

Meaning in Material: Amani AlThuwaini's Artistic Mantra

Through her multidisciplinary creative practice, Kuwaiti Ukrainian artist Amani AlThuwaini engages with themes of heritage and history, consumerism, childhood, and ritual.

Nada Ammagui · Aug 21, 2023 · العربية



"SUR.RE/VIVAL" (2019) by Amani AlThuwaini (photographer: Wessam Kahwaji, credit: Amani AlThuwaini)

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Artist, designer, and business owner Amani AlThuwaini seeks to explore the ways in which historical symbolism can, or cannot, represent people's lives today. From Kuwaiti and Ukrainian descent, Amani questions the appropriation of heritage practices, like traditional Kuwaiti Sadu weaving or dowry vessels, to convey relevant meaning to everyday lives today through her tufted, woven, embroidered, and built works. Her works "SUR.RE/VIVAL," "STAGED," and "Luxury Sufra" tell stories that are at once familiar and prodding, capturing everyday experiences in a new light.

Amani's artwork has been shown internationally, from Brazil and Bolivia to Prague and Dubai, affording viewers the opportunity to engage with rituals and narratives that are specific to Gulf audiences while inviting others to compare practices more familiar to them with other contexts. Combining a rich array of materials, shapes, colors, and patterns, Amani's work aims to underscore where contemporary life and historic traditions overlap, from traditional weaving patterns made from iPhones to Quranic references challenging consumption practices today.

AGSIW spoke to Amani, who is represented by female-centered and Gulf-focused contemporary art gallery Hunna, about her dual heritage, dowry vessel design firm Dazzalab, and exploration of different artistic mediums to portray themes like childhood, heritage, and consumerism.

