

Interview with artist Salmah Almansoori, conducted at the artist's studio on 18.12.2023 by Prof. Katarzyna (Kasia) Dzikowska

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Speaker Name	
Kasia Dzikowska	First of all, please introduce yourself.
Salmah Almansoori	Hi, everyone. My name is Salmah Al Mansoori. I am a visual artist based in Abu Dhabi, born and raised in Al Ghayathi, Al Dhafra.
K.D.	What artistic training do you have?
Salmah Almansoori	I hold a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Zayed University, from the College of Arts and Creative Enterprises.
K.D.	How long have you been in the creative industry?
Salmah Almansoori	I've been in the creative industry for the last five years, since I started my education in the arts.
K.D.	How have you developed your creative career so far?
Salmah Almansoori	Developing my art career started from 2018, when I decided to pursue a career in art and I moved from my hometown Al Ghayathi to Abu Dhabi city. This made me realize that I wanted to do art as a career, as an artist, working in the arts in general.
K.D.	I think you also have got an interesting history with Khalifah Univesity as well?
Salmah Almansoori	Back in 2018, when I was looking at university options, I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do in life. I applied for two majors, the first one was Biomedical Engineering in Khalifa University and the second one was Visual Arts at Zayed University. By the time I graduated high school, I figured out that I couldn't do anything other than art, and I wanted to follow my passion and make it as an artist. It wasn't that easy to convince everyone around me because they didn't know what I wanted to do. But now, four or five years later, I think I made it in the arts. I recently graduated from Zayed University with the bachelor degree in Visual Arts.
K.D.	You've been doing quite a lot of things outside of the university as well, even when you were a student.
Salmah Almansoori	I would describe myself as a passionate person who likes to learn a lot. I was always trying to look out for opportunities other than art education because it's a different perspective when you work in the art, the art in the UAE and the art worldwide. I was trying to get myself into programs that are based in Europe, in the US, specifically New York, and getting mentors from

	<p>all around, because I think we should look at art that is not usual within the region. I was trying to expand on my artistic practice as an artist. Through Zayed University I've learned a lot specifically technical skills but I felt like I wanted to learn more because I really like the idea of learning and trying new mediums, going deeper into art concept and, getting critiques and feedback to see if I was doing at the right way or not. I was getting myself involved in different art jobs, different art programs, residency programs, critique programs to develop as an artist.</p>
K.D.	<p>What has been the most significant impact on your career so far.</p>
Salmah Almansoori	<p>I think, first of all, what kind of changed and developed my practice was my mom's support because at the beginning, she didn't understand what I was doing and she was basically like: "What are you doing?". But then she started slowly realizing that I was trying to say something with the art I was making, and the concept I was exploring specifically was all about the place I grew up around and things connected with that space that impacted my practice.</p> <p>I benefited from the programs I did, the work experiences I've done. I wanted to learn behind the scenes of being an artist, all the things I can do with art. I've noticed that I've also learned a lot from the different jobs as exhibition coordinator, a curatorial assistant. To this day, I'm playing a role in project management and the arts. It got me a better understanding of what an artist can do or someone with an art degree can do.</p>
K.D.	<p>You are, first of all, a visual artist. Describe your process.</p>
Salmah Almansoori	<p>I would describe myself as a process-based artist because of my education at Zayed University. I was not restrained into one singular form of art. I was always tapping into many different mediums, including painting, ceramics, installation and found objects. that I've recently started to explore within my work. I think my process starts usually with a walk and a documentation.</p> <p>My work is based on documentation and archival materials of my hometown. It all started because when I moved to Abu Dhabi in 2018, I started experiencing my hometown from an outsider perspective. I made regular trips back, and I started questioning everything around there. Before, as someone who grew up in that small town, I thought I knew everything.</p> <p>From this perspective, I started questioning all elements that existed there: the housing system or the social environment and the desert. That experience made me realize that I always worked with documentation. My documentation can vary and takes the from from photography to videos to sound records. Later it expanded to me collecting objects.</p> <p>I started with gathering tires and now I'm collecting found objects and furniture pieces that exist within my hometown. From there, I come back to my studio and try to figure out what will the next project be or how can I develop them and add to my current work. My art is based on materials I collect. I go back to research and study what I've collected or look at the images and the videos I've recorded or even sometimes the sounds.</p> <p>Later, they will become a painting or an installation-based work, or found object assembly. I don't like to be restrained in one singular art form because I feel like my concept, my research and my ideas can be done in many different ways. I try to explore a lot within the studio and try to figure out what the content can give me other than just an artwork.</p>
K.D.	<p>In other words, the documentation is driving you to the specific techniques and ways that you create.</p>

