
CULTURE

In Motion: Inside the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale 2026

From refugee memory to speculative landscapes, the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale's third edition traces how movement – across bodies, histories, and territories – continues to shape contemporary artistic practice

BY AISHA ZAMAN

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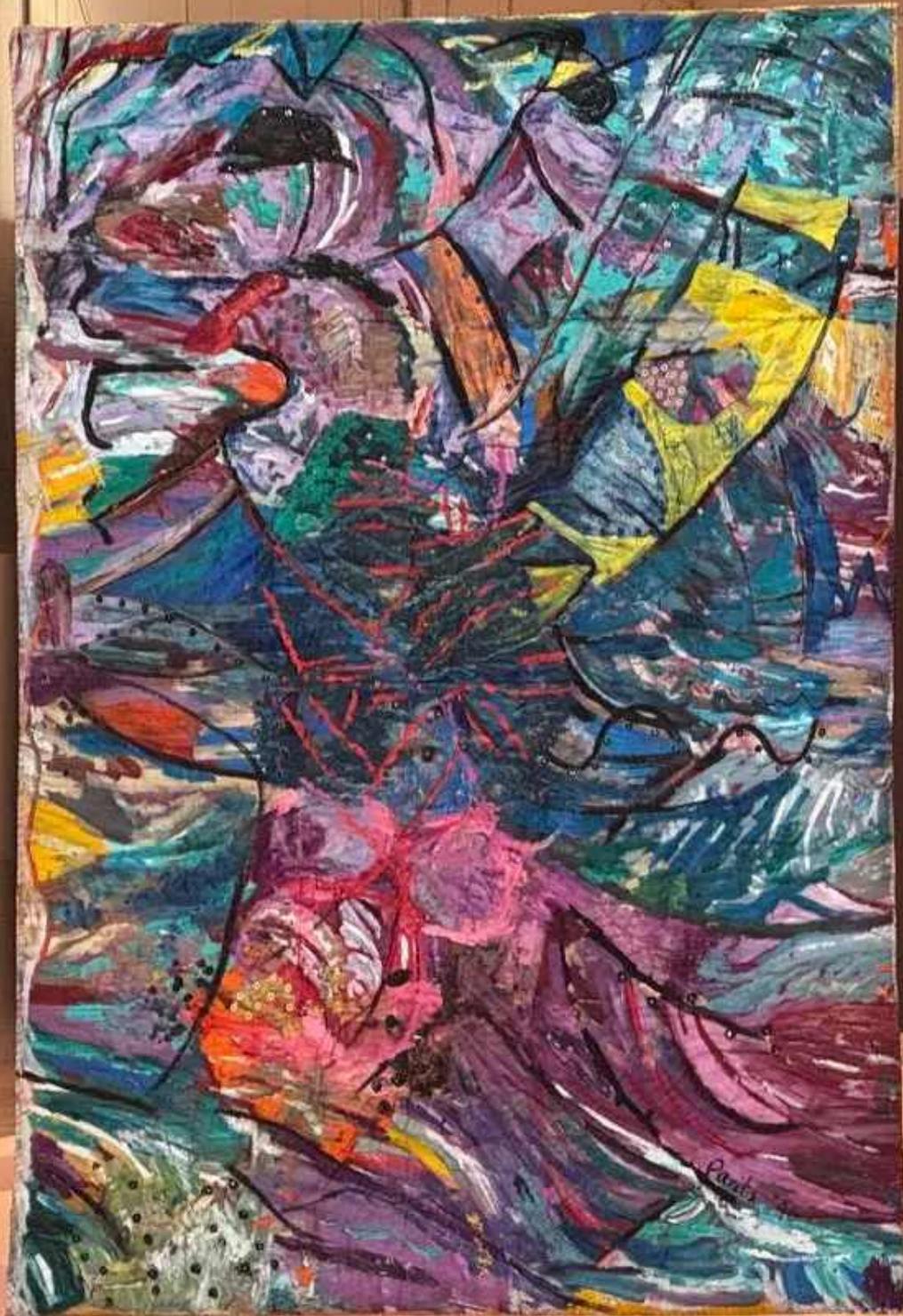




Photo: Anadolu/Getty Images

The third edition of the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale, *In Interludes and Transitions*, unfolds across the JAX District through May 2, 2026, assembling more than 65 artists from over 37 countries alongside an ambitious slate of new commissions. Led by Co-Artistic Directors Nora Razian and Sabih Ahmed, the exhibition resists the conventions of a geographic survey, instead positioning movement defined by migration, exchange, procession – as both its curatorial framework and a defining condition of the contemporary. Here, movement is treated not as metaphor but as a structure through which culture is continuously made and remade.

