by alienation and anxiety, through a painful paradox: the river, a symbol of fertility and life, dies of thirst in its own land as a result of the imbalance of justice. He says:

It was a river with two banks
and a heavenly mother who nursed it on drops from the clouds
But they kidnapped its mother
so it ran short of water
and died... slowly... of thirst

And for Qasim Haddad, water becomes the title of a poem in which he embodies the absence that leaves him lost in the desert of waiting:

He leaned on the weariness of waiting.
Neither rain nor river was his. A body more delicate than longing...

I leaned on water. I grew weary, I waited, and I grew weary. I grew weary...
O master of wandering, I am lost.

Saadi Youssef surrenders to the water in his poem The Journey, where he says:

The water will take me...
the sky will take me, as I wish.
I will go where there is no end...

We find that the legendary Nizar Qabbani tries to resist the overwhelming current of love, which he portrays as drowning, in *A Letter from Under the Water*, saying:

If I had known that the sea was so deep,
I would not have set sail...
If I had known my ending,
I would not have begun.

A recurring theme in world poetry

Water is just as prevalent in world poetry and among the Western poets. Here is the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his epic poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, presenting a passage that expresses suffering amid abundance, as he says:

Water, water, everywhere
And all the boards did shrink
Water, water, everywhere
Nor any drop to drink.

'Bay of Uri, Brunnen.'
John Singer Sargent. 1870.
Courtesy of the MET.

Meanwhile, the American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson recalls his childhood and the features of the river along whose banks he used to play.

The river has remained young, and the nature around it still fresh, while the people who knew it have grown old and passed on to their ends. In a poem titled *The River* he says at its opening:

And here I am, seeing once again... my old, familiar haunts; here is the blue river, the same blue wonder that dazzled my eyes in the cradle... and I ask, with a childlike wisdom: where has this traveller come from?

And then comes the poem *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot, in which the absence of water dominates as a metaphor for the spiritual barrenness suffered by modern humanity. It says:

Here is no water but only rock
rock and no water and the sandy road

The winding road going up among the mountains
which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink...

if there were water among the rock

The dead mountain mouth with decayed teeth
cannot spit...

It is no exaggeration to say that water is a poetic being par excellence, transcending the limits of being a natural element, expanding into vast dimensions where meanings race to draw pictures of different colors and layers, making it present in the worlds of musical poetry, in the sound of rain, the breaking of ice, the rippling of streams, and the roar of the waves.

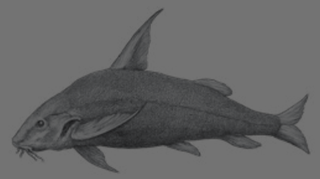
Abeer Al Deeb is a poet.

