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Oil Dialogue

Karez Abdulhameed, Mari Fraga

experiment
artist
oil engineer
crude oil
microscope
laboratory
dialogue

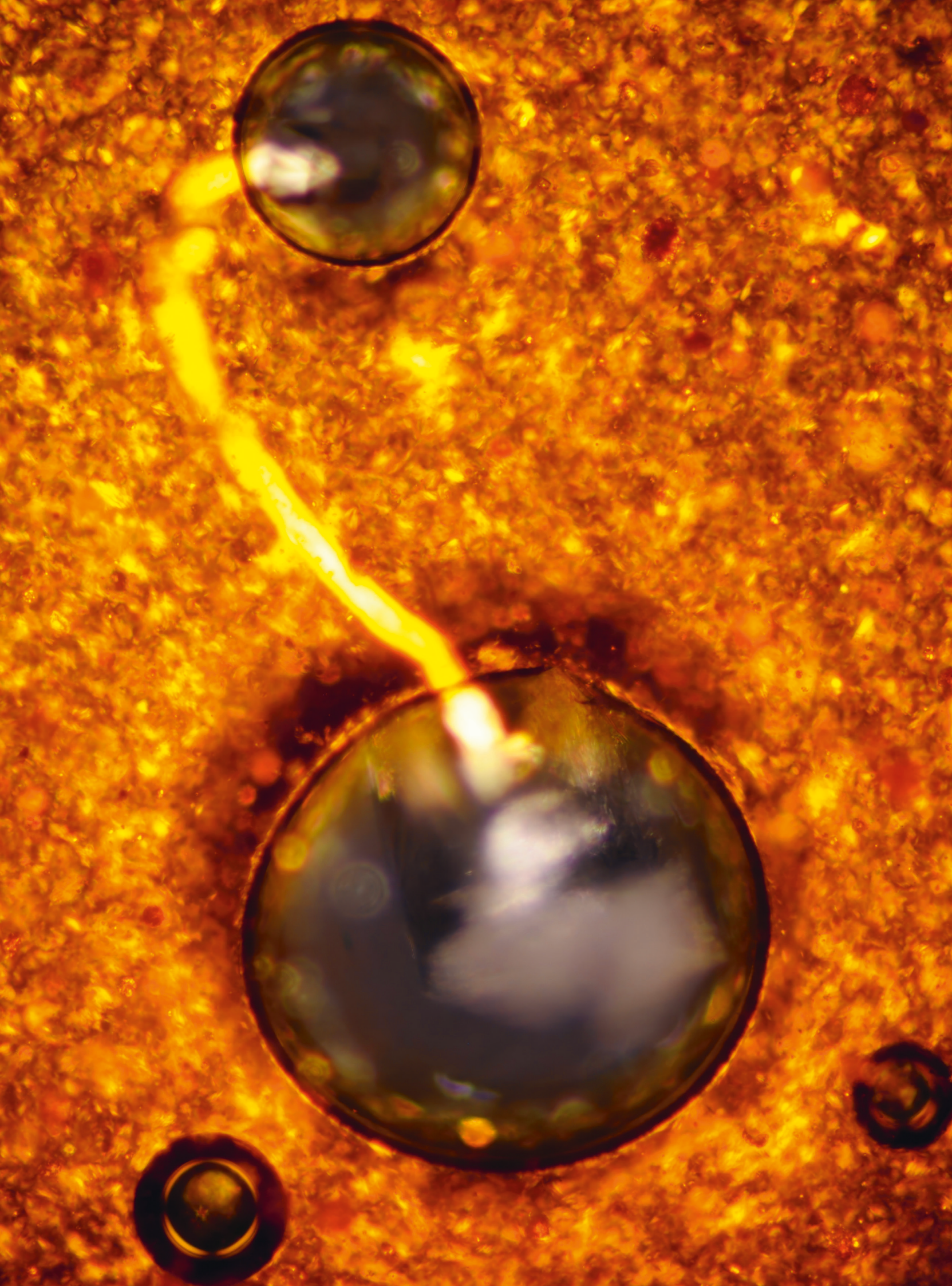
Mari Fraga: *We meet at the laboratory. I am from Brazil, you are from Iraq. I am an artist, you are an oil engineer. We are both women who come from countries with complex histories. In Brazil, centuries of colonialism, centuries of the capture and slavery of black people, centuries of Indigenous genocide and decades of violent dictatorship are historical wounds that are still open and bleeding. Our past is alive in the present. Our land is our body, and the body doesn't forget trauma—the pain always returns, re-incarnates; the plot constantly re-enacts itself, in spite of our individual or collective will. At the same time, resistance is also always alive, embodied in cultural manifestations that are full of music, color, dance, and joy.*

