

Carrying and Throwing Shells: An Embodiment of Help-Seeking Behaviours Across Cultures

I | Introduction

The Sharjah Biennial 16 (SB16), themed *To Carry*, offers a versatile exploration of what it means to carry. Through evocative contemplations such as “*to carry a wound; [...] to carry resistance*” (*Sharjah Art Foundation*), the Biennial invites literal and metaphorical interpretations of what individuals and communities bear as they navigate pasts, presents, and futures. In this framework, curator Amal Khalaf employs a collective wayfinding approach to encourage audiences to rethink systems of oppression and consider alternative paths for surviving and thriving amidst societal transformation.

Khalaf’s curatorial concept, *Throwing Shells*, builds upon the SB16 theme by referencing the ritual of Cowrie-shell divination, a coastal Indigenous practice that reflects humanity’s timeless need for guidance in adversity. Rooted in reflections on collective memory, grief, and resistance, *Throwing Shells* draws from Khalaf’s personal experiences in the *matam*¹, where communal mourning rituals transform into acts of solidarity and resilience. She highlights how collective grieving practices—such as chest-thumping, poetry recitation, and divination—become tools for processing and releasing memories of injustice, forging paths of resistance and renewal (*Khalaf*).

This knowledge is carried to Hashel Al Lamki, providing the foundation for his artwork in SB16: *Maat* and *Part-Time Lovers*. The shared understanding among these three artistic entities—the Biennial, Khalaf, and Al Lamki—centers on resilience, nature, critiques of Capitalist structures and modernity, and the exploration of the trinity of Science-Spirituality-Arts. This Biennial offers Al Lamki an opportunity to employ an artistic practice of embodiment in two distinct ways, using it to navigate Khalaf’s curatorial concept of *Throwing Shells*, giving rise to his pieces *Maat* and *Part-Time Lovers*.

Embodiment offers tacit knowledge. By integrating the body, emotions, and lived experiences into the creative process, it provides an alternative way of generating and interpreting meaning—offering insights that are deeply personal yet universally resonant. In *Maat*, embodiment serves as a documentation of the artist’s own experiences, translating the process of bringing conceptual meaning to life through residencies in Egypt, India, Spain, and his local practice in the UAE. Here, embodiment engages with vernacular cultures, seeking conceptual guidance from communities while reflecting on their histories, rituals, and traditions. The final piece synthesizes these lived experiences, demonstrating how embodiment allows meaning to emerge from both the internal journey of the self and the external world. *Maat* exemplifies the search for artistic and personal guidance within the cultural environments we inhabit.

Conversely, *Part-Time Lovers* shifts the focus of embodiment from the artist to the spectator. Al Lamki creates a work enriched with iconography, structure, composition, and a meticulously chosen color palette, inviting viewers to engage in a contemplative act. By immersing themselves in the visual and symbolic depth of the piece, spectators are encouraged to embody the concept of *Throwing Shells* themselves, forming personal interpretations and insights. This embodiment is not prescriptive but rather

¹ A Shia congregation hall.

an open invitation to engage deeply with the visual “shells” Al Lamki has laid before them, offering their own readings and reflections.

Through these dual approaches, *Maat* and *Part-Time Lovers* illustrate how embodiment functions both as a method of artistic creation and a tool for interpretation, bridging the gap between the personal and the collective, as well as the conceptual and the experiential. This text accompanies Hashel Al Lamki’s artworks to provide an academic exploration of the research and production processes behind them, fostering a conversation about the relevance of traditional help-seeking practices in contemporary discussions of the modern human condition.

II | *Maat*: Reading Shells That Were Thrown

Hashel Al Lamki is an Emirati multimedia artist whose practice bridges multicultural influences, global perspectives, and a deep engagement with themes of humanity’s interconnectedness. Born in the UAE, a rapidly evolving cosmopolitan hub, and shaped by his education in New York City, Al Lamki incorporates diverse cultural narratives into his work. This is particularly evident in *Maat*, a site-specific installation located in the courtyard of Al Qasimiah School in Sharjah, the UAE’s first prototype public school, later replicated nationwide.

