

**HADEER OMAR:
CONTEMPORARY
HERITAGE: AND THEREAFTER:
HADEER OMAR IN
CONVERSATION WITH
MARYAM HASSAN AL THANI**

Maryam Hassan Al-Thani: Tell us about your photographic and image making practice - how you got to where you are today and the way you use images in your practice.

Hadeer Omar: I graduated with a graphic design degree which means by default I was working with imagery and creating imagery using photography. It was how I could communicate easily - through the use of images. For my photography practice I think, the department when I was in school pushed us to use the camera to observe and see beyond what we were looking at - "seeing" not "looking". Photography was a way of composing and framing and the camera helped me at the beginning to do this. I tend to forget a lot and it helps me remember that I was in those places. That is how I connect the dots in my life or other people's lives. It is also a nice icebreaker. For me, that is how I start talking to people. Without a camera, you can't just go up to people and be like, 'Hi, my name is Hadeer', the camera gives me confidence, it gives me that push. These are a couple of reasons of why and how I photograph. When it comes to moving images, it is when things start becoming more fun for me because I'm adding the component of time, of duration.

In terms of my interests and how they helped me develop my practice, there were a couple of themes and topics that I was very interested in. For example, my own history and heritage. I just started digging into my own identity and broke it down to many things like being a girl, being in a region, travelling and getting to know myself. I was raised in Egypt and now I am in Qatar, which also has affected my identity. I get really excited about cultures in general and I link it back to questions of identity, creating your own culture and how we can hack, decode and understand other cultures. Feminism is another element, in a subtle way, and as a female maker I deal with the expectation that I will make "pretty stuff". I had to search for what exactly I want to produce, not just for myself but for an audience. This led me to work on the conceptual aspects, such as the themes, techniques and visual language that I am interested in. I tested a lot of things - landscape, portraiture, street photography, abstraction and conceptual work. I am interested in all of those concepts and used them to develop my photography and film. More recently, immersive experiences started to excite me and I wanted to design my own immersive experience that translates an image in different ways. I started combining film, photography, VR, AR, mapping - whatever I can do to translate the idea that drives me. If the idea needs a photograph, I'll do it, but I usually observe life around me in general with photographs.

Maryam Hassan Al-Thani: In the context of the digital era that we live in, how do you choose what to explore and how do you choose the form of images? How does that work in your practice of creating immersive experiences?

Hadeer Omar: A lot of people have started to shift to social media, digital platforms and virtual space to exhibit their work, especially within the current pandemic. But I have been working on these platforms for a while and, for me, my work does not just or only have to be exhibited in a gallery to exist or become known. I feel like you can do it all - I recently joined Tik Tok and thought through what this platform does with and for my work - learning how different it is to produce work for Tik Tok rather than Instagram. It is a very different set of possibilities compared to producing work for an exhibition or preparing a project for students in a classroom for students. It really is about picking the right format or changing the way a message or story is communicated. For me, even if you are posting on Instagram,

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it is different from posting an IG Story, and it is completely different to what you can do live on IGTV. I took it upon myself to produce something everyday to post on social media and create content - I sometimes get stuck on something and explore a bit further to create a bigger project for an exhibition. My exhibition at Doha's Fire Station, was my compilation of all the content I had made throughout the years that I found had similarities in their look and feel and were very personal to me, and my own footage shot in specific times. And I can recycle all this content later for another project that is saying something completely different. For me, I always make content and add it to my library constantly, while I am making the content I start curating based on what is happening around me. I don't just react to things on the spot all the time. It helps me not be stuck when I am hit with a new proposal or a new exhibition because I can look back at the ideas and content I jotted down through time.

Maryam Hassan Al-Thani: You touched upon something quite interesting which is this time element, you use time in many different ways which brings us to your installation Contemporary Heritage: And Thereafter, and the elements of time in image-making, and the meaning of recent and live time being added into a historic place like Al Koot Fort - a heritage site that has a deep history of its own. How does the time element in your work affect something like a site that actually has its own time equation?

Hadeer Omar: Al Koot Fort is very special and, at the same time ,we can all relate to common stories that such a place shares with us. It is a historical place that has many stories that you breakdown into people, time, space elements that can become super relatable. I start with my own experience of a place first - how do I react to that place? How do I react to the time it embodies? How do I react to this experiment that I am making? Once I break down those elements, I create a mind map of information regarding people who have or now inhabit a space, and relatable stories - or I take a completely different direction and create a new meaning by putting elements together. Basically, the art is held in that reaction to Al Koot Fort and not just looking at its history. Analyzing the information that can be gathered, and responding to it is one of the most essential mechanisms for an artist. The space has its own story, and what we are bringing is both an animation and an introduction into the space for an audience.

Maryam Hassan Al-Thani: What within the space of Al Koot Fort in particular were you reacting to, thinking about or reflecting upon? As an artist, what stood out to you in this space?

Hadeer Omar: I saw an old photograph of Al Koot Fort in Sheikh Faisal's museum showing how the fort was historically positioned. It struck me that Al Koot was right there, in the middle of Souq Waqif, which is the center of trading and where people come together. It made sense to me that it could be the center of that space - we have all of these white walls that can tell the story of the space, not just the historical part but also our views on things now. We hope that this installation invites you into this bubble of intense smells and sounds, of whatever you experience in the Souq. Because it is in the center, it makes sense that you just create that mini "heart" in the middle with all these experiences around you.

Maryam Hassan Al-Thani: Is there something in particular with your work that you are excited about exploring, that can only really happen in Al Koot Fort that maybe you would not be able to

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in other spaces in terms of your practice or image-making?

