

# MONIRA AL QADIRI | USURPER

KÖNIG GALERIE | NAVE

19 JANUARY – 2 MARCH 2024

KÖNIG GALERIE is pleased to present the second exhibition of Monira Al Qadiri in the spaces of St. Agnes. Following her 2023 show, *CRUDE EYE*, in the former Chapel, *USURPER* is installed in the more capacious NAVE, transforming it into a monochromatic, (post-)apocalyptic setting in which the artist confronts us with the topic of theft: theft of vision, theft of life, and theft of the natural world – the environmental destruction wrought by the excavation and use of fossil fuels, especially petroleum.

Entering the exhibition, the monumental sculpture *THE GUARDIAN* awaits: a mesmerizing milky white plant. It is an enlarged *Calotropis Procera*, a biblical plant that goes by many names one being “The Apple of Sodom,” known for millennia for its poisonous milk that causes blindness. As the frightening dripping form indicates, Al Qadiri’s sculpture stands as a memorial to the blind condition, not only in a physical sense but also a psychological one, in which people refuse to believe the reality of images they are confronted with within the confines of the post-truth world we inhabit today.

Another dimension emerges beyond the initial entrance, which overwhelms with glowing whiteness and a stark soundtrack playing in the background. The space is reminiscent of the afterlife, of that alternate universe where a story’s protagonist is confronted with existential truths and intractable questions. Against this backdrop, Al Qadiri unfolds *USURPER*’s core narrative, at the centre of which lays the sculptural installation *ONUS*: a haunting scene depicting the aftermath of the Gulf War (1990-91): 700 oil wells that burned for almost two years, killing all manner of wildlife in their wake, and one of the worst man-made ecological disasters of all time.

Petroleum is an underlying theme of many of Al Qadiri’s works, but it also marks a personal timeline of foundational moments and experiences in her life. Originally from Kuwait, the artist lived through the Gulf War, in which she confronted the destruction of war and of environmental catastrophe first-hand; an experience which informs much of her artistic oeuvre since that time.

The trauma of war, as well as the trauma of the incredible denial of image as truth, materializes in *ONUS*, which Al Qadiri first conceived for her largest institutional exhibition to date at Kunsthhaus Bregenz in 2023. The installation consists of multiple glass sculptures of birds covered in oil. The choice of medium refers to the idea of the fragility of memory and the ways in which it can be distorted or broken by another’s influence. The artist is haunted by the reality of these oil-covered animals that she saw after the war, only to be shocked that people abroad did not believe the images of them to be true. In recreating the forms of these birds, she directs the viewer to observe the frail nature of their own memory, no matter how impactful or life-changing it is. It can still be malleable and allowed to fall victim to suspicion and denial, even by oneself over time.

The sculpture *MINER* is the largest to date from Al Qadiri’s series of 3D-printed sculptures. For these, she appropriates the shape of real drill heads used in the oil industry, which she then transforms into fantastical alien-like artifacts from a futurist past. The white colour and pearly shine of these works grant the objects a magical quality, but their appearance also refers back to the history of pearl diving, which was the main industry in her native Kuwait before the discovery of oil. Between pearls and oil, which share an iridescent colour at either end of the color spectrum – black and white – *Miner* becomes an almost religious object, a totem of power that manages to dazzle despite its potential for destruction.

In the exhibition *USURPER* Al Qadiri intertwines various stories, historical and political motifs, to create a timeless narrative about power, violence, the depletion of natural resources, and, just maybe, a future beyond the era of petroleum.

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