

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES / 421

ARE YOUR MEMORIES OF ME ENOUGH FOR YOU?

Alla Abdunabi's Sculptural Interrogation of Colonial Memory Preserves the Past and Questions the Present. Brendon Bell-Roberts visits 421 as Abdunabi shares personal insights into her latest body of work.

Reviewing Alla Abdunabi's first solo exhibition at the 421 Arts Campus, which forms part of this year's cycle of the 421 Artistic Development Program (ADP), is an intriguing and fresh interrogation of empire in the context of the Barbary lion of North Africa and its tragic story—hunted into extinction by imperial powers yet immortalised as a symbol of their dominance. 'Are your memories of me enough for you?' is a potent metaphor for colonial violence and its enduring legacies.

Yet, I endured for you, 2024. Installation; salt sculptures installed on beds of salt. Courtesy of 421, Abu Dhabi.

Alla Abdunabi pursues the potential existence of matter. Her practice activates fragments—organic and inorganic, real and imagined—revealing their latent energy and inner life. At times, she traces histories; at others, she creates new objects or reconfigures existing ones. Shifting between the roles of caretaker and disruptor, she urges materials to speak in the present. Her work is rooted in attunement, engaging with the contradictions, coincidences, and responsibilities embedded within the materials.

Faisal Al Hassan, Director of 421 Arts Campus, writes in the catalogue foreword for Abdunabi's exhibition, "Alla's work offers a deeply reflective engagement with history, iconography, and the structures that shape our understanding of truth... this exhibition engages with the concept of simulacra—the ways in which representations shape our perception of reality".

Abdunabi's practice is rooted in sculptural interventions. In *Are Your Memories of Me Enough for You?* incorporates salt sculptures, ceramic castings, human teeth, concrete reliefs, and oil paintings on wood panels. The exhibition examines how colonial violence extends beyond physical subjugation, embedding itself in visual culture and institutional memory.

The artist references the Barbary Lion throughout the exhibition, exploring the lion as a simultaneous extinction and symbolic survival case. Once native to North Africa, the species was wiped out by imperial forces, a casualty of ecological destruction and colonial domination over nature. Yet, in death, the lion persists as an enduring

emblem of imperial power. Even as the lion's body disappears, its image remains—a reanimated tool of power. The exhibition questions the ethics of restoring and displaying colonial artefacts by presenting the lion as a remnant of destruction and a symbol of resilience. It invites reflection on the more profound implications of "care" within historical and contemporary contexts.

I met Alla for a walkabout of her exhibition, as we talk she introduces her thought process, "My practice entails thinking about objects in North Africa, colonial objects as they move from the global South to the global North and reflecting on that movement, displacement, and the assimilation of these objects as they move across borders, how they get valued and devalued." The artist invites the viewer to consider how truth is constructed through this interrogation of how symbols endure, evolve, and gain new meanings over time, as well as the colonial intervention and our relationship with these objects. Her work challenges us to question whose truths are being told, whose histories are being preserved, and for what purposes. "I present these histories to the contemporary audience through the objects I present playing the role of caretaker and aggressor, recreating the same practices of preservation that museologists may have used historically. However, I create alternative narratives using similar techniques using materials from the domestic space so that these acts of preservation move from the museum space to the public space and into our domestic spaces, mimicking these ways of conservation and presenting an alternative perspective of these histories."

In the window of the foyer of the building is a large sculpture of a sleeping lion lying on a mound of salt titled *Yet, I endured for you.* (2024). "The sculpture is made entirely out of salt. Its body is encrusted with salt, its interior is salt, and it sleeps on a salt bed. In these

PLEASE PROCEED
WITH CARE

This exhibit contains cultural stereotypes and shows a violent act against a Person of Color. We want to acknowledge its harmful impact. The diorama has been on view at this museum for over 100 years — these stereotypes were wrong then and are wrong now. We are actively working to find appropriate long-term solutions so that everyone feels safe and welcome in the museum.

This exhibit also contains human remains. We are developing a plan to remove the remains of this person from the diorama and place them in a sanctuary space in the museum's care.

