

Louvre Abu Dhabi's Art Here 2023 explores ideas of transparency

► Exhibition features artists shortlisted for the third Richard Mille Art Prize



Waterdust by Sawsan Al Bahar and Bahar Al Bahar

Razmig Bedirian

Nov 24, 2023

The [Art Here 2023](#) exhibition at [Louvre Abu Dhabi](#) begins at the 18th century Damascene fountain, a highlight of the museum's collection that is installed in the shade of the museum's seemingly floating dome.

Handblown glass sculptures sit around the octagonal fountain, meticulously positioned upon flooring that comprises polygons crafted from marble, limestone and slate. The sculptures, called *Waterdust*, range from bluish and greyish hues to a rich, moss green.

Their forms are disparate. Small oblong shapes juxtapose with other much larger, rounded pieces. With their irregular surfaces, the sculptures give the impression of water droplets kneaded by the breeze.



The *Waterdust* glass sculptures were made in Damascus and Berlin. Khushnum Bhandari / The National

The placement of the sculptures may seem sporadic at first glance. *Waterdust's* thoughtful arrangement, however, becomes apparent as the sun spots filtering through the dome gradually move over the sculptures.

The tints of the glass pale and its transparency is accentuated. As the light moves away again, the colours of the glass are emboldened, reflecting the geometries of the dome above. The work was conceived by artists Sawsan and Bahar Al Bahar, and as the siblings say: "*Waterdust* is a collaboration with the sun."

From the outset, Art Here 2023's material and conceptual exploration of transparency is apparent. The exhibition, which runs until February 19, features the seven projects shortlisted for the third [Richard Mille Art Prize](#). While some of them touch upon the literal connotations of transparency, they each contain additional layers that delve into the concept in metaphorical, historical and social terms.

Waterdust, for instance, reflects upon the age-old Syrian craft of glassblowing, which has become threatened due to the war and its subsequent economic consequences. As such, the placement of the sculptures around the Damascene fountain accesses another dimension of meaning, drawing parallels between two crafts that are each a point of pride for Syrian artistry and heritage.

"The fountain is definitely the grounding of the piece, because for me, this is about Damascus," [Sawsan Al Bahar](#) says. "It's a dialogue about Damascus. It's about the craft of Damascus. It's about the hands that made that fountain and the breaths that blew those glass pieces. But then after that, it [also] became about time, tracing the sun, and in a way, a performance."



Waterdust by Sawsan Al Bahar and Bahar Al Bahar. Khushnum Bhandari / The National

The Al Bahar siblings began the project by tracing the forms of the sun spots around the fountain, placing sheets of paper on the floor and outlining the shapes of light that projected through the dome. They then set out to Damascus, to work with the city's last remaining glassblower, Ahmad Al Halaq, whose Abu Ahmad glass factory is a landmark in the Bab Sharqi area. While the siblings initially intended to make *Waterdust* in its entirety at the shop, there were complications.

"Because of the economic situation, that's impossible," Sawsan says. "They had furnaces of three sizes but now they're down to one. There's one glassblower left. He's very well known. You go to his shop and there are people constantly taking videos. Somehow, that's not enough. This craft has been hit particularly hard, considering that it counts on fuel."

The smaller, green sculptures in *Waterdust* were all created by Al Halaq. However, for the larger pieces, the siblings reached out to a German glassblowing initiative called Berlin Glassworks Studio, whose director, Nadania Idriss, is of Syrian heritage.

"They're trying their best to grow, and even from a communal standpoint, [they're] doing workshops for children and refugees so they can promote the craft," Bahar says.

He adds that there was an apparent difference with how Al Halaq and glassblowers in Berlin approached the craft. "He inherited the craft, it's somehow in his blood. It's not a profession."