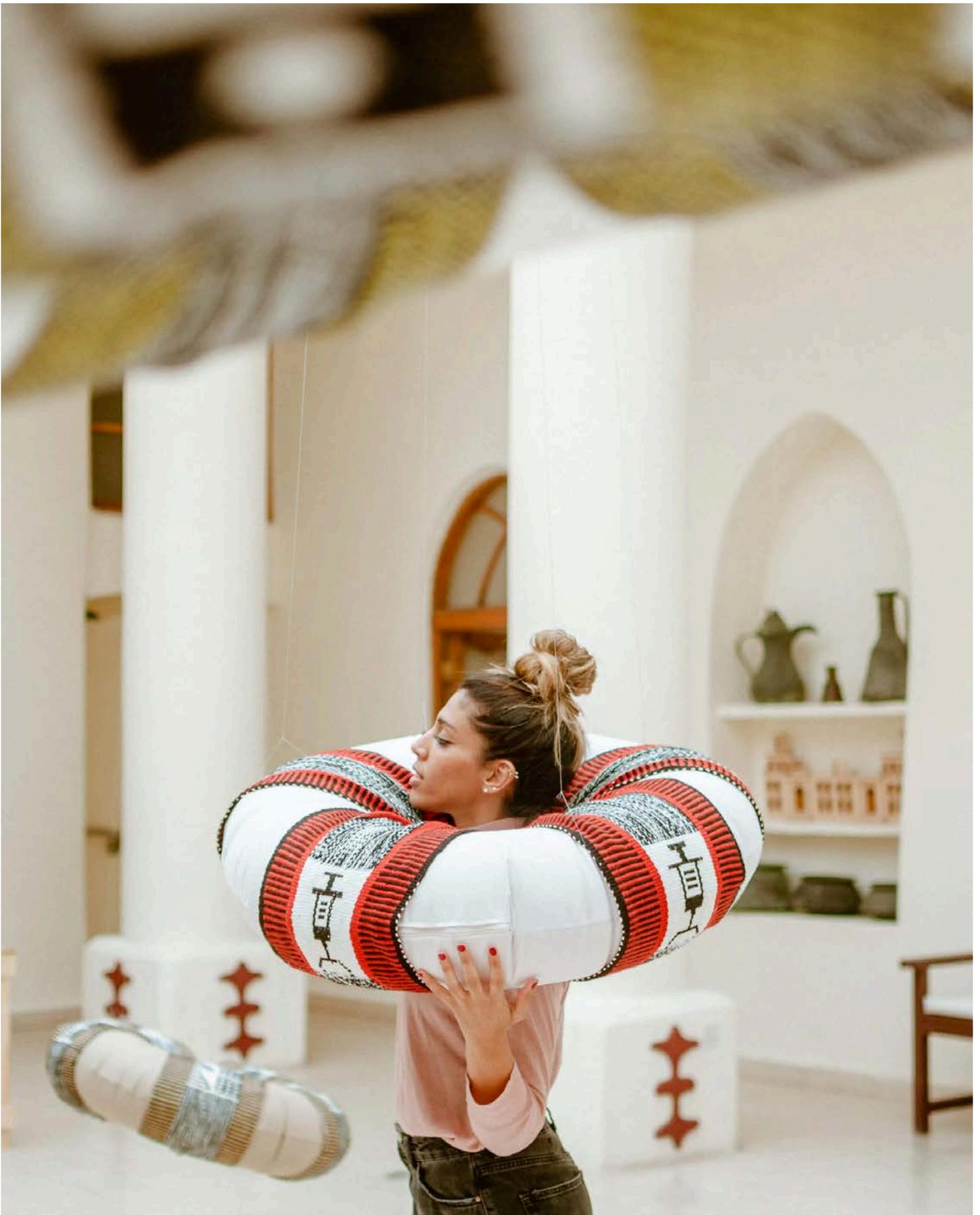


Artist Amani AlThuwaini (photographer: Anfal Almuhaiteeb, credit: Amani AlThuwaini)

AGSIW: Tell us a bit about yourself and how you became an artist.

Amani: I was born and raised in Ukraine, and I think that's the main reason I am an artist. Since I was a child, I was exposed to beautiful illustrations, TV shows, and cartoons from the Soviet era. It was really rich content with a rich history. I also think that being in kindergarten in Ukraine had a lot of influence on me because the main focus during that time was on creativity, play, and imagination. I was an artist from a young age, and I continued to make art throughout my school years, even when I came to Kuwait. I was also doing exhibitions on the side when I was in high school and university, so it's always been there.

I started with painting and illustration, but my work has evolved and transformed. I started doing mixed media work and installation when I was still in my BA program in architecture, so that has influenced the way I see things and the way I portray my ideas. Then when I went to do my MFA in London, that led me to work with textiles. In my recent works, I've been working mainly with textiles – as two-dimensional wall installations – but I do also paint every now and then. It's very specific to the topic. For instance, I was doing lots of fieldwork and research on the history of dowries and marriage in Kuwait and things related to consumerism, luxury and display, and social class, and I felt like these things were best portrayed with the use of the actual material or medium that I wanted to talk about. So, the medium is also a marker of time and history.



"SUR.RE/VIVAL" (2019) by Amani AlThuwaini (photographer: Wessam Kahwaji, credit: Amani AlThuwaini)

AGSIW: Tell us about your work "SUR.RE/VIVAL." What is the meaning behind it? What do the different weaving styles and symbols represent?

Amani: I've been interested in traditional weaving – specifically Sadu weaving from Kuwait and Kilim weaving from Turkey – so I started researching the symbols and shapes that were presented in the woven works. Those symbols represented weavers from that time telling stories about what they're living, what they're witnessing around them, their environment, their landscape, and their traditions. I found it really interesting that even with our contemporary lives and experiences, we are still appropriating older symbols that don't represent our time right now. I believe that our role as artists and designers is to reshape these traditions and rethink how we portray the experience we're living using these symbols. For example, I made a float related to Al-Sawaber Complex – a historical architectural landmark that is being demolished in Kuwait – and more broadly related to the culture of waste and replacing something very easily, much like with consumer objects.

The shapes of the floats represent the survival of the tradition since the interest in weaving is slowly disappearing. There are lots of weavers from older generations, and they are teaching the younger generations, but not everyone wants to keep that tradition going. As for the name, it refers to survival and revival – I combined the two words because we need to revive how we portray symbols.



"STAGED" (2020) by Amani AlThuwaini (photographer: Aidan Brooks, credit: Amani AlThuwaini)

AGSIW: In your work "STAGED," what is the significance of the material you used?

