

7. THE PETROLEUM PROMISE, NOSTALGIA, AND FUTURISM

With the full disclosure of petroleum's dark side during the Gulf War, the image-world from times prior to that is now also under scrutiny. For some, these historical images are a nostalgic retreat and refuge; for others they are a point of access from which to challenge the official (hi)stories of Kuwait and other Gulf states and from which to imagine alternative future scenarios and imaginaries. It is this spectrum that is currently negotiated in the contemporary art scene in the Gulf region through artworks that deal with petroleum and notions of past, present, and future.

For a long time, the petroleum promise fueled the imaginaries of the future. Dipesh Chakrabarty has outlined the project of history insofar as “the discipline of history exists on the assumption that our past, present, and future are connected by a certain continuity of human experience. We normally envisage the future with the help of the same faculty that allows us to picture the past.”¹ The infinitely perpetuating petro-modernity that has been the dominant global expectation of our time is especially contingent in the oil-producing Gulf. Here, petro-modernity and its iridescent urban visual culture not only constituted the experience of “modernity,” but also coincided with and even partially determined the crafting of state images, national identities, and (physical) nation building, as the case of Kuwait has demonstrated.

In Kuwait, the oil period began with the first shipment of petroleum in 1946. In the following decades, oil unfolded its iridescent power in a multitude of images. The highly successful and internationally visible city-state of Kuwait was the forerunner of other Gulf states like Qatar, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai, which subsequently also became oil producers, rich welfare states, and independent nation-states that have been as deeply invested in curating their image.

The image-world of petro-modernity that emerged and proliferated in Kuwait from the 1950s onwards, a time when petro-modernity disseminated around the globe, promoted a belief in the unlimited alteration of urban space and supported the integral role that the aerial view could play in this transformation. It was thought that “making the desert bloom” through the power of petroleum was a benefit bestowed on oil-producing

¹ Chakrabarty used this explanation to reflect on the idea of what a planet Earth would look like without human beings. Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 197.



7.1 Digital rendering of Madinat al-Hareer (Silk City) with the Mubarak al-Kabir tower at the center, ca. 2018.

and oil-consuming countries by the oil companies and, ultimately, the governments. Furthermore, there was a belief that one could position oneself as a self-confident petro-state on the international stage by constructing and depicting (petroleum) infrastructure. Since the 1950s, images of transforming urban space, of the latest architectural styles, and of impressively large building projects have circulated as *the* national currency. Among other things, petro-modernity has meant experiencing (urban) space as image.

Acknowledging the historical fixation on infinite urban overhaul and on brand-new architecture as visual markers of national progress helps to explain the unbridled energy of nations in the Gulf region to destroy existing buildings and to erect previously unimaginable glass, concrete, and steel structures in their place. From the 1950s onward, even more impactful than the sky-rocketing high-rises themselves have been the images of these undertakings, which often sought to mesmerize the viewer with a futuristic aesthetic. A difference between images of today and the images proliferating in the 1950s is probably one of scale and quantity, given that a plethora of digital renderings visualize spectacular architectural projects in the Gulf today, irrespective of the fact whether they are being built or remain as images only. One current example of the contemporary architectural hubris enveloped in a digitally rendered futuristic yet generic aesthetic is the projected Silk City in the north of Kuwait (fig. 7.1), but one could equally think of NEOM (Saudi Arabia) or Burj Jumeirah (Dubai).² With the advance of visualization technologies and social media, the power of images to show urban transformation has

² Silk City (or Madinat al-Hareer) is a Kuwaiti development project in cooperation with China that is scheduled for completion in 2035. The 250-square-kilometer site is projected to encompass a self-sufficient city in Subiya, northern Kuwait, that will include tourist attractions, an Olympic stadium, and the high-rise Burj Mubarak al-Kabir, whose height of 1,001 meters will be a reference to the *Arabian Nights*. For a general critical assessment of the Gulf's urbanization, see Steffen Wippel et al., eds., *Under Construction: Logics of Urbanism in the Gulf Region* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

expanded significantly. Yet, in light of the dwindling spell of the petroleum promise, the governmental and corporate projections of an accelerated ever-expanding future that materialize in such building proposals are no longer embraced by a civic majority in Kuwait—not to mention the residential majority, which has no say in this at all.³

In recent years, a young generation of artists from the Gulf region have developed works that question the ability and trustworthiness of governments and companies to project sustainable futures. In their artistic (research) practices, many artists re-engage with the urban visual culture that has emerged since the mid-twentieth century and the resulting artworks are of particular importance to the book's scope. Here, the artistic interest lies in the widespread circulation of shared memories, photographs, and other historical cultural artifacts on social media, private blogs, and websites, as well as in printed books. However, also the unearthing of private archives or the engagement with documents and artefacts from corporate or state collections play an important role. Current artistic practices therefore substantiate the large popular interest in revisiting the recent past and present in light of a future that seems increasingly impossible to imagine.

Petro-modernity as iridescence has been so all-encompassing and seductive that the resulting images that came to portray the recent past and present have made it difficult not to believe this version of the (hi)story of Kuwait. However, reassessing a country's prevailing imagery is currently not only taking place in the artistic practice of Kuwait and the Gulf region, but in the Middle East at large. This is because petro-modernity is not just a Kuwaiti phenomenon; rather, it has come to characterize the individual and collective experiences of the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first century for everyone. In an article titled "Anachronistic Ambitions: Imagining the Future, Assembling the Past" published in the magazine *Ibraaz* in May 2014, writer Sheyma Buali describes current artistic practice based on a similar understanding of past and future as Chakrabarty quoted earlier:

Despite a general inaccessibility to history, artists and writers have been there to set it free so peoples can reassess what has brought them to where they are, and in turn, decide how they are to overcome those very positions. And it is this overcoming that is today vital. The dystopia of forgetting is not about the past, but about taking control of history and moving on with as much knowledge and imagination as possible. It is about understanding the past so as to take control of the future.⁴

Informed by artistic research, intensive archival digging, the tracking down of officially forgotten or buried memories, and the assembling of disparate and rediscovered factual

³ According to the 2011 census, Kuwait had a total population of 3,065,850, of which almost 65 percent were non-Kuwaiti. State of Kuwait, Central Statistical Bureau, "Statistical Review 2014" (Kuwait, 2014). These numbers do not consider the large number of *bidūn* (Arabic for "without," meaning here without citizenship), who the government classifies as illegal residents, often despite decades of residence in Kuwait, and who are juridically stateless.