For Ahmed, the premise begins with the nuances of translation. “In Arabic (titled “في الجَلِّ والترحال”) the theme of the biennale means the cycles of journeys and encampments that have actually defined so many lives of communities, especially the Bedouin communities of the region,” he explains. “The English title... is not a one-to-one translation, but rather a different kind of way of articulating the cycles of itinerancy.” The project, he continues, seeks “to reconsider the world as a multitude of processions,” one shaped by histories and experiences that unfold through motion rather than permanence.

That movement is inherently shared. “None of these movements are individual or solo, they’re collective,” Ahmed notes, describing a “we” formed through the entanglement of human, technological, ecological, and spiritual domains. Installed across nearly 12,900 square metres of exhibition halls, courtyards, and terraces, the biennale privileges a mode of looking grounded in relation rather than sequence – less a procession of discrete objects than an accumulating field of encounters.

What emerges is a biennale attentive not only to circulation across borders, but to the ways memory, material, and embodiment register its effects. The following works stand out for the clarity and urgency with which they engage these conditions.

Petrit Halilaj, *Very volcanic over this green feather* (2021)



Photo: Petrit Halilaj, *Very volcanic over this green feather* (2021) (Alessandro Brasile, courtesy of the Diriyah Biennale Foundation)

Halilaj revisits 38 drawings he made as a 13-year-old refugee during the Kosovo war, enlarging them onto felt, where they are sprayed, stitched, and suspended throughout the space. Fantastical birds and pastoral landscapes initially register as childlike, even buoyant, before scenes of violence surface. Rather than reconstruct memory as fixed history, the installation stages imagination as both witness and shelter, exposing the uneasy coexistence of trauma and resilience.

Taysir Batniji, *Remnants* (2024–25)

