

**SHAHA AL KHULAIFI:
CONTEMPORARY HERITAGE:
THE SPACES IN BETWEEN
SHAHA AL KHULAIFI IN
CONVERSATION WITH
MARYAM HASSAN AL-THANI**

Maryam Hassan Al-Thani: The convergence of photography and architecture has been a recurring theme in your practice - in a previous exhibition called 'Here/There' and during your residency at Doha's Fire Station, and now in your installation at Al Rayyan Palace as part of Tasweer's inaugural programme. Can you say more about this meeting of photography and the spatial in your work?

Shaha Al Khulaifi: I was really interested in developing photography from a traditionally 2D medium into 3D space - kind of like translating architectural space into the way I'm exhibiting my work. I began exploring different materials and discovered that printing images onto and into layers of glass achieved that spatial effect for me. I wanted to add more depth to the images - adding a third layer - and making that integral to the viewing experience. I decided to incorporate materials such as glass and mirror. There are some explorations with mirror that I have never exhibited but I used to also work with printing on mirror. Using different materials such as mirror and glass, and achieving the projection effect with lighting, the glass kind of added a third element to the work. I was really interested in doing that and I continued to incorporate that method in my works after the 'Here/There' exhibition, currently at Al Rayyan Palace. Exploring the palace architecturally really inspired me to continue with the medium as a way of mimicking the shadows and lighting within the palace, and creating a space - creating a third element to the 2D photographic prints.

Maryam Hassan Al-Thani: You like to work with materials that create forms that change. Did your interests start with architecture and then you went into thinking of ways to document space with photography, or did it start with this exploration of materiality? Were you interested in spaces and that translated into your own artistic practice of image-making?

Shaha Al Khulaifi: It definitely was documenting architecture for me. It was more about archiving and witnessing how the city of Doha is changing, and places that are undergoing construction and makeovers. That was the main starting point, but I've always been interested in spaces within the built environment and in creating spaces, so I wanted to combine the two together - documenting architecture while also presenting creating a space for it. And exactly as you mentioned - with my incorporation of different materials - I am in dialogue with the architecture of the city. New construction is typically glass buildings with reflective windows - kind of a mirror effect, where light is a really important feature in architecture and defines what a building looks like. My installation work adds that element to it.

Maryam Hassan Al-Thani: As an artist, what was your first reaction to the space at Al Rayyan Palace? When we first went on site visits, was there something specific that struck you?

Shaha Al Khulaifi: It was overwhelming when I first entered the palace - the beauty of it is overwhelming, it's a masterpiece all on its own. And even not knowing the historical context or the stories behind it at that point, you just wanted to be there and silently observing the beauty of it. As a building, it's really impactful and I think it's one of the most important examples of Qatari architecture. It puts a huge responsibility on me to respect and to keep the integrity of the building, and to try not to disrupt it in any way with my installation works. I wanted to continue documenting the building itself and just highlighting the features of the building - the plaster work, the latticework, the Mashrabiyyas [latticed window], the arches - all these

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architectural features of the building were extremely beautiful. I couldn't ignore them, I had to highlight them. The concept of my works as a contemporary reflection upon the buildings and their qualities. I wanted to play with one of the features of the palace - the tinted glass on the windows that's a feature of traditional Qatari houses. I wanted to add a "pop" of color - emphasizing these tinted glass windows, and enlarging them while also incorporating the image work into these installations. It's a celebration of local Qatari architecture. I didn't focus on the historical, anecdotal stories of the palace but rather the aesthetics of the building itself.

Maryam Hassan Al-Thani: I tried to push you to document the human stories - about the people that lived in Al Rayyan Palace - but that's not your practice. I'm glad that you stayed true to who you are, as someone who is interested in the architectural elements whether through archival material, histories or the impact of a specific built environment.

Shaha Al Khulaifa: Al Rayyan Palace was beautifully documented by Jassim Mohammed AlKhulaifi - his work is really inspiring for me and an important resource for me to understand exactly how these buildings were designed and why were they designed the way they were - and the materials that were used. I was really inspired by that and written documentation about old Qatari architecture.

Maryam Hassan Al-Thani: We started this project as the global pandemic became real - did that experience change the way that you worked as an artist? Did it help you develop ideas or constrain them.

