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Monira Al Qadiri

GASWORKS



View of "Monira Al Qadiri," 2017. Photo: Andy Keate.

Monira Al Qadiri's playful and engaging show "The Craft" was packed to the brim with conspiracy theory-like clues and references. The first of two rooms was almost completely dark; in the gloom, one made out only a replica of a hamburger spinning over a tall plinth—a piece titled *The End* (all works 2017). But there was a soundtrack: a male voice reciting a passage about an unspecified genre of architecture that, although supposedly attempting to respond to its terrain and atmospheric conditions, failed to blend into its context. This architecture's innovative forms made it look like something from outer space.

This narrative, juxtaposed with the rotating burger, was somewhat baffling until one reached the next room, which had been styled as a typical American diner, complete with black-and-white tiled floors, a gum-ball machine, and booths with green seats. Salt and pepper shakers, ketchup and mustard bottles, and napkin and straw dispensers were carefully placed on each table. At one end of this seamlessly constructed simulation stood high green barstools, above which shone a neon sign reading THE CRAFT (but titled, rather, *Omen*). At the other end of the room, a flat screen displayed a looping video, titled *The Craft*, that had been collaged from vintage VHS tapes.

The Craft tied all these elements together. It showed vintage recordings of an affluent neighborhood in Dakar, Senegal, where Al Qadiri, a Kuwaiti, was born, including views of the facade of the Kuwait embassy, her parents' workplace. The modernist exterior of that building, with distinctive window frames seemingly adapted to the sunny climate yet also somehow alien-looking, reminded me of the words I heard back in the first room of the show—according to the press release, the narration was an excerpt from the book *The Kuwait Urbanization* (1964) by Saba George Shiber. In *The Craft*, however, it is Al Qadiri herself speaking: She describes how all embassy buildings are like spaceships, and launches into the story of a UFO sighting she experienced as a girl. Her mother and sister entered the spaceship, which the sister later described as looking just like an American-style diner. From that moment, the artist came to believe her parents were complicit with aliens plotting to take over the world.

Did the plot succeed? Perhaps not. As the video continues, the artist goes on to describe two more alien encounters—first, during the Gulf War, which aliens "tried desperately to make look like a human conflict," and then, twenty years later, in Beirut, where she saw an abandoned spaceship and a single human-looking alien sitting inside and smoking *shisha*. "The plan failed, go away," he told her.

Modernist embassies, American-type eateries, even that now-ubiquitous disk of ground meat known as the hamburger—all these certainly might have seemed like emissaries from another planet in the Africa of the 1950s and 1960s. Al Qadiri concludes the video with the humorous suggestion that the omnipresence today of such phenomena is proof of a long and lasting relationship between humans and aliens.

—Sylwia Serafinowicz







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