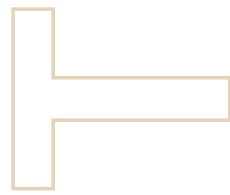
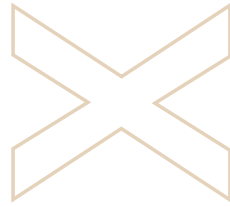


ALULA  
MOMENTS

DESERT > ALULA 2024

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**DESERT X ALULA  
EXHIBITION OPENS**

**9 FEBRUARY – 23 MARCH 2024**





— Kimsooja , *To Breathe - AIUla*, Desert X AIUla 2024, photo by Lance Gerber, courtesy The Royal Commission for AIUla

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— Top  
Faisal Samra, *The Dot*, Desert X AIUla 2024, photo by Lance Gerber, courtesy The Royal Commission for AIUla

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Ayman Yossri Daydban, *A rock garden in the shape of a full-sized soccer field*, Desert X AIUla 2024, photo by Lance Gerber, courtesy The Royal Commission for AIUla

## FROM 9 FEBRUARY – 23 MARCH 2024, UNDER THE THEME OF ‘IN THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE’, DESERT X ALULA 2024 COMMISSIONS 15 ARTWORKS TO EXPLORE THAT WHICH CANNOT BE SEEN

Open to all, Desert X AIUla is a recurring and temporary, site-responsive, international open-air art exhibition taking place in AIUla, a globally significant ancient desert region in the Arabian Peninsula. This year’s exhibition, under the curatorial vision of Maya El Khalil and Marcello Dantas, with artistic direction from Raneem Farsi and Neville Wakefield, features 15 newly commissioned artworks.

Following two exhibitions since 2020, Desert X AIUla returns for its third edition from 9 February – 23 March 2024, placing visionary contemporary artworks by Saudi and international artists amidst the extraordinary desert landscape of AIUla, a majestic region in north-west Saudi Arabia. Positioning AIUla as a global destination for experiencing site responsive monumental art, Desert X AIUla invites artists to engage in a dialogue with the landscape, nature and heritage of AIUla to create distinctive works that emerge from the local context and resonate with audiences around the world.

Desert X AIUla takes place as a highlight of the AIUla Arts Festival, part of the annual AIUla Moments calendar of events. AIUla Arts Festival runs from 9 February – 2 March 2024. Under the theme of *In the Presence of Absence*, Desert X AIUla 2024 asks ‘what cannot be seen?’. Often dismissed as spaces of emptiness, deserts are rendered mute, static, but there is much more than meets the eye. Artists taking part in Desert X AIUla 2024 are invited to explore ideas of the unseen and the inexpressible.

**The full list of exhibiting artists are:**

- Aseel AlYaqoub, b. 1986, Kuwaiti
- Ayman Yossri Daydban, b. 1966, Saudi-Palestinian
- Bosco Sodi, b. 1970, Mexican
- Caline Aoun, b. 1983, Lebanese
- Faisal Samra, b. 1955, Saudi Arabian
- Filwa Nazer, b. 1972, Saudi Arabian
- Giuseppe Penone, b. 1947, Italian
- Ibrahim Mahama, b. 1987, Ghanaian
- Kader Attia, b. 1970, Algerian-French
- Karola Braga, b. 1988, Brazilian
- Kimsooja, b. 1957, South Korean
- Monira Al Qadiri, b. 1983, Kuwaiti
- Nojoud Alsudairi, b. 1994, Saudi Arabian
- Pascal Hachem, b. 1979, Lebanese
- Rana Haddad, b. 1970, Lebanese
- Rand Abdul Jabbar, b. 1990, Iraqi
- Sara Alissa, b. 1990, Saudi Arabian

The upcoming edition of Desert X AIUla will be situated across three locations for the first time, inviting visitors to experience spectacular and varied landscapes as they weave their journey between works. Desert X AIUla works can be seen in the desert landscape of Wadi AlFann, amongst the black lava stone terrain and breathtaking views of Harrat Uwayrid and at the AlManshiyah Plaza, which features the carefully preserved AIUla Railway Station, revealing the many layers of history and cultural confluence you find in AIUla.

All artists visit AIUla and spend time in its landscape; their proposals are then developed from this experience.

**Sara Alissa and Nojoud Alsudairi** turn the landscape into a self-reflective arrangement in *Invisible Possibilities: When the Earth Began to Look at Itself*. Through different viewpoints and approaches, the work aims to reshape viewers' understanding of the site's ecological transition and its physical geographies. As we enter the cylindrical form of **Kimsooja's** work, between iridescent walls, visitors are drawn in and out to the center of a spiral. The chromatic walls of *To Breathe – AIUla* distils light that has travelled aeons into prisms that dance across the visitor and the landscape.