⁴ Sheyma Buali, "Anachronistic Ambitions: Imagining the Future, Assembling the Past," *Ibraaz*, May 8, 2014, accessed June 21, 2019, https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/91#_ftn20.

and fictional material have become strong tools in countering amnesia and pervasive ideologies. This has gone a long way toward combatting the inaccessibility of history (and of archival material), and also toward unraveling the cultural complexity and (in)visibility of petroleum in everyday life.⁵ Contemporary art from the Gulf states circulates not only in established and emerging spaces within one country but also regionally and even internationally.⁶ The regional and global connectivity of artists, cultural practitioners, and creative entrepreneurs from the Gulf is crucial. Cultural events like conferences, exhibitions, and art fairs are usually attended by a regional instead of an exclusively national audience, and social media is of course a perfectly suitable medium for the transnational production and circulation of forms of knowledge that are increasingly thought of collectively rather than nationally. Elsewhere it has been emphasized that “the Gulf world from the earliest times has been characterized by a dense web of economic and social connections.”⁷ Despite another peak in nationalist thinking, current cultural and artistic collaborations show themselves to be a continuation of that network among the affluent, social media savvy, and highly mobile younger generations of the Gulf.⁸

Some contemporary artworks by Kuwaiti artists and artistic collectives based in the region have constructed, as I see it, a form of visual response to the urban visual culture that has emerged in Kuwait since the mid-twentieth century by reassessing the historical image (world) of Kuwait and the herein embedded narratives. A selection of these is discussed here and provides for a potential bottom-up counter-narrative to past and present official political and corporate narratives or at least a re-evaluation of those. These artworks can be considered pivotal in challenging the 1950s hegemonic discourse of images through images from a position of today. The—admittedly small and biased—selection of art projects from the Gulf region to be discussed in this chapter, and the theoretical discourse embedded therein, provides thought-provoking insight how the mid-twentieth-century image-world of petro-modernity is perceived and negotiated today. Contemporary art has become a progressive field where investigations into petro-modernity are currently undertaken, from which I have chosen especially such projects that address the relationship, or incommensurability, of past and future.

⁵ Sheena Wilson, “Energy Imaginaries: Feminist and Decolonial Futures,” in *Materialism and the Critique of Energy*, ed. Brent R. Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti (Chicago: MCM, 2018), 379.

⁶ The term “contemporary art” is used as a temporal category to refer to artworks produced since the 2000s. In addition, the artistic language and media of the works discussed in the following section also resonate with transregional and even transcultural audiences, and are intended to circulate in both the regional and the international contemporary art scene.

⁷ Lawrence G. Potter, “Introduction,” in Potter, *The Persian Gulf in History*, 7–8.

⁸ On the rise of national identities and their increasingly tribal branding, see Miriam Cooke, *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

7.1 Deconstructing Nostalgia in Contemporary Art

Inquiring into Kuwait's petro-fueled political iconographies and national imagery is a central theme in Aseel AlYaqoub's (*1986, Kuwait) work. AlYaqoub assesses the symbolic-aesthetic narratives of the national/political by deconstructing historical postage stamps that the Kuwaiti government issued during the second half of the twentieth century. In conversations with the artist in 2018 and again 2020, AlYaqoub related how she had long felt a strong sentiment, a kind of nostalgia, for the twentieth-century oil period prior to the Iraqi invasion—a period that was known in popular parlance as the “Golden Era” (*al-ʿaṣr al-dhahabī*).⁹ This was a period she had hardly experienced herself, but which felt so familiar to her from stories, historical images, and videos. Susan Sontag has pointedly described how images, especially photographs, can make the viewer feel like a participant in historical events that one merely saw in images and experienced as images.¹⁰ Images can make the (experience of the) situation feel even more real and yet inaccessible, as the situation itself remains encapsulated in an iridescent picture. As one keeps trying in vain to access these periods, we experience nostalgia. AlYaqoub explained that she eventually decided to confront these strong affects by deconstructing historical visual material from the oil period and by using her sense of nostalgia as a seismographic device.

For the series *Cultural Fair: Yesterday* (2018), AlYaqoub dissected original Kuwaiti stamps under the microscope and reassembled them meticulously in long hours of manual labor. The resulting stamp-collages were placed on jutting stud planks of brown-stained wood and displayed under a magnifying dome (fig. 7.2). Despite the dissimilarity of the collaged elements to the original stamps and the absurdity of many of the compositions, the new stamp-images convey an astonishing homogeneity that, at first glance, makes them appear as authentic stamps. Similarly to the disguise of the photomosaic's composite nature, the viewer is able to unravel the artistic constructedness of the stamp-collages only when looking at them in close proximity. Knowing that each and every reused element had been part of an original stamp issue raises questions about Kuwait's political iconographies.

One of AlYaqoub's stamp-collages, *Stone Commandments*, depicts a dinosaur with a laser sword in a well-maintained park in front of Kuwait's gleaming white Palace of Justice; in the foreground, a man with stretched-out hands covered in white paint exits the scene (see fig. 7.2). Similarly to the first Kuwaiti stamps from 1959, this image presents a large building complex erected in Kuwait City in a photographically detailed yet color-beautified style. However, the composition ridicules this “stable” architectural image as a form of national representation (“stone commandments”) by juxtaposing it with a sword-wielding dinosaur. The white color on the man's hands possibly indicates that the building was just recently painted, suggesting a newness that is mirrored by the freshly manicured

⁹ Conversations between the artist and the author in January/February 2018 and August 2020.

¹⁰ Sontag, “The Image-World,” 121–26.



7.2 Aseel AlYaqoub, “Stone Commandments,” from the series *Cultural Fair: Yesterday*, 2018. Four-layer stamp collage, magnifying dome, etched brass, stained wood, 25 × 25 × 15 cm.

garden. Having white hands, AlYaqoub has noted, also relates to the expression *aydī bayḍāʾ*, meaning “my hands are white,” used to declare one’s innocence. For viewers acquainted with current politics, the “fresh” appearance of the judicial institution—which stands for the governmental apparatus at large—clashes with the frequently felt inefficiency of the state, which has witnessed several parliamentary gridlocks over the past decade. The upkeep of the building thus equals mere window dressing. Tellingly, after several years of not issuing new stamp designs, the Kuwaiti government recently also shut down most of

its postal services. Moreover, one wonders how a dinosaur ever made it onto a national stamp and what this motif is supposed to convey about Kuwait.¹¹

In contrast to Kuwait's first issue, unruly forces, both humans and nonhuman matter have entered the national imaginary conjured up by the artist and have destabilized the political iconography. In the 1950s and beyond, infrastructure-as-images on stamps symbolized future stability in the form of already built structures, a promising future already tangible in the visual present. This future promise, a petroleum promise, AlYaqoub's work seems to imply, has been hollowed out, because even though it has been manifested in concrete, the commandments that the structures supposedly represented have not materialized with lasting effect for the present.

Intrinsic to Aseel AlYaqoub's work is a deep skepticism about the authenticity of the state's political iconography and about the (postal) images it has developed as national representations over the decades. "Shouldn't one understand who we are and what we have become in order to reposition ourselves within the narratives of the past?" she argued during a talk at the Abu Dhabi Art Fair in 2017. "How can one do so when there is an increasing mistrust of official history?"¹² In a subsequent conversation with the author, the artist underscored that, viewed from today's perspective, the postage stamps have projected images of the past and the future that are highly ambiguous. Nevertheless, the images presented on the postage stamps have had a strong impact on the Kuwaiti imagination, in AlYaqoub's case in the form of creating a nostalgic sentiment. Her artistic practice seeks to disclose this discrepancy by hijacking the historical visuals, their aesthetics, and medial forms and confusing them with her artistic propositions of (impossible) what-ifs, unlocalized in time.

