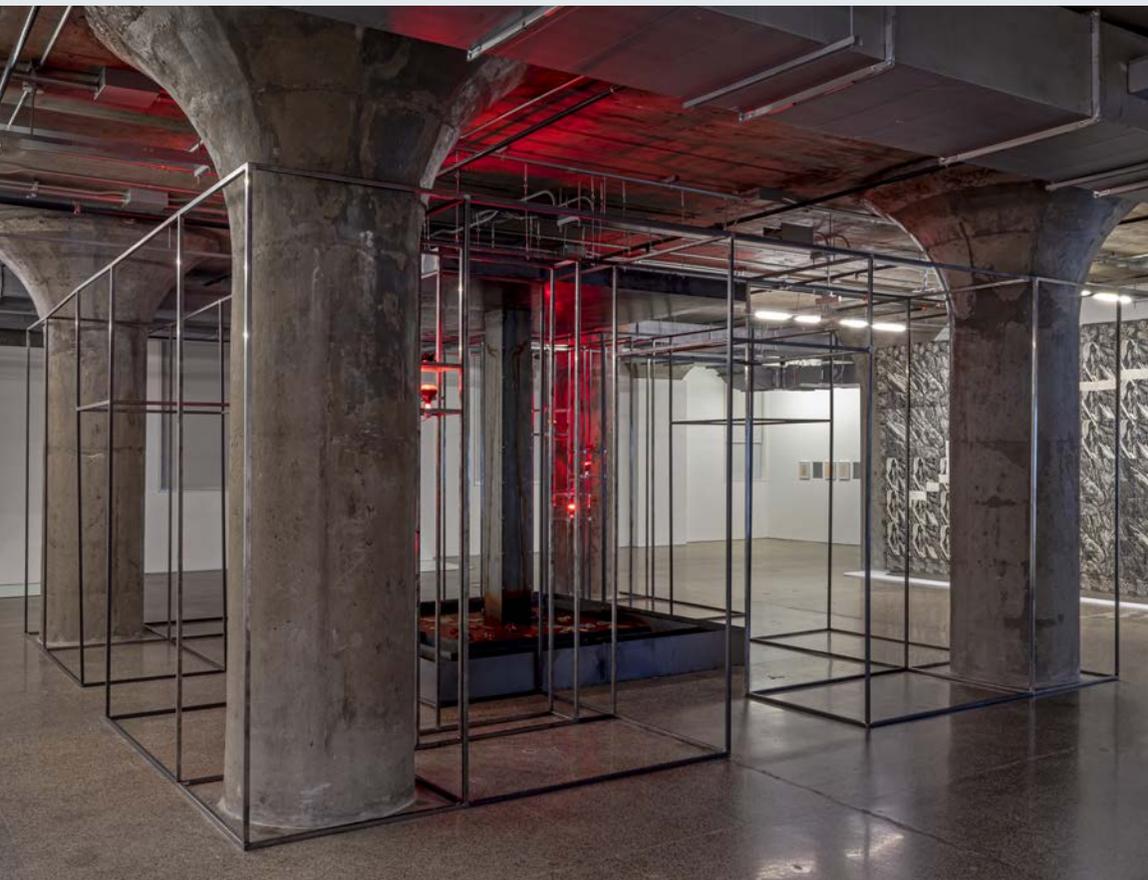


List Projects 25: Azza El Siddique

June 30–September 4, 2022, Bakalar Gallery



MIT List Visual
Arts Center



Fade into the Sun, 2021. Steel, expanded steel, water, unfired slip clay, bisque-fired slip clay, enamel spray paint, slow-drip irrigation system, heat lamps, *bukhoor*, sandalwood oil. Installation view: *Greater Toronto Art 2021 (GTA21)*, MOCA Toronto, 2021. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid

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Azza El Siddique is known for her room-sized sculptural environments made of welded steel that take up the related themes of entropy, impermanence, and mortality.

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Reflecting the transitory nature of these subjects and experienced with multiple senses, works by the Sudanese-Canadian artist feature materials recast by time and the controlled exertion of elemental forces, like water, light, and heat, until only residues remain.