Salmah Almansoori	Yes, exactly. I really like the experience of me walking, researching or going to places, it does impact me personally and impact the work. I work a lot with the movement of my body within my artwork as I don't paint while I am sitting. I'm always walking and using my whole body to do it. My body is the actual device for documentation. I am using tools like a camera or a phone or to record. But my body is present in that experience. So the experience of starting with a walk always impact me in one way or another when I create the work.
K.D.	In other words, no easels in your studio.
Salmah Almansoori	No easel!
K.D.	Are you working on a big wall or on the floor, what is your preference?
Salmah Almansoori	Honestly, it depends on the scale that I'm working on. Usually I don't like to sit at all when I work, unless I'm doing admin work or writing proposals or looking at artist work or researching. Other than that, I always use the wall. Even currently in my studio, I don't have a desk because I feel like I need the wall space to hand my paintings or my papers or my found objects. And when I work on larger scales, larger than my walls, I would put them on the floor and I'm bending over, reflecting the act of me collecting and using my body when I'm on my walks.
K.D.	I would like to go back a bit to Al Ghayathi, which is in Al Ruwais region, right?
Salmah Almansoori	Yes.
K.D.	That's where your mom is still living. That's where you're from. Could you tell us a bit more about this place?
Salmah Almansoori	<p>Baisically, I lived my whole adolescent life in that town, and I've never known anything other than Al Ghayathi until I moved to Abu Dhabi city. Al Ghayathi is a very small, family oriented town located in Al Dhafra in Abu Dhabi emirate. There are around 30,000 inhabitants there.</p> <p>There are not a lot of things to do there other than family based activities. I started the research on my hometown when I moved to Abu Dhabi and I began to question experience my hometown from an outsider perspective. It began with going back subconsciously to spaces that I've looked at throughout my whole life, my childhood house or even the desert or the roads within that town.</p> <p>My whole life, I've never known anything else other than Al Ghayathi. As a girl who grew up in a very small town, I've only known Al Ghayathi through an outsider perspective when I moved to Abu Dhabi city and I did my weekly trips. I think whenever I went there, I started subconsciously connecting more to the place I grew up because I kept questioning my identity, where I stand at.</p> <p>Throughout my whole process as an artist, I was carrying this concept of knowing where I come from. For me, Al Ghayathi was a hometown. It's very family oriented. It happened because back in the days when the place was developing, it was created to bring the community together. My art research started from exploring spaces that were where, the first</p>