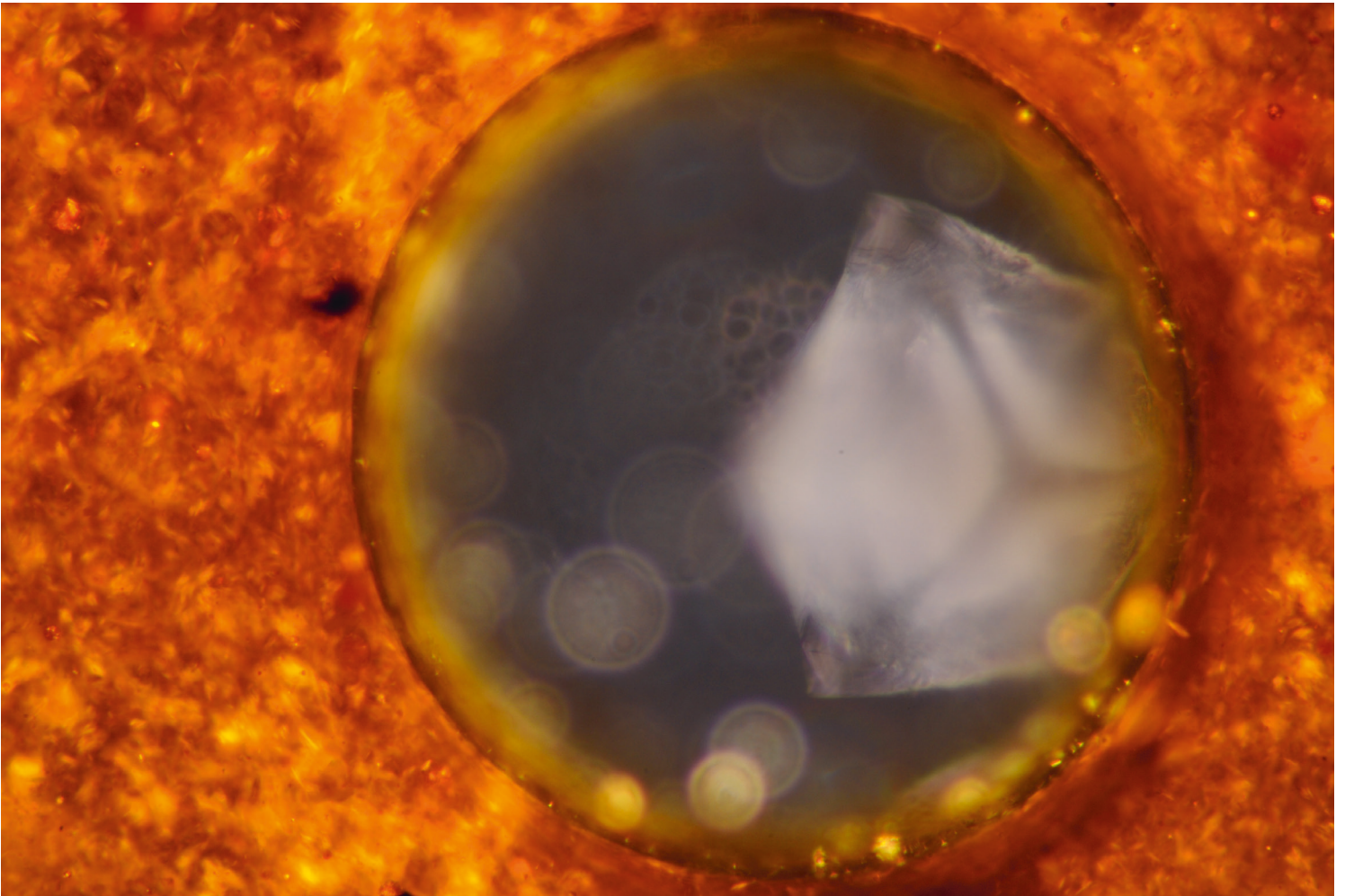
Karez Abdulhameed: The historical complexity of Iraq is rooted in its long, rich, and diverse history where successive empires, dynasties, and cultural influences marked its legacy of conflict and resilience. A sinuous history of prosperity and rapaciousness due to its resources and geographical location. Crude oil, as an ancient commodity, played a significant role in Iraq's modern history and shaped its economy, and its political and international interactions. Today, the world's thirst for more energy has grown to a scary level and has created confusion for how the world operates.

