

VOGUE

ARABIA

SPRING/SUMMER 2024

DESTINATION DESIGN

The best of
Salone del
Mobile and
the Venice
Biennale

SLEEPING BEAUTY

Dorra
Zarrouk
checks in
at the new
Disneyland
Hotel

DREAM INTERIORS

PALATIAL SPACES WHERE CRAFTSMANSHIP AND EXTRAVAGANCE MEET

OUTSIDE



THE BOX

With the theme *Foreigners Everywhere*, this year's Venice Biennale shines a light on the experience of outsiders. For artists from the Arab world, migration and decolonization take center stage

Photography MARCO VALMARANA *Words* AMANDA RANDONE



Palestinian-American
artist Samia Halaby



“When you quiet the voices of Arabs, you quiet everything”

For Palestinian-American artist Samia Halaby, appearing in the main exhibition at the 2024 Venice Biennale – and receiving a special mention from the jury – is a sort of “poetic justice.” Despite having been embraced by exhibitions of this caliber in places like Beijing and Havana, the leading abstract painter says she’s still not fully accepted by the gallery scene in her own city of New York, where she’s lived since the 1970s. Venice seemed an equally impenetrable space. “To be chosen for this, it’s a once in a lifetime thing,” she shares.

Halaby credits Brazilian curator Adriano Pedrosa for the emphasis on engaging Indigenous artists and those from the Global South in the Biennale’s 60th iteration. His theme of *Foreigners Everywhere*, she points out, celebrates being an outsider in a way that can foster solidarity. “It can mean there’s turmoil everywhere and we’re forced to move, but it also means there’s transportation and we no longer live in isolated nations where everyone looks alike and has the same type of name,” she says. “You can jump from that to

other issues. You can ask, why is everybody concerned about Gaza? There are demonstrations everywhere, and it’s no longer just about Palestine, it’s about all the peoples of the world.” Fittingly, Pedrosa chose to display Halaby’s 1969 *Black is Beautiful*, a geometric piece paying homage to the Black Liberation movement and dedicated to the Pan-African activist Elombe Brath.

Following the cancellation of her first American retrospective at Indiana University, the artist believes Arab representation at international events like the Biennale are more important than ever. “When you quiet the voices of Arabs, you quiet everything,” Halaby posits. “You rob your constituency of the pleasure of seeing a lot of variety, of broadening their minds. You make them more ignorant and easy to manipulate so they lose their expansiveness.”

While the main exhibition features other Arab visionaries such as Huguette Caland, Etel Adnan, and Inji Efflatoun, the national pavilions are also important spaces for Arab talent to be seen and heard. Below, *Vogue Arabia* speaks with the artists commissioned to represent their countries.



From left: Essa Al Mufarji, Ali Al Jabri, Adham Al Farsi, Alia Al Olaqi, and Sarah Al Olaqi **RIGHT** Al Olaqi in front of her work *Breaking bread* **BELOW** **RIGHT** Alia Al Farsi



OMAN PAVILION: ALIA AL FARSI, ADHAM AL FARSI, ALIA AL JABRI, ESSA AL MUFARJI, SARAH AL OLAQI

Returning to the Biennale for its second year, the Sultanate of Oman once again engaged multiple artists to best represent the country and its take on the larger notion of foreignness. This collective approach, says Alia Al Farsi, curator and one of the five participating artists, conveys the message that Oman's culture scene is rich in diverse talent and rooted in a sense of interconnectedness.

Titled *Malath-Haven*, the exhibition serves to demonstrate how the country has been "a hub of globalization long before the term was coined," centering around various pillars Al Farsi and her co-exhibitors identified as essential to the historical influence of foreigners: language, food, architecture, attire, and arts. Her contribution consists of an imagined city in which everyone belongs, filled with infinite stories and opportunities. Adam Al Farsi created a bold video for the occasion, depicting the journey of a green turtle to mirror man's search for a home. Sarah Al Olaqi delved into the role of food as an expression of identity, while Essa Al Mufarji explored Arabic poetry to reflect on immigration as a constant state of existence for those from places where resources are scarce. Lastly, Ali Al Jabri combined tree woods with local marble to symbolize the quest for solace, like that of a wanderer seeking a well of water in the desert.