The Paths Carved by Water

By the **Ithraeyat Editorial Team**

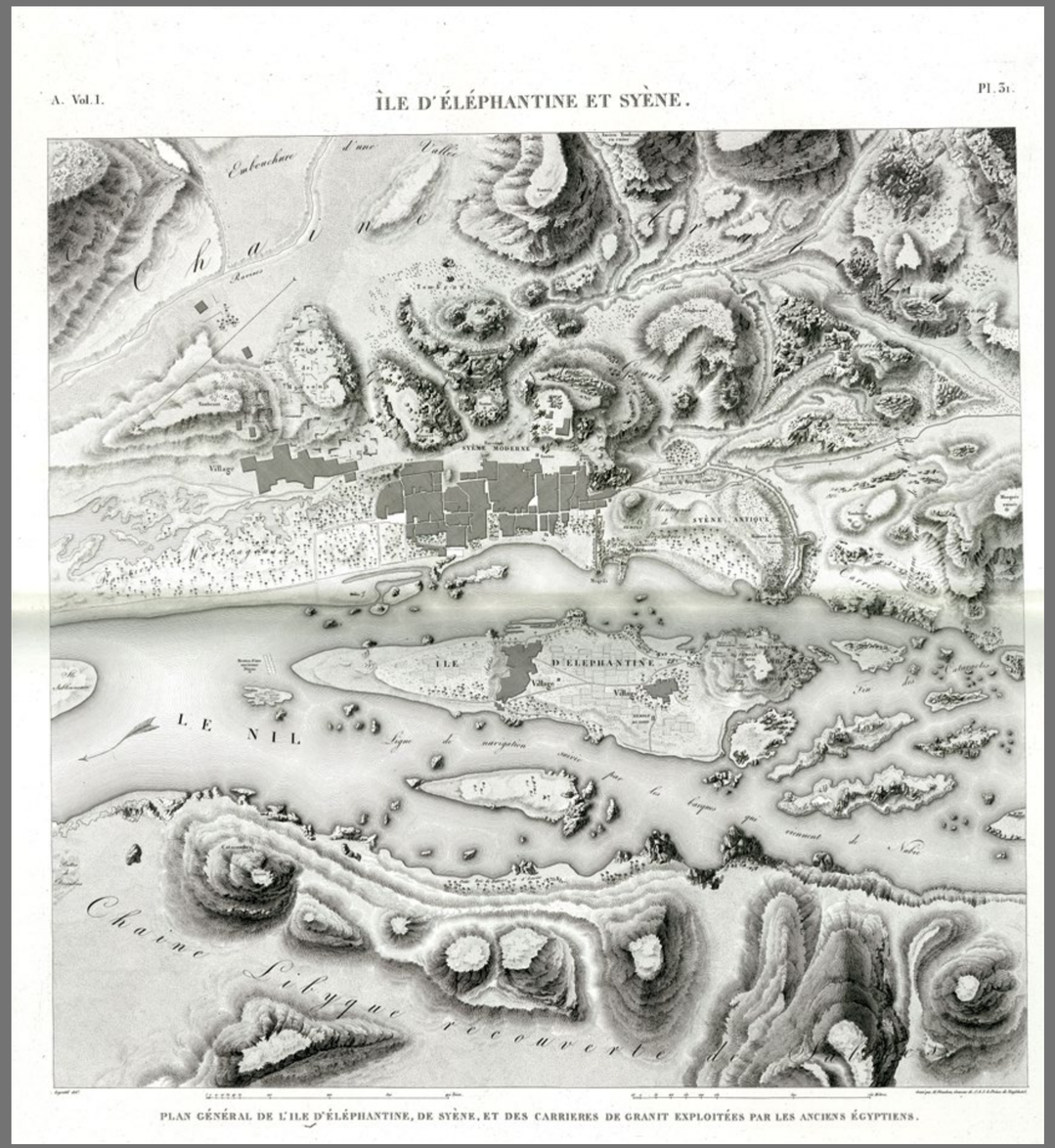
Long before roads were drawn on paper, rivers and seas were the first paths through the world. In our continuing collaboration with the Qatar National Library (QNL) we are showcasing a selection of some of their treasures. These maps, travelogues and treatises of the past centuries chart the many ways water has shaped movement, sustained life and defined the landscapes of the Arab and Islamic world. From the irrigation canals of Al-Andalus to the pearl beds of the Arabian Gulf, from the flooding Nile to the twin rivers of Mesopotamia, each work invites us to follow water whereverit leads.

Enjoy the journey!

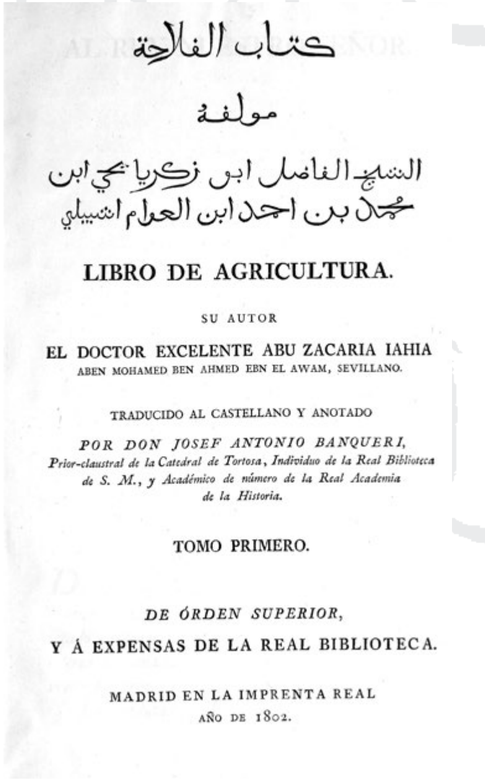


'Description de l'Égypte,'
Panckoucke (Second Edition). 1820-1829.
Produced following Napoleon Bonaparte's French Campaign in Egypt, this work documents Egypt through detailed maps and engravings. Its plates show the Nile as a central feature of the landscape, flowing past sites such as Philae and Elephantine, shaping settlements, and guiding movement along the river. (HC.FB.25925.01/HC.FB.25925.11).

Courtesy of the Heritage Collection Team in the Heritage Library, Qatar National Library.



'Description de l'Égypte.'



كتاب الفلاحة

مولفة

الشيخ الفاضل ابى زكريا يحي ابن
محمد بن احمد ابن العوام اشبيلي

LIBRO DE AGRICULTURA.

SU AUTOR

EL DOCTOR EXCELENTE ABU ZACARIA IAHIA
ABEN MOHAMED BEN AHMED EBN EL AWAM, SEVILLANO.