That stamps once used to be a novel and important media for the state to reinvent itself is both revived and scrutinized by AlYaqoub's stamp-collage *The New Kuwait* (fig. 7.3). In this piece, a 1961 stamp depicting the desert landscape around the hill of Wara close to the Burgan Oil Field has been transformed into the set of a moon landing, with one astronaut having planted the Kuwaiti flag. The artwork plays with the "futuristic" aesthetic of many stamps and the belief in infinite progress, unlimited mobility, and the concept of linear history that petro-modernity has been fueling. The composition, staged amid the desert around Wara, provokes questions such as whether there might have been a Kuwaiti space mission, whether Kuwait has become impossible to live in, or perhaps whether the country has been transported elsewhere. AlYaqoub's work also relates to modern Kuwaiti

¹¹ However, in popular discourse on petroleum, the dinosaur is often but falsely considered the source material (the dead organic material) of coal, crude oil, and natural gas.

¹² Aseel AlYaqoub, "GCC Narratives: National Nostalgia: The Construction of Kuwaiti Identity," YouTube video, 19:43 min., uploaded by Abu Dhabi Art, January 4, 2018, presentation originally delivered at Abu Dhabi Art, November 2017, accessed February 5, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=am2sY-ZLIwg>.



7.3 Aseel AlYaqoub, "The New Kuwait," from the series *Cultural Fair: Yesterday*, 2018. Six-layer stamp collage, magnifying dome, etched brass, stained wood, 25 × 25 × 15 cm.

art by an older generation of artists, such as Ibrahim Ismail, who created a ceramic sculpture of an astronaut in 1977.¹³

However, in contrast to the Emirates' Mars Mission that targets to build a city on Mars within a hundred years and that has successfully sent the first orbiter (called Hope or Al Amal) into space in July 2020, Kuwait's space images belong to a national imagery that

¹³ Ibrahim Ismail, *Rā'id al-Faḍā' (Astronaut)*, 1977, ceramic, 10 × 10 × 30 cm, Barjeel Art Foundation, accessed January 19, 2021, <https://www.barjeelartfoundation.org/collection/ibrahim-ismail-raed-al-fada-astronaut/>.

characterized the twentieth century, the fictional “yesterday” of the series’ title.¹⁴ *The New Kuwait* portrays an exaggerated and fanciful vision of the future but also discloses that the power of images such as those used in the Kuwaiti postage stamps is derived from conflating past and future into one dense vision—just as the 1952 Master Plan’s “aerial space” vision projected a future Kuwait City on top of the existing town, which overnight came to represent Kuwait’s pre-oil past.

The deconstruction and reassembling of historical imagery raise questions about the ways in which the future was depicted in the past. The artistic stamp-images provide for experimental impossible futures or futuristic past-presents around the themes of nation-building, (visual) representation, and petro-modernity, for example by being encapsulated in the (image) world of space exploration. Currently, similar themes can be seen in the work of several other artists from the MENA region, including Larissa Sansour, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, and Christina De Middel. For instance in the multi-media project *The Lebanese Rocket Society*, which has been ongoing since 2012, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige revisit historical postage stamps and other artifacts to unearth Lebanon’s short-lived space program, which was buried together with the Pan-Arab project after the 1967 Six-Day War. The artists understand their practice as a tactic of “overcoming the nostalgia for what used to be, the regret over what could not be achieved,” a supposed certainty regarding a progressive future that, they find, was encapsulated in the 1960s utopian and modernist visions of grand architectural schemes and space traveling. The artists also admit that they feel a haunting sense of nostalgia, which they attempt to resist, for this foregone phase of petro-modernity.¹⁵

Nostalgia, as generally understood, develops from the idea that the past is no longer available, often springing from the sense of a rapture or discontinuity between past and present/future. It is often associated with the feeling of melancholy. In *Living Oil*, Stephanie LeMenager discusses contemporary “petromelancholia,” a term she coined to capture “the grieving of conventional oil resources and the pleasures they sustained.”¹⁶ But rather than melancholy, I would argue, it is nostalgia with which the affective mourning in response to the end of the cheap fossil energies of the twentieth-century and the lifestyles they enabled is encountered, and that characterizes the mixed feelings often stirred up while recognizing and even welcoming that the spell of the petroleum promise is dwindling; it is the nostalgic feeling for the unclouded pleasure of driving a private car smoothly and speedily through the landscape without thinking about the ecological

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of the relationship between space science and nationalism, science fiction, and the Mars Mission, see Jörg Matthias Determann, *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); Jörg Matthias Determann, *Space Science and the Arab World: Astronauts, Observatories and Nationalism in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 162.

¹⁵ Joana Hajithomas and Khalil Joreige, “On the Lebanese Rocket Society,” *e-flux journal*, no. 43 (March 2013), accessed June 24, 2019, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/43/60187/on-the-lebanese-rocket-society/>.

¹⁶ LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 102–3. On petroleum and affect see also Wilson, “Energy Imaginaries.”

consequences. Clearly, the longing sentiment for Kuwait's past that AlYaqoub experienced is also a longing for the optimistic heyday of petroleum-fueled and -financed modernity, for this particular iridescent image of Kuwait as encapsulated in the image-world of the mid-twentieth century.

Nostalgia in Kuwait, it appears, has moreover arisen from the experience of a second rupture, the invasion, the Gulf War, and the oil spills. Significantly, this moment also marked a loss of control over the promising image of petroleum and the iridescent image of the state, as crude went up in smoke. The reference in popular discourse to the period between the 1950s and the early 1990s as Kuwait's "Golden Era" is a sign of the positive way it is remembered by many Kuwaitis today in contrast to what came after. The inherent nostalgic longing for this iridescent-positive era is also caused by the "stability" of the image-world of the period, especially when contrasted with the unsettling events and imagery that followed in 1990–91.

Is nostalgia an uprising against petro-modernity, an escape from petroleum's iridescent effect? Or is nostalgia complicit in petro-modernity, a way of consuming not just the future but also the past in a pervasive process of recycling petro-fueled images? In contemporary artistic practice, such as in AlYaqoub's *Cultural Fair: Yesterday*, nostalgia can be used to trigger a conscious distancing in time and/or space for the purpose of creating a void for a self-critical, self-reflective longing, when, at the same time, the government of Kuwait is presenting its current agenda in the form of the Kuwait National Development Plan "Kuwait Vision 2035 *New Kuwait*," that "stems from his Highness ... conceptualized vision of a new Kuwait by 2035" as "a consolidated approach toward a prosperous and sustainable future." The path to implement this plan is described as: "to mobilize all efforts in order to achieve the objectives of the development plan across seven main pillars targeting the transforming of Kuwait into a leading regional financial, commercial, and cultural hub by 2035."¹⁷ The idea of transforming the country by a certain date according to the vision of a ruler by means of a large-scale development plan certainly sounds—historically—very familiar and continues to be practiced all over the Gulf today.

The growing temporal distance to the "Golden Era," the accumulation of (digitally circulating) historical visuals of that period, and the crumbling of the urban fabric that once stood for the petroleum promise and the petro-state have led to a collective awareness that continuing as if nothing has happened no longer adds up. This is especially because Kuwait has not been able to reassume the avant-garde position in politics, economics, and culture that it held prior to the Iraqi invasion, particularly in comparison with the other Gulf states. In contrast to Qatar and Dubai, for example, Kuwait has still not diversified its economy and is today probably the least-known Gulf state of them all.

