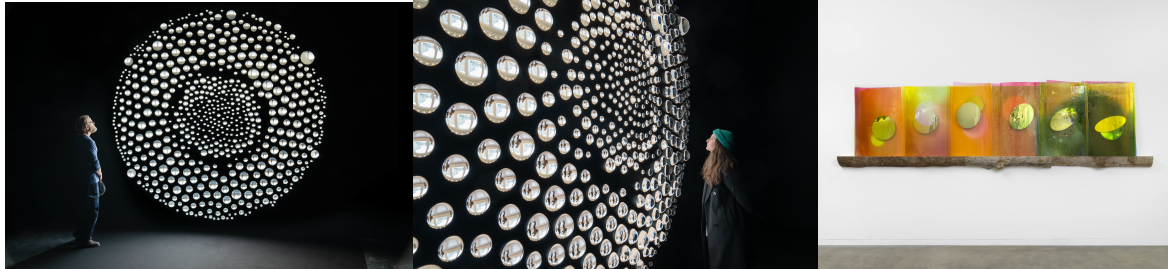


OLAFUR ELIASSON: THE CURIOUS DESERT

The curious desert, the first solo exhibition by Olafur Eliasson in the region, brings together a dozen site-specific desert installations at Al Thakhira and an extensive gallery presentation of artworks at the National Museum of Qatar.



[\[IMAGES\]](#)

DOHA, QATAR, 19 March 2023—Qatar Museums will present *The curious desert*, a new exhibition conceived by Olafur Eliasson for a site in the desert outside of Al Thakhira Mangrove Reserve and for the galleries of the National Museum of Qatar in Doha, from 19 March through 15 August 2023. Located inside and outside the museum, the exhibition includes new site-specific works that continue to explore the Icelandic-Danish artist’s abiding interests in light and colour, geometric studies, ecological awareness and more-than-human relationships. The exhibition is presented as part of Qatar Creates, the year-round national cultural movement that curates, promotes, and celebrates the diversity of cultural activities in Qatar.

Her Excellency Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, Chairperson of Qatar Museums, said, “*The curious desert* by Olafur Eliasson illustrates the power and problem-solving ability of art. Olafur’s profound body of work, including the new installations in the Qatari desert, opens an important dialogue about the environment, one of the most pressing topics of our time, in the context of our nation’s natural landscapes. This exhibition is unique in its presentation, which exists both inside and outside of the National Museum of Qatar, to further demonstrate how art is not confined to galleries, but is around us, everywhere, to inspire and educate.”

Olafur Eliasson stated, “It is an extraordinary opportunity to create artworks for the sabkha near Al Thakhira Mangrove Reserve. The sun, the wind, the nearby lagoon saltwater – they all help co-produce the artworks that visitors will encounter here. I hope the artworks in turn may sensitise people to the singular landscape and to the more-than-human agencies at work. The other half of my exhibition, at the National Museum of Qatar, is an assembly of embodied thoughts and actions from over 25 years of working as an artist. These two natural/cultural sites enrich each other – together they make up *The curious desert*.”

Located in a sabkha habitat some 64 kilometres northeast of Doha, near the Al Thakhira Mangrove Reserve, twelve temporary pavilions enclose a series of new, experimental artworks that respond to the ephemeral natural phenomena of the local environment, such as sunlight, wind and water.



The first three outdoor pavilions explore optical phenomena, making use of rainbows, shadows and mirrors to create mesmerizing effects, while pavilions five through seven contain innovative drawing machines that enlist the elements of the sabkha habitat to create artworks that will later be displayed within the exhibition at the National Museum of Qatar. The final three pavilions bring this environment into dialogue with others, with materials such as obsidian and glacial mud from Iceland. Among the projects located in the twelve desert pavilions are:

- *Rainbow incubator* – 11 prisms, arranged along the top of a reflective sphere according to the path of the sun at Al Thakhira, bend and break the daylight entering the sphere, causing it to appear at different times of the year as a perfectly circular rainbow.
- *Saltwater-drawing observatory* – Two circular canvases – one white and the other black – turn slowly on motors as water, mixed with black and white pigments respectively, drips down onto the spinning surfaces. The wind causes the drawing utensil to move across the surface of the turning page, leaving undulating marks upon the surface. The drawings, portraits of the weather conditions at the location, are then periodically shown at The National Museum of Qatar.
- *Solar incense burner* – A single glass sphere uses the rays of the sun to ignite a selection of scents typical of Qatar and the region – oud, musk, and amber, among others. Each burns for exactly one hour, functioning as a clock by marking the times of day in a variety of scents.
- *Your obsidian garden* – Inspired by Eliasson’s hikes through volcanic obsidian fields in the Icelandic highlands, the artwork in this pavilion features black, shiny obsidian that stands out in stark contrast to the sandy ground, appearing to have erupted from beneath the desert.