Lion Attacking a Dromedary, 2024.
Copper plate etching on a museum sign podium.
Courtesy of 421, Abu Dhabi



Installation view of Alla Abdunabi's 'Are you memories of me enough for you?'. Courtesy of 421, Abu Dhabi

works, I'm thinking about this ghostly act of its return, that it's gone extinct and will never return. It also explores what my role as an artist is. By bringing the lion back, I acknowledge that it is extinct and highlight that there are no reparations at all for this colonial act. I always consider my use of materials. Salt is used in taxidermy to preserve the skin of the animals. During the tanning process, they rub the animal's skin with salt. In the domestic space, specifically in North Africa, we often preserve food with salt. I engage in this practice with my mum in the kitchen, which made that connection between myself in the domestic space and my North African heritage. So I decided to create these sleeping lions made entirely out of salt, who, during the duration of the show, will wither and disintegrate, and at the end of the exhibition, they will no longer exist." She continues, "The Barbary lion went extinct after being hunted by imperial powers, starting in Roman times when they used them to kill or be killed in gladiator games. The show focuses on the lion's body and the brown body under colonial rule. What's interesting about the lion's story is that these powers hunted it to extinction yet exalted it as an icon."

She adds, "This show looks specifically at icons that persist within colonial objects, our continued restoration of these objects, and what that does to our relationship with them as a contemporary audience."

I am continuously thinking about the historical relationship between aggression and care, so in this show, I wanted to present the works with tenderness, empathy and care – thinking about how the subjects in the show have been displayed aggressively in the past and inducing a tenderness and stillness to their bodies now. I also have some personal works alongside the historical pieces that address my thinking about the relationship between the personal and the political."

On entering the exhibition space, we are greeted by a copper plate etching mounted on a museum sign podium: *Lion Attacking a Dromedary* (2024). Alla explains, "So we start the show with this title: *PLEASE PROCEED WITH CARE*, thinking about caring and aggression in the museum space."



tooth and a folly, 2024.
Tooth from father's collection
of artists baby teeth in metal container,
glass, mirror. Courtesy of 421, Abu Dhabi.



Delacroix Foreign Bodies, 2024. Oil paint on wood panel. Courtesy of 421, Abu Dhabi.

Lion Attacking a Dromedary is a 19th-century taxidermy diorama by Edouard Verreaux, formerly displayed at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh. It portrays a fictional scene of a Barbary lion attacking a North African man on a dromedary, constructed through romanticised Orientalist tropes. Rather than reflecting historical reality, the scene emerges from European fantasies of “exotic” lands, people, and animals. In the 21st century, the diorama became highly controversial when it was revealed that, beyond the taxidermied lion, parts of the human mannequin were also actual remains. The Verreaux brothers, known for looting Indigenous graves for their taxidermy work, had used actual human remains in the display. Before its permanent closure in 2023, the Carnegie Museum acknowledged its unethical and racialised origins with a disclaimer. This diorama and its history expose the ethical dilemmas of postmortem display, colonial legacies, and the tensions within contemporary museum spaces. It underscores the shared experiences of suffering and objectification between the Barbary lion and the human body under colonial rule.

The following work is mounted on the wall and contains a baby tooth encased in a metal container and accompanied by glass and mirrors entitled *tooth and a folly* (2024). I asked her to explain, “This is one of my baby teeth in the container my dad kept them in. I found boxes and a bunch of these tin containers, with all my baby teeth and those of my siblings labelled with dates and times and organised in a particular way. I am thinking about reclaiming the self by considering the tooth in the domestic space as an icon of my body. Again, these processes of preservation as

they seep into the domestic space as well. You see the tooth placed on a laser-engraved mirror and then see the image of the mirrored tooth.”

Abdunai’s work challenges conventional notions of preservation and value, offering an alternative vision of care. Rather than aligning with colonial, imperial, or capitalist frameworks, this work centres on a profoundly personal and communal form of care that values relationships over material possessions. By using domestic materials that are intimate, familiar, and steeped in personal history, Abdunai reimagines care as an act of connection, resisting commodification and embracing a more relational approach.

