

# DESERT X ALULA 2020

## Desert X AIUla announces participating artists Exhibition opens 31 January – 7 March 2020



*On the left: the canyon in Ashar, AIUla, where Desert X AIUla will take place, photo by Nick Jackson Photography, courtesy RCU and Desert X On the right: Neville Wakefield and Raneem Farsi, curators of Desert X AIUla, onsite, photo by Noon Art, courtesy RCU*

**Desert X AIUla** announced today participating artists for its site-responsive exhibition opening 31 January – 7 March 2020. Organised collaboratively by Desert X and the Royal Commission of AIUla (RCU), the exhibition takes place in the desert of AIUla, an ancient oasis in Saudi Arabia, and brings together a plurality of voices, co-curated by Saudi curators **Raneem Farsi** and **Aya Alireza** with Desert X Artistic Director **Neville Wakefield**.

Desert X AIUla is the first site-responsive exhibition of its kind in Saudi Arabia. An exploration of desert culture, the exhibition is a cross-cultural dialogue between artists from Saudi Arabia and its surrounding region and artists from previous iterations of Desert X in California, taking its cues from the extraordinary landscape and historical significance of AIUla.

Participating artists are:

**Lita Albuquerque** (b. 1946, US, based in Santa Monica)  
**Manal AIDowayan** (b. 1973, Saudi Arabia, based in Dubai)  
**Zahrah AIGHamdi** (b.1977, Saudi Arabia, based in Jeddah)  
**Nasser AISalem** b. (b.1984, Saudi Arabia, based in Jeddah)  
**Rashed AISHashai** (b. 1977, Saudi Arabia, based in Jeddah)  
**Gisela Colon** (b. 1966, Canada, based in LA)  
**Sherin Guirguis** (b. 1974, Egypt, based in LA)  
**Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim** (b. 1962, UAE, based in Khorfakkan)  
**Nadim Karam** (b. 1957, Lebanon, based in Beirut)  
**eL Seed** (b. 1981, France, based in Dubai)  
**Wael Shawky** (b. 1971, Egypt, based in Alexandria and Philadelphia)  
**Muhannad Shono** (b. 1977, Saudi Arabia, based in Riyadh)

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**Superflex** (founded 1993, Denmark, based in Copenhagen)  
**Rayyane Tabet** (b. 1983, Lebanon, based in Beirut)

Over the past year, AIUla has welcomed artists to engage with its environmental conditions, historical context and surrounding communities. Large-scale site-specific works presented in the exhibition will inspire new dialogue about the desert and reflect on themes that range from the passage of goods and ideas along the ancient incense route, the cultural memory that passage has left, and the natural resources that have shaped the region, both past and present.

Serving as a crossroads between three continents and a gateway between East and West, AIUla was built from successive civilisations and for millennia was a place for cultural exchange. As AIUla's first major contemporary art exhibition, Desert X AIUla marks an exciting and transformative moment for Saudi Arabia, reviving this cultural legacy and adding new layers to the destination's future as an open living museum that inspires creativity. RCU's wider long-term plan is to reinvigorate, protect and preserve AIUla, rooted in a Cultural Manifesto developed to create a sensitive, sustainable transformation of the region with its community integrated into the process. The exhibition is unlocking national talents, providing opportunities for local guides, engaging with youth and community through schools, universities and public outreach programmes, including artist-run workshops, and laying the groundwork for future creative endeavours and collaborations.

Lita Albuquerque's star map *NAJMA (She Placed One Thousand Suns On The Transparent Overlays Of Space)* invokes the cosmic myth of a female astronaut who arrives on earth to spread light and information, an ode to the region's genesis as the birthplace of astronomy; Rashed AlShashai's *A Concise Passage* reflects on the passage of goods and trade from ancient past to modern times, creating a bridge between a vast open landscape and the economic systems that determine present day borders.

Rayyane Tabet's *Steel Rings*, from the series *The Shortest Distance Between Two Points*, references the Trans-Arabian Pipe Line Company's pipeline bisecting the Arabian Peninsula with forty rings forming the sculpture, each inscribed with the distance from the pipe's source; Muhannad Shono's *The Lost Path* takes youth as the new commodity across Saudi Arabia through a decaying pipeline that rests motionless, semi-submerged beneath the shifting sands.

Zahrah AlGhamdi's *Glimpses of the Past* is a flickering oasis made of thousands of date containers, once key to AIUla's agricultural wealth; eL Seed's *Mirage* is inspired by the image of fertility that the AIUla oasis presented to those who first crossed the arid landscape in search of trade, allowing viewers to enter a script-like structure submerged beneath the ground. The evanescence of objects and images within this landscape is also at the heart of Manal AlDowayan's *Now You See Me, Now You Don't*, an installation of artificial puddles.

The fragility of the desert ecosystem is evident in Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim's *Falling Stones Garden*, which consists of rock-like forms painted in highly saturated colour; inspired by the diverse flora and fauna of the Arabian desert, Nadim Karam's *On Parade* is a caravan of forms that appear to have sprung out of barren ground like desert bloom after rain.

Nasser AlSalem's *Amma Qabel* is a sculpture with both interior and exterior landscapes, which embraces the idea of time as a continuum that connects all cultures and civilisations; Gisela Colon's monolith *The Future is Now* is at

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once high-tech and futuristic but also reminiscent of the mystery of ancient cultural artefacts such as totems - it speaks to a moment in history marked by the coming together of old and new.

Sherin Guirguis's *Kholkhal Aliaa* looks at the role of cultural memory in shaping ideas of the present. Wedged within a rock crevice, a sculpture of a Bedouin anklet is a symbol of female power and agency as well as a metaphor for journeys, referencing the old city of AIUla; Wael Shawky's installation, *Dictums: Manqia II*, recalls the once thriving historic town as a place of architectural memory through video projected onto the rockface. *One Two Three Swing!* by Superflex is a call to collective action, connecting people through shared endeavour.