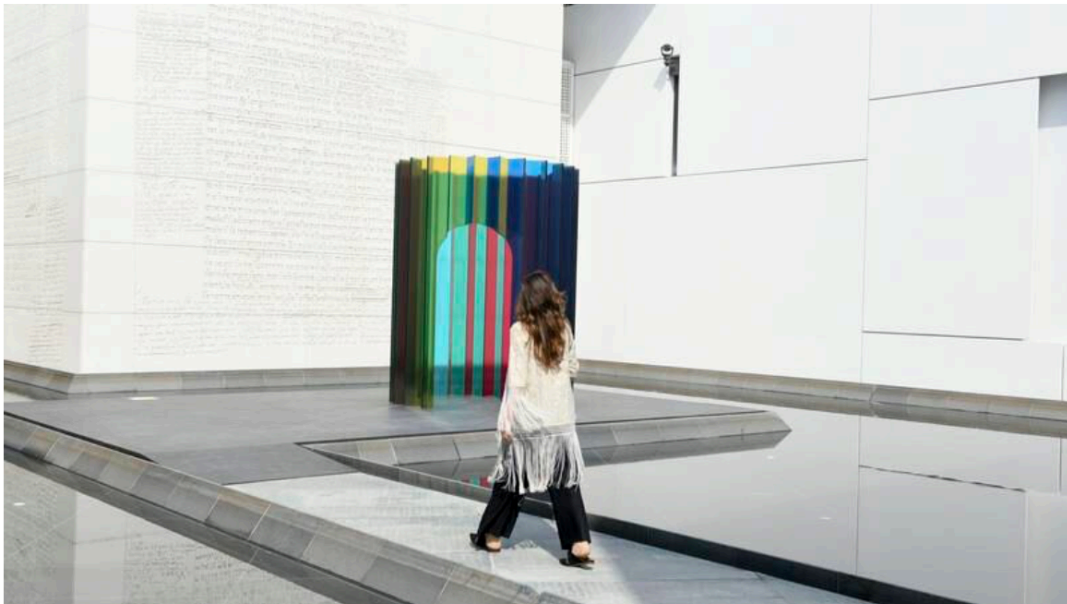
Hiya (She), 2023, installation by Farah Behbehani. Khushnum Bhandari / The National

This interplay between material form and history is interwoven across several works in Art Here 2023. In [Farah Behbehani's *Hiya \(She\)*](#) it manifests as a 24-sided tower of coloured glass that takes its geometric cues from the Tughrul tower, the 12th century brick monument in Rey, Iran, that serves as the tomb of the Seljuk ruler Tughril.

The colours that make up the 48 panels of *Hiya* are drawn from the hues in the visible light spectrum. The installation is positioned on a platform at the centre of a body of water.

As the area is particularly sunlit, *Hiya's* shadow sweeps across the platform with a polychrome vibrancy. It also brings to mind the original Tughrul Tower's capacity to act like a clock pointer.

"The design of the tower is a 24 pointed star, and there are 48 panels," Behbehani says. "You'll have the shadows indicating the time of day. At a certain hour, you'll have a certain shadow that evolves from morning to sunset."



Hiya (She) is displayed on a sunlit platform at Louvre Abu Dhabi. Khushnum Bhandari / The National

This element of time-telling extends into another homage within *Hiya*. The installation pays tribute to the 10th century Syrian astronomer Mariam Al-'Ijjiya, who was also known as Mariam Al Astrulabi. She was a reputed astrolabe maker, who developed the device's capacity as an astronomical, navigational and timekeeping instrument.

"She was hired by the emir at the time, and she was brought in for her skills as an astronomer and an incredible astrolabe maker," Behbehani says. "She was actually known for making the most intricate astrolabes of her time."

Walking within *Hiya* envelopes the visitor with a meditative and calming sound, reminiscent of the resonant sustains of sound bowls. Behbehani says she was keen on activating as many of the senses as she could with *Hiya* and worked on the sound element with a meditation practitioner "to create an experience that will transport people into a deeper state of consciousness."



Anthropocene's Toll, A Planet Asphyxiated, by Zahrah Al Ghamdi. Khushnum Bhandari / The National

Anthropocene's Toll: A Planet Asphyxiated by [Zahrah Al Ghamdi](#), meanwhile, is a visceral reflection of the adverse human imprint on the planet. The installation forms a twisted tree lined with animal bones and waste. Plastic drapes around the tree, going down to its roots and instilling a feeling of suffocation. The work is a powerful reminder of the effects of climate change and our neglected duty in preserving the planet's health.

"She's somebody that works in situ," Maya El Khalil, curator of Art Here 2023 and one of the judges of the art prize, says. "She changed the work on site. This is not a tree, these are all fragments that she collected from around her. These are all detritus of wood and bones and plastic."

