

**Alia Farid** (b. 1985, Kuwait City; lives and works in Kuwait City and San Juan, Puerto Rico) received a BFA from la Escuela de Artes Plásticas de Puerto Rico (San Juan), an MS in Visual Studies from the Visual Arts Program at MIT (Cambridge, MA), and an MA in Museum Studies and Critical Theory from the Programa d’Estudis Independents, Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art. She has presented solo exhibitions at Portikus, Frankfurt, and Kunstinstituut Melly, Rotterdam. Recent and upcoming group shows include participation in the 32nd Bienal de São Paulo, the 12th Gwangju Biennale, Sharjah Biennial 14, the 2nd Lahore Biennale, *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991-2001* at MoMA PS1, Yokohama Triennale 2020, and the 10th Asia Pacific Triennial. She has forthcoming solo exhibitions at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto; Rivers Institute, New Orleans; and Chisenhale Gallery, London, all in 2023. Farid is among the artists selected for *Whitney Biennial 2022: Quiet as It’s Kept*.

*Alia Farid: a solo exhibition* is co-produced with Kunstinstitut Melly, Rotterdam. The exhibition is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Misa Jeffereis, Assistant Curator.

The Artist Talk is sponsored by the Robert Lehman Foundation

Related Programs

**Artist Talk: Alia Farid**  
Saturday, June 25, 11:00 am (Virtual)

**Gallery Guide**  
Contemporary Art  
Museum St. Louis

March 25–  
July 24, 2022



# Alia Farid

## a solo exhibition



Alia Farid, *At the Time of the Ebb* (still), 2019. Single-channel video loop, stereo sound. 15:43 minutes. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation. Courtesy the artist.

Through a combination of mostly film and sculpture, Alia Farid’s work gives visibility to lesser-known histories often deliberately erased. In 2019 she presented *In Lieu of What Was* at Portikus in Frankfurt. This exhibition was the first presentation from a group of works that probes the impact of extractive industries on the land and social fabric of southern Iraq and Kuwait. Concurrently, her work *Migration of Forms*, which has received the 2022 Creative Capital Award, traces the eviction of Arab and South Asian groups to Latin America and the Caribbean.

At CAM, Farid presents the film *At the Time of the Ebb* (2019), a poetic meandering through *Nowruz Sayadeen*, the Fisherman’s New Year festival in Qeshm, which is a vast island in the Persian Gulf adjacent to the Iranian mainland. *Nowruz Sayadeen* (“new day”)

takes place annually on the summer solstice. On this day, the fishermen stay on land and the entire village abstains from consuming anything from the sea. Instead of fishing, members of the community praise the sea by dressing up and dancing at its shores.

In *At the Time of the Ebb*, Farid captures this celebration—this festival between the desert and the sea—as well as a trance ritual, fishermen donning



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Alia Farid, *At the Time of the Ebb* (still), 2019. Single-channel video loop, stereo sound. 15:43 minutes. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation. Courtesy the artist.

animal masks, a camel chewing trash, and a young man dancing to a love song. The magical film foregrounds local residents, whose performances draw attention to their customs, traditions, material surroundings, and natural environment. Those living in Qeshm are at the geographical and cultural intersection of Iran and the Persian Gulf—existing at the axis between two cultures, and between the past and the present. The artist urges us to move beyond the prescribed parameters of what it means to inhabit a place, to transcend national and ideological borders, and to insist on a multiplicity of experiences of contemporary life.

### Nowruz Sayadeen

Fishing plays an important role in the lives of those who live on the island of Qeshm, providing a majority of the island’s food and serving as the primary occupation of its inhabitants. Although much of Iran celebrates *Nowruz*, the Iranian New Year, in March, the island of Qeshm celebrates *Nowruz Sayadeen*, Fisherman’s New Year, at the beginning of the fishing season in late July. On this day, fishermen do not fish and the entire village abstains from eating seafood. Celebrating the sea by dancing along the shore and in the water, the inhabitants wish for an abundance of sea life to sustain their life and work.

A performance of fishermen and villagers dancing in various handmade costumes is central to the celebration of *Nowruz Sayadeen*. The festival is thought to be a confluence of more recent Iranian traditions and an absorbed form of Zoroastrianism, an

ancient pre-Islamic Iranian religion. By foregrounding this celebration, *At the Time of the Ebb* highlights the persistence of long-standing traditions and rituals in the face of the global modernity surrounding it.

### Scenes and Performers

*At the Time of the Ebb* begins with a trance-like ritual in a pink room. Figures completely shawled in white cloth dance to music chanted, sung, and drummed by those at the perimeter of the room.

Throughout the central celebration of *Nowruz Sayadeen*, which follows the previously described ritual, various individuals dress in symbolic costumes. Two dancers, known as *shushis*, wear large reed hats and carry palm-leaf fronds in each hand. Representing the ungovernable self, they taunt and scare anyone who gets too close. Other performers include the lion, a common Iranian representation of the sun, replaced here by the mask of a tiger; a camel led by a herder; a carpet-backed and black-masked horse; and a white bird: all dance to the music of a flute-like instrument.

The film ends with a young man singing and dancing to a love song in the same pink room in which the film began. Prior to the discovery of oil in the region, which would become the most sought-after resource and lead to modernization, dancing for guests was a traditional form of hospitality.



Alia Farid, *At the Time of the Ebb* (still), 2019. Single-channel video loop, stereo sound. 15:43 minutes. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation. Courtesy the artist.

### Qeshm

Located in the Strait of Hormuz, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, Qeshm is a predominantly rocky and barren land, with fishing as the primary occupation of the island’s nearly 120,000 people. It is also an important international trade location, as one fifth of the world’s oil shipments pass through the Gulf. Today, it is administered for the Iranian government by a local sheikh.

### Urbanization and Cultural Heritage

Urbanization is the process by which a large migration of people come to settle in an area and develop rural locales into cities. East of the Arabian Peninsula and south of Iran, Qeshm is not far from port cities along the respective coasts. The increasingly globalized trade of the 20th and 21st centuries has prompted a rise in the populations of these cities. Some of the effects caused by the rapid urbanization of these areas include the introduction of new technologies, the rise of consumerism, and environmental pollution.

In the film, a camel chews on the trash of a cardboard box. Here, *At the Time of the Ebb* subtly conveys the effects of urbanization as they collide with the cultural traditions that have persisted on Qeshm for centuries. In describing her interest in Qeshm, Farid says “I’m interested in how urbanization affects the aspiration of communities that are close enough to major cities to be influenced by them, but still far enough to continue living their own ways.”

