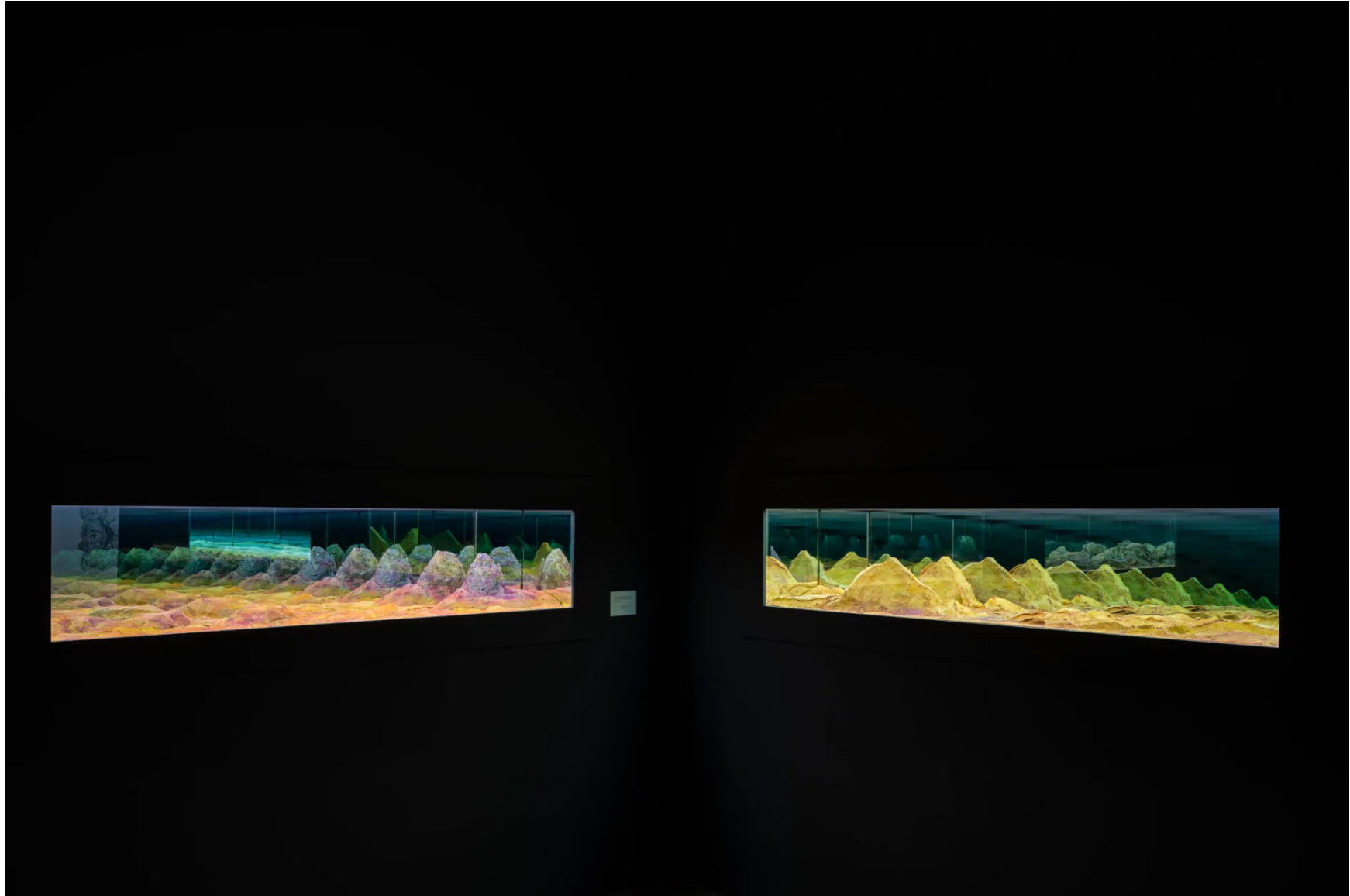


Thinking Green in the Gulf: Creative Approaches to the Climate Crisis

Gulf creative communities turn to their crafts to reimagine sustainability in the region.