LEBANON PAVILION: MOUNIRA AL SOLH

In the face of local and regional crises, Lebanon's pavilion is a testament to its artists and their enduring optimism and innovation. Known for her playful approach to highlighting socio-political issues and the role of art in Arab society, exhibitor Mounira Al Solh was tapped for the commission. Her extensive multimedia installation titled *A Dance with her Myth* is composed of 41 pieces spread across 180sqm including drawings, paintings, sculpture, embroideries, and video. At its center is an unfinished boat symbolizing the journey of emancipation and gender equality as part of Al Solh's reinterpretation of the ancient tale of Europa, a Phoenician princess abducted from the shore of Tyre in Lebanon. Drawing a link between myth and reality, the artist questions what's beyond the horizon not just for Europa, but for anyone forced to leave their home. "The Lebanese people continue to face waves of exile," she says. "Today, due to the financial crisis, the Beirut port explosion, and ongoing difficulties in the country, many of us had to leave again. We, the Lebanese, are 'foreigners everywhere' in that sense."

UAE PAVILION: ABDULLAH AL SAAD

After being featured in the 2017 Biennale's main exhibition, Abdullah Al Saadi returns to Venice. For the past 40 years, the prolific Emirati artist has been working from his studio in Khor Fakkan, employing a variety of mediums: drawings, paintings, sculptures, diary entries, and even the invention of new alphabets. His exhibition at this year's UAE pavilion, titled *Abdullah Al Saadi: Sites of Memory, Sites of Amnesia*, brings visitors into a recreation of this workspace through the discovery of hidden objects, sensory recordings, and aesthetic interpretations of his journeys into the wilderness. There are also readings from his decades-long practice – some performed by professional actors and students from the Sharjah Performing Arts Academy – which interrogate the relationship between memory and forgetting. "It is an invitation to see my creative process as a journey that begins outdoors, in nature, and ends inside my studio where I archive and preserve my chronicles," the artist explains.



**EGYPT PAVILION:
Wael Shawky**

Representing Egypt at its national pavilion is multidisciplinary artist Wael Shawky, who gained international recognition for his work depicting the medieval Crusades through a Middle Eastern lens. He titled his Biennale exhibition *Drama 1882*, in reference to the year when Egypt's nationalist revolution was crushed by the British. The work is a filmed rendition of a musical he directed and choreographed and is accompanied by vitrines, sculpture, paintings, drawings, and a mirror relief made in Murano glass.

The film's reflection on this period in Egypt's past, sung in classical Arabic, is a response to the art festival's overarching theme in its interrogation of what it means to be "a foreigner" in the context of colonization: "Who were they? They were the occupiers – it was not the idea of immigrants that we have today," Shawky states.

Likening 1882 to a moving painting, the artist says that by putting a play within a film, his aim is to translate the notion of staged history. "Trying to show the history of occupation, immigration, and injustice with a real voice from a different point of view is important," he says. "And it has to come from the Arab world."





SAUDI ARABIA PAVILION: MANAL ALDOWAYAN

In her multimedia installation titled *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song*, artist Manal AlDowayan explores evolving gender roles for Saudi Arabia's national pavilion. Her practice spans photography, sound, and sculpture and often incorporates a participatory element – all of which comes together in Venice through an immersive soundscape and large-scale soft sculptures. Marking the Kingdom's fourth participation in the Biennale and its third national pavilion featuring women artists, AlDowayan's multi-layered exhibition captures the perspectives of Saudi women during a moment of profound cultural transformation in their home country. With evocative sounds of sand dunes and singing in the background, media clippings are presented alongside the contributions of over 1,000 women who joined workshops led by AlDowayan. Transformed into silk-screened texts, these words cover three large-scale sculptures resembling the desert rose with charcoal smudges on their edges. The intention is to center female voices in conventional media narratives by contemplating "how women are seen in the collective memory of their society, and how profound the impact these images have on perceiving the humanity of the individuals portrayed." The artist hopes viewers will be encouraged to look within themselves and their communities "to find their voice and their space, especially the Saudi woman whose history is just beginning to be written."