Hadeer Omar: In Al Koot Fort, you have its gorgeous architecture that is striking, with different forms and configurations of spaces. You do not need to add too much at all - just the bare minimum can become an amazing experience without taking away from the beauty of Al Koot. It can be super powerful when the space and its animation work together - like a girl in the abaya walking back and forth within the architecture instantly becomes a conversation.

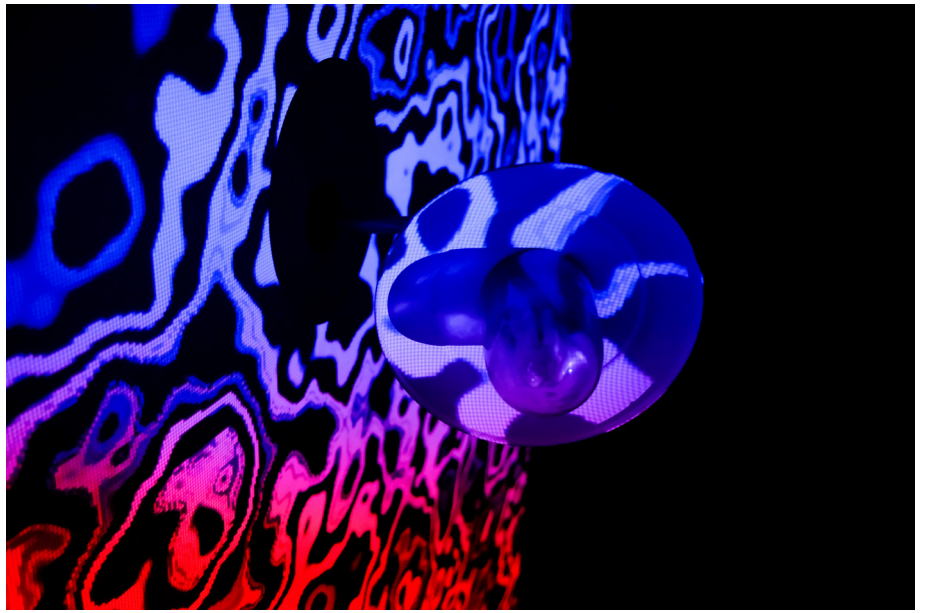
Maryam Hassan Al-Thani: In terms of the exhibition layout, you create stages in experience - 'Transition', 'Journey' and 'Metamorphosis'. How did you arrive at that concept? It is really immersive and it is like you are taking me into a different world, in stages. What does this world say about the work you are trying to produce?

Hadeer Omar: When we were brainstorming this project, we were interested in having multiple experiences. The place is huge and I wish I could activate every inch in it, but I can't. The one thing I was interested in was to have these separate individual experiences but at the same time they are related to a bigger story. Every room you enter has its own specific outlook - observing something specific. One of the rooms is very focused on falcons and their sounds - when you go into another room, you can still hear birds but it is subtle comparison. Every room is trying to highlight a specific element and from beginning to end is constructed to make you curious and enjoy everything about the spaces and the immersive experience as a whole. The audience is not just receiving but participating in the animation of the fort. We are respecting the place and customizing the experience to best compliment it while we are there.

Maryam Hassan Al-Thani: A common experience of the pandemic involved feelings of being stuck or trapped and not exposed to new experiences. How did the lockdown and the whole stay at home restrictions effect you? As an artist, how did you come to find inspiration in Qatar? Did it change the way you work?

Hadeer Omar: I produced a lot of work this year and I think it is mainly due to the fact that I had a lot more time on my hands. I get inspired by random things - I do not have to travel or get out of my comfort zone. I mean, it would be great to travel but I find inspiration in my everyday activities, even if it is just going to the mall or the Souq. The Souq is one of the coolest places for me - whenever I go there with my camera, I always return with a handful of content. Always. There is always something to look at even if it is just someone preparing food, ladies getting their henna done or women choosing and buying fabric - there is always a story I want to document. During lockdown, I started projecting on my neighbour's building because there is not really anywhere else I could do projections. The internet was a place where I spent a lot of time networking and meeting a lot of artists from Saudi, Egypt and London. Amazing people were coming together from all over the world I didn't even think I would get the chance to meet and were being creative together, which was really a huge plus side of lockdown because people weren't as busy anymore. Lockdown also made me explore Qatar from a very different angle and I think this happened to a lot of people. Everyone became creative with staycation ideas and I remember stargazing with my friends, which is something I got to do a lot in Egypt but had never done here in Qatar.

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Hadeer Omar is an Egyptian time-based media artist currently residing, teaching and practicing her art in Doha. Omar has been commissioned to produce a contemporary response to the Al Koot Fort, which holds a unique and complex history. Since the fort's original inception in 1906, and throughout its existence, it has been at a confluence between the historic market area and the seaside port and is now in a central location between Souq Waqif and Msheireb. The artist draws upon the surrounding areas of Souq Waqif as sources of inspiration, weaving together traditional and contemporary aspects of daily life, translating and transforming them into surreal immersive environments.

Omar's installation - And Thereafter - activates Souq Waqif into a dynamic spatial experience that transforms three key areas of Al Koot Fort; 'The Transition' (courtyard), 'The Journey' (back rooms), and 'The Metamorphosis' (entrance rooms). She heightens lived moments in the souq by amplifying private instances like bartering and smelling the bukhur through captured images and sounds, all uniquely choreographed in the designated spaces. The narrative unfolds as the spaces are explored in no particular sequence, guided by the experiential elements of aroma, sound, light and imagery.

The artist created the sound and light immersions in collaboration with Sonic Jeel, an artistic collective exploring hybrid-media, initiated by Michael Hersud and Simone Muscolino, and multidisciplinary designer Katia Kolovea who incorporated new technologies to communicate messages through light.

Curated by Maryam Hassan Al-Thani.