

Alshaibi

Sand



Sama

in

Rushes

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in**

Sand Rushes In

Photographs and video stills by Sama Alshaibi
Edited and with an interview by Isabella Ellaheh Hughes
Foreword by Salwa Mikdadi
Essay by Alfredo Cramerotti

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Silsila:

A Desert Ritual and Spiritual Performance Independent of an Audience

Salwa Mikdadi

Exploring

Sama Alshaibi uses photography to situate her performance art, which is independent of an audience, and that performance—an abstract manifestation of her personal and intimate experiences—gives new dimension to her artistic practice. Unlike the fourteenth-century Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta, who is often referenced in *Silsila*, Alshaibi does not document the moment but rather lives it, in order to become one with a landscape threatened by ecological disasters. There are hardly any living beings in her images; instead, traces of life—the fruits of paradise, such as pomegranate seeds and dates, and the white feathers of birds—lend her images a spiritual and meditative quality that she shares with the viewer.

Silsila, which means “link” in Arabic, is at the heart of Alshaibi’s oeuvre. The artist explores in her photography conceptual ideas that are linked to previous work in which she first addressed the social and political implications of crossing into North America and examined the personal dimension of forced displacement.

Alshaibi’s first home in Iraq, like those of most Arabs, was on the threshold of a desert that Arab poets have long described as borderless. Today, these deserts are sites of some of the bloodiest wars in centuries. For modern poets, desert imagery evokes war, isolation, forced exile, absence of homeland, and political and social ruin. The photography in this book disguises such references within the seemingly serene landscape, where Alshaibi’s desert performances suggest—through kaleidoscopic images that are as infinitely changeable and as unpredictable as the desert itself—a kind of freedom.

But there is a looming sense of alienation in this freedom and open space: one is isolated from all signs of life, and strong sand storms and the harsh arid climate erase all traces of directional markings. While there is freedom to wander here, one can also lose one’s bearings, resulting in a sense of hopelessness and despair. Only desert Bedouins and their poets praise desert life. Alshaibi manages to marry these juxtaposing realities of desert life with images of haunting beauty; she then contrasts them with hints of calamities and a sense of loss, but also a purposeful meditation. Yet, for me, this opposition evoked an uneasy sense of impending disaster of apocalyptic proportions.

Her performances in endangered environments—whether referencing the Maldives, soon to be drowned by rising sea levels, or the threatened ecosystems of the Dead Sea and the Tunisian desert—make allusions to both the political and the ecological. The “eco-link” she creates with her work goes beyond the borders of *Silsila* to underscore the interconnectedness of all people on this fragile planet, where one catastrophe sets off a chain of environmental disasters that compromises the fine balance of Earth’s ecosystems and impacts all humanity. For Alshaibi, eco-refugees and political refugees face similar predicaments; in her overall practice and more specifically in the works included here, particularly *Silsila*, Alshaibi uses the desert as an allegory for their common loss.

I first met Alshaibi at the Jordanian and Israeli border crossing—a place that witnesses the forced deportation of Palestinians on a regular basis, a border fraught with violence, a crossing that travelers approach with apprehension. Together, we witnessed acts of unwarranted cruelty and humiliation, which only strengthened our resolve to face the soldiers with dignity and to refuse to submit to their threats. This experience forged a lasting bond of friendship and, eventually, a professional relationship.

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