

MANAL ALDOWAYAN SHIFTING SANDS: A BATTLE SONG

NATIONAL PAVILION OF SAUDI ARABIA
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A RALLYING CRY

JESSICA CERASI

Shifting Sands: A Battle Song sets the scene of a landscape in flux; one marked by the passage of time and the inevitability of change. In its midst, a chorus gathers its strength and lets out its rallying cry, exhilarated and ready to march forth, come what may. Through sculpture and sound, Manal AlDowayan's multi-layered installation for the Biennale Arte 2024 evokes this powerful vision of womanhood in Saudi Arabia today. Yet, while it may be a work emerging from the distinct particularities of its context, it tells a story that transcends cultures and geographies asserting an autonomy and solidarity among women that will find resonances the world over.

Although this work brings together many of the lines of inquiry that have defined AlDowayan's practice over the past two decades, it was inspired by a personal experience which took place before her artistic career formally began. Growing up in Dhahran in Saudi Arabia's Eastern province, within the residential compound of Aramco (formerly Arabian-American Oil company) where her father worked, AlDowayan began her own working life at Aramco too, joining the company in 2000. She describes that as a new employee she was sent to visit the Shaybah plant, an outpost oil facility deep in the southern desert of Rub' al-Khali, also known as the Empty Quarter. It was there she first experienced the extraordinary natural phenomenon of the "singing sands": "We climbed the tallest dune, and with our bodies, we started to push the surface of the dune into a cascade of sand waves. The dune responded with a soft hum that became louder and louder. The hum carried a vibration that embodied a sense of change, it was an announcement that the landscape had been disrupted. I took a deep breath and I began to hum with the dune."

This low, sustained groaning of the dune is the result of tiny landslides caused by the pressure of footsteps or vehicle tires. Interestingly, these sounds are not a feature of all deserts, and are especially pronounced and multi-tonal in Rub' al-Khali, where the dunes are remarkably steep and the air particularly arid. For AlDowayan, the sound of the dune adapting and responding to her presence was memorable and extraordinary. She recalls: "My voice united with the sand as it shifted and moved, announcing its transformation to whoever hears it."

It is this moment that she has sought to share with her community. AlDowayan recorded the sound of the dunes and, through a series of participatory workshops held in Al Khobar, Riyadh, and Jeddah, invited women and girls of all ages to hum and harmonize with its tones. It is this communion between woman and landscape, as both adapt and change, that first greets visitors to the Pavilion.

While this is the first time AlDowayan has explored sound as a medium, what has remained constant within her practice is the unrelenting commitment to empower and uplift the voices of Saudi women. Across a wide-ranging body of work spanning photography, sculpture, video, and installation, AlDowayan has long documented the lived experience of the women of her homeland with sensitivity and pride.

The participatory workshops that underpin *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song* are a mainstay of AlDowayan's practice. Her first workshops were conducted as part of her work *Esmi – My Name* (2012), but the artist also views her earliest series of black-and-white photography *I Am* (2005) and *The Choice* (2005) as participatory given that the images were staged in close collaboration with the women portrayed. In works such as these, and notably also *Tree of Guardians* (2014), AlDowayan has used her position as an artist to share her reach

with other women of her homeland, together building up a powerful collective view into what it means to be a woman in her country. The metaphor of the singing sands holds here too: the sound of miniscule individual grains of sand interacting with one another accumulates into a collective roar.

However, it is through both sound and sculpture that *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song* claims the space of the Pavilion. Visitors are invited to wind their way through a maze of large-scale, printed silk, petal-like sculptures that take their forms from the desert rose, a crystal commonly found in the desert sands near the artist's hometown of Dhahran. Prized finds for centuries, these strangely organic tessellated blossoms are created when minerals in the sand are welded together in the dry desert heat. AlDowayan recalls searching for them in the desert as a child. They have featured in her approach to sculpture since 2018, but in the artist's hands their unique petal-like accretions are made less crystalline and more bodily, their organic nature exaggerated through soft materials and soft edges. The curvature of these edges is made even more pronounced through black outlines the artist applies with her fingers. This action is in reference to some advice she received early on in her career: approaching certain topics was like touching charcoal, from that point on she would never get clean.