Maat pays homage to the spirits of those dedicated to guiding youth, drawing inspiration from coastal rituals of carrying and casting shells. These rituals, such as Cowrie-shell divination, serve as an allegory for humanity’s search for meaning and guidance in life. By observing the connections, distances, and contrasts among shells, practitioners find significance in their relationships—a practice symbolizing the migratory patterns of knowledge, traditions, languages, and peoples. Al Lamki’s immersive multi-panel installation reimagines this allegory, blending multicultural coastal wisdom from Mallorca, Munnar, and Cairo into a shared space. Through *Maat*, Al Lamki creates a symbolic and contemplative environment that resonates with the UAE’s own role as a crossroads of cultures.

The following passages elaborate on how each host town in his artist residencies molded the form and essence of *Maat*.

A — Mallorca, Spain

In Mallorca, Spain, artist Hashel Al Lamki embarked on his first residency of the year, hosted by La Residencia, a renowned retreat in the artistic village of Deià. Surrounded by the Tramuntana mountains and lush Mediterranean landscapes, the residency offered Al Lamki a setting steeped in tranquility and beauty, where art and nature intersect. This experience provided him with a unique reflection on how local cultural narratives, histories, and natural resources are often transformed within resort culture into curated attractions.

The picturesque environment of Mallorca, frequently marketed as an escape from the complexities of modern life, represents a broader phenomenon found in popular leisure destinations. Resorts, including La Residencia, often frame experiences as “timeless”, inviting visitors to immerse themselves in spaces that preserve an idealized past. This framing can evoke dualities of time: past and future, archaic and modern.

For Al Lamki, such places raise questions about how histories are presented, celebrated, and consumed, especially within landscapes with deep Indigenous and cultural roots.

The presence of donkeys in Mallorca, for example, embodies these tensions. Historically, donkeys were integral to global systems of trade and labor, facilitating human movement and commerce. Yet in contemporary contexts, they are often romanticized as symbols of a “simpler” past, their significance reduced to an aesthetic element of the landscape. In Deià, the village’s legacy as a haven for artists and poets, including Robert Graves, further enriched Al Lamki’s exploration. Graves’ observation that “*one gets to the heart of the matter by a series of experiences in the same pattern, but in different colors*” resonates with the themes of Al Lamki’s *Maat*. Like the practice of “Throwing Shells”, Graves’ words suggest a process of interpreting patterns across time and space—an idea Al Lamki incorporates into his installation.

Al Lamki’s time in Mallorca offered him the opportunity to reflect on these complexities with a sense of curiosity and critical engagement. While La Residencia played a valuable role in providing a space for his practice, it also exemplified a global resort culture in which notions of rest, art, and heritage intersect with commercialized narratives. Through his observations, Al Lamki reconsiders the ways in which landscapes and cultural practices are shaped, celebrated, and reinterpreted over time.

B — Kerala, India

In Munnar, India, Hashel Al Lamki found a profound contrast to the resort culture experienced in Mallorca. His residency with the Srishti Charitable Trust, nestled amidst the vast tea plantations of this hill town, offered a transformative engagement with art, sustainability, and inclusion. Established in 1991, the Trust is dedicated to the rehabilitation and empowerment of differently-abled children and young adults within the rural plantation community of Kerala. Through their initiatives, such as the natural dye house Aranya Natural, they combine ecological awareness with artisanal creativity, fostering livelihoods that respect both people and the planet (*Srishti Trust*).

Munnar’s natural beauty and biodiversity played a crucial role in Al Lamki’s exploration of the meditative and ecological aspects of artmaking. As he described, “[w]hen creation of art becomes a meditative process and when care is given to every detail by the artists. Then the artwork comes into itself as a profound piece of work” (*Al Lamki, Munnar*). Inspired by this philosophy, Al Lamki collaborated with artisans to produce nine large panels of dyed chiffon, a lightweight, sheer fabric with historical significance linked to the Silk Route. The fabric selected was pure flat chiffon, a lightweight material known for its transparency and shimmery appearance. Historically, chiffon is believed to have originated in China and later traveled through the Middle East to Europe, where it evolved into its modern form (*Al Lamki, Munnar*).