El Siddique's modular, architectonic steel forms are based on the floorplans of ancient Nubian sacred sites, including ritual and funerary temples. Calling on her inheritance of traditions that originated in these spaces, she reconstitutes them with contemporary industrial materials as enveloping monuments to transience. Often, the purpose-built architectures support smaller sculptures of vases, urns, and fragmented figures rendered in glass and unfired ceramic. In installations like

Begin in smoke, End in ashes (2019) and *Measure of one* (2020), water droplets released through slow-drip irrigation systems gradually erode the clay objects and oxidize the steel. Through this dynamic, time-based material system, elements of her works undergo an entropic transformation—from creation to dissolution. The artist has also outfitted her austere metal constructions with heat lamps diffusing the scent of sandalwood, an aroma that evokes both Islamic mortuary rituals and sensorial recollections of her adolescence in a Sudanese community in Canada. El Siddique likens the slowly unfolding events in her installations to the subjective, unstable, and mutable production of historical narratives and personal recollections.



Recently, El Siddique has become drawn to the cultural and economic significance of scent in ancient Nubia and the neighboring Egyptian Empire, investigating the lineage of aromatic materials that continue to play important roles in contemporary Sudanese culture. At the List Center, her newly commissioned work, *In the place of annihilation, where all the past was present and returned transformed* (2022), uncovers the intertwined, personal, ancient, and colonial narratives of the fragrances used in *bukhoor*. Ubiquitous in Sudanese and diasporic Sudanese homes, this incense is made from compressed sandalwood chips, a blend of precious aromatic resins (including frankincense, amber, and *oudh*), Sandalia (a sandalwood oil perfume), and European scents made for export to North African markets, all bound together with sugar. While *bukhoor* is commercially available, there are many

homemade variations, and El Siddique studied traditional recipes to develop the incense that serves as a sculptural medium in this installation.

Small *bukhoor* sculptures in the form of waterlilies are incrementally heated and will gradually combust, permeating the gallery with scent and eventually melting until only a sticky residue remains. The waterlily is associated with Dedwen, a shape- and gender-shifting Nubian god closely associated with the natural resources of Nubia and incense, in particular.¹ With this subtle reference to the mythic Dedwen, who was said to smell of burning incense, the cast *bukhoor* blossoms are placed within the framework of an immersive steel architecture based on the floorplan of the deity's birth house in the Temple of Kalabsha grounds.²

The artist's structure also houses a two-channel video mapping chemical compounds of the various ingredients



Begin in smoke, End in ashes, 2019 (detail at left, installation view above). Steel, slip cast, enamel spray paint, water, slow-drip irrigation system. Photos: Sebastian Bach



Measure of one, 2020. Installation view: RAW, Gardiner Museum, Toronto, 2020. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid

that comprise bukhoor incense. A sort of digital recipe, the video's 3-D scans of the topographies of eerily floating mounds of frankincense and other fragrant resins also allude to historical trade networks. Ancient Nubia's premier exports to pharaonic Egypt were the aromatics used in ceremonies "connected to the inseparable realms of religion and politics," which intricately linked them with displays of state power.³ El Siddique summons these entangled histories in illustrations welded onto the installation architecture. Formed by a metallurgic alchemy of concentrated applications of heat and gas (she employs a combination of MIG and TIG welding techniques to render loose, expressive sketches on polished stainless steel panels), her drawings include pictorial homages to precious aromatic resins and their

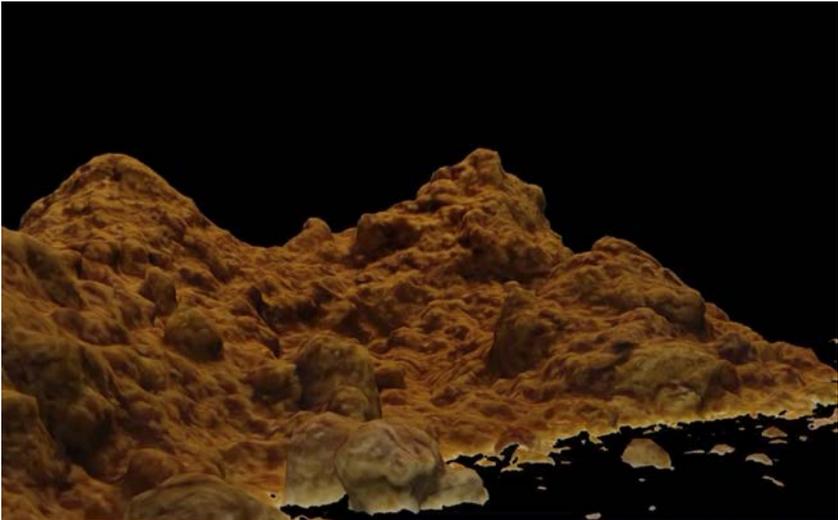
chemical makeup, the artist's interpretations of the narratives of ancient creation myths, and iconographic references to Hatshepsut, a "female king" in pharaonic Egypt. The latter, keenly aware of the power conferred by both representation and religious ritual, presented herself with masculine features and kingly regalia in commissioned portraits that glorified her rule, particularly her role in organizing trade expeditions, which brought frankincense and myrrh to Egypt for ceremonial use.⁴