As with her earlier desert rose sculptures, AlDowayan marks the "body" of these outsized blooms with text. Previously, in works like *Watch Before You Fall* (2019) and *O Sister* (2021), this printed matter was appropriated from outdated publications containing directives on women's behavior. Here, for the first time, the surface of these sculptures is silkscreened with texts about Saudi women, sourced from local and international news media.

AlDowayan has had a long-standing interest in media representations of women, first incorporating them into her work within the photography series *Landscapes of the Mind* (2009–2010), for which she collected images of Saudi women from local newspapers. A pattern emerged of women depicted at a distance, faces hidden, with no distinguishing features, and always in groups. This lack of individuality extended beyond the ways women were photographed to the ways they were written about. *Crash* (2014) gathered the artist's research around the tragic numbers of women educators dying in car crashes as they commuted to teaching posts in remote villages. While these deaths were extensively reported, social considerations of the time meant that the names of the deceased teachers were not mentioned in the media directly.

In 2023, AlDowayan broadened her scope to address international print media around women's bodies more generally, with *From Shattered Ruins, New Life Shall Bloom*, a sculptural installation and participatory event held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. Text and imagery, ranging from Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's odalisque through to clickbait articles on female celebrities' weight fluctuations, were transposed onto a series of stacked silk cushions or "totems." Atop each of them were porcelain scrolls printed with further texts, that visitors were invited to handle and break together in a shared moment of catharsis and release.

For the Biennale Arte 2024, AlDowayan takes a different approach to breaking free of these constricting assumptions. Here, AlDowayan has trained her focus on the ways Saudi women in particular are discussed, both locally and internationally. Her research has revealed

an obsession with their veiling and unveiling, how they may and may not act, and manifold assumptions around their wants and desires, but very little around how Saudi women themselves identify. Indeed, this cacophony of imposed opinions has largely served to obscure their own self-representation and moreover, as AlDowayan notes, has had a profoundly damaging impact on one's own self-perception: "I grew up and spent most of my adult life in a context where visual representation of women and girls was hard to access in both media and in real life. I filled the gaps with what the world mirrored back to me and how the external interpreted who I am, and I didn't like it: weakness, helplessness, uselessness." In many ways, she understands her practice to be restorative, a crucial reconstruction of her self-image.

Significantly, in scale with the burden of these preconceptions, these are the artist's largest soft sculptures to date. Intersecting the space like dunes, each cluster of forms forces visitors to adjust their paths in order to pass between them with care. The layout loosely follows the structure of the traditional ceremonies of warriors preparing to meet their enemies on the battlefield. In the case of the Alardah and Aldahha, men assemble themselves in two lines opposite one another, organizing their song around a central motivating element: generally, a dancer or poet. In *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song*, amidst the wall of sound on either side, in the middle of the space, a shift occurs. The two desert rose sculptures at the center of the work are silkscreened, not with newsprint, but with the drawings and handwriting of Saudi women. At the participatory workshops, AlDowayan shared media excerpts with the participants, asking them to note their responses on paper. This exercise yielded a wide range of insights and approaches around what it means to be a Saudi woman today. Many of the written contributions were then read aloud and repeated back by the group in unison. In effect, through drawings, speech, and song, it is the voices of Saudi women boldly proclaiming themselves that acts here as the motivator, charging everything around it.

As the culmination of her participatory workshops, AlDowayan has offered Saudi women and girls a platform to assert their own voices, both individually and collectively, in shared gestures of support and unity. As she explains: "We are going to need to reinforce each other to face the next chapter of our story, to build our own vision of what a Saudi woman is in today's world."