Shaha Al Khulaifi: The pandemic and the lockdown definitely took a toll on me. The experience of the pandemic put me in a state of unease - it's very stressful to be working during these time, and it has been quite challenging to find processes, materials and workshops to render my ideas, simply because I was working in the middle of a pandemic. Our normal interactions with people weren't as smooth as it would be usually and when you're travelling and exploring museums, it gives you a different energy. I'm always more inspired when I'm travelling and exploring spaces and places and we've been deprived of that. But thank god, it worked in the end, we're trying our best.

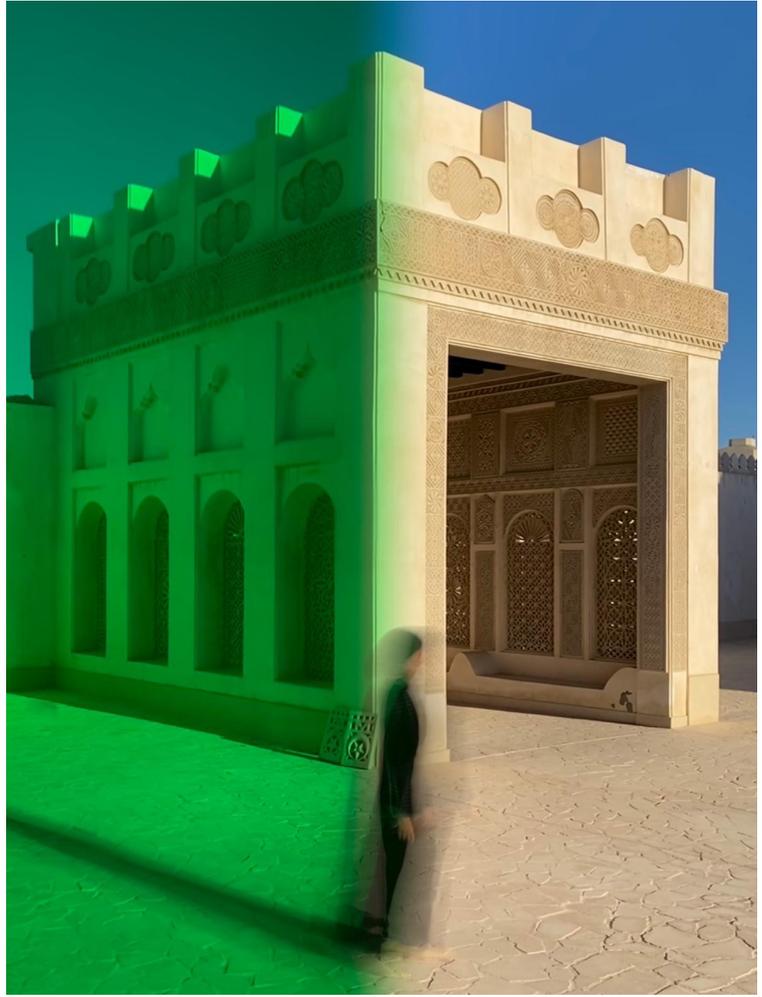
Maryam Hassan Al-Thani: Did it force you to think about things differently?

Shaha Al Khulaifi: It definitely pushed me to explore some options that we have in Doha. I've discovered more places that I can work with, so that's good. Even the suppliers here are trying to work out how we use the resources we have here in Doha rather than depending on other countries to get them. I feel like everyone is trying to be more creative with what they have and trying to create things locally.

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The exhibition consists of installations that artist Shaha Al Khulaifi has created specifically for the Al Rayyan Palace, calling on her experience in interpreting and investigating architectural spaces through the medium of photography. In her work, the artist observes and records the intricate layers of the architectonic environment, the impact of rapid urban growth, and people's experiences with a developing city.

The experiential installations reflect and highlight architectural features of the palace's corners, windows and gypsum wall decorations as spaces that hold and embody memories in their own right. Through her technique of printing on glass, Al Khulaifi creates intimate, localised spaces that evoke nostalgia. These installations evoke a sense of familiarity with the interior spaces that supersedes any one point in time. Al Khulaifi's work becomes an evocative experience specific to its designated space and place.

The gypsum engravings were architectural gestures with abstract motifs common in the GCC in the 1950s, and have been used as embellishments and decorative elements. The engravings were added at a later date by artisans from Fars, which were invited to decorate the palaces and fortresses in the mid-20th century. The Al Rayyan area - named after the abundance of water in the land - had fertile soil and environmental elements facilitating the molding of these ornamental features.