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# Monira Al Qadiri

## The Archaeology of Beasts

14 Nov.'24 »→ 09 Mar.'25

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PRESS FILE



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## Press Release

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### Monira Al Qadiri. The Archaeology of Beasts

14.11.2024 – 09.03.2025

#### Opening of exhibition 'The Archaeology of Beasts': première of new works by Monira Al Qadiri at Bozar

From 14 November 2024 to 9 March 2025, Bozar (Centre for Fine Arts of Brussels) is presenting the first solo exhibition by Kuwaiti visual artist Monira Al Qadiri in Belgium. The exhibition, entitled *The Archaeology of Beasts*, presents four new works by the artist, including two sculptures, an immersive video installation and a Virtual Reality experience.

Internationally renowned artist Monira Al Qadiri is known for her playful yet subversive take on the Gulf region's fading cultural histories, changing topographies and ecosystems, caused by the extractivist activities of the Petrostate nations. The four newly commissioned works in this exhibition mark the start of a new visual direction for Al Qadiri, examining for the first time Ancient Egyptian myths and history. They nevertheless continue the artist's exploration of the complex and ever so fragile relationship between nature, animals and humans, as well as the multi-layered power struggles that ensue.

In the middle of the Royal Rotunda is *Automaton*, two ready-made sculptures of the anthropomorphic Egyptian animal deities Khnum and Anubis, facing each other while quietly rotating. *Archaeology of Beasts* is an immersive four-channel video installation, where the artist brings to life hundreds of souvenirs of gods and pharaohs found in the street markets of Luxor. In the three-channel video installation *Book of the Dead*, we become witness to an existential conversation between the pharaoh Akhenaten and six interchanging gods: Hathor, Babi, Sekhmet, Seth, Horus and Sobek. *Aaru: After Lament* is Al Qadiri's first Virtual Reality work combined with an installation of golden wheat. It transports us in the Ancient Egyptian afterlife, where the artist invites us to reflect on labour, loss and the circle of life.

Hyper masculine figures, distorted bodies, and anthropomorphic animal forms dominate the works. Through her focus on the transformations from human to animal to divine, Al Qadiri interrogates who qualifies as human (and who as beast).

Al Qadiri: *"Who qualifies as human? Who qualifies as beast? And is one's life worth more than the other? Certainly today, these are pertinent questions – at a time when we are well aware that we need to rethink our relationship with nature and abandon the idea that we can control it."*

She thus alludes to questions of otherness and, ultimately, to the methods of dominance that mankind has inflicted upon each other for centuries. Ancient Egypt has often been a site for the projection of cultural ideals, while shaped by geo-politics. For example, the hunt for treasures in Egypt in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was a race between France and England in symbolically asserting their presence and commercial stronghold on the people and

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territories of the region. In light of the current unfolding of events in the Middle East, the Egyptian imagery that Al Qadiri uses in her work, with all the significance and history that it holds, subtly places the emphasis on human vanity and is an urgent call to respect all life.

Al Qadiri adds: *"I have recently been very preoccupied with the relationship between humans and animals. Nowadays, we live so segregated from each other that we are stunned when 'wild' animals suddenly appear in our streets and rivers during a pandemic. As if we had completely forgotten that these animals live in the same world. The difference with Ancient Egypt, where animals were depicted as gods, could not be greater."*

## About the artist



Monira Al Qadiri © Courtesy of the artist  
photo by Raisa Hagiu

Monira Al Qadiri (b. 1983) is a Kuwaiti visual artist born in Senegal and educated in Japan. Spanning sculpture, installation, film and performance, Al Qadiri's multifaceted practice is mainly based on research into the cultural histories of the Gulf region. Her interpretation of the Gulf's so-called "petro-culture" is manifested through speculative scenarios that take inspiration from science fiction, autobiography, traditional practices and pop culture, resulting in uncanny and covertly subversive works. She is currently based in Berlin.