In the context of the Biennale Arte 2024 theme *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, in which the solitude of an outsider is met with the fellowship of shared experience, AlDowayan resists a narrative of "othering" and offers forth voices that have for too long gone unheard. Describing her ambitions for this installation, AlDowayan has said: "I hope this artwork will encourage women to look within themselves and to lean on their community of women to find their voice and their space within this new chapter in history, much of which is still unwritten." This is a moment of tremendous change in Saudi Arabia, taking place at astonishing speed. *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song*, is inspired by the evolving role of women in Saudi Arabia's public sphere and their ongoing journey to articulate their own narratives, and assert their place at this moment of profound cultural transformation. It is a symbolic action and a call for solidarity: an experience designed to inspire courage.



Manal AlDowayan
Shifting Sands: A Battle Song, 2024
Multimedia installation
Tussar silk, ink, acrylic paint
Dimensions variable
Sound, multichannel, 41'38"

A VOICE AND A VOICE AND A VOICE AND A VOICE

MAYA EL KHALIL

When Manal AlDowayan brings women together, she creates a process where words and thoughts become ideas with the power to transform public spaces. She explains: "I have always thought of the space created through the collective voice. Whenever you do a participatory session, a collective voice is performed." In past projects, the workshop sessions accumulated the words of many women into outsized sculptural forms that transformed the place of viewing – the overhead flock of birds soaring in *Suspended Together* (2011) or the monumental prayer beads of *Esmi – My Name* (2012). Both works include traces of linguistic artefacts – documents and names, respectively – but no voices were heard directly. "It's not an act, we're not making a statement, I am not making a statement," AlDowayan clarifies; "Instead, I create a moment for a group, a shared space where we perform together."

Her works have always gestated in women's spaces: "They've always been a part of my life," she explains, "I know that when women gather together, that is one of the most powerful spaces they can exist in. The nature of these spaces means they are impossible to describe or recreate. When there's the presence of any other gaze – a man or a foreigner – it changes. The spaces are a complete comfort where I find so much power – I continue to look for it everywhere I go."

AlDowayan's participatory compositions interweave the visible and the invisible, the absent and the present, in a continuous process. The moments of collective making

– when the public or the outcome are absent – take precedence for the artist. The moment of presentation channels the invisible force of the women's contribution, entering it into public space; the collective action within makes it powerful.

For AlDowayan, invisibility is often misread as absence: "To me, the invisibility of women does not mean the absence of their physical presence or their voice. Invisibility is just what your eye sees and what your eye doesn't see." This un-seen quality is also a form of power that AlDowayan finds in women's spaces: even if voices are not heard publicly, they hold the potential to be a transformative force – whether for the individual women or in community.

The subversive power of the unseen collective first emerged in her early participatory art, creating platforms for women at a time when public gatherings were scarce: "The groups included many women with different experiences of visibility and invisibility – for example, my mother or other older women had fewer platforms than younger women. Many had no platform to express or say anything other than within their groups or gatherings." By creating cross-generational, collective moments, she translated their energy and ideas into works that entered public spaces and public consciousness: "I used something men didn't have access to, which was the counter-public of women's spaces. They couldn't access it. So, I found extreme power in something seen as very weak."

AlDowayan's work for the Biennale Arte 2024, *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song* (2024), is a matrix of forms and notions that appear and disappear – sensory traces bloom and surge around the viewer while ideas recede, retreat, and reappear. Two forms hang, two others rise, sinuous layering pleats and curves of fabric over and into themselves as if cocooned and enfolding simultaneously. These are desert roses, in geological terms – an ephemeral crystal found beneath sands, found if you're lucky, if you're careful, when conditions are right – their precarious existence a secret of the desert.

Like its crystalline formation, for AlDowayan, a desert rose layers multiple dimensions – it is fragility, ephemerality, femininity and resilience. On its surfaces, printed words recede into the petals. Swallowed and contorted between folds, they are still legible – as brazen as skin branded with immutable terms. The words taken from newspaper headlines speak of Saudi women, terms that want to fix and hold their presence, unyielding opinions made fact.

