

## The Performativity of Emotions

### Abdullah Al-Mutairi in conversation with Sarah Abu Abdallah

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Sarah Abu Abdallah

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What does it mean to be an artist in the Gulf today? What are the politics of representation and presentation of art that surround artistic production? In this conversation, artists Abdullah Al-Mutairi and Sarah Abu Abdallah discuss the problems that they commonly face in their artistic careers, from the misinterpretation of their works to their positioning as 'spokespeople' for their region; the misunderstanding and stereotyping of the Gulf itself; and the expectations placed upon their production and subjects of interest. The conversation, conducted online since December 2014, reveals the subcultural influences that inspired both artists in their youth and the central position of emotion in their art.



NYC -> REPRESENTATION  
DUBAI -> EMOTION

PROVIDENCE -> LOVE

FACETIME -> MEMORIES/FUTURE

**Abdullah Al-Mutairi:** So. Here we are, contemporary 'Caleeji' artistes, writing in English. This brings up something we've spoken of before, particularly during your visits to New York: 'audience'. Who are they?

**Sarah Abu Abdallah:** I guess to name an 'audience' is to assume having the power to direct your work to an audience?

**AAM:** I agree that you can't really set those limits, though I try to make it a point to create work for a specific audience. That is, I make work for people I relate to and who can link certain elements of my practice to their own lived experiences rather than catering to the 'artworld' (read: western audience). I do not act as if I don't understand how culture is consumed.

**SAA:** For me, it gets harder when I think about audiences while making work. The audience for me is one person with whom you have a conversation on an intimate level, as if I am writing a letter to an individual. This makes the process less policed compared to always thinking that a work will end up broadcasted to the masses.

**AAM:** This is one of the main points of 'making art' I think: expressing an emotion you can't put into words. I find it hard to drown out the 'masses'. I'm not really sure why I make what I make but think that, in a way, I've been making work to let people know they're not alone, as grandiose as that sounds. There's not a lot of representation in the Gulf. And what I mean by representation is people making art for and about different groups in the Gulf and not making art as a native 'informant' in order to get ahead in the art world

**SAA:** It is important to tell one's story – it's a responsibility we have to each other. I don't think anyone is qualified to talk about others in a general and generic way because our experiences are solitary in nature, but I do think that you should try to say your part and relay your own story. The question for me is what this story is exactly. A lot of it is heavily related to one's own location but there are certain things below the surface that language and locality are not capable of expressing. The reason I ended up making art was because I wanted to talk about these things despite being terrible with words

**AAM:** People involved in art in the region seemed to have lumped us two together early on even before we had actually met or made any substantial work to compare to each other

**SAA:** I imagine they do that because we are both Khaleeji, are the same age, and are both working with new media practices. In a way, it makes sense regardless because I feel we both share similar interests and there is in fact a lot in common in terms of style. I remember listening to one of your DJ Halaga mixes the first time around and noting certain editing choices, thinking: 'YAS! He gets it!'

**SAA:** Exactly. For example, I'm mostly known for *Saudi Automobile* (2011), which I originally produced in relation to a personal experience. I was looking at cars as these intimate spaces but it totally got overlooked



and pulled into social justice narratives. I didn't resist this narrative because it was nice being branded as an activist.

I do understand there is a lack of representation in the region but it is still quite presumptuous to expect artists to assume the role of an educator, and to offer a 'voyeuristic' glimpse into the region.

**AAM:** There's a thirst for native informants in art spaces, which I find suspect. There's a thin line between advocating on behalf of a group you feel associated with and having to carry the burden of representation beyond that. I don't want topics to be imposed on me from western institutions because that's the hot topic over there, or because of what family I come from. We have our own battles to consider; being wary of who wants to