Monira Al Qadiri has held solo exhibitions at UCCA Dune, China (2023); Kunsthau Bregenz, Austria (2023); the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Spain (2022); Blaffer Art Museum, Texas, USA (2022); Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany (2020); Kunstverein Göttingen, Göttingen, Germany (2019); The CIRCL Pavilion, Amsterdam, Netherlands (2018); Sursock Museum, Beirut, Lebanon (2017); Gasworks, London, UK (2017); Stroom Den Haag, the Hague, Netherlands (2017); and Sultan Gallery, Kuwait (2014).

Her participation in collective exhibitions includes DesertX AIUla (2024); After Laughter Comes Tears, MUDAM, Luxembourg (2023); "Our Ecology. Toward a Planetary Living" Mori Art Museum, Japan (2023); "Thinking Historically in the Present" Sharjah Biennial 15, Sharjah, UAE (2023); "Is it Morning for You Yet?" The 58th Carnegie International, Pittsburgh (2022); "The Vibration of Things" The 15th Triennial of Small Sculpture, Fellbach (2022); Dubai Expo 2020, Dubai (2021); "Feeling the Stones" Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennial, Riyadh (2021); "Phantasmopolis" Asia Art Biennial, Taiwan (2021); "Our World is Burning" Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2020); "Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars" MoMA PS1, New York (2019–20); Future Generation Art Prize, Kyiv (2019); "Antikino" Berlinale Forum Expanded, Berlin (2019); Asia Pacific Triennial, Brisbane (2018); Lulea Biennial, Sweden (2018); Athens Biennial, Athens (2018); "Crude" Jameel Arts Center, Dubai (2018); among others. In 2022, Al Qadiri was featured in the Venice Biennale's central exhibition "The Milk of Dreams."

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## Practical Information

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Dates: 14 November 2024 »→ 9 March 2025  
Tickets: €3/6 (Discounts on [www.bozar.be](http://www.bozar.be))  
Address: Bozar – Centre for Fine Arts of Brussels  
Rue Ravensteinstraat 23, 1000 Brussels  
Open: Tuesday > Sunday, 10am > 6pm  
Closed: Monday  
Info & tickets: [www.bozar.be](http://www.bozar.be) – +32 (0)2 507 82 00



Monira Al Qadiri © Courtesy of the artist  
photo by Raisa Hagiu

### Meet the Artist: Monira Al Qadiri

On Wednesday 13 November from 7pm to 8pm  
Tickets: €10/€8  
Centre for Fine Arts of Brussels  
Rue Ravensteinstraat 23, 1000 Brussels  
Terarken

The talk will be moderated by Elisabeth Van Caelenberge, Egyptologist (KU Leuven) and art historian specialising in contemporary art (former director of gallery Xavier Hufkens).

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## Quotes

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**Monira Al Qadiri:**

*“This is my most technology-heavy exhibition ever. One of the four installations is a VR experience with which I want to create a parallel world – based on the rather agricultural idea the Ancient Egyptians had of the afterlife.”*

*“Bozar allowed me to experiment with my obsessions as artists are usually expected to present the same body of work. Here I worked directly with the unconventional space in mind to create an unconventional show.”*

**Zoë Gray**, Director of Exhibitions, Bozar:

*“It is a remarkable new body of work that uses the myths of Ancient Egypt as a filter through which to consider pressing questions about today. The exhibition represents a new chapter in Al Qadiri’s playful yet critical practice.”*

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## List of exhibited works

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### **Automaton**

2024

Two fiberglass sculptures, automotive paint, rotation device

237 x 85 x 65 cm each

*Two hyper-masculine ready-made statues of anthropomorphic Ancient Egyptian animal deities quietly rotate, reminiscent of exhibits at a luxury car show or a high-end merchandise showcase. Originally intended for home décor, they are repainted in high gloss black, accentuating the exaggerated musculature of their humanoid bodies. In Ancient Egypt, a continuous chain of transformation from human to animal to divine being was a common concept, allowing a single deity to inhabit multiple forms and multiple bodies. This stands in stark contrast from our modern religious perspectives, where roles and narratives are much more rigidly defined.*