Around the structures, a sonic atmosphere eddies with a guttural symphony that brings together the expressions of land and women. These are echoes of the booming dunes of Rub' al-Khali (the Empty Quarter, the desert that dominates the southern third of the Arabian Peninsula) and the voices of women singing with those dunes, drawing sound from deep within their bodies. Together, these intermixed scores are a mythic soundscape ready to purge the words scarred into the



desert rose, a collective lament – or battle cry – against the portrayals that limit, constrain, and contort them.

In approaching Venice, several long-held ideas came together for AIDowayan: “I realized with this project, the sound of the collective voice is very physical. But it wasn’t until now that I knew how to translate it into my work as *sound*; the voice has never come through as it does here.” In *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song*, she explains, “sound is an invisible instrument that occupies the space. It has a huge presence; you can’t see it, but you cannot deny that what you don’t see exists. This is what I try to play with.”

As a material, sound is more amorphous and all-encompassing than an object. The enveloping atmospheres of sound summon the desert and reckon with the bonds and strictures of media and archives. In earlier works, AIDowayan directed focused acts to challenge specific confines that Saudi women encountered. These were concerted, repetitive gestures that accrued into one act to criticize the absurdity of these confines or test their capacity for constriction – as in gathering unspoken names in *Esmi – My Name* to string together a shared enunciation of what is omitted.

The ideas confronted in *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song* are multidimensional, yielding different notions and affect depending on vantage. Where earlier works were a processual transformation for the women producing the work, *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song* enfolds many different perspectives, drawing in and implicating our own as well. Most notably, what an audience in Venice might hear in the headlines will contrast with what the women in the workshops might have felt. The media artifacts that adorn the surfaces of the desert rose make present commanding voices that accuse and articulate uninformed narratives.

The artist summons the women to join her in a defiant sonic counter – an insubordinate utterance that channels the currents of the desert to reject determined stereotypes, bursting out of these confines with charged humming and roaring.

The sounds made by the women draw their inflammatory energy from two sources, geological and cultural. In the vast expanses of Rub’ al-Khali, towering sands hum and sing and the dunes drone. As people move down the surfaces, the body of the earth vibrates in response, sound emanating from deep within to produce a sonic envelope that ricochets and fills the colossal sands.

The second source is a human-made song of battle, based on the Aldahha, a traditional performance

art combining poetry, song, and movement, used historically in Bedouin communities before wars to rally fighters. A performance of unity, the Aldahha sees men stand close to each other, moving their shoulders rhythmically as if their bodies become one pack, building energy together. As they move, they chant and growl, collectively making the sounds of lions or camels. AIDowayan reflects on the ritual and its purpose: “When men perform these group sounds, it’s about uniting them. The group feeling is very tribal, an ancient Arab attitude about the approach to battle that acknowledges that what any individual does impacts everybody. In this way, we are unified, we are one, we are not individuals but one tribe.”

This collectivism is profoundly important to AIDowayan, who is conscious of her hypervisibility as an artist, and works continuously to find the right balance of authorship and togetherness. She rejects the idea that a collective utterance might subsume an individual’s unique perspective. Each voice is essential, but harmony requires a collective. She explains: “To me, we inherited individualism from capitalism. To be an individual, to think of yourself first and foremost as an individual, is contrary to how we think. A congregation, in anthropological terms, is important to protect the tribe. We stick together, we follow certain rules, and that’s survival. It’s how we survive as a group and as individuals. But, if you behave as an individual, you either hurt yourself or the group.”

The unification goes further; it is not just between all the women in the group, it is between the land and the body. The women sing, drawing into their bodies the sonic qualities of the dunes, letting its mythic qualities inform the sounds they make as they sing together, as one.

