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ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

Manal AlDowayan channels the voice of many women at this year's Venice Biennale. The Saudi artist reflects on why this is key to representing her country's evolution on a global stage

Words AMANDA RANDONE

WOMAN WITHOUT BORDERS



At 6pm on a May evening in New York last year, more than 700 people gathered in the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum's famed rotunda to look at hundreds of porcelain scrolls atop silk podiums made by Saudi Arabian artist Manal AlDowayan. At 7pm, after an hour of observing these delicate objects upon which commentary about women's bodies from mainstream media had been reproduced, visitors were instructed to take the scrolls in their hands and crush them. And so they did – on the floor, onto their heads, even onto each other's heads.

"The idea is that these systems that we think are permanent can be changed, and change comes from the collective, from our own hands," AlDowayan tells *Vogue Arabia* over Zoom from a hotel room in Jeddah, calling attention to the fact that the event was happening at a turning point in US history after laws related to abortion rights had been reversed. The multidisciplinary artist is known for the participatory nature of many of her pieces, and when considering how to bring that approach to a project in New York back in 2023, she turned to American writers of color like Angela Davis and Rafia Zakaria for inspiration. Their intersectional, transnational feminist messaging, she explains, echoes her own belief that women must work together regardless of borders and backgrounds in the global fight for gender equality. The event at the Guggenheim, which she called *From Shattered Ruins, New Life Shall Bloom*, impressed upon that notion. "Fragmenting ourselves is the worst thing that we can do [if we want to] bring women and girls to spaces where they are safe, where they can be who they are."

It is with this collectivist spirit that AlDowayan, who is based between London and Saudi Arabia, is heading to the 60th Venice Biennale next month to represent the Kingdom at its fourth-ever national pavilion from April 20 to November 24. While specific details remain under wraps, AlDowayan says the festival's overarching theme of *Stranieri Ovunque*, which translates in English to *Foreigners Everywhere*, struck her as a natural expansion of her undertaking at the Guggenheim. She has even tapped the same curator, Jessica Cerasi, for the commission, alongside Maya El Khalil and assistant curator Shadin AlBulaihed. "Throughout her career, AlDowayan has brought together communities in participatory, collaborative works that elevate and document their voices," the trio said in a statement following their biennale appointments. "Her profound connection to and her exploration of the changes taking place in Saudi Arabia earns immense respect both locally and globally."

In order to best portray this evolution of a nation within an international context – as part of its transition away from an oil-dependent economy, Saudi Arabia has been bolstering its culture and tourism sectors while relaxing some religious laws

"See how much is written about the body of the Arab woman in general, and the Saudi woman, it is just shocking"



ABOVE AND BELOW A render and sketches for Oasis of Stories, AlDowayan's 2026 land art commission that will sit permanently in Wadi AlFann in AlUla. **OPPOSITE** The Oasis of Stories exhibition curated by Iwona Blazwick, 2024



and traditionally conservative social restrictions – AlDowayan invited women across the country to join her in deciding what that can and should look like. During a series of workshops that have welcomed up to 350 attendees at a time, she's been gathering thoughts from her female peers to take with her to Venice. "I will not go there alone, as a singular voice," she stresses, the tenor of her discourse sharpening. "I am going as a community voice. I ask [the participants] to look at the women on their right, the women on their left, and then to think about themselves and to write something to encourage, to center ourselves, and to not look for our identity or for validation from the outside."

As she continues describing these sessions, AlDowayan's tone softens. Despite the barrier of a screen, she is visibly moved reflecting on how the "cacophony of media and texts" offering unsolicited opinions about Arab women clouded her sense of self growing up. Her work in Venice will not only interrogate these orientalist narratives depicting women like AlDowayan as a monolith, it will be a reclamation of the stories that belonged to them in the first place. "Just Google on the internet and see how much is written about the body of the Arab woman in general, and the Saudi woman, it is just shocking. It's very demeaning, it's very reductive. And now, with all the changes happening, the writing continues with no acknowledgment of that. I think there's an addiction to this kind of thinking, to portraying Arab women in a certain way," she says. "So, I turn to the women in my community for my Venice commission."