*Here, the two gods – Anubis and Khnum – face each other as if locked in a confrontation, their shadow-like figures poised in a tense standoff. The othering that occurs between human and animal also extends between human and other humans: Who is deemed fully human, and who is reduced to the status of a 'beast'? Those who are categorised as 'beast' are too often treated like automatons with no will or political agency of their own, relegated to the realms of eroticism or death.*

### **Archaeology of Beasts**

2024

4-channel video installation. 4-minute loop, sound. Music by Raed Yassin

*Hundreds of souvenirs 3D scanned from the street markets of Luxor, form digital 'mounds' of beings, piled atop one another, surrounding the viewer creating a deformed and distorted landscape of different anatomies. Tiny bodies; large bodies; strange bodies; stretched bodies; incomplete bodies merge to shape this chaotic terrain, each contributing to this unsettling tableau that evokes an allegory of otherness.*

*In times of crisis, disrupted livelihoods, fractured families, lost homes and displaced bodies of those who suffer, are often reduced to abstractions and statistics: they are not like us, they are not worthy of pain or sadness as we know it. This deformation of the human experience hinders our capacity for compassion, reflecting our current global condition in which the experiences of the 'other' are continually distorted, overlooked and rendered alien.*

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## **Book of the Dead**

2024

Three-channel video installation, sound. 11-minute loop.

*In a narrow, tomb-like corridor, seven 3D scanned statues from museum displays, come to life, animated and speaking to one another with AI generated voices. Three screens surround us, creating an intimate space where we become a participant in this ritualistic dialogue. At the centre stands Akhenaten, the sole human figure, surrounded by statues of Ancient Egyptian animal deities. Excerpts of the Egyptian Book of the Dead — a collection of myths, prayers and spells that guide the deceased through the afterlife— are reinterpreted here as a dialogue between humanity and those it deems lesser than itself. Through this exchange, the installation questions hierarchical views on life and probes the ecological challenges humanity has created, inviting reflection on our place within the broader web of existence.*

## **Aaru: After Lament**

2024

VR experience, painted wheat installation. Music by Fatima Al Qadiri

*The Ancient Egyptians had believed that heaven consisted of a field of golden wheat, where the dead could continue farming after they had passed on, embodying a blend of labour and sustenance. In preparation for these heavenly duties, the dead were often buried with their scythes and farming tools in their coffins. This idea of labour in eternity seems strange to the modern conception of paradise, as a place of eternal rest.*

*Moreover, in Ancient Egypt, the cultivation of land symbolised social status and expertise. The presence of such tools in tombs reflected an individual's knowledge and access to food resources, lending an elevated status to farm work that contrasts with modern views of manual labour.*

*Using virtual reality, where the myth of the Heavenly Cow also appears, this otherworldly dimension is depicted in a 360 degree view akin to a painting. On the adjacent wall, a long row of gold-painted wheat hangs in a line, each stalk symbolising the souls of the departed. In a world marked by loss, this installation offers a reflection on the afterlife, inviting us to consider an Ancient view of eternity—one that honours labour, cultivation, and the enduring cycles of life.*

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## Partners

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# Press Contact

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## Contact

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## Accreditation

If you have a valid press card\*, you can reserve online a time slot to visit our exhibitions by ordering a ticket with 'PRESS' rate. You can pick up your ticket for the online reserved time slot before your visit, at the box office, upon presentation of your ID and press card.