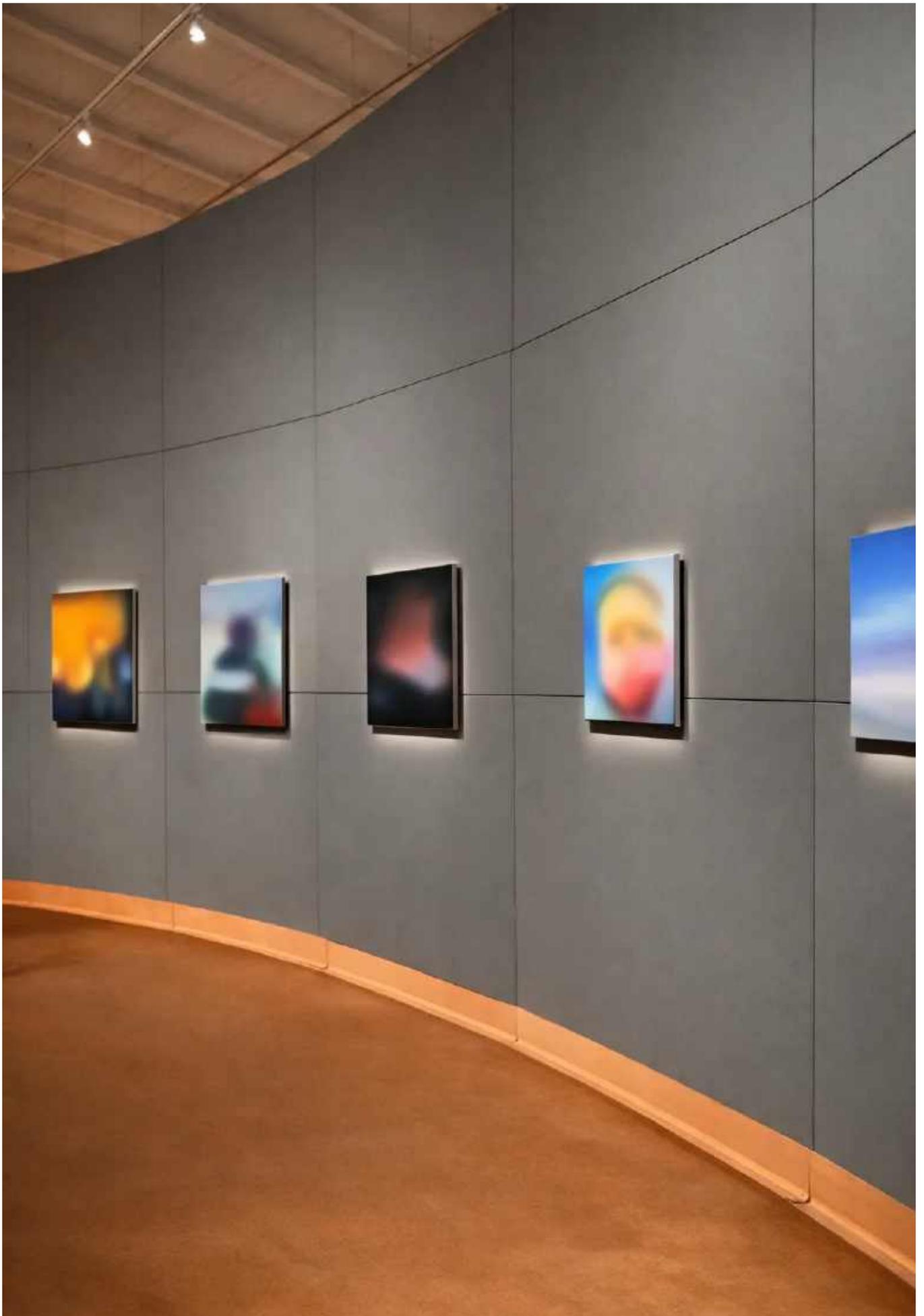


Photo: Taysir Batniji, *Remnants*

Batniji translates blurred images downloaded from Gaza into oil paintings, fixing the moment before clarity arrives. The lag – when forms hover between abstraction and recognition – becomes the work’s conceptual core, operating simultaneously as buffer and wound. In arresting this threshold of visibility, Batniji probes how contemporary conflict is mediated, consumed, and endured through screens.

Kamala Ibrahim Ishag, *Procession (Zaar)*



Photo: Kamala Ibrahim Ishag, *Procession (Zaar)* (Alessandro Brasile courtesy of the Diriyah Biennale Foundation)

Drawing from decades of engagement with Sudanese spiritual traditions, Ishag depicts a circle of women immersed in a zaar ritual, their bodies dissolving into rhythmic motion. Humans and vegetal forms echo one another, reinforcing the artist’s longstanding belief in the continuity between natural and social worlds. The painting reads less as representation than as invocation – a meditation on healing, collective presence, and cyclical time.

Pacita Abad, *Asian Abstractions* (1983–92)



Photo: Pacita Abad, *Asian Abstractions* (1983–92) (Alessandro Brasile courtesy of the Diriyah Biennale Foundation)

Developed after her training in Korean ink painting, Abad's series transforms studies of rice stalks into densely layered trapunto canvases, padded, stitched, and embellished into near-sculptural form. What begins as botanical reference gradually dissolves into saturated fields of line and colour. The works reflect a practice shaped by migration, where material experimentation becomes a language for negotiating movement and identity.

Théo Mercier, *House of Eternity* (2026)



Photo: Théo Mercier, *House of Eternity* (2026) (Alessandro Brasile courtesy of the Diriyah Biennale Foundation)

Mercier converts an entire hall into a sand-covered terrain punctuated by monolithic forms that evoke termite mounds, fossils, and wind-carved architectures. An elevated metal walkway cuts across the installation, shifting the viewer from participant to observer and reframing the landscape as both stage and archaeological proposition. Suspended between deep time and speculative future, the work treats history as something continuously formed rather than unearthed.

Hazem Harb, *Gauze* (2023–24)





Photo: Hazem Harb, *Gauze* (2023–24)

Harb arranges strips of medical gauze into fragile configurations resembling wounded or shrouded bodies. The material – historically produced in Gaza and associated with care – acquires a double resonance, recalling both treatment and burial through its evocation of the *kafan*. The installation confronts the viewer with the stark materiality of loss while resisting overt spectacle.

Elias Sime, *Lines in Nature* (2025)