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, written with a view to post-communist memory and the end of the Soviet Union, Svetlana Boym perceptively noted that

¹⁷ Government of Kuwait, "Kuwait Vision 2035 *New Kuwait*," accessed February 7, 2021, <https://www.newkuwait.gov.kw/home.aspx>.

at first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space.¹⁸

In view of the remnants of the oil period, the feeling of nostalgia is especially pervasive in Kuwait. *Cultural Fair: Yesterday* attempts to revisit the Golden Era from a position of today by holding on to a similar (stamp) aesthetic, the same (by now outdated) media form, and even the original artifacts of that period. The continuity this creates underscores the lasting identification with petro-modernity's mid-twentieth-century urban visual culture, which continues to linger even as it is critiqued.

Nostalgia, however, also has the potential to create alternative futures. The sentiment can be used as an access point not only for revisiting but also for changing memory and establishing alternative representations. Instead of a linear progressive path forward, it is a meandering, a flaneur-like explorative mission that challenges officially promulgated notions such as modernization and development. Svetlana Boym differentiates between “restorative” nostalgia, which “manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past,” and “reflective” nostalgia, which “lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, [and] in the dreams of another place and another time.”¹⁹ *Cultural Fair: Yesterday* shows that, when nostalgia is involved, the line between the total reconstruction and the deconstruction of petro-modernity's iridescence is fine indeed.

In relation to the built environment, the two notions of nostalgia identified by Boym find their architectural counterparts in heritage village theme parks and decaying twentieth-century modern architecture. But what happens in those cases where there are no ruins left anymore, when Kuwait (and the Gulf at large) has already “rejuvenated” itself during the next phase of national development planning? Does the photographic image suffice, or is the (photographic) image as memory replacement even more effective than a (ruinous or reconstructed) built environment? These questions are tackled by another Kuwaiti artist, Mohammed Al Kouh.

7.2 Architecture as Alternative History

The often-controversial approach with which the (historic) urban fabric of Kuwait City and other Gulf capitals is handled by governments, investors, construction companies, and the media gives insight into the way in which the urban past and the heyday of petro-modernity are currently negotiated. Photography has played a central role in visually preserving the urban fabric, but also in foreshadowing its destruction, highlighting certain vistas, and hiding other vistas from view, as the examples of the aerial photomosaic for

¹⁸ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xv.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.



7.4 Mohammed Al Kouh, "The Kuwait Towers," from the series *Tomorrow's Past*, 2012. Hand-colored gelatin silver print, 40.6 × 50.8 cm.

Kuwait City's first master plan and Adolf Morath's photographic framing of the capital have shown. The work of visual artist Mohammed Al Kouh (*1984, Kuwait) plays with photography's representational ambiguity in relation to such historical architecture that was once showcased as being emblematic of petro-modernity. For the series *Tomorrow's Past*, Al Kouh revisited urban localities in Kuwait City over the course of the year 2012 and captured selected buildings that he considered representative of Kuwait's oil period with an analog camera. Believing that a photograph also captures a trace of the photographed object, he understands his work as a practice of preserving Kuwait's "Golden Era" architecture.²⁰

While petro-modernity has not yet ended, its speed and eternally unsatisfied hunger for change triggers a kind of nostalgic longing for deceleration and stabilization or even for freezing the dilapidated buildings in time in order to provide for a critical assessment of Kuwait's urban transformation since the 1950s. What tool and visual medium is better suited for this than the Janus-faced medium of photography?

²⁰ Interview and conversations with the artist in January/February 2018 and September 2020.

To “preserve” an object, Al Kouh carefully prepares the composition before releasing the shutter of his analog camera while being physically face-to-face with the architecture. The practice of shooting each of the series’ twelve motifs, the first step of the artistic process, contrasts starkly with today’s digital renderings of yet-to-be-built skyscrapers or mobile phone snapshots taken in an SUV-drive-by mode. Instead, it reconnects with twentieth-century analog practices. The second step is also elaborate and time-consuming: it involves developing gelatin silver prints from the film and carefully hand-coloring them in pastel-colored hues. In conversations with the artist, Mohammed Al Kouh has described how, after discovering a large hand-colored photograph in a photo studio in Kuwait, he began learning the almost forgotten technique, a process that took him several years.²¹

Al Kouh’s series *Tomorrow’s Past* (2012) shows buildings that were erected in the second half of the twentieth century in the new modernist architectural language prevalent in Kuwait and that became prominent locations of everyday life. As such, the series’ selection of motifs is reminiscent of the travel guide-like intention of the first series of Kuwaiti postage stamps, despite the fact that it spans a broader time frame and also depicts different architectural (infra)structures.

For Al Kouh, the selected architectural objects are symbolic of the bright side of petro-modernity, which the Iraqi invasion shattered overnight. However, the buildings are also localities that remind him of a childhood spent in Kuwait City. Some of the motifs depict today’s official landmarks, like the stripy mushroom-shaped water towers (fig. 7.4). Most of the photographs, however, show structures that, in the year the photographs were taken, were already in dilapidated conditions, like the Thunayan Al Ghanim Building, home to both the KOC’s Town Office and the Sultan Gallery (fig. 7.5). Furthermore, today, more than seven years after the series was shot in 2012, some buildings are in the process of being demolished or have already been destroyed.²² The dereliction (or destruction) is taking place despite the buildings’ and objects’ undoubtedly important role for both the (historical) architectural development and the (contemporary) urban social life of Kuwait. For example, some hand-colored photographs show extremely popular cinemas, and the Thunayan Al Ghanim Building was considered the face of Kuwait’s first modern avenue—Fahad al-Salem Street.²³ Through Al Kouh’s artistic process, these buildings have been revived as part of Kuwait’s “Golden Era” in the form of photographs.

²¹ Ibid.

²² In August 2020, Al Kouh reported that “four buildings from series had already been demolished and the fifth is on its way. It’s like the past for these buildings has already begun to happen.” Email to the author, August 21, 2020.

²³ The well-known Egyptian architect Sayyid Karim designed the building in the 1950s for the Kuwaiti entrepreneur Yusif Ahmed al-Ghanim. See Fabbri, Saragoça, and Camacho, *Modern Architecture Kuwait*, 50–51. It was a hotspot that over the decades also housed the famous Kuwait Bookshop, the first office of Kuwait Airways, the Sultan Gallery, Kuwait’s most important art gallery, and a Lebanese car wash.



7.5 Mohammed Al Kouh, "The Rolls Royce Building," from the series *Tomorrow's Past*, 2012. Hand-colored gelatin silver print, 40.6 × 50.8 cm.