We experiment with oil, but I can't stop thinking about the layers of violence that are inseparable from the substance. For me, oil means energy and hopes of development, but also coups, corruption, cruel geopolitical power dynamics, and disappointment. The exploitation of natural resources is analogous to the exploitation of vulnerable bodies.

I've feared and detested this natural resource all my childhood and teenage years. I viewed crude oil as a curse rather than a grace. It brought dictatorship and isolated my country from the rest of the world for the longest time. We grew far from modern societies. I didn't choose to study petroleum, it chose me. Back then, I was fascinated by the science and technology of oil, by its vital side, and the fact of it driving our civilization forward. I want to share the importance of understanding the value of this commodity both as an ambitious engineer and as an optimistic individual. Engineering happens to be my destiny, as now I am able to change what I once viewed as a beast.

Inside the lab, we experiment with oil, water, and salt. One of the largest reserves of crude oil found in Brazil sits at the bottom of a deep underwater salt layer. The





Mari Fraga, *Oil Dialogue*, 2024
Microscopic photograph of crude oil, water, and salt

political events that happened after this discovery also made me think of oil as a curse. In my culture, salt is a matter used for spiritual healing. I brought salt and oil together in past works hoping that some alchemic-poetic cure could be imagined—through substances, an encounter between the death drive and the healing drive can be dreamed of. Water is elementary for life. Crude oil is a substance that results from aquatic life that inhabited the Earth millions of years ago. But oil and water don't mix, and crude oil effects can be toxic for our living planet. Can we control a substance that transcends us in space and time?

The subsurface, where different substances flow, is packed with wonders. These include, to name but a few, the secret of living water, blasting lava, gas, and oil. Crude oil has contributed wonders to our world today. It has brought us energy in easier and cheaper forms. It has built our lifestyle and allows us to tour the globe and the universe. An ancient substance that now has the time to shine brighter during both day and night. It builds societies and grows the economy, but it can burn and kill when handled with greed. It took millions of years for nature to make it. We need to be more cautious with how we treat it. The sea doesn't mix with oil because life cannot be mixed with what's now a potential death sentence.

We look inside the microscope and see a water bubble surrounded by crude oil. Another image shows two bubbles connected by a mysterious string-like thread.

The first thing that comes to my mind is the connection between a mother and her baby growing in her belly. A connection that remains even after birth. A connection that nourishes and grows an important being. The immiscibility of crude oil and water, yet the salt seems to bring them slightly together.

The way you look to these images makes me think how love can be present even in the most contrasting and ambiguous contexts. Maybe you and I are like these tiny globules, weaving an oil dialogue. In the other image, we see a cubic salt crystal inside the water bubble.

The salt crystal is embraced by a water droplet thanks to the molecular attraction between these two substances. The oil layer showcases the immiscibility of these disparate substances as in a war of polarity where the salt crystal is shielded by the water bubble. This microscopic image magnifies the beauty of these molecular forces that interplay with each other and reflects meanings of microcosmic tensions.

Even when immersed in a toxic environment, we can create the poetic space and time for beauty and imagination to be born.