Nada Ammagui · Dec 11, 2023 · العربية



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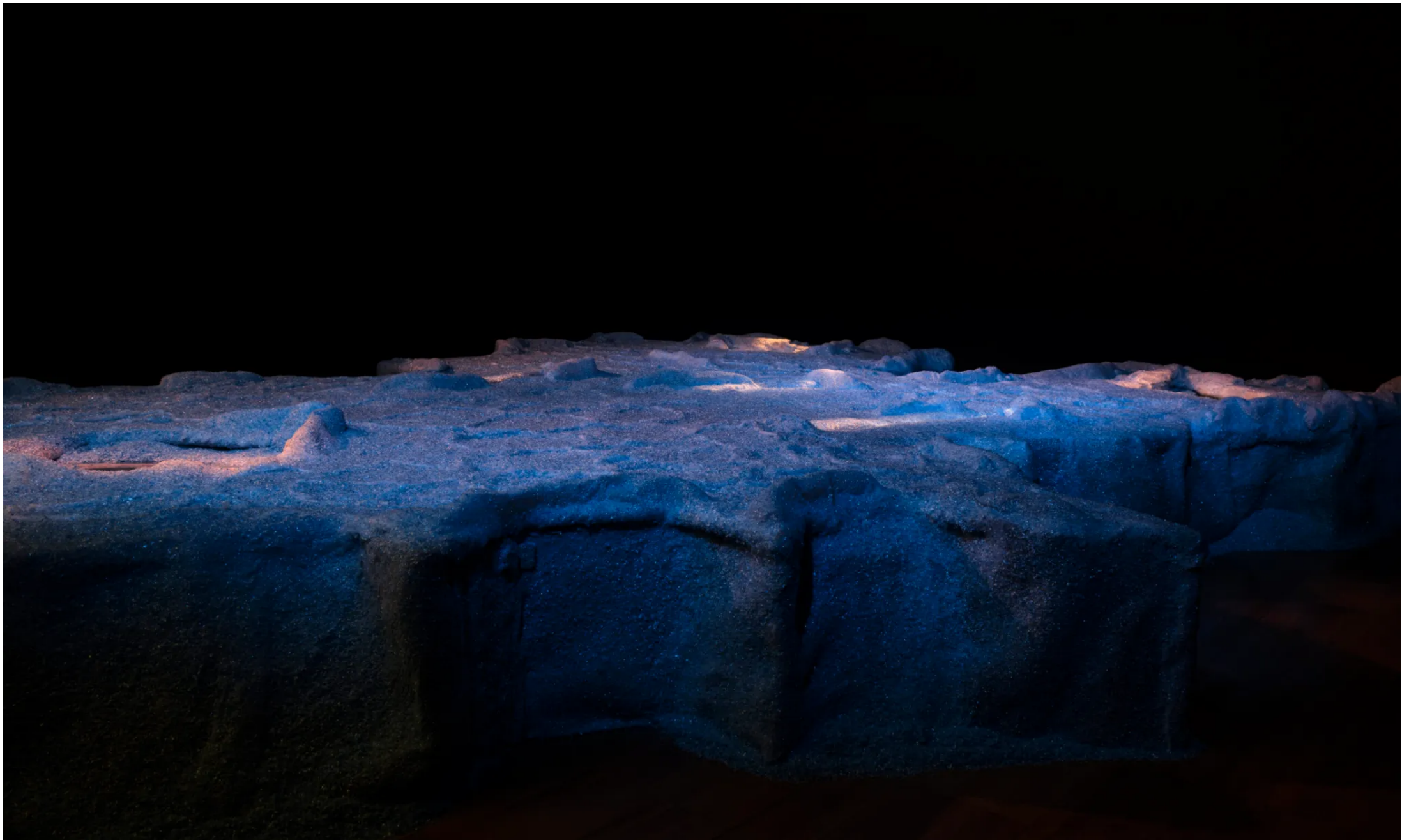
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While all climate-focused eyes are on the United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP28, in Dubai and the formal diplomatic discussions taking place to combat climate change and support sustainability, artists and architects from the Arab world and beyond have been engaging with these issues through their crafts. In Gulf countries, the effects of climate change are felt acutely. Arts practitioners, curators, and exhibitions have investigated how humans might live more in tune with nature, creating avenues for environmental engagement through immersive and visual experiences.