TRADUCIDO AL CASTELLANO Y ANOTADO

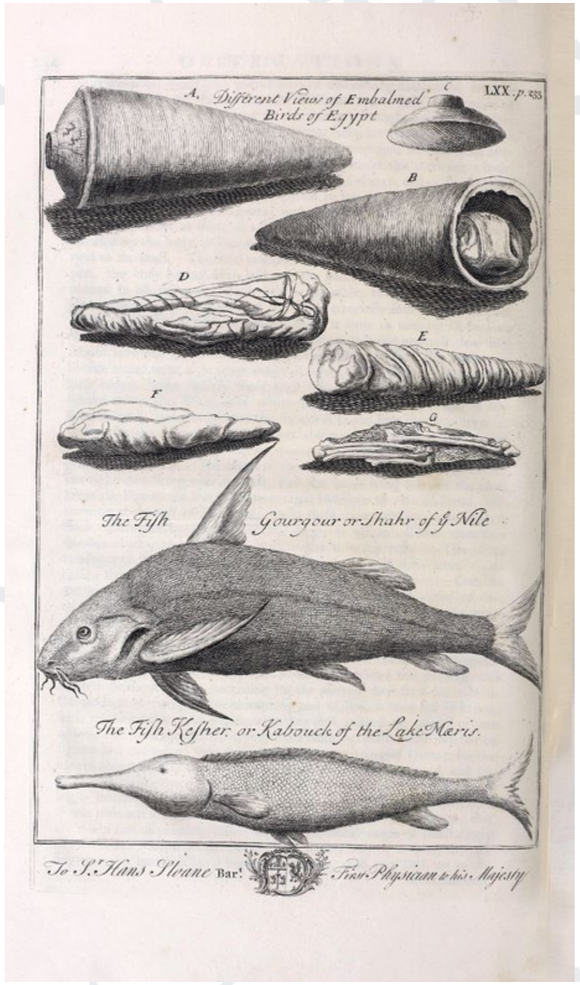
POR DON JOSEF ANTONIO BANQUERI,
Prior-claustral de la Catedral de Tortosa, Individuo de la Real Biblioteca de S. M., y Académico de número de la Real Academia de la Historia.

TOMO PRIMERO.

DE ÓRDEN SUPERIOR,

Y Á EXPENSAS DE LA REAL BIBLIOTECA.

MADRID EN LA IMPRENTA REAL
AÑO DE 1802.