The dyeing process was guided by Munnar’s rich ecological resources, with natural dyes sourced from plants such as indigo, pomegranate shells, turmeric, tea waste, eucalyptus leaves, and eucalyptus eupatorium. Techniques like bundle dyeing, tie-dye, and eco-printing using fresh leaves and flowers were employed to create vibrant and intricate patterns, rooted in the locality’s flora. The artisans at Srishti also incorporated lac dye, derived from the resin secreted by the female lac insect (*Laccifer laca*), which produces deep hues of crimson, burgundy, and purple (*Al Lamki, Munnar*). Additional pigments were

extracted from natural sources: yellow from dried pomegranate peels, pink from lac insect excretion, red from madder root, blue from indigo leaf extract, and beige from tea waste.

Unlike the ornamental uses of nature seen in resort culture, the approach in Munnar emphasized a sustainable relationship with the environment. The artisans' practices exemplified a balance between innovation and tradition, transforming local resources into meaningful artistic expressions while reducing ecological impact. Al Lamki's project extended this ethos, shifting the focus from textiles as commodities to textiles as art, bridging the gap between craft and fine art.

Flowers played a crucial role in the eco-printing process, with many collected from the temples and shrines dedicated to Devi, the goddess, and Shiva—sites of devotion for the artisans and tea plantation workers. These flowers, along with tea leaves, pine leaves, and eupatorium leaves, were pressed into the chiffon fabric before being dyed in sappanwood, a material that yields a pink pigment from its bark. As Al Lamki reflected, *"flowers have been deeply connected with the history of cultures around the planet... They play as a pathway between reality and divinity"* (Al Lamki, Munnar).

Moreover, the Srishti Trust's mission to empower differently-abled individuals challenged the exploitative tendencies of capitalist systems. By integrating these individuals into the creative process, the Trust offered them agency and visibility within the community. Al Lamki collaborated with artisans including Sreekala, Kalavathy, Mallika, Arumugham, Rama Lekshmi, and designer Krishnendu Sarath, under the guidance of Manoj Kumar, manager of Srishti's Aranya Natural program (Al Lamki, Munnar).

For Al Lamki, the residency in Munnar was not merely a space of production but one of profound learning and reflection. The natural and cultural resources of Munnar enriched his understanding of art as a practice deeply intertwined with geography, ecology, and community. This engagement with Munnar's environment and people allowed him to deepen the themes central to Maat, particularly the migratory and transformative power of knowledge and tradition.

C — Cairo, Egypt

During his month-long residency in Cairo, Egypt, hosted by ARD Art Institution, artist Hashel Al Lamki immersed himself in the city's rich craft traditions, drawing inspiration from its deep cultural heritage and historical craftsmanship. The residency facilitated interactions with local artisans and institutions, creating a dynamic cultural exchange through the art of craft. These engagements formed ongoing dialogues, blending Egypt's traditional techniques with Al Lamki's contemporary artistic practices. His exploration culminated in two significant artworks: a woven carpet inspired by the traditions of Harrania Village and an embroidered piece influenced by Cairo's historic textiles from the Khayamiya market.

Al Lamki's journey to Harrania Village provided insight into a craft tradition revived in the mid-20th century by architect Ramses Wissa Wassef, founder of the Wissa Wassef Art Center. Wissa Wassef's philosophy centered on preserving Egypt's ancient weaving heritage by guiding untrained artisans to create tapestries organically, blending personal narratives with cultural symbolism. During his visit to the center, Al Lamki collaborated with Morsi Al Nagar, an independent weaver and former student of the center, translating Al Lamki's paintings into woven carpets. This collaboration became the foundation for

Al Lamki's woven piece, merging the tactile qualities of traditional weaving with his contemporary approach to painting.