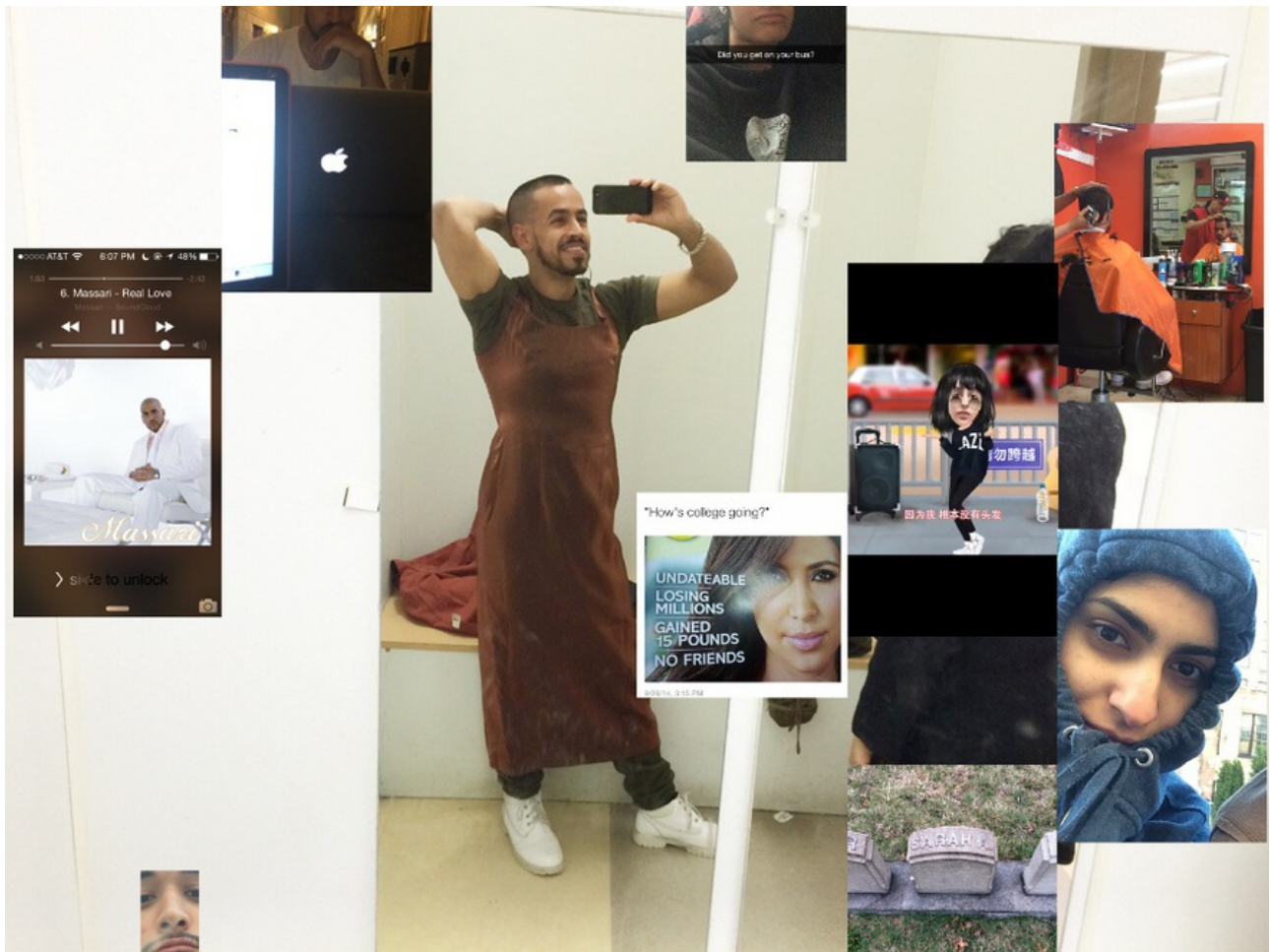


**AAM:** This reminds me of the first time I presented work at Art Dubai, I was commissioned to make ad breaks for the Global Art Forum talks in 2013. A woman came up to me and told me she loved my work and I said: 'What work?...'. I didn't have anything up beyond random Tumblr posts at that point; it was before the commissioned ads started playing during breaks. I was sure she had no idea who I was, just some ass-kissing academic looking to make a contact. It's funny because it seems like we went through the same experience of being placed on a platform early on to represent something due to certain boxes we tick. It's as if what we supposedly represent eclipses anything we've actually created. You get the feeling of an agenda surrounding you but not knowing how to exactly pinpoint it.. if this sudden demand is due to your perceived socio-economic background, gender identity, or any other imposed categorical lens

hear you out is just one of them. I feel that discussing things like gender and body dysmorphia in english is already pushing into orientalist fantasy if I'm not careful about it

**SAA:** There is this certain perception that in any work produced outside of default western culture there is a statement. I find this particularly stressful, especially when placed in an art exhibition context, which stems from a eurocentric discourse. As an artist I find myself put in a position steered towards me presenting, defining or defending 'my culture'. The fact that most of the work I have produced is time-based makes that even easier, it is actually a common occurrence to work with a curator or talk to a journalist that wouldn't even bother to do their homework and simply watch the work. The focus is one-dimensional and the conversation gets stuck on a superficial level, that reads the work literally or disregards it completely favoring a discussion of my person.