**Ayman Yossri Daydban** draws the contours of a football pitch with white stones and rocks gathered by the AIUla community from across the valley. Placed in a remote, rocky area, the football field is a mysterious and suspicious presence, provoking collective memory and considering the social role of football. For *When I saw my reflection*, **Bosco Sodi** gathered volcanic rocks from across the landscape. Wrapped in gold, they have been placed in rock faces that tower above the desert to draw the viewer's eyes to the beautiful organic formations and accidents that already exist in the rock formations.

In **Caline Aoun's** *The Desert Has No Surface*, stones from the basalt plateau of Harrat al Sham are polished on one side. The sun is an essential element in Aoun's work which is activated through the refraction of sunlight producing

moments of shimmering that reflect the impermanence of the desert landscape and the natural forces that created it. **Rana Haddad and Pascal Hachem**'s installation focuses on honouring the traditional crafts of the region, creating a refuge made from rammed earth jars. Dubbed *Reveries*, each jar in the tower bears geometric cuts, allowing nature and light to shift and cast ever-evolving patterns within.

Also composed of vessels, **Ibrahim Mahama**'s terracotta pots are scattered across the landscape, suggesting new ecosystems emerging from the relics of history. Mahama's works can be viewed across Desert X AIUla's three sites including *Dung Bara – The Rider Does No* in Wadi AlFann, *Hanging Garden* at AlManshiyah Plaza and *Gabli Din Pali – A Full Gourd Does Not Rattle; It Is Only a Partially Filled Gourd Which Rattles* on Harrat Uwayrid. Drawing on AIUla's legacy on the Incense Route, **Karola Braga** uses scent to recreate the sensory world of ancient trade. Her structure, *Sfumato*, engulfs participants in hazy frankincense and myrrh, inviting visitors to reconnect with the olfactory heritage of the route in a unique and immersive encounter.

**Aseel AlYaqoub**'s *Weird Life: An ode to desert varnish* is inspired by the 'desert varnish' that naturally appears in landscapes like AIUla's, evolving into a luminous veneer with yellow, orange, red and black, and bemusing scientists for centuries.

Inspired by pre-Islamic beliefs of jinn inhabiting the desert, **Filwa Nazer**'s elevated walkway of *Preserving Shadows* is structured using steel mesh to form a massive, undulating black snake. Elaborated into massive, outsized forms, **Monira Al Qadiri**'s *W.A.B.A.R.* echoes mysterious objects that perplexed inhabitants of the desert in the 1930s. The work summons a cosmic folk narrative where upon discovering the pearls, a community in the Empty Quarter believed they had an extraterrestrial origin.

**Rand Abdul Jabbar**'s *Where myths are born of mud and desire*, is situated in an alcove in the mountain valley, its five sculptural forms telling the story of Venus. While encountering each piece through the story, the visitor becomes immersed in ancient perspectives and shifting relations to the celestial. In *The Dot*, **Faisal Samra** shows how the Wadi AlFann valley originated from an ancient crack, revealing the small forces that shape grandeur over epochs. The illusion of time is symbolized by a line composed of rock fragments.

**Giuseppe Penone**'s *The Logic of the Vegetal – Metamorphosis* explores the cyclical nature of all life. Fossilized tree trunks hover between living organism and mineral state, encouraging visitors to reflect on the transformations that occur over time. Necks of glass bottles emerge from **Kader Attia**'s sculptures in *Whistleblower*, which whistle when open to the wind. The haunting sound that results encourages viewers to reflect on the concern we should all have for Earth.

An extensive programme of events for visitors and local communities will take place during Desert X AIUla. This will include curator and artist talks, primary school visits and art workshops on themes from collage and model making to print making and photography. Music events taking place during Desert X AIUla include traditional Saudi dance, ambient compositions, and live radio broadcasts.

For the first time, Desert X AIUla has offered a special commission which is realised by **Tino Sehgal**. Sehgal's work (*un titled*) emphasizes the interaction between the natural elements of the desert and the human intervention through movement and sound, creating a connection between the visitor, the environment, and the intangible aspects of experience and imagination.