For his embroidered artwork, Al Lamki turned to Cairo's textile traditions. His visits to the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) and the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (NMEC) offered an expansive view of Egypt's crafts throughout history. At MIA, he explored intricate Islamic patterns, discovering how embroidery has served as a medium for storytelling, spiritual expression, and geometric design, while NMEC illuminated the evolution of materials and techniques. This inspired Al Lamki to visit the Bab Zuweila district of Old Cairo, where he encountered the historic craft of Kheimayah, or tent-making. Originating in the Fatimid period, Kheimayah artisans use embroidery to adorn ceremonial tents with vibrant colors, geometric motifs, and arabesque patterns. Despite modern challenges, artisans such as Khaled Hani and Tarek preserve and innovate this craft, highlighting its dual role as functional and artistic.

One of Al Lamki's most striking realizations in Cairo came through his exploration of Tatreez embroidery and its connection to the sacred Kiswa, the cloth covering the Kaaba in Mecca. Historically crafted by skilled Cairo artisans using silk and gold threads, the Kiswa exemplifies embroidery's dual role in spiritual expression and storytelling. The motifs and verses embroidered on the Kiswa echo the ethical principles found in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, further reinforcing Al Lamki's contemplation of self-reflection and guidance.

The title *Maat* directly reflects Al Lamki's reflections on the Egyptian Book of the Dead, particularly its 42 Confessions or "Negative Confessions," which represent declarations of moral integrity recited in the afterlife. These principles emphasize the significance of self-examination, accountability, and ethical clarity as guiding forces in both personal and societal contexts. Through his time in Cairo, Al Lamki not only engaged deeply with traditional crafts but also wove these ethical themes into his work.

This alignment of craft, philosophy, and history enriches *Maat* as an artwork and concept. Al Lamki's woven and embroidered pieces reinterpret ancient techniques through a contemporary lens, bridging past and present. They create a profound dialogue of cultural exchange and self-reflection, echoing the ethical inquiries at the heart of *Maat*. The residency in Cairo thus becomes a pivotal chapter in Al Lamki's journey, linking his artistic exploration of craft with the universal human pursuit of moral clarity and guidance.

III | *Part-Time Lovers*: Shells Handed Over to be Thrown

Hashel Al Lamki's *Part-Time Lovers* invites viewers to interpret his "thrown shells" not as mere artistic flourishes but as symbolic cues that engage audiences in deciphering the interplay between humanity and nature. The nine-meter polyptych, commissioned for the 16th Sharjah Biennial and exhibited at the Sharjah Art Museum, operates as a surreal landscape layered with complex narratives about environmental fragility, interconnectedness, and personal accountability. This work imagines a landscape shaped by phenomena such as altered rain patterns and tectonic shifts, offering a visual language that reflects the intimate and global consequences of climate change.

Part-Time Lovers positions nature as both a creator and vessel of wisdom. This approach channels Al Lamki's broader artistic practice, which explores humanity's entangled relationship with its habitat. Al Lamki's use of "thrown shells" serves as an allegory for divination: a gesture of seeking guidance and interpreting signs within a framework of ecological and cultural interconnectedness. These shells become metaphors for the fragments of wisdom scattered across time and geography, urging viewers to consider their role in environmental stewardship.

Rooted in the symbolic interplay between the sun and moon as natural partners in balance, Al Lamki's painting reflects on the delicate equilibrium that sustains life. The polyptych's swirling hues and layered iconography evoke a "beautiful chaos" that mirrors both the fragility and resilience of ecosystems. Drawing on Edward T. Hall's concept of the dialogical relationship between humanity and culture, Al Lamki's practice underscores the bidirectional influence of humans and their environment: both mold and are molded by one another (*Tabari Art Space*). This interconnectedness is integral to understanding the environmental crises that inform his work, bridging personal experience with broader global challenges.

