

Fatiha Zemmouri.
Empreinte carbone 1. 2022.
Raw earth and pigments on
wooden panel. 130 x 98 cm
Image courtesy of the artist

DOWN AND DIRTY

ART MEETS LAND

When artists get to work, the starting point for many is what they encounter in the world around them. Landscape, topography and geology, composed of the raw elements that form our environment. Rock, soil and wood, variously carved, chipped, shaved, sculpted, manipulated and crafted into pieces of art or installations that express both an innate primeval quality and the imaginative insight of the creative into whose hands they have passed. In this special section we look at how artists have got down and dirty – often literally – to embrace all aspects of landscape, from microscopic particles of dust to the big picture of soaring mountains and desert horizons.



HASHEL AL LAMKI

Born and raised in Al Ain, in the east of Abu Dhabi and edging the border with Oman, Hashel Al Lamki draws inspiration from the local landscape and its beguiling complexities.

Words by Katherine Volk

Hashel Al Lamki. *Merry-Cure*. 2022. Oil, natural pigment, oil pastels, ink on canvas cotton bedsheet. 240 x 160 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tabari Artspace



Earth tones, desert vegetation, rugged mountains and manmade paths are captured in Hashel Al Lamki's current exhibition *Sensu Lato* at Dubai's Tabari Artspace (running until 1 September 2022). In it he pays homage to his relationship with Al Ain's Jebel Hafeet, which stalks his work in myriad ways. Standing out from the series is *Merry-Cure* (2022), painted in dark blues and greens with fish, a seemingly curious motif for the predominantly mountainous landscape. "The painting is of the fish aquarium at the Mercure Grand hotel on top of Jebel Hafeet," reveals Al Lamki.

Built in 2002, the Mercure Grand is something of a marvel. The sun-bleached hotel sits just below the summit of the mountain, at over 900 metres, and features a swimming pool (currently under renovation) complete with waterslides and panoramic views of the "garden city" – a name given to Al Ain that reflects the impact of the oasis, green parks and springs. "I am trying to capture the shift and formation of different landscapes," continues Al Lamki. "The painting is a commentary on the cycles of the Earth. Millions of years ago, the tectonic plates forced the mountains, once submerged underwater, to rise up. So, when you check in to the hotel, there is a huge aquarium behind you, which brings back the idea of cycles and that things are in constant motion."

Similarly focused on our planet's vast history, *Nawras* (2022) is a focal point of Al Lamki's current exhibition, based around the Arabic word for seagull. "There are more than 40 different types of seagull

and scientists are constantly studying their different characteristics and behaviours. This is a metaphor for how I see Earth, it goes way beyond a single lifespan. I think one can attempt to understand, document and comprehend, but you will always be fascinated with our planet and trying to capture it. We take things for granted," he muses.

Al Lamki was initially drawn to Jebel Hafeet's history during his formative years, before he developed his passion for art. "I grew up not knowing what art was as a practice or as an industry," he recalls, "it was more of a way of expressing and connecting. I have these memories of going to the local market and to the Al Ain Museum, the oldest in the UAE." It was these trips that encouraged his investigations into ancient civilisations and a deeper exploration of the landscape. "There is a connection between those two places. The museum exhibits historical artefacts from different civilisations that were here before 1971 [the year the United Arab Emirates was formed], while the farmers' market hosted artisans and craftsmen using natural pigments, dyes and other indigenous materials," he continues. Yet it was not until after he had left the UAE that these played a crucial role in his practice.

In 2007 Al Lamki went to pursue his BFA at Parsons in New York, remaining in the United States for three more years after graduation. It was a highly formative period. "I was trained in classical techniques, such as oil on canvas or acrylic on canvas," he explains. "I was taught

Installation view of *Sensu Lato* at Tabari Artspace. 2022. Image courtesy of Tabari Artspace



to understand the concepts of composition and I looked a lot into the art history of American landscapes, which shaped my understanding towards painting as a medium itself." During his time in New York, something clicked when he began using natural pigments during workshops – perhaps sparked by the environmental sensitivity prevalent in his life from the very beginning. Al Lamki has Kenyan and Emirati roots and spent his first 13 years between the two countries. "When we would go back to Kenya, I would see how people were so resourceful with what was available and the idea of recycling. I grew up around these concepts, knowing that these small acts matter and are important to operating and navigating through life," he observes. "I made a conscious decision that through my journey, I would be resourceful and leave minimal waste behind me." From boiling carrot tops and onion skins to using insects such as dried cochineal beetles, Al Lamki experimented and learned that such natural resources require unique processes and techniques to extract their colours. "After spending so much time with acrylic as a tool that led me to a better understanding of painting composition, I felt it was time to address colour by incorporating natural pigments in order to push the conversation about painting into a more contemporary dialogue," he explains. "There was also a sensitive, responsible and sustainable aspect to the pigments that I became interested in and they allowed me to look at nature in a different way and challenge

the landscapes, not just romanticise them. So far all my pigments are natural, but not necessarily from the UAE. That's something I aspire to one day."