— Sara Alissa and Nojoud Alsudairi, *Invisible Possibilities: When the Earth Began to Look at Itself*, Desert X AIUla 2024, photo by Lance Gerber, courtesy The Royal Commission for AIUla



— Rana Haddad and Pascal Hachem, *Reveries*, Desert X AIUla 2024, photo by Lance Gerber, courtesy The Royal Commission for AIUla



— Caline Aoun, *The Desert Has No Surface*, Desert X AIUla 2024, photo by Lance Gerber, courtesy The Royal Commission for AIUla

Desert X AIUla is a collaboration between Desert X and the destination of AIUla established to advance new cultural dialogue through art. The first site-responsive exhibition of its kind in Saudi Arabia, it fosters dialogue and exchange between artists, curators, and international and local communities, shaped by a curatorial vision that takes the desert as its inspiration. Building on the legacy of Desert X, which takes place in California's Coachella Valley, Desert X AIUla draws on principles of land art, offering a profound opportunity to experience art on a monumental scale in dialogue with nature.

Desert X AIUla has played a pivotal role in paving the way for the development of another initiative due to open in AIUla in 2026, Wadi AlFann, a 65 square kilometre site set to become a global destination for monumental site-specific, permanent land art. The epic, monumental scale of Wadi AlFann's cross-generational commissions will open a new chapter in art history, expanding and continuing for years to come. Both Desert X AIUla and Wadi AlFann are examples of RCU's vision for art in the landscape, providing unparalleled opportunities to experience contemporary art in dialogue with nature.

As well as being a historic cultural site, AIUla is at the heart of Saudi Arabia's burgeoning arts scene. Arts AIUla is dedicated to creating a culturally enriched place to live and visit, to revive the rich legacy of arts in the region and to create opportunities for the community to experience art as a source of education and enrichment through job creation and skills development.

Desert X AIUla takes place as a highlight of the AIUla Arts Festival, which runs from 9 February – 2 March 2024. During the festival, More than Meets the Eye, an exhibition of contemporary works by Saudi artists will be presented by the contemporary art museum, AIUla. There will also be two exhibitions of work by Wadi AlFann commissioned artist Manal AlDowayan in Aljadidah Arts District. The festival will immerse visitors in a vibrant celebration of contemporary visual and public art, design, art tours, and artist residencies. At AIUla's mixed-use creative hub, Madrasat Addeera, there will be hands-on workshops on crafts such as palm weaving, pottery, jewelry, geometry, 3D structures, textiles, and many more.

Desert X AIUla aims to contribute to and continue the artistic heritage of the local community and region: Works from Desert X AIUla 2020 by Sherin Guirguis, Lita Albuquerque, Manal AlDowayan, Superflex, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim and Nadim Karam have been acquired by RCU, some of which are on view at Habitas, AIUla. Works from Desert X AIUla 2022 by Dana Awartani, Alicja Kwade, Monika Sosnowska, Sultan Bin Fahad, Khalil Rabah, Shezad Dawood and Serge Attukwei Clottey have been acquired by RCU, some of which are on display. Jim Denevan's work for Desert X AIUla 2022 also remains in its original location, where it will dissipate naturally. Desert X AIUla has been building local and international audiences over the years, with a 53% increase in average visitors per day from 2020 to 2022 editions.

Maya El Khalil, Curator, Desert X AIUla 2024, says:

*The region of AIUla is monumental. Formed of inconceivable spans of time and space, the urge is to meet it with imitations of similar size and impact. But the reality is, human efforts struggle to match the grandeur sculpted here. We challenged the artists participating in Desert X AIUla 2024 to adjust their perspective to encounter the unseen aspects of the place with reverence, attuning to the forces, rhythms and processes that shape the landscape in imperceptible ways. In response to this, the artists have developed innovative and dynamic works that address profound topics such as trade, migration and time that are relevant to the region and connect with the wider world.*

Marcello Dantas, Curator, Desert X AIUla 2024, says:

*The desert, often perceived as a place of emptiness, gradually unveils its intricate layers of existence as one immerses in it. Desert X AIUla invites artists to create original works with a unique canvas on an unprecedented scale. As visitors explore Desert X AIUla, they'll discover that in times of uncertainty, when the tangible is elusive, nothing is more real than the presence of the invisible. We invite visitors to encounter the limitless boundaries of imagination and discover the profound forces that silently shape our world.*

Raneem Farsi and Neville Wakefield, Artistic Directors, Desert X AIUla 2024, say:

*Taking place across three sites for the first time, this edition of Desert X AIUla will fully immerse visitors in the heritage, nature and landscape of AIUla. A crossroads of trade and culture for centuries, projects like Desert X AIUla continue AIUla's legacy as a place of cultural exchange and dialogue. The last two editions of Desert X AIUla in 2020 and 2022 proved how AIUla's landscape and community can inspire artists to create works that resonate with audiences around the world.*

