“Thousands have lived without love, not one without water” British poet W. H. Auden famously wrote. It seems fitting to recall his words here, in an introduction to Alia Farid’s work because, in a certain sense, much of the art she has made in recent years comes down to love and water. Entwined with these basic human needs are the contradictory forces of conflict and nature, ideology and ecology, vulnerability and justice, and ultimately, the ways in which greed and vengeance—love’s antagonists—have historically weaponized water in the Arab world. It is this region and a complex of concerns on which the Kuwaiti Puerto Rican artist focuses her first exhibition in Switzerland.

Farid presents three bodies of new work: a series of monumental sculptures that imposingly stand, lined up, one after the other, in the main space, as well as a sound piece and a display of found textile harnesses to be encountered in the adjacent rooms. With a sparest that belies the complexity of the histories that she probes, the artist follows the trails of water as a political agent in the Arab region.

The first room of the exhibition features an installation of five larger-than-life vessels used to store and carry water—a globular copper lota, a plastic jerrican, a clay juglet with a small lid, a now-ubiquitous PET-plastic water bottle, and a ceramic pitcher. Farid’s versions are enormous but hollow and light, molded in lacquered fiberglass, colored like the desert sand and fabricated using the same method as the decorative casings for public drinking fountains that have become a distinctive feature of the urban landscape across the Arabian Gulf. Over the past few years, the artist has been working with commercial fountain producers to develop constellations of these sculptures (sometimes casting copies from existing molds, sometimes creating her own) as a way to intertwine a centuries-old tradition of public drinking fountains with the reality of water desalination in the region—the lack of available fresh water being an ecological consequence of government policies and the activities of industries that have prioritized oil extraction above nearly all else.

In Kuwait, a country with almost no natural water resources, drinking water no longer comes from natural springs and wells, nor is it any longer transported by traditional sailboats. Instead, with the advent of an oil-centered economy, the population has become almost entirely reliant upon desalinated water supplied through pipelines. Industrially extracted and channeled into contemporary stand-ins for village wells and other communal water sources, drinking water in Kuwait comes largely from desalination plants, as is the case in most Gulf countries. Their energy consumption is massive, and their salt waste is thrown back into the ocean, increasing its salinity and shifting an already fragile ecosystem. Yet what is a desert, if not a place in need of water? Following a centuries-old tradition, drinking water is freely available in the Gulf through public water fountains, known locally as ma’a sabeel (water fountain of the street), located on sidewalks, in front of houses and schools, on roundabouts, and along nearly every city block. In contemporary times, these water sources have taken on a variety of recognizable shapes—from sports equipment to architectural landmarks—resized to become either larger than life or, in the case of architecture, shrunken to a strange ersatz version of the original.

Inspired by these fountains, Farid’s sculptures, in a deliberately tautological move, assume the form of oversized water vessels. Historically, vessels mark the locations of human habitation. Vessels are found everywhere, in every culture, era, and type of settlement, among every social group. They are the single most common find on most archaeological sites
1. **Lota**, 2022  
   Fiberglass and polyester resin  
   240 × 190 × 190 cm

2. **Jerrican**, 2022  
   Fiberglass and polyester resin  
   255 × 233 × 91 cm

3. **Juglet**, 2022  
   Fiberglass and polyester resin  
   297 × 125 × 125 cm

4. **Water Bottle**, 2022  
   Fiberglass and polyester resin  
   295 × 100 × 100 cm

5. **Jug/Pitcher**, 2022  
   Fiberglass and polyester resin  
   245 × 145 × 145 cm

6. **Pipeline sling tapestry**, 2022  
   Textile  
   Dimension variable

7. Qasim calling his buffalo back from the water (field recording of interspecies calls from the southern marshlands of Iraq), 2022  
   Multi-channel sound installation  
   5 min 17 sec, in loop

All works courtesy the artist
Throughout history, the wetlands and their people were deemed ungovernable. Residents of the marshes have posed a political challenge to every iteration of the Iraqi state because of the marshes have posed a political challenge, people were deemed ungovernable. Residents throughout history, the marshes, their wildlife, and the livelihoods of those that populated the area were radically threatened. Its human inhabitants were arrested, executed, “disappeared,” or forced into exile.

The story, however, didn’t end there. In a final twist, under the US occupation and UN reconstruction following the 2011 end of the Iraq War, the “restoration” of the marshes became an emblematic public image of a new nation. But this act celebrated as ecological rehabilitation, actually facilitated multinational oil extraction for profit, serving as convenient cover for the expansion of US oil infrastructure. It became, in short, nothing less than warfare by other means, as anthropologist Bridget Guarasci suggests, and as the artist’s own probing inquiry has led her to understand.

The artist’s display of found textile slings was motivated by her thinking about the perpetration of such officially sanctioned violence. These industrial cloth halters and girth belts, often used in ports, on construction sites, for assembling pipelines, and generally, as practical implements for carrying weighty things, are faded and worn, dusty and marked by use. Displayed like archeological artifacts, as if precious civilizational evidence, they stand in for the harnessing of nature and the massive amounts of material moved and, consecutively, the colossal efforts to destroy whatever is deemed unruly or intractable. To Farid, they evoke the manifold manipulations of the state, but also of multinationals pretending to restore the region while lining their pockets along the way.

If the circulation of water can be read throughout her exhibition as a metaphor for the circulation of lifeblood, it is also a metaphor for the flow of capital, power, and violence. Across its three rooms and three bodies of interlocking artworks, In Lieu of What Is unspools a reality seemingly far from our own, yet intrinsically connected to ours not least by way of the petrochemical products we consume every day. The artist conjures a place riddled with complexity through the lightest of touches and in the hushed hues of its wind-swept deserts and marshy waters. There is a formal serenity to her project, despite the various injustices that instigated it; it asks us what would happen if respect, generosity, and care—in short, love—came in place of (in lieu of what is) repression, powerplays, vengeance, and profit margins. Farid, with Qasim’s tender interspecies call echoing in her head, asks us to try, for a moment, to imagine it.

Alia Farid was born 1985 in Kuwait City and lives and works in Kuwait City and San Juan.
GUIDED TOURS THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

Every Sunday at 3 pm guided tour, in German
(Except on Sundays, when the tour is in English)

Artist’s tour by Alia Farid, in English
13.2.2022, Sunday, 3 pm
Registration at kunstvermittlung@kunsthallebasel.ch

Curator’s tour with Elena Filipovic, in English
3.4.2022, Sunday, 3 pm

Guided tour in the context of the Architecture Week Basel 2022, in German
13.5.2022, Friday, 3 pm

MEDIATION AND PUBLIC PROGRAM

Mal-Mal—draw from a live model in the current exhibition, in English and German
23.3.2022, Wednesday, 6–8 pm
Materials will be provided.

Casting workshop, in German
9.4.2022, Saturday, 10 am–2 pm
Objects will be molded and cast, participation from 16 years

Film Night, in English, admission 15 CHF
10.5.2022, Tuesday, 6–9 pm
Artist’s tour followed by a film screening, with the European premiere of Alia Farid’s latest film at Stadtkino Basel

Basel Museums Night
20.5.2022, Friday, 6 pm–2 am
Special program with Button-UP! workshop and Talk to Me

Registration for all events at kunstvermittlung@kunsthallebasel.ch

In the Kunsthalle Basel library you will find a selection of publications related to Alia Farid.

Follow us on Instagram and share your photos and impressions with #kunsthallebasel.

More information at kunsthallebasel.ch