

Manazir
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Nostalgia and Belonging in Art and Architecture from the MENA Region

Essay Collection

Research project conceptualized and edited by Laura Hindelang and Nadia Radwan

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Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts,
Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region

2021

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Published with the support of the
“Inspirierte Lehre” (Inspired Teaching) grant
of the University of Bern

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Impressum

How to cite this essay: Lara Morgan, "Reimagining Black Gold Nostalgia in the Arabian Gulf: Monira Al Qadiri's Alien Technology II", in Laura Hindelang & Nadia Radwan (eds.), "Nostalgia and Belonging in Art and Architecture from the MENA Region. A Collection of Essays", Manazir: Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts, Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region, 18 October 2021, <https://manazir.art/blog/nostalgia-and-belonging-art-and-architecture-mena-region/reimagining-black-gold-nostalgia-arabian-gulf-morgan>

Manazir is a platform of exchange that aims to connect researchers interested in the study of visual arts, architecture and heritage in the MENA region (Middle East & North Africa) in Switzerland.

The term "Manazir" refers to landscape, perspective and point of view in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish and Persian. Thus, Manazir is oriented toward a diversity of transcultural and transdisciplinary "landscapes" and "points of views" and open to a multiplicity of themes, epochs and geographical areas.

It is a non-hierarchical platform that will connect scholars, PhD candidates and art professionals working in Swiss universities and institutions, in order to give higher national and international visibility to a rich but yet relatively unknown field.

The Platform disseminates information regarding conferences, workshops, publications and exhibitions taking place in Switzerland. Research results are also promoted through *Manazir Journal*, a peer-reviewed online journal that regularly publishes thematic issues in open access.

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Production, Design & Layout: Joan Grandjean
Copy editing: Markus Fiebig
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Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Laura Hindelang & Nadia Radwan	
Neo-Pharaonism and National Revival. The Controversy Surrounding the Saad Zaghloul Mausoleum	9
Émilie Magnin	
Between Photography and Architecture. Gertrude Bell's Sense of Nostalgia	13
Linda Herzog	
La fabrication du désir. Les cartes postales orientalistes de Lehnert & Landrock	17
Ksenia Sadilova	
Der Palast Baron Empain in Heliopolis. Imperiale Nostalgie und koloniales Kulturerbe in Ägypten	21
Vera Reich	
Social Housing and Belonging. Fernand Pouillon's Climat de France in Algiers	25
Jana Scharll	
The "Exhibition Here and Elsewhere". On the Contentious Concept of Contemporary Arab Art	29
Sara Kišević	
Fragmentierte Erinnerungen einer Stadt. Circle of Confusion von Joana Hadjithomas und Khalil Joreige	33
Anika Rieben	
This is a Souk. Ruins and Reconstructions in Post-War Beirut	37
Abigail Stoner	
Reimagining Black Gold Nostalgia in the Arabian Gulf. Monira Al Qadiri's Alien Technology II	41
Lara Morgan	
Kolorierte Nostalgie in den Selbstporträts von Youssef Nabil	44
Hanna Hänggi	
Interwoven Collective Memory	48
Mina Achermann	
Petro(leum)Melancholia, Ecologies & Gulf Futurism in the Work of Design Earth	51
Ramona Tschuppert	

Lara Morgan

Reimagining Black Gold Nostalgia in the Arabian Gulf Monira Al Qadiri's *Alien Technology II*



Figure 10: Monira Al Qadiri, *Alien Technology II*, curated and produced by Mizna for Northern Spark 2017, a project of Northern Lights.mn. Photo: Dusty Hoskovec.

Alien Technology—a fitting title when one does not know the context of these strange sculptures by Kuwaiti artist Monira Al Qadiri. The large abstract figures, which were created in 2014 and displayed amongst other places at the fifty-eighth Venice Biennale in 2019 and at the Northern Spark Art Festival in Minneapolis in 2017, are artistic depictions of industrial oil drill heads. Some viewers may be intimidated by the display of these oil drill heads, while others might even consider the painted, polished, and refined heads as cute. The oil drill head sculpture *Alien Technology II* in particular has a strange appearance, with a rounded grinding surface covered in an exterior of seemingly small-looking bubbles. The intimidating aspect of this almost kitschy-looking oil drill head is its large and overpowering size (three by three by three meters). Knowing the context of the usage of the drill head, which is industrially utilized to penetrate the rock surface to

obtain oil and gas, gives the sculpture an additional violent and almost aggressive aura. Although this large depiction of the oil drill provides the recipient with the named impressions, it is held in a stunning shimmering color scheme that gives the monument a very uncanny and mysterious approach. A different version of *Alien Technology* that was displayed at the fifty-eighth Venice Biennale has a dark metallic color reminiscent of the color of oil on the surface of the water. But *Alien Technology II*, with its already mentioned rounded grinder, has a surface of a shimmering mother of pearl. These purposely chosen colors reference specific materials and substances that define or defined the Middle East and have contributed to the economic growth of the Arab states: the pearl industry from the 1860s to the 1930s and the oil industry (Aqil 464). All in all, Al Qadiri's monuments refer to a specific historical as well as a contemporary context for these Arabian Gulf states.