Amani: "STAGED" started when I did my residency at the Sheikh Abdullah Al Salem Cultural Center in Kuwait. I was looking at Islamic miniature paintings and that perspective as inspiration for the composition of the work because I wanted to show simultaneous scenes of a narrative. The composition shows the outside of a wedding venue, the inside of the room where the bride gets ready, and the dance floor where the bride is

sitting and where everyone is viewing the bride. In the Gulf, it's very interesting how weddings are staged – they are literally a stage set up with leveled seating looking down at the dance floor.

I wanted to question and emphasize who is important, or the superstar, at these weddings – people who are behind the scenes, the helpers, people designing the whole setup, and people serving the food and drinks – and to flip this importance in roles. So, I portrayed all the guests in black and white and all the people working behind the scenes on the wedding in gold so that they were the main emphasis in the work. It also shows the practice of displaying things on social media, taking pictures for Snapchat, taking pictures of your shoes and nice dress, but not showing the face. All these things are fun and humorous, but at the same time refer to something really important and common.

AGSIW: You've also been working on your design business, Dazzalab. How does it tie to your artistic work?

Amani: During my MFA, I was researching dowry vessels and how the dowry transformed physically since the 1960s, as a result of increased trade between Kuwait and India, and the importation of new materials. I then translated this idea into pieces of art that represented different moments in history. In one conversation with my advisor, he asked me, "You know the market now, and you know the history behind these objects, why don't you write a criticism on the current dowry industry and how it should be transformed? As you said, it's your role as an artist to transform it."

I started writing the criticism and then my paper kind of turned into a business plan because it inspired me to implement the changes that I wanted in the industry. I saw lots of problems of waste and spending too much money for something that you will throw out after the event. I wanted to go back to this idea of preciousness and having something as a sentimental, high-quality heirloom that is also functional and has a life after the wedding. I have experience in interior design and architecture, so I thought, "Okay, I will try this, but maybe as a small project on the side." When I went back to Kuwait and started making prototypes, it became so big and popular that it had to be my main work, and I had to hire people just a few months into the business. Now, we are a team of eight. This is becoming research for my practice, because every day we meet new people with different stories, and the trends are always changing, which is super inspiring. It's also giving me the time and freedom to continue my art practice without being confined to a day job. I feel really blessed and lucky.



"Dazza Setup" (2023) by Dazzalab (photographer: Amani AlThuwaini, credit: Amani AlThuwaini)

AGSIW: What are some of the other projects you're working on at the moment?

Amani: One project is a series of works related to childhood and consumerism, so the same themes that I've been working on but from a different approach. Since having kids, I've been trying to tap into my inner child and think about my children as well and the extravagant display of wealth in terms of dressing up your children or buying the best toys for them. I'm also exploring this in relation to my childhood memories and fairy tales trying to take a more playful or whimsical approach. I'm in the beginning stages of working on these ideas for a solo exhibition next year, hopefully.

AGSIW: Regarding your childhood, how has your Ukrainian heritage, and the recent invasion of Ukraine, shaped your work?

Amani: I've always felt like an outsider in both places – too Kuwaiti for Ukraine and too Ukrainian for Kuwait. So, I've always felt like an observing eye that cannot blend very easily with the typical mindset of each place. When I came to Kuwait, I wasn't blending in at first. When I got married and received my dowry for the first time, it was a super strange thing to me. My mom is Ukrainian, so she couldn't help me and tell me how things are supposed to go, so I had to ask my aunt and friends, and I felt really lost in this. I think that was the start of the dowry series. After doing my MFA and starting my business, I feel like now I'm an expert on Kuwaiti traditions.

Once the war started, I kind of started feeling the opposite. I feel like I'm still grieving because I feel like my children will never experience that part of my childhood and my life in Ukraine. My city, Kharkiv, is destroyed. All the memories that I had and all those experiences are kind of fading and slipping away from me. So, it definitely has influenced me, and that's why I made those works about me looking out the window to my childhood but also to a landscape that is lost. It's a tufted piece that I created using wool. The material is also representing that cushiony, childhood feeling of home. That was the start of the childhood series – when the war on Ukraine happened. Personally, it also affected my family, of course, and my cousins are refugees now. It's a huge part of my life, and it is affecting my work whether I know it or not. In my subconscious, it's there.



"In Search for What's Lost" (2022) by Amani AlThuwaini (photographer: Amani AlThuwaini, credit: Amani AlThuwaini)

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