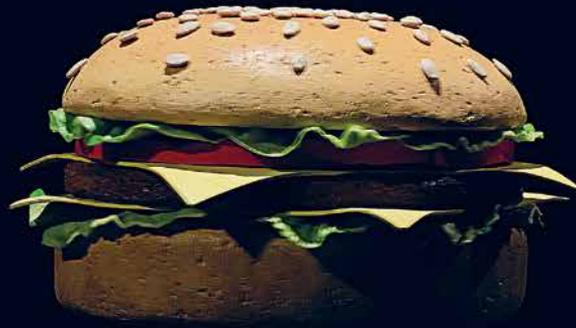


# Monira Al Qadiri The Craft

3 November 2017 – 5 February 2018



متحف  
سراسق



Sursock  
Museum

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*Cover*

**Monira Al Qadiri**

**The End, 2017**

Polystyrene model, sound, levitation module, dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

Photograph: Andy Keate

*The Craft* comprises works in sculpture, video, and sound that envisage international diplomacy as an alien conspiracy. Shown in two distinct environments – a mysterious, pitch-black room and an American diner – these semi-autobiographical pieces of science fiction unearth the unlikely stories lurking in the shadows of Monira Al Qadiri’s childhood in Kuwait. Revisiting the fantasies that she and her sister elaborated during these early years, they depict the culture and rituals of diplomacy by which they were then surrounded as literally other-worldly to the current rise of nationalism and populist politics.

In the VHS video *The Craft* (2017), presented in the diner, the artist asks: “Were my parents conspiring with aliens behind my back?” Reality crumbles; paranoia and speculation take hold. Pop culture, futuristic architecture, junk food, dream readings, alien abductions, geopolitics, diplomacy, war, and peace: all of these once solid staples of modern life become tainted by a general sense of distrust. Like a ticking time bomb placed at the center of the nuclear family unit, suspicion reaches a crescendo when the protagonist discovers that the “American Century” has finally ended. Though the word “craft” is often reserved for manual skills that belong to a premodern world, Al Qadiri applies it to the intangible trade of international diplomacy to stress its anachronism. If diplomacy is the art of dealing with others in a sensitive and tactful manner, then it, too, will soon become a thing of the past – an ill prophecy gleaming from the diner’s red neon sign, titled *Omen* (2017).

Leaving the diner, we encounter *The End* (2017), a dimly lit, levitating hamburger. Arguably the most iconic symbol of consumer capitalism, here the burger is associated with the Japanese Ukiyo-e: pictures of hedonistic, “floating worlds” that became popular amongst the merchant classes in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Japan. The crude mechanics of suspension reveal, however, the precariousness of American cultural hegemony – a point brought home by the accompanying sound piece: a pre-recorded, voice-manipulated reading of an excerpt from *The Kuwait Urbanization* (1964) by Saba George Shiber, a book about the modernization of Kuwait in the 1960s. This period was the high point of American cultural expansion in the region, which the artist notes “has now faded to the point of alien-ness.”

**Nora Razian** Independent curator; former Head of Exhibitions at the Surssock Museum, and **Robert Leckie** Curator, Gasworks, London



Video still from a Hardee's television commercial in Kuwait in the 1980s, featuring a flying hamburger and Ghanem Al-Saleh, a very popular local comedian  
Courtesy of the artist

# Empire of Fiction

Monira Al Qadiri

## Quintessential Mutants

I was born in 1983 – the same year the chicken nugget was invented. My entire generation in Kuwait was named after these deep-fried pieces of processed chicken. Artificial yet addictive, they were crunchy brown on the outside, fluffy white on the inside. This naming was very much relevant to how we were described, as most of us spoke English better than Arabic – our supposed mother tongue.

We were quintessential products of American cultural hegemony, spoon-fed to us through television and pop music in the 1980s. But beyond the usual tropes of pop culture, just as the chicken nuggets had entailed, it was first and foremost a cultural invasion of our guts – an imperialism of the stomach. As the oldest carrier of culture, food was at the center of our naïve imaginations. The ideology embedded within the deep-fried batter taught us to become individualistic, streamlined, space-aged, and prosperous.