**AAM:** This all makes me think of defence mechanisms: you find yourself deliberately adapting the way you produce work so that it doesn't come across as a new 'National Geographic' series.



**SAA:** When viewing your work, I get the sense that you use humour to mask an underlying pain and helplessness that would otherwise come across as heavy-handed were you not to use humour as a device.

**AAM:** I like to use humour because I'm not really that funny and because I think there's nothing more alienating

than not being in on a joke. Pushing against subtitles might be a dumb move, but feels like a small victory in some ways. Not to imply that what I do is centred around alienating a western audience – it can also be seen a response to being an alien in the Gulf. But I'm aware of this alienation when I'm presenting work in specific environments, where I know a specific audience will be the majority, and I think that, to some degree, it's important for people to feel excluded at some point to be able to empathize with others.

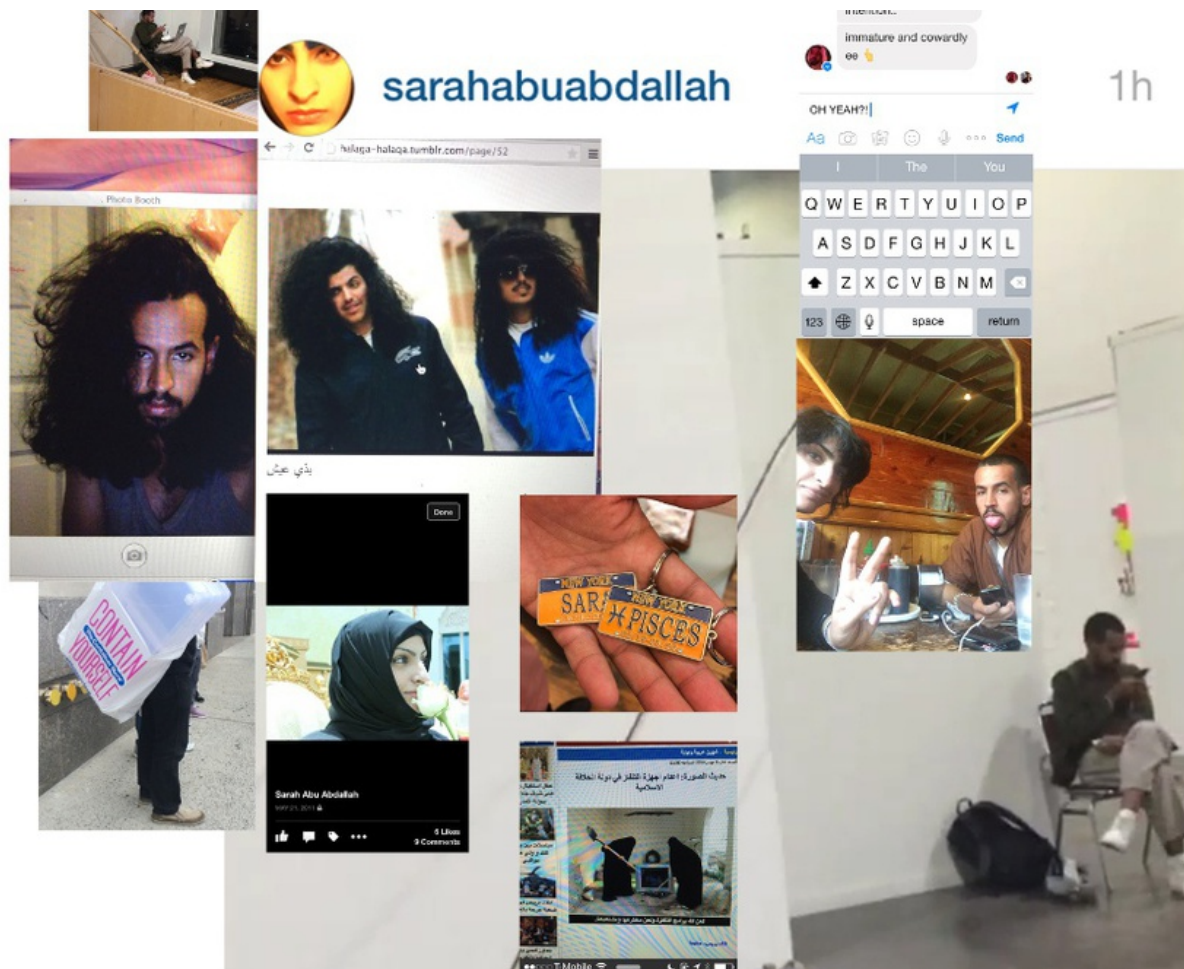
I don't think people realize how self-deprecating I'm being in my work – it's really attached to how I see myself, with humour being a high-level ego defence. I get this uncomfortable knot in the pit of my stomach when I hear people talk about my videos or photos and just laugh. I don't think it's meant to be condescending, but there's this grain of belittling the subject matter that I sense from the laughter that I don't appreciate. It's a thin line for me to tread, especially when zooming in on humour as a form of self-preservation. I've gotten burnt before for failing to see that not everyone in Kuwait has the same associations to certain symbols like the hijab