If you don't have a type of press card that Bozar accepts, it is possible to request an accreditation at least 3 working days in advance by emailing the press office:

[press@bozar.be](mailto:press@bozar.be)

*\*Bozar only accepts valid, non-expired Belgian press cards of type VVJ, AJP, IFJ, API-IPA and AICA.*

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# Annexes

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Script of Monira Al Qadiri's "Book of the Dead" (2024) video installation

## **Man (Akhenaten):**

*I wanted to replace you with the sun, but I failed.  
Alone I am, alone.  
Alone I hasten through the cosmic solitudes.  
I am yesterday, today and tomorrow.  
I am the divine and mysterious soul.  
I am countless generations.  
I have formed myself.  
Unlike you.  
You will never outgrow your beast body.*

*Deliver me from those Wardens of Passages with hurtful fingers.  
I lighten up the darkness and overthrow the devouring monsters. Those who are in their own darkness worship me, and they rise up to me. I have come to dissipate the darkness.  
Deliver me from the one that seizes souls, who consumes all filth and corruption in the darkness of light. All those who fear him are powerless.  
Deliver me from the one that lives among the damned. Whose face is that of a hound but whose skin is that of a man. At that angle of the pool of fire: devouring shadows, digesting human hearts and voiding deeds. I do not want to see him.  
I come forth by day and disclose myself as the head of the gods. I am the god who chases all boastfulness.*

## **Monkey (Babi):**

*I am a Prince, son of a Prince. A flame, son of a flame. My head has been restored after it was cut off. The head of the divine was not taken from him and mine shall not be taken from me. I raise myself up, I renew myself, and I grow young again.  
I am infinite.  
I have spoken the words of men, and I have repeated the words of beasts. My spirit comes equipped, for I am an equipped spirit and I have equipped all the spirits.  
I have come to you and I am with you. I will not be restrained or repulsed. My flesh will be renewed at the sight of beauty. I have arrived at the land of eternity, I have joined myself to the land of the everlasting, and it is the divine who commanded it for me.  
My soul will not be isolated from my body at the gates of the underworld, but I will enter in peace and resurrect in peace.  
May this heart be with me in the abode of hearts.*

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**Bird (Horus):**

*From my egg, I rise up in my orb, and shine forth on the horizon, and swim and sail over the sky. My mouth sends out flames that light up the Earth. My eyebrows are like balanced arms upon that day when your outrage is brought into account, and each wrong is tied up to its separate block of settlement.*

*I have dug up the sky, I have hacked up the horizon, I have traversed the earth to its furthest extent. I have taken possession of the spirits of the great ones, because I am the one who equips the world with magic.*

*Air and earth are my horizons. What lies between is what I am.*

*How can you reach the confines of the sky? Indeed you are equipped with a body, but you do not possess the right soul.*

*I am the soul of souls of the eternal gods. My body is everlasting. I am he who is on high. I am young in my city, I am boyish in the field, and such is my name, for my name will not perish.*

**Man (Akhenaten):**

*I come to you as an equipped spirit. The wardens of the gates walk for me. The great powers clear the roads for me. The great ones who dwell in the horizon fear me. Let my wisdom be granted, for I desire triumph over my enemies. May I see the lord of weariness, who is limitless, and let no one thwart me.*

*My utterance is mighty, for I am more powerful than the ghosts and the beasts; may they have no power over me.*

**Cow (Hathor):**

*Come to my voice. Your name is in my mouth. Listen to my voice. On the day when you put the flame among the divine, it will be struck down. He may look like he is from Earth, but he is the shining one, who has the divine body and soul. Do not ignore his name. Come, be his follower, as we all are.*

*I am the one who lights the darkness. I have come to light the darkness, for it is twice lit. I have lightened the darkness. I have adored those in darkness. I have lifted up those who weep, who hid their faces, who had sunk down.*

*I am the one who gave birth.*

*Air is what I breathe. Earth is where I stand. I have given my face to the divine. It is white with heat. The world is bright as bronze. The dead rise up to see me, breathe the air and look into my face, a yellow disk on the eastern horizon.*

**Lion (Sekhmet):**

*I am the great Cat, who frequents the trees. On that night of battle, when you were defeated, all of my enemies were exterminated.*