Desert X AIUla co-curator Raneem Farsi says:

*"Artists are at the centre of this exhibition conceived to foster artistic exchange and dialogue across continents. The diversity of backgrounds, concepts, and themes found in this exhibition affirms the power of art in creating cultural exchange beyond geographic boundaries. Alongside international and regional artists, Desert X AIUla gives voice to Saudi Arabia's dynamic artistic community, cultivating new audiences for contemporary art in the country. Many of the works on view are informed by the multiple layers of history shaping the region and through exhibitions like this, we are working towards a more inclusive future through art."*

Neville Wakefield, Desert X Artistic Director and co-curator of Desert X AIUla comments:

*"Site-specific exhibitions such as Desert X take their cues from land art of the late '60's and early '70's, when artists consciously gravitated towards the remote as a means of breaking down the walls - physical, experiential and economic - of the institutions to which they felt bound. Since then, globalisation has left us with a radically altered perception of the world. The universe may have contracted but cultural walls remain. Our hope is that in helping bring a site-specific contemporary art exhibition to the desert of AIUla, there will be new conversations, new cultural dialogue between individuals and communities. The exhibition will engage with the citizens of the country - half of whom are under 30 years of age. Fostering engagement at this critical time provides a way to connect artists and individuals who have remained isolated for far too long."*

Nora AlDabal, RCU Arts and Culture Engagement Manager, notes:

*"The remarkable heritage and enduring traces of culture that have traversed AIUla for millennia are a reminder this ancient crossroads cradled reflection, creativity and ingenuity. Desert X AIUla is a continuum of AIUla's legacy as an oasis for art. By putting the transformative power of art centre stage, we can foster new perspectives and opportunities for transformative conversations that build understanding between people. The exhibition captures the spirit of the Cultural Manifesto of AIUla, as we continue to preserve, enhance and interpret a constellation of natural and historic wonders. We believe culture is indispensable to our quality of life, and we are proudly spearheading an environment which supports creativity, unleashing new and inspiring forms of expression that will interact with the world."*

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Susan L. Davis, Desert X Founder and President says:

*“Desert X AlUla will shine a light on contemporary art being made in Saudi Arabia and the neighbouring region, bringing the work of international artists to new audiences. We believe that art has no boundaries and fosters mutual understanding. Our goal is for Desert X AlUla to activate international dialogue through the voices of artists, and the RCU is advancing this shared vision.”*

Visit: [www.experiencealula.com](http://www.experiencealula.com)

[desertx.org/alula](http://desertx.org/alula)

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## **Notes to editors**

### **About AlUla**

Located 1,100km from Riyadh, in North-West Saudi Arabia, AlUla is a place of extraordinary natural and human heritage. The vast area, covering 22,561km<sup>2</sup>, includes a lush oasis valley, towering sandstone mountains and ancient cultural heritage sites dating back thousands of years to when the Lihyan and Nabataean kingdoms reigned. The most well-known and recognised site in AlUla is Hegra, Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site. A 52-hectare ancient city, Hegra was the principal southern city of the Nabataean Kingdom and is comprised of more than 100 well preserved tombs with elaborate facades cut out of the sandstone outcrops surrounding the walled urban settlement. In addition to Hegra, AlUla is home to a series of fascinating historical and archaeological sites such as: Ancient Dadan, the capital of the Dadan and Lihyan Kingdoms, which is considered one of the most developed 1st-millennium BCE cities of the Arabian Peninsula; thousands of ancient rock art sites and inscriptions; and Hijaz Railway stations.

AlUla will reopen its key heritage sites including the UNESCO World Heritage site, Hegra, Dadan, AlUla Old Town and Jabal 'Ikma in October 2020. They are presently closed to allow ongoing archaeological work and enhance the sites in readiness to welcome visitors. Many other sites such as Elephant Rock and other scenic areas remain

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accessible to visitors during Desert X AIUla, which coincides with Winter at Tantora festival (which runs for 12 weekends from 19 December 2019 to 7 March 2020).

## About the Royal Commission for AIUla

The Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU) was established by royal decree in July 2017 to protect and safeguard AIUla, a region of outstanding natural and cultural significance in North-West Saudi Arabia. RCU is embarking on a long-term plan to develop and deliver a sensitive, sustainable transformation of the region, reaffirming it as one of the country's most important archaeological and cultural destinations and preparing it to welcome visitors from around the world. RCU's development work in AIUla encompasses a broad range of initiatives across archaeology, tourism, culture, education and the arts, reflecting the ambitious commitment to cultivate tourism and leisure in Saudi Arabia, outlined in Vision 2030. <https://www.rcu.gov.sa>

## About Desert X

Desert X is produced by the Desert Biennial, a 501(c)3 charitable organisation, conceived to produce recurring international contemporary art exhibitions that activate desert locations through site-specific installations by acclaimed international artists. Its guiding purposes and principles include presenting public exhibitions of art that respond meaningfully to the conditions of desert locations, the environment and the indigenous communities; promoting cultural exchange and education programmes that foster dialogue and understanding among cultures and communities about shared artistic, historical, and societal issues; and providing an accessible platform for artists from around the world to address ecological, cultural, spiritual, and other existential themes.

**Dates:** 31 January – 7 March, 2020

**Opening hours:** Monday to Wednesday, 10am - 6pm, Thursday to Sunday, 10am - 7.30pm

**Tickets:** Tickets for the exhibition are free. Further information available on site and by visiting [experiencealula.com](http://experiencealula.com).

**Access:** Transport to and from the Desert X AIUla Visitor Centre will be provided to all visitors from the Winter Park in AIUla.

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