Al Qadiri, who grew up in Kuwait and then studied in Japan at the University of Tokyo, completed her Ph.D. in inter-media art on *The Aesthetics of Sadness in the Middle East*. Her work *Alien Technology* is a reference to the petroleum culture that has been one of the key factors contributing to the enormous wealth in the Middle East since the mid-twentieth century. Her sculptures show the very instrument of extraction of the so-called "black gold". They question the practice of drilling for oil by shining an artistic spotlight on it. Oil is a very limited resource, one that through its violent extraction contributes to climate crises and the destruction of the planet (LeMenager 5–6). This leads to certain questions. When will this valuable and simultaneously destructive resource run out? What does a post-petroleum culture look like? With these reflections, one can say that a melancholy feeling echoes in Al Qadiri's work. The melancholy feeling also comes from the intimidating look of the oil drill head, which is suggestive of the violent act required to retrieve the precious resource.

Alien Technology II, which has a shimmering pearl surface, generates a different feeling in the viewer. The reference to the almost-forgotten history of the Middle Eastern pearl industry gives us a sense of nostalgia. The pearl industry that thrived in the Arabian Gulf region from the 1860s to the 1930s was a staple export that significantly contributed to the economic wealth of the region (Aqil 464). After the 1930s, the industry experienced a decline in pearl exports due mainly to Japan's globally expanding pearling industry and the world economic crisis that began in 1929. The social construct of pearling in the Arabian Gulf and the industry itself was complex and contributed to fostering the cultural identity of the Gulf region (Khalaf).

Al Qadiri's pearl-coated drill head can therefore be seen as adding a nostalgic element to her work. But what exactly do we understand as nostalgia? Svetlana Boym defines the term nostalgia in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (xiii). Belonging is therefore a core aspect of a nostalgic feeling. Boym goes on to say that "Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (xiii). Nostalgia can therefore only be lived through a fantasized connection to something or someone. By applying this understanding of Boym's definition of nostalgia to Al Qadiri's sculptures, we realize that her work indeed produces nostalgia. The Kuwaiti artist has moved across the world and is currently stationed in Berlin, but her work always references her Middle Eastern origins. Al Qadiri's creations are contributions to the art world that arouse a nostalgic feeling in the viewer. Thus, *Alien Technology* is not only a comment on the petroleum culture of the Arabian Gulf states but can be seen as a product of the artist's feeling of nostalgic belonging. Settling on this interpretation of the artist's nostalgia, another question arises regarding the naming of the artwork itself. How can we perceive nostalgia if the work is titled *Alien Technology*? Can the feeling of nostalgia still exist if we label something as unfamiliar, or in this case, "alien"? Primarily, the title refers to the strange look of the object itself, which without further context can be seen as

foreign or "alien". In an interview with the online magazine Living Content, Al Qadiri states her clear intention that her work *Alien Technology* is not a portrayal of nostalgia at all. She argues that her sculptures depict the history (and the lack of history) of the Arabian Gulf region (Paul). She states the importance of knowing one's history in a realistic matter, especially the history of the early twentieth century, which has been rewritten due to government censorship and the influence of regional conflicts and wars.

In her definition of nostalgia, Boym emphasizes a romanticized feeling of belonging to a place or a time that was either experienced in the past or has never been experienced at all. The part of life that has not been experienced but that one identifies with can be seen as an unfamiliar or an "alien" experience. In Al Qadiri's *Alien Technology II*, one may presume that she is referring to the pearl industry of the 1860s to 1930s, and that she is asking the viewer to then feel nostalgic about a piece of the Arabian Gulf's history that they did not experience. For the viewer, rethinking history through *Alien Technology* has the potential to form a cultural identity with the region, which can be seen as a feeling of nostalgia.

This brief essay on Monira Al Qadiri's work *Alien Technology* in the context of nostalgia has hopefully shown the complexity and layers that Al Qadiri's work has to offer. *Alien Technology* is an art piece that not only places a question mark on the industrial, economic, social, and cultural concept of the Arabian Gulf states but also combines this with various layers of personal perceptions of nostalgia that also question the future of petroleum culture.

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