To achieve this revitalization, strokes of pastel colors are softly brushed over the marks of dilapidation and neglect: the colorful enhancement makes the buildings shine again. In a way, the series of photographs even speaks to the iridescent effect set forth most profoundly by Adolf Morath in his color photographs for the KOC. However, through the use of imperfect hand-coloring, the belated application of color communicates the photographs' artificiality and therefore concedes the impossibility of retrieving the bright, multicolored, and highly selective appearance staged in Morath's shots. Moreover, with the photographic development process of using gelatin silver prints, the photographs obtain such a blurry and grainy texture that they appear to resurface from a different century altogether. These photographs of Kuwait's modernist architecture therefore speak more to early twentieth-century photography of the Middle East and might intend to claim a similar historical—i.e., respectable and valuable—status. Consequently, *Tomorrow's Past* seems to propose imagining modern Kuwaiti architecture as an antiquated yet meaningful architectural heritage by framing it in what Al Kouh calls "a visual language of the past."²⁴ However, this artistic practice also creates premature death pictures of these buildings and

²⁴ Mohammed Al Kouh, "Tomorrow's Past: Artist's Statement (2012)," artist's website, accessed February 5, 2021, <https://www.mohammedalkouh.com/tomorrowpast>.

urban sites, in which the real architecture has already been replaced by a photograph that will, with rouge on the cheeks so to speak, remain the same even as the physical structure suffers a different fate.

However, the debate about the fate of Kuwait's and other Gulf capitals' historical urban fabric is not restricted to images only. Given that the negotiation of these (photographs of) architecture has taken place after a second rupture within Kuwait's history, and in view of the currently ongoing destruction of this historical layer of Kuwait City's built environment, *Tomorrow's Past* encourages viewers to reflect on whether a certain physical continuity of the built environment is in fact relevant; something that Arab and Kuwaiti urban professionals became convinced of when reassessing the radical urban overhaul of the pre-oil town according to the dictates of the first master plan through historical aerial photographs. With today's rapid vanishing of modernist architecture, Al Kouh and others argue, the social memory that is connected with these material testimonies is vanishing, too. In a way, artworks like *Tomorrow's Past* strive to reevaluate modernist architecture as urban heritage for people of Al Kouh's generation, people who were born during the end of the "Golden Era." Maintaining this architectural (hi)story would create a stark contrast to the typical government-run heritage village displays, with their kitsch mise-en-scène of pre-oil life, that usually pass for heritage.

The Story of Kuwait's narrative suggested that Kuwait would achieve prosperity and social progress through oil, a transformation that provoked the drastic destruction and de-urbanization of the historic town of Kuwait and that culminated in a second destruction of Kuwait City during the Iraqi invasion. *Tomorrow's Past* asks whether, this time, a conscious appreciation of existing architecture should not play a role, whether architecture should be maintained, valued, and revisited for all the stories it is able to tell. This may be especially important in light of the next historical period, a period that is approaching slowly but surely: a period "after oil."

The belief in architecture as an alternative source of history and of collective storytelling is evident in the work of Mohammed Al Kouh and others. According to Boym, this belief is infused with a "restorative" nostalgia and a desire to renovate these buildings and let them shine in their old glory. However, this is not just meant as window dressing; rather, it is wishfully seen as a way for society to reconnect with that "golden" past, a time before the image of the state and petroleum was shattered. Al Kouh's photographs, however, are also somewhat "reflective" in their negotiation of nostalgia in that they are accepting of the patina that the architecture accumulated over the decades and which the gentle hand-coloring only covers up so much. His photographs capture the traces of architecture's life stories in the form of light waves reflected by physical structures that face an even more accelerated urban transformation, another potential architectural amnesia, and even more futuristic propositions for the Gulf. It seems that the Gulf has gained a paradoxical new image that vacillates incongruously between running out of petroleum and building even grander. One provocative perspective on how to make sense of such a Gulf today is proposed by a group of artists who term their approach "Gulf futurism."

7.3 Gulf Futurism

In an interview with *Dazed* magazine in late 2012, Kuwaiti visual artist and musician Fatima Al Qadiri spelled out the motivation behind “Gulf futurism,” a term that American-Qatari visual artist and writer Sophia al-Maria had coined around 2008 and the two had developed further. Al Qadiri explains:

Huge swathes of Gulf cities are being knocked down for like, this insane skyscraper with a laser on top of it pointing to Jerusalem. Gulf futurism is really about this destruction and rebirth. We lost our architectural and cultural identity and had to start over. There’s a secret, hidden history and then [there is] this horrifying, stark future.²⁵

Gulf futurism takes the dystopian dis-alignment conjured up by the Gulf’s contemporary image at face value: infinite skyscrapers, enormous luxury villas, 99 percent motorization, and a dependency on an endless supply of maids and other migrant workers mixed with static projections of Bedouin desert culture, pearling, and dhow seafaring. In a way this image is the contemporary continuation of the Gulf’s peculiarity, its derogative othering that is ascribed not only from the outside but increasingly from the inside. The petroleum promise, orientalized as Aladdin rubbing the oil lamp and portraits of Kuwait as “the richest country in the world,” were just as unbalanced as the (mental) images and tropes that are predominantly connected with the Gulf today, including preposterous new cities from scratch, the senseless race for the world’s-highest skyscraper, and unimaginable decadence in pseudo-feudal settings.

The basic idea of Gulf futurism is to consider the Gulf’s hyperreal presence as a microcosmic dystopian future scenario of the petro-capitalist world and the rapidly warming planet. In the logic of Gulf futurism, the Gulf has already far exceeded the modernization target, the mark set by the developmentalist logic of the 1950s. The question of where to position the Gulf on the global timeline of capitalist linear progress has become somehow irrelevant in light of the fact that, from the perspective of Gulf futurism, the Gulf has been catapulted into another time-space nexus on the way altogether.

In the 2012 interview with *Dazed*, Al-Maria and Fatima Al Qadiri essentially proposed Gulf futurism as a prism for viewing the Gulf’s reality as a form of “prophecy of what’s to come” for the rest of the world.²⁶ They suggest nothing less than that the Gulf no longer serves as a playground but that it has become the “avant-garde” of the future, a future that has already taken place. They see the Gulf as a region that, from pre-oil standstill and tropes of timelessness, skyrocketed upward with the aid of fossil fuels and ever-increasing oil revenues, only to crash-land in a dystopian future. This way of portraying the Gulf’s

²⁵ Karen Orton, “The Desert of the Unreal: Conversation with Fatima Al Qadiri and Sophia Al-Maria,” *Dazed*, November 9, 2012, accessed February 5, 2021, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/15040/1/the-desert-of-the-unreal>.

²⁶ Ibid.

present as a future already reached holds great potential because the domain of “futuring” is usually firmly in the hands of the Gulf governments, who draw political legitimacy from projecting yet another utopian “national development plan” to be realized over the next few decades. In view of the origin of this rhetoric in the 1950s, this becomes a “business-as-usual” attitude at odds with the unsustainability of the petro-capitalist system. Jonathan Crush has nicely summarized the conceptualization of “future” and “past” from the perspective of a perpetually developmentalist logic:

Because development is prospective, forward-looking, gazing towards the achievement of as yet unrealized states, there seems little point in looking back. The technocratic language of contemporary plan writing—the models, the forecasts, the projections—all laud the idea of an unmade future which can be manipulated, with the right mix of inputs and indicators, into preordained ends.²⁷

In a way, Gulf futurism suggests the complete opposite because it takes the past seriously by seeking alternative narratives to the official texts. It proposes radical alternatives to the speculative visions and future outcomes that development boards, development plans, and development theory produced in the twentieth century, because it does not view the Gulf’s progress as the accomplishment of pre-set objectives (formulated by foreign and national consultants alike). Instead, it sees the status quo as something altogether different and, importantly, something already achieved. Gulf futurism plays with the idea that the future of the planet has very recently been written in the Gulf—not just written in the form of a global development plan, but actually implemented. Moreover, the plan did not go quite as outlined or projected, turning the Gulf into a prophetic dystopian hyperreality.