Standing in front of 3 wooden panels with images of lions painted in red oil entitled ‘*Delacroix Foreign Bodies*,’ Abdunai explains, “I created these sleeping bodies from these aggressive postures, thinking about sleep as a decolonial act of resting—being especially kind to the lion in this context. The show interrogates fact and fiction and plays with what the museum space, public space or art space could be. I imagined every representation of the lion in the exhibition—the representations are not real—and Delacroix’s work is one example. I created these paintings and extracted the postures from Delacroix’s original paintings of the Barbary lion. Delacroix was inspired by the lions on a trip he took to Morocco. He returned home and created these exaggerated scenes of the lions attacking North Africans. I wanted to induce the stillness I found in their compositions.”



TOP: *Delacroix Foreign Bodies* (Detail of third panel), 2024. Oil paint on wood panel. Courtesy of 421, Abu Dhabi.
BOTTOM: *Yet, I endured for you*, 2024. Installation; salt sculptures installed on beds of salt. Courtesy of 421, Abu Dhabi.

Installation view of (left) *Yet, I endured for you*, 2024. Installation: salt sculptures installed on beds of salt.
(right) *taste sweet, taste bitter*, 2024. Large-scale concrete relief sculptures. Courtesy of 421, Abu Dhabi.





THIS AND FACING PAGE: *taste sweet, taste bitter*, 2024. Large-scale concrete relief sculptures. Courtesy of 421, Abu Dhabi.

We move on to a large-scale concrete relief work entitled 'taste sweet taste bitter', and she continues, "In the concrete reliefs that I've created, I reference the allure of monumental beauty. I am specifically thinking about the beautiful monuments in Libya, where colonisation fueled a restoration industry. These include the Lepcis Magna ruins, a prominent city of the Carthaginian Empire and Roman Libya at the mouth of the Wadi Lebda in the Mediterranean. Italy would say that Libya is the fourth shore of Italy because of how the Roman Empire used restoration as a tool to do so. Much of my practice references this and the need to preserve the beautiful object. But we seldom look beyond its beautiful, delicate facade, and this is what I want you to question. So, I create these facades by pulling from nature like we see this referenced in our monuments. I pipe concrete with icing bags in a witty response to think about beauty as aggression and our bittersweet relationship with these beautiful objects. I also want you to think about labour,

like the labour behind the making of these monuments that represent the aggression of imperial power and control over land."

"The works are not perfectly symmetrical, which was important, especially when looking at these pristine, beautiful monument exteriors. I wanted you to see me in that process and the labour behind the making, where you see the different colours of the concrete because every time I came back and added to the work, the concrete would be slightly different. The work is about what's beyond the facade of the beautiful monument."

The following work is *Love that Reassembles Fragments* ceramic sculptures made using casts of the artist's baby teeth on a slab; Abdunabi elucidates "these are an extension of the first work at the entrance to the exhibition, where we saw my baby teeth that my dad collected. I made many casts of the teeth to create these





taste sweet, taste bitter, 2024
Large-scale concrete relief sculptures.
Courtesy of 421, Abu Dhabi



different motifs on slabs rearranging, extracting, removing and displaying, in an attempt to think about what happens when you take a private familial gesture and display it publicly. Again, I wish to show how care and aggression exist in both domestic and public spaces.”

The last work is another sculpture of a sleeping lion installation, like a bookend to the exhibition. “Again, I was playing with the posture, as a lion would never really sleep like this—my dogs do. Again, this shows the domestic reference that permeates my work.”

Love that Reassembles Fragments, 2024.
Ceramic sculptures made using casts of the artist's baby teeth on a slab, metal armature.
Courtesy of 421, Abu Dhabi.



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Installation: salt sculptures
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'Are your memories of me enough for you?' references the history of the representation of these lions in paintings, monuments, and taxidermy. Abdunabi concludes, "They are yet again misrepresented, even after their death. When you look at the taxidermy lions, they are warped in weird ways because there is no accurate reference or representation. I used vulnerable animals like dogs and cats from the domestic space and the human body to create the lions' poses. One has a bit of a human face, and the other one's legs and arms are not proportional. That was an intentional choice. So again, I play the aggressor and push that misrepresentation and distortion further to address the sad story of the Barbary lion of North Africa—a potent metaphor for colonial violence and its enduring legacies."

Alla Abdunabi (b. 2001, Freiburg) is a Libyan artist working in sculpture and installation. She has had recent group shows and public presentations at Jameel Arts Centre, Bayt Al Mamzar, The Foundry & Alserkal Arts Foundation.