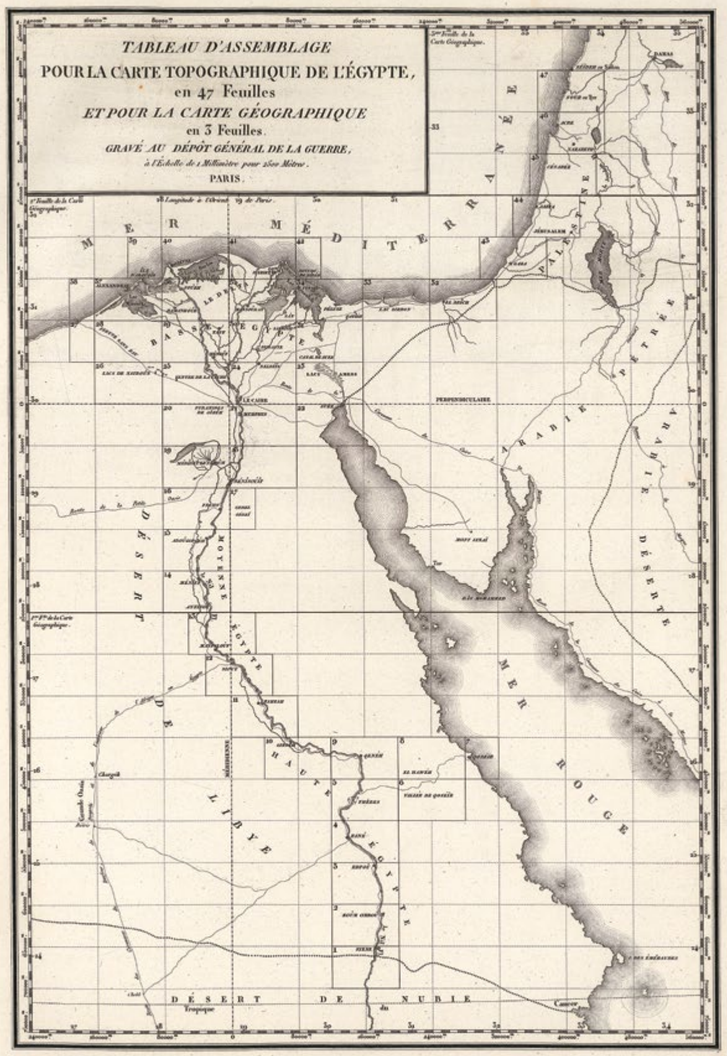


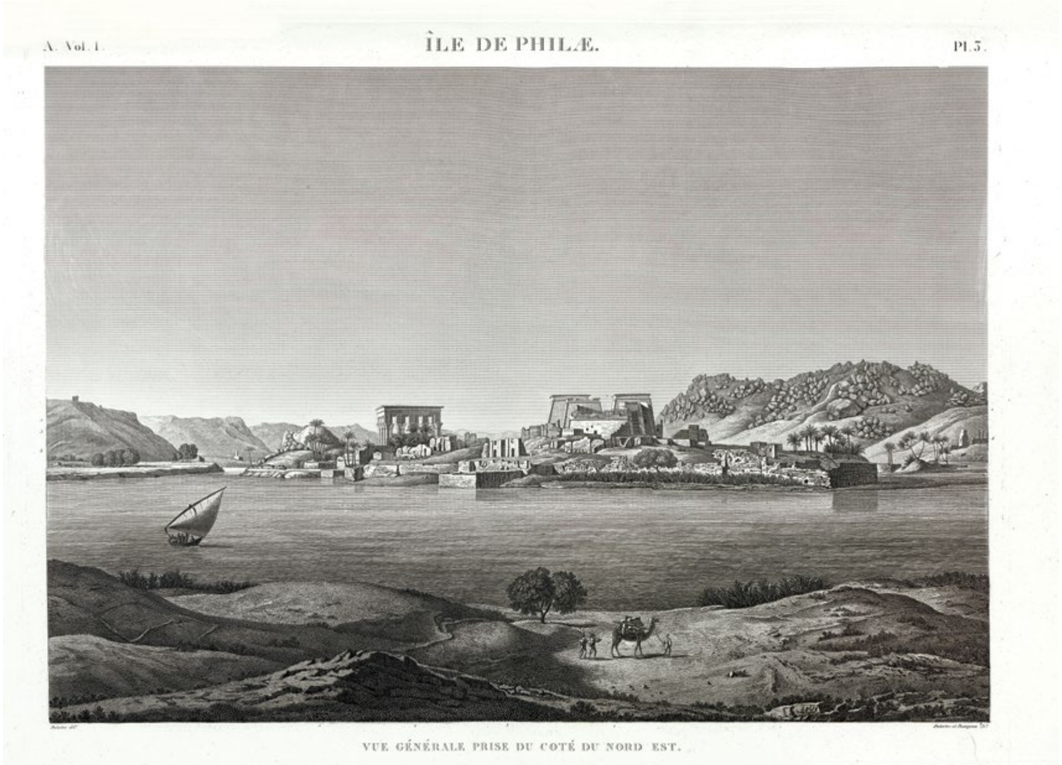
'Libro de agricultura,' by Ibn al-Awwam (12th century CE), translated
Josef Antonio Banqueri. 1802.
Rooted in the agricultural traditions of al-Andalus, it preserves a deep understanding of Islamic agricultural knowledge, with particular emphasis on irrigation and water management. (HC.FB.02999.01 & HC.FB.02999.02).

Courtesy of the Heritage Collection Team in the Heritage Library, Qatar National Library.

'A Description of the East, and Some Other Countries.'
Richard Pococke. 1743–1745.
During his journey along the Nile, he recorded its seasonal floods and described how its waters were directed through canals and into areas such as Lake Moeris. Accompanied by illustrations of Nile fish and views of Thebes, the work offers a visual record of how water shaped travel, agriculture, and settlement in Egypt. (HC.FB.03831.01). (image on page 132 & 133).

Courtesy of the Heritage Collection Team in the Heritage Library, Qatar National Library.





