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# Jameel Arts Center Opens With “Crude”: An Exhibition On The History Of Oil In The Middle East



images courtesy of JAMEEL ARTS CENTRE,  
DUBAI



*Rayyane Tabet Steel Rings, 2013 From the series: The Shortest Distance Between Two Points Rolled, engraved steel with km, longitude, latitude, and elevation marking of specific location on the TAPLine Ø 78 cm, 10 cm depth, 6 mm thick each Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg*

## Slide into the slippery world of oil with "Crude", a show that nimbly side-steps the usual ecological anxiety to focus on oil's indelible impact on our contemporary moment

Think about oil. We never do. Yet we are literally awash in it. Our cars, our kitchens, our clothes, our cosmetics. Ubiquitous though it may be, oil remains largely invisible. At once vastly consumed yet insidiously contained — in pipelines, in pumps, in plastics — oil somehow resists representation. Crude, the inaugural group show at Dubai's Jameel Arts Centre, brings oil out of hiding. The fruit of profound research undertaken by curator Murtaza Vali, Crude looks at oil through the prism of modernity: how it spurred on urban transformation; its complicity in the tightening stranglehold of neoliberalism; and its hand in a host of political and social tensions that continue to shape our

contemporary society. While the show plumbs the archive, it is not historical. Rather, it suggests that oil's historical continuum is in fact fragmented, non-linear, episodic. For Vali, the history of oil is like the material itself: opaque and slippery.

Equally split between local and international loans and the flourishing Art Jameel collection, the 50-plus works by 17 artists and collectives include four commissions. For anyone who has navigated the UAE art scene over the past five years or so, some of the works will seem familiar. Yet they are cast here in a tantalizing narrative, punctuating a curatorial exploration that is both new and nuanced.



*Alessandro Balteo-Yazbek. Last Oil Barrel Date Postponed. India ink on wood, printed paper and financial markets. Courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery, Dubai*

Crude begins with two bodies of mid-twentieth century works by artists who, employed by oil companies in Iraq and Iran, contributed to the very archives to which the contemporary artists react. Iraqi photographer Latif al-Ani worked for the photography unit of British-controlled Iraqi Petroleum Company (IPC) from 1954 to 1960, generating images for the company's PR arm, most notably its widely distributed monthly magazines. The striking images, hovering between corporate propaganda and fine art, document the oil-fueled social and urban transformations that indelibly altered Baghdad, yet stretched well beyond the capital itself. In Building the Darbandikhan Dam, Iraq (c. 1961), a succession of infrastructural circles (recalling, oddly, a pipeline) coil off into the distance behind a

crouching welder. Such images are “the visual repertoire through which Iraqis came to recognize themselves and their nation as modern,” said Vali. “I was trying to do something that hasn’t been done. A lot of exhibitions in the West fixate on the ecological and environmental anxiety. I prefer to look at how the material is also producing the modern.”



*Monira Al Qadiri. Flower Drill. 2016. Fibreglass and automotive paint. Art Jameel Collection. Courtesy of the artist*

The trope of the “company man” — the corporate executives, politicians and expat employees invested in the Middle Eastern oil industry — permeates the archive. For example, Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck and Media Farzin’s video *Chronoscope 1951, 11pm* (2009-11) captures outlandish Western exceptionalism through an orchestrated conversation on the 1951 Iranian oil crisis amongst statesmen and industry experts.

Invisibility/visibility emerges as a curious tension throughout *Crude*. Rayyane Tabet’s *The Shortest Distance Between Two Points* (2013) exhibits, in a way, the Trans-Arabian Pipeline (Tapline), stretching from Al Qaisumah in Eastern Saudi Arabia to Sidon, Lebanon: a succession of steel rings, geo-locationally tagged, mimic the pipeline, “challenging its containment,” as Vali said, “and opening it up to scrutiny.” Conversely, Monira al-Qadiri’s video *Behind the Sun* (2013) makes oil manifest: images of Kuwait’s oil fields, ignited by the retreating Iraqi military, are set to Sufi chants, in a hellish fire-and-brimstone flourish.



*Latif Al-Ani. Building the Darbandikhan Dam. 1961.*

In spite of its familiar feel, discoveries abound in *Crude*. Lydia Ourahmane's surprising *Land of the Sun* (2014) is perhaps the only moment in the show when oil actually appears. In a strange natural-versus-artificial ecology, a lemon tree is potted in a rubber tire, both wading in a puddle of engine oil. This synergy between the locally familiar and the globally relevant seems to be the fruit of a clear and conscious strategy on behalf of Art Jameel Director Antonia Carver. "The show should be surprising for those in the art world," said Carver, "since we can see familiar works in new contexts. But it should also be interesting for newcomers. This audience of 'the curious' is key for us." The final section, on plastics and the petrochemical, squarely brings oil into our daily lives. Hassan Sharif's *Slippers and Wire* (2009) reigns supreme in this room, as "a perverse monument to oil," as Vali would have it.

*Crude* heralds a new conversation. It is at once uniquely wise — grounded in eminently thorough research twisting through everything from Energy Humanities to "petro-magic" while eschewing the predictable environmental angst — and enticing — with works running the gamut from visually engaging to, at times, intellectually spellbinding. Increasingly, Vali's shows bear the hallmark of his sly, almost playful erudition. *Crude* is deeply critical: look no further than the title for proof of that. Yet this critique does not reveal itself so easily. Like the very material it references, *Crude* is both powerful and subtle.



*Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck. Last Oil Barrel; Raja'a Khalid. Fortune Golf. 2014. Archival inkjet print.  
Courtesy of the artis*

*Crude runs until 30 March at Jameel Arts Centre [jameelartscentre.org](http://jameelartscentre.org)*

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*Press play to watch our interview with Abu Dhabi Art director, Dyala Nusseibeh.*