**SAA:** That brings up issues such as how an artist presents themselves in and out of their work, what certain signifiers mean, and who has the right to use them. There's a question of whether you should or shouldn't embody the background you come from to justify your work.

**AAM:** I shouldn't have to splay myself open and expose my circumstances for others to respect me and what I'm saying. I don't think it's anyone's right to know my background. There are some artists in the region, as there is everywhere, who take advantage of the fact that outsiders are blind to local class systems to put on drags for show, but it always comes out in the end..

I, for one, can only speak on behalf of my own experience; doesn't mean I don't care for the wellbeing of others. Personal agency is important; it's not my place to speak for someone else or take on their struggles for selfish reasons. People mistake egotism for morality. I feel it's our responsibility to do what we can to improve matters without speaking over others or putting out a publication for low-key self actualization.





**SAA:** A lot of the people writing about the region seem to be heavily influenced by western theory and aren't able to see themselves outside of that. You have to come from some type of background to be able to learn this theory in the first place, but they seem kind of blind to that positioning. Not everyone in the region is able to learn western theory, let alone live.

**AAM:** It's a double bind, experiencing layers of alienation within a majority culture and wanting to express this helplessness but also being expected to speak of the subjugation inflicted on others by those in power. What do you focus on? Is it realistic for artists to focus on the highest level of marginalization in their environment? It becomes so muddy and turns into finger-pointing 'oppression Olympics' instead of a collective consciousness-raising question. People can do more than tweet while adorning the guise of activism.

**SAA:** It can come off as a diversion tactic, excluding oneself from the discussion. People are not limited to their circumstances, but it shapes them. This seems clearer in the states where people appear hyper-aware of circumstance, but this doesn't seem so obvious yet in non-white cultures. Behavior reflects environment, but it's hard to differentiate between what is nature and what is nurture; if something comes from an instinct or from the social construct they are from, especially when it comes to the somatic reactions to human interactions. Take the experiences we have in the western world, where most displays of emotion are considered dramatic and hysterical.

**AAM:** I remember we also once spoke about jealousy and the commodification of physical intimacy, and how both relate to your work. I appreciated the comparisons you made, tracing the boundary of modernity and love

**SAA:** How jealousy is related to ownership and Tinder love is a rented love? Love is a violent concept. Is it possible to reconcile one's deep-rooted emotional capacity between two specific locales? Adaptation seems to come naturally at first until you are confronted head-on and asked to display the same level of indifference and causality as those who don't have as much at stake.