*I eat with my mouth, I chew with my jaw, and I am furnished with numberless Words of Might. I can overthrow you. For you are the Prince of the City of Blindness.*

*I am the priest in a hidden house; a guide to inner worlds. I am the idea of myself in my mother's belly, a bright trembling star in the memory of morning, a grain of sand blown east. I*

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*am a woman, a widow, a witch. To embrace me is to dream of ripening wheat. To sleep in my arms is to dream of honey. With a word I drive the snakes from the river. The boats sail far to its mouth.*

*I am a magician.*

*I am complete.*

*I am equipped.*

*I have healed the limbs.*

### **Man (Akhenaten):**

*Yesterday, which is pregnant with the one who shall give birth to himself at another time, belongs to me.*

*It belongs to me.*

*I am yesterday, today and tomorrow.*

### **Crocodile (Sobek):**

*I am a crocodile immersed in dread. I am a crocodile who takes by robbery. I am the great and mighty fish-like being who is in the bitter lakes. I am the lord of those who bow down to sheer night. Your face does not belong to righteousness. The sky encloses the stars, magic encloses its settlements, and my mouth encloses magic within it. My teeth are a knife, and my tusks are the viper mountain.*

*In seafoam, in swirlings and imaginings I am fish, tadpole, crocodile. I am an urge, an idea, a portent of impossible dreams. I lie between heaven and earth, between goodness and evil, patience and explosion. I am innocent and rosy as dawn. I sleep with my finger in my mouth, the cord of life curled beside my ear. Like a child in its mother's belly, I am with you but not among you. I know no ending and I have no beginning. I have always been here, a child in the silence of things, ready to wake at any moment.*

*I am possibility.*

### **Man (Akhenaten):**

*All things are possible.*

*Oh place of mine, oh throne of mine, come and serve me, for I am your lord. Oh you beasts, come into my company, for I am the son of the divine, you are mine, for it was my father who made you.*

*To me belong all men, I have given everything to myself.*

*I have removed my offenses. I have cast off all the sins that were a part of me. Yes, I am pure;*

*Yes, I am mighty.*

*Behold my word is spoken.*

*Wrong is washed away, and it falls away immediately.*

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**Dog (Seth):**

*I am the jackal of jackals, who conveys breezes in the presence of the divine. To the ends of the sky, to the ends of the earth, to the ends of the ring of clouds. I give air to youth as I open my mouth and gaze with my two eyes.*

*Give me jars of milk and cakes and flesh meat at the door of my house.*

*I am the jackal of jackals, who draws the air into the presence of the sunshine, to the limits of the sky, to the limits of the earth, to the limits of the plume. Air is given to those youths who open my mouth so that I may see with my eyes.*

*If the sky comes with the north wind, I will dwell in south.*

*If the sky comes with the south wind, I will dwell in the north.*

*If the sky comes with the west wind, I will dwell in the east.*

*If the sky comes with the east wind, I will dwell in the west.*

*I will pull the skin of my nostrils, I will open up at the place where I desire to be.*

*Never forget, the words are not the reality, only reality is reality; picture symbols are the idea, words are confusion.*

**Man (Akhenaten):**

*I've dreamed the nightmare a hundred times, that old revulsion of bone and flesh, waking in sweat, in a headlong rush toward the world, into the cool certainty of fires that burn in sudden stars, the heat in the body. That I am precludes my never having been.*

*What I know was given to me to say.*

*There is more.*

*Who you are is limited only by who you think you are. I am the word before its utterance. I am thought and desire. I am a child in the throat of god. Things are possible—joy and sorrow, men and women, children. Someday I'll imagine myself a different man, build bone and make flesh around him. I am with you but a moment for an eternity. I am the name of everything.*

*I am, I am, I am.*

## **“You don’t need VR glasses to enter a parallel universe”**

The relationship between humans and animals has become so distorted in recent centuries that, during Covid, we were stunned when animals suddenly moved into ‘our’ cities. “I mean, we do still live on the same planet,” exclaims Kuwaiti artist Monira Al Qadiri.