'Description de l'Égypte.'
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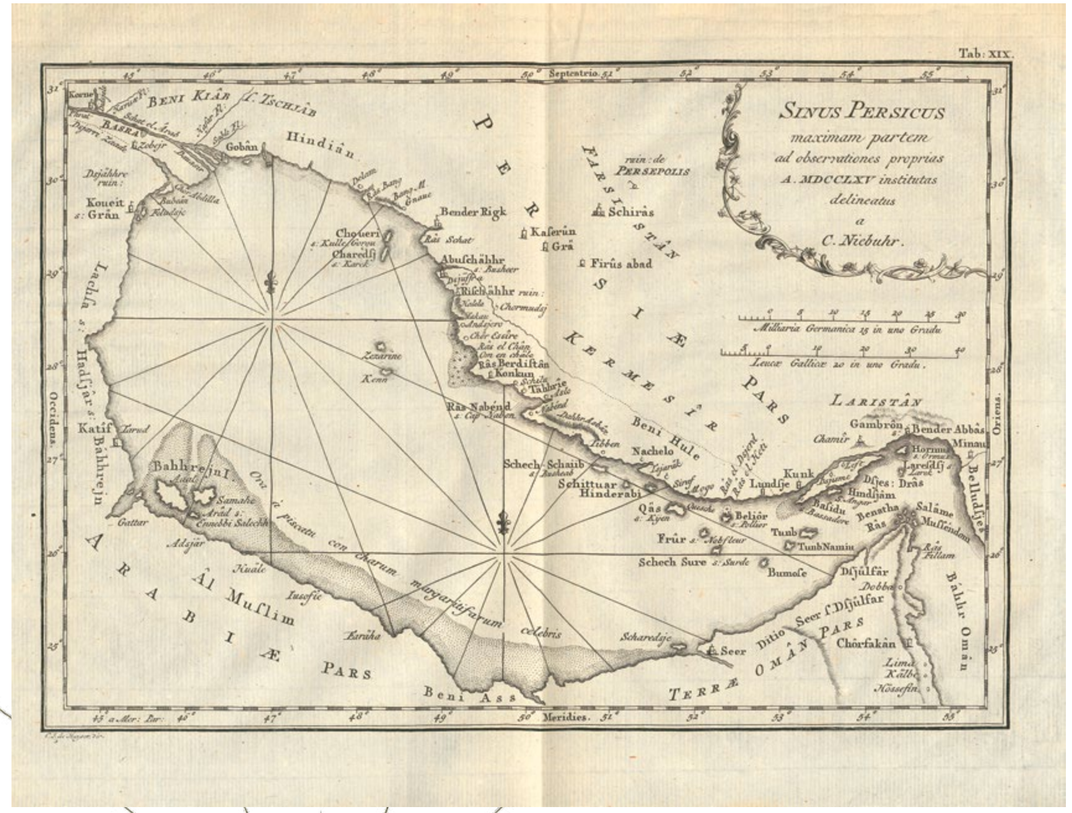
Courtesy of the Heritage Collection Team in the Heritage Library, Qatar National Library.

'Description de l'Arabie.'
Carsten Niebuhr. 1774.
Documenting the Arabian Peninsula as part of the Royal Danish Expedition to Arabia (1761–1767), Niebuhr's detailed maps highlight coastlines, ports, and maritime routes, showing how travel depended on navigating surrounding waters. (HC.FB.01362). (Maps on pages 138 - 141)

Courtesy of the Heritage Collection Team in the Heritage Library, Qatar National Library.



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Courtesy of the Heritage Collection Team in the Heritage Library, Qatar National Library.

H. J. Macdonald with the author's Comp. 1890

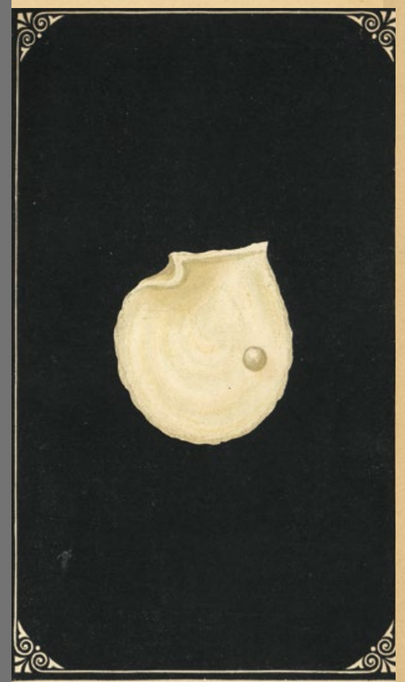
PEARLS
AND
PEARLING LIFE.

BY

EDWIN W. STREETER, F.R.G.S., M.A.I

Gold Medallist of the Royal Order of Frederic,
Holder of a Gold Medal from H.M. the King of the Belgians,
Author of "PRECIOUS STONES AND GEMS," 4th Edition,
"GREAT DIAMONDS OF THE WORLD,"
"GOLD: Its Legal Regulations and Standards," &c., &c.

Illustrated.



VALVE OF PEARL OYSTER (*Meleagrina Margaritifera*) WITH A PEARL.