Nora Aldabal, Executive Director of Arts AIUla, says:

*In AIUla, we are working towards building the next chapter of art history. Through arts initiatives such as Desert X AIUla, artists are invited to collaborate not only with other artists, but with the spectacular landscape and heritage of AIUla itself. This edition of Desert X AIUla with its striking artworks and educational and cultural programming underlines the value of arts and creativity as essential and transformative layers for enriching society, economy and quality of life.*

## ENDS

For more information please visit:

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**Notes to editors:****About AIUla:**

Located 1,100 km from Riyadh, in North-West Saudi Arabia, AIUla is a place of extraordinary natural and human heritage. The vast area, covering 22,561km<sup>2</sup>, includes a lush oasis valley, towering sandstone mountains and ancient cultural heritage sites dating back thousands of years to when the Lihyan and Nabataean kingdoms reigned.

The most well-known and recognised site in AIUla is Hegra, Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site. A 52-hectare ancient city, Hegra was the principal southern city of the Nabataean Kingdom and is comprised of more than 100 well-preserved tombs with elaborate facades cut out of the sandstone outcrops surrounding the walled urban settlement. Current research also suggests Hegra was the most southern outpost of the Roman Empire after conquering the Nabataeans in 106 CE.

In addition to Hegra, AIUla is home to fascinating historical and archaeological sites such as: Ancient Dadan, the capital of the Dadan and Lihyan Kingdoms, which is considered one of the most developed 1st-millennium BCE cities of the Arabian Peninsula; thousands of ancient rock art sites and inscriptions at Jabal Ikmah; AIUla Old Town, a labyrinth of more than 900 mudbrick homes developed from at least the 12th century, and Hijaz Railway and Hegra Fort, key sites in the story and conquests of Lawrence of Arabia.

**About The Royal Commission for AIUla:**

The Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU) was established by royal decree in July 2017 to protect and safeguard AIUla, a region of outstanding natural and cultural significance in North-West Saudi Arabia. RCU is embarking on a long-term plan to develop and deliver a sensitive, sustainable transformation of the region, reaffirming it as one of the country's most important archaeological and cultural destinations and preparing it to welcome visitors from around the world. RCU's development work in AIUla encompasses a broad range of initiatives across archaeology, tourism, culture, education and the arts, reflecting the ambitious commitment to cultivate tourism and leisure in Saudi Arabia, outlined in Vision 2030.

**About Desert X:**

Desert X is produced by The Desert Biennial, a 501(c)3 charitable organization, conceived to produce recurring international contemporary art exhibitions that activate desert locations through site-specific installations by acclaimed international artists. Its guiding principles include presenting public exhibitions of art that are free to the public and respond meaningfully to the conditions of desert locations, the environment, indigenous communities, and promote cultural exchange. Desert X is committed to education and public programming with a robust series of initiatives that expand the breadth and depth of the organization's engagement with the surrounding community. The exhibitions provide a platform for artists from around the world to address ecological, cultural, spiritual and other existential themes. From its inception in 2017, Desert X has presented four exhibitions in the Coachella Valley. In 2020, the organization began to engage with exhibitions outside the United States and helped establish Desert X AIUla in the desert of Saudi Arabia. The exhibitions to date have explored new configurations of site-responsive work by more than 80 artists from North America, South America, South Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa creating a new paradigm for the presentation and experience of art and welcoming an audience of over 1.7 million. Desert X is funded by its board of directors and an international group of individual donors, foundations, and sponsors.

### Maya El Khalil

Maya is a renowned art curator that has over 14 years of experience in the arts industry with a focus on the MENA region. She was born in Beirut and is based out of Oxford, UK. She is the former founding director of Athr Gallery, a contemporary art space in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where she curated several exhibitions that showcased the works of emerging and established artists from around the world. One of her notable curatorial works was the annual 21,39 Jeddah Arts exhibition. Maya has also worked as an independent art advisor and curator.

### Marcello Dantas

Marcello is an award-winning curator and artistic director with 35 years of experience, known for innovative interdisciplinary practices and the use of Science, history and technology, to create engaging exhibition experiences. Dantas has conceptualized several museums and cultural institutions across South America and Asia including the Museum of Portuguese Language and Japan House Sao Paulo, and, curated solo exhibitions featuring influential contemporary artists like Ai Weiwei and Anish Kapoor. He also curated Vancouver Biennale, BienalSur and Mercosul Biennale. In 2021, he became the curator of the SFER IK Museo in Tulum, Mexico.



— Filwa Nazer, *Preserving Shadows*, Desert X AlUla 2024, photo by Lance Gerber, courtesy The Royal Commission for AlUla