AlDowayan's focus on the erasure of certain groups of people has been a common thread throughout all her endeavors even before she was ready to call herself an artist. While pursuing her computer science studies in the US and the UK at her father's suggestion, AlDowayan was secretly sent money by her mother to attend art and photography classes. Upon starting her job at the Saudi oil company Aramco shortly thereafter, her creative inclinations persisted. In 2005, she set out to make the work of her female compatriots visible through photographs of them donning veils and traditional jewelry while posing with objects illustrating their occupations such as a keyboard and a stethoscope. That same year, in a series titled *The Choice*, AlDowayan's images, like that of a woman behind a steering wheel, questioned gender-based restrictions in the country. Later work also examined the oft-overlooked societal contributions of the kingdom's Bedouins and the poorer populations. After participating in group exhibitions in Spain and Bahrain, she was ready to leave Aramco in 2009 following a residency at the Delfina Foundation in London. Soon her pieces were being acquired by collectors and institutions like the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. They have since appeared in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the Gwangju Museum of Art, to name a few. Spain remains a significant place for her practice because of the establishments that embraced her there early on in her career, and today she is represented by Sabrina Amrani's eponymous gallery in Madrid.

"The concerns and themes of Manal's research are relatable to women all around the world, making her practice universal," Amrani says, adding that AlDowayan's exhibition in March of last year became the most highly attended show in the gallery's history, quadrupling typical visitor figures. Titled

Their Love Is Like All Loves, Their Death Is Like All Deaths, it grappled with subjects of ruin, heritage, lineage, and preservation through the lens of the artist's encounter with Hegra, an ancient city in Saudi Arabia that went undisturbed for nearly 2 000 years. Now open to the public, Hegra is located in the popular desert oasis region of AlUla, and AlDowayan's related work paid homage to the sculptures and engravings in its tombs along with the labyrinth-like passages that might have once formed its streets. The exhibition included drawings, acrylic paintings, clay figures, and wall pieces made using old weaving techniques.

Their Love Is Like All Loves, Their Death Is Like All Deaths is presently on view in AlUla until March 23 as part of a series of shows leading up to *Oasis of Stories*, AlDowayan's 2026 land art commission, which will sit permanently in a large valley flanked by two mountains. This, however, will not be her first public artwork in the area – in 2020, she unveiled *Now You See Me, Now You Don't*, an assemblage of puddle-like installations featuring massive trampolines that can be touched, laid upon, jumped on, and observed. The interactive project quickly became a much talked-about part of the AlUla experience. "AlUla is a huge library... I've been around 45 times because I just can't get over it. I keep thinking about the Nabateans, the Arabs who traded with the ancient Egyptians, and this idea of being connected to the larger narrative of humanity. It really impacted me," she explains.

In keeping with her preference of stepping out of the spotlight that follows her art, AlDowayan spent two months in late 2023 meeting with local communities to engage as many participants as possible in her process. She collected hundreds of drawings from teachers, farmers, cooks, craftspeople, students, members of a disability association, and more in order to unearth historical, folkloric, and contemporary accounts related to their surroundings. These depictions are currently being exhibited and will eventually be inscribed into the walls of the forthcoming land art project. *Oasis of Stories*, she says, will be for the people of AlUla.

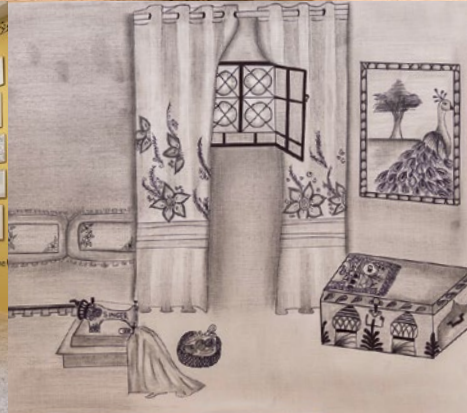
"I always tell them in the workshops that yes, international communities will come to visit it, art people too, but in reality, it's for you and only you. It's for your kids to go and enjoy, and so that in a hundred years your grandchildren will stand and look at your drawings," she shares. "It was very emotional to stay in AlUla for that long and produce that much work, and now the shows are a chapter giving gratitude to them for supporting my idea and believing in it." □



LEFT AND BELOW From *Shattered Ruins, New Life Shall Bloom* on May 22, 2023, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, displayed porcelain scrolls upon which commentary about women's bodies from mainstream media had been reproduced – visitors were then asked to take the scrolls and crush them



PHOTOGRAPHS: MIDGE WATKINS © SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, COURTESY OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION FOR ALULA, LANCE GERBER, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DESERT X ALULA



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
AlDowayan's participatory workshops in AlUla, 2023, part of Oasis of Stories; AlDowayan with Iwona Blazwick; Oasis of Stories exhibition; sketches for Oasis of Stories; Now You See Me, Now You Don't, Desert X AlUla 2020