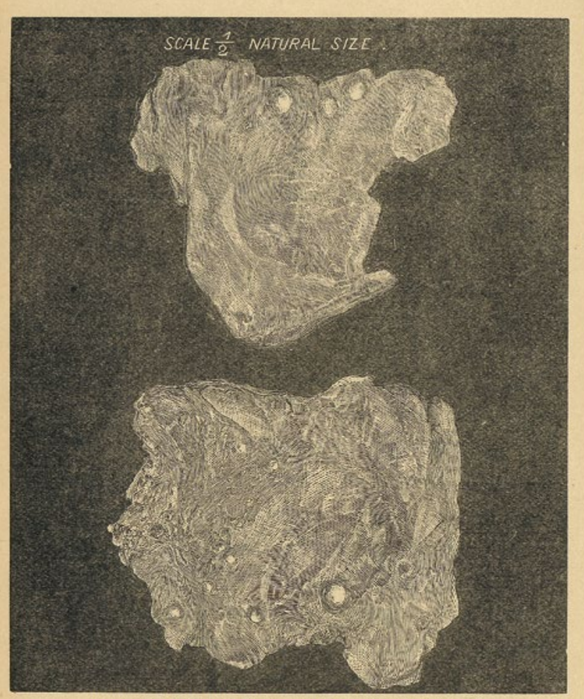


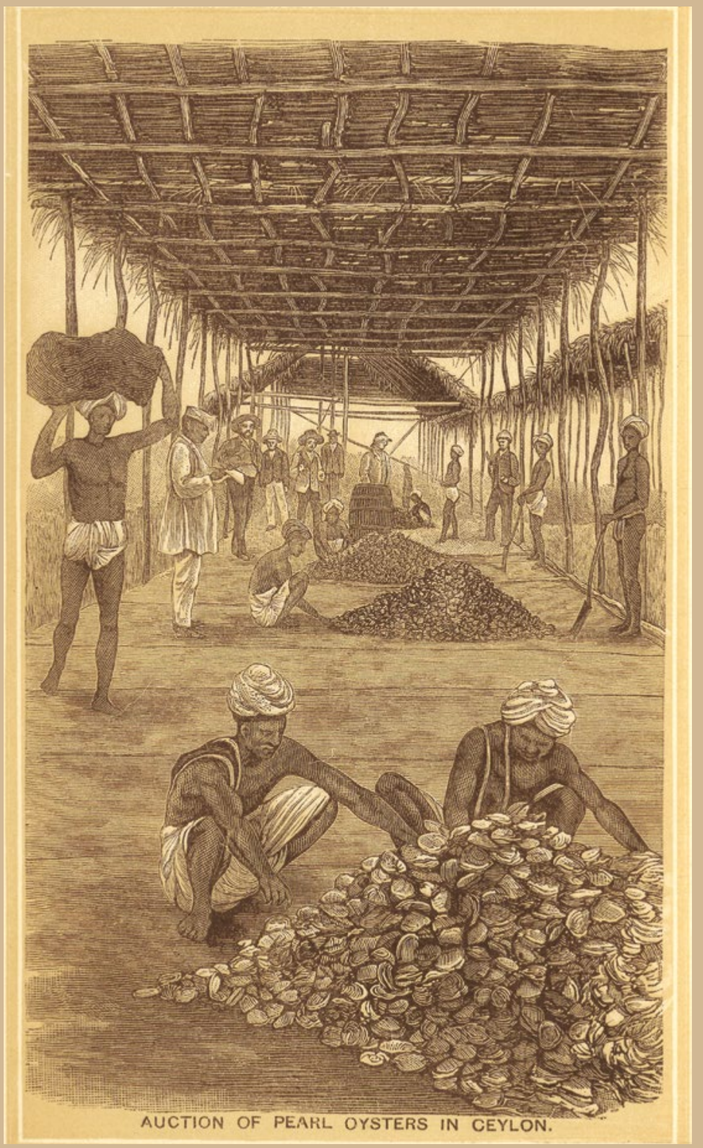
FIG. 8—SPLIT SHELL DISCLOSING EMBEDDED PEARLS.

Pearls embedded in the shell are generally found in close proximity to the hinge, and in splitting shells open to examine a "blister," an embedded Pearl has often been found (see Fig. 8.), at a place where the surface of the shell gave no indication of its presence.

In the British Museum (Natural History), at

'Pearls and Pearling Life,' by Edwin W. Streeter. 1886. This illustrated work explores the historical global pearl trade, with particular attention to the Arabian Gulf. Streeter describes pearl diving as a way of life shaped by the sea, where communities depended on maritime routes and seasonal expeditions, highlighting how water served not only as a route of travel, but as a source of livelihood and connection across the region. (HC.FB.2017.0072).

Courtesy of the Heritage Collection Team in the Heritage Library, Qatar National Library.



AUCTION OF PEARL OYSTERS IN CEYLON.

Literature's **Watery Depths**

By **M. Lynx Qualey**

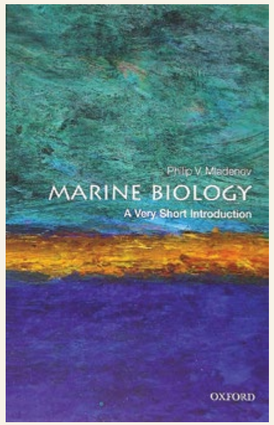
Many of literature's oldest rhythms were born of our relationship to water. Rain incantations are some of the earliest recorded literary forms, as many ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian poem-songs called on deities in the hopes they would send rain. Water was also how early stories traveled, as it was often sailors who carried tales from one community to another. Interestingly, two of the earliest fictional narratives, Daniel DeFoe's Robinson Crusoe and Ibn Tufayl's Hay Ibn Yaqzan, are both desert-island stories.

