

# MORE THAN A FEELING

*The Memory In Our Bones*, a recent exhibition at Dubai's **Green Art Gallery** featuring Majd Abdel Hamid, Nasser Alzayani and Gülşah Mursaloğlu, unpicked the power of history and recollection to help define new senses of the present.

Words by Yalda Bidshahri

Gülşah Mursaloğlu. *Merging Fields, Splitting Ends (Sequence III)*. 2021. Installation view at Green Art Gallery, Dubai, 2022. Photography by Anna Shtraus. All images courtesy of Green Art Gallery



Memories are often manifest in overlooked ways. Liquified solids, traces on fabric, vanishing landscapes. They all measure time and change, a perspective conveyed in the works of Gülşah Mursaloğlu, Majd Abdel Hamid, and Nasser Al Zayani in *The Memory In Our Bones*. A text by Saira Ansari accompanies the show, describing how memories can also inhabit our bodies. "We classify them as side effects," she writes, "responses to lived experiences and trauma; conditions to fix... But should we try to send it away, or could we instead massage it into our bones so that we can live with it?"

Entering the exhibition space, one was confronted by the

overpowering presence of Gülşah Mursaloğlu's *Merging Fields, Splitting Ends (Sequence III)* (2021). Blue wires covered the floor, hooked to multiple USB wall plugs at one end and to various heated copper and ceramic vessels filled with water at the other. Two long cascading strips of white material hung from the ceiling above them, made from sewn-together square pieces of potato plastic. The ribbons stretched across the ground and over the containers, vapour slowly dissolving them. This installation is a continuation of the artist's experimentations with materials sourced from below our feet. "How we relate to the materials in our surroundings has always



Majd Abdel Hamid. *Research I*. 2022. Detail. Cotton thread on fabric, 34 x 30 cm. Photography by Anna Shtraus

been peculiar to me because we see them in a very transformed state," says Mursaloğlu. "But actually, most of those things come from the underground, they're extracted from the earth." The artist rejects the understood function of her unassuming materials, trusting their monumentality through changes in form. "I don't necessarily think that the artwork has to be something stable or that it needs to be preserved forever. So I want to recognise that agency, and I think making that unfolding or transformation part of the process and presenting it in the space also alludes to the earlier memories of the materials."

On the opposite side of the room was work by Majd Abdel Hamid, who makes time visible through slow acts of embroidery. The Palestinian artist focuses on process rather than motifs, creating small-scale abstract stitchings on fabric. Displayed under glass, the delicate works have intriguing titles like *Walls are the notebooks of the insane (It doesn't have to end like this)* (2019 – ongoing). "For me, memory is one of the things that I've been dealing with while working with embroidery," explains the artist, "because of this idea that embroidery stopped being an organic component of daily Palestinian life with the trauma of 1948 and has since become symbolic of identity. It became something to preserve and also a way of coping."

In the video piece *Double Sheet* (2021), Abdel Hamid unstitches a large piece of white fabric as the voice of the Syrian activist Riad al-Turk is heard in the background. He describes using lentils and gravel picked from soup to draw natural scenery onto a double-sized bedsheet during his 17 years as a prisoner in solitary confinement. The depictions were intended to be destroyed, but they reclaimed



Majd Abdel Hamid. *Quarantine series I*. 2020–2021. Cross-stitch, cotton thread on cotton fabric. 39 x 27 cm. Photography by Anna Shtraus

their maker's inner freedom. Handwork, such as drawing or embroidery, can create traces of patience as much as marks of time.

Filling the back of the gallery was Nasser Alzayani's *Watering the distant, deserting the near* (2016–ongoing, see *Canvas* 103). The installation incorporated works on paper, an audio piece and sand tablets for a research-based documentation around the now dry natural spring of Ain Adhari in Bahrain. Framed on the wall were written records of the artist's findings. The work began as an archival study and is focused on narratives of collective experience that lie outside traditional history. The site served generations of families and inspired significant cultural production in which language and poetics played an important part. For example, the Arabic word *ain* can mean both "spring" and "eye". Included in the audio piece is a song mourning the water's disappearance. It laments that, as the spring dried up, eyes began to gush. The melancholic lyrics are stencilled onto fragile sand tablets, which slowly fade over time until just dust remains, similar to the place they reference. Yet the voices and materials gathered by Alzayani keep the spring running in the form of memories.

As the pieces on display melted, crumbled and mended, they evidenced a continuing process of expression and existence. By repeating cycles of doing and undoing across varying materials and scales, a cohesive dialogue emerged about the condition of memory and how it is embodied. The works challenged the notion of memories as ephemeral, something that fades or should be encouraged to pass, and invited us to consider what it would be like to embrace memories as persevering, as living on in physical transformation. ■

# LET'S GET PHYSICAL

## the body in art

In this section we explore the artistic potential of the human body and its physical properties, from the power of our hands to create and sculpt to the movement of our limbs in performance art. We also look at the social, political and symbolic aspects of the human form and its physicality, as expressed by artists in their quest to explain and understand what it means to be human.