Recent exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates, such as the annual Dubai Design Week as well as "Jawhar" and "Melting Point" at Alserkal Avenue, have made sustainability their core focus. Similarly, many artists from Gulf countries have – some for decades – used their creative practice to investigate the effects of climate change on local ecosystems and human life and explore novel methods rooted in art, creativity, and design to tackle the climate crisis.

Local Ecologies, Global Echoes

"Blane De St. Croix: Horizon," an exhibition at the NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery and the product of a yearlong artist residency at the university, "celebrates the less-familiar views" of the UAE's environment, including salt lakes and various rock formations. In his exhibition, Blane De St. Croix, an American sculptor and researcher who worked closely with the local scientific and artistic community during his research visits to the UAE, drew on overlaps in climate research, sustainability, and artistic intervention to fashion a *sabkha* (salt flat) installation – "Salt Lake Excerpt, UAE" – out of an estimated 50,000 recycled plastic bottles. The work was conceived and produced with NYU Abu Dhabi theater professor Joanna Settle and made in collaboration with NYU Abu Dhabi students, alumni, faculty, and staff. It creates an immersive experience through audio recordings, moving lights, and a walking path around the sabkha, urging conscious engagement with the environment.



"Salt Lake Excerpt, UAE" (detail), 2023. Photo by John Varghese. (Courtesy of NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery)

In a conversation with AGSIW, Joanna explained: "I activated liveness in a sculpture with Blane. My thought with that is if science was going to resolve the climate crisis, it would have been resolved in the 1970s. So, 50 years later, it seems to me that there's something about our hearts and our willingness to change that needs to be accessed, and that has to do with our psyches and gets more into art than into science. How do you move somebody's heart? How do you change somebody's perspective? So, in this piece, the audience is the doer in creating their own experience – you have to have mobility with how you perceive that sculpture. As you have mobility, your perception shifts. That seems to me like a good place to start with the crisis, this *existential* crisis."

With cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional collaboration at its core, the sabkha installation was made using polyethylene terephthalate, or PET, from a factory in Dubai whose owners, the sons of a former plastic producer, harvest recycled plastic. Resembling in sound and color the salt flats' crust, the use of this material in the sculpture plays on the fine line between human-made materials, such as PET, and natural elements, such as salt. On this delicate distinction, Joanna noted, "At this point, we have to think of plastic as a natural material – it's in you, it's in me, it's in the water, it's in the fish, it's in the earth."

While several new commissions in Blane's exhibition focus on the UAE's various landscapes, he worked several other locales into his ruminations on the climate crisis, from Haiti and the Louisiana bayou to Svalbard and the Himalayas. To Blane, while different ecologies have endured the effects of climate change in different ways, its undeniable impact is universal.



Installation shot from "Aridly Abundant," 2023. Photo by Ismail Noor of Seeing Things. (Courtesy of National Pavilion UAE - La Biennale di Venezia)

At the 2023 International Architecture Exhibition – the architectural biennale in Venice – two Gulf pavilions examined the human relationship to local environments as a means of rethinking architectural and spatial engagement with the land. The UAE pavilion, “Aridly Abundant,” which was curated by Faysal Tabbarah, an architect and associate dean of the College of Architecture, Art, and Design at the American University of Sharjah, investigated “what architectural possibilities can become possible when we reimagine arid landscapes as spaces of abundance.” The exhibition sought to highlight ways in which architectural practices could work more cohesively with local landscapes, while challenging viewers to rethink deserts and arid land as places of abundance. The pavilion’s installations urged an architectural approach that worked in, for, and with the UAE’s landscapes.

The UAE pavilion displayed stone assembly methods from across the Al Hajar mountain region while using materials from the Veneto region of Italy. These historical practices have enabled communities to live in harmony with the arid landscape in a way the curator hopes others worldwide adopt: “Knowledge rooted in the UAE’s cultural and material environments can help inform approaches and responses to the climate crisis. The UAE is seen as an arid landscape, which is an environment that many believe will be replicated globally due to the increasing risks of global warming.”