Both the sea and the rain provide a sonic backdrop to many great literary works, from Shakespeare's 17th century play Twelfth Night, which repeats, "With hey, ho, the wind and the rain" to Badr Shakir al-Sayyab's 20th century Rain Song, where he returns to the invocation: "rain / rain / rain." Water, moreover, plays a new role in 21st century literature, as climate change means an ever-greater threat of both flood and drought. Here, we journey over the watery landscape, from the rain that falls from above to the strangeness of the ocean far below.

'The Animal in Decorative Art [Das Thier in der Dekorativen Kunst].' Anton Seder. 1896.

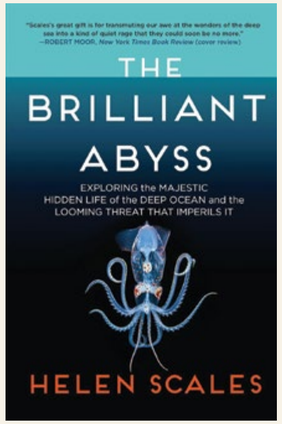
Source: The Public Domain Review.

A Scientific Introduction **to the Deep Sea**



Marine Biology - A Very Short Introduction,
by Philip V. Mladenov

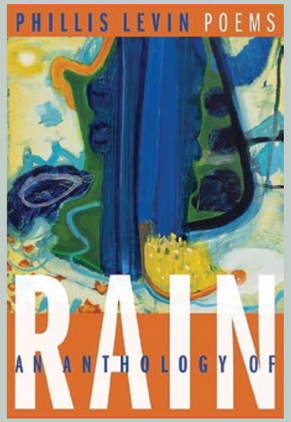
Our first stop is a scientific look at marine life. Although many of us know that oceans cover around 70% of the world's surface, this book reminds us that more than 99% of the world's liveable space is underwater. And yet, to those of us who live above the surface, it remains largely a mystery. The book, part of Oxford University Press's "Very Short Introduction" series, gives a clear and necessary overview of the diverse life forms in oceans and seas, as well as how the ocean depths connect to our daily lives.



The Brilliant Abyss,
by Helen Scales

Although oceans have "always shaped human lives," as Scales writes, we still know very little about the ocean's furthest depths. Not long ago, humans thought that no life existed far beneath the ocean's surface. Now, however, we know the dark deep sea is home to "countless unimaginable life-forms." Scales provides an accessible introduction to these life-forms, in all their alien weirdness, as well as a look at how these distant systems affect our daily lives.

The Rhythms of **Poetry and Rain**



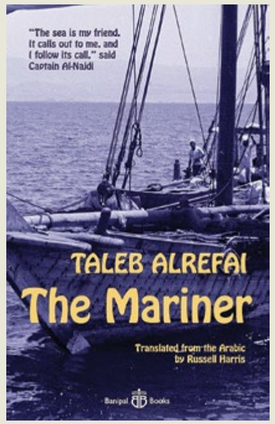
An Anthology of Rain,
by Phillis Levin

You can hear the beat of raindrops everywhere in this 2025 book, An Anthology of Rain. The collection performs the magic alchemy of all rain: "As air turns to water, water to air." Here, we see rain in its many aspects, and we feel both a sense of awe and a scientific curiosity, as in the title poem, where raindrops chase each other to the ground: "In the passing of one drop / Gathering speed, one drop /Chasing another, racing".

Rain Song,
by Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab

Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab's Rain Song, originally published in 1960, is one of the great poems of the 20th century. It encompasses myth and song, as well as the rhythms of rain and the cycles of human life. The refrain of "rain, rain, rain" evokes farmers' folk songs, while also mirrors cycles of sorrow: "Do you know what sorrow the rain brings? Do you know how gutters weep when it pours down? Do you know how lost a solitary person feels in the rain?"

Changing Attitudes
Toward the Sea



The Mariner,
by Taleb Alrefai, translated by Russell Harris

Globally, our relationship to the sea has changed drastically in the last century. The novel The Mariner shows us how these changes affected Kuwait in particular. The novel's main story takes place in February 1979, when our protagonist, the elderly Captain Ali al-Najdi, goes out fishing with his friends and is caught up in a deadly storm. But it also takes us back through his memories of the early 20th century, contrasting the cement-block buildings of Kuwait in the late '70s with al-Najdi's adventurous sailing life in the '30s and '40s.

