Islamic Paradise Gardens, Car Interiors and The Journey

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For the inaugural exhibition at Soup Gallery, Alia Hamaoui uses painting, sculpture and video to investigate the relations between architecture and alienation, and the uncanny effects of speculative space.

In *Passing Pari-daiza*, Hamaoui invites us to think about two specific architectural arenas: the inside of a car, and the Islamic paradise garden. The specific car interior she envisions is akin to taxis in bustling cities, such as Beirut, Gaza or Tehran. Where, more often than not, the driver will pour out his whole life story, and make heavy eye contact through a rearview mirror adorned with spiritual paraphernalia. Such journeys exist as if in a state of limbo, or barzakh in Islamic tradition, that liminal place of non-identity that holds the soul between destinations, between life and death. In contrast, the Islamic paradise garden is a constant and fixed location. This is reflected in the architecture, which is mathematically determined in neat, symmetrical, geometrical shapes. The steadfastness of the space is one of perfection and peace. The car is a journey, and paradise a destination.

Hamaoui asserts that the meaning of space is changeable depending on who is producing it, and the forms mediating it. This idea was most popularly explored in Henri Lefebvre's seminal book *The Production of Space* (1974). Lefebvre writes about how space is not a product, but a process of social production. The meaning of space is changeable depending on how the space is produced by society, including visually by architects and artists. This notion comes to the fore in the Islamic paradise garden, as landscapes in particular can be interpreted very differently depending on who produces the images, how it is produced, and to what ends.

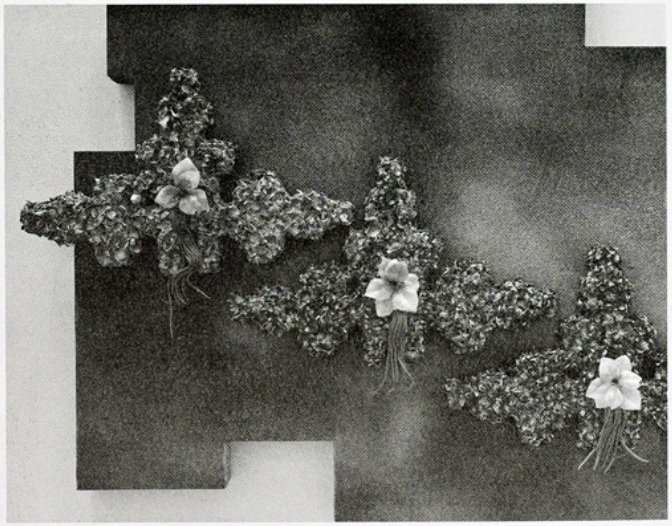
For example, satellite views of landscapes in Palestine are often biased towards Zionist perspectives, as Google Maps is built using Israeli navigation software. These 'scientific' maps are presented as paradigmatic and objective, despite being built on principles of apartheid. Therefore, hand-drawn maps which navigate the land using the names of destroyed villages – such as those produced by Vivien Sansour – mediate a totally different understanding of space. Similarly, historical images of Iraq's luscious southern marshlands, the assumed location of Babylon, were mediated extensively in US media during the Iraq War. This was supposedly towards an environmental aim of 'saving' the marshlands from Saddam Hussein, who drained them. In actual fact, the US used the campaign as one of the primary excuses to invade the country and mine the rich landscapes of oil fields in southern Iraq.

Hamaoui often refers to textiles in her practice, questioning how they mediate space, and often elicit memory of place. The materiality and textures employed in the artist's printmaking are particularly striking, alluding to a faded textile quality. Hamaoui begins each print by feeding keywords into an AI programme - such as 'Islamic garden' and 'car interior' - before digitally manipulating the images, substituting the generic, generated image with elements more pertinent to her own knowledge, memory and experiences. The subsequent digital images are then UV printed onto a bed of dyed sand, where the colours and hues of the print and the surface merge to create a particular distortion of light. They evoke the dyed sand bottles tourists can take home from visiting sites such as the Pyramids in Egypt, or Petra in Jordan, which fictionalise and distort the historical space, turning artefacts into kitsch trinkets. The outcome is a surreal image which is identifiable as a certain place, but with uncanny qualities. Hamaoui mediates the original site through multiple image-making processes, a painterly game of translation.

Hamaoui's video work, *Panoptic Gardens* (2023) acts as a digital tour of her own imagined version of the Islamic paradise garden. The environment is created using CGI-software, that clairvoyant technology which can be used to construct places we cannot physically access. A camera circles around the garden, zooming in and out, while the video itself plays on a loop, all to signify that we as viewers are not yet in a position to arrive in paradise. There is something kitsch about the sweeping drone images, transition fades, and neon colours. The video resembles the futuristic advertisements of pending redevelopment projects, such as Saudi Arabia's NEOM, The Line or The Mukab. They have the effect of movie trailers, yet advertise unrealised cities and colossal architectural structures. The glitzy promise of such monumental sites often falls short in reality, living instead as half-constructed buildings, skeletons of hope. In war-torn countries, they too are still waiting to arrive at architectural paradise.

The futuristic, visual lexicon evident across Hamaoui's work feeds into Grace Dillon's notion of Indigenous futurisms, which seeks to highlight the uncanniness of the present for Indigenous people on the peripheries of power. This is unlike the hegemonic or Western understanding of sci-fi, which is located in the apocalyptic future. This positions Hamaoui's practice alongside the work of artists such as Sophia al-Maria, Meriem Bennani, Monira al-Qadiri, Farah al-Qasimi and Ahaad Alamoudi, who look at the production of utopian spaces in the present, producing the jazzy architecture of speculative worlds, and equally speculative futures.

Essay by Róisín Tapponi



Front Cover: Still from *Panoptic Gardens*,
3 min single-channel video and audio, 2023

Poster: AI generated digital sketch, 2023

Inside: Commissioned photo series
by Yasmina Hilal, 2023

Back Cover: Detail from *Floating Roses*,
UV print on dyed sand, dried rose petals
and epoxy putty, 271 x 100 x 10 cm, 2023

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Essay by Róisín Tapponi
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