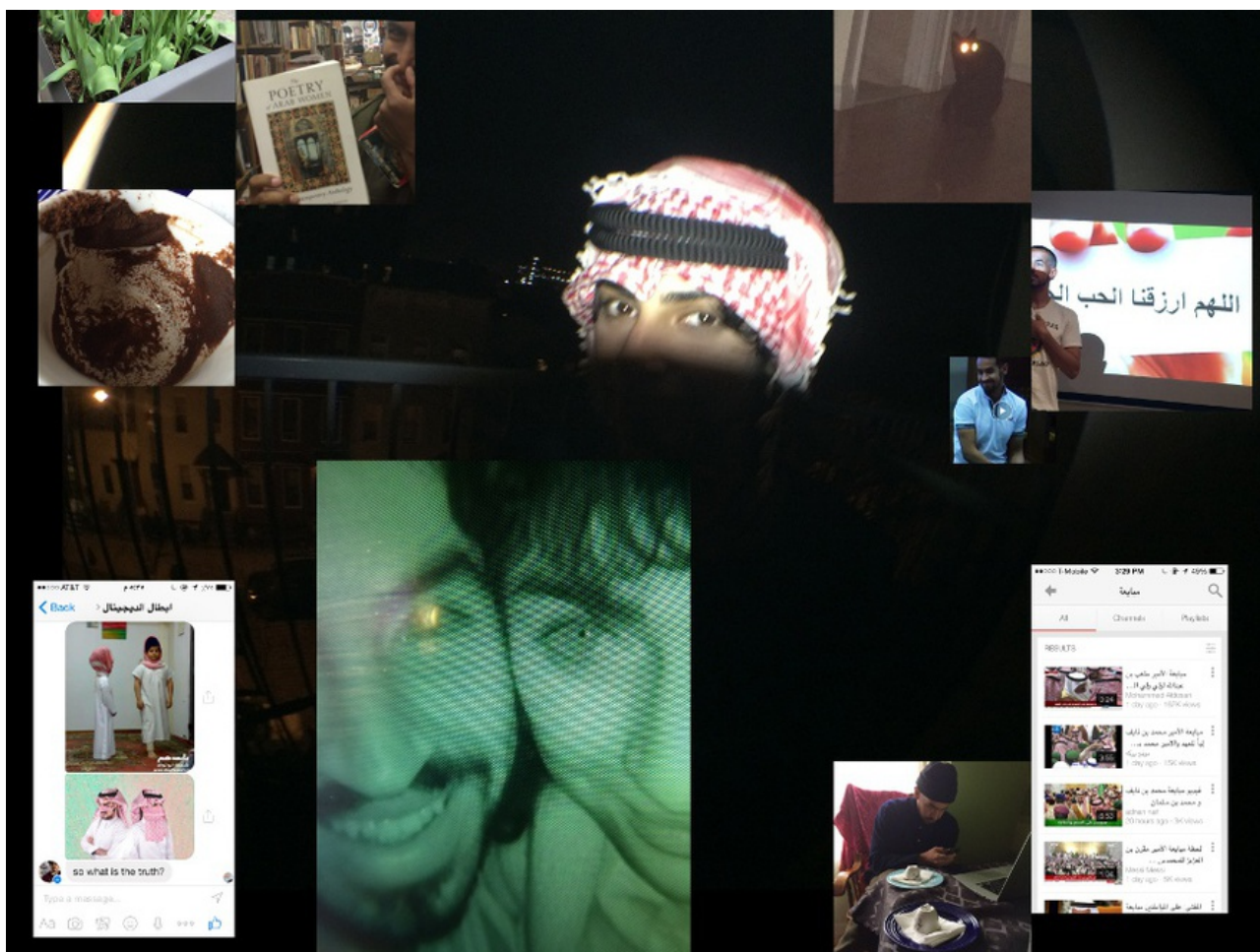
**AAM:** Having everything for rent is perceived as something freeing when it's really not – renting is safe, if not selfish. There is no commitment, nothing to lose.

**SAA:** Any display of emotion is heavy-handed, a mess. Practicing rationality in the face of the irrational. Familiar social gestures become disorienting, it doesn't seem you can give without expecting something in return. Interactions are transactional in the guise of being progressive.

**AAM:** There's a link, I think, between neoliberalism and the annihilation of emotion. There is this sense that to be cultured is to be reserved and 'in control' of your emotions. There were many different reasons why it was historically considered acceptable to rule over certain cultures, one of them being a perception of the emotionally driven native. Emotion has always been seen as lowly in the face of 'rational thinking'. Simply existing and feeling is seen as lowly in a way.

I don't think I have to justify my experience of pain or heartache theoretically when it's the simplest biological process of information transmission. It's as if to deny emotion, the most basic physiological experience, is a way to opt out of the animal kingdom. I guess that's one of the points of art, or at least it is for me – the idea of presenting emotion or the physical experience of existing in certain structures.