Initially, the breeding hub of ideas around Gulf futurism was Al-Maria’s blog *The Gaze of Sci-Fi Wahabi* (since ca. 2008), which included texts and a series of experimental video works. The discourse on Gulf futurism has subsequently taken place mainly in (online) journals such as *bidoun*, *Ibraaz*, and *Dazed* and in collaboration with Fatima Al Qadiri, but also with other artists who are loosely connected around and through the Gulf-based artist collective GCC (named after the Gulf Cooperation Council).²⁸ Sci-Fi Wahabi is the alter ego of Al-Maria, whose father allegedly originates from the Bedouin Al-Murrah tribe, a tribe that the artist describes as “fervently Wahabi.”²⁹ In Al-Maria’s own words, Sci-Fi Wahabi “is an attempt at the leveling of a dogmatic, genderless gaze through which to view the Gulf’s uncharted expanses and bizarre output after its crash landing

²⁷ Jonathan Crush, “Imagining Development: Introduction,” in *Power of Development*, ed. Jonathan Crush (London: Routledge, 1995), 9.

²⁸ The GCC collective was founded in 2012 by Abdullah Al-Mutairi, Amal Khalaf, Aziz Al Qatami, Barrak Alzaid, Fatima Al Qadiri, Khalid al Gharaballi, Monira Al Qadiri, and Nanu Al-Hamad.

²⁹ Sophia Al-Maria, “The Way of the Ostrich: Or, How Not to Resist Modernity,” *Bidoun*, no. 11 (Summer 2007), accessed February 5, 2021, <https://www.bidoun.org/articles/the-way-of-the-ostrich-or-how-not-to-resist-modernity>.

in the future.”³⁰ Petroleum’s role is vital for this spectacle’s historical growth, which Sci-Fi Wahabi assesses in the following terms:

The last event that went unrecorded by the jawal was the moment of collapse. The cameras weren’t rolling when the colossal gravitational force of the Gulf’s ancient cultural/spiritual/technological platforms bored a hole in reality. The volatile forces of a regressive Islam, foolhardy futurism and sudden wealth jettisoned the oil-states through this fresh temporal portal into a prophetic unreality at the edge of our end.³¹

When oil companies started oil exploration, the mobile phone (*jawal*) was not yet invented to record it. Oil companies’ drill bits not only bored oil wells, but “a hole in reality,” through which the newly appointed oil states have been sucked, time-(and space-) traveling, into “a prophetic unreality at the edge of our end,” a state she refers to as being “left ahead in an elsewhere.”³² Sci-Fi Wahabi continues:

This is why the Arabian Gulf is unique in the world as a floodlit, pressurized stage of the imaginary and birthplace of the very hole which caused its still recent conception. It is an infuriating abiogenesis which haunts all discussion around the Gulf, fueling what Jean Baudrillard called an “obscene rage” to unveil truth Just as Orientalists were seduced and subsequently obsessed by what lay beyond the veil/garden-wall/Mecca, now we court speculation over what lays beyond reality: an imaginary visualized easily on the brittle science fictive pulp of today’s Ole [*sic*] Araby.³³

The Gulf is conceptualized as the “floodlit” mold of petro-modernity and petro-capitalism in the form we know it today. It manifests itself not only as its poster child, but as its essentialized dystopian reality, hyper-accelerated by geopolitically concentrated fossil fuels and petro-dollars. Yet, the perpetual invisibility and unsustainability of energy emanating from nonliving fossil matter (“abiogenesis”) triggers the furious speculation of what comes next, what comes after this kind of reality. For Sci-Fi Wahabi, the contemporary Gulf already projects a disturbingly real presence of the fossil-fueled hyperreality or post-reality: while the rest of the world tries to conjure suitable scenarios of peak oil, the Gulf is already living it.³⁴ Consequently, what makes Gulf futurism so compelling is that the speculative analysis of the Gulf’s status quo allows for a look into an already-present future, a futurist imaginary that conjures up the greatest nightmares of globalization, climate change, and capitalism. Acknowledging the Gulf in this way and developing new futuristic imaginaries from here, as Gulf futurism proposes, could establish the Gulf as an innovative artistic-theoretical breeding-ground miles ahead of the unimaginative rest

³⁰ Sophia Al-Maria, “The Gaze of Sci-Fi Wahabi: A Theoretical Pulp Fiction and Serialized Videographic Adventure in the Arabian Gulf,” artist’s blog, accessed February 5, 2021, <http://scifiwahabi.blogspot.com/>, Sci-Fi Wahabi section, September 7, 2008.

³¹ Ibid., Introduction section, September 7, 2008.

³² Ibid., Sci-Fi Wahabi section, September 7, 2008.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ The term “peak oil” describes the final climax of oil production before its rapid demise.

of the world. It relates to Chakrabarty's observation that "climate change poses for us a question of a human collectivity, an us, pointing to a figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world. It is more like a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe."³⁵

Explored as an artistic entry point toward Gulf futurism, but also as the figure of thought to petro-modernity as iridescence and thus to this book, Monira Al Qadiri's *Alien Technology* shows uncanny ways of relating Kuwait's and the Gulf's experiences of petroleum to a futuristic reading of the Gulf's past-future through monumental iridescence.

7.4 Monumentalizing Petro-Modernity Through Iridescence

Alien Technology is the larger-than-life sculpture of an oil well drill bit turned upside down (fig. 7.6). Made of fiberglass and then carefully coated with layers of iridescent varnish, the smooth surface of the sculpture shimmers in an iridescent color spectrum, from orange to petrol-blue, in pearlescent white, and grayish-black in the different realizations of the artwork. Kuwaiti artist Monira Al Qadiri (*1983, Dakar) understands her work as "making fictional and formal connections between pearling and oil," working against a strongly felt rupture between lifeworlds without and with oil, a rupture that in her opinion has become an obstacle to imagining the future.³⁶ Trying to connect these historical episodes, Al Qadiri points out that iridescence is characteristic of both petroleum and mother-of-pearl (pearlescence) and that this particular color spectrum thus forms a powerful prism through which to challenge the apparent incommensurability of the pre-oil and the oil periods.³⁷

The unfamiliar organic volume and the intensive swirling sheen of the sculpture are reminiscent of bio-morphologies, the strangely beautiful bioluminescent forms of maritime life that make up the environmental home of the Gulf pearl. Yet, these characteristics also allow for a futuristic interpretation of the sculpture as an iridescent flower rising from the sandbanks of the Persian Gulf, as Kuwait City did in *The Story of Kuwait* and Adolf Morath's color photographs. The reflective, shiny, and perfectly smooth surface of the monumental sculpture confers comforting fragility and overwhelming beauty, yet it can also trigger vertigo in the face of the constantly changing and reflecting nuances that oscillate from orange to pink to petrol-blue. The sculpture irritates the viewer

³⁵ Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 222.