Translated into the workshop space, AIDowayan sees this collective performance as a motivational tool: “When the one next to you and the one next to her utter the same sound, you look at each other, and you become connected in a very invisible way. It is the same feeling you’d get if you were to stand and hook your hands together. A power arrives through this sense of unity.” This kind of utterance radically rejects words printed in newspapers that frame and limit women in stereotypes or misunderstandings.

The workshops also use printed media stereotypes as a provocational tool. The same words used to provoke and challenge the women to defiant song in the workshops are found on the desert roses. Written words imply permanence as an archival truth. “But truth evolves,” says AIDowayan. “Newspapers, words, as physical things are systems that exist and we think they are forever.

But, as I showed in *From Shattered Ruins, New Life Shall Bloom* (2023), these objects can be deconstructed and destroyed. Saudi women are resilient; their thoughts and presence exist – they are here. Headlines can be manipulated but women’s power is a fluidity that lives.”

The work comes at a time of concerted archiving as Saudi Arabia changes: “We have a big push for archiving, remembering, and registering. This is a rush toward preservation, whether very tangible cultures such as buildings and archaeological sites or more ephemeral traditions such as gestures, clothes, storytelling or food. So, this felt like the right moment for this to happen.”

Though the archive has always been an integral part to AIDowayan’s practice, she continues to question its meaning: “To me, it is the final end of all conversations and histories. But just because something is written and put in a book and put on a shelf, is that the truth? Using the voice in this work, creating and adapting a song, I want to think about what it means to have a written archive instead of the oral archives within women’s psyche and traditions.”

AIDowayan feels a tangibility in the culture of her land and the wider Arab lands, in the way songs or traditions are built, and how they are very connected: “They’re not just something floating. No, it’s grounded and connected to heritage, landscape, and traditions.” *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song* draws on the past but is a subtle subversion of these archives – for example, women performing a song hitherto reserved for men. It is simultaneously of the archive and an instigation to move away from what is fixed and defined.

Media, words, the desert, the desert rose, sound – the work choreographs many elements, but the heart of the piece is clear to AIDowayan, and it does not take place in the moment of viewing in the pavilion. “The most powerful moment of this participatory act is women in a group making a sound together. That! That is the most powerful point.” The words may not be lucid, but their effect is: “What you experience in the exhibition is the trace of women trying to unite in their conversations, I capture the trace of these moments.”

Encountering the work is to find another figure of duality: The force of a sound and the power of invisible archives with all that they carry forward through people and land. “You cannot look at the sound. You just have to experience it physically through your body, and that’s it. You let it in through your ears, and you let it get to your head and mind. You feel it unsettle misconceptions and rewrite those violent restrictive headlines in ways that are inarticulable but felt – that’s it.”



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Shifting Sands: A Battle Song

Manal AIDowayan

National Pavilion of Saudi Arabia

60th International Art Exhibition

La Biennale di Venezia

20 April – 24 November 2024

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Manal AIDowayan is one of Saudi Arabia's most significant contemporary artists working internationally. Her work, which spans various mediums including photography, sound, sculpture, and participatory practice, interrogates traditions, collective memories, and the status and representation of women. AIDowayan's work has been exhibited regionally and internationally in institutions such as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, USA (2023); the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada (2023); Los Angeles County Museum of Art, USA (2023); Louvre Abu Dhabi, UAE (2023); Misk Art Institute, Saudi Arabia (2023, 2022); Setouchi Triennale, Japan (2022); Diriyah Biennale, Saudi Arabia (2022); Taehwa River Eco Festival, Korea (2021); Victoria & Albert Museum, UK (2021); British Museum, UK (2021); Desert X AIUla, Saudi Arabia (2020); the Aga Khan Museum, Canada (2018); Institut du monde arabe, France (2017); the Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE (2016); Santander Art Gallery, Spain (2016); Prospect New Orleans, USA (2014); Gwangju Museum of Art, South Korea (2014); and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Qatar (2014), among others. Her works can be found in the collections of the British Museum, UK; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark; the Centre Pompidou, France; Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Qatar; and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, USA. She participated in the Robert Rauschenberg Residency, USA (2015), and the artist-in-residence program at the Delfina Foundation, UK (2009). She holds an MA in Contemporary Art Practice in Public Spheres from the Royal College of Art, London. Born in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, in 1973, AIDowayan currently lives and works between London and Dhahran.