Installation view, National Pavilion of the Kingdom of Bahrain, 2023, gerdastudio © (Courtesy of Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities)

Bahrain's pavilion in Venice, "Sweating Assets," examined how water condensate, a byproduct of the omnipresent cooling mechanisms and air conditioners used in Bahrain's hot and humid environment, could be adaptively reused to supplement gaps in the water supply elsewhere in the local ecology. Architect Latifa AlKhayat, who curated the exhibit with fellow architect Maryam Aljomairi, explained: "I would say that it's important, rather than constantly looking to use more resources to create more novel technologies, to look at what's there and simply manage those loose ends so that every drop is collected."

In this sense, both pavilions urged visitors in Venice and climate enthusiasts everywhere to consider more sustainable living practices to combat the effects of climate change worldwide.

Making a Visual Statement

In the realm of visual arts, Gulf creatives have taken to the metaphorical (and literal) canvas to pay homage to the environment, express their concerns over climate change-induced hardship, and propose alternative, more sustainable practices in their fields. Saudi artist Abdunasser Gharem, for instance, used his signature rubber stamp mosaic technique in his work "Climate Refugee" (2022) to draw attention to how subsequent crises, such as the increasing number of climate migrants and refugees, have been created by what he calls "economic violence," or the "increase in physical and psychological barriers impacting humanity" and the "unfair distribution of capabilities and freedom of movement."



"Climate Refugee," 2022. (Courtesy of Abdunnasser Gharem)

The work depicts a map of the world in tiny gray stamps and features concentrated areas of stamps in varying shades of blue to indicate zones with climate refugees across the world. On the stamps are phrases such as "Refugee camps are optimal forms of mercy killings," "In this century the largest marine cemetery is Europe," and "Some countries have outlawed giving refuge & rescuing from drowning in the open sea." Through "Climate Refugee," Abdunnasser highlights how the preservation of human life and the Earth itself have become secondary concerns in matters pertaining to economic markets, government affairs, and war: "Globally, we are living in a period that is obsessed with demolition, production, and excessive hysterical violence. Violence is aimed not only against humans but rather against living organisms and species in general," said Abdunnasser.

In another vein, Emirati artist Latifa Saeed uses her research-based methods to explore alternative art-making practices rooted in an understanding and appreciation of natural materials. Works such as "Sand Room" (2021), "Al Sahraa" (The Desert) (2022), "Untitled (Research)" (2022), and "Sand Route" (2023) all use locally found sand as the primary material – in its granular form or processed into glass – to explore the relationship among local residents, heritage practices, and environmental change induced by construction and urban development. Born and raised in the rapidly evolving city of Dubai, Latifa's practice is rooted in an investigation of the human connection to the local ecosystem, particularly how humans use sand's many forms, on assumptions of abundance, as the basis for their built environment. By collecting and geoarchiving these sand varieties in her studio, Latifa aims to raise awareness of the history, movement, variation, fragility, and vulnerability of the second-most consumed natural resource in the world after water.



"Benz," 2021. (Courtesy of Tabari Artspace and Hashel Al Lamki)

Using yet another medium, the canvases of Emirati painter and sculptor Hashel Al Lamki and Saudi painter Alia Ahmad draw viewers' attention to the subtleties of local environments, whether it's the Al Ain oases and mountains in Hashel's vivid, earthy tableaus or Riyadh's co-mingled urban and natural landscapes on Alia's dream-like canvases. Hashel's work "Benz" (2021) uses richly colored natural and oil pigments to depict the excavation of Jabal Hafeet, the tallest peak in his hometown, by German construction workers in the 1980s, which enabled vehicular access to the mountaintop for the first time. Capturing historical moments enables Hashel to draw attention to how humans conquer environmental barriers to the demise of the landscape itself. Through their work, both artists highlight the relationship of human life to local ecologies, underscoring "the dependency of mankind on natural resources and their subsequent responsibility for the environmental catastrophe that looms."

As climate concerns and sustainability take center stage at COP28, the creative community in the Gulf has channeled energy into urging environmental consciousness. Through research-based practices, design-oriented solutions, and cross-disciplinary collaboration, artists and architects have opted for visual routes to addressing the climate crisis that encourage deliberate engagement with the environment.

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