Photograph of the Sheikh Fatima Muhammad Ali's Mosque in Kuwait, built in 1976 (architect unknown)  
Courtesy of the artist

## Dream States

“Very often, I wondered if it was reality or a dream I was experiencing. Very often, I felt alienated, agonized, depressed. For, I argued to myself, instead of creating a great ‘school’ of contemporary architecture in the great Arabian desert, we were being blinded by a maze of architectural gymnastics of no architectural substance or significance. Forms, shapes and fetishes, proliferated and multiplied by the day. The color schemes were too ‘rich’ for description.

Architecture became an exercise in aerobatics, and not an endeavor in creation, economics and organicism. It has become rare to find lines anchored to the earth. Instead, they all seem pivoted to point restively to outer space.”

Excerpt from *The Kuwait Urbanization* (1964) by Saba George Shiber.

The 1960s were the high summer of American cultural expansion in the third world, and also the arrival of modernity and statehood in my native Kuwait. So far, this is the only accurate text I have found that likens the arrival of modernity to an alien invasion. Ultra-futuristic modern architecture in Kuwait always triggered subconscious images of spaceships and other galaxies, appearing in our dreams at night.

*Next spread*

**Composite image** by the artist created from family photos and childhood drawings she made with her sister  
Courtesy of the artist







Composite image by the artist created from family photos and her childhood drawings she made with her sister  
Courtesy of the artist

## Double Memory

It was in the summer of 1988 that my sister and I saw my mother walk into a spacecraft in our front yard. I will never forget that day, as she ascended those steel stairs with her flashy power suit and short-cropped hair. The large disk hovered quietly above. We were held back by our nanny at the door, when my sister was able to free herself from her grip and run after our mother. I only remember blacking out at that point, and waking up in tears, staring at my sister. “You saw it too, right?” We both nodded in shock. I asked her what she saw, what was inside the craft. I was so curious, and felt a deep sense of regret that I didn’t make it in there. She said it was designed like an American diner, and on each table, there were ketchup and mustard bottles, salt and pepper shakers. My mother was casually conversing with the aliens, like they had known each other for a long time, when she noticed my sister behind her. “What are you doing here?!” she scolded her, and quickly escorted her out.

## Collapse

Niall Ferguson writes in his essay “Complexity and Collapse: Empires on the Edge of Chaos” (Foreign Affairs, March /April 2010, Vol 89, No. 2): “What if history is not cyclical and slow moving but arrhythmic – at times almost stationary, but also capable of accelerating suddenly, like a sports car? What if collapse does not arrive over a number of centuries but comes suddenly, like a thief in the night?”

We have ingested popular culture into our bodies, transforming us into mutants of some sort. Once we excrete it, we will suddenly feel as if we are waking up from a hallucinatory dream, where the future appears dark and mysterious.



Screenshot of the 1986 videogame “MacAttack,”  
published by Aacksoft International B.V.  
Courtesy of the artist

## Gastromancy

Ventriloquism originates from the Latin for “to speak from the stomach,” ie. *venter* (belly) and *loqui* (speak), also known as gastromancy. The noises produced by the stomach were thought to be the voices of the dead, which would be interpreted by the ventriloquist, thus enabling them to foretell the future.

*Excerpts of these texts were originally published on the Frieze.com Portfolio section, 7 August 2017.*



A childhood drawing by the artist's sister  
Courtesy of the artist

## Monira Al Qadiri

b. 1983, Dakar, Senegal

Lives and works in Amsterdam, Netherlands

Monira Al Qadiri is a Kuwaiti visual artist born in Senegal and educated in Japan. In 2010, she received a Ph.D. in inter-media art from Tokyo University of the Arts, where her research was focused on the aesthetics of sadness in the Middle East stemming from poetry, music, art, and religious practices. Her work explores unconventional gender identities, petrocultures and their possible futures, as well as the legacies of corruption. She is also part of the artist collective GCC.

Her work has been exhibited at Gasworks, London (2017), Stroom Den Haag, the Hague (2017), ACUD Macht Neu, Berlin (2017), ATHR Gallery, Jeddah (2017), the Sultan Gallery, Kuwait (2011, 2014), Beirut Art Center, Lebanon (2013), Home Works 6, Lebanon (2013), and Tokyo Wonder Site, Japan (2009).

### Works on display

#### Twin Gallery 1

**The Craft**, 2017

Video, color, sound, 16'

**Omen**, 2017

Neon sign, dimensions variable

#### Twin Gallery 2

**The End**, 2017

Polystyrene model, sound, levitation module, dimensions variable