Eliasson and Qatar Museums worked with an ecologist to conduct an extensive survey of the site near Al Thakhira to ensure the protection of its native plants and non-human inhabitants, such as the Arabian Red Fox.

Inside the National Museum of Qatar, an extensive presentation of works from throughout the artist’s career invites viewers to situate themselves anew in relation to expansive light installations, photo series from Iceland, complex geometric studies, watercolours, optical devices, and a sprawling research map.

Works featured at the National Museum include:

- *The living lighthouse, 2023* – a new installation comprising broad bands of colourful light that crawl across the walls of this circular room, wrapping visitors in a vibrant, ever-changing light installation.
- *The Research map, 2019-* – a sprawling pin wall that charts the research and ideas that have inspired Eliasson and his studio in recent years. The map can be seen as a space of micro-storytelling, where seemingly unrelated contents vibrate next to each other and create new meaning.
- Photography series depicting the natural landscapes of Iceland – including *The glacier melt series, 1999/2019, 2019, The inner cave series, 1998, and The horizon series, 2002* – selected by the artist with the landscape of Qatar in mind.
- Artworks created by drawing and painting machines installed outdoors near the Al Thakira Mangrove Forest.



The presentation of *The curious desert* follows Qatar Museums' October 2022 unveiling of Eliasson's outdoor installation commissioned for the desert near the Ain Mohammed heritage site in Northern Qatar. The artwork, *Shadows travelling on the sea of the day* (2022), continues the Icelandic-Danish artist's longstanding exploration of the interplay between human perception and the natural world.

A two-part film created by Tigerlily Production for Studio Olafur Eliasson and Qatar Museums captures the development of Eliasson's installation *Shadows travelling on the sea of the day* and his exhibition *The curious desert*. The film created for *Shadows travelling on the sea of the day* will be on view at the Mohammed Jassim Al Khulaifi Library of The National Museum of Qatar, together with a special reading room dedicated to Eliasson, that collects a broad selection of catalogues covering the artist's production, starting from the his first solo exhibition in the nineties running up to the present. The screening of the premier of the film about *The curious desert* will be announced during the course of the exhibition.

A richly illustrated publication – documenting the exhibition and its development in photographs and artist sketches – will be available from late summer. The book will contextualise the exhibition, with a special focus on Eliasson's site-specific installations in the Qatari desert. Throughout this publication, themes explored will raise pertinent questions around the global climate emergency, including vulnerability, responsibility, and urgency. The book will be available in English and Arabic.

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About *The curious desert*

A free shuttle bus to the outdoor location will run once a week. Starting from 25 March the bus will depart from the National Museum of Qatar every Saturday.

- March to May - departing from the National Museum at 9:00AM, returning at 12:00PM.
- June to August - departing from the National Museum of Qatar at 4:00PM, returning at 7:00PM.

Bus capacity is limited and will be available on a first-come, first-served basis.

For further details, please visit the NMoQ website.

Catalogue

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Public Panel Talks

Two public panel talks took place at the National Museum of Qatar to mark the exhibition opening. The first was a dialogue about *The curious desert* between Eliasson, H.E. Sheikha Al



Mayssa Bint Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, Chairperson of Qatar Museums, Doha Film Institute, Reach Out to Asia, and Qatar Leadership Centre, H.E. Mr. Ahmed Al-Sada, Assistant Undersecretary for Climate Change, and Ghanim Al Ghanim, CEO of Al Hosh Gallery. On the occasion of the exhibition Olafur Eliasson: The curious desert at the National Museum of Qatar, the cross-disciplinary discussion looked at the ways in which art and culture strive to inspire positive change when confronted with the urgency of the climate crisis.

The second talk, ‘Art and the Environment: Awareness and Action’ between Eliasson, Mohammed Omar Al Bader, from the Climate Change Department, Ministry of Environment and Climate Change; Dr. Aspa D. Chatziefthimiou, Ecologist and Environmental Consultant at NMoQ; Reem Al Sehlawi, Associate Director of the Arab Youth Climate Movement; and Neema Githere, writer, artist, and grassroots theorist, from the USA/Kenya, centred around our entanglements with natural environments in the context of the climate emergency and addressed the complex ways in which we can hear and respond to the needs of many – humans and nonhumans alike.

The panel were recorded and will be available on Qatar Creates.

