

Olafur Eliasson

Artist's statement for *The curious desert* at The National Museum of Qatar

Entering a museum is a way of stepping closer to society, to the realities that we live in. In a museum, you are able to see things in higher resolution. You become more focused, aware. Your senses become more alert; your body attuned; your mind open. What you encounter are most often artefacts or works of art. In my artistic practice I try to hand over the authority of deciding what is important in these encounters to the visitors. My artworks strive to embody transformation rather than stability and being.

The curious desert, my new exhibition conceived for the landscape near Al Thakhira Mangrove Forest and for the galleries of the National Museum of Qatar, is no different. It is not a stable representation or a model of reality; it *is* reality. Your experience of it changes with the time you spend in it.

The outdoor part of *The curious desert* resembles a desert laboratory, created especially for this exceptional landscape, known as a sabkha – a low plain covered in salt and other mineral deposits left over from evaporated sea water, a rich landscape bearing, as it were, the presence of absence. It consists of twelve temporary pavilions with various artworks in the shape of experimental setups, many emerging over the course of the day or over the duration of the exhibition. For some of these I have enlisted the sunlight, wind, and water to co-produce the artworks. Other pavilions host glacial sediments, remnants of oil spills, and salt crystals left over from evaporating lagoon water. Wandering in and out of the gathering of tent-like pavilions becomes an individually crafted journey. This allows you to sensitise yourself to the desert surroundings, to naturally occurring phenomena, and to the emergence of art through processes that draw on more-than-human collaboration.

Working in the seemingly barren landscape of Qatar reminds me of time I've spent in the black-sand deserts of Iceland, a space I've always considered a laboratory setting for artistic experimentation. Both sites are subject to extreme temperatures; both are fragile and challenge your sense of time passing. Responding to this fragility in Qatar has meant working closely with the museum team and engaging in dialogue with a local expert on vulnerable sites, who has produced an ecological survey of the Al Thakhira area. This has given me the opportunity to learn about and minimise the ecological footprint of the exhibition on the landscape; to acknowledge the presence of non-human inhabitants, like the Arabian Red Fox.

My artistic laboratory at Al Thakhira and my permanent installation, *Shadows travelling on the sea of the day*, near Fort Zubarah and the village of Ain Mohammed are complemented by a series of meditative light installations, geometric models, photo series, watercolours, and a sprawling research map inside the National Museum of Qatar. These artworks, like their outdoor counterparts, ask how we use vision and movement to make sense of our worlds; to make invisible phenomena visible and palpable; and to collect knowledge, engage in critical reflection, and construct worlds based on the stories that we live each day.

Together, these naturalcultural sites enrich each other. Together they make up *The curious desert*. The artworks that inhabit them are an assembly of embodied thoughts and actions, each entangled with the presence of their fellow artworks.

– Olafur Eliasson