Jessica Cerasi is a curator based in Abu Dhabi, Istanbul, and London. She was most recently Associate Curator for the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi project at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Foundation. In this role, she co-curated Manal AIDowayan's participatory event *From Shattered Ruins, New Life Shall Bloom* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in May 2023. Over the years, Cerasi has gained extensive experience working with artists from Türkiye and the Arab Gulf region. She likewise possesses a breadth of biennale experience, having worked as Assistant Curator for the 58th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia in 2019, and Assistant Curator for the Biennale of Sydney in 2016. She has previously worked as Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the UK Government Art Collection, Exhibitions Manager at Carroll/Fletcher Gallery, and Curatorial Assistant at London's Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre. With a strong interest in fostering contemporary art appreciation among new audiences, she conceived and taught a popular course on "Demystifying Contemporary Art" at Tate Modern (2017-2019), and has written two books on the subject. *Who's Afraid of Contemporary Art* (2017, co-authored with Kyung An) is a playful introduction to contemporary art at its most baffling, while *Contemporary Art Decoded* (2021) takes ten key questions about contemporary art and uses them to explore what you're looking at, how it works, and why it matters. She holds an MA in Art History from University College London and a Postgraduate Diploma from the Courtauld Institute.

Maya El Khalil is a curator based in Oxford, UK. Over two decades, she has collaborated with artists, collectors and institutions to shape transforming art scenes across the Gulf and Arab world. Her curatorial work foregrounds socially engaged exhibitions through partnerships with international foundations and museums. She curated Manal AIDowayan's first solo exhibition in Saudi Arabia, *A Journey of Belonging*, Athr Gallery (2013). In 2022, she curated ADMAF's *Portrait of a Nation: Beyond Narratives*, the first survey exhibition presenting 50 years of the UAE art scene, marking a significant contribution to the region's art history. Since 2020, El Khalil's research has examined environmental and climate challenges through multidisciplinary exhibitions. These include *I Love You, Urgently*, 21,39 Jeddah Art (2020); the digital platform *Take Me to the River* with Goethe Institut and Prince Claus Fund (2020–2021); *Perceptible Rhythms/Alternative Temporalities* at the Middle East Institute, Washington D.C. (2022), and *In the Presence of Absence*, the third edition of Desert X AIUla (2024). As founding director of Athr Gallery in Jeddah from 2009–2016, she pioneered new exhibition approaches and cultural exchange, helping establish Saudi Arabia's contemporary art scene. She has been appointed to diverse panels, advisory boards, and juries. In 2023, she joined the International Advisory Board of Prince Claus Fund. El Khalil holds an MA Art and Politics (distinction) from Goldsmiths College, University of London, an MBA and a Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering from the American University of Beirut.

Shadin AIBulaihed is a curator based in Riyadh. She was the Assistant Curator for the 8th edition of the Saudi Art Council's annual 21,39 Jeddah Arts exhibition in 2021, *The Secrets of Alidades*, curated by Fabien Danesi, and the 9th edition in 2022, *Amakin*, curated by Venetia Porter. AIBulaihed also served as the Production Manager for the AIUla Residency during the AIUla Arts Festival and completed a curator's residency at The Delfina Foundation in London in 2022, besides being part of the production team in Noor Riyadh 2022. Currently, she is Assistant Curator at the Misk Art Institute, leading the Misk Art Grant program. She holds a BA in Architecture from the School of Design and Architecture from Dar Al-Hekma University in Jeddah (2017) and an MA in Museum and Gallery Studies from Kingston University in London (2020).



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