³⁶ Melissa Gronlund, "A Tropical-Island, Dream-Land Purgatory Place: Monira Al Qadiri Lands in Abu Dhabi," *The National*, November 17, 2018, accessed February 5, 2021, <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/a-tropical-island-dream-land-purgatory-place-monira-al-qadiri-lands-in-abu-dhabi-1.792771>.

³⁷ In the following, "Al Qadiri" refers to Monira Al Qadiri and not her sister Fatima Al Qadiri, who was mentioned earlier.



7.6 Monira Al Qadiri, *Alien Technology*, 2014–19. Fiberglass sculpture, automotive paint, 3 × 2.5 meters. Installation view at Shindagha Heritage Village, Dubai, 2014.

as its formal language and color install a sense of organic animation that crunchingly collides with the idea of the drill bit as a heavy mechanical tool.

Alien Technology intrigues with its perfectly smooth and iridescent surface; also historically, the skin of pearls was a crucial characteristic. One mid-twentieth-century account recounted that: “A first grade pearl should have a perfect ‘skin,’ i.e., be free from flaws and specks, and should have a fine ‘orient,’ that is, a delicate texture of translucent pink or cream color with an *iridescent luster*.”³⁸ Since the first realization of *Alien Technology* for the Shindagha Heritage Village in Dubai in petrol-pink hues, Al Qadiri has developed various other versions, one of which in pearlescent white, and another in asphalt grayish-black. Gulf pearls were not only known for their nacre but to be “of all colors—white, black, gray, green, yellow, gold, and pink.”³⁹ Yet, “luster is probably the most

³⁸ Bowen, “The Pearl Fisheries of the Persian Gulf,” 162 (author’s emphasis).

³⁹ Ibid., 162. Harold Dickson praised the Gulf for the “best rose-pink pearl” that even Japanese pearl producers could not imitate. Dickson, *The Arab of the Desert*, 484. Hightower suggests that “the dominant hue for

important characteristic of a first-class pearl;" and according to the same account, "other qualities can be more or less lacking if the pearl has good luster or depth."⁴⁰ Obviously, iridescence (or luster) and color reinforced each other. Likewise, also the various case studies of petro-modernity, iridescence, and visual culture discussed in this book have indicated that color has played a crucial role.

With *Alien Technology*, Al Qadiri moreover challenges the strange invisibility of petroleum production outside the oil fields and the highly-guarded oil production facilities, as well as the absence of the viscous, black-yet-iridescent crude material itself. In an interview with the UAE newspaper *The National*, the artist recalled encountering a drill bit:

I thought, I'm from Kuwait and I don't know that the things that sustain our society look like this. Why isn't this a part of our education? These things are me—they're a representation of who I am, more than a dhow or a pearling boat or a camel. Those things represent my freak generation. The oil interval in history is a freak interval. It's not going to last long. What came before? What will happen after? It's an existential question I deal with all the time.⁴¹

Al Qadiri belongs to the younger generation of artists who grew up with the haunting images of the Kuwaiti oil fires that made petroleum as raw material and almost unstoppable natural force visible to many people for the first time. Never had petroleum been such a firsthand experience for such a large group of spectators; never had it been so directly visible in all its physical facets from liquid to fire to smoke. For this generation of artists, the literal burning of Kuwait's oil wells has become an unforgettable, personally relatable symbolic image of contemporary worldwide concerns about the unsustainability of fossil energy and global warming. Yet, the petroleum "freak interval" that is petro-modernity is still ongoing: our world is still visually and materially drenched in petroleum-derived products and petro-modernity's morphing visual culture.

In a way, *Alien Technology* imitates oil infrastructure's "stabilizing image of functioning production" by relating to modern refineries and other oil infrastructure in monumental size, clean and shiny surfaces, and physical presence.⁴² This effect of stabilization and iridescent mesmerizing was also claimed by the first series of Kuwaiti stamps and the KOC photographs. At the same time, the artwork disrupts these infrastructurally contained notions of tranquility and security by means of its obvious dysfunctionality and its provocatively alienating and attractive sci-fi aesthetics of monumental iridescence.⁴³

Gulf pearls is yellow, though other colors—pink, yellow, green, or blue—are possible." See Hightower, "Pearls and the Southern Persian/Arabian Gulf," 48.

⁴⁰ Bowen, "The Pearl Fisheries of the Persian Gulf," 162.

⁴¹ Gronlund, "A Tropical-Island, Dream-Land Purgatory Place."

⁴² Pendakis and Wilson, "Sight, Site, Cite," 4.

⁴³ Al Qadiri often explains this with her experience of hyper-futurist aesthetics in Japan, a country known for its futuristic craze, where she lived while studying and pursuing a PhD in inter-media art. "Sweet Talk: A Conversation with Thuraya Al-Baqsam and Monira Al Qadiri," *Bidoun*, 2018, accessed February 5, 2021,

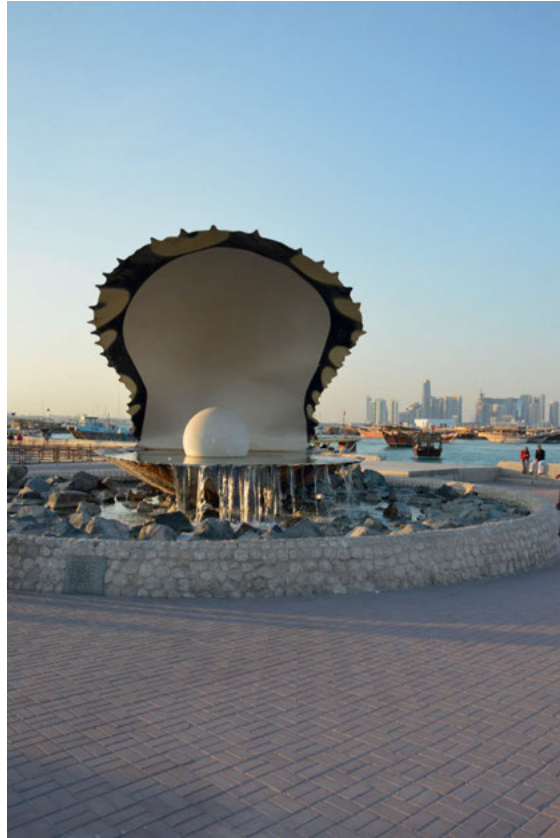


7.7 Monira Al Qadiri, *Alien Technology*, 2014–19. Detail of the sculpture's head while on display in Dubai, in 2014.

In *Alien Technology* the drill bit is positioned upside down. Instead of driving its head into the ground as an oil company would have it do, the drill bit is pointed up towards the sky (fig. 7.7). This allows for a moment of rest and contemplation to open up. Is the drill bit only temporarily at rest? Does its dysfunctional position indicate that it has already become an obsolete object of estranged yet compelling beauty, like retired headframes and oil derricks that continue to mark the former availability of the fossil material in the horizontal? Or is this object even announcing the arrival of a time “after oil”? While installed in the Shindagha Heritage Village in Dubai, the sculpture featured next to reconstructions of pre-oil housing made from coral stone, mud bricks, and palm leaves and next to displays of pearling and seafaring culture and the Bedouin nomadic lifeworld (see fig. 7.6).⁴⁴ Embedded in this context, the sculpture could be read as a premature monument to petroleum for Al Qadiri's generation: it both acknowledges oil's (continuous) influence on humankind and triggers speculative reflections on its expiration. In fact, Monira Al Qadiri has called her work a self-portrait that “[evokes] my cultural heritage as a child

<https://www.bidoun.org/articles/sweet-talk>; see also Robert Barry, “Remembering the Future: An Interview with Monira Al Qadiri,” *The Quietus*, July 22, 2017, accessed February 5, 2021, <https://thequietus.com/articles/22891-monira-al-qadiri-gcc-gasworks-london-interview>.