The visual language of *Part-Time Lovers* extends Al Lamki's multidisciplinary practice, which is deeply informed by his diverse cultural and geographical experiences. Born in Al Ain, at the foot of Jebel Hafeet, Al Lamki's exposure to the contrasts between Bedouin culture and rapid urban development shaped his sensitivity to the intersection of humanity and the environment (*Tabari Art Space*). His time in Guatemala, Haiti, and the United States further emphasized the importance of sustainability and community cohesion, themes that recur in *Part-Time Lovers*. By integrating natural pigments sourced from the MENA region into his palette, Al Lamki not only emphasizes the scarcity of these resources but also reminds us of the immense natural power they embody, reinforcing the urgency of environmental awareness.

The "shells" in *Part-Time Lovers*, whether represented through Al Lamki's surreal landscapes or as allegories of natural disasters, signal a call for reflection and collective action. By inviting audiences to interpret these "thrown shells," Al Lamki reframes nature's phenomena as vernacular expressions of resilience and warning, weaving a narrative of shared vulnerability and hope. This invitation challenges viewers to consider their responsibility in maintaining the fragile balance between humanity and the environment, positioning *Part-Time Lovers* as a poetic yet urgent plea for a renewed relationship with the natural world.

IV | Conclusion: Reflection on the Artworks' Contribution

Hashel Al Lamki's *Maat* and *Part-Time Lovers* invite audiences to engage with themes that resonate far beyond their immediate visual and spatial contexts. These artworks underscore the importance of rituals and cultural practices, such as Cowrie-shell divination, as meaningful methods of guidance and wellness. When examined within the framework of mental health and cultural relativism, as discussed in *Assessing Mental Health Across Cultures* by Lena Andary, Steven Klimidis, and Yvonne Stolk, the relevance of Al Lamki's works becomes academically significant.

Modern psychiatry and psychology, as argued in Andary et al.'s text, are predominantly rooted in Western conceptions of mental health, where diagnostic tools like the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental*

Disorders (DSM) prioritize universal categories that often fail to account for cultural nuances. The authors emphasize that “the basic concepts of psychiatry reflect the culture and history of Western Europe-influenced societies” (Griffith 27). These concepts, though globally applied, risk misdiagnosing or undervaluing culturally specific rituals and explanatory models of illness.

This critique resonates with *Maat* and *Part-Time Lovers*, which challenge audiences to reflect on alternative forms of guidance and help-seeking embedded in diverse cultural frameworks. For instance, *Maat*’s invocation of coastal rituals such as Cowrie-shell divination draws attention to non-Western traditions of understanding and addressing human needs. These practices exemplify what Andary et al. describe as “culture-bound syndromes”, or “recurrent, locality-specific patterns of aberrant behavior and troubling experience” that are indigenously understood as forms of illness or affliction (*American Psychiatric Association* 844). Al Lamki’s works elevate these practices, not as “primitive” or “illogical” (Andary et al. 101), but as valid and contextually appropriate responses to the human condition.

The interpretive openness of Al Lamki’s artworks aligns with Andary et al.’s assertion that “the expectations and constraints of culture tend to influence how distress is expressed and how it is perceived” (Rogler 7). By situating his installations within culturally charged sites, whether the historic Al Qasimiah School in Sharjah or through intimate relational dynamics in *Part-Time Lovers*, Al Lamki constructs spaces where cultural rituals are not only acknowledged but actively reimaged as relevant tools for navigating modernity.

Ultimately, *Maat* and *Part-Time Lovers* contribute to a dialogue about indigeneity’s place within contemporary life, rejecting the marginalization of traditional practices as outdated or irrelevant. Instead, these works highlight the profound diversity of human methods for seeking guidance, underscoring how cultural rituals can enrich modern understandings of wellness, interconnectedness, and resilience. By engaging with such themes, Al Lamki’s oeuvre provides a fertile ground for academic inquiry, bridging art, anthropology, and cross-cultural mental health.

V | Bibliography

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VII | Appendices