	<p>houses or the spaces that were built back in like the late seventies, early eighties, questioning why did the government built these housing system, what they were trying to do.</p> <p>And I was also reflecting on the school I have been in, the desert around me, the streets, everything that I've ever known. I started to think about these houses, even if I knew what information I wanted to question what have happened to the people? Why did they left their houses or why did they left all of these objects in them?</p> <p>Why does this culture and its elements exist within the desert? Previously, as someone who lived in Al Ghayathi, I would have just ignored that because I've always witnessed it since I was a kid. But slowly when I started growing up and specifically going to the arts, it made me question everything I have ever known in my life, and that what made me also reflect on my identity and where I come from.</p> <p>Yes, Al Ghayathi is a very strong place or family oriented kind of town that maybe 30,000 inhabitants are there, mostly Al Mansoori family, like 99%, and there's few other families that exist there. So everyone knows everyone. I grew up around the same people my whole life. I've been going through school with the same kids I was with all the time until I decided to move to the city.</p>
K.D.	What is your core goal for producing art?
Salmah Almansoori	<p>I feel that my core goal is to achieve teenager's Salmah dreams. In the past, I felt that it was impossible for me to be an artist or there was no clear road for me to become an artist. I was dreaming until my graduation from Zayed University about achieving my goal of being an artist, even though most of the people in my life didn't believe in it. It was an unknown for them.</p> <p>The other goal is to be a role model for people still based in Al Ghayathi. If they have high dreams, they should continue with them and keep dreaming because nothing is impossible. Whatever you're dreaming of, just keep on; that is one of my core objectives. One of the other things I keep thinking a lot about is I am the first artist who is taking art seriously from Al Ghayathi. It's also my role to showcase the small town, the essence in terms of the architectural element, the culture, the heritage, the society there, and trying to tell that story. I'm a storyteller and I'm creating these visual narratives.</p>
K.D.	You cannot be what you cannot see. And it takes a visionary to come out out of the box and try something different. But when someone does something different, it's almost like showing the other people that there is a possibility of of breaking the mold or or achieving different things, right?
Salmah Almansoori	Yes, exactly. Because when I was young, I didn't know how I could make it as an artist in terms of what jobs I could do, what things I could make. This drove my passion for the arts, to explore and learn and try to figure out what I wanted to do in life. I had a passion of art, but without the knowledge, and I didn't consider it as a hobby. For me, it was a career path that I wanted to explore. I wanted to learn, I wanted to put myself out there. I wanted to connect with the people in my region. And this took me a bit of time to figure out. I am always looking for opportunities and experiences to learn from as an artist, someone who works in the art, because you can't stop learning.
K.D.	What attracts you to the visual arts?

Salmah Almansoori	<p>I like the general idea of visual arts. I'm a storyteller and the visuals do speak to me. I've noticed that I'm a very visual person. My work starts with documentation, looking at things, walking and wondering. I don't consider myself someone who starts their ideas with sitting down and writing because I don't think my work begins like that.</p> <p>It starts with me wondering and asking questions with no answers. My path to visual starts with what I observe and try to preserve. Whether I'm using ceramics or a drawing or a painting or installation, or all of these different mediums that I've learned through my past, I am not limited. I am exploring different ideas, all of them at once. I am not a person who limits themselves to any singular form. That is what I really like about the visual arts, It speaks out to me in that way.</p>
K.D.	How would you summarize your role as an artist?
Salmah Almansoori	<p>I think my role is to carry out a narrative that no one knows about, the narrative of my home, the narrative of the people I know, the narrative of my family, the history, the heritage, the culture. And I think it makes me know myself through the process of making art and researching and reading and reflecting. I believe all of my projects one way or another make me question things that I never thought I could, and make me know myself more and accept things that are part of my identity. It made me the person I am today.</p>
K.D.	Describe how art is vital to society.
Salmah Almansoori	<p>I think of art as a history. I think a lot about art history, modern art, all of the artists. They founded the art scene, whether it was in Europe or the US or here in the Gulf region, specifically in the UAE. I feel like art is documenting something, art is building history for future generations. We are now in the present. No one knows what's going to happen in a hundred years. So we're documenting, we're archiving, we're building history that if we don't do and no one will know anything about. So we're expanding it in all in our own ways, but we're still documenting the current living moment for future generations to know more about how the UAE is and how it will be years later.</p>
K.D.	This is very interesting. You talk about the region and this is especially UAE art scene is very new. Could you describe it a bit more?
Salmah Almansoori	<p>I think the UAE art scene is developing. Based on my past experiences, I've been in conversations or in exhibitions with people who founded the art scene in the UAE like the people who taught me art. Those were interesting conversations with different artists about how things were in the past and how things will be in the future. I think art is developing importantly in the UAE because we're carrying our story and again, history.</p>
K.D.	Could you tell us a bit more about where you find inspiration?
Salmah Almansoori	<p>My inspiration comes from my hometown because it's the place I know well. Me wondering and exploring and questioning things around me. I've never thought I can carry questions with no answers. My work is carrying my own answers, even if I don't have all the information.</p>