**SAA:** I think that the virtual plane allows room for one's emotional make up. Nowadays most of my interactions are on Facebook chat and I google stuff, but growing up it was a very different experience, I was very into Anime culture and spent time posting in forums under a nickname and took my output very seriously. Anime itself has these narratives about self-realization and quests that test the strength of your will so it makes sense to want to be immersed in its world.

There was a whole community of Arab and Khaleeji illustrators in online forums, and as a group we were very involved. The same group of friends from school is still working together today and they launched a proper office and are making amazing video games and design work.

**AAM:** In a way, I feel the internet allowed both of us to experiment with concepts and methods of expressing emotion, but it's insidious in a way because you don't realize how culturally specific these forms of emoting are. In hindsight, I think what I got out of that specific subgenre is probably experiencing vicarious emotion; a sort of mirroring. At the time, I felt like I was a robot, I didn't think I could feel anything. It seems like a whole generation grew up exposed to so many different emotional influences, which seem to impact on how one relates to or identifies with others. This is especially true considering that a lot of these influences are in written and spoken English (even if the original material wasn't). I think we learned how to perform thoughts and emotions in such a novel visual way that it makes sense that there's a dissociation between our respective inner and outer experiences.

**SAA:** It astonishes me to realize that much of my experience of growing up in the Gulf is a pretty common one, when I was mostly loitering by my computer and thinking that I was alone. TV always showed a more glamorous representation of everyday life there that I didn't find relatable. This perception of isolation is probably mainly due to the lack of contemporary public spaces that one can interact in, except for shopping malls and the Internet. But shopping malls are very goal oriented, and the Internet is made up of communities that might not correlate geographically.

**AAM:** There's definitely a lack of public space. There's also a false perception out there about the connection between Khaleeji people and the rising skylines. I don't think people realize how these structures are as alienating to the 'locals' as they are to others, whatever the word 'local' means. I find that, due to this idea of Khaleejis as all being rich and spoiled, we're not allowed to aspire to different ideas of prosperity or create work that is not straightforward – as though visual output was in any way a representation of reality.

**SAA:** The narratives built around the Gulf are certainly artificial. Thinking of how fixated people became over the idea of Gulf futurism you see that people's ideas around the Gulf are closely related to the hype and what goes viral on the Internet. The only way I see around it is if the people themselves carry on the conversation and question what is real and relevant instead of answering to the western-imposed expectations and presumptions. There needs to be a way to redefine what it is to be an artist in the popular Khaleeji mindset so that even what one does on Tumblr or Instagram can be considered as legitimate art. It is a matter of numbers.

**AAM:** I agree, I think that there are people who understand this though I'm still wary of what representation does. I'm trying to think that through – how to reach the core of a narrative without putting on aesthetic airs. It really is about forms of language and forms of communication, which is something we're both looking into for an upcoming project. Maybe we'll just let that play itself out and see where it takes us.

**Sarah Abu Abdallah** grew up in Qatif, Saudi Arabia has an MFA in Digital+Media at the Rhode Island School of Design. She had shown work in the Musée d'Art Moderne, Sharjah Biennial 11, Centre Pompidou and several other. She's affiliated with the 89Plus project and she is working on a series of new collaborations at the moment.

**Abdullah Al-Mutairi** is an artist and art therapist based in Kuwait. He is part of the GCC collective, and has shown at Sultan Gallery, Serpentine Gallery, MoMA PS1, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Click on each artist's name to see their Platform 009 projects: [Abu Abdallah](#) and [Al-Mutairi](#).

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## TAGS

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Sarah Abu Abdallah

**Sarah Abu Abdallah** works primarily with video and film as a medium. She grew up in Qatif, Saudi Arabia and is currently pursuing her masters degree in Digital Media at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. Her recent exhibitions include Arab Contemporary in the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark, Migrating Forms in NYC, the Serpentine Galleries 89plus Marathon in London, the 11th Sharjah Biennial in 2013, and Rhizoma in the 55th Venice biennale 2013. She contributed to Arts and Culture in the Transformative Times festival by ArteEast, NYC, and the Moving Image panel on Video + Film in Palazzo Grassi, Venice.

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