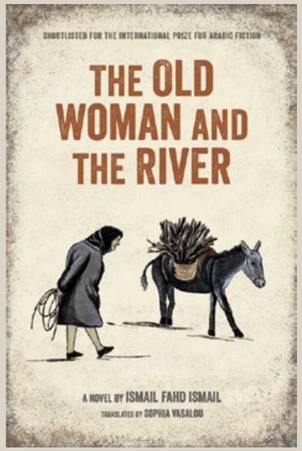
Gafir's Exile,
by Zahran Alqasmi

Omani novelist Zahran Alqasmi is one of the great chroniclers of the power of water in human lives and communities. This novel, winner of the 2023 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, is steeped in the history of the aflaj, an irrigation system deeply linked to village life in Oman. The protagonist in this delicate humanist novel tracks water sources deep beneath the surface of the earth. As he does, he discovers that the water he follows not only gives life, but also takes it away.

Honey Hunger,
by Zahran Alqasmi, translated by Marilyn Booth

Another novel by the great Zahran Alqasmi, this one brings to the foreground bees, which Azzan (a beekeeper in rural Oman) both keeps and tracks in the wild. As we follow him through this delicate portrait of Oman's natural landscapes, we see the power of water, both in the wild rainstorms that sweep away his bees, and in the mountain pools that attract them.

Water **and War**



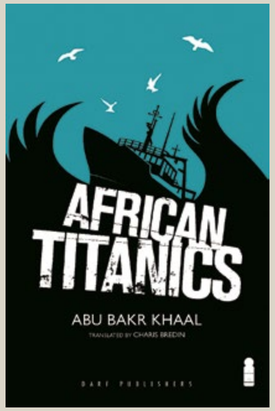
The Old Woman and the River,
by Ismail Fahd Ismail, translated by Sophia Vasalou

Set in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq War, this magical-realist novel takes us to southeastern Iraq, along the shores of the Shatt al-Arab River. Here, because of the warring armies, date palm trees have withered and people and animals have fled. Yet there is one old woman named Um Qasem, and her trusty donkey, Good Omen, who risks her life to fix the river's course and save a patch of date palms, a community of frogs, and other thirsty creatures. Here, we see that water is about more than just human needs.

Migrant Pathways, **Dangerous Seas**

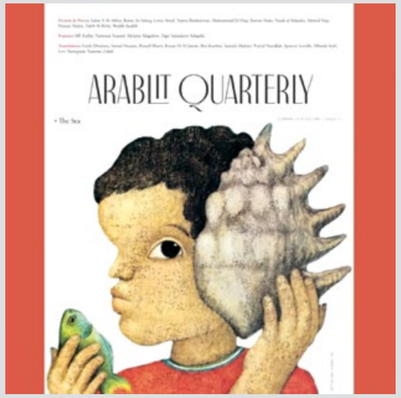
The Songs of Salt: Memoir of a Harrag,
by Larbi Ramdani

This rare autobiographical narrative of a Mediterranean migrant's sea crossing tells the story of an Algerian man who pretends to be Syrian as he attempts to reach a new life and career in Europe. His book provides detailed descriptions of his experience as he survives the myriad terrors of the sea: from the wild weather and the greed of smugglers to the ruthlessness of police.



African Titanics,
by Abu Bakr Khaal, translated by Charis Bredon

This brilliant and terrifying novel follows an Eritrean migrant named Abdar as he first crosses the "sea" of the Sahara Desert, which is dangerous because of the absence of water, and then the Mediterranean Sea, which is dangerous because of water's abundance. A novel of both racing ahead and impatiently waiting, we bide our time with Abdar, as he swings between hope and terror. It is a stark reminder that, for some, modern sea crossings are just as fraught with danger as they were a thousand years ago.



Arablit Quarterly - summer 2019 the sea digital

ArabLit Quarterly's
Summer 2019 Issue, "The Sea"

In this issue, the sea appears as a site of pleasure and of shocking violence. In addition to recent poetry and fiction that feature life on and alongside the sea, you can find the Moroccan malhun poetry sung by sailors, a collection of classic pirate argot, and a look at the sea in classic Arabic children's fiction. It includes poetry by Rami al-Asheq, Nazik al-Malaika, Wadih Saadeh and more, as well as works of fiction by Muhammad El-Hajj, Taleb Alrefai, and Najwa Binshatwan.

Arablit Quarterly - spring 2023 rain digital

ArabLit Quarterly's
Summer 2023 Issue, "The Rain"

Rain is a blessing and a curse, a source of sustenance, danger, beauty and annoyance. This issue honors the many faces of rain, as well as its rhythms and power for poets, short-story writers and anonymous supplicators. At the center of the issue, Salma Harland brings readers back to the earliest Arabic literature in "Making It Rain: Rain Deities in Pre-Islamic Arabia." Meanwhile, a wide range of novelists and poets address the driving power of rain, including Moroccan-Dutch poet Nisrine Mbarki, Saudi poets Ashjan Hendi and Muhammad Al-Turki, and Bahraini poet Wael Almahdi, who writes about Badr Shakir al-Sayyab's unforgettable and aforementioned "Rain Song.

M. Lynx Qualey is founder and editor in chief of Arablit.

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