	In also comes within me and my surroundings, my daily life and the things I look at, from wandering around and observing. I have that thing in me that I'm trying to preserve the current moment that, can't be fully preserved. Through my observations, I try to study this what inspires me on a daily basis.
K.D.	What is your connection to the desert?
Salmah Almansoori	<p>I grew up around the desert. As a family, we camped a lot in the desert. We spent out winters in the desert. My hometown is literally surrounded by dunes and desert and the neutral color tones of it. It affected my artwork. I've noticed that in my earlier work I've always used neutral desert colors within my work.</p> <p>One of the other thing are my road trip from and to Al Ghayathi and Abi Dhabi. I'm surrounded by the desert because it's a 3-hour trip. Whenever I take these road trips, whether it is daily or weekly between these two cities, I'm always looking through the window. What I'm looking at is views or signs and the neutral color palette. I've always played around with that color palette with my color, with my work subconsciously. Later I started reflecting and it just connect me to my younger self, my dream to be an artist and how that affected the person I am today.</p> <p>When I started reflecting on it, I started thinking of my childhood and experiences like camping in the desert, spending my winter barbecuing or living in a tent for fun. Even though we had our houses like 10 minutes away. As a family, we found it very intimate and nostalgic to be in the desert.</p>
K.D.	Why do you think it was? Does your family have a historical connection with the desert?
Salmah Almansoori	I come from a Bedouin family. All I've heard throughout my childhood was stories about my grandparents, moving and having fun, or spending up to eight months out of the year just camping in the desert. We have our camels, we have our stuff. We just enjoy being in the desert, even if we do have the technology and better living situation. We still feel nostalgic to just be in the desert, even if it's for fun, just sitting down around with the family, enjoying time, connecting, talking, laughing.
K.D.	How does your connection to the desert affects the feeling of being an Emirati?
Salmah Almansoori	I think it's a central part of being an Emirati to go camping in the desert or just spending some time there. The UAE is mostly the desert other than the big, major cities. So you walk around, you see deserts everywhere, even even in the cities. We're trying to do planting and things like that. But the central part is the oasis and the desert within the UAE.
K.D.	It feels like it's a big part of being an Emirati.
Salmah Almansoori	Yes, it's a huge part, it's an essential part of being an Emirati.