The "annihilation" El Siddique references in the installation's title aligns less with the word's colloquial usage as complete destruction than with annihilation as a principle in physics—where the force exerted by subatomic collisions converts matter into energy (when two particles

collide at speed, for instance, they “annihilate” into photons with mass identical to that of their previous form). Physical state changes akin to annihilation are found throughout the work’s materials and techniques, from the combustion of cast incense to the residual heat ripples that form the linework of her metallurgic drawings. The transformative resonance of annihilation also offers a metaphor for the sensorial historiography present in

the work’s consideration (and collapse) of past and present relationships between scent, memory, and power. El Siddique’s atmospheric evocations of the long, multilayered histories of ancient sites, precious resins, and traditions she carries into the present highlight how, in the artist’s words, “lineage and inheritance keep moving through systems”⁵ that are re-formed with the passage of time.

- 1 Pearce Paul Creasman and Kei Yamamoto, “The African Incense Trade and Its Impacts in Pharaonic Egypt,” *African Archaeological Review* 36 (2019): 349.
- 2 The Temple of Kalabsha was erected around 30 BCE near what is now the city of Aswan in southern Egypt. In 1970, after the construction of the Aswan High Dam, the temple was relocated to higher ground to protect it from flooding. It was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979.
- 3 Creasman and Yamamoto, “The African Incense Trade,” 358.
- 4 Uroš Matić, “(De)queering Hatshepsut: Binary Bind in Archaeology of Egypt and Kingship Beyond the Corporeal,” *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 23 (2016): 813.
- 5 Azza El Siddique, “Creative Conversations: Azza El Siddique, Nour Bishouty and Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum,” MOCA Toronto, October 14, 2021, <https://moca.ca/events/creative-conversation-azza-el-siddique-nour-bishouty-pamela-phatsimo-sunstrum/>.



In the place of annihilation, where all the past was present and returned transformed, 2022
(video still from installation)



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Azza El Siddique (b. 1984, Khartoum, Sudan) lives and works in New Haven, CT. Previous solo exhibitions include *Begin in smoke, End in ashes*, Helena Anrather, New York; *let me hear you sweat*, Cooper Cole, Toronto, ON; *Concave Conflux Convex*, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto; and *Lattice be Transparent*, 8eleven, Toronto. Her work has been included in group exhibitions at MOCA Toronto; Gardiner Museum, Toronto; Oakville Galleries, Toronto; Shin Gallery, New York; Green Hall Gallery, New Haven; Towards, Miami; and Parisian Laundry, Miami. El Siddique received an MFA from Yale School of Art in 2019 and a BFA from Ontario College of Art and Design University in 2014. She was a Skowhegan resident in 2019.

List Projects 25: Azza El Siddique is organized by Selby Nimrod, Assistant Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center.

Measure of one, 2020 (detail). Steel, expanded steel, water, unfired slip clay, slow-drip irrigation system, EPDM pond liner, cement bricks, dimensions variable. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid

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Behind-the-Scenes Preview

June 29, 2022, 6:00 PM

In-person program



Curator Tour

with Selby Nimrod

September 1, 2022, 5:30 PM

In-person program

Top image:

Begin in smoke, End in ashes, 2019 (detail)

Bottom image:

What is left is only water, 2019 (detail). Steel, fired slip cast, water, slow-drip irrigation system, cement bricks. Photo: Sebastian Bach

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Front cover:

Fade into the Sun, 2021 (detail)

All images courtesy the artist and Helena Anrather,
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