Talking about Covid: in 2021, Monira Al Qadiri was already supposed to give a lecture–performance at Bozar, but due to the pandemic, it ended up taking place online. Moreover, the topic of that lecture was also the result of the pandemic. “When museums were allowed to reopen again after the first lockdown,” recalls the artist, “I rushed to the Egyptian Museum in Berlin. I just had to get out of the house! There, I was drawn to two hands – all that remained of a three–thousand–year–old statue of Nefertiti and Akhenaten.”

Al Qadiri was mesmerised by that seemingly eternal touch and she started digging up everything she could about the royal couple and Ancient Egypt. At that very moment, the artist was asked by Bozar to give a lecture “on any subject,” the artist recalls, “so it was obvious that it had to be about that.” But even a millennia–old handshake of an Egyptian king and queen was no match for yet another lockdown, and Al Qadiri never made it to Bozar.

“Luckily, Bozar let me pick up the thread,” says the artist, “and that makes me intensely happy. Especially since I can now also incorporate my fascination with parallel universes. I often felt so lost during the pandemic that I started pondering parallel timelines and worlds.”

Quite specifically, the Kuwaiti artist is brooding on an ambitious exhibition consisting of four installations that explores the relationship between humans and animals ... through the lens of Ancient Egypt. “I call it *The Archeology of Beasts*,” Al Qadiri enthuses. “Because who qualifies as human? Who qualifies as beast? And is one’s life worth more than the other? Certainly today, these are pertinent questions – at a time when we are well aware that we need to rethink our relationship with nature and abandon the idea that we can control it.”

## **Environmental Message**

It is far from the first time Monira Al Qadiri has tackled ecological issues, “but I guess that’s because I come from a country that produces oil, which makes me feel responsible for the end of the world.” She laughs but seemingly means what she says. “Ecology is a broad field, though, and I have recently been very preoccupied with the relationship between humans and animals. Because that’s very different today than what it used to be. Nowadays, we live so segregated from each other that we are stunned when ‘wild’ animals suddenly appear in our streets and rivers

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during a pandemic. As if we had completely forgotten that these animals live in the same world. The difference with Ancient Egypt, where animals were depicted as gods, could not be greater.”

The artist gives the example of Thoth, an Egyptian god with the head of a bird who decides whether or not someone goes to the afterlife. “He puts your heart on a scale with a feather, and if the heart weighs more than the feather, there is a small alligator that eats it. And that’s it! Your life is over, and you don’t go to heaven.” Al Qadiri jumps up straight: “Amazing, right! Today, we are barely in awe of lions or tigers, but in Ancient Egypt, our fate was decided by a bird!”

The artist gives the example of Thoth, an Egyptian god with the head of a bird who decides whether or not someone goes to the afterlife. “He put your heart on a scale with a feather, and if the heart weighs more than the feather, there is a small alligator that eats it. And that’s it! Your life is over, and you don’t get to go to heaven.” Al Qadiri jumps up straight: “Today, we are barely in awe of lions or tigers, but in Ancient Egypt, our fate was decided by a bird!”

Naturally, the artist travelled to Egypt several times for the exhibition. On the one hand to do research – “it completely revitalised my idea of art because after five thousand years, that’s all that remains of this Ancient civilisation” – and on the other hand to make 3D scans.

“This will be my most technology-heavy exhibition ever,” says Al Qadiri. “One of the four installations is a VR experience with which I want to create a parallel world – based on the rather agricultural idea the Ancient Egyptians had of the afterlife. Although I have to admit that sometimes you don’t need VR glasses at all to feel like you’re in a parallel universe. Whenever I stepped into one of those five-thousand-year-old tombs in Egypt and saw things that were never meant to be seen by people, I already felt like I was walking around in an alternate reality.”