K.D.	Why?
Salmah Almansoori	<p>I think, because it's our surrounding, I don't know how to explain it. It is just there. It is a part of our identity and our history.</p> <p>The desert is an essential part of being an Emirati, we grew up around the desert, it's part of our natural landscape. We're always look at the desert in one way or another. You know, some families like to camp and be in the desert and other families, they're in the city. But in one way or another, we're always looking towards the desert.</p> <p>I think a lot about my childhood and how I grew up, specifically coming from a small town that is literally surrounded by the desert. Back then, I didn't know anything other than the desert. Even if it was rainy day, we just went and sit in the desert to have fun and connect with the family. I feel like it's a spiritual thing and it's very nostalgic and at the same time is a way to connect and have fun with the family.</p>
K.D.	That actually brings me to my next question. What are your childhood memories of the desert? Do they differ from your current experience of the desert? Or they are the same?
Salmah Almansoori	<p>In one way or another, that desert was present in my childhood life and in my adulthood life. My family is currently camping in the desert and I'm the only one who is stuck in the city because I'm working at the moment.</p> <p>When I was a child, I always went to the desert with both of my grandparents and they both passed away when I was 10-11 years old. At that time, I've never thought that I am not going to have the same life as them because all I've known as my town, the desert, camping, having fun with the family.</p> <p>At the moment, I'm missing the idea of going back to the desert and connecting with the family. I think I'm missing the idea of being surrounded by an extended family members that will just be there and us being together. One of my recent project is about my grandparents who were Bedouin who like to camp, who like to travel, who like to just move within the desert.</p> <p>I remember my grandfather through his belongings as a Bedouin who traveled a lot. When I was looking at his boxes and the belongings that he left behind when he passed away, I found the tools tha he used when he was camping and objects like that. I was connecting to my childhood life through objects that my family members left behind, whether they passed away or moved from my hometown.</p> <p>My present relationship with the desert is different because when I was a child I never thought I'm going to leave this kind of life of being surrounded by the desert 24/7. My adult life is me basically being in the city, working, being an artist. That is why I take the time to go back on the weekends, especially winter time, just to just be around my family and enjoy the desert as a nostalgic way to connect with my late grandparents.</p>
K.D.	Do you feel that now when you go into the desert, it feels more precious because you can't do it every day?

Salmah Almansoori	I think it is more precious as I'm currently away from my family because of my career and on making art. Whenever I go back home to the desert I'm connecting with my family and just enjoying my time being around them and building my relationship with them.
K.D.	You have mentioned your grandfather. I would like you to talk a bit more about him. You said that he and your grandmother were traveling a lot. I assume that they were born before the formation of the UAE as a nation.
Salmah Almansoori	<p>Yes. They were camping because of them having camels. They took their belongings and were moving between the borders of Saudi Arabia and the UAE before it became the UAE. In the Western Region. It's not very well known that there is a lot of grass there during the springtime. They were using their camels a lot and moving throughout the region and the blurred borders of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. During the senior project for my BFA show, I started exploring them and knowing them through their belongings, both of my grandparents.</p> <p>How did I know them? The young Salmah knew them because she was their grandchild, but as an adult, I was going through their belongings to learn more information. I've looked at their IDs, their medical history, the tools they have used. My grandmother was known for collecting passport images and things like that. And I've kept wondering and asking myself question of why did she collect certain objects, was she's trying to preserve the memories of her kids and grandkids or, to just have the objects with her.</p> <p>Both of my grandparents were collecting in a way. And now I producing artwork, using their boxes, using their bags, their tools that they've had once upon a time. I am reflecting on their life. They have lived moving through the desert, going back to the city, trying to teach their kids and being wise about how to teach their kids.</p> <p>They were very heavy on education, supportive of education, and also supporting their children's connection to one another. And they have raised people I look at as role models.</p>
K.D.	Sounds like they were very progressive in terms of their approach and also very family-oriented.
Salmah Almansoori	<p>Yes, they were really family-oriented. Even though they were not educated and they never experienced what education is, they have supported their children's education, allowing them to get educated, whether it was in a different city or outside of the country. They were never the parents who would stop their children from doing anything.</p> <p>I think that affected me as an artist today. Without my family's support and without that kind of mindset, I wouldn't have reached what I am today. Even as simple as getting an arts education would never be a case without the effect of my both grandparents on their family.</p>
K.D.	It's almost like through documenting and collectiong, you are celebrating your grandparents in a sense.
Salmah Almansoori	I am both celebrating and honoring what they've done, the way they've raised their children, and the way they built the family. They didn't differentiate between a son and a daughter. They treated them well in a way that it's today affecting me and affecting the way I was raised. And I will always celebrate that.