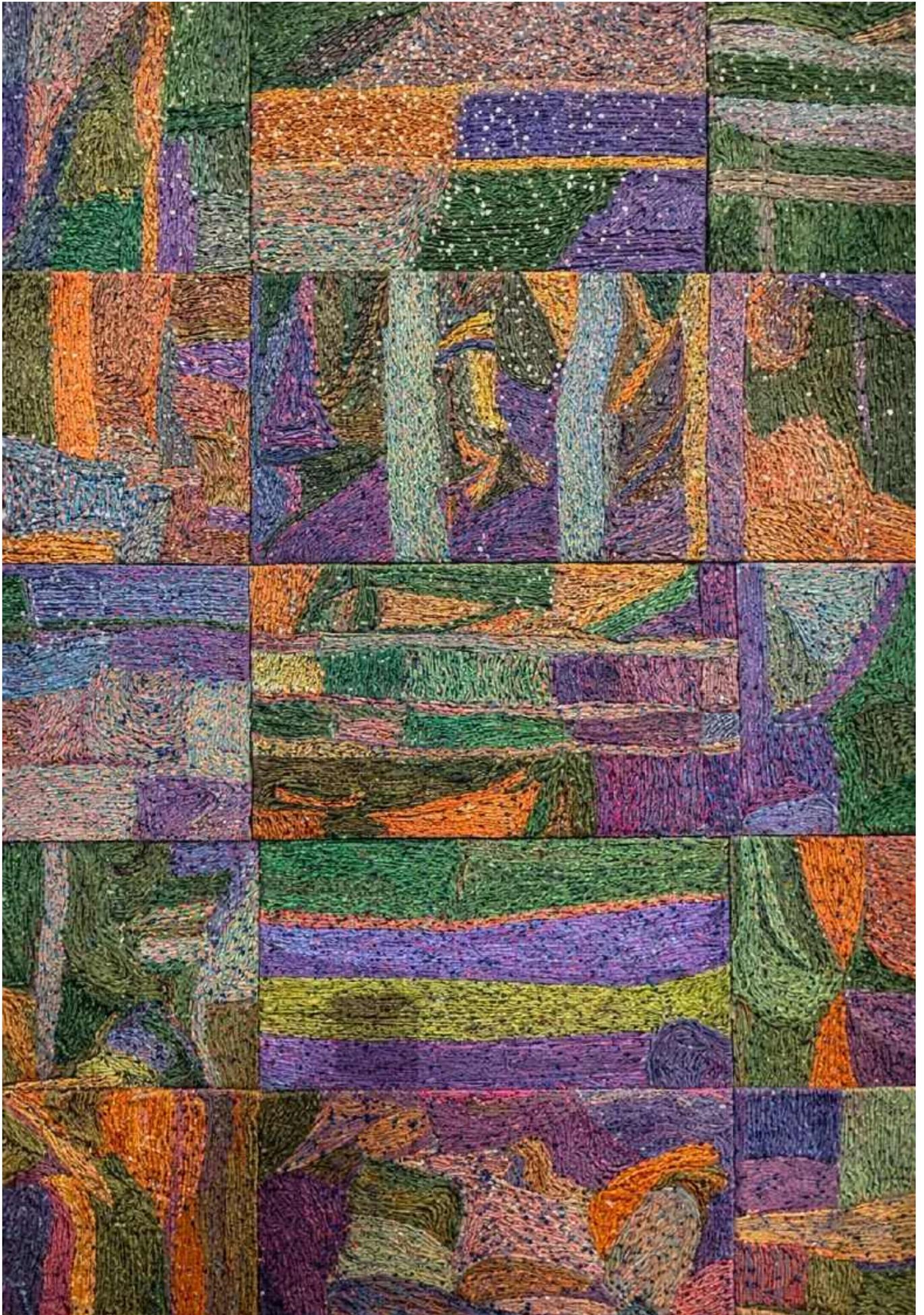




Photo: Elias Sime, *Lines in Nature* (2025)

Composed from discarded circuit boards, wires, and electronic fragments, Sime's intricate panels oscillate between technological detritus and organic pattern. From afar they suggest aerial cartographies; up close, their fractured components reveal the infrastructures underpinning global consumption. The works quietly stage a tension between innovation and environmental consequence.

Ahaad Alamoudi, *The Run* (2025)



Photo: Ahaad Alamoudi, *The Run* (2025)

Set against the vast terrain of NEOM, a solitary runner moves through banners printed with images of the very landscape they occupy. The gesture is deceptively simple yet faintly absurd – forward motion persists while the land remains indifferent and unchanged. Reduced to the cadence of footsteps, progress becomes both aspiration and loop.

Raqs Media Collective, *Something Rare to Lose* (2026)



Photo: Raqs Media Collective, *Something Rare to Lose* (2026)

Structured around a convalescence bed, this immersive installation turns attention toward embodiment at its most precarious. The work considers consciousness not as abstraction but as something grounded in vulnerable, interdependent bodies, drawing on medical and philosophical lineages associated with Ibn Sina and Al-Biruni. Inward-looking yet expansive, it asks what it means to care – and to remain alive – in an era increasingly mediated by data.

Afra Al Dhaheri, *Dining East or West?*



Photo: Afra Al Dhaheri, *Dining East or West?*

A plexiglass table balanced on cinder blocks anchors an installation scattered with glass casts of limbs and domestic fragments, suspended between rupture and cohesion. The work reflects on shifting social rituals – particularly traditions of gathering and dining – without settling into nostalgia. Instead, Al Dhaheri constructs a space of cultural in-betweenness, where infrastructure and memory press uneasily against one another.

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