

MIT List Visual Arts Center
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[LIST PROJECTS]

Farah Al Qasimi

July 30 – October 20, 2019



FRONT *Aviary*, 2019, archival inkjet print, 45 × 60 in.

ABOVE *Perfume (Obama, Lovable, Flawless)* (detail), 2018, archival inkjet print, 30 × 21 in.

Images courtesy the artist; Helena Anrather, New York; and the Third Line, Dubai. © Farah Al Qasimi



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Much like the lush visuals of her still photographs, the improbable premise and sometimes comedic tone of Farah Al Qasimi's video, *Um Al Naar (Mother of Fire)* (2019), are subterfuge for more serious concerns. The artist presents a fictional reality television program whose titular protagonist is a supernatural spirit, or *jinn*, cloaked beneath a floral-patterned textile. Addressing the camera, the melancholic Um Al Naar confesses her aversion to change, enumerating historic shifts in a region now known as the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah. These "changes" develop chronologically from the area's settlement by the Bedouin people to the centuries-long control of its trade by Portuguese and British colonial rule, later delving into Ras Al Khaimah's foundation in 1972 as the seventh and final emirate to join the federation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Arriving at the present moment, the *jinn* alludes to a recent PR campaign engineered by the UAE government naming 2019 the "year of tolerance," a concept as ambiguous as its branded language suggests.¹

Employing the device of Um Al Naar's recollections, Al Qasimi's video performs a nuanced critique of contemporary Emirati life, acknowledging the lasting cultural residues of colonial rule (including the adoption of Eurocentric museological practices by UAE museums), while reckoning with the state's changing stance on matters of gender and sexuality. "I guess the people need their museums, and they need their malls," sighs the *jinn*, "they need their cultural centers." Many of Al Qasimi's still photographs, like *Abraj Mall* (2018), which depicts the glittering interior of a shopping complex in the historic Dubai neighborhood of Deira, take public places of commerce as their subject. A related group of photographs of Dragon Mart, a Dubai mall that bills itself as "the world's largest Chinese trading hub outside China," were taken by the artist when vendors temporarily halted business to answer the call to prayer.² This *Closed Kiosk* series (2019) shows yards of brightly-colored silk draped over the market stalls to corporeal effect, some appearing to cloak a human figure. Simmering beneath these images of shopping centers is Al Qasimi's sustained inquiry into public expressions of taste and self-presentation in the Emirates—how consumerism and religion seem to function in uneasy tandem within these spaces, and how these concepts are but two of many shifting ideals that comprise what is referred to as culture.

From the suggestion of hidden bodies in the *Closed Kiosks* to its literalization in the *jinn* disguised by a swath of fabric in *Um Al Naar*, camouflage and concealment play a central role in Al Qasimi's images. In a recent series of portraits that include *Living Room Vape* (2017) and *A's Reflection* (2019), Al Qasimi obscures the faces of her subjects while capturing moments that feel intimate despite their staging. Various compositional strategies hide identifying features—behind plumes of smoke, sumptuously patterned textiles and drapery, or through the spectral image of a face reflected in glass—while accentuating the opulently decorated interiors her sitters inhabit.

The imperative for disguise as a response to state conservatism is elaborated in scenes of *Um Al Naar* where Al Qasimi incorporates found footage of M'alah dancers. With its

ambiguous gender associations, performing the expressive and sensuous dance has since the 1980s become a social taboo in the Emirates. Um Al Naar, who as we are told by the whimsical motion graphics "LOVES TO DANCE!!!!," is rumored to possess individuals, thereby compelling them to dance hysterically until they die of exhaustion. But the *jinn* feels her need to dance is misinterpreted, stating she only wishes for "people to be free with their bodies." For Um Al Naar, the notion of unencumbered expression—to dance unconstrained by fear of judgement or reprisal—is cause for celebration.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Farah Al Qasimi (b. 1991, United Arab Emirates) lives and works in New York and Dubai.

List Projects: Farah Al Qasimi is organized by Henriette Huldish, Director of Exhibitions & Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center.

PUBLIC PROGRAM

Gallery Discussion with Farah Al Qasimi

Thursday, October 10, 6:30 PM



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SUPPORT

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1 "Tolerance Initiatives," Government.ae the official portal of the UAE Government, accessed July 1, 2019. <https://www.government.ae/en/about-the-uae/culture/tolerance/tolerance-initiatives>.

2 "Shopping," Dragon Mart company website, accessed July 1, 2019. https://www.dragonmart.ae/en/shoppings/ground_floor.