	<p>I lived in their house for more than 18 years until I moved for a better housing system and more space. But I have lived my whole life around them, around the idea of connecting with them and with my extended family, my uncles and my cousins, all of us lived in one house and I feel nostalgic about that.</p> <p>I have been always subconsciously going back to the house I grew up in. And I have reflected a lot on the idea of how did I grew up with them, how do I connect to them, how do I know about them. I've always liked the idea of listening to stories about both of them from my mother and my uncles and aunts. A lot of stories.</p>
K.D.	What does desert mean to you?
Salmah Almansoori	<p>I think the desert is an inspiration within my work because it affected the way I am today. Because of the way I grew up and the place I lived in and how it just surrounded me. I always wondered about my surroundings since I was a kid without me really thinking about it.</p> <p>So I think the desert affected me in a lot of ways. Again, even my concepts, my color pallet, the way I look at other things, I've never felt connected to a lot of colors. Even when I use colors within my work, somehow I have to have the neutral color tones. And when I started analyzing it, it made so much sense because it's part of my identity. Even within the color palette.</p>
K.D.	And through that, it feels like the desert plays a vital and big role in your artistic practice right?
Salmah Almansoori	Yes, 100%. I can't use any color without using the essential, main neutral color. And then if I need to add anything, I would always mix it with that color. It's an important part of who I am. All of my work is all about identity, and memories and time. Time affects all of these different elements.
K.D.	Does the natural environment of the UAE influence your work?
Salmah Almansoori	<p>I think the natural environment of UAE does influence my work. Other than the natural landscape, there is also the urban. I really like the idea of just looking through the window whenever I drive around Abu Dhabi or the road trip that I take, or even within my town and within my walks. I like the idea of looking at different places that I've felt connected to, the different scenes that are existing within our landscape or surrounding.</p> <p>I feel like there are always abandoned objects, and they are my inspiration for documenting them, whether they are in Al Ghayathi or they're in Abu Dhabi, or in between. I feel like they're part of our landscape and what I observe.</p>
K.D.	In your experience, what do the Emiratis think about the desert?
Salmah Almansoori	I think the desert is an essential part of the UAE, both to tourist who comes to the UAE and the people who live in the UAE. There is this idea of going back to the desert, whether it is to have fun or for gatherings or even to show it to people who want to be introduced to the UAE.

	I think desert is the landscape and the history and the identity and the culture of the UAE. I have noticed, even within major cities in UAE, there are always spaces that represent the past, and they are always in the color palette of the desert, because that's the natural environment we used to build these houses in. It does affect our history and who we are. And this is our identity as people who live in the UAE.
K.D.	Do you think that the desert is treated as a symbol?
Salmah Almansoori	I think it is a symbol within the UAE and the Gulf region. Most of our landscape is desert. It is an essential part in many different ways. We do camel racing, falconry, and all kinds of exercises and activities in it. It all happens in the desert. It can't be in any other environment. I think it's a symbol of who we are today. And even in 50 years from now, even if the landscape develops, it will be an essential part that can't be erased.
K.D.	Does the desert have a symbolic impact on creative people in the UAE?
Salmah Almansoori	I believe it does have a symbolic impact. I've noticed that many creatives return to the landscape, the things that surround them. A lot of people talk about different desert landscapes within the UAE because there is a lot of differences, depending on where you come from. I have seen a lot of artists discussing the sand colors within their works or all of the different landscape that exists within the UAE. The desert looks different in each emirate.
K.D.	Do you think that desert has a personality?
Salmah Almansoori	I think it does and it changes over time.
K.D.	Tell me more.
Salmah Almansoori	The desert has personality. I'm thinking about camping in the desert. How sometimes is calm, sometimes stormy and angry and sometimes it just becomes rainy. And sometimes it's just dry and doesn't want to communicate with us anymore. I think the desert is very spiritual. It does have so many personalities in terms of welcoming people. And when it's angry, it forces you to find a way out of it. It does have different moods.
K.D.	Is the desert still authentic?
Salmah Almansoori	I think it is still authentic because without the desert, the UAE is not the UAE. And Salmahh is not Salmahh.