Carbon footprint report

The full carbon emissions report for Olafur Eliasson: The curious desert at the National Museum of Qatar will be available after the exhibition closes. Final results and offsetting partners will be published on [Studio Olafur Eliasson](#) website and the [NMoQ](#) website.

Studio Olafur Eliasson is dedicated to seeking sustainable solutions in all aspects of art-making and studio operations. While there is no substitute for cutting carbon emissions, we opt to offset those we cannot currently avoid.

About Olafur Eliasson

The works of artist Olafur Eliasson (IS/DK, b.1967) explore the relevance of art in the world at large. Since 1997, his wide-ranging solo shows – featuring installations, paintings, sculptures, photography, and film – have appeared in major museums around the globe. In 2003, he represented Denmark at the 50th Venice Biennale, and later that year he installed *The weather project* at Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, London. He returned to Tate Modern in 2019, for *In real life*, a wide-ranging survey exhibition of his artistic practice over the past twenty-five years. *Olafur Eliasson: Symbiotic seeing* appeared at Kunsthau Zürich from January to March 2020, and *Sometimes the river is the bridge* was shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo from April to September 2020. In the autumn of 2022 Eliasson presented two solo exhibitions in Italy: *Nel tuo tempo* (In your time), at Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, and *Orizzonti tremanti* (Trembling horizons), at Castello di Rivoli, Turin.

Eliasson’s projects in public space include *The New York City Waterfalls*, 2008; *Fjordenhus, Vejle*, 2018; *Ice Watch*, 2014; and most recently *Shadows travelling on the sea of the day*, 2022. In 2012, Eliasson set up the social business Little Sun, and in 2014, he and Sebastian Behmann started Studio Other Spaces, an office for art and architecture.



Eliasson founded Studio Olafur Eliasson in Berlin in 1995, which today comprises a large team of craftspeople, architects, archivists, researchers, administrators, cooks, programmers, art historians, and specialised technicians.

www.olafureliasson.net

About the National Museum of Qatar

The National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ) seeks to preserve and celebrate Qatar's heritage and natural history, engage with its present, and inspire the country's ambitions for the future. The museum, which opened in March 2019, gives voice to the country's heritage and culture through commissioned films and artworks, storytelling, artefacts, and music, combining wide-ranging scholarship with oral histories of the people of Qatar. NMoQ is organised as a thematic and chronological sequence of galleries, which take the visitor on a 1.5-km journey through immersive, multisensory experiences that provide multiple perspectives. The iconic building, designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Jean Nouvel, is based on the form of the desert rose and is composed of large interlocking disks of different diameters and curvatures that surround the restored historic Palace of Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al Thani (1880-1957), son of the founder of modern Qatar. Sheikha Amna bint Abdulaziz bin Jassim Al-Thani has served as director of the museum since 2013.

About Qatar Museums

Qatar Museums (QM), the nation's preeminent institution for art and culture, provides authentic and inspiring cultural experiences through a growing network of museums, heritage sites, festivals, public art installations, and programmes. QM preserves, restores, and expands the nation's cultural offerings and historical sites, sharing art and culture from Qatar, the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia (MENASA) region with the world and enriching the lives of citizens, residents, and visitors.

Under the patronage of His Highness the Amir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, and led by its Chairperson, Her Excellency Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, QM has made Qatar a vibrant centre for the arts, culture, and education in the Middle East and beyond. QM is integral to the goal of developing an innovative, diverse, and progressive nation, bringing people together to ignite new thinking, spark critical cultural conversations, educate and encourage environmental stewardship and sustainable practices, and amplify the voices of Qatar's people. Since its founding in 2005, QM has overseen the Museum of Islamic Art and MIA Park, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, the National Museum of Qatar, QM Gallery Al Riwaq, QM Gallery Katara and the 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum. Future museums include Dadu, Children's Museum of Qatar, Qatar Auto Museum, Art Mill Museum and the Lusail Museum.

Through its newly created Creative Hub, QM also initiates and supports projects—such as the Fire Station Artist in Residence, the Tasweer Qatar Photo Festival, the creative hub for innovation, fashion and design M7, and Liwan Design Studios and Labs—that nurture artistic talent and create opportunities to build a strong and sustainable cultural infrastructure.

Animating everything that Qatar Museums does is an authentic connection to Qatar and its heritage, a steadfast commitment to inclusivity and accessibility, and a belief in creating value through invention.

Qatar Creates curates, celebrates, and promotes cultural activities within Qatar. Working



with partners in museums, film, fashion, hospitality, cultural heritage, performing arts, and the private sector in Qatar, the Qatar Creates platform amplifies the voice of Qatar's creative industries, directly connecting audiences to events.