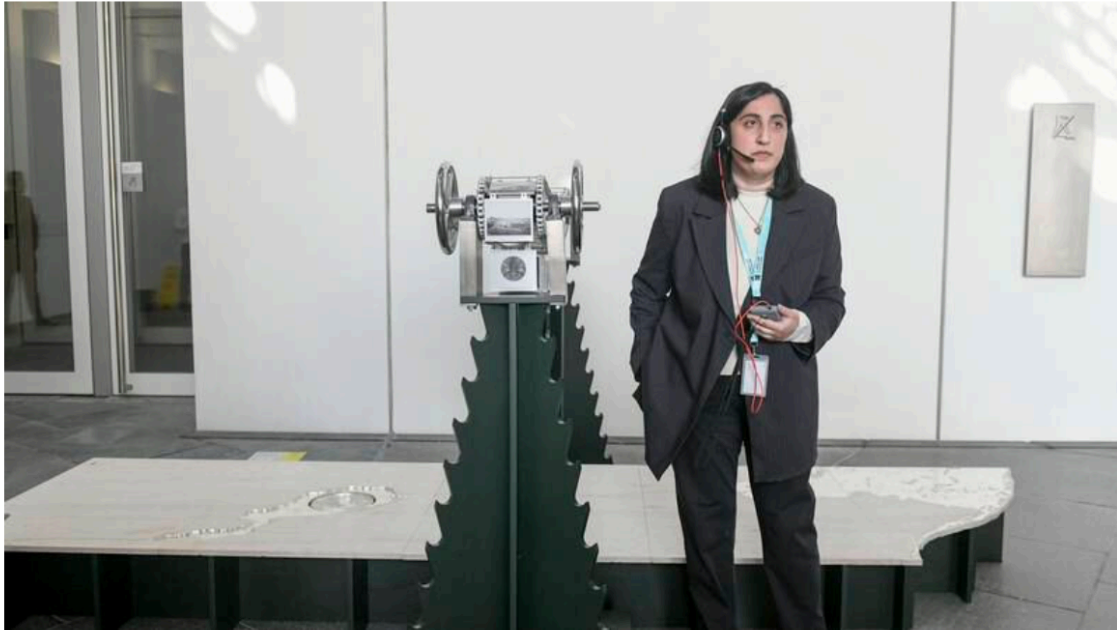


Remember to Forget by Alaa Tarabzouni. Khushnum Bhandari / The National

Alaa Tarabzouni's *Remember to Forget*, on the other hand, is a snapshot of the artist's neighborhood in Riyadh. Composed of stained-glass panels, the work outlines the streets and boundaries of the Riyadh neighbourhood, which is on the verge of redevelopment and will be reconfigured in its entirety. Materially, *Remember to Forget* evokes the delicate nature of cities, showing how they too are subject to fragility and change.

"Cartography is quite scientific," El Khalil says. "It's quite objective, and [here] it is paired with this with subjective feeling of disappearance, of a memory."

With *SoftBank*, Nabla Yahya spotlights the obscured history within the construction of the Suez Canal between 1859 and 1869. An installation comprising three components, *SoftBank* contrasts a slab on travertine, engraved with the original form of the canal, which has since been widened. The etching has been lined with silver leaf, providing a shimmering contrast with the pale travertine stone. A healing bowl babbles with water on one side. It is engraved, not with contemplative Quranic passages, but rather with the mottos of imperialistic narratives.