During his time in New York, Al Lamki connected with his professor at Parsons and applied for a grant to work in Guatemala for a few months one summer, learning from local artisans about weaving carpets and textiles and utilising natural dyes. He also completed a stint in Taos, New Mexico, living in the Hive Earth Ship – an off-grid residence that utilises renewable energy and recycling. "It made me realise the importance of the handmade and of employing what is around you. We live in a time when everything is computerised and digital and we're moving away from our senses," he laments.

The earth pigments Al Lamki encountered also began to tell a human story, one that he started tracing back to his own family expeditions and also to the experiences of nomadic tribes across North Africa and Arabia, who respond to the resources around them. He became fascinated by the transmission of knowledge between communities, as well as the concept of movement between people, between lands and between histories, all of which started to emerge in his work. His recent paintings *Eau de Cologne*, *Missionary* and *Kinda Mexico* (all 2022) reflect on the movement of people up and down Jebel Hafeet, from construction excavators to holiday makers. "My studio actually

Hashel Al Lamki. Nawras. 2022. Oil, natural pigment, oil pastels, ink, on canvas. 255 x 152 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tabari Artspace



Hashel Al Lamki. *Kinda Mexico*. 2022. Oil, natural pigment, oil pastels, ink, on cotton bedsheet. 240 x 160 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tabari Artspace



Hashel Al Lamki. *Neptune*. 2021. Immersive video and audio installation, pigment on canvas and sculpture. Installation view at Abu Dhabi Art 2021 as part of Abu Dhabi Art's Beyond: Emerging Artists. Image courtesy of the artist and Tabari Artspace

used to be a car-repairing garage, so the idea of movement and mobility is already part of the conversation," he laughs.

Fabric is as crucial as pigment, he points out. "As my work looks at nomadism and tribes, fabric also plays an important role through shelter and the architecture of these communities. I started looking at these elements in conversation with the pigments. I began to look at bedsheets, linen, burial cloths and tent fabrics as a surface, because each medium tells its own story." He explains how the importance of these materials and the production of each work serve to convey this message of dialogue. "I create the first layer of dyeing in my studio, and then I take the fabrics with me to my parent's house where there is land. I rinse the fabrics there, and the left-over dye ends up going back into the soil. As I'm not just rinsing the fabric in a studio sink in a way that is basically disconnected, this act of returning the dye to its source ignites another conversation."

Last year Al Lamki participated in Abu Dhabi Art's *Beyond: Emerging Artists*, curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, in what might seem to be a deviation from his focus on history, the mountains and traditional peoples. Not so. After a string of cancellations and shows cut short due to the beginning of the pandemic the previous year, a resurgent Abu Dhabi was starting to look at art anew. Al Lamki's multidisciplinary commissioned work *Neptune* (2021) made use of contemporary fabrics to reflect and record the prevailing social landscape. "I continued to use natural pigments but the surfaces shifted," he points out. "I went to the local shopping mall, where there is a whole section of fabrics for

wedding gowns and saris. As this was a moment of celebration I decided to work with these fabrics as a canvas. That's when the shimmering and ethereal element came into my paintings." Their composition also reflected the city of Abu Dhabi, with views from meeting rooms overlooking places where land and water are in dialogue, glazed building facades that mirror the sky, and the parking lot of Abu Dhabi's Marina Mall, a community hub popular in the early 2000s. As Al Lamki describes, "Malls here are beyond just shopping malls, they function as big living rooms where people congregate. They go on dates, families connect and social events take place." Yet these works go further than simply capturing daily life. Currently being exhibited at the Palazzo Franchetti in Venice as part of *Beyond: Emerging Artists in Venice*, they prompt us to question our moment in history as the artist builds upon the immediate past through the language of nostalgia and highlights the impact of our societies and values on the future.

In addition to his current exhibitions in Dubai and Venice, Al Lamki has also been invited to participate in the Lyon Biennale, which opens in September this year. "It's going to be an immersive installation of paintings, sculptures and maybe some video and sound elements that are emerging in my practice," he shares. "The work will continue to talk about landscapes and the shift of tectonic plates, as well as the movements and migrations of different species – not just human beings, but also the plants and animals that surround us. It's all part of me looking to understand the history of humanity at large."