

ARTS
COUNCIL
OF
THE
EMIRATES

of **سندباد** and **sandbox** | Gelare Khoshgozaran

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Curated by Nasrin Himada



Gelare Khoshgozaran, "Medina Wasl: Connecting Town", still, 16mm film and digital video, 2018, color, sound, 31 min. Courtesy of the artist.

"There's nothing but dirt, dust, and sand"

The above quote is gleaned from a voice-over in Gelare Khoshgozaran's "Medina Wasl: Connecting Town", a thirty-minute film shot in 16 mm transferred onto video. The piece is part of her solo exhibition, *of **سندباد** and **sandbox***, which accompanies a sculptural component titled "U.S. Customs Demands to Know". The voice-over is of a US veteran in the film, recalling their time as a soldier in Iraq. As grainy footage of a simulated Middle Eastern village rolls in the background, we hear the soldier reminisce over the beautiful skies they saw and the harsh desert landscapes in which sandstorms were regular.

These simulated Middle East villages popped-up all across the US, mostly in the deserts and some on the east coast. Built as training camps for soldiers who were going to Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11. This particular one—the one we see in the film—is a site in the California desert, thirty minutes north of a military base and two hours away from the nearest town. Isolated and contained, they function to give the aura of a village that the soldiers could be stationed at or near, where “enemy combatants” might live or hide. In these simulated villages, Afghani and Iraqi actors are hired to play “terrorists.” Made to jump out from behind a wall in a surprise attack yelling gibberish. Much like what we see depicted in Hollywood films.

Who designs, builds, and manifests the vision of a simulated Middle East village in preparation for battle? How has this become a training strategy for the US military? What is being simulated? And how does this manifest as data, a knowledge system created to falsely identify, target and kill unknown persons? For Khoshgozaran, the Middle East exists only as simulacrum for the west. These simulated architectures exemplify this effect in which fragments of cultures and ethnicities are compounded to create a site that might feel, look, and smell like any village in that vast region. Languages and religions are all jumbled into one orientalist image of what Americans imagine to be the Middle East. The American military narrative of an “us vs. them” logic constructs the sensorial effect of an American soldier’s experience in battle, in a landscape unknown but that will become familiar.

Khoshgozaran’s process begins with research, delving into various resource material— interviews, films, readings, writings, conversations with interlocutors and collaborators. She refers to her practice as “undisciplinary,” which in effect speaks to Khoshgozaran’s capacity to foreground process as the instigator of what becomes a source for encounter. Her research-based projects are contemplations on the artist’s role as witness. As she expresses, “how remembering may offer an embodied understanding of historical narrative.” She inserts herself into the work through performative gestures and experimental storytelling techniques, infolding her own memories, dreams, and recollections into the production and construction of her practice.

of ساندباڊ and sandbox brings into view the complex and layered narratives that emerge when an embodied sense of knowing is prioritized. In the space of the exhibition, Khoshgozaran is letting us in on a story that is formulated out of the desire for inquiry and curiosity. She examines the history of the landscape of the California desert, and how it is mired in appropriations of Middle Eastern cultures that began in the early 1900s, when American merchants brought date palm into California for the first time. Branded as an exotic fruit, the merchants needed to promote the product to westerners. In order to sell the dates, they began to throw orientalist themed parties with genies and camels, organized date festivals and fairs with ostrich rides and pageants, all taking place in and around where these sites are now. When traveling through the California desert today, there is a town named Mecca and then there is the Salton Sea, surrounded by land full of date palms that are being cultivated, produced and farmed. The history of orientalism in this landscape dates back before the military bases were built and the simulated villages were developed, yet these histories converge and present a perspective on American consumption that is not free of its racialized violence.

For Khoshgozaran, the desert landscape, with the date palms everywhere, recall the images that were also emblematic of the Iran-Iraq war. In the film, she gives space to her own memories and recollections as a child growing up during this time, when young teenage boys were being

drafted for battle. Growing up seeing images of the war, the landscape full of date palms on fire, watching as bombs and rockets fell, conditioned an intimate relation with images. Most of what was seen or heard on television and radio were footage and reports of the war, of death, sermons of pride and patriotic duty. In Khoshgozaran's film, these experiences are presented to us from a critical perspective, and approaching these concerns from an autobiographical lens reveals the intricacy of violence as it is tied to militarism, nationalism, and desire. The complex history of a landscape and its manifestation in images is reformulated, constructed, archived, and imagined through abstraction. Rendering a temporality that is queer and diasporic; asserting the power of remembrance as material to be imaged.

The sculptural pieces in the exhibition, "U.S. Customs Demands to Know", consist of twenty LED-lit packages in various sizes. They give off a warm light in the space, yet an eerie tone also ensues. The title of the piece is a direct quote from a policy legislated after 9/11, where US authorities can search any package without consent. They can tamper with it, remove items, destroy the contents without repercussion. The boxes contained archival and research material that were sent from Iran to Los Angeles. Laid out across the gallery floor, they condition a sense of dream-like movement toward an otherworldly place. As with the film, there is something felt that not only acknowledges the violence ingrained in these national security structures, but that moves beyond their world view and opens the possibility for us to also witness another story being told.

Nasrin Himada