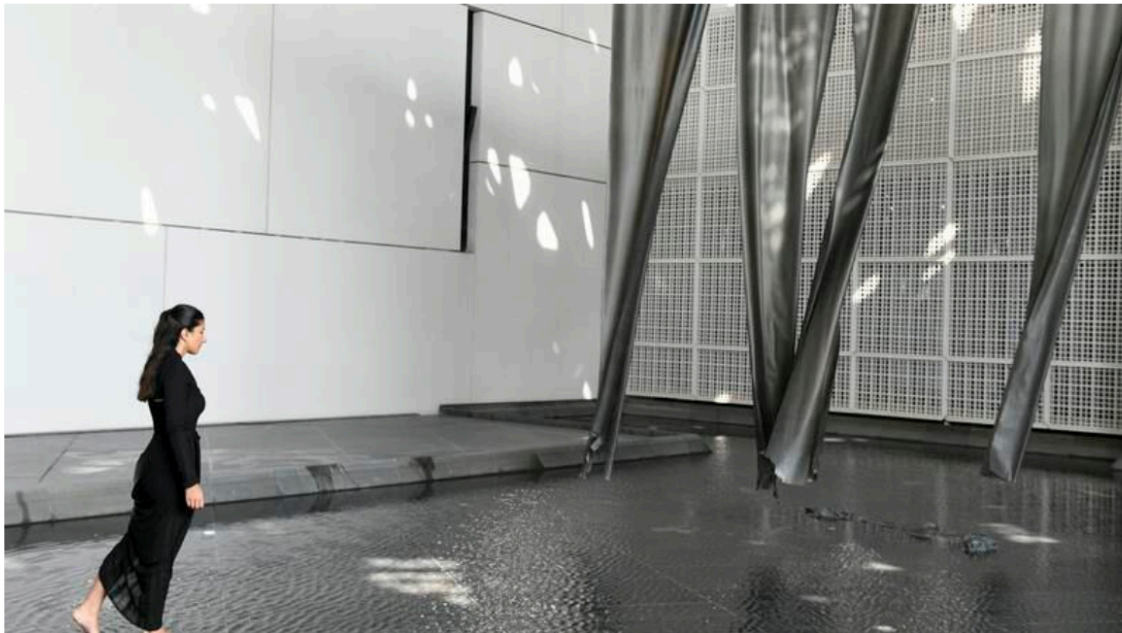


Softbank by Nabla Yahya. Khushnum Bhandari / The National

"These projects are led by industrialists or colonisers," Yahya says. "They promote it as a kind of utopian vision for society, but in reality, the truth of the matter is projects come at a great cost for people who have absolutely no benefits from these changes."

The installation is fitted with an interactive carousel of archival photographs that feature, more than the project, the workers of France's Suez Canal Company. Some 1.5 million indentured labourers worked on the project, with thousands dying for reasons that ranged from exhaustion to cholera.

Yahya aimed to spotlight those who were subject to these inhumane working conditions through the photographs. However, while there were plenty of archival images that showed the canal's monumental aspect and the dredges, there weren't so many of the workers. "I had to think a lot about my intention, what I was showing, and why I was showing it," she says. "For instance, like there's an illustration over there, which shows that they were child labourers toiling the land as well."



Flesh Memory by Sarah Brahim. Khushnum Bhandari / The National

With *Flesh Memory*, [Sarah Brahim](#) reveals a concealed and pivotal propeller of life: The breath. The installation comprises algae biomaterials hung as sheets above pools of water. The biomaterial rustles and folds with the breeze, materialising the rhythms and motions of breath. The work, Brahim says, is tribute to the role algae has in producing about 70 per cent of the atmospheric oxygen.

"For a few years, I researched the respiratory system," Brahim says. "I explored that in textiles, film installations, and different text research. It's a really underexplored part of our life. Breath is something that really brings empathy. It's something that we all have, and it's literally that most ancestral part of us and part of our movement."

Flesh Memory will culminate in its biodegrading on-site. The biomaterial has already begun to tatter at the ends, with parts of it piled in the water below.

"It's really amazing to do something morfeatures sheets of Japanese chiffon fabric and cotton that are spotted and streaked with water-based pigments. As the fabrics bend and twist with the wind, their patterns animate with a mesmerising cadence. Al Lamki worked on the piece by stacking multiple layers of fabric and letting the pigments seep in. While the colours are bold in some sheets, they are fairer in others.

This artistic approach resonates deeper, considering the work's title, which is named after single-celled organisms. Fossils of the organism were found in the sedimentary rocks of Jebel Hafeet, near Al Lamki's hometown of Al Ain. The ancient marine fossils, which encompass foraminifera, corals and bryzoa, are testament to the mountain's submerged past.



Foraminifera by Hashel Al Lamki. Khushnum Bhandari / The National

"Hashel is playing with how the viewer experiences the work and what the artist wants to reveal," El Khalil says. She underscores Al Lamki's use of water-based pigments, saying "what Hashel is trying to try to do here is to make visible the materials, the elements he's using in that work, the weight of the different pigments, how they interact with water and seep differently.

"He is also talking about trade because the pigments that he used are from different corners of the globe."

Art Here 2023 will be running at Louvre Abu Dhabi until February 19

Updated: November 24, 2023, 3:03 AM