

Saudi artist Manal AlDowayan brings stories of AlUla's people to life in Wadi AlFann

'Everyone has a story,' the artist says after collecting drawings from communities across AlUla

Saudi Arabia



Wadi AlFann presents Manal AlDowayan's journey towards 'Oasis of Stories'. Exhibition curated by Iwona Blazwick, 2024.
(Courtesy of the Royal Commission for AlUla)

9 min read

After spending months collecting drawings and stories from communities across AlUla, Saudi artist Manal AlDowayan is displaying hundreds of artworks in an exhibition as part of her ground-breaking Wadi AlFann commission.

AlDowayan had been tasked by the Royal Commission of AlUla (RCU) to create a new, era-defining land art commission for Wadi AlFann that will be permanently placed in the middle of AlUla's desert landscape in 2026.

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The 'Oasis of Stories' exhibition showcases pieces by approximately 1,000 people, including teachers, farmers, cooks, rangers, tour guides, artists, craftspeople, students, junior football teams, and differently abled members of an association.

The participants were told to share their personal drawings on paper, which were then collected and divided into six sections: Our landscape, our home, our family, our art and culture, our rituals, and our children and football teams.



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What she learned from their drawings will remain with her forever, AlDowayan told Al Arabiya English in an interview ahead of the opening of [the AlUla Arts Festival](#).

"I learned that everyone has a story. Everyone. And it's not the same as mine, but it is beautiful," she said.

AlDowayan, who will also represent Saudi Arabia at La Biennale di Venezia 2024, in Venice, is known for the participatory nature of her work.

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She told Al Arabiya English that she always ensured that the community she works in or lives in is involved in whatever art piece she is working on. For her, creating art is as much of a solo experience as it is one that brings people together.



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“My practice has always included the voices of the community that I work

to it? And how will they connect to it, and will they love it? Will they think of it as a symbol within their community,” she says.

She goes on to add: “And because of that, I chose to bring the community alongside me to make this artwork in the hope that in the future, they will look at it as a symbol of their story, their narrative. [I wanted them to think of] this moment in time where this work was conceived between me and them”.

Building trust

An essential part of the project was getting the community to trust her enough to want to share their lives with her, without holding themselves back, according to the Saudi artist.

“I have been coming to AlUla for over 15 years. I have made many, many trips in preparation for this work. I would visit people and tell them my story. I would tell them where I’m from, what my parents are like, and what my sisters are like.

“So, it was a long journey of understanding of where I’m coming from and because of this, I think I laid a good layer of trust to build on. That is when I started to invite them to the workshops,” she said.

The artist told the community that as part of her contract with the RCU, the pieces they would create would be displayed in AlUla for at least a 100 years. Their children, grandchildren, and maybe even great-grandchildren would be able to visit Wadi AlFann in the future and relay the stories of their ancestors who created each piece, she said.



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The responses she has received from the community so far has moved her, AlDowayan added. "It was very positive. It was very emotional. They did give me beautiful stories. We recorded and documented [their stories]."

She further said: "They understood I was here to listen and to never lay my narrative on top of theirs. Instead, [I was here to] highlight their story to a world that would come, visit them from now on as one of the main destinations for tourism, and for Saudis to also come and understand their history and their connection to it."

Vastly different but the same

The project showed her that within AlUla's small community, what set people apart was intertwined with what made them the same, the artist said.

"There is diversity in the stories. Even though you think AlUla is such a small place that everybody is exactly the same, they are not. There are different experiences, depending on age, depending on where they grew up, what family and tribe they belong to," she said, adding: "But then, on the other hand, we are also the same. We all have passions that are very similar: Love for family, love for nature and animals."



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"You know, understanding the heritage that our grandmothers and grandfathers have handed down to us [is vital], and we desperately want to preserve their memory. And so, it was a journey of understanding the similarities, as well as the differences," she said.

Dozens of artworks depict the ancient city's tall, striking palm trees, landmark canyons, and old town. Others offer a glimpse into the daily lives of AlUla's people – either gathered around the television, playing football, or

Some reflect the drastic transformation the city has undergone since the establishment of the Royal Commission of AlUla in 2017, as well as the cultural and political transformation that has taken place across Saudi Arabia.

Wadi AlFann

Curated by Iwona Blazwick, Lead Curator for Wadi AlFann, the ‘Oasis of Stories’ exhibition marks a milestone in the development of AlDowayan’s permanent large-scale desert installation for Wadi AlFann.

The artwork takes inspiration from the walls of AlUla’s Old Town and invites viewers to walk through its labyrinth-like passages.



A view from the intended site of Wadi AlFann in AlUla. (File photo: Reuters)

artists will be permanently showcased.

In a site spanning 65 sq km, the concepts, vision, and epic scale of Wadi AlFann's cross-generational commissions will mark a new chapter in art history, offering a profound opportunity to experience art in dialogue with nature.

AlDowayan is one of the first five commissioned artists, alongside fellow pioneers and land art icons Agnes Denes, Michael Heizer, Ahmed Mater, and James Turrell.

Based out of London, Dhahran, and Dubai, AlDowayan's practice spans media – including photography, installation, sculpture, and sound.

The artist, who is a critical witness to the cultural transformation engulfing Saudi Arabia, has for long invested in interrogating the gender-biased customs that impact the condition of women. In just the past year, AlDowayan exhibited in Brazil, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Spain, the UK and the US.

Her participatory work at New York's Guggenheim Museum in May 2023 saw visitors symbolically shatter hundreds of porcelain scrolls containing texts that oppress women and girls. Her critically acclaimed commission for the temporary exhibition Desert X AlUla 2020, 'Now You See Me, Now You Don't,' remains on permanent display in AlUla for the public.

AlUla Arts Festival

The AlUla Arts Festival, inaugurated in 2022, has become a must-attend annual event on the global arts scene.

Running from February 9 to March 2, the three-week-long festival offers visitors curated art experiences, bringing together exhibitions and experiences carefully put together by a diverse group of artistic talents under the direction of Arts AlUla and in celebration of AlUla's legacy as a cultural crossroads.

spread across AlUla's ancient sites and modern-day arts precincts and venues.

Featuring an exciting mix of talent including local, regional, and international artists, performers, curators, collectors and more, the festival revives AlUla's creative legacy.

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