⁴⁴ Due to reconstructions, the sculpture was removed in 2015. Interview with the artist, July 2020.



7.8 Arabic coffeepot and cup as entrance gate monument at a park in Abu Dhabi.

of oil.”⁴⁵ What is exciting about this work is that, by monumentalizing iridescence in the form of *Alien Technology*, petro-modernity is given a monument in a way that recognizes the pre-oil period as an intrinsic part of Kuwait’s (hi)story.

Alien Technology, as installed in Dubai, had another site-specific twist to it, namely the way in which it engages with the Gulf’s shared (visual) culture. Its monumental size, figurative-objective form, and its decontextualized presence in a semi-public space makes the work reminiscent of many of the monumental sculptures placed at roundabouts and parks across the Gulf. For example, at Doha’s corniche, a half-opened pearl oyster is on display, while in Abu Dhabi’s city center, a giant brass-colored Arabic coffeepot welcomes visitors to a park (figs. 7.8, 7.9). Reminiscent of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour’s duck theory, which describes an overtly sculptural building as a sign in urban space, the sculptures embody objects of apparent historical importance to the region, objects one would also find in heritage villages, souvenir shops, and national

⁴⁵ “Sweet Talk.”



7.9 Pearl Oyster monument at Doha's Corniche.

museums, like a coffeepot or a pearl oyster shell.⁴⁶ In the Gulf, these monuments are usually unauthored and produced in a local workshop. Their immediately recognizable form speaks to their decorative and beautifying intentionality, which seemingly serves to pacify public space instead of responding to the location's (historical) specificity in a complex way. Nevertheless, over the years, many of these “maxiaturen” have become beloved local icons and important points of orientation in rapidly transforming cityscapes, and thus part of the regional urban visual culture.

Al Qadiri initially conceptualized *Alien Technology* as a sculpture on a roundabout and given the size, her work relates to these monumental sculptures spread across the Gulf region, which, for a long time, have been the only attempt at something like public art. At the same time, she challenges the acknowledged symbols of “Khaleeji” heritage, such as the teapot, the pearl oyster, and the camel, by presenting an oil drill head as addition

⁴⁶ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972), 13–18 and fig. 15.

or, rather, alternative symbol of Gulf heritage, postulating *oil heritage* as, undoubtedly conflicted, local yet global legacy.⁴⁷

What point of view on petro-modernity can *Alien Technology* provide? Energy humanist Sheena Wilson has cautioned that while the current energy impasse needs alternative futurist imaginaries, many proposals are a “mere repackaged/re-glossaried perpetuation of petro-capitalist relations greenwashed with tech solutions.”⁴⁸ Similarly, one could claim that Al Qadiri’s sculpture over-aestheticizes oil infrastructure and thus runs the risk to divert attention away from oil’s disastrous implications. However, in line with this book’s approach, petroleum and its system need to become aesthetically visible and thereby accountable in order to propose radically new imaginaries outside of oil. Al Qadiri’s sculpture, if placed on a roundabout in a Gulf capital, would be a perfect start for a visual, artistic, and public face-to-face with the Gulf’s oil period and its lasting legacy, but the heritage village proved an intriguing testbed for this encounter, too. Instead of staying in the tradition of sci-fi, which mingles the past with the future but usually omits the present, *Alien Technology* became physically embedded in the now, in an actual physical space in Dubai. This site-specificity “roots” the ideas and aesthetics it conveys in an actual existing environment. Even if the heritage village is a kind of simulacrum or fake environment, in line with Gulf futurist thinking, it is part of the Gulf’s present. Monira Al Qadiri’s sculpture best embodies, in an artistic way, the “iridescent effect” as a sculptural demonstration of petroleum’s ability to have a powerful aesthetic and visual presence that resonates with our experience of the world. Iridescence, as monumentalized in *Alien Technology*, tries to capture the mesmerizing attractivity of the visual effects petroleum is invested in and points to petroleum’s characteristic of always being in pursuit of new and more materials, surfaces, textures, and colors to create and synthesize. It monumentalizes iridescence as the elusive and endlessly mutating spectrum of blessing and curse, cure and poison that results from petroleum and its anthropogenic usage.

It is through iridescence, understood as the color of both pearls and petroleum, that the omnipresent incommensurability of the pre-oil and the oil period can be overcome. This, however, requires the viewer to connect these two periods with each other, as petro-modernity’s urban images have worked extensively to dissolve one from the other. From this point of view, the prevailing tropes of pre-oil Kuwait as being static and timeless and then suddenly gone, and of modern Kuwait City as being built on sand, must be challenged. Consequently, to engage critically with Kuwait’s first postage stamps, the 1951 aerial survey, the 1952 Master Plan, Adolf Morath’s color photos for the KOC, and many other images that form the mid-twentieth-century urban visual culture of

⁴⁷ The adjective “Khaleeji,” which derives from the Arabic word *khalij* (gulf), is used to refer to the Arabian/Persian Gulf (states).

⁴⁸ Wilson, “Energy Imaginaries,” 385. Wilson defines the “energy impasse” as “the political, economic, and environmental deadlock created by the limits of Western ontologies and epistemologies that need to be newly thought.” Wilson, “Energy Imaginaries,” 378.

petro-modernity and in order not to be nostalgically overwhelmed, an iridescent prism such as *Alien Technology* is crucial. As a figure of thought, *Alien Technology* exposes the destruction of the pre-oil urban fabric necessary for mid-twentieth-century buildings to rise. It also acts as a site-specific access point that relates the locations depicted in pre-oil urban photographs to sites of modern Kuwait City and vice versa in an attempt to form a continuation, a connection that is worthy of the complex process that urban transformation always is.

No longer is the Gulf merely a place of petroleum extraction and cultural-technological-social-political-economic injections, no longer simply a playground of foreign interests. The Gulf is no longer a development project. The positions, in a way, have reversed. New theories and imaginaries, which reinstate the Gulf as a futuristic iridescent foil over an actual built environment, as a place from which to not only see but experience the rest of the world's dystopian development in the near future in real time, are seething and bubbling beneath the surface of the Gulf's bling. The artistic and theoretical practice put forward by artists such as Mohammed Al Kouh, Aseel AlYaqoub, Sophia Al-Maria, Fatima Al Qadiri, Monira Al Qadiri, and others allows for a provocative reflection on the local, regional, and international perception of the Gulf and our relationship with petro-modernity. It is clear that, to be really fruitful, unraveling petro-modernity visually, materially, and aesthetically can only be a collective effort across disciplinary boundaries and in close conversation with artistic practice. Investigating